

1. Overture To a Dream

.....The Statues are standing with love in their hand

They're trying to live but they don't understand

Sarah-Jane was lost; not in the vast complexity of our synthetic society, but in the forests of her conscience, which were the downfall of all who ventured through it. She was alone, in the automated constituency of tomorrow's misfortunes. Lost like a goddess in search of vengeance. The red clouds of marmalade ecstasy had vanished from the swollen skies she was falling deeper into the abyss of night watched over by the peering eyes of the marmalade tree. Outside in the close the children were playing 'kerby' with a football. The constant thud of the ball as it hit the pavement edge was distracting to the point of annoyance. Sarah got annoyed very easily these days. Her headaches were getting worse; they had been for weeks now. She could see stars, and planets for that matter, without the use of a telescope.

The semi-drugged serpent slowly slithered downstairs to the sweet aroma of breakfast, which lay waiting on its white carpet. (Except that, it was not breakfast; but dinner!) The kitchen revolved around her hungry eyes and Sunday sneered beneath its mask. Yes, today was Sunday! She hated Sunday, and once she had abandoned the depths of her daydreams and sacrificed the soft euphoria of bedtime, she could begin to pluck the fruit from the over laden branches, which hung rhythmically from the ceiling of her room. Sarah-Jane Sullivan stared into the swirling coffee and once more her thoughts were on a journey in her blanket of dreams.....

She leant over towards him, aesthetically pleasing his whole body, his nerves stood out from their limbs and fervour racked within him. She cupped her hands and cradled his head inside them, each movement a work of art, each sign a sign of love. Mark washed his eyes in her beauty- Well it was better than Optrex! He pursed his aching lips towards hers: a kiss, the magic of the lover's mist, the soft sweet touch of gossamer from an angel's wing, frothy clouds of pink mush on the

horizon of her mind, well you know what I mean..... I'm sure you've read it all before and if you want that sort of thing, then please go off and read a Mills & Boon because you won't find it here.

It was twelve-fifteen when Sarah had leapt from the dark depths of cotton blankets to parade herself in front of the yawning mirror. Is this face, this the innocence of seventeen? Her dark hair bounded her slim face and curled up slightly, giving the whole visage an appearance of an Egyptian queen, and yet somehow she had never appreciated her own beauty, her own simplicity, until that night. 'God it's early' she thought to herself looking at the enamel clock on the dressing table. (Now you, the reader must appreciate that time as understood by teenagers is a different concept to that of normal mortals. The days do not officially start until midday and continue until 4am. Sundays do not exist at all and as such, they could be obliterated from the calendar with no detrimental effect. For Sarah-Jane Sullivan the only good thing about this particular Sunday was that she would be seeing Mark tonight; but that was eight hours away. Now, Sarah Sullivan she was not one of those women who require a week to get ready for a date, hers' was a natural beauty, and as such after along relaxing bath, she could be ready to face the world in less than two hours. (It is rumoured that this is something of a world record for a woman, and as the author, I am toying with the idea of contacting the Guinness book of Records).

Eventually she managed to find enough strength to raise her hand to brush her hair into its familiar shape. Her rounded face and large brown eyes spelt out her youth and gave her an elfin-like countenance. Her face glowed with the flush of youth, and even without makeup, she managed to look radiant and beautiful. Slowly, but surely the bedroom carpet carried her to the landing, where the crystal-cut stairway unravelled beneath her feet like, some giant escalator, as she slid down towards the ascending aroma of Sunday lunch.

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Mark stared blankly at the frost bitten windows wincing with pain from its icy touch. Darkness slowly, slipped away into obscurity without ever asking permission to leave; and dawn arrived whisking passed his yawning eyelids, stroking lawns of velvet grass; Dawn, lightly tapping on the windowpanes and sighing softly on the silver glass. Yes, Dawn arrived. - She was not expected that early in the morning but she came, nonetheless, and a lovely girl she was. - Well at last, he

divested himself of the soft silk sheets of his bedtime, exchanging them for the cold stark stare of morning, greeted as he was with the birth of a new winter's day. His nostrils twitched at the ascending bouquet of fried bread, eggs, and bacon seeping up from the flat below into his' room. How kind of his neighbour to greet him with the wonderful aroma of such a early morning repast.

Weakly the ripples of harlequin light tried to force its way into the flat through the cold glass of the window. The silver ray of morning had chased the exodus of night to the very gateway of the dawn, where the proverbial elusive butterfly brushed passed him on the way to the bathroom. Mark awoke to the semi-arctic greeting of that early morning sunshine infiltrating through the frost patterns on the glass, which now resembled a stained-glass window in the churches of yesteryear. Despite the cold Mark found the sight comforting and friendly.

A dark unshaven face stared blankly through the mirror, which hung helplessly on the wall, it frowned at Mark, and he frowned back. After a minute's visual discussion between the two faces, they met, and Mark proceeded to dress in his modestly conventional attire, after all, it was Monday and he did have to go to work. The shivering skeleton, for Mark was not a well-built lad, stood scraping his flesh with a well-used Gillette razor over a sparkling sink, which reflected his frustration.

By seven o' clock, Mark was ready to devour his insufficient breakfast, insufficient merely because he never got up early enough to cook anything, and anyway he had already sampled the delights of a full English breakfast through his nostrils courtesy of his neighbour. The ice-cold milk bottle stuck to his hand as he carried it from the refrigerator, and the corn flakes seemed to freeze as the white stream flowed around them. Mark got himself ready, wandering about from room to room, sitting down only briefly to gulp coffee and crunch large spoonfuls of Corn Flakes. Just as he was about to begin chiselling the dregs from the bottom of his dish, the ever-friendly voice of the BBC Announcer issued forth from the mouth of the transistor radio:

“The time is seven-fifteen...Attention all shipping here is a gale warning issued at.... and within seconds the figure that once sat silently eating cereal and drinking black coffee was gone into the coldness of the hallway. Mark clambered down the forty-nine steps (with apologies to John Buchan) of Spencer House; a journey, which would not normally be necessary, but City Councils being as they are, the lift, was yet to be repaired following several bouts of particularly vicious

vandalism. At the bottom of the stairs, Mark found the women of Spencer House immersed in a pool of idle chatter. The pangs of justice were probing the moral obligations of Chesford to the ‘degenerating adolescence’, but of course, such wide and varied topics also found their way onto the agenda: the incompetence of the council; the state of the economy; and where elephants go to die. Two main points were thrown up from this volcano of gossip, firstly the sensational activities of Sarah-Jane Sullivan in the Sacred Heart on Sunday morning, and secondly the news of a fight at the Roostertail on Sunday night involving Enoch Harlem. Enoch was the local Mr Fix-it, general Dogsbody and Big Time Organiser. If you want something, he can get it for you. There were not many West Indians living in Chesford at this time, so lets be honest one of them was bound to make it big, and rumour and suspicion followed him everywhere. Enoch was never one to fight shy of public recognition and often encouraged some of tittle-tattle because it suited his image. Public opinion being a slow moving animal was yet to connect the two major issues of discussion - that is of course assuming they are connected and as I haven’t written that bit yet your guess is as good as mine. However, despite the lack of detail in any of the stories, there was enough news to keep the editor of the Chesford Daily Mail happy for several days. What tabloid ever worried about the minutiae let alone facts and truth anyway? Never had there been so much excitement and no doubt, he would be able to publish a special lunchtime edition to celebrate the occasion. Whether or not Enoch was actually involved in any fight, seems at this juncture irrelevant, he was there, and that was enough for the tongues of Chesford to wag and the fingers to point.

As Mark whisked passed the coagulation of housewives he cast a cursory glance at Mrs Carver-Smith, please note the double-barrelled name, it may become significant later on. The rest of her supporters rallied quickly to her aid as they possibly and quite understandably, took an innocent, if cynical look as a gross insult, and many remarked on the “Gross impudence of the cheeky little bastard.”

“If he were my son I’d teach him a lesson or two.”

“Wouldn’t let my daughter go round with the likes of him, that’s for sure.” (It was obviously Mrs Carver –Smith who said this, note the lack of obscene language!)

“Wants bringing down a peg he does,” and so on and so on; the typical uniformed prejudice of the Victorian housewife against the younger, but obviously more educated generation. (Please note that this is the government’s contention and not necessarily mine)

“You know he goes round with that young West Indian lad from George St, you know the one who is so much trouble a couple of years back.”

“Never!!”

“Yes –I saw him and that girl of his only last week.”

What a shame she missed seeing them yesterday! And so the molehill becomes a mountain, the trickle becomes a stream, and all the dinners will be burnt because everyone is out talking to everyone else.

Midnight grass wave me goodbye, but leave the statues where they are

The shadowed surrounds like silhouettes of the burning bush

await their master on the horizon of the Velvet Sun Factory.....

One end of the factory was taken up with three voluminous sheds, under which hung the mixers for varnish making: bright silver rings, sharp silken blades spinning forward and backward. The noise was incredible; almost deafening, but as long as the managing director didn’t have a headache, which incidentally was frequently caused by the warehouse door banging shut when left ajar, the varnish plant continued to produce its fuss, fumes, and confusion. The two men employed in this unique area of the factory seemed somehow immune to the smells and sounds of bubbling resins, atmospheres filled with clouds of black locusts and dust that infiltrated every mouth and lung within a five mile radius. There were worse jobs of course, the technicolor lungs of the colour-mixers told their own rainbow story: chemical pigments distilled into undiluted air and overalls awash with every colour imaginable to mankind. It was not that conditions at the ‘Velvet Sun factory’ were bad; they were on a par with the rest of the industry. Ink making was a messy business and poor health seemed scarce compensation for a large bank balance and profit for the ‘Fat Man’.

The sun glinted through a crack in the ceiling of white cloud and smiled on its subjects below, the wind whistled its way across the exposed yard hurling empty oil-drums against the factory wall. As Mark peered into the blank wastes of landscapes that surrounded him, the mechanical sliding

doors pushed their way open and the 'Fat Man' appeared. Mark had never bothered to learn his name; everyone called him the 'fat man' so it just stuck. It suited him. The broad shoulders, stubby beard and unbreakable plastic face, he was not the sort of gaffer you questioned too much. He was not too bad as bosses go, and how many people could say they have Pavarotti as their manager?

Mark stared towards the Fat Man who was well aware of the turmoil he created within the chapel. Mark for his part was amazed at the apoplexy within the union, indeed indifference. They even call the union 'a Chapel' he thought, southern softies! The Fat Man was happy to keep his workers divided; it played into his hands. Only a few outspoken individuals ever dared voice an opinion. Ex Capt. Bobby Womach was one such forthright soul, recently discharged from Her Majesty's paratroopers after spending five years in Margate (owing to a clerical error in the spelling of Marrakech). Yes, Bobby (I was a captain) Womach often spouted forth spurious rivers of unanswerable gibberish intelligible only to higher forms of animal life such as snails and green men on Mars.

James Porter-Brown was another of the outspoken characters, a stocky man (that means he looked like a gravy cube), experienced in the ways of the world and a person not easily moved from his goal. He usually had his say whatever the odds and seemed afraid of nothing except perhaps his own eloquence. Then there was the 'Snake' Larry, so expert in the field of managerial manipulation he had earned a nickname for his worm-like activities. Larry Yesman was a driver or so we are led to believe, the fact that no-one ever saw him do any driving seems at this point irrelevant; his case for being a driver does seem to be strengthened somewhat by the frequency of battered lorries returning to the depot.

Another face in the sea of troubled waters was that of Jack Starr, the foreman who was always in the limelight and at the forefront of any 'ex-curricula' activity. Unfortunately, he was a close friend of the Chapel steward. This led to many awkward if not impossible situations; management was able always to mysteriously head off any potential problems from the work force. To describe Jack as an amiable young man would be an exaggeration- in fact it would be a downright lie, he was intensely disliked by all and sundry, and particularly sundry.

.....Sunshine smile of tenderness

and Sarah-Jane finds happiness

The morning, and quite a beautiful morning it was now that the frost had disappeared, soon slid gracefully into the afternoon with no one ever noticing. Marks' dinner break was at 12-30 and so promptly at that precise hour, he placed himself at the main gate to await the arrival of Sarah-Jane. (It is worth noticing how punctual a man can be where a woman or his stomach is concerned).

Soft, soft sighed the wind sweet, sweet love and Sarah-Jane smiled at the depressed face of her loved one, who was really too engrossed in his sandwiches to notice the sweetness of the smile or indeed the motives behind it. However, woman is a subtle creature and thrives on petty things, they like playing with words and toying with emotions. A smile like that must have ulterior motives. Eves' daughter was still clutching the fruit of Eden. Believe me, the serpent was not the only villain of the piece in that famous garden.

“Mark” the word seemed to come like water from a spring

“I was wondering” (a typical feminine trick opener).

“If we could getaway, you know holiday or just for a few days don't....”

Mark exploded, much to the disgust and discomfort of a passing cyclist who possibly did not like tuna salad, and certainly not raining on him from the pavement.

“Holiday...When...? Where...? “And not forgetting “Why?”

“Well I was thinking about next weekend, Bank Holiday and all that, its half term and you're on holiday anyway.”

Don't argue boy this has been well planned. She's good this one, don't ever play chess with her!

And despite protestation there followed a well thought out and logical explanation of why they should get out of Chesford for a while, see more of each other, and have a real fun holiday. Sarah eventually

concluded “We could hitch it'll be fun”

“As in Hitch-hike?” Mark mumbled between mouthfuls of sandwich

“Yeah, why not?” Sarah replied tossing back her hair in the sunlight

“Hmm”

This first sign of enthusiasm was a mistake, Sarah Jane hung herself ecstatically round Marks' neck pushing his lips towards hers, only to be told he was still trying to eat his dinner, and would she refrain from love-making at mealtimes.

“Yeah okay it should be a good laugh” said Mark finally, thinking this would be enough to satisfy his love-leach, allow him time to eat his sandwiches and, more importantly, think of a perfectly good reason for not going. Although deep down Mark did not think, it was such a bad idea. He needed some space from this town, particularly now after last night's escapades.

Therefore, all was settled, except for Marks' stomach, which occasionally gave way beneath convulsions of undigested food, making him feel most unpleasant as he said goodbye to his happy, happy sunshine girl. Sarah walked off down the road into the delightful afternoon sun, Mark turned, and trundled back into the 'Velvet Sun Factory' like a maximum-security prisoner returning to his cell after a futile attempt to escape. Sarah-Jane was so buoyant, mainly because she had gotten her own way and that in the eyes of any female creature was true success. The sun shone brightly from its blue-framed skies but the light that shone from her eyes seemed even brighter as she thought of what lay ahead. She had no worries, no cares, just the occasional headache, which she ignored, along with the phantom calling of her dream, that she cast it into a haze of euphoric mist, where it slid like a serpent beneath the feet of its master, waiting and biding its time, poised to strike out at any moment.

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Only the soft sighing of the bushes, swaying in the gentle breeze broke the silence of that misty morning. White patches of frost stained the dew damp grass and the night owls flew off to their lofty nests. All was quiet, and then suddenly the sound of a car horn drifted in on the wind from the bypass and disturbed the birds as they roosted in the trees. On the other hand, perhaps it was the chime of the bells from St Michaels. But whatever it was; the black shapes soared into the sky hovering over the tall elms, which lined The Avenue leading to the square. Most of their leaves had now disappeared and the trees took on a weird appearance of living statues, stretching out their arms up towards unsuspecting victims. To the rear of them, an egg-shaped pool was home to several species of freshwater fish. Later in the day, youngsters would gather there. They always did, but it was quiet now just the odd fisherman attempting to land an exaggerated sized perch. The weeping willows that lined

the pool hung their weary heads, and in the half-light of dawn took on the appearance of old men leaning on their canes to survey the rippling waters. The path that came from Parsons Pool turned almost back on itself and split into two separate ways one took you back to The Avenue whilst the other meandered across the meadow through a little copse and back towards the town. On its route through to the other side of the little wood, it passed an old oak where legend said the King hid during the Civil War. Its hollowed out trunk was certainly big enough, and provided shelter from the elements for many a traveller. They had built a car park now at the front of the oak but it was still an imposing sight. No one saw the stranger as he crept from the shadowy depths of the trees to leave a package in the bowels of the giant oak, and only the whispering wind bore witness to its retrieval later that morning and she couldn't tell anyone.

Serenade to Southsea

.....The statues are speaking to her out aloud

They're standing alone with their heads bowed

Milky morning mists mingling with the choking fumes of passing banana lorries - never ending carpets of spring blossom and waste paper, bustling crowds of faceless nobodies going nowhere. This was Saturday morning in Chesford. Mark and Sarah walking hand in hand through mellow sunlight, laughing at fat old ladies on bicycles, kicking neatly piled mountains of brightly coloured autumn leaves into billowing fountains and smiling through chattering teeth.

The clock on the front of the Town Hall beamed down on the early morning crowds (alright there were only four people around at that time of the morning its poetic licence okay? and three's a crowd) The clock unmercifully boomed out the hour of six o' clock. Mark and Sarah seemed to quicken their step and miraculously managed to cross the road without getting themselves wrapped around the wing mirrors of a passing double-decker bus. They staggered up the curb and slumped breathlessly against the wall of somebody's front garden. Mark groaned as he slipped the bulging haversack from his aching shoulders and dropped it with a thud on the pavement. Trembling he slipped a bent 'Embo' between his dry lips and managed somehow to force a smile; Sarah giggled back. She grabbed him by the hand and dragged him forward, but dismay suddenly replaced her unexpected burst of enthusiasm and registered as a muttered curse on her sweet lips.

Thundering towards them through the belching cloud of smoke emitting from the exhaust was something resembling a Vauxhall Victor, pearly-whites grinning at the wheel. It was Enoch Harlem. Mark's troubled face broke into a somewhat relieved smile and dragging the haversack behind him, he half ran to the edge of the road frantically waving his free arm as he did so. Sarah watched unbelieving as the spluttering wreck came to a more than sudden halt opposite her and astride the white line in the middle of the road; angry motorists, unable to get past remonstrated and shouted

abuse. The two hitchhikers threw themselves headlong into the back of the car, and with the door still swinging open; they took off down the road, leaving the irate motorists behind them in a fog of exhaust fumes. The door eventually banged itself shut (with a little help from Mark). Sarah-Jane merely smiled and managed to contain her frustration and anger with a sigh as she wrestled for a more comfortable position on top of the spare wheel. Most people kept them in the boot, she thought to herself, but not Enoch.

Ten o'clock found Sarah much happier as they were set down outside the University entrance, some miles further down the road. Mark thumbed through a tattered road atlas whilst Sarah straightened her dress and tried to do a quick repair job on her hair. She was carrying one of those super magic bags that all women carry, you know the ones that look small but are bottomless and contain all things known to man, and woman for that matter. Hair-bands, rubber-bands, and economy size hair spray, safety pins, Band-Aid, bandages, brushes for hair, teeth and nails, a small metal disc with bits of wire sticking out (don't ask!), shampoo, soap, lipstick and lace. A spare pair of tights in case they have an accident and a spare pair of knickers in case they don't. A mobile phone with no credit left on it and a mirror, must not forget the mirror, ever! The above list is by no means a comprehensive one but it does go some way to explain the age-old question of women go to the loo in teams of at least two. They have to carry out an inventory of each other bags on a periodic basis to ensure they are not letting the sisterhood down.

Their next lift dropped them in the middle of Stratford a small, but busy town about twenty miles south of Chesford, and where they made for the nearest pub to sip aimlessly from fathomless glasses of bitter shandy. Then out once more into the cold crisp air heading towards the purlieu of the town and better prospects for a lift on the open highway. They soon found themselves standing ankle deep in cold wet leaves by the roadside sucking avidly on damp cigarettes and half-heartedly blowing hazy smoke rings as they anxiously awaited transport. Mark shuffled his cold feet and gazed down at Sarah, she just gazed back and smiled. Sunshine smiles of love divine, and Sarah-Jane find hearts entwined.....

.....Whispered the luke warm wind. Then off again as the Wartburg Knight on his charger of green steel whisked them through frigid grey suburbia and out onto the rambling

ribbon roads of Oxfordshire. Alas, the Knight is gone just as quickly as he came leaving alone the intrepid adventurers once more on the outskirts of the county town. They walked on passed the hallowed walls of the famed university, looking for all the world like residents of that venerable establishment. They both felt quite at home and it was with a tinge of sadness that they waved goodbye to Oxford and hello to Abingdon with fish and chips eaten out of last weeks Abingdon Herald. Time goes on inexorably refusing to wait for the lovers and as it neared to the stroke of three, the two companions were huddled together in the cockpit of a Volvo juggernaut. Hans (his real name was Dietmar, but the stroking of Sarah's thigh had earned him the nom-de-plume) was a friendly sort of chap, and the long A34 stretched out before them. The wagon was heading for the docks and Hans' incessant chatter, the rumbling of giant wheels and the ching ching of the music from the radio broke up the long monotonous journey.

Their next stop, Chandlers Ford, situated on the edge of Southampton was a small insignificant place but proved good for a lift to Portsmouth. It was only a short distance and before long, the nice chap in the cavalier had waved them goodbye and they were trundling along the promenade at Southsea

The beach was soft and the sand warm under the early evening sunlight, although late in the year it was quite hot, almost summer weather. The noisy children had all gone home and only love walked hand in hand.

“Shall we pitch the tent?” Mark looked at his young Juliet.

“No, let's kip on the beach,” she replied.

Dreamy clouds of wispy white cotton descended from the blue-grey sky and the lights on the promenade began to disappear one by one. It was just as the moonlight began to bare its soul to a drowsy world, that Sarah half-opened her eyes to get a closer look at the shadow of the crucifix along the concrete walling. Isolated, desolate and looking out across the ocean blackness; her mind raced on. The atrocities that ones own brain could perpetrate! The shadow of the lonely telescope could indeed in certain light and from a certain angle look like a giant crucifix, its massive crossbeam stretched out in the dimmed light; and so with the night finally descending from its hiding place, the pair found a suitable place in which to dream. The gentle lapping of Neptune's waves provided a soundtrack for

tired limbs. Sarah closed her eyes and departed the darkening world.

Listen lover, sighed the wind

As she danced with the night in the moonlight.....

Angled light and flashing cubes, the dancers swayed and music splashed into waiting eardrums. White flashes of neon teeth appeared to fill the room, grinning, smiling through nicotine haze and alcohol swirl. The beat descended on Sarah-Jane as she wavered slightly under the strain of vodka & lime. Mark steadied her and sat her down, whilst he went to the bar for a refill.

The Roostertail was Chesford's only discothèque. That is to say, it was the only worthwhile one. If you wanted to be 'it' (whatever 'it' was) you were there. The music was good, the drinks were reasonable, for a club and it was the place to be. Most of the kids in Chesford went there on a Saturday and it was the only place open on Sunday night. Sarah was swimming in the pulsating light of discord and plastic music, vibrating walls of red noise and multi-coloured lights. Her eyes were closed and her thoughts away at the events of that morning. The purple lighting reminded her of the priest's robes and the pious congregation turning to notice the latecomers. Hypocrites! - All of them, she thought. . Sacred Heart, bleeding hearts more like. The chalice held high with purple hands; gold trim vestments preaching Latin with an Irish lilt.

Why had Enoch gone to church that morning? Even the priest stirred from his eulogy to John the Baptist to look up at the new member of his flock - the black sheep no doubt? (She laughed to herself at her irreverent humour.) The candles burned, the incense smoked and the faces looked and stared as Sarah ran, screaming at the top of her voice from the assembled throng. Mrs O'Hagen looked over to Mary Hennessey, and she looked at Edna Sullivan, who glared back, "Spiders!" she mouthed. Mary smiled knowingly and began whispering to Mrs O'Hagen. The message was relayed around, no doubt losing any sense or meaning on route. A shrill low humming echoed round the ecclesiastical columns. The priest resumed his liturgy, the congregation resumed their lethargy, and Sarah-Jane was being violently shaken by Enoch Harlem:

"Sas! Sass!! Sarah!!! Sarah-Jane!!!!"

Enoch was shouting above the decibels all around them. He was fighting not only the music but also Sarah's drifting mind "Hey you were miles away."

"Yes, I was thinking, I'm waiting for Mark, he's at the bar"

...."You can get it if you really want it"... the speakers blurted out, the bass rebounded and reverbed. What a shame the music has to keep interrupting the DJs' clever patter, he must practice the drivel, sorry his 'act' for hours. Practice makes perfect, and those who are perfect were in the Sacred Heart that morning, sitting in their pious pews, with their 'holier than thou look on their faces.

Mark returned but Sarah had gone....."Red, Red Wine goes straight to my head and makes everything seem calm again....". Kaleidoscope colours cast strange shadows over the talking stone statues that picked her up and took her ever onwards. The Brown bombers descended from the Blue ceiling and Lucy was in the sky with diamond rings around her pretty head.

Lucy was 29 years old, and lived in Rochester House, a tower block situated on the edge of town. The flat came as part of her job. When she was not sleeping over to care for Michael she would retire to the flat that she shared with the other carer, thus offering twenty-four hour care to their client. Recently, her life had become rather complicated. Never helped by her constant consumption of alcohol, her marriage to Robert Simpson had been failing, which was why she had taken this job away, she needed space, needed freedom, away from his oppressive personality. Lucille (she hated that name) was unable to have children and felt unfulfilled. They had tried all the conventional treatment. Lucy was tired of hospital visits, tests, and consultants. She seemed to spend her life there, being prodded and poked and began to feel like some scientific experiment. To be honest it seemed to bother Bob more than it did her. The whole business was making her feel ill. Bob had always blamed her throughout their five-year marriage; he once raised his fist, and hit her in his frustration and anger. Once was enough! Lucy packed her bags and moved south, she was confident of getting work with her qualifications and experience. She was a qualified nurse and had been a ward sister in the days before re-organisation of the NHS into private Trusts, abolished such positions along with matrons and proper patient care. Lucy loved her work, she was one of nature's natural compassionate people and only truly happy when she was looking after some unfortunate soul.

The fact that she had ended up in Chesford, however, was purely by chance. Sitting at the bus station on route to anywhere south really, she was reading the local freebie newspaper. The ad stood out in bold type:

THE DISABLED TRUST

Requires full-time carers, ex-health professional welcome; live in: all found.

She made a mental note of the phone number and put the paper down; her bus was due any moment. It was just as she got up to go to the bus stand that it dawned on her 'live in: all found' the words stuck in her mind, no worries about finding a place to live she thought, ideal. She picked the paper back up off the bench and made her way to the ticket hall to find a phone. Her mobile was out of credit as usual. She only used it for emergencies it was just that in emergencies she never had any credit on it. Still people could still contact her, except that the only people who knew the number were people she didn't want to talk to just now. Lucy found a phone and made the call to DLT arranging to see a Mr Spriggett later that day. The rest, as they say, is history. So here, she was in Chesford slap-bang in the middle of the country two hundred miles away from Bob and enjoying what should have been newfound wealth, independence, and freedom.

Michael Sands was a very wealthy young man, good looking with an excellent career prospect. He had been injured in a skiing accident two years ago that had damaged his spine leaving him in a wheel chair and dependant on others. This had left him morose, understandably so, except that he appeared to blame everyone else for his predicament. The Trust looked after his money and provided him with round-the-clock care, however, even they were becoming increasing annoyed with his quick turnover of staff. Michael had gone through six carers in five months. On the plus side, he had a magnetic personality, which Lucy adored, although initially it may have been pity and the £1500 per month that kept her at his beck and call. The job had become a vocation of joy for her. She revelled in the authority she held over her charge. It was almost like being back in charge of a ward again. She was her own boss to a certain extent and could arrange her own hours in conjunction with the other carer She felt strangely drawn to Michael. He was after all a very attractive looking man.

Michael enjoyed a drink and encouraged Lucy to drink with him. Many nights they spent together intoxicated recounting their problems to each other. The depression grew worse with each

drink but the alcoholic fog masked any real problems and Lucy was content. (She always was content when she was drunk; it was only when sober that she bemoaned her lot). They made a strange couple, Michael with his miserable temperament cursing the world for his invalid status and Lucy recounting the traumas of her romantic encounters. She was careful to avoid mentioning Bob by name, both to Michael and to herself, She had cast him into that wasteland of limbo that stretches forever between marriage and divorce.

Once a week Lucy had to take Michael into town to collect his money, the insurance for his accident together with a pension and disability allowance came to a tidy sum. They did some shopping and often called in at the Bookies. Michael loved to gamble; he said that it was one of the few pleasures left to him. He was able to fill out the slips himself and watched the races on TV at home. It made him feel independent. Lucy understood, but she hated going to the Betting Shop, it was always full of old men smelling of stale beer and cigarettes, a noisy tanoy and a fog of chauvinism in the air. She detested it!

Moonlit trees whisper you wisdom but try not to probe too far;

Your haunting voice echoing through the stone valleys of existence,

Screams out like the siren at the Velvet Sun factory

Mark was idly chatting to 'The Snake' when Jack Starr appeared; he always just appeared. Rumour has it that he is actually an Alien life form able to turn himself invisible and reappear at will at just the appropriate moments. There again it is probably just a skill that most management develop.

"I would be grateful if we could start work soon, lunchtime ended three and half minutes ago"

"Just checking on a delivery" Larry replied

"Are you loaded up yet?" Jack sneered

"Not Quite"

"Well go and get on with it, and lets try and deliver the stuff without any mishaps or we will be taking money out of your wages to pay for the damage" Jack continually harangued Larry about his ability, or lack of, in driving skills. To be fair, Jack did have a point Larry had had three smashes in a month, only minor skirmishes but over £1000 in damage plus lost stock: dented tins and

damaged reels. The last one was a rush contract and resulted in overtime being worked to replace the special Blue required for a printer in York. It was not a standard stock item so the factory had to work until midnight to get the replacement order finished. Larry was not a popular chap that day.

Mark left the two of them to discuss the finer points of delivering contracts on time and intact and returned to his office. He had a mountain of paperwork to get through – why they didn't invest in a computer, God only knows and if He did, He certainly wasn't telling Mark Hero. The invoices were simply copies of the delivery note but had to be processed and then filed separately. Why they couldn't use the same form? Ours is not to reason why etc. The machinations of management within the workings of British industry will forever remain a mystery.

From his office on the ground floor, Mark could hear Bobby Womach was whistling a number by the Beatles (well actually, although it bore some resemblance to a Beatles track it was totally unrecognisable to almost everyone else except Bobby). The Fat Man and Jack Starr were deep in conversation in the top office and thus unable to see Bobby hurtle towards the mezzanine floor. It was too late anyway and the yellow painted forked monster careered into the metal beams that supported the upper floor. Mark shot up when he heard the crash, so did Jack Starr and the Fat Man, as well as others in the area that could hear the thud of metal on metal over the din of varnish making.

“You are supposed to lower the forks to get underneath” Jack shouted running down the metal stairs to survey the damage.

“I thought you had a licence for that thing?”

Bobby had stopped whistling by now, he hated being torn off a strip; after all he used to be a captain (although nobody ever found out what he was a captain of). And so Jack read the riot Act, Bobby pretended to listen and Mark buried himself in the paperwork and thought of his happy sunshine girl Sarah-Jane. She was a good kid really, just seems a bit off sometimes – its probably just women's stuff he thought.

3. Pevensey Polonaise

.....The statues are falling; they're starting to cry

Turn their backs on the crowds and whisper goodbye.

The warm caress of morning smiled sweetly over the blue azure of sea and Mark awoke to see the stern figure of Mr Bluebottle the policeman standing over him. Because of this untimely intrusion on the privacy of the hikers, breakfast had to be abandoned. Mark and Sarah hastily skipped along the promenade, blew kisses to the lonely telescope and alighted a number fifty-one bus bound for yet another somewhere. The crisp cold air of an October morning formed dainty frost patterns on the window of the vehicle. Mark and Sarah-Jane paid their fare to the conductor (now there is a novelty, bus conductors!) and ten minutes later, at nine o'clock they were standing on the corner of the main road to Brighton.

It was just as Mark was trying to retrieve a squashed packet of Embassy filter tips from the dew damp pocket of his anorak that an over-sized delivery lorry came thundering towards them in a cloud of carbon-monoxide fumes. A few frantic scrambled seconds later, a little struggling to reach the high cabin of the truck and Mark and Sarah-Jane were sitting side by side of the man with the khaki teeth.

“Come far have ya?” he said grinning through his friendly nicotine breath “just bin to Portsmouth meself, on to Folkestone but I'm stopping at Brighton if that'll do ya”

“What... oh..... Yes” stammered Mark. The constant jolting of the wagon and the metronome beat of the tyres on the road made it difficult to hear conversation. Mark and Sarah were both tired and he said yes not really knowing exactly where they going. Any port in a storm he thought: Brighton, Folkestone at that precise moment he didn't really care.

The sun was sadly approaching the midday quarter as the sluggish six-wheeler strolled into Hove. Mark and Sarah-Jane dismounted on a deserted sea front and made for the beach where the

waxing moon had sent the tide to the shore. The couple were soon serving dinner courtesy of a cold can of baked beans, under the watching eyes of late-season tourists. It was nice to think how beautiful the seaside was in July or August compared to the barren desert that the lovers looked out on now. The clinking cutlery emptied the sparse meal, and they sat dreaming under the shadow of an empty pier. As the organ played "I do like to be Beside the Sea-Side" and the crowds that weren't there danced with the sky.

Hail, fair dreamer sighed the sky; a willing welcome breathed the wind.

And the sun, lost in her silver beams, sets in its crescent the hopes of the day.....

Lazily the happy couple lounged away the remainder of the time as the windows of happiness drew their curtains to the afternoon. Two o'clock saw the twin shadows of Sarah-Jane Sullivan and Mark Hero walking on the outskirts of Brighton, on a clearway outside of Roedean, public school for girls. How relieved they were when Rosalyn arrived from nowhere to give them a lift in the new Ford that 'Daddy' had bought her. Spirits were high again and Hastings came into focus, at least in their minds if not in practice, as the car sped across the shiny surface. Alas, their joy was not to last for long. Ruthless Rosalyn turned off at a junction for Lewes, leaving the stranded couple munching on a marathon bar outside Sunnyfield Farm. Now there's a name almost guaranteed to produce constant rain, rather reminiscent of Happy Valley in Mid Wales a beautiful area permanently treated to the fine spray that visits on the breeze from Cardigan Bay. Anyway where was I? - Please do pay attention, I'll be asking questions later. Oh yes Sunnyfield farm. Softly Sarah lay down on the lush green grass stained grey by autumns' cruel hand. Mark was content to use his rack-sack as a pillow, whilst Sarah used Mark.. Old Father Time must have seen them as he rushed by on his silver steed and slowly the sky began to fade into the blackness of the evening. The sun began to set and the lovers went to sleep.

Morning light bring me a cigarette so that I can die of lung cancer,

Like everyone else in this shell, once a city, now reduced

to a charcoal frame, burnt to the ground, like the Velvet Sun Factory.

No one knew how the fire had started but the acrid smoke, from the many chemicals used in the ink-making process, hung in the air. The twelve fire tenders attending the incident attested to the

seriousness with which chemical fires were always viewed. The first Mark knew about it was when black smoke billowed across his office window. Marks' office was at the back of the factory, at ground level with two small windows one looked out into the yard the other into the factory itself. It was only a small cabin affair. The only two other people housed there beside Mark were the account manager, Marks' immediate boss, David and his secretary Janice. The alarm rang raucously soon after, and pandemonium broke away from its mooring. The Fat Man was out doing what Managing Directors do while workers man the pumps. (Although for safety reasons, boots and not plimsolls were to be worn at all times on the shop floor) Jack Starr was invisible as usual; conspicuous by his absence, so all the marshalling of employees fell to James Porter-Brown. He loved it. His authoritative voice was commanding and instantly obeyed by most people, Bobby (the captain) Womach being the exception.

Outside the factory, the assemblage waited for Jack to appear, which he duly did to carry out a head count. Having counted the heads he then moved on to the arms and legs. Look, if you don't like corny jokes, I'm sorry but I'm writing this so I get to choose all right? The Fire Brigade busied themselves dousing the smouldering bags of calcium phosphate and the bags of pigments. There wasn't that many flames but the smoke was horrendous and the damage caused by the smoke and the foam used to fight the fire was worse than that of the fire itself. By the time the Fat Man arrived, with face like a thundercloud ready to burst its load on an unsuspecting public, the fire was well under control. He called Jack over for a 'chat'. Not being privy to the private machinations of management, Mark had no idea whether or not they were discussing the cause of the fire. He speculated with Larry about smoking, officially allowed only in the canteen, but Larry knew, like everyone else that smoking went on all over the factory. As he said to Mark, it's always discreet and everyone sensible, no one would leave around a discarded butt.

“No I think it's the Chemicals,” said the driver

“So someone set fire to them then?” Mark expressed his incredulity.

“No I've seen it before, at Palmers when I worked there, certain chemicals can react with each other. Spontaneous combustion they call it.” Larry looked quite pleased to have remembered the correct terminology “One chemical reacts with a bit of something else; all it needs is

a catalyst and Bob's your uncle". But Mark didn't have an Uncle Bob (*Sorry, but I did warn you!*)

"We just started taking that new Blue Sulphur in for that Durham job," said Mark not really believing Larry's theory about spontaneous combustion.

"Yes and who knows what it's stacked next to there's never any room on them racks they put stuff anywhere here."

"It started in the stock area then?" Mark asked quizzically.

"Oh yes, Jack thinks someone was having a crafty fag, but I don't think so."

"Well the Fire Service will find out if there was fag-end there," offered Mark.

"Yes and then there's the Health & Safety Executive They'll have to be brought in as well" Larry interrupted him.

It was some two hours later that the Fat Man decided to send everyone home for the day.

"Come in as normal tomorrow, we'll need to get the place cleaned up. We've still customers out there and all of our jobs depend on that," he thundered.

Mark was quite pleased to have an afternoon off and skipped through the gates, he would go and meet Sarah-Jane from college.

The statues look down on the lover's dreams,

They're trying to tell them, it's not all that it seems.

Michael was still testing his new carer, running Lucy ragged. Even after she had dressed him, attended to his toilet needs, changed all the bed sheets and fed him, he would still ring the buzzer of the flat. It was as though he liked the power. She was on call and he was going to use her fully. Very often, when she came over he would want a glass of water or a book changing "I've read this before" he would say.

'You didn't tell me that when I gave it you, you awkward bastard' Lucy thought, but she never complained, at least not to Michael. She felt sympathy for him; he needed company. He was a pain in the backside but she was growing quite fond of him despite his belligerence. Sometimes she even stayed over when it was not her turn, after all, she had nowhere else to go, her social life was non-existent, and Michael was generous, with his whisky at least.

It was on one of their expeditions into the wide world that Lucy and Michael met Mark and

Sarah-Jane. Literally bumping into them outside Tesco's. Lucy was still half sloshed from the previous night, having engaged in a heavy morning 'session' with Michael, as usual when depression engulfed his crippled body he tried to bury the problem beneath a lake of liquor. Thus, Lucy's co-ordination with the wheelchair was not all that it should have been. Sarah was window-shopping in her mind, away with the fairies, as was getting quite common lately, and she clattered into Michael, her young lithe body sprawling across the invalid.

"I'm really sorry," Lucy said as she helped extricate Sarah from an astonished but smiling Michael.

"It's OK I wasn't looking where I was going" Sarah smiled at Lucy to show she wasn't hurt and held no hard feelings, which was a lot more than could be said for Michael - if anyone could have seen!

"You can bump into me anytime gorgeous" he charmed.

"This is Michael" Lucy introduced her charge, "My name's Lucy."

"Hi I'm Mark and....."

"I'm Sarah-Jane" Sarah gushed enthusiastically interrupting her boyfriend.

The couples quickly passed on their separate ways after exchanging pleasantries, and the incident was forgotten, certainly by Lucy. Michael however, did not forget and entertained fantasies about his encounter with the teenager:

"It isn't every day an angel like that falls into your lap," he said quite loudly for passing crowds to overhear.

"Tch Tch Michael she's at least 15 years your junior."

"So what? All I have left is my dreams."

Lifeless limbs lay back in slumber, piercing eyes all set to wander,

Upon her body, he drinks his lust, mind alive and body crushed.

Wash and scrub; cook and clean, - "Treat me well I'll still be mean."

Deep in thought, don't look for clues, Lady sings The Wheelchair Blues!.....

....."Blues.... blues?" "No thanks Enoch, not now." Aretha's' voice belched out over the

speakers. The DJ spun his web of deceit and didn't see the small brown envelopes as they changed hands. The packets of dreams being peddled by the jingle jangle man from his basket of lies. Visions of a rainbow coloured clown, sowing seeds of maliciousness over Adam's paradise and Enoch puffing a long fat cigar, his pearly white teeth grinning through the rubber mouth door. She didn't know what was fantasy any more and what was real.

The music swayed soulfully the disc jockey piloted the Stax of plastic tunes that sat beside him. He saw everything but noticed nothing. The alcoholic mist provided some answers but no questions. The crystal ball revolving in the mirrored ceiling did catch a glimpse of steel in its beam, but no one saw the knife until I was too late, and the young man lay bleeding on the floor; life's blood oozing from a purpled heart.

Mark grabbed Sarah and pulled her from Enoch's grasp; half-walking; and half-running and skipping they left through the side exit and jumped on the vacant Vespa. Its lamps illuminated the blackness like a hundred eyes. The engine roared into life. Still dazed from her journey into never-never land Sarah clung on, not aware of the chaos behind her. The flashing lights faded to blue and the bass drumbeat changed to shrieking sirens.

The statues can see all there is to see,

They catch a glimpse of the lovers as they flee.

.....

Mark was the first to wake from the unscheduled slumber, the sky was beginning to darken, but still they had to make it to a reasonable place to spend the night. Sarah held tightly onto Mark as they trundled on past the secret shadows of Pevensey. The castle cast its inquiring eyes at the misty shapes, which dared to approach its quarter. The bugler blew his trusty horn: 'Out of darkness cometh light, and Childe Rolande to the Dark Tower came' Bypassing Pevensey castle was in fact a mistake. The intended route through Eastbourne however had now been abandoned (partly due to lack of time and partly due to a very unfortunate lift from the man with the plastic raincoat.) The night was still and overpowering, how silently, how silently the stars shone down on Pevensey. The knights of old embraced their effigies in the chapel of the Crusader and the night-eyed owls called out from the quaint old gate in front of the portcullis. It was an eerie place, silent and cold, but no doubt, if the

ancient walls could speak they would tell tales of warm blood and battles glorious.

The two hitch hikers were given a history lesson from the man in the green Volkswagen as it pushed its way through the autumn mists of Pevensey past William the Conquerors landing place, according the extremely knowledgeable, but boring driver. Mark was never one to dwell on the past and Sarah thought the chap was too much like her schoolmasters. Orange lights penetrated the murky depths of dusk, daintily on the subtle highway, but the scene lightened somewhat with the introduction of streets lights as they approached the outskirts of town.

It was fast approaching nine o'clock when Mark and Sarah were sitting on the Hastings-St Leonard's public transport vehicle smoking the last of yet another packet of cigarettes. Only the night and the shadows of Pevensey knew what had happened to the afternoon. The castle was quiet and quaint with its dark buttresses, its bailey, and its terraced towers. Their heads were swimming with the excitement of all. The serene tranquillity, the sweet, sweet peace captured so perfectly and encased in the silent dungeon of Pevensey Castle.

Fairy lights lined the coastal road through St Leonard's and Hastings to celebrate at least some of the holiday spirit. Christmas never seems like Christmas these days especially when the decorations begin to appear sometime after the summer holidays. The lapping of the sea and the soft whispers of courting couples on the promenade made Hastings seem far more real than Southsea or even Brighton, with its curious town and inquisitive people. Lying stretched out on the coarse sand of Hastings beach Sarah-Jane sipped with her ultra-feminine lips at the scalding soup called mushroom. Overhead the small silver gulls circled. As the tide crept into the shore bringing with it the startling stench of seaweed wrapped around the stones that now lined the point where the sand, such as it was, plunged deep into the channel and was never seen again to be called England. The distant light-ship passed to and fro some fifty or sixty times with the regularity of an athletes pulse. The love-huddled twins coupled together for warmth and stared out at the funny little animals above the sea. Clouds of silver and grey wings with high squeaky voices swooped across the bay, and Mark spent much time deciding whether they were indeed gulls or bats. A glance at his luminous Timex, the two-thirty news on Radio Luxembourg confirmed his suspicions, and he realised that the night was half-gone and they were yet to sleep.

Suddenly, a torch-beam hit the cold damp sand around their sea-kissed ankles. The waves licked the golden, glistening sand and the one solitary light on the promenade shone down to meet the shy smile of morning's moon. Mark nudged Sarah-Jane and they both stared in amazement as a group of four or five people cast their rods into the sea. Mark looked again at his ever-reliable watch: three-twenty five Am.....3-25a.m. and fishing! The ability to stand and watch fish throw themselves on metal hooks has never ceased to amaze me. However, before long the fishermen soon tripped back to their waiting beds, lacking warmth through their absence. Mark and Sarah cooked some more soup with water from the public convenience, which looked in dire need of company, standing alone on the prom. The soup, chicken noodle, or was it oxtail? Sufficed to defrost the vagabonds and Mark rolled over to embrace his lover. How wonderful love was; but how synthetic, Mark thought as Sarah-Jane pushed her petal lips towards his. The dawn began to smile from its haven above wrapping the beach in the aroma of love.

Raindrops call her neon name, while velvet light rebukes the dawn

And life is sealed in silk-soaked cloud of gossamer dreams on a dew cast sea.

The pulsating lights of the Roostertail were only a memory deep down on the computer of the mind. Mark could still hear Police sirens as he dropped off Sarah-Jane and returned Paul's Vespa to walk the last bit of his journey to Spencer House. It was nearly 1 am and he had work tomorrow. The streets were quiet as Mark walked home, kicking polystyrene food trays into the gutter. Tin cans rattled through the empty walkways, littered with multi-coloured yawns. - Just another weekend night in Chesford! Mark would have to square it with Paul, he knew that but he had to get Sarah out of there. Fights meant police and that spelt trouble. After all, Sarah-Jane was under age!

Paul's place was about half a mile from Spencer House. Mark had known Paul since they both moved from Nottingham about six years ago. They had been 'Burton Mods' in the old days and Paul still clung on to the image even though time had passed him by and life had moved on. He usually left his scooter at the club anyway over the weekend and collected it the next day when he was sober. Ever since Mark had sold his bike (he had always intended to get a car but never did), Paul had given him the spare keys for the Vespa to use as and when, usually to fetch him home when he was incapable or intoxicated, or both. I'll ring him tomorrow Mark thought better still I'll stuff a note

through his letterbox on the way to work.

A little old dog sauntered round the bend wagging his tail in a mistaken greeting for Mark. The poor thing was a stray and greeted every visitor to the area in the hope of a meal. Mark bent down, stroked the emaciated head, and spent a few minutes fussing the animal. The dog soon realised that fuss was all that was on offer and decided to try his luck elsewhere. Mark liked dogs and used to have one but the tenancy rules of the flat prevented him from keeping one now, anyway he was always either at work or out, so it wouldn't really be fair on the animal.

It was 1-15 am when Mark reached the five storey block at the back of Chesford square, he used his key, the entry phone being disabled after midnight, and considerately, very quietly entered, then closed the door behind him, rather than let it slam. He climbed the stairs; those stairs he had climbed and counted so many times in a vain attempt to find the missing step. There were ten steps between each of the five floors, so why when he counted did he only get 49 and not 50. This along with how the driver of the snowplough gets to work when it's snowing and why do jam butties fall jam side down, was destined to become one of the great-unanswered questions of the universe. Anyway now was not the time to puzzle over such mysteries of mathematics.

He reached the door of his flat, turned the key in the lock, and walked in. The flats in Spencer House were unusual in design. Built on two levels as most flats were, they were upside down and back to front. On the first floor was a lobby from the front door to a lounge/diner area and a kitchen, whilst downstairs was the bedroom and a bathroom and shower area. It was a strange arrangement, which Mark found awkward at first but now accepted as perfectly normal.

He was dead tired but needed a drink to unwind, not that he was a big drinker by any means, but his mind was swimming with the events of the night: The flashes of light - the plastic smile of Enoch. Mark was sure he had seen blood on his shirt, no perhaps not. He certainly had not seen the fight start, but was quick to avoid getting him or Sarah-Jane embroiled in any bother. They always left before the end anyway and the Rooster closed at 1am on Sundays, so no big deal! I must talk to Paul tomorrow Mark reminded himself, not only about the bike but to see if Paul had seen anything. Thus with things settled best he could in the machinery of his brain, he went downstairs to the bedroom, set the Radio alarm and almost fell into the deep pile of the duvet.

Sleep came easy to Mark he had never had any bother reaching the land of Nod. He was one of those lucky people who could either sift through the problems of the day before retiring or in those few moments before unconsciousness set in, and thereby leaving the night free for deep relaxing sleep and not the troublesome dreams that seem to haunt so many of his friends. His last thoughts before reaching the higher state were of his Sarah-Jane. Her smile could sustain him through any crisis.

4. Hastings Habanera

The statutes are silent their voices unheard

They're looking down on the square and think it's absurd

The lapping of the lunar controlled ocean sweeping its swollen waves onto the beige beach of Hastings seafront gently woke the young lovers from their tortured sleep. The sea birds called to their mates as they spotted the shoals of silver fish darting through the rolling foam. Sarah-Jane cuddled up to Marks' warm body and gazed up into his opening eyes.

“Any fags left” she said.

“Only one, we can share it if you like, then I'll get some from the café up there,” Mark pointed towards the brightly painted shack on the promenade. A small friendly looking transport café owned by a man called Pete, according to the legend above the shop. The bright orange colour on the side of the building glared at the morning, greeting the visitors with its' garish smirk. Pete was obviously a man of great taste and absolutely no sense of colour, as no doubt the increase in the incidence of migraine in the area since the re-decoration took place, would testify.

Mark and Sarah-Jane finished the last cancer-stick and ambled over towards the gaudy building, it was actually a lot further away than it looked. The air was thick with cooking steam as they opened the door to the café, walked in and sat down at a melamine-topped table to read the menu. Now for simplicity's' sake the word 'grease ' had been omitted from the menu (although as it was a non-chargeable item I suppose that is fair enough) Having caught a glimpse of the wonderful fare served up in the name of breakfast to other diners, and much preferring more egg and bacon with his grease, Mark decided on toast. Sarah followed his lead, she was not very hungry anyway, but needed a coffee, and at least the café was warm. Mark walked up to the counter, negotiating the haphazardly arranged tables as he did so. The faintly moustachioed woman peered from under her spectacles and explained that cigarettes were on sale at the newsagent two doors away and that she was serving

someone else already so would he mind waiting a second please. Mark returned to the table and Sarah.

“I’ll have to nip next door to the newsagents for fags, you order and I’ll be back in a tick,” he said to his paramour.

“Oh yeah okay, don’t be long though I need the loo” Sarah’s voice was slow and trailed off towards the end of the sentence. She had a vacant look on her face, the sort that made Mark feel like knocking twice on her forehead to ask if anyone was in.

“Are you okay, babe,” he said, “I’ll be as quick as I can, couple of minutes.”

“Yes fine” Sarah responded.

Mark was actually gone for about fifteen minutes in all. What with the chap in the cap who did not know what he wanted; and the surly shop assistant who did not seem to care what he wanted; Mark felt that he was losing the will to live whilst waiting to be served.

By the time he did return, Sarah was chatting to a tall unshaven man and sipping dark brown gravy that was masquerading as coffee.

“Don is driving north today and offered us a lift back home if we want” Sarah chirped up.

“Yeah Grimsby Docks, leaving in about a quarter of an hour if that’s all right” the swarthy looking man joined in.

“Oh fine yes” a startled Mark responded” we’ll drop off anywhere that suits you, we don’t have to back till tonight anyway. Thanks a lot”

“I’ll be going A21, then up the 42 and across, got a drop in Birmingham first ya see so just ya give us a yell where you wanna be” he smiled through his dark bristles at the young couple.

“The M40 services at Warwick will be fine, won’t it love,” Mark replied trying to involve Sarah, if only to stop her staring at Don “We can spend the rest of the day there, and we can always get a bus home from there if necessary” Mark continued.

“Great, mine’s the red wagon at the side” Don said waving his arm vaguely towards the left hand windows of the café, “Bookers Transport, see ya in a bit”. He turned back to his own table to continue with his ‘Heart Attack’ special, a wondrous concoction of fried eggs, bacon, black pudding, and mushrooms served on tomato-flavoured bed of Castrol GTX

Mark turned his attention to his coffee, he took it black but wished he hadn’t now and began

looking around for milk to take away the taste of pork from the drink. The spoon whirred in the mug mixing the creamy fluid and making patterns on the surface. Smiling swirling faces looking up at him, twisted shapes of nothingness as the coffee grounds rose to the top of the mug. (Well he hoped they were coffee grounds anyway). He took a sip casting a glance at Sarah as he did so. He was becoming increasingly worried about her. Her violent mood swings were getting worse and more frequent. She had looked dead on her feet before he'd gone to get the cigarettes and now she was as bright as a button; she was even flirting with the truck drivers on the next table. Mark knew that she had smoked weed in the past and he had disapproved, that is where he had seen that vacant look before. He knew that she had also experimented with pills.

“Everybody’s does pills,” she said when confronted with the evidence Mark had found.

“Blues, bombers- just pep pills” she argued her bright eyes laughing as she did so.

Now Mark was no expert on amphetamines but he knew the effect was not that instant. He began to puzzle at Sarah’s remarkable powers of recovery. Perhaps she could manage on only three hours sleep he thought, but I’m whacked, ‘Was she on anything now?’ he pondered, winding the spoon round and round the spinning coffee. He stared into the black foaming mug searching for answers, but none came.

“Sarah-Jane are you alright” he eyed her with his serious fatherly look.

“Of course, don’t be silly Mark,” she replied indignantly “I’ve just woke up I need caffeine, you know I can’t face the world without a coffee” Sarah slurred her words; she sounded drunk.

“But aren’t you knackered. I am; we never got much sleep last night” Mark tried a different tack.

“Yea I know, but I guess it’s the sea air or sommut” Sarah straightened up visibly “I’m fine honestly Mark” she added, “You are such a fuss-pot”

Mark let it pass; he was far too tired and too sensible to have an argument at this time. To argue with a woman at any time is to live dangerously, and Mark knew he would need all his faculties to tackle Sarah head on. He looked at his sweetheart. She raised her cute eyebrows to look back at him, her eyes laughed and a smile radiated from her pretty face. He had promised Sarah’s mum he would take good

care of her, but knew it would be pointless continuing with any discussion now, particularly after a smile like that!

While the tears gushed loudly like a waterfall of laughter,
he thought of the broken blanket of dreams,
and the girl with the garland thread in her hair was smiling.

The rain will sing you a song while the sun sleeps in its shell,
the pavement stones are painted like a mosaic dream,
and the girl with the rainbow smile was standing alone.

Lucy had always been quite contented with looks. She assessed herself as she looked into the large mirror that hung in the back room. Her boobs weren't bad, her legs were long and shapely and unlike most women she knew, she was quite satisfied with her bottom, not too big and not too small. At 29 years old she considered herself young, although she was never one for fashion in either clothes or music, she always managed to look smart and well dressed. She liked to consider herself sophisticated, classic rather than trendy - modern rather than frumpy. She tried to keep up to date but did not care for the delicate and frivolous trends of youth. Yes, all in all Lucy was happy with her lot. She was happier in fact, than she had been for very a long time. She now found herself spending more and more of her free time with Michael. They talked: she'd learnt all about his family and why he felt so alone now. He told her about his job, how successful he had been, his achievements, full of so much promise until cruelly denied the fruit of his labours. They drank: many evenings were wiled away in idle chatter as the whisky flowed freely. They watched TV together, mainly movies although Michael seemed to enjoy nature documentaries, which suited Lucy as she too marvelled at the scenery. Her viewing pleasure increased by Michael's asides telling her anecdotes of the places he had visited. Michael was extremely knowledgeable on places, people and their history, although whether that was as a result of travelling or reading, Lucy did not know, but she enjoyed his tales nonetheless. They had even gone out together socially albeit only to the Bingo Hall in town. The relationship was growing fast. The bud was blooming into a rose. Sure, there were thorns but its petals were wonderful and the blossom smelt sweet.

It was early one evening when Michael suggested, that, as there was nothing on the box That he wanted to see, why not watch what he called a 'naughty video'

"In the cabinet alongside the bed" he called over to Lucy, who was busying herself 'in the back room "the one in the red cover," he added.

Lucy went into the front bedroom, Michael's room, and searched the bedside cabinet. There were four videos in there, all in plain unmarked covers. All except one were in black plastic boxes. Lucy opened the red box:-'The Prisoner' 'Innocent enough title' she thought and brought it downstairs to insert in the state of the art video player for Michael to watch. Lucy had seen 'blue' movies before they did not really do anything for her but she was not prudish about them. Live and let live she thought. All she needed was the sensual touch of a real man warming her body up to sexual temperature to turn her on; she had never needed artificial stimulation of any kind.

"I'll go and prepare the supper then" Lucy said to Michael as he switched the television to the VCR channel.

"No don't go, sit her and watch it with me I'm not very hungry anyway." He gestured to her to sit down.

"I might not like the film "Lucy responded, trying to sound indignant.

"You will if you sit here," Michael's eyes sparkled as he nodded to the empty space on the couch beside him and she knew what he meant. Despite his disability, Michael was able to touch and feel some things. Lucy had to lift him bodily on and off the couch, the bed and into the bath; she didn't always use the pulley, which was in the bathroom, and Michael had often touched her intimately during the lifting process. Initially she had put it down as an accident, but then as it happened with increasing regularity she knew he meant it. Indeed she quite enjoyed the attention and the limited fondles he offered. She even slept alongside him on two previous occasions masturbating him while he performed his perfunctory foreplay.

The TV jumped into life. Michael fast-forwarded the interminable adverts for films of the same ilk with obscure titles and equally obscure stars, if stars were indeed the term. The film opened in a kind of army barracks. An old castle looking building provided the sparse looking setting.

"They spend a lot of budget on scenery" Lucy commented, desperately trying to

hold back her amusement at the cheap quality of the film.

“Quiet in the gallery” Michael quipped.

“Sorry, Michael” she said, But Lucy’s apology was drowned out by the uninspired and insipid background music to the film.....A smartly dressed young woman was walking through a myriad of winding corridors, flanked by two female Arab officers, their uniforms and weapons indicated they were guards of some description. Eventually after the scene setting music died away, a door opened and the woman was pushed roughly inside Amazingly the Arab guard spoke in perfect Oxford English “You strip now please.”

“I’ll do no such thing” the western woman replied indignantly.

This is a comedy thought Lucy, but she said nothing to Michael. The butch looking guard who was obviously neither Arab nor a good actress then produced a revolver and it pointed at the captive’s head barking “You are not required to speak yet, just get your clothes off and be quick about it. It was all Lucy could do to stop herself from laughing. Michael grabbed her hand and pulled it towards his groin; she felt a stirring and knew what he desired. She unzipped his fly and slipped her hand inside, with her other hand she undid her bra to allow Michael’s’ limited hand movement access to her sensitive area. Michael was obviously getting excited by the film or by Lucy’s expert fingers. She turned towards the screen to look at the woman. The Prisoner’s’ screams had made her take an interest. The captive was now naked stretched up with her hands handcuffed above her head and standing on tiptoe she was weeping loudly at her chagrin and embarrassment - Lucy was in hysterics; it was so unreal!

“I didn’t know you were into bondage,” she whispered gently in Michael’s ear.

“I’m not really, but it is indicative of my position don’t you think?” Lucy didn’t think anything at all; she found the whole situation comical and definitely not erotic “Do you find the film exciting?” Michael continued in his velvet tone, the one he used when he reverted to little boy lost mode, with his puppy dog eyes and doleful face.

“It’s Okay” Lucy replied hiding her boredom at the pathetic scenario, she hadn’t the heart to tell him what she really thought of the film. She could read his look though, and immediately, smiled back at him sweetly, then buried her head in his lap bringing her luscious tongue into play.

The hazel mask of glassy eyes a passionate sandwich of love,
With fingertips, that glowing red caresses the slender trunk.
Alive but drugged with ecstasy the virgin stream strides on.
The forest of her undergrowth is, as sunlight seems to die.

.....

Sarah-Jane sat cuddled up to Mark in between him and the string bean of a driver, Don as they sat high above the tarmac ribbon wending its way to their destination. Don was quite chatty as they passed through the villages and towns on route to the giant car park known as the M25. ‘Chris Rhea’s Road to Hell’ Mark thought ‘we’re already on it!’ He was not in the mood for chatting. Sarah has enough verbal diarrhoea for both of us he considered quietly to himself. Thoughts flashed into his tired and tortured brain, in all the two years he and Sarah-Jane had known each other neither of them had ever been with anyone else. They both implicitly trusted each other, but now Mark’s mind was working overtime and beginning to question the basis of their relationship. He searched the hot black tar as it curled under the windscreen before him. He found many questions –Why did Sarah spend time with Enoch at the Roostertail and then act as if she hated him when they were offered a lift the other day? – Who was the girl she was talking to near John on Sunday night? Moreover, why did that girl lunge at John with a knife? Who was she? And was that what started the fight? Too many questions he thought and not enough logical explanations. Perhaps it would become clearer when they got back home, but Mark doubted it, he was only fooling himself, he knew that.

All the kids knew John; they all got their stuff from him but Enoch, now he was a puzzle, an enigma. Everyone, including Mark always assumed him to be a major player, but he just did not fit the part, no flashy car, no flashy pad, not even flashy clothes Although there was not that many of Mark’s circle of friends that ever got invited to ‘E’s famed parties. Enoch was always smart, always trendy, but never ostentatious or over the top, he attracted attention without being ‘in your face’ as the locals called it. He was friendly and polite; Mark had never seen him get angry, but he didn’t appear to do anything work-wise, which is why I suppose, the rumours seem to constantly surround him. About a year ago, he was supposed to be the local pimp, Enoch actually encouraged that one; it was good for his image.

“Life is an illusion Man,” He would say, “You can be anything you wants to be”

Enoch’s real claim to fame stemmed from his ability to know exactly when something was going down. A party or rave, a concert, any sort of gig within trucking distance of town and not only did Enoch know about it but he probably organised it and was selling tickets for it as well. He had originally moved into Chesford in the sixties with his family, so he had grown up in the area and got to know it well; they had came up from London where his dad was born. So Enoch, as a second generation Jamaican considered himself totally English (even if he did wear that ridiculous Rasta hat in the middle of summer and support the West Indians at cricket)

“You’re a bit quiet lad” Don the bean man broke Mark’s digressions.

“Yeah, sorry, I was drifting; I’m tired” Mark apologised for his lack of interest in his travelling companion’s conversation.

“He’s always tired” interjected Sarah-Jane “Never got any energy, he’s old and boring!” she laughed wickedly her eyes flashing a thousand darts towards her lover’s heart.

Mark knew that that was just not true, if anything, it was the opposite. Sarah-Jane was the one with the problem; she was constantly tired and moody. He had always put it down to a teenage girl thing, but now he was not so sure. The moodiness was getting more frequent and random. No! it was Sarah-Jane who was never at home these days. There was a light on but nobody was in!

The glasses clinked to symbolise the end of another phase,

a weekend web unwinding whilst work stood still,

and the girl with the crystal cut eyes was laughing

While the grandfathers’ neon face approached the midnight quarter,

the white cloaked figure crept from the shadows of revelry

and the girl with the ribbon in her hair had gone.

Lucy and Michael were woken by an attempt to beat the door of its hinges. It was Aysha, the other carer. She shouted loudly through the letterbox.

“What’s she want” Michael was not keen on Aysha, her tongue was sharp and she gave back as good as she got. Michael didn’t like her cold efficient manner he said that she made him feel

like a piece of meat.

“It’s her shift and she said she’d come early to give me a hand with you in the bath”

Lucy explained, “I told you, her back has been playing up so I said I would give her some help

“I don’t need a bath” Thank you very much “Now go and get rid of her,” Michael snapped.

Lucy got up and after straightening her dress, she turned the television off, before going towards the door. The video had stopped, and two extremely patronising women were discussing the seven-year itch on GMTV. Lucy and Michael had slept on the couch all night!

The door banged again. Aysha shouted “Are you awake in there, come on open up”

“Get rid of her,” Michael shouted back. Lucy opened the door.

“You took your time” the girl quipped and walked in “I’ve been ringing the buzzer from the flat for ages, have you turned it off?” she said waltzing forward into the kitchen to check the unit.

“Michael!” Lucy turned to her charge “Why did you do that?”

“You know why, I needed peace and quiet; you two fussing over me like Mother Hens.”

“That’s very foolish, you know the buzzer is supposed to be on at all times, it’s for your own safety” Lucy answered “What if you’d have had an accident? How long has it been turned off” she continued her tirade

“He’s just a self-centred little man, never any consideration,” Aysha joined in the verbal assault.

“If you’ve only come here to insult me you might as well go home again” Michael retaliated.

“I might just do that one of these days” Aysha retorted realising at once that the words were addressed to her.

“I don’t know why we put up with you and your moods”

“Well you know where the door is” Michael was unrepentant, and secretly enjoying every minute of the altercation.

“If you’re not happy with my work why don’t you just say so,” the carers’ face was like thunder she was intensely proud of her work record, and always took a pride in her assignments.

“He doesn’t mean it Ays he’s just grumpy today,” Lucy said defending Michael vigorously.

“He’s always grumpy, it’s no wonder carers come and go like Piccadilly station” Aysha

answered visibly upset.

“I’m not grumpy. I am the client and you’d do well to remember that young lady,” Michael retorted, addressing his comments to Aysha, although he was looking mischievously at Lucy.

“Leave it Aysha, he’s trying to wind you up, you should know him by now.” Lucy was right, Michael was playing games something he often did of late.

“I don’t know how you’ve put up with him for so long,” she said to Lucy “If he’s getting personal, and questioning my ability, I don’t know whether I wish to continue working for him.” Aysha was good at her job, she may have been cold and clinical but she was good, probably better than Lucy, but whereas Lucy felt emotion, and even love for Michael, to Aysha he was the client, nothing more. It was a job, full stop.

“If I didn’t need this job I would get out now” she continued her icy exterior cracking

“If you’re worried about that, don’t be” Michael shouted “I’ll pay you till the end of the month and give you a wonderful reference. Close the door on your way out!”

“Fine! You’re a miserable sod anyway; I really can’t understand how Lucy manages. She had never really got on terribly well with Lucy; just a working relationship - they hardly saw much of each other anyway, when Lucy was at the flat Aysha was with Michael and vice versa. In fact Aysha had a boyfriend where she had been spending a lot of time lately so she hadn’t even been in the flat much in recent weeks. So, the two women didn’t meet socially either: Aysha was too busy and Lucy’s social life was non-existent. Lucy tried to calm the situation “Don’t be hasty Aysh, he’s just being Michael.

“No! He’s promised to pay me, so I’m going” Ayshas’ face was like thunder, “I don’t need this hassle just now, I’ve enough problems with my Leroy. I just don’t need it!”

“I’ll see to it that you get your money and reference,” Lucy smiled.

“Cheers I’ll get my bit of stuff out the flat. Good luck with him Luce, you’ll need it!

Aysha turned, picked up her bag, and went back through the door. Lucy turned round towards Michael, he was beaming from ear to ear. “Michael you are incorrigible” she said.

“Yes, but lovely with it”. He laughed loudly.

5. Dance of the Swans

The statues look down with tears in their eyes,

They cover their ears and can't hear her cries

The sun was framed in a blue tinted cloudless sky. The gentle breeze fanned a cool breeze of air across the horizon, making it a rather pleasant afternoon as Don set Mark and Sarah down at the motorway services. Sarah-Jane was still buoyant.

“I'm hungry, let's get some eats”

“Okay, but we'd better walk into the town, it's not far and these places are well pricey”

Mark replied adjusting the rucksack on his tender shoulders.

Sarah planted a kiss on his surprised lips; she was certainly not the same shy seventeen year old he once knew. They held hands, or rather, Sarah clutched Marks hand so tightly he felt the blood flow would stop, and they walked off in the direction of Stratford town centre.

Stratford was busy as usual. It was the sort of place that tourists loved. It was always busy whatever time of the year; it was constantly crammed full of Americans, Japanese, or the odd Belgian who had got lost on the way to London. The famous well-preserved Norman castle at nearby Warwick was one of the main attractions, but there was the river and Nature Parks, numerous historic buildings and quaint streets jammed full of gift shops; plus of course the Shakespeare connection. Every little trinket in the myriad of souvenir shops carried the great mans portrait even the buildings tried to get in on the act: The Shakespeare Tavern, The Bards Head, The Playwright Rooms.. In fact every part of the beloved poet was turned into a pub, hostelry or eating establishment of some kind. Nearby Chesford claimed association with a proudly displayed signpost: ‘The city in Shakespeare's County’. The mere fact that Shakespeare spent most of his working life in London and had probably never even heard of Chesford, seems to have escaped the city councils notice, No matter back to the plot. Mark bought two packs of sandwiches, some fruit, chocolate and two cans of coke, in one of the small shops

of the small shops that hung so decoratively over the winding streets. The couple made their way to the riverbank to enjoy their snack.

Mrs Swan looked magnificent her white plumage radiant in the sun and her family drifting behind her in rigid formation, their tiny bodies hardly making a ripple on the glass surface of the water. Mark and Sarah-Jane walked alongside the river watching the gliding swan and her entourage, admiring their twists and turns reminiscent of a ballet dancer in a white tutu. They followed the winding river through the flood plain, across the little stone bridge by the theatre and made their way downstream to find a quiet place that Mark knew where no one else came. He wanted to get Sarah alone, and away from the crowds of peering eyes and inquisitive ears. She was too hyper and Mark thought a little tranquillity might calm her tortured soul.

Just after a wide bend in the river, where a small tributary leaves the main spur for 'Price's meadow' a large clump of willows shelter the riverbank from the path. Mark sat Sarah down under the canopy of the largest tree. He liked this place, it was quiet, not quite off the beaten track, but hidden from view because of the hedges and trees; he had come here last summer and sheltered from the blazing July heat. Mark had never like the sun and always avoided it whenever possible. Sarah like most women with dark colouring revelled in it and spent many hours cooking her skin first to a delicate pink and then to golden brown. Mark's skin never got past the salmon pink stage.

They lay side by side. Mrs Swan had taken her ballerinas into the reeds back to the hidden nest. Wispy clouds had just begun to enter the vista of the light blue ceiling. Sarah tried to make sense of their shape.

"There's a dragon up there- can you see its tail" She enthused.

"Sort of." he lied.

"See its head, over there?" Sarah pointed at the fluffy cumulus, "and look it's breathing fire, see?"

"Yes" said Mark unconvinced.

Lying on the banks of the Avon the sun bright in its picture-framed sky, trouble seemed a million miles away but it was only hiding behind the dark trees waiting to pounce on the unsuspecting lovers. Mark was gentle with his angel. Having known Sarah since he was seventeen the two years had been

idyllic. He felt protective towards her, perhaps it was the age gap, they had not even had sex until after Sarah's seventeenth birthday, and even then, it was at her instigation. Mark had grown up during the two years relationship into a mature and responsible adult. Sarah-Jane on the other hand appeared to have stuck into the schoolgirl mode and not ventured into the world of maturity.

"Can I ask you something, sweetie" Mark spoke softly, closely holding Sarah into his body and breathing in her sweet-scented hair.

"Mmmm. "She sighed dreamily, then rolled over, brushing her skirt as she did so.

"You've got your serious head haven't you Markie?"

"Yes- I need to know about Enoch, what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on Mark, I don't like Enoch you know that"

"He's been spending at lot of time with you lately, at the club last week-end, and I heard about the incident at church from Paul"

"Oh that! Look I panicked when I saw a spider and ran out, Enoch just happened to there, that's all. Ask him why, I don't know" Sarah slipped into defensive mode "What's all this for anyway" She smiled her eyes brighter than the suns rays staring at her inquisitor.

"Spiders?" Mark knew the terror they brought on in Sarah-Jane, but never understood the reason why. Sarah smiled back at her stern faced lover, trying to distract him from his goal.

"You would tell me if he was giving you any stuff, wouldn't you?"

"Mark!" She sat upright removing her arm from Mark's chest.

"Don't get all huffy, I'm concerned, that's all" Mark injected.

"You shouldn't even need to ask that question" by now, Sarah had stood up and was pacing up and down. It reminded Mark of his visits to the headmaster's office at Fosters

"Look at me Sarah and tell me you're not taking anything," Mark demanded.

"I'm not, I've told you" Sarah turned round "Honestly Mark" she offered her arms in an act of conciliation- Mark took them (even though he two of his own). He really did not know why he asked her to turn round and look at him, because like most men Mark could never tell when a woman was lying. Sarah-Jane Sullivan was particularly adept at this skill; her large brown eyes were warm and inviting, her smile so sweet and innocent. She could be hiding a six-inch dagger behind her

back and Mark would not have known.

He reached up to caress her and pulled her tightly into himself. She took the initiative, and stroked it gently. They made love, the lush grass sighing in unison with the exquisite movements, the low moan of distant cattle appearing to echo their approval and the sun smiling down on the joined couple as they climbed the mountain of Venus to the very summit. Even the swans came out of their hiding place to dance in accompaniment.

They danced on the wings of whispers in magic oceans of the mind.

The tender arms of silken smiles holding hands in a forest of love

Sigh, she said and Sarah moved, waiting dancers call her name

How swiftly now the forest clears and silver dreams disguise the path.

.....

Robert Simpson, Bob to his friends and family was still trying to work out why Lucy had left him. Sure he was angry and yes, he had raised his fist and hit her, but only once and it had not been hard – well not that hard, she had belted him a few times. He remembered particularly the can of Baked Beans that bounced off his skull necessitating the need for visit to casualty and three stitches. Theirs was certainly a volatile relationship - the children thing did not help the situation – it threatened his masculinity, his very being. He was not sure why it affected him so deeply, but it did. Anyway, why had she gone now? And where to? She was lost on her own. (The self-delusion of the average male never fails to amuse the women of this world. Bob was convinced that Lucy would be back home within a week. That was six months ago - and it still hurt!). He must have tried the mobile a hundred times that first fortnight. The last time he tried it, all he got was the unobtainable tone and the ‘No such number message’. She’s had it disconnected She must have changed the number, Bitch! Thought Bob she didn’t even give me chance to explain'

When the letterbox flapped, Bob still hurried to collect the mail even now he in spite of everything he expected to hear something, just a note would do - anything. Five letters came today, two brown envelopes, one circular of the ‘You have definitely won a prize, please ring this really expensive phone number to claim, variety; two red reminders for gas and water and an official looking business envelope from Nat West Bank addressed to Mrs Lucille Simpson. Bob stared at the manila.

envelope, he knew that Lucy banked with Nat West; he even knew the account details because she used to write everything down like that in the bureau upstairs. He had once tried to contact her through the bank but obviously they refused to give him any information. Bob opened the letter making no attempt to be careful and try and hide his deception, he ripped open the envelope and read the contents:

Dear Mrs Simpson,

We have today made the necessary arrangement for your account to be transferred to our Chesford branch and can confirm the continuation of your salary credit from D.L.T on the last day of each month.

Please do not hesitate to call us if we can be of any further assistance.

Yours faithfully

Mr John Collins

J. Collins

Asst. Accounts Supervisor

Chesford? Where the hell is Chesford? Bob thundered to himself whilst rummaging through the bookcase for his Road Atlas. “Christ Almighty! – It’s miles away!” In fact it was 200 miles away but Bob had rarely been out of Newcastle, so the Midlands was indeed a journey too far. They had managed the coast in the past, he and Lucy; they had even been up to Scotland, but never south. That was a different country. They spoke a different language, didn’t they? Just as north of Watford is non-existent for Londoners, south of Manchester did not exist for Bob.

He sat staring at the map in his atlas glancing at the small town of Chesford, up to Manchester and then across to Newcastle. He picked the letter back up and re-read it, as if it might have changed, but no; Lucy was still in Chesford and he was here in Newcastle two hundred miles away. He was not about to go chasing after her. Why should he – she knew where he was – he had no real idea where she was living now. It had only been a mistake by the bank that had got him this far. No he could not go. Damn her! He thought he had just about forgotten Lucy, now this. I’ll be damned if go chasing after her he said to himself, ‘Damned if I will. “Trudging half way round the country

looking for a needle in a haystack.” Bob was seething inside at the injustice of it, in fact what upset him more was that fact that Lucy might actually be making a success of her life without him – male pride hurt again!

“No, no, no! I won’t go” Bob continued the tantrum that only he could hear.

“I just won’t” and he threw the letter into the waste-bin.

Morbid statues turn to cry and wave their arms for all to see,
At silken chords that bind the shadows of memories
and desperate lives that fill the air of the Velvet Sun Factory.....

Larry was happy, he had finished early today, another twenty miles, or so and he would be home. He would take the van back his place as usual, come in late tomorrow and everyone would think he had not got back till much later.

“Traffic was bedlam down there” he would say when they asked him; Larry was laughing to himself the times he had pulled that one. The truth was the Fat Man knew exactly how long journeys took; he used to do everything himself in the old days, as he constantly reminded his workers. But Larry knew all the drops by heart, all the short cuts, plus he got on really well with the customers and even brought back the orders occasionally, so it was worth putting up with his games, even to the extent of him playing dodgems with the company vehicle. I suppose there might come a time when enough was enough, but for now Larry’s job was safe.

Just as he was approaching the traffic roundabout on the Stratford bypass, he stopped at the Pelican crossing. No pelicans were around so he drove on, and then he spotted a familiar face: ‘was that Mark with a rucksack on his back and a bit of totty in tow? – Yes it was Mark Hero and that gorgeous girlfriend of his what’s-her-name (When it came to females, Larry could never remember names - face, clothes, bust size, inside leg measurement, and what colour their underwear was, but not their name) He honked twice on the vans’ horn.

Mark turned at the noise to see the white van with red lettering: ‘Pointers Inks Ltd’ and a beaming Larry waving through the driver’s side window.

“Quick Sarah, here’s Larry from the factory, we’ll get a lift all the way home”

They climbed into the cab and were greeted with a jovial smile” The wanderers return eh. Good weekend you two?”

“Yeah not bad thanks” Mark answered, “Going back to base then?”

“Nah – don’t be silly. I’m finished now. I’m off home, I’m still in Taunton me and that’s official,” Larry laughed

“I don’t know how you get away with it” Mark commented, shaking his head.

“Experience that’s what it is lad - once you know the roads you can find your way anywhere. In and out before they know it, Lightning Larry they calls me” (Mark had never heard *anyone* call Larry ‘Lightening’; Wrecker, Lazy, but not Lightning) “If there’s a short cut I’ll find it This job is booked for ten hours, is it my fault if I finish it in six?”

“Can you drop us at Sarah’s’ place first down by the square?” Mark said nodding slowly, still flabbergasted by the arrogance of his colleague.

“Yeah fine—are you up for some beers then?”

“Yes if you like, where you going?”

“Larry’s place – I got plenty in”

“Hey! What about me” Sarah-Jane eventually interrupts the cosy chat” I am still here you know!”

“Yeah, babe I know, but I promised your mom I’d get you back safe and sound before seven” Mark tried to placate his unhappy sunshine girl.

“And sober” Larry joined in

Sarah was sulking now; you know that rather pretend sullen look that women can throw up at a moments notice. She undid the ribbon in her hair, tossed her head in a preening gesture showing off her dark flowing locks to best advantage. She folded her arms and looked straight ahead.

“Do you now how sexy you look when you’re angry?” Larry ventured

“Leave her Larry, don’t tease” Mark said.

Sarah lent over Mark and pecked Larry on the cheek nearly causing him to cross the white line in centre of the carriageway “Hey what was that for?” he said

“Just for being a gentleman and not a pig like him,” Sarah replied dug Mark in the ribs

and then resumed her haughty pose.

The silent treatment lasted for at least five minutes; Sarah-Jane found it impossible to be angry with Mark for long. Anyway, she knew he was right; she did not want any more hassle from her mum and certainly could well do without her father going on one of his rants because she came home drunk in the daytime. Mr Sullivan was very old fashioned and chauvinistic; women he thought should never smoke, drink or gamble; as a matter of fact he would chain them to the kitchen sink and only release them to move them into the bedroom. He was from a very old Northern Irish stock (almost Irish stew!) He spoke in the loud brash drawl that was never quiet and most people in Robert Close Close knew when Mr. Sullivan was at home, which funnily enough was usually just after closing time.

“Any news of the fire” Mark asked

“Nah, not really, I left work early this morning but the H.S.E are supposed to going in today to collect some samples, you know to try and recreate the conditions – load o’ bollocks! Sorry ‘csuse my French” replied Larry forgetting the young lady’s’ presence.

“It’s not French it’s an Arabic word” Sarah ended her silence.

“Ooh get the scholar” Larry retorted.

Sarah smiled her wonderful smile that melted icicles and Mark squeezed her hand tightly, she kissed him quickly so as not to embarrass Larry.

“Don’t you think they will find anything then?” Mark continued his enquiry.

“Nah – told you I’ve seen it all before. For spontaneous combustion to occur the temperature, the moisture, everything has to be just right, just a fluke really. It was a freak accident. I suppose they have to try to discover what happened, what chemicals were involved, that’s their job. Probably mean a re-organisation in the stock racking, more bloody work for me”

“They could always let Bobby do it he drives the fork lift” Mark was half laughing as he said the words; he knew exactly how Larry would react.

“Captain (I was in the army) Womach?” Larry was spitting feathers, there never was any love lost between Bobby Womach and Larry” Have you seen him drive? Anyway Jack told me since Bobby tried to demolish the factory they would not let him near another fork-lift, he said he either wait for me to be free, or do it himself”

“Can’t say as I blame Jack, I watched the Captain as he tried to rearrange the top office” Mark replied smirking.

The road travelled silently underneath them and soon familiar sights came into view. Larry stopped the van in the square and Mark and Sarah- Jane got down from the vehicle.

“Gissa a couple of minutes Laz” Mark said as he escorted Sarah-Jane towards her house. She was much calmer now Mark thought, and looking more like the radiant being, he knew of old. Mrs Sullivan looked out of the bay window when she heard the gate-latch and rushed to open the door, so Sarah did not have to use her key. The warm maternal smile that greeted them as the door opened, showed the extent to which her mother had missed Sarah; she might be on the verge of womanhood but to Edna Sullivan Sarah-Jane was still her ‘baby.’

“Thank you very much Mark” Edna said, “Are you coming in for a coffee?”

“No thanks Mrs S, I need to get back and change out of these clothes. I’m looking forward to a nice relaxing bath,” Mark answered.

“Yes of course – see you soon then I expect, thanks again for bringing her home safe”

“Oh mum” Sarah sighed at the way her mother was fussing “We’ve only been away for three days” she planted a restrained kiss on Marks’ cheek and went inside. Mark returned to the waiting van, where Larry was remonstrating with a man with a yellow band on his head.

“Sorry” Mark said as he clambered back inside, realising he was the cause of Larry’s’ predicament “No problemo” Larry replied doing a poor Swartzenegger impression. He accelerated away leaving the traffic warden frustrated and one short on his quota for the day.

Waiting in the darkest corner lives the memory of the mind.

Hark! I hear another calling, softly through the wings of time.

Michael was trying hard to support his weight to make Lucy’s job easier, as she lowered the pulley into the bath. Although he had recently begun to respond to her humanity in kind, he still had fits of depression. She had tried on more than one occasion to snap him out of it. She tried talking, telling him anecdotes, although she had never talked about Bob; that was one part of her life she wanted to erase from her memory. She had even tried to instigate a sexual encounter on one occasion

only to be rebuffed with “I’m not in the mood”. (This was strange really, because Michael was always in some sort of mood). Lucy found his moods hard to take, but she understood what lay behind his morose, dark side and consequently was able to circumvent most of his bad humours. Lately however, Michael was on a high. This was the happiest he had been since the accident. Lucy did wonders for him and if anyone could permanently snap him out of his depression, it would be Lucy. She was his nurse, cook, cleaner, lover and friend. ‘More than any wife’ he thought, she was his entire world and his only link with the real one. She was part of his entire being. Goddam it he was in love with her!

She let the water trickle over his fine firm body. To look at him lying in the foaming bathtub, you would not know that he was disabled. His muscular chest and upper arms belied his inactive status and gave testament to his former athletic prowess. Lucy massaged the soap into his smooth back vigorously rubbing, in some vain hope that feeling may return to his spine. She gently kissed the nape of his neck, something she had done before to see if there was any response, she fancied that he did seem to feel more lately. She had read before about nerves re-growing, was it possible or was it imagination? Or was it just that Michael was now more in tune with her body and respected her feelings, anticipating the correct response. Either way Lucy remained convinced that Michael now had at least some movement in his injured limbs.

She carefully washed Michaels’ hair in the coconut shampoo and after attending to the lower part of his anatomy and rinsing him, she left him for a few moments to soak whilst she dried her arms in readiness for the haul out. She towelled him dry and dressed him, which compared to the very first time she had done it, was a hundred times faster. She was far more adept now, and Michael was much more helpful. She sat him down on the settee.

“What shall we do today then; anything planned?” she asked him

“I need you to take me into town please that's one of the reasons I wanted a bath – I need to go shopping”

“Any special or just browsing” Lucy inquired.

“Oh special – very special indeed” Michael beamed and Lucy thought she detected a playfully wicked glint in his bright eyes.

“Am I allowed to know what it is” Lucy responded getting quite curious now

“No it’s a surprise” Michael laughed, he could see the humour of keeping a surprise from Lucy when she thought that she would have to buy whatever it was for him. Michael, however, had other plans.

6. Symphony in Sunlight

.....The statues are dancing out in the square,

No one can see but they don't care.

The snow lay sleepily across the gardens and pathways of the city. Bob looked out of his leaded light windows; he could see the city centre from his small terraced house. The Christmas lights were just visible through the gloom of early morning. It was 4am. Bob had been awake most of the night. Last week, he had just about come to terms with the fact that Lucy was not coming back. He had blown it – happen, she did not like being used as a punch-bag. He had promised himself to start afresh, file for divorce and find a new sparring partner.

‘Stop sitting around and wasting your life Robert Simpson’ He instructed himself ‘thirty is not old, you can start again – you must, life goes on’ Bob often had meaningful debates with himself, he felt it was the only time he had any worthwhile discussion with anyone remotely intelligent.

However since a few days ago; since that letter, the letter that Bob received from the Nat West Bank, or rather that Lucy received and Bob had opened, the whole business was back in the melting pot.

‘Bloody Chesford, it's miles away – how will I find her anyway?’ He argued with himself ‘You must try – Why should I? – I should forget her and start again, that is what we agreed – I should never have took the letter back out of the waste-bin, Shouldn't have even opened it - Now look what you've done - right bloody can of worms!

And that was the reason that Bob was standing at his window at 4am on a cold December morning, he had been deep in conversation with himself all night! So wrapped up in his discourse in fact that he had not even noticed what time it had started snowing. Not that the Northeast of England was any stranger to harsh weather, some would say the inhabitants are bred tough up there to cope

with the harsh climate. Others would say the opposite was true. That it is the harsh conditions that produce the breeding: 'Nature versus Nurture' a philosophical argument with which the experts can bore us all silly.

Lucy had not been Bobs' first girlfriend, far from it, but she had been the first one he had asked to marry him, why he didn't know, not now anyway. He knew five years ago or he supposed he did otherwise, he castigated himself 'Why did I marry her?'

'But it had been good – she had been a wonderful wife.'

'What do mean **had** been' said Bob to his inner psyche we are still married you fool stop talking in the past. Well what happened to this wonderful marriage then Bob?'

'It was the children thing, we both so much wanted a family' '

'Bah! Excuses Bob, you just making excuses for your pathetic inadequacies'

'God I must snap out of this, I'm going mental' Bob finally spoke an element of truth He was trying desperately to establish whether he was winning the argument or not, funnily enough, he usually did.

'I will go today, I've decided – no time like the present, I'll drive down this morning.'

Bobs' mind was made up (it should perhaps have been locked up, but no matter) he had reached a decision, quite a substantial achievement for a woolly-minded liberal like Bob, who spent so long on the fence he required surgery to have the splinters removed from his backside. He spent the next hour or so rushing around getting everything together that he might conceivably need. He did not like long journeys, but when he did make them he always tried to be well prepared, well organised. He checked and double-checked everything then, when he was satisfied, went down the garden and into the garage to prepare the car. He looked at the old Rover and smiled "Faithful old girl" he said. "Never let me down have you? – Well almost never" he corrected himself "Do you remember the time we were stuck in quicksand in Scotland" he smiled in the reflective bonnet of the car "and the time in the Lakes when I thought I'd lost both you and Lucy" he laughed as he chatted over all times with the Rover. It didn't answer!

Silence like a dragon sleeps, justice like a serpent creeps.

Never ending dreams, descending into the depths of borrowed time.

Sarah woke up sweating profusely. Mark was jogging along the promenade at Hastings. The priest, resplendent in his gold and purple robes, was being crucified on the lonely telescope. He looked remarkably like Enoch. The man with the nicotine teeth was chasing Sarah through the dark shadows of Pevensey Castle as the charger on his white steed came riding out of the sunset like some old cowboy movie..... Sarah screamed out.

“Sarah, are you going to school today?”

“Mark?”

It was her mother who finally plucked the dreamer from her ramblings. Mrs Sullivan was an intensely religious woman. She had brought up two children almost single-handed, her husband spent so much time in the pub they should have got married there those 25 years ago instead of next door! (Just why is it that there is always a public house near to a Catholic Church)?

Edna Sullivan had been very worried about Sarah lately. She did not seem to be eating as much as usual, and having seen so many TV programs, and magazine articles about young teenage girls and anorexia, (or whatever it was called) she began to wonder if that was the cause of Sarah’s problem. With the exams coming up I suppose she could be off her food, Edna had thought, but she should be working more. She should knuckle down and get some good results. As Edna had said to Sarah-Jane many times, “I don’t want you ending up like me.” Mrs Sullivan knew her daughter was a bright girl, she, unlike her husband had been to all the school open days and avidly read the reports: -

“Sarah is academically excellent. She is a bright girl and has a no problem interpreting the work. It is her application that needs attention.” Edna knew what that meant; it was school master jargon for ‘Boys’, an unnecessary distraction for teenage girls. She liked Mark Hero however; at 19 she thought him about the right age, but in view of Sarah’s’ academic career, she viewed them both too young and wanted them to cool any relationship until after Sarah’s eighteenth birthday. Edna Sullivan had already made plans for her daughter’s future career path.; she was very optimistic for Sarah’s future, University, then teaching or even the church, were both possibilities (unfortunately, she was yet to discuss any of this with Sarah-Jane). She knew better than to interfere in the relationship though. She had expressed her opinion two years ago and they were still together. ‘As long as Sarah is happy she said out loud and then realising, that she was not alone in the house she whispered to

herself“and doesn’t end up with a lump like Frank Sullivan”

“Sarah, its eight o’clock – Are you getting up now please.”

The sky was continuing to rain its illusions down on the unsuspecting victim. Sarah locked wide-eyed in the scenes before her, was again wrenched from the Brighton sea front by the familiar voice. This time it was real. It *was* her mother! Still in a state of half-sleep, she cast aside the duvet and answered the call.

“Okay I’m up I heard you the first time!” she lied unconvincingly.

Sarah-Jane’s lifeless corpse came down the stairs into the kitchen and gave her mum a peck on the cheek before slumping down onto the hard wooden chair “Morning Mum”; she managed through a stifled yawn.

“You look wonderful this morning,” Edna said “What time did you come in?”

“Not late really” Sarah groaned, angry at being the brunt of her mothers inquisition at such an early hour of the morning.

“Hmm – here get this tea down you while I get your sisters ready, I want you to take Mary with you today and drop her off at St Winifred’s. She’ll be dressed soon.”

“Oh mum, do I have to, I’m tired – I don’t have to be in ‘till after nine.”

“I know but it won’t hurt you - what about doing some revision in the library? Your exams aren’t far off. Anyway I need to see Dr Patrick this morning I won’t have time.”

“What you seeing him for?”

“Never mind I’ve got an appointment at 9-15am, it’s the only one could get, now will you take her or not?” Edna sounded agitated, unusually so for her, she was normally so calm about most things.

“Okay, don’t go on about it, I’m getting a headache now.” Sarah held her head “I’ll take her if you like.” Sarah grumbled.

“Serves you right, gallivanting about until all hours, dancing, and drinking no doubt, and you a good catholic girl. If it wasn’t for Mark keeping an eye on you, I don’t where you’d be. I’ve a good mind to tell your father what time you came in”

“Yeah, yeah when he’s awake or not in the pub tell him, see if I care. I’m going to get

washed” said Sarah disinterestedly, and she got up from the chair to stretch her body in an attempt to dislodge the marching band that had become encamped in her skull. It wouldn’t have been so bad if they had been able to keep time properly, but the drums were wildly off beat, and the trumpets sounded horrendous

“What about your breakfast?” her mother’s voice showed genuine concern.

“I’m not hungry” and a sullen Sarah sauntered back upstairs to the bathroom.

“Just have some toast then” Her mother called after her.

“No thanks mum, I’m all right, honestly, I just feel a bit queasy.”

The mornings always came too early for Sarah Jane. An armoured division of foot soldiers, goose-stepping around her head had now joined the marching band, Sarah leant over the porcelain sink trying to flush them out with splashes of cold water. Fortunately they could all swim, but two Paracetamol and a pot of coffee eventually did the trick.

Rest you eyes and go to sleep in the yellow contented corn

Of that sun-filled field.

Close you heavy lids and stare up at the vast blue curtain of sky

Which towers above you.....

Mark was busy or at least pretending to be busy, sifting aimlessly through the piles of unimportant memos, invoices and delivery notes that had accumulated on his desk at the Velvet Sun Factory. Now there is an interesting story as to how the Pointers Inks came to be known as ‘The Velvet Sun Factory’ but now is not the time to tell it, suffice to say that work out on the shop floor was dirty, hot and dangerous. Even in the office, Mark was forever wiping the dust from his chair and desktop. The air was always full of powdery particles clearly visible in the streams of sunlight infiltrating through the carefully arranged skylights on the roof of the factory.

It had taken about a week to get the place straight after the fire. The H.S.E had been in to investigate, just as Larry had said, but they came to no firm conclusion, just a raft of recommendations. They were testing samples of stuff they had taken away and no doubt would be

back soon to carry out further tests and to make sure their safety directives had been followed. Jack and the Fat Man had already decided, despite lack of evidence that sabotage was at work.

“Things just don’t burst into flames” Jack had said, “There will be a total ban on smoking within the factory boundary in future. The H.S.E. have told us to provide a cabin outside in the yard, it will be here tomorrow and from then on, it will be the only place where you will be allowed to smoke.”

“Good idea” Larry chimed in endeavouring as usual to endear himself to management.

“It’s all right for you; you smoke like a chimney all day long in your cab” Captain Womach remarked pointedly.

“Smoking is bad for your health anyway – you should give up!” (A reformed smoker really is a big pain in the butt – cigarette or otherwise)

“Thank you Mr Porter-Brown for your lesson in personal health habits, now can we get back to what we are supposed to be doing” Jack spoke in his condescending tone. He dismissed any further protests with a wave of his hand and concluded the discussion. “These rules will be brought in with immediate effect so just get on with it.” And that was why Mark was sitting in the wooden shack sucking on a Duty Free he’d been lucky enough to cadge of Janice, when Jack came over to tell him that his presence was required upstairs. The Fat Man wanted to see him.

Mark knocked on the hardboard-covered door. “Come in” the booming voice of the Fat Man bellowed out. Mark entered and saw two gentlemen standing by the desk. One was a policeman or at least he was dressed like a policeman, the other just looked like a policeman.

“These gentlemen would like a quick word with you Mark please, you can use my office” The Fat Man left the room, he had work to do in the lab he said, but everyone knew you could hear every word that spoken in the MD’s office if you stood in a certain position on the balcony. Mark had visions of Jack and the Fat Man standing behind the office listening.

“Nothing wrong is there,” Mark said as soon as the coast was clear.

“No, no Sir, nothing to worry about, just routine really, we will not keep you very long” That’s a shame thought Mark, anything to get away from those rotten invoices. You have two days off and come back to a weeks work.

“Its really just about John Simmons, do you know him?”

“Vaguely, I’ve seen him around, why?”

“We will ask the questions Sir, if you don’t mind” The uniformed man has got the power of speech after all, Mark pondered - things must be improving in the police force, articulate policeman whatever next!

“We are just making enquiries around his colleagues and friends,” continued the plain-clothes policeman who had introduced himself as Detective Inspector Jenkins.

“I wouldn’t call myself a friend of his,” said Mark.

“You didn’t like him then?” - I fell in to that one thought Mark.

“No, I hardly knew him that’s all; spoke to him a couple times. I didn’t know him well enough to either like or dislike him really” Mark was flustered and he tried to repair the damage

“Why all the questions, what’s happened?”

“Mr Simmons died in the early hours of yesterday morning in hospital. He had received stab wound earlier in the week at the – er - Roostertail is that the name of it Jones?”

“Yes Sir” the uniform replied.

“Do you go to the club often Mr Hero?” the detective continued.

“Sometimes yes, most weekends I suppose Mark said defensively.

“Where you at the club on the fourteenth, a week last Sunday, Sir?”

“Yes, we left before the end about 1 o’clock I think – work you know how it is.”

“We, Sir you were not there alone then?”

Mark felt cornered; he had not done anything wrong, but these two made him feel guilty.

“No couple of mates you know how it is” Mark realised he was repeating himself,

“No Sir, we do not know how it is that is what we are trying to establish – Did you see a fight break out say about 12-45am?”

“There was a bit of a squabble on the other side of the floor, I didn’t see much though, thought nothing of it usual stuff, you know how.” he corrected himself “you know how easy these arguments start?”

“Quite, well thank you for your time Mr Hero, you understand we are just making

preliminary enquiries into the events of that night. We are talking to everyone who was at the club or may have known Mr Simmons. The membership list seemed a good place to start”. The detective’s sidekick held up a piece of paper. “We won’t keep you from your work any more, if you could perhaps pop into the station some time and give us a statement, we would be most grateful” Mark nodded “Thank you for your time then Sir” The two men moved towards the door.

“Stabbed to death you said,” Mark was stunned. He knew there was a knife Paul had told him but no one died he was positive Well almost positive.

“No Mr. Hero I did not say that.”

“But you said he was stabbed at the club” Mark protested.

“And so he was, but we have yet to establish the cause of death, we do not have any more information as yet.” Now Mark was even more puzzled, intrigued even “I’ll come to the station on Thursday if that’s ok, I’m only working half day, and I have a dental appointment so I won’t be able to speak much” Mark smiled.

“You will be able to write though Sir” The uniformed constable was certainly adept at stating the blindingly obvious. ‘Must be destined for promotion’ Mark thought. ‘He’ll be Chief Constable within a year’

“Goodbye then Sir” DS Jenkins held out his hand. Mark shook it and watched as they strode through the office door and down the steps to the waiting vehicle.

Mark stared at the open door as they left. He was convinced the stabbing was just superficial someone was always causing hassle somewhere in town at weekend it was par for the course. What was that song his dad used to play, oh yes ‘Saturday Night’s All Right for Fighting’ Elton John must have been to Chesford! I’ll have to see Sarah-Jane before they do, he thought, although as she wasn’t a member she wouldn’t be on the detectives list so that prospect was remote.

Stop awhile to look at the mysteries that surround the universe

And blow away on the wind

Rest you eyes and go to sleep in the yellow contented corn

Of that sun-filled field.....

Whilst Lucy was upstairs readying herself for the shopping trip, Michael was confirming his booking for a personal shopper that he had arranged with the Trust. He would get Lucy to drop him at the entrance to the Mall. There the shopper, he had arranged through the Trust would meet him. Lucy could go off and do her own little jobs whilst he could get her birthday present in secret. Lucy thought he did not know that it was her birthday, but he had details of all his carers on the computer. Michael was extremely organised and very competent when he wanted to be. As a young business executive, he was very adept and was in line for a promotion before his accident. He had decided last week, when he had dismissed Aysha that he would treat Lucy a lot better, she was good for him. They had slept together, they had even made love together in a primitive sort of way, and she showed real understanding. It was her 30th birthday coming up and Michael could be very generous when he was so inclined. He would buy her a ring; hence all the secrecy. He might even make it an engagement ring; he had not quite determined that bit.

Lucy was upstairs changing because she had now moved all of her belongings from the flat into the spare bedroom, which had previously been used only as a storeroom. Michael had already placed a notice in the Tribune advertising the vacant flat to rent. He was adamant that he would not sell it. She heard the radio burst into life: -

‘If I gave you the chance to live your life again
To put all the wrong things right
Would you jump at the chance or not change a thing
Would you start right away tonight?’

Michael liked rock music but not that song; the lyrics were too close to home, too painful. He switched to cassette and pressed record.

7. Pastoral Concerto

.....The statues are sleeping out in the square

Their eyes are closed but she doesn't care

The shiny Rover cruised silently over the pockmarked surface of the A1, heading south for somewhere. Exactly where Bob did not know, all he had to go on was a town called Chesford together with an AA route map and the letter from Nat West Bank to his estranged wife. The engine purred as it gorged itself on the liquid feast of gold that petrol had now become. The weather seemed to be easing as the road unravelled before him, indeed it was now becoming a very pleasant December day. The radio station was playing Rossini, Bob joined in with his deep baritone voice: "Figaro, Figaro" He remembered how much his singing along with the radio irritated Lucy and she particularly hated opera always complaining, even about the light stuff like Carmen. She had a point. Bob would insist on always singing in the original language of the piece, and having no linguistics skills whatsoever produced a very loose interpretation of some lyrics.

"Maurice Vincento my cavaliero, bella, bella my lumbago malissimo figaro figaro Fig- ar-O" Bob had no idea who Maurice Vincento was or why he was driving a cavalier and suffering from lumbago, he just enjoyed the music and sang along.

On through barren fields of redeveloping and reconstructing industry, passed green wastelands, a rural patchwork of varying colours. The concrete pillars of the angry bridges seemed to close in on him, charging towards the green Rover as it sped relentlessly on. Occasionally the car was blown slightly off course by one of the never-ending chain of lorries that used this vertical artery of the country. Bob was tired, his eyes began to play ticks, and they knew how to fool his deadened brain. Elgar replaced Rossini on Classic FM. Bob wound down the window and turned it up he liked this: "Land of hope and glory, mother of the three". 'Land of hope and glory' Bob argued with himself Land of bloody parasites more like, never got me anywhere, working hard, the only hope in this

country was the hope that you would earn enough during your lifetime to enable you to pass something on to your kids. - Oh that hurt! His thoughts had tricked him into resurrecting the old fire. Bob pulled into the services to take a rest, and one of those all day breakfasts that really had been there all day.

Rest awhile, your weary load weighs so heavy on your soul

Dawn breaks, to colour horizons new

What is life worth without a view?

Lucy left Michael at the entrance to the shopping Mall, and as arranged, she went off to do some business of her own. She had the bank to sort out for instance – they had not sent the statements they had promised, she had a few bills to pay as well. Time permitting she might even call in at the hairdressers to make an appointment ‘I could do with a change of style’ thought Lucy.....Perhaps a tint as well. She was a little put out by Michael arranging a ‘shopper’ behind her back but understood his dire need for independence and privacy; with Christmas just around the corner she assumed he wanted to get some presents. She would get him one later; the thought of Christmas had not even entered her head yet.

Michael waited for the young volunteer to come along and take him first to the jewellers and then he wanted to visit his solicitors.

“Good morning” the amiable young man said as he greeted Michael

“Good morning – can you take me to Samson’s the jewellers please, and then depending on time I need you to take me to the solicitors. Their office is at the back of the Mall, you can drop me off then, and I will be okay from there. Lucy, my carer will pick me up, I reckon about an hour,” Michael said, trying hard to be friendly although he was never good with strangers

“That’s fine, they told me an hour, my name’s Darren, by the way”

“Darren” repeated Michael, well as they probably told you I am Michael Sands”

Formal introductions completed they went off to buy his Lucy a ring, Michael had taken to calling her ‘his’ Lucy for some time now; at least in his own mind.

The assistant brought out all the trays of rings and placed them where Michael could see them. Now Michael was not a pernickety shopper; he knew exactly what he wanted when he saw it,

but after numerous selling techniques by the nice man in the blue suit who was getting rather annoyed, Michael eventually spotted the very thing, a large single stone on a gold base.

“That one there – how much?” making every effort to point but failing miserably

In the end, Darren pointed and Michael nodded.

“That’s a diamond engagement ring Sir, it is £500.00” the sales assistant said adopting a patronising voice as if Michael was not entitled to be engaged, after all no disabled person should be buying engagement rings should they?

“I didn’t think it was glass at that price, it’s my body that is disabled not my brain! – I’ll take it” Michael snapped.

Darren laughed at the humour of his charge and on instruction from Michael got the credit card out of his top pocket and handed it to the salesman. “Well that didn’t take too long.” Darren said to Michael, as he pushed the wheelchair out into the main thoroughfare of the Mall. “The salesman was getting a bit agitated, don’t you think?”

“I can’t stand jumped up shop assistants it’s not as though I’m one of those people who can’t make up their minds. They just need to show a little humility; a little patience and courtesy would not go amiss either. Good manners seem optional with shop assistants these days”

Darren took Michael to the offices situated at the rear, car park end of the Mall, taking him up the ramp to the office of Longton, Adams and Weaver his solicitors.

“I can manage from here, thank you; your hour is nearly up anyway,” Michael said to Darren “You’ve been most helpful.”

“If you’re sure then,” the young man replied, quite pleased to get away early.

“ Yes I’ll be fine, my carer will be here to pick me up in about fifteen minutes; thanks again for all your help”

Longton, Adams and Weaver were not the original solicitors that acted for Michael Sands after his accident but they were used to their client, and the office knew him well. The girl asked Michael to wait a few moments whilst she went to see if Mr Longton was free. Michael assumed everyone was always free to see him; if he put a lot of business in path of someone way he expected prompt reciprocal action in return. Sure enough, Mr Longton appeared soon after and greeted Michael with

with a warm but business-like smile.

“Hello Michael to what do we owe this pleasure?”

“I wish to make a small adjustment to my will,” said Michael “wondered if you could pop up and sort it out for me”

“Oh good, I told you at the time the basic provisions you made were not adequate, not with the assets at your disposal” the efficient legal expert replied, perusing his diary “Now, I can spare you about half an hour on Tuesday that should be plenty of time. Have you got anything particular in mind?”

“Yes I’ve got all the outline changes on the computer at home; I could just e-mail them to you and then sign it off when you come over.” In fact, most of Michael’s business was conducted by email and phone these days. John Longton had only met with him face to face on one other occasion

“Yes, thank you that will save time, See you about 2 o’ clock on Tuesday then?”

“Thank you John, I’ll e-mail you the stuff over later on today, give you time to look through the changes”

Mr Longtons’ secretary pushed Michael out of the office and back down the ramp, the timing was nigh on perfect, Lucy was just arriving as Michael was pushed into the Malls’ main thoroughfare.

“Thanks” said Lucy to the young office girl, who incidentally like all young office girls was called Sandra. There must be a reason for this in the grand scheme of things, but for the moment, enlightenment escapes me

“It’s okay we all know Michael very well, he’s our favourite invalid aren’t you Michael?” Sandra said.

“I m probably your only invalid” responded Michael in sarcastic tone, but smiled at the girl adding “Thank you Sandra” and then he turned and looked straight at Lucy. “And how’s your morning been?”

“Fine I’ve done all my jobs and booked myself in at the hairdressers and I’ve bought you back a couple of fresh creams, know you’re partial “ she said holding up a bag with the word ‘Greens’ written on the front. Michael knew the bag well; it was one of his few vices, along with

gambling, sex and alcohol (he had stopped smoking two years ago and very rarely farted in public!)

“Oh cheers,” he said, “You look after me wonderfully well – I do love you so”

“I know” Lucy replied, she had known for some time in fact, but did not know yet how to handle it, after all she was still married!

Rest awhile, your weary heart weighs so heavy in its cage
Of broken dreams and lonely heart,
What's life worth life without you?

The girl in the florist was chatting to her friend Sharon (yet another mystery of the universe why shop assistants have friends called Sharon) She did not see that Mark was waiting by the bouquets.

“If you could possibly spare the time I would like to give you some of my money” Mark scorned. Now he was not one to use sarcasm under normal circumstances but morose, inefficient and downright ignorant shop assistants really hit a raw nerve with him. Incidentally, his other pet hates, were the customer service representatives who spend ages telling you what you do not want to know, never telling you what you do, and the electronic switchboards that frequently seemed to replace them. (Press ‘1’ for sales, ‘2’ for service, ‘3’ to listen to a tinny version of ‘Greensleeves’ 14 times ‘4’ to speak to an operator who’s very nice but no help at all and ‘5’ to be plunged into a telephonic abyss.) But I digress - The girl in the florist, eventually managed to tear herself away from the phone without the need of an operation and wearing her customer smile she approached Mark and inquired as to the nature of his business.

“I would like a bouquet about £25-00 please, sent this card to the address on the back” he handed the surly assistant a small white card he had ‘borrowed’ from his office. The girl took looked at the card and read it: -’To my sweet Sarah-Jane- All my love Mark’ She turned it over to read the address.

“That’s fine Sir, delivery tomorrow be alright?”

“Tomorrow will be fine” Mark handed over the cash waited for he girl to master the mechanics of operating the cash register, he obtained a receipt, and walked out.

His mood, although not helped by the ‘Shop-Assistant-of-the-Year’ was in reality, brought on by his impending appointments this afternoon. The dentist was never his favourite port of call and Mark could think of better ways of spending his afternoon off and the best part of £30 quid, than having his molars prodded and drilled. Following that, he had promised to waste the rest of the day giving a statement to the boys in blue following their visit to the factory. Not a prospect he relished but nevertheless he would go, he had nothing to hide, (except Sarah’s age and that was no big deal) and certainly did not want them returning to his work, or Spencer House for that matter, Mrs Carver Smith would have a field day! Mark was not anti-police but like most young people lacked sympathy for their ‘laissez-faire’ attitude to crime

Our wonderful Bobbies on the beat now have cars instead of feet

“Evening all” with a friendly nod. Whatever happened to PC Plod?

Don’t drive too fast, speed kill (And fines help pay policemen’s’ bills)

And don’t expect them to get their man. Why bother when you can take the can!

“I didn’t do it, I wasn’t there” Now sir, don’t tell the truth, that’s not fair.

You must be guilty we’re never wrong - just sign this statement, it won’t take long.

The Rover roved on towards its’ goal and by eight o’clock Nottingham was on the horizon. Not bad thought Bob considering I had a break, another hour or so I should be there - wherever *there* is. – Then what will you do? – Something will turn up – Bob the eternal optimist. He was actually talking to the driving mirror, he could not see the lips moving but he knew that there was someone there.

The motorway was unduly busy at that time of the morning. Bob had meticulously planned to follow the A1, M1 and then cut across the country using the A42 exiting at the wonderfully named Ashby-De-La-Zouch. It reminded him of Zorro movies when he was a kid. He had never been there but the very name inspired him when he saw it on maps and road signs ‘De-La-Zouch’ ole he thought. He drove admiringly through the green forests of Nottinghamshire. Tall-silhouetted trees stood out like green monuments staring sullenly at the snake of silver traffic disturbing the pastoral scene.

Under the cement columns of roads to other places, he did not want to go to, and over the

criss-cross concrete junctions to the silent highway, which would take him through Leicestershire and into deepest Warwickshire. Massive steel pylons rose above the brown and green of the winter fields looking for all the world like rows of giant scarecrows with multiple arms stretched out in defiance. Their eyes stared with frightening regularity as the rover manoeuvred itself under the long steel ropes that joined them all together.

Bob pulled in at the service station at the bottom of the town. "Fill her up Please," he said to the man in the green overalls cleaning the pumps.

"Its self-service Sir" he replied curtly

"Oh sorry, my mistake" Bob naturally assumed that a man wearing the uniform of the oil company standing next to the petrol pumps was there to fill up the cars – it was perfectly normal back home to find assistants who did just that.

"How far to Chesford" Bob asked the man who was not there to fill his car up

"About 25 miles I think" the chap replied.

Now Bob already knew that, after all, he had a map, but he was one of those people that always needed confirmation, and apart from that, he was trying to be friendly to cover his embarrassment. The chap obviously felt insulted that Bob thought his job was to fill up cars when in fact, he was there to clean up the forecourt.

Ashby was a nice little market town. Bob had decided to stop there for no other reason than the name. He needed to feed both the rover and himself 'Ashby-De-La-Zouch' was on the road sign so why not thought Bob. He parked the car and walked up the main street, a wide thoroughfare of pseudo-historic interest. He cast admiring glances at the façade of rural England that greeted him. Some of buildings had plaques on them referring to the Civil War 'Oliver Cromwell slept here' said one. 'Hope they changed the bed-sheets' said Bob to himself, quite amused at his wit (which was as well because nobody else was) many other buildings also carried signs directing would be tourists to interesting areas of the town.

All Bob wanted was a café and eventually found what he was looking for, not that the large yellow neon sign was what he was looking for, but at least it signified somewhere that was open this early in the day. He went in and sat down only to discover that 'fast food' did not refer to the service

but the speed with which it is regurgitated after consumption. For those of you fortunate enough never to have partaken of a 'Big Breakfast', for everyone favourite fast food restaurant, may I say at this point well done and keep it that way. You other poor souls will only be too aware of the meagre content of the said meal in which Bob indulged. The plastic matting masquerading as an egg together with synthetic cardboard, which roughly translated means sausage, and fried potato in batter, which for reasons best left to the marketing men is called a hash-brown. To complete the repast there was a muffin, which in all honesty was probably the only edible part of it. The coffee was very welcome though.

Whispered on the wings of love: secret words are spoken

Deep within a tortured soul, a confidence is broken.....

Mark was not at the Police Station for very long He answered the questions of the nice constable who wrote down the answers in a coherent statement for Mark to sign. Job done! 'Well that wasn't too bad after all 'Thought Mark. As it was still only 3-30pm he decided to walk home past Sarah's house, he knew she would still be at college but hoped to catch sight of her mum. He was in luck; Mrs Sullivan was cleaning the front bay windows, and greeted Mark as soon as he approached

"Hello there, young Mark"

"Hello Mrs Sullivan" Mark spluttered through his still faintly numbed lips "I'm sorry I can't speak properly yet – I've just been to the dentist," he said enunciating every word and sounding like a reject from RADA "I'm a little worried about Sarah-Jane can you spare me a couple of minutes?"

"Yes of course, come in and have a cup of tea," Edna offered.

"No thanks, better stay here Sarah might come home early. I don't want to appear disloyal, going behind her back and all that"

"Yes I suppose you're right – she's been a bit edgy lately, I thought it was just her exams coming up; that and teenage stuff. She doesn't seem to eat as much either, do you think she's suffering from that anorexia?" (Mrs Sullivan could never get her head around medical terms; her recent visit to Dr Patrick was to seek reassurance following complications regarding her

misdirectomy)

“No! She’s alright on that score” Mark smiled as he answered Edna “What about sleep have you noticed anything there?” he continued.

“Well some days she doesn’t sleep as much, as she used to, but then on other days I can’t shift her, she’s dead to the world”

“I know” said Mark “I’m concerned she may be coming down with something.” He didn’t want to mention his real suspicions for fear of upsetting Edna unduly; anyway his evidence was only superficial. If Sarah was on hard drugs, he knew that he would need professional help to get her of them and back into the real world.

“Look I’ve got to shoot off now, I’ve got some things to sort out before I get home, try not to worry too much about Sarah-Jane, I think she’s just a bit down at the moment, I’ve sent her a bouquet to cheer her up. Goodbye for now and don’t worry Mrs S., she was fine when we went on holiday “Mark lied unconvincingly as he waved goodbye.

.....

After his banquet, Bob took a slow walk back through the town. The Rover was fine on long journeys but like Bob, she needed rest and recuperation periodically. He bought a local newspaper and a chocolate bar in one of the shops; he was peckish as it was all of five minutes since the ‘big breakfast’ He sat in the car park munching the sweet and perusing the local media for clues. He had no idea what he was looking for and eventually gave up. ‘This is silly Bob; you know it is – What in hell’s name are you doing here? – I need to find Lucy, to see her, to talk to her. – Why? What are you going to say to her – You don’t even know where she is, -do you?’ Bob was in danger of losing the argument with himself so he gave up, started the engine and put the put the radio on. He moved off in the general direction of Chesford joining in half -heartedly with Handel’s ‘Messiah’ but eventually even tiring of that he re-tuned the radio to a local station ‘Might pick up some thing useful’ he commented to the dashboard, which winked at him cheekily as he turned right.

By mid morning, the day was bright, the sun was out, not hot, but that cool wintry sun that often happens in England in December. The Rover gently purred through the tree-lined avenues approaching the main roundabout, which linked the Chesford Ring Road with the outside world. Now

the Chesford Ring Road was not the best-designed road in the world. The road signs and lane markings were in dire need of repainting, (such signs as there were). People have been known to die trying to find a way out of Chesford Ring Road and others visiting their loved ones in hospital have found them to be discharged by the time they found a route through to the place.

The problem was with the design concept of the road. Built in the 70's and hailed as the first environmentally friendly ring road in the country, it bypassed the City Centre and was supposed to alleviate traffic problems. The chief planner at the time a Mr Leif Eriksson was a 'green' champion, unfortunately this meant he had never driven a motor vehicle in his life; consequently, all roads built during his tenure had pedestrians and cyclists in mind and not the motorist. It was successful as a green route, for the first five years after its construction, it carried very little traffic, motorists preferring to use the old back streets and avoid the 'Ring Road from Hell' altogether. The Council, fearing their money wasted, promptly put up 'No Entry' signs everywhere, forcing all the traffic onto the Ring Road and thus producing the mess that faced Bob now.

He was lost. Well strictly speaking as he had no idea where he was going in the first place he could hardly be called lost, but he had planned to start in the City Centre only he could not find the non-existent sign. It was on his third circuit that Bob decided he would park up in one of the municipal car parks and walk. He pulled into the space alongside an orange meter which he fed with a couple of pound coins and followed the arrows to the shopping area and square. The main City centre of Chesford was pedestrianised, i.e. traffic-free. That is to say traffic free except for buses, taxis, delivery vans, disabled vehicles, bicycles, lorries, motor bikes and the odd cars that found its way passed the ring road and could not find its way out again. Bob was amazed. In Newcastle 'traffic-free shopping' meant traffic-free shopping, obviously in the Midlands it means something else, he said to himself as he choked on the black diesel fumes of the twenty-six buses lined up in the square. He went into a newsagent to enquire about a place to stay.

"Yes my love, there are quite a few guest houses and B & Bs' down by the station" the woman behind the counter said in response to Bob's question

"Is it far?" Bob asked

"About 10 to 15 minutes walk. Do you know Chesford at all" she said.

“No I don’t, I’m not from here” said Bob secretly quite pleased that he wasn’t

“Oh” said the woman it’s a little tricky to find, you’d probably be better off jumping on a bus, take you right there”

“Great” Bob answered “Where’s the bus station then please?”

“Oh no – you can’t get a bus in the bus station. You can catch one in the square, in the High street, round the corner in Timothy Street but not the bus station. No buses go in there, and by the way you must have the exact fare”

“Fine!” Bob sighed, “How much is that?”

“Oh I don’t know” the very helpful woman replied, “You will have ask the driver

“Thank you” Bob replied “thank you very much for your help” He was beginning to realise what he had let himself in for coming so far south of civilisation. This small insignificant little dot on his atlas of Great Britain was already beginning to get on his nerves. A death defying Ring Road, a pedestrian area with traffic and a bus station with no buses that require you to tender the exact fare, which you don’t know. He wondered what other delights this place had to offer.

8. Prelude to a Nightmare

.....The statues are miserable ready to fall

Their mouths are closed unable to call

Today was Saturday; Mark did not have to work today. He occasionally did go in to work on Saturday mornings but lately, even before the fire, orders had been slack and although Mark could always find something to do; the overtime pay was not that great. Consequently, Mark never volunteered to work extra shifts so if the Fat Man did not ask him to go in by, he stayed away; he could find plenty to do to occupy his time. Today, Mark had a lot to do and he was on his way to the Central Library to find out all he could about the club scene and so-called designer drugs. He already had web-site addresses and reference points, he had listed them to save time and hoped to spend a profitable morning surfing the net.

The Central Library, so called because, funnily enough it was in the centre of the city, used to be a dance hall in the sixties when Chesford was really a place worth knowing. The music scene was vibrant; the pubs, and nightclubs were jammed packed with 'Mods', Lambrettas lined up outside raring to go. The decline of the town following the general malaise of the country and the demise of the motor industry in particular resulted in an exodus of people from the area. Fewer and fewer teenagers were going out, attendances declined and inevitably, the Rock House closed. Thus, the Palace of Dance where The Stones rolled and The Beatles rocked re-opened to house rows upon rows of books, cassettes, newspapers and other media following refurbishment. The once proud dance-floor became a museum of silence to quench the thirst for knowledge and betterment. As Mark entered, he tried to picture his dad on the balcony - girl watching or at the bar drinking, his father had told him all about this place.

"Johnny Hero was a name they all knew in the Rock House, son," he had said. "Best dancehall and disco for miles round here" Mark considered how perverse life was; twenty years ago

Johnny and his friends would travel down from Nottingham on their scooters to have wild soul nights in Chesford, and now if you wanted good night out the journey reversed and you went the other way, out of town to Nottingham, Leicester or Birmingham. Mind you twenty years seems like a lifetime when you are nineteen conceded Mark.

'Methamphetamine hydrochloride' Mark wrote it down. Street name 'Ice' it produces a profound sense of euphoria by stimulating the release of dopamine and noradrenaline in the brain. Jesus thought Mark I'll have to print this stuff off; too much to write down. The whole subject was very confusing. Common names that Mark had heard bandied about on the street: snot, junk, bombers, Miss Emma, White Lightning, sugar cubes. He read all about the numerous effects: extreme elation, alertness, self-confidence, aggression, talkativeness, loss of appetite and the withdrawal symptoms: severe cramps, deep depression, fatigue, inertia, paranoid psychosis. His head was spinning; just reading about this stuff was mind numbing to him, but soon he began to realise why the 'garage' and 'dance' nights at the Rooster were so popular. The symptoms he had seen in action many times at the Roostertail; the Rave culture, which attracted the same intellectuals who drank lager straight from the can, wore string vests and partied all night in Ibiza, seemed to be rife with the ailments about which he had been studying.

Methodically Mark worked through all the web sites he had listed, and then linked on to others that he hadn't. L.S.D, Heroin, G.H.B. Ketamine, and Ecstasy. This was heavy stuff, he judged. Schizophrenia and severe psychological problems brought on by bad trips. He printed off eight pages on the different substances associated with 'club culture' the effects and symptoms, and another four pages on the treatment diagnosis and rehabilitation. He was beginning to get a headache and feel nauseous .It was the same feeling he always got when Sarah insisted on dragging him to a 'Rave' night, Mark liked Melody and Harmony - they were nice girls - and in a funny sort of way he was very old fashioned when it came to music. Sarah-Jane on the other hand was deep into the 90s scene and all that came with it. If Sarah was taking something like this, he considered thoughtfully she was in a real mess. He paid the library assistant and went out to get some air, the three hours he had spent pouring over the computer and the sickening details he had uncovered made him, feel quite ill.

Out in the daylight the square was just beginning to fill itself up with the Saturday morning

shoppers and the inevitable traffic that came with them. Buses swamped Chesford, they choked the city, with their fumes and blaring horns, and most of the drivers would not have been too much out of place at a stock car rally or bumper ride at the fair. Mark watched the to-ing and fro-ing of people as they dodged the polite motorists gesticulating violently through grimy windscreens, and was almost mesmerised by his thoughts. He would have to spend a lot more time systematically going through all the information that he had printed off. Sarah had to be on something, other than ‘cloud nine’, which was where she seemed to spend her days lately. The symptoms all fitted her volatile behaviour, loss of appetite, the words he had read could have written about his Sarah. He wanted her safe, he wanted her sane and above all, he wanted her back.

Floating on the clouds of marmalade ecstasy,

Drifting in dreams at the waters’ edge.

Laughing at the sound of icicles breaking:

Crying with tears of joy in her eyes.

Michael was awoken from a rather pleasant dream by Lucy offering him a cup of tea. He was standing at the altar rail of St Michael’s - standing mind you – just as he used to before his injury. Lucy was at his side, flowers adorned the aisles and pews of the old church, which was full of smiling faces. The ring was on Lucy’s finger split the golden sunlight into a myriad of rainbows, and sent signals to every corner of the cathedral. Everyone was happy! Michael was ecstatic, even the vicar was beaming; Michael could not quite see Lucy’s face as she stood turned slightly away from him, but he knew she was happy too.

“Michael are you awake?” Lucy raised her voice “It’s eight o’clock”

“Oh what!” he woke up with a start “Good morning my angel” He continued quickly regaining his composure.

“Smooth talking will get you everywhere” Lucy joked and bent over to give him a peck on the cheek, “Let me pull you upright so you can drink your tea, I’ve got to go to the hairdressers later so I need to get you up.”

“I’ll be alright, I’m happy to stay here, don’t be long though I’ll miss you” Michael dropped his eyes in that schoolboy pose of his, Lucy ignored his flirtations and puffed up his pillows

Once sitting up Michael looked up at his Lucy, his eyes ablaze with passion, she had seen that look before

“There’s a little something for you in the top drawer of the dresser,” Michael said to Lucy

“A present for me, what’s that for?” she replied.

“Just fetch it over here and you’ll see” Michael had that wicked glint in his eyes. Lucy went over to the tall dresser unit, opened the drawer, and found the little package so neatly wrapped up by the jeweller. She started to rip off the paper like an excited child and by the time, she had reached the bed, she had discovered the little black felt box “Michael!” she exclaimed opening the delicate casket to reveal its glittering prize.

“Happy Birthday” he said “ I hope it fits, we borrowed one of your dress rings to try it for size, after all we can’t have an engagement ring that doesn’t fit”

“Engagement ring?” Lucy stammered “Michael what are you saying” She shot a glance at Michael holding out her hand to show him the diamond ring.

“I’m asking you to marry me,” he said stroking her long slender fingers “not today, not this side of Christmas, and perhaps not even next year, but I am asking you to spend the rest of your life with me. You must know how I feel about you?”

“Oh Michael, I don’t know what to say” Lucy was confused. She was very fond of Michael even loved him, after Bobs’ ‘wham-bang-and-thank-you-mam’ approach to the art of love-making, Michael’s’ sensitivity was welcome and refreshing. He had revitalised her life, she was drinking less, as was Michael, and things were much better, but was she ready for marriage? Really ready? She hadn’t got rid of her old one yet. She knew she had no intention of returning to Bob; that was over, she was sure of that, but she still needed time to think things through.

“Just say yes,” Michael added

“I .er... I need some time to think about it, it has come as a shock – out of the blue”

“A nice shock, I hope” Michael laughed

“Yes of course” she said, she put her arms around his helpless neck “I’ll always be here for you if you want me, you don’t need to marry me you know” Lucy took off the ring and offered it back to Michael.

“I may not need to but I want to, please keep the ring, it’s yours and think about my proposition” Lucy bent over him and kissed him full on the lips.

“Thank you Michael, thank you for being so kind and thoughtful, you even remembered my birthday” she sounded surprised.

“It’s my body that’s crippled, not my mind,” Lucy laughed, Michael was always contrasting his alert brain with his crippled body it was one of his favourite ploys.

“You have a fine mind Michael,” she said kissing him on the temple as she leant over him. Michael smiled back at Lucy, he was confident that Lucy would eventually agree to marry him, he had been so much better since her arrival. He was in fact more than a little perturbed that she had not said ‘Yes’ immediately, although he didn’t show it. Lucy sat down beside him on the bed and leant over his body as she kissed him again to say thank you. She thought she felt his legs move under her, but then again perhaps not.

“You’re rather heavy on my legs” he said “and I’m responding if you know what I mean”

“I know exactly what you mean Michael. Percy has risen to the occasion, perhaps I should soothe his fevered brow until the swelling subsides” Deftly she undid his pyjama cord slipping her hand inside to caress his manhood. Lowering the garment to reveal its glory she kissed it gently rolling her tongue around its length. Enjoying the warmth and love, Michael responded with intimate caresses. Lucy locked in passion attempted to free her hands and struggled to lower her knickers whilst Michael positioned himself below her to carefully, but deliberately enter her.

Wave crescendo hits the shore, the canyon gates are breached

How silently the river flows, and fills her heart with joy

Sarah’s mum had already put the flowers into water by the time Sarah-Jane had decide to greet the new day. “Mmmm nice smell” Sarah said as she sniffed the bouquet.

“They are lovely aren’t they Sarah-Jane?” her mother said as she wandered aimlessly into the dining room. “That boy thinks a lot of you know” Edna said as she handed the little envelope to Sarah

“I know” Sarah replied dreamily as she opened and read Marks’ message

“I suppose you’ll be going out later on and not studying,” said Edna reverting to her school

mistress voice and scowling at her daughter.

“No not till later, I might go shopping this ‘after though” Sarah yawned

“Good, you can give me a hand round the house I’ve got loads to do.

“Let me get up first Sarah complained.

“Tea’s in the pot – are you eating today” the sarcasm hid Edna’s real concern over her daughters health and well-being.

“I’ll get it, I’m capable”

“That’s debatable”

Sluggishly the slumber soaked shadow of Sarah-Jane settled into the kitchen chair to waken her mind and body to the world with a drink of tea. The flashes of light that shot periodically across her eyes were not painful but were annoying. Sarah put it down to a migraine – too much bookwork.

“That’ll be the day” Edna had said, “You should see a doctor”

“I’m alright; I just need rest and a couple of aspirin

Now, however, the flashes were getting worse and more frequent – blue, red and yellow streaks shooting from left to right interrupting her field of vision .It was like watching some distance firework display, but without the noise. It was spooky. Edna went out into the back yard to peg out some washing. Sarah fell back asleep at the kitchen table.

Floating dreams in azure skies. Opens wide her fiery eyes

from which all light and colour fade. Only love can hear her cries.

In the lounge of Mrs Green’s guesthouse, Robert Simpson sat perusing the telephone directory and the yellow pages, waiting for his landlady to serve him with a full English breakfast (you know the sort Danish bacon, German sausage French butter etc). He searched through the nursing agencies and care homes all to no avail, and then remembering the letter, he thumbed his way straight to the ‘Ds’. There it was, he found almost immediately, at the top of the page D.L.T. Disability Living Trust -that was it! –It had to be it. He shouted nearly loud enough for other guest to hear. He knew with Lucy’s nursing background she would be working in the same field and the banks’ letter specifically mentioned Disability Living Trust. It all fitted. He entered the number on his mobile and

set about enjoying his breakfast. He would ring later.

Mark had spent the entire afternoon sifting through all the information he'd gleaned in the session at the library. He had methodically listed all the substances from Amphetamines through to LSD and Heroin on a spreadsheet in the second column he put symptoms – Sarah fitted every one – but as he knew once you start reading medical texts –books and the like you begin to suffer from every ailment listed. She could not possibly be on everything – could she? -but the effects were so similar and the treatments too. In a third column he put down street names and common terms for all the substances and finally in the last column he jotted down diagnostic signs and rehabilitation and treatment centres, making a careful note of any the withdrawal indications. He put the whole lot in manila folder to which he added press cuttings, gleaned from the local and national media about the death of John Simmons. The local rag had an article on that 'mad bitch' with the knife, as they so affectionately christened her, and one of the nationals ran a story on 'Drug dealer attacked by one his victims'. Mark looked through his various notes and the press comments trying to make sense of it all.

It was like a huge jigsaw without a picture on the box to guide you. However, what Mark was sure of, was that the treatments involved were exclusive and expensive. That would not necessarily be the problem, the hard part was going to be persuading Sarah-Jane to go. He would have to talk to someone. Edna? No! - She would just go ballistic and hysterical. I really need to talk to a medical expert - No! - Mark could not trust Dr Patrick, he knew the Sullivan family too well, What about the church, Father O'Malley, he pondered. - Can catholic priests tell lies? - He didn't want to take the chance. It would have to be Enoch; at least it would be a starting point. Tonight at the club, he decided to quiz Enoch and see what he knew.

The telephone rings its warbled song, a strangers voice is heard

Speak now or forever hold your peace. The timing is absurd!

Michael answered the phone; Lucy always put it onto speakerphone when she went out

"Hello,Michael Sands here"

"Hello, my name is Bob Simpson, can I speak to Lucy"

"I'm afraid she's not here at the moment, can I take a message or leave your number and I'll get

her to call you when she comes in” Michael spoke in his business voice, he was calm even though he mistrusted strangers. The fact he did not recognise the name ‘Simpson’ was understandable, Lucy had reverted to her maiden name of Proctor, and only the Trust knew her married name.

“No; its okay I call back later” Bob was annoyed he had come two hundred miles and now she wasn’t in. She should have been waiting for me – But she wasn’t expecting you! – Perhaps she was, that why she’s gone out. Bobs’ mind engaged in a duel with itself. He had done well really he considered and smiled furtively, one call, one visit and superb acting skills at the Trusts’ office in Chesford “Oh I haven’t seen my sister in years. I’ve only just come back into the country” he had fooled the girl on reception quite easily and she had given him the number straight away.

Michael dialled 1471 he did not like strangers phoning particularly as it was the first time he could ever remember anyone asking for his Lucy. ‘Bob Simpson, Bob Simpson’ he muttered to himself as he scrawled the number on the pad. He wheeled himself through to his office started the cassette player and pressed record only to be disturbed almost immediately when Lucy arrived back. He managed a smile and commented on her hair as soon as she appeared.

“Thank you, nice of you to notice” Lucy responded. He hadn’t - he wasn’t that observant, but knew the correct response when a woman has just spent three hours and £30 at the hairdresser was to say how wonderful she looked.

“You’ve just missed a call by the way” he looked towards his intended bride

“For me, who was it -what did they want did they leave a message?”

“Numbers on the pad and the name Timpson I think Bob Timpson, Michael remembered the name perfectly well, he had been repeating to himself for last half an hour, he was just toying with Lucy to see if there was any reaction. There wasn’t! Lucy went to the phone pad. She looked at Michael’s scrawl:’ Bob Simpson and a local number’

“He’s here?” She said aloud

“Who’s here?” asked Michael

“Bob is my...” her voice trailed off not wishing to upset Michael, particularly in view of this morning she decided to lie “He’s an old friend, I wonder how he found me.”

“Northern accent, Georgie I think” said Michael helpfully

“Yes that’s right he’s from Newcastle”

“That figures” Michael was jealous without even seeing this stranger from the north. Lucy on the other hand was taken aback. Here she was on the verge of a new beginning and fate deals this scumbag back from the past. She would ring and tell him their relationship was over and not to contact her again, she was divorcing him. That was the theory anyway. What actually happened when Lucy rang back was that Bob using his inimitable charm arranged a face-to-face meeting in Caspers wine bar on Sunday night - to clear the air. Lucy did not think it such a bad idea; the air in this city was stifling, anyway what harm would it do, at least it was a public place hard to have an argument there, even for Bob “Great, see you there,” she said almost enthusiastically.

Bob was elated, patience was not his strong point, first day here, and he’d cracked it. I am good aren’t I’ he bragged to his inner psyche, but for now I’ll have to wait. He decided to use his time profitably by exploring this two-bit town, first of all I’d better find Caspers’ he told himself and he got down a local amenity booklet from the shelf. It contained a tourist guide map, listing not only local facilities but also showed the one-way system, and before long, Bob had planned a clandestine route across the concrete circle of ring road and into the inner sanctum of Chesford City Centre. He could hardly wait until Sunday.

9. Rhapsody in Moonlight

The statues are starting to twist and crack

They're wondering if she ever coming back

The square was already filling up with the usual Saturday night crowds by the time Mark and Sarah-Jane made their way to Romeo's. They never went out too early; Mark could not see any point of getting tanked up before going on to a nightclub. The market clock peered down on the statues of the Council House and in a booming voice roared out the hour of nine o'clock.

Chesford square was a central meeting place for the people of the city and its environs. With the Council House on one side and the cathedral church of St Michael's behind it, the other three sides filled with bars, restaurants, cafes and coffee houses, an innovation in the area and rapidly becoming very popular, particularly with the student clientele. The council seemed to like the idea of young people drinking coffee and readily granted planning permission for new establishments. They based their support on the misguided notion that more coffee houses and fewer public houses would reduce violence. Unfortunately, this was not the set of 'Friends'. This was reality. In Chesford, fights would break out if you combed your hair the wrong way!

In the daytime, the square provided rest-bite for busy shoppers, at night and particularly weekend nights it became a Mecca for the youth of the area. Indeed, later in the evening many of them lie down on the pavement, presumably praying, but not necessarily cognisant of the direction in which they faced. Teenagers milled around appearing not to be doing anything in particular under the watchful eyes of the local constabulary. In fact, since last weekend, there had been a dramatic increase in police numbers, (Most constables could now count up to ten without using their fingers!). Any would be burglar would be well advised to commit their crime in the suburbs on a Saturday night, and thus reduce the already low chance of being apprehended. Although of course there is a one hundred percent chance of being caught if you are driving a motor vehicle, as the police are able, with the use

of new technology to smell a car that is 2mph over the speed limit from over five miles away. The modernisation of the police, with the use of computers and electronic gizmos has improved the crime statistics dramatically, in dealing with serious crime. Now, only minor misdemeanours such as street mugging, burglary, rape and murder are untouched by the new broom that sweeps through the British Police force and we can all feel a lot safer in our beds that Pc Plod is out there nicking all the evil motorists before they slaughter us in our own homes.

Romeo's was one of the new Coffee Houses, so beloved by the establishment. Mark led Sarah-Jane into the dimly lit premises.

Smoke-laded dust hung like a cloud of locusts in the coloured spotlights as they turned in tune to the loud nondescript music. The sort of noise, sorry music that the media call 'middle of the road' so named because it always sounds as if it is being played on the central reservation of the M1 or a roundabout on a busy bypass. I am sure there is a program there somewhere: "Traffic Island Discs" Just think of the celebrities we could use and on which roads to put them in the middle of, - a wicked thought, but for now back to Romeos.

"Hi Mark" Paul and his gang were already seated by the window, unlike Mark he always started early. Sarah-Jane went over to the table to join in the incessant bubble of nonsense in which young women indulged. You know the really important topics of life, like the size of Emma Jones nose or Marsha Thomson's' backside, or whether David Smith got into so and so's knickers last night. Mark went up to the counter to get two cappuccinos. Paul and Alan quickly joined him, anxious to find out all he knew about the other night, and desperate to get away from the annoying 'girl-talk', which is specifically, designed to drive men to distraction.

"Heard any more about John Simmons?" Paul asked.

"No not since I spoke to the police – did they talk to you yet" Mark, returned.

"Yeah nothing much, just general stuff, give 'em statement though. Heard was an overdose"

"Same as that but who's the girl who stabbed him, where's she fit in?"

"Jennie, he used to go out with her, bit of an old tart" Paul was very informed on 'old tarts', it was one of his specialist subjects - Paul Reynolds, University of Life reading 'Slappers and old Tarts' here is your starter for ten.

“I heard he owed her, something to do with drugs,” Alan offered.

“Nah, she’s always been the same she’s just mad for it. She’s twisted. Always has been”

Paul replied Mark picked up the tray with the coffees and turned to make his way back towards the window seats.

“Going up tonight,” inquired Alan changing the subject.

“Course, nowhere else is there” Mark responded.

“Always good for the totty, we can’t all cradle snatch like you” Paul joked digging Mark in the ribs, he was continually joshing with his friend on the subject of Sarah’s age.

“Lay off her – she’s older than most of the kids up there, you know that” Mark snapped back.
(In fact Sarah was well above the fifteen-year-old average age for the local nightclub scene)

“Touchy! Touchy! Don’t gets so sensitive you should know by now we all think the world of you two, like an old married couple, just jealous that’s all. Come on; let’s link up with the others, and they pushed their way through the writhing bodies with Alan clearing the path for Paul and Mark to carry the drinks back to the table by the window where the girls sharpened their claws and gossiped their garbage, and the lads admired the preening hordes.

Saturday night a teenage feast, sore eyes disturb the mighty beast

Bouncing flesh parade the walk. Smiles and laughter: women’s talk.

Alcohol dull senses sigh: stocking tops and a glimpse of thigh

Too young to vote but not to love, dresses that fit just like a glove.

Yawning eyes on socket stems: stiletto heels and rising hems.

Lashes, lipstick, lace and scent,

..... I wonder where childhood went.

Bob had spent the night at the little bed and breakfast on the edge of town. He was not sure how long he would stay so he booked in for only a couple of nights initially. He did not reckon much on staying in watching the box on a Saturday night - he never did go a bundle on Cilla Black, so he thought he would sample the delights of this godforsaken place he now found himself to see how it compared to Newcastle. He was disappointed. Chesford square did not compare to the ‘Big Market’.

To be honest Chesford does not compare to anywhere, for the kids who could not get in at the Roostertail there was nefarious other establishments: Egberts, Greens and The Universe for example, most of dubious character, and the most popular place was the railway station, which took you to out of town to somewhere interesting.

After casting his vision over the bustling scene of nubile teenagers, jostling for position and filling the air with the scent of young love, alcohol mist and body sweat, Bob went into the Rock Café next to the cinema. There was no particular reason he chose it, although being a canny northerner it may well have been the sign that read £1-50 a pint. It was a karaoke type bar thus Bob was able to exchange Figaro driving his cavalier for Beelzebub and the devils' sideboard. He enjoyed the night, contrary to his expectations and forgot the *raison d'être* he was here. He put Lucy out of his mind whilst the music washed over him and the beer spun its web within his brain - and his liver. It did its job well. The five years he was attempting to resurrect disappeared under the flood of amber nectar. The injustice he felt at his wife's departure buried itself beneath a raucous rendition of a Bryan Adams song, which two girls, who should have been in bed hours ago were slowly murdering

Ultimately, the artificially induced euphoria gave way to depression and Bob, as was his habit, began pouring out his troubles, his life story, together with his insides at regular intervals, to anyone who would listen. The place soon emptied. Well it was two o'clock, but the bar-staff were very grateful to Bob for helping effect a quick evacuation of the premises. After a brief argument with himself about the state of the country and whose fault it was that he was here in the first place, he stumbled back into the square, tried to ask directions of a waste-bin and spent five minutes chatting to the statues. The fact that he never received a reply did not seem to bother Bob as no one ever listened to anything he said anyway. He soon mingled with the bubbling crowds waiting to sample curry and kebab with extra chilli.

The square was probably busier at this time on a Sunday morning than any other time. All the clubs, bars and restaurants emptied their clientele into the small plaza to the mercy of the fast food shops and 'salmonella vans' parked on every corner. You could get curry, of sorts; tepid pork batches; burnt roast potatoes, soggy chips, jacket spuds, under cooked chicken, and kebabs of every description and hue all served in cardboard trays with the same disgusting gravy and none of which you would eat

if you were sober. Stationed at each of the food outlets were two riot-equipped policemen in yellow fluorescent jackets standing like banana bodyguards waiting for the inevitable fights to start. An argument over a girl, not enough onion on a beef-burger or just someone looking at the wrong person at the wrong time might spark them off. - The real cause of course was nothing of the sort. - The white vans would be busy tonight!

Fortunately, for Bob Simpson his key-fob had the address of his digs on it so it was not too difficult to avail a taxi and get a lift home. The fact that it was only walking distance did not seem to bother the cheerful cabby. He was used to drunks on a Saturday night, particularly out-of-town ones. (The B & B was a dead give away). Three times round the Ring Road and £7-00 later Bob was dropped off outside the No 6 Moore street. He sidestepped the vomit and manoeuvred passed the young couple locked in frantic embrace to put the key in the lock.

Hark! I hear the morning dawn,
Curries' multi-coloured yawn.
Hair dishevelled, tights are torn,
And yet another suckers born.

By 10-30 pm, Mark and Sarah-Jane together with their entourage had moved to the Roostertail. If you went too late, it meant long queues and if you went too early, nothing was happening. Mark wanted to be earlier than usual tonight, to get a table away from the main dance floor, in one of the alcoves. It was a good place behind the pillars to observe what was happening, to be part of the scene without getting too involved. It was divorced from the main action plus of course, he was a romantic at heart and the privacy suited his mood. To be honest he had not really wanted to come at all after the trouble a fortnight ago, but realised it would give him an opportunity to see Enoch, that and the fact that Sarah had insisted, flashing her lovely brown eyes and turning Mark's resistance to putty.

“Bunny's on tonight” she had said, “We must go”

Bunny Joe (what sort of a name is that?) was a circuit rave DJ with a growing reputation club-land. The music was loud and basic. A primitive beat designed to stimulate the nerve centre in the brain and alienate everyone who was over twenty. Mark went up to the bar and left Sarah-Jane with two of her

girlfriends. By the time he got back, she was dancing.

Spotlight shed your shadow onto the violet floor of the Roosters' jaws.

The hypnotic monster leaps to the pounding of the metronome;

and they dance.

Tomorrow is another day, but she is here and he loves her.

Record-spinning alcohol to blind the swaying mind with music;

and they dance.

Webs of suspect dreams hanging from the ceiling of the hall.

Wait, here comes the usic-man with his basket of lies;

and they dance

Mark put the drinks down on the table and took the opportunity to seek out Enoch Harlem. He was easy to spot in his red suit, leaning against one of the pillars talking to a girl in a green top and a belt; well it looked like a belt anyway. Mark puzzled as he approached his target why girls wore skirts so short they could not sit down without revealing what they had for breakfast and then spend all night pulling them down in an attempt to get them to reach their knees. He cast the query into the dustbin of the universe along with the other great mysteries and made his way through the squirming bodies dancing to the hypnotic rave music of Bunny Joe. Music, and the term is used very loosely here, that is only truly appreciated if you were drunk, on drugs or totally insane, and preferably all three! Mark did not like the noise; he hated the cacophony, like his father, Johnny; he loved the old soul of the Sixties: Otis Redding, Aretha Franklin, Sam & Dave. "We knew how to enjoy ourselves" he could hear his father now as he walked over to attract his quarry's attention. "No need for mind bending drugs in our day" Mark always found his fathers' words funny as he always believed the drug revolution had started in the Sixties. Johnny would have none of it.

"Hi" Mark said shouting over the din" Can I have a word"

"Sure, Markie lets slip over to the Blue Room"

The Blue room was a section of the club used as a restaurant in the week and a 'chill out' area on 'Rave' nights, it wasn't exactly quiet, but at least it was free from smoke haze and you could see each

other, which made lip reading easier. Once away from the deafening cacophony of white noise Mark asked Enoch about the police and John Simmons. Enoch was not initially forthcoming, so Mark tried a different tack “I know but you always seem to have your finger on the pulse in this town, I thought if something was going off you’d know” He tried to sound casual. “if you hear anything let us know mate”

“Pigs bin to see you yet bout Simmo?” Enoch grinned through gleaming dentistry.

“Yeah, given them a statement” Mark replied, “What’s going on Enoch?” he continued.

“Look I don’t need to get involved, they watch me, everything I do is legit, but they watch.

Jeannie was seeing Simmo that’s what the row was about, she flipped, I’d lent her some readies to get shut of Simmo, and she owed him big time”

“I’m worried about Sarah-Jane” Mark interrupted Enoch’s’ flow. He wanted to see if there was any reaction from Enoch. There wasn’t!

“Look mate Sarah’s cool she’s got her head screwed on” Enoch answered “No! I’m more worried about what happened to Simmo”

“Well the inquest is next week, overdose I heard said Mark

“I dare say, but take it from me pushers don’t generally become users. Simmo was clean; yeah he smoked a bit and the odd tab, who doesn’t? But nothing heavy, know what I mean?” Enoch grunted and turned his head the door had opened; the girl with two-inch waist and a skirt to match had come looking for him to buy her some more vodka.

“Enoch, just before you go, who supplied John Simmons?”

“Listen Markie my boy, if I knew that don’t you think would have told the pigs?” he laughed loudly. Actually no, Mark didn’t think he would tell the police even if their panda car were on fire. Enoch was typical of many young blacks, never mind a chip Enoch had a sack of King Edwards on his shoulders. Mark wandered after Enoch and the waif and went back into the main club. He was not really any further forward but he wasn’t going to get anything else from Enoch, he knew that. He glanced at his young lover as she swirled in the fog of lager and thumping drums. The ultra violet light picked up the white shirts and lace on the tops as it swished around the room, whilst any guys with dandruff made a hasty exit.

Her white nylon sweater shows up under the lights of the sky,
and she is still living in the light of my mind;
as they dance.

The fish of her mind swim round in their pool of silver water
and the smile that comes from beneath the ring of hair;
as they dance

.....

The Fat Man picked up the telephone and answered the rich dark voice with his curt brusque manner “That’s what I pay you good money for – sort it!”

The receiver scrambled an answer back “I don’t care whose fault it is, just sort it. And don’t call me here again, use the mobile” He hated being disturbed at home, particularly on a Saturday night; worse still, he abhorred incompetent people. Forty-two years he had been in business in this town, forty-two years man and boy, people liked him and respected him in the town. Jack Forman was a name they all knew and liked. He attended all the correct functions and cultivated all the proper contacts.

He could not afford another mess up, not now just when he was running for the council. “I seem to employ idiots” he said aloud, refilled his brandy glass and lit a cigar. He heard his expected guests arrive as their car nosily scraped over the gravel drive, the security lights came on and he went out to greet them.

10. Toccata & Fugue

The statues lie broken, shattered destroyed
They can't understand how to fill up the void.

Sarah-Jane was screaming. The duvet opened up before her and the little juicy bugs poured out, twisting and turning their bodies in a macabre dance. Hundreds of them - Millions of them - Short fat maggots of varying hue: white ones, pink ones, red, yellow, and brown. They climbed up her legs and onto her contorting body. Within minutes, she was covered. The humming of the little insects invaded her ears. The bugs themselves crawled into every orifice of her body: her ears, her nose and her mouth. She screamed again. The invaders wriggled and writhed all over her frame searching out her flesh. She gouged her nails into her thighs to brush them away. She thrashed at her torso pulling her tea-shirt, ripping it from her swarming body. The little beasts squealed as she knocked them from her sweating skin. – She was frantic. She could feel them in her hair and on her face – she ran from her room and into the shower and turned it on. The water cascaded down her wretched face and mingled with the salty tears of her panic. Her arms were still flailing about in a vain attempt to rid herself of the little monsters.

She slumped down in the corner of the shower and left the water streaming onto her infested body. Head held in her folded arms, she screamed and screamed again before entering the forest of her worst nightmare. Long tall elms lined the road “Oranges and Lemons say the bells of St Clements” but it was St Michaels that chimed out the hour. She plucked the fruit and took a bite. . It seemed to work the maggots seemed to be getting less. They were slowing down. They were dying. They pupated on her skin. She felt no movement on her flesh, no more crawling on her body. She breathed deeply, the panic subsided and sobbing she lay face down in the shower waiting for the water to cleanse her of the dead larva.

It was Enoch who finally turned the water off and took Sarah back to her room. He carried her

gently and lightly on the wind and laid her on the primrose duvet. He whispered a sweet greeting in her delicate ears. Mark could see what was happening. He was watching from the shelter of the Elm trees. Enoch was with his Sarah-Jane, she was virtually naked and they were alone in her bedroom. Mark lunged at Enoch and Sarah could see the long blade as it plunged through Enoch's side. A red river flowed and stained the virgin white sheets. A lake of crimson blood spread out from the corpse, flooding the duvet but then dries up. The wound was still pumping, but the blood had ceased it was hundreds of tiny spiders that now gushed forth from Enoch's drained cadaver.

Sarah watched in horror as the spiders ran on their tiny legs about her person. The screams came back. She fought the rampant arachnids. She fought hard. She ran. She ran fast brushing the creeping things from her body. She removed the last of her clothes ripping them from her infested body. Frantically she ran through the house. She heard them behind her. They were talking, whispering. They were planning. She could hear them plotting. She knew they would soon all mass together joining to form one massive spider – she had seen it before, but never like this. She bellowed and screamed but nobody could hear. The noise of their little voices was deafening. They were taunting her, challenging her to turn around and face them. She ran down the stairs sobbing as she went; she could hear their laughter behind her. She bellowed and screamed but nobody could hear. She ran into the hallway, not daring to look in the mirror as she passed for fear of glimpsing the giant that surely now followed her. Her legs ached from the scratches, her arms were tired from fighting and tears blurred her vision. She opened the front door and ran down the path. She was crying. She was yelling, shouting. Were they still there? She could still feel them behind her. The square engulfed her. She could still hear their incessant chatter. She cried out once more asking them to stop. She ran across the uneven pavement the tar was cold on her bare feet. She screamed again. She didn't see the people in the square, She didn't see the passers-by. She didn't see the Rover as it entered the square and she did not see the panic on the driver's face as a naked girl frantically confronted him dripping wet, flapping her arms and screaming and screaming and screaming.

There, in the intricate cells of twilight, where no-one comes or goes

Only shadows are permitted to die

There, in the silent valley of the statues where the purple spiders wait

Only ripples on their web are alive

Here, in the soft glow of the neon shade, she walks the twisted highway

And screamed as he tried to brake!

For a second the whole square froze. The world stopped spinning and actually went into slow motion. Sarah-Jane lay motionless on the cold black tarmac. People all seemed to stop and stare, silently pointing. A hush pervaded everywhere. The wind no longer whistled, the birds stopped singing, the church bells of St Michael's stopped chiming. The pigeons had all but disappeared and even the sky held back from rolling the clouds across its grey façade. It was only for a second, a millisecond even, but all was still....

..... A woman screamed and a crescendo of noise broke out. Pedestrians just passing by rushed to help the stricken couple. Mobile phones were ringing, horns were blaring as the traffic came to a grinding halt. Someone dragged Bob from the shattered Rover just before it exploded and burst into flames. Sirens were echoing through the side streets searching their way to the tragic scene.

By the time the paramedics arrived, a young man in a blue suit had taken charge, managing the crowd whilst another chap directed traffic away from the accident. A local resident had fetched blankets out for the victims. The crowd just watched. Sarah-Jane was static, her face blank, impassive, and her pupils wide but still, looking up at the ever-darkening sky. Bob was moving, but in a total state of shock, his disorientated mind trying to establish a link with reality. This town was bad, from the moment he first came here, the signs were there, (or rather they weren't there, which brings us back to that ring road again!). The omens were definitely black. He had even read his horoscope at Mrs Greens' guesthouse "An unnecessary journey will bring you trouble". Of course, Bob did not believe in all that nonsense, but he was in trouble now all right – he couldn't feel his legs! He felt someone loosening his collar, he could hear voices even though they sounded distant, and he felt the stretcher as they strapped him in it, but he still couldn't feel his legs. He looked down, they were there – blurred and uncertain, but they were there .

“Why can’t I feel my legs” he screamed

“Don’t worry sir, we’ll have you sorted, very soon now” Bob did not hear the paramedics voice after that. The injection worked very quickly.

Bob remembered nothing about his journey in the ambulance, which was probably just as well. The Chesford General Hospital stood on the north side of the city. The journey involved negotiating some nightmare traffic and numerous speed humps, designed for maximum discomfort of the patient, all along the six-mile route. There used to be an Accident and Emergency hospital in the centre of town, but under the new and efficient National Health Service it closed and a hotel now occupied the site. There still was a medical facility in the middle of Chesford specialising in what was now euphemistically called ‘Trauma Care’ but all accident victims and coronary care emergencies were taken first to Chesford General. They were left waiting around for hours to be assessed, recorded, filed and eventually treated and were then transferred back to the Trauma Centre or, depending on the severity of the driving and the number of sleeping policemen encountered, to the Spinal Injury Clinic on the other side of town. It is this procedure typical of most large towns and cities that serves to explain, at least in some small way, the ever-decreasing waiting list in our hospitals (or should that be deceasing) If you can sit up to drink tea, or dress yourself then you are discharged. You may need to come back to deal with anything you may have contracted whilst in there, after you taken your turn on the waiting list of course, but at least for now you can go home.

It was much later in the evening when Edna Sullivan discovered what had happened to her ‘baby’. Returning home to find a sympathetic policewoman in her house, Edna was told the front door was open and they needed to secure the premises, Sarah-Jane was still alive but she was undergoing tests and would not be able to have visitors until tomorrow. Dr Patrick arrived shortly afterwards to sedate Mrs Sullivan.

“You need some rest – you’ll be no good to Sarah, or Mary else eh?” he said kindly and gave her the two tablets “Take these now with a drink of water and two more in six hours if necessary. I’ll pop back in tomorrow, and we’ll have more news then”

“Mary, where’s Mary?” Edna managed through her tears

“Oh she’s okay she’s with her nanny, she doesn’t know anything yet, we thought it

best.” The woman police officer held out a glass of water for Mrs Sullivan. Edna took the drink and swallowed the sedatives.

“Can we contact anyone else for you, what about Mr Sullivan” she continued.

“I don’t think that will be necessary” said Dr Patrick, who appeared to be taking charge of the situation. He knew the family well enough, and knew that wherever Frank Sullivan was he would not be much use to anyone. “I’ll send my nurse round to keep you company” he said to Edna and I’ll tell her to inform Father O’Malley.

“Thank you doctor, you’re very kind; all of you. I don’t know what I do without you “Edna made her way upstairs with the doctors assistance and was soon asleep.

As sleep kissed her troubled brow and night besieged her mind

Blackness hides the dwindling light and she is left behind

Crying in her slumbers’ dream, yet she knew not why

Pools of empty tears were all that she could cry

Empty hands of silent love, an absent strain of life

Time, the ebbing surf recedes; a foaming haze of strife

Lucy sat in Caspers’ wine bar waiting to meet her soon to be ex husband Bob, sipping with lady like delicacy at a Port and Lemon. It was her third and last. She had decided that fifty minutes was long enough to wait even for Bob, after all it was a woman’s prerogative to be late. But she knew Bob and how much he relied on her. She knew that if she was not there to help him as she had always done in the past he would never make an appointment on time. How on Gods good earth had he managed all this time without her to do his washing, cooking and ironing? She even chose his clothes for him; he had terrible dress sense. Lucy realised that this was probably the first time in over six months that she had spent anytime thinking about Bob. She had not really missed him always having found herself too busy, but now she found herself waiting with anticipation like a young girl on that first date. The reason was of course, she really did want to see him.

She fingered the stone on the ring that Michael had given her and smiling to herself thought that she probably did as much for Bob unpaid as she now did for Michael on a salary. In addition, Michael was kind and loved her, though she supposed Bob did too in his own way. Michael showed

his love with gifts, he was certainly more generous than Bob, and more affectionate. No, she had made her mind up Michael needed her. She would say 'yes' to Michael and start divorce proceedings. She finished her drink and went towards the door.

"Oh I'm sorry," said Mark, apologising for colliding with Lucy as he entered Caspers

"It's okay I wasn't looking where I was going," replied Lucy picking her bag up from the floor

"Let me get you a drink by way of apology" Mark offered.

"No it's alright I was just going"

"Please I insist" Mark smiled despite his troubled mind.

"Port and lemon then please" Lucy thought it better to stick to the same poison, since cutting back on her drinking she had been very good with booze. She genuinely was not bothered about a drink now, but this boy's face looked familiar. She recognised him from somewhere in her past - her recent past! "Haven't we met somewhere before?" Mark said putting the drinks down on the small table by the door

"I'm not sure butYes!" she said suddenly as the picture of Sarah-Jane crashing into Michael came into her mind, she remembered how taken Michael was with the young girl." I have an excellent memory for faces but I just couldn't place you before. Do you remember about two or three weeks ago outside the supermarket, I was with a chap in a wheelchair, Michael Sands, and your girlfriend....."

"Sarah-Jane" interrupted Mark as Lucy struggled to put a name to the face in her head "she fell over the chair," he added recalling the incident. He went quiet as he thought about Sarah in the hospital.

"Yes, that's it Sarah-Jane. How is she by the way?" Lucy asked warmly breaking the silence with polite conversation.

"Not well actually" Mark responded, "There was a very bad accident this afternoon in the square, she was run over by a car" Mark spoke in a low voice and Lucy could hear the tremor in it

"Oh I'm ever so sorry to hear that," said Lucy wishing she hadn't brought the subject up, but she was a genuinely compassionate person "Many others hurt?"

"The driver of the Rover looked in a bad way but no-one else was involved. They don't

even know who the driver was, he wasn't local, Geordie I think someone said. It's only just happened everything's a bit of a blur at the moment not much information yet. You know how it is."

Lucy stopped sipping her drink and stared at Mark - "Rover" - "Geordie" they were the words she heard; nothing else. "Bob drives a Rover," she said aloud - and at that instant, she knew why Bob had not shown.

Lost in the forests of her conscience
Hand that beats the heart of love
Soft sweet murmurs of the memory
Has vengeance come from God above?

Silver leaves on sun-kissed pavements
Blowing in the silk blue sky
Death won't answer any questions
She didn't even say goodbye

Larry wasn't expecting a pick-up. He wanted to get back. It wasn't that unusual for him to have an extra drop suddenly thrust on him or even some returns that someone had forgotten to tell him about, but it was all a bit unexpected when Jack rang him to say he would have to call in at Hull on the way back.

"Stop whining! You're on double time. It won't take you long, there's nowt on the road on Sundays" Jack was his usual likeable self. Larry grumbled and complained but knew that Jack was just the messenger and if the Fat Man had authorised it, he would have to do it. It must be important he thought to himself, the darts and a couple of pints in the Fox would have to wait. It's not as if Larry was any good at darts anyway - his belly was not the officially required size.

The dirty narrow tracks at the rear of the docks took Larry into Dentons yard. It was strange that old Bill wasn't there to greet him - "Bet the tight bastards wouldn't pay the old salt overtime" Larry said loud enough for 'the tight bastards' to hear had they been there. He clambered down from the cab and walked over to the tall sliding doors. Stacked just inside were four boxes, sealed with tape and marked in felt tip with the legend 'Pointers Inks' Larry signed the returns docket put the top copy

through the slot on the office door and loaded the packages onto the van.

He started the Transit and manoeuvred it back out on the road, whistling to himself and too engrossed to notice the dark blue Peugeot that followed at a discreet distance.

11. Intermezzo

Mosaic raindrops play your dance upon the pavements of the
mind

Painted sunlight leave your songs into the shadows of his world

For Sarah waits with hazel eyes in the tunnel of tranquillity

Silken dewdrops spin your webs upon the walls of conscience steep

Jigsaw dreams of harlequin into the corridors of night

For Lucy waits with sweetened smile in the tunnel of sensitivity

Swollen skies parade the clouds upon the willow sea of love

Thunder chords echo out your notes into the valley of her brain

For Michael waits with begging arms in the tunnel of humility

Continuing with this musical theme, we will now have a short interlude. Now you may think that this is a peculiar point at which to take a break. Sarah-Jane and Bob Simpson are at death's door in Chesford General, Lucy is on the verge of accepting Michael's proposal, but has now discovered why Bob failed to turn up to their meeting, and Mark is at his wits end worrying about his childhood sweetheart. Well my friend you are just reading this garbage, I have to write it. To be honest I had considered finishing all together at this point, now don't all cheer at once because I decided against it on reflection as I want to know what happens in the end. "Ah" you say but I must already know the end, I wrote it. – Wrong! – This story unfolds as it is written, the one and only reason for continuing is to get to the end and see what develops. It's a bit like life really. There is a master plan, a skeleton laid out upon which the characters are manipulated but the nuances of each decision and the intricacies of every event are not written in stone. As in real life, they change with each person's perception and knowledge. There you get philosophy as well! There are of course other perfectly good reasons for continuing but I cannot think of any right now. However, if you wish to discover the true meaning of

the Marmalade Tree then you should continue, if on the other hand you remain unmoved then please feel free to go off and watch one of those interesting soaps that seem to be constantly on our television screens these days.

You may also think that it is commercial suicide to break a novel in the middle but dear readers (assuming you are still reading and not yet joined Sarah-Jane in a deep coma) that rather depends on the purpose of the book in the first place:- To inform and entertain? – Hopefully To make a buck or two? – Possibly, but doubtful. No the real motive is purely selfish. It may come across as the ramblings of an inane mind but primarily the reason I wrote this book was to get down on paper a story that has been spinning round my head for 20 years or more, before the nice man with long scythe comes to pay me a visit. I enjoyed writing it and enjoyed reading it even more. So, before I completely disappear into the murky depths of my own digressions, back to the plot. Just a quick point regarding the statues, because I am sure you will be concerned. They do get repaired at great expense to the council and will no doubt re-appear in both the square and in future chapters. You could of course have completely missed out this section, but there again; you would not have known that until you got to this point.

The inquest on John Simmons had been a short affair. He had been poisoned by a drug overdose. Traces of the dextroamphetamine Dexedrine had been found in his body together with flunitrazepam a strong sedative. Commercially known as Rohypnol, it is commonly called ‘roach’ on the streets or even ‘ro-shay’ after its manufactures Hoffman-La-Roche. The coroner had said that the dose was self-inflicted but intentional suicide had to be ruled out because the police had found no evidence to support the theory. Mr Simmons friends had verified in testimony as to his state of mind and all agreed that he was not the sort of person to have taken his own life.

The only conclusion that the coroner could arrive at therefore was that John Simmons had not known of the contamination within the tablets. In his expert opinion and that of several other eminent doctors and scientists, the addition of the Rohypnol (it was about ten times the strength of Valium.) would have produced a lethal cocktail. He thus concluded a verdict of ‘death by misadventure’; which I must admit has always struck me as a peculiar way to die. I mean if one freezes to death because you

are lost on the moors in the snow when your car has broken down and the heaters out of order, is that death by misadventure or double pneumonia. If you fell headlong off a roof because the ladder gave way after you went up to fix the aerial because everyone on Emmerdale had a two shadows, is that death by misadventure or a broken neck?. Death by adventure seems a much more plausible and possibly more exciting way to go: eaten by a lion on an African Safari; Killed by an avalanche on a mountaineering expedition, whatever, perhaps it is just semantics, but does qualify as a misadventure?

John Simmons it appears did take amphetamines on a regular basis. No traces of any substances were found in his home. The police even used DNA (which incidentally stands for Dangers No-one Admits) to try to establish a connection with other recent incidents in the area. After all, it would be nice to clear up some outstanding burglaries and a few muggings at the same time and John Simmons was hardly going to protest his innocence was he? Nevertheless, they could find nothing and were unable to pin anything on him. He did face one definite charge, however, his car left in a restricted area whilst he was dying in hospital was causing an obstruction, and the police issued a bailiffs warrant for the £40 ticket. The Christmas Ball was not far away and funds were low this year!

The incident at the Roostertail was not according to Detective Superintendent Tatton connected. Any injuries sustained by Mr Simmons were just superficial. "A girl is currently assisting us with our inquiries," he told the court. Most of the police investigation, he had gone on to say was concentrating on the supply of amphetamines and other drugs to the local club scene. "It is an ongoing inquiry and we are liaising with our colleagues from other forces," he continued, which simply put meant the police did not have a clue where the drugs came from and probably weren't too concerned anyway.

Westward through the dreams of time, over love that lies without,

She is waiting, solid love, to crown him with her celandine.

Lucy's perfect corralled heart in dreams that only Gods can dream,

Ambrosia, sweet beyond compare; for Lucy lives and Lucy loves,

And while she loves I cannot die

Michael sat in his office, a small back room that he had converted some time ago. It was

around the time he was in line for promotion at Electra. He had started bringing more and more work home with him and decided to utilise the spare capacity in his house for business rather than a store for the vicars bring and buy sale. The church had been very grateful and sent a couple of volunteers round to help Michael clear it out so he could get started on his office. It had been a labour of love for him. He had designed all of the units himself. He had done the painting and the wallpapering. He had virtually completed the room over a period of six months.

Then, that fateful trip to San Moritz for ‘team building’ and ‘male bonding’ and all of that crap. Michael had bonded all right with 5000 tones of snow at 80 mph. So the office just never got finished. Still he was not bitter! Just bad tempered, belligerent, depressed, downcast and deflated, and generally awkward with everyone who came into his life. That was until Lucy entered his life; she changed his whole outlook and gave him a purpose once more Lucy in fact was the reason that Michael was in his incomplete office now. He was going to reward Lucy, just for being Lucy.

He clicked the mouse and the screen changed from blue to green, he brought up his Word document detailing changes to his will. Fundamentally, he left everything to Lucy. That was how much he felt about the person who came into his life and turned it upside down. Made him feel human again and not a wheelchair bound invalid. He set up a trust fund to look after a niece and nephew, and another fund in case Lucy had children or his brother turned up. It would look better, anyway if he made some provision for Jonathon. There were some other little bequests and minor stipulations “John Longton will sort out the legal bits” pondered Michael “and no doubt offer unwanted advice as to what I should really be doing with my money. He pressed send to despatch his communiqué to the solicitors

Michael’s’ parents were both dead. They died in a tragic plane crash when he was very small. Everyone had told him how ‘lucky’ he had been that chicken pox had prevented him from travelling at the last minute. Michael did not feel lucky when he was growing up without his mother. He never really got over the fact that she had not cancelled the trip and stayed with him instead of farming him and his younger brother out to grandparents. He understood his fathers business took him away but could not comprehend why his mother had to travel with him. It was in these early years of his life that Michael sought solace in the church looking for answers to his questions. They never came and

gradually, particularly after the injury he decided that if there was a God he'd emigrated long ago, perhaps even on the same plane as mum and dad. In later life these experiences had made him tough and ruthless, just the sort of qualities, you would expect from a top business executive. Michael was adept at exacting maximum potential from people. He was good with his work colleagues, particularly the junior staff under him. He demanded and got respect. He would crush you like a fly if you stepped out of line but treat you with equal admiration if he thought you merited it.

He had inherited a reasonable sum of money from his parents, and his guardians used it wisely educate him, first at the local Grammar school, one of the few to survive the 'new deal' for education cuts, and then at Cambridge where he studied Computer Science and Mathematics. It virtually guaranteed him a job in the same line as his father, electronics and communications. Donald Sands had worked for Copra, as had his father before him. Electra took over the company, and now enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the field. Michael was soon ensconced in a suitable sinecure waiting to climb the rungs of the managerial ladder. His life was just beginning to brighten up from its unfortunate start when it turned round to kick him once more in the teeth. - Michael never did like dentists!

Silence sings the song of love, with all the pain of just being apart

The emptiness of echoes sound to the slow dull beating of her heart

Sarah's mind was wide-awake even if her visitors could see no outward sign. Motionless on the crisp white sheets her body waited for its call to journey on, one way or another. She was totally unaware of the drama all around her, the tears that Edna shed and the anguish and helplessness that Mark felt. She took the path through the little copse and turned left at Parsons Pool back towards the Tree. John Simmons was there waiting for her to join him, and that other chap was there the tall swarthy looking man who was always hanging around. Sarah didn't like him. He looked like trouble. John smiled and beckoned to Sarah to come to him he held out his arms and she could see the needle marks. The sky was a peculiar shade of red, angry but not quite right, as if it was the picture had not been finished or like an oil painting badly done. Sarah got nearer to John Simmons and was about to take his hand. Mark appeared from the other direction, he called to her "Sarah Sarah" The wind seemed to fight his voice, it made it echo and sound subdued. He shouted louder. Sarah broke free

from the grasp of the shadowy shape of John Simmons and ran towards her lovers arms. The sky changed suddenly, it was more real now, and it darkened noticeably. The rain began to fall. The trees bowed their heads and waved their branches as if in attempt to stop her progress. Mark called her name again. John Simmons was just a silhouette now against the massive form of the silent oak. The rain continued to soak the ground and Sarah was drenched. She tripped, (not really but all females seem to in films and books when they are running away, so it is expected.) The giant oak was closer now. It was definitely following her. John Simmons had disappeared completely. The oak was behind her ready to devour another victim. Sarah screamed. The tree swooped down and she was gone into its belly. Mark looked on in astonishment at the scene. It was as if he understood. Edna looked at her daughter as she slept, through the blotched eyes of a distraught mother. She held Sarah hand and prayed to her God who was listening somewhere behind the row of elms.

.....

Jonathon was Michael's younger brother. He had always resented the attention Michael received; it is an unfortunate feature of life that one child often perceives the other to receive all the praise whilst he accumulates only reprimands. As young boys, they had been close but they gradually drifted apart and seemed to compete with each other for favours, girls and jobs. Jonathon eventually landed a good job in the Diplomatic Service and was posted abroad, South America somewhere.. Michael had not heard from him since. He often thought about his brother and had tried on several occasions to contact him. He searched the net, left messages with the Foreign Office and even used the 'old boy' network at Cambridge - All to no avail. Since the accident, Michael redoubled his efforts, as he felt isolated and vulnerable. He felt responsible that Jonathon had gone to live abroad, even though it was nothing to do with him.

Jonathon was jealous of Michael's success and always tried to emulate him. He was just as bright, achieving a 2:1 in English and Politics at Manchester. He could quite easily have made Cambridge, but did not apply himself as Michael did. Jonathon always looked for the easy way out of most situations – a quick buck. If there was a short cut to riches and success Jonathon wanted it. He always tried to be one up on his brother. It was not until they were in their early teens, that Michael began to realise that Jonathon's competitive streak was ruining their relationship. Every achievement

Michael produced, Jonathon tried to better. Jonathon was excellent at sport and excelled at Rugby and cricket and although Michael was no mean athlete this was the one area where he could truly say he beat his brother. After Michael's award of a place at Cambridge, Jonathon withdrew into himself, he seemed to view it as failure in the race with his sibling. He became heavily involved in politics at school, and world events greatly influenced him. He never intended to become a civil servant, but when the appointment came up, he saw it as an opportunity to get one over Michael. The gloating letter he sent to his brother when he originally left for Chile was the last time there had been any contact between them and that was 15 years ago!

Michael, in his more morose moods often got depressed at his isolation from Jonathon who was after all his only remaining family. It was shortly after the accident that Michael had moved into the bungalow in Pitchers Gardens, although quite why he had chosen to stay in the Chesford area was something of a mystery. Electra closed their factory about a year later during which time Michael did some freelance work for them, but after they moved the regional office to Sheffield, he decided to stay on even though he no ties with the area. It was during this period of inactivity that Michael developed his interest in the Internet; he often sat in front of his monitor. He used it to try to discover anything he could about his brother, where he was, what he was doing, but never found any trace of him and assumed if he was still alive that he just did not want to be found. Perhaps he had changed his name. Perhaps he was dead, that part of the world was well known for being unstable. The computer became his lifeline and link with the outside world, before Lucy it was his only link and provided consolation from his misery and self-pity. However, he now found he was using it less and less

Was but my love an orchid pure then I would treasure it

Till willows bend their weary boughs

And autumn turns to spring

Nay, she is no flower: for a flower cannot love,

Nor kiss a sweet as summer rain

And love will never die.

Michael was quite pleased with the poem he had written. He saved the document and pressed print. He would leave it for Lucy to find it might hasten her 'yes' decision. Michael decided before

closing down he would browse around the net “ You never know what’s out there” his old tutor from from Cambridge had told him. It had been over a week since he had last logged on so whilst he was e-mailing over to John Longton he thought why not.

Working in the communications and electronic industry Michael had always been partial to new gadgets and gismos. He always intended to get a camera for his desktop to link in with the microphone he had installed last year, but had never got round to it. His plan was to use it for a video diary, which he considered more reliable and efficient than the audio on he was compiling at present. He soon found the page for the Electronic Shopping Mall and scoured the menu for what he wanted. After several attempts the page came up, he ticked the relevant boxes entered his credit card details and clicked on ‘submit’

“Your order will be despatched within 5 working days,” The screen legend said

“Good “said Michael aloud assuming the computer would hear him” That’s another job done” He logged off and pointed the cursor to ‘Shut Down’

12. Sonata for Sarah

Love is happiness, laughter and light.

Love is the tears you are weeping at night

Edna had been at her daughters' bedside all night; she was still there when Mark returned the next morning "How is she Mrs S?" Mark asked

"No change dear"

"Why don't you get off home and get some rest, I'll stay for awhile, 'till you get back if you like. I have asked for a couple of days off from the factory," Mark volunteered

"I could do with a break. I'll pop back after lunch" Mrs Sullivan said stifling a yawn

There was plastic tubing arcing its way in and out of available orifices from Sarah's body and her nose and mouth took on the appearance of an African ritual piercing. Electrical wires extended from various points to machines that pumped her blood, fed her and controlled her breathing. A bank of monitors watched with flickering accuracy their charges condition. Sarah was still in a coma. The doctors had already told Edna that there were no critical internal injuries and that the superficial cuts and bruises would soon heal and leave no scar. Their main worry was the head wound. Sarah had had a scan but nothing had shown up. Plenty had shown up on the blood tests however, and Dr Bhatti was about to broach the subject with Edna when Mark had arrived.

Mark quite liked this doctor, who unlike most of her colleagues actually looked like a doctor. The crisp white coat she wore at least gave Mark the impression that she knew what she was talking about. All the older specialists or surgeons, whatever their grand title Mark didn't know; but they seemed aloof and disinterested. With their three pieces suits and fancy braces, they seemed more in tune with a Rome or Paris catwalk than a hospital ward. Dr Bhatti did know what she was talking

about, as it happened. She was a neurological specialist and had coaxed many patients out of deep trances. She was used to dealing with severe trauma and was also an expert in 'social drugs' as such things were known, although Mark could never understand what was so sociable about killing yourself. Mind you dear reader I am sure you could think of one or two people that if they committed suicide would have been considered doing the world a favour. (Answers on a postcard please!!) The original consultant had called in Dr Gurinder Bhatti when they found evidence of the cocktail of substances inside Sarah-Jane. It was thought her expertise in this area would be useful, plus the fact it enabled him to go off and play his golf.

The bleep bleep of the bedside monitors that supervised Sarah-Jane formed a bizarre background to the concerned words of the doctor. "Our main worry is the opiates; dilaudid a heroin type drug and MDMA ecstasy. It was probably this that produced the halucogenic effects and the trauma that she was obviously suffering from." Mark looked puzzled, and Dr Bhatti could see his concern, she continued "Something made her run naked out of the house and in front of that car, it is certainly not normal behaviour; but we may never know the real truth, it may be too much for her brain to cope with." She explained, Mark and Edna were listening attentively. The doctor went on "The coma may be Sarah's way of dealing with the trauma, she has shut down the system completely, if she comes out" the well spoken doctor quickly corrected herself "when she comes out of the coma she may well have no memory of the incident"

"How long will that be, doctor – can you tell?" asked Edna

"Not really. It could be days, weeks or even months; we have no way of knowing what is going on inside her head. We are monitoring her all the time and she is stable" The doctor smiled, trying to minimise the seriousness of Sarah's predicament.

"Can you wean her off the stuff she's been taking whilst she's in here?" Mark inquired

"We can try, she may well be clear of any withdrawal symptoms when she comes round. On the other hand, she may not; but the most important thing is to clean her blood, feed her properly and get some nutrients into her. Nature should do the rest or rather Sarah herself. The power to heal oneself comes from within. We must wait, be patient and just let matters take their course. We are doing everything we can. Sarah-Jane is in the best possible hands" Dr Bhatti went on to explain about Sarah

being on the edge of a precipice, she go forward into a deep abyss or take a step back, the choice was really her own. “These substances that Sarah has been taking are mind altering drugs; we have no idea what effect they may be having on her immune system, and we must hope that her will to survive is strong enough to bring her back.” Edna looked up through reddened eyes, she had not really understood most of the doctors’ words, she was too engrossed with her daughter, but she knew a kind voice and a friendly manner when she heard it and thanked the doctor for being so honest and straightforward.

“Now I really must go,” Edna said, “I’ll call in the church and ask Father O’Malley to pray for Sarah-Jane, I’ll be back later” she aimed her words in the general direction of the bed even though she was really addressing Mark.

“I’ll still be here, when you come back Mrs S.” Mark said, secretly thinking to himself that if the man in purple really could do something then now would be a good time. Somehow, he doubted it. He sat on the chair that Edna Sullivan had vacated and held the hand of his loved one. He stared at her blank expressionless face, her eyes seemed to flicker, but perhaps it was the merely the lights reflecting on her dark brown pupils. Mark looked hard at the bedside screens, the pretty, coloured lines undulated with metronome regularity. He stared and worried to himself that they might stop. He stared and stared. It was the first time he could ever remember not being bored whilst watching television.

Deep blue mysteries of the mind you never know what you might find

Gentle waves on the beach they roll opening windows to the soul

The cars that had been following the Transit had changed three times by the time it got back to the Velvet Sun Factory. They were professionals and Larry had not noticed any of them. He drove into the yard at the side as the wind pushed the litter against the back fence of the factory Pointers Inks stood in a very exposed position on the north side of Chesford. The open fields at the back stretched as far as the eye could see and varying shades of yellow, green and brown painted a picturesque backdrop to the small industrial estate. Built in the re-development, which followed the war, it stood on former green belt land, turned over to industrial use to house the mighty Triumph works. Cars trundled off the production line at the rate of forty cars an hour. Working two shifts, five days a week,

it did not take a genius to work out that the market would eventually collapse. After numerous takeover and various attempts at workers buy-outs, redundancies were soon the order of the day (although it was of course re-designated 'downsizing' to soften the blow for the employees.)

Inevitably, the factory closed. The Townsend Industrial Estate built on the redundant site was named after the councillor whose brainchild it had been. The place became a proud emblem for the 'new job-creation schemes so popular with government at the time. There were about a dozen small to medium units on the estate. Pointers Inks had been deliberately allocated the large end unit to subvert any residential protest. Although locals did complain, from time to time, about the fumes that emanated from the chimney, which towered above the Velvet Sun Factory. A business friendly council keen to promote its own schemes and encourage enterprising entrepreneurs soon dismissed such objections. Mr Pointer, as in the name, didn't exist but came about because of a sign writing error. (Although how an 'r' can be misconstrued as an 'o' is beyond me) The Fat Man saw the completed sign on returning to the site after a Bank holiday weekend and as the project was already behind schedule, he decided to let it stay. It suited his purpose.

Detective Superintendent Tatton and his assistant Detective Jenkins watched from the unmarked Peugeot as Larry unloaded the boxes from the van. It was not until he had finished that they approached him.

"Working late Sir?" Derrick Tatton queried as he walked briskly towards Larry.

"Yeah, bloody rush job. I should be in the Fox and Goose by now" Larry was unconcerned by the production of warrant cards, he assumed it was all part of the investigation into the fire.

"Can I see the documentation for that job?" the detective asked

"Sure" said Larry. He fetched the dockets from the cab, and when he returned, Jenkins had disappeared. Just as D.S Tatton was pretending to understand the paperwork, a red Mercedes pulled into the yard. The Fat Man got out with a face like a Rottweiler on heat

"Is there a problem Larry? He shouted over towards his driver.

"Ah Mr Forman" the detective saw the Fat Man starting towards them "We saw the gates

open and thought it a little unusual for a Sunday evening, just checking it out so to speak Sir” the detective was desperately trying to hide his obvious embarrassment, he continued. “Particularly in view of the fire recently, we thought you might have unwanted visitors”

Fine! Look officer I can confirm that this man works for me. We have a very important order on, and needed these returns tonight. The formula is wrong. It needs regrinding and despatching all by tomorrow night. That’s why I’ve come down.” He said angrily, adding. “Although to be perfectly frank, (which is clever considering his name was Jack) It’s none of your damn business!”

Jenkins wandered out of the warehouse at that inopportune moment, apparently oblivious to the presence of the factory owner and making no attempt to hide the intrusion..

“Do you mind telling me what that man was doing in my factory Superintendent? Have you got a search warrant?” The Fat Man was gesticulating violently at the senior man.

“No Sir, please calm down. I told you it was just a routine call; we have no need to apply for a warrant. We’ve finished now; everything seems to be in order”

The Fat Man glared at the policemen as they walked back to their car “I’ll be reporting this incident to your superiors. I know the Chief Constable well” Larry continued to load up the van with Mondays orders, smiling to himself at all the excitement. Mr Forman disappeared inside the factory to check his packages.

“Nothing Sir – tins of ink, that’s all,” Jenkins said when they were back in the car

“Duff info then “his superior replied,” I’ll have him for wasting our time; and You” the D.S. shook his head “You could have kept your head down whilst Jack Forman was about”

“Sorry gaffer I didn’t think anything to it, no harm done though eh” the sergeant responded “Let’s hope not, Jenkins for both our sakes.”

Scarlet riders on saddles black with dust.

Take me back into the quietness of time.

And let me rest awhile to discover all my dreams

Lucy arrived at the hospital and inquired at the reception about Robert Simpson. She was met

by a nurse who was to take her up to see Bob, explaining on the way that the consultant was already up there and would clarify the position regarding Bobs' condition. The neurologist met Lucy on the third floor and greeted her with a curt "Hello, I'm Mr Blair, I'm dealing with your husbands injuries"

"Hello" said Lucy "How is he doctor?"

"It's early days yet, but the tests are not hopeful. He may have permanently lost the use of his legs" Lucy nodded. The consultant continued, "We still have other tests to carry out, both neurological and physiological, but I thought I should put you fully in the picture"

Lucy was still in a state of shock, ever since she bumped into Mark at Caspers and heard about the accident, she had had a bad feeling. Now the irony of the situation almost brought a smile to her face. She thought of Michael in his wheelchair, and then replaced him in her minds eye with Bob. Life could be so cruel she thought and was very adept at dishing up complications to add to her present dilemma regarding them both.

Bob looked well considering what he'd just been through His face had a few scratches, although he was no oil painting before and some might say the blemishes gave him a rugged more masculine appearance. He looked peaceful and only when he tried to move did anyone realise he was in acute pain

"I can't feel my legs Luce" he blurted out as Lucy approached "They told me they might come back, but hey who are they kidding, I know Luce. I can't feel my legs. What am I going to do?" Lucy gave him a peck on the cheek. He seemed a completely different bloke to the one that she had run away from all those months ago. His bitterness and anger, although still there, was now directed at his condition rather than her.

"Don't get yourself all worked up" she said, "I'm here now"

"Thanks Luce, I didn't think you'd find me. I thought you would think I'd stood you up and you'd say Sod the bugger. I know you" he half laughed, then coughed and remembered how much his bruised chest hurt him. The nurse checked the chart at the end the bed and administered a creamy looking liquid

"Try not to get him too excited Mrs Simpson" she said addressing Lucy "We had the police here yesterday upsetting him"

“No I won’t I promise” Lucy smiled at the young nurse as she left the room She turned to Bob

“What did the police have to say then?”

“Nothing much, she’s exaggerating they were just going through the accident really. It wasn’t my fault Lucy honest. The kid just ran out. She was starkers!” Bob emphasised the word, as if it was far more important that she was naked than the fact she was hysterical and hell bent on killing herself.

“I braked hard and skidded demolished a couple of statues by all accounts, I don’t remember. They’re checking the car out, just routine they said, but it wasn’t my fault. I couldn’t stop in time. Nowhere to go” Bob looked towards his estranged wife as if to get acknowledgement that he was not to blame for the tragedy.

“That girl is called Sarah-Jane. She’s in the room down the corridor” Lucy replied, “She’s in a coma.” She went on to explain her meeting with Mark in Casper’s and how she had come to know where Bob was, how she instinctively knew it was him when Mark mentioned a Rover and a Geordie “What on earth possessed you to come down here in the first place? And how did you know where I was? She had lost any anger she once had for Bob; in fact, she was a little flattered he had had the gumption to follow her and try to track her down.

“The bank wrote you a letter about moving your account to Chesford, they mentioned D.L.T. and the rest was easy with my charm and wit” Bob tried to smile again, he was quite pleased with his detective work and assumed Lucy would be also be proud of his persistence and perseverance. She was not; well she was not going to let him know even if she was!

“How dare you open my mail? I came here to get away from you - remember. To get away from your overpowering nature and the constant aggravation” She stopped herself in full flow for fear of making his injuries worse. Anyway how could she be too angry with a man who and chased after her and crashed his car on the way to meet her. Nevertheless, she was damned if she was going let him know that. He was not getting off that lightly.

“I’ve changed Luce – honest –anyway I can’t do much now can I? You can’t leave me now with no legs. You’ll have to come back to me now. How will I ever manage without you?”

Lucy looked straight at her husband, then at the ring on her finger and eventually back to Bob. Her mind had been made up once, now it was confused again. She secretly slipped the ring from her hand so as Bob would not notice the large stone. “Robert Simpson, what are we going to do with you?”

“Take me back Luce, take me home – Please?”

Lost in the mind of her unconscious
Hiding behind the doors of night and day,
Lying in wait for the time to be right
Which way will you jump my dear, which way?

Deep in the multicoloured lights of the church
The ghost of the priest kneels to pray
Trying to help at the crossroads of life
Which way will you jump my dear, which way?

Mark had stayed with Sarah most of the morning, watching for the little signs of movement, signs of life, and signs of love. Once Edna came back, Mark slipped down the corridor to look in on Mr Simpson. Lucy was still there.

“Bob, this is Mr Hero, the fiancé of Sarah –Jane, the injured girl”

“I didn’t see her mate, till it was too late, It wasn’t...” Mark interrupted him “Don’t trouble yourself, call me Mark by the way,” he said offering his hand towards Bob “It’s alright, it’s me who should be apologising for Sarah and it’s you who should feel aggrieved. You do not expect people running out in front of you like that. Sarah has not been very well.”

“You’re telling me...” Lucy nudged Bob into silence “Is there any improvement?” she asked

“No, no change, we’ve just got to wait so the doctor keeps telling us. He is on the mend though, by the look of him. Looks quite chirpy now”

“That’s because of Lucy,” Bob piped up

“Bob!” Lucy was embarrassed

Standing on the lip of the cradle of life,

at the end of the worlds' spinning dome,
Listening to answers of questions not asked.
When are you going to come home, my dear?
When are you going to come back?

The sun went down on another sleepy day and the lunar face smiled down on his subjects. Lucy found the poem that Michael had left on the coffee table. She was not in the mood after seeing Bob and tactfully explained the situation to Michael. She told him about Bob. How she had left him to start a new life, and how Bob had tracked her down and journeyed 200 miles to fetch her back. She told him about the horrific accident in the square and Sarah-Jane (he remembered her too!) It has all thrown me into confusion she finally concluded, "I need to assess the situation now," she told him. "I need more time. My head is just spinning at the moment" Michael for his part seemed to take it badly. He had been so convinced that Lucy was on the verge of becoming his wife. Lucy noticed that as she readied him for bed, his old stubbornness had returned his sullen looks and morose tone. She gave him a kiss. He remained impassive.

"I may need to take some time off away" Lucy announced, "I'll sort out a temporary replacement with the agency"

"I don't want a temporary replacement. I want you!"

"It'll only be until Bob's well enough to leave the hospital. I will have to sort out the arrangements. You will like Bob. I'll take you to see him tomorrow if you like," Lucy, said trying to drag Michael out of his self induced depression.

"I'm busy tomorrow all day!"

13. Oratorio

Love is the sunshine that brings forth life

Love is the darkness that stabs with a knife

“Right” said Detective Superintendent Tatton as he gathered his team around him for a briefing. “Let’s review what we’ve got so far: Drug dealing at the night club, John Simmons, a known dealer dies from an overdose possibly self inflicted, possibly not and a drug crazed girl that runs out in front of a car. Now are those isolated incidents” he said drawing arrows across the blackboard with wide sweeps of the chalk

“The girl, Sarah-Jane Sullivan” Jenkins observed, “Still in hospital in a coma won’t get much out of her yet,”

“If ever, from what I hear” one the junior officers joined in “what about the statements we took from the kids and that fire at the Ink factory, what’s the story there?”

“We’re working on that,” said D.S. Tatton “meanwhile we can find out about this girl, drag the boyfriend in and anyone else. Make ‘em sweat a bit. Arrange it will you Pete?” He looked over towards Jenkins who nodded an acknowledgement “And you two”, Derrick Tatton eyed the two female detectives” I’ve got the ideal job for you.” The two women in the team were both younger than Pete Jenkins was, but were brought in by D.S. Tatton because of their experience in the drug squad, anyway the political correct brigade insisted on equal rights and police women had to be included in

all operations. He was just about to brief them on an undercover operation at the Roostertail, when he got the call from Inspector Cook

The Inspector had asked to see D.S. Tatton, he knew what that meant, “the old man’s been chewing Charlie’s ears off again and now he wants a go at mine.” He told his team. “Bloody figures again! Here Jenkins take over will you”. He threw the chalk over to his Sergeant and walked briskly towards the office of Inspector Charles Cook. Derrick Tatton was of the old school of policemen who actually believed it was their job to solve crimes and apprehend criminals, unfortunately, time had moved on and Derrick had not moved with it. The force was now far more interested in statistics of crimes rather than the crimes themselves. Derrick Tatton did not really give a tinkers cuss for graphs and charts or the Home Office targets but he was only a couple of years away from his pension and wasn’t going to blow it now.

“Come in” Inspector Cook bawled as D.S. Tatton knocked on the door

“Hi, sit down Derrick” he said pointing to a small upholstered chair on the far side of the room, which was dwarfed by his leather recliner “Just had the Chief on the line – Do you know where we stand again this month Derrick?”

“No Sir, Have we improved on last month?”

“No Sir, we have not, bottom three months in succession. I’ve just had a rocket up my arse” the inspector stood up and began pacing the over-sized office “But that is only half of it. What’s this job you’re on at the moment ’Operation Bullshit?’”

“Operation Bullfrog Sir” the detective corrected

“Whatever, how many personnel have we got on it? He looked over his spectacles at the bemused officer

“Six plus me and Jenkins, Sir” Derrick answered his superior

“And how’s it going, this Bullshit?”

“Bullfrog Sir” The Detective Superintendent was used to his superiors mispronunciations but they annoyed him nonetheless “We are on the verge of a breakthrough, I think Sir” he continued “The Ink Factory on Townsend’s estate we think that’s a local source”

“Do you” Inspector Cook took off his spectacles and glared at his minion

“Yes Sir we have...”and Derrick was about to explain his thinking so far when the inspector interjected “Have you any evidence?”(Now there’s a concept new to policemen)

“Not yet, but we’re on to it”

“No Derrick, you are not on to it. I’m on to you. Keep away from Pointers”

“Sir?” D.S.Tatton queried the Inspectors tone

“It’s not a request, do you understand. I do not want the Chief on my back again about Jack Forman got it?”

“Yes Sir”

“What on earth were you playing at, marching in there without a search warrant. The Chief has just spent two hours and a crate of whiskey calming Jack Forman down to stop him suing

“We had a tip off Sir” explained Derrick

“Well it wasn’t very reliable then was it?” the inspector growled

“No Sir”

“Look, I’m halving you team, I need three more officers to back up the traffic boys. We need some white-liners quickly. The Chief wants results, figures; bums on seats know what I mean?

“Derrick knew exactly what the Inspector meant. Clear up a few missing items, lost cats, stray dogs, catch a dozen or so motorists and the graph begins to look a whole lot better. God he hated this job sometimes

“Can I keep the team together for a couple more days, got some lose ends to tie up?” the detective finally conceded”

“Ok but I want it wrapped up by the end of the week. We can’t afford to waste any more time on this “Inspector Cook was at the door opening it for his Detective Super to leave “And keep right away from Jack Forman’s place, got it?”

“Yes Sir, Thank you Sir” Derrick departed the office to return to his team. He marched straight into his own office, opened the filing cabinet and got out a bottle of Jack Daniels. Jenkins followed him “We’ve been pulled” he announced to his fellow officer” Two days to wrap it all up and then traffic” he took a swig of whisky “And” he continued we’ve been warned off old Forman’s’ place”

“He reported us then the old bugger,” said Jenkins smirking

“Don’t laugh this is serious, the Chiefs ordered us off. Bloody Masons!”

Listen to the beating of a shallow heart, deep within its morbid cage

Listen to the words from silken lips and try not to turn the page

Between the lines of written prose, that forms the basis of her dreams

You’ll see a message hidden there and life’s never all it seems

Father O’Malley’s prayers did not appear to have been answered. Sarah-Jane remained in a coma, much to the annoyance of the local police who unable to get a statement from Sarah took it upon themselves to pester all of Chesford’ club goers on the pretence of trying to establish a link between the accident, John Simmons’ death and the Roostertail. Mark sat and watched as the girl he had spent most of his short life with stared blankly into the hi-tech space around her.

Although the doctors had mentioned an improvement in the oxygen levels in her blood or something like that Mark was not really listening he was waiting and watching for the flicker of an eyelid or the quiver of the lips. He spent long periods talking to Sarah-Jane in a low murmur in an attempt to raise her subconscious from its dream. He wanted to be with her, really with her, not beside her bed but inside her head sorting out the problem for her, showing her which direction to travel, finding the right path for her journey back to the world of reality

“I know I could bring you back if I could get inside your pretty head and help you,” he said to Sarah. She didn’t answer.

“You’ll tell me one day, won’t you what it is you were dreaming about all this time?” he went on and recounted the happy times they had spent together remembering the doctors words about pleasant associations of places ,people and things

“Her favourite clothes, music and people – just keep probing away,” the consultant had said.” It will work eventually. We just have to create the climate; her body will do the rest, when it’s ready.” Edna had brought in some familiar objects from her room at home, a picture or two and a cassette player for music to soothe gently the roaring waves of her mind

Mark divided his time between his work at the Velvet Sun Factory and visiting Sarah-Jane at the Trauma Centre. On a couple of occasions he popped down the corridor to see Bob Simpson and chat to Lucy, more as a change of scenery than anything else although he did feel responsible in a strange kind of way. After all his Sarah had caused the accident by all accounts and this poor woman's husband was going to be a cripple for the rest of his life, whereas Sarah-Jane would be fine once she woke up, and Mark was confident she would wake , it was surely only a case of when. It was during one such visit to Bob that Mark discovered Detectives Jenkins and PWC Thomson had visited Bob to ask questions about the accident. The car had been thoroughly checked over and was perfect. – Facts that did nothing to make Bob feel any better – the only other explanation for the tragedy was driver error, but the police assured Bob that their investigations were now complete and his speed and stopping distance were correct. He just had not had enough warning or time to brake or take evasive action, when the maniacal girl ran out.

Mark looked deep into Sarah's glistening eyes he could see the machinations of her inner mind, the cogs churning away. He fancied, in fact he was convinced her eyes moved, but perhaps it was just his imagination

The wind, the wind, the soft sweet wind, is dead

But the rain is still falling

The sun, the sun the warm wax sun, is asleep

But the fire is still burning

The moon, the moon, the cold coy moon, has gone

But the lovers are still sleeping

The sky, the sky, the blind black sky, is angry

And the kissing is over?.....

Michael had woken up in a worse mood than when he went to bed, if that was possible. He had been in the depths of depression for several days now. The flat was bringing in a nice £400.00 a month; Christmas was just around the corner and today his new toy was arriving, the

camera for his computer, but none of that made him feel any better. He was getting less attention from Lucy, understandably so; but Michael did not understand. The substitute she had arranged to cover for her absences did not meet with his approval, few people ever did. Moreover, to top it all he had started drinking again

Lucy had witnessed his moods in the past and was aware that they could last for days if he chose them to do so. She knew the only way forward was to ignore him, keep out of his way, and try to carry on as normal. He wanted an argument when he was like that and would pick on the slightest thing to start one. Lucy did not like the silent treatment and spent less and less time with Michael and more time visiting Bob in hospital; this of course only made matters worse. She hated conflict; she had had enough of that in her life already and thought everything was just beginning to settle down nicely. Then Bob arrives, like a bolt from the blue and Michael does a moody. "I'm not sure I could live with a man like that," he thought to herself, then realised she was getting like her husband and beginning to argue with herself. The replacement help was taking most of the 'flak' as a result, and she soon began to tire of Michael's moods. From Michael's perspective, he felt hurt by Lucy sudden interest in her long lost husband: a man who chased half way across the country to find her and then crashes his car, probably deliberately to gain her sympathy, he began to hate Bob without even meeting him

"I really don't know how you could have put up with him all this time" Marsha said to Lucy when they were alone "He's always rings for me just as you settle down for the evening, you know it will only be something trivial but you have to go and check,"

"Yes I know, he knows it too, that why he does it, he really is a wonderful person underneath all that moroseness. You just have to dig deep" Lucy replied defending Michael, although she had no idea why, when some of his moods were indefensible.

"Remind me to bring my Black & Decker next time" Marsha quipped

Michael spent more and more of his time up in his office, particularly after the delivery of his web-cam. The nice young man from Computex had even fitted it all for him, not that Michael would have let him go until he had. Michael was one of those people who assumed that everyone else in the world was there to serve him, and always took full advantage of any generosity that came his way. To

be fair he was generous himself and rewarded the deliveryman appropriately. He went away happy, having done his good deed for the day.

Michael began his exploration of the cameras software. He spoke into his diary relating the events of the past few weeks, catching up on the news of his life: Lucy and the ring; his proposal and her acceptance as he saw it, then the traffic accident, and a sudden appearance of a husband from nowhere. He had a lot of catching up to do and spoke with increased zeal, despite his state of mind. It was only as the whisky began to take effect that he slipped back into the bitter lake of self-pity and darkness crept upon him. The diary entries became more colourful as the liquor took hold. The equipment was accurate enough to pick up the slurred speech and red complexion that accompanied his drinking spree. The radio sang out its miserable tune. Michael always resorted to Mahler when he was depressed. That in turn fed his depression and he drank more whisky to alleviate it.

Twilight peeps through Bourbon clouds, then screams with eyes ablaze

Knotted sinews twist and turn "It's just a passing phase

Silence infiltrates the mind to hide the truth from tears

Blackness colours all his dreams then empties out his fears

.....

"Are you positive about that?" Jenkins said into the mouthpiece nodding towards D.S.Tatton who was listening on the extension

"Look" the voice said "everything I've given you has been kosher, it's you lot who fuck up"

"There was nothing in those tins, only ink, I checked them myself," Jenkins argued

"Did you check all the tins? Did you scrape the top layer off?"

"Well, no we didn't have time Jack Forman came down" the detective got defensive

"The stuff was there – you owe me –I can't be responsible for police inefficiency"

"Ok, just get the next shipment date," Jenkins said

"It's too risky, I don't think I want to involved anymore" The Detective Superintendent nodded an affirmative to Pete Jenkins, who looked over to his boss

"What about an extra payment?" he finally said

“It will cost double. I’ll give you a bell in a couple of days” The line went dead

“Any joy?” Jenkins shouted over to his colleagues

“No, not enough time to trace it. His voice is heavily disguised, but we’ve got it on tape” the reply came back.

“You’ve really no idea who our chummy is then Pete?” asked D.S. Tatton

“No, never met him we always use a safe drop and he phones out of the blue either here or on my mobile” the detective sergeant replied

“Get me a list of employees at Pointers’ will you Sheila” Derrick Tatton said to a WPC

“It will be in the folder with the Fire Report on my desk “

“What you up to gaffer” Pete Jenkins was curious.

“Why do you think old Jack Forman turned up like that just at that moment?” the Super said with his patronising habit of answering a question with a question

“Dunno really, bit of a coincidence I suppose” Jenkins shrugged his broad shoulders

“Too much of a coincidence, Pete I don’t believe in coincidence, I think someone tipped him off we were going to be there.” The penny finally dropped in the detective sergeant’s brain

“Do you think our man is playing both sides then?”

“Quite possibly, that’s why I want a full list making out of all the employees. I want to know who started when and where they came from. Work on it with Sheila will you Pete. I’m off to lunch with the old man to get my ear chewed off again

14. Chesford Cantata

Love is the God with the golden heart

Love is the Devil that rips you apart

Two weeks after the accident in the square, the hospital allowed Robert Simpson to go home. The results of all his tests having been completed; his condition remained the same and was diagnosed as permanent. Lucy came to collect him. She took him first to see the yoghurt knitting sandal wearers at the Council for Living with Mobility Problems, as Bob so affectionately called them, to discuss coping with his disability. Because of her training and her current job, Lucy was well aware of the difficulties Bob would have to face, but he disliked outside interference, he hated social workers, and was managing quite well as it happened. The councillors offered their council and the psychologists their platitudes, but at the end of it all, his condition was still the same. He still couldn't walk! Fortunately, Bob was quite philosophical about the whole affair. Unlike Michael, he did not blame the whole world for his injuries; Bob did not even blame Sarah-Jane. Indeed, before his discharge from the hospital, he asked Lucy to push him into her room where he sat admiring the lovely vision that lay static before him. The sight of the young girl in such a state of limbo brought tears to his eyes.

Lucy had previously arranged through her contacts at the Disability Living Trust for temporary accommodation, suitable for a wheel chair. Her plan was that when the insurance money eventually came through together with the proceeds of the sale of the house back in Newcastle, Bob could buy a nice suitable house, or have it converted if necessary. The only problem with her theory was that Bob was not enamoured by Chesford. The city had nothing going for it as far as he was concerned. If the city of Chesford was a colour it would undoubtedly have been grey, whereas Newcastle was chameleon-like, changing from vibrant red to soothing blue with every tide that swept up the Tyne. Bob felt like a fish out of water (although as Chesford often smelt of rotting fish, perhaps he should have felt more at home). He missed the sea and the noisy sea gulls chattering in the half-light of dawn. He missed the early morning raucous as the fish market began its auction. He was Geordie and wanted to be home. For the present, however, he was content to go along with Lucy. She, like all women was happier when she thought she was in control and Bob was happy to let her think she was in control. He was pleased with the attention she was lavishing on him, she visited every day at the hospital. He loved it. He loved her; but ultimately he knew he would return home with or without Lucy, but hopefully with her.

Bob had tried to like Chesford. He had, for Lucy's sake; but he longed for the green hills, the rolling suburbia, the friendly people, the smoke, and the grime. Yes, the Toon had character. Chesford had none. It was quiet, nondescript. It may have been a bubbling cauldron of racial unrest, drug culture, and alcohol-induced fervour, but on the surface, to an outsider, it was boring. It was perhaps the most boring place Bob had ever been to. The main problem with the city as Bob saw it was the lack of identity. It was so cosmopolitan. The council appeared to demolish anything older ten years in the name of progress, thus losing any link with history, and Chesford did have a very colourful past. It grew up in the Middle Ages and only 20 years ago, there was a host of medieval shops and houses teetering over the pavement. Most of them had gone now. Either moved brick-by-brick, like some gigantic 3D puzzle, to a 'touristy' part of town; or even more curiously packed away in crates deep in the vaults below the Council House Such was progress. To be fair, Hitler's bombs destroyed most of the city centre in 1940, but what he left standing, the Council finished off. It was the just the sort of place to come to if your doctor gave you six months to live – It would seem like six years!

Being so close as it was to the second city of Birmingham, Chesford suffered from a lack of investment, ingenuity and enterprise. After all, why build an ice-rink when there is one a bus ride away. Why build plush cinemas and nightclubs when Broad St boasts ‘Ronnie Scotts and the ‘Millionaires Club’? The grand neighbour was gradually swallowing up Chesford. The so-called green belt land between the two cities was all but gone. Housing developments and supermarkets had eaten into the parks and gardens, and the concrete jungle so beloved by West Midland planners was stretching its ugly arms to every quarter. In his short time in the city, Bob had found it unfriendly and filthy. Indeed, it had only recently won the coveted award as the filthiest town in Britain, an accolade it would have no trouble retaining for posterity. The council in an attempt to lose this title did spend £90,000 on dog bins. Unfortunately, no one seems to have bothered to train the dogs to pick the litter up, and so the bins stayed empty. Crumbling buildings lined the once proud streets; run down decaying streets, which were full of ‘interesting’ people. You know the sort of people with an intelligence level slightly above a tent peg, who holiday in Ibiza, drink lager till comes out of their ears and with whom you could have hours of stimulating conversation with (provided of course you had been dead for weeks!)

Cloudy skies, grey ribbon roads

Next-door neighbour’s no one knows

Friendly folk with time to spare?

History’s gone, but we don’t care

Sarah opened her eyes for the first time. The little cassette player was drumming out some unknown dance-mix that Edna had given to Mark to bring in to the hospital. “Sarah” Mark spoke softly but excitedly. Her lips parted, but no sound came out. Mark pressed the buzzer to summon a nurse. Sarah’s eyes flickered once more her lashes fluttering like a butterfly trapped in a spotlight. She adjusted to the light. It was blurred. The music was extraordinarily loud; her ears began to hurt. The light shone brightly into her face, her eyes stopped flickering. A stern looking nurse arrived, puzzled as to why this young man should have woken her from the only catnap that she had been able to grab during her 18-hour shift.

“What’s wrong?” she snapped

“Sarah-Jane is awake” Mark replied hardly able to contain his enthusiasm. The nurse looked at Sarah lying peacefully on the bed, perfectly still.

“She moved! Her eyes opened” Mark continued

“They often do, it doesn’t mean anything, I’m afraid” she said, crushing Marks eagerness

“Is Dr Bhatti around, can I talk to her?” Mark did not like this nurse she sounded as if she did not believe him and Mark disliked her for that.

“Dr Bhatti is busy at the moment,” said the nurse as she took a meaningful look at the charts at the end of Sarah’s’ bed

Sarah-Jane stared into the bright light; it became more focused now, not as fuzzy. The light was intense; it filled the little room. Sarah looked up; the ceiling changed into a bright clear blue sky. The bed was soft and luxuriant. No wait! It was not a bed it was too light, too fluffy – more like cotton wool or a cloud even. She felt herself floating up towards the light. The sky beckoned. The ceiling had vanished. The walls around her dissolved. She kept her eyes tightly closed; she dare not open them as she drifted towards the powerful light source. It pulled her ever onwards and upwards. She could hear the music from the cassette growing fainter; she dared to open her eyes. Looking down, she could see the light was much dimmer now, she could see the tubes and wires extending from her body. She could see Mark sitting by the edge of her bed, holding her hand. She called out to him “Mark, Mark” but he could not hear her. A bell was ringing; the troughs and peaks that the lines made on the screen became straight. Sarah could see there were no more wavy lines! Doctors and nurses rushed from all around into the small white room, confusion reigned all around her and Mark was ushered out of the room.

Sarah could see a man in a hideous pink shirt and stripy braces shining a torch into her eyes, but she could see nothing of its beam. She felt nothing as he pounded her chest. She tried to call out again but to no avail. Her thoughts went out to Mark; he looked so worried as the nurse took him out into the corridor. Sarah concentrated her mind, focussing in on Mark, and found herself outside with him in the corridor. She wanted to console him; she willed herself along the small corridor and called out to him “Mark I’m here. Mark look up at me I’m here Mark”. Her cries went unheeded. She was

upset at not being able to comfort Mark, or her mother, who by now was sobbing uncontrollably. She saw the young Asian doctor in her pristine white coat and she could see all the comings and goings from the little ward in which her body lay

“I love you Mark,” she shouted above the din Mark looked up to the ceiling. He was looking right at her “You can’t die Sarah, please, you just can’t, don’t go yet, we have so much more to do together. Please come back to me Sarah please. Just come home Sarah-Jane please come back to me”

Floating on the edge of a gossamer dream

A silent seraphim sweeps

through the clouds of cupid’s highway

Are you going to come home, my dear?

Are you going to come home?

.....

Michael was not behaving himself with Marsha

“Leave me alone woman, don’t fuss so” he snarled

“Look, I need to give you your medication” she argued “and I won’t take no for an answer”

“Well you’ll have to force them down my throat then, ‘cos I’m not taking them off you. I’ll wait for Lucy” Michael was back to his old belligerent self.

“Lucy is not coming today, you know that, and if you think these antics will force me to phone her then you’re wrong. She is far too busy with her husband, he’s coming out of hospital today”

Michael sulked; he did not need reminding about Lucy’s husband thank you very much!

“Poor woman, you run her ragged, I don’t know how she has put up with you for so long.”

Marsha continued as she stood up to Michael, and not for the first time. He liked a woman with spunk

It was feistiness that first attracted him to Lucy but this woman was just bossy and Michael hated ‘bossy’

“You’ll never be half her equal,” Michael finally said not really understanding what he meant but hoped it sounded impressive enough to stump Marsha

“Ok, you win, I’ll leave them on the table for you to take as you wish” and Marsha put the two pillboxes on the dining table. Michael knocked it with his fingers into his lap and wheeled off in the direction of his office

“I suppose you’d all be happy if I wasn’t around” he mumbled silently, more to himself than anyone else. He entered his office, switched on his computer and began playing with his new toy. The view-cam showed the strain in his eyes as he laboured over an entry in his video diary. As he had not been using the audio version much lately, he had much to tell as he sat before the flickering screen. The visit to the solicitors and the change to his will, how much he loved Lucy but now feared he losing probably the only thing he ever cared for

“She was like a light going on in a darkened room and someone has turned the light off”. He spoke softly into the microphone “I know who turned the light off” he continued with a picture of a smiling Bob in his mind “But I don’t know whether I’m up to the struggle to win her back.” Michael had met Bob. He had been introduced to him on Lucy’s last visit to the hospital, having finally agreed to accompany her, Michael was particularly obtuse that day, but managed a brief ‘hello’ Bob had smiled back and greeted Michael with gusto, which unfortunately only made things worse. Not only did Michael feel as if he was losing the love of his life, but she had this jovial bloke in who would be wheelchair bound for the rest of his natural to care for in his stead. How the hell could he still be so cheerful after all that has happened. Damn him! Michael continued his diatribe with the computer, pouring out his venom and bile, peppering it occasionally with his thoughts on Lucy. Just how did he feel about her? Why had she kept her husband so secret from him? Was she really intending to leave him? On the other hand, is she just patronising me? Have I misread the signs?

there he stood, waiting for the sun to sink

beneath its ring of lights

he smiled through the mask of tomorrow

and his dreams were always one step ahead.

there he stood, contemplating on the prospects of life

which held little but failure

she came to the edge of his tears to weep.
and his dreams were always one step ahead.

there he lay, downing in the pool of his tears
on the shores of a Lake of Self Pity.
she looked at his broken body of dreams,
which were no longer just one step ahead.

.....

Lucy wheeled Bob through the litter-strewn streets of the delightful town that he loved so much. He observed the people too busy to stop and chat; too frantic to get out of the way of his wheelchair and too disinterested in life to care. Being closer to the ground, as he was, Bob noticed certain things for the first time. Diesel fumes that belched out at just the right height to choke him from Chesfords' wonderful fleet of passenger friendly buses, for instance and smell of rotten eggs and stale urine that invaded his nostrils. The latter no doubt a result of the closure of every public lavatory within a 20 mile radius of the town, in an attempt to save money. This was done with all good intention, so that any money saved could be recycled into the community and spent on more important projects. The canopy built to cover the famous statues, being once such example, a wonderful piece of architecture, pure, white, and pristine, until the pigeons decided they would decorate it in their own inimitable way.

Bob was very talkative this morning. He was determined not to let this depressing place get to him. He had Lucy. Mission accomplished! 'So I lost my legs on the way' he thought to himself 'but I always said I'd give my right arm to get Lucy back, so it doesn't seem such a bad deal' he smiled to himself, for once he agreed with his inner psyche instead of arguing. He looked up at Lucy, who was deep in thought; about Michael, she had not yet reached any conclusion about the mess that she now found herself in; Michael was sweet and generous, she liked him a lot, but Bob needed her now and he did seem to be a different person. They turned the corner into the square

"Shall we stop in Caspers for a bevy? She asked her charge

"You betcha girl" Bob replied with relish

Now it was no co-incidence that Lucy had come this way, she was hoping to bump into Mark Hero; he had mentioned at their last meeting that he often stopped for a drink on the way home from seeing Sarah. Lucy was worried; she witnessed the frantic procession of doctors into Sarah-Jane's room this morning and wondered what was going on. She missed any chance to see Mark since and feared the worse with her usual pessimism. She pushed Bob into the wine bar, ordered a couple of 'Buds' and sat down with him at a window table

"How long have you been drinking beer then?" he asked

"Oh you know how it is" she absent-mindedly responded, "Just occasionally I like a beer." In fact, she had only just started drinking beer. She tried it once when she was out with Michael, liked it and found it less addictive than vodka or Port and Lemon. Lucy was distracted and not being very attentive to Bobs' outpourings; mind you, he was used to talking to himself anyway. She was looking for Mark There was no sign of him and it worried her.

15. Requiem

Love lies bleeding, desperate, and cold

Love disappears as the drama unfolds

Larry was singing to himself along with the tinny sound on the radio in the Transit. He was on the way back to Denton's' yard with another order for Hunterprint. They were the biggest publishers in the north and produced most of the top shelf magazines on sale in newsagents. This specialisation had earned Hunterprint an unsavoury nickname amongst Pointer employees; Larry always returned with 'freebies' which he put in the canteen for the lads. The day was getting gradually brighter and Larry was a particularly good mood. The Fat Man had left him alone for over a week; in fact, no one at all had seen Jack Forman for days now. Larry was oblivious to the black Mercedes van that had been waiting by the junction of the Nottingham rd and the side road that led to the docks. The two

occupants saw the Pointers Ink van as it came over the brow of the hill. They manoeuvred the Mercedes across the road to block off any escape route and waited.

It was the last thing that Larry was expecting at that time of the morning, on such a quiet road. He braked hard, the squealing of the wheels interrupting the dawn chorus and bringing to a merciful end his off-key rendition of 'Papa was a Rolling Stone'. He was still sitting in the cab shocked, when the doors opened and he was dragged out. He did not remember what happened next, except that when he awoke he felt terrible. A policeman was helping him to his feet and guiding him back to the Transit. It was painful because of the bruising, but Larry opened his eyes. The load was gone!

"Ink" stammered Larry in answer to a question not asked

"Now why would any body want to steal a van-load of ink?" pondered the local bobby, who just happened to be passing the scene on his way to arrest a five-year girl for not having a bell on her bike. "I've sent for back-up and an ambulance to have you checked out. Some of our boys from the West Midlands are taking an interest they told me to stay put. The C.I.D. are on their way evidently. Bugged if I know what's going on. Lot of fuss about nothing if you ask me" Larry was not asking He had passed out again, which in a way was a blessing, as he did not have to hear P.C., Ryan's ramblings. Like most fresh-faced youths, that the police now seem to employ Ryan was an amiable enough chap, but boring. It is perhaps now official Police policy to wear down criminals into confessing their misdemeanours by boring them to the point of distraction. Along with his monotone voice, P.C. Ryan had an IQ level of a mentally deficient mouse so could only speak in words of one or two syllables, adding to the crassness of his demeanour. He was obviously well suited to the constabulary.

.....

Marsha, Lucy's temporary replacement was puzzled as she entered Michael's living room as to why he wasn't staring at the four walls and shouting back at her for being ten minutes late. She went into the back room. She could hear the morbid rock music blaring out its depressing lyrics:

Life is a prison without the bars, blue blood is colder than red
Listen to your heart and sing its song, come on, you're a long time dead
If I gave you your chance to live your life again, to put all the wrong things right,

Would you jump at the chance or not change a thing

Would you start right away tonight?

She followed the music into Michael's office, it was unusual to find the door unlocked. Michael was inside slumped in his chair. His arms hanging by his side. The empty pill boxes were on the floor beside him. Marsha took one look at his bluish complexion and knew; she had seen dead bodies before. She dialled 999 and the ambulance arrived within minutes to take Michael to the hospital. The paramedics tried to resuscitate him but failed and the doctors pronounced him dead on arrival.

Life is a prison Life is a prison

Come on, you're a long time dead

The policewoman turned the music off and took Marsha outside whilst her colleagues began their gruesome work. The carer was inconsolable, she did not like Michael that much, but she did not hate him and certainly would not wish him any ill.

Lucy meanwhile was spending the whole day with Bob trying to teach him how to manoeuvre the wheel chair on his own. They had gone out to Centenary Park, a local amenity on the south side of the city, not far from the city centre. In the recent past, it had been very popular with the local residents, who would sit and enjoy the squirrels and various birds that flocked there and came out of hiding whenever they spotted human company. Lately, however, the park, left to its own devices had fell into neglect; the peacocks had all gone, and the place had become a bit of a wasteland; a haven for the unemployed and unemployable, the tramps, winos and drug addicts. So much in fact that people rarely ventured into the park after dark, which was as well really because the over zealous Park-Keeper belonged to the 'Jobs Worth' brigade and locked the gates promptly at 6pm Winter or Summer. Rules are rules!

It was not an especially warm day but at least it stopped raining and Bob was enjoying Lucys' company. He was a fast learner and Lucy a patient teacher, she was pleased with his progress and looked forward to Bob being independent. She thought it might ease her dilemma and perhaps her conscience, so that she could deal with Michael. Her heart was still with him, but her head was firmly with Bob even if it was a little up in the air at the moment. Inner turmoil raged within Lucy, and as she

was genuinely worried about Sarah-Jane. Her gloom had deepened when Mark had not shown up at Casper's, despite all her other faults, Lucy was a compassionate creature and she fretted about the situation. She was completely opposite to her husband in that she was a born pessimist and always feared the worst in every given scenario

“Shall we go and visit Sarah this afternoon?” she eventually said to her husband

“I Think I have spent enough time in that place, don't you?” Bob argued, although he was quite pleasant about it; he seemed to have left his belligerent face back in Newcastle.

“I know, but I am worried after what went on the other day and I'd rather like to see if she's alright” Lucy spoke absently to her spouse

“Well, you go if you like. I'll be alright,” he looked straight at the furrowed brow of his wife. “Honestly, I will be fine for a couple of hours on my own” he continued with a smile. He really was making an effort. Lucy did notice but was too wrapped up in her thoughts to pay much attention

They walked back through the park and Lucy pushed Bob along the miserable tarmac paths, taking great care to avoid the potholes, deliberately set there by Chesford council in an attempt to trap drunken youth and exuberant teenagers, but in fact they only served to annoy the elderly and disabled who were constantly getting their wheelchairs stuck. It was not an unusual sight in Chesford to see the Fire Brigade charging through the city streets, in all its glory, to rescue some poor wheel chair bound occupant who had fallen foul of a deep pothole. It was just as they arrived at the gate of the little bungalow, that Lucy saw the police car draw up to the kerb. The two policemen helped her push Bob up the path. They had come to inform Lucy of Michael Sands death.

The shadow of the sun hides the secrets of the sea as the sun sets over the water

The dawn of tomorrow hides the dusk of today, and life just gets gradually shorter

The colours of evening hide the blackness of night as reflections paint over the ocean

The haze of her mind hid the truth from his view and her worlds in perpetual motion.....

Sarah felt a jolt as the electrodes fired and she was staring up at the ceiling again. The monitors burst into life and her aching heart began its work once more. This time she could feel Mark

as he held her wrist. His grip was firm. His hand was warm and soft. The music was loud, but Edna's sobs were even louder. Her eyes flickered into life and she stirred attempting to cover her burning ears

"Noise, noise" Sarah's weak voice rang out over the commotion. Mark reached over to turn off the cassette player. The nurse quickly drew the curtains back round the bed and went off in search of the consultant.

"Sarah my sweet, where have you been? You had us worried there for a bit" Mark said to his sweetheart

"Everywhere, Mark, I've been everywhere" Sarah replied "Mark I am so scared"

"Don't be, we're here now, your mum is still here, she over there" Mark gestured towards the other side of the bed, where Edna was smiling through her reddened eyes. She had been weeping tears of joy

Edna leant over towards her daughter and kissed her gently between the wires and tubes that spoiled the beauty of her young face "I will go on home now that I know that you're alright; I have to get Mary back from your Grans and your father will want his dinner" Edna said "You'll be okay now" she continued through her tears.

Sarah nodded slowly and said "Mark's here Mum, I'll be okay now. It was nice to see two friendly faces when I woke up, thank you for being here. She held her mum's hand as Edna hugged her tightly.

The doctor soon arrived and began the routine checks "I'm hungry and my ears hurt" Sarah said in response to the doctor's enquiry, but she soon became quite agitated at being prodded about and at her inability to answer any of the questions put to her. She remembered nothing of the accident

"I remember the forest and running through the trees, someone was chasing me, I think! I saw a doctor in a crisp white coat. It was all calm and peaceful, white light was all around me. Then there was a man in a red striped shirt and fancy braces" Sarah was rambling

"I think you should get some rest now" The doctor spoke softly and then turning to the nurse snapped out specific instructions regarding medication. Mark overheard their cosy chat "She was talking about Dr Bhatti and the surgeon wasn't she?" the nurse asked the doctor "No, no that is quite impossible, she was unconscious when she was brought in. It is all part of her vivid imagination; she

has been very ill. She is probably still hallucinating We will take her off the drip but increase the sedative until Dr Bhatti comes on” The nurse pretended to busy herself puffing up the pillows and smoothing the bedclothes whilst the doctor made adjustments to the chart. After they left Sarah looked at Mark

“I could see everything” Sarah-Jane said softly to Mark, “and I could hear those two, they may not believe me, but I did see it - it was beautiful Mark I did”

“It’s okay I believe, don’t get upset about it., we’ll talk to Dr Bhatti later, she understands these things better than anyone” he replied trying to calm Sarah down as she was becoming restless

“I don’t care what anyone says, I know what I saw and it was real” Sarah continued petulantly

“okay I told I believe you, you know that, but to be fair you have been a bit detached from ‘real’ lately don’t you think?”

“I’m sorry” Sarah had not forgotten her schoolgirl petulant look that melted Mark instantly

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Mark asked trying not to sound too angry

“I knew how you felt about that sort of thing, I thought I could handle it, you know” but Mark did not know that was why he had asked “You could have been killed, you ran out in front of a car; stark naked as well!” Mark added as if being naked was somehow more of a sin than being dead “The driver is in a bad way, paralysed; he will be in a wheel chair for the rest of his life”

“Oh Mark” Sarah-Jane was genuinely shocked and tears came to her eyes “I thought I was dead now I wish that I was”

“Don’t be silly, you have had a very lucky escape and I intend to keep you alive and on the straight and narrow from now on. I have had a word with Dr Bhatti and she has said she can get you place at a clinic she knows in the Lake District. She reckons you can recuperate up there and finish with all that stuff for good” Sarah wasn’t listening anymore, she had fallen back to sleep as the medication took effect, and Mark was left holding her hand and caressing her slim wrist, where the needle marks from the drip had left a small scar.

Ghosted love of living beauty, walking through his sleep

Her smiling lips began to speak as painted willows weep

Worried eyes watch anxiously, beneath her silken hair

His mind awoke and he arose, but Sarah wasn't there!

.....

The red Mercedes sped over the shiny wet surface, the Fat Man reached over to answer his mobile and silence its appalling rendition of Beethoven's 5th

"Yes" he snapped through the microphone

"Need to abort Jack, need to abort"

"Abort? No chance, can't you control your own men"

"It's gone too far for that" the voice on the other end continued "they are others involved, evidently they have been on to you for months"

"I'll take you and some others with me - you know I will"

"Calm down, Jack, just postpone the operation for now and pick it up later on. Lay low for a bit see what transpires" the voice sounded almost pleading though it managed to keep the authoritative tone. "All we need is a bit of rest bite till the heat's off" he added

"Great! That's just great, and what am supposed to do about the council post now?"

"I think you had better forget that for now, don't you, you know what the press are like if they get hold of something. You don't want to attract any attention to yourself unnecessarily do you? Once the papers take hold they never let go. You of all people should know that!"

"They only print what you lot tell 'em, George, I'm not happy about this at all"

"Leave it for now, just till it all blows over"

He replaced the receiver and turned on the radio, attempting to subdue his anger with Wagner at full volume.

.....

"The girl has woken up" the message was shouted across the office and spurred D.S Tatton into action "Jenkins you come with me, Sheila stall the Boss, if he asks we're out dealing with a new lead. Don't tell him where we are going"

"I don't know where you are going" Sheila answered

“Good girl!”

With the prospect of a lead in the case at last, Derrick was filled with anticipation (which actually makes quite a change from what most British policemen are filled with) as he walked into Chesford General Hospital. He and Jenkins managed to sneak past the reception desk without detection. In fact, the girl on the reception desk rarely saw anyone; in between painting her toenails, and filing her teeth, she was usually chatting at the coffee machine. They made their way to the Admin Office where someone had kindly left a list of which patients were in which particular ward. Sarah-Jane was on the third floor. Jenkins and Derrick Tatton went over to the elevators

“You keep watch for the staff nurse” D.S. Tatton ordered Jenkins “I’ll go and see the girl; it’s my neck that’s on the line over this one!”

“Yes Boss” Jenkins replied

Sarah-Jane sat up in bed and was chatting to Mark when the Detective Superintendent walked in

“Do you think you’re up to some questions now?” he said briefly showing his warrant card

“I don’t know.....” her voice trailed off “I don’t remember anything really” she continued

“We just need a name, who was supplying you?”

“I don’t know, honestly, I never.....” Mark squeezed her hand “I really think it’s too early for these questions Sergeant, if you don’t mind” Mark addressed the D.S.

“Detective Superintendent to you sonny, we are dealing with serious crimes here. One man is already dead and your girlfriend here has been very lucky.” He turned back towards Sarah “Now miss, if you could possibly remember a name anything you might have heard”

“Sir” Jenkins popped his head around the door and nodded to his superior. Sarah-Jane froze and Mark could not help but notice the panic on her face. She closed her eyes and pretended to go back to sleep.

Jenkins warning came too late the staff nurse was striding towards the room. D.S. Tatton and Detective sergeant Jenkins hurriedly left the building “Bugger” the superior officer said to his minion, “If she reports us we’re done for”

“You knew him!” Mark said to Sarah quietly after the two policemen had left

“I’ve seen him at the back of the club, by the Tree” Sarah-Jane replied

“Not that gnarly old oak by the path to the car park?” Mark queried

“The Marmalade Tree” Sarah replied” we call it the Marmalade Tree

“I never heard it called that before” Mark laughed

“It was a drop for the stuff. We used to pick it up from there, you paid John or one of the others, they went off to get your order, and you collected it from the tree. You see I really don’t know who was selling it, honestly.” She looked almost pleadingly at Mark “But that man” she continued “he was talking to John Simmons by the tree once. I’ve seen him there before; he was always hanging around” She seen him in her dreams as well but she did not tell Mark that bit.

“Perhaps he was working undercover,” Mark offered

“I don’t like him. I don’t trust him” Sarah was shaking visibly. Mark held her tightly and kissed her gently on her forehead.

Dancing in the mind of a thousand darkened lives,
Drowning ‘neath the fear of sharpened silver knives;
Hearts that dream constantly but long to be set free,
Drift in shadows; deep in the shade of the Marmalade Tree

Inspector Cook picked up the red telephone as soon as it rang out its raucous sound. He knew it would be important. “Hello Inspector Cook” he answered in his efficient professional voice.

“Charlie” It was the chief

“Yes George”

“The Jack Forman operation, I thought we had closed it down?”

“Just about Sir, Is there a problem?” He knew full well that George Evans would not be calling him for a social chat. The Chief Constable never rang anyone just for a social chat

“No, Charlie not a problem, just a bloody disaster! Your Detective Super has blundered his way into the Mets territory, they have had a man in there for months” The Chief was angry

“We had no idea”

“You weren’t supposed to .The undercover boys have been setting it up for two years and now Jack Forman’s’ got wind of trouble and gone to ground. Evidently the receivers been called in and the

factory's closing. They are not happy!" The Chief thundered, Charlie Cook just listened silently cursing D.S. Tatton under his breath. The Chief continued without waiting for a response from him "Do you really know what your men are doing Charlie? Are you on top of the action, because if you're not up to the job, there's plenty that are? Now get Tatton off the case and see if we can salvage something." The phone went silent and the Inspector was about to reply when it started up again "And Charlie while I'm on I have got the re-organisation details here We got to make three divisions out of the four we've got now, so 'C' division will be in the top three next month won't it?"

"Yes Sir" Charlie Cook replied but the phone was dead the Chief rarely waited for a reply when he was in that mood. Discussion was not an option he encouraged. The Inspector was left speechless. He was never fully aware of what his teams were doing, his style was to let them get on with it, while he filled in the interminable forms and tried to balance the books, but now he felt completely impotent. Events had overtaken him. He must act quickly.

"Send Detective Superintendent Tatton in to see me, please Angela," he announced through the intercom brusquely. D.S. Tatton and Sergeant Jenkins had watched from the outer office the animated conversation Charlie Cook was having, or rather not having, but they witnessed his expression changing and smelt trouble. When the call came through for Derrick, it was not unexpected

"What you don't realise Derrick" Inspector Cook said staring hard at the officer" Is that the Met are involved, they have had a man in there for months and you've just blown it all out of the water"

"Jack Starr, Sir, the foreman? Derrick replied

"You knew? The inspector raised an eyebrow

"No not till just now and even then it's only an educated guess. Sheila has been digging through the employment records to find our informer, Jack Starr fits the bill."

"Well it's too late now. I told you specifically to leave Pointers alone. didn't I?" he glanced at Derrick Tatton but did not wait for answer." Now let's see if you can keep a low profile and take orders. Get yourself over to Pitchers Gardens with the forensic team and wrap that up will you. You should be able to manage that without causing any ructions; it seems fairly straightforward. We need a top three position this month or there we'll all be looking for early retirement. And Derrick" he said

just as the Detective Super made to answer lets hope there isn't an inquiry over this because I'm not going anywhere. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly Sir" D.S. Tatton opened the door and left the Inspectors office. He marched across the worn green carpet of the outer office and into his own, slamming the door behind him. Jenkins knowing his boss well gingerly opened the door and peered in

"Can I help Derrick?" he asked

"Come in Pete, sit down" he gestured to the old armchair that he had brought in himself when he moved home last year.

"What's up gaffer?" Pete Jenkins seemed genuinely concerned for his boss

"More bad figures is it?"

"Wish that's all it was. No! It's your bloody informer Pete. I think he's an undercover man.

"You're kidding"

"No. The Met have had a man in Pointers for months evidently. Now they decide to tell us!"

Pete Jenkins sat silent for a few minutes staring into space, trying to weigh up the implications of the words he had just heard

"But why would he be giving us tip offs if they are involved themselves, I don't understand" Jenkins eventually replied

"Oh who knows how the Met works. They have always been a law unto themselves. They got some big operation called 'Marmalade Tree' of all things, bloody daft name for an operation if you ask me". Unfortunately, D.S.Tatton was looking out of his window at the time and had his back to Jenkins; otherwise, he might have seen a flicker of recognition in his sergeant's eyes to the words he'd just uttered.

Lament

The statutes stand tall their secrets untold

Like dark silhouettes all silent and cold

The police had spent most of the morning at Michael Sands' place, taking samples and dusting the furniture, which seems a shame really, because it had only been done just the day before.. The forensic squad worked hard bagging up pieces of evidence and sending off for analysis. The two empty pillboxes, exhibit 'A' and exhibit 'B' discovered under the table where they fell, were despatched accordingly, along with various samples retrieved from the scene, and the city morgue took delivery of Michael's body to await a coroners report. Superintendent Tatton and Detective

Sergeant Jenkins arrived on the scene to assume control and took a briefing from the officer in charge. They pulled rank on the scene of crime officer, Sgt. Evans who was most indignant about it. He explained that in his opinion it was a simple case of suicide so why bother a detective superintendent with it when he could deal quite adequately manage on his own. "Mr Sands was known to be volatile and depressed, he had never really come to terms with his injuries" the sergeant continued his synopsis of the situation. Derrick Tatton thanked him for his help assured him that they could manage here and would he go with a Policewoman to the Disability Living Trust to get some background on Mr Sand's carers.

The D.L.T. was very helpful in making their records available to the police. Sgt. Evans together with the PWC began the laborious task of conducting preliminary interviews with all the names on the list. Marsha who found the body had already given a statement. Aysha although unhappy at her dismissal from Michaels employ was nonetheless upset to hear of his death. There were various other names on the list, contacts from the Trust, social workers and other ancillary workers. Many people had drifted in and out of Michael's life; he did seem to discard them like old coats and a picture began to emerge of a man with no financial worries but a volatile temperament, nothing that Sgt Evans discovered did anything to change his initial diagnosis. The recent carers all agreed, however that lately Michaels temper had somewhat cooled due to the influence of Lucy. "She had a very calming nature; she was the sort of person you immediately warm to. She had that effect on people," Marsha had said

When the WPC and Sgt. Evans came to see Lucy, she was a little surprised that they had not called earlier. At the initial visit to inform her of the death, they told her not to be alarmed, that a routine interview would follow where she would be required to give a statement. The WPC, Helen was very nice and understanding, realising the shock that Lucy was still suffering; she kept the conversation brief and factual. Bob sat in his wheelchair, periodically interrupting to say how wonderful Lucy was at caring for him. They covered the basics, how long she worked at Pitchers Gardens for Michael; did she get on with him? Was he a difficult man to know? Etc etc. Lucy was less than honest about her true relationship with Michael, partly for Bob's sake and partly because she thought, it sounded rather ,well odd, and although she did not think so at the time, she wondered

whether having sex with a disabled man was considered to be proper behaviour. Better to leave that bit out she thought. Sgt. Evans said that initial inquiries were now virtually complete and the most likely outcome, subject to the post mortem results, was suicide. Lucy agreed to come down the station later to fill out a statement formally. They told her they would inform her when the inquest would be but, as she was not working on the day Michael died she did not have to attend unless she wanted to.

Back at Pitchers Gardens, D.S. Tatton was listening to the audio tapes from Michaels' diary, He had them labelled and taken away to the incident room back at base. The tapes shed a somewhat different light on the picture the police were building up. Despite pressure from his superiors and the need for a 'good score' and a quick conviction, Derrick tried to be fair, even if most times he was not. Derrick wanted to be thorough in his search for a suicide note and asked Jenkins to check the computer in Michael's office. "Chap like that might well go in for a high tech version" he announced to a startled Jenkins, who said he just about knew how to switch a computer on. His rudimentary I.T. knowledge, however, made him an expert compared to his superior. Derrick detested machines; he was an old fashioned copper. The Sergeant switched on the machine and the screen flickered into life, he clicked on the Tree icon with the file name '*Family Tree*' underneath. Jenkins manoeuvred the mouse to the legend: '*Open existing database?*' He double clicked and a password box appeared; He typed in the letters carefully only to be met with the response '*File Not Found!*' "Good" he said to himself and closed down the computer. He returned to the other room to see his boss deep in thought.

"Nothing in there Sir, just personal stuff" he broke Derricks concentration "You don't think this *was* suicide do you Derrick?" he asked the Superintendent

"No, there is no reason. There is no note; there is conflicting reports from the carers and now we have an engagement ring" he held up the jewellers receipt towards Jenkins.

The tapes referred to the engagement, and it puzzled Detective Superintendent Tatton.

"Why would a woman already married be getting engaged" he posed

"Did Michaels Sands know she was already married do you think?" Jenkins answered

"I don't know, I don't think so" came back the reply "but we can't prove she intended bigamy can we?" he stood looking at the chair where Michael's body had been "We might be able to convince a jury of murder though Michael Sands was a very wealthy young man. Put us right up the

charts that would – loads of brownie points- and the old man might well drop the other matter if we could swing this one

So, he had a suspect. He had circumstantial evidence; he even had a bit of a motive. All he needed now was proof that a crime had been committed!

Dark and deep the bubbling waters meander through the meadow green

Overheard clandestine meeting of the people no one's seen

Voices talking on the wind carried into a new day's morn

Hiding all from prying eyes and seeking solace in the dawn

Tall Elms that hide the secret world. Information passed and money spent

Listen to his lies, he knows too much;...and where youth and innocence went

The hospital on Humberside where Larry had been taken after the attack on his van, discharged him after a few days. He was quickly, on the phone to Jack Starr, who had agreed, although somewhat reluctantly, to come up and drive him back home.

“What s going on Jack? - I've had enough”

“I dunno but I intend to find out” Jack stared hard at the windscreen trying to discern whether or not the crushed insect was 'indeed just that or damage to the glass caused in the attack on Larry

“Who would want to hijack. a load of ink?” Larry interrupted Jacks entomological ponderings. He was incredulous “They were waiting for me Jack, they knew I would be coming”

“Look” Jack thought it about time to put Larry fully in the picture “There's something I think you should know”

“What's that then?”

“The only people who knew about that trip were Hunterprint, Pointers and the police”

“Yeah, so, I know that, what are you getting at?” Larry began to lose patience

“If you will let me finish; I don't-mean the police as in my lot, It's the locals, they've been sniffing around for drugs, poking their noses in and putting a few others out of joint”

“Drugs?” Larry was astounded, he was no prude and certainly was not naive but drugs, this

wasn't the East End "Look, you never said nowt about drugs"

"I couldn't now could I, you wouldn't have done it would you"

"You set me up you bastard - you coppers are all the same" Larry's pride was hurt far more than his body. His injuries in-fact were only superficial although he still ached .Like a lot of men was a complete baby when it came to pain

"That's not fair. You have been well looked after. The local boys have fucked up not us. They've ruined the whole operation, It all blew up when that young lad died at the club, Simmons, He was some sort of dealer. The local D. S. got a bee in his bonnet and tried to score some points. and then that RTA with the girl as high as a kite, It just snowballed out of control, the left hand never knows what the right ones is doing always been the same in the force. It all had to be kept under wraps, you know that."

Larry sat in silence, not knowing what to make of the whole affair. He knew Mark and it was not that long ago he sat next to him and Sarah-Jane in the cab from Tratford. She looked fine then, perhaps a bit too talkative and hyperactive. Larry put that down to her youth. Funny old business this he thought, but he kept his thoughts to himself. He was still angry with Jack for not being up front with him to start with. Sure, it paid well, he was on a good earner, and he liked Jack, he got on well with him; but hell he wasn't a copper why should I risk my neck he thought., but he kept his thoughts to himself.

The journey back to Chesford did not take long. Jack maintained a steady 70 mph all the way only slowing down once or twice to negotiate the interminable cones on the motorway. Therein lays another puzzle: traffic cones that spring up overnight. Is there a factory farm somewhere in Wales that has cornered the market in red and white plastic cones? Do they just breed in the darkness and multiply to cause havoc in daylight hours? And why oh why is there never anybody working on that bit of the road that is coned off?

.....

Lucy was not in when the nice police officer called to ask her to accompany him to the police station 'to assist with their inquiries'. She had given her address as 12 -The Corale, which was the place she had obtained temporarily for Bob. She did not intend to stay there indefinitely, but with

Michael gone, she was not sure what to do and could hardly go back to the bungalow. Bob answered the door, a task made easier from his wheelchair by the low handles with which the bungalow had been equipped. He told the officious constable that Lucy had gone to visit a friend in hospital and would be back shortly. He would pass on the message and she would no doubt come down to the station later.

“I'm sure that will be all night, Sir. Tell her to ask for Detective Superintendent Tatton” the policeman handed a card to Bob

“You have already interviewed her you know” Bob remarked

“Yes Sir, I am aware of that, we just need confirmation of some of the points in her statement”

“You're not arresting her or anything are you? Bob queried. His mind beginning to spin, darting in and out of questions and excuses, like a discovered miscreant.

“Oh no Sir, nothing like that as I said, just one or two loose ends to tie up”

“Okay fine, I'll see she gets the message she will be in touch. Goodbye officer” Bob took great pleasure in closing the door on the young officer. He knew the way the police worked and began to suspect something was amiss. Why are they so keen to talk to Lucy again so soon? They have had a statement. What else can she tell them? They obviously don't believe her! They think she's done him in! Nonsense, Robert he argued, just like his mother Bob always called himself Robert when he was serious. He continued the rhetoric with his inner psyche What if she lost that wicked temper of hers? She belted you once, remember - seven stitches and a six hour wait in casualty. (They were not very busy that day so Bob was seen quickly!) What if she did do it? - What then? Bob a never received answer to his inquires, because of Lucy's arrival; she was back full of good news about Sarah-Jane. Bob was quite pleased at the news as well, after all he felt responsible even though he had no control over the accident.. He often thought whilst he was in hospital how different things would have been if he had stayed in Newcastle; he would not be in a wheelchair now, and that girl wouldn't be in a coma. It was that damn letter that started it all - bloody banks!

The recovery of Sarah Jane had helped Lucy come to terms with the shock of Michael's death, but she was still wandered around in a bit of a fog,- absent looking and staring 'in disbelief at the events unfolding before her. She was most unlike her normal self, since leaving Bob she had become

self assured, self reliant, efficient and energetic; but now she lapsed into lethargy, became forgetful and distant. Bob had noticed the change and put it down to the trauma of the situation. He told her that the police wanted to ask her some more questions, and would she mind going down to the station.

“They sent a car for you, I think it must be important.” Bob ventured. Lucy gave him one of her all too common vacant looks and said.

“Yes okay I'll go when I've had a drink and something to eat”

.....

At the front desk, after telling the receptionist her name, Lucy was told to wait for D.S. Tatton. He arrived some time later. The fact that she had been kept waiting over half an hour did not seem to bother her, she was still in a daze, and even though her despair was tempered with the joy of seeing Sarah-Jane, she was still in a self induced fog of dreams; she just could not believe what was happening to her.

“Thank you for coming Mrs Simpson” Derrick emphasised the 'Mrs Simpson' to see if there would be any reaction. There wasn't! “Let's go somewhere quiet”- he said pushing open a door to a small interview room. A policewoman stood by the doorway and Jenkins sat waiting to operate the tape player. Lucy froze when asked if she would like her solicitor present

Journeying through fields of conscience away from the troubles of mind

Chasing through the forests of blackness, leaving deceit behind.

Whispers silent on the wind, dreams of young life dashed

Secrets hidden, hopes destroyed. Another cheque is cashed.

What really annoyed him was the deception. He had been paying wages for months. God in heaven! How did I not see that coming? He went through the recent employees in his mind Larry Yesman or Mark Hero, one of them two I'd bet my life on it. Still it was a masterstroke 'losing' that ten grand order - no business could survive a blow like that. No choice, he had to call in the receivers. That should keep them busy for a few weeks trying to find the missing invoices. He chuckled to himself. He had covered his tracks extremely well, losing a few thousand pounds, missing delivery notes presumably lost by the driver (or that incompetent clerk in the accounts office) Any ‘suspect’ invoices had been destroyed. They could probably -get him on some business misdemeanour- not filling in the designated forms, as the government required or some other technical offence. They

might even prove embezzlement, but that would be difficult. Anyway, they would have to find him first.

The road was wet, and driving a little tricky especially as the grey boxes mounted every few miles occasionally flashed to warn of their presence and to provide funds for the Police benevolent fund. He could ill afford to appear on camera after so much careful planning. They would find the car soon enough and work out where he was headed; he would rather it be later, much later.

Jack Forman was a very private man. He moved up to Chesford about ten years ago and bought the old vicarage at Fennersbank, a large Victorian house, (although mansion might be a more appropriate term) set back from the main road and hidden by its own small woodland. A 900-metre long gravel drive twisted and turned its way to the front facade and he had installed a security light to illuminate the blackness as one drove up through the orchard up to the house itself 'The Vicarage' had become his new base equipped with all the modern trappings of a business executive. In fact, all the gizmos the Fat Man could buy... and he did buy, he loved gadgets, especially expensive ones. He enjoyed his wealth and enjoyed parading it. An invite to an evening soiree at 'Chez de Jack' was much sought after in the surrounding villages. He would miss the old place, and probably not make as much money as he wanted on it either. Damn the police! Bloody incompetents "I need a quick sale" he had told the agent on the phone "I'll be going abroad soon and I want it all completed before I go"

Jack pulled onto the motorway, the engine purring delightfully, as the revs increased Within a few miles, he saw a sign for the Services and turned off the roads damp grey surface towards the brightly lit concourse. Driving over to the far corner of the Services, he parked up and lit a small cigar. He plugged the mobile into his laptop and keyed in the number to log onto his on-line bank. He needed to check the balance on his accounts and to see whether the bankers draft had cleared. It had. £450,000 he had asked for £600,000. Still he had made quite a handsome profit, and now at least he had cash. He quickly transferred the funds he required to the relevant accounts and logged off. He finished his cigar and walked over to the Avis returns box where he deposited the key, then slowly and unobtrusively he walked across the bridge to the other side of the motorway to pick up the silver grey Jaguar that awaited

him. He found the key in the exhaust where they had left it and zoomed off smooth as silk, still admiring his ingenuity at evading the ever-tightening web.

The cold mist of a winter morning hung precariously in the air as Mark struggled to throw off the soft warm duvet. The radio alarm was already alive with the dulcet tones of Terry Wogan's Irish brogue; although why he wore noisy shoes, no one knew. The weak yellow light of the sun was vainly attempting to break through the grey mood of the sky, a mood that reflected Mark's own demeanour. He had to call into the factory today to see the men from the D.T.I. They specifically asked if he could be present to go over some invoices with them and generally show them the ropes. It meant he had to be in for 9 o'clock something he had not had to do for a long while on a Saturday, but he had promised because they said he would be free in a couple of hours so he would still be able to get to the hospital to see Sarah. Jack Starr, the foreman had asked Mark to come in on this particular Saturday and Mark had agreed more as a favour to Larry than anything else, after all it would be him or Larry that would get the blame for any lost delivery notes.

By the time Mark reached the Addison's Estate, the mist had cleared, but it was still not warm and he could see his breath in front of his face. The large hangar, cleverly disguised as a warehouse that housed Pointers Inks stood before him casting a large dark shadow over the poorly lit streets in the run down neighbourhood Jack was already there to unlock the factory and greeted Mark in what he thought was an over friendly manner. Over friendly for Jack that is. Jack had never been one to indulge in small talk but now he chortled on about the factory being bought as a going concern by Hunterprint as their supplier in the south. Mark was not interested; he had already set himself up with an interview on Monday at the council. The Velvet Sun Factory held little fascination for Mark any more, not that it ever did. It was only a job. The dark suited accountants with their briefcases and laptops followed Jack and Mark into the accounts office "I'll be upstairs in Mr Forman's office, if you want me" announced Jack "Mark's got to get off early to visit his girlfriend in hospital- so finish up here first and I'll talk with you later."

"Thank you Mr Starr" said one of the pinstripes "we won't need to keep Mr Hero long we just need some clarification on the odd purchase invoice and familiarise ourselves with his filing systems"

Mark retrieved the file of job dockets from the grey metal cabinet narrowly avoiding getting his fingers trapped; he was used to the sharp spring on the drawer by now. 'March Orders' the logo read. He flipped through the file and realised quickly that some dockets were missing. Double-checking with the Purchase invoices, he could see that some documents had been removed "I can't help you Mr Forman must have removed some of the invoices, he may have taken them home, you'll have to talk to Jack"

"Can they be tied up with the delivery notes?" the bespectacled accountant asked

"I suppose, they are in that bottom drawer" Mark pointed to the long flat filing cabinet by the door "And the Purchase Ledger?" the suit continued

"The top office upstairs" Mark replied

"Fine, we'll just enter up the figures we've got here then we can tie up any blanks in the records later. No computer back up then?" the senior pinstripe reminded Mark of the accountants in a Monty Python sketch his mannerisms were annoying to the point of distraction.

"No, I always asked for one but technology did not figure in Mr Forman's plans. Sometimes for quickness I used enter some figures up at home and print them off, you know end of year stuff here's one of my sheets" Mark handed the neatly printed A4 sheet over to a John Cleese look alike, who peered through the bottom of his bifocals?

"Hmm, good I think we have all we need from you now. We have a lot a work to do. We will contact you through Mr Starr if we need to talk to you again"

"Thank you and Goodbye then" Mark said, pleased to leaving the men from the ministry to their own devices. He secretly wondered if it was a job requirement to be boring and staid and could not stop himself from imagining them performing 'silly walks' all around his office. He strode out and into the silent factory. It was eerie, no banging of pipes from the old boiler pans or clanking of chains from the lifting equipment. The acrid smell from half-finished varnish and ink added to the unusual scenario as Mark moved briskly through the workshop towards the main exit "See you again soon Mark" Jacks' words startled Mark and he jumped, as he turned round to see Jacks' smiling face. No one before could ever remember seeing Jack Starr smile. "Thanks for coming in. I'm lost with all that paperwork.," he continued

“Its okay, glad to help “said Mark not realising he had had a choice about coming in on a Saturday morning Jacks behaviour puzzled him. The whole situation was unreal; weird; I need that council job he thought to himself as he left the environs of the Velvet Sun Factory.

Listen to the voices echoing in your mind,
harken to the sound of sadness
and the secrets you may find
that appear before her weeping eyes
then fade away into blackness.....

At her second interview Lucy had decided it was time to come clean and be completely truthful, partly because Bob had sussed something was wrong and partly because she had begun to worry herself. She thought the police did not believe her about the relationship with Michael, perhaps they knew something - the diaries, yes that was it. She knew how fastidious Michael had been about those damn diaries. She detailed her intimacies with Michael, wondering all the time what the police might make of it. D.S. Tatton raised his eyebrows once or twice but made no comment. He asked Lucy about the engagement ring and the will. Mr Longton from the solicitors had already testified that Michael had gone against his advice in altering the will. He had suggested change but warned about Lucy being the main beneficiary. He thought it too soon! The post mortem had also provided the police with further grounds to question Lucy. There was bruising on Michaels neck and throat, its cause was unknown but was consistent with having been forced fed. Death was a result of poisoning. He had ingested five times the normal dosage of his medication Lucy could shed no light on either discovery

The detective thanked Lucy and issued a routine warning not to leave the area. This worried Lucy even more. She did not like D.S. Tatton’s tone it made her feel like a suspect in a murder inquiry, which of course is what she was! The new information Lucy had given in her altered testimony, however, greatly interested Derrick Tatton. The police had already made contact with the original surgeon who treated Michael Sands after his accident, as part of the general background to the case, so now he left a message for Mr Lloyd the consultant at the private hospital to call the station. To be honest the detective found the very idea of love making between an able-bodied young woman and

a disabled man a bit distasteful. He noted how Lucy now lived with her husband who was also in a wheelchair.

“This world is sick Jenkins” he finally voiced his thoughts to the Sergeant

“Not for us to judge though is it Sir?”

“It is if she's going around bumping 'em off Keep a tail on her will you Pete and I'll get Sheila to see if there's any history on her”

17.Ode to the Marmalade Tree

The statues stand upright on plinths made of stone

When the wind whistles you can hear them all groan

Sarah had been making excellent progress in her recovery so Mark not wishing, to risk a relapse told her nothing of the attack on Larry, he thought it best to leave all that until later. Mark did tell her that Pointers had lost a lucrative order, which was true. Hunterprint cancelled their contract once they discovered the police involvement. They could not afford any bad publicity and certainly did not want to be associated with drug running or anything unsavoury, after all- they had their hands full producing pornography. Mark went on to tell Sarah Jane that he thought the factory

would now close. He told her that he had been working with the receivers only that morning, and did not hold out much hope, although Jack seemed to think they would be able to salvage something. Mark was not waiting to find out, he had already applied to Chesford City council for a position. He was good at his job and considering his age he was both experienced and qualified. Sarah wished him luck in his new job. "I am so proud of you Mark. You are very clever," she said.

The most important news that Mark brought to Sarah concerned Lucy Simpson, whom they now counted as a friend. Lucy had finally come to see Sarah yesterday and the two women got on famously. Now, however, the papers were full of the story about the suspicious death of Michael Sands. The prime suspect it appeared was Mrs. Lucy Simpson, indeed according to some reports she was the only suspect and the British press being, the responsible body that it is had already tried the woman and found her guilty. What a shame the death penalty has been abolished!

"She seems so nice and caring," Sarah said

"Yes I know, I can't believe it" Mark- replied, "I think a lot of it is just paper- talk" Mark passed the Chesford Daily News over to Sarah; the photograph of Lucy was not very flattering but then neither was the headline: - '*Carer Interviewed Over Wheelchair Death*' the sub headlines said an ex-nurse was accused of murder. Not strictly true; Lucy was under deep suspicion, certainly in Superintendent Tatton's eyes, but at this juncture she was not accused of anything. As usual, the papers were jumping the gun! Sarah glanced down the columns of newsprint without really reading the words and handed the newspaper back to Mark. She was bursting to tell him her news.

"I'm coming out on Monday" she said, "Well at least I am being taken to a clinic Dr. Bhatti knows in the Lake District" Mark looked at Sarah-Jane; he was very good at trying to look surprised

"Do you know exactly where this place is?" He said trying to make casual conversation. Sarah smiled "Grasmere, I think - have you heard of it?"

"Yes"

"I know it's a long way away but it's only for a few weeks. I had to go, but they said you can visit me you will won't you - It's not too far for you is it? You will come won't you – please" Sarah looked pleadingly at Mark with her moon drop eyes

“Yes of course if you give me chance to get a word in” he laughed and stared into the dark pools of her eyes, wishing he could descend into their depths and disconnect the troubled soul from deep within his lover. Sarah interrupted his concentration “What's the genius thinking about now?” she commented.

“Oh nothing much, just puzzling over that copper we saw the other day with the detective Super, Jenkins, wasn't that his name?” Sarah looked blank, Mark continued, “I was trying to piece it all together, you said you knew him. Do you remember? He frightened you didn't he?”

“Come here and stop worrying, leave it all to the police. It's all over now. Three weeks, four at the most in the Lakes and I will be back for good. I promise I am done with all that. No more tabs. I might even finish school”

“You will if Edna has anything to do with it.” Mark announced. “She has been telling me all her plans for you, university or even the church, although that opportunity may have passed you by now.” He laughed loudly knowing full well the response he would get from Sarah

“University? - I never told her I wanted anything like that, and there is no way you would get me into a purple robe! It's not even this year's colour” She giggled “Anyway the Church is definitely out; I don't think I could put up with all the sex and drugs” she smiled her mischievous smile back at Mark and he was happy to see her back to the bubbly self assured girl he had known since childhood.

“All I ever wanted is you” Sarah continued and kissed Mark. He responded stroking her hair and pushing his lips towards hers. It was only the possibility of an impending entrance from a nurse that prevented him from taking it further, and although the thought of discovery excited him he refrained ‘I have waited this long’ he considered to himself ‘I can wait a little longer’.

Darkness creeps upon the land
where danger loves to play;
And send its seeds into the night
to spoil some one else's day!

Mr Lloyd, the London surgeon contacted D.S.Tatton as requested. "No quite impossible" he said, "There is no possibility that Mr Sands would have been able to have sex"

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, the nerves in his spine were ripped from the bone, in essence, officer he had a broken back. We can heal the bone but not the spinal cord"

"Is there any possibility that it could have healed itself over a long period of time?"

"There is evidence to suggest that some repair can occur but it is quite impossible, in my experience for it to have healed sufficiently to enable vigorous exercise. Possibly a small amount of re-growth, but any thing else would be nothing short of miraculous. He embroidered his diagnosis with medical jargon as if trying to create an impression on the Detective Super and concluded by repeating his initial comment "Out of the question. Quite impossible!"

"Thank you for your assistance Sir." D.S.Tatton put the phone down and turned towards his ever reliable assistant" The doc reckons Michael Sands could not have even washed his own face let alone have sex with our Mrs Lucy Simpson" Jenkins could hear the disdain in his superiors voice

"She seemed pretty convincing to me Derrick," he said

"Yeah, I know, could be all in her mind though, you know what these people are like. She's obviously got a thing about wheelchairs" Jenkins did not what 'these people' were like and thought his boss a little hard on Lucy. He quite liked the woman; he found her personality warm and inviting, during the investigation he had developed a bit of a soft spot for her, but there again he may have had a good reason for assuming her innocence. He replied to his superior "Like a fantasy you mean?" He queried, "Could be, either that or she is the original bad luck charm. Funny how the men in her life seem to end up in wheelchairs"

"Could just be coincidence?" Jenkins pondered, "Wouldn't want to get too close to her though" he quipped

"No such thing as coincidence in police work Sergeant, how many times have I told you that, and as far as keeping away from Mrs Lucy Simpson is concerned we'll have to talk her again and soon. Arrange will you Pete?"

"Yes Sir"

.....

Lucy had started drinking again, small amounts at first. Bob noticed she was surreptitiously sipping his whisky and the cooking sherry was vanishing fast. She seemed to cope with proceedings outwardly and looked after her husband with her normal efficiency, but Bob was becoming more and more aware of her moods; and they were nearly always alcohol induced. Lucy tried to make light of it, but he knew her and began to question in his own mind whether her relationship with Michael Sands was indeed purely professional. Events seemed to have hit Lucy very hard. An advance on the insurance money from Bobs' accident had come through and he used it to arrange cover for Lucy to enable her to spend more time on her defence. They both thought it high time she contacted a solicitor. Lucy, however, withdrew into herself, and with more free time on her hands, she tried to find legal advice in a bottle of Glenfiddich.

Fulchard and Thompson had been the family solicitors for a long time and were on stand by to act for Lucy in her pending divorce, so Angus Fulchard, the senior partner, was slightly surprised to receive a call from Bob Simpson. Nevertheless, he agreed to come down and talk to Lucy in the offices of a local firm. Although they were not a nationwide company, they did have an arrangement with a local solicitors and Lucy was to meet with Angus on Friday, at the offices of Longton, Adams and Weaver. Had she known of the connection with Michael she might well have seen the irony of the situation, but there again she was not in a fit state to appreciate anything; let alone the subtlety of irony.

Forensic evidence had put Lucy at the scene of the crime, hardly surprising since she lived and worked there. The statements from both Mr Lloyd and the solicitor, Mr Longton carried far more weight in the eyes of the police than Lucy's' changed statement. The engagement ring and the altered testimony were, as far as Derrick Tatton was concerned, the clinching evidence against her. He believed her to be a cold manipulating woman who used Michael Sands for her own ends. Whether true or not, like all upstanding officers of the law, he could only reach his biased opinion based on the facts, and it was his intention to have her arrested for murder.

The local media continued with their frenzy and before long, the nationals joined in. It was a good story. This unassuming woman from Newcastle, a registered nurse who comes to south to take a

job as a carer for a wheelchair bound invalid and becomes the serial killer from hell. (It is worth noting here that the definition of a serial killer in tabloid journalism is somewhat different from the norm.) The headlines ran 'The evil nurse' story whilst speculation into similar unsolved crimes helped fill up column inches and keep the advertisers happy. The gossips began to eat away at the truth like worms in a compost heap and D.S. Tatton, in all the press interviews he gave, appeared to look like the cat that had got the cream. The trouble with cream is that it goes off quickly!

The rooster secret smile of hate,
Invites the suspects all to wait.
And leave their hearts unlocked and free
Underneath the boughs of the Marmalade Tree

Mark joined Paul at the bar; only short staccato conversation was possible due to the loud bass beat masquerading as music emanating from nearby speakers. Paul knew about Sarah-Jane and was pleased to hear that she had recovered consciousness

“Bad business” he shouted

“Yes” Mark yelled back “I need to find George he wasn't on the door”

“He's outside I think, in the yard,” Paul pointed to the Fire Exit. Mark jostled his way through the melee of mindless automatons littering the dance floor. Although the reader should appreciate, the term 'dance' is used very loosely in this context. The bodies did appear to move in some sort of sequence to the music and lights but any similarity between that movement and dance steps was purely coincidental. Mark disliked 'garage' nights intensely after all he did not own a car! He had only come tonight to see the doorman.

George McPherson was a giant of a man and was clearly suited to being a club doorman or to be politically correct a door attendant. Unlike most of the other 'bouncers' employed on the local club scene, George was popular with the kids and could actually converse in words of more than one syllable. He was standing under the big oak tree that shaded most of that corner of the car park talking to someone, when Mark approached. Mark could not see the second person clearly, as shadows obscured their faces but just as Mark was about to step out fully into the terraced area, the two men

turned and walked briskly back towards the club. The light from the full moon although hindered by the neon of the streetlights hit the profiles as the men turned. Was it Jenkins? Mark thought he recognised him. Jenkins had interviewed Mark at the factory so he might remember him. He would have to wait to get George alone, and so he stepped back into the porch way at the back entrance of the club. Fortunately, Mark did not have to wait too long. Jenkins disappeared through the side entry, which led to the park and Mark approached the burly looking doorman.

“Hi Mac you still working?” Mark asked

“Yeah, what do you want” George seemed agitated and nervous, but then as if hit by a bolt of conscience, mellowed and smiled towards the youngster “How's your Sarah by the way?”

“She's fine now, but I need some stuff I promised I would get her something to help wean her off gently she's not one for cold turkey” Mark lied

“I really can't help you Mark, you know I'm clean” George relied

“Look, I know the S.P., a twenty shot right”

George bent down towards Mark and surreptitiously took the £20 not from him “I'll see if there is someone around who can help you” he said. “One hour at the tree okay?” George went back inside the club and Mark turned to follow but felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned around quickly, heart pounding. It was Enoch

“Hey man, where yoh bin?”

“Hi Enoch, you scared the living daylights outta me, I was looking for you”

“No you weren't, yous buying junk - nothing gets past Enoch, you know that”

“Ok I'll come clean. I'm following up a lead on something Sarah said about a chap called Jenkins” Mark knew he could not lie his way out of the situation, Enoch was far too canny.

“You mean Marlon alias Detective Sergeant Pete Jenkins” Enoch grinned at Mark

“You know him?” Mark spluttered

“Sure, I've bin feeding him info for months, he's 'bout as bent as a three bob note. Pays well though”

“He's the source of smack and all sorts of shit round here?” Mark asked annoyed, but not at all surprised that Enoch appeared to be one-step ahead of him.

“Naa he's just a small cog in the big wheel, a little man”

“A dealer?” Mark interrupted

“Not so much that more of a goffer really, trades a bit now Simmos gone” Mark stared at Enoch as if waiting for an explanation.

“There's loads of 'em. The authorities even know who they are, and where they hang out. Man, done a bit meself in the past when I was younger, ya understand. They even pretend to know who the big boys are, but it's all a front. They don't care; everyone makes too much dosh outta it”

“I can't believe they don't want to stop it” Marks said incredulously “You are honestly telling me that the authorities don't want to end this shit?”

“Boy I never had you down as a country boy, native or what? They could stop about half of it at the ports if they wanted, but you try getting a few fags in. It's the money, see, big money. that's what it is” Mark did not consider himself as naive and could see logic in Enoch's argument, but he was disillusioned

“So if I watch the tree, Jenkins will put the stuff in the trunk for me to collect?” Mark asked,

“Unlikely my boy, he probably pays someone to do that for him” Enoch laughed showing his gleaming teeth which shone out like tombstones in the diffused light. “Men like Jenkins pays punks like me and Simmo to do the dirty bits. How do you fink he stays legit?” Mark looked astounded at what Enoch was telling him. He felt impotent against the world, used and discarded. Suddenly his whole ideals about life were being cast aside. Enoch could see his troubled face “What makes you fink ya can sort out the drug scene? Take my advice. Markie my boy, don't get involved. Look at me. I know what's what. I make a few diamonds, keep me nose clean and more importantly out of other folks business. You do the same. You only get one shot at livin' Man, this aint no dress rehearsal!”

Mark returned home to Spencer House no closer to finding the truth and more confused than ever.

Perhaps Enoch was right he should keep out of it.

Eyes that watch and see the truth are blinded by the message.

Silent walls look down upon the sadness all around her

Bob Simpson's reaction to the furore in the media was initially one of incredulity. After all he lived with the woman, albeit in an atmosphere of hostility towards the end of their time together in Newcastle, especially when the marriage was failing, but he could not envisage her as a murderess. Quick tempered, yes, he could certainly testify to that, but not the cold calculating monster that the press painted her. The woman he read about in the newspapers was not his Lucy. For her part, Lucy was still dazed, she thought it all some ghastly mistake that would soon be resolved. Instead of which the evidence against her was mounting steadily; the investigation gathered momentum and C Division was preparing to climb up the Police Crime figures chart.

Angus Fulchard brought Lucy back down to earth. He explained that 'things just did not turn up. The police think they have a case and will set about to prove it. They will not want to waste any time looking for clues for the defence. "No Mrs Simpson" he had said, "If there is anything to find that will help you, then we must find it ourselves. Now drink your coffee and tell me the whole story from the beginning".

Lucy sipped at the beverage and related the tale from the start in all its sordid minutiae. She was totally honest, in fact she was too tired to be anything else, the whole affair was physically draining and beginning to take a toll on her health. Twice Angus asked her about the intimate side of her relationship with Michael Sands and twice Lucy reiterated the details. "Hmm" he said staring at the police reports he had been sent." We will have to sort out the discrepancies before your next interview with the police"

"Will they arrest me then?" Asked poor Lucy weakly

"Probably" Angus replied, "but try not worry yourself too much. They certainly have enough evidence to do so. You were silly to accept the engagement ring whilst you were still married and the will....."Lucy interrupted him

"I did not know anything about that," she protested

"So so, I believe your story Mrs Simpson, but the question still remains, who killed Michael Sands and from the police point of view, why was he killed. If we can find the answers to those questions, we may well be on the way to proving your innocence and getting your life back on track."

"Will they lock me up?" Lucy was frightened and spoke almost with tears in her eyes

“Not for long I hope, possibly for a short time until you come before a magistrate. I see no reason why they would oppose bail. At least once they charge you we will know exactly what evidence they have and I will access to all their files. Actually, the reason Angus questioned Lucy's relationship with Michael so closely now, was that he was already in possession of Mr Lloyd's statement. It was this, in his opinion that formed the whole basis of the police case; everything else was supposition and circumstantial. D.S.Tatton had deliberately released the file in the hope of obtaining a confession. Angus Fulchard however failed to mention the point to Lucy, He thought her state of mind already confused, and anyway he reasoned that if the Detective Super needed a confession then he was not terribly confident of carrying the jury in court. Funnily enough, Angus genuinely did believe his clients story and considered he had every chance of obtaining an acquittal, the evidence was not that strong, and even if the doctor's statement was correct, that in itself did not prove murder.

The cold north wind of December's dawn,
Silver streaks on nature's lawn
of glistening dew-drenched clover.
The still sound of morning birds
can tell you more than words
could ever hope to do.

Mark had not been home for long when the buzzer went. He went upstairs to the intercom to see who was calling at this time of the morning. “Jack here, Jack err Starr, I need to see you, its important”

“It bloody well must be at this hour” Mark replied and pressed the buzzer to let him in

Jack knocked the door of Marks flat and Mark opened it to see a stern but smiling face of the foreman from the Velvet Sun Factory. Jack Starr quickly produced a police warrant card and showed it to Mark; he took it and stared at the picture. It was Jacks' photo all right Detective Sgt. Twford “You're a policeman?” Mark said casually

“You don't seem too surprised” Jack replied

“Not any more nothing surprises me now; anyhow I was chatting to Larry earlier, I wondered when you would call on me.”

“So you know what this is all about then?” the policeman reverted to his official tone

“Not really, what could you possibly want with me?”

“You went to the Roostertail tonight, yes?”

“Yes just to see a few friends” Mark became defensive. It was his usual manner when dealing with police interrogation, not that he had had a great deal of experience in that department

“Mark, I *am* a detective, give me some credit.” Jack smiled that cynical ‘we already knew what you have been up to’ smile that policemen are trained to give to suspects.

“Okay, I went to get some stuff for Sarah”

“No you didn’t, Sarah’s getting professional help, you wanted to trap Pete Jenkins, but thought better of it in the end. Am I right?” Jack took out a cigarette. Mark had never before seen him smoke; all part of the act he thought

“Enoch been talking to you as well has he?” Mark replied petulantly

“Am I right?” Jack continued, ignoring Marks comment and looking around for a suitable receptacle in which to flick his ash

“Yes you’ve got it” Mark replied handing him a blue glass ashtray.

“Well that is why I am her. I need you to go back and collect the package from the tree-trunk”

“I don’t use that shit, never have.”

“I know, but it’s a very special batch, part of a lot stolen from Larry’s van last week. They were all marked. If anything turns up here, it puts our Jenkins firmly in the frame. I hate bent coppers more than any other sort of crook” Jack began to get excited at the thought of nailing a corrupt colleague.

“I don’t know whether I should get involved,” Mark said retreating to the settee, remembering Enoch’s pearls of wisdom.

“You are involved already. You have just paid for a Class A drug. I can arrest you for that” Jack looked straight at Mark to await his response.

“You always were a bastard at work, fitted in quite well didn’t you?”

"Will you help us nail Jenkins? For Sarah's sake at least"

"Leave Sarah out of this! Why should I help you? There is a lot of truth in what Enoch says isn't there. You must have known about Jenkins?"

"No actually I didn't and Enoch is only seeing one side of the situation, he doesn't understand. We are under constant pressure, budgets, and personnel cutbacks. Sure, we miss out sometimes. This operation for instance, the local boys were trampling all over our feet, but we are winning the war on drugs. We need people like you to help us." Jack spoke with passion and sounded as if he believed in what he was saying, even if it was being laid on with a trowel. Mark remained sceptical

"It's everywhere, part of youth culture. How can one person make that much difference?" he asked

"One less rat in the sewer, two if we can catch the 'Fat Man' and who knows how much deeper this goes. Look, I was joking earlier about arresting you, but I do need your help. Will you do it Mark?"

"Yes alright" Mark finally conceded. "I suppose you want a cup of coffee now as well?"

"Wouldn't say no" Jack replied smiling as genuinely as he could

"Come on downstairs then you can fill me in on all the details, and don't give me any shit about confidentially, if you want my help I need to know what I'm up against. To tell the truth you'll need to draw me a picture, I still can't get my head round all this"

.....

The motorway was busy with juggernauts as the Jaguar silently whisked the Fat Man into obscurity. He whistled to himself along with the radio. He was a lot happier now that the money from the sale of the Vicarage had come through. Disappearing cost cash - lots of it, new bank accounts, new identities, and Jack Forman knew only that too well. He had enough to take care of all that now and just about enough to start over. Jack Forman had a very low opinion of the police, he had bought so many of them in the past but he knew that even they would not take too long to discover his Merc, which he'd left back at the lock up. Eventually they might even connect it to with the hire car he abandoned at the Services. He smiled, with that smirking superior grin of his, the one he always

reserved for his employees. He checked his speed to keep within the law and leant back into the plush seat to enjoy the rest of his journey.

18 Lakeland Concerto

The statues are wise and wisdom reigns supreme-
In this world where, life, is little more than a dream

Sarah was enjoying her stay in the Lakes. The regime she was following was strict. She was on a stringent diet and a routine of regular exercise. Her days were pre-planned for her, but

nonetheless she found the time to take in the winter colours of the landscape. Set in its own woodland, 'Park- View' overlooked a vast panoramic vista. A little stream that eventually wound its way down towards Grasmere Lake rippled through, the estate. Sarah-Jane liked the clean crisp air. She was feeling much better for it, although maybe the diet and 'Dettox Plan' she was following had a little something to do with her health improvement. Occasionally she visited the local village of Great Langdale but always with an escort. The doctors at Park View did not allow Sarah out on her own; that made Sarah feel like a criminal. "Do they think I am going to buy some smack in the local Post Office?" she once asked Don who accompanied her

"No it's not that, It's just that they don't want patients falling, off the wagon so to speak. The diet is very important. It is nothing personal, just normal procedure" (What Don failed to point out was the fact that the local Post Office has gone the way of many rural shops and been closed for nigh on three years); anyway even when they were open, they sold stamps not 'Smack')

The clinic itself was pleasant enough but Sarah quite naturally missed home and Mark, she longed for his visit, and clutched the letter he had written to her as she walked down towards the woodland walkway. She craved the news from Chesford. Here, it was as if they wanted to isolate the inmates and keep them away from any corrupting influences. Park- View was in fact a Drugs and Drink Rehabilitation Centre. Privately owned, the six-week stay had cost Mark- his savings. Edna had helped out too but they kept it from Sarah preferring the suggestion came from Dr Bhatti and trusting that Sarah-Jane would follow her advice. As it turned out, they need not have worried, Sarah considered the proposal an order and her only option of escaping Chesford General. None of that mattered now, she was happy to be here and stood on the banks of the stream that had its origins in Scafel Pike casting pebbles into the water. She often sat here and played pooh sticks using clump of reeds as the winning post. She told herself if Mark-s' boat won he loved her deeply. It always did of course because the current on that side of the stream was much swifter. She sat down on the bench and read Mark's letter

Sweetest Sarah

Hope you are well I am missing you lots xxxxx, Starting the new job this week with the council, pretty well doing the same thing I was, but with more money. Better equipment as well I have

a decent computer to start with! Sarah laughed she had heard Mark complain so many times about the inefficiency at Pointers and how much easier his job would have been with a computer. She glanced at the rippling water as it cascaded around the jagged stones in its path and could feel the first spots of rain as the sky darkened and threatened to empty, its contents on the verdant countryside. She returned to the letter,

How's the Lakes. I'll be up to see you next weekend. Can't wait to see you again. Boy, what news back here. You are better off where you are Do You remember Lucy Simpson? Yes silly of me of 'course you do, all that trouble, well it turns out police have arrested her for murder Can you believe it? She seemed so nice Larry has been in the wars, got himself done over by a gang up near Hull somewhere; and that dark haired chap you got all funny about, Jenkins, turns out he's a bent copper. I'll tell you more when I see you but it has all been happening here. Funniest of all you, wont believe this – Jack Starr that grumpy foreman from the factory, he is a detective! Whatever next Detective Sergeant Twford from the Metropolitan Police no less It's like living in a spy thriller or some cheap paperback! I can't trust anyone anymore, only you darling, even Larry knew Jack was a copper, he's been working for him, Enoch as well. Seems the whole world knew what was going on except me and you and we were in the middle of it. They have been watching the Fat Man for ages now and he's done a runner. Sorry I'm getting carried away, it will be easier to explain when I see you, talk to you, touch you. Oh, I do miss you Sarah. My head is spinning with all the intrigue and plots that are going on. When you come home, I think we should get married and move away. There I've said it now. I love you Sarah-Jane...

Sarah read the words but did not really understand their import, she understood the last bit though, and her heart leapt at the suggestion of marriage, it was all she had ever wanted. Mark ended the letter in his usual style. Although he was not a prolific social letter writer he did used to write to Sarah when she was younger, and she still had them all in her dressing table drawer at home, bundled in purple ribbon.

Love you darling, sweetness and love

Loads and loads of kisses xxxxxx

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Mark

Sarah was pleased to get the letter from Mark. She had been here for two weeks now, even though it seemed longer, but day by day, she was gaining in strength both mentally and physically. She was still on medication to help with her recovery but she was feeling, fine, and much better. Now, it was her heart that needed attention.

Drums that roll the sound of doom

Ever onwards into gloom and sorrows deep,

Silent witness stained with blood

Says too much for her own good;...and that of others.

Mark had returned to the Tree as Jack had asked him that night. The little package was still there and he brought it back for the detective. As it turned out Jack was his real name anyway which made life a whole lot easier, not least for the author! Mark did not see much of Jack Twford after that, not until some two weeks later, the day after he went to see Sarah in the Lakes. Jack did try to phone Mark a couple of days later but by then Mark was too busy preparing for his new job. He had used his spare, particularly whilst Sarah was away to hone up on his computer skills and re-familiarise himself with the basics in readiness for his new job with the council.

His first day in the job, however, became a bit of an anticlimax He had been looking forward so much to starting this new phase of his career, but after detectives coming out of the woodwork and all the recent events he found the routine mind numbingly boring; in fact, induction took up most of the day. Now induction is the term-most companies use to introduce new employees to procedures but put in simple terms it meant Mark spent the whole morning doing nothing. He could not get Jack Starr cum Twford out of his head and Pete Jenkins for that matter and of course, Sarah Jane was never far from his thoughts. During one of the classes, when he was supposed to learning all about the do's and don'ts of Chesford City Council regulations, he was on the banks of the Avon with Sarah in his arms, looking up at the cloud patterns in the sky - he never could see that dragon!. He had to make a serious effort to bring himself back to the job in hand.

The first real task he was given was after lunch. He was to be involved in costing the latest project. Now, you must understand that Chesford Council like all councils of that political colour were excellent at spending money. In Chesford's case they excelled, and formed a Special

Finance Committee to oversee all major projects; it was an important group, their brief was to highlight the prestige of city and promote it throughout the country-They attempted to achieve this by developing grandiose schemes, usually at great public expense, thus earning- the committee a nickname amongst council employees. N.O.M.A was in fact an acronym for 'Not Our Money Anyway'.

Past projects involved the demolition of a theatre to build a Millennium Clock, which could tell you the time in fifteen capitals of Europe. Thus, the citizens of Chesford would always know when they were left waiting for hours in the rain for a bus, that the French, Germans and Swiss had caught their trams on time. Then there was the National Football stadium fiasco. This involved bidding to host the site for a massive multi-million-pound sports stadium. The site, on a derelict gasworks with no infrastructure ensured the bid would fail but details like that did not stop NOMA from spending thousands of pounds on stickers, videos, a web-site and newspaper adverts to promote the case. In addition, of course several councillors also had to go to California for ten days to see how the Americans built their stadia. No one could ever accuse Chesford Council of not being thorough in their research.

Mark's job was to put some hard figures to the bones of the estimates for the latest high profile scheme. Three office blocks in the City Centre were to be equipped with a system of flashing coloured lights to indicate the weather and travelling conditions for the following day. One site would indicate wind direction and speed, one air quality, and the other temperature. NOMA's initial estimate was £450,000, which meant from past experience that the final cost would be in excess of £1 million. Mark thought the weather provided by Teletext was much cheaper, but began his costing exercise anyway, quickly realising that it would not make a scrap of difference, as the Special Finance Committee would eventually do exactly as they liked. After all, they were the elected councillors, and of course, it was 'Not Their Money Anyway!'

Meanwhile, back in the real world, Lucy Simpson was arrested, and finally charged with the murder of Michael Sands, just as her solicitor had predicted. After a long interview, which concentrated mainly on the evidence of Mr Lloyd and his statement, she was given overnight

accommodation courtesy of Her- Majesty's Government. Once in the cells, Lucy descended deeper into her despair. She was unused to the ways of police interrogation having never been in any sort of trouble before. Angus Fulchard had assured her that she would be granted bail in the morning, well ninety percent certain anyway; he said. 'The police did not object, subject to the normal conditions'. Although it was a murder case, they did not consider her a danger to the public (perhaps only a danger to middle aged men in wheel chairs). In view of the overwhelming evidence of the doctor's statement, D.S. Tatton was a little surprised, however at her stubbornness in response to his questions.

"Well the doctor is wrong!" She announced

"You are a medical expert then. Mrs Simpson?"

"I am a qualified nurse." Lucy continued to argue

"But not a neurologist" the detective countered "or a surgeon"

"Please do not bully my client please Superintendent" Angus had adjoined

She could offer no explanation as to the 'miraculous' recovery of Michael and his ability to defy, the surgeon's expectations with regard to his super human sexual exploits. Nor could she shed any light on the medication that Michael had taken. "Marsha was having trouble getting Michael to take them so she left them on the table for me to give him, but I didn't get back in time." She explained

"Did Mr Sands often play up like this?" the detective asked

"No certainly not with me, he had been funny lately but I put that down to my spending less time with him, my husband you know...."

"Ah yes, your husband. Bob isn't it?"

"But weren't you engaged to Mr Sands?" D.S. Tatton went straight for the throat

"No I er.." Lucy hesitated "not as such, he wanted to marry me but I had not yet divorced Bob"

"Did you tell Mr Sands that?"

"I am sure he knew I was married already"

"Did you tell Michael Sands about your husband before he bought the engagement ring?"

Derrick rephrased the same question

"Not in so many words"

.. “What words did you use then?”

“I can't remember exactly I just tried to stall him, I hadn't fully worked out what to do myself” Angus Fulchard came to his clients rescue again and informed Detective Sergeant Tatton that Mrs Simpson had already made inquiries too his office regarding the divorce. “So you see Sergeant it was her intention, certainly at the beginning, to finalise the separation from her husband. It was the unfortunate accident to Mr Simpson that clouded the issue and threw everything up into confusion”

“I thank you Mr Fulchard for your candid appraisal but I still find this whole business a little bewildering” Derrick actually found Angus Fulchard interventions a little bit of a nuisance but he returned the line of questioning regarding the tablets “Did you administer those tablets” he said to Lucy . “No I didn't get back until after,..” her voice trailed off. She was visibly upset

“So could he have taken them himself?”

“With difficulty, but yes I am sure he could”

“How many were left in the bottle, can you remember?”

“Yes one bottle, the brown one was nearly full; I had only fetched them on his prescription the day before, the other ones would have had about seven or eight left. He was not due any more of those for another week.

“It was you who always collected the prescriptions then?”

“Of Course, sometimes Michael came with me” Lucy answered

“Sergeant, have you completed the forensic examination and established the cause of death yet?” her solicitor interrupted proceedings once again

“Not entirely we are still awaiting lab reports.”

“Then may I respectfully suggest we leave that line of enquiry until the facts have been verified?” Derrick Tatton agreed, he could see no point in pursuing Lucy Simpson any longer until he had something more concrete. She was tired and at her solicitors request he left Lucy alone to rest. He was not getting anywhere, just covering old ground and realised she was not going to admit to anything he did not already know. She was proving a difficult nut to crack.

Lucy sat in the small walled cell unbelieving that which had befallen her. Two weeks ago, she had finally made up her mind to ditch Bob and marry Michael. She knew it was no longer pity that she

felt for him. Perhaps it never was. She had become quite fond, possibly even in love with him. It didn't matter now; one man was dead and the other crippled for life in a wheelchair. If she had believed in God she would have cursed him "I must be a -jinx on these men," she had told her solicitor instructing him to continue with the divorce proceeding against Bob.

"Let us deal with your present predicament for now" he replied

Love is sweet and his hearts desire

Rainbow smile through eves of fire.

Stolen kisses and a lovers tryst:

Hidden secrets in the mist.

Mark travelled up to the Lakes in Larry's motor. It did not take as long as they had thought it would, but it did give Mark chance to tell Larry about last night and Jack Twford

"Do you know what's going on Laz?"

"Not a clue mate - I'm staying well out of it now." Larry did explain to Mark how Jack had first approached him and brought him to Pointers as a driver. Evidently, Larry had always been on the fringe of 'police work;' anything for a 'buck, that was Larry He had been working on and off for Jack since he first recruited him some three years earlier. He had been Jack's casual informer for about eighteen months before coming to Pointers and was only too happy to help out. "He was trying to stop corruption in the force," Larry concluded

"Yes I know that much, but there more to it, where's the Fat Man fit in?"

"He doesn't fit in that's why he is known as the Fat Man" Larry quipped "No seriously they have been on to him for months, probably years but could never get anything on him. Jack was convinced he had an insider at the top. You know funny handshakes and the like. This operation was supposed to catch the whole shooting match in one. Bit of a loner our Jack, always going out on a limb" Mark told Larry about his visit to the club, and how Jack wanted his help to trap Jenkins.

"Hope you told him where to go, young Mark" Larry piped up

"Initially I did, but then I got to thinking about Sarah, I owe to her to get to the bottom of it"

“Believe me son, you don’t owe that girl a thing, she idolises you anyway, what’s more if you want my advice, you’ll keep well out of it all”

The friend's conversation eventually turned to Lucy Simpson. At least the media had stopped its colourful exposés after her arrest. Larry was an avid tabloid reader and thus remained convinced by it all. (He also watched soap operas on television and believed in Santa Claus) He pronounced her guilty. Mark said very little on the subject but thought plenty. He just could not see that the woman he sat drinking with in Casper's could be guilty of such a heinous act.

.....

Sarah was in her small room when the tall man in a white coat showed Mark through to see her. Mark was a little shocked at all the security it made the place seem more like a prison than a hospital, but he assumed it was for the best. Sarah did not wait for the escort to disappear; she ran towards Mark and crushed him towards her

“I’ve been waiting all day for you” she enthused “I have been so looking forward to seeing you. I love you Mark”

“I love you too petal. Sorry 'bout the letter by the way bit messy really”

“No I loved it, I have read it loads”

The two bodies untwisted themselves and sat on the edge of Sarah’s bed and Mark began to relate the complicated tale of the last few days.....

.....

“Hello D. S. Tatton here.” Jenkins watched as his boss answered the phone and saw him listening without much reply to the voice on the end of the line. He could see Derricks face change and visibly whiten before displaying a puzzled expression. The telephone conversation ended; Jenkins could not wait to discover the content of the call.

“What’s up?” he said

“That was the lab on the phone; the samples don t match”

“What samples don't match?”

“Don't be obtuse, Pete, the swabs from the body and the ones sent up from London”

Jenkins, like most coppers was not very bright, hence despite being not much younger than Derrick Tatton he was still a Sergeant. He stood silently trying to work out in his own little brain what it all meant. His thoughts finally found a voice “But what....

Derrick continued ignoring his minion's protestations. “That means” he sighed “the body from Pitchers Gardens was not the Michael Sands that Mr Lloyd operated on in London”

“But he must be” a spluttered response was all Jenkins could manage He was devastated.

“Evidently not! We will have to order a second post mortem and find out who the hell he was. Organise it with Sheila will you and get the solicitor and Lucy Simpson back in for a formal ID and I'll get onto London again.

“This lets the lady of the hook now then?” Jenkins ventured nervously

“I don't know about that, if she still thought it was Michael Sands she could still have been after his money. Perhaps she only knew him as Michael Sands.” D.S. Tatton pondered “And” he continued, “We now know that Michael Sands was required to marry in order to receive the final part of his Trust Fund, if our Lucy Simpson knew that as well. Who knows what she thought?

“Well at least we know she was telling the truth about the sex.”

“We know nothing Jenkins, nothing.”

.....
Sarah Jane was far more interested in getting Mark to respond to her ministrations than listen to his story. She soon lost interest in the intrigue and eventually suggested they go for a walk and Mark agreed, escorting his young lover to the banks of Langdale stream. These two weeks were the longest they had ever been apart in all the time they had known each other. Mark and Sarah strolled hand in hand like two lovesick teenagers, which indeed is what they were. “Remember that time we lay on the grass at Tratford” Sarah wistfully said as they sat on the neatly coiffured carpet by the little stream.

“Yes, those swans remember?”

“I remember the clouds, look up there now,” she said pointing to a flat looking cloud with a bulbous nodule at one end “There's a giant hedgehog”

Mark had never been able to comprehend Sarah's' ability to see faces and figures in the sky and always assumed it was her vivid imagination. To Mark a cloud was a cloud, no mystical powers, no magical beasts, just the possibility of rain! They spent most of the afternoon in each other's arms. It was as if they were meeting for that first date; only without the nervousness. Fortunately, when Don appeared on the horizon to announce that tea was about to be served, they were disengaged from each other and merely chatting.

“Stay a little while longer Mark, please” her voice was soft and pleading

“I told Larry 5 o'clock in the town, he has been good to run me up here you know”

“Just a bit longer” Sarah gave her lover the puppy dog look with doleful eyes and pursed lips. She fluttered her long lashes. Mark could never resist feminine trickery

“Five minutes; Larry will be waiting”

Sarah leant over and kissed him on the cheek. They walked back towards Park View and Mark left Sarah at the gate with tears welling up in her deep brown eyes. He turned several times as he walked up the drive. Sarah was still waving furiously. He blew her a final kiss and she faded into the landscape becoming no more than a black speck on the green carpet.

.....
Even deeper are the mysteries of life, when then, involve someone else death

Puzzling through, eternal flames, not waiting for the victims to draw their breath

The second post mortem on the body found at Pitchers Gardens, originally believed to be Michael Sands was completed. No spinal injuries were found. Mr Lloyd from the London hospital, which treated Michael Sands, confirmed that the body was not that of his patient. Lucy Simpson and Michaels' solicitor, Mr Longton, however, contradicted that and made statements to the effect that the corpse was indeed that of the man they knew to be Michael Sands.

This unexpected turn of events led Detective Superintendent Derrick Tatton back to the bungalow. Still under pressure from his superiors to climb the statistics ladder he had the computer taken away by Jenkins analysed systematically searching the hard drives for clues. They could find nothing. The audio diaries on the other hand removed from the house on the original visit, provided a better source of information. They seemed to vary in pitch and tone, and although sounding similar, some

differences were detectable on the voice print analyser and the experts established a change in the voice recording the diaries about a year previous.

The Detective Super was secretly quite pleased that the investigation had become more complicated. He liked a case to get his teeth into. (Perhaps that is why his dentist bills were so high) His quick dismissal of the routine suicide had been proved correct. His instinct had led him to Lucy Simpson and his policeman's intuition was rarely wrong. At least her stubbornness to his questioning was now understandable, but if she thought that her charge was indeed Michael Sands then the prima facia case against her still stood up. There remained the puzzle of the mystery man and indeed, where was the real Michael Sands. Derrick sighed shaking his head, trying to make some sort of sense of it all. Jenkins had slipped outside to get some air he was feeling quite ill!

“What the hell are you doing phoning me” the voice replied

“I’m in a call-box; it’s okay. Michael Sands, the book keeper whoever he was he wasn’t Michael Sands”

“So! - did you dump the disc?”

“Yeah. I switched the computers, got rid of the old one”

“Good! So there is nothing to connect us then”

“But the body?” Jenkins complained

“Why the panic?”

“The accountant, whatever his name was, where did he fit in?”

“Who's asking Marlon or Jenkins?”

“Just me I'm puzzled this is getting far too complicated”

“Don't give yourself an ulcer. It doesn't matter. You did your job. You'll get –paid, now leave someone else to do the worrying” The phone went silent and Jenkins walked back along the path to the avenue, passed the pool and up towards the old oak. It's broad silhouette standing out on the horizon like a lost giant searching for its mate. There were people milling around as he walked past the tree and into the car park of the Roostertail where he had left his car. He sat puffing on a filter and tried to look busy, pretending to read the newspaper whilst in reality he was killing time. He waited

for the coast to clear, and then he went back- to collect the envelope. He counted the notes and placed them in his wallet.

19 Nocturne

The Statues are staring up at the sky

They know all the answers but not the reasons why

It was during this time on his own, whilst Sarah was away at Park View that Mark became quite competent with his computer skills and became almost an expert in 'Windows'. (If such a thing were possible, which given the in built hidden files and dynamic obsolescence I personally doubt) Not only did this prove useful in his new job at the council but also became an interest, which he developed at every opportunity. It helped take his mind off Sarah Jane. The second hand machine he had purchased locally was state of the art compared to the '486' he had traded in; this one had a microphone, a web cam, two hard discs and a CD writer. It was a lot faster than his old one, but still well below industry standards these days, with a '750' Pentium processor.

Mark explored both the hard discs. The previous owner had left some programs on the machine, including various games and an office suite. One program, 'Family Tree' was specialist genealogical software that enabled you to create your own family pedigree chart, something in which he had always had a fascination. Mark clicked on the icon to start the program and began by entering the names of his grandparents. He typed in, as much information as he could remember using his hand written notes as a prompt, and considered the next step would have to be a visit to his Great Aunt Jessie in Wales, and perhaps even a trip to the local records office in town. He was to become very interested in genealogy and along with the computer; it became an all-consuming passion.

Before closing down at the end of his session Mark decided to clean up the desktop He had a tidy mind and wanted his computer the same way, so he spent several minutes customising the screen to his tastes and deleting unwanted items. He changed the boring standard screensaver and put a 'Theme' on the desktop. Anna Kournikova was much preferable to fish swimming in an artificial sea He checked the Recycle Bin before emptying it just as Mr. Simkiss, his old teacher had always taught him and during this process Mark noticed some files that he had not put there. 'Smith.fob' was one of them and Mark immediately recognised it as a database file from the Family Tree program. He clicked restore and re-opened the program, hoping to see the history and chart of the Smith family. Unfortunately, when he tried to open the file the screen asked him for a password. "How stupid" Mark said aloud "Who would want to password your family history." It made him even more intrigued and pondered over the possible password He tried some common words, randomly plucked from the ether,

in the hope that it would be a fairly simple and obvious answer. It wasn't! "I wonder what the big secret is, a few skeletons in the old family cupboard no doubt?" He began entering random combinations of letters in a vain attempt to uncover the enigma. He gave up after numerous futile attempts, and went upstairs to make himself a coffee.

It was some time later when he was sitting on the armchair near a low glass coffee table, he picked up the notes he had made a couple of days previously, when Jack Twford called. There was a sketch of a large Oak tree in the centre of the white page with the legend 'Tree' under it in capitals. That was Jack's handiwork. Red and blue arrows came off in all directions pointing to the various events of recent weeks. Mark did not understand why Jack had drawn some arrows in red pen and some in blue, was it significant, or did his pen just run out? Mark had asked the detective for a diagram to explain the situation, and Jack had obliged, going in to great detail about the various fractions as he saw them. Mark stared at the document and read the annotations trying to clarify everything in his mind and make sense of it all. It was just as he was about halfway through his second cigarette when it hit him; the old tree, the 'Kings Oak. 'Family Tree - it was too obvious surely Jack had told him it was colloquially known as the Marmalade tree, after a street name for a designer drug, and he remembered Sarah-Jane calling it that as well, the idea intrigued on him. "Worth a try" he shouted to the empty flat and he ran back downstairs to the computer,

He clicked on the 'Tree' icon, on the desktop 'Open Existing File' he selected Smith fob The screen, flashed its usual message 'Please enter Password' Mark carefully typed M A R M A L A D E T R E E Bingo! He was in. "How fantastic" he screamed but the screen stayed silent. By a stroke of sheer luck, (or as Mark would like to think inspired genius) he was into the database, however instead of seeing descendants of the Smith family as he might have expected, all Mark could see was a screen full of initials and .numbers with links from one to the other. There did appear to be a hierarchical structure to the family but it was certainly the most unusual family he had ever seen., and the password, "Must belong to a local" though Mark, Why else use Marmalade Tree. He printed the page off and closed down the program, returning upstairs to the lounge. What on earth did it all mean? He looked at the sheet. Not all the initials had numbers, they could be dates, but some looked like bits of telephone numbers. There did not appear to be any sort of pattern; Mark loved a puzzle and spent

some time pondering over the paper he had printed off. Whoever deleted it, he thought had not been very thorough, so perhaps there was no mystery and it was not that important after all. Was it just a coincidence the password turned out to be a phrase well known in certain quarters locally? After recent events, nothing surprise Mark anymore so he put the paper down and went off to work.

It was several days later when Mark realised the significance of the sheet of paper. In an idle moment he had been playing with the initials and numbers, trying different codes: a for 1, b for 2 etc, nothing seemed to fit, but once when he was looking at the top line he stared at the initials J F. Under the top letters was the number 770 below that was C.C. 695 and almost level with those initials was J.S. with 2771 alongside it. Mark decided to fool around with the numbers, which he thought looked remarkably like a mobile phone number.

He rearranged them and tried dialling different combinations, more in hope than any real anticipation. Eventually he got lucky, merely reversing the whole thing 077 -596-1772 “I told you not to use this number again”_the voice was sharp arid snappy, and not all that unknown to Mark. It sounded familiar!

“I’m so sorry,” said Mark I must have got the wrong number” and he quickly put down the receiver. Fortunately, he had remembered to dial 1471 before ringing so the brusque voice could not trace his number. The initials meant nothing to him, although he amused himself with the notion that J.F. was Jack Forman and J.S. was Jack Starr. He decided to ring Jack and tell him of his find and about the phone call, he had made even though at the time he still did not think it of particular import, after all it hadn’t been deleted properly and cracking the password had been easy The voice annoyed him though. Did he know it, or was it just one of those voices?

Sunlight casts its shadow onto the Lakeland scene
Never asking questions about where it has been.
Blue sky forms a canopy to all her hopes and fears.
Sarah Jane finds happiness, after all the tears

Sarah lay on her bed staring up at the cream ceiling above her. The headaches that used to plague her had now all but disappeared and she felt much better. Since Mark's visit, she had felt elated. The doctors were pleased with her progress as well, and she was now having additional

psychological counselling to overcome any fears of returning to the outside world from her protected environment. It was true she did have slight apprehension about the 'real world'; she had been divorced from it for so long now. She genuinely wanted to lead a normal drug free life. She wanted it for, Mark and her mother as much for herself. She had suffered a massive shock and knew that she was lucky to still be alive, and now she had her whole life to look forward to, the rest of her life with Mark. Dr Bhatti had impressed on her when she first arrived at the clinic just how much they would need her co-operation "You must want to give up or we can't help you," she had said

"I do, I do" Sarah screamed back. The dim light cast a weird shadow across the small room and Sarah Jane drifted off into a deep sleep. She had been sleeping much better lately, no vivid dreams or frightening nightmares. The spiders seemed to have returned to their lair. She did get the occasional flashback "Think of something pleasant" they had told her so she went off onto the wings of slumber with Mark in her arms, as well as on her mind. She still had his letter on her bedside cabinet and read the relevant part over and over in her head She remembered the first time they met. Quite all achievement considering she was having trouble remembering her own name a few weeks ago.....

The three girls were walking home from school, Sarah Jane and a couple of her friends. Sarah was on the end of the row, head in a book as usual and she literally bumped into Mark She remembered how he smiled his wonderful warming smile as he picked up her copy of Shakespeare, and how impressed he seemed with her bookishness.

"Romeo and Juliet; have you read it.?" Mark said with his mischievous eyes twinkling in the summer sun

"Yes, we are studying it for GCSE", she replied coyishly
"Very appropriate, here you are," he squeezed her hand as he passed the volume to Sarah and looked straight into the deep brown pools where her eyes once resided. It was magnetic. Carly and Paula were giggling - Sarah was amazed at her powers of recall. What was Paula's surname now - oh yes Frimpton we used to call her Po, although she could not remember why.

It was a whole week later before she saw Mark again. It was called Big Gs back in those days before it became the Roostertail. She could even remember the song they danced to: Percy Sledge: 'When a Man Loves A Woman'. Mark acted like the perfect gentleman; he was only a couple of years

older than Sarah and so she readily accepted his offer of a date. (She was not too keen on figs though). That was nearly three years ago, before she disappeared beneath the swirling mists into the dreamy stupor of uppers and downers descending the dark path towards addiction. Sarah drifted off to sleep; she slept well these days and while she slept, Dr Bhatti was on the phone to Edna Sullivan talking about her daughters release date. "She has made excellent progress, phenomenal in fact and we are all very pleased with her." The doctor remained convinced that with a little help at home and with friendly faces around her, Sarah's recovery would be complete and she would be able to integrate back into society to resume her former life, perhaps regaining some of the teenage years she had lost

Miserable city with its dull dark tones

No one can see passed the filth and the lies

People crouching in damp dark corners

To hide from the truth, and empty cries of helplessness

Following the discovery of Jenkins guilt and with the new evidence from Marks computer, Jack Twford decided it was time to take D. S. Tatton into his confidence. Some of the initials on the 'family tree' were easy for Jack to work out J.F. was indeed Jack Forman P.J, Pete Jenkins J.S. was rather puzzling, and he spent hours playing around with anagrams and randomising the numbers that were listed but still could not get anything to make sense. It was Derrick; still reeling from all Jack had told him who came up with some answers. "The dealer who we found with overdose his name was John Simmons"

"J.S." Jack replied, "Possible, but I don't think so somehow. Our investigations have been turning up a much more interesting array of names" He handed a piece of paper to the Detective Super. "I fancy these men are the top brass, just a hunch, but I would value your input." He handed the list of names over to Derrick, then passed Marks list of initials and numbers.

"These don't mean a thing to me" he said

"Absolutely positive Derrick, nothing at all?"

"Well one of these numbers is my wedding anniversary|" the D.S. chuckled

"Be Serious please, Derrick, anything at all?"

“Well that’s Charlie Cooks old call sign he said pointing to two digits on the sheet “CC” Jack shouted almost loud enough for anyone listening to hear.

“No not the Chief Inspector?”

“Why not you said yourself they appeared to know your every move. You thought they were being tipped off remember?”

“That could have been Jenkins”

“No, far too risky, Jenkins has been playing his cards very, close to his chest. What about this” Jack pointed to the bottom of the sheet where he had written down the phone number that Mark had discovered within the figures. “Mean anything to you?”

“Nope could be anyone’s mobile”

“Do you know Charlie Cooks number?”

“God no! Not his mobile, what, phone the Chief Inspector at home you must be joking”

“It could be his then?”

“Suppose” Derrick was beginning to become wary of any involvement in the scheme of things. He considered himself too close to retirement and his pension to start rattling cages “Look this too big for me Jack How are we gonna handle it?”

“I’ve already called in C5, they are tailing Jenkins as we speak” Jack added

“What about the Sands murder, if indeed it was murder” D.S. Tatton was no longer sure about anything anymore. This case was starting to get to him

“I think it probably was murder. We think J.S. was Jonathon Sands”

“The brother?”

“That’s the man, my boys have been very busy; it appears Michaels’ brother was in Columbia. At the last report we have of him he was working for the foreign office or some such Government department out there. It was always assumed rebels killed him, there's a lot of unrest in that part of the world”

Derrick listened intently as Jack continued, “We now think he was mixed up in drug running. We have had unconfirmed reports of him in Chile. I think he was the bookkeeper, the accountant, possibly even more than that. It is likely he arranged the couriers; he would certainly have had the contacts in South America which would have made him very useful indeed to the likes of drug barons in Europe and the

UK.” “Like our Mr Forman you mean?” Derrick smiled; he always knew something was very wrong with Jack Forman's place. He had always had his suspicions and was pleased his instinct was justified. “But if what you say is true then why kill him? It doesn't make any sense”

“That I don't know yet. Possibly panic, Jack Forman wanted a clean quick break, who knows”

“We got nothing on the file. I can't even build a case against the carer because the place was so clean, smacks of professionalism”

“And the old man been chasing you for results yes, been there before Derrick it goes with the territory. Shitty this job innit? Well take it from me, it was professional, probably your man Jenkins.”

“Jenkins?” the Superintendent interrupted Jack in full flow

“Just a hunch, no proof but that's not stopped us in the past eh?” Derrick knew only too well the value of a policeman's hunch. His middle name was 'Hunchback'.

“What about the computer that was a bit careless of them”

“My guess is that Jenkins swapped it, the one your boys are taking apart is totally clean. He probably traded it in and didn't expect the other one to turn up so close to home and even if it did he thought he had deleted the file. That young Mark Hero found it in the Recycle Bin and cracked the password. Bit of luck really, trial and error as they say but we all need a break now and then”

“Still very careless of Jenkins if it was him, very sloppy. Are C5 pulling him?” D.S.Tatton asked

“No, not just yet we need to see how deep this thing goes. I've got so close to Forman I don't want to lose him now. I need something concrete. Got to make it stick this time”

“What about that fire at the factory, very convenient for you, anything to do with you was it?”

Derrick smiled at his colleague

“It wasn't that convenient at the time Jack Forman kept all his important stuff in his brief case and he was out that day, but no, just for the record, I didn't start it. Pure accident” Jack replied

“Okay I believe you. We found his car by the way,” Derrick continued

“Where?”

“Hilton Park, Services on the Southbound he's got a lock up garage there”

“Then check all the airports in the north, Manchester, Leeds even Aberdeen. Get his description circulating through Interpol. If Jack Forman left his beloved Merc., you can bet your last pound he would have had another motor waiting, and I'd stake my life on the fact it would be on the other side and he'll be travelling in the opposite direction.” Jack added, “What about Hertz or Avis have you checked them out?”

“Not yet I'll get on to it. What about Jenkins, won't it be a bit awkward? What do you want me to do” Derrick asked

“Do nothing try not to alarm him, we've got him on possession and dealing we might yet be able to pin something else on him. Murder would be good” Derrick smiled at Jack- who continued with a serious look on his face .Keep in touch, use this number; it's secure” Sgt. Twford handed Derrick a plain white card with a telephone number printed on it, Derrick entered the number on his mobile and handed the card back to Jack.

“What's the story on the carer? I've been reading all about this Mrs Lucy Simpson Jack Twford asked

“I thought originally she was involved, her statement was all lies, from our point of view, but the docs put her in the clear. Now we know it was not Michael Sands she was working for she is out the picture,” Derrick replied

“Unless she thought he was Michael along?”

“Yes its possible. I have considered that.” Derrick answered

“Assuming this Michael was Jonathon all along why would want to marry Mrs Simpson anyhow?”

“Ah that one's easy, oldest motive in the book. He wanted the rest of the inheritance, needed to be married to qualify” Derrick replied “seems he got greedy”

“That gives the carer a motive for murder too then, if she knew about it,” Jack observed

“Exactly my line, you're bang on with your analysis Jack”

“Look” Detective Twford continued, “Keep her in the frame as long as you can will you?”

Jack smiled and he looked over the top of his cappuccino at Derrick's tired eyes.

“That won't be easy, she's got a good brief, I know him, Fulchard; I even sent him the prelim reports. Thought I might get a quick confession”

“I'm sure you'll think of something to stall him just till I get more info on our friend Jonathon, I've got my lot working on it now.”

“You definitely think the body is his then” D.S. Tatton queried

“Yeah, it all fits the initials on the computer; opportunity, if he returned to Britain he would need a new identity. His brother provided it”

“But to kill your own brother!” Derrick was still not convinced

“We don't know yet what happened or how close they were as brothers. Look I have to shoot off now. Let me know if anything turns up, I should know about. I'll get my team to work some more on the numbers and initials on that damn tree.

Velvet sun that sheds its light over the green lawns of life

There's always one corner that remains in darkness

Always one that stays in the night

Mark threw himself vigorously into his new work with the council. Rows and rows of figures came up on the screen before him like neon lights; he thought the whole scheme a waste of time and money but obviously said nothing. Pound signs flashing up and down buildings in the city centre were to be the city's jewel in the crown. The Council was drawn from the same clientele as magistrates and the individuals who serve on our wonderful British juries: the unemployed and the unemployable (the sick, the lame and the remnants of the Women's Knitting Circle) Chesford was particularly blessed with several 'bright young,' councillors, some of whom could even speak English. Johnny, Marks dad had always said that the very fact that a man wants to be a local councillor should automatically bar him from ever being one. Mark wholeheartedly agreed with that sentiment.

Reasonably, content with his lot, Mark tended to ignore the politics and concentrate on the pragmatic he was not one to be intimidated by regular meetings with the Finance Committee. He considered the Venus Flytrap on his desk to have more intelligence and knew that all he had to do was produce a report with a few figures and graphs, recommending, exactly what they wanted, and they would all nod approvingly like the toy dogs on parcel shelves of cars. If the reader thinks I am being a little hard

on the fine upstanding burgers of Chesford, you should remember, that these very same elected officials are responsible for the warm welcome the city gives to its' visitors; like Bob Simpson. It was just a job to Mark. He had meant what he had set out in his letter to Sarah though; they would marry and then certainly move away. Chesford was beginning to etch itself into his bones with its stench of corruption and incompetence. (Although it is just possible, that Mark misinterpreted the smell of urine on the city streets)

Sarah Jane was looking forward to her release, and if that makes it sound more like a prison than a clinic then that is because in some ways it was. Sarah certainly viewed the tight security that way. She was eating heartily now and Edna had already, arranged with Mark about fetching Sarah home, following her conversation with Dr Bhatti.

"I'll hire a car Mrs S if I can't get a lift organised. I can't ask Larry again. -he was very good last time. Mark had said

"That will nice" Edna replied, "If you do hire one can I come up with you?"

"Course you can" Edna had warmed to Mark since Sarah's troubles, even to the idea of marriage. She was not keen on the idea of them moving away but realised Sarah would soon be eighteen and able to do as she wished. Like most mothers, she just wanted the best for daughter and no man would really be good enough or in Edna's case Catholic enough.

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The police did not release the news about the body at Pitchers Gardens to the press. They thought it too early, as they did not yet have formal identification. Detective Superintendent Tatton was acting best he could on Jacks advice trying to keep Lucy Simpson in the picture so as not to alert Jenkins. He knew. However, the situation could last only a few days. The initials on the computer plan signalled Jonathon Sands and he had already asked his team to check on the movements of Jonathon through various government channels. He had had some feedback from Jack; the last posting of Mr Sands had been in Argentina some eighteen months ago, and after that, he seems to disappear. Official records show him as missing, but nothing ever made the press. Still, that was not unusual with the Foreign Office. Many people went missing in that particular part of the world. Jacks theory was that he had gone over the border into Chile or Columbia and with the help of his contacts slipped out of

South America and unnoticed into the UK to take his brothers identity. Derrick thought it unlikely that someone could get into the country unnoticed until Jack reminded him of the open door Immigration policy that the government pursued. Tracing precise movements for Jonathon Sands proved impossible and the theory fitted the facts such as they were. The problem for D.S. Tatton was that he now had to find Michaels Sands. Did his brother kill him? If so why? or had he just 'disappeared' as well.

D.S. Tatton phoned Jack Twford to tell him he was authorising a search of the back garden of the bungalow. He knew the story would break soon anyway; Jenkins had a tail and was probably aware of the situation by now so he saw no point in working blind any longer.

When Lucy heard the rumours that the body at the bungalow was not that of Michael Sands she broke down in tears, she did not know what to make of it. Despite protests from Angus Fulchard, the police however would not drop the charges against his client. Derrick told them nothing of his inquiries and stuck to the official line that if Lucy thought it was Michael then the previous story still stood, and the case against her was not substantially altered. He knew in reality, that his case was weak and growing weaker by the day.

The police did manage some progress in the main investigation. An abandoned Jaguar turned up at Harwich although it was several weeks before any connection was made to Jack Forman by the time the car hire company had discovered the loss and the paperwork had been filled out, photocopied and indexed, Jack Twford got the message too late. He did despatch two men to interview ferry staff armed with a photograph and description of the Fat Man but they were unable to obtain any useful information.

The Statues are silent the end is near

They hold up their heads and show no fear

Bob Simpson sat in his wheelchair looking out over the grey park. It was grey because it was still early and anyway since the clocks went back everywhere was plunged into a murky blackness at this time of the morning. He often came here lately it was a good place to think. Today he had even more to think about. The police had finally dropped all charges against his wife, having made a positive ID on the body from Pitchers Gardens; Lucy was now free to care for Bob again full time. The problem was he was not sure if that that was what she wanted anymore. He still longed to go home, but wanted Lucy to come with him. It was not so much that he needed her; he could quite easily have gone to Social Services for help, or arranged private care. No, it was more a male pride thing; he had chased down to this God forsaken city in search of her, and having found her was damned if he was going to return to Newcastle without her. He looked towards the city centre, knowing that it was in the general direction of home, but even with the Christmas lights in the distance, it was a poor substitute for Newcastle. Chesford, in fact, was not a substitute for anywhere. It was unique on the face of the globe. Where else would the smell of body odour and stale urine compete with the air of desperation? Where else did the spectre of unemployment and distrust hang so heavily on the shoulders of this forgotten city? Chesford in the midst of the sprawling West Midlands festered like a boil on the arm of a concrete giant, like a disease that infected its citizens with its corruption and depression. Bob felt it too and was beginning to feel trapped. The city always had that effect on people.

Bob watched intently as a man in a white overcoat passed by taking his dog for a walk, stopping briefly at the row of elms to do what dogs always do to trees. He saw the little terrier and it reminded him of Terry, not a very original name for a terrier, but he and Lucy had decided on it the first time they saw the little fellow at the kennels. He missed that little dog; Lucy doted on it. He remembered how when they rowed about the children or rather the lack of them, how he used to accuse her of using Terry as a child substitute. She was devastated when the dog died. So was Bob to

be fair, although he may not have shown it at the time. Bob was not very good at showing his emotions, something Lucy had criticised him for many times. He whistled and the little dog stopped and looked towards him, but then it turned away and ran after his master.

Lucy had stayed back at the house. She had not been out since her ordeal had ended. She should have been relieved to be cleared and anxious to pick up where she left off, but she wasn't. Somehow, everything seemed different now; confused and contorted. The vodka did not help in that department; even if she thought it did. It merely served to gloss over the depths of devastation that she now felt. Bob was worried that she would disappear completely into the unknown oblivion that her mind had become. He had to get her away from this place – back to the Toon. This city has such bad vibes. It felt wrong, it looked wrong. It had brought them nothing but bad luck. 'There wasn't a lot wrong with our relationship' Bob began his solo discourse. Not really, it was only the absence of tiny feet. Then why did she leave you and come down here. You hit her, only once! Frustration that was all. Come on Bob snap out of it. You have got to be strong for Lucy' and with that, having finally won an argument against himself for the first time, he turned the chair round and headed back towards the house.

Despite being so late in the year, the weather was still mild. The grass verges were barely visible under the carpet of damp russet brown leaves that covered them. They were very late falling from the branches this year. The sycamore seeds spun to the ground like small model helicopters coming in to land and Bob felt the wind on his face as he pushed himself along Bridge St and into The Avenue. He had only just turned into the street, when Mark Hero spotted him, and he recognised Bob immediately from his visits to the hospital.

"Hello, Bob Simpson isn't it?" said Mark in his friendly manner

"er.. yes, but I don't think..." Bob knew the face but could not place it. Mark saw his difficulty and interrupted him

"Sarah Jane's boyfriend, Mark Hero, do you remember?"

"Why yes of course, I'm sorry. How are you?" replied Bob pleased that he now knew to whom he was speaking

"Fine thanks, you?"

Mustn't grumble, especially now that Lucy's troubles are over. She's been cleared of any involvement in that awful murder" Bob looked up and smiled

"Yes, we heard about that. Must have been hell! I bet you're both glad it's over?"

"Well you would think so, but Lucy is so down, I can't seem to shake her out of it. It has all been very tiring and confusing for everyone but particularly for Lucy. I think I am going to take her back home to Newcastle to try to sort things out between us. This town is so depressing!" Bob spoke with venom in his voice, he was angry at the town, angry at its menace and all it had inflicted on him

"I know exactly what you mean. When Sarah finally comes home we are going away; we are planning to get wed you know" Mark replied

"Congratulations are in order then. Sarah's not still in hospital is she?" Bob queried

"No, no she is up in the Lakes at a clinic, she was transferred up there three weeks ago. I'm going to fetch her home before Christmas"

"Give her my love and you must come and see us before you go. Tell you what why don't you both come up and visit us in Newcastle, Lucy would like that."

"Sure, that would nice. I'm sure Sarah would enjoy it," said Mark opening the gate to Bobs house "I really must dash, I'm off to work, nice meeting you again"

"Goodbye then, don't forget now, keep in touch" Bob shouted in jovial fashion

"Sure, I'll give you a call," returned Mark, knowing full well he did not have Bobs number. Bob opened the front door and pushed himself inside. He could hear the television arguing the pros and cons of gay fatherhood but there was no sign of Lucy. Why is it thought Bob, turning off the set, that morning television is always full of so much crap? He turned on the radio and listened intently to the local news, half expecting news of Lucy, although he had no idea why. She had been asleep when he had left, up and dressed but asleep in the armchair that was why he had let her stay, now he wished he had woken her up and taken her with him.

The winters' sun brings little warmth

across the unloved streets;

She peers down from a cloudy sky

and casts her shadows deep

With Jack Twford preferring to take a back seat, it was D.S. Tatton in the media spotlight. With the positive ID through Civil Service records of Jonathon Sands' body, the vultures from the press went into full cry, especially when news of a police excavation at Pitchers Gardens leaked out. Eventually, when the news that the police were searching for the brother, Michael Sands, broke, the press researchers set about unearthing as much as they could about the Sands family. Lucy Simpson came in for some more detailed attention and the local boys could not believe their luck. It all made good copy and a pleasant change from writing about council misdemeanours and incompetence. The details of Donald Sands' plane crash and his work in electronics all surfaced. According to them, his work there was on secret government contracts. Nothing sells papers better than a good spy angle, well perhaps sex but they were working on that one with Michael Sands and Lucy. When it came to unearthing facts, the press appeared to beat the police hands down; - it was a shame none of it was true! Before long, the story hit the nationals. Chesford was at last prominent on the national stage, without any help from N.O.M.A. or their grandiose schemes!

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Lucy was slumped against the white fence at the front of the bungalow, watching through bleary eyes the police 'gardeners' as they meticulously sifted through the area systematically creating havoc among the camellias. D.S. Tatton sent a policewoman over to her, he hated morbid curiosity, but he was genuinely concerned for Lucy's state of mind. The papers had already driven her to the edge of madness and it would not take much of a push to send her plunging over. He considered it more tactful to send PW Willis, more friendly and feminine. Lucy refused to budge, so Jean Willis stayed with her. They could not see Michaels' body when it was ultimately brought out because of the tent that covered the excavation, but Lucy was still there when the police surgeon arrived on the scene, and following the frantic activity that ensued, Derrick approached Lucy in his best customer friendly manner. "The body we have found today is that of Michael Sands, he has been dead for sometime as far as we can ascertain at this early stage, so you could not possibly have known him. I am sorry. I really am." Although Derrick finally realised that Lucy was more the sinned against than sinner, his conscience was still puzzled over her intentions towards her charge; whether he be Jonathon or Michael, her behaviour was certainly unusual and she may well be guilty of fraud or some other

offence but she was not a murderess, Derrick knew that much now. His policeman's instinct watched her face but it merely confirmed what Jack Twford had already told him. Lucy stared into the white canvass, she could visualise the film that she had watched with Michael (or was it Jonathon); she was confused. She saw the Arab guard and the young English woman. She remembered his excitement and her amusement. She still found the scene comic and giggled loudly then smiled, before screaming out hysterically. Derrick was mystified, he nodded to his constable and P.W. Willis led Lucy away to a waiting paramedic.

She watches all from her lofty perch,
serene in golden silence
Sending down her gems of wisdom
but none of it made sense!

Mark did hire a car to fetch Sarah-Jane back to Chesford. He was ecstatic at the thought of having her back to himself once again. He took Edna with him for company "You try and stop me" she had said. He was only too willing, after all it was a long drive and he had come to regard her more as a 'Mum' than a future mother in law. The Fiat purred nosily as it forged its way over the busy motorway, the headlights burning into the dusk like the eyes of some ferocious beast. The early morning mist had been quite dense, but was now beginning to clear as the sun put in an appearance low in the sky with its' wintery glare They made reasonable time, and Sarah was ready for them when they arrived just before midday. She looked positively radiant, skipping towards the car, so happy to be returning home and resembling much more like her former self. She had been up since 6am getting ready; such was her enthusiasm for the journey home. Mark held her in his arms and kissed her softly, Edna was near to tears and Sarah even managed a hug for her. Mark stashed the suitcase in the boot of the Fiat and Sarah sat in the back with her mother, she lay her sweet head on her Edna's shoulder and was asleep by the time they reached Lancaster.

Edna talked incessantly on the way back, not that she had been particularly quiet on the outward journey. She engaged Mark in conversation about the wedding, despite there being no date set, Mrs S was not one to let the grass grow under her feet. Mark and Sarah had vaguely talked in terms of next summer after Sarah's eighteenth birthday, and that seemed to be the spur for Mrs

Sullivan to fuss on about the booking the church and arranging the reception. Her life, filled with the tragedy of her daughters dabble with drugs and her husbands drinking, now took on a positive track and she revelled in the role of organiser. It was only when Edna mentioned ‘a nice little house in the suburbs’ that she had seen, that Mark responded with other than the normal grunt that disinterested males are notorious for.

“We haven’t really thought about that yet”, he chimed in.” But I don’t think we will be staying in Chesford”. Both he and Sarah Jane had made their views clear to Edna, but she had just ignored it and like most mothers wanted her children around her forever, anyway she thought it would all be different once she got Sarah Jane home, in the meantime Edna was happy with her self-appointed role as wedding organiser. Mark did not want to press the point at this time and thought it better to leave the question of where to live until after he and Sarah had settled down in familiar surroundings

“We’re not planning anything for a year or so” he told Edna eventually in an attempt to steer her away from the delicate subject.

“I know that” replied Edna indignantly,” but these things take time to organise, we need to get the bans read, book the church and reception, you know how it is?” Mark did not know how it was actually. He did not have any sisters and had never been involved in that side of a wedding. The only weddings that Mark had attended usually found him propping up the bar or consoling a distressed bridesmaid. “I’ll leave all that to you, Mrs S. and Sarah of course if you don’t mind. Let’s take it one step at a time Eh?”

The tall metal poles which held the sodium lights undulated with the terrain and gave an appearance of a column of invading aliens marching towards Armageddon They sped on their way rushing towards their destiny as Mark kept his foot hovering over the accelerator to keep the Fiat at a steady 75mph. He had learnt to drive about five years ago but never bothered to get a car. His father, Johnny, never drove so Mark felt no pressure from that quarter. There was not a lot of point either he had reasoned, he had the use of Paul’s’ scooter as and when he wanted, and he had always intended to buy a decent motor later. Now he would have to start saving all over again. He glanced in the mirror at the sleeping figure of Sarah-Jane. She was worth every penny, he thought to himself.

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How the jigsaw actually fitted together, Derrick was not quite sure yet. Jacks' team had been working on the 'Forman ' connection, but as usual police resources were at a premium and the order came through for the arrest of Jenkins to free up manpower and bring the investigation to a close. With Christmas already upon them, bodies were badly needed on the streets to cover the annual Drink Drive campaign.

Derrick had kept Jack informed of any developments regularly by phone but they eventually agreed a meeting at Casper's to discuss progress. D. S. Tatton had been particularly keen to see Jack Twford face to face for a couple of days now just to tie up loose ends, and hopefully get answers to the one or two outstanding questions he still had regarding the whole affair. Now, however, in view of the fax he had received it was essential they met today.

"So you think Jonathon Sands was a key player" then Derrick asked

"Almost certainly" Jack replied, "From what we have discovered. Can't yet trace anything back to old Forman though, not even a petty cash receipt!" Jack seemed to take his frustration out on his coffee, stirring it vigorously.

"What did you expect?" Derrick interspersed

"Nothing, I suppose, which is exactly what we got." The detective continued, "I'm still convinced that Jonathon killed his brother and stole his id, but we haven't got a shred of evidence. Jonathon Sands would have been an extremely useful part of the operation, providing contacts and possibly even organising the shipments"

"So," said Derrick managing to stem Jack in full flow "It brings us back to the same question, why kill him?" D.S. Tatton was far from convinced of Jacks theory, in fact, he still had Lucy Simpson in his mind; she was certainly a strange bedfellow for Michael, (or was it Jonathon?).

"That's just the way these guys work. If Jack Forman and the Chief wanted to be kept lily white then a clean break would be the order of the day. Anyway, they had the contacts and the distribution network set up so Jonathon would have outlived his usefulness. Why keep deadwood, another mouth to feed, and another tongue to wag."

"Sounds plausible, I suppose" replied Derrick rather unconvinced

“Well, they might have taken exception to his affair with your Mrs Simpson, bedroom secrets and all that. Either that or Jonathon was putting the squeeze on either of the big boys and ruffled a few feathers. We may never know for sure. One thing is certain though he was killed professionally; my educated guess is Jenkins, but again, no proof.”

Derrick did not subscribe to the ‘professional hit’ hypothesis. He wasn’t entirely sure mind you, whether it was because of his embarrassment at being so close to Jenkins that he refused to believe him guilty of murder, or whether it was just his policeman’s radar spinning wildly whenever he interviewed Lucy Simpson. He found her behaviour at best ‘strange’ and although as far as the official line was concerned she was a free woman, Derrick Tatton was far from sure about Mrs Lucy Simpson. He was trying desperately to pin her down on something. Sex with ‘someone you thought was an invalid’ was not an offence, even though D.S. Tatton thought it should be. Impersonating a disability, now surely that was fraud and Lucy was aiding and abetting. Derrick delved into the depths of his mind trying to dig up a crime with which charge Mrs Lucy Simpson.

“They got Jenkins on tampering with evidence as well as the drugs, conspiracy to pervert. His prints were everywhere,” Derrick finally concluded after finishing his mental gymnastics

“On the body and the tablets” Jack interrupted, shaking his head

“Yes but he was an investigating officer”

“Exactly my point, Derrick” Jack responded, “They’ll find it hard to make the conspiracy stick; a good brief and blast a hole through that lot. We need something more concrete.”

“Why order his arrest so suddenly then?” D.S Tatton asked

“Dunno – Top floor job, I don’t even know yet whose running the show now that George has took early retirement”

“Yeah that’s a bit dodgy don’t you think?” Derrick queried

“Possibly, possibly not, those letters on Marks chart C.C., remember? We thought it was Charlie Cook could be Chief Constable”

“George Evans?” Derrick was incredulous

“Why not, would you retire with five years to go without taking the credit for a big coup?”

“No, but ...if he thought he would be tarnished.”

“Mark my words, C5 have been digging around they know something, Charlie Cooks was suspended on full pay but he’ll be back, probably get the nod for Chief Constable

“Doesn’t this job get to you sometimes Jack?” Derrick sighed

“Yeah, but it has its compensations. You can never get one hundred percent at anything but we’ve done okay. What really gets to me about this one is that after all that planning and hard work, old Forman is probably laughing at us from his villa in Spain or the south of France”

“Derrick Tatton smiled, this was his moment, for once he had information that Jack was not party to. He presented the fax to Detective Sgt. Twford. Jack stared hard and long at the piece of paper “I don’t believe it!” he said finally “I’ll never believe Forman’s’ dead till I see his body”

“Well Interpol have checked it out, his movements tally, his personal effects and passport are being sent over. If his body really has been dumped in the sea they might never find it”

“Too bloody convenient if you ask me” Jack relied tartly “You don’t know Jack Forman, why would he be mixed up in the Dutch underworld?”

“Trying to muscle in on their operation maybe,” Mused Derrick

“Derrick” Jack Twford looked straight at D.S.Tatton “Jack Forman *is* the Dutch operation!”

“Jack you old cynic – you’re in need of a long holiday”

“Well that’s as maybe, but when I see Forman lying on a mortuary slab then I’ll believe it, until then, never!”

Whisper wind that bend the trees to its own way

Ever onwards, homeward bound, through another endless day.

Lucy and Bob were tucked up in the corner of an overcrowded Inter City Super Saver. (provided you got your ticket on a Thursday before 10 am when there’s a ‘R’ in the month) train to Newcastle upon Tyne. Lucy acquiesced rather than agreed to Bob’s enthusiasm for the return north. The hospital at Chesford had kept her in a couple of nights for observation after her collapse at the bungalow. Rest and quiet was the order of the day from the doctors. They said she was suffering from nervous exhaustion, but would be fine after a few days rest. Bob noticed, however, how Lucy

brightened up visibly when he mentioned Sarah-Jane and his conversation with Mark. He even got a response from his wife:

“Yes, that would be nice,” she said, and actually sounded as if she meant it.

These last few weeks had been hard on Bob here he was trying his very best to please and woo back his wife, and there she was chasing round after another man and getting herself arrested for murder. Very selfish, some women will do anything to avoid facing their responsibilities he thought. Lucy seemed so distant, vacant almost, Perhaps it's me Bob thought, -Don't be foolish Robert Simpson, she knows how much you care. Why else did you chase her half way across the country. Bob could find plenty of reasons, that is the problem with arguing with oneself, you always know the counter argument before you begin, it is rather like playing chess against yourself. The short stay in hospital had done Lucy some good and she was now able to sleep at night. Bob however was tired, and he found himself drifting in and out of slumber, whilst all around him the melodies of mobiles and the constant hum of chatter whistled through the draughty carriage.

Lucy had gone off in search of the buffet car, a hunt that proved fruitless, as refreshments are only included on journeys over five hours in length departing after 9am and ending before 5pm; and only then when there was enough staff to man it. Lucy did manage to find a coffee machine. It didn't work; and proudly displayed its notice 'Out of Order' Yes it bloody well is out of order thought Lucy. “The whole bloody railway is out of order” she loudly exclaimed in her frustration and she returned, exhausted from her efforts to the carriage and remained cuddled up to Bob for the remainder of the trip.

21 Coda To A Dream

The statues smirk silently, they knew all along

It's not for them to tell what's right and what's wrong!

Lucy was lost; not in the vast complexity of our synthetic society, but in the forests of her conscience, which were the downfall of all who ventured through it. She was alone, in the automated constituency of tomorrow's misfortunes. Lost like a goddess in search of vengeance. The red clouds of marmalade ecstasy had vanished from the swollen skies she was falling deeper into the abyss of night watched over by the peering eyes of the marmalade tree. Outside in the street the children were playing she could hear their yells and it annoyed her spinning head. Lucy got annoyed easily these days. Her headaches were getting worse; they had been for weeks now. She could see stars, and planets for that matter, without the use of a telescope.

The semi-drugged serpent slowly slithered downstairs to the sweet aroma of breakfast, which lay waiting on its white carpet. (Except that, it wasn't breakfast but dinner) The kitchen revolved around her hungry eyes and Sunday sneered beneath its mask. Yes, today was Sunday! She hated Sunday, and once she had abandoned the depths of her daydreams and sacrificed the soft euphoria of bedtime, she could begin to pluck the fruit from the over laden branches, which hung rhythmically from the ceiling of her room. Lucy Simpson stared into the swirling coffee and once more her thoughts were on a journey in her blanket of dreams.....

She leant over towards him and Michael responded in kind as best he could. She could hear his dull moans as she cupped her hands and stroked his tortured brow. His hands started on their journey over her upper torso his perfunctory technique crude in its baseness. She didn't care and moved position slightly to assist him and allow access to her shirt buttons. She smiled as she unclipped her brassiere, and then leant back over his broken body. She kissed his dry lips. They were cold. He was cold. Michael was dead! Lucy screamed and Bob came rushing to her aid as fast as his wheelchair would allow him. "What's up what's the matter pet?" he cried

"It's only a dream. A nightmare" She said and went back to sleep.....

The arrival of Virgins' finest at Newcastle station was supposed to herald a new dawn for Bob and Lucy. Bob was excited at the prospect of returning to their little house at Attercliffe St. he assumed that once home things would return to normal, well as normal as life could be when you were confined to a wheelchair. Unfortunately, life has a habit of kicking back particularly when you are already down, and things rarely pan out the way they are supposed to. Bob reminded himself of his mother's favourite saying: 'If you want to give God a good laugh, then tell him about your plans'. Well, He had certainly put a damper on Bobs plans

Lucy became very ill; her depression never really went away and became much darker. Her appearance changed, she became gaunt and withdrawn. She was eating less as well, and found it hard to hold down a job. Since returning home and moving back to her old position at the hospital, Lucy had been in trouble twice for coming in late and insubordination. Eventually, she was dismissed for losing her temper with a patient, something she would never have done before. Her headaches began to get worse and cause her problems with vision. Bob encouraged her to go and see an optician. Lucy claimed it was just overwork. Her frequent visits to the Big Market only served to compound the situation, and although puzzling to Bob, she did always return happier and more ready to assume her responsibilities. He put it down to alcohol, particularly in view of the glassy eyed vacant expression on her face whenever he asked her where she had been.

Turning, turning ever more, the world spins madly on

The future catches up the present and the past is all but gone

D.S.Tatton picked up the phone and the operator said there was a call for Inspector Twford from Mr Van Helsing from Rotterdam

"Who?" Jack asked "Never mind I'll take on the intercom"

"Mister Twford" the man emphasised the word 'Mister'. He spoke excellent English, but with a distinct foreign flavour. "Congratulations on your promotion, well deserved in view of your recent arrests, but I fear you may have won only the battle and not the war. You will never stop it Jack. Life goes on. It always will" the phone went dead

"Damn him" said Jack "Damn damn damn that was Forman"

“You think so?” queried Derrick

“I know so” Jack replied “I worked closely with for the best part of a year and before that I was working on his case. He knew this number, he knew about my promotion. He even knew I would be here. Do you see what we are up against here, Derrick?”

“I could hear most of it through the speaker” Derrick reminded Jack “Is he right?”

“Of course he is, but that doesn’t stop us trying does it? If I thought for one moment that operation Bullfrog was a waste of time I would have resigned by now”

“Don’t let him get to you, Sir You’re above all that now. Don’t take it so personally.”

“It is personal; anyway I miss the leg work, Derrick. I do so hate the desk job, but I guess you have to think of the pension when you get to our age. This job was yours by right, you know that”

“Too many gaffes I’m afraid and mud sticks. Jenkins was my sergeant for two years. I taught him everything he knew. Doesn’t say much for my judgement does it?” D. S. Tatton argued

“You’re a good copper Derrick, always will be

.....

“Are you really going to leave it there?” Sarah-Jane said when she finished reading the manuscript.

“Well I was planning to” answered Mark petulantly “Why what’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing, darling, it’s beautiful, but it does seem to end rather abruptly, you know not satisfactorily resolved”

“Life’s like that, it doesn’t always come in neat little packages. You’ve been watching too many TV dramas” Mark laughed and ran his fingers through Sarah’s hair “anyway there is still a chapter left on the computer, but I don’t know yet I may discard it. But never mind that, what do you think?”

“Is nice, great but..”

“But what” Mark interrupted Sarah digressions She continued

“Was I really that far gone?”

“Yes Babe you were” He looked over to little Josh and Amy “If it wasn’t for all the doctors and a month in the Lakes those two wouldn’t be here now” The two children were playing in the back room.

Josh was two; Mark had started the book when Sarah was three months pregnant. They had been married for three years. Amy was one, a beautiful child with wild dark hair and hazel eyes. She was a miniature version of Sarah and a constant reminder to Mark of when he first met Sarah –Jane.

Edna Sullivan loved her grandchildren and was pleased that Sarah and Mark had decided against moving away from Chesford. Mark still worked for the council and detested commuting. The traffic in Chesford was worse than ever: Too many cars and not enough road; too many buses not going anywhere and that frightful Ring road. The council continued to demolish the past; sometimes buildings were knocked before they had even finished being built. The city was in grave danger of becoming a permanent building site. All in all Mark decided to rent a small house on the outskirts of town. It was a short bus ride away for Edna, handy for baby-sitting and support for Sarah, his wife. ‘Wife’ the very word conjured up feelings of warmth inside Mark. They had known each other for so long and been through so much in their short lives and now here they were bringing two others into the world to start their own adventure. Mark always looked on life as an adventure and he had had more than most. He kissed Sarah and she responded, “Have you heard from Bob and Lucy lately,” he asked his smiling companion.

“Not since the card they sent at Christmas, I think Lucy is quite ill, Bob says its nerves”

“Yeah she wasn’t that well when we saw them last year. I am glad we didn’t take Josh - she looked quite frightening,” Mark added

“Yes” said Sarah “But Mum was happy to have him, you know that. Do you think Lucy’s all right Mark - you know what I mean - I mean really all right,” She added

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Mark in reply” and no I don’t think she’s is, and what’s more I don’t think Bob has any idea of what’s going on.”

“Anyhow are you going to resolve anything about Bob and Lucy in your book, what’s in this last chapter? Why so secretive?” Sarah enthused playfully tapping Mark on the arm

“Its no secret, but I may rewrite some passages I’m not sure about parts of the story, but I don’t necessarily have to resolve anything about Lucy do I? -after all, it is only fiction!

It was much later after Bob’s death that Mark put the finishing touches to his book. It had been such a public affair, the media had dragged up all the old Sands case and the ‘Carer from Hell’

headlines reappeared. Even the Chief Inspector Jack Twford admitted the similarities between the cases were uncanny. D. S. Tatton, went up the funeral just to nose around with his coppers instinct. He still believed her guilty of Jonathon's murder and Bob's death only served to feed the notion. He hoped to find some clues but was disappointed. Lucy, by this time, was well known to the local police as a heroin addict. They had been called to the house on Attercliffe Street on several occasions to quell domestic squabbles. Bob, exhausted from his efforts to win over his wife and the eventual realisation that he would never walk again become violently depressed, and as a result reverted to type. Unfortunately, Lucy was no longer the wallflower he married and she responded in kind. It was partly police testimony, but mainly the evidence of the doctors that persuaded the jury that Lucy was not fit to stand trial and she was committed to a psychiatric hospital.

Ex Sergeant Pete Jenkins was charged with conspiracy and was sent down for a very long time. There was always a suspicion that he became the scapegoat for others but of course, nothing was ever said. Even when new forensic techniques came along no D.N.A. samples were ever matched up to enable a conviction for the Jonathon Sands murder. The coroner had recorded an open verdict, but most people believed Jenkins to be the killer. Most people that is with the exception of Derrick Tatton he still had nagging doubts and spent a great deal of his free time trying to piece together different snippets of information to build a case against the 'Wheelchair Killer'

Van Helsing continued to prosper, working from his base in Holland. He started an Internet Book company, distributing worldwide. The ex Chief Constable George Evans was the sales manager. I am constantly amazed at what one can find in a book these days. All human life is there and sometimes a lot more than you bargained for. Larry continued driving after he left the Ink factory, for a small bakery. He still saw Mark and Sarah; in fact, now that he had retired he spent a lot of time with the children. 'Uncle Len' constantly amused Josh and Amy with his stories, Mark was amazed how he could come up with so many adventures but was never entirely sure which tales were real and which were pure fabrication. It did not matter to Josh and Amy. After all a story is a story.

THE END