

Jason was just sitting comfortably in their swing deck chair, he had a large tumbler of beer clasped in his hand. Then he heard the door bell ring.

'Deb can you get that please. I've just sat down this minute.'

A few minutes later Debra his wife came out onto the garden balcony. She peered down at him. 'Its your cousin complete with haversack and bicycle.'

'What cousin?'

"I left him at the door, so give me the beer and pop it on the table here and go see your cousin.'

Now Jason came from a large family with a horrendous number of Aunts and Uncles so he lurched up from the swing seat and went to the front door.

'I'm your cousin Rick.' said the stranger, now inside with his bike leaning against the hall wall. 'Rick Welby.'

'But I don't have a cousin by that name you must have the wrong house.'

"Your names Dentine, Jason Dentine, my mother was a Susan Dentine married a Welby from down south.'

Jason thought for a minute and then invited Rick onto the back balcony.

'I only want to stay a couple of days as I've job interview in town to go to and I asked Mom if she had any relatives up here in the big smoke, and she mentioned you.'

by this time Jason was scratching his head, yes he had an Aunt Sue but there was never any mention of her moving south, so he turned round to this long lost cousin who was slurping into his beer glass.

'Great beer this you must have been expecting me guess Mom must have rung ahead.'

'Well you can stay a couple of days I'll get Deb my wife to prepare the spare bedroom.'

Rick looked around him. 'Nice place you have here, Mom said she came from a large family, I guess you are one of Uncle Richards tribe?'

Jason nodded. But his mind was still racing mainly about Aunt Sue moving south, wonder if David his brother, the family archivist knew this?

And so after three weeks and no sign of movement, a cooling off from near found relatives by Jason and Deb occurred, and it all started on the shopping expedition. Rick had invited himself along to help carry the packages, and just as Jason and Deb entered the supermarket Rick disappeared. After shopping they both wheeled the trolley over to the car but still no sign of Rick. They waited inside the car for an hour and eventually he turned up, glowing as ever as he had found a long lost friend in a store not far away.

That night Jason closed the door of his study and rang David. 'Dave do you have any record of a cousin called Rick one of Aunt Susan's children, by the way she moved down south and got married. '

'Really Jas! That's strange as she lives close to us in the same nursing home as Mum and to my knowledge she's never been married. What name does this long lost cousin

go under?'

'Rick Welby.'

'Wait on, I will go onto my listing and check it out, we do have a large family and I think there's a couple of W's in the south.' A few minutes went by, 'Jas we have a Wecome and a Wallis down there but no Welby. Just give me a few minutes you have to ring off and let me check an old mate of ours, do you remember our Dad's best man Uncle Syd?

'Yep deputy Mayor now I believe.' Jason rang off and went out to get a cup of coffee, Rick had helped himself to another beer and was lounging outside with a bag of crisps on the swing seat.

'Dinner will be ready soon Rick,' Jason called as he poured the coffee.

'By the by Jason that friend of mine I met in the shopping centre today wants me to go and stay with him for a week if that's all right. Off tomorrow OK?'

'Yes sure', said Jason but just then the telephone rang so he zoomed into his study to take it.

'Dave here Jas, I think you might have cookoo living with you so Syd has arranged a police visit first thing in the morning.'

'A what?', but Dave had gone.

Next morning as Rick was strapping up his haversack onto his bike Jason opened the door to allow him to wheel it out.

'Bye.' called Deb from the kitchen.

'See you in a week Jason thanks for the stay, don't change the bed sheets be back in a wink.'

'Oh I don't think so Mr. Deverell you'll be coming with us now.' And the two policemen guided Rick down the path and lifted his bike into the van, he was then handcuffed and led to the waiting car. One then returned to an amazed Jason and Deb at the open door.

'You and your brother are in for a tidy sum as reward, we've been chasing this conman all over the county, Good day to you both.'

There lay beyond the fence line, a forest so thick even a person on hands and knees would have a struggle through the briar and fern undergrowth. But what made people hesitant were the low slung branches with spikes on every limb ready to peel back the skin of any who would trespass. It was late autumn or Fall as it was known hereabouts and the trees were in a bright reflective mode with every colour from red to bright purple bronze flashing in the swirling wind. They had predicted heavy winds for the area some days before and indeed they had come with a vengeance followed by heavy squalls of rain and cracking thunder besides. I suppose it was inevitable that a lightning strike would occur but only after the rain had eased considerably and the blasts of wind had once again dried the vegetation. The strike hit 'Old man Tatter tree' one of the highest in the forest and it blazed like a torch clearing out the undergrowth and neighbouring trees around. You could here the roar of the tree tops as they caught and the wind acting as a blow torch to the surrounding forest. There was a sentry post high up on 'Highwayman's hill' and they responded with the siren call which bought volunteers and police running to the Shire Brigade doors.

It was deemed dangerous to venture close to the heart of the fire so a helicopter backup was called to draw water from local dams and swing it over the flaming area time and time again. Then the Brigade went in to damp down the embers and fallen trees. After a few miles of driving through the forest on the loggers trails they eventually reached the now blackened stump of 'Old man' and commenced damping down the area around.

Number two crew group came across a blackened shell of a late model vehicle and its number plate hardly readable. Inside were the dehydrated bodies of two people crouched together in the back, on the floor below a dogs skeleton so they taped over the windows they had to smash with polythene and raised up the local police. They were all shaken by the find so a tow truck was ordered and the volunteers hoisted the car and its contents onto the flatbed where it was roped and chained off. The metal was still hot and many a hand got burnt even when they wearing thick gloves but they persisted until the job was finished. Several troopers marked the original site with coloured tape and one patrol man started asking questions of the Firies.

'Which one of you opened the car doors', was the first, but the crew chief shook his head and pointed up the vehicle on the flat bed. 'Welded shut all four of them tight as a tin of sardines, we had to break in via the windows'. The patrol man hoisted his female assistant up onto the tray and she nodded agreement.

Then he called for a forensic team to visit the site first, just in case before too much disappeared under foot. As the Patrol officer walked carefully over to the ground he noticed where the vehicle had lain it was some distance to the rear of the Old Man. Plus the vegetation on the ground was still green in places so he called the Crew chief over and asked him why it was not incinerated like the front. Chief pointed to the sky 'The wind came from behind and blasted everything in front, by the looks of it Old Man got a direct lightning strike so the flames were driven to the front, you can see some damage to the tree tops here in the rear but they were caught by the limbs of Old Man burning.'

So the Firies continued damping down whilst the flat tray was driven out and passed the forensic team coming in. They found nothing of interest and the ground around had several car tracks presumably left by the police and troopers. As they were preparing to leave one of the team called out for the photographer.

'Gus take a photo of these tracks over here and whilst you are at it do the whole area.'

'Tom they look like tractor tyre marks and pretty old by the looks of it.'

'Who bought a tractor into this desolate spot and why.' Then Tom of forensics turned to the Chief, who shook his head.

'Not one of us, we only use dozer's to clear a trail on grass fires and we did not see any tractors.'

Forensic Tom then rang his colleague and told her to come down before inspecting the car and its contents. She was called locally Forensic Pot, her own name unpronounceable. They called her 'Pot' at college so she was stuck with it, friends and colleagues asked why? Someone who knew her said the stuff affected men's minds. No mention of women though and there she stopped, no explanation just a sort of hidden anger beneath those hazel eyes that could outglare anyone.

So Pot arrived in a four wheel drive and she and Tom examined the tracks then followed them behind Old Man. Then they set up a minute search along the tractor trail. A cigarette stub and nothing else in the singed grass lying close to the top soil.

'Stumped out with the heel of a boot.' Tom nodded to Pot who bent down for a closer look.

'OK take a plaster copy of that print please, steel heel flaps and an unusual pattern almost gone so very worn.' Pot stood up to let Tom mix and place the plaster.

'Did you get a chance to look at the vehicle yet?'

Pot shook her head, 'I stopped it on its way and a quick check confirmed the Firies that the doors and trunk were all welded. We'll take a look later under lights but first we'll raise it up and look underneath.'

'For?'

'I guess we should find chain or strap marks, if it was towed here or on a trailer they would be there.'

They finished their search then had the area cordoned off. They thanked the Chief for their prompt action and for help loading the vehicle onto the flatbed. The Chief acknowledged the hand grips and shook his head in puzzlement.

'Beats me how they could have driven with the doors all welded shut.'

'Well,' said Pot 'Easily done if you don't need to stop for petrol but we will examine the car carefully, on first look it was on a big wheeled trailer or pulled here by a tractor or some such it, don't think it was driven here.'

Eventually they all retired back to their separate departments and Tom and Pot went to the Forensic police garage to take a close look. Already the car was up on the lift and they walked under it with the mechanic who pointed out some chain marking both on the front and rear crash bumpers.

'So now we have those marks which will give the size of chain and the one boot mark. Perhaps Tom you can get onto the net and look for a manufacturer tomorrow. Our

mechanic can work the chain size and now lets get the car down and look it over. They bought the lift down and studied the car exterior minutely. At the rear trunk they found a small twelve millimetre drilled hole.

'What do you suppose that was for?' Tom looked at Pot.

'Lets get a sample around the hole before we open the trunk lid, my guess is something like the input of a gas. Then get one of the guys to feed a hose in and take a sample of the air, then get it analysed. We don't open up until that's done Tom, by the look of those skeletons they have been there a some time so a couple of days won't matter. In the meantime I'll do a check on the number plate.'

'Strange, Pot. No clothes inside they must have been quite naked.'

'Yes I noticed, you can see their ribs poking though skin as well as just under the dogs fur, that will give a great indication on the age.'

Having ordered the careful removal of the welds but to leave the vehicle shut for now the two left for their separate desks and the investigation of boot and number plate.

Pot found the licence number plate very quickly, Tom's choice took longer but there was a positive reaction from the hole. The weld marks were studied before the were filed away and these were found to made by an amateur, horrible was the professional view, not a normal clean ripple. Eventually the bodies were lifted gently and taken into the Forensic lab where they were examined carefully. The dog turned out to be a Golden Labrador and Tom was sicked immediately he was told, he had the same type at home. Pot continued her examination and discovered drill marks on on the bones of both. Drill punctures on the left ankle bone of each, so she immediately called in the Sheriff.

'What you got Pot?' he asked on the phone.

'Not suicide as we suspected but torture and murder. I say looks like a boy and girl about mid teens but will get some scrapping done and a DNA on both. Tom is pretty upset about the dog but it seems just asphyxiation by gas for all.'

'I guess we better start looking for missing teenagers, I'll keep you posted, but a full report for any ancillary stuff would help.'

'Yes I will do fingernails and mouth parts next but it appears to be a violent trauma on both kids, I'll let you know by this evening. Some skin left around the torso's and what looks like duct tape around the ankles and the upper torso and arms, just that one piece around both so looks like they were strapped together.'

Pot rang again that evening.

'Tom's feeling much happier, we found somebody else's blood on the teeth of the dog, seems the killer or killers made an enemy of the Labrador. Tom's sent it over for DNA, and that may help you a lot, have you any news of the missing people?'

'No not a bight if you'll excuse the pun, which is odd so we have to put out feelers beyond the county boundary and any help you can give us on bone material could help. By the way we found the cars owner, it had been bought over eight months ago, seems it was a planned killing and they needed a coffin and maybe the owner.'

Pot stayed on the line until the Sheriff came back with

'What's up Pot come on spit it out.'

'I'd say a revenge killing Jack pure supposition I know but it really looks very ugly.'
'Now we base things on facts, just the facts please Pot. What about the organs any use to you?'

'Well very shrivelled but we'll do some drug testing just for you.' knowing the Sheriff was a bit anti anyone under the age of thirty.

'I want a definite age from you both if you please, try the bones.'

'University types?'

'You got it in one Pot some of them can be real nasty, so I'll get my boys and girls to do some searching.'

'But Jack I have not aged them yet.'

'True but Pot I can sometimes read your intuition like a book, you suspect some source of jealous rage, what did Tom find around that hole?'

'Acetylene.'

'Now that is interesting. Ducting tape and acetylene. That and a bit of air, kaboom. Thanks Pot.'

'Wait Jack, no explosion, we had some gas in the lungs and no carbon. If you were insanely jealous would you kill the person whose affection you sought?'

'Suppose I might if I was a mad man or woman, but it sounds like a man to me, don't know many women in the welding trade.'

'There you go typical male chauvinist, bye Jack be in touch tomorrow.'

The police search did indeed find two likely victims in a University fifty miles away. A young couple had gone missing some six months before so a search was made of their apartment, a few photographs and parents addresses helped identify them the car owner matched the boy. Forensics also made the match though dental work on the male. Jack was sent to break the news to the parents, a job he hated. Then the questions began, the girls parents, still in shock, gradually opened up.

'We were told that they had eloped, by the university staff.'

'Who exactly told you that?' but they couldn't remember who it was, it came in a telephone message. But it was a man's voice they were sure.

Jack left them very deflated, they had got the message on the machine and had wiped it. They were pretty sure that it was genuine as their daughter had advised the parents of their intention to marry and the the parents were opposed to any formal engagement until the children had finished their education.

The police then searched the garage and property on the off chance of finding oxyacetylene equipment. But nothing found. Jack had asked about the dog and apparently it had been the boy friends Labrador.

He then went to visit the the boys parents and found them to be just as unhelpful. The car was the boys, given as a birthday present by the parents, brand spanking new. All this he related to Pot on his return.

'This is weird but I agree with Tom, its obviously a nasty piece of male shit all over this crime scene, who on earth would leave a brand new vehicle to rust away in the undergrowth. It shows an intense dislike of both the lad and his car, look Jack I think you need to check out friends and enemies at that Uni and don't forget any of the big wigs they could be involved.'

'There you go Pot using that infernal nose of yours so how about sticking to the facts, of course if you are so fired up about the whole thing how about you join my investigation team and we go up there tomorrow and pull the place apart.'

'Make it the day after tomorrow, Tom and I have not quite finished on the autopsy and we have to complete that poor dog.'

'I reckon its the dog that really affects you both.'

'Yep, so I'll beg and borrow a gun from you and shoot the bastard who did this.'

'There you go again making assumptions just count the number of people needed to load a trailer and drive a tractor fifty miles and know this spot. So we look at the kids contacts and fathom out who is local and has the ability to hire, steal or own a trailer and tractor.'

'And we have a footprint.'

'Yes I guess some kid with well worn sneakers, that can be your job on hands and knees looking at the treads while I interview those kids.'

'Thanks, and what about the gun.'

'No way, just be ready in two days meantime I will organise an interview room and collect those we need to see. I have someone up there already seeking out who we might be interested in. The boys father came up with some of his friends who had visited, that will be a start.'

'You really don't like kids Jack!'

'Can't stand them. Bye for now, and Pot just keep that mind of yours on a scientific level.' With that and a wave Jack departed for his car, but Pot suddenly had an idea. 'Jack' she yelled, 'Take me with you next time you see the parents.'

'Tomorrow be ready at ten' and he flicked his glove back at her.

Tomorrow came and Pot checked with Tom on the footprint search and he had come with a name but was awaiting confirmation. Jack turned up on the stroke of ten and Pot got in beside him.

'Why the parents?'

'Got a premonition Jack.'

'Oh Pot you really are a choice specimen, now you'll be consulting the Tarot or is it a glass ball you have in the office.'

'OK laugh but there is one question neither you your officers have asked.'

'OK shoot.'

'Not until we get there. Who's first?'

'The girl.'

They drove on in complete silence until they reached the parents house, Jack introduced Pot as his assistant in the case and after shaking hands Pot got down to business. First she produced a photo of the worn shoe and asked if they recognised it but they both shook their heads, then she asked if their daughter had bought any specific friend or friends home in the past year. They looked at one another and mentioned the missing university lad.

'Oh, the lad bought his dog with him, it was a Labrador, lovely creature'. Pot nodded.

'Any specific people?' She asked but they both shook their heads.

'Thank you, are you ready Jack.' She indicated that they should leave and they drove

on to the boys parents with Jack in a chilly mood.

Soon they were in with the boys parents and they got a negative reaction to the photo of the shoe but when it came to friends both the girl and someone called Ant was mentioned. They were great friends were Ant and Mark, as boys they went everywhere together, up hill and down dale so to speak said the boys Father, then something happened, they both went to the same Uni at the same time and suddenly they split seeing one another regularly.

'Mark said to me he saw Ant most days and at term break Ant just wanted to get home to his own parents. Thought nothing of it but Mark bought his girl home soon after and Marge here thought it might be a bit of jealousy.'

'She is or rather was really nice and we were happy for Mark.'

'When did Mark acquire the Labrador, did you buy the dog for him?' Pot asked gently.

'No, it was a bitch, his girl bought him a pup last year.' The mother clasped her hands.

'The officer who interviewed us told us there was a diseased dog in the car.'

'Did you recognise the car the dog was found in?'

'Yes, it was new one I gave to Mark for his getting into Uni so he could get back here whenever he wanted, I told the officer all this.'

'Thank you, were there any other people that Mark may have bought home, new friends for example, I am nearly finished.'

'Thank the lord.' whispered Jack whilst the two parents thought hard.

'Well there were those two last spring, mates he had made at Uni only came the once, now Marge what were their names?'

'Well,' Marge rose from her seat, 'I have a photo of them together, we took before they all left, I'll fetch it as I printed their names on the back.'

'Very efficient my wife puts everything in its place.'

'Thank you, I would like to keep this if I may, I will return it after we copy it.' Pot reached across and she and Jack quickly looked at the print. They shook hands and left.

In the car just as Jack switched on the motor, Pot leaned across.

'You gave a reaction back there, you recognised someone in the photo, and you've just pocketed it so come on Jack tell me.'

'Well first thing, I do submit that ability to drag something out of those poor folk did in fact reveal a piece of information we had not found before.'

'And?'

'When we get back to you office we will take a copy and blow it up on the scanner then we might find out who this is.' Jack patted his pocket with a knowing smile.

'Oh, Pot one thing I already asked both parents for a recent photograph of their children, I'm surprised you did not, bone structures flesh type etc. Am I treading on you toes?'

'No dear Jack, Tom and one of you valiant officers already acquired these self same pictures and yes we have them on file in the office!'

'Good then perhaps we will make a match, yes Pot we work well as a team I'll ask the board to take you on as an officer of the law.'

'Now that's kind, will I get two salaries as well?' And they both laughed but Jack refused to say what really was on his mind.

They arrived back at the office and Pot called Tom in and to bring the kids photo's in, then they all viewed the large scanned photo of Mark and his two friends.

"Do you see that Pot?" Jack pointed behind the group of three. There was another person behind one of the visitors, it was definitely a blond girl, half her face hidden. 'Could it be, at least lets do a scan same size and check the right side cheek. What do you think it means?' Pot raised her eyes from the photo.

'Well for you Pot it means you have to get tested for new glasses.'

'Well I guess your eye sight is better than mine but you use yours for checking out moving number plates all the time.'

'Wrong division Pot!' Tom handed him the resized copy and he cut out the head and placed them over the group photo.

'There Pot, they match, now isn't that interesting. I now have a lead of three people to check out. Can you get me a foolscap of the group and one with this new cut-out, Then a copy of the girls portrait photo, I'll need them tomorrow and before you ask no you are not coming to the University with me, you've done enough damage already, its my fishing day tomorrow and I am not well pleased at going to work!'

'I would have liked to but Tom and I need to check out that shoe and the tractor prints they may tie in what you may find on the morrow, but thanks for putting up with me you cantankerous old servant of the law.'

'Not so much about the old, so good afternoon you two and thanks for the excitement.' Jack left after the new photo's had been printed and were safely placed in a polythene bag.

On the Monday Tom eventually found the Adidas shoe sole, with their help, it belonged to a group made in the early eighties so he called into Pots office and she had found the tyre, not for a tractor but a heavy goods lorry. They both spoke at once so Pot put up her hand.

'Me first Tom, tyre belongs to a specific lorry large rear wheel single hub and probably an old Ford used in the thirties, now yours.'

'Adidas, eighties, male.'

'Elder male I bet, too old for a young one.'

'Could be a hand me down!'

'Could be, lets wait now for Jack's information, but I'll try him on his phone.' She did and it was switched off so she left a message at the station with a brief summary of the sole and tread details.

It was late noon that Jack eventually turned up with his news.

'Well you two I got the message but this is getting bizarre. Both the guys standing in front of the girl say she was Marks girl at the time but Ant the old friend said Mark did not know her. He reckons she was the girl friend of the big fellow, Cubby Bellows. Well named because he really had a bad mouth on him. The other guy, his cousin, confirmed it. If I went by your glass ball I'd say it was the load mouth Cubby

but I'll get the guys down town to do the official follow up on both of your findings. We don't want to scare them off so we'll do this quietly by the book.'

But they could not, there was fire at Gums farm that night and the Firies managed to save an old Ford lorry.

Pot rang Jack as soon as she heard of the fire and arranged a quick trip to the farm with Tom in tow to examine the truck and its wheels. Jack picked them up and by mid morning they were at the farm. An ambulance was there already and they were attending an old man barely alive. Pot gave him a brief examination but the ambulance women insisted on getting to hospital intermediately.

'She found the Firies chief still inside the farm outer building, there was a lot of burnt hay bales which his men had doused with water.

'Well Chief where did you find the old man?'

'The fire was started in the early hours of the morning, we got called out about two am, the bales were alight but the truck stopped us getting to them so we pulled it out into the yard and started dousing the hay which was well alight, a section had fallen towards the rear so we left that and dragged out the worst behind where the lorry had stood and left the rest undamaged until the morning. When we came back about eight we searched the whole building for evidence and in doing so some of the men lifted back the fallen bales and underneath was poor old Dan Spiller with a big crack on his skull.'

'Caused by the fallen bales?' asked Pot.

'You the expert Pot but I hardly think a bale of straw could do that, yes pin him on the floor but it looks like it tumbled slowly, it did not crush the old git, it just held him firmly. He was lucky not to suffocate with that weight on him guess he's a strong little git.'

Jack came back from looking at the lorry,

'Been driven recently so its in working condition.'

'Yep, old man Spiller used it regular like around the place.' The chief looked at it appraisingly. 'Grand old bus, he's had the beast some forty years or more.'

'Could tow a car no doubt, What's over there in the small shed Chief.'

'Take a look yourself Jack you'll find a small smithy, these farmers always do their own repairs.'

Jack did as he was bid and he called Pot and Tom over, they opened the door and they found a quantity of tools and an oxyacetylene bottles and torch. On the rack behind the door were several lengths of chains. Jack knocked both bottles with his knuckles.

'Well you two I have to get off to hospital to see what I can get from Dan if he is awake, meantime go up to the Uni and hold young Ant for me. Keep him close and take him back to the station, book him in to the Duty Sargent not as a suspect but as someone to be protected.'

'Ah you have a crystal ball Jack and you did not tell.'

'A nose Pot, just a coppers nose, I'll order you a highway car.'

'For Tom, I want to look at old Dan's head if they will allow me. So I'll come with you.'

'Tom when you go in to find young Ant, you take the officer with you, you hear.'

Then Jack and Pot drove off to the hospital leaving Tom to take a sample from the acetylene cylinder and bagged the drill plus a bit box he found on the bench.

When they arrived at the hospital old Dan was barely alive but the surgeon was close to operating, but he said it looked like a round steel bar at the rear of the head. And turning to Pot

'I doubt Pot he had no idea what hit him.'

'So Jack where to now, I presume we follow Tom to the Uni?'

'Not so quick young Pot. I expect some reaction when your Tom and my officer get there. Whilst you talked to that Doctor I rang though to the Department for some back up from our heavies. So yes we go but by the back way if there is such a thing and darn it Pot you stay right in this car when we get there.'

'Expecting trouble are we.'

'There's no real proof it was Cubby could have been the small one, the ones with the brains.'

'Jack you need brains to get accepted into Uni and I'm sure they both have them.'

'Maybe but we assume that the girl was with Cubby only because she was closer to him, could have been pure fluke, we will take both in and shake them up a bit and I really do hate kids.'

'Yes so you've said.' So Pot sat back as Jack drove carefully up towards the back of the Uni buildings where he was stopped by one of the heavy mob dressed all in black.

'Can't let the lady through Jack.'

'She's one of us, sharp shooter Nell.'

'Well I'll be damned, I have heard of Bang Bang Nell, she's all the talk of the Depot and you detectives won't let us get to see her, you keep all to yourselves, OK go through.'

As they gently rolled forward Pot took his arm,

'When do I get my gun then Jack.'

'Nell was somebody my old boss thought up years ago and you fit the bill. Not very sharp are our special heavy mob, if you really were a sharp shooter there surely would be a rifle in the back!'

'Trunk. Now slow down I can see Tom going into that hall over there.'

Indeed Tom and his attendant officer appeared some minutes later with Ant between they had gone no more than a dozen yards when two figures raced toward them, the smaller had a gun and he was yelling the word murderer several times. Then came two sharp retorts, both fell to the ground then a surge of black suited grabbed and cuffed them.'

'There just as well they bought their Bang Bang Nell with them,' he looked across to Pot, 'Yes she really exists but she works for them under another name of course!'

'Of course now lets get my poor Tom into this car and I guess its safe to release Ant back to his studies. By the way Jack who was the murderer, don't leave me in suspense.'

'I guess whose ever fingerprint was on that drill I asked Tom to bag, the drills should show metal from Marks car and then we have the truth!'

'Well can I offer you a position in Forensic, Tom and I could do with some help!'

Jack laughed and they drove on to pick Tom up, and was decidedly upset at that last incident.

'Jack you ever do that again I'll I'll.' He stopped. 'Pot we never took any soil from that trucks tyres.'

'Too late Tom Mr. Spiller used it regularly, but if you want you can try, get the mechanic up here and take a look at those chains in the shed. but not today its been exhausting to ride with Jack!'

' Ok Clever Clogs which do you pick as the culprit? ' Jack turned to Pot.

'Well its a case of pure evil jealousy and I guess the smaller one egged on the big guy to do the dirty work.'

'How do you work that out?'

Pot thought for a while,

'Jack he was the one who had a gun and shouted out thus venting his anger.'

'Yes I guess that's pretty close, and sorry Tom for making you a provisional goat.'

'That's not the right word Jack I think its sacrificial, but we will leave at that.' And Tom closed his eyes in exhaustion.

BLACKOUT.

Copyright 2014 Paul Audcent

A short story about having an argument with your better half, but who said they were better? Nasty perhaps, but it gets worse.

It was dark, pitch black. Grayson stopped and felt in his pocket but the torch was not there. It normally resided in his side pocket where he kept his keys, they were there as he jangled them between his fingers but no torch. A car came past at some speed and he stepped back onto the footpath. The headlights allowed him briefly to see where he was going and he spotted a gate belonging to Farmer Jackson it had its broken slat, the third down if he remembered correctly so at least he was in the right direction. He looked around to find any more incoming vehicles, he was on a side road and yes he could see them travelling on the main highway flashing by in the distance, well at least he was close to home and knew that around an unseen bend ahead there was the three cottages, a pub and the Saxon church further on. He quickened his stride to reach the bend where the path stopped where he had to use the roadway. He came to the edge of the kerb and stepped down cautiously so as not to trip, he swore about losing his torch. He thought for one moment that Jennie had removed it, they had had a row that morning, a violent one and he had slapped her hard on her face, for her tongue was unnerving him and she was getting hurtful, so he then and there accused her of fancying Tom their next door but one neighbour. So she turned onto their kitchen table and aimed his breakfast plate at his head, instead she changed her mind and threw it directly at his chest, it missed but he picked his coat off the hook and dashed outside to meet his lift to the station.

As he came close to Mrs Compton's the first cottage he passed by her high pine hedge and his hand outstretched to find the gate he then felt a blow on the back of his head and he sank to the ground his hand slipping down the wet slats of the gate, he tried to grab the bottom rail but a kick in the stomach rolled him into the road. Unconscious he remained for several hours until he was collected by a fast car swinging around the bend which did not stop. Mrs Compton found him next morning across the lane and rang the police.

I was passing by in my car and listening to the whine in my drive shaft, I looked to my right and slowed down. Ahead was an old green car parked badly by the verge with its backside hanging well into the road. I stopped behind it and got out ready to berate the owner. All I could see were a couple of heads, one white and the other brown bobbing up and down amongst some metal posts and standing stones.

'Hey you two', I called and they stopped abruptly and looked in my direction. 'Your car is poking out into the road!'

'Can you move it for us please' came the reply and their bobbing commenced again. I looked inside and shook my head in disbelief, they had left the keys in the ignition for anyone to steal. So I got in, started it and moved it fully onto the grass.

I then tried to lock the car but the latch was broken so I left the keys on the seat and hopped over the fence to find the bobbing heads.

They were weeding alongside the graves and at first they did not notice me so I looked around and read some of the stones, at least those that were standing almost erect, until I came across a small grave with a lovely stone child mounted on a granite pedestal all by itself.

'Not from around here then.' They both came up to me, every so often dipping down and pulling a weed.

'No. You left your car keys in the car and the door wont lock' I said.

The elderly silver haired one smiled, 'Not worth pinching.'

I pointed to the stone child. 'alabaster?'

'Marble, the finest they told me.' said silver head.

'Maise Dell' said the little brown lady.

'But there's no name or date on the column.'

'Don't need to be, everyone knows wee Maise.' And both nodded.

'They thought the little angel was a fitting piece for little Maise. Well Council did and everyone subscribed, back in the eighteen hundreds it were.'

'Its a beautiful piece without a doubt and carved by a real professional, must be worth a bit of money now!'

'You from the city I guess, what with you worrying about my car and now this sculpture, with you wondering no doubt why it hasn't been stolen, its the country our country, we leave things as they are.'

'That might be up here but where I come from it would be gone in a trice. Still tell me what young Maise did to receive the bounty of a beautiful memorial?'

'Just go around the back of the column there is an inscription.'

I walked around and indeed there was a small panel hardly eligible now but by getting close I could make out the words. 'To dear Maise Dell my sincere apologies, John Webster, Mayor.' 'Well, it told me nothing, how old was Maise when she died?'

'Ninety three.'

'So why the apology?'

'It will take a little time, we have a flask of tea, so lets sit over there on John Webster's flat slab shall we.' The silver haired lady pulled a flask from her bag and both old ladies went over and sat on Webster's flat grave.

'Not to flash this slab, just a flat stone and his name carved roughly at the top,' said I. 'Well he spent most of all he had on that marble girl statue, had it shipped out by a sculptor in Italy, cost a fortune so people said. The Council and residents paid for the column. Now sit down and listen. ' So I did.

' Maise and seven children went over to the lagoon looking for tadpoles.' She pointed past the cemetery with her finger, 'about a mile down there in the dip. Young Ricky Gallop slipped down the mud embankment and only Maise spotted him, so she dashed across the bank and grabbed him by the hand then dug her other hand into the oozing clay. Apparently she shouted and held on the Ricky until the others came across and helped drag both of them to safety. Of course the children were scared of what Ricky's parents would say him now covered in the red slime so John Webster made the story up that he had rescued Ricky, which they all agreed to.'

'Why not give the girl her due?'

'Well, she was brown, dark brown like me.' Said the other lady and drank her tea slowly.

'It was like it those days, Maise would have got a thrashing as a thank you.' said silver hair.

I looked across at the column with its beautiful statue perched on top and instantly felt a great sadness. ' How awful that Maise did not see this beautiful thing.'

'Oh rumour has it that the Mayor bought it several years before her death and had it placed in her little orchard just down the road, you can just see the tops of her plum trees over that brow.'

'We are saving up to have a new marble inscription to replace that old wooden one at the back of the column, plus rewrite some of the older stones.' Said the little brown lady.

They had finished their tea and handed me one of the cups with the last of the tea, and in return I gave them some notes to help pay for the refurbishing. Well the story was worth every penny. And no, I won't tell you where it is, I reckon the Yobs round our way would either smash it or steal it, so let it stand, a testament to a brave young lady.

Mr Johnson sat quietly reading from the Sports magazine he had picked up from the table filled with magazines, many as old as he was. Clip Clip in the background plus a gentle hum of voices as the Barber talked to his customer. Johnson shifted his seat to be closer to the action still reading about the sports scandal, drug taking to increase the physical action or some such. Johnson shook his head in disbelief, this had been going on for decades, it was absolutely not a shock to him but still to the average punter, I expect it caused some distress.

The Barber called him. Not by name just a 'Next Sir' as he brushed down the customer whose hair now lay scattered around the chair. So Johnson took his overcoat off, hung it on a peg and sliding his hand beneath his suit coat switched on the digital recorder and sat down in the ample barbers chair.

"Now how do you want it, by the way I haven't seen you here before?"

"No I was passing, going to visit my Sis, I thought I would pop in just for a trim please."

"Certainly Sir." The barber went away to return with a brush and pan to clear the old hair of the floor. Whilst the barbers back was turned Johnson felt below the patent leather arms until he found it, a small switch. Reynolds had been here yesterday and had found it, mark you it had been the dead of night and a locksmith had got him in. So Johnson felt the black cape spread over his body and relaxed.

"Just a trim was it Sir."

"Yes please, its a bit long over the ears."

And so the snipping commenced, as did the interrogation, starting with the compulsory 'and where do you come from Sir?' and then very gently almost in the same rhythm as the scissors, the persuasive questions of what work was he in and was he married and where did he live. The work reply certainly caused a reaction, a skimp in the rhythm, but that was all. Of course what Johnson was telling the barber was total eyewash set up by his colleagues at the office. But as the barber delved deeper into the Johnson history, suddenly Johnston's mobile phone went off. The barber stopped and Johnson retrieved his mobile. "Yes now" he said into the microphone.

"You've been a very naughty barber, amazing how much damage you have caused this shipyard."

The Barber looked at him, the scissors poised above his head, a brief look of fear crossed his face as two Federal agents entered the shop. Johnson raised himself up from the chair and held the Barbers wrist and twisted it with the scissors away from him. He turned to the sailors waiting their turn and said quietly,

"I'm afraid gentlemen you will need to find another barber, this one works for the enemy. He records everything you tell him."

Many stories have covered that wonderful invention of the car, some have been full of fun like Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, others like that big American killing limousine have been dark and foreboding plot. My little story falls nowhere near those two, and frankly is a piece of light heartedness and pure invention. I did once own a Morrie Minor, it was my first car and had a split screen to boot!

It was a car dealer like any other except they were not on the main drag but up a corrugated dusty side street. He had walked several miles already along the central highway crossing through town from one side to the other but nothing took his fancy until one very smart car dealer mentioned old Tom Goodling up the Dairy track. 'You want a cheap car go to old Tom's that where we send our old crates when we can't sell them, old Tom will do you a deal for the ridiculous price you intend to pay, but mark my words you'll get a real botched job and that's if you are lucky.'

So Eddy Makepeace calmly walked into a scruffy yard to the sound of hammering and welding. Two people he spotted in a shed, an old bearded man with a tattered golfing cap and what looked like a younger figure in pale blue dungarees with a welding hat perched above a freckled face which could have been female. It was for she called out 'Can I help you Mister?' To which he responded 'Need a car, got to be cheap and clean.'

'Cheap Pop can do, but clean its for you to do.'

'Any guarantee it will go?'

'It will go all right but for how long is anybodies guess.' She walked over to him and eyeing up and down.' You need it for a quick get away then.'

Eddy shifted his feet and brushed down his dusty trousers. 'I need to get to Morton.'

'Bus tomorrow be cheaper, and hotel here not expensive.'

'I need to get to Morton by tonight.'

'Well look around anything you fancy?'

Eddy looked they were all a bit wasted with bumps and scratches, one had a crack through its windshield. 'Long as it can get me to Morton, but cheap please.'

'Well got an old Morris traveller out back of shed, came in yesterday from old Mrs Cotten by up yonder, bought herself a brand new Zombie four wheel and she be eighty three. I reckon served her for forty years and Pop did all the service, you can have it cheap.' She turned to her Father, ' Old Morris a goer Dad.'

Dad nodded, 'insides a bit ropey but engine and gears are OK, but she's done 300000 so can't be pushed too hard. Three gears, reverse a bit of a problem.'

'How much? Said Eddy

'You can have her for 200.'

'Can I return her tomorrow I only need it the two days?'

'Sure you can, lets say you get 120 back, mind in same condition.'

Eddy nodded, seemed fair.

The old man took a key out of his pocket and threw it to his daughter who jerked off her welding hat and with a flourish of her head a cascade of brilliant red hair

showered down her shoulders. She marched behind the shed and soon Eddy heard the sound of an engine spluttering and then revving.

'Listen fellow my daughter wants to go to Morton there's a big show on there, she can stay with my sister, do you mind taking her and you can bring her back then you can have all your money back, being frank you don't seem a feller with plenty of money.'

'I get by, yep that's OK it she agrees.'

The girl arrived back and nodded, 'and no funny business.'

She drove, he paid the petrol at the local garage then lay back and slept. When they arrived in Morton she asked where to and he directed her to the park where a stage was being erected. 'You can leave me here thanks take the car up to your aunts if you want and pick me up tomorrow from this spot.'

'Are you going to the concert tonight?'

'Well I guess I have too, the other guys would miss me, is that why you wanted to come here tonight?'

'Yes I did, but I need to change at Aunts first. How can I find you, look the crowd is getting thicker.'

'Well I guess the first band is on soon. When you get back just come to the front of the stage, I'll tell one of the security to look out for you, presumably you have a ticket?'

'Yes I bought one last week its out the back on the hill I think, the seat I mean.'

'Well here's a ticket for the front, she you soon.'

Strange is it not, how two entirely different people meet. A girl from a dusty old car yard and a famous international pop star, There really was not much about the car in this story. Eddy decided to keep it and had old Tom do it right up new engine, new paint, new interior, for his new bride and he chose a rich red leather for the seats to go with her glorious hair.

We saw it from the valley, as I drove around a bend it was Marcus who yelled to stop and Francis leapt out to take a photo. What all the fuss was about I had not the slightest idea but those two seemed to know something I did not.

"It's the house that Marcus is thinking of buying, he saw in last week's magazine and rang the agent yesterday. "

"You did not tell me this, all you said let's go for a drive, listen Francis I came out for a drive not a house buying trip." But the other two just clambered back in and with pointed fingers to show me the small lane I had to take.

Well we eventually reached a set of gates wide open as if they were expecting us and once through we brushed past some overgrown rhododendrons and eventually reached a circular gravel drive with lots of weeds growing through.

"Surely not here Marcus, everything is overgrown!"

"Well maybe that's why the price was so reasonable."

"Well I can't see another car, the salesman car!"

"Well they said the door was broken so just go in and take a look around then let us know if you are interested."

Both Francis and Marcus got out and raced up the steps and through the unlocked door. Marcus won and gave a hoot. I waited, I had no intention of getting cobwebs all over me so instead I got out, locked the car and went for a stroll around the driveway. I noticed the weeds were rampant in many places and if they were annuals then a few seasons had passed from being cleared off. What's more the place smelt dank, probably the undergrowth by those Rhododendrons. Over to one side was a little stone gazebo with a glass framed rounded roof so I walked over there and found a curved seat inside. It collapsed when I sat on the edge so I hurriedly pulled myself up and went back to car and waited, and waited.

I looked at my watch and the two friends had been gone an hour, so how long does it take for the boys to look around the house and then a thought struck me, I had fallen when I destroyed that chair, what if they had had a similar occurrence. It was then I decided to go and seek them out. So I opened the car boot and fetched a tyre lever just in case.

I climbed the steps and opened the heavy front door, I looked down to see the latch had a key in it, so I turned and the lock clicked back. Funny I thought, leaving a house open to anyone. So I yelled for the boys. Not a sound, so I carried through the lower rooms which I must admit seemed well proportioned and clean. No one there as I reached the back hallway so I retraced my steps and climbed the staircase, as I did I checked the railing which seemed to be well polished, I called as I climbed and there was the faintest reply coming from somewhere far. After reaching the top I

turned left and into what obviously was a sitting room and called, no reply. Eventually after peering into each room and checking I found another staircase climbing up to the loft, the servants quarters? So again I climbed and noticed the dust on the stairs had been scraped away, so I called again but this time I heard Francis call back.

“Up here Nick, we are locked in.”

Eventually I found the door way and indeed there was a key on the outside. So with the tyre lever in one hand at the ready, I turned the key and there they were, white faced and obviously scared.

“Don't come in Nick stay outside we are coming out.”

“Well what happened?”

“Somebody locked us in, we thought it might have been you, but Marcus spotted you going into that stone thing.” Francis pointed to the window at the back of the room.

I peered inside and I noticed the small metal bed was fully laid out so I gave the over blanket a whack with my hand and a cloud of dust filled the room.

“Strange that, just check on the other rooms will you?”

“Why” came the reply from them both, still not eager to get locked in so I pointed down the hallway and they did as I asked. Every room had at least one bed and some at the end had two. The boys whacked each bed with the same result a cloud of dust.

“So what?” asked Marcus.

“Did you not notice how clean the downstairs was, and yet here in the servants quarters every thing is dusty, lets go down to that sitting room on the second floor and have a think.”

So we descended the stairs and went along to the far end room which was obviously a lounge cum sitting room for the inhabitants of the bedrooms on that floor. There were two gigantic sofa's opposite one another with a large low slung oak table between, and I don't know why but we all plopped into the one with its back to the large window. I guess for comfort or safety or some such. So I asked Marcus if he was going to buy this property, And he shrugged his shoulders.

“Well Nick, what do you feel about this house?”

“Mausoleum” interrupted Francis, still a light shade of white, no doubt disturbed by their getting locked up.

“Well I'm sorry about that it was me.” Just then three little ladies appeared on the sofa across the table. Somewhat stunned I said,

“Are you sisters by any chance?” Francis had grabbed my arm in fright and I brushed him away, but Marcus had a faint smile on his face.

“Ah.” He said “I thought I smelt perfume up there”.

“Well that would be me I hurried up to stop Jane locking you in, but alas too late.”

“Well let me introduce you to my sisters and I. I am Myrtle the oldest, this is Charity the middle and that little miss is Jane.” Each bowed their heads as Myrtle introduced them.

Marcus took control of the conversation and asked them about themselves it was Myrtle who replied telling us that their father had built this home some two hundred years ago, he was a merchant with connections with the East Indies, but alas his fortune diminished leading the family threadbare. All the servants had to leave, the gardens were still cared for by the sisters as indeed was the house, but one by one they all eventually died but not before when burying their parents they made pact to stay as long as they could.”

“Did you not marry?” I asked

“No all our young men, at least the really pleasant ones were carried off to war so our sweethearts were lost to us.”

“Now that's sad.” This was Francis who had decided to wake up from his trauma.

“I'm sorry Francis you were obviously a bit shocked to see us, we meant no harm and Myrtle would surely have unlocked the door but she was watching Nick down by the Gazebo.” Charity smiled.

“Yes Nick and I expect you to mend that chair, we all love sitting in the Gazebo and listening to the birds.” Myrtle looked at me crossly.

“Indeed I will, but I wonder if Marcus is going to buy this place.”

“Well either he does or he doesn't but its common practice to ask the house if it wants to be sold.” Myrtle straightened up and looked directly at Marcus.

“Well Myrtle I would have to ask my wife if she would willing to move if I did want to buy the place, but frankly having four women trying to tell me how to run the place may be somewhat irritating.”

Myrtle leapt to her feet and seemed ready to throw a cushion at the smirking Marcus who had given me a gentle wink so off I went.

“And since Marcus is not going to buy it then I won't fix that crappy chair which I had the misfortune of falling over.”

The ladies faces had remained a slight hazy white but Myrtles had definitely coloured up until Charity laughed out load,

“I think the boys are getting their own back Myrtle.”

“Well I never.” said Myrtle instead of an apology.

“Do you have children?” It was Jane nodding to Marcus.

“No Jane we have not had that pleasure or I suppose blessing if you like kids.”

“We do Marcus, we've had several who come up the drive and through the house but they never stayed. Mostly in the autumn so we suspect they were after the apples and pears, but we never frightened them but just watch them climbing the trees.”

“Well thats not strictly true, Jane frightens them away by suddenly appearing and then disappearing, it tends to frighten the little ones off.” Myrtle gave Jane a frosty look.

“But we listened to their voices and learnt how they talked.”

“And she locks people up for no cause, if I do buy this house and of course the house agrees, then Jane will have to limit her locking up to just the front and back doors at night. Well you three, can I buy the house then?”

“Well you have to ask your wife first then come back when we've had a chance to see her.” They all nodded but I could see that they were really hoping Marcus would buy the house and land.

“Well we will be off now to let you boys have a bit of a look round.” We all stood up as they slowly disappeared into empty space.

“Well now Marcus how do you feel?”

“Fine, but that was quick, I had imagined they would have liked to be left in peace, after all two centuries is a fair old time.”

“Well” I said as we got up to go, “I expect having three young men fairly well dressed and spoken may have helped these charming ladies make up their mind.”

Well eventually Marcus called on me to take him and his wife up to the house and she walked around and after a kiss on his cheek she said yes if the girls approved. At that instant we were surrounded by the three woman which somewhat startled Grace but give her her due she acted with composure so I suspected Marcus had told her all about this strange house beforehand.

And so time past and Francis and I rebuilt the broken Gazebo chair and placed a number of benches around the garden, which we dutifully cleared and replanted at Myrtles directions. Eventually first one baby entered their lives and subsequently two more. Marcus told me that Jane and Charity made excellent nursemaids and he and Grace eventually made the three ladies God parents to each child.

After a few years Marcus lost his job as he was not to keen on doing all the overtime his bosses wanted him so he called us all together and said he wanted to open up the house and gardens to the public and therefore work from home developing the estate. There were old carriage buildings that could be turned into short term rental and would I and Francis like to do them up and in return have a holiday home each from the subdivision.

Well Marcus plans eventually succeeded and the house and grounds are now open for inspection by the public, for of course a small fee. And no I'm not going to tell you where it is, you will just have to visit every garden you can think of and if you see three lovely elderly ladies parked on the circular seat inside a stone Gazebo then you will know you have arrived. But please leave them alone as they do like their own company, after all they are two centuries old. Though I have to admit they do enjoy observing the public at large and you can sometimes listen in to their gentle chatter if you are nearby. But if they catch you listening a clip on the ear is the likely result, and how they do that without an ounce of flesh between them, I have no idea.

THE NEW GARDEN.

Copyright Paul Audcent 2014

A place of serenity, but it all goes wrong, only to be saved in the most unlikely way!

They, the local bigwigs, had a problem so they turned to the local council and requested their help. In short, would they please annul the current ownership so that the land could be repurchased legally and the major development proceed to the benefit of all, particularly the council and the financial bigwigs backing the project. Well said the council, what is in it for us and our ratepayers?

Well, said the developers, a goodly slice of land bordering the edge of the proposed new shop buildings and close to the apartment structures so that a green open space would be available for both shoppers and residents to enjoy.

So it was agreed and the site, which originally was an old bombed site, substantial in size but no longer owned by any living person, was legally changed to Government ownership after a superficial checking for likely kin, none were found. Thus the land was finally added to an auction list and eventually sold to the developers. Council planning eventually received a planning application and council received its plot of land that the developers had originally agreed upon. Naturally this boosted the chances of any residential and commercial plans to succeed and those opposition letters were quietly filed into the waste paper basket.

So the builders arrived together with an assortment of vehicles and the work began. It progressed in leaps and bounds. Soon the Council park area was cleared of rubbish and the first sods were bought in. They were rolled out and positioned in a brick like pattern, then a sandy soil was vibrated in between the edges and joints, finally a heavy spray watering to finish the job by the Council Parks Department and all was finished. The next day the Mayor came down to view the result and what he found made him very angry, the whole green sward was now a mass of brown textured grass. The Parks management took samples for testing at the laboratory and a bewildered team of men and women left to await the tests.

The results soon came back and they weren't negative so a fresh watering was ordered and although the grass grew it still remained a grey brown colour. So experts were called in and they took samples in pots that turned a bright green after a few days. The experts billed their accounts and shook their combined heads in unison. Local professors were called in to give their verdict from two universities but to no avail, so finally the Mayor ordered that the whole area be concreted in.

When the towns people heard this, a public storm erupted and the Mayor had to back down. Meanwhile the housing site progressed and the developers began selling the apartments, alas sales were very slow and it was discovered that the new grassy area was the cause.

A Mrs. Coleman expressed a view in the local newspaper that no one had really checked out the real owners of the land, there had been several families with homes that had suffered the heavy stick of bombs that had fallen one night many years previously. The Council disagreed and said they had tried their hardest so Mrs. Coleman suggested a full batch of children's equipment be installed.

Swings, roundabouts and football areas sprouted over the following month and then the area started to green up. At first a light tinge but increasingly, a proper green sward rapidly began to appear. Mrs. Coleman said that it was the children's feet that finally convinced the lawns to grow their proper colour. And maybe she was right.

The bigwigs however started to fret and investigated more deeply the various plots of previous ownership and this time they did not skimp but hired ancestry experts to trace the original owners and their probable relations if any existed. Indeed there were several with likely claims and these were paid out at current prices. Now trees started to flourish, no one knew where they had come from, perhaps the wind had brought the seed in. But Cherries and Acer's soon populated the corners. Mrs. Coleman denied having anything to do with it as did the Council.

Another strange thing was the grass never seemed to need cutting, it thrived and grew so slowly that just peoples feet walking over it seemed to keep it low permanently. The townspeople were so pleased with the new space they asked Council to allow Mrs. Coleman to plant a small flower garden to one side of the play area and away from the soccer field. So she chose a variety of annuals, bi-annuals and roses to one side by the new wooden seats so beloved by the elderly.

But would you believe that green sward still exists today with the minimum support from the Council gardeners, well you can say anything in a fictional story!

Jenny Craven was born in the middle fifties and was an only child. She was bought up by an elderly aunt, her parents having been divorced and now free of any encumbrance, launched themselves into a new spirit of freedom of drink and drugs. Jenny was bounced from relative to relative eventually at the age of two bouncing into the rock solid arms of Aunt Tracy a cold efficient woman versed in sums and subtractions, in other words an accountant. Jenny's life from that time on was spent in those damnable times tables at an age when she should have been galloping over the countryside or parks with children of her own age. So despite the good intentions of Aunt Tracy to feed, cloth and educate the child, Jenny grew up in a very lopsided way. Eventually she attended her first school and the following day she left under her own steam much to the consternation of her aunt who had to manhandle her back to the authority of the school and non caring students. This increased Jenny's hesitancy to form friendships with her fellow students and sadly resulted in bullying and non acceptance by both staff and her fellows. She did however excel at mathematics and eventually won every prize going for her studying and examination results.

There was in fact a growing acceptance of her brilliance later in the high school and university so she soon accumulated some friendships which because of her previous non exposure in earlier years caused her to be somewhat brittle and unyielding, any relationship seemed doomed before any firm closeness matured. She continued to succeed in her studies and was a joy to her elderly aunt who, now out manoeuvred by Jenny's brilliance, changed tack from being a teacher to became her acolyte and sponsor in all things. Alas any further future with her aunt was abruptly stopped by the sudden demise of old Aunt Tracy. Still Jenny was left the house, a small fortune in bank shares and a lovely garden to while away her time in. But she could not get used to having to tread on slugs and snails, let alone fertilise the plants with that awful smelling powder they called plant food. Alas she was bereft of good company, she was even short with her neighbours and had totally lost any communication with her cousins who coincidentally were a little jealous of the attention and fortune Aunt Tracy had bestowed upon her.

So one day she wrote for a blow up doll to keep her company. Someone to talk too and give an occasional cuddle too. She had thought of buying a cat or a dog but was put off by the fact they had to be kept clean and fed, plus the idea of bringing up a pup or kitten filled her with horror at having to clean their messes up after them. So the pump-up arrived and after unpacking she blew it up, wonders of wonders it was a lovely man size and for a doll, really handsome. So she just had to name it, well you had to know the name of someone you spoke too so she thought and thought, then Hank slipped into her mind, and Hank it became. So Hank remained the highlight of her day when returning after work, he stood in the corner awaiting her embrace then he listened to any grievance and never answered back, a perfect gentleman was Hank. Except for the occasional need for a fresh input of air, Hank was so unbelievable easy to care for. So one day she gave a lecture at Uni on the practical use of a male doll. They laughed her out of the auditorium! That's when I lost contact with her, I tried to console, her but she turned her back on me. Hank was too strong. -----

There was a sudden glint of light behind the frosted glass and his hand stiffened on the trigger, but relaxed immediately when he screwed his eye to the scope, an adult had entered but below him or her was a child. The adult bent and lifted the child up to the basin. He had lain here covered by a green poly sheet for four hours and cramp was setting in. He raised each leg one after the other and stretched as quietly as he could.

A normal person by this time would be bored but Fleet knew about boredom and its possible affect so he stayed alert and thought only of the service and commitment. Next he moved his arm carefully away from the weapon and stretched that as well. He checked the scope and the child was washing its face and suddenly splashed both hands into the basin. A faint screech of laughter came followed by a sharp report as a fathers hand slapped his son. A cloth was handed to the young one and apparently thrown down then both left the bathroom. Then Fleet continued watching through the scope, as you never knew when the opportunity could occur.

He stretched his other arm slowly and continued watching as the child came back into the room and bent down, perhaps to retrieve the fallen towel. Or maybe it was its clothes as he saw the kid throw it over the shoulders and march out. But that was interesting, as the child did have a military bearing. Now I wonder who taught him that, how to almost march like that and swinging the arms. Fleet searched in his warm coat and pulled out a bottle of juice which he clenched with his teeth and sucked the liquid greedily, he put it back.

This was definitely the address, some way out of town and patrolled by security around the ample garden brimming with tropical trees and shrubs. It was one of the shrubs he lay behind after quietly manoeuvring through the steel link fence on hands and knees. He rested his finger back to the trigger as he saw a shadow of the bathroom door open and re-sighted the cross hairs but it seemed to be a small shadow, a woman of sorts perhaps the wife or the mother, both lived here with the commander, he was thoroughly briefed. So he relaxed. When the shot was made he realised the guards would have to be disposed of so a second rifle with a multiple cartridge case attached lay beside him resting on the black case that eventually would hold both rifles. He then felt a movement on the lower end of the dark green poly sheet that covered his body so he stayed absolutely still. A lizard or some such perhaps seeking his warmth, but as the minutes tick by it seemed to get heavier, God forbid a snake he prayed. Suddenly through the undergrowth behind him he heard faint steps so he quietly moved his hand to his inside pocket and removed a pistol with its snub nosed silencer. Still with his eye firmly on the target window he held the pistol close to his chin and stopped. The footsteps came louder and stopped behind him. Then a rush by an unseen force grabbed him from behind followed by a scream of horror as the snake bit deep into the assailants hand. As Fleet turned he saw the guard smiting the large black snake away from the hand but Fleet shot both the snake and the man in two quick shots.

The light went out and the shadow went but it was followed by re-lighting and the

large figure of the adult male was going to the window which was swiftly opened a brief shout for the guards around the house to check so Fleet quickly pulled the cross hairs to where the adult stood and gently pulled the trigger. There was a quite putt report and a sharp tug on his shoulder. He watched the scope and reloaded automatically just in case. The figure had slumped over the window sill, Fleet spotted a guard with his eyes almost upon his position, he moved the sight, surveyed the scene for others, but only this one so he pulled the trigger again. Quickly dismantling the rifle and packing it into the case carefully. He had no idea how long he had so he pushed the button on his throat mike and clicked his tongue twice, then grabbing the case quickly and snatched the automatic rifle, he scurried away towards the hole in the fence. He could hear other guards in the distance but they all seemed to race into the house rather than after him so now out of clear sight he ran for the fence noting the small sticks he had pushed into the ground as markers for a quick exit along his entry route. He heard the barking of dogs but he had found the clipped hole and threw the case through. His boss was there waiting and both then sealed up the hole with wire, at least that would stop any dog. Still holding his automatic rifle he got into the Land-Rover, the case he jammed beneath his feet whilst the boss let go of the hand brake and let it drift slowly down the slope with ever increasing speed until the road eventually flattened out, then he gunned the engine and they fled the scene.

Tired of thieves, then how about this?

Jonny Johnson was a thief, and had been ever since he was wheeled around a supermarket by his Mum. He would lean out of the trolley and snatch at various objects as he sailed past. Invariably his mama would view this with a baleful glance and grab back the offending item and return it to the shelves or give it back at the checkout so the staff had to return the items. But one day Jonny's big sister Rosie took him around and her eye was directed at more interesting things so she missed young Jonny shovelling sweets, razor blades anything he could grab into his jumper. Well that was the start of his troubles and it continued right up through school. His angelic smiling face always got him free from a sharp slap or a belting from those he stole from. He, as a teenager found bicycles to his liking, and earned a regular income stealing from the school compound and selling them cheaply on the open market, mainly to kids like himself with an aptitude for dishonesty, they knew where the bikes came from but their eagerness, to own an almost brand spanking new one, overcame any caution that parents might eventually cotton on that pocket money could not have bought such glowing transport.

And so Jonny reached manhood and because he was a gifted child his parents found him a position with a local solicitor where he trained in law at college. He soon got bored but as it happened young Jimmy Crystal also joined the firm and naturally both lads got on like a house on fire. Well that's what they did in the evenings, go out on their bicycles and look for empty houses. Soon they got bored lighting up peoples property and one fine day over an outdoor lunch they hit on car jacking as being a more profitable adventure, firing up homes may have been fun but there was absolutely no profit in it.

The first few cars they stole they sold to a car merchant who turned a blind eye to obvious forged papers which the two scoundrels designed in the solicitors office using their profession as a means of extracting official information. However the community sat up and took notice as the car thefts increased, so the lads had to find alternative sources to sell them and that meant driving further afield. One night they had just dropped their latest theft, as they were leaving they came around a bend and discovered the most unbelievable car parked outside a small villa. They stopped and Jonny the expert nipped across the road and discovered the owner had left his car keys on the seat, so he signalled to Jimmy and dropped inside. This car smelt of fresh new leather and it had all the bells and whistles of the latest model. So he quickly inserted the key that flashed up all the interior lights including a smart red start button which he pressed. A voice growled out from the audio speaker asking 'where to'? 'Oh great, its obviously needing directions for its GPS system, this will fetch us a deal of money unless we decide to keep it for ourselves. 'Go to Mortlake Crescent.' he yelled.

There was a sudden whoosh from under the steering wheel a metal prong hit him straight in the stomach. Jimmy could see smoke coming out of Jonny's widow so he drove quickly off. They found Jonny dead as a dodo an hour later and the cars batteries completely dead as well. Wonderful things these new electric cars!

I suppose like so many mums, my Mother had a secret recipe handed down to all her sisters and herself by my grandmother. This little story is not about that, but it was the basis of an idea for a story, so here goes.

Daisy Leeman was given this very special recipe for a Danish tart by her mother Florence who had it from her grandmother and so on. It was a tart her mother always baked for Christmas and was heartily devoured by the family on that special day. Whilst Florence was making the tart none of the males in the family were allowed in the kitchen and Daisy was posted at the door to ensure not one male foot entered whilst the preparation was laid out on the table and Florence's work commenced. She was always aided by her daughters who learnt the method by watching, no notes were made, it was all taken into memory. Now Daisy being the youngest had to wait several years until the eldest sibling had a child daughter and it was she who grew up to be custodian of the kitchen door. At last Daisy was able to help her mother and learn the secret of the Danish tart.

Some years later after she had married, her husband took her out to dinner at a very expensive restaurant and for pudding they had selected a French tart which turned out to be the exact replica of the secret Danish tart Florence had taught her daughters. Daisy was flabbergasted to say the least, and weird thoughts began to circulate through her brain, which of the sisters had sold this secret recipe or was it one of the cousins? So she asked her husband to ask the Chef about the pudding, so a waiter was called and instructed if he would ask Chef to come if possible. Chef came and immediately asked if their meal had been poor, both shook their heads and said it was delightful. Then Daisy told him about the French tart being exactly like her mothers secret recipe and how had he acquired the tart?

'Well its a long story but we had a couple in here some years ago and alas having eaten a meal to celebrate a golden wedding the husband discovered he had forgotten his wallet so his wife volunteered to to cook a special exquisite desert in our kitchen. So I agreed, and she put a piny on and raiding our fridge she commenced work. At first I left her entirely alone as to be honest she had waved me away. But that only stirred me to watch from a distance and make notes in my little notebook. I remember she made and baked four tarts and later we divided them up and invited the customers in the room to partake. Well you can imagine the compliments that came back to the kitchen and the increased tips that were left, more than paid for the meal this lady and husband had owed. So we shook hands, she would not tell me the name of the tart so I named it after the French.'

'Well I never' said Daisy, 'but that's a relief I believe I know the couple who could not pay. To be honest I thought it might had been my siblings!'

'If it was secret I would like to keep it please, so I will only serve it in this place because it brings the customers in regularly, So your meal today is on the house. May I ask have you any secret recipes at home?' -----

I had a friend called Henry John who lived in the house opposite and one day over a beer he related a strange occurrence that happened to him some years previous. He lived for a time with his parents in the high country and used to enjoy cycling and exploring the many roads and lanes and footpaths in his locality. One day his mother packed him a full lunch as he said he was not going near any villages but would head for the forest instead. So off he cycled a backpack with his mothers lunch and a flask of cider to drown it in when he stopped. At first he rode along a long country road that he knew so well and then he turned off a narrow little lane he had often passed but not explored. So he decided this was the time to do so and continued cycling up hill and down dale with the lane getting narrow each mile. Then abruptly the lane ended and a narrow footpath could be seen under the boughs of a gigantic tree, looking carefully around he could see that was the only entrance so he stowed his bike against the tree trunk and prepared to walk into the undergrowth along the small path. It was obviously used as the earth beneath was firm and vegetation free. He thought it might lead to a small farm up on the hills above so he continued on setting a steady pace with his back pack firmly on till he reached a cross road of paths. Now the quandary which to use so he broke a small branch of the bush on the path he had come on and took a right hand turn on the crossing path which took him down into a little dell by a stream. He stooped and drawing his hands together he scooped up the water and drank it slowly.

“ You should never drink from water you cannot be sure of.”

He turned around and noticed a little half bent lady peering at him from over a fence hidden by the vegetation. She had white hair and wrinkled eyes.

“You quite frightened me Madam, but the stream's water looked so clean that I couldn't resist it.”

“Well you shouldn't is all I can say especially as you have that flask of cider in your bag and a lovely lunch besides.”

“Now on earth did you know that?” Henry John rose up from the stream edge and approached this strange lady. “I am feeling hungry and Mother made a fair amount as she always does so may I offer you a share of my lunch.”

“Well I don't mind if I do, come into the cottage and I will set the table up.” The old lady beckoned him through the gate and then into the cottage. She helped him off with his back pack and hurried off into the kitchen and bought back two plates and two glasses. Then she changed her mind and went back into the tiny kitchen and bought another glass and plate and knife.

“Henry will be back soon from his snooping trip, he does love keeping his eye on other peoples business.”

She then unpacked the lunch pack and inside were three M&S medium pork pies. "Oh" she squealed I do so love those pies, they are shocking to try to make yourself, did she make them?" Then followed "but I doubt it, they have Cellophane wrapping to keep them fresh."

"I wonder Mrs? Do you have a name I might call you?"

"I'm Edith, Henry's wife, you should call me Aunt Edith."

I sat up at least ten centimetres in shock.

"I used to have a Great Aunt and Uncle by those names, that's why I am called John Henry after Great Uncle Henry."

Just then a gust of wind blew, a door had opened, and in whisked a bearded gentleman with a broad smile and a very long scarf. It was the scarf that John Henry noticed and Aunt Edith immediately said,

"Its to keep him warm when he's out in the cold but now it won't leave his neck!"

Aunt Edith returned to the kitchen and fetched a long loaf and some pickles. John Henry poured some cider in each cup and they supped heartily on those three M&S pork pies.

"My" said Uncle Harry, "they were scrumptious Always said your Mum Mel was the best cook in town."

"Oh you know Mother?"

"Many years ago, and your Dad, pity about the prawns though, your Mum did a great job by herself."

John Henry was taken aback by the mention of his father, "I think I have to get home before it gets dark I have no lights as a rim dynamo slows me down!"

"Right you are, now Uncle Henry will show you a quicker way back to your bike and be sure to mention to Mum how we enjoyed having you and those wonderful pork pies."

"And that cider" said Uncle Henry as he guided John Henry outside.

"Now John listen, at the cross paths instead of taking that path with the broken branch go straight on and you will come into that clearing by the big tree."

Well by all accounts John Henry followed the directions and came upon his bike which he mounted and rode away back home. So full of this amazing discovery he ran into the house and holding his mother tightly recounted all that had happened that afternoon. She was astounded at first and then a look of bewilderment crossed her face. Then she unhinged his back pack off and looked inside.

"Well John you have left your lunch box behind, next Saturday you will take me on

your motor cycle and we look for it, it was a present from Grandpa for your third birthday. Its too precious to loose.”

I, like you my readers, was beside myself to know what John Henry's mother found on her trip to the forest that following weekend, they did find the lunch box next to the stream. Inside was a scrap of paper and in pencil was written, 'Thank you dear Mel, they were delicious and Joe is fine.'

“Well that's strange,” John's mother scratched her chin, “I was going to buy you one pastie but something changed my mind and I bought those three small pork pies.”

I later met Andy, John Henry's younger brother, and told him what John had said to me, I was intrigued to understand a bit more of the story he related. Andy smiled and said his father Joe did indeed die of a seafood complaint and Great Aunt Edith did in fact exist, she and Henry looked after John and mother for a year on their farm. They were killed five years ago in a freak accident when an aircraft landed on their farmhouse. Andy shrugged his shoulders and did not know what to believe.
