JUNK
and
other short stories

Published by Duncan James

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1 – JUNK

Gavin never opened junk mail. He took the view that if he wanted anything, he could get it himself, without prompting. So junk mail always went, unopened, into the bucket under the sink.

There always seemed to be a lot of it, too. The post usually arrived just as he was leaving for the office, so he quickly thumbed through it, and anything that was

addressed to him went into his briefcase, to be read on the train, and the rest went into the bucket. The only exception was the occasional begging letter from a charity, which included a ball pen. He kept the pens. He sometimes felt a bit - well, awkward, - but took the view that if they could afford to send him a pen, then they could afford for him to keep it. So that's what he did. The rest was thrown away, unopened.

Except that this morning, for some reason, he found himself on the train actually reading a letter that was obviously junk mail. It was from a firm called FreeRanger Travel, which he'd never heard of, and which addressed him as, 'Dear Sir or Madam'. He hadn't been called 'Sir' for a long time. He looked again at the envelope. It was certainly his address, and he was certainly 'The Occupier'. He read on, to discover that it was a competition for a five-day holiday in Hong Kong, staying on a privately owned luxury junk in the harbour, and travelling by scheduled airline. Sounded good – he wouldn't mind a few days in the Far East. He'd never been, and could do with a break. In fact, he'd never been anywhere much. He read on, completed the competition, and posted his entry in the reply-paid envelope on his way to the office from Bank station.

That was that. He thought no more of it.

No more, that is, until he had a phone call at home a couple of months later from FreeRanger Travel.

"Good news," said the voice. "You've won one of our free holidays."

"Really?" asked Gavin. He only vaguely remembered the competition, to be honest.

"I just need to ask you a few questions, to confirm your identity, and then I can send you details," said the voice.

He answered the questions, most of which confirmed information he had put on the competition entry form – name, age, address - that sort of thing.

"What have I won, then?" Gavin asked the voice.

"Five days in Hong Kong, staying on an exclusive privately owned junk moored in the harbour. The prize includes scheduled flights, private room with en suite facilities and breakfast. There is a choice of dates to select from when you get our letter, and the holiday includes free transfers from your home to the airport, and from the airport in Hong Kong to the junk. All you have to pay for is insurance, local taxes, your main meals, and any tours and excursions you want. We'll send you a leaflet."

This all sounded too good to be true. His mother had always said that anything that seemed too good to be true probably was, but he couldn't, off hand, see anything much wrong with this.

He didn't have to wait long for the letter confirming the details. This time, the envelope was addressed to him by name, but still said 'Dear Sir' inside. He was impressed. There was a leaflet, with details about the junk. Distinctly Chinese looking it was, too, from the outside, but the inside looked very smart. There was a map of Hong Kong, another leaflet about tours, and one from someone wanting to sell him holiday insurance, which he already had anyway, through his bank.

He selected a date, agreed it with his boss, and rang the free-phone number of FreeRanger Travel to tell them when he wanted to go.

"No problem," said the voice. "You'll get the tickets in a few days, with all the details about baggage allowances, check in times and so on, and you'll be given the time your taxi will call to pick you up to take you to Heathrow airport. Please try to be ready, as traffic can cause delays and if you're late for check in you could miss your flight."

This still seemed too good to be true, but at least he appeared to be dealing with a well-organised company who knew what they were about. This was certainly no call-centre in India. And so far, he hadn't had to spend a brass farthing, or been pestered into buying anything.

He tried to look them up on the Internet, but they didn't seem to have a web site, for some reason.

Anyway, all the paperwork duly arrived, with the tickets and everything as promised. British Airways all the way, non-stop. It was a very long flight, but he was now getting quite excited about the whole thing.

Gavin had arranged for Nick, his neighbour upstairs, to look after the fish for him while he was away. Tropical fish, they were. Not many – there wasn't room for a big fish tank in his small flat – but they were, in a funny sort of way, good company for him. He worked a lot from home, did Gavin, and the fish were always there for him to watch. Colourful and lively. You got colour and movement in a garden, but not a lot of it in a converted warehouse flat in Limehouse. The fish were a good substitute and no real trouble at all. The glass needed cleaning from time to time, but the water stayed clear so long as you didn't give the fish too much food. That's why he'd given Nick the key. The fish would need a feed while he was away. And Nick had offered to keep an eye on the place as well, so Gavin would have nothing to worry about.

Gavin had just put the final pinch of food into the tank when the doorbell rang. It was the taxi, a bit early, but Gavin was all ready, so it didn't matter. The driver was a real cockney, as you might expect in this part of London – chatty and friendly. It was a private car sort of taxi, too, not a black cab.

"Is this all the kit you're takin'?" asked the Cabby, jerking his thumb towards Gavin's small suitcase and even smaller rucksack with his overnight things in it.

"That's all," replied Gavin, collecting his luggage. "Don't need much for five days."

The cabby held the door open, while Gavin set the alarm. "One…two…oh…eight," he recited to himself.

"Got yer keys?" asked the cabby.

"In here." Gavin dropped them into the front pocket of his rucksack.

"Orf we go then," he said slamming the door shut and grabbing the suitcase. "Goin' anywhere nice, are yer?" he asked.

They chatted on, and Gavin learnt the man's views on almost everything, from Muslims to Meusli, but in particular about the Government.

"'eafrow in abaht ten minutes," announced the cabby, as if Gavin was a complete stranger to London. "Yer' in good time."

So far so good. He checked in at terminal five, and had time to browse round the duty-free shop. Very tempting that was, too, but he avoided temptation, and settled for a small bottle of gin for use on the junk when he got there.

Gavin enjoyed the rest of the journey as well. The plane was on time, he had a couple of gins before a good meal with a small bottle of wine, and after checking for emails on his laptop computer, slept through what might have been a good film.

He was glad to get to Hong Kong's Chek Lap Kok airport. It had been a long and tiring journey – nearly 12 hours. He wasn't the world's greatest traveller, and this was a massive adventure compared with his daily commute on the Docklands Light Railway.

Hong Kong smelt different. Probably the heat, he thought. It was lunchtime when he got there, but he wasn't hungry – he'd had lunch on the aircraft, seemingly minutes after they'd served breakfast. There was a taxi waiting for him, which he thought was a bit extravagant, since he'd noticed there were plenty of coaches into town, and an express train. But he wasn't grumbling, especially as it was over 20 miles, and he was able to sit back in comfort and admire the view. The driver spoke a bit of English, but they travelled in silence, and eventually arrived at the harbour area. The driver parked, and escorted him to where water- taxis could be hired. But Gavin didn't have to pay for that, either – there was one waiting for him. Another short, slim Chinaman helped him into a rather battered dinghy with a smoky outboard motor, and a rickety awning supported by stout bamboo canes to keep the sun off his passengers. They set off across the busy harbour, home to everything from huge cruise liners to rusty tramp steamers, all surrounded by a seemingly endless number of barges and small craft like his, scurrying around like bees at the hive.

Gavin could smell the sea. At least, he thought that's what it was. They were heading towards a large and very smartly painted junk, not too far out, and he could see a tall, bronzed man standing at the top of the steps on the deck. Don Stevens eventually greeted him, welcomed him aboard, and helped him with his luggage.

Also on deck was a large, colourful, parrot sort-of bird, chained to a perch, who greeted Gavin with a shrill "g'day sport."

"That's Bradman," said his host, with a broad Australian accent. "Don't feed him – he's got a beak like two razor blades and he'll have your finger off soon as look at you."

Gavin gave the bird a wide berth, and the two eyed one another suspiciously as he edged past, the parrot hunched like a vulture. "Shove off," screamed the bird.

"Take no notice," advised Don. "I can't think where he gets it from, but he's a good alarm system."

Noting the bird's name, Gavin resolved to keep off the subject of cricket altogether, and certainly not to mention the recent Test matches.

His cabin was small, but clean.

"There's no air conditioning, I'm afraid, but the two fans are adequate. There's always a sea breeze out here," explained Don. "Make yourself at home, and when you're ready, join me on deck for a cold beer."

The two men settled with their drink, and Don explained that he and his colleague, Oz Windsor, owned the junk and had decided a couple of years back to let out the spare cabin. They were both journalists; Don worked for ABC and Oz for the Sydney Morning Herald – he was out on a story, but would be back soon. Don gave Gavin a guidebook and a large map, and was soon recommending where to eat and places to visit. He was told to help himself to anything in the fridge, run by a gently throbbing generator down below.

Oz Windsor appeared over the rail soon, and yelled at the bird before the bird had a chance to say anything. It kept quiet. Over a few more beers, they watched the sun set until Gavin eventually turned in at the end of a long and tiring day.

It was a couple of days later when he got the news. Gavin had been having a good time, no doubt about it. He'd done the markets, had some fantastic 'real' Chinese food, quite unlike the sort of rubbish they generally served in London's West End, and had just got back from a visit to the top of The Peak, when his mobile phone rang. It was unexpected, and made him jump. It woke the parrot, too, which screeched at him to "answer the bloody phone."

It was Nick.

"I thought I ought to give you a ring," said Nick. "I'm in your flat."

"What's up then?" asked Gavin. "Fish OK, are they?"

"Yes they're fine," Nick reassured him. "I've just come in to feed them, and they're fine," he repeated.

"So what's up," asked Gavin again.

"Well," said Nick, "it's your flat."

"What about it?" asked Gavin.

"Well," said Nick again, "it's kind of – well, - empty, that's all."

"What do you mean, 'empty'?"

"I mean there's nothing here," Nick replied. "The place is empty. Everything's gone."

"Gone?" Gavin sounded a bit hysterical.

"Absolutely everything," replied Nick. "Furniture, computers, hi-fi, clothes – everything."

"You mean everything?" Gavin couldn't believe it. "Is this some kind of joke or something?"

"I'm afraid not," replied Nick. "Some bastard's been in and stripped the place. There are some papers scattered about in what used to be your office, but there's not even a saucepan left in the kitchen. Nothing. Oh, except the fish, of course. They're all right."

"Have you been on to the police?" demanded Gavin.

"I'm just going to do that," replied Nick, "but I thought I should ring you first."

"Don't touch anything," instructed Gavin, even more hysterical. "They'll want finger prints."

"There's nothing to touch," replied Nick.

"How did they get in?"

"Through the door," replied Nick. "There's no sign of it having been kicked in, either. It's almost as if they had a key. And the alarm wasn't on."

"Hang on," shouted Gavin.

"Pieces of eight," screamed the parrot.

Gavin grabbed his rucksack, and went to the front pocket. No keys. '*That bloody taxi driver,*' he thought. *'And he watched me punch the code into the alarm system.'*

"Nick, I've been set up. Tell the Police to ring me, and then tell them to get on to FreeRanger Travel. They sent me here, as far away from home as they could get me, and then took their time to strip me of everything I've got."

"Had," corrected Nick.

"OK, everything I had. They had five clear days to lift thirty grand's worth of gear from my flat, and it only cost them the air fare and a bit of rent for this place."

"Sounds a pretty good sting to me," commented Nick.

"I'll get home as soon as I can," said Gavin, "but I guess the air ticket was one of those cheap deal affairs which I can't re-book. I'll let you know."

"Leave everything to me," said Nick, with confidence. "By the way, there's a pile of stuff on the mat, but it's nearly all junk mail. Shall I ditch it for you?"

"Yes, please," replied Gavin. "But keep the pens."

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2 - A FAKE WORSE THAN DEATH

He had never been to a car boot sale in his life. Neither did he know anyone who went to them, at least not regularly. He seemed to remember, when he was at work, that his secretary went to one once. She had told how she and her husband had arrived at the site, in a field somewhere, and had set out an old blanket on which to display their things, and that someone had immediately offered them a fiver for the blanket. He had been impressed.

But now he was thinking that it might not be a bad idea to go to one himself, just to see what it was like. He had a load of things to get rid of, and he had already taken more than enough to the local charity shops. Besides, he could really do with the money, and if a fiver for old blankets was anything to go by, then it shouldn't be difficult to raise a few quid.

They held one, once a month, in the town centre car park. There was one next week, so he decided to go.

Having been, he wished he'd gone to one sooner. The car park was transformed into a veritable Aladdin's Cave, and it seemed that there was somebody,

somewhere, who'd buy anything. The place was full of the most awful tat – at least, it mostly looked awful to him – and yet there were people buying stuff as if there was no tomorrow. All sorts of junk, there was. Souvenirs from holidays which people now wanted to forget; old woodworking tools; radios; gramophone records; tea sets; jewellery; old clothes; bits of furniture, most of which needed mending or polishing or both; kitchen utensils; ornaments – you name it. Thinking about it afterwards, he didn't actually notice any blankets, but then perhaps they'd been sold by the time he got there. They said the dealers always arrived first, to snap up anything worth having.

But he saw enough to know that it would certainly be worth taking a carload of stuff to the next one. He found out how to go about it, and paid to reserve a plot, wishing now that he had kept half the things he had taken to the charity shops. He supposed they might even be there, selling some of the items he had given them.

He spent a happy few weeks sorting through all the bits and pieces he no longer wanted, and deciding how much they might be worth. His wife would have been good at this – always knew a bargain when she saw one, and had a pretty good idea about what people might pay for things. But now she was gone, he had to sort it out for himself. Indeed, that was why there was so much spare stuff about the place. Until now, he hadn't had the heart to get rid of most of, but now he had decided that the time had come for him to move to a smaller place he could better manage on his own, and to throw sentiment to the wind.

It was amazing what there still was to get rid of, when he put his mind to it. Some of it he carefully cleaned and dusted, the odd thing he polished, and there were a couple of bits of furniture – a cane chair, for instance – which he repaired. He packed it all carefully into cardboard boxes, sticking labels on everything with what he thought was a reasonable asking price. If he only sold half the things he had turned out, he would make a hundred pounds or so – well worth the effort. And what was left, he could always take to the next sale, or find another one somewhere else. He was quite looking forward to this.

On the appointed day, he made sure he got there early, just in case a dealer spotted something among his bits and pieces that was worth having. He didn't spot any dealers as it happened, but he was soon attracting interest. Some of the things, which he hadn't a clue what to charge for, he simply asked interested potential customers to make him an offer. He was amazed that some of his old 78s went for two pounds each. As the morning wore on, so more and more people turned up, and at one time, trade was quite brisk – by car boot standards, that is. By lunchtime, he had already taken well over a hundred pounds he thought, when the smells from a hamburger stall across the car park proved too much for him. He realised he was hungry, and thirsty, so strolled over to buy himself lunch. The crowds were thinning, anyway, and he was able to keep an eye on his car as he strolled towards the stall. He thought it unlikely that anyone would nick anything, and if they did, so what. He didn't want the stuff anyway.

So he took his time, stopping to look at what other sellers had on offer. He noticed on one of the tables a couple of old toys – he used to have some exactly like that when he was a lad. He idly picked one up to look at the price. Staggering! A hundred and fifty quid for a van he remembered had only cost a few shillings of his pocket money. The chap selling it said it would be worth a great deal more if he had the box to go with it.

The only other thing that caught his eye was a rather nice looking oriental vase. Except that it had a lid on it, so it wasn't really a flower vase. A ginger storage jar, the man said, and real Chinese, too. You could tell by the characters scrawled underneath it. And there are dragons on it, and everything. Fifty pounds was the asking price, but he eventually settled for thirty-five. It would look rather good on the table in the hall, which was decorated in a sort of blue colour, like the jar. He must have been mad, he thought afterwards. He'd gone there to sell things, not to buy them.

Anyway, it looked good on the hall table when he got home, although he did take the lid off and put it in the drawer. It somehow looked better without it. The more he looked at his new purchase, the more he liked it. It was nicely glazed and delicately coloured, and there wasn't a bit of damage on it anywhere. He actually began to wonder if it might be worth rather more that he had paid for it. You read about these things, after all. Old vases in the attic for years, suddenly found to be worth thousands. He got a book from the library about old vases, and decided that his bargain could just as well be from the Ming Dynasty as anything. He was beginning to convince himself that he had picked up a rare collectors' item, so he took it to the local museum to see what they thought. They didn't think much, as it happened, as the man there didn't really know about rare vases, Ming or otherwise. He did suggest, though, that one of the big auctioneers in London would know, without a doubt.

So off he went with his precious possession, to Christerbys, in Old Bond Street. The lady on reception said they had an expert on these things, and he eventually appeared from upstairs to have a look. He seemed too young to know much about anything, but studied it carefully, and gave the impression of knowing what he was talking about. He eventually decided that it wasn't a genuine Ming, but a very good copy, probably made in Holland, and, quite honestly, not worth putting in an auction, but he was curious to know how he had got hold of it. He told the man the story, from car boot sale to hall table, via the local museum. He gave the expert his address, so that he could be sent a catalogue of their next auction of oriental porcelain, in case something similar took his interest.

So that was that. For thirty-five quid, what more could you expect. It went back on the hall table, and there it stayed until one dramatic and frightening afternoon.

He had been out, shopping – a few bits from Sainsburys, nothing much. He got back to find that he had forgotten to lock the door, although he could have sworn he had – he always did. You could never be too sure these days. But it was open, so in he went. That's when he got the shock of his life.

There was a masked man in the hall, with a gun in one hand and his vase in the other.

"Stay where you are, or I'll shoot," said the man, but he was too late. Before he could even take aim, he had been knocked off his feet and all the breath taken out of him in a flying tackle. His head struck the bottom stair with a sickening crack – the sort of noise it makes when you break a stick across your knee – and he lay quite motionless, with the gun under his twisted body, and the vase in two pieces on the hall carpet. It was all over in a flash.

The proud owner of the vase was trembling with fear and anger. Whatever had he done? It had been a spontaneous reaction on seeing the man. He wasn't violent by nature, and had never done anything like that in his life before. He didn't know he had it in him to react like that.

He nervously went over to the twisted figure at the foot of the stairs, and felt for a pulse. There wasn't one. The masked man was quite dead.

In a daze, he phoned for the police to explain what had happened, and then called an ambulance, which arrived first. He had picked up the two pieces of the broken vase and put them in the drawer of the hall table, with the lid.

He kept on explaining what had happened; how he'd feared for his life at the hands of the armed burglar and had reacted in self-defence. Eventually, the body was taken away, and he went to the police station to make a statement and face more questions. This time, he made sure he locked the door, which bore the marks of having been forced open. A jemmy or something like that, so the policeman said.

He was eventually allowed home on police bail, but hated going back on his own. His GP gave him a sedative to calm his shattered nerves, and he got a man in to mend the door and change the lock.

To cut a long story short, the coroner eventually brought in a verdict of death by misadventure on the masked man, who had no previous criminal record and was obviously acting on information, perhaps even from the local museum, which had led him to believe that the vase was worth trying to steal, which of course it wasn't. To make matters worse, the man's gun was a fake – an imitation – just like the wretched vase he had come to steal.

Some months later, a judge accepted a plea of guilty to manslaughter and agreed that he had acted in self-defence. He was given a two year suspended sentence.

It was a good time afterwards that he eventually plucked up the courage to get the broken vase out of the drawer in the hall table, determined to throw it away. Damn thing – he should never have bought it in the first place. But he began to change his mind, however, when he looked at it closely. The base had come away from the body of the vase where the two parts had obviously once been joined. It was as clean a break as you could wish to see. But what really caught the man's eye was what looked like some form of document, neatly folded into the base of the vase. The manuscript, if that's what it was, was in neat but tiny Chinese script, on very thin and flimsy paper of some sort. Perhaps rice paper, he thought.

He was very puzzled by this discovery. The man at Christerbys had said the vase had been made in Holland, famous for its Delft and other makes of porcelain. So why would they hide a document like this in the base of it – written in Chinese, too? All very odd.

There was only one thing for it – he would pay another visit to the young expert in Old Bond Street.

He told the receptionist that he had been there before, told her what it was about, and asked to see the same young man again.

"An expert in oriental pottery, I think he said he was."

"We certainly have a specialist in that field," she replied. "I'll enquire if he's free to see you."

An elderly man eventually arrived, shook his hand warmly and asked how he could help. This fellow looked much more the part, and instantly inspired more confidence.

He was shown the vase, and the manuscript secreted in the broken-off base. He showed immediate interest.

"Where did you come across this?" he asked, squinting at the manuscript through an eyeglass produced from his waistcoat pocket.

He told the old man the story, although did not go into detail about how the jar had come to be in two pieces.

After some time, the man said, "This is almost certainly a genuine piece of Ming Dynasty porcelain, I would guess dating from about 1400 to 1450. What's more, I am almost sure that the British Museum has one exactly similar. But I have never seen a manuscript like this before," he admitted, "and certainly not one hidden in the base of a Ming jar in this fashion."

He carefully examined the two pieces of jar.

"It is such a clean break, exactly along the line of the join, that a restoration should be relatively easy and impossible to detect afterwards," he pronounced. "That is, of course," he added hurriedly, "if you should wish it to be restored. I can easily arrange for that to be done if you should so decide."

The owner of the broken pot was speechless again, but nodded.

"I suppose it's worth restoring?" he asked.

"Without a doubt," replied the expert. "I can arrange for one of the top porcelain restorers at the British Museum to undertake the work for you, if you wish." The man paused. "There is, however, one difficulty."

"What's that?" he asked.

"We shall need to decide whether to remove the manuscript during the refurbishment, or to keep it hidden where it is. I am no expert on documents of this sort, but I can easily consult a colleague who would be able to help you decide. Much will depend on what the document says, and whether it has a value in its own right."

"Ah," he said, now quite bewildered. "I suppose we should know what the document is all about before we decide," he agreed. "It could lead us to hidden treasure, or something!"

"I doubt it," said the expert. "And in any case, my guess would be that you hardly need hidden treasure now. You already have it in the shape of this historic jar."

"You mean it could be valuable?" he asked.

"Without a doubt," replied the learned old man again.

"How much?"

"I have no idea how much the manuscript might be worth, but the restored jar, on its own, could fetch at least a quarter of a million pounds at auction."

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "And I only paid thirty five quid for it at a car boot sale!"

"It's such a pity it's not quite complete," said the expert thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?"

"This is a storage jar," explained the man, "probably for keeping ginger in, or honey, or some such thing. It should have a lid."

"But I have the lid," he exclaimed, "at home, in the drawer of the hall table."

"In good condition?" asked the expert auctioneer.

"Perfect, so far as I can tell," he replied.

"In that case, add another half a million pounds to the likely sale price," said the man. "Perhaps you would be good enough to let me see it."

"I shall bring it up tomorrow," he promised, "and leave to rest to you - the valuation, repair, decision about the manuscript – everything. I would like you to auction it for me when you can."

"Certainly," replied the man. "It will be a great pleasure to act of your behalf, and it could well be that the British Museum would wish to buy it themselves, to put alongside the similar jar which, I recollect, they already have on display. Now, if you would be willing to leave this with us today, I will draw up an official receipt and immediately insure the objects for a sum of – shall we say – one million pounds?"

And so it was agreed.

As he was leaving, he said to the expert, "By the way, what happened to the colleague of yours I saw when I first brought this to you? He told me it was a copy, made recently in Holland."

"A young man?"

"Yes, he was. I thought at the time he didn't look old enough to have the experience to decide."

"As it turns out, you were quite right, and he certainly should have known better. Anyone with the slightest knowledge on the subject could have told you that it was an original, dating from the fifteenth century. But he is no longer with us, I'm pleased to tell you, although the circumstances of his leaving were, shall we say, unfortunate."

"Why, what happened."

"He was killed in a somewhat mysterious incident. Something to do with a gun, I am told."

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3 - A BRIDGE OF LETTERS

Marjorie Northcot died quite suddenly. It turned out to be a heart attack, but it was a great shock because nobody was expecting it at all. There were no real signs, early on.

There is never a good time to die, but, although she had no real say in the matter, this was about the worst time she could have picked.

Her husband, Maurice, was abroad. He was 'something' at the Foreign Office, although no-one, not even Marjorie, was ever quite sure what. Neither was anyone quite sure where he was. One thing soon became clear, though. He was not 'abroad' in the sense of 'gone to a conference' or anything like that. He was *travelling* abroad. One official at his office thought he had flown to Singapore, while another thought it had been Hong Kong. One chap, a clerk of some sort, even suggested he had gone to Korea, but nobody took much notice. Not that Maurice had a proper office either, really. Not the sort one commutes to every day, because that is something Maurice never did. Commute.

In the end, when they did eventually track him down, it turned out that they were all wrong, as he had intended.

He had gone to Helsinki, but only a couple of people knew.

So it took some time to find him, and even longer, since he was *travelling*, for him to get home for what, in the end, turned out to be a much delayed funeral for Marjorie.

Not that it made much difference to her, of course. The one who really suffered was son Peter.

He was only ten at the time, and devoted to his mother. She was gentle and kind and loving, but strict just the same. She spent as much time as she could with Peter, and realised that what he really needed was a father. Peter realised this too, but he never saw much of him because he was always travelling. When he was home, though, they got on like a house on fire. Football, fishing, long walks with the dog, playing with the train set – everything. But only ever for a day or so at a time - never for long enough. His mother was useless at fishing, didn't play football or enjoy watching it, and didn't understand about railways, real or toy.

Suddenly, Peter was a very lonely, small boy. No mother at all, and not much of a father either.

He had no time to wonder what might happen to him, because it happened anyway, and immediately. Aunt Elizabeth moved in, for the time being, especially to look after him. After the funeral, when they had finished packing all his stuff, like toys and books and clothes and so on, they took him back to their place. He ended up staying there for ever, with Aunt Elizabeth and Uncle Norman. His old home was put up for sale, and his Dad bought a small cottage somewhere else.

Now; there was nothing wrong with Aunt Elizabeth, or her husband, Uncle Norman, who was OK, too. But they were no substitute for a real Mum and Dad, and

they had no children of their own, so he still had no-one at home to play with. However, it was as strange for them to have Peter staying there as it was for Peter to be staying with them. It soon became obvious that he was not just staying there, either – he was living there. This was his new home. Uncle Norman and Aunty Liz had a nice house, in a sort of rural area, and they had a dog, and they had a decent sized garden where you could kick a ball about without annoying the neighbours, who were also OK by the way, and the nearby school he was sent to was, in many ways, better than the one he had started at and just left.

But somehow it wasn't home, and never would be.

Peter and the dog got on really well; he made a lot of new friends there, at school, and, for some reason, seemed to be learning a lot. He was probably quite happy, given the stress and upheaval and sadness he had recently gone through. But he longed for the rare visits his father was able to make. He knew his father couldn't visit more often, but, for a few months, actually saw him now more often than he had when his mother was alive. But it wasn't half often enough, and the visits quickly became less and less frequent.

One day, not long after Peter had moved to his new home, his father sent him a letter. There was not a lot of news in it, and his father didn't say where he was, but the envelope had a London postmark, so Peter guessed he was not 'travelling'.

My Dear Peter,

I thought I would drop you a line just to see if you are all right, and to send you my love. It was wonderful to see you again the other day, and I wish I could see you more often, but you know my work keeps me away from home quite a bit. I'm afraid I shall be away quite a long time this trip. Aunty and Uncle tell me that you are well, and I hope you are starting to settle in with them OK. They are good people and are very fond of you so I am sure you will be all right staying there. But I know it is not the same as being at home, and perhaps one day we shall be able to live together again in another home of our own. That will be really nice, and it is something I shall look forward to. They say you are doing well at school, which is good news, so keep working hard. If you get the time, it would be nice to get a letter from you to hear your news. The address at the top will always get to me.

With much love, Dad.

The address at the top was just 'Dept. OS 19, The Foreign Office, London, SW.1.'

Peter wrote back, almost at once, thinking his Dad would do the same.

Dear Dad,

Thank you for your letter. I hope you are well. I am alrite and getting used to things. But I miss you and Mum of course. School is OK and I am playing football. We have started French which I like and am good at. Please write again soon.

Love Peter, xxxx

But he didn't write soon. In fact, he didn't write for a month or so, during which time Peter had sent at least two more letters. Eventually, they managed to keep up a pretty regular flow of correspondence, which, in time, became the only contact between them, as Maurice spent more and more time away. His letters to Peter never contained much news, and always seemed to be posted in London. *"I never have much news, as nothing much ever happens for me to tell you about. I just seem to work all the time"*, he once explained. Peter, on the other hand, always had plenty to talk about, and the older he grew, the more he enjoyed writing about his life. It was obvious to his father that he was doing well at school, and that he was particularly good at languages. He eventually started talking about his own future, and even thought he might one day join the Army, if he could get to university first. Maurice was delighted to read this, and was full of encouragement.

It was some years since Peter and his father had met, and yet through all this time, their exchange of letters was maintained to the point that they both felt that they knew one another quite well. But Peter was curious to know more about what his father did, and where he was, to the point that he once even phoned the Foreign Office. He didn't really know where to begin, so asked to be put through to the mysterious "Dept. OS 19".

"I'd like to know the whereabouts of Mr Maurice Northcot, please," he asked the man who answered the phone.

"I'm afraid I'm not allowed to tell you that," replied the man.

"Why not?"

"I'm just not allowed to, that's all. But I could pass a message if it's urgent."

"But you must know where he is, because I write to him at your address all the time," protested Peter.

"That's the point," said the man. "We're just a sort of post office here, passing messages to and fro."

"But I'd like to know where he is so that I can talk to him for a change."

"We don't do telephones," said the man, "just letters and messages. We send them on via the Diplomatic Bag service."

"But he's my father, and I want to talk to him. He wouldn't mind – he writes quite often. In fact I'm sure he'd be pleased and surprised if I rang him up. Why can't you give me his number?"

"I'm not allowed to, that's why," said the man, irritably. "You'll just have to keep writing, but you could ask him to ring you or give you his number."

"I have asked him, but he says he's never in the same place long enough."

"There you are, then."

"So how do my letters get to him?"

"Well, I suppose there's no harm in telling you, but one of the Queen's Messengers takes it to the nearest British Embassy, which passes it on to him. The same thing happens in reverse when he writes you", explained the man.

"And you get it and post it on to me, do you?"

"Exactly."

"At least I know now why his letters are always posted in London. For a long time I thought he worked there," said Peter.

"I'm sure sometimes he does," said the man.

Maurice was very amused by Peter's account of this, and not a little proud of the fact that his son had shown such initiative. For the first time ever, he rang the boy for a chat, but even then wouldn't say where he was. Thrilled though he had been to talk to his father after so long, it turned out to be a unique event, and the regular exchange of letters was maintained afterwards. His father only ever rang Peter on three other occasions. The first was to congratulate him on getting into university to study languages, the second was to congratulate his on being accepted for Army training at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, and the third, a year later, was to say how pleased he was that he had graduated and joined the Intelligence Corp.

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Major Peter Northcot's phone rang. His mobile.

He looked at the clock on his digital radio.

This was his second tour in Hong Kong, but nobody ever rang him at home on his mobile at 04.37 in the morning. On a Sunday. Not even his secure phone rang at that time. Not even in Hong Kong. Well, not often, anyway.

He switched on the bedside light, thumbed the button to answer the phone and said 'hello'.

"Who's that?" said a voice he didn't recognise.

"Who wants to know?"

It was plainly somebody he didn't know. All his contacts were in the mobile's address book, and one would have shown up on the screen if the caller had been listed.

"What number is that?"

"The number you dialled, probably."

"I want to know who I'm talking to," said the voice, irritably.

"You mean who you *were* talking to," he replied, and rang off.

The phone rang again. It was the same number as before, now automatically logged on his phone and displayed on the small screen. He jotted the number down – a quick check in the morning would find the owner of the mobile.

"Was I talking to you just now?" said the same voice.

"How would I know who you were talking to just now?"

"I dialled the same number as before, and you sound the same as the chap who answered it last time."

"Do you have the slightest idea what the time is?"

"Half past four – I'm sorry, but it's urgent."

"What is?"

"I need to talk to you."

"Ring my office later, then, and my PA will arrange a meeting. But only when I know who you are and what you want and if I agree that it is urgent."

He rang off again.

He didn't really have an office as such. His wasn't that kind of job. But he hired an agency to take care of things like this. They provided him with his own 'office' phone number, which they monitored. Nobody much rang it, but when somebody did, they told him.

The phone rang for a third time.

"I'm going to gamble that I've got the right number," said the voice. "I'm in Singapore, and arriving at Chek Lap Kok on UA 896. Meet me. It's urgent and important. You'll recognise me."

This time, the man rang off before Peter could say anything. *What the hell was going on?*

Peter rang the stored mobile number. There was no answer. Not even a voice mail.

He swung his legs out of bed, and went into his small kitchen to make coffee and to think. It was five o'clock now. If he remembered rightly, it was about 4 hours flying time from Singapore to Hong Kong, so the man couldn't arrive much before 0930. UA 896, the man had said. United Airlines, eh? American. The man didn't have an American accent – very English, in fact. He didn't recognise the voice, but the man said Peter would know him when he saw him.

All very strange. Peter didn't like things like this. They made him uncomfortable – and nervous.

He rang the airport to check to arrival time of the United flight. Leaving Singapore at 0640 and arriving at 10.30. So the man was still in Singapore. He rang his mobile again, but still no reply. Maybe in the departure lounge by now, unless he was changing planes; in that case he'd be in the transit lounge.

Northcot checked on the mobile phone number. Not listed. Now that was very odd, and no mistake. It must be listed – the man had used it three times this morning already. He checked again. No trace.

This whole thing began to stink.

A man who refused to identify himself over a phone that didn't exist, who Peter didn't recognise but would know when they met, was arriving in Hong Kong in a few hours on an American flight from Singapore and demanding to be met because it was 'urgent and important.' What was?

Only one way to find out, decided Northcot, pouring a second cup. Get to the airport and meet the man.

He rang a contact in security at the airport. In spite of the fact that Hong Kong was now under direct Chinese rule, bits of the 'old boy network' from the Colonial days still worked. An airside pass would be waiting for him in arrivals, and Northcot could watch the passengers off the United flight from behind a one-way glass window overlooking the baggage gondola. If he saw someone he knew, he could slip out to meet him – if it was someone he would rather not meet, he would stay put until the man had gone.

Peter Northcot decided to walk to Lam Tin, and catch the A22 coach to the airport. Only 39 dollars, which he could claim back, and a nice morning for the 34 Km drive from Kowloon. He had nothing much else to do, anyway. He arrived at the airport early, and had breakfast before he picked up his pass.

The plane arrived on time, and it was only 15 minutes or so before the passengers started to arrive at the gondola in the baggage hall. His view from the security office was as good as it could get. It was specially located for an up-close view of arrivals before they went through customs. He recognised nobody.

He made his way, the long way round, to the arrivals hall the other side of customs, where people were met by friends, relations and hire-car drivers bearing the name of their intended passengers on bits of paper. He had access to a balcony above the crowds, where he could see but not be seen. Again, nobody. There was nobody he recognised, either, among the meeters and greeters.

He made a final check. All the passengers had now left the customs area, and there was no baggage from the United flight left on the aircraft, or in the immigration hall, or on the gondola. A helpful official, suitably impressed by his pass, provided him with a passenger list. None of the names on it rang even the faintest of bells.

This was altogether bloody odd, he thought.

He could not work out what was going on. The man who rang him three times at such an un-Godly hour this morning, had not rung again or left a text message or anything. But then, how could he. His phone didn't exist.

The more he thought about it, the more uneasy he became. Suppose - just suppose - that he, Peter Northcot, had walked straight into a trap. Just suppose - only suppose - that some villain or other had wanted him out of the way for an hour or so. Out of the flat. His mind raced to remember what, if anything, there might be in the flat. Nothing of any value, that's for sure – but papers? Code books, perhaps? He was certain there was nothing of value to be found; not to anyone, even the opposition. Almost sure, anyway.

Suddenly, he was in a hurry.

He dashed to the nearest police office, and within minutes was being driven, much too fast, back to Kowloon, blue lights, sirens and all. They dropped him off near his flat, having switched of the bells and whistles a few blocks further away. Kowloon is never quiet, even at this time on a Sunday, but it was as un-crowded as it gets. He sprinted down several back-alleys, cutting through to his block, and went up the fire-escape, two at a time. It opened onto the lift lobby, with its faded carpet and old Chinese prints on the wall. He could see there was no-one about, and the lift was on the ground floor.

Trouble was, he only had a front door. There was only one way in to his flat.

He had a spy-hole in his door – the sort that lets you see who's outside, ringing the bell. He had modified his a bit, so that he could look in as well. He carefully adjusted the focus, and peered in to his front room.

There was a man standing at his balcony window, looking out over the harbour.

He was silhouetted against the daylight, so Peter could see no detail, but the man appeared to be casually dressed, and was standing with his hands in his trouser pockets. *Did he have a gun?*

The man moved away from the window, and looked nonchalantly around the flat's living room. He glanced at his watch, and moved back to admire the view from the window, hands in pockets again.

He didn't appear threatening, but Peter knew he had to get into his flat somehow. And quickly. He heard the elevator on its way up. He silently put his key onto the lock and took out his Smith and Wesson.

In one swift movement, he opened the door, burst in and threw himself flat, levelling the gun at the man in the window.

"One move, and you're dead."

The startled man froze, still with his back to Peter.

"For God's sake don't shoot," pleaded the man.

Peter stood up, and closed the door behind him.

"Put your hands behind your head, one at a time and nice and slowly," demanded Peter.

The man did as he was told, nice and slowly.

Peter walked over to the man, jabbed his gun into the man's ribs, and quickly frisked him.

No gun and no knife.

Peter took a few steps back.

"Now turn round," demanded Peter. "Nice and slowly. I've had a bad morning already, so don't make me any more nervous."

The man turned to face him.

"Hello, Peter," he said. "Long time, no see."

This time, it was Peter's turn to be startled. Shocked, more like it.

He lowered his gun.

"Dad!" What the hell are you doing here?"

"It's a long story, but I need your help. Urgently."

"I recognise the voice now. You rang me from Singapore."

"I rang you, but I wasn't in Singapore. I just wanted anyone who might be listening in to think that's where I was."

"Dad, you look terrible. But I'm not surprised – I nearly killed you. Come and sit down, and let me get you something."

"I've had a bad couple of weeks, I won't deny. Not much sleep and little to eat. But I can't relax yet. I must get back to London."

Maurice Northcot slumped onto the sofa.

"If you weren't in Singapore, where were you? I went to the airport to meet the flight."

"I know you did. But can you help me get back to London?" pleaded his father. "You're my only hope."

"Of course I can," Peter reassured him. "Come and sit in the kitchen while I get you something to eat, and you can tell what's happened."

"Please get my return to London organised first."

"OK. But why the great rush? What's been going on? Why can't you just go to the airport and catch a plane home like anyone else?"

"Because my life is in danger, that's why, and I may well have put you at risk now as well. I'm truly sorry about that, but I was desperate for help. That's why I came here."

"Where from?"

"Korea. North Korea, as a matter of fact. I work for MI6, and I was sent to get vital information about the North Korean nuclear programme. But my escape route blew up in my face, and several people who should have been able to help me get out have been killed, or captured – which is probably worse. So I've had to make my own way out. I was just south of Pyongyang when it all went wrong. I made my way to Kaesong, mostly by night and by river, and then across the border into the south. But I had no money, apart from a few US dollars, and I don't speak the language. It wasn't much easier in South Korea, either, but here I am at last."

Peter was appalled.

"But why here? Why did you come here rather than head for Japan, which is closer? The Embassy in Tokyo could have helped you."

"I don't know anyone in Japan, or speak the language, let alone read it. And the Embassy people would have known little or nothing about me. I would have stood out by a mile, and would probably have been caught."

"Are they still after you, then, from the North?"

"Almost certainly. What I have is far too valuable for them to let it go without a fight, which is why I came looking for you. We're in the same business, after all, and you speak Cantonese."

"How did you get here, then?"

"Let's just say I got in by unconventional means, and that's how I'll have to get out. With no papers, I can't just turn up at the airport and book a ticket."

"We have several escape routes from here," said Peter. "Let me get on to my minder at the Embassy. She'll help, even though it is Sunday."

He got on to the secure phone.

"Suzy? I need to use the 'tunnel'," he said. "Urgently."

"You? Not you, I hope."

"No, a colleague who's on the run after a job, and has made his way here."

"Code name?"

Peter put his hand over the mouthpiece.

"She want's your code name. It's all right, she's quite safe. In the same business as us. And this is a secure line – digital satellite link with agile frequency transmission."

"Dr. Penny."

Peter repeated the name to his contact. There was silence for a moment.

"Are you quite sure about that?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Describe him."

"Medium build, about 5ft 9ins, grey hair. Broken nose with scar from mid forehead across his nose to his right cheek."

There was a pause.

"Are you sure about the scar?"

"Quite sure. It's feint now, but I put it there."

"You what?!"

"I did it with a football, years ago – he's my father."

Another pause.

"I hardly believe this," said the girl, "but it sounds like 'Penny' all right. The whole world's been looking for him. Hell of a panic. Earlier today, we thought he was in Singapore."

"So did I. Now we must get him on the home run in double quick time, before the opposition track him down."

"Agreed. The UK is desperate to find him and get him back. Hang on."

Another pause.

"Here's what we'll do. We have a civil crew in town on lay-over, and as luck would have it, there's an exchange member on board. About the same build as Penny. I'll send him over, and you can do the switch. Get Penny to the Mandarin Hotel where the crew is based, and he can go with them to the airport on the crew coach later. Let's just hope you're not being watched. When was your flat last swept?"

"Thursday."

"Should be all right then, but be careful. Penny is about the most wanted man in the world at the moment, both by us and the opposition."

The line went dead.

"You're pretty hot property at the moment, Dad. They've all been looking for you, but with any luck we'll have you out of this flat in an hour or so, and on the way home later tonight."

He outlined the plan.

"You'll be on the crew manifest for the British Airways flight out of here later tonight. BA058 leaves about midnight. Once you're safely on board, change back into civvies and travel as a passenger. Club Class, of course! Non-stop to London, where you'll be met. It takes about 13 to 14 hours, depending on high level winds over Siberia, so you should get in before six, London time. Now let's get a meal before your double arrives for the switch."

"I hope this works," said his father. "I have vital documents and copies of plans of their nuclear facilities, which simply must get to London. If anything happens to me, you will have to take them. Everybody wants them – UK, USA, United Nations; everybody; except China. Let me show you where they are."

Some were in the lining of his small bag, others strapped to his body.

"There's a letter on its way to you as well. Whatever you do, get that to London as well if I don't make it. It's in code, so don't lose it."

"I've still got every letter you've ever written. They have been a bridge between us."

"I've kept all yours, too, as it happens. For the same reason."

Peter's secure phone rang. It was Suzy, his minder.

"Alex Sumner will be with you in twenty minutes or so," she said. "You know the drill. One of our friendly taxis will be cruising nearby when Penny has changed. Go with him to the Mandarin, and make your own way home."

"OK, Suzy."

"Peter! Take great care. I want to see you again."

"You too," replied Peter. Suzy Chi-Lye was about the first girl he'd met who he thought he could possibly have a relationship with, but they had agreed it wouldn't be sensible. Apart from the odd meal together, they had kept at arm's length from one another.

Peter and his father had just finished a rather hurried meal when the doorbell rang. It was a smartly dressed BA flight attendant, Alex Sumner. Maurice quickly changed into his uniform, which was a remarkably good fit.

"The hat suits you," said Peter. "Let's go!"

Anyone watching closely would have noticed that Alex Sumner had aged quite a bit in the last twenty minutes, but there was no sign of anyone suspicious as Peter and his father bustled into the taxi, and headed down-town. Peter decided to walk back to his flat – it would be easier to spot if he was being followed. He let himself into the flat, and went to tell Alex that the coast was clear for him to leave.

Alex, though, would be going nowhere. He was stretched across the bed with a neat but bloody hole in his forehead.

Anyone else would have panicked. The first thing Peter did was check, swiftly but thoroughly, that nothing important had been taken. So far as he could tell, this had not been a robbery that had gone wrong. Everything was in its place, and even things like day-code books were where they should be. The intruder obviously only wanted one thing – to kill.

Now he panicked slightly. He had a murdered body lying across his bed. The real issue, though, was whether the killer had meant to shoot Alex Sumner, or kill his father, the much-wanted escaping spy, or even himself. If they had got the wrong man and found out, they would be back, he concluded. His father had been right. Now he was in danger, too.

There was only one thing to do.

He rang Suzy, and told her what had happened.

"The worry is that we were, after all, being watched," he said.

"Probably still are," she replied.

"Exactly. So I need to get out fast myself now. Any 'tunnels' left open?"

"Nothing much," she replied. "The nearest military transport is over 1,000 miles away, and we probably wouldn't be able to divert it, even if it was a good idea. The only other option is a coastal Junk to Macau, and then hope the Portuguese can do something to help you."

"All too slow," said Peter.

After a moment's thought, he said, "So here's what I'm going to do. I shall pretend nothing has happened. Sling my bag over my shoulder, get to Chek Lap Kok, buy a ticket, and go home. There's just a chance that if I act quite normally, I shall get away with it, and nobody will notice me."

"I suppose it's worth a try," she said. "I agree that you certainly can't stay here a moment longer than you need, but I can't think of any better plan on the spur of the moment."

"I'm off, then," he said. "Do me a favour if you will, after I've gone. There's a body here to be dealt with, and other bits of admin and paper-work to be dealt with. Will you look after all that for me?"

"Of course I shall," she replied. "And Peter…"

"Yes."

"Please take care!" There was the slightest of pauses. "I love you."

There was only a momentary hesitation from Peter. "You too, Suzy. If I'm spared, I'll be in touch."

For the second time that day, he walked to Lam Tin, and caught the A22 coach to the airport. He was the last to board the coach, and was almost sure he had not been followed. But he had been sure earlier this afternoon, too. What the hell! If someone was after him, they would get him whatever he did. And there was no other way of getting out quickly.

He bought a ticket, Club Class, and checked in.

With any luck, his father would already be on board the 747, with the rest of the crew.

By then, he should have ditched the uniform and changed into civvies. The crew were glad to see the back of him. They didn't like this sort of operation, well rehearsed though it was. Just knowing they had a runner on board made them nervous. They should have found him a seat at the back somewhere, where he could mingle anonymously with the fare-paying passengers.

They'd been airborne for about ten minutes and the seatbelt signs were off, when Peter spotted his father a few rows in front of him. Safe, thank God.

He slid into an empty seat next to him.

"Hello Dad. Long time, no see!"

"Peter! What the devil are you doing here?!"

Peter told him.

"I just had to get out, and this was the only way we could think of in a hurry."

"Will you be going back sometime?"

"I doubt it," replied Peter. "Apart from anything else, I'm a Defence cut. I've been made redundant thanks to the Defence Review, and was due to leave the Army in a month or so anyway."

"This was to be my last run, too," said his father. "I very nearly didn't make it into retirement, though. It's only thanks to you and your contact, Suzy, that I'm here at all."

"We should be OK now, Dad."

"What will you do when you've left the Army?"

"Not a clue. I shall get a pension of some sort and redundancy pay I suppose, but it won't be enough."

"You could take my old job. I could probably fix that, if you're interested. You're better at languages than I ever was, and the Foreign Office is always looking for linguists who are prepared to travel a bit."

"Could be fun," said Peter. "What about you?"

"If I'm spared, I shall retire gracefully to the country. I've got a small cottage in Hampshire, near some pretty good fishing. We could set up home there together if you like."

"It's what we've always wanted," mused Peter. "Perhaps I could get Suzy over as well. She's an excellent cook, you know. I'm sure you'd like her."

"And she's already pretty good at looking after both of us," said Maurice.

The girl came round with the Champagne.

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4. - UP IN ARMS

It's all very well for you, sitting there, reading this. You haven't a clue what it was like to be my age. You can't remember a thing about it, anymore than I probably shall when I'm your age.

Well, let me tell you that it's no real fun. And that's mostly thanks to people of about your age. If you could only remember what it was like, you'd treat people like me a bit differently. Not that you mean to be unkind, I'm sure, but the indignity of some of the things we have to put up with is quite awful. And we can do nothing about it yet, because we have none of the skills that you seem to have. I suppose one day we'll catch up, but until then, being my age is no real fun.

In my house, there seem to be three people around most of the time, although they are different. One is shorter, with long hair and knobbly bits that give me milk when I'm hungry – or at least, when they think I should be hungry. Her name seems to be Mum-mum or Mamma or something, so she keeps trying to tell me, and another one is taller, out of the house a lot and generally not much use except that he seems to take his turn getting up in the night when I yell. He seems to be Dada, or something like that. He doesn't do milk.

Then there's a much shorter one, also with long hair, whose name is Yoursister, although she seems a bit unsure of this herself. Quite often, I hear her telling people 'I'm four', so perhaps she has two names. Anyway, Four or Yoursister or whatever she is called, is my favourite, as she is always around, and seems to have plenty of time to spare. She makes me laugh, too, but doesn't actually seem able to do much that's useful. She doesn't do milk, either.

There are others about, whom I come across from time to time, but I know nothing about any of them. Mostly, they are just intensely annoying.

In general, I find life extremely frustrating, and not a little boring. So would you. For a start, I spend a great deal of my time lying on my back, either on the floor, or in bed. I spend hours staring at the ceiling, which is white and nothing ever happens up there, apart from the odd spider or fly. The others in the house, who are strong enough to sit up and have learnt to walk about, don't have this problem. For one thing, there's a sort of flat box thing in a couple of the rooms downstairs, which have colour pictures moving about on the front, and which make noises. They seem to spend hours watching the things. Why can't I have one on the ceiling, that's what I'd like to know? I bet if those boxes just had pictures of the ceiling and nothing else apart from the occasional fly or spider, they wouldn't sit there for long, and would soon switch them off.

I have a sort of thing on wheels that I get pushed about in outside from time to time, and sometimes I'm left in it indoors. There's a string across the front just above my head with coloured bits hanging on it. I think it's supposed to amuse me and keep me quiet. It would be a good deal better if I could get at the thing, since some of the bits rattle, except that they don't unless someone twangs the string. I can't do that, because I can't reach it. I'd also like to see what the bits taste like. I like to have a suck at everything new that I come across, although most of it is rubbish, and not even cooked, and certainly none that I have discovered so far does milk. I have small soft things I can play with, but the fluff comes off when I put those in my mouth, and they taste like nothing on earth. They don't really seem to be a lot of use, except that I'm getting quite good at throwing them over the side. I find then that, if I yell loud enough, someone will pick them up for me and put them back, so I can chuck them out again. I could play for hours like this, but pretty soon they yell back at me and keep the things. Even Four or Yoursister or whatever her real name is, and she's usually pretty good at providing some amusement. Sometimes, she brings along soft things of her own to show me, but, more often than not, I'm not allowed to touch, let alone suck.

She can be a bit sensitive, though, I have discovered. There's one thing I quite enjoy having around – it's sort of short white plastic stick thing, with a ball on the end that rattles when you shake it. I have discovered that, if you hold the stick at the end, you can really throw it quite a long way. That's about all its good for, really, as it certainly isn't worth chewing. Anyway, one day, after weeks of practice, I managed to hit Yoursister on the head with it. You should have heard the noise. I wish I could yell like that, although one day I shall be able to, as I'm practicing that as

well. I've heard people say what a good pair of lungs I've got, and it seems to run in the family, if Yoursister is anything to go by.

Mind you, I think she's a bit deficient in other areas. For one thing, I've noticed when we've been in the bathroom together, that she doesn't seem to have a willie, poor thing, which is probably why she takes such a keen interest in mine. But she can at least get about, like the rest of them, on her two legs. I'm in training for that, of course. I spend as much time as I can, kicking my legs about to build up the muscles, and they do already seem to be getting a bit stronger. Certainly, the cup of tea I hit the other day went further than I thought it would, much to the annoyance of the tall thing that was holding it while pulling faces at me and making funny gurgling sounds. Do you know, that really does annoy me. It is supposed to amuse me, I think, but I thought the flying cup and saucer was much funnier, although the reaction was a bit fiercer than usual I must admit, and accompanied by a good deal of yelling. But I raise my hat to Yoursister – she thought it was hysterical and laughed out loud, until she got shouted at as well.

If I could, I would complain about my diet. I've been downstairs when all the others have been having a meal, and they get platefuls of the most interesting looking stuff, some of which smells pretty good as well. Even Yoursister is given some. Me? Me, I get milk, and not much else. And it's not delivered on a plate, either – I have to work hard to get any at all sometimes, and all that sucking can be quite tiring. Every now and then, it comes in a bottle, but I still have to work at it. At least it's warm, but that's about all you can say for it. Never strawberry flavoured or anything like that for a change. I've seen the others getting milk, too, and theirs comes in a cardboard box of some sort. I haven't been able to work out how mine gets from the box to the knobbly bits of the Mamma person. Just recently, she has tried to give me stuff on a bit of bent metal, but it seems to go all over the place, especially if I blow with a mouthful. It tastes pretty awful, too, whatever it is. But it makes a change, and it could be the start of something better, because I've seen the others using these metal things when they eat.

But what really gripes me about the whole procedure is what happens straight afterwards. When you've had a decent meal and taken on board just about all you can hold, all you want is to put your head down and sleep it off, right? Not in this house, you can't! You get hoist onto the shoulder of the Mamma one, and thumped hard on the back. I've got the message now, I think. Their theory is that it makes you burp. Well, let me tell you that I burp when I want to burp, not when someone else thinks I should. Apart from anything else, when you're full up, it is most uncomfortable hanging over someone's shoulder, especially when all you want is a quiet doze. I had thought I had worked out how to put a stop to this nonsense, but it didn't quite work out as planned. My theory was that if I threw up instead of burping, I would immediately get put down, and so be able to have forty winks. But I only managed to achieve this once, and it caused such a fuss, there was no way I could get to sleep. So now I have to put up with it, but I do manage to put the elevated position to some use, as I study all there is on view from this lofty perch. There's a good deal of very tempting stuff down there, and I can't wait until I can get

mobile and have a really good look at it all. So I have redoubled my training, and kick hard whenever I can.

As I mentioned earlier, I quite often get taken out of the house in a thing on wheels. It's the second one I've had. The first was a sort of bed, and I would normally lie down in it, so the outlook was nothing special, not least because I faced the way I'd been. This view was largely dominated by Mamma's crutch, which I can tell you is not a pretty sight even when hidden in jeans. But once they started propping me up a bit, so that I could see things a bit better, I eventually got a different sort of machine. In this one, I face the way I'm going, which is a mixed blessing. The view is better, but you come close to hitting things, since you arrive before anyone else. Trees and lampposts are obvious hazards, which so far have been avoided, but only just. We've managed to take the paint off one or two other pushchairs, and run in to numerous people who should, apparently, have been looking where they were going. But I really don't like being launched head first into moving traffic when we cross the road. Apart from the jolt as we crash off the kerb, the mad dash to get to the other side is really quite scary. And you'd be surprised how big busses look from low down. So do dogs. I don't like dogs. I went off them in a big way when I was left parked outside a shop – only for a few moments, of course, - and one of the brutes came sniffing around. The stick thing at the other end was wagging about, but my end gave me a good licking. It then had the nerve to pee against the wheel, until someone heard me yelling and chased it off.

Apart from my temporary lack of mobility, which I am in training to overcome, my other big problem is that I seem unable to communicate with the others properly. Try as I might, they never seem to understand what I'm saying, and I never get the drift of what they are on about, either. They never seem to have the time to teach me, that's the problem, although sometimes they will repeat the odd word a couple of times, bent low over me, and seem to expect me to immediately grasp what's going on. Yoursister is best, I must admit, as she has more time, and doesn't mind devoting some of it to my education. She's quite good company, and chatters away, trying to get me to understand what's going on. But at least I know her real name at last.

It happened the other day, when we all got dressed up to go out. They even put me into some sort of long white thing, which I'm not sure quite suited me, but there you are. We ended up in a place I hadn't been to before, with lots of other people milling about. It all looked a bit serious at one stage, and there was a lot of muttering, and then some singing. There seemed to be a chap in charge of all this, who also had a long white thing on like mine. Eventually, I was handed over to him, and he splashed water on my face for some reason, and then we all went outside to have our photos taken. Everyone kept coming over to tell me I was Hugh and hadn't I been a good boy. The more people said I was Hugh, the more Yoursister told them she was Four, so that's how I came to learn her real name. Whoever it was who had said all that time ago, "This is Yoursister," obviously hadn't a clue what he was talking about.

The odd thing is that no sooner had they made all that fuss about me being Hugh, than they all started calling me Huggy, and even my thing on wheels is called a Huggy Buggy now. Anyway, after all this fuss, we all went back home, and the tall ones got stuck in to great plates of food and strong smelling glasses of something that didn't look much like milk, but more like something else I'd better not mention. It smelt awful, as I know, because they kept coming over to me and breathing on me while making goo-goo noises. Some of the longhaired ones even kissed me, which I don't like, so I started yelling. That put a stop to it, thank goodness, but they obviously didn't like the noise, so I had a dummy shoved in my mouth. Do you know, I think that's the biggest con I've come across so far. It looks like Mamma's knobbly bit, but no matter how hard you suck, nothing comes out of it. Absolutely nothing. Even chewing on it makes no difference, and if you spit it out, they simply wipe it on the seat of their trousers and shove it back in again.

So what with one thing and another, I've no real idea about what's going on, although as I said at the beginning it's no real fun. I can't properly make myself understood, even to Four, and I can't get about on my own yet, although that day will come, believe me, and then watch out. They'll soon know about it. I have a lot of old scores to settle, lots of things I want to explore, and many more things I want to do – although they would probably rather I didn't.

Huggy, indeed.

And just you wait until I've got teeth.

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5 - DEATH BY DROWNING

(Based on an original idea by Vida Goodfellow)

Charles Toogood and his wife Jo had decided to have an early holiday this year, and to do a bit of touring in the car instead of going abroad. They had motored in leisurely fashion, as much as one could on motorways, to the Lake District. Even off the motorways, the roads around the lakes were crowded, but they had managed to see what they had planned, and the hotels they had chosen had been comfortable, so they were in a relaxed mood as they eventually headed north, over Shap and across the Scottish border, towards the Stranraer to the Belfast ferry and the next leg of their tour.

They had never been to Northern Ireland before, but friends had been insisting for some time that they should pay a visit, so that's what they were going to do. There had been a long debate about whether to fly to Belfast and hire a car when they got there, rather than take the ferry, but eventually Charles had been persuaded that it would be easier and more convenient to take their own car. He was not, however, looking forward to the crossing. He had managed to avoid the Lake steamers on Windermere and Coniston, and although he had been tempted by the thought of

fishing for Arctic Char, one look at the small rowing boat was enough to make him change his mind.

The fact was that Charles Toogood wasn't a good sailor, although he should have been.

Both his Grandfather and his uncle had served in the Royal Navy, but Charles had never shared their love of the sea. Indeed, Grandfather Toogood had served most of the war as a gunnery officer on HMS Rodney, and, if you accepted only half of what he said, you would be forgiven for thinking that he had been personally responsible for sinking the Bismarck. It was only later that Charles discovered that it was not the guns of HMS Rodney that had finally sunk the German Battleship, but her torpedoes, although Rodney's guns had inflicted mortal damage earlier in the engagement that day.

Charles had also discovered, long ago, that the sea did not agree with him. He enjoyed watching it, especially when it was rough, but only with his feet firmly planted on the beach. He didn't much care for swimming in it, and particularly disliked being *on* the water, however big the boat.

He somehow managed to survive the 'voyage' from Stranraer to Belfast, all of 3¼ hours, thanks largely to two powerful seasickness tablets and a day cabin where he could put his feet up.

In the end, he and Jo very much enjoyed an agreeable few days with their friends near Belfast in spite of the weather, which their friends described as 'soft'. That meant it was raining, which it nearly always was. They were told that if you could see the Mountains of Mourne it was going to rain, and if you couldn't, it already was. They never did see them, although they spent a good deal of time touring the lush, green, countryside with its patchwork of small fields. Their friends, however, had insisted on taking them out mackerel fishing on Strangford Lough, the very thought of which had quite terrified Charles and threatened to ruin their stay. However, it turned out to be quite fun, again, no doubt, thanks to two more powerful tablets. Charles had not been ill, and had actually caught a few fish.

The Irish Sea on their return had been different, though.

This time, tablets and a day cabin did not work. Granted, it was only a car ferry, which the operators claimed was fitted with stabilisers, but everyone knows what the Irish Sea can be like, even in May, and it had lived up to its reputation that morning. Which was why he was very glad to have made landfall at Stranraer. Charles was not feeling at all well.

Jo drove the car off the ferry, and eventually found a quiet teashop in the town where Charles sat for a bit to recover. The next part of their planned itinerary was somewhat unusual, but Charles wanted to visit the Parish Church at Inch, which was only just outside Stranraer. Not that the church itself was anything spectacular, but his Grandfather had spoken of it so often as being the final home of HMS Rodney's ensign, that he simply had to have a look while he was in the area.

Charles had been very fond of his Grandfather, who had retired to a cottage on the Sussex coast when he left the Navy. The family had spent many happy school holidays there, playing cricket on the lawn, looking for crabs in the rock pools when

the tide was out, and sometimes even fishing off the beach. Grandpa Toogood always had a yarn to tell about his adventures at sea, but was always saddened by his experience during the engagement with the Bismarck.

He had served on HMS Rodney for most of the war, and although it had been an old ship, launched from the Cammell-Laird yard at Birkenhead in 1925, it was regarded as one of the Navy's most powerful battleships for a decade or more. It was in May 1941, while commanded by Captain Sir Frederick Dalrymple-Hamilton, that the Rodney was diverted from escorting to the troop ship Brittanic on its way to Canada, to join in the pursuit of the German battleship Bismarck. Radio silence was ordered as HMS Rodney joined up with another battleship, HMS King George V.

It was early morning when the two battleships, and the cruisers HMS Norfolk and Dorsetshire, engaged the Bismarck, which had already had its rudder machinery damaged by a torpedo the previous day. The bombardment soon knocked out Bismarck's guns, and HMS Rodney was able to close in on the Bismarck, until she was firing essentially a flat trajectory. Grandpa Toogood recalled how he could actually follow the shells to the target through his binoculars. By then, there were German sailors in the water as the Bismarck began to keel over.

The Captain wanted to break off the engagement to rescue survivors, but the Admiral refused, and ordered Rodney to continue its shelling. Eventually, recalled Grandpa Toogood, the battleship was ordered to turn for home because there were reports of U-boats in the area and because she was by then also low on fuel. Before doing so, though, she had finished off the Bismarck by firing torpedoes into both sides of the stricken German battleship. Once again, Captain Dalrymple-Hamilton was ordered to make for Rodney's home port with all speed, and not to loiter to rescue survivors. Although HMS Rodney had picked up some of the German crew, they could only watch and listen as the deperate men shouted and waved in the water, clinging to their liferafts and bits of debris, as Rodney turned away.

It was a scene Grandpa Toogood would never forget, and the memory of it had always haunted him. With his own dread of the sea, Charles could only imagine the terror which the German sailors faced, struggling to survive in the oily, burning water, and watching a potential life-saving rescue ship turn away from them.

But now Charles planned to do something his Grandfather had not been able to do during his lifetime. He was going to visit the small church at Inch, where the Rodney's ensign had finally been installed after the ship had been scrapped at Inverkeithing in 1948.

"I don't think I ever knew why the ensign was put in the church in the first place," said Jo.

"So far as I can tell," replied Charles, "the captain of HMS Rodney, Fred Dalrymple-Hamilton, came from these parts, and was an elder of Inch church. By the time he retired, he was an Admiral, so he was able to rescue the ship's ensign and its flagpole, and donate it to the church."

"It will be fascinating to see it," said Jo. "I just hope the church is open so we can go inside."

"Grandpa always wanted to get up here to see it for himself, for old times' sake, but never made it."

"Well, now *you* can," said Jo, as they turned off the main road to Newton Stewart. They turned left under the railway bridge, passed a quarry, and saw the church ahead of them.

They parked at the end of a short path which led to the grey stone building. The path was hedged with dog roses and honeysuckle, in sharp contrast to the austere and rather bleak looking church itself.

"It doesn't look exactly warm and welcoming," commented Jo.

They opened the heavy oak door, and stepped inside. The church smelt damp, but as their eyes adjusted to the gloom, they were able to see the ensign on its flag pole, pinioned to the wall on the left of the nave.

"It's much bigger than I thought," said Charles.

"It certainly looks old," observed Jo. "The white isn't white anymore. It needs a good clean."

As they got closer, Jo shivvered.

"It's cold in here, don't you think?"

"Damp, too," replied Charles. "And there's quite a draught coming from somewhere, as well."

The ensign stirred silently, and Charles felt his hair ruffle.

"I don't think I like it in here," said Jo. "Would you mind if I waited in the car?"

"By all means," agreed Charles. "I shan't be long, but I'll just sit on the pew here, by the flag, for a few minutes if you don't mind. Grandpa would have wanted me to."

"I suppose he would," Jo nodded. "It doesn't bear thinking about what terrible scenes that ensign must have witnessed during the war."

There was a gust of a breeze as Jo turned to walk back down the aisle, and the oak door slammed shut.

"I'll open it," she said. "You stay here as long as you like, but I'm going."

The heavy ensign stirred again, and there was a faint rumbling sound, as if someone was in the organ loft, tuning up. But the church was empty apart from the Toogoods.

Jo managed to open the door, and was glad to get out into the open air again, leaving the damp and draughty church behind her. As she turned to close the door, it slammed behind her.

Charles was feeling decidedly chilly now, and turned up the collar of his jacket. As he sat at the end of the pew nearest the ensign, the flag fluttered again in what was now becoming quite a stiff breeze in the cold church. Charles could have sworn that the rumbling noise they had heard was getting louder, too. Indeed, it quite sounded like gunfire. He was beginning to feel distinctly uncomfortable, and wished he'd left with Jo, and yet, oddly, and for some unexplained reason, he wanted to stay. The damp, dank smell in the church was getting stronger, and Charles decided that it

must be the salt laden sea air, blowing in from the loch. His dread of the sea returned for a moment, and he felt a wave of nausea sweep over him.

As he sat there, he became convinced that it really was the sound of gunfire he could hear, and there was definitely quite a strong wind behind the ensign, which was straining at its old flagpole. Suddenly, Charles wanted to get away from the church quickly, but was somehow he was unable to move. Now, to the ever-increasing sound of the gunfire was added the anguished cries of shipwrecked German sailors, pleading in vain for help and rescue. The noise of the gunfire and the screams of the men in the debris-strewn, oily sea grew louder and louder while the wind in the church grew ever stronger. Charles was not just feeling ill, he was petrified, and struggled in vain to get out of the pew and out of the church.

Jo was getting worried, sitting in the car on her own.

At first, she had been thankful to be away from the church, and had enjoyed admiring the view and watching the birds feeding in the hedgerow. But she had been there for twenty minutes or more. Charles had said he would only be a few minutes. She decided to fetch him.

What she saw when she entered the church, she would never forget.

Charles was lying in the nave, half out of the pew, staring eyes open and mouth agape. His hair was dishevelled and he was soaked through.

He was quite dead.

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In England, they would have held a Coroner's inquest, but this was Scotland. Jo wasn't quite sure what was going on.

The police had made an extensive investigation first, but had decided that there would be no prosecution, as there was no motive and nobody to prosecute. Jo couldn't have done it, and in any case, one of the villagers had seen her, through his binoculars, sitting in the passenger seat of the car outside the church at the relevant time. Not that he had ventured to visit the church, of course, to see at first hand if she was all right. That was the one day of the year when none of the villagers went near the place.

So the Procurator Fiscal - a sort of Crown Prosecution Service, Jo had concluded - had decided that there should be a Fatal Accident Inquiry, to be carried out by the local Sheriff. There was no jury, and there would be no verdict, but the Sheriff had not only to decide the cause of death, but also to make a 'determination' as to whether there were any reasonable precautions that could have been taken to avoid the death or to prevent a similar death in the future.

He had talked to Jo, who had described the reason for their visit, and he had also taken medical evidence.

That was when he decided to summon the Minister of Inch Church as well.

The Minister was distraught by the whole affair. The Ensign, he had said, was very much a part of local life. It was always pointed out to visitors, it was there on Remembrance Sunday, and even the local Sea Scouts in Stranraer had named their

hut, rather pretentiously, HMS Rodney. The Minister admitted that strange things had happened in his church in the past, although nothing like this, of course. Nobody from the village would ever set foot anywhere near the church on one particular day of the year – the day, indeed, of Charles Toogood's death.

It was May 27th - the anniversary of the sinking of the Bismarck. Usually, the church was shut on that day, but this year neither the Minister nor any of the elders had locked it.

The Minister also had to admit that the installation of the Ensign was, according to the records, quite unofficial. The General Assembly in Edinburgh had never been asked for permission to house it in the Church, and, if they had been, it was his view that permission would not have been granted. Which was why he was totally opposed to the Sheriff's suggestion that he might consider conducting some sort of exorcism service. Edinburgh would need to be told about that.

"Anyway," asked the Minister of the Sheriff, "what is there to exorcise?"

"Don't ask me," replied the frustrated Sheriff. "I know about Scottish law and I know about salmon fishing, but not much else. You are a man of the cloth and as you admit, there is something very odd about your Kirk."

The man paused.

"The surgeon who conducted the post mortem thinks so, too," he added.

"Do you mean that the poor Mr Toogood didn't simply die of a heart attack?" asked the Minister.

"He didn't 'simply' die at all, according to the autopsy," replied the Sheriff.

"What, then?" asked the Minister.

The Sheriff shook his head in disbelief.

"There is some strange and powerful force at work in the Kirk at Inch," replied the man.

"The Will of God works in strange ways, to be sure," commented the Minister.

"This is not God's hand at work, I'll be bound," said the Sheriff.

"I shall decide that, when you tell me the cause of the poor soul's death," said the Minister, tetchily.

"Try this then," said the Sheriff. "The man's lungs were full of oily sea water. Charles Toogood drowned."

The Minister crossed himself, and muttered something about 'the sins of the fathers'.

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6 - POLES APART

"I'm going out," he said.

"What do you mean, 'going out'? You've only just got in."

"Well, I'm going out again," he replied.

This is it, then, she thought.

She'd been expecting it for some time, to be honest. But not just yet. Not tonight. It was still a bit of a shock, although not altogether a surprise.

"But you can't go now," she insisted. "Dinner's nearly ready."

"I'm not hungry," he replied.

Neither was she, as it happened; suddenly, she'd lost her appetite.

"But it's your favourite," she pleaded. "Steak and kidney pudding."

"I'm not hungry," he said again.

"I made it specially."

"Sorry."

"If you must go out, at least have dinner first."

"No thanks."

"Where are you going then? Down to the pub, or something?"

"Doesn't matter where," he replied. "I'm just going out, that's all."

"I suppose you've had a bad day at the office again. Is that it?"

"I don't have good days at the office anymore."

"It's never been the same since you had promotion, has it?"

"That's what did it," he agreed. "I just can't stand the new bloke I work for, and that's all there is to it."

"I thought he was rather nice when I met him," she said.

"Christmas parties are one thing," he replied. "Working for the bloke is something different."

"He seemed all right to me."

"Not day in and day out. He gets on my nerves."

"He's always been very pleasant to me, every time I've met him."

"An hour or two over a drink might be all right, but not every day for hours on end. You should try it sometime, and see how you get on."

That's the plan. She grinned inwardly. *But not starting tonight, thanks.*

"Why don't I serve up?" she asked. "It's all ready."

"Steak and kidney, did you say?"

"That's right. Made it myself. Not one of those 'ready meals'.

"Ready now, is it?"

"Ten minutes, unless you're in a great rush."

"Any wine left from last night?" he asked.

"In the fridge – I'll get it."

"You serve up – I'll get it," he insisted.

"What happened at the office today exactly," she called after him.

"Nothing special. Just like any other day. Breathing down my neck all time, checking up on everything I do, never stops talking. It gets on my nerves."

"He *is* your boss," she reminded him. "He's supposed to do that sort of thing."

"Well, I'm not having it. Not anymore."

"Try talking to the man," she suggested.

"I've tried, but he won't listen."

"Ask for a transfer, then."

"Where to? There isn't anywhere."

"So you're walking out on him, are you, just like that?"

"Him – and you." he added.

"What have I done, specially?"

"Nothing really. I've just been so depressed, you wouldn't believe."

"I had noticed," she said.

"I just feel I've got to get away from everything and everyone."

"Why don't you see the doctor, before you decide?"

"I've decided."

"You can get things for depression, you know. Quite good things, nowadays, on prescription."

"No thanks."

"I could make an appointment for you now. There's probably still someone at the surgery."

"No thanks."

"If you went tomorrow, I could ring in for you to say you were sick."

"I said 'no'."

"You ought to give it a try."

"I've had enough. I'm going out, and I may be some time." He made to stand up from the table.

"Finish your dinner first, then."

He sat down again.

"The last bloke who said that," she said, – 'I'm going out and I may be some time' - didn't come back, as I remember it."

He looked at her.

"Died in the Arctic," she told him.

"I'm not going to the Arctic," he said.

"Wherever," she said, "don't take the car. I shall need it."

"Keep the car."

"Not that it would be much good to you in the Arctic," she said.

"I'm not going to the Arctic."

"You need dogs and things, there."

He looked at her, sadly.

"And warm clothes," she added. "Remember to take that wool sweater I gave you for Christmas."

"I'll remember."

"And don't forget your passport."

He nodded.

"And a hat," she said. "You'll need a hat. The Arctic winds are freezing."

"I'm not going to the bloody Arctic."

"Have you packed yet?"

"I shan't need much."

"You'd better take some tins of food. I'll see what there is in cupboard. And if you are going to the Arctic, take that rotten bird food with you that's in the shed. You can feed the penguins with it."

"Why in God's name would I need to take tins of food?"

"You won't find Sainsburys in the Arctic, that's why," she said.

"For the last time," he was getting cross, "I am not going to the Arctic."

"There's no need to shout," she said.

"And there aren't penguins in the Arctic, only Polar Bears. Penguins are in the Antarctic."

"Mind the bears – they can be dangerous."

"The chap you mentioned, by the way, who didn't come back, was in the Antarctic. Captain Lawrence Oates – 1912."

"Well that's even further then. If you're going there, the shops will be simply miles away, even with dogs. And you certainly won't need the car."

"I am *not* taking tinned food."

"There isn't a lot, but I could nip out and get some more while you're at the doctors."

"I am not going to the Antarctic or to the doctors," he shouted again.

"Well, make up your mind. But take the bird food for the Penguins, anyway."

He put his head in his hands.

"Now what's wrong," she asked.

"I think I'm going mad," he said.

"Well, if you are going out, you'd better hurry. You know how early the last train runs on this line."

He looked at her.

"I didn't know you get to the Antarctic from Waterloo," she said. "That Channel Tunnel's better than I thought."

He was staring at her now, wide-eyed, in almost demented disbelief.

"I think perhaps I will go to the doctor tomorrow after all," he said.

"Very sensible," she replied. "I'll ring them now."

***

While he was there next morning, she rang his boss.

"That was close," she said. "He nearly walked out on me last night."

"How did you stop him?"

"I'll tell you later, my darling. But he's at the doctor's now, so I can get away if I'm quick about it."

"Good girl," said the man's boss. "We'll meet where we arranged."

"See you in about an hour, then," she replied.

"Oh, and by the way," she added. "Your wife will have a job on her hands when they do eventually move in together."

"Why's that then?"

"Since he's been to the doctors', I've just had time to cut the left leg off all his trousers, and the right arm off his shirts."

***

There was a note waiting for him when he got back from the doctors'. "I've gone to the Arctic," it said. "Your dinner is in the oven."

When he looked, it was the box of maggots from the shed. "Shan't need these," said the label. "Penguins are further south."

***

7 - THE TOY BOX

Christian Luke remembered it well. Would he *ever* forget? *Could* he ever forget?

Never.

That fateful, frightful, terrifying moment, all those years ago, was forever etched on his brain. Now in his mid-forties, he could remember that day as if it was yesterday.

And he was only – what – one year old? Perhaps two. Who cares? Whenever it was, it could have been yesterday. He would remember what happened that day until the day he died.

The way things were going, that could be later today.

***

As a child, he had never been able to understand what had happened, and never been able to work out what it meant or what to do about it, but he had relived that fateful event over and over again. He couldn't share his secret with anyone, and even now, he never quite knew who he could trust and who he couldn't.

As he got older, he began to understand that he could use his discovery to do things he had never imagined possible. Things that, so far as he knew, nobody else could do or believe possible, even if he told them. There were people, though, who had the same extraordinary powers. They had approached him, and had shared their secrets with him. It was a huge relief to him, but of little use. So far as the vast majority of ordinary people were concerned, this was a secret which had to remain a secret.

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Whatever an ordinary day looks like to a one- or two-year-old, this had been one of them. Nothing about it had been any different from any other, so far as he could remember. The usual routine, the usual occasional tantrum about something-

or-other, the usual trip to the shops, to be dumped after lunch, as always, in the play room to get on with life on his own for a bit while his mother bustled around, dusting, doing the washing, getting dinner ready for when dad got home. All quite normal.

Until he couldn't find the large plastic fire-engine he wanted.

Then it stopped being ordinary.

The big red one – you know. *That* the fire-engine. With the ladder, and if you pushed it hard enough and let it go, it would drive itself across the room with the siren going. You know the one. He had it yesterday, but now it wasn't with the other toys which he'd left around. You couldn't miss it. It was big and red, with a ladder.

Someone must have put it away. 'She who tidies up', no doubt. Before he shouted, he decided to have one last look around. Not behind the curtains, or under the sofa. He sometimes used the space under the bookcase as a garage but it wasn't there either.

He looked towards the wooden toy box in the corner, and there it was. That's where she'd put it.

He crawled towards it, but never got there. He froze a few feet away.

The fire engine was in there all right. He could see it as plain as day, on its side at one end. On top of all his other toys. He could see them all.

But he shouldn't have been able to. Even at his age, he realised that.

It was a solid wooden box, and the lid was shut.

Now he yelled.

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He kept shouting until Mum turned up, and she was in a right state already. Rolling pastry, she had been, and still had floury hands when she whipped him off his feet in a fury. '*He was too old now to wet himself like that. It wasn't as if he couldn't ask her. What had he been thinking about?'*

He couldn't tell her.

If he had, she would never have believed him anyway, so he let her get on with the finger-wagging and rough handling while he was changed and the carpet mopped up. He was well shaken by the time she had finished, and got the usual parting shot about *'just you wait until your father gets home'*, so he knew he was in for another dose when dad returned from work.

Eventually he was dumped back onto the still damp carpet and left to get on life again, while she got on with the pastry. He was still very frightened about what had happened. Not the ticking off, severe though that had been. He'd had those before, and no doubt would have others, not least from his dad when he got home later and was told.

No. He was really frightened about what he had seen, because he knew it was impossible. Not the fire-engine, but the way he had seen it. He could not understand or explain what had happened, and it had really scared him He was almost trembling with fear, and sat for ages where he had been dumped. He dared

not look at the wooden box in the corner again, although he knew he would have to at some time. So he sat, petrified, staring ahead of him.

Eventually, his mother appeared again.

"Why are you just sitting there?" she asked. "Why aren't you playing?"

He looked at her, terrified. His fear must have shown on his tear-stained face.

She picked him up and kissed him.

"Come on, Christian! I'm sorry I shouted, but you really were very naughty. Now! Let's get your favourite fire-engine. It's in the box. I put it there last night."

Christian knew very well where it was.

As his mother went over to it, he looked at the toy box, and it was just as it always had been. Wooden, with a lid. No window on the front or anything. It was quite a relief, but he was still very frightened by what had happened.

He played for a bit with his red toy, but with no real enthusiasm. He kept glancing surreptitiously at the toy box. It hadn't changed. Quite normal, in a solid, wooden sort of way. Which made everything even more difficult to explain. Perhaps it was the fire-engine and not the toy box. Perhaps he had a magic fire-engine. Something was very scary about one of them.

But the toy box stayed wooden for days, and the fire-engine and its siren kept going like it always had. Christian began to relax a bit as he played.

Until his friend Tim came over.

Tim's mother and Christian's were good friends, and sat in the kitchen over tea while the boys were given some orange squash and a chocolate biscuit each in the play room. There were plenty of toys out to amuse them, but that day Tim wanted the green plastic steam train with its two trucks. They were his favourite among Christian's toys. For some reason, the trucks were out but they could not find the engine.

Christian glanced at the toy box, and there it was. He could see it as plain as day although the lid was shut again.

A wave of fear swept over him, as it had the first time this had happened. He could not understand what was going on, but was too frightened to say anything. He looked around him, but Tim had noticed nothing. When Christian looked back, he could no longer see through the side of the wooden box. He made his way over to it, slowly lifted the heavy lid, and took out the engine for his friend.

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From then on, the toy box always managed to strike fear into Christian, although he'd not been able to see through it again since. It stayed as it always had been. Solid and wooden. But you never could tell. He never quite trusted the wooden box again. But, eventually the memory slowly began to fade.

Until the day, not all that long afterwards, when they went to Tim's house for tea. Christian liked going there. Tim had things he enjoyed, especially in the garden. Swings and a sandpit and a peddle car in yellow plastic. But it was raining,

so they had to amuse themselves indoors. Not that Christian minded that. There were toys there to play with which he hadn't got but wished he had. Things like the model zoo with the wooden animals that each had their own cage. Tim's play-room was always very untidy, and although they could find most of the animals, the zoo itself seemed to have disappeared.

Tim thought it might still be in the toy cupboard, and when Christian looked – sure enough, there it was. Inside, under a jumble of other things. He could see it clearly - through the closed door.

He sat, petrified, but said nothing. Tim eventually found it, after much rummaging, when Christian could have gone straight to it, had he been brave enough.

Once again, he was overcome with a sense of fear. What he had seen scared him as it had when he saw into his own toy box. But this wasn't his – this was Tim's cupboard, and Tim's zoo. From then on, Christian realised that it wasn't anything to do with a magic fire-engine or a magic toy box.

It was him, Christian Luke, who was magic, although not all the time. Not every day.

Three times now that it had happened, and although Christian wasn't nearly old enough to work out what was happening or why it had happened, he was old enough to know that it wasn't usual. It wasn't the sort of thing most people could do. People like Tim, for instance, couldn't do it. Neither could his Mum or Dad as far as he could tell. They even lost things of their own which they couldn't find. Usually, when he couldn't find anything, he was told to look for it. 'In' the cupboard, not through it. 'Under' the bed, not through it. 'Behind' the curtains, not through them. And so on. And when they helped him look, they moved things about, and opened doors and that sort of thing. They never went straight to it like he had.

Three times now, he had.

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Then, he discovered something else very odd. Quite by accident, and without in any way trying.

He had just started nursery school a year or so later. He soon worked out that the three mornings a week weren't so much for his benefit, but so that his mum had a bit of time to herself. Shopping without the pram, coffee with Tim's mum without the kids being under their feet all the time. His friend Tim went to the same nursery school at the same time, which was good. He and Tim could play without their mums constantly nagging and shouting and telling them 'not to do that'. They had a teacher who did it instead, but not as much, and without the threat of telling dad when he got home. There were girls there as well, that screamed and cried at the slightest thing. They had their own 'girly' toys, like dolls and dolls' houses, but still they insisted on playing with boys' things, too. They wouldn't let go, either, unless you pulled their hair or something, and then there was a fuss and a lot of noise.

He and Tim enjoyed drawing and painting. You could make a mess and it didn't matter because it washed off and didn't ruin the carpet like it did at home.

There was a box of felt-tipped pens they liked using, and one day, it had disappeared. They couldn't find it anywhere. Nobody else had it. They hunted high a low for it.

Eventually, Christian saw it in the dolls' house. Without thinking, he reached in and took it. Tim had started drawing something by the time Christian realised what he had done. For a start, he shouldn't have been able to see the box anyway, as the front of the dolls' house, which opened, was shut. But he had not only seen through the front, like he had seen into the toy box and Tim's cupboard, but had simply reached in and taken out the box of pencils, without opening it. He had put his hand straight through, grabbed the box, and taken it out again.

He looked at the model house. It wasn't damaged. He hadn't broken it, or made a hole in it, and he hadn't hurt his hand, either. No cuts, no blood, nothing. It was as if he'd put his hand into the bath to pick up the soap from the bottom.

Once again, he was terrified.

How could he have done such a thing?

He looked around him, and at Tim. No-one seemed to have noticed, and life at the nursery school was going on quite normally.

But life for Christian Luke was, once again, far from normal.

He was frightened again, and worried. He had never been told that he would one day be able to do such things. There were any number of things he *would* be able to do when he was older, so they said – like ride a two wheeled bike, use the computer thing, have a glass of wine, go swimming on his own, drive a car – things like that. But no-one had ever mentioned this sort of thing.

After a time, he began to wonder if, in fact, this was something he would still be able to do when he was older. He wondered, because he seemed to be losing the knack. He had always been terrified of someone discovering what he could do, so it wasn't the sort of thing he practiced often, and never in front of people. Because he couldn't explain it, and because he had never seen or heard of anyone else being able to do what he had done, he kept it to himself.

But he had slowly discovered that he couldn't just look at something and see into it. And he couldn't just reach into something at will. He'd hurt his hand more than once trying to do that. No. What worked was when he was looking especially for something. If he concentrated hard on what he was looking for, he could see in to things, but only if what he was looking for was there. And once he'd seen it, if he kept thinking about it, he could reach in and get it. But not otherwise.

So it was really only of any use if you'd lost something. Or if somebody else had.

One day, when he was about six, his Dad locked the car keys in the boot. Just slammed the lid, with them inside. Christian had been there, and saw what happened. Dad was furious, especially as Mum was out, with the spare set in her handbag. The only option was to call the AA and hope they would be able to get them out.

Christian did, though, while Dad was indoors on the phone. Looked hard into the boot, he did, saw the keys, reached in and pulled them out.

"I found your keys," he lied. "They were on the drive, under the car. You must have dropped them."

That was the first time he had put his unique skill to any real use.

And the last, for a long time, not least because he could not think of any way to use the power he had been given, and put it to any good use. He had a feeling that he should use it in that way. To help people who couldn't do it, rather than help himself.

By now, he was at school, and so busy that he hardly had time to think of his strange abilities, and it certainly hadn't occurred to him how to apply it in his new environment.

But he did discover something new one day. He got home to find his mother was out, so he couldn't get in. He looked hard and could see into the hall through the front door, but there was no way he could see anything inside that would help. He went to the back door, and this time he could see a spare set of keys on the kitchen dresser. Out of reach, though. He turned away, resolved to wait. Slowly though, he came to wonder if there might be a way of getting those keys. If he could get his arm in through the door, perhaps he could reach the lock and open it from the inside. He was about to try when a further thought struck him. If he could reach inside, why couldn't he just walk through? Not just his hand, and his arm, but all of him. He concentrated hard on the keys, and suddenly, there he was. In the kitchen. He had managed to get right through the locked door.

He felt quite sick to think of what he had just been able to do.

He now had a new problem. He had to get out again before his mother got home. If she found him indoors, he would never be able to explain how he got in. In a panic, he tried to get into the garden the same way he had got in from it. He smashed straight in to the door.

He felt blood running down his face from where he had banged his forehead on the door frame.

Think!

Don't panic!

He pulled himself together, and used the keys to unlock the door from the inside. Once out, he locked the door again, and thankfully found he was able to reach through far enough to toss the keys back on to the dresser, just as he heard his mother's car on the gravel drive at the front. Too close for comfort. He knew he had to be even more careful in future.

His mother patched up his 'accident at school', and left Christian to ponder on the new-found miracle he had discovered. He didn't know it at the time, but he was soon to discover that he could perform other 'miracles' as well. Considerably more useful, too. From then on he could always reach into packets of biscuits or boxes of chocolates and take one out without leaving behind any trace of what he had done. More than once, his Mother had returned things to the shop because they were not full.

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They were on holiday at the time. Staying on a farm in Devon.

Christian's father did not have a brilliant job with the local authority. Not the sort that allowed him to take his family abroad twice a year. Or even once. So bed and breakfast on a farm was what they could afford, and what they actually really enjoyed. The country air was good, there was a relaxed pace to the life on the farm, and plenty of new things to see and explore without walking too far. They had been there twice before, and had got to know the farmer and his wife pretty well. Christian especially enjoyed it. He was becoming more and more introverted, the more he came to realise that he was a bit unusual in what he could do, and the more he understood that he couldn't share his secrets with others. As he did at home and at school, Christian tended to go off on his own; to keep his own company and to shun the friendship of others. On the farm, he enjoyed exploring the fields and the hedgerows, while his parents went on longer walks.

They were, however, becoming increasing concerned about Christian, and his strange attitude to things. They were sure there was something wrong somewhere, but could not explain it. He had few friends, kept himself to himself, had little to say for himself, and always seemed to prefer his own company to that of others. Including them. That hurt a bit. It was while they were on their farm holiday this year that they decided to seek advice. They thought their GP would be a good starting point, and resolved to see him, on their own, as soon as they could when they got home. They would take Christian later if the doctor wanted to see him, or take him to some sort of specialist if that's what the doctor recommended.

Christian, meanwhile, was coming to terms with his lot, although he understood in some mysterious way, what his parents were planning. He quite enjoyed his own company, but discovered, while on that same farm holiday, that he was not really as alone as he had thought. He was looking for bird's nests in the hedge at the time. He hadn't noticed that he had strayed into a field full of cows, which, being naturally curious creatures, came across the field to see what was going on.

At first, Christian was quite frightened – he had been told to keep away from the livestock, in case they became aggressive. As the herd got nearer, he realized that they did not like strangers. He wasn't the man who brought them food, or led them to the cowshed for milking, so, they thought, he must be up to no good and mean them harm.

In some way, Christian knew what they were thinking.

Somehow, too, by facing up to them and walking towards them as they approached, he managed to make them understand that he meant them no harm, and was simply looking for bird's nests in their field. He would never understand how he did it, but the cows appeared to know that he was no threat to them. Christian was able to approach them, and even give the apparent leader of the herd a friendly pat on the nose. The others gathered round, and suddenly they were all friends.

Back at the farm that evening, the herdsman told Christian that he had seen him with the herd, and told him he was lucky not to have been butted or trampled.

"They're all right," said Christian. "Once you get to know them."

“Get to know them?” said an incredulous labourer. “How can you possibly get to know a herd of cows?”

“They know you,” replied Christian. “By the way, one of them is quite sick.”

“How on earth would you know that?” he demanded.

“The one with the large white diamond on her forehead; needs to see the vet,” announced Christian. “She’s really quite sick.”

“I know the one you mean, but she looked all right when I took the hay to the field this morning.”

“The vet will tell you,” said Christian.

The man shook his head.

“As it happens, the vet’s coming tomorrow to do a TB check on the herd. I’ll see what he has to say.”

“Thanks.”

Christian knew what he was thinking. The man went off muttering about ‘townies not knowing nothing about anything, least of all about cows’.

In the half-light of dusk, Christian slipped away again from the farmhouse, after supper. For some reason, the two Border Collies decided they wanted to go with him as he went back to the herd. The cows would normally have been apprehensive of the dogs, but not as they were with Christian, who had told them to behave.

The sick cow was relieved to know that help was on the way in the morning.

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It was nearly dark when Christian noticed a few rabbits about. They were as plain as day to him. He was able to corner one of them, using the Collies. One the dogs expertly caught it and swiftly killed it with a sharp shake of the head, breaking the animal’s neck before it suffered.

The dogs were surprised and pleased to discover their new-found skill, guided by Christian, and the farmer’s wife was equally surprised and pleased to be presented with the rabbit.

“Most unusual, that is,” she commented. “They’re sheep dogs, not hunters, and I’ve never known them kill before. And they don’t usually do anything in the dark. But it will make a nice casserole for tomorrow, you’ll see.”

Christian knew what she was thinking, even before he heard her challenge her husband.

“A few rabbits now and then would be a great help towards the housekeeping,” she said. “If that boy can take the dogs out hunting, then so can you.”

But Christian knew he couldn’t.

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Christian learnt a lot during that holiday on the farm. He was able to spend even more time to himself than normal, and to get away from people when he wanted. He used the time to explore his attributes, as well as discover new ones. What people were thinking, for instance. And animals. He could read them all like a book. He also discovered that he could influence people up to a point – what they thought and what they did.

He knew his parents were worried about him, and that they planned to take him to see the GP and eventually a specialist. But there seemed to be nothing he could do to stop them at the moment, although he tried telling them that they had no need to worry. But he couldn't, yet, get through to them on serious things like this. Getting them to buy ice creams was one thing, but this was a bit different. He needed more time, that's all.

Their GP was a wonderful man – elderly, of the old school, round of girth and bald of head, seemingly knowledgeable about everything, and yet, somehow, knowing nothing apart from what life had taught him. He knew about tonsils, and flu, and in-growing toenails, piles and pregnancy, dandruff and diabetes, but not much about much else. Christian knew what to expect. The dear man first of all prescribed anti-depressants, although he knew they would do nothing. Christian wasn't depressed – just frightened of talking to people who wouldn't understand. Next, stimulants. Something to spur the inactive into hyper-activity. Not for Christian, who was already actively avoiding contact with people with whom he knew he would not be able to communicate on equal terms.

Eventually, and as expected, the man referred Christian to a specialist. This one dealt with behavioural science. He believed he knew exactly why people did what they did, and how they could be influenced to do something different. But not Christian, who did not propose to share his extraordinary capabilities with anyone, least of all with a chap who would never understand or be able to explain what Christian was able to do, or change the way Christian chose to handle the situation.

So he was passed on again, this time to a brain surgeon, who immediately organised all sorts of scans. All they did was show that Christian was just like anyone else, so far as science could tell.

But between them, these various specialists had been able to conclude that Christian was capable of doing things that were – shall we say – unusual, and that this could explain why he was so introverted. They concluded that he was seeking to keep his rare attributes to himself, not least because he was unable to explain how he did what he was able to do.

While all this was going on, Christian was still at school. He was learning fast. Whatever they taught him, somehow it seemed to stick, to be recalled at will. He realised that this was unusual, and went out of his way to hide the fact. It actually made exams a bit more difficult, since he knew that he had to get some things wrong to avoid drawing attention to his remarkable memory. It wasn't all memory, either. He had developed the knack of understanding what people were thinking. He had first noticed this on the farm, but realised how useful it was during a maths exam. After he had quickly glanced at all the questions, he looked up to notice the Maths

teacher, who was supervising the exam, was going through the paper himself and mentally working out the solution to the problems. Christian was able to memorise his calculations, and commit them to paper as the morning went on. This was when he realised the dangers of a perfect exam paper. It was even as if Christian had been told to build in errors. He had caught the teacher's eye, and the thought immediately went through his mind, *'get some wrong.'* Christian had no real idea what was going on until the Maths teacher called Christian to his study a few days later.

"I'm glad you did as I suggested."

"Sir?"

"To get some wrong."

"I don't understand, sir," said Christian, totally confused.

"That's why I wanted to see you. To explain a few things. You will already know that you have some extraordinary abilities, not shared by others."

"Yes sir."

"I wanted to reassure you that you are not totally alone. There are others like you, although very few with the range of skills which you will develop as you get older. I have many more than you will ever acquire or need. I knew, for instance, that you were following my mental calculations during the exam, and that it would be dangerous for you to produce a perfect set of answers."

"I thought that, too."

"You did the right thing, as you have always done in the past. You must avoid drawing attention to yourself and your abilities. We must all put our abilities to the common good, and not seek any personal benefit."

"How will I find other people who have these special abilities?"

"They will find you, as I have," replied the teacher.

"How is it I can do these things."

"You are old enough now to be told. Your special powers have been given to you so that you can help the beings that inhabit this planet to thrive – to do well and to avoid evil. It is difficult to explain, but your powers come from another world, as inhabitants of this planet would have it. We are not extra-terrestrial beings. We are not, in that sense, 'beings' at all. We have no form, no shape, no life of our own, and no home elsewhere in the universe. People here believe that any extra-terrestrial 'life' would have to be in a form they know and would recognise. But we are not. We are simply an all-pervading intelligence. And we are universal. We have no physical presence, but adapt to the physical form of others. In some cases, it is micro-biological life deep in the frozen wastes of planets distant from this one, which we seek to help to develop. In others, we can assist the survival of life forms on planets long thought, by those on earth, to be dead. We are a power, and nothing else, and we permeate the universe, going at will where we believe we can help physical life to develop. On this planet, where we have had a presence for several millennia, we strive to combat the natural violence and evil which is endemic in its human and other life forms. It begins to seem however, after all this time, like an impossible task. But we continue to hope, and now work by implanting our intelligence into some of the very young inhabitants who we believe to be most likely

to respond in the way we wish. You are but one of those chosen. It is to be hoped that you will succeed where others have failed."

"Tell me about some of these people," demanded Christian. "Give some examples of the successes and failures,"

"You will know of those in history who have succeeded in bringing peace to this world, and those who, on the other hand, have sought to use their power for their own benefit. But we choose our proxies carefully, although not always successfully. Some we should have selected have passed us by, while others have been defeated in their efforts, in spite of our best endeavours, because of the combined forces of evil brought against them. As an example, some two thousand years ago, we tried to bring peace to the Middle East and to the whole of mankind. Some will say we failed, although the man chosen has left behind a lasting legacy, and is still worshipped in churches throughout the planet. He remains, however, a figure of controversy, as you will know."

"He died a terrible death."

"But his spirit lives on."

"Can I talk to you again, sir?"

"Of course. But privately, not in public."

"Thank you, sir. I often feel quite lonely," admitted Christian. "Not being able to share what I can do."

"That's natural, but you are coping well so far."

"May I show you something sir? Something I have discovered?"

"Go ahead, please."

"Could you please give me the light bulb from your desk lamp, sir?"

The man frowned, puzzled, but unscrewed it and handed it to Christian.

It immediately lit up.

"I have never seen that done before!" the man grinned.

Christian put it down on the man's desk, and immediately picked it up again. This time, it did not light.

"I can do it or not do it, as I like. If I think about it, it happens. Like everything else. It only works when I want it to."

"The power of thought," said the teacher. "That's the secret of our abilities."

"But what possible use can that be?" asked Christian.

"I don't know, boy. Perhaps no use at all. Time will tell."

"Perhaps I should join a circus or something, when I leave school."

"Others will guide you later," said the teacher. "For now, I simply wanted to reassure you that you are not alone."

"Thank you, sir. I feel a bit better about things already." He stood to leave.

"Before you go, I must warn you of one thing. Next term, you will start learning French. Your teacher is French. It is her native tongue. You will be able, almost like a computer, to download her memory into your own, and immediately be able to speak her language as well as if it was your own. Be very careful not to draw attention to your ability. That's all." He waved the boy away.

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"Come in, Luke." It was his manager.

Christian went on to the spacious office of his boss at the bank where he had been working for some years – since he had left school, in fact.

"I won't beat about the bush," said the man. He waved to the chair facing him on the other side of his desk. "Sit."

Hardly friendly, thought Christian. He guessed what was coming, and looked around at the other people present. Nobody he recognised, although he could tell who were in the police.

"You know that we have had several serious losses of cash in this branch in recent years," said the man. A statement, not a question. "Well over a million pounds, now."

"I had heard," said Christian.

"Other banks in the county have been reporting the same thing."

Christian nodded. He had heard about that, too.

"The odd thing," said the man, "is that these losses only started when you joined the bank."

"As you say - 'odd'."

"We have had a widespread and thorough investigation, in conjunction with the police – fraud squad and everything. Us and all the other banks."

"And?"

"And you are the only common denominator."

"So you think I'm stealing millions of pounds, do you?"

"We have no evidence to suggest that, I must confess, and no idea how the money is disappearing." said the man. "We've looked carefully at your bank accounts, and not just at this bank, either. It's just odd, that's all."

"We've also looked carefully at your lifestyle," said another man, who Christian knew was from the police.

"So?" asked Christian.

"So we have no evidence," admitted his manager. "But I - *we* - wanted to warn you, in case in some mysterious way you do have anything to do with these massive losses, that we shall be keeping a very careful watch on you and everything you do form now on."

"Thanks for the warning," said Christian, standing up without being asked.

His manager waved him away.

As he left the office, the psychoanalyst who had been present shrugged. "Cool as a cucumber," she said. "No trace of guilt, or even interest, so far as I could tell."

They all agreed that it was 'odd'.

Christian, however, was more than angry. To be summoned like that was an indignity he could have done without. Others in the bank, including the few friends

he had been able to make, all knew that he was under suspicion, in spite of the fact that there was not a shred of evidence to connect him with the huge losses of cash.

He had made sure of that.

What the banks had lost, they could afford. Never mind the investors and their huge dividends, just look at the bonuses the banks' top people all got every year, whether they deserved them or not! The charities he had chosen, however, were doing great work with his donations. Medical research was benefitting, deprived children, hospices – all of them. His mission, as he understood it, was to benefit people as best he could. He had been told more than once that he should use his extraordinary powers to help other people and not to help himself. Well! That's what he was doing. And that's what he would continue to do.

The odd bit he had kept for himself was neither here nor there, he thought. They obviously knew nothing of his deposits of gold in China or his hoard of diamonds in Africa. How could they?

But he decided that perhaps he should be a bit more careful in the future. Perhaps find other ways of benefitting society rather than simply robbing his employers. But he would have one last, massive raid, first.

Until now, he had used his unique powers to develop a technique that allowed him simply to enter a locked building and its vault, without setting off the alarm, fill his bag with as much as it would hold in high value notes – not bonds – and walk out again when he could see that the coast was clear.

This time, he would be bolder.

Since 'the toy box', he had known he could get into and out of places with ease, and now he knew that he could take things in with him – briefcases, back packs and so on. But they were limited in size.

So why not drive in?

That's what he would do. Load the vehicle with gold bars, rather than take a meagre suitcase full of notes.

He hired a four-by-four. He knew exactly which bank to hit.

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Nothing had gone well, that night.

Christian's powers were obviously, as he had just discovered, not transferrable.

The Range Rover had not simply slipped through the fortified walls of the bank into its re-enforced vaults and the alarmed, steel cavern which held the bullion. He, Christian, could have simply walked in, the same way that he had reached for the toy train in Tim's' toy box, or the box of felt-tipped pens in the nursery school.

Not this time.

The fact that he was driving the vehicle apparently made it different. It smashed into the building, and smashed Christian with it.

Effectively, he was 'DOA' when they eventually got him to hospital. Physically, anyway. The surgeon in A&E peered down at him, under the glare of the operating theatre lights.

He said nothing. Christian would not have heard him if he had spoken. His physical presence at an end.

But he knew that the man with the mask over his face and the surgical skull-cap covering his head was communicating with him. He had similar powers.

"There's nothing I can do for you," he told Christian. "You've gone too far this time."

"I know," Christian conveyed back to him. "But I meant well."

"Like China and Africa? You've missed the whole point. You're not here for your benefit, but to benefit others; that's the point."

As a human being, Christian was dead.

"I suppose this is better than crucifixion."

"At least your spirit will live on, as it has before."

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The cremation was three days later. There were only a few people there: Mary and Jo, his mother and father, two friends, Peter and John, his old maths teacher and the surgeon. The curtain closed on an empty coffin.

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8 - DON'T BANK ON IT

Pierre Gustave never had sufficient cash to allow him to live the life he craved. He had a reasonable job, but it didn't pay half enough to support his life style, so he was always in debt.

His job was certainly secure, but living in Switzerland was expensive at the best of times, and his salary hadn't by any means kept up with inflation. The rent for his flat cost the earth and he refused to move to a more modest apartment, for fear of what his elegant friends would think. There were cheaper places to eat out, too, but he much preferred good restaurants to fast food chains. So did his friends. And he liked bespoke shirts and jackets, rather than the cheaper clothing mass produced in the third world.

This is why he was always in debt. On all his credit cards. He took care not to be too overdrawn on his bank account, though. That was another of his problems. He worked at the bank as a junior manager. There he sat, day after day, surrounded by millions and millions of Swiss Francs, with no way of getting at them. It was all too frustrating.

He had spent many hours trying to devise a way of getting at some of the bank's reserves, but of course it was impossible. Simply raiding the till would be of no use at all. He needed to raid the safe or the vaults. That way he could clear his

debts and clear the country to start again somewhere else. Somewhere far away, perhaps somewhere a bit warmer, too. Spain would be too close, but one of the smaller islands in the Caribbean would be nice and relatively safe, he thought. But he could only dream.

Until one day when, quite by chance, a possible solution to all his problems presented itself.

***

The bank had many dead accounts. Accounts which had been opened many years ago, and left untouched, abandoned, forgotten, lost, dormant, perhaps homes for laundered money, now too hot to touch – whatever the reason, the money just sat there, doing nothing. The bank had a policy that, after fiteen years without activity or contact with the depositor, the money was frozen while efforts were made to trace the account's original holder. Other banks started that process after ten years, but this was Switzerland, so it had to be different. According to reports, there was a sea of unclaimed assets sloshing around the financial system, very conservatively estimated to be worth 112 billion Swiss Francs! Some of that was in his bank.

In nearly every case, family members were quickly traced, and found to be unaware that they were entitled to collect unclaimed assets owned by deceased relatives. But Pierre Gustave had been put in charge of a case which was now subject to this research by his bank, where it appeared that there were no heirs to the fortune. And when that happened, after legal notices had appeared in all the proper places with no result, the money went to the State.

Now, that was a real waste. Pierre could think of a far better home for it, if only he could devise a way of getting at it.

The account in question had been opened by a man in Hong Kong. Pierre looked it up. Ah, yes! A civil engineer of some prominence by the name of Ronald Twyman, an Englishman who had been working in Hong Kong for many years. According to the papers on the account's file, he had been involved in running many major projects including building the Metro system. The man had died suddenly, and no-one had come forward at the time. The company he had worked for had no record of any next of kin, and apparently none of his colleagues knew of any. Ronald Twyman was therefore buried in Hong Kong, and the bank into which his salary and allowances were paid, froze his assets. These appeared to be considerable, as they were in Switzerland, where he had made many wise and very lucrative investments. He had another extensive portfolio of investments in Hong Kong, as well as cash. The Hong Kong bank, which Pierre had contacted, had transferred their holding of the man's fortune after ten years, and his dormant account had been closed. He had also contacted Twymans' former employer, but, like the bank, they had not been approached by anyone since he had died claiming to know or be related to the man.

He appeared to have been alone in the world.

Now the fifteen years was up in Switzerland, and Pierre Gustave had been given the job of closing the man's Swiss account, one way or the other.

He set about inventing an heir to Twyman's fortune.

***

For some years, Pierre had taken an interest in genealogy and had managed to trace his own family back almost 300 years, until he came up against a dead-end. He tried every avenue he could think of to discover his missing ancestor, but eventually gave up and admitted defeat. But he had learnt enough to know how to carry out the research, mainly using the specialist 'family history' web-sites on the internet.

Now he looked up Ronald Twyman. Before long, he had traced his date and place of birth, and both his parents. He now had two branches of Twyman's family to explore. His father's side looked the more promising, since he had both a brother and a sister. It was Ronald Twyman's aunt who attracted his attention, since, if she had married, her surname would cease to be Twyman. Indeed she had married, he discovered, and he was eventually able to trace a daughter of hers. It took some time – longer than he had hoped – but finally he was able to work out who the daughter had married and look up the names of their children, a boy and a girl. Second cousins, that's what they were, and that's just what Pierre had been hoping to find. Distant relations who had probably never met Ronald or even knew that he had once existed, let alone that he had died. He was not bothered about the girl, Sheila Goodwin, as a bit more research had revealed that her brother, Dillon, lived in a small village in Surrey, where his young daughter had recently been baptised. This was looking good. The chances were that Dillon and his wife needed a bit of cash, to help with a mortgage and a young daughter, living, as they did, in a small rural community.

He wrote to Dillon, to offer a substantial sum of money from his unknown relative's estate. Pierre was not about to part with all of it, but at least if he was caught out, he could claim some legitimacy by having found a living relative of Ronald Twyman.

***

Neither Dillon Goodwin nor his wife Sarah knew anybody in Switzerland, so they were intrigued to receive an air-mail letter in an envelope bearing a Swiss stamp. They were even more mystified when they read the letter. It was addressed to Dillon from a chap named Pierre Gustave, who gave his phone number and an e-mail address, but no postal address. It read:

"Dear Mr Goodwin,

Allow me to introduce myself. I am Pierre Gustave, and I am a manager in one of the oldest and most respected private banks in Geneva. Part of my responsibilities includes settling what we call 'dormant accounts', which are accounts held in this bank which have seen no activity for fifteen years. Unless it proves possible to identify the owner of such an account or, in the case of their death, a surviving next of kin, then the value of the account is handed to the Swiss State Treasury.

One of the accounts which I am presently dealing with is proving particularly difficult, which is why I am writing to you privately rather than officially. I would ask you to respect this privacy and confidentiality, and to keep the contents of this letter secret between us, since no one else is aware that I am contacting you in this way.

The account in question was opened by a Mr Ronald Twyman, who was a prominent civil engineer working for some time in Hong Kong, where he died apparently intestate and with no known relatives. This bank holds a very considerable sum in his name, in both investments and cash. Similar holdings were deposited with the Hong Kong branch of BEA Investments UK Ltd, but regrettably their policy is to close dormant accounts within ten years of them becoming inactive. They have confirmed to me that Mr Twyman's account was disposed of in accordance with their stated policy, after they also failed to trace any possible beneficiary.

My own researches have similarly failed, except that I believe that there is a very remote possibility that you may be a distant, far removed, ancestor. Since I have exclusive access to the papers relating to Mr Twyman's affairs, I am in a position to nominate you as the sole beneficiary. I similarly have the power and authority to decide that no such person can be traced, and to transfer Mr Twyman's estate to the Swiss Treasury.

What I therefore propose is that, if you agree to be so nominated, we should divide the estate between us. Should you be prepared to co-operate in this way, I shall arrange for the electronic transfer of what will become your portion of the estate from my bank to your own, and report the satisfactory outcome of my research to my senior partners. All I shall require from you is your bank's sort code and your account number. If, on the other hand, you decide against my proposal, then I shall have no alternative but to declare to my senior partners that my searches have been unsuccessful, and arrange the transfer of the entire estate to my Government in line with my bank's stated policy.

You will see why I have chosen to contact you privately rather than officially at this stage. I ask you to be good enough to observe the confidentiality for which I have asked, and to contact me personally at my home either by telephone or by e-mail with your decision, if possible within the next few days.

Finally, I should tell you that the amount which could be transferred to your UK bank, should you agree to my proposal that you should be nominated as the only surviving, if distant, relative of Mr Ronald Twyman, amounts to some 4.5 million pounds sterling.

I look forward to hearing from you soon, hopefully with a positive response."

When he returned home from posting the letter, Pierre Gustave got on the internet and looked up the Turks and Caicos Islands.

***

Neither Dillon nor his wife Sarah could believe what they had read. So they read it again, several times.

"This must be a hoax!" exclaimed Sarah.

"Or some kind of scam," said Dillon.

"Perhaps whoever it is will simply take what little there is from our account, once he's got the details of our bank."

"I don't think he could do that, without passwords and Pin numbers and so on," replied Dillon. "And in any case, if he could, he'd be more than welcome to our overdraft!"

"Just think what we could do with a few million pounds," said Sarah.

The more they thought about it, the more tempted they were to accept the offer.

"He doesn't even say what Bank he works for," observed Sarah.

"I can understand that," replied Dillon. "He doesn't want us checking up on him. But he does give the name of an investment company. I'll look them up on the internet."

"They exist, all right", he announced later. "Head Office in Bloomsbury Square, in London, and a branch in China - Hong Kong's in China now."

"Perhaps it's not a scam, after all."

"I wonder?"

"As a matter of interest", asked Sarah, "do you remember any relations called Twyman?"

"Not off-hand," replied Dillon, thoughtfully. "Although I do vaguely remember someone once mentioning a distant second Uncle or something, who was doing awfully well abroad somewhere."

"So perhaps you are entitled to the estate," said an excited Sarah. "If you are, you could collect all of it, or at least a lot more than half!"

"Doubt it," replied Dillon. "Apart from my estranged sister, I've got loads of Aunts and Uncles and cousins all over the place, so if I am related to this Mr Twyman, we'd be at the bottom of the list and be lucky to get anything at all."

Sarah thought for a minute.

"If you're right, and the Gustave man knows about all your other relations, then he's really been quite clever to offer you what he has."

"Very clever, in fact," agreed Dillon. "Very tempting, too."

"What have we to lose?" queried Sarah.

"We need to think carefully about this," said a serious Dillon. "If this bloke is up to no good, then we don't want to help him commit some sort of crime. We'd be accessories, or something, and end up in trouble ourselves."

"Only if he was caught, by some means."

"Or if we were. How would we explain our sudden wealth?"

"We could say we won the Euro-lottery or something. Nobody would know."

"We need to think carefully about this," said Dillon again.

The more they thought, the more tempted they were, not least because they could think of no very good reason for not taking the money. They certainly needed it, and there seemed to be no risk attached to accepting the offer.

"If we do accept, and if we do get the money, perhaps we should open a separate bank account in a different bank for it to be transferred into. Then our existing account would never be at risk."

"That's a good idea," said Dillon. "If nothing happens, we could always shut the new one, and go on as normal, as if nothing had happened. If we don't get the money, I mean."

"That sounds safe enough," agreed Sarah.

"Before we do anything, we should check with the bank security people - just in case. Then, to be doubly sure, we can open another account somewhere else. Perhaps in Guildford or Dorking."

"If we do contact the man, will you ring him or send him an e-mail?"

"Talk to him on the phone, I think, but it might be a good idea if I have a word with Uncle Stanley first, as well as the bank."

"I wonder how this man got our address."

"Electoral register, probably. He's obviously quite a clever chap, but I don't want to give him our e-mail address as well. E-mails can be traced, but there's no record of phone calls."

The phone call between Dillon and Pierre was long and profitable.

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Pierre Gustave wasted no time. As soon as he was sure that his share of the legacy was in the special account he had opened, he resigned from the bank. Pierre had certified that the Twyman account could be closed as no living relative could be traced and no Last Will and Testament could be found, in Switzerland or in Hong Kong, and had arranged for the money to be passed to the Swiss Treasury. It amounted to just over 13 million Swiss Francs. Pierre had effectively robbed the bank of about £9 million.

It was some eighteen months after he had left that the auditors began to wonder how the bank had managed to give so much more to the Exchequer than they should have done, but had been unable to discover how the error had occurred.

He had settled quite well into his new life in the Turks and Caicos Islands. They drove on the left, since it was a British Overseas Territory, but they used US dollars as their currency, and there was no income tax or any other form of direct taxation. As for the weather – well! It was warm all the year round! For the first time in his life, he had enough cash to live the life he had always craved, without getting into debt.

He had a very smart apartment overlooking the sea, which rolled onto a golden beach below, and a reasonable job in the Grace Bay office of the Scotia Bank in Providenciales, who were delighted to recruit a Swiss banker who came with such an excellent reference. Altogether, his life style was just as he had dreamed, but with no financial worries. The bulk of his money had been deposited in a different bank, the Grace Bay branch of the FirstCaribbean International Bank not far from his own office, rather than arouse suspicion where he worked.

A playground for the rich, the islands' economy relied heavily on tourists, who were mostly American. So the bank was always busy, and, more to the point, there were always plenty of new and wealthy people for Pierre to meet and socialise with in the expensive bars and restaurants he frequented. One evening, sitting at a beach-side bar with a quiet cocktail before dinner – Lobster, he rather fancied tonight – he noticed a young couple a few tables away. Most of the wealthy tourists he met were older than that. He took no more notice of them, until they suddenly appeared at his side. They each drew up a chair, and sat at his table, one either side of him.

"Are you Monsieur Gustave?" asked the man.

"I am," responded Pierre with a smile, flattered to have been recognised.

"Pierre Gustave?" asked the man again.

"That's me. But I don't think we've met before, have we?"

"No. But if you once worked as a junior manager in a large private bank in Geneva, then we have spoken before."

Suddenly, Pierre Gustave lost his smile, and frowned. A cold shiver went down his spine, in spite of the heat.

"Let me introduce my wife, Sarah," said the man. Pierre stood politely, and shook her hand solemnly. "And I am Dillon," the man continued. "Dillon Goodwin."

Pierre sat down again, ashen faced.

"How on earth did you trace me here? How did you find me?" he asked quietly.

"You were not to know this at the time, of course, but I have an Uncle who works at Interpol's Central National Bureau in London. That's my uncle over there, leaning against the bar." Dillon thumbed towards him. "One of the two men with him is from the London sub-bureau of Interpol, based here in Turks and Caicos, and the other is from the Swiss Federal Police in Berne."

Gustave slumped into his chair. "What do you want of me?"

"You owe us something over four million pounds," said Dillon. "We've come to collect."

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9 - LOCAL TIME

Albert Ainsley had been wandering around like a lost soul for a few weeks now.

Since his wife had died.

He simply hadn't been able to come to terms with the fact that he was now on his own. Very much on his own, in fact. They had had no children, and made few friends. His wife had a brother, Stan, who lived in Australia, but they rarely got in touch. She simply couldn't stand the man, and Albert hadn't taken to him, either, on the few occasions they had met. Not that it mattered. He had died himself,

suddenly, five months or so ago. They had a letter from his solicitor in Perth, telling them.

And now the man's sister, Albert's wife, had gone, too.

Julie's funeral had been a quiet affair. They had been on nodding terms with quite a few people in the village, but had not made any real friends in spite of the fact that they had lived there all their married life. So there weren't many people in the congregation. The vicar, who Albert was ashamed to realise they hardly knew, was very good, and said some nice things about Julie. And it was a lovely old church. Quiet and peaceful, as churches should be, part of it dating back to Norman times, so it was said. It was small, and quite in keeping with the village. It had a huge Yew tree just inside the wicket gate, and a winding gravel path leading past a few old tombstones to the chancel door.

But that was three weeks ago.

Now Albert had resolved to pull himself together, and get on with life, such as it was without Julie. They had decided before she died that their present place was getting too big for them, and had been looking around for something smaller. They wanted to stay in the same village if they could. They had always lived there, and got used to it. They rarely left the place, as a matter of fact. Why should they? It had everything they needed. Shops, a pub, buses to Chelmsford, a nice church, post office, and a bank which opened three days a week. Everything, really.

So they had been planning on getting a cottage, on the other side of the village. Near the stream it was, but it had never flooded, otherwise they would have looked for something else. Nice place, about the same age as their present house, but with only two bedrooms and a smaller garden, which Albert could manage without too much trouble. Their offer had already been accepted when Julie was taken ill, and Albert had now decided to move anyway. A new place, and a new start, that's what he needed. And he was sure he could afford it. Although he had only ever worked on Mr. Boutle's farm, he had a decent pension. Enough, anyway.

It would be a few weeks yet before the formalities could be completed, which suited him fine, since it gave him time to pack up. He had made a start with black sacks. Clothing and stuff like that - you know. He had decided what furniture to keep, and what to sell, if anyone wanted it.

He had even made a start clearing out the loft. God, the dust! Things up there he had quite forgotten about – why on earth they kept it all, he couldn't imagine. Perhaps everyone had an attic like that.

It was while he was up there that he had come across a pile of old letters from Julie's brother in Australia, tied up with a bit of string. He was surprised to find them. Given that Julie had no time for brother Stan, he couldn't understand why she had kept the few letters he had written to her. But there they were. He did wonder for a moment if the stamps might be worth anything, but then decided he couldn't be bothered to find out. At the top of the pile were the letters from Stan's solicitor. He'd never read them, but did remember Julie saying something about Stan leaving her some property or other if she wanted to go out there to claim it. She didn't want to, and had told the solicitor. She wasn't going out there to claim some old tin shack

in the outback, or for the funeral, either, come to that. All that way – not likely! They had passports, of course, in case they ever decided to get the train under the tunnel for a day in France. But they never had. They never bothered with holidays, not since they had gone by coach to Bournemouth for week, when it rained every day.

Albert decided it might be worth reading the letters, at least those from Stan's solicitor, so he dropped them through the hatch on to the landing below with everything else. He'd needed a bath after all that dust, then had to get himself something to eat and as always, that seemed to take forever. Never done much cooking, to be honest, and he wasn't very good at it. But at least he tried now, although he hadn't at first. Then there was football on the tele, so by the time he got round to it, it was quite late, and he didn't feel like reading old letters. He put them to one side.

***

It was Sunday before he remembered them again, and started to thumb through them out of curiosity. He didn't bother reading the letters from Stan. Although he didn't like the man, he would still have felt guilty about doing that – almost prying, since they weren't addressed to him. Not that Julie would have minded if she'd been here. But he did read the ones from the solicitor, in Perth. There were only two. The first one announced, with great regret and heartfelt sympathy, that Stan had passed away. He, the solicitor had no record of any other surviving relative, so would Mrs Ainsley be attending the funeral? Funds were available from Stan's estate to pay for the fares and other expenses involved, and he, the solicitor, would welcome meeting her to go through the terms of Stan's last will and testament, in which she was the main beneficiary.

There wasn't a copy of Julie's reply. They didn't have a computer or anything like that, so it would have been hand written, but he knew roughly what she had said, because they had talked about it and agreed not to go. It was too far just for a funeral, and whatever Stan had left them they didn't need, so the solicitor could give it to charity or something. Words to that effect, anyway. The solicitor had replied and, according to Julie, quite understood.

Albert thought it looked a long letter, when he took it out of the envelope, just to say that. As he read it, he soon realised that there was much more to it than Julie had said.

The solicitor, a Mr Herrington, from St. George's Terrace, Perth, had made all the funeral arrangements as requested, and had attended on her behalf with about a dozen others, who, like Mr Herrington, were also close friends of Stan's. He said it had been a dignified event. He then went on to talk about Stan's Will. It seemed that Stan had been involved in mining, and had lived in a rented apartment in Perth while he was there, or at the site of the mine in the Kimberley region up north, where he had a small house. Albert didn't know that. Stan apparently owned a large holding of shares in a small mining company, of which he was a Director. The mine, which produced diamonds and a small quantity of gold, was near the huge Argyle diamond mine. Albert didn't know that, either. Stan had bequeathed his whole

estate, after taxes and funeral expenses, to Julie, and Mr Herrington was obviously surprised that she had shown no interest in claiming it. He would happily provide her with the fullest possible details if she wanted to change her mind.

And there was still time, as Mr Herrington pointed out, since her brother had thoughtfully allowed six months during which Julie could make all the necessary travel arrangements and get out there to claim her inheritance. After that, the estate would pass mainly to Mr Herrington himself, who was a long-time friend, but with a share also going to charity. To register her claim, Julie would need to report to Mr Herrington's office to sign papers and so on, by mid-day local time six months from the day of her brother's death – i.e. October 20th.

Albert looked at his watch.

It was the 16th.

Sunday.

What had Julie been thinking about, rejecting all that? Why had she not told him? They could have gone. There had been precious little adventure or excitement in their lives, and little spare cash either to be honest, since he was little more than a farm labourer, but this would have been a golden opportunity to get away from their happy, if monotonous life, and perhaps come back with something to spend on a few luxuries. Too late now though, he thought ruefully.

Or was it?

It was just possible, he thought, with Julie's death, that Stan's wealth had passed to him. She had after all left him everything she possessed, such as it was. Perhaps he, Albert, now owned shares in a diamond mine and a house in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.

He looked at his watch again.

Four days.

Thursday, he would have to be there.

He would get up early tomorrow, and see what his solicitor thought. If it had all passed to him, it would be a nice trip, and there really was no reason for him not to go. The dog had died last year, and the garden wouldn't need watering, not in October.

So he could go.

Cancel the papers and tell the estate agent, that's all he would have to do.

***

It could never be said that the solicitor in the village was a busy man. It wasn't that sort of village. So although Albert didn't have an appointment, he was able to see Mr Smithers almost straight away. He showed him the letters from Perth, and Mr Smithers was able to confirm that the Kimberley mine was now, subject to the necessary papers being signed and so on, Albert's. If he should be so minded as to visit Australia to claim his newfound inheritance, he, Mr Ainsley, would need to take no end of documentation with him, like proof of identity, death certificates, copies of

Julie's will, probate forms etc, etc, which he, Mr Smithers, would be happy to put together for him, for a small fee of course.

Mr Ainsley was of a mind to go, he decided.

There was a sort of travel agent at the back of the Post Office shop, mostly doing package holidays and the odd coach trip to Southend – that sort of travel agent. But Albert knew they had a computer, installed since the trip to Bournemouth, so he walked down the street and across the Square to see if they could do Australia. Apparently, given time, they could.

"I don't have much time, that's the problem," explained Mr Ainsley. "I have to be in Perth in three days," he added.

"Ah," said the lady with her grey hair in a bun. "Three days, eh?"

"That's all," replied Albert. "That's Thursday. Can it be done?"

The woman sucked her teeth, and started typing on her computer.

"I have a passport," added Albert helpfully. "If I can find it."

"That's a good start," replied the travel agent lady.

"How long will it take?" asked Albert.

"When can you leave?" asked the woman, by way of a reply.

"Anytime, really," replied Albert. "I only have to cancel the papers." He nodded towards the counter on the other side of the shop.

"Well, according to this," she tapped her computer screen, "according to this, it takes about 24 hours, depending on which airline you use."

"It's the same distance however I go, isn't it?"

"Of course," replied the lady. "But some airlines go by a different route from others, and on some – most in fact – you have to change aircraft somewhere."

The woman stared at her screen in silence.

"Would you mind changing your flight in Dubai?" she asked.

"Where's that?"

"Middle East, somewhere. Or you could change in Singapore."

"Singapore," decided Albert, who had heard of that.

"In that case," she said, "I can probably get you a seat on a flight tomorrow evening from Heathrow, changing in Singapore. There's a four hour wait there, so you should catch the connection without any trouble."

"So when do I get to Perth?"

"About two o'clock on Thursday morning, if all goes well," she replied.

"Anything earlier?" asked Albert. "What about tomorrow morning?"

"According to this," she tapped her screen again, "according to this, the morning flight is full."

"Put my name down for the evening one then, please," instructed Mr Ainsley. "How much is it by the way?"

"Well, if I were you, I'd go business class," she advised. "Much more comfortable on a long journey, and better food too. Especially as you haven't done much travelling."

"Actually, I've never been anywhere before, on an aeroplane" he admitted.

"In that case, I would definitely go business class," she nodded persuasively. She told him how much.

"I'll just nip over to the bank, and be back in a minute," he told her.

Fortunately, the local branch was open that morning – it didn't open every day – and the manager was free when Albert called.

He explained his problem, showed the manager the letters from the Perth solicitor, and asked for a short-term loan to cover his immediate expenses until he got his diamond mine. He thought £5,000 would do, for the airfare and a hotel for a couple of nights. The manager agreed, told him the interest rate, took copies of the letters from Perth and made Mr Ainsley sign no end of papers, after which Albert hurried back across the Square to confirm his booking.

The kindly lady with the bun, realising that Mr Ainsley was quite new to all this, explained how to get to London's Heathrow airport, that he needed to be in terminal five at least two hours before take-off, and that he would have to collect his ticket from the airline desk. This was already beginning to look like a major challenge for Mr Ainsley, who began to wonder if it was really worth all the trouble and the rush. There had never been much of a rush on the farm, even at lambing.

He decided he really should have a word with the solicitor in Perth next, and eventually got through to Mr Herrington, who, it seemed, was just about to go home. Mr Ainsley thought it an odd time to be going home, but put it down to being in Australia. In the end, they had a long conversation, and all the while Mr Ainsley was worried about what his next telephone bill would look like. But Mr Herrington agreed that the mine was now his, subject to satisfactorily proving his identity and signing all the necessary papers before the deadline. He looked forward to meeting Mr Ainsley on Wednesday he said, and hung up.

"Er, hang on a minute – it's Thursday," protested Albert, but the line was dead. He dared not ring back because of the cost, and was sure Thursday was what the man meant anyway.

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Albert Ainsley packed his suitcase, an old leather thing that hadn't been used since Bournemouth, and realised he had no real idea what the weather was like in Australia. He hoped for the best, taking a couple of pullovers in case October was cold like it was here, and crammed in a short telescopic umbrella for good measure.

The airport was a nightmare. Queues of people everywhere, loudspeakers giving instructions, TV screens with arrival and departure information, baggage check-in, immigration, searches for guns – everything. He even had to take his shoes off, and the belt on his trousers set off the alarm. Everyone looked. And he seemed to spend hours hanging around, waiting. He looked at the shops, but didn't buy anything. There was nothing he wanted that he couldn't get in the village at home.

But at least the flight was comfortable, if long and boring. He had a good meal with a little bottle of wine for dinner, dozed while trying to watch a film on the

tiny TV in the seat in front of him – what would they think of next, he wondered? – and was then woken up for breakfast.

Singapore smelt different, somehow, from England. Perhaps it was the orchids. He wished he could buy some for Julie. He hadn't realised how much he missed her, but now he was a long way from home and even more alone than he had been recently, away from his familiar surroundings. He spent rather longer in Singapore than he should have, as his plane to Perth was delayed, in the end by several hours. Albert Ainsley was getting very tired and cross and bored. He was also getting a bit worried that he would miss his Australian deadline. He wasn't very good at working out things like that, but he thought he should still be in Mr Herrington's office in good time.

Eventually, he got airborne again, only to be served another dinner, and then, almost immediately it seemed to him, breakfast again.

At last, he landed in Perth, and although it was not yet mid-day, the heat was stifling. Nobody had told him it would be early summer when he got there. But his hotel room was air conditioned, and so was the taxi to Mr Herrington's office, where he arrived just after lunch. According to his watch, which he had kept on Essex time, he had six hours to spare before the mid-day deadline. What a relief!

Mr Herrington greeted him warmly, and offered him coffee in his air-conditioned office. Albert felt a bit out of place – and hot - in his old and rather worn tweed suit.

"Sorry I'm a bit later than I thought, but my aeroplane was delayed in Singapore," he explained.

"Such a pity," said Mr Herrington.

"Anyway," said Mr Ainsley, enthusiastically, "Tell me about the mine and about Kimberley."

"Well certainly, if you would like me to," said Mr Herrington. "It's way to the north of here, and the best way of getting to it is by air. It's about a four day drive, otherwise, with stops. The whole area is bigger than Japan, and much bigger than the UK, but only about 25,000 people live there. There's one decent road, and only three towns with more than 2,000 people living in them. The Argyle mine up there produces about a third of the world's diamonds, and what used to be your brother-in-law's mine is in the same area. There's a bit of cattle farming, some agriculture based on the Ord River irrigation system, and a few people still work for gold, although the gold rush at the end of the last century didn't really last long. And that's about it, really. If you're thinking of visiting, you'll need a proper guide and plenty of emergency supplies, especially water. It's pretty hostile up there."

"It sounds awful," commented Mr Ainsley, "but I suppose I should take a look at it all before I decide what to do with it, especially if I'm now a director of the mining company."

"Ah," said the Solicitor. "I'm afraid you are not a director of the mining company, Mr Ainsley."

"But I thought my brother in law was a director, and had a large shareholding, as well as a house of some sort up there."

"So he did," agreed Mr Herrington. "But I'm sorry to say that none of that has passed to you."

"What do you mean? It all passed to my wife – I have your letter, telling her – and when she died, her whole estate passed to me. So it must all be mine," protested Albert.

"I'm afraid not, Mr Ainsley," replied the solicitor. "You will recall from my letter, which I see you have with you, that your brother in law set a timetable in his will during which your wife should lay claim to his estate. She initially chose not to claim it. I have her letter here saying that she had no interest in it, and that, furthermore, she had no intention of attending his funeral either."

"I know that," agreed Albert. "We discussed it. But now she has sadly died and I have inherited her estate, I am here to claim what she didn't want. Why else do you think I've come all this way?"

"I understand that," said Mr Herrington, "but I am sorry to say that you have missed the deadline which was set."

"No I haven't," declared Albert, getting cross. "The deadline, according to your letter, is today at mid-day."

"Quite so," agreed the solicitor.

"And according to my watch," protested Albert, tapping the ancient instrument with his finger, "I have about six hours to go."

"The deadline," argued Mr Herrington, "if you look at my letter, is mid-day today, local time."

"Exactly." Mr Ainsley was getting quite hot under the collar, what with his tweed suit and the heat. "Exactly," he repeated, "and it is only six o'clock in the morning local time in England, so I am well within the deadline."

"I am sorry to have to tell you, Mr Ainsley, that 'local time' refers to local time here in Perth, not in England. We are eight hours ahead of you here, so the deadline expired here at four o'clock this morning. That's why," explained the solicitor, "I was expecting to see you yesterday. Wednesday, not Thursday."

Albert slumped into his chair. He couldn't work this out at all. Where he lived, it wasn't even today yet, not properly.

"Such a pity," repeated Mr Herrington.

"Do you really mean that I've come all this way for nothing," asked a distraught Mr Ainsley.

"I'm afraid you have had a wasted journey, my dear sir," he replied.

"Can nothing be done?" asked Albert.

"Nothing," said the solicitor. "Not even a court of law, at this late stage, can over-ride the conditions set in your brother in law's will. Such a pity."

"So what happens to my diamond mine," pleaded Mr Ainsley.

"It isn't your diamond mine," replied Mr Herrington, "and it never was. Under the terms of the will, it now belongs to me."

Albert Ainsley sat stunned for a few moments, in silence. Eventually, he levered himself from the chair in front of the solicitor's desk, and, without a word,

stumbled like the lost soul he was from the office, into the summer heat of downtown Perth.

As the door closed behind him, Herrington's secretary appeared from an adjoining office. The solicitor was mopping his brow, in spite of the air conditioning.

"That was close," he commented. "Too close for comfort."

"What happened?" the girl asked.

"That poor old pom had no idea what was going on, thank the Lord," he replied. "He hardly knew what day it was, let alone could he work out deadlines and time zone differences."

"What if the penny suddenly drops?" she asked. "What if he suddenly works out that he was right after all, and that he was in time to claim the mine? What then?"

"He won't. And anyway, by then it really will be too late," he replied looking at his watch. "It nearly is now."

"I couldn't face the thought of having to give up all that, after all this time," she said.

"We'd never be able to afford to pay back all we've taken from the company, anyway," said Herrington. "It makes me sweat just to think about it."

"Don't worry my darling," said the girl, putting her arms round his shoulders. "It was very clever of you to word that letter the way you did in the first place. It was so ambiguous, you could have argued about 'local time' for ever, if you needed to."

"Thanks to our friend, brother-in-law Stan, really," he admitted. "He always said they were just a couple of outback farmers, and that's certainly what he was. But I never thought either of them would ever turn up – not after her letter all those months ago."

The girl drew back a corner of the curtain and looked out of the office window.

Albert was a tragic figure standing across the street, looking total bemused and lost. She almost felt sorry for him, but dared not go out to comfort him.

Albert Ainsley was hot and tired and confused. What on earth was he doing here, in a strange city on the other side of the world? He must have been mad. He had ended up with no diamond mine and a debt of £5,000 he would now never be able to repay. He must have been quite mad.

Now all he wanted was to get home, to his familiar surroundings and the memories of his beloved Julie. He missed her terribly. She would never have let him come.

She had been right all along, of course.

But then she always was.

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10 - DOWN ON THE FARM

They met at University.

Oxford.

Henry Smith and Allan Wilberforce.

Started at the same time, doing the same degree course, attending the same lectures, living in Halls. Inevitable that they should meet, really. And when they did, there was an immediate rapport between them, although neither understood why. They just got on well together, that's all.

Truth be known, they were from quite different backgrounds. Henry Smith came from the East End of London, and sometimes it showed. Did ever so well at school though. Well enough to get to Oxford.

Allan Wilberforce, on the other hand, had gone to a good private school near his parents quite large home in the Surrey hills, and then to boarding school. In spite of distractions like trout fishing on the Hampshire chalk streams, a horse of his own in the paddock and a few years spent living abroad when his father's work took him there, he also did well at school. But he tended to keep quiet about his background, so as not to embarrass Henry, whose friendship he valued.

They started spending spare time together, what little there was of it. Pubs in the evening, the odd proper meal out, if you call burgers a proper meal – that sort of thing. But they couldn't eat out all the time. Their allowances wouldn't stretch to it for a start, and there was a limit to how much junk food you could take in any one day, however much you enjoyed hamburgers and pizzas. So they ate in Halls with the others in their first year. They both agreed to move out when they could though, and find a flat or some digs somewhere near their college. Everyone else did, so why not? They both had bikes, and everything was near everything else in Oxford, especially if you had a bike. So it didn't matter where, really.

Neither of them had much spare cash – students don't, what with small grants and big loans and all that. They both reckoned they would be in their thirties before they paid off their student loans. So they needed good degrees to get good jobs with good pay. That meant they had to work. Hard. Another reason why they didn't eat out a lot or spend much when they did. And in spite of his background and rather well-off parents, Allan was kept on a tight purse-string. His parents had decided that he had to learn the value of money, so refused to be forever putting their hands in their pockets to help him out. Like everyone else, Allan had to take a part-time job, when studies allowed, to help pay his way. So did Henry, who spent time at the weekends washing up at Alice's Tearoom, while Allan helped out behind the bar at The Wheatsheaf.

They both enjoyed their studies all right, but certainly not their lifestyle. They both missed home, even if for different reasons. Which is why they had decided to move into digs when they could after their first year, rather than stay in College accommodation. Up to a point, living in Halls was all right. They were at least able to eat in the dining room with other students when they wanted, even though it was expensive, but it reminded Allan too much of boarding school, which he had hated, and Henry didn't like it because he thought it must be like that in prison, judging by

what his uncle, who had first-hand experience, had once told him. So they opted for more freedom, in a 'place' of their own, however humble.

Their parents also thought it would do them good, even though they weren't paying for it. The fact was that neither of them had any real idea about how to look after themselves, because they'd never had to. So far as Allan was concerned, boarding school, and servants when they lived abroad, had all helped to make sure of that. And no matter how hard times had been for the family, Henry's Mum had always made sure that there was a warm home and a good meal ready for him whenever he had got home to his high-rise block of flats after school, or football, or whatever. But now he, too, was on his own, like a fish out of water.

They eventually found a small flat in a quieter part of Oxford, away from where most students lived. Not many had digs south of Folly Bridge, on the Abingdon Road, and yet it was still not a difficult bike ride for them to get to their college. It was also handy for where they both worked part-time. Not a lot needed to be done to make the flat habitable for the pair of them, which was just as well, as neither of them was much good at DIY. The flat had a small kitchen cum dining room, where they could boil an egg or heat up some soup when they were desperate, a tiny bedroom each, a bathroom and a telephone. What more could impoverished students ask?

However, the day they moved in, they decided not to celebrate by cooking for themselves, for fear of the consequences

"Chinese would be nice," said Henry. "Cheap and filling – specially made for penniless students."

"Sounds OK," agreed Allan. "Which one?"

"We've been to the 'Opium Den', and the Mongolian place next door, and they're not bad, but why don't we try the new 'Golden Wok' for a change. Someone said it's quite good."

There was a small bar tucked away in one corner at the front, from where they served drinks to those who wanted them – or could afford them, in the case of under-graduates – and the usual silk dragon prints hung on the walls. But the tables had real tablecloths on, rather than paper ones, and little vases with real freesias in them. The little Chinese ladies who were bustling about serving had spotless white uniforms on, too. Worryingly, it looked a good deal more expensive than they could afford, although in the end it wasn't. But Henry studied the menu closely, looking for the cheapest fried rice.

"I'll do the food," offered Allan in a sudden fit of generosity, "if you get the drinks. I fancy a Chinese beer, myself." Allan knew he could afford the meal, and that Henry really couldn't.

It was during that celebratory Crispy Duck that they decided they needed a break; to get away from Oxford during the vac. somewhere different for a change, rather than just go home. Trouble was, it would be winter then, and they could never afford to find the sun and warmth.

"We could go skiing," suggested Allan.

"We couldn't afford that, either," said Henry. "If we can afford Switzerland, we can afford Spain, where it's warmer."

"I didn't mean abroad. Scotland. They have snow in Scotland. We could go there."

"That sounds better." Henry cheered up. "I've heard of that. The Cairngorms, isn't it, with the snow?"

"There's a proper ski resort at Aviemore, with ski lifts and everything."

"We could find a B&B somewhere. We could afford that."

"Decision taken, then. A week on the slopes and we can still be home for Christmas."

"Just one problem," said Henry.

"What's that, then?"

"I can't ski."

"I can. I'll teach you. It's really easy; you'll love it."

"But I haven't got any skis, either."

"We'll hire some when we get there. I've got my own, so we can share the cost of hiring if you like."

"That's kind of you. But there is one other problem."

"Which is?"

"The train fare. It's bound to be astronomic."

"Ah! Good point."

Allan thought for a moment.

"I suppose we could go by bus," suggested Henry helpfully.

"I've got an even better idea," announced Allan triumphantly. "There's an old van at home – we could go in that."

"That's handy."

"I could nip home for it one weekend. It's a bit of a banger, but it's reliable and goes well, and we can get all our kit in it. All we'd have to pay for is the petrol."

"Problem solved then!"

They ordered another Chinese beer to celebrate.

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A few weeks later, Allan turned up with the van.

Henry looked at it a bit dubiously.

"It's older than I thought," he said. "And smaller."

"It's quite all right," reassured Allan. He opened the rear doors. Or at least, one of them. The other seemed to be stuck.

"Rusted in, I expect," grumbled Henry.

"A drop of oil will sort that. Now look inside. There's a spade and some old bits of carpet in case we get stuck in the snow, and I've brought things like thermos flasks so we can take hot soup with us – just in case. And there's a sleeping bag

each, and extra blankets. If push comes to shove, we can easily sleep in the back of the van."

"I hope we don't have to push or shove. Are you sure this thing will get us there? It's a long way, you know."

"I've looked at the map," said Allan, "and it's just short of five hundred miles from here. If we take it easy, it will be no problem at all. I thought we could stop off for the night, about half way. Somewhere like Carlisle. It will be quite an adventure."

"I don't like adventures," complained Henry. "You never know what might happen on adventures. But stopping half way sounds a good idea."

"Not least because I'll have to do all the driving," explained Allan. "You wouldn't be covered by the insurance."

"I'll navigate, then," Henry replied helpfully. "And keep a look out for the police."

"They won't pull us over, don't worry. This doesn't go fast enough for us to be done for speeding. The tyres are OK, and so far as I can tell, all the lights work."

"Don't they bother about rust?"

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The day eventually dawned. They had been able to arrange their studies so that they could get away early on the Friday morning. Warm clothing, extra sweaters, wind cheaters, spare boots and shoes, thick socks, scarves and gloves had all been shoved in to the back of the van the night before. It couldn't quite be called packing, but everything they thought they might need was somewhere in the back of the van. Henry had a map, and they thought they had worked out the best route. At one time, they had planned to avoid the motorways, but eventually decided that rescue services would probably be better able to help and get to them quicker, in the unlikely event that they might be needed, if they were on the motorway rather than on other roads. It would probably also be quicker, as Allan pointed out. "Once the van gets up to about sixty, it will quite happily sit there for ever," he had said.

They had taken the trouble to check the Aviemore weather forecast, too. Plenty of snow and good skiing, it had said.

So they were in good spirits when they set off after a hearty University breakfast. They headed for the M40, and then Birmingham, which they fortunately didn't have to drive through. The M42 took them neatly round the outskirts, and delivered them, as planned, on to the M6. There was a lot of traffic about, most of it wanting to go faster than they were capable of, but they soon got used to ignoring the irritating blasts from the horns of other cars. This was going to be the boring bit, the M6. The best part of two hundred miles on this road, but they stopped at a couple of service areas for a cuppa and a stretch – even a hamburger at one of them – so it wasn't too bad, really. They had passed sign posts to a multitude of places they had never heard of, but eventually skirted Newcastle and headed towards Manchester and

Liverpool, which they passed between. It was now beginning to get dark and cloudy and cold, as they climbed passed Kendal.

"It's a bit hilly round here," commented Allan. "And there's snow over there."

"Lake District to our left, and the North Yorkshire Moors to our right," pronounced the navigator. "We're heading up towards the famous Shap Summit."

"Hope the old girl makes it."

"Doing better than I ever dared hope," said Henry.

"I could do with a break soon," said a weary Allan.

As he spoke, they drove into snow. Not much at first, but then it came down quite heavily, with a gusty wind with it. The large flakes of wet snow began to settle on the road, although the motorway looked as if it had been gritted. Their ancient windscreen wipers were having difficulty coping.

"I don't like the look of this," said Allan. "Perhaps we had better turn off now and find somewhere to spend the night, and forget getting as far as Carlisle."

"Penrith isn't that far short, and we're not that far short of Penrith."

"We were idiots not to look at a weather forecast for our route. We were too interested in what it would be like when we get to Aviemore."

"*If* we get to Aviemore now, if you ask me."

There was a turn off at Shap summit, which took them from the motorway on to the A6. After a short while, they saw the lights of a farm not far from Penrith, and decided to go down the lane towards it. The snow was getting worse, and the wind was almost turning it into blizzard conditions.

"Farms often do bed and breakfast to supplement their income. Let's hope for the best."

They passed a row of half-a-dozen farm cottages, and pulled in to the farmyard.

"Didn't see a B&B sign," said Henry.

"Let's go and find out."

Like all farmyards, it was mucky underfoot, but now made worse by the newly fallen snow. They rang the bell on the front door, and heard dogs barking inside. Eventually, the door was warily opened by a very attractive woman.

"Sorry to bother you," began Allan, "but we wondered if by any chance you did bed and breakfast and if you have any vacancies."

"I'm afraid I don't," she replied.

"I was afraid of that," said Henry.

"We're on our way from Oxford to Aviemore, and had planned to night-stop in Carlisle or thereabouts, but this weather – well. We decided to stop earlier rather than press on," explained Allan. "I suppose there's no way you could put us up for the night is there?"

"I really wish I could," she said, "but you see, I'm only recently widowed, and I'm afraid the neighbours will talk if I let you stay. They're bound to notice."

"I saw a curtain being pulled back in one of the cottages as we passed just now," said Henry. "Someone would notice all right – they already have!"

"I'm really so sorry," she pleaded. "It's a terrible night out there, and I live here on my own now, except for the dogs. I feel quite guilty not letting you have a room."

"Don't worry," said Allan. "We quite understand. But would it be all right if we parked in the yard? We have sleeping bags and can put our heads down in the back of the van."

"And if the weather clears a bit, we can be up and away early in the morning, so nobody will notice."

"By all means park in the yard, but don't sleep in the van," she said. "Take your sleeping bags into the barn across there. You'll be much warmer on the hay. Apart from an owl and a few bats, there is no livestock there at the moment."

"That's very kind of you. The barn will be just fine if you're sure. And we quite understand."

"Good," she said. "I feel better about things now – I hated the thought of turning you away in this awful weather. And if one of you likes to come over in half an hour or so, I'll have a flask of hot soup ready for you, and some fresh bread I made this morning. Not much of a supper, but the best I can do."

"That really is most kind," said Allan gratefully, "but do let is pay for it."

"I wouldn't hear of it, but if you do leave early in the morning, there's a Little Chef on the A6 just before you get to Carlisle, so you can at least have a good breakfast."

It was certainly warm and snug in the barn, provided you could keep out of the draughts. They each found somewhere comfortable, and got the sleeping bags from the van.

"I'll go over and get the soup," offered Henry. "You've done enough today, with all that driving."

After their excellent and welcome snack, Henry also offered to take back the flask and bread basket, in case they were able to leave at first light as they hoped. By the time he returned to the barn, Allan was sound asleep, and snoring loudly.

The owl did not get much rest that night, and not much luck hunting either, because of the snow. He was glad to see them go early next morning.

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It was about nine months later when Allan received an unexpected letter from a solicitor in Carlisle. He read it over and over again. At first, it made no sense to him at all. But slowly, it dawned on him what it might be about. It could only be from the solicitor of the very attractive farmer's wife, whose barn they had stayed in whilst en route to their skiing holiday before Christmas. There was no other explanation. But even then, it was difficult to work out why he had been sent the letter, and still more of a puzzle to understand why he, of all people, had been singled out in this way. He didn't even know the lady's name.

It occurred to him that Henry might know.

That evening, in their flat, Allan confronted his friend to see if he could throw any light on the mystery.

"You remember that barn we stayed in about nine months ago, on our way to Aviemore?" he asked.

"Of course. Very generous of the lady to let us stay there, I thought."

"Bearing in mind the circumstances."

"Exactly. Very attractive woman, she was, recently widowed, and keen to avoid any gossip."

"Understandable."

"So what's suddenly brought this up?" enquired Henry.

"I just wondered if you remember the lady's name. If she mentioned it, I've quite forgotten."

"Mary something-or-other, I think. I seem to remember that her surname was something to do with farming. Tractors."

"Fordson?"

"No. I remember now. Ferguson. Mary Ferguson, that's who it was."

"I don't remember her telling us that," said Allen. "But then I only met her once, when we first arrived."

"Why do you suddenly want to know, after nine months?" asked a puzzled Henry.

"I simply couldn't remember her name, if I ever knew it at the time, but I had a letter from her solicitor this morning. He mentions her name, so now I know who it's about, if not why."

Henry blushed and looked sheepish.

"What's it about then, this letter."

"Personal," replied Allan. "Very personal, as it happens."

"Anything wrong, then?"

"That depends," replied Allan mysteriously. "I only met her briefly, when we arrived, but you saw her twice more than that, I seem to remember."

"Did I?"

Henry fidgeted and looked a bit awkward.

"You went to collect the soup she made us, and took the empties back afterwards."

"So I did," admitted Henry. "I remember now. It was so long ago."

"Nine months," said Allan.

Henry blushed again.

"Did you by any chance go in to the farmhouse when you took the soup things back?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. She invited me in out of the cold. I could hardly refuse."

"And she was very attractive."

"And lonely."

"And you stayed some time with her?"

"Well, um, actually about an hour, I think." Henry was now acutely embarrassed, and looking not a little worried.

"And you gave her my name instead of yours, I guess."

"I have to admit that I did, in the heat of the moment. I really am sorry, old friend, but I'm afraid I did."

"At least I now know why I got the letter from the solicitor, and not you," said Allan.

"Is it bad news? The letter?"

"Yes, it is."

Henry was silent for a moment, now looking very worried.

"I hardly dare ask," he said, "but is it a boy or a girl?"

"Worse than that," replied Allan.

"Not twins for God's sake! I'll stand by the woman, of course, and do my best to help bring up the child, but twins … I could never afford to support them."

"And a degree in nuclear physics isn't going to be much use running a farm, either."

Henry's previously beetroot face was now ashen. He sat silent for some time, and Allen left him to sweat.

"I suppose I'll have to live on the farm. I hadn't thought of that." He paused. "I hate farms. All that mud and cow dung."

"You'll get used to it."

"Apart from giving up my degree course, I really don't know what else to do," he almost whispered.

"Don't worry about a thing," said Allan.

"Don't worry?" Henry almost shouted. "How can you sit there and say that. You don't have to spend the rest of your life looking after twins and an enormous overdraft on some stinking farm miles from anywhere."

"Neither do you, as it happens," said Allen.

"What do you mean?"

"You're not the father of Mary Ferguson's twins. Mary Ferguson hasn't had twins. According to this letter from her solicitor," Allan waved it in the air for effect, "According to this letter from her solicitor, she died a few weeks ago."

Henry was silent for a moment or two.

"So why the letter?"

"To tell me that she left everything to me," replied Allan. "Everything. The farm. Everything."

"That should all have been mine," said Henry, after another silence.

"Serves you right," said Allan with a broad grin. "But if ever you're passing that way, I can always offer you a bed for the night. In the barn."

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11 - TAKE ME HOME

They were in Stockbridge when they first saw the boy.

Andrew and Mary Draper were shopping, and had managed to park outside the butchers, half way down the long, wide road that made up the village. They wanted to go in to the shop, anyway, so left the two dogs in the old Landrover.

"'Morning, Andy," said William, resplendent in a straw hat and slightly bloodstained striped apron. "Any rabbits for me today?"

"Afraid not," replied Andrew. "The dogs seem to be losing their touch. They caught one earlier, which we kept, but don't seem to have had any luck since."

"You need new dogs," joked the butcher. "Can't let my customers down like that, y'know."

"Nothing wrong with my dogs," responded the farmer. "Probably this cold spell, keeping the rabbits underground."

Mary finished their shopping – pork chops and a pound of Will's homemade sausages, and a couple of ham bones for the dogs – and there was the boy, outside, looking at the dogs in the car.

"Lovely dogs," said the lad. "They're good hunters, I can tell, but do you shoot with them, as well?"

"Not so much these days," replied Andrew, wondering who the boy was. They reckoned to know everyone thereabouts, having lived in the area all their lives, but they had never seen him before. Probably with his parents, visiting the fishing tackle shop or something like that. They got a lot of visitors in the village, in the heart of the valley of the River Test, attracted by the river as much as anything. Part of it ran under the main road, and there was always a shoal of trout to be seen in the town duck pond, as it was known, and the inevitable ducks looking for their share of the bread the visitors brought with them.

"We must get on," said Mary, keen to finish her shopping.

"I'll see you again later, then," said the boy, turning again to the dogs in the back of the four-wheel drive. The dogs were taking a lively interest in him, looking at him intently, ears cocked. But they were not barking, or disturbed by him in any way, the Drapers noticed.

It was about an hour later when they saw him again.

They'd been to the small supermarket, Andrew had been to the paper shop, and they had gossiped with a few friends and neighbours they had met. Mary had decided they should go to Lillie Langtree's tearooms for some fresh bread and a sit down over a warm coffee. They had just taken their seat at a table in the window when the boy appeared outside. He looked in and waved.

"Funny that he should still be hanging around," said Mary. "I wonder if he's all right?"

"Looks a bit lost if you ask me," replied Andrew.

"Perhaps I should nip out and have a word," suggested Mary. "He looks a nice lad – well spoken, too – but I wouldn't want him to come to any harm."

"His parents must be around somewhere," said her husband. "Probably shopping, like we have been."

"I'll go and ask," decided Mary, looking at the boy still standing on the pavement outside.

Andrew watched as she went up to the boy, and saw him shake his head a couple of times in answer to her questions. After a few moments, they both turned and came into the café.

"This is Tom," said Mary to Andrew. "He seems to be a bit lost, just as we thought."

"Oh, dear," said Andrew. "Tell us what's happened, then," he said to Tom, and beckoned to the waitress. "Bring another cup, will you please. Do you want a piece of cake or something?" he asked Tom.

"That would be nice – thank you," said the boy.

"So how come you're lost, then," asked Andrew.

"I really don't know," replied Tom. "I'm not even sure where I am, to be honest, or how I got here."

"You must have come in with your parents for some shopping," suggested Mary helpfully. "This village is called Stockbridge. Does that ring any bells with you?"

"No, it doesn't," replied the lad.

Mary poured the coffee. "Do you take sugar?" she asked.

"I don't think so," replied Tom.

Andrew frowned. "What's your surname, boy?" he demanded.

"I'm not sure I've got one," replied Tom.

Andrew looked across at his wife. "Looks as if Tom is suffering from a loss of memory or something," he said.

He turned to the boy. "Can you remember anything?" he asked. "Where you came from, where you go to school, what your parents look like, why you came here – anything at all."

Tom frowned. "Nothing at all, really," he replied.

"Well, this is serious then," announced the farmer. "What do you think, Mary? We'd better go round the village, I think, to see if we can see anyone looking for the lad, or see if we can find someone who Tom recognises, don't you think?"

"Yes, I suppose you're right," replied his wife. "But I haven't seen anyone outside looking anxious. Not since we've been sitting here."

"Drink up, then lad. The sooner we start looking for whoever you're with, the better."

They hurried outside, and went from shop to shop down the High Street, making enquiries and looking out for anyone who might be searching for Tom. Tom recognised no one, and no one appeared to recognise Tom.

As they left the butchers, the boy turned to William and said, "We'll bring you rabbits next week. Plenty."

Outside, Andrew caught Tom by the sleeve. "How do you know I bring rabbits to this shop?" he demanded.

"I must have heard you talking, earlier, I suppose," replied the lad.

"And what makes you think we'll have plenty to bring down next week?"

"Your dogs are good hunters," replied Tom. "They'll catch lots."

Andrew looked at Mary and shook his head, as they went on, from shop to shop.

In the fishing tackle shop, Tom seemed fascinated by the boxes of tiny imitation flies. "Is your father a fisherman?" asked Mary. "Is that why you came down here – to visit the fishing shop?"

Tom had moved across to the rack of fly rods on display. "No. I don't think so," he said. "But I'd like to try catching fish with one of these."

"Come on," said Andrew, getting irritated. "I haven't got all day. I need to get back to the farm."

"Your sheep will be all right," said Tom.

"And how do you know I keep sheep, may I ask?" demanded the farmer.

Tom shrugged. "Somebody must have mentioned it, I suppose," replied the boy.

They came to The Vine Inn, in the centre of the village.

"We'd better look in here, in case his parents are having an early lunch, or someone has heard something," said Andrew.

As they went in, the landlord called across.

"Hey, Andy – morning Mary. Don't often see you in here. What can I get you?"

"Nothing thanks, Fred," replied Andrew. "We're in a bit of a hurry as a matter of fact."

He explained quickly what the problem was.

Tom had been listening, and quietly took Mary to one side. "If you would like to stop here for a drink or some lunch with your friend, please do," said the boy. "I can tell you that there's nobody in the village who knows me, and nobody I know, either."

Andrew heard what Tom said.

"How can you be so sure of that, if you don't know who you are or how you got here?" he asked.

"I just know, that's all," replied Tom. "So please don't waste any more time searching."

Andrew Draper sighed. "I really can't make you out, boy," he said. "But I could certainly do with a pint while I think what to do next." He nodded to Fred behind the bar. "And a small shandy for Mary, please," he said.

He turned to Tom. "Would you like a Coke or something?" he asked.

"I'm not sure I know what that is," replied the boy, "But I'd like to try it. Thank you."

They sat at a small round table, and Tom sipped his Coke through a straw.

"Hum – nice," he said.

"Have you never tasted that before?" asked Mary.

"Never, as far as I can remember," replied Tom.

"Well I'm blowed!" she exclaimed.

"What we need to do next," said Andrew Draper, "is decide what we need to do next. It looks as if we shall have to report you as a missing person to the Police, young man. Then that means that Social Services will probably look after you, until they find out where you come from and what's happened to your parents, so that they can send you home."

"I don't think I have one," said the boy. "Why can't I stay with you and the dogs?"

The farmer looked across at his wife.

"Well, I suppose you could until they sort you out, if that's what you want," he said.

"Providing they let us," added his wife.

"Who are 'they'?" asked Tom.

"The authorities, that's who 'they' are. The people who will have to find out about you and get you back home where you belong. That's who 'they' are," replied Andrew.

"But it would be nice to have you stay for a few days while they sort it out," said Mary. "If that's what you'd like and if they let us," she added.

"Yes," said Tom emphatically. "That's definitely what I'd like. Please take me home."

So that's what they did. Tom sat in the back of the Landrover, to the delight of the dogs, who behaved as if they had known him all their lives. "We've got to catch lots of rabbits next week," Tom told them. "I can show you how to do it better than you have been," he added.

They almost seemed to understand. There was something very odd about that boy, thought Andrew. Very odd.

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It seemed a cruel thing to say, or even to think it, but nobody seemed to want Tom.

The Police had been very good. They had put notices up everywhere, checked with all the other police forces, sent pictures to the papers, and generally done everything they could to discover who might have lost the boy and where he might have come from. They had even checked his dental records, although that wasn't a lot of use, as he had perfect teeth and had obviously never been to a dentist in his life. And there were no labels on his clothes, either. But the harsh fact was that no family anywhere in the country had reported a missing person who fitted the description of Tom, and there seemed to be no official record of him either, although since he didn't remember how old he was, they had needed to guess at his age.

While all this was going on, the Social Services people had swung into action, ready to take Tom into care until his real family had been found. It was routine. The sort of thing they did all the time. But for some reason which none of the officials in the office could quite explain, Tom's interview with them didn't go quite the way

these things normally did. When he walked in to their office, it was automatically assumed that he would walk out and go straight into a care home, and yet he had somehow managed to persuade them that he should return to the farm and live with the Drapers. They couldn't remember that happening before, although they agreed afterwards that it was probably all right. They knew where he was, the Drapers were more than happy for the boy to stay there a bit longer, and it was saving the taxpayer money. It was certainly what Tom wanted, and of course that was important. That's really what their job was all about, after all. So he stayed with the Drapers while the search for his family went on.

The Drapers lived a short way from Stockbridge, at Goodworth Clatford, an even smaller village on the River Anton, rather than the River Test. The water meadows of the valley were ideal for sheep farming, with their lush growth and easy grazing, and Andrew was able to work his flock down the length of the Anton almost until it joined the Test at Fullerton, by The Mayfly pub.

Tom had fitted in very well on the farm. He was no trouble around the house, and he got on with everyone, and especially with the animals. The dogs loved him, and even the sheep ambled over to him when he appeared, as if he was going to feed them all some tit-bit or other. Which, of course, he never did. But Tom enjoyed working round the farm, and Andrew found the extra pair of hands a great help.

But there was definitely something odd about the boy.

He had gone to the local school, where the headmaster had pronounced him one of his brightest pupils, who was very quick to learn. "You only ever need to tell him anything once," he had said.

The French mistress was astonished to find that he spoke her language fluently, although he had no recollection of ever having been to France, or having lessons before.

He was good at Maths, understood computers, never had a day off ill, and took a keen interest in astronomy. He had joined the school's astronomy club, and frequently went back to school after dark to use their telescope. The planets were a particular interest, and he spent ages looking at Jupiter when it was visible above the horizon.

On the farm, the two small black Labradors had certainly regained their old skills at catching rabbits, especially when Tom went with them. It was as if he was showing them were to look, and how to stalk them. And the old sheepdog, Beth, which Andrew had seriously considered replacing, took on a new lease of life, and suddenly seemed able to get the sheep to do anything she wanted, and without fuss. But only if Tom was there. Andrew couldn't make out whether it was Tom's influence over the dog, or over the sheep, but certainly the boy appeared to be able take charge of events in some mysterious way.

And he was good with his hands, too, seemingly able to fix almost anything that went wrong whether it was the old computer in the dusty office, or the Landrover.

One evening, after a long day in the fields, when the three of them were sitting in the kitchen after a hearty meal, Tom said, "You know, I really can't stay here with you for ever, can I."

"You can stay here for as long as you want," replied Mary. "We've grown very fond of you, y'know, and it's been nice having you about the place for the last couple of years. It's just a pity you're not with your real family, that's all."

"You are my real family," said Tom, "since I don't know any other. And I don't want to leave you, but I really think I should, that's all."

"As Mary said, you can stay here for ever, so far as we are concerned. And you like it here well enough, don't you?" asked Andrew.

"I love it here. I love the countryside, the farm, the animals, the school, the people in the village, the fishing – everything. And more than anything, I love both of you. You are my real parents," said Tom.

"We feel the same about you, Tom," said Andrew. "You're a funny chap, though, and no mistake. You seem to know so much, and be so good at everything, without ever trying. But if you're really happy here, why ever think about leaving? Where would you go?"

"I just feel I should go, that's all," replied the boy. "You see, I know that I have special powers which other people don't have, and that I can do things other people can't do. I've done my best to fit in, without making it too obvious, but it's getting more and more difficult for me, and for wonderful people like you. I know you've noticed. So I just feel the time has come for me to move on again."

"You see," said Andrew, turning to his wife, "I told you the lad was special."

"So how do you do these extraordinary things," asked Mary.

"Well," said Tom, "the human brain is like a computer in many ways. It stores information. The difference is that information in a computer can be shared, whereas what's in your brain is just yours. Nobody else can get at it. Except that I can. I can download information from other people the same as people can download information from computers. That's how I learnt French – I just downloaded everything the French mistress knew about it, and since she is French, I spoke the language immediately as if I was French as well. That's how I knew about you keeping sheep, and about the rabbits."

The farmer and his wife sat in amazement, spellbound.

"If you could teach people to do that, you'd make a fortune," said Andrew.

"But I can't teach it," replied Tom. "If I could, all the crooks in the world would want the skill, and mis-use it. I only use it for good, not for evil, and I only use it to learn. But it allows me to communicate with anything else that has a brain. Not just schoolteachers, either; your dogs and the sheep, too. That's how I can get butterflies to settle on my hand, and why the Kingfisher landed on my fishing rod the other day."

"I've certainly never seen that before," commented Andrew. "I knew there was something strange about you, Tom. I said so, didn't I Mary?"

"But why are you telling us all this," asked Mary.

"Because I trust you, and I thought you should know after all this time," replied the boy. "And if you did try to explain to anyone else, they wouldn't believe you anyway. But I am sure the time has come when I must move on again, before too many people become curious about my behaviour. I hope you understand that.

One day, though, I'd like to come back here and teach others what I can do - if they let me. "

Andrew was going to ask, *"Who are 'they'?"* but thought better of it.

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They were in Stockbridge shopping when it happened. They had just delivered a few brace of rabbits to Will, the butcher. Tom looked down the High Street, and pointed to the trees and hills, which rose at the end of the High Street.

"You know," he said, "if was dark, you could see Jupiter from here, just above those hills on the horizon, to the right of the trees."

For some reason, they turned to look where the boy was pointing.

"Take me home," he said.

They thought he was talking to them, but when they turned back, he had gone. The dogs in the back of the Landrover went mad, barking and jumping about, while Andrew and Mary looked about them. But there was no sign of Tom.

Suddenly the dogs were quiet. Suddenly, too, the farmer and his wife knew there was no point in searching for the boy. He had gone in the same way that he had arrived.

For a few days, the Drapers were quite at a loss about what to do for the best. They couldn't very well just send a sick-note to the boy's headmaster, could they? But what could they say? There was much head scratching by the police, too, who were now being asked to find a boy who they had been unable to prove existed in the first place. And the officials at the social services office all tut-tutted and said, "I told you so" to one another. This would never have happened if they had done what they always do, and placed the boy into care. They should never have let him talk them out of their normal practice. They would make sure that wouldn't happen again.

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Next day, there was a small item in the *Daily Telegraph*, in the 'news in brief' column. NASA scientists had announced that a satellite probe, which they had lost contact with shortly after its launch some two years before, had suddenly come to life again. As they had planned, it was orbiting Europa, one of Jupiter's moons. It was thought that there was a hidden ocean of liquid water beneath the moon's surface, and the satellite had been sent to establish whether or not it was possible for any form of life to be supported there.

Andrew and Mary Draper and their dogs already knew the answer to that.

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12 - HAPPY LANDINGS

Luke Edwards was in a bit of a sweat, if he was honest.

Not that it was hot or anything, although it should have been, bearing in mind it was the end of August. But he was in a rush, and it was late on a Friday. Everyone else went home early for the weekend on Fridays. But not him. His editor had decided he desperately wanted photographs, and Luke was a photographer on the staff, so Luke got sent. His was a 24/7 job – that's what they called it these days. None of this 9 till 5 stuff for him. He was on-call all the time. Accidents, fires, murders, VIPs, you name it – he got called out to get pictures for the paper, and to get them before anyone else got them for a rival paper.

So that's why he was in a bit of a sweat.

It seemed to him that it had been raining for weeks. They said, whoever 'they' were, that it was the wettest August since records began, although nobody seemed quite sure when that was. But suddenly the river had burst its banks, as 'they' said it would, and the town was flooding, and there were people in rowing boats down the High Street, and the trains had stopped, and cars had been abandoned and everything.

"So get some pictures", was the message.

Except that if the town was flooded, he couldn't get into it, could he, he pointed out to his editor, looking at how near it was to going home time.

"I'll fix that," said the editor, grabbing the phone. "I'll hire an aeroplane, and you can take pictures from the air. Much better!"

That was another reason Luke was in a bit of a sweat. He hated flying, and he just knew what was in store. The editor had done it to him before. There was a small private airfield not far out of town, and the editor knew someone who had one of those little aeroplanes which was parked there. Propeller at the front, wings on top, two seats and that was it. You know the sort.

"Perfect for air-to-ground photography," claimed the editor. "The wings don't get in the way of the view."

Luke's stomach churned at the very thought of it, but there was no escape.

"My chum's aeroplane is not being used, so get there fast," he was ordered, phone call over. "It'll be on the end of the runway with the engine going by the time you arrive."

'Runway' was a bit of a joke, too. It was a grass airstrip. But at least it wasn't far from the flooded town or from the newspaper's office. With any luck it would all be over in half an hour or so.

The Chief Photographer (he was actually the only one on the paper's staff) grabbed his bag of kit, hurried to the car park and drove off. It had been a nice day for a change, and he made good time.

Near the airstrip, there was a ludicrous road sign pointing to 'The Airport', with a pictogram of an aeroplane. Not only ludicrous, but quite un-necessary, as you could see it from the road. There was a collection of huts, one of which had a bit added to the roof to act as a control tower, an old red Landover with a ladder and two fire extinguishers – a Health and Safety requirement, no doubt, - and that was about

all. One of the huts, near the car park, grandly proclaimed itself to be a 'Flying Training School' where, for a hefty fee, you could be taught to fly. There were three or four small aircraft parked near the huts, and Luke noticed one on the edge of the grass with its door open and the engine running. His, no doubt.

He parked his car, grabbed his bag and ran to the aircraft, waving cheerily to a man in the control tower who was leaning out of the window. As Luke threw his bag into the plane and scrambled aboard, the man shouted something, which he didn't hear over the noise of the engine.

He slammed the door and climbed into the left-hand seat.

"Let's go," he shouted, as he did up his seat belt.

The pilot nodded and slowly taxied into wind.

"Get a move on ," demanded the photographer. "I haven't got all day."

"You want me to take off ?" asked the young man.

"What else."

The man revved up the engine, and trundled off across the grass. A bit bumpy and not very straight, Luke thought, but they eventually managed to get into the air just before reaching the hedge at the end of the field.

The little plane slowly climbed away from the field with its collection huts.

"Shouldn't we be turning towards the town?" asked Luke, "It's over that way, I think." He jerked his thumb.

"I normally get to 5,000 feet before starting a turn," replied the pilot.

"We need to be lower than that," said Luke.

"If you say so," said the pilot, and very gingerly turned right. The town was on the left, but Luke thought that perhaps it was what they had to do because of the radar or something, so said nothing immediately.

"How low can you fly this thing?" asked Luke, eventually.

"5,000 feet normally, but if you want me to, I can try to go a bit lower."

"As low as you can," replied Luke. "I'll never get any decent pictures from this height."

The pilot looked across at him, and Luke noticed that he tightened his grip on the control column.

"Pictures?"

"That's right. Pictures."

"Why?"

"For the newspaper, that's why."

"Pictures of what?"

"The flooding in the town," replied Luke. "Didn't anybody brief you?"

"Not about pictures," said the pilot.

"Well, that's why I need to go low, over the town. For pictures of the floods."

"For the newspaper."

"Right", said Luke, groping in his bag for his camera. "So let's get over the town, low level, so I can get this job done and we can get home."

There was silence for a bit, as the plane droned on.

"Are you a photographer then?" asked the pilot.

"Of course I'm a photographer." Luke was getting a bit cross by now.

"For the newspaper?"

"The penny is dropping at last!"

"And you want me to fly low over the town?"

"Right again!"

More silence.

"The town's over there," said Luke, waving his thumb. "Let's get over there, shall we. Then we can all go home. Once I've got some low level shots of the floods, my job's done, and we can get back on the ground."

The pilot looked across at Luke, in silence.

"You really are a newspaper photographer, are you?" he asked.

"Of course I bloody am! And you've been chartered to take me low level over the town, so let's get this show on the road, shall we?"

Silence again.

"So if you're a photographer," said the pilot, after a time, "where's my instructor?"

This time, it was Luke who was silent. A shocked silence.

"Instructor?"

"Instructor. I'm supposed to be having a lesson."

"What sort of lesson?"

"A sort of 'how-to-fly' lesson".

"What sort of 'how-fly-lesson' for heaven's sake? You're flying, aren't you?"

Luke was beginning to feel a bit hysterical.

"Yes. But I'm not supposed to be. Not without an instructor, anyway."

"But you're a pilot, aren't you?"

"Not really."

"What do you mean, 'not really'?"

"Well, I'm not qualified yet."

"To do what?"

"To take passengers, for a start."

"What can you do then?"

"Not a lot, really."

"How many lessons have you had, then?"

"Three. This was to be my fourth."

"What have they taught you to do, in these three lessons?"

"Things called 'general familiarisation' - that was the first – then 'straight and level and left turns' and, last week, 'straight and level and right turns'."

"Take-offs?"

"Haven't done that yet," replied the man.

"But you just did!"

"That was my first, but I've not had the lesson yet."

Luke broke out into another sweat.

"I hardly dare ask this," he said, "but what about landing this thing."

"Lesson six, I think." The young man frowned. "Or perhaps seven. I can't remember."

Silence.

"Is there a parachute on board?" asked Luke.

"I don't think so. And if there was, you wouldn't leave me up here on my own, would you?"

"I'd be very tempted."

Silence again.

"This is typical of my Dad," said Luke.

"Your Dad? What's he got to do with it."

"Never there when he was wanted, my Dad," explained Luke.

"How could he have helped, then?"

"A real pilot, he was," replied Luke. "No disrespect or anything, but he was in the RAF and flew proper aeroplanes."

"What's he doing now then?"

"Teaching angels to fly, I shouldn't be surprised. He died two years ago."

"Sorry to hear that," said the pilot.

Luke looked across at the man.

"Cock this up, sunshine, and I could be introducing you in an hour or so."

"Don't make jokes like that. It doesn't do my confidence any good. We're in this together, remember."

"Sorry," said Luke. "No offence meant."

"None taken," said the pilot. "But I'm going to need your help if we're to get out of this."

"So what can I do?"

"For a start, keep your hands to yourself. I don't want you twiddling knobs or turning switches on and off unless I ask you."

"You're in charge," replied Luke.

"Right! Just remember that," said the student, grandly. "I'm captain of this aircraft, and strictly speaking, I should be sitting in the left hand seat."

"Let's not change round now."

"Of course not. But don't forget you're only a passenger, so you must do what I say and nothing else, - if you don't mind."

"You're quite sure about the parachutes, are you?"

"Stop it!" demanded the pilot. "By the way, my name's Harry. Harry Fowler."

"Luke Edwards – but let's shake hands later, if you don't mind. I'd rather you kept yours on the controls at the moment."

"Agreed," said Harry.

"Is there a sick-bag, by the way?"

"No! If you're ill, use your camera bag. Otherwise, you'll spend the rest of the day cleaning up."

"OK – only joking again. And I wouldn't be joking if I wasn't confident you were going to get us out of this mess," lied Luke reassuringly.

"Thank you."

"Let's head for home, then, shall we?" suggested Luke.

There was a pause.

"I'm not exactly sure which way that is," replied Harry.

"Don't tell me we're lost as well!"

"Pilots never get lost," replied Harry. "It's just that I am temporally unsure of where we are."

"Is there someone we can talk to?" asked Luke, helpfully. "How does the wireless work on this machine?"

"Don't know. 'Radio procedures' is lesson nine."

"There are headphones hanging on the back of your seat, plugged into a hole thing on the dashboard. Put them on and see what happens."

Harry put them on, and listened intently.

"Well?"

"Classic FM," he said. "The last bloke to fly this tuned it in to Classic FM."

"So how do you tune in to something else more useful?"

"Don't know," replied Harry again, looking at a forest of knobs and dials.

Luke always knew he hated flying. Even the annual trip to Spain with the kids was a nightmare, but at least that had someone on board who served gins and tonic, and there were sick-bags in the seat in front. The plane he was in now didn't even have a pilot.

"There's a railway down there," he pointed out. "Let's follow that and see where we end up. It goes within a few miles of the airfield."

"Good idea," said Harry. "If I fly low enough, we might even read the station name when we get to one, but low flying is lesson eleven."

"Please," begged Luke. "Don't even think about it."

"It would help if we could talk to someone," said Harry.

"Tell you what," said Luke, rummaging in his bag. "I'll try my mobile phone. It should work from up here."

"Good idea. Who will you ring?"

"I suppose you haven't got the airfield's phone number, by any chance?"

"Not with me."

"No good ringing the police. We're not illegally parked and haven't started a fight or anything."

Pause for thought.

"I know," said Luke, "I'll ring my editor, that's what I'll do, and he can ring his friend who owns this aeroplane. Actually, he doesn't own it, because I seem to have caught the wrong one, but he should be able to contact the airfield for us."

His editor was over the moon.

"My God, Luke, what a story!! Forget the flood pictures. Tell me again everything that's happened. And while you're up there, get some pictures of the pilot chappy, and …"

"Shut up," shouted Luke. "Forget the story. We need help to get down on the ground in one piece, and you're our only link, so please get on with it. Ring your friend with the aeroplane, and tell him to get on to the airfield people. And please hurry. We can't stay up here all day waiting for you."

"OK, OK! But don't hang up – keep the line open and I'll get back to you. I'll use the other phone."

"As a matter of passing interest," said Luke to Harry, keeping the phone pressed to his ear, "How long can we stay up here?"

"I hadn't thought of that," came the reply. "Probably about another half an hour, at a guess."

"We haven't got long then."

They were flying parallel to the railway line now, trying to recognise something.

"Are we flying away from London, or towards it?" asked Luke.

"How can you tell?"

"No idea, really."

"Does it matter?"

"Probably not, in our case."

They were silent for a bit, watching the passing fields, the odd farmhouse here and there, but failing to discover their exact position in relation to anything else.

"How do you feel about the landing, then," asked Luke. "When we come to it, that is."

"As a matter of fact, pretty confident," Harry almost boasted. "I've got plenty of computer flight simulator games at home, so I do quite a bit of flying from behind a desk. This is different, of course – the real thing – but I have actually landed an American F/A 18 jet fighter on an aircraft carrier deck, and didn't go over the end."

"That's great," said Luke looking around him. "Is there an aircraft carrier within half an hour of here, do you think?"

"Don't joke," demanded Harry. "I'm concentrating."

The editor shouted at Luke, who still had the phone pressed to his ear.

"This story gets better and better," shouted the man excitedly.

"Never mind the bloody story, help us get home, will you."

"There's help on the way, don't worry."

"What sort of help. We're up here and you're down there."

"The RAF has scrambled one of its air defence Tornado fighters, and it's on the way even as we speak."

"How will that help?"

"They think you've hijacked that aircraft, and that your bag you put on board is a bomb, and that you going to dive on to some strategic target or other. They haven't quite worked out yet what that might be, but they're guessing that the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Aldermaston is your target. They've already started to evacuate the whole area, and have sent up a Tornado to find you before you get there."

"You mean they're going to shoot us down or something?"

"Probably."

"WHAT?" screamed Luke.

"Don't panic," said the editor.

"It's all very well you saying 'don't panic.' You're down there, and we're up here, and we're about to be shot down!"

"Relax! I'm trying to stop them. My God, Luke, this is some story you've got. Can you get the pilot's home address for me, while I'm on?"

"Sod off," shouted Luke, thinking he would rather survive and be sacked than not survive at all.

"By the way," said the editor, almost as an afterthought, "that man's instructor is going to ring you sometime, to tell you what to do. I'd better hang up, and so had you."

They did, and almost immediately Luke's phone rang. It was the instructor.

"Whatever you do, don't hand the phone to Harry," he commanded. "He needs both hands to fly the aircraft, so you will have to pass messages."

"Roger," replied Luke, remembering from the films he'd seen that that's what they said.

"It's your instructor," shouted Luke to Harry. "He wants you to fly straight ahead for 30 seconds, then turn right 120^{o} and fly for another 30 seconds, and then do the same again. He reckons the radar should be able to pick you up flying that pattern."

"Roger," said Harry, entering in to the spirit of the thing. "At least he's remembered that I'm better at right-hand turns than left-hand."

"Are you sure about the sick bags," said Luke, reaching for his camera case with his free hand.

"Quite sure."

"What about a toilet then? I suppose there's no toilet at the back, is there?"

"No."

"I really do need a loo right now," said Luke.

"No. There isn't one."

Luke held up his hand, as the instructor came on the line again.

"He says they know where we are," he shouted at Harry. "Not far away at all, as it happens. They are sending up another 'plane, with your instructor in it, to guide us home."

"Thank the Lord for that," replied Harry. "For a minute, I almost began to think that we were lost."

"You're to turn left on to a heading of 060 degrees, he says. Can you manage that?"

"I'm not very good at 'left', but I'll try," Harry replied, tapping the compass. "I think I'm beginning to get the hang of this."

It wasn't long before another aircraft pulled up alongside. Harry waved cheerily to his instructor.

"I wish you'd keep your hands on the wheel thing," objected Luke. "Your chap says you're to follow him, and he will guide us down. He wants you to get on

the right radio frequency so he can talk to you direct. He says the wireless is in the roof just above your head."

Harry looked up.

"For God's sake look where you're going," yelled Luke. "I'll do the wireless."

He fiddled about, as instructed by the man in the next aeroplane, and suddenly Harry shouted with glee.

"I can hear them! I can hear them! What a relief! Luke, put on your headset, and you'll hear them, too."

Quite soon, they were within sight of the airfield – they both recognised it at the same time. The instructor was busy instructing Harry what to do – "nose down a bit, reduce power, set 1250 revs, put on 5^{o} of flaps, turn right ten degrees, cross the threshold at about 60 knots," and all that sort of thing. It seemed to Luke that the ground was coming up at them rather fast, but he could see the grass strip that served as a runway. All the time, the instructor was flying in close formation alongside. Rather too close, Luke thought.

"We'll be down in a minute," Harry said to Luke. "This is the difficult bit, if I'm honest."

"Don't try to win the Air Force Cross or anything heroic – just get us on the ground."

"I'm doing my best."

"You're doing a brilliant job," said Luke encouragingly.

"But I'm not looking forward to this landing, quite frankly, in spite of the computer games," said Harry. "Anyway - thanks for all your help. It's been good knowing you."

Luke thought that sounded a bit like an obituary, but said nothing.

"Pretend it's an aircraft carrier," he shouted as the ground rushed up to meet them.

The aircraft hit the ground with an almighty bang, and bounced back into the air. Luke wanted to shut his eyes, but somehow couldn't. The instructor was shouting instructions all the time, flying very low just to one side and a bit behind them. They hit the ground again, and bounced again, but not so high this time. Harry pulled the throttle back, and they sank on to the grass. This time they hardly bounced at all, and Harry stood on the brakes as the boundary hedge got closer and closer. The old red Landrover, with its ladder and two fire extinguishers, appeared alongside, bouncing across the uneven grass. The instructor zoomed past, and climbed into a tight turn to go round and land behind them. A man from the back of the Landrover jumped across on to the aircraft, and wrenched open the door.

Soon, Harry and Luke were on the grass. The relief was tangible. They both had trouble standing, their knees felt so weak.

Harry threw up.

They looked at one another in disbelief, and an RAF Tornado, with afterburners going full blast, thundered over the airfield with wings swept, very low indeed, and pulled up into a near vertical climb, missiles glinting in the evening sun.

The two intrepid airmen embraced in self-congratulation and relief at still being alive.

"Your third landing was the best," said Luke. "I reckon you can go straight to lesson twelve, after that."

Harry grinned. "Thanks. There's a loo in the Flying Training hut, by the way."

"Too late for that, now!"

Luke Edwards was in a bit of a sweat, if he was honest.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Duncan James was an RAF pilot before eventually reaching the higher levels of the British Civil Service, in a career that included top-level posts at home and abroad with the Defence Ministry, and work with the Metropolitan Police at Scotland Yard.

A life-long and compulsive writer, he has produced everything from Government statements, Ministerial briefing papers, media announcements and reference books. As a public affairs consultant and freelance author, he was a prolific writer of magazine articles on a wide variety of subjects, as well as short stories and three novels.