

ShadowGrimm Tales

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Do Unto Others

(Loosely based on Charles Perrault's Toads & Diamonds)

A broken home is rarely anything other than a trial for all those who have to live within its walls. Apart from the trauma caused by the breaking up of a previously coherent family unit, subsequent actions and hardships often make life extremely difficult and taxing for each and every one of the unhappy participants in these events. The time when and the place where lives are squeezed and wrung out under such circumstances is, in the great scheme of things, immaterial, but for one such family, living in a small village in one of England's elm-folded western valleys, the struggle for a good life was particularly hard.

Mrs. Milligan and her two daughters, Estelle and Hazel, lived in a small redbrick cottage that stood in a forlorn and lonely spot at the far end of a shabby and dusty village high street. Where there had once been rows of vegetables growing in the front garden and a pretty orchard of neatly pruned and espaliered fruit trees in the back garden, there was now nothing more than a choking of weeds and ivy smothered, skeleton branches. Ever since the departure of her husband some years previously, the family had scraped a living by taking in washing and ironing, and doing cleaning jobs for some of the village's more prosperous families. The two girls could remember little other than traipsing around after their mother, visiting house after well-appointed house, in a desperate quest to earn money amid fineries and fripperies that they could never hope to afford for themselves.

Of the two daughters, Estelle was the spitting image of her mother, although blessed, thankfully, with the softness of youth, while Hazel, two years the younger, was the very picture of her

father. The similarities between mother and eldest daughter did not end in looks. They were both of a similar personality and disposition, being proud and disagreeable to an extreme, convinced as they were that they were the victims of a cruel and heartless man. Because of this undoubted sin perpetrated against them by the ogre, they both believed the world owed them big time for all of their suffering and undoubted grace under poverty's iron heel. It was no surprise to anyone in the village that Mrs. Milligan had remained single for so many years.

Hazel, on the other hand, was one the sweetest, kindest and most courteous little girls in the whole county. She had a radiant smile that lit her face up with a pure and natural beauty, a beauty that brightened the gloom well beyond the physical limits of light. No matter what the hardship or the provocation, she always tried to see the best in any situation and so, despite the tragic circumstances of her family's life in the closeted world of Upper Risington, she remained a shining beacon of happiness when all around was shadowed in darkness and despondency.

Life in the Milligan household was a bleak affair at the best of times and Mrs. Milligan suffered unaccountably from her nerves due to the continual reminder of her bastard husband that blazed out from her youngest daughter's face every minute of the day. She would have been quite content for the girl to spend her days out of sight and her nights locked in her bedroom had it not been for the fact that Hazel never complained about chapped hands or ironing elbow. Hazel was quite unlike Estelle, who preferred to spend her time, when not pretending to dust someone's knick-knacks, watching day time television soap operas and reality shows about other people's lives. Mother and eldest daughter doted on each other and regularly shared the little luxuries that came their way when there was a purse full of cash left over from the benefits payments and the hourly wages earned from charring.

Poor Hazel, meanwhile, worked her fingers to the bone in a never-ending cycle of drudgery and domestic slavery, washing other people's clothes and ironing them, cleaning the house, cooking meals and fetching thick, black coal from the back yard bunker. She was never allowed, now that she was blossoming into a beautiful young woman, to leave the house and accompany her

mother and sister on their daily errands and cleaning jobs. Her only respite from the drab surroundings of the little redbrick cottage was a weekly trip to visit an aged, one time neighbour, a certain Miss Huddlestone, who had been kind enough to baby sit for the girls in happier times before the family had split asunder.

Miss Huddlestone now lived in a sheltered retirement bungalow in the next village, Lower Risington, and every Wednesday afternoon Hazel popped into the village shop, and, out of the bus fare given to her by her begrudging mother, she bought a large Bakewell tart and a bag of lemon sherbets, and walked, come rain or shine, the two miles to her friend's neat little home.

One Wednesday afternoon, with the sound of her sister's harsh voice still grating in her ears, Hazel put the usual cakes and sweets into a plastic bag and walked all the way to Lower Risington bathed in bright spring sunlight. She was particularly fond of spring, heralding as it did the lengthening of days and the chance to hang the washing outside to dry in good, clean, fresh air. On this particular Wednesday the world was particularly bright and full of goodness, with the hedgerows sparkling in their blossom coats and the birds busy with their nest building songs. Hazel was in a fine mood when she knocked on her friend's door and together they enjoyed quite the happiest afternoon tea they had ever had together.

As Miss Huddlestone drained the last dregs of her Earl Gray and wiped Bakewell tart crumbs from the lightly sprouting beard that covered her withered old chin, she turned to young Hazel, took her hand and whispered, "You are such a lovely girl, my dear, so pretty and kind, and you've never forgotten to come and see me. I want to give you a gift".

Hazel smiled sweetly and protested that visiting her friend was enough of a gift and that she wouldn't think of accepting anything else, but the old woman paid no attention to her whatsoever.

"I think you'll like the gift", continued the old girl, smiling broadly. "You see, I'm not just any dear old bat, dear, I'm a dear old witch, dear!"

Hazel tried very hard not to laugh because she didn't want to appear rude, but she couldn't help smirking slightly behind her hand.

“I know, I know”, said the old woman, “it’s all very hard to fathom, especially when you’re so young and inexperienced. Anyway, I’ve decided to reward you for all of your kindness and for taking the time and trouble to come all this way every week. From now on, whenever you smile a real smile, a smile that breaks like sunrise on a clear blue summer morning, you’ll find a little pearl or diamond in your pocket!”

Hazel laughed out loud and beamed at the old woman. “Oh go on, Mary, you’re so funny”, and as she grinned at the old woman with every ounce of her happy, joking little soul, she put her hand into her jeans pocket.

No one in this fair land’s long history could ever have been as surprised or delighted as little Hazel. Between her fingers she could feel something small and hard and round, and she was sure that there had been nothing in her pocket just a moment ago. She pulled out her tightly bunched fist and opened her fingers out slowly and nervously. Right there in the palm of her hand was a perfectly round, moonshine pearl of such beauty and radiance that the girl was unable to move or to speak for a full five minutes. As the shock and surprise subsided, Hazel realised that she did believe in witches and fairies and she let out a yelp of joy, hugging Miss Huddlestone so tightly that the old dear thought she would burst her seams.

By the time that Hazel had greeted everyone she met on her way home that evening with a massive smile and wave, by the time that she had expressed her joy to the world a hundred and one times, her pockets were positively bulging with gem stones and pearls. She arrived home a little later than usual to find her mother and her sister waiting impatiently for their tea. As soon as the front door shut they both began to scold her for being so late and so inattentive to their well-being.

“I’m sorry for being late, Mum”, replied Hazel, smiling in spite of the hurtful things that were being said. She walked over to the coffee table in the middle of the living room and filled the spaces in between empty cola cans and the over flowing ashtray with a heap of brightly shining diamonds and pearls. “But I can explain...”

“What the bloody hell have you been doing?” screamed her mother as Estelle immediately knelt down by the coffee table and

started to pick out all of the biggest diamonds from the pile. “Where the chuffin’ hell have they come from?”

Hazel told her mother and her sister the whole story about their mutual friend, about her being a witch and about her wonderful gift. By the end of the story the entire family was beaming. At last their suffering was over and their fortunes assured. Mrs. Milligan cuddled her youngest daughter to her ample bosom for the first time in years and called her things like ‘darling’ and ‘poppet’ and ‘precious’. Every time that Hazel smiled at her mother or her sister she reached into her jeans pockets and added another sparkling gem to the pile on the coffee table.

By nine o’clock that evening the family had enough booty in their living room to retire from the domestic cleaning and washing business forever more, and Hazel, tired out from smiling so much with all of the love in the house, went to bed to dream happy dreams of a future where neither the bogeyman nor the tallyman would ever come to get her again.

Once Hazel was safely tucked up in the land of dreams, Mrs. Milligan, having allowed her eldest daughter to keep a few of the smaller diamonds, then swept the pile of jewels into a plastic food container. Sharing a bottle of fizzy wine with Estelle, she set about making her own plans for a future far removed from the heartache and stress of her current life.

“Hazel’s luck should be yours by right, my girl”, she said to Estelle. “From now on we’ll keep her here on Wednesdays while you visit that daft old bugger. With a little bit of work you should be able to get her to do the same trick for you. She was half raving when we moved in here and she’s obviously gone the whole hog now. Treat her nice for a few weeks and we’ll be millionaires by Christmas”.

“I’m not visiting the daft crow, ma”, replied Estelle with a whine. “She’s old and she smells and everything.”

Mrs. Milligan looked at daughter number one with a hard ratty stare.

“Do I have to?” whimpered the girl.

“You’ll do as you’re bloody well told, miss”, hissed her mother, and with that, and despite all of the sullen whinnying and misery

that Estelle brought to bear, schemes and plans were laid for the following week.

Come the Wednesday afternoon, Mrs. Milligan locked Hazel in the under stairs cupboard and frog marched her eldest daughter to the village shop, where she bought the finest assortment of soft centres that the proprietor had to offer. Then she ordered a taxi to take Estelle to Lower Risington. In no time at all Estelle found herself on Miss Huddlestone's doorstep, box of chocolates in hand, forcing the most wheedling of smiles across her barely cleaned teeth. The taxi parked up at the kerb side, Estelle having told the driver that she'd be no more than ten minutes.

Miss Huddlestone opened the door to her beloved Hazel but found there instead the gum chewing, pony-tailed whine that marked Estelle's presence in the world. She let out a long sigh, but nonetheless she ushered the girl into her home and brought the tray full of tea things through to the front room.

Estelle sloped into one of the armchairs, declining a drink or a biscuit. She chucked the box of chocolates at the old lady and pouted.

"Are you sure you won't have a cup of tea, dear?" asked Miss Huddlestone

"No", grunted the girl.

"Oh well" replied the old woman. She took a sip of Earl Gray and looked at her visitor over the rim of her teacup.

"Would you mind awfully fetching my glasses from the kitchen? I must have left them on the work top and I can barely see anything without them"

"What am I", complained the girl, "you're bleedin' slave or something? I'm not a skivvy, you know!"

Estelle gave the old bat one of her looks, a look that told you to sod off because you were boring and didn't understand anything important. Miss Huddlestone, who was no stranger to angry young women, having spent many years in secondary education before taking up her current line of work as a white witch, returned the look, eyeball to eyeball, pensioner to youth, and won the contest hands down.

"I'll tell you what you are, dear", she said calmly and quietly, as she put her cup down on the tray. "You're a rude and spoilt little

hussy, definitely your mother's daughter. You've all the breeding of the pigsty, but despite your ill manners and your attitude I will give you a gift, just like I gave lovely Hazel a gift. Every time you give someone one of those vacuous and disobliging looks you will find a little present in your pocket."

"Vac...what?" muttered Estelle

"Just leave now, dear, before I get really pissed off"

Estelle had her pride. No one had a right to talk to her like that. She gave the old hag her most vicious, drop-dead stare and stormed out of the little house. She slammed the cottage door shut and jumped into the waiting taxi, barking orders to the driver to get her back to Upper Risington pronto.

That might have been the end of Estelle's ordeal, except that Miss Huddleston's power to grant gifts was unparalleled anywhere in England's green valleys. The car had only gone a few hundred metres down the road when the driver slammed on the brakes and turned to look at the girl on the back seat.

"What the bloody hell is that smell?" he hissed nasally, holding his nose tightly shut between his thumb and forefinger. Estelle pouted, stuck her hands in her pockets and was about to deliver her best ignoring look when she made a dreadful discovery. Her right hand, rather than being thrust into a soft, warm pocket full of dark, tight nothingness, had actually made contact with something altogether more disgusting. She felt something soft and warm all right, but whatever it was it was certainly of some substance.

"Out", yelled the taxi driver, in a horrified, gagging voice, and out the girl got. She was left stranded in the middle of a country lane on a bright and sunny summer afternoon with nothing to show for her effort but a pocket full of dog mess and a smell that seemed to follow her whichever way the wind blew.

When Estelle eventually reached her home, bedraggled and exhausted after her long walk under a baking sun, she hung around in the front garden, not daring to enter the house. As soon as her mother caught sight of her lurking there in the front garden she rushed out to find out how the afternoon had gone.

"Well?" she demanded urgently, before taking a step back and asking, "Have you trodden in something?"

Estelle stood there dumbly, mouthing words but unable to make any sounds, and so, after a few mute moments during which she could feel her mother's anger rising, she pulled her right hand out of her jeans pocket and let little gobbets of half baked ordure drip from her fingers. At the sight of the awful gift given to her by Miss Huddleston both mother and daughter wailed like banshees, cursing their ill luck and the name of poor Hazel to hell and back.

"It's all her fault", screamed Mrs. Milligan. "I'll beat her black and blue, I'll tan her, I'll strip that smile of hers from her bones!"

Needless to say, poor little Hazel, who had been locked away in the cupboard for the whole of the hot and sweaty afternoon, had finally come to the end of her own tether. When her mother unlocked and opened the door, Hazel burst through the opening like a small hand grenade and ran out of the house, down the road and far, far away, taking her wonderful gift with her. No one in Upper Risington ever heard from her again, although there were rumours that she ended up in London, where, it was said, she married a prince or a famous footballer and lived happily ever after.

As for Estelle, try as she might she couldn't break the habit of her early years and she never learned to smile. Eventually, after suffering many years of ridicule and evil odours, she learned to never wear any clothes that had pockets attached, but by then the following wind that had first assailed her one Wednesday afternoon in her teens had saturated her skin. Wherever she went people called her names until, one summer some years later, she took herself off to a remote corner of the Lake District, lay down in a corner of a field and there, as far as anyone knows, she still remains.

Mrs. Milligan, meanwhile, minding the Tupperware tub full of diamonds and pearls taken from Hazel when she had come home from visiting Miss Huddleston's bungalow, found that a life backed up by a little capital was much more bearable and now lived in genteel respectability in a seaside villa on the south coast with a retired bank manager, which goes to show that happy endings, even with Estelle's tragic and lonely life taken into account, usually have little to do with what some people deserve.

A Question of Spin

(Loosely based on Grimm's Rumpelstiltskin)

Once upon a time there was a poor political lobbyist, which is in itself an uncommon thing. He spent many years at his trade but even after a lifetime of work the only true treasure that he possessed was his lovely raven-haired daughter, Emily.

Towards the twilight of the man's career a combination of luck and subject matter expertise finally gave him access to the country's top political hombra and in order to appear as a person of more significance than he really was he told the great politician that his daughter could spin the worst gobbledygook into solid gold prose.

"That's a talent worth having on the team", said the politician to the lobbyist. "If she's really as good at this presentational stuff as you say she is bring her to my office tomorrow morning and I'll put her to the test".

The next morning the lobbyist and his daughter attended upon the head of state. After some polite preliminaries the young woman was taken into a room full of the most incomprehensible government policy papers, briefing documents and committee meeting minutes.

She was made to sit at a computer and one of the politician's more officious aides said, "Now, you're not to leave here until you've finished the lot. We want all of this bullshit turned into easily readable prose that gets our message across but also hides the skeletons in the closet. If you fail your father will never work in Westminster again". Then he closed the door and left her all on her own to finish the job.

So the poor lobbyist's beautiful daughter sat there and wondered exactly what she was meant to do. All she ever did at her father's office was make coffee and answer the phones. She wasn't even sure how to switch the computer on, let alone how to use a word processor. She had no idea how she was going to turn all of this officialese into plain and clear text.

No matter how hard she thought about it, she simply couldn't work out what to do and became terribly disconsolate and miserable. She tried to read one of the documents, but apart from

recognising some of the more obvious words and phrases, she was completely stumped by all of the jargon and, realising that both she and her father would soon be the butt of jokes throughout the Westminster village, she started to cry like a baby.

Suddenly the door burst open and into the room stepped a small, bald man in a brown three-piece suit. He looked the girl up and down a couple of times and said, "Good morning, miss, why are you crying so bitterly?"

"Oh", answered Emily, "I have to rewrite all these official government papers so the common folk can read them but not really understand them. I haven't got a clue how to do it".

"It's just a question of spin", said the wee bald man with a chuckle. "Now, what will you give me if I translate all this stuff for you?"

"I'll give you my necklace", replied the girl. "It's real silver and diamonique".

The little man took the necklace immediately, sat himself down at the computer and looked at the first document. His fingers moved across the keyboard in a dazzling blur and in no time at all the printer was churning out a brilliantly concise, but simply worded version of events that answered all of the Prime Minister's needs. The little man continued working on the documents for the entire day until, with just five minutes left before the government official returned, he finished the last of them.

At five o'clock, and not a minute before or after, the official returned to the room in the company of the great politician. When they saw the pile of translated documents they were amazed. A few more minutes passed, during which the United Kingdom's glorious leader read some of the newly minted papers. He was so delighted with the results that he gave Emily a small peck on the cheek and one of his renowned, election winning smiles. Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, he recognised a rather beautiful and useful filly when he saw one, and his thoughts turned to the Ministry of Defence, which was well known for the sheer head splitting boredom it induced in anyone stupid enough to read its papers. The lobbyist's daughter was told to report to the Chief Secretary at the Ministry of Defence the next morning.

At nine o'clock Emily was shown into an even bigger room than the one she had been in the day before. Around her were stacked nearly one hundred manuals, status reports, intelligence briefings and detailed planning exercises designed to cater for any military emergency. Once again the official in charge told her that she had just one working day to précis all of this stuff and turn it into something intelligible to the leader of the nation's government.

The young woman leafed through a manual describing the operation of the army's new standard assault rifle and began to sob. "What the hell is a slide bolt release widget?" she muttered, as her tears fell onto the brightly buffed parquet flooring.

There was a brief, peremptory knock on the door and with a flourish the small, bald man entered the room. This morning he was wearing a grey two-piece suit, betrayed in its modernity by the fact that the trousers were bell-bottomed flairs. The little man looked like he was drowning in the thing, the suit being at least two sizes too tall for him.

"So, young lady, what'll you give me if I spin this load of old tripe into something more coherent?"

"You can have my ring", replied the young woman. "It's real gold and has faux elvish writing on the inside".

The little man grinned at her, sat down at the computer and once again worked his magic, turning every one of the unintelligible documents into something resembling a primary school reading book.

"It's best to keep it simple if the Old Man is involved", he said as the final piece of paper emerged from the bowels of the printer.

Having collated and filed the last of the documents, the wee bald man slipped out of the door just in time to avoid the returning government official.

The great politician was so pleased with the results of the young woman's labour that he almost skipped around his office. In fact he was so delighted by it all that he demanded that she return the very next morning to work her way through an ocean of Treasury figures and policy documents. After all, he'd been in office for three years and he still didn't have a clue about the nature of the fiscal policy that his government was pursuing.

As requested, Emily presented herself at the gates of Her Majesty's Treasury the next morning. She was quickly ushered into the biggest office yet, where, emerging from the shadows, the Prime Minister took her hand and whispered, "Pull this one off, my love, and not only will your dear old Dad become my personal press secretary, but I'll bloody well marry you!"

Emily waited for the sound of footsteps on cold marble to recede. This time she didn't bother to open the documents or to read their contents, but instead she pulled half an onion out of her pocket and made herself cry, adding some loud gulps and sniffs just for good measure. As usual there was a rap on the door and in came the little man.

He'd obviously had difficulty with yesterday's oversize suit, so he'd made sure his clothes fitted him perfectly this morning. However, the combination of a loud plaid jacket, a striped shirt, tartan golfing trousers and white loafers somehow missed the sartorial target he'd been aiming for. He took his sunglasses off before he spoke.

"You now the drill, love"

"But I haven't got anything left to give you", said Emily, trying to look as sad and forlorn as she could. "My dad's just a poor lobbyist and you've already got all my dear departed Mum's jewelery".

"Then you'll have to promise me that when you're married to old jug ears you'll pass on a few snippets of information. You know the sort of thing; tips on cabinet reshuffles, early sight of government policy, juicy titbits about personality squabbles and all that jazz".

Emily decided that discretion was required in such matters, and once she was the first lady of the country then who knew what might happen. She promised the little man what he wanted and sat back to work on her nails while he converted every last scrap of paper in the room into a layman's guide to the country's tax and spend financial regime.

Within a year Emily and the great politician were married. Her father's new role as the Prime Minister's personal press secretary largely consisted of lunches with some of his old lobby friends and off the record briefings with favoured newspaper hacks, so all in all everyone was very happy. Emily didn't give another thought to the

small, bald man until one day he suddenly appeared in her boudoir at Number Ten, Downing Street.

"Got anything for me, then?" he asked.

"And what if I say no", Emily replied brusquely.

"Then I tell him it was your Dad who inadvertently leaked the stuff about the pensions crisis to the press. Might mean an end to those lunches..."

The first lady suddenly realised how dangerous this little man might be and became extremely worried about where this might all lead. She promised him riches, a knighthood and a lucrative position as Chief Executive of a non-governmental organisation, but he was having none of it.

"No, I want gossip. Nice, fat, juicy gossip. That's what you promised me and that's what I'm going to have".

Emily began to cry and sob and wail so much that the little man decided to give her three days to come up with the goods just so that she would shut up. The last thing he needed was the secret service asking awkward questions about how he'd found his way into her bedroom, and, if he was being entirely honest with himself, he found Emily quite enchanting to be around. He felt sorry for her. Somewhere, buried deep beneath the outer layers of his hard-bitten, bottle-nosed hide, he still had a heart.

"Tell, you what", he said, "if you can guess what my job is in the next three days, I'll leave you alone forever more".

Emily spent the whole of the next night compiling a list of every possible job title that might exist in the world of newspapers, television and radio. When the little man arrived the next morning she tried everything she could think of but it was all to no avail. He was not an editor, nor was he a hack, nor was he a plague of boils on the bottom of mankind.

The next night the first lady studied the shadow cabinet posts of all of the opposition parties in the country's parliament. When the little man came to her again she called him many things, including leader of the opposition, shadow trade secretary and old weasel features, but not one of these job titles were correct.

In desperation the first lady finally consulted one of her husband's aides and asked him to go onto the Internet and find out

the names and job titles of every single spy in the world. It was a long job and the aide didn't return until early the next morning.

"I'm sorry, ma'am", he said, "but I haven't been able to find out the names or job titles of any spies. Apparently they're all secret".

"Bugger", said Emily, pulling a large foolscap folder from under her mattress. She leafed wistfully through a couple of pages listing all of the extra marital affairs that her husband's cabinet ministers had been involved in since taking office. She supposed this would have to do.

"I did see one strange thing though, ma'am", continued the aide. "As I was walking through the civil service quadrangle this morning I saw a strangely dressed little man doing an odd sort of jig and singing a weird song. He was hopping up and down like a madman and crying:

*I've got juicy gossip,
My diary's going to be full,
No more Mister Nice Guy
Now I've got all the bull!*

"When he started singing I recognised him immediately.", continued the functionary. "Bullington Minor. We went to prep school together. Strange behaviour, I thought, for a man on the Arts Council. Then again, perhaps not. Those artistic coves are all a bit doolally."

Emily could taste the pure, unadulterated delights of victory.

"So what exactly does he do? For a job, I mean", She asked.

"Oh, erm, he's the council secretary, I think. Pushes paper around mostly, writes communiqués, that sort of thing."

Emily was over the moon when she heard that her tormentor was one her husband's more obscure minions, at least that was how she thought of all and any public servants. With the help of her husband's aide she checked the government lists and sure enough in the Arts and Heritage Year Book there was a picture of the horrid and slimy toad.

The little man came to call later that morning and asked the first lady, "Well, what's my job, then?"

Emily thought for a moment or two and replied, "Are you a janitor?"

"No".

"Are you a nuclear physicist?"

"Ha, no! One more guess..."

"Well, then, you must be the Secretary to the Arts Council".

"You bastard", screamed the red faced little man. "Someone's sneaked on me, haven't they? How can I publish my diaries now?"

In his rage he stamped and stomped on the floor with so much force and spite that his left foot sank right through it and he fell through the rafters all the way up to his waist. Then, in an absolute fury of passion and anger, he seized his right foot with both of his hands and tore himself in two.

Emily called down for maid service and quietly slid her dossier on ministers caught in flagrante delicto back underneath her mattress. As she did so she made a mental note to slip out to the shops later that afternoon so that she could buy a nice new foolscap diary.

Only The Names Change

(Loosely based on Andersen's The Evil Prince)

History books are full of names and dates. They are full of stories about great lords and ladies and about the things that men do in the world, and some of these stories may even be true to a degree. Much the same can be said for little stories such as this one, except little stories like this are usually much more accurate than any history book. This is a tale with roots that run deep into the folds and the valleys of the country, a story from a time before enlightenment brought its own challenges to the people of this dark land.

The world is a very big place, with room enough for everyone and room besides for all of their differences. Unfortunately some people prefer a world that bends to one particular will rather than a world that reflects the views of the many. There was once just such a person. He was, at the outset, an ordinary man, whose only

thought was to make a world more comfortable for him and his own kind. We shall call him a prince, for every story should have a prince.

Our prince began life in a humble way, growing into and learning some of the methods of the world common to his people. He sought their approval, promising them much and delivering on some of his promises. In short, he was no better, but no worse, than any other prince. He strived for the public good, especially when it coincided with his own interests, and took thanks in as many ways as such thanks became available to him. He tried to face the dangers and the troubles of his people as well as he might, until, faced one day by a strange and threatening combination of events from the far side of the then known world, he decided that this confluence of opportunity and challenge was his moment of destiny.

Our prince was skilled in many ways, not least in his powers of persuasion. Faced by something that he did not really understand, he listened to advice and sought out experts, and he found himself having to make a choice. Should he open his heart to the world or should he seek protection from it? He made his choice.

He convinced his people, his courtiers and his councils that the only way to secure peace was by striking fear into the hearts of his enemies. One by one he sent his armies out to the far corners of the wide, wide world bearing fire and sharp edged blades. His soldiers trampled down the grains in the fields and set mills and workshops and cities ablaze with red fire. He looked on as the fruits of one civilisation after another charred and burned on the branch. Everywhere mothers hid with their babes behind smoke drenched walls, but the soldiers marched on, rooting these potential assassins out for their pleasure.

Wherever his soldiers ranged, the prince's name became fear and dread, and his power grew and grew. He sucked wealth and might from every conquered land and city. His treasuries overflowed and his warehouses filled with every luxury and every loaf. At no time and in no other place had anyone amassed so many of the riches of the world.

Mindful of his place in the history books, our prince used his vast wealth to build huge palaces, monuments and castles. He

commissioned epic poems and stirring stories about his ferocious deeds and he employed the cleverest scholars to write true accounts of his great crusades. All who saw the wonders in stone that he erected and all who read the towering texts that carried his name beyond the clouds were moved to say, "What a truly magnificent prince".

Nowhere was the suffering of others ever mentioned. The prince's own people did not, could not, would not, hear the sighs and the laments rising from the scorched fields and the ash filled streets in foreign lands.

After many years the prince surveyed his realm. He looked at his piles of gold, at his huge and glorious palaces and at his subject peoples, and he thought, "This is good. This is as it should be. I am, indeed, a great prince".

But even after such unprecedented success he still felt the emptiness of the great world around him. He decided there and then that he must bring order to the chaos surrounding his perfect world; he must ensure that there were no powers equal to his own, much less any power greater.

The prince marshalled his forces, made plans and waged wars against every neighbour and every enemy and, one way or another, he conquered them all. Each one of these vanquished kings, queens and princes were bound and gagged and shown at trials, where their unworthy souls were metaphorically flogged. They were chained like dogs, made to lie down at the prince's feet and made to beg for scraps of food from his table.

With the world at his command, with his own men running the cities and the fields and the seas of the world, the prince had reason to be well satisfied. He raised new statues in every square, he made proclamations in every place of congregation and he sent orders to his priests and to the holy souls of the realm that his likeness should stand shoulder to shoulder with the highest of their many Gods.

As one the priests and the holy souls said, "You are a mighty prince, but our Gods are surely mightier. We cannot do what you ask".

The prince considered this. He asked himself if such a thing could, indeed, be true.

"Of course not", said a voice. "You are one of us. We have chosen you to command the earth and to rule the sky. Hear our voice, for we are legion, and know that what we say is true".

The prince was dumbfounded when he first heard the voices of the Gods speaking with him personally, but he quickly came to realise that this was as it should be. He was a most powerful prince and it was only to be expected that the Gods would side with him. And so, with the voices of the Gods in his left ear, it took but a little time to extend his dominion to every soul and across every inch of the earth.

And this too was good for a while. With new palaces raised and with statues and books exalting the prince and his friends, the world and the heavens were joined as one. But, even in such a time of plenty, the prince was not satisfied. He filled the earth with his name, but still he felt the emptiness of the skies.

"Why", he asked himself, "should I share this. What have these Gods done but talk. It is I who has struggled and fought for truth and glory all of my life".

The prince called his peoples together. He called his lords, his ladies and his priests to him and announced, "I am your Lord. I am the greatest prince ever known. Now I will conquer the Gods".

The riches and the resources, the minerals and the great minds of the earth were assembled and the prince built a great fleet of ships to carry him far into the heavens to meet these Gods face to face. Each ship was as black as a heart and bristled with a thousand blades, but each blade was a missile that the prince could fire into the soul of the universe. Great, steaming engines spewed out fire and heat as the ships rose from the ground, climbing higher and higher until all of the prince's dominions lay beneath his feet like a map. Every art and every science was employed to fashion this vast fleet. His soldiers and his sailors searched the heavens, scoured the stars, bombarded every comet and fired cannonades into every asteroid in their path.

But the Gods did not wish to be found.

And so it was, with a vengeful wrath building in his heart that the prince returned to his own world. He was determined to expunge the Gods completely. He wanted to obliterate their names and their memory.

The Gods watched as the days unfurled. They decided that enough was enough. They sent forth a single virus, complex in its own way, but no match, on paper at least, for the science and for the technology employed by the prince. The virus had no firepower with which it could outgun the armies of the world of men. The virus was nothing but a carrier of the common cold, no more, no less.

The virus twisted and turned, flew somersaults in the air and made men cough and sneeze. It changed and modified itself, becoming more virulent, more invasive, and with every infection its strength grew until it became a killer of flesh. The virus waxed and multiplied, infecting the young and the old, the rich and the poor, and the strong and the weak without mercy or allowance for wealth and status.

At last the chains that bound our prince to the world were yanked tight. Standing at the head of his armies, surrounded by his vast wealth and his walls of science, he came face to face with the Gods. There were no bullets capable of shooting the virus, no speech could influence it, no rhetoric could inflame the mob to protect him from it and no history book could provide a vaccine against the virus.

He was vanquished. Our prince, who commanded the riches of the earth, sneezed once, retired to his bed in terror, and there he died, sniveling and delirious just a day or two later. He was extinguished and, if not forgotten, he was certainly relegated over time to the pages of fairy stories like this one, which is where, as I said at the very beginning of this story, the truth is often found.

All for One

(Loosely based on Grimm's The Travelling Musician)

The 'Dunlavin Rest Home for the Chronically Ancient' had seen better days, nestling as it did between a SpeedyJob tyre and exhaust garage and a Shilling Shop distribution warehouse. Once upon a time the splendour of the home's architecture had been graced by green fields and sweet smelling meadows, but now the house and

its inhabitants' only claim to grandeur was the dusty tether that held their tired old souls to the swirling currents of modernity. Paint peeled from every windowsill, and the delicately pierced eaves dripped rust from the corroded iron guttering that hung to the fabric of the building for grim life, just like most of the inmates. The one simple, uncluttered vista enjoyed by residents was a patch of scrub land directly opposite the front door, a patch of land on which grew truly magnificent specimens of urban thistles. Pippin's field existed, such as it was, as a result of the wartime demolition of a row of terraced houses by a thousand pound bomb. Such were people's retirement prospects in one of London's outer suburbs just a few short years ago.

Of the many residents crowded two and sometimes three to a room, most were in such a raw state of dilapidation that a high-backed plastic chair, a warm mug of something resembling tea and endless quiz shows on day time television were the only stimulants they could manage. There were four residents in particular, however, for whom the prospect of one more day drinking thin soup and watching cheap soap operas was simply too much to bear. The accumulated spite and suffering caused by rough hands, tepid bed baths and endless days spent watching traffic through grey streaked windows forced their liver spotted hands to desperate action. One Tuesday morning, after another breakfast of stale toast and last year's raspberry conserve, Big Al Frasier nodded to one of his co-conspirators and whispered, "Pass the word on, Harry, we're go for Operation Sunlight straight after lunch".

Harry nodded back, adjusted the cuffs of his shirt so that they were set at regulation length under his smart blue blazer, and stood up very slowly so as not to dislodge any more of his vertebrae than were absolutely necessary.

Big Al watched Harry Cock, once a sergeant major in one of Scotland's finest regiments, parade out of the dining room, his head held as high and his back held as ramrod straight as his recalcitrant spine would allow. For all of his eighty years, his triple by-pass, his two replacement hips and his urgency in the bladder department, he was still a fine specimen of a man, just the sort you needed on a dark and dangerous mission. His fighting spirit was legendary in the home, where he constantly battled with the carers in a vain

attempt to keep up some semblance of dignity in the most trying of circumstances. It certainly wasn't easy keeping your pecker up when you knew that your son had sent you to 'Dunlavin' because he wanted to extend the living room to make way for a home cinema, but old Harry wouldn't let the buggers grind him down. Anyway, all of that was soon to be a thing of the past if things went smoothly and their aged bodies held up. Big Al thought Harry was a brick, although he never said any such thing to the man's face, not now that he sometimes forgot the exact words he should use when he came over all emotional.

The third of the four conspirators, or Musketeers as Big Al preferred to call them, was Miss Peggy Grimalkin, or 'Wheels' for short. Peggy struck the fear of God into the soul, despite the fact that she had been chair bound for thirty years. She had obviously been a bit of a looker in her youth and, after lock down at half-past eight, Big Al often wandered through the dreamy pastures of his own tender years and thought about what might have happened had he met her when they were both considerably more agile. It was best not to mention such things to her these days, however. Peg could give you one of those steely-eyed stares that made your knees tremble for all the wrong reasons, and she gave him the impression that she could impale a charging tigress at fifty paces with her size four knitting needles, regardless of undergrowth, wind direction or terminal medical conditions.

"Still", he thought, "she keeps herself clean, she's still got lovely hair and all her own teeth. She's bound to be an asset in a tight spot and we'll need some wheels if things get really sticky".

The only one of the four Musketeers who did not possess his own teeth was Dickie "Dog" Virtue. Dog, as he was affectionately known by the inmates, was a fixer, a King Rat sort of geezer, a man who instinctively knew how to play the game of survival. His procurement of a case of brandy and some Turkish Delight last Christmas had become the stuff of legend amongst those inmates whose memory had sufficient width to deal with real live events. What on earth the woman from the off-licence could have wanted with twenty litres of KY Jelly was anyone's guess, but the trade had made another season of miserable bad-will into a truly festive moment, a moment when they had all been able to remember what

it was like to be five years old again. Dog was vital, Dog was one of the team, and even though he might sell his granny, God rest her soul, Big Al was sure that he could prevail upon him not to sell Peg unless it was absolutely necessary.

Big Al wiped up the last of the jam with his crust and popped it into his large, cavernous mouth, which was made all the more impressive by the hydraulic motions of his many chins. He had been a builder and a labourer all of his life and was still a bear of a man even at his advanced age. He was no longer six feet tall, having lost nearly a foot to general decay and a lifetime of hard physical exertion, but he felt happy in the knowledge that he more than made up for his reduced height by some impressive lateral expansion. His muscles were still toned and powerful, albeit shaped a little differently from his younger days, because you simply couldn't carry that much weight around without having an underlying physique capable of crushing small boulders between your knees. He preferred to think of his outer layers of fat as camouflage, as a shield against the austerity of the regime in which he found himself incarcerated. It felt, he sometimes thought, as if he were watching the world unfold through two tiny little portholes, but that world would soon end and a new world would be born. As soon as lunch was finished, as soon as they had all visited the bathroom and while the staff and the other poor inmates took their afternoon naps, the Four Musketeers would prize open the big sash window in Peg's ground floor bedroom and would make their break for freedom, armed with their carefully hoarded rations, a small but effective arsenal and assorted medical paraphernalia.

The rhubarb crumble was particularly impressive that lunchtime. It consisted of one part crumble, one part rhubarb and five thousand parts grey sludge and the sight of old Mrs. Bottomley's custard covered chin really had been the last straw. As soon as the staff room door slammed shut and the sound of contented snoring reached its usual two o'clock crescendo, the four escapees assembled in Peg's ground floor bedroom and made their final preparations.

Harry was as organised as ever, trailing a small, wheeled suitcase behind him that was covered in taped down lengths of flexible domestic waste piping, each one of which contained a stout, wooden shafted golfing iron. Dog, displaying his usual laissez-faire attitude to preparedness, wore his old tweed jacket, an unusually patterned pair of slacks and some water stained loafers. The only visible signs that he was prepared for the rigours of the road were a Swiss army knife hanging from his belt and a tube of denture fixative, which peeked out from his breast pocket. Peg had attached various wire shopping baskets to her wheelchair, which contained carrier bags full of clean underwear, balls of wool, her entire collection of knitting needles and enough boiled sweets to sink a battleship. Big Al had managed to squeeze himself into combat fatigues and a camouflage pattern baseball cap. He held a canvas kit bag over his shoulder, the combined effect making him look a retired butcher setting out for a survivalist weekend jaunt.

Big Al nodded to Harry, withdrew a mottled black crowbar from his kit bag and applied every ounce of his considerable weight to the task of inserting its flat end between the window and its frame. The team visibly tensed as the sound of splintering wood briefly obliterated the sound of snoring coming from further down the hallway, but no one stirred. One by one the aged, rusting nails that pinned the sash window permanently closed sheared and shattered. Harry and Big Al managed to push the sash window up as far as it would go. Harry then climbed through the opening as gingerly as he could and one by one the team passed out the bags, the wheelchair and finally Peg herself.

“Mind where you put your hands, Al Frasier”, she hissed as he took hold of her just a little too familiarly for her liking.

Once outside, Harry closed the window, Dog checked that the coast was clear and the four of them set off down the street. Stage one of the plan had been a complete success and stage two required them to put as much distance between themselves and ‘Dunlavin’ as possible by teatime. Thick black clouds swept across the city skyline but thankfully the rain held off as the four musketeers hobbled and rolled towards the safety of the crowds in the nearest shopping centre, where they spent an hour attempting to blend in with the general population, before realising, as the shops began to

roll down their shutters and the boulevards started to echo to the sound of Peg's squeaky wheel, that they would have to find somewhere safe to shelter for the night.

"Tell, you what", said Dog, "why don't we head down to the Chavbury Estate? There's loads of empty flats down there...well, there always used to be. Don't suppose it's changed much recently".

"He's right", said Harry, "We'll need a roof over our heads tonight by the look of those clouds".

By the time that darkness had fallen and London's sodium orange suburban streets had taken on their ominous evening mantle, the gang of four had made it to the outskirts of the Chavbury. To be safe all they needed to do was negotiate the broken bottles and the carcasses of burnt out cars, fend off twelve year old muggers with their assortment of knitting implements and lofted sand wedges, and then break into a boarded up flat. Big Al could feel the tension and the heat in the mean city streets and he was starting to sweat profusely as he pushed Peg along in front of him. What they all needed right now was a nice cup of tea and a slice of fruitcake.

"I don't think I can go on much longer", Harry called out from behind a glassless bus shelter as he relieved the pressure in his bladder for the umpteenth time since their daring break out from Stalag Wrinkly. The fact that everyone could see exactly what he was doing was, from Harry's point of view, immaterial. Unlike the kids on the streets, Harry still believed in doing the right thing and as the bus shelter was the only half decent structure left standing on this particular street, it would have to do.

"Me neither", said Dog, "I need a sit down and a rest".

"And me", added Peg, as she finished another row of the scarf that she was knitting in case the weather turned nasty.

"What do you mean, 'and me'? You're always sitting down and having a rest"

"Don't you go cussing me, Dog", Peg replied, giving him one of her looks and waving her knitting at his groin. Dog instinctively took a step backwards.

"Peg's right, boys", said Big Al, "we all need a rest. Anyone got any ideas?"

Harry finished watering the nettles behind the bus shelter and rejoined the group. “There’s a place over there, just down from the shelter, where the door’s open. We could try that”.

“Zip, Harry”, said Big Al, wheeling Peg away from Harry’s partially exposed nether regions. “OK, you three stay here. I’ll go and recce”.

Big Al set off to reconnoitre the joint by the light of the street’s one remaining lamp post, taking on a silhouette that looked like the backside of an African elephant being ridden by Mr. Potatohead. Dog, Peg and Harry formed a triangle, standing, or in Peg’s case sitting, back to back, weapons at the ready, determined to protect their hard won freedom and their supply of ginger nut biscuits against all comers.

It was pretty evident, even though Big Al had been away from the mean streets for some years now, that this was no ordinarily abandoned abode. The open door was made out of half inch steel plate, and judging by the array of padlocks hanging from various latches and catches, it was designed to prevent the delivery of more than just junk mail. Given the obvious levels of security employed to keep people out of the place, Big Al was a little surprised to find that there was no one on guard. Sloppy, he thought to himself as he peered inside the hallway. There was no carpet on the floor, the occupants clearly preferring to use carrier bags, cigarette butts and tinfoil as a floor covering. He could hear voices in the front room of the flat so he decided not to venture in, and instead inched his indelicate frame along the front wall of the building so that he could peer in through a window guarded by a sheet of metal security mesh.

In the front room he could see four young men, none of them older than twenty, lolling around on a flea-bitten sofa and smoking some very large looking cigarettes. On the floor by their feet there were bags of powders and pills and some neat piles of ready cash. Big Al understood. He had seen enough repeats of television cop shows to know that this was something called a drugs den and if he and his fellow musketeers were to stand any chance of converting the place into a bijou little residence for the independently retired, they would need a plan.

“Right, so you all know what to do”, said Big Al as the four of them huddled together at the end of his pre-battle briefing. They all nodded solemnly and placing their hands in the middle of the huddle, one on top of the other, they exchanged flint eyed glances, took a deep breath and prepared to attack. They knew that this was the big one and that anything could happen in the next five minutes.

The Special Operations Pensioners crept up to the front door of the flat, where Big Al steadied his company of grey haired warriors, checked that each of them was armed and ready, and chopped the air with his hand, unleashing his elderly dogs of war on the poor, unsuspecting youths within. Harry went in first, seven iron at the ready, and made a beeline for the kitchen at the far end of the hall. He reached his objective safely, made a quick mental map of the room’s layout, opened a large cupboard and found what he was looking for. The flat had an old, pre-industrial fuse box set low on the back wall of the cupboard and Harry’s job was to kill the lights. Unfortunately the plan had taken no account of old ironing boards, a defunct Hoover and piles of dirty washing, nor had it taken into account the fragility of Harry’s back. He waved at his compatriots desperately, but Big Al just made chopping motions with his hand. With all the excitement and the adrenalin pumping through his veins Harry suddenly needed to pee very urgently, which is precisely where his old military training kicked into gear. You had to make do with whatever came to hand, and in this case Harry knew exactly what was needed. He unzipped and let fly, killing the lights and every other electrical appliance in the entire block with the torrential fizz and sparkle unleashed from his own personal water cannon.

As the flat flickered into darkness Peg wheeled herself into the living room, where the youths had been relaxing. She screeched like a banshee, running two of the youths over as they stumbled towards the hallway. She reversed back over them, stabbing them in their bottoms with her knitting needles just to make sure they got the message that you should never mess with a retired nit nurse.

Big Al followed her into the room and absorbed the other two charging youths as they crashed into his stomach. When they finally emerged from the folds of his military fatigues, desperately

fighting for air, he picked both of the scrawny little runts up by the scruffs of their necks and deposited them on the pavement outside the flat. Just in case they felt like continuing the fight, both Dog and Harry were now positioned on either side of the doorway wielding frying pans in frenetic arcs above their heads while shouting and screaming at the tops of their voices.

Big Al retrieved the remaining two boys from underneath Peg's wheels, ejected them from the building and, once he was certain that the perimeter had been secured and that Harry and Dog were safely inside the flat, he slammed the huge metal door shut and leant his not inconsiderable weight against it. Harry lit some candles that had been lying on the living room floor and the four of them wedged the door shut with an old wooden plank. The battle weary troop then panted and wheezed their way to the kitchen, lit the gas stove and settled down for a nice brew.

Outside on the pavement the four young men picked themselves up and fled towards the local multi-story car park to regroup. A new gang of vicious, drug crazed thugs had obviously taken their stash and their safe house away from them and they would have to get their revenge, but first they had various stab wounds and inflamed bruises to tend to. Meanwhile, in the kitchen Big Al took a puff on his inhaler, took a long gulp of his life restoring tea and grinned.

"Bloody hell, Peg, I thought you were going to steam roller the poor buggers", he said as he totted up the ready cash and the bags of gear from the living room.

"I wonder what these yellow ones do?" said Dog, digging a little mental furrow and sowing the seeds of a bright and blooming future for the four of them.

After a nice cup of tea, and having eaten a whole packet of ginger nut biscuits between the four of them, Harry checked that the front door was firmly wedged shut and that the rest of the flat was secure. Peg had already completed her ablutions and bagged the flat's only bedroom, so the men settled down on the sofa and tried to get some much needed sleep. After the battle of Chavbury, the troops needed some rest and some liniment, and so, with the candles snuffed, Big Al, Harry and Dog let their eyelids drop and drifted off into the more than welcome land of dreams, a land

where they were all twenty-five, raven haired and able to drink more than half a pint of beer before needing the toilet.

Outside, in the bleak, bottom numbing reality of the concrete jungle, the four young drug baronets finished patching up their wounds, smoked their last spliff and started to get really scratchy. They had a couple of notes and about five cigarettes left between them, having lost everything else that defined their world during their eviction from the flat about two hours earlier. They tooled themselves up with iron bars, a pocketknife and a length of metal chain, and were now ready to reclaim what was rightfully theirs. After some heated debate and a slap or two, the youngest and smallest of the four boys was despatched on a fact finding mission, and was told not to return until he had thoroughly investigated the situation and found out who and what they were up against.

Using his many years of experience in the breaking and entering of various types of house and small factory unit, the young drug runner prised open the kitchen window with a chisel and a length of coat hanger wire, climbed warily onto the kitchen work top, and set about the business of clandestine intelligence gathering. He noted the four washed mugs on the draining board, nearly fainting with the shock when he realised the place had been subjected to soapy water, but recovered his sense of cold, rational, Holmesian observation and started to make his stealthy intrusion into the heart of the enemy's camp.

Unfortunately for the young man, his powers of observation did not run to doorknobs and as he stole down the corridor towards the open living room door he completely failed to notice the knob of the bedroom door twisting slowly in the shadows behind him. Just as he was about to peer around the door frame to see what or who might be in the front room he became aware that the night air had suddenly taken on the consistency of treacle. He felt his chest muscles constrict and his stomach started to scream at him from inside that whatever else he might do in life, he most definitely should not turn around and look behind him. Of course, the young man had no choice in the matter, whatever self-preservatory advice his petrified gut might be giving him, and he turned to face the unknown demon lurking in the pitch black darkness of the corridor. He came face to face with two gleaming sparks of impish fury.

Peg, suffering from the combined effects of ginger nut dyspepsia and the thought that the bed would be full of fleas, had been quite unable to sleep. She had no doubt that the boys would be well away in the land of nod by now and so, with the coast clear, she could open the bedroom door and get some much needed air. Just as she had been about to trundle down to the kitchen for a glass of water she heard the sound of wood under duress and guessing that something troublesome was afoot she had waited for the inevitable sound of footsteps in the hall.

The boy never had a chance. Before the scream could reach his larynx Peg's favourite carbon tipped, size seven knitting needle had slid home with deadly force somewhere between his thigh and his groin. The boy staggered backwards only to find his posterior fixed firmly in the vice like grip of Dog's false teeth. The scream strangled in his throat, turning into a mewling whimper as he caught sight of the huge bulk of Big Al Frasier standing silhouetted in the living room doorway. He could feel something warm and sticky running down his left leg and faced with the combined wrath of the incredible hulk and his rabid guard dogs the boy dug deep and somewhere in the darker recesses of his motor neurone system he found the strength to leap over Peg, to hit the ground running and to dive head first through the plate glass kitchen window, preferring the possibility of death by a thousand cuts to the prospect of facing these hell hounds one moment longer.

As the last shard of glass hit the kitchen linoleum, Harry emerged from behind Big Al, holding a lighted candle and asked, "Anyone for a cup of tea?"

For the previous occupants of Flat 2a, Chavbury Villas the war was over. Faced with the terrifying ruthlessness of Big Al and his cunningly disguised Yardies, the local criminal fraternity decided that discretion would be infinitely preferable to the valour required to face down Wheelchair Peg, Dickie "Dog" Virtue and Harry "The Sergeant" Cock, and that is exactly how the legendary Frasier gang started out on the road to criminal infamy...

The Starving Wolf

There are still, even in these most enlightened of times, some people who believe that wolves only exist in children's stories. There are others for whom the sight of a shaggy, grey-coated creature prowling around a wildlife park enclosure warrants little more than a photograph and a half-stifled yawn. But all of these people are wrong to think like this, for wolves come in many forms and their ways are rarely simple and benign.

A short while ago, in days much like our own, there lived in a busy country market town the prettiest little girl that you could ever have seen. Her hair fell about her shoulders in free flowing cascades of black, liquid motion. Her face was as serene and quietly beautiful as that of the fairest fairy tale princess.

This little girl's mother was excessively fond of her, as were the whole of her family, but no one was more proud of the little girl than her dear old grandmother. In fact, and much to the little girl's delight, her grandmother made a bright red hoodie for her with the words 'Shooting Star' emblazoned upon its chest in gold lamé lettering. The little girl doted upon her grandmother, and because she wore her lovely red hoodie every day, everybody in the neighbourhood called her Little Red Gangsta.

One day, just as Little Red Gangsta was about to set off to meet her chums at the local park, her mother called out to her. "Dova, love, be a dear and take this packet of Writher's Uniques to your Granny's house. She's not been at her best lately and you know how she loves a nice suck on something tasty and hard boiled".

Little Red Gangsta's real name was, indeed, Dova. Her mother gave her this name because it was fashionable at the time to call a child after the place of his or her conception and little Dova had been conceived during a pre-Christmas booze-cruise. Needless to say, Dova's mother had not done well at school.

Little Red Gangsta thought about complaining, but then she decided that enjoying a packet of hard-boiled sweets with her darling Granny might be just as much fun as hanging about on the swings with her girl friends and talking about boys.

"Of course, mummy", she replied as she took the bumper pack of sweets from her mother and set off immediately towards her

grandmother's house. She skipped and sang her way along the city streets, waving to her grown up friends and schoolmates as she went happily on her way.

By the local convenience store Little Red Gangsta turned into an alleyway that she used as a shortcut on her way to Granny's house. The alleyway passed around and behind the corner shop and as Little Red Gangsta idly kicked a half-squashed fizzy cola can along in front of her, she suddenly caught sight of a whole row of overturned dustbins. The pavement was littered with gnawed chicken bones, chewed up burger cartons and masticated carrot peelings. It was a terrible mess and Little Red Gangsta thought it was appalling. Her outrage at this wanton vandalism turned to shock and then to fear when she saw a thin ribbed, spare and shabby looking dog nuzzling his way through some greasy chilli kebab wrappers.

The poor dog was so pre-occupied with his desperate search for nourishment that it was he who recoiled in fear and terror when Little Red Gangsta shouted at the top of her delicate young voice, "Oi, scram!"

The dog sprang backwards and landed bottom first against the alleyway fence. He squatted there, trembling from the tip of his jet-black nose all the way to the end of his scrawny grey tail. He cringed and whined as he hunkered down on his belly in abject supplication to this menacing phantom dressed in red.

Little Red Gangsta's initial feelings of fear gave way to a sense of disbelief. The dog looked so pathetic as he cowered there in front of her that her initial feelings of disgust and revulsion gave way to the strongest feelings of pity. She was so overwhelmed by her feelings of compassion for this desperate creature that she quite forgot to be amazed when the dog spoke to her.

"Don't...don't hurt me, please", whimpered the dog. "Just...want...food, yeah, yeah, yeah"

"Well, you won't get much of a meal out of those bins", said Little Red Gangsta. "What you need is some nice steak or some sausages".

The dog continued to cringe and whine, although he was starting to eye up the rather large bag of sweets sticking out of Little Red

Gangsta's hoodie pocket. She continued to talk to the dog in a quite matter-of-fact way.

"You look so sorry for yourself, dog. I think you need some help. Oh, and by the way, you're not having any of Granny's sweeties".

"Dog!" growled the pathetic beast and he rose up to his full height. Despite his trembling and the rumbling of his stomach, he barked as fiercely as he could. "I'm no dog. I am Wolf, proud master of the wilderness, spirit lord of the north lands and of the mountain slopes!"

This momentary act of bravado was all that the wolf could manage. He slouched back onto his hind legs as the hunger pangs took hold again and he whimpered, "I'm lost and alone here in this horrible place. Help me, please, help me".

Little Red Gangsta remembered the tales that her Granny had told her when she was very little. Before she considered helping further she asked the wolf, "You're not going to eat me or my Granny, are you?"

"Haven't got the energy", the wolf said forlornly, "and I'm far too frightened of this terrible city. I promise to be good if only you'll help me find some shelter and something to eat".

Little Red Gangsta was so touched by the plight of this bedraggled lord of the wilderness that she agreed to help him straight away. He explained that he'd escaped from the city zoo a few days previously and now rather wished he'd ignored the call of the wild. After some discussion it was decided that the wolf should go to Granny's house for the time being. Little Red Gangsta was sure her lovely Granny would be only too willing to help such a poor and lonely creature. Granny was, after all, such a dear old bat and she had a heart of gold.

"Right, Mister Wolf, if you're sure you can follow my directions to Granny's house, I'll be off to find some sausages for you", said Little Red Gangsta.

"No problem", said the wolf and off he slunk into the shadows, heading towards the west, where Granny lived in a little red brick, terraced cottage.

The wolf made his way to Granny's cottage with as much speed as his four tired and scrawny legs could muster. Little Red Gangsta

worked methodically and quietly, the way that she'd been taught by the big girls who hung out with her at the park. She managed to relieve the local branch of a national supermarket chain of two pork joints, a pack of minted lamb sausages and a box of turkey wrigglers. It was amazing just how much contraband she could hide underneath her big red hoodie. She knew not to hurry, because that's how mistakes are made, and so, at last, she set off for Granny's house carrying all of poor Mr. Wolf's rations.

Meanwhile, upon reaching the house where Granny lived, the wolf checked to see that no one was about, put on his bravest, most charming smile and knocked on Granny's front door.

"Who's there?" asked Granny, peering through the little spy hole in the middle of her front door. All that she could see were the tips of two very furry ears and the tip of gently swishing tail.

"I'm...I'm a friend of Little Red Gangsta", replied the wolf, trying to sound as warm and as cuddly as he could. "She found me wandering the streets and she befriended me. She told me to come here and to wait with you while she gets me some food. She said you're kind and caring and you have a heart of gold".

"But I'm not a fool", muttered Granny behind her door, for although she was old and frail, for although she did have a heart of gold where her family was concerned, she also remembered the olden days, when wolves were wolves and vicious brutes to boot.

"Hold on a minute, please", said Granny as she lifted a cast iron fire poker out of her elephant's foot umbrella stand.

Granny flung open her front door and brought the cast iron fire poker crashing down on the wolf's head with all the strength that she could muster, which was, alarmingly, quite considerable for someone of Granny's age and general physical condition. Being as weak and feeble as he was, and having led a relatively unferocious life at the city zoo, the wolf was totally unprepared for an assault by a Granny using extreme force. It was all that the poor creature could do to roll over and die as quickly as he possibly could.

It took Little Red Gangsta nearly two hours to purloin Mr. Wolf's luncheon and to trek all the way over to Granny's house. When Granny opened the door to Little Red Gangsta she was so relieved to see that her grandchild was still in one piece, having spent the last hour or so wondering whether she had become dog

food. She really did think the wolf had eaten her grandchild and she'd been getting into a real state trying to work out how best to tell Little Red Gangsta's mother.

"Oh, my lovely, lovely girl", cried Granny, quite overcome with emotion, and she hugged the little girl tightly to her ample breast. Little Red Gangsta loved her Granny very much and didn't think anything was at all wrong with this welcome. She accompanied Granny into the kitchen, where she gave her the pork joints, the minted sausages, the turkey wrigglers and the very large packet of sweets.

"How very thoughtful", said Granny, beaming, "and all for me?"

"Not exactly", replied Little Red Gangsta. "You see, the meat is for a poor, starving wolf I met in town. I told him to come over here and wait for me. Have you seen him, Granny?"

Granny sat Little Red Gangsta down on a stool and looked at her sternly. "I know you meant well", she said, "but you can never trust wolves. Promise me that you'll remember that in future. No matter how sad or cuddly or playful they might appear on the outside, remember, my darling girl, remember this; a wolf is always a wolf, in the same way that a boy is always a boy. Neither of them can ever be trusted."

Granny and Little Red Gangsta both looked over at the cooker. Boiling and bubbling away on the hob was Granny's huge old stockpot and even though the pot lid was rammed down as hard as possible, poor Mr. Wolf's head, bleached right down to the bone, could still be seen looking right back at them.

Little Red Gangsta started with fright and she looked into Granny's lovely face for some reassurance. Granny looked back at her and smiled what she hoped would be a big and comforting smile.

"Good gracious, Granny", said Little Red Gangsta, "what very big teeth you have..."

Big Black Boots

(Loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen's The Red Shoes)

There was once a little girl who ate gristle and vegetable soup just like all of the fair and dainty little girls who lived in the industrial towns of old, coke-smothered England. Her mother was very poor and in summer the little girl never had shoes to wear on her feet. In winter the girl's brooding and wretched mama made her wear clogs in the snow and, as a consequence of this, her feet were always cold and terribly sore.

The town where the little girl and her mother lived was dilapidated and failing, locked into the decline that blighted so many of the darkling centres of fading wealth that nestled amongst England's once satanic hills. Things had come to such a pass that many of the old ways and trades had all but disappeared, and the pinch-faced peoples of that scabbed landscape had to scrimp and scratch out meagre livings as best they could. Typical of this decay was an old shoemaker who sat and sewed big black boots out of scuffed scraps of worn out leather and from strips of almost threadbare felt. The boots that he made were heavy and clumsy, but they were, nonetheless, better than clogs. One Christmas the little girl's mother took all of her scratched savings to this boot maker and she bought a pair boots as a present for her darling daughter. The little girl in question was called Karen.

Both mother and daughter woke up on Christmas morning with an eager glint in their eyes. Neither of them complained about the cold, the fires were laid and lit, and the presents, such as they were, were given and received with great joy and excitement. Unfortunately, just as the Christmas goose leg was about to be served, the little girl's mother was suddenly taken very ill and she died that very festive afternoon from the combined effects of absolute poverty and the scabrous pox.

As was the custom in those days, the little girl's mother was buried that same Christmas evening to prevent any contagion spreading amongst the populace, and although big black leather boots were totally wrong for a funeral they were the only proper shoes that poor little Karen possessed. She walked bare legged behind her mother's coffin through the spare and bleak snow-dappled streets wearing her Sunday best pinafore and her new Christmas boots.

A rich old woman was driving through the town in a large, black limousine on her way home from Christmas lunch with her cousin. As her leviathan automobile wafted down the street that ran along one side of the cemetery, the old woman caught sight of little Karen through the smoked glass windows and her heart cried out for all of the lost summers that she could never regain. She felt awfully sorry for the little girl who was standing in the cold, cold cemetery on this benighted Christmas evening, so she had her chauffeur stop the car.

The wrinkled but ruthlessly rich spinster then called the parson over and said, "Look here, my good man, let me take that pretty little thing home and I promise to bring her up properly and right".

Little Karen, confused by the simple delights of the morning and the great sadness of the afternoon, was convinced that the rich old woman had noticed her because of her special Christmas boots, and she could feel the spirit of her departed mother pushing her towards the car, pushing her towards a better life of plenty and comfort.

As Karen climbed into the car the old woman tutted and said, "Well, my dear, let's see what we can do for you. A new dress and some proper little girl's shoes are in order, I think. We can't have you wandering about the house in ugly old boots like that".

When Karen and her new benefactress got home, the boots were taken away and burned, but despite these initial hardships and misgivings, little Karen was quickly won over by gifts of fine new clothes and several pairs of lovely, well-fitted shoes. Over the next few years Karen learned to cook and to sew. Her school lessons went well and she quickly grasped the rudiments of reading, writing and mathematics, and in no time at all Karen grew up to be a proper young lady. Everyone who met her told her that she was very pretty. When they heard about her lowly start in life and about how she had been saved by the rich old woman they all told her how lucky she was and how happy she must be. Karen believed every word of it except one. She knew, especially when she looked in the mirror, that she was not just pretty. Karen knew in her heart that she was beautiful.

One day, when Karen had grown into her mid teenage years, a famous singer came to Coalminster to perform a concert in the town hall. People crowded outside the singer's hotel balcony just to

try and catch a glimpse of her, and, sure enough, the singer made frequent appearances on her balcony to greet her adoring public. On one of these occasions Karen was there in the crowd. Karen loved the glitz and the glamour that seemed to shine out from the famous singer's smile. She was doubly overjoyed when she saw that the famous singer was wearing a pair of beautiful, hand-tooled Moroccan leather boots. They were, of course, much prettier than Karen's old boots, but they reminded Karen of her dearly departed mother and of the boots that she had given to Karen on that fateful morning long ago. Karen decided there and then that there could be nothing finer in the entire world than a pair of lovely, properly hand-stitched big black boots.

The rich old woman who had taken Karen in all of those years ago was a religious sort, in a Methodist way, and she wanted Karen to be confirmed. She sent Karen to Sunday school and when the day of her Confirmation approached Karen and the old woman went shopping at all of the finest stores in town, which meant in reality that they spent most of the afternoon ensconced in the rather threadbare surroundings of the Walter Henry Cheeps department store. They hummed and whispered over racks of chintz and lace, examining every dress and petticoat in close detail until, as dusk started to fall, they set out for home laden with bags and boxes full of the previous year's fashions and fads.

They had one last call to make at the biggest and most famous shoe shop for miles around. The shop was full of display stands and long, sleek, polished wooden racks full of sling backs and high heels. The assembled pantheon of footwear dazzled and gleamed, but Karen only had eyes for the finest black leather boots. Fortunately for Karen the rich old woman was by now hard of hearing and a little short sighted. She thought that Karen had chosen a lovely but demur pair of cream court shoes and she completely failed to notice Karen and the shop assistant secretly agreeing to substitute them with the most expensive pair of black lace up boots in the whole shop. The boots fitted Karen perfectly and so they were bought with a sly nod and wink towards the old lady's disabilities and her deep pockets. If the rich old woman had been able to hear, had she been able to see just how big and black

these new boots were, she would never have agreed to let Karen wear them to church.

The very next day, when Karen walked up the aisle in her pretty white lace dress and her big black lace up boots, everyone stared at her. It seemed to Karen that the hand-carved figures on the tombs, that the grim portraits of old ancestral parsons and even the alabaster angels that flew above the altar were all staring at her. Her head was awash with the thrill of shocking the good citizens of the parish and when the parson laid his hand upon her head, when he spoke of rituals, meanings and covenants, all that Karen could think about was how grown up she was and how beautiful she must look in her big black leather boots.

By the time Karen and the old woman got home, everyone knew about the boots. The old woman's friends gleefully told her all about them with the politely but barely disguised relish that the socially superior members of society used to employ so well, and the old dear was furious. She and Karen had a blazing row in the sitting room because Karen, feeling her way into her adult years, answered back, but, after many tears, Karen agreed that she would only ever wear sensible shoes to church.

During the following week, the weather was absolutely stunning and the ground became ever so dusty and dry, which gave Karen a brilliant idea. She decided to wear a long, flowing skirt to church, one that would hide all but the toe caps and the soles of her big black boots. The dust from the parched and dry earth would surely disguise how black they were, and sure enough, as they walked to church, the rich old woman completely failed to notice that Karen was wearing her black boots under her long skirt.

As Karen and her patroness approached the church they saw there, standing by the gate that opened into the churchyard, an old veteran of one too many wars selling matches at sixpence the box. Spotting a chance to do a little business he offered to clean the ladies shoes for them before they entered the house of worship. The rich old woman sniffed a little as he doffed his cap and scraped the dry earth with a creaking bow, but his tone and manner were suitably deferential and so she put out each foot in turn so that the man could wipe the dust from her shoes. Karen, giggling, did so too.

“Good grief”, whispered the old soldier as he set about wiping the dust from Karen’s shoes. “What lovely fighting boots they are, little miss!” He grinned at Karen as he waved his right hand over her feet, muttering in low, wheezy tones, “Stay put in those boots when you fight”.

Then he struck the sole of each boot once with the flat of his right hand before rolling away in a twenty-a-day coughing fit. The rich old woman flipped a shilling into the dirt by the old man’s tray of matches and hurried Karen away and into the church, feeling as though she should wash her hands immediately.

Karen and the old woman sat in the front pew as usual. In the heat of the day the service seemed to drone on forever and when the parson started his sermon Karen could feel her eyelids drooping. She tried to stay awake but as the seconds dripped away she couldn’t resist the urge to stretch her legs out in front of her and slide down a little in her seat. Everyone in the congregation stared at her as her big black boots slid out from under her skirt and the parson nearly choked on his words when he caught sight of the boots from his pulpit. When she knelt down to receive the chalice full of wine all that the congregation could see of her were rubber boot soles as thick as tyre treads. Karen, meanwhile, in her day dreaming state, forgot about everything in the world, imagining herself drinking wine from a crystal goblet fashioned in the shape of a hand tooled Moroccan leather boot.

With the service over the congregation trooped outside and said their genteel farewells. Karen and her doting foster mother, who was not as fit as she had once been, waited for their chauffeur to bring the limousine round to the gate that lead out of the church yard. She felt that in the heat of a glorious late Sunday morning it would be too much to walk home after the service. When the car arrived the old woman climbed into the rear seat with a weary sigh and waited for Karen to join her.

Just as Karen was about to climb into the car she caught sight of the old war veteran, who was leaning against an oak tree, grinning once again.

“See,” he said, “what lovely fighting boots they are”. He clapped his hands three times.

Karen tried to swing her right foot into the car but it refused to obey her. Her left foot also refused to move and suddenly, from nowhere, Karen felt a desperate urge to kick something. She felt an urgent and irresistible need to fight. Her feet started to lash out in every direction, left and right, catching anyone within range on their shins and on their knees. Her boots were thoroughly democratic, aiming kicks at women's ankles, children's toes and even one at the parson's nose. Protest as she might, there was nothing that Karen could do, for her boots were determined to fight.

Karen brawled up the streets and tussled down the lanes; she battered doors and kicked at cars, inflicting cuts and bruises on innocent bystanders wherever she went. In the end, and with the police in hot pursuit, all that the old woman's chauffeur could do was bundle Karen into the back of the car, with her flailing boots still sticking out of the back window. They made their escape just in the nick of time to avoid any more of a scandal than was absolutely necessary.

Once they judged themselves to be safely out of harms way the chauffer and Karen, both of them suffering many bruises, eventually managed to untie the laces, unhook the eyes and pull the boots off of the poor girl's battered and desperately tired legs. Only then did her feet stop lashing about in the back of the car. Karen felt exhausted and not a little frightened. She was still out of breath when she got home and then, of course, she had to face the old woman's anger once again. The terrible boots were thrown out with the garbage, and with good riddance to them as far as the rich old woman was concerned. Karen was made to swear that she would never wear boots again.

Over the next few weeks the old woman grew steadily more pale and ill. She was very old, but her health was made all the worse by having to pay the doctor's bills for all of Karen's unfortunate victims, and the general medical situation was made worse by the flood of letters from solicitors demanding compensations. Then, to cap it all, the frail old dowager was summoned to have words with the local chief of police. The threat of an Antisocial Behaviour Order for Karen was probably the straw that broke the camel's back. It was all too much for the old woman and just before she

fainted away at the end of that dreadful day, she insisted that Karen be grounded for at least a year.

The sad truth was that the rich old woman became steadily worse from then on, until the doctors gave up any hope of her ever recovering her old strength. Karen was really very sorry and she promised to be good and to look after the old woman, which she did with great care and love. Karen made bowls of chicken broth for her guardian, sat with her and read to her, gave her bed baths and held her hand as she drifted off to sleep in the evenings. Karen worked every hour of the day keeping the house clean and her patroness as comfortable as she could, which was hard and tiring work, but Karen was well aware that she had a great debt to pay.

One morning, some months later, a parcel arrived for Karen. It lay on the kitchen table all day while Karen cooked and mopped and scrubbed and read to the old woman, and it wasn't until late into the evening that Karen had the chance to sit down and relax. She poured herself a small sherry, which, although she was under age, she found to be of help after a long day of household duties, chores and cares. Her fringe hung limply across her forehead. As Karen brushed her hair out of her eyes she caught sight of the parcel for the first time since it had been delivered that morning.

It was addressed to her and a card said that it was from 'Dickie the Dog'. There was a message on the card saying that he had heard about the strange incident of the Sunday boots from an old soldier friend of his one evening down at his local pub, and he wondered whether Karen liked football. If she did, he said, a few of the lads would be meeting down by the gasworks on Tuesday night and she'd be welcome to tag along. According to the note the parcel contained the appropriate clothes for a night out with the gasworks boys. Somewhat disturbed but also intrigued by this strange message, Karen opened the parcel, and was amazed to see that it contained a blue and white scarf, a blue and white knitted bobble hat and those same shining black boots that had caused such mayhem after church service.

Karen immediately put the boots, the scarf and the bobble hat back into their wrappings and placed them on top of the highest cupboard in the kitchen. She dared not wear them again. She had made a promise.

But living a life made up of all work and very little play started to make Karen think. She was desperate to escape the gloom of the old house. She was a teenager, after all, and she felt as though she was missing out. She knew that she should repay her debts to the old woman for this wonderful life and all of the worry that she had caused, but that didn't mean that she was a prisoner. She could feel the weeks ageing her and she longed for just one night out, for a little bit of excitement. Every time she walked by the cupboard in the kitchen she looked up at the parcel that contained her black boots. She could feel her feet itching to wear them once again and as the days counted down towards the next Tuesday, Karen's thoughts were entirely taken up by the possibilities that beckoned to her from the top of the kitchen cupboard. She deserved a night out, she thought, and slowly she convinced herself that it would be all right. "After all", she said to herself over another glass of sherry, "what could possibly happen?"

When Tuesday finally came Karen spent the day in a high state of distracted anticipation. The chicken broth was slightly overcooked, the bed bath a little rough and the afternoon story reading just a little rushed. Eventually she managed to tuck the rich old woman up for the night, gave her a glass of warm milk and hurried downstairs. She pulled a chair up in front of the kitchen cupboard, stood on it and reached up for her boots with trembling hands. Karen put on the left boot, fully expecting havoc to break out, but everything in the kitchen was peaceful and calm. Encouraged, Karen pulled on the right boot and then she walked around the kitchen, but still everything was quiet and decidedly unwarlike. After five full minutes of walking up and down without feeling any urge to maim or disembowel, Karen decided that all of the fuss after the church service had been nothing more than a storm in a teacup.

"It was a hot day, after all", she said to herself, "and maybe I just had a conniption or something".

She pulled on her jacket, wrapped the scarf around her neck, put the bobble hat in her pocket and slipped quietly out of the back door. At first everything was just fine and dandy. The boots were lovely and snug and comfortable, obeying Karen's feet perfectly. She turned a corner and, even as she passed strangers on the night

dark streets, there were still no signs of trouble. In fact nothing untoward happened at all on any of the streets or lanes that lead towards Dickie the Dog and the gasworks boys.

As Karen turned the last corner and started to walk along a broken chain link fence beside an old disused factory next to the gasworks, she saw a group of twenty or thirty young boys in front of her. Some of them were wearing blue and white scarves, while others were wearing red and white scarves, and they were all throwing punches and aiming kicks at each other. Karen suddenly felt very, very frightened. Not only was there a fight going on, but try as she might, she couldn't stop her feet from walking straight towards the bundle of scrapping youths. She knew instinctively, deep in her bones, that she was in desperate trouble.

Karen caught sight of someone leaning against the factory wall and as she drew closer to the turmoil she recognised the grin of the old soldier who'd cleaned her shoes outside the church all those months ago. He held a long, fat cigar in one hand and as he winked at her he blew a series of perfect smoke rings into the air. Then he clapped his hands together three times.

The boots started to tingle, shake and shudder so much that Karen could feel them scratching at the loose stones and the mud beneath her feet like a bull preparing to charge a matador. Suddenly she lurched forward into the thick of the fight and started to lash out in every direction, her booted feet pummelling anything and anybody within range, and it was then that Karen realised that every single boy around her was also wearing a pair of big, black, leather, lace up boots. As she stared at the mass of bodies and faces around her she became only too aware that every one of these madly scrapping boys was screaming and shouting in pure, absolute terror. Their boots were all wildly out of control.

On and on the fighting went, with bodies lying broken on the ground and with blood splattered everywhere. Even the legs of the unconscious boys were still trying to lash out as the magic boots tried desperately to stay in the fight. Gradually the number of the fully conscious and able-bodied combatants dwindled and thinned out, until Karen was one of the last youths standing, but still her boots raged on, lusting for bursting blood and splintered bone. At that moment Karen caught sight of a small and particularly ugly

looking man, more hobgoblin than human, laughing and joking with the old soldier. They were both smoking large, fat cigars and the ugly looking troll of a man flashed a gap toothed grin at her and waved to her with long and dirty fingers.

“See you got the parcel, then”, he shouted.

With one last burst of desperate energy, Karen managed to tear her boots away from the fight and she dragged them, kicking and screaming, around to the far side of the gasworks. It was like wading through thick treacle, but she hauled herself away from the fight until there was no more breath left in her lungs. She leaned against the chain link fence, breathed in deeply and looked up the street towards home and peace and safety.

To Karen’s absolute horror she found herself confronted by an advancing line of black clad, helmeted and shielded riot police, who had been called out to deal with the disturbance. Karen’s big black boots suddenly went into overdrive, slashing and beating at anyone in uniform who was unlucky enough to be in range. She attacked with such force that she was completely lifted off the ground. She drove into the police line like a heat seeking missile, laying into every police officer with the greatest of fury. She screamed and screamed for help, bursting her lungs with her wild pleading. Karen begged for mercy and for someone to stop this madness. She beseeched the heavens, wishing that she might wake up at home and in bed. No matter how hard she wished and begged and pleaded with her demonic boots, they simply carried on annihilating each and every member of the town’s Special Patrol Group.

Helmets, truncheons and shields lay scattered across the road. Karen was in a state of total and mad despair when, all of a sudden, there was blinding flash of light. As her booted feet continued to lash out amid the bodies and the bruises, she thought that she could make out the shape of an angel or a spirit silhouetted in the brilliant white light. Slowly, and despite the gyrations of her wildly thrashing legs and the ebb and flow of charging policemen, Karen began to see that the angel’s face was pure and loving. She begged for help, promising to repent her sins and to be good forever and ever and ever.

The creature of the light smiled at her, hearing her desperate plea, and started to say something but Karen didn't hear a single word. Her world went suddenly very black, indeed. With her attention fixed on the radiant smile of her saviour, and as her boots experienced a momentary sense of unease, she simply didn't notice the biggest, toughest and burliest member of the police riot squad sneaking up behind her. As she gazed into the bright white light of hope the policeman ended the fighting by crashing his baton down onto poor Karen's aching head.

When Karen awoke she felt uncomfortably warm. It took a second or two for her to focus properly, but when she could see straight she found herself in a red walled hall, quite alone and friendless. There were no fighting boys, no policemen and no bright lights. Karen untied the scarf that was still hanging around her neck, still feeling groggy after the blow to her head and only slowly did the events of the evening filter back into her memory. As things became clearer she started to whimper a little. Her faint sobs grew into a wholehearted wailing when she looked down at her feet and saw that her boots were gone and in their place she was wearing a pair of soft red ballet shoes. She was confused and scared and desperate for home.

Just then a door opened and Karen watched aghast as the old soldier sidled into the hall. He was still wearing that horrible grin and he was holding Karen's big black boots. He walked slowly over to where Karen was standing, and with every step his knees and hips cracked and snapped. He wheezed with every breath, and yet Karen saw within his aged frame the shape of something lithe and coiled and ravening. The old man put the boots down on the ground in front of her. Karen could hardly breathe. The adrenaline of fear raced through her veins. The air around her grew hot and fetid.

The old soldier snapped his fingers once. The boots disappeared in a puff of smoke. He snapped his fingers a second time. From somewhere above her Karen could hear the tinny sounds of Strauss waltzes being played as if through elevator speakers. The old man snapped his fingers a third time and leered at the girl. Karen suddenly felt her red ballet shoes begin to dance, and no matter

how hard she tried she simply couldn't stop dancing, dancing up and down the hall. To the left, to the right and twirling round she went in some crazed sort of Irish jig.

The old soldier had swapped Karen's lovely big black boots for red ballet shoes that would dance and dance from here until the ends of days. He'd done just the same thing to other little girls and boys over the years and always enjoyed that first moment of their panic filled realisation. He watched her spin and pirouette. He watched as she screamed and yelled above the tinny sound of whirling strings and he chuckled to himself, as little devils are wont to do.

"There's beautiful", he said to himself, as he lit another cigar and started to blow perfect little smoke rings in time to the rhythm of the dance.

Jack and Jill Went Up the Hill

Although the great and the good of this feted land have, in recent times at least, attempted to develop a responsible and ethical relationship with their own population, with their neighbours, with foreign potentates and with the leaders of other races, factions and interest groups, nonetheless the pressures placed on any free society by the complexities of modern statehood have taken their toll on the patience of our law makers. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in London's shimmering streets of gold, where the right of the individual to express his or her free will has not always been appreciated or encouraged, despite the avowed intent of worthy politicians from all shades of the political spectrum to protect the very basic tenets of free liberal democracy.

A few years ago the policy makers in the country's parliament were faced with making one of any truly democratic nation's most unpalatable decisions; namely whether to take the country to war or to reject violence in favour of an attempt at a diplomatic solution to their problem. Now, the purpose of this story is most definitely not to debate the merits of the choice made by the politicians of that day, for this has already been the subject of considerable vitriol and public argument. However, if you cast your minds back to the

newspapers of the time, there is every possibility that you will remember hearing something about Jack and Jill, and their unfortunate walk along the paths of our political uplands.

That the nation's politicians had chosen the option of war in a foreign land rather than the continuation of diplomatic and economic methods of problem resolution had irked Jack and Jill considerably, so much so, in fact, that they willingly joined a protest march that snaked and chanted its way along their local suburban high street. The march was held on a bright and crisp spring day, and the assembled crowd was a refreshing mixture of young and old, of blue and red, and of creed and colour. Rather than being a riot of the usual suspects, at least as portrayed in the media, Jack and Jill really felt that this time the commoners of the land, the everyday jobbing folk, were standing up for what they believed in. The numbers varied according to the witness, but the country as a whole saw millions of Jacks and Jills walking under a clear blue sky peppered with banners and filled with the harmony vocal slogans. In every borough and every ward, under familiar high street signs and shop displays, the streets echoed to the sound of tooting car horns and good natured but serious protest.

Jack joined in with the chorus line on every marshalled step, "Not in my name...No War...Freedom, not oppression..."

Jill, feeling herself to be at one with the ebb and flow of the crowd all around her, found her voice breaking with emotion as she too called out, "What do we want? Peace and understanding! When do we want it? Now!"

Neither of them had ever actually participated in any form of public protest prior to this, preferring to comment quietly from the relative safety of the front room in their semi-detached home. Jack had supported the government's taming of the wilder elements of the socialist movement some years earlier, had despaired of the more recent sleaze bound affairs of state and had even questioned the merits of voting on one or two occasions, but on this matter both he and his wife were of one opinion. It mattered desperately. It mattered that they stand up and be counted in a way that would really make the politicians think.

Ever since the debacle of "Honest John" Skuttle's forced resignation following the blank speech scandal, Jack and Jill had

grown both disillusioned and militant in their own particular, socially responsible manner, picking issues on which they could hold definite opinions amid the general torpor that they felt in relation to the general body politic. The war helped to galvanise them into belated action, giving them common cause with thousands upon thousands of similarly confused and worried men and women who lived everyday lives and dealt with everyday problems just like their own.

Things had changed in the country's parliament and now that fresh faced and youthful Mike "Mickey" Gambol had assumed the reins of power, it was most decidedly time for Jack, Jill and the rest of the little people to remind the establishment of who it was that really stalked the corridors of power in England's green and pleasant land.

In the Houses of Parliament, "Mickey" Gambol, having accepted the poisoned chalice of a foreign war, tried desperately to persuade his fellow parliamentarians and the wider constituency of voters that they were all fighting for the same ideals.

"Despite our differences, despite our deeply held convictions", he asked, "are we not really brothers? This great country has seen a thousand years of history, during which we have developed as a nation to value beyond measure the freedoms and securities that only a true and open society can yield. That this government has embarked upon a policy that some of you disagree with is, understandably, a bone of contention among many of us, but this government's actions and policies are designed to protect exactly the right that you are exercising, the right to dissent in a proportionate and measured way.

We will debate these issues. We will reach a consensus and we will remain, now and forever, arbiters of freedom, democracy and inclusion amid the chaos of a fractured and hostile world.

It is precisely because we can air our views without fear of reprisal, that millions of our citizens can conduct peaceful and considered protest and that we, as a government, will listen to your protests.

It is precisely because of these ancient traditions of fair play and accountability that we can stand tall in the world and defend the

rights of the oppressed against the dark forces of persecution and oppression”.

The debate in the media raged on, as it did around dinner tables and in taverns throughout the land. Points of view differed immensely, but in general people understood that, although opinions differed and that arguments could become quite lively and heated, they lived in a reasonably balanced land where the state, despite the occasional bout of nannyism, preferred to leave the individual some scope for making choices and for taking responsibility for their actions.

Away from the public eye the debate raged within government circles too, although it assumed a slightly more hushed and cautious tone. Away from the hurly burly of the parliamentary debating chamber, “Mickey” Gambol and his advisers from the governing party and from the civil service took the whole debate about the protection of democracy very seriously. Over a plate of chocolate hobnobs and plastic cups of a vaguely tanned tea-like substance, they met in secret conclave to discuss the issue and to decide upon the best way forward.

“Of course”, said the leader’s chief policy adviser, “we cannot endanger the rights and freedoms of individuals, but we should remember that such freedoms have been, and will continue to be, our Achilles heel in times of crisis like this. It’s all very well saying that we have to respect considered debate and responsible protest, but the laws, as they stand, protect any sort of protest, no matter how wild and inflammatory it may be. We have to distinguish between legitimate protest and incitement”.

And so, after a tough but productive session, the assembled ministers of state, private secretaries and political consigiore agreed that a combination of closed circuit television, internal surveillance and intelligence gathering, improved police responsiveness, and a few new clauses tacked onto the forthcoming Freedom of Speech legislation ought to be sufficient to keep a lid on the more extreme members of society.

Jack and Jill retired from the world of public protest as soon as the first wave of popular enthusiasm for the anti-war march had broken on the breakwater of political indifference to their cause.

They muttered and mused on how a government that claimed to listen so intently to the voices of the common people could so completely ignore those voices when raised outside of the normal focus group channels.

Over one too many glasses of reasonably priced red plonk, Jack suggested and Jill discounted the options of shoe bombing, egg throwing, naked building scaling and petitioning. Anthrax was discussed, as was direct action of the Red Army Faction variety, but neither over the dinner table nor over the long wooden bar at their local pub, could they decide on how best to wake the buggers up and get them to smell the roses.

Every form of anarchy and every form of peaceful protest withered in their minds as the days and weeks passed into the obscurity of history, until, wrapped up in the mundane chores and stresses of normal life, Jack and Jill's brief flirtation with political protest and activism dissipated and dwindled, becoming nothing more than the sound of a dog gnawing at a bone in a neighbouring garden. With the sound of birdsong in the branches, of lawnmowers droning on a Sunday morning and the inevitable chatter of the daily grind, they could hardly make out the sound of chewing canine teeth at all, but during the quiet hours of the night, when most of the usual suburban noise polluters had given up the ghost and finally fallen asleep, Jack and Jill were sometimes able to hear the gentle crack of a splintering bovine hock.

With time and the continued commitment of forces in overseas lands, buried bones came fresh to the surface and the dogs of war chewed enthusiastically. Jack and Jill found that the daily casualty lists weighed more and more heavily upon them. A continual diet of sanitised news reports, of ineffective debates and the inevitable slump into response fatigue by a general population whose attention wavered and drifted in the summer heat haze, tickled their own consciences lightly but persistently. With the war's general death toll rising inexorably and with the losses experienced by Britain's own forces of liberation approaching a significantly rounded number, Jack and Jill finally heard the dogs leave off from their chewing to bark and howl from the shadows.

"It's really not good enough", said Jack one evening over a light supper of smoked mackerel salad. "I mean, everyone's saying how

bad the war is but no one's doing anything. Bloody Gambol is ignoring everyone. If only we could do something”.

“I know, love, I know”, replied Jill, “but what can we do? There doesn't seem to be much in the way of organised opposition to the war. None of the political parties are doing anything and no one else seems bothered anymore”.

Evenings drifted by like this, interspersed with the usual distractions on the television and in the pub, without any real progress being made on the issue of how to make their voices heard. The dogs, however, continued to gnaw away and Jill's private thoughts kept company with the hounds, whittling the bone down to the marrow of the problem as it nagged and badgered at the seams of her considered sense of justice. The words that really stuck in her mind were ‘no one’ and ‘organised’. It seemed to Jill that perhaps she and her husband were looking in the wrong place for inspiration.

“Perhaps we should think about this in a different way”, she said a few days later as she and Jack finished off a lovely late night snack of cheese slices on slimming rye bread wafers. “Perhaps we should think about doing something ourselves, you know, just making a small statement on our own. It's a start and maybe, when a few people see us they'll think the same and maybe it'll grow, maybe it'll be like a chain letter or something”.

“You've got a point, you know”, said her husband “I mean, even if there was a group to join or whatever, all they'd really want was our money and a signature. Even if we did buy a rubber bracelet, they probably wouldn't actually want to listen to us, to you and me personally. Of course, they'd say they were listening to ‘Us’, but we'd never really have any say in anything. Look at that march, I mean, it was a lovely day out, but it didn't actually achieve anything lasting, did it”.

Jill topped up her husband's glass of Merlot. “I was thinking maybe if we did something simple, something nice, maybe if we just made a small point it might help. I've got an idea. I'd like to read out the names of the dead soldiers at Trafalgar Square. No one could object to that, could they? I mean, it would be peaceful and quiet and over in a jiffy”.

“And I could wear a t-shirt and hold a banner or something, you know like those protest t-shirts that were all the fashion twenty years ago. And if the banner said something like ‘quiet please’ or ‘just listen’, then who could object?”

There followed a week of planning and painting on torn up bed sheets. From a local screen-printing shop Jack ordered two bright pink t-shirts with their chosen slogan emblazoned across the chest. On the Friday afternoon, having travelled to the heart of the political district in Westminster, Jack and Jill started their ascent up the shallow rise from Whitehall, passed the Foreign Office, Downing Street and the old Admiralty buildings and eventually emerged onto Trafalgar Square carrying two sheets of A4 paper, a rolled up banner made out of an old bed sheet, an empty bucket and a bag containing one hundred small pebbles. Directly underneath Nelson’s column, they walked over to the white marble steps of one of the country’s most famous and recognisable martial memorials, and set about their quiet, peaceful and considered protest in the hope that someone, that anyone, would listen.

Jill stood on the bottom step of the memorial and prepared to read out the names that were printed on the A4 sheets of paper. Jack filled his bucket with water from a couple of bottles of Tesco stripy, stood on the second step and placed the bucket between his feet. As Jill started to read out the names in a normal, everyday tone of voice he unfurled the banner above his head, tied the posts to the pedestal of one of the lions and proceeded to drop one pebble into the bucket for each name that was read out aloud. In a simple, dignified and personally significant gesture, Jill waited for each gentle pulse of ripples to subside before reading out the next name.

Above them the sky was filled with scudding grey clouds and a light breeze made their banner flap and snap on its broom handle poles. Together, reading and dropping pebbles into a bucket, they worked through their protest, name by name, wearing bright pink t-shirts bearing the slogan, ‘Maybe if we’re all quiet’ on the front, and ‘Gambol might get the bloody message’ on the back. The banner simply asked anyone who could read it to please respect ‘The Silence of the Dead’ as they passed the strange couple dressed in pink t-shirts.

Government workers on their way to and from meetings, rubber necking tourists and the occasional meandering, unworldly vagabond strolled through the square, catching sight of the protest and registering the usual mix of momentary confusion, annoyance, interest and amusement. Jack and Jill plodded on, one name at a time, one pebble at a time, in the simple hope that one of these passers-by would see and think and take up the challenge. The possibility that television cameras would relay their activities to a much wider audience had simply not entered their heads.

Of course, the television cameras in question were those that had been installed as part of the government's response to the perceived threat of wild and inflammatory protest. As Jill read out name number thirty-seven and as Jack dropped pebble number thirty-seven into the bucket, the high pitched snarl of a revving engine pierced the quiet dignity of their polite little memorial ceremony. Even in the afternoon hustle and bustle of the tourist throng, the whine of gears and the rumble of tyres on tarmac seemed to them to be a gross intrusion on the solemnity of their act and they watched, rubber necking just like the ambling tourists, as a white van rushed up Whitehall to where they were protesting.

They assumed, as did everyone else who had stopped to look at the van, that there must be an emergency, that there must be some dastardly act of terror or vandalism taking place somewhere in the government district, against which a fully armed response squad had been despatched to ensure that all who obeyed the law and worked hard would be protected.

The men in the van were, indeed, armed, armed with the weapons of state that allowed them to protect the great and the good, the high and the low, the strong and the frail, from rogue elements in a society threatened by extreme views and an unfettered willingness to create chaos.

They were armed with legislation that gave them wide discretionary powers, powers that allowed them to determine just what constituted wild and inflammatory protest, and so it was that the van screeched to a halt by the memorial, that seven uniformed officers bundled out of the van and these same officers managed, with a great expense of arm twisting and wrestling, to manhandle

Jack and Jill into the secure environs of the vehicle's transportation cell. The van containing the police officers and their securely bound charges careered back down the road.

Sporting bruises and cuts to their heads and hands, and with the bucket tumbled down the memorial steps, Jack and Jill nursed their aching limbs and broken crowns, and prepared, finally, to speak to the one member of the state apparatus who seemed inclined to listen to their story; namely the presiding judge in their forthcoming trial for crimes against public order and incitement to terrorism.

Picking the Wings off Crane Flies

(Loosely based on Andersen's *The Girl Who Trod On A Loaf*)

You've probably heard about the boy who trod on an Indian take away meal so as not to spoil his brand new training shoes, and of how badly he fared. It was in all of the red top newspapers at the time. The boy in question was well known locally for his fastidious way of dressing, and although his choice of clothes wasn't everyone's cup of tea, he had already become something of a legend in his neighbourhood for his sharp temper and his vain and overbearing nature. In short, he was the sort of boy who, when five years old, delighted in picking the legs off crane flies to see if they could still fly, and if they could still fly he plucked off their wings as well.

As he grew older the boy's manners and his sulky disposition became steadily worse, but he was blessed with a strapping physique and sultry looks that turned girls' heads. He knew he was handsome and as his school days wound down and he matured into a young man, his looks and his personality were the very undoing of him. His physique and his winning smile were all that stood between him and many more beatings than he ever received.

His father often said to him, "It'll take something desperate to cure you of your mean little ways. You'll be the ruin of us all if you don't grow up and accept some responsibility".

But try as they might, his family couldn't cure him of his pride and his temper. His friends, such as they were, had neither the wit nor the inclination to take him to task. He preferred it that way and chose his friends accordingly.

Having left school without many qualifications, trusting his fortune to his smile and the forcefulness of his personality, the young man started work at a factory run by one of his father's friends. Because of the esteem in which his father was held, his new employer treated him very well and Billy almost became part of his employer's family. He was trained and paid a good wage for his age, all of which allowed him to indulge his passion for designer label clothes, shoes and jewellery. He looked good, he felt good, and his arrogance increased with the purchase of every new shirt and every new pair of tight fitting trousers.

He spent so much time with his new employer, both at work and on a social basis, that it soon became clear that he preferred money to blood. After a year had passed his kind and considerate employer said, "Really, Billy, you should spend more time with your parents. They're not getting any younger and your Dad could do with some help around the place. Why don't you make a bit more of an effort?"

Billy could think of nothing worse than having to spend an entire weekend with his folks, much preferring the company of his employer's spoilt and wealthy sons, but he had also learned that it was good to listen to his surrogate father, that it was good for his image and for his prospects, and so, one fine summer weekend, he stayed at home as a means of garnering brownie points. He managed to grunt his way through breakfast and even managed some meagre civility when his father asked him to help in the garden, but as the morning dragged on and as his father prattled away about trivial rubbish and the incomprehensible doings of maiden aunts, Billy started to scream inside his head. He had to get out of there. As soon as his father's back was turned he slipped out of the garden by the side gate, gunned his small but heavily customised hatchback car down the drive and fled towards the nearest decent shopping mall.

Billy was ashamed of his parents. He was ashamed of their petty little lifestyle and of their inane and constant chatter. His father,

who was a book-keeper for a local firm and had worked there all of his adult life, was a grave disappointment to Billy. His mother, who worked as a cleaner at the local primary school, was beneath him. He felt humiliated by the fact that he was making an effort, making a real splash in the world, and his parents were so boring and tedious. Billy had no regrets about spending the rest of the day drinking Cappuccinos and hanging out in designer clothes shops, being, by now, quite experienced in the use of retail therapy as a way to mitigate the irritations caused by the thought of his home and of his family.

As soon as he was able to, Billy rented a small studio flat and left home for good with his stereo, his compact disks, his wardrobe and his collection of soft porn magazines. For six months he carried on working, going to the shops, drinking luridly coloured alchopops and dating girls for a week at most. Not once did he visit his parents or pick up the telephone. He even set his email account to automatically delete any communications from them.

Then, at work one day his employer called him over and said, "I was having a chat with your father in the pub the other night. He was telling me that since you moved out they've seen neither hide nor hair of you. I know you're young and eager to make your own way in the world, but you really should try to get on with them a little better. Blood is thicker than water, after all".

"Right", replied Billy from under his fringe, shifting his weight from foot to foot, "suppose you're right, it's been a while".

"Good boy. Now, I've got an idea. Mrs Spencer and I are having a take away curry with your mum and dad on Friday night and I think it would be a lovely surprise if you turned up with the take away and joined us for the meal. What do you think? They'll be delighted to see you".

On Friday night Billy put on his tightest jeans, his most flamboyant French shirt and his latest purchase; a pair of red and gold trainers made by the coolest sportswear manufacturer this side of last month. Despite the fact that it was raining, Billy parked his souped up roller skate of a car a couple of streets away from his parents' house and walked round to the local Indian take away. After all, he might manage a visit but he didn't want to advertise

the fact that he was spending a Friday night at home with his mum and dad.

The streets were full of puddles and dirty brown mud where people had been walking on the grass verges and Billy trod as carefully and as delicately as he could through all of the muck and grime, desperate not to spoil his pristine shoes. He'd borrowed from the rent fund to afford them and he was not going to see them ruined on account of a stupid family obligation.

After Billy picked up the curry, the popadoms and the pot of minty yoghurt, he set off at a brisk pace for his parents' house, but at the bottom of the road where they lived Billy came face to face with his worst nightmare. Somewhere, somehow, one of the drains had backed up and was spilling a cold and dirty mixture of rainwater and sewage right across the pavement and into the gardens on both sides of the street. The stream of murky brown liquid was just too wide to jump across. Billy was stuck. There was no way on this earth that he was going to put his shiny new training shoes in that mess. Billy had an idea. The curry was in a plastic bag. If he put the bag into the middle of the stream and used it as a stepping-stone, then his trainers would be saved. "After all", he thought, "I can say I'm broke and they'll just have to get their own bloody curry".

Billy pushed the plastic bag full of cartons into the stream of dirty brown sewer water and, attempting something akin to levitation, he tried to step as lightly as he could on the bag so as to avoid both the water and the possibility of curry sauce splashing his designer trainers. But as Billy's right foot landed on the carrier bag and his left foot started on its arc towards dry land on the far side of the stream, the take away meal started to sink. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, but try as he might Billy couldn't reach dry land. The bag of curry sank deeper and deeper, taking Billy with it, until he disappeared completely and there was only a thick, gurgling stream of water to be seen in the cold and empty street.

Billy continued to fall and fall until he thought that he was going to end up on the other side of the world, but then, with a sudden bump in the darkness, he came to rest with his cheek against a cold and clammy brick wall. Billy was in the great hall of the King of the Sewer Rats and the King of the Sewer Rats loves rain and dirt

and all things foul. He brews his potions out of the world's stinking detritus and Billy knew from the smells all around him that he couldn't stay here for long. The stink that rose up from King Rat's cauldrons made Billy's head spin. He searched desperately for a chink of light, for any sign of a doorway, but there was no way out because all of the exits and entrances to the hall were full of squirming, wriggling, horn tailed rat soldiers. Billy sank to his knees in the middle of this loathsome, writhing mat of warm, twitching flesh and he started to shiver and shake and moan.

On this foul weather day the hall was full of commotion because King Rat was playing host to a much-esteemed visitor for whom he was conjuring potions. He was entertaining the Devil's grandmother, who is a virulent old woman at the best of times, spending her days sewing unrest into people's shoes so that they can never settle down. She is keen on needlework of many varieties, embroidering unfulfilled wants and needs in people's pockets and crocheting lies and thoughtless remarks in busy people's underwear. In short she does anything based on the sewing crafts that will cause harm and corruption in the daylight world of men.

The old woman looked at Billy as he knelt in the mire and said, "Now, there's a man-child with attitude! Give him to me as a token of my visit here and I'll set him up for eternity as a Toby Jug in my grandson's living room".

Of course, King Rat was only too pleased to be able to make a gift of this foul creature of the sun, and that is how Billy ended up spending the rest of his days in the Devil's living room as part of the his prize collection of amusing caricature pottery. The Devil's living room is really quite small, unlike his eternal and unending halls of pain, and he likes to relax in a well-worn armchair that stands beside a cosy fire. In fact, the room looks like the parlour of a small Victorian terraced house, except for the fact that the walls are lined with shelf upon shelf filled to the gunwales with grotesque faced Toby Jugs.

Perched high up on one of the shelves, Billy felt as cold and as stiff as an earthenware flower pot, for cold glazed pottery was what his body had become. Like the rest of the damned souls

immortalised in pottery, Billy could still move his eyes and as he did so his head filled with shapes and dreams of absolute horror. Huge bulbous bodied spiders were spinning thick strands of silk over the jugs, building webs that lasted for a thousand years or more and Billy could sense the torment in the souls around him. The contorted faces of loan sharks and estate agents, of fat corporate cats and smug warmongers, filled his view of the room. It was a truly dreadful thing for Billy to find himself stacked on these shelves.

“This is what you get for wanting to keep your shoes clean”, he whimpered to himself in a terracotta voice. “It’s awful, dreadful, quite the ugliest thing to see them all glowering back at me like that”.

It was true. Every one of the Toby jugs flashed an evil grin at him, shooting stars of menace across the room. Billy could hear their demonic mumblings even though none of them could move their mouths, set as they were for eternity beneath paint and glaze. Billy looked down at the bulbous shape of his own jug and saw that it was painted to look like just like the clothes and shoes that he had been wearing when he set the Indian take away in the stream of water. “Well, at least I still have a sense of style”, he mumbled to himself, “which means they’re all jealous. What a terrible pleasure it must be for them to see me in all my glory”.

Billy continued to stare at his own painted body. The general effect was pretty cool, but now that he looked closely he felt that something, somewhere was wrong. As he stared and stared he realised that he must have been covered in grime and filth after his fall into the hall of the King Rat, and someone had painted all of that grime onto his pot bound body. It was awful to see how his trainers were covered in thick globules of mud. At least he hoped it was mud.

“Still”, he muttered, “none of the other ugly pot bellied bastards are looking too hot to trot either”.

It was then that Billy noticed the smell of burnt chicken Madras. He felt pangs of hunger rising from the pit of his earthenware stomach all the way up to his painted eyebrows and he felt a lump of something settle in the bottom of his hollowed out body. Billy screamed silently inside his own head as he realised that he was full

of cold chicken curry. His hunger pangs drove him into a frenzy but there was simply no way that he could satisfy his ravenous appetite despite the ample source of food that he held within his own portly shell.

And then the flies came, attracted by the smell of coagulating Madras. They came in their thousands, swarming all over his eyes and his mouth and his ears. He couldn't even blink. Billy was stiff and cold. He shuddered and started to cry non-existent tears when he realised that the flies were wingless, legless crane flies, but worst of all was the endless hunger. It seemed to Billy that his entrails were eating themselves and he felt nothing but emptiness inside, nothing but hollowness and loneliness.

"I can't stand it", he yelled at the top of his voice, but stand it he did, for he had no choice.

It was then that Billy felt a tear fall upon his glazed face. The tear trickled down his cheek, down his chin and all the way down to his china training shoes. More tears fell upon him, each hotter than the last, because up above him, through the darkness and the cold, his mother was crying over her lost son. She was crying tears of grief and a mother's tears always reach her child, although in this case they were of no comfort for they burned as they fell, adding to Billy's torment. He was consumed by hunger and by the knowledge that he was full of chicken curry and couldn't eat a drop of it. He was convinced he was devouring himself from the inside out. He was like a black hole sucking everything into his black heart, which was how he came to hear the words of his parents up there on earth.

What he heard was harsh and painful. Although his mother wept deep tears of sorrow, her words were full of anguish and anger.

"Pride goes before a fall", she moaned. "That was your undoing, boy. That's why we suffer so".

Billy was mortified.

"If only I'd never been born", he thought, "then we'd all be so much better off. Now my mother is snivelling and crying like a banshee but she's no help to me. They should've cured me of my attitude, should've made me into a better person, should've cured me of my temper... not that they're bloody saints, the miserable bastards".

Billy's attitude was cast in hard, eternal relief, just like his face and his hands, and he fumed quietly on the shelf as he heard every word that was said about him up on earth. None of it was complimentary. He consoled himself by thinking, "Well, if I'm as bad as they say it's their fault and they should be punished for their sins as well. Oh yes, then these shelves would be full to overflowing. Can't they see how tormented I am?"

Billy's soul grew progressively harder and colder, his heart filling with icy fury and spite. He ranted and raved over many, many years, until he realised that his story, that the words that he could hear from the world above were fading almost to silence. Billy realised that his parents, that his employer and his friends were all dying, one by one, and that his story was passing into folklore.

Now all that he heard were other children's parents telling them not to be like the boy who loved his shoes so much that he sank down into the pits of Hell. Children everywhere were told Billy's story to stop them being hateful and full of pride. Most of these children just stood there silently or cried in fear, but one day, as he listened and ranted back at these disembodied sounds, Billy heard a little boy cry not in fear but in despair.

"Mummy, please, won't Billy ever rise up again, won't he ever be saved?" pleaded the little boy. "He can't be punished forever just because he liked his shoes so much, can he?"

The little boy's heart was breaking for Billy. He showered tears of compassion down upon Billy's hard coated face, but unlike the tears of Billy's mother, these tears were soft and gentle. One of the little boy's tears ran in through a crack in the glaze and reached all the way to Billy's soul, filling him with warmth and hope.

As the years have drifted by, and as Billy has continued to shout back at the human voices that he can hear, that one tear has worked its slow magic. Billy's anger has gradually waned and his voice turned to a gentler tone. Billy knows that he can never expect anything more than this darkness. Billy knows that the flies will still come to gorge themselves on the never emptying slops in his pottery body. Billy knows that flames will lick and crack his glaze, turning his once bright colours to shades of grey and black, and that his hunger will never abate, but he also knows the love of a small

innocent child. He just wishes, when the flies stop buzzing and the flames stop crackling, that he'd put the plastic bag down a few yards to the left all those years ago.

The Phantom of the Sixpenny Stalls

(Loosely based on *Le Prince Desir et la Princesse Mignonne* by Madame Leprince de Beaumont)

Just before the second of the great wars, towards the middle of the last century, there was a famous movie star, whose face appeared in all of the celebrity magazines of the day. Even now, you can sometimes see him swashling his buck or romancing his true loves under a moonlit sky on a late night re-run on one of the many satellite film channels. His hair was always immaculately black, his moustache was always pencil thin, and his eyes, even in black and white, held a sparkle and an intensity that has set female hearts racing from that day to this.

The famous movie star was no stranger to the palpitations of the heart either. Towards the twilight of his career he spent one glorious summer on location with a stunningly beautiful young lady, who was co-starring with him in a suitably melodramatic matinee feature. He fell deeply in love with her and longed for the day when he might marry her, but there was a problem. The young lady was not free to marry because she was already married to one of London's larger than life theatrical impresarios, a man famous for his quick temper. In desperation the famous movie star sought the advice of a wickedly wrinkled old socialite who'd had more than her fair share of husbands, lovers and divorces.

This aging 'It' girl lived on a diet of rouge and impossibly scarlet lipstick and when she spoke she was reputed to be able to breathe pure sulphur and brimstone. It was with some trepidation that the famous movie star called on her one afternoon to hear what she had to say about his case of unrequited love. Over tea and cucumber sandwiches the old dear fixed our movie star with a steely-grey eye and spoke imperiously.

“You know that the young lady in question is married to that hateful mogul of dodgy musical reviews. What you don’t know, however, is that he was only able to persuade her to marry him because he knew about her illegitimate child. Oh yes, it’s true, she had a baby when she was just seventeen. It would be an awful scandal if it ever got out. So, in return for his silence and his support in her stellar career, she has to pretend to be happily married. My advice to you is to bop him on the nose and to call him a cad and a bounder. Then you and the young lady must sell to the most lurid of our newspapers a story of tragedy and heartbreak made good by your true love”.

For all of his on-screen thud and blunder, our movie star was not a brave man when it came to the realities of physical violence, but nevertheless, his love for the young lady with perfect skin was just too strong to ignore. He secretly contacted his true love and put the plan to her and without question she readily agreed that it should be done. Together they worked on their stories, on their facial expressions and on their star-crossed gaze, and influenced by the heady aphrodisiac of risks taken in extremis their mutual respect and love for each other blossomed. It wasn’t long before the young lady sensed the impending patter of another pair of tiny feet.

Spurred on by the prospect of becoming a father, the famous movie actor collared the evil theatrical entrepreneur one evening as he left the first night premiere of his latest hit musical. With flash bulbs screaming in the dark night sky, he bopped the vile Svengali on the nose, cuffed him around the ears and told him what an absolute scoundrel he was. With the perfect timing borne of many years working in the mire of celebrity shame, the editor of the country’s favourite celebrity magazine published a full front page spread the very next morning. Over the ensuing days the general public learned all about the young lady’s heartbreak and about the sheer nastiness of the man who was soon to be consigned to marital history’s list of theatrical first husbands.

It transpired that everyone who loved cinema and the fragile flowers that blossomed on the silver screen forgave the young lady and wished the happy couple a long and merry life together. All that remained was to complete the divorce proceedings, book the

registry office and throw the mother and father of all show business parties.

The final petitions in the divorce case took place on a cold and foggy January afternoon. With everything done and dusted down, the famous movie star and his wife to be left the weakly glowing comfort of the lights in the court building's entrance hall and started to blend into the pale corona of mist and smog smothering London's busy streets. That dastardly old trooper of a first husband had not bothered to contest the proceedings, so neither the famous and happy movie star nor his betrothed little starlet were prepared for his sudden emergence from the gloom.

"So, you're going to marry the brazen little hussy now, I suppose", he hissed. "Well, there's nothing I can do to stop you, but I'll have my revenge. Your son, for it is a boy, will never be happy until he finds out that his nose is too long. And if you ever tell him what I've just said, he'll disappear in a puff of smoke and never be seen again".

There was an awkward moment as the theatrical impresario got his arm twisted in the folds of his cloak, but after a few seconds of muttering and cursing he managed to sweep the black cloth across his face and let out a rough edged, grating cackle.

The famous movie actor was terribly afraid, but somewhere down by his bootstraps he found the strength and the courage to turn and face the spectral figure hamming things up in front him.

"It's all rot and hot air," he stammered. "And anyway, it doesn't matter if he has a long nose. Unless he's blind or an idiot he'll know its size as plain as the..."

The actor's words shattered like glass on the empty cobblestones. The caped phantom had already disappeared into the misty night.

The actor and his bride were soon married and, despite her bump, they made a fine looking couple in the all of the magazine features and on the cinema newsreels that tracked the early stages of their new life together. Their happiness was complete some five months later when a fine and healthy son was born. In true movie star style they held a huge christening bash in a big hotel, where they announced to the world their pride and joy in the fact that little Archibald had joined the family.

No more than a year after the child's birth the famous actor met a sticky end when he fell from a fly tower while filming a story about love in a lunatic asylum and his beautiful young wife was left all alone to bring the toddler up. Remaining true to her late husband's dear memory, she eschewed any further relationships and concentrated all of her time and all of her husband's vast fortune on the boy. The child grew lustily and quite dazzled everyone with his sparkling blue eyes. He gurgled delightfully through his perfectly aligned mouth and both family and friends could see that one day he would have the perfect jaw line for robust action roles. They were all, therefore, extremely upset and surprised when his nose started to grow and grow and grow.

The little boy's mother was inconsolable when she saw how long her child's nose was becoming. She remembered the parting curse uttered by her first husband and she feared greatly that she would be the cause of her son's disappearance at any moment. As luck would have it, however, all of her advisors, secretaries, nannies, friends and hangers-on said that the boy's nose was actually very fine; that it was a Roman nose and you only had to open the history books to see how important such noses were. Buoyed by these comments, she felt much better and when she looked again at her child's face his nose certainly didn't seem too long at all.

Archibald was brought up with the greatest of care. As soon as he was old enough to understand things, everyone who came into contact with him was instructed to make the best of his facial feature. Consequently, the child's favourite bedtime stories were nearly all about the terrible things that happened to people with really short noses. No one was allowed to come near him unless they too had a very long nose, or was prepared to undergo an hour's worth of work with a prosthetic artist. Friends of the doting mother became so engrossed in the whole nose business that they took to pulling their own babies' noses several times a day to make them grow longer, but no matter how many times they tweaked their kiddies' snouts, not one of them ever came close to matching little Archibald's fine muzzle.

As the boy progressed through childhood and into manhood, he was provided with the finest tutors, all of whom made sure that the

men of history, politics and the arts were always described as having extremely long noses. Nothing was left to chance in the boy's education. Every one of his history and picture books was doctored with sticky paper, biro and crayon to make sure that every person featured was shown with the largest of probosci. In short, Archibald grew up so convinced that a long nose was the most beautiful of facial characteristics that he would not on any account consider having his own nose an inch shorter than it was.

And so the years passed until the boy became a man of twenty summers, and his mother decided that he should have a girlfriend. Times had changed and with them had come a more relaxed attitude to courting, but Archibald's mother was determined to continue protecting her long-nosed child. She secretly advertised for a lady companion for her son, using the services of a very discreet dating agency so that she could vet each young lady for her character, for her status and for her facial features. Once she had assembled a list of potentially suitable fillies for her darling boy, she made a gift of their photographs to him and asked him to select those young ladies who might be of interest. Unfortunately, Archibald's mother did not check the photographs properly and stuck to the bottom of the pile was a picture of a most unsuitably button nosed young woman.

Archibald was completely bowled over by this femme fatale's saucy little nose. He refused to look at any of the other pictures, despite his mother's protests, and was absolutely adamant that this was the girl for him. The young lady in question was the only daughter of an oil magnate and would one day inherit a vast fortune and huge estates in several countries around the world, but Archibald couldn't care less about her wealth or her position in the social pecking order. He fell in love in an instant, which caused much consternation in the family home. Some of his mother's friends and some of his tutors had become so accustomed to laughing at small noses that they just couldn't stop themselves criticising Archibald's new found love. Two of the tutors and a family friend of some twenty years standing were dismissed immediately and told never to darken the doorstep again.

The remainder of the staff, family and friends took the hint and learned how to deal with the situation, always thinking twice before

making any further comments to the young man about the way people looked. One particularly clever acquaintance even had the foresight to tell Archibald that, although a long nose was only to be expected in any man of worth, a woman's beauty was quite another thing.

"In fact", he said to the young man, "I know a learned professor who understands Greek and Su Doku and stuff, and he said that he read this old manuscript once and even the beautiful Queen Cleopatra had a button nose".

Archibald was very impressed with this advice and he sent a message to the young lady asking her if she wanted to meet for a drink one evening. The young lady, being a dutiful daughter, asked her father if it was permitted for her to meet this young man. When her father heard that he was the son of a famous actor, he too was impressed. He felt it would be most appropriate to marry new money to such an established and well-known scion of the arts, and so he willingly gave his consent to the meeting.

Archibald was so excited at the prospect of meeting this darling young lady that he couldn't stand waiting for her to call at the house, where his family would doubtless get in the way and be embarrassing. On the day that they were due to see each other for the first time, he called her and arranged to meet her in private at a little bar that he sometimes visited. He drove himself all the way there, never once noticing that a dilapidated and rusty old saloon car was following him at a discreet distance.

When Archibald met his paramour in the bar's secluded car park he was instantly smitten by her simple and well-proportioned beauty. He knelt down on one knee so that he could kiss her hand, just like a fairy tale prince, but as she approached him the battered old car that had been following him swept in between them. To his horror one of the rear doors swung open violently and the young lady was pulled into the car, which then roared away in a shower of stone chippings and thick black smoke from the exhaust.

The next thing that the terrified and bewildered young man heard was the ringing of the public telephone on the corner of the street. Without quite understanding why he did so, Archibald went over to the phone and lifted the receiver from its cradle.

“Listen carefully, Big Nose”, said a thin, rasping voice. “You’ll never see her again. She’s mine now! It’s payback time for your bitch mother’s treachery all those years ago. And if you don’t believe me ask her about her first marriage”.

The line went dead and so did Archibald’s heart. He was quite inconsolable and wandered London’s mean streets for hours trying to work out what he could do to win his darling beloved’s freedom from this evil interloper. He had no idea where he was when he finally came out of his sad reverie. All that he knew was that there was a lot of garbage in the streets, that there were steam rising from broken pipes in the alleyways and that mean looking men kept pushing past him on their way to dark deals in dimly lit bars. This was as far from home as Archibald had ever been in his life and he was very scared. He also realised that he was extremely hungry and very cold, all of which contributed to make him feel wretched and desperately alone in this harsh and threatening world.

All of a sudden a high-pitched voice broke through the black night air and made him stop dead in his tracks. “Archie? Is that you Archie? Coo-eee...over here... in the shop doorway”.

Archibald looked across the street and directly into the heavy mascara eyes of a very down at heel looking lady, who was dressed in clothes that would have embarrassed a sixteen year old. Her skirt was too short and it had a slit in the side that revealed rather more cellulite than thigh. Her boots had long since lost their patent shine and her crop top revealed far too much of her very large breasts to be at all decent. Her exposed midriff appeared to be melting like an ice-cream cone on a sizzling summer afternoon at the seaside.

Shuddering internally, Archibald crossed the road and came face to face with the oldest working girl this side of the Black Death, who put on a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles so that she could see him better. The young man steeled himself and asked the old girl for help.

“Madam, I need some help finding my true love and you look like someone who knows a thing or two about the world. Can you help me?”

“Probably”, the old tart replied, “But first you need some grub and a good stiff drink. You look famished and with such a silly big nose you’ll appreciate a quiet spot out of eyeshot. I recognised you

from the magazines and stuff, darling. Always remember big ones, me, and I certainly remember your father. Oh, yes, he had a very handsome nose, if you know what I mean.”

“And what exactly is lacking in my nose”, replied Archibald with just a hint of a serrated edge to his voice.

"Oh, nothing's lacking", replied the senior citizen of the night. "On the contrary, in fact. There's so much of it, but never mind, deary, you can be a worthy man whatever size your nose is. Anyway, I was telling you about your father and what good friends we was. He often used to come and see me in the olden days. Course, I was a lot younger and prettier then; least he always used to tell me so over a woodbine and a nice cup of tea afterwards. We used to have such lovely chats in them days. The last time I saw him he told me all about..."

"Indeed", said Archibald, cutting across her reminiscences about his late father. "I'm really very hungry. Could we continue the conversation somewhere a little more salubrious than this doorway?"

"Posh..." said the tart. "Why don't we go over to Rick's bar? You can buy me a brandy-shandy and a bun".

She set off at a brisk pace towards a brightly lit bar at the end of the street. Archibald watched her as she walked. He could imagine that her wiggle had once been very seductive, but he couldn't quite overcome the sense of revulsion rising from the pit of his stomach as he realised he was being given the come on by someone's aged grandmother. Things just didn't seem to be sitting in the right places anymore. He followed her down the street, taking care to remain at least two steps behind her, partly out of a vague sense of social decorum and partly because of a growing and morbid fascination with the simple harmonic motion of her buttocks.

"Come in, then, deary", she said, holding the door open for him and they went and sat in a quiet booth at the back of the bar. When the waitress came over the old tart ordered two large brandy-shandies and a plate full of iced buns. A popular beat hit thumped out of the juke box speakers, repeating again and again because the bar owner only had the one unscratched record left following a minor altercation the previous week between two groups of caffeine-crazed Mods and Rockers.

"Tuck in, love, while I tell all about your dad. I'll keep it short, mind, 'cos time's money in my game and, anyway, I hate long-winded stories that go on and on forever. I mean, who needs a life story? People with long tongues is worse than people with long noses, and when I was young I never got paid for chattering with the customers. I was well known for me brevity in the gob department, I was. When I was little they used to say to me mum I weren't much of a talker. My dad..."

"Your father, I dare say, got the chance to eat when he was hungry", Archibald interrupted, somewhat rudely.

"What, oh yes, love, do tuck in, didn't I say so", said the old tart holding out the plate of iced buns towards him. Archibald was just about to take a large bite out of his bun when she put her hand on top of his and said, "I was only gonna say..."

"Look, I can't listen to anything else until I've had something to eat", cried the young man, getting quite angry now. He paused and counted to ten, remembering that he needed the old girl's help to find his beloved. "I'm sorry, do go on, while I eat. I'm ravenous to hear your story".

The old tart was very flattered by his kind words, completely missing the sarcasm that Archibald had tried to inject into that last phrase. She smiled a gap toothed smile at him as she lit an unfiltered cigarette and blew smoke all over his iced bun.

"You're very nice for a big nose, you are".

Poxy bloody woman, why does she keep going on about my nose? thought Archibald. If it weren't for the smoked buns I'd tell the old biddy to bugger off. Why can't people recognise their shortcomings? I bet she really thinks she doesn't prattle on at all. I blame all those people who told her mother she was quiet. She really believes all that flattery and flummery. Just goes to show how sensible my mother was. She never let me be flattered or be over protected. People like that tell us what they think we want to hear and they hide our faults away. I'll never let it happen to me. I'll always pay particular attention to my faults and do something about them.

The poor boy really did believe that all of his mother's friends and servants had praised his nose because they really meant it. He had no idea that they laughed at him behind his back.

"Look, 'mmm sorry", he said distractedly with his mouth full of slightly stale bun. He swallowed. "I'm looking for a young lady who was kidnapped this afternoon by an evil looking old man in a tatty brown car. I wondered whether you might know anything given your experience on the streets?"

"Yeah, whatever", the old tart replied. "Would you mind moving that way a little, 'cos your nose is casting such a big shadow on the table I can't see the buns..."

Archibald turned to offer her his profile while she fingered the buns to find the one with the thickest icing.

"Thanks. So, a brown car, you say. Did you get chance to speak to the old git, only if you did it might be a help, 'cos there's quite a few brown cars in London".

Archibald was about to tell the old girl about the telephone call when she interrupted, winking at him as she said, "You know, you really have got the biggest nose I've ever seen. Is everything else in proportion?"

"Really!" cried Archibald. "I wish you'd stop going on about my bloody nose. As far as I'm concerned it seems perfectly normal and I'm very happy with it. In fact, I love it just the way it is and don't want it be any shorter, longer or fatter. It's perfect".

The old girl sat back in her seat, looking quite astonished.

"I'm sorry, Archie", she said quietly. "I really didn't mean to upset you. I want to help you find out where your little girl is. It's just that your nose is shockingly large. I'll try not to mention it again. I'll definitely try not to think about it at all, although, in truth, you could probably poke a very large rhinoceros with it".

That was the straw that broke poor Archibald's back. He was now so angry with the old woman because of her continual sniping about his nose that he stormed out of the bar and strode through the city streets in a foul temper for the rest of the night, but no matter how hard he looked or how many people he questioned, no one seemed to know anything about his stolen lover or about the evil kidnapper and his clapped out motor. For the most part Archibald couldn't even get straight answers from the people that he stopped and questioned. All anyone in the city seemed able to do was to mock his nose and call him rude names. He thought that everyone must be quite mad and he was in no mood to admit to himself that

he was in possession of an oversized hooter. The years of conditioning and polite remarks made to him by family friends and retainers were so ingrained that he was convinced that he was the only sane person walking the city streets that night.

Meanwhile, back in Rick's bar the old tart with a heart was making a few telephone calls. The truth was that she was more than just an old professional; she was, in the vaguest sense, Archibald's Fairy Godmother, having promised his father that she would look after the boy when he most needed it. She was convinced that time had now come.

With the last call made, the old girl now knew exactly who had taken Archibald's true love and she knew where he was keeping her. She also knew that Archie would eventually end up back at the coffee bar. It was an unwritten law of street life that condemned the miserable to wander aimlessly around Soho's darker haunts for hours before inevitably ending up back where they had started out from. The old girl ordered another brandy-shandy and waited. Trade hadn't been up to much lately and she was skint, so there was no point in trying to leave until the boy returned and paid the bill.

Sure enough, at about four in the morning a weary young man stumbled back into the bar. He collapsed into the booth, ordered a double strength Americano, put his head in his hands and wept like a baby. The old girl put a comforting hand on his shoulder, slipped a grubby piece of paper under his nose and quietly made her way back out into the insomniac streets of the city.

Eventually Archibald managed to summon up the strength to drink his coffee. He looked at the piece of paper that the old lady had passed to him and saw a bill for eleven large brandy cocktails, fourteen buns and a Viennese Whirl. He was about to crumple the bill up and throw it at the waitress when he noticed that there was some writing on the other side. He turned the piece of paper over and there he saw an address and a name. He had no idea who the person named might be but the address was that of an old and disused theatre a couple of streets away. He threw some notes and some coins onto the table and ran all the way to the theatre, convinced that he would at last find a clue to the whereabouts of his one true love amongst the rotting stalls.

Breaking and entering was not something that Archibald had studied with his tutors, and so it was with some difficulty and quite a lot of noise that he eventually managed to force a window at the back of the ramshackle and degenerate building. As he made his way through the darkness he kicked various buckets, pots and pans that had been left strategically placed to deal with the many leaks that the roof had sprung during so many years of neglect. With every screech of metal on the wooden floor and with every yelp that came out of his mouth as he smashed his shins into rotting theatre seats, Archibald expected to be attacked by the hounds of hell, but nothing stirred within.

Once in the main auditorium, he saw that there was a cage on the stage lit by a single spotlight and in the cage he saw the crumpled form of a young woman, who was, he was sure, wearing the very same dress that his beloved had been wearing when she was so cruelly snatched away from him the previous evening. He ran down the aisles and up on to the stage where he tried with all of his might to break open the cage door.

Archibald's joy at finding his darling was quickly tempered by his frustration at not being able break her out of her prison. She cried and wept and begged him to set her free, but in spite of all his efforts he failed utterly. In despair Archibald thought that at least he might be able to comfort her with a kiss. She understood immediately and came towards the bars with her lips puckered. Archibald twisted and turned every which way he could, but he found it impossible to position his own lips close enough to those of his darling girl because his nose always got in the way. After twenty minutes of sheer and utter frustration, and with a nose that was black and blue from battering the cage bars, he finally sat back on the floor and, for the first time in his life, admitted to himself just how long his nose really was.

Behind the desperate couple, the house lights went up, but they were so engrossed in their respective miseries that neither of them noticed a shabby little old man shuffling down one of the aisles and taking a front row seat. Had they looked over their shoulders they would have seen a mad gleam in his eye and a bucket of popcorn on his lap, and Archibald would have heard him chuckling quietly

to himself as he came face to face with the results of his curse from all those years ago.

The desperate young couple slowly became aware that they had an audience. The air around them thickened as the old man in the stalls uncoiled himself and started to slither down the aisle towards the foot of the stage. As they both turned to look at the man he doffed his shabby top hat and grinned a toothless grin.

“Got you,” he snarled as his head bobbed up and down just beyond the footlights. “Been a long time in the waiting, and the curses turn you bitter inside, but it’s worth it, boy, to see you here like this. Blame your bastard father.”

Archibald edged closer to the cage bars, shrinking back from the papery skin and pallid, baleful glare. “What... what is this? What do you want with me... with us?” he asked timidly.

The old man chuckled. “Your mother never told you about me, did she? No, don’t suppose she did. I’m the cuckold. I’m the wronged party. I’m the man with revenge in his soul.”

He raised his crooked arms out wide to encompass the world. “This is it. This is my world. And you, you snivelling little shit, you are my prize. Break in you did, but you’ll never break out. You’re going to spend eternity here trying to kiss your little vixen, and I’m going to watch you every afternoon, watch you scab and scrape and graze that monstrous nose of yours against those bars. It’s a comedy of sorts. My comedy, my last, my best, my eternal showtime.”

He cackled out loud, and waving them away he turned to resume his seat in the stalls. “Carry on, carry on”, he said with another low chuckle. “Do your worst...”

Archibald turned to his would-be lover in the cage and taking her hand in his own he sighed. "I can't believe it", he said to the girl. "After all these years and all those lies. I really have got the biggest, stupidest nose in the whole wide world!"

As soon as he said this there was a sound like thunder at the back of the stage, followed immediately by the appearance of a towering wall of smoke and dry ice. Gliding through the mist there came the figure of a tall, slinky blonde, who wiggled outrageously as she walked on air. Archibald was sure that he recognised the wiggle, but he couldn't quite put his finger on where he'd seen it

before. When she reached the front of the stage the gorgeous blonde phantom took a long bow.

There was a ghostly drum roll playing from the back of the auditorium as she raised her hand and pointed it at the wretched old man, who was, by now, trying make for one of the exits. The mad gleam in his eye turned to one of sheer, utter panic, but no matter how fast he shuffled forward, the exit sign seemed to recede into the distance twice as quickly. Although he looked as if he was running forwards, in reality he was being dragged back towards the stage by an invisible will.

Archibald and his true love held hands tightly as they watched the little old man rise up into the air and pass by the cage. Underneath him a trap door opened and he started to scream. "No, not now, you old hag, not now, damn you. Why me, why does this always happen to me? I'll get you back, you old witch. I'll get..."

The platinum blonde at centre stage winked at them both and snapped her fingers. The old man disappeared into the hole in the stage amid a shower of sparks and curses. The blonde snapped her fingers again and the cage disappeared in a puff of magician's smoke, allowing the two lovers to embrace for the very first time.

The lights snapped off and there was another crack of thunder. As the lights came up again slowly, the tart with a heart was standing where the blonde spirit had appeared, and she was smiling her soft and gentle, gap toothed smile once again.

"So, deary, won't you admit you owe me one, as it were. Not only have I saved you and your lovely little miss from that old bastard's schemes and plots, but I've also taught you a lesson. You'd never have found out how extraordinary your nose was if it hadn't stopped you doing what you most wanted to. You see, self-love is ever so destructive. It stops you dealing with your faults. No matter how hard your reason tries to tell you something's wrong, it only ever really sinks in when the problem gets in the way of something important".

The two lovers looked at her in dumbfounded amazement as she snapped her fingers one final time and made herself disappear without a trace. To Archibald's eternal gratitude the old lady's last act of kindness also reduced his nose to a more normal size, and he

was finally able to kiss his darling fiancé fully on the lips to an accompanying fade out of delighted, girlish laughter.

And, of course, he learned by his past mistakes and profited greatly from his now well-proportioned good looks. With his lantern jaw, with his sparkling blue eyes and with his perfectly aquiline nose, Archibald followed in his father's footsteps and became a matinee idol on the silver screen, fulfilling his long but dearly departed father's final wish. All that remains of this story is to say that both Archibald and his darling young lady were married, that they inherited her father's vast fortune, and that, in between location shoots, premieres and promotional tours, they lived happily ever after with an enormous brood of normally featured offspring.

As for the kidnapper, that devious impresario, it is said that he appears briefly in cameo in every one of Archibald's films, his pale head floating like a spectral balloon across a corner of some vast landscape, sneering and leering and mouthing the words, "I'll get you back for this you old witch...I'll be back..."

Happy Families

(Loosely based on Andersen's Hansel & Grettel)

Once upon a fairly recent time there dwelt in one of the gloomier districts of Leeds a family of four who knew little of the finer things in life. Their lives consisted of a daily battle with the twin demons; struggle and want. The husband and wife tried to work, but with the arrival of a son and then a daughter, they gave up what they felt to be an unequal fight. No one knew whether their situation was one that betrayed a lack of application or a dearth of opportunity. Few, it would seem, cared. The boy was called Kirk and the girl was called Ruby.

By trade the father was a labourer, although through a combination of ill luck and regular run ins with the genie of the bottle, he rarely engaged in his professional calling. His wife took her wedding vows seriously and shared the trials of their marital bed, often lying with him long after the children should have gone

to school. In times of plenty the cupboard was rarely full and in times of hardship the children barely had a crust to share between them.

One night, as the husband tossed and turned in his bed with that needful worry that flows from a full stomach and fire in the veins, he turned to his wife and prodded her until she awoke. The man sighed and said to his wife, "What the bloody hell are we going to do? There's never any money left since we had those two brats. I thought we'd do well on benefits, but it barely does more than pay for you and me. With the price of fags and all, there's never enough to buy a round."

As his wife surfaced from beneath the rolling waves of slumber she groaned and mumbled, feeling for a tumbler full of bathroom tap water that should have been on her bedside table. She cursed when she remembered that she had smashed the glass earlier that night when she and her husband romped home from the pub.

"I'll tell you what we'll do", she said irritably. "We'll take them both down to the city centre tomorrow when we go to collect the unemployment. We'll park them on one of the train station benches with a bottle of fizz and then we'll tell the little monsters we'll be back later to collect them. The cops will pick them up, unless one of those perverts gets to them first. They haven't got a clue where we live, so that'll be that".

The husband looked at his wife in astonishment. He was shocked by the grim and determined tone of her voice. He considered the situation for a moment or two and shrugged his shoulders.

"Darling...I like it. Only we'd best make sure there's nothing about them that'll lead the fuzz or the social back here. And we ought to warn them about strangers".

"What?" she asked incredulously.

"Well, I don't want little Ruby being ripped apart by any of those back street beasts".

"Sod you." said his wife. "It's that or thieving again and my money's on leaving them. I can't be doing with the hassle. It's simple. We can't afford bloody kids and it's not as though we get anything back for all our hard work. No, we'll leave them".

The argument didn't last long. The husband's heart wasn't really in it and he knew he would get no peace if he kept up his pretence of worry for the little girl's soul. They rolled over, lay their heads on their pillows and both were snoring loudly within a minute.

The sound of their parents stirring woke the two children. They had learned through hard experience to sleep lightly, for they never knew when a harsh word or the back of a hand might come their way. As quietly as mice, they sat up in their beds and listened to every word their mother and father exchanged. Ruby was dreadfully upset by the despicable fate her mother had chosen for her and she sobbed quietly into her bedclothes.

"Oh, Kirk, what are we going to do?" she whispered underneath the low rumble of nasal thunder that was brewing in the next room.

"Don't worry", said Kirk, putting a reassuring hand on hers. "I'll work something out. You're my little sister and I won't let anything happen to you, I promise".

Once the pattern of snoring and grinding teeth settled down in the next room, Kirk slipped out of the bed he shared with his little sister, pulled on a threadbare dressing gown two sizes too small for his arms, and crept downstairs. He sneaked into the living room, which was lit by brilliant white moonlight streaming in from a night bright sky through windows that had never seen any curtains. Then he went fishing through the liberally disheveled contents of his parents' lives, contents that lived in disarray on a low coffee table propped up by three wooden legs and some house bricks. He carefully avoided the half finished cartons of Chow Mein. He took extra care whenever his small hands brushed one of the empty cans of strong lager that his mother drank in the afternoons before going down the pub. And there, sitting under a spilled dollop of chicken jalfreezi was the object he was looking for, his parent's council rent book. He slipped it underneath his pyjama jacket and crept back up to bed.

Ruby was waiting for him when he got back upstairs and she gave him a huge hug when he said to her, "Don't worry, sis, it's all taken care of".

Ruby really wasn't sure how he knew that everything would be all right. She thought about the two of them, small, alone and lost in the big city amongst all of those huge, hurrying adults and she

felt terribly afraid. Somehow, though, Kirk's tone of voice reassured her that they would get through it all and she fell asleep in his arms with just the faintest trace of a smile on her lips.

The children's mother woke them shortly after nine the next morning, which was a surprisingly early hour for any of them to stir on a school day.

"Come on you lazy buggers", she yelled, "It's money day down at the social, so get yourselves moving. You're coming with us today".

The family made its usual peremptory visit to the world of personal hygiene, got dressed in whatever reasonably clean clothes came to hand and set out on the number seventy-eight bus that would, with a couple of changes, take them to the black heart of the city. There was little or no conversation on the bus. The two children sat remarkably quietly on the bench seat in front of their parents, holding hands as they watched the wet and glistening streets drift by outside their window. Their mother and father were equally quiet. They were suffering from the combined effects of thumping heads, dehydration and the bile churning nerves that accompany deeds such as the one they proposed to execute that morning.

On the final leg of their bus journey, the husband turned to his wife and whispered conspiratorially, "It's not natural. They're never this well behaved. It's like they know something".

"Don't be bloody pathetic", replied his sour faced wife, as she absentmindedly picked at her fingernails with a broken match head.

She hated public transport now that the buggers in the government, lead by that cigar chomping public school twat, had introduced all these smoking bans. It was at least forty minutes since her last fag and she was starting to get really scratchy.

"It's a bloody good job they're behaving themselves. I'm not in the mood for any shit this morning and they'll get it if they play up. Anyway, what does it matter? It'll all be over soon enough and we'll be off, free and easy, like magpies".

All the way to the great vaulted station that stood at the heart of the city like a huge steel-roofed cathedral, Kirk kept one hand tightly closed around little Ruby's cold and trembling fingers, while with the other hand in his coat pocket he kept a tight grip on

his parent's rent book. If his parents had bothered to look into his small and grimy face they would have been chilled to the bone to see the cold and steely determination burning behind his bright blue eyes.

When they arrived at the station the family went straight through to the main concourse and found a vacant wooden bench that wasn't covered in too many pigeon droppings. The children were made to sit at one end of the bench with their father while the mother went off to buy a couple of bottles of fizzy pop and a packet of jammy biscuits.

Once she had unscrewed Ruby's bottle top and given the biscuits to Kirk, she turned to the father and said, "Okay, time to go and sign on". Then she spoke to her children in what she hoped was a reassuring and loving voice. "Oi, Kirk, look after your sister. We'll be gone for an hour, at least, so don't move off this bench. Remember, if the boys in blue start asking questions, your mum's just nipped off to the loo. I don't want no trouble, so keep yourselves to yourselves 'til we get back".

With that both she and her husband hurried out of the station and headed towards the bus stop. Once they thought they were safely out of their children's line of sight, they lit much-needed cigarettes, took the smoke down into their lungs in huge gulps and started to laugh and cough all at the same time. In the station, under a huge steel sky, the two children sat quietly amid the hustle and bustle of bags and feet that rumbled by oblivious to their plight.

Kirk and Ruby remained sitting quietly on the bench for an hour. No one pestered them or asked them if they were alright. At precisely one minute past the hour, when he was sure the coast was clear, an older gentleman in a well-cut suit came and sat on the bench. He asked them if they were waiting for someone, but both of the children stuck fast to their promise not to talk to strangers. The older man asked them if they wanted something to eat and even suggested to them that he might take them to a nice little cafe just around the corner, but still they sat in mute silence. This relatively civilized introduction to importuning went on for a few minutes more until interrupted by the approach of two railway policemen. The older gent's self preservation skills flickered into life as soon as he saw the approaching policemen, and by the time

the boys in blue reached the two abandoned children the older gentleman was nowhere to be seen.

"What have we got here, then", said one of the policemen as his colleague made enquiries over his two-way radio. "Two little runaways, or are we just out for day's sightseeing?"

He tried to sound as light and as jovial as he could but his eyes spoke a different language, revealing a mix of concern and tiredness in the face of so many disappointments. The children were taken away and given a hot drink in the office at the back of the station. There followed a succession of visitors, all of whom took the utmost trouble to check on the children's health and on their background. Kirk and Ruby refused to tell anyone anything other than that they were lost. Eventually, armed with the address printed in the rent book, the police handed the kids over to a lady from social services and filed their report, a copy of which was sent to the local police station where Kirk and Ruby lived.

There was an awful scene back at the family home when Kirk and Ruby arrived in the back of a police car. Their mother, who hadn't yet hit the cans, made a real fuss of them and told the assembled figures of authority that they were always running away and she was so relieved they had been found. She explained that her children had left for school as normal that morning and she had no idea they were playing truant in the big city.

"I mean, its fucking unbelievable, isn't it?" she said, making cow eyes at one of the police constables. "Anyway, thanks for bringing them back. I'll make sure my husband gives the two of them a right bloody bollocking when he gets back from work!"

"Back from the pub, you mean", muttered Kirk.

The lady from social services made a note to put the children on her 'At Risk' register and arranged with the mother to call back in a few days to make sure everything was alright. The policeman and policewoman who had driven the children home made a note to mark the house down as a potential source of trouble.

That evening, with a four pack empty on the already crowded coffee table, their mother subjected both of the children to another verbal assault while their father sat slumped in an alcoholic stupor in front of the television.

"You see what you do to us, do you? Do you? Your father was so sick with worry he's gone and made himself ill. After all we've done for you. After all the love we give you is this all we're ever going to get back? We'd all be better off if they'd taken you to a home. Now, you can piss off upstairs and go to bed without any tea."

For about a week things returned to a state resembling normality. The children's parents rose late into the morning, unless it was benefits day, and hit the pubs at lunchtime. They sat watching mindless garbage on the television late into the night while they consumed more alcohol and smoked so many cigarettes that they regularly exploded in apoplectic fits of coughing. The kids did the best they could to keep themselves to themselves and to fill their half starved bellies with scraps and leftovers from take aways and half finished fry-ups.

Then late into the small hours of another disturbed night Kirk woke Ruby up and told her to be very quiet. Their parents were talking about them again in the next room. The children heard their mother speaking first.

"It's all shit again. There's no money until next Wednesday unless you get off your fat arse and do some robbing or begging or something. I've got half a loaf downstairs and two fags left. We've got to get rid of those bloody millstones. You listening?"

"Yeah, yeah, listening", mumbled her husband as the wardrobe swayed gently in and out of focus.

"I read in the papers about these adoption agencies. All legal, well almost. They pay you for your kids then spirit them away to some poor sod that's got more money than sense. Two grand, it said".

"How much?" slurred her husband.

"Two bloody grand. You know a few people, you know, the ones who buy car stereos off you and that. They must be able to point you in someone's direction."

The husband felt something stir inside him, something that told him this was wrong, but he buried it again quickly. He was already complicit in the conspiracy and once committed he knew there

would be no turning his wife from her course. And there was the matter of two grand to consider.

Kirk and Ruby listened in horror as they heard the conversation continue in the next room. Their father was going to start making discreet enquiries the very next day, while their mother was going to invest some of her meagre weekly allowance from the government in new secondhand clothes to make sure the kids were presentable.

"But I don't want to go and live anywhere else", whimpered Ruby. "This is our home".

"Shhh, don't cry, Ruby, don't cry. We're not leaving here. I'm going to think up a plan. Shhh, don't worry, I won't ever leave you alone". Kirk cuddled his little sister in his arms once again and rocked her gently until she drifted off into the troubled land of her dreams.

Over the next few days the children lived in a world of hushed whispers and furtive glances. While their parents made their plans for an unencumbered future and discussed the possibilities that a large amount of ready cash might bring, Kirk and Ruby spent their time in their bedroom playing with Ruby's toy kitchen set.

Their mother, having bought them some nearly new trainers and a couple of faded tee shirts each, spent the rest of her money on fags and booze. It being cold and grey outside, there was little incentive for their father to go out and find work or to relieve unsuspecting motorists of their mobile entertainment systems, and there was little food in the house and certainly no warmth. It was no surprise when the day came for the visit of the social worker that the children were left alone in the house to greet her.

When the doorbell rang Kirk answered the door and asked the lady to come in. He told the lady that his mother had just popped next door to borrow some sugar so that she could make a cup of tea and she wouldn't be long.

"So, how are you both?" asked the social worker. "No more little trips out and about, I trust".

"No, miss, we've been very good all week", Ruby called out from the kitchen.

Kirk tried to show the lady into the living room, but she said she preferred to do these things in the kitchen.

"It's usually makes people feel more relaxed if we sit around the kitchen table", she said.

Kirk followed her into the kitchen, smiling at Ruby from behind the lady's back.

The lady from social services let out a small shriek as she entered the kitchen. There, in broad daylight, Ruby was trying to light a really old and very large gas oven with a lighter so that she could boil the kettle. The lady rushed over and snatched the lighter out of Ruby's hand and turned off the gas. Then she opened the kitchen window and started to wave a dish cloth in the air saying, "Goodness me, what a terrible pong. Now, little one, you can't boil a kettle in the oven, can you".

"But I can't reach the cooker bit", said Ruby, "I'm only small".

"Here, let me", said the lady and she filled the kettle full of water, set it down on the hob and lit the burner.

"Anyway, the oven won't work. That's why it smells of gas", said Kirk.

"Really", said the lady, "let me have a look"

She opened the oven door and bent down so that she could poke her head inside. As she squatted down awkwardly with her head in the oven, Kirk and Ruby moved silently around behind her. They picked up the kitchen broom and without saying a word they hit the lady really hard on the bottom so that she rolled headfirst right into the oven. Kirk slammed the door shut, turned the gas up full and hit the button that fired up the automatic pilot light.

Having raided the lady's purse to get enough money to buy the necessary ingredients, the children spent the rest of the afternoon working out how to make pastry by reading their mother's solitary and previously pristine cookbook. By tea time every work surface, every utensil, the floor and every appliance was covered in blobs of congealed dough and snowstorms of spilled flour. The children resembled pygmy zombies from a second rate horror flick, but there in the middle of the kitchen table was a beautiful meat pie steaming away in readiness for the return of their inebriated parents.

Some time later mother and father rolled through the door in the middle of a heated argument about the pros and cons of holidays in the sun and gambling trips to Las Vegas. It appeared that mother

was winning and the bright lights of the Nevada desert would soon be graced by two new high rollers with money to burn. The argument ceased abruptly when the adults saw the mess covering every inch of the kitchen and every last hair on their children's heads.

"What the bloody..." stuttered father.

"What the hell have you done now?" screamed mother.

She exploded into the kitchen in a blind rage and laid about her with extreme prejudice. Cups and plates went spinning through the air to smash on the floor and against the walls. The huge pie dish slid all the way down the table and spilled its contents all over poor little Ruby, who wailed and screeched and sobbed. Father stood in the hallway open mouthed as his wife raved and ranted at the kids and chased them up and down the stairs until she came to a sudden, spluttering, coughing halt.

While Kirk wiped the pie juices off Ruby's clothes with the bedspread, the frightened little girl called out to her mother from behind the bedroom door.

"Mummy...mummy...we only...mummy, we got some food and we wanted to make you and daddy a lovely pie for your tea. We thought..."

"You thought what exactly?" screamed their mother from the living room. "You thought you'd make my life hell is what you thought. What the blazes will the social lady think tomorrow when she comes back and finds the place looking like a bomb's hit it."

The children barricaded themselves in their bedroom, but their parents made no attempts to break in. Instead they went back to the pub, via a local car park, and didn't come home until the wee small hours.

Kirk and Ruby didn't sleep a wink that night. Instead, they talked and they talked until they made sense of the world. They carefully hid the social lady's handbag in their wardrobe, safe in the knowledge that their mother would never find it in there. It took three attempts to get the counting right, but they were now the proud owners of two credit cards, a cheque book and quite a lot of ready cash.

While their parents slept on peacefully, the children crept downstairs and as the dawn sky uncurled from its slumbers they

cleaned every last inch of the kitchen. Kirk wrapped a cloth around the broom and scrubbed the floors and the walls, while little Ruby stood on a kitchen chair and washed all of the pots. Together they scoured the cooker and when it was all done Kirk ran down to the corner shop with some of their money to buy some more ingredients and a fresh packet of cigarettes for their mother.

Towards lunchtime father emerged from his pit and stumbled down to the kitchen. He had the worst hangover in the whole wide world and he felt physically sick as he remembered the state of chaos that he and his wife had left behind them the previous evening, but when he opened the kitchen door he was blinded by the dazzle from the work tops and the gleaming surfaces of the kitchen appliances. Kirk seized the moment and gave him a nudge in the back. In his confused state the man lurched forward in surprise, still dazzled by the glittering kitchen, and tripped over the open oven door. His upper body and head fell across the hob, where Ruby was waiting with the frying pan. The rest was simple, if hard, work.

By the time that their mother surfaced to greet the day, there was a nice stew bubbling away on a slow heat in the kitchen. She couldn't remember a thing about the end of the evening and assumed that her bloke had buggered off somewhere. The kids said they had already eaten but there was plenty left if she wanted some proper food for a change. Their mother looked at them. She had no idea why they were suddenly starting to be useful, but with a fresh packet of fags laying open on the kitchen table, with the kitchen cleaned, with something smelling lovely bubbling away on the cooker and with a head that was hosting a motorway maintenance crew, she didn't feel inclined to argue. Kirk laid the table and Ruby dished up a huge plate of fresh, fatty stew. Their mother sat at the kitchen table and accepted with a shrug the food that was being served to her by her smiling offspring.

"He'll be back", she said to herself as she tucked into the first plate of proper home cooked food she'd had in a long, long while.

And for all that anyone knows this happy family still lives in one of the gloomier districts of Leeds. Social services raised the alarm when one of their staff went missing, but no one considered it possible that two small children might have something to say on

the matter. With father gone, Kirk and Ruby grew up to be fit and healthy young people, living in the company of a number of long-lost uncles who visited the family home all too briefly, and never, ever seemed to be around on the day that Kirk and Ruby made stew for their mother.

Heirs and Graces

(Loosely based on Grimm's King Grisly Beard)

The world seems to grow ever smaller, with the grandeur of sheer distance made into a commonplace game of skipping by the advent of more efficient means of travel and the communications revolution that has blossomed in the bright sunshine of this digital spring. England's green and pleasant land is no exception, with every home an entertainment gin palace, where businesses thrive and prosper in the information age, and where the electronically dispossessed watch the valves and fuses of their analogue existence slowly burn down towards a state of mass extinction. London boasts at least seven Interweb billionaires amongst its fabled glitterati, but not one of them can begin to measure their fortune or their white-hot technological status against that of old Jimmy Cameron, the founder, chief executive and principle shareholder of NanoGoo International. Mister Cameron is blessed with the sort of fortune that, in fables and fairy stories at least, has only ever been granted to mere mortals in return for a lien on their soul. Jimmy, of course, puts it all down to a combination of hard work and inspiration.

Before his recent retirement James Cameron's octopine good fortune reached its happy tentacles out to touch every aspect of his life, not the least part of which was his stunningly beautiful eldest daughter, the delightfully named Cyberia. In every facet and viewed from every aspect old Jimmy's business life, his family life and his charitable works, underpinned as they were by an income that was the envy of many developing nations, were beyond reproach. Jimmy Cameron's world was a veritable treasure trove of goodness and sparkling happiness, except for one thing. Cyberia

was quite possibly the most haughty, proud and conceited young lady to have ever shopped and lunched in the fabulously gold plated arcades and streets of London Town.

In spite of every advantage in life, including a fabulous education and a family ethos of good works and humble gratitude for the largesse granted by fate, this young lady rarely had a good word to say for anyone. Her sole purpose in life seemed to be dedicated to looking down her nose at people, and nowhere was this alarming personality trait more obviously demonstrated than in her reaction to possible suitors. She was famed throughout the elite echelons of London's highest society for humping and dumping the most eligible young men, and all of it was done in the blaze of paparazzi flashbulbs and on the glossy pages of celebrity gossip magazines. Cyberia was an Olympian in making a sport out of rudeness.

The regularly played out scenes of Cyberia's drunken wantonness eventually became too much for old Jimmy to bear and he finally decided to do something about his wayward daughter. Together with his wife he planned a great party, to which he invited the country's great and good, including every single unattached young man who either possessed or was heir to a significant wedge. Come the day of the party, each of these potential suitors was made to sit in a row, ranged according to their social rank and family wealth. Cyberia, under the gentle but determined guidance of her despairing father, was made fully aware of the fact that her allowances, party frocks and charge card accounts would be summarily discontinued if she failed to choose a husband and settle down into a life of domestic contentment and suitably directed good works.

The young lady was somewhat less than impressed by the situation. It was only under the severest of admonishments that she had ceased to throw plates, crystal knickknacks and sundry items of cutlery at her parents. Come the evening of the party, and even with a substantial layer of foundation on her face, the guests could still see red rings under her eyes from all of her screaming, bawling and crying. Needless to say, and despite the threat of imminent penury, she could hardly contain her contempt for the men displayed before

her. As she walked along the line of potential suitors she spat out insults at every one of them.

The first was too fat. “Euk! Mister bloaty or what?” she bellowed.

The next young man was far too tall and lanky. Pinching her nose and turning to the other guests she exclaimed in a nasal tone, “Smells of wee-wee!”

The next young man, while muscular and neither too fat nor too thin, was far too short. Cyberia refrained from speaking to him at all, and simply put her empty glass down on the top of his head.

The fourth young man was too pale and she called him a lungfish, and so it went on. She cracked wicked jokes or made spiteful personal observations at the expense of almost every single one of the young men at the party, until coming face to face with the last of the line she burst out into raucous laughter. It took two security guards to hold her down and a good ten minutes before the sobbing, giggling young woman could regain any semblance of composure.

“Look at him”, she said, choking back tears, “his teeth are all crooked and those glasses, that moustache... what a minger!”

And that is how Captain “Rocky” Flashman-Pebble, a company commander in the Royal Horse Guards and heir to the fourteenth Duke of Stackton, got the new nickname of “Minge-face”.

Old Jimmy Cameron was furious when he witnessed at first hand how his daughter treated his guests and friends. Her behaviour was quite beyond the pale and he took all available legal steps to ensure that every one of her lines of income and credit were suspended with immediate effect. He also made a solemn vow to his wife later that evening that, willing or not, Cyberia would marry the very first man, be he prince or pauper, that pressed the buzzer on the security gates that separated the family mansion from the mean streets that housed the capital’s hoi-polloi.

All was quiet in the Cameron household on the day after the party. A combination of hangovers, of both the alcoholic and emotional varieties, served to keep father and daughter well out of each other’s way. On the second morning after the party, however, there was a loud bleep on the intercom that connected the house with the electronic gates. Jimmy buzzed back and heard a young

man's strangely colloquialised voice ask, "Sorry to bother you, guv, but I'm a bit down on my luck. Tenner for a song?"

The busker was granted admittance to the Cameron estate and proceeded to play a very rough rendition of a then popular chart tune as he stood on the front doorstep. When he finished murdering the melody, the clean shaven young man asked for a few pounds to keep hunger at bay, at which point old Jimmy asked him if he would like to come in for a cup of coffee and a bun. Over a mid-morning snack in the kitchen, with Cyberia watching from a safely curious distance, her father turned to the young vagrant and said, "Tell you what, you've sung so...erm...beautifully for us this morning that I'm going to give you my daughter for a wife!"

Cyberia stood transfixed for a long, fecund moment, quite unable to believe her ears. Her father had often threatened her with punishments when she was naughty, but he had never actually carried them out. She was his little princess, his little starlet, and he simply couldn't mean to go through with his threat from the party. Cyberia looked at her father and saw in his eyes something that she had never seen there before, namely hard, cold, blue steel. The poor little rich girl sank to her knees and begged her father for forgiveness. She promised, swearing blue and blind to every saint and deity that she could think of, that she would be good from now on, but no matter how much she pleaded and cried, her father would not to be moved.

"I swore the other night that I'd be rid of you. I'm going to teach you a lesson, and this fine young man is the first to knock on our door. This time I will keep my word!"

The car was called for and Jimmy Cameron, his wife, his daughter and the young busker were whisked through town to the 'Elvis, "The King", Wedding Chapel', where, by twelve noon, the young man and his reluctant bride were duly wed by a fully shell-suited, coiffured and qualified registrar. Once the ceremony was over, old Jimmy poked his head out of the car window and looked at the newly weds. Cyberia stood dumbly next to her beau.

Jimmy smiled at the happy couple and said, "Well, my girl, you're on your own now. I've stopped your allowances and cards, and given this young man a small bung to see you through for a day or two, but it's up to you now. Don't come back to the house".

With that the black tinted window glided back up and the car purred its silent, luxurious way into the teeming lunch time streets of London's hustling West End.

"Well, doll, time to be on our way", said the young busker and he lead his bride by the hand through the crowded and dusty city streets.

Cyberia, unaccustomed as she was to seeing the metropolis in its daytime apparel, walked open-mouthed past dingy basement flat windows, down long, dark alleyways and visibly felt herself shrink before the impressive, classically styled porticos of ancient institutional temples. Eventually, as she and her new spouse walked down one of the leafier boulevards of the city near the diplomatic quarter, she saw a mansion house of the most ornately carved variety. Stopping and pulling the young man back towards her she asked, "Please wait. Do you know who lives in that marvelous house over there?"

The young man looked at the house that Cyberia was pointing at and replied, "Oh yeah, that's Stackton House, owned by the fourteenth duke. I think his son, Minge-face, lives there at the moment. If you'd behaved properly, all that could've been yours".

Cyberia felt a long, hollow pain swell up in her chest as she gazed on the magnificent residence and sighed, "It's not fair...if only I'd been nicer to Minge-face..."

The unhappy couple continued their foot slogging journey across the Smoke, heading for the river and the poor busker's home territory in one of the poorer southern suburbs. As they crossed the river on one of the city's famous bridges Cyberia caught sight of a huge, enclosed park and wished for all the world that she could sip some cool lemonade and rest her weary legs under the shade of a great oak tree.

She stopped the young man once again and asked, "That park looks lovely in the sunlight. Who owns it?"

The young man shielded his eyes and looked across the diamond-encrusted water. "That place? Lovely isn't it. Belongs to the Duke of Stackton, part of his extensive estate here in the city. You see, if you'd been a good girl you could've enjoyed all your summer afternoons in there."

Once again the shattered young lady felt great pangs of regret well up in her throat. “Shit”, she muttered, “if only I’d listened to the old man”.

Cyberia turned to look once again at London’s more fashionable districts that towered above her on the northern bank of the river Thames. Never again would she see the inside of a five-star restaurant or dance the night away to the latest drum n’ bass beats in the Department of Tunes nightclub. As she gazed on her former life for the last time she found her eyes drawn to the tallest glass tower on the city skyline, on the windows of which the brilliant afternoon sun was conducting a symphony of light.

“Oh”, she sighed, “how beautiful. Who owns that skyscraper?” The young man didn’t bother to turn and look, but continued to drag the reluctant young girl towards his home as he spoke.

“Stackton family”, he said. “Actually, it’s called the Flashman-Pebble Tower and it’s owned by old Minge-Face’s property development company. Part of his long term plans, so they say, for when he leaves the cavalry and becomes a city gent.”

Words could never convey the utter despair and horror that Cyberia felt as the full force and consequence of her past life fluttered down to roost on the parrot cage perch in her brain. As she stumbled blindly after her new husband towards a life of disappointment and endless drudgery, the brightly coloured bird of regret that now inhabited her waking mind squawked repeatedly, “Told you so! Told you so!”

The newly spliced couple tramped onto the dirty soil of the young man’s home manor, and as the young woman became visibly cowed and burdened by her fate, the young busker made one final observation.

“No point crying over spilt milk, love. No point wishing you’d married someone else. We’re done and dusted, all legal, and you’ll find I’m perfectly good enough for you.”

At last they came to a very down at heel street, where most of the back-to-back terraced houses were either boarded up or bare boned skeletons. The man stopped outside the only house in the road with glass in its windows.

“What a dismal place”, said Cyberia. “Who on earth would live in a place...?” She didn’t need to finish the sentence. She knew in

her heart of hearts that this was now her home. The young man opened the front door and ushered her into a world of bachelor squalor, where dust hung in the air permanently because it refused to fall on flat surfaces that had already accumulated too many years worth of grime and flaked skin.

“I don’t suppose we have a cleaner?” asked Cyberia in a flat, monotone voice.

“We do now”, replied her husband. “You’ll find the kitchen down the end of the hall. There’s a mop and a bucket and stuff. There’s also a kettle and a cooker, although that’ll need some elbow grease on it. Be a love and make a cup of tea”.

A cup of tea was one thing, but when it came to domestic chores, cooking and the generality of tasks that comprise sound household management, Cyberia was a complete novice. For two days the blissful romance that should be the ambrosia of all newly weds was forced to give way to lessons in using the Hoover, heating up baked beans and loading the washing machine in such a way that the clothes didn’t all come out shit colour drab.

When the small pile of cash that Jimmy Cameron had given to the young man had been exhausted on take-away curries and some cheap red plonk, the young busker turned to his new wife and said, “Right, time for you to earn your keep. You’re to look after the house and cook meals, and you’ve also got to earn cash. I’ll put an advert in shop windows telling people you take in ironing.

Over the next three or four days a succession of busy city types, who had invested in this run down part of the city in an attempt to make a killing on property prices in a rising market, brought around baskets full of striped shirts, frilly blouses and flimsy briefs to be ironed. During the day the young man went off to commit his musical crimes in shopping malls and bus stations, only to find that he had to hand over most of his meagre gains to blustering brokers and flustered financial advisers because Cyberia had scorched their whites. Eventually, over a bowl of thinly disguised gruel, he said, “Look, love, this won’t do. I can see ironing’s not your strong suit, so from tomorrow you’ll do piece work. There’s three hundred greeting cards a day for you to paint and stick. I’ve arranged for someone to drop them in of a morning”.

True to her husband's word, a man arrived on the doorstep early the next morning and deposited a number of cardboard boxes in the hallway. He told Cyberia that there were some instructions in an envelope in one of the boxes and that he would be back that evening to pick up the first three hundred cards. All she had to do was colour in the flower petals and stick paper leaves to the front of each card. Having spent her first week of married life struggling with piles of creased cotton and Lycra, Cyberia felt much happier about her revised career prospects.

"After all," she said to herself as she unpacked the boxes and made neat piles of the cards and the packets of paper leaves, "I always enjoyed art classes at school and it can't be that hard to make a few hundred of them".

Unfortunately, Cyberia's appreciation of art and craft was based on the experience gained at her finishing school, where she had spent relaxed Wednesday afternoons fiddling with watercolours and making decoupage kittens out of old socks and yoghurt pot lids. Nothing, however, on her curriculum vitae included the term 'industrialised'. When her husband returned home after another hard day performing for London's musical cognoscenti he found the poor girl buried up to her armpits in smudged sheets of thin cardboard. Her arms, her nose and her hair were covered in glue and disintegrating paper leaves. She was in such a frustrated lather that her mascara had run right down her cheeks and lay in a sludgy grey puddle on the kitchen table.

"What the bloody... you're crap at cards as well!" he exclaimed, sweeping the mess of celebratory messages into a big black bin liner. "Right, plan C. It's Saturday tomorrow. There's a load of old rubbish in the lock up I nicked from outside charity shops, you know, dead men's suits and dog eared paperbacks. I want you down at the car boot sale at six tomorrow morning flogging the lot. One way or another you'll earn your keep, girl!"

Clothes, of course, were something that Cyberia did know about and despite the unearthly hour of her rising and the wonky wheels on the shopping trolley that she had to use to transport her uncharitable apparel down to the local football club's car park, she made a good fist of the first hour. By arranging the suits, shirts, blouses and skirts by label, size and colour she managed to shift

most of the better items to middle class bargain hunters and a good deal of the less fashionable items to the local student population. By nine o'clock Cyberia had nearly sold out her stock and was looking forward to the little luxury that might be afforded by way of a bacon butty and a polystyrene mug of tea, when her husband arrived pushing an old pram full of soiled tee-shirts and builders' low slung jeans. He forbade her to take a break until the whole wardrobe had been disposed of and it wasn't until nearly four o'clock that afternoon that Cyberia managed to trudge home wearily, smelling of sweat, fried burgers and other people's loose change.

Nonetheless the day had been something of a success. From the takings her husband was able to recompense his mate for the ruined cards, put enough cash in his pocket for a good night in the pub and leave Cyberia with enough housekeeping to keep them going for nearly a whole week, providing, of course, that she shopped frugally and avoided anything expensive like fresh bread and real butter. During the week Cyberia cleaned the house, cooked meals and performed a range of other wifely duties while her husband, under the guise of bringing euphonic enlightenment to the masses, rescued black bin liners full of old clothes, books and partially complete jigsaw sets from the doorways of London's charitable retail outlets. On Saturday and Sunday mornings for the rest of that summer you would have found Cyberia pushing shopping trolleys full of used clothing in the direction of car boot sales full of eager, budget priced consumers.

In relative terms everything seemed to be going well for the young woman until she encountered a group of local youths one Saturday afternoon. She had seen them hanging around the car boot sale all morning but thought nothing much about their presence other than that they exuded the normally confused menace of seventeen year old boys. They had, however, been scouting out a likely target and had chosen the slightly built young lady with the bulging money belt as the best source of the filthy lucre that they needed to maintain their lighter fuel and crack cocaine habits. Cyberia soon realised that the normally confused menace presented by a group of teenagers in a crowded car park was nothing like the real, in your face, blade wielding menace that they could deliver on

the corner of a quiet, backwater city street. Her husband was not impressed when she eventually returned home minus the shopping trolley, without any money and too scared to make amends for her failings by popping down to the off-licence for him.

“I mean...it’s not as though you’re a child”, he admonished her. “They’re only kids but you’re a grown up and with all the work you’ve been doing around here you’ve got muscles on your muscles. If you’re going to make your way in this part of London you’ve really got to learn to stand up for yourself”.

Cyberia tried to be brave but the trauma of the robbery combined with the endless trials of her new life had worn her out. As she sat on a kitchen chair and quietly sobbed to herself, her husband decided that he had, perhaps, been a little harsh. He made her a nice cup of tea, sat down opposite her and suggested an alternative way in which she could contribute to family life.

“OK, darling, what about this? I’ve got a mate, well, a contact really, up in the city who’s always looking for a nice girl to do a bit of work for him. It means working at night, but the pay’s not bad if you don’t mind a bit of scrubbing. Shall I tell him you’re interested in a bit of office cleaning?”

And so Cyberia became one of London’s army of night cleaners helping to keep the wheels of commerce running on well oiled bearings, and by combining her weekly wage packet with her husband’s musical royalties the couple managed to earn enough to keep the wolf and the bailiffs from the door. After a few weeks Cyberia was even asked to become a cleaning team supervisor and, accepting the increase in wages without a second thought, took command of the cleaners on the executive floor at the NanoGoo International headquarters building.

A few evenings later, as Cyberia was preparing to dust the huge, polished wood boardroom table, an officious looking woman in a bright red power-shouldered suit came into the room and button holed her.

“Can you make a bit more of an effort today, dear. We’re holding a party here tomorrow afternoon to welcome Captain Flashman-Pebble onto the board. I want you to make sure you can see your face in the table, that the bins are all emptied properly and

that you run the Hoover under the chairs and not just around them. Understood?"

Cyberia just looked at the woman.

"Hello? Speakie English?" asked Jimmy Cameron's personal assistant, before pointing at the table and making grunting noises. She turned on her heel and muttered something about employing immigrants.

Left alone with her thoughts, Cyberia collapsed in on herself and slumped down into one of the big leather boardroom chairs. After all of the hardships of the last few months, this was the final straw. She cried and cried and cried, grieving for the pride and the utter folly of her previous existence that had now laid her down so low. The teams of cleaners finished their work and, wondering where their supervisor had disappeared to, signed themselves out of the building and evaporated back into the teeming maelstrom of the city from whence they had come. Left alone in the boardroom, Cyberia lost all sense of time as she sobbed her heart out for her foolishness.

Time passed in a blur of wet eyes and convulsive sobs, and it was late into the evening before Cyberia realised that she was not alone in the boardroom, and through her tears she could barely make out the shape of the person standing by the door. She waved her hand at the figure, desperate to shoo the person away, and continued to spill bitter tears upon her red flushed cheeks, but the figure came towards her, knelt at her feet and held her hands. She felt the rough calloused fingers of someone she had come to know well in recent weeks and her shoulders immediately began to heave in a great, heartfelt wail. He would only make fun of her, she thought, and pulling away from her husband she tried to rise from her chair and run for the door.

Her husband refused to let go and pulled her back into his arms, where he held her close and tight to his chest until her anger, fear, frustration and wretchedness dissipated and she fell into a gentle half swoon. Quietly and softly he lifted her head up so that she could look him in the eye.

"Aaaarrggghhh!" she screamed, desperately trying to push him away. "It's... it can't be... Minge-face?"

“I prefer Rocky, or Captain”, he said tenderly, taking off the milk bottle glasses, pulling a set of theatrical teeth out of his mouth and ripping off his fake moustache. “Don’t be afraid, my darling. It’s always been me. I fell in love with you ages ago, but you were always so rude. Your father and I cooked up the whole plan. All of the other girls are sweet but so utterly boring. To be a real member of Albion’s aristocracy you have to have some spunk in your soul, but you we’re something else. I had to cure you of your pride before you met Mummy and Daddy”.

Cyberia flung her arms around her handsome, landed busker and hugged him so tightly that he thought he would burst. Just then the doors to the boardroom crashed open and the combined weight and wealth of the Cameron and Flashman-Pebble clans surged into the room, waving glasses of bubbly and cheering loudly as they celebrated the perfect society couple locked in true love’s wonderful embrace.

Miss Jones and the Refugee

(Loosely based on Andersen’s In The Duck Yard)

An obscure but historically rich family of age old standing first came to live in one of London’s green suburban idylls when those self same suburbs were nothing but virgin fields and meadows recently subsumed into William the Conqueror’s new realm. At that time the family name was long and impressive; D’Agouteville perhaps or Cholmondley-Warner or some such thing, but, as with all families, the generations followed one after another, proving more or less that sons and daughters inherit a mixed bag of genes and ancestral memory. Despite the vagaries of birthright and ability, the family remained true to its long heritage in one respect, at least, and that was to its ancestral home. Fortunes varied, were won and lost, and the family name changed through the ages, becoming a proper product of each model of social propriety, until, at the very end of a long line of ancestors , there was but one member of the family left living. She was known simply as Miss Jones.

During the long sweep of days that passed during which the family had faded into its current state of dilapidated grandeur, the great city had, conversely, spread its teeming streets far and wide. Miss Jones and her ancient familial home now stood in much reduced status in the middle of this quiet and genteel suburban sprawl. Around her home there had come the houses of merchants and bankers, followed by the lowlier dwellings of middle class managers and finally there came the estate houses of the common workers.

The family shut themselves away behind the barrier of polite poverty, pulling up the rope ladder of social interaction. Safe behind their crumbling castle walls, the family's ancient lust for life dissipated, and the vitality of these new lives completely passed them by. Miss Jones, as the last of her line, lived a quiet and shrouded life that was bounded by the tightness of good old-fashioned values and good old-fashioned friends. From time to time she watched the new world of alien features and fads strut and crow and found it all strangely attractive, but the rules of the game quite prevented her from embracing such energy and liveliness. It simply wasn't done. Self-control was an art that Miss Jones and her family had perfected through many long years of carefully managed breeding and etiquette.

Miss Jones had few vices and few interests that could be described as hobbies, but she was very keen on politics. Of course, it had to be the right sort of politics, the sort that was supported by bazaars, whist drives and charity lunches attended by her sitting member of parliament. Nevertheless, and in the privacy of her own salon, she was quite vocal in her support of the poor oppressed victims of foreign dictators and of those unfortunates in far off lands whose lives were devastated by fire, famine and flood. It was widely reported in the leafier lanes of suburban south London that after the local church's recent summer fête Miss Jones had sampled the sherry and become extremely eloquent on the subject.

"When you see them on television sitting around their fires and singing their traditional songs, well, it's so moving. They have so much dignity in their suffering. If it were only possible I'd take just such a person into my own protection. I would be a good mother to her. It's in my blood, you know. We Joneses have always been that

way inclined. But they are so far away and there is so little one can really do to help”.

Mistress Fate heard this desperate plea and within a week Miss Jones found herself facing a very new and challenging situation, for which she was entirely unprepared. Walking home from a visit to a friend’s house one evening at about seven o’clock, Miss Jones was enjoying the last of the sun’s tree-dappled warmth. The birds sang sweetly in the hedgerows and the last of the house martins were diving and darting across the sky as they fed themselves up for their long autumn flight south. A few wisps of cloud on the far horizon glimmered red and gold as they reflected the falling of day into the purple dusk of night. All was well with the world as Miss Jones turned the corner into her own street and was almost bowled over by a young man running at full pelt in the opposite direction.

Miss Jones spun around in an anti-clockwise direction when the young man’s shoulder hit her left arm with all the force and momentum of a battering ram. She lost her balance and her grip on her handbag as she stumbled and tripped over her own feet, falling backwards into a beech hedge that bordered one of the suburban gardens. The young man managed two or three disjointed paces before he too crumpled and flaked, finally tripping over an uneven paving stone and falling chin first to the floor. As he fell he thrust out an arm to try and cushion his fall. The evening’s background sounds of bird song and bees buzzing their way from flower head to flower head were cut in two by the sharp retort of bone breaking on hard cement.

Miss Jones heard the sound of footsteps following on behind the young man and as she pushed beech leaves out of her face she was able to make out three other young boys heading towards where she lay suspended in the hedge. With a physical urgency usually reserved for athletes and Special Forces troops, Miss Jones launched herself into a standing position, braced her legs upon the pavement and picked up her handbag in the most menacing way that she could manage. The young man with the broken wrist was of some ethnic stock, while the three other youths were Caucasians and Miss Jones was no fool. She recognised the situation for what it was and reacted instantaneously.

As soon as she realised what she was doing her legs turned to jelly, her heart skipped several beats, and she could feel herself glowing all over with beads of perspiration. All that had been so clear for that vital second was now clouded in the fog of doubt and confusion. She was not the stuff of legend nor of heroism, being the sort of person who worried that she was letting her whole class down when her shoes got dirty, and here she was facing down three members of an alien youth culture, whose sole intent was to inflict grievous bodily harm on another vulnerable individual. It occurred to her there and then that if they couldn't get to the crawling thing behind her, they would probably take just as much delight in wreaking havoc upon the body of one of the genteel classes. Her resolve momentarily wavered. Nevertheless, centuries of fine and proper blood were coursing through her adrenalin swollen arteries, and with her unwavering sense of indignation on behalf of underdogs everywhere, she steeled herself for the physical punishment that was about to pour forth upon her head.

She looked straight at the charging youths and yelled at the top of her voice, "You'll have to answer to me to first!"

The sound of running footsteps had already caused curtains to twitch in the front rooms of the houses of those who lived close enough to the road to have heard the disturbance. The sound of Miss Jones's defiant voice being raised in such an unlikely and, frankly, shocking way, heralded the full pulling aside of various nets and blinds. As soon as the good people of this suburban paradise realised that one of their own was in trouble with a posse of hell's skinheads, front doors opened and at least three elderly gentlemen were pushed and prodded out onto their doorsteps.

The three white boys, while hell bent on completing their terrible task, were not entirely insensitive to the weight of evidence that was being amassed against them. Their headlong charge towards Miss Jones and the stricken young man on the pavement behind her slackened off until they came to a skipping halt some ten yards away.

The gentlemen on doorsteps started shouting things like, "Bugger orf... We've called the police, you know... Go on, get out of it".

The boys shouted obscenities back, informing anyone who was listening that they knew where everyone lived and would be back later to get them. The stand off lasted for nearly a minute before the sound of a siren in the distance saw the three of them break into a hectic run back the way they had come.

In no time at all, the entire street seemed to be filled with cars and uniformed officers, and an ambulance whisked the young man away to Accident and Emergency before Miss Jones had time to find out his name. She was, anyway, helping a very pleasant young policewoman with her enquiries and Miss Jones was on fine form as the policewoman took her statement. Truth be told she was probably a little tipsy having supped one too many medicinal Scotches from one of her neighbours' hip flasks when she said, "They're absolute scoundrels. Hanging is too good for them. That we permit such creatures to live and walk about on the planet! It wouldn't have happened in the old days, you know, oh no!"

Quite what would have happened in the old days Miss Jones couldn't actually say. She had a vague and hazy image in her head of one of her early ancestors running his opponents through with a large sword, and in her more candid moments she secretly approved of this approach. As it was she was quite content to end the day as she often did by toasting the world with another hint of single malt, safe in the comforting knowledge that the sun, like people, inevitably moves towards sunset.

Unfortunately for Miss Jones there was another sun of which she had taken no account whatsoever in her long and relatively restricted life, and at seven-thirty the next morning she was rudely awakened by a series of loud knocks at her front door. The adrenalin rush of the previous evening and the near quarter bottle of Scotch that she had drunk before bed had not mixed well and, when she opened the door to the reporter from the Sun & Mercury, Miss Jones was suffering from the unpalatable effects of her first hangover since her debutante years.

The next few moments were a horrible mixture of *déjà vu* and misunderstood questions, all of which left Miss Jones in a state of confused and bemused uncertainty. The photographer did at least have the dignity to let her change out of her dressing gown and slippers, but everything was still rushed and she looked as if she'd

just gone three full minutes with a welterweight boxer. The only saving grace was that the headlines painted a picture of a plucky citizen coming to the aid of a poor victim of racial abuse. Over the next few weeks both Miss Jones and the young victim appeared in the newspapers and on many of the news and current affairs programmes on the television and the radio. Their life stories were told and compared and much was made of the fact that two very different worlds had collided and, out of the chaos of the moment, had created a perfect picture of what the country should be striving for.

In Miss Jones's case her family background was investigated and she was revealed to the world. All of the political parties identified with her recent struggle, praising her for her actions, and she was held up as a paragon of good old fashioned and traditional values by the true blues of the political firmament. Even those who thought her type was an anachronism in these modern times were forced to agree that she was very unassuming and brave. Cameras whirred and digital footage streamed across the closed world of conservative South London, so much so that nearly everyone in the neighbourhood wanted to invite Miss Jones to their parties, to their charity bashes and to their seasonal celebrations.

The young man, of course, received some publicity as well. His face appeared in print and on television screens and his own background was presented to the world, just as Miss Jones's had been. In his case, and although there was, obviously, just as much history to it, his family background was untraceable. He came from a remote region of a far off nation that was locked into a vicious cycle of civil war and warlordism. As much was made of the tragedy in his homeland as was made of his broken wrist and the fact that no one could find the perpetrators of the attack.

Unlike the almost universal acceptance of Miss Jones in the media, however, some of the reporting that related to the young man tended towards the dark side. Some newspapers, tiring of the feel good factor inherent in the immediate events of the day, started to ask questions about the presence of such people in the country. Numbers were discussed. Entry criteria were argued about and the cost of his treatment at the expense of the public purse became an issue for some of the more garrulous members of the establishment.

When his story was set into the context of geography there were those who questioned whether any good could ever come of a country that suffered from an apparently incurable case of Asperger's Syndrome. The final denouement was the revelation that the young man in question was waiting for his appeal for asylum to be heard by the government and he was not yet, by any right, a citizen of the country.

For Miss Jones, however, the social breeze, which she had until now only briefly caught the coat tails of, turned into a full-blown tornado. She was invited to parties and to dinners with friends and acquaintances, about whom she often knew only the bare bones. Nonetheless, she found herself positively enjoying the concentration of interest that surrounded her whenever the conversation turned to the state of the nation and to the whole immigration issue. She felt that she finally had something to offer to these discussions, basing her opinions on her direct experience with these poor unfortunate people. She was the queen of the chicken run with a bevy of hens and cocks clucking around her, hanging on her every insight and word.

In all of this, in the hurricane of press interest that engulfed the protagonists and in the quietly ebbing tide that followed as the story wound down onto the spools of microfiched newsprint, Miss Jones and the young man never actually met. In fact, under the strains of the moment and the inevitable riot of questions and counselling in the immediate aftermath of the alleged attack, they had never even spoken with one another. Their only real, physical contact had been when the young man barged into her by accident on a street corner. In the resulting confusion, with neighbours comforting Miss Jones and paramedics aiding the young man, they had no time in which to become acquainted. Their only indirect contact was when they exchanged thanks and some brief sound bites via a television link.

It should come as no surprise that Miss Jones's experience at the forefront of integration and social inclusion should provide her with the moral courage and the fortitude to deal with her next hot political potato. A year or so after the event on the street corner the government proposed the setting up an immigration processing centre in the borough where Miss Jones lived. Given her local fame

as the woman who had a go, as the woman who stood up to racist job culture, she was delighted to be asked onto the committee of the "Asylum Centre Campaign Group".

As she said on local radio one evening, "We should all do what we can to make this country socially and culturally cohesive, and no one knows that better than I do. But even after all of my experiences I have to say that we, the people of this borough, do not want this facility in our back yard".

The Mobile Phone

(Loosely based on Andersen's The Tinderbox)

A soldier came marching along the road one fine day; left, right, left, right, left, right. He had a kit bag over his shoulder and wore his cap all askew upon his head, because he was coming home from the wars and although not yet formally and officially demobbed, he simply didn't feel like complying with dress regulations anymore. He had served his time and was now heading for London, where they said that money grew on trees. He didn't quite believe this, but nonetheless he fancied a change of career and scenery.

On the outskirts of the city he met an old woman with hideous, blotchy skin and a bottom lip that stretched all the way down to her chest. In olden days she would have been called a witch, but the soldier, being thoroughly modern in his outlook, just assumed that she had wandered off from her care home.

As he walked past the old woman she turned to him and said, "My, what a handsome boy you are. What a lovely cap and what a very big kit bag you have". She winked at him suggestively as she continued, "I know where you can find lots of lovely money".

"Sure enough", said the soldier to himself, "she's escaped from the local nut house".

"Do you see that old tree over there?" asked the weathered woman pointing at a gnarled and ancient oak tree that stood in the middle of someone's front garden. "It's quite hollow. If you climb

to the top and drop down inside, you'll find three magical money making machines in a great hall lit by a thousand fairy lights".

"Humour her", thought the soldier. He stopped and asked the old woman, "How will I get out of the tree after I've gone down to this hall of lights?"

"Oh, don't worry about that", she said, "I'll tie a rope around your waist and pull you back up".

"Right, of course you will", said the soldier pretending to be interested. You can imagine his surprise when the old woman produced a long length of coiled rope from under her voluminous purple overcoat.

Wide-eyed and somewhat taken aback, the soldier asked, "So, how do these magical money machines work, then?"

"I'll tell you", said the old woman. "You'll see three doors in the hall, all of them unlocked. If you go into the first room you'll find a Northern Bank cash machine guarded by a dog with eyes the size of compact disks. But you needn't worry about him. I'll give you my tartan shopping trolley. Just pop him inside, press one, two, three four and you can take as many ten-pound notes from the machine as you like. Of course, if you'd rather have twenty-pound notes you can go to the second room. There you'll find a dog with eyes the size of saucepan lids. Pop him into the shopping trolley, key in the same numbers and take as many twenty-pound notes as you like from the machine. On the other hand, if you'd prefer fifty-pound notes you should go to the third room. There's another dog, of course, with eyes the size of giant sparkling Catherine Wheels. Now he's a real dog, a real son of a bitch, but don't worry about that. Just pop him into the shopping trolley, key in the magic numbers and take as many fifty-pound notes as you like".

The soldier decided that he'd better do as she said, if only to keep her under surveillance until the search party arrived from the hospital armed with really strong sedatives and a straightjacket.

"Sounds like a good plan", said the soldier. "But I ought to get something for you as well seeing as you've been so kind".

"No, no, no", said the old woman. "I don't need any more money. All I want is my mobile phone, which I dropped the last time I was down there".

"Well, tie the rope around my waist", said the soldier, "and I'll hop up into the tree and take a look".

The old woman did just that and after the soldier climbed the tree and found the hole, she passed the shopping trolley up to him. The soldier then climbed down into the hollow tree, which was made more difficult than it ought to have been by the awkwardness of the trolley. To his amazement he found himself in a great hall lit by a thousand fairy lights and sure enough there were three doors set into the far wall of the hall, all of them slightly ajar. The soldier entered the first room, and sure enough, there sat the dog with eyes as big as compact disks.

"Bugger me, but you're ugly", said the soldier, but he steeled himself and popped the dog into the shopping trolley. Then he keyed the magic numbers into the magical money machine and watched in absolute wonder as the machine spewed out huge great wads of ten-pound notes. Needless to say he stuffed every one of his jacket pockets with the cash. Having filled every pocket the soldier popped the dog back in front of the cash machine and went on his way to the second room.

"Careful", said the soldier to the dog with eyes as big as saucapan lids. "You'll get eyestrain if you keep staring at me like that".

He popped this second dog into his shopping trolley, entered the magic numbers on the cash machine's keypad and proceeded to stuff his trouser legs full of as many twenty-pound notes as he could. With the second dog safely deposited in front of the cash machine the soldier waddled into the third and final room.

Hideous! There sat the dog with eyes as wide as sparkling Catherine Wheels.

"Afternoon", said the soldier, saluting, because he had never seen anything like it before. He looked at the dog. The dog looked straight back at the soldier. After a few seconds the soldier started to feel really freaked out, so he popped the dog into the shopping trolley, pressed the buttons and built the biggest pile of fifty-pound notes he had ever seen by the door. There was enough money in the pile to buy a small army all of his own.

Being thoroughly practical and having been trained to deal with difficult situations, the soldier put the dog back by the cash

machine and proceeded to empty all of his pockets and his trouser legs of ten and twenty-pound notes. These he stuffed into the shopping trolley followed by the huge pile of fifty-pound notes. Then he wheeled his heavy load back to the base of the tree and shouted, "Pull me up now, old woman".

A faint voice replied, "Have you got my mobile phone?"

"Bugger", muttered the soldier, "I nearly forgot".

He searched for a while by fairy light and sure enough he found an old mobile phone on the floor in the middle of the hall. He pocketed the phone, called up to the old woman once again and she pulled him and his trolley back up through the hollow tree. Soon he was standing back out in the open air with a tartan shopping trolley full of ready cash.

"What do you need a mobile phone for, old woman?" asked the soldier.

"That's none of your business", the old woman snapped. "You've got your money, so just give me my phone and I'll be off".

"Doesn't seem right to me", said the soldier. "There's something fishy going on here. Tell me what you want that phone for or I'll push you under a bus, you old crone".

"No", shrieked the old woman, making ready to pounce on the soldier like a wounded lioness.

As luck would have it a red double-decker London bus turned the corner of the street at that very moment. Just before the old woman leapt at him with her hands bared like claws, the soldier pushed her under the wheels of the bus and ran off, pulling the tartan shopping trolley behind him like a demented go-cart running in reverse gear.

Later that night, when the coast was clear the suburban hiatus by the oak tree was just a distant memory, the soldier stood on Harrow hill and gazed out across his new world horizon. After his experiences in the dust and heat of war, the soldier looked at the steaming city and saw that it was beautiful.

The busy streets in the centre of the city were full of light and music and pretty young girls, and the soldier paid cash for a suite at the Ritz with room service on call twenty-four hours per day. He sent his old army clothes for dry-cleaning and the cleaners simply

couldn't believe that someone so rich could dress so scruffily. The very next day, guided by the hotel concierge, the soldier went to the finest tailors and shirt makers in Saville Row. Overnight he turned into a fine looking gentleman and bought drinks for city whiz kids, rich bankers and portly brokers in the hotel bar. They told him all about their great city, its lights and music, and especially about their jobs and their wonderful bonus payments. They even told him about the great and majestic bank at the heart of the city, about its chairman and about the chairman's very pretty daughter.

"Where can I find this lovely girl?" asked the soldier.

"Oh, you can't see her", they replied. "Her Daddy keeps her working on mergers and acquisitions all day and every day. No one but the chairman sees her because it's prophesied that one day she'll marry a common soldier. Her father thinks that's so last year."

"Even so", said the soldier, "I'd very much like to see her".

But, all things considered, and after the third bottle of shampoo, he supposed that it simply wasn't meant to be.

The soldier lived well in the city, going out for expensive dinners at the finest restaurants, attending the theatre regularly, spending pleasant evenings in the brightest of celebrity haunts and even doing a little work for charity when time permitted. He was particularly proud of his charity work, which was a good thing, for he well remembered being a poor squaddie. Now, though, he was rich, handsome, had fine clothes and he had a new set of friends, who were all eager to join with him in his good fortune. His great pile of cash dwindled slowly at first, but as the weeks progressed the pile seemed to shrink more and more quickly. For every penny that he spent he got nothing back at all until, at last, there was nothing left but two fifty-pound notes, and after the incident with the old lady he dare not return to the cash machines under the oak tree.

The soldier had to leave the Ritz that night and move into a tiny little room in a traveller's motel out by Heathrow airport. He saved every penny he could by washing his own clothes, eating in burger bars and buying cheap plonk from the local off-licence. He pawned his fine clothes, sold his gold wristwatch and hocked his patent leather shoes, until he had nothing left but his old army clothes. None of his new friends seemed to have the time to come and see

him anymore, saying that business commitments were just too demanding. For a while he believed them when they said they would do lunch very soon, but the phone never rang.

A few weeks after his flight from the swanky city hotel, the soldier found himself in a dire situation, unable to afford a bottle of Chateau Maggot even. He was about to fall into the deepest, blackest depression, when he suddenly remembered the old woman and her mobile phone. He checked his army jacket and sure enough there it still was.

There was a pawnshop around the corner and he might get a few pounds for it, he thought, so he took the phone out of his jacket and gave it a cursory inspection. It was a very old model, more monolith than mobile, and the battery was as dead as a doorknob. More out of frustration than hope, the soldier started to press the buttons randomly, and as he did so the door to his meagre little motel room crashed open and in sprang the dog with eyes the size of sparkling Catherine Wheels. It lurched to a halt in front of him, panting and dribbling on the carpet.

"What", ...pant, "doth", ...wheeze, "my mathter want?" it lisped.

"Poke me sideways with a fish fork", said the soldier, "what a funny old world. Did the phone bring you here, dog?"

"Yeth, mathter"

"Right, well, can I really have anything I want?"

"Yeth", said the dog, "I am yourth to command".

"Right", said the soldier, "fill this tartan shopping trolley with fifty-pound notes. Oh, and pop in a lamb Madras, pilau rice, a mushroom bhaji, and a couple of bottles of Spanish brandy while you're at it".

The dog careered back out of the hotel doorway, pushing the trolley in front of him with his big, slobbery mouth. No more than a few moments ticked by before the dog and the shopping trolley crashed back into the door frame, spinning the dog into the room bottom first. The shopping trolley was full to overflowing with fifty-pound notes, some of them covered in curry sauce, and two bottles of cheap hooch.

The soldier began to understand what a marvellous mobile phone this was, and he thoroughly understood why the old woman had wanted it back so urgently. If he pressed one, then the dog with

eyes as big as compact disks would come. If he pressed two, the dog with eyes as big as saucepan lids would come. If he pressed three, then the dog with eyes as wide as sparkling Catherine Wheels would come.

The soldier played with the phone all night long, until he was as rich as Croesus. He moved straight back into the Ritz, bought new clothes, bought a brand new sports car and almost immediately found that his fair weather friends, now that the rain had ceased to fall in the soldier's life, all suddenly had sunny windows in their diaries.

With the magical phone and his team of wonder dogs at his command, the soldier rapidly became one of the richest young blades in the city. He spent every moment that he could collecting shopping trolleys full of ready cash and, when he finally had enough money to hand, he opened an account with the great and majestic bank that pulsed at the heart of London's financial community.

This, of course, was all part of his plan and the soldier mused on this later that night; "Now, it's really too bad that no one is allowed to see the chairman's daughter. Everyone says she's a stonker, even if they do say she's also a bit of a ball-breaker. But there's no use in her being lovely if no one can ever see her. So..."

He pressed one on his mobile phone and with a whoosh, up popped the dog with eyes as wide as compact disks.

"I know it's late", said the soldier, "but I'd like to see the bank chairman's daughter".

The dog, by now on more familiar terms with its new master, raised a paw, licked its lips and waited. As soon as the soldier gave him a marrow bone biscuit, the dog rushed back out into the night. After about half an hour the dog crashed back into the soldier's hotel room, panting and wheezing, with the chairman's daughter lying upon his back. She was fast asleep and she was, indeed very lovely to look at. Even her pyjamas smelled of silver spoons and the soldier simply couldn't resist temptation. He kissed her on the lips as she slept, proving, despite his newfound wealth and status, that he was a romantic old thing at heart.

When he eventually finished gazing at this vision in flannelette, the dog returned her to the penthouse apartment that she shared

with her parents. In the morning, when she joined her father and mother at their seven A.M. power breakfast, she told them about her strange dream in which she had been whisked away by a large brown dog with weird eyes and that a soldier had kissed her. Her father smiled serenely without looking up from the business pages of his newspaper, while the lovely young woman's mother made a mental note to check her daughter's bathroom for signs of illegal drugs. The Filipino maid, however, believing in ghosts and witches, made a mental note to keep watch the very next night. Where she came from such things were not at all unknown, especially when they concerned beautiful young maidens.

The soldier really did want to see the young lady again, and so the dog was despatched the very next night to fetch her while she slept. The dog brought her as fast as he could, but the maid was waiting for him and she followed the dog and his package at a discreet distance in the back of her cousin's minicab. The maid followed the dog right up to the door of the soldier's suite at the hotel, where, so that she would remember things properly in the morning, the maid chalked a white cross onto the door. Then she went home to wait and see when the dog would bring her mistress back again.

When the dog left his master's room to take the girl home, he noticed the chalk mark on the door. Having eyes as wide as compact disks has its advantages. As soon as he delivered his package home, the dog returned to the hotel, made another piece of chalk appear by magic, and proceeded to mark a white cross on every door in the hotel.

Early the next morning a fleet of black limousines sped into the hotel car park and with much slamming of car doors and with the heavy echo of rushing footsteps reverberating off the marble walls, the chairman, his wife and various members of his personal security team crashed through reception. Moving like a well-oiled machine the security unit covered each other, took up positions, made sure that all was safe and beckoned the chairman and his wife forward.

"There it is", shouted the chairman, pointing at a door with a white chalk cross on it.

"No, there it is", shouted his wife, pointing at another door.

Having kicked open three doors with white crosses on them they had to admit defeat. With the best will in the world, they couldn't see how their daughter had been spirited into a broom cupboard, a conference room and an octogenarian couple's golden wedding anniversary suite. They soon realised that every door in the hotel had a white chalk cross on it and that their search had ended in failure.

The great bank's chairman was ready to fire the maid for causing so much confusion and embarrassment, but his wife had extensive experience in the realm of hotels and subterfuge, and she persuaded him to go to work and that she would sort things out with the domestic staff. She had, after all, met her husband at a banking conference in Switzerland many years before and the sight of so many white crosses immediately made her smell a rat. Instead of firing the poor girl, the chairman's wife asked the maid to sew a little bag of the finest silk and fill it with ground up Puy lentils. When her daughter, tired as usual after a long day at the coal face of international mergers and acquisitions, went to bed, her mother tied the bag to the back of her pyjamas. Then she cut a tiny whole in the bag so that the ground up lentils would leave a trail if she were abducted once again.

True to form, the dog came that night and took the sleeping young woman to the soldier, who by now was madly in love with her. He wished for nothing more than to be an international banker too, so that he could make her his wife.

Even with eyes as big as compact disks, the wonder dog did not notice the fine trail of lentils leading all the way from the girl's bed to the soldier's suite at the Ritz. The very next morning, and much to the chagrin of the concierge and the paying guests, the chairman, his wife and their security team came crashing through the hotel once again. They followed the trail of ground lentils right up to the soldier's door, smashed their way into his room and had him arrested immediately. He was indicted for stalking, for abduction and for a host of other charges, which lead, with a nod and a wink and some party donations, to the minister responsible for such matters making stalking a capital offence. The soldier was tried, convicted and sentenced to hang by the neck the very next day.

The poor soldier sat on the bunk in his cell, alone and without shoe laces in his shoes or a belt to secure his modesty. He had been force-marched out of his hotel room in only his bathrobe, and now he wore the condemned man's prison blue overalls. His army jacket, where he always kept the magic mobile phone, was still hanging in his hotel suite wardrobe, which meant that he was feeling very sorry for himself.

"If only I had my phone", he thought to himself sadly.

The very next morning the soldier watched through the bars of his cell as a huge crowd started to assemble in a public square outside the prison's front gates. There was a brand new gallows standing there and the steadily growing crowd seemed very excited because there had not been a hanging in the City for years and years and years. Gantries, platforms and temporary grandstands surrounded the gallows where television crews were setting up and radio presenters were practicing their lines. The soldier sighed, resigned to his fate. Then he spotted a boy working his way down a line of parked cars, who was taking advantage of the crowds to steal the radiator badges from the more expensive sporting models.

"Psst", hissed the soldier. "You there, yes you. Do you want to earn five hundred notes?"

Although startled at first, the boy came over to the cell window when he heard mention of easy money.

"There's still an hour to go before they stretch my neck. If you can get to the Ritz and bring me my mobile phone, I'll give you the cash as soon as you get back".

Now the boy, while not an A grade student, was quick and cunning and he'd heard that the soldier was absolutely loaded. He spotted an opportunity to do himself a favour, wrote down the number of the suite and sped off in pursuit of serious wedge. He broke into the suite with little trouble, changed out of his Baggies into an Italian designer suit and a pair of hand made brogues, picked up some loose cash for good measure and pocketed the mobile phone.

With just five minutes to go before the soldier was due to be led out to the gallows, he heard a shrill whistle, and when he looked through his cell window a remarkably well-dressed young man threw an old and battered mobile phone into the cell.

The soldier pressed one, two and then three. There was a whooshing sound and a second or two later a bundle of fifty-pound notes was passed through the cell bars to the young boy. The soldier then composed himself and waited for his escort to come and lead him out to his place of execution.

Despite the chill air, the early hour and his impending death, the soldier cut a fine, bold figure as he accompanied his guards to the gallows, where he stood to attention on the raised platform and looked at the crowd. The best seats were on a dais to his left and in these seats sat the bank's chairman and his wife, their daughter, government ministers, the chief judge and the Superintendent of the Metropolitan Police. To great applause, the hangman placed the noose around the soldier's neck and made ready to pull the lever that would send the soldier to his death.

All went quiet. The director of the live television special whispered into his microphone and the cameras panned in on the hangman, on the judge and on the soldier. Through the latest audio communications wizardry, the director asked the hangman to wait. He then asked the judge to stand and ask the soldier if he might have any last requests. The director wanted to build both the atmosphere and his chance of a gong at the annual television awards ceremony.

The soldier responded to the judge by asking if he would grant a sinner one last favour. He wanted to phone his dear old mother to say goodbye and to say that he was sorry. The hangman reached into the soldier's overall pockets, took out the mobile phone and pressed the numbers one, two and then three as instructed. In a blinding flash of light, accompanied by a deep roll of thunder, all three dogs appeared at once.

"Help me now so I won't be hanged", yelled the soldier.

The dogs flew to the right and to the left, up and down the aisles and rows, savaging all of the dignitaries with their massive fangs until there was nothing left of the government ministers, the judiciary and upper echelons of the police service but rags and bones. The hangman, fearing for his own life, immediately cut the soldier down and untied the ropes that bound his hands and legs. All of the policemen on crowd duty turned and fled the carnage, but the ordinary people in the crowd started to cheer and whoop

with delight, carrying the soldier around on their shoulders and yelling and shouting that they'd never liked bankers at all.

Later that year, being the largest account holder at the great and majestic bank, and because of his newfound fame as a television celebrity, the soldier was unanimously elected as its new chairman. After a short but intense period of mourning, the soldier married the old chairman's daughter, which she liked very much because he made her Chief Executive Officer and together they cornered the world's markets in gold and oil, before retiring in their late thirties to live in Antibes and raise a gaggle of spoilt but happy children.

As for the dogs? Well, it took them a little while to get used to the sunshine in the South of France, but these days they can usually be found lounging by their master's pool, getting fat on the finest sirloin steak and freshly made marrow bone chews.

The Assistant Shop Manager

In a small town set upon the flat plains of England's far flung eastern lowlands there once lived a very pleasant young man. He came from a very pleasant family with a father who worked hard and diligently and with a mother who stayed at home and brought up her children until they were old enough to attend the local senior school. The young man had a pretty older sister, who married well enough and settled down to raise her own family. He also had two sets of doting grandparents together with a host of happy aunts, contented uncles and aspirational cousins.

On leaving school with good, but not necessarily spectacular qualifications, the young man found a job in the retail sector. He progressed through a variety of jobs in a variety of shops until, at the age of twenty-one, he decided that he had made sufficient progress in life to get married. He had a reasonable salary, some nice perks and had just been promoted to the responsible role of Assistant Shop Manager with a very caring company selling mobile telephones.

Late one Thursday afternoon in the run up to Christmas the shop was full to bursting with young teenagers on the way home from school or college. One of the young man's employees called him

over to authorise a sale to a young lady and as soon as the young man saw her he knew that she was the one that he would marry. He saw her standing there in her black puffer jacket, with her long black hair and her belly button piercing, and his heart started to pound. She was perfect. She was cute beyond belief, especially in the way her nose twitched as she chewed gum.

Now it was, of course, very presumptuous of him to dare to say to her: “Fancy a drink on Friday?”, but he dared, for he had a good job, was full of the confidence of youth and he knew deep in his bones that there was many a young lady who would be glad to join him for a drink.

The young girl gave him the look. He loved women with attitude. She signed the contract for her phone, said nothing at all to him, and walked out of the shop. It was all a code, thought the young man, and having noted down her address, her home telephone number and her date of birth, he started to plan for his future. She was called Tiffany, according to the form, lived just a few streets away from his own home, and she was seventeen years of age; a perfect match.

The next morning the young man rang a local florist and arranged for a bouquet of the finest mixed winter blooms to be sent round to her house, hoping that she would be shocked, surprised and then intrigued by this wonderful gift. He dictated a cryptic message to the florist, signed himself as The Telephone Man, and even remembered to put his own mobile number on the bottom of the card. He had, of course, already stored the young woman’s new number in his own mobile phone’s memory.

When Tiffany arrived home from another hard day at the grindstone of academia, her father called her into the living room. On the coffee table there was a huge bouquet of flowers and an opened message card. Tiffany’s first reaction was one of sheer joy.

“At last”, she thought, “my prince has come”.

She clapped her hands together, dreaming of DJ Reckless, the wizard mixer of trance and acid bass at the student union, with whom she was madly in love.

“Who the hell is The Telephone Man?” growled her father. He was, of course, unprepared for this only too visible sign that his little princess was growing up. “What have you been up to?”

It dawned on Tiffany that her father had opened the card that had come with the flowers, which was an outrageous breach of privacy. She deserved more respect than that.

“Ugh!” she mumbled before giving her father a look that she hoped would convey the message that he was a complete embarrassment to her. Then she ran up the stairs, slammed her bedroom door and turned the volume button on her compact disc player up to maximum.

Over tea there was an almighty row that ended with Tiffany crying, her mother shouting at her father and the bunch of flowers being thrust head first into a wheeled dustbin standing out on the pavement ready for emptying the next morning.

The young man stood in the shadows on the opposite side of the street and watched as Tiffany’s father thrust the blooms into the dustbin and slammed down the lid. He was disappointed, of course, that the flowers had not been allowed to brighten up his darling fiancé’s home for longer, but he thought that he understood.

“Well, her father is just being protective”, he said to himself as he rescued a single red rose from the rubbish, “but no matter, she will be mine”.

He walked down the street towards his home plucking the petals from the flower as he repeated that lover’s mantra of old: “She loves me, she loves me not”. He was overjoyed when he plucked the last petal from the now bald flower head and found that she loved him.

For a whole week Tiffany wracked her brains trying to work out who The Telephone Man might be. She looked long and hard at a telephone engineer who was working in the street, which resulted in her hurrying home in tears, her ears ringing with the sound of wolf whistles. She checked with her college friends to see if anyone went by the nickname, but she couldn’t find anyone who she could identify as the sender of her flowers. She did see a young man, who seemed oddly familiar, watching her at the Friday night rave in the student union, but then boys always watched her and she was hopeless with names and faces.

The young man bided his time and was rewarded for his patience the very next Saturday afternoon. A gaggle of young girls came into the shop to look at the latest mobile telephony wonder in

pink and there, in the middle of the group, was his princess. He knew exactly what to do. He rang the number of the display model that they were looking at. Instead of the usual ring tone, the phone burst into life playing Tiffany's favourite dance tune. She was delighted and grabbed the phone out of her friend's hand, flipped open the clamshell display and pressed the connect button.

"Hello", said a voice, "this is The Telephone Man. I'd really like to take you out for a drink. I'll even give you that beautiful pink phone...in exchange for a kiss".

Tiffany stood there in a state of shock. The Telephone Man! She turned around very slowly and looked at the young man who had served her when she bought her current mobile phone just a few days ago. It all came flooding back. She shut the pink phone and thrust it back into the hand of her bemused friend. Tiffany's cheeks matched the colour of the pink phone's case perfectly.

She stormed out of the shop closely followed by her coterie of giggling young ladies and once they were all outside in the mall they held a heated debate about The Telephone Man. There were differences of opinion, ranging from weird through cute to typical boy. After a couple of minutes one of Tiffany's friends was nudged and prodded back into the shop. She walked up to the young man and said, "She says if you kiss me, can she have the phone?"

"No thanks", said the young man. "No disrespect, love, but either I get a kiss from her, or I keep the phone".

"Shit!" said Tiffany, on hearing her friend's report. "Oh well, in for a penny, but you've all got to come in with me", and so, surrounded by a multitude of sniggering young girls, the young man got his kiss and Tiffany got a really good deal on a mobile phone that would be the envy of everyone at college.

For the whole of the next week Tiffany was a rock and roll goddess. Whenever she received a call or a text message her phone made her the centre of attention. It was so much fun showing everyone how bright and pink her mobile phone was. The other kids and quite a few of the lecturers thought her ring tone was really funky and they all agreed it was definitely a cool bit of kit.

The following Saturday Tiffany received a message on her wonder phone from the young man. It read: "Wht abt tht drnk? Free calls 4 life = 10 X".

Tiffany understood the text message only too well. For 10 kisses she could get the young man to fix her account so that she never had to pay for another top up ever again. Perhaps he wasn't quite so bad after all. He clearly liked her and even if he was a little geeky, a kiss or two couldn't really hurt.

Later that day, and as before, the girls assembled outside the shop and one of Tiffany's friends was sent inside to ask, "She says you can have two kisses and she'll think about a drink".

"Sorry, no deal", said the young man, "ten kisses and the drink or she pays forever like the rest of you".

"If I kiss you can I have free calls?" asked the girl.

The young man smiled sweetly and told her that he couldn't possibly be unfaithful to Tiffany. Once again, surrounded by her giggling friends, Tiffany went into the shop, kissed the young man ten times, and said that she would definitely think about a drink but could he wait until next week as she already had plans for Saturday night. The young man agreed to wait another week, gave the young girl a new sim card that was already prepared, and sneaked an eleventh kiss just for good measure.

Another week went by, during which Tiffany called everyone that she knew over and over again. She sent text messages by the score and took pictures of everything and anything that moved, but, and much to her delight, every time that she checked the credit on her phone it was full. She was over the moon with her new pink phone and her limitless line of mobile telephony funding. In fact, Tiffany started to see the young man in quite a different light.

"He's not that bad, I suppose", she said to one of her friends on the following Friday night as they walked into the pub. "I mean, it's all a bit freaky, but he's got a job and a car and seems keen enough. I think I will meet him for a drink...as long as you and Robbie come along too".

The following morning Tiffany woke up and checked her messages. She tried to send a text to her friend to arrange to meet up outside the phone shop, but her phone wouldn't work. She checked her credit and checked the battery but she couldn't find anything wrong. "Typical", she thought, "that nerd's making sure I turn up at his shop today so he can ask me out for a drink".

Later that same morning Tiffany and her friends were in no mood to compromise as they approached the place where the young man worked. Demanding kisses for free telephony services was one thing, but being mean and spiteful just to get your own way was something else. As one of her friends had said, it was disrespectful; it was definitely not the way to win a young woman's heart.

They all marched in to the shop expecting to see the young man lurking in the shadows, but he was nowhere to be found. Instead, there was a new man, older and stern looking, standing behind the counter. Tiffany was momentarily confused by this new situation, but then she remembered that she had stored the young man's mobile number in her phone. Even if she didn't have any credit she could display his number and call him on one of her friends' telephones.

As soon as she pulled the bright pink mobile from her pocket the older shop manager spotted it and walked up to her.

"Would you be Miss Tiffany Lemon?" he asked.

"Might be..." mumbled Tiffany.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to return your phone. It appears there's been a problem, as it were. The young man who sold you the phone was acting outside of his sphere of authority. Oh, and these gentlemen want a word too".

Tiffany looked over her shoulder and, to her horror, she saw two uniformed policemen rocking backwards and forwards on the heels of their big black boots. She nearly fainted as they explained that, while she was not under arrest, they felt that it would be in her best interests to accompany them to the local police station. Tiffany was escorted out of the shopping centre by the two big and burly police officers, put into the back of their patrol car and whisked off into the busy Saturday morning streets.

The next few hours were, indeed, some of the worst in Tiffany's short but eventful teenage life. Her father went berserk when he was informed that Tiffany was helping the police with their enquiries and was quite ready to give her a good thrashing and to call her all sorts of nasty names. Then, when he heard all of the details concerning the young man, who was, as it was now becoming clear, quite widely known as The Telephone Man, he realised that it had, in fact, been a very close shave for his daughter.

After all of the questions were done with and the lady from social services was satisfied that all was well, he was simply relieved to have his little princess back at home, safe and sound.

It transpired that The Telephone Man had stolen many, many kisses from young girls in exchange for free pink mobile telephones. He had stolen even more kisses in return for doctoring telephone sim cards. He had even persuaded some of his many and varied young, female customers to join him for a drink. In fact, he was now on remand waiting for a court date to answer charges relating to a number of accusations of very persistent stalking.

Within a day or two the local press got hold of the story and the whole situation became public knowledge. It was a dreadful shock for the young man's family. His father refused to talk about his son, preferring to bury himself in his diligent duties at work. His mother felt unable to attend any more coffee mornings, preferring a gin and tonic with her mid morning biscuits. His sister, while feeling very sad for her brother, found herself looking at her own baby son in a strange new way.

But, as Tiffany's father said as he downed another large brandy late one evening, "Now it's that young perv's turn to be pretty and vulnerable".

And as fate would have it, at exactly the same time that Tiffany's father said this, the young man was lying on his bunk bed crying his eyes out. Of all the dreadful shocks experienced that day, nothing compared to the sudden and degrading catastrophe that he had just suffered as he'd bent down to pick up the soap in the prison shower.

The Politician's New Speech

(Loosely based on Andersen's The Emperor's New Clothes)

Politicians come and go, passing through the revolving doors of power and celebrity, and sometimes even infamy, like eels sliding from a barrel. For the most part the good folk who take up the cudgels of representative democracy on our behalf are well meaning, hard working souls armed with the sword of conviction

and the shield of dedication. In recent years this combination of valour and commitment has been ably demonstrated by many of the parliamentarians who congregate at Westminster. During recent periods of parliamentary jousting one politician above all others has become synonymous with the ruthless pursuit of truth and the calling to account of those who would betray the allied boons of principle and practicality. He has made it very clear that he doesn't care for convenient little compromises and political deals, believing absolutely that a spade should be called a shovel. That he is no longer in direct control of the levers of power is a shame, but in his time of greatness he employed a whole army of secretaries and assistants, whose sole job it was to document every fact and every detail of every case and policy so that he could remain true to his principles. He was well known for his ability to quote chapter and verse, with a comprehensive range of interpretations, on any of the hot political potatoes of the day.

So renowned was he throughout the country, indeed throughout the world, that many famous and influential people came to visit the him at his London home, from where the man worked so hard to forge his shrine to political verisimilitude. One day, attracted by the unrivalled opportunities being offered to skilled people by this new broom sweeping through government's old and crusty cobwebs of social patronage, two provincial public relations specialists arrived in the city determined to make their fortunes. They watched and listened in the market places, taverns and forums, and then, one morning, they called an impromptu press conference where they made a grand announcement. They could, they said, write the most fabulously truthful documents in all the known world.

"That's right", they said to an amazed crowd of journalists and onlookers in the main parliamentary square, "we are the greatest doctors of spin ever seen or heard. Our speeches, pamphlets and white papers are guaranteed to cure all evils".

To cap it all, they claimed that their documents were so beautifully written and were so truthful that they had a very singular and wonderful effect. Their words, phrases and arguments were so truthful that they became quite invisible to any person who was unfit for their office or who was inadmissibly stupid. The great

politician was stunned when he heard these claims. "What a wonderful thing", he thought to himself. "With documents like this I can find out which men and women in my government aren't suited for the posts they hold; I can tell the wise ones from the stupid. Yes, these men must become my secretaries at once".

Within a couple of days the politician's grey suited emissaries employed both men at a very competitive salary and asked them to lend their considerable expertise to the production of a particularly difficult document that the governing party had to set before their parliamentary colleagues. The two men were installed in a bright new office full of the latest computers, printers and online, on-demand production facilities. They sat tap-tapping away for days on end, preparing this very difficult document from the politician's notes and the supporting data supplied by various agencies, committees and focus groups. They attended countless briefings with government advisors and other interested non-governmental agencies, demanding without ceremony or attention to etiquette or protocol, the finest paper, the most exquisite pens and a great largesse of expenses, all of which disappeared into their briefcases at the end of each long working day.

After a month, and with the deadline for the great politician's speech looming, he decided that he would like to see how the document was progressing, although, given the special properties of this document, he felt a little uneasy about reading it in person. He certainly didn't want to appear unfit or stupid. The great politician did not believe in conceptual attitudes like fear, but nonetheless he felt it best to send one of his advisors to find out how things stood. After all, the political and media establishment knew about the magic powers this wonderful document possessed and the great politician knew that these people, who generally failed to see the bigger picture, would be as keen as mustard to see how unfit or stupid various members of the government might be.

"I'll send my faithful old private secretary to see these doctors of spin", thought the great politician. "He's very capable and far from stupid, so he's the best one to see how the land lies".

Sir John Gladstone went to the rather tastefully decorated office where the two word-smiths were beavering away at their task, and as he perused page after page of the report he became more and

more agitated. "Heavens above", he thought, his eyes wide with surprise and fear. "I can't see a single word on any of the report's pages". But he said nothing.

The two writers asked him if he thought the syntax was just perfect? They asked for his opinions on all manner of things, and particularly whether he thought the blending of fact, interpretation and style created the most stunning and persuasive of arguments? Then they showed him the latest section of the report, which was hot off the printer, and Sir John could do nothing but open his eyes wider and wider. He couldn't see anything but blank pages, for there was, as far as he could tell, nothing written on any piece of paper anywhere in the room.

"Great galloping synonyms", he thought. "Am I really this stupid? I've never thought so, and if I really am then no one can ever find out. And if I'm not stupid then I must be unfit for my post! No, it will never do to let anyone know I can't read the report".

One of the two men of letters asked the old man, "Well, what do you think? You're being very quiet"

"Oh, erm, it's wonderful, to the point, pithy but flowing, quite brilliant..." enthused Sir John.

"We're delighted to hear it", said the two men, beaming at him, and they proceeded to name the chapters, to summarize their arguments and to explain all of the most salient points they had made. The great politician's faithful private secretary paid close attention to everything the men said so that he could repeat it all verbatim when he reported back to his master, which he did directly.

After this visit, and pleased with their work, the two doctors of spin demanded an increase in their salaries somewhat above the prevailing rate of inflation. They also asked for a chauffeur driven limousine and a large apartment overlooking London's magnificently refurbished and regenerated dockland landscape, but not a word was typed even though they sat in their office day after day tap-tapping away diligently on their keyboards.

Not long after this, and with the day of the speech now very near at hand, the great politician sent another official to review the document and to report back on its progress, but exactly the same

thing happened to him as had happened to Sir John. He read and he read, but as there was nothing to read but empty pages, he couldn't actually read a thing.

"Isn't it a beautifully constructed thing", said the two public relations wiz kids, and they explained every nuance, every intimation and every statement, overt or implied.

"Well, I'm not stupid", thought the official, "and neither am I unfit for my position...at least, I've always assumed that was the case. If I really am incompetent I must be careful not to reveal it".

And so he praised the document that he couldn't read and assured all who would listen that it was perfect. "It really is your sort of thing", he said to the great politician later that same day. "It's direct, to the point and it's sure to knock your opponents into next week".

Every journalist and commentator in the world of newspapers, television and radio, together with every member of the chattering classes and everyone who was anyone in the established elite, were all talking about the soon to be published paper. Reassured by his aides and aware that the world's press was waiting with baited breath, the great politician himself now wanted to read the document, even though there were still some relevant facts to include and a few final conclusions to draw. Together with Sir John and his cabinet colleagues, the great politician swept through the corridors of power and into the office where the two doctors of spin were pretending to type away furiously at blank computer screens.

Sir John, aware that he had to make a strong showing in the midst of so many hawk-eyed, elected members, exclaimed, "Oh yes Sir, isn't it magnificent, so well argued, so concise, so irrefutably true. Please, Sir, take a look, read the executive summary". He took the great politician to one side and showed him page after page, reassuring everyone assembled in the room that it was only the stupid or the incompetent who wouldn't be able to read a word.

"Bollocks", thought the great politician, "I can't see anything at all on these pages. This is dreadful. Am I really stupid? Am I truly unfit for the great office I hold? This is the worst thing that could happen to me. There'll be a leadership challenge for sure".

Calling on every ounce of his experience and all of his blithe abilities, honed to perfection through dealing with cabinet crises

and the terrier snappings of the gutter press, the great politician read through a few pages silently. Then he turned to his colleagues and said, "Some good points being made here. Just what I wanted. All as it should be. Couldn't have put it better myself".

Turning to his two new spinmeisters he said, "Yes, very good work, gentlemen".

The great politician nodded approvingly at the piles of papers that covered every desk and table in the room. He certainly wasn't going to say anything about not being able to read the bloody thing. It was then the turn of his cabinet colleagues to scrutinise the document, page by page, but they weren't able to make any more sense of it than their boss had been able to do. Yet, like the great man himself, they were all convinced that their own survival in office was at stake. One after another they made various comments of agreement such as, "Oh yes, I entirely agree...Extremely well put...A fine piece of work...A solid basis for policy..."

So pleased were the great politician and his cabinet, so convinced were they of the document's merits, that they promised the two charlatans a knighthood apiece if the document found favour in parliament and the policy became law. The gentlemen in question thanked the members of the cabinet for their generosity, pleased that their work was so well appreciated, and looked forward to enjoying the benefits that such preferment would bring. They were particularly interested in lucrative non-executive directorships and non-governmental agency sinecures.

The two masters of official prose worked like Trojans throughout the whole of the night before the paper was due to be published, collating pages by section and sections by chapter. They bound the finished documents in real red leatherette and hand embossed the government's coat of arms on each cover. As dawn broke they staggered wearily out into the early morning daylight for a well deserved cigarette on the Embankment. They were just in time to meet the deadline for publication. The great politician's long awaited speech on the matter was just a few hours away.

During the course of the morning the finished document was delivered to every cabinet minister, to the media, to members of parliament and, of course, to the great politician himself. The two charlatans attended the cabinet and ran through the contents of the

report with the assembled ministers of state, describing and explaining all of their arguments, summaries and conclusions in the clearest and simplest terms.

"It's such an easy read, though", they said. You'd think there was nothing here but blank pages were you a simple minded man or an incompetent fool, but that, of course, is the beauty of it".

For the rest of the morning the two men worked with the great politician, schooling him in the contents of the report. They made sure that he could cross-reference the relevant sections with his own briefing notes and that he could quote verbatim from all of the sections and paragraphs that would support the arguments he was to make in his speech. As the great politician tried out different tones of voice and different facial expressions, as he opened his stance and practised his smile, the two doctors of spin encouraged and enthused; "Oh, sublime, Sir...Well put, Sir...What a winning way with words".

Just then Black Rod, in his role as master of ceremonies, popped his head around the door and said, "Time, Sir. They're all assembled in the chamber".

"I'm ready", said the great politician. "Bring it on..."

He took one last glance at the executive summary and checked his notes. He checked that his tie was straight and that there were no bits of cabbage stuck to his perfectly white teeth. Then he proceeded to enter the great debating chamber in procession with the master of ceremonies. The place was crammed to the rafters. Every bench seat was taken and there were crowds of people standing in the aisles. In the galleries up above the assembled politicians there was a veritable host of media reporters, who were all fighting and scrapping for the best vantage points. On every lap and in every hand there was a bound copy of the government document, resplendent in its full red leatherette glory. Every copy was thumbed and smudged with sweat and grime where avid but confused readers had tried and failed to glean the document's meaning from its empty pages. There was a look of madness in every elected representative's eyes, and the reporters in the gallery, having assumed they were in some way mentally sub-normal, were ready to hang on every word that the great politician might say. There was a general air of desperation.

Following a brief introduction by the Speaker, the great politician rose from his seat on the front bench and the wild chatter that had filled the great hall subsided and was replaced by a hum of nervous excitement. All became still, except for the sound of a car engine being revved outside, followed by the squeal of tyres on damp tarmac. The great politician cleared his throat and raised himself to his full and magnificent height.

"Never before have we faced such a clear and present danger", he began, using his most authoritative and serious voice. "Never before has our resolve been tested to such limits..."

All around him members of the parliament shouted and cheered. "Hear, Hear...Absolutely...Come the time, come the man", they all exclaimed, waving their order papers in the air above their heads. Not one of them wanted to appear stupid or unfit for their position in front of so many of their peers and friends in the media. The great politician raised his hand for silence, but just as he was about to continue the otherwise usually anonymous member of parliament for Rutland Metropolitan stood up and spoke.

"But there's nothing written on any of the pages..." he said quietly.

The chamber was pregnant with silent expectation. The Speaker started to rise, intending to admonish the backbencher for his rude interruption, but thought better of it when he caught the great politician's steel grey gaze. For his part, the great politician broke off from his prepared text and brought his verbal guns to bear on the heckler, just as he had done with unfailing accuracy so many times before. He glowered at the meek little man who had dared to interrupt him, before breaking into a fatherly smile and saying, "There speaks the voice of innocence..."

Even as he spoke the great politician became aware of a whisper circulating around the chamber. Backbenchers on all sides of the house became more and more animated, while the press pack in the gallery repeated the words of the otherwise unknown political representative to their editors by means of their mobile phones. Suddenly, one of the great politician's own cabinet ministers leaped out of his seat and shouted, "There's nothing written here at all - that's what old Hester-Whatsisname is saying - there's nothing written here at all!"

His words turned into a chant. Every single person in the chamber jumped up to his or her feet. The air was thick with the maniacal laughter and the sound of pages being torn out of the beautifully bound document. The great politician was drowned out in a storm of derision, with shouts and cat-calls ringing out everywhere. Every newspaper and every television programme ran special editions and lurid news flashes. The great politician shuddered and sank back into his bench seat. He knew the game was up... except that he puffed and he blew and he managed, with the help of the Speaker, to finish his speech.

The rest, as they say, is history, although throughout his long years of retirement, when he published his memoirs and his diaries and tried to settle into a state of fatherly grace in the House of Lords, the once great politician told anyone who would listen that he had been right, that his opponents had been wrong and that a report with blank pages was exactly what he had intended all along.

Upwardly Mobile

(Loosely based on Grimm's *The Fisherman & His Wife*)

Although life by the sea might appear to be idyllic, it is not without its problems of season and poverty, and there was once a poor fisherman who lived with his long suffering wife in a caravan on the cliff tops that rise up from Cornwall's craggy southern coastline. Apart from a few casual jobs that he managed to get during the summer season, when Britain's residential masses poured out of their suburban homes to spend two weeks basking in the melange of weather systems that blow in across the great western seas, he spent most of the year fishing from beaches and rocky breakwaters, eking out a meagre living by selling sea bass to local restaurants and pubs.

Towards the end of another summer of variable weather, with the seasonal work drying up, the fisherman went down to his favourite spot on the beach and cast out his lines, settling down in a rocky hollow to wait for the bounty of the oceans to come his way. He spent a happy hour musing on the vagaries of fortune and on his

wife's incessant drive to better her lot by putting up new net curtains and buying things in the end of season sales, before, all of a sudden, the line went taught and his float was dragged under the waves and out of sight.

The fisherman played out the reel, letting the fish take enough line so that it wouldn't break and then he hauled and spun for all he was worth. It was, quite possibly, the biggest fish he had ever landed and was sure to be worth a pretty penny. He worked as diligently and as carefully as he could so as not to lose his prize. Eventually, after much travail and having expended a great deal of energy and sweat, the fisherman finally caught sight of the great fish he hoped to land. He was stunned to see that holding on to his line for dear life was a soaked, bedraggled and half drowned man in sailing gear. The fisherman planted his rod into the sand, wedged it fast with some rocks and waded out into the surf to rescue the poor unfortunate from the heavy swell and from a wind that whipped the spray up and around his ears.

"Please...help...me", gurgled the waterlogged tourist as he finally managed to grab hold of the fisherman's coat sleeves, and without a moment's hesitation the fisherman dragged the man to safety on the beach. Having checked that there were no broken bones, the fisherman dashed up to an ice cream kiosk at the head of the beach, borrowed a mobile phone and called for an ambulance. Then he went back to the stricken man and tended to him with great care until the rescue services arrived.

As the half-drowned man was placed onto a stretcher he placed a soggy but readable card into the fisherman's trembling hand and whispered, "My name is on the card. I'm in catering and if ever you should need anything at all just call me. I'll do whatever I can to help you. You've saved my life".

The local paper took pictures of their resident hero and by the time that the fisherman got home to his caravan, his wife had heard all about her brave husband's stirring deeds that afternoon on the radio. She pressed him to tell her everything, which he did, including the part where the poor unfortunate man had promised to remember them if they ever needed help.

"Did you ask him for anything?" said the fisherman's wife.

“No, not at the time, I didn’t think it was right”, replied her husband, “and anyway, I wouldn’t know what to ask for”.

“Typical bloody man”, said his wife, as she looked the now dry business card over for the umpteenth time. “You can start by calling this number and asking him if he could help us to get a proper little cottage in the village. This caravan stinks and it leaks and winter’s coming on”.

The fisherman walked the half-mile to the nearest telephone box and called the number on the card. The phone rang a few times and was answered by the businessman’s wife, who, on hearing that it was the fisherman who was calling, immediately promised him that she and her husband would sort this small thing out.

“After all”, she said, “everyone should have somewhere warm and dry to live and it’s such a small thing to do to repay your bravery and your kindness”.

Within a month the paperwork was done, the local council searches were completed and contracts were signed. Well before the final onset of winter’s driving rains and howling gales, the fisherman and his wife were snugly settled into their new cottage home, complete with brand new furniture, a proper telephone line and a lovely new kitchen. The cottage even had a pretty little courtyard garden with a greenhouse in one corner so that the fisherman could supplement the family diet by growing a few vegetables and fruits in the spring.

The fisherman remarked to his wife as he carried her over the threshold of their first real house, “Well, love, this is where true happiness begins”.

She looked at him quizzically for a moment before replying, “We’ll see”.

That winter was full of beating winds and horizontal rain. The seas towered above the bunkered land in their grey majesty, and the couple, blessed for the first time with central heating, lived as well as they had ever done.

The fisherman thought the world was a beautiful, a perfect place, until early on a bright spring morning his wife turned to him and said, “You can’t swing a cat in this place. It’s really getting me down, and as for the garden, well, it’s no more than a yard. It reminds me of the sort of place my grandmother used to live in.

What we need, especially if we're going to have a family, is a nice three bedroom semi-detached house with a proper garden. Call your mate and tell him I'm in the family way and we need something bigger".

"Darling, darling", exclaimed the fisherman, "that's wonderful news, I had no idea. But do you really think I should ask our friend again. I mean, he was very kind but we can't keep asking for more. The cottage is snug and warm and we've got two bedrooms, couldn't we make do here?"

"Rubbish!", said his wife. "You saved his life and he can't put a price on that. Pick up the phone and ask him".

Reluctantly the fisherman telephoned the businessman again and this time he got straight through. He explained that his wife was expecting and that, although they appreciated his kind gesture, the cottage was really a bit small for a growing family. He apologised but asked nonetheless for a three bedroom semi-detached house with a garden and a swing.

"Of course", said the businessman. "I understand. I've got a couple of kids myself and I know how it is, never enough space for the nappies and the toys, and your wife will be getting anxious about her little nestlings. Leave it with me. After all you did, how could I possibly refuse?"

To make things run as smoothly as he could, the businessman bought the cottage from the couple, which, given that they never had a mortgage in the first place, meant that they pocketed a tidy little sum. Then he made them a gift of a beautifully decorated, modern semi detached house on a quiet new estate in a local seaside town. The house had the latest in modern kitchen appliances, a brand new corner bathroom suite, fitted wardrobes in all three bedrooms, and a lovely garden in which the businessman had a swing, a climbing frame and a sand pit installed. Within a month, and with late spring in full bud, the couple took possession of their brand new home, invested some of their newly acquired cash in a sporty little hatchback car, and paid for a family membership at a local country club and gymnasium.

Strangely, the fisherman's wife did not suffer from morning sickness, nor did she eat for two, gain weight or find cute little knitted booties of any interest whatsoever. It turned out that she

had misread the results of the pregnancy testing kit, and although disappointed, she told her husband that they should keep practising in the bedroom of a Sunday morning. In the meantime she spent a great deal of her time at the country club and gymnasium, toning her muscles, keeping her figure in trim and joining a number of other upwardly mobile wives for coffee mornings, hair appointments and tennis lessons.

Towards the end of summer, on a balmy Sunday afternoon with the barbecue embers glowing in a corner of the garden, the fisherman raised a glass of sparkling Chablis to his wife and said, "Darling, what a life. There's money in the bank, we've got a lovely house, and I've finally been able to afford the best fishing rods that money can buy. We couldn't be happier, could we?"

His wife lay back on her sun lounger, shut her eyes and murmured, "No dear, probably not".

The next morning the fisherman's wife woke up early. She had not slept very well, her head being full of ideas and schemes, and so, as the sunlight streamed in through the bedroom window, she nudged her husband awake with her elbow. "Come on, wake up, I've got something to say".

He turned over slowly and opened one eye, feeling that slight dullness around the edge of his thought processes that suggested that maybe he had supped one glass too many the night before. Once he was able to focus he realised that his wife had that look on her face that signified trouble, not of the 'You Bastard' variety, but of the 'I think we should' variety. He sat bolt upright in bed and waited.

"Now that I've finally got your attention", she said, "I want to discuss our present living arrangements. Ever since we joined the country club, I've had to put up with the airs and bloody graces of all those other women. I don't mind that you don't go to work, in fact I like it, but how will we ever afford one of those big, new, detached five bedroom houses with automatic gates like the ones at Seaview Park? How will we ever be able to afford brand new cabriolets and a swimming pool?"

"Are you saying you want me to get a job?" asked her husband after a moment or two casting his line out amongst his early morning thoughts.

“No, dear, I’m not. I think it would be much better if we asked our mutual friend for bit more help. I mean, if he buys this house from us and gives us a lovely new executive home, we’ll be able to put one over on those bitches at the club, won’t we. We’ll be the only ones out of all of them who have independent means”.

“You’ve got to be joking”, replied her appalled husband. “I can’t ask him for another house. It’s just wrong. No, I won’t do it”.

Breakfast was a frosty affair and the fisherman decided that this was one of those times when absence would definitely make the heart grow fonder. He packed up his rods and his brand new multi-compartment bait box, loaded them into the back of the car and spent the rest of the day sitting on the beach waiting for the fish to start biting and for his wife to stop snapping. He didn’t get home until dusk had fallen and was very surprised to find a beautiful candlelit dinner waiting for him, a dinner that was suffused with the sound of romantic strings and a look in his wife’s eyes that meant that he would be getting very little sleep that night.

Unfortunately, the mood was broken when, over a large cognac, his wife revealed that she had phoned their mutual friend, had told him about her husband’s terminal illness and had persuaded him to make her poor spouse’s final year or two truly comfortable. The fisherman was disgusted with his wife’s behaviour, until, with the screaming and shouting turning into the inevitable sobbing and sniffing that always closed down their arguments, she explained just how much their current house was worth and what that meant in terms of their future lifestyle.

Before the autumn leaves started to fall, the happy couple had moved once again, this time to the gated residential community called Seaview Park, which stood in beautifully landscaped surroundings on the fringe of the lovely, picturesque Cornish village of Fowey. They also spent just enough of their newly banked cash to park two matching cabriolets on their substantial, shingled driveway.

The only dark cloud on their horizon was a note from their benefactor that had been pinned to a bottle of champagne that awaited them on the day of their arrival in their new home, offering his sincerest condolences on the sad news about the fisherman’s

health and saying that he would consider it an honour if they would invite him to the funeral, long may that day be postponed.

Apart from the discomfort caused by the occasional call from their friend to enquire on the fisherman's health, the couple thoroughly enjoyed their new life embedded in one of the higher strata of the aspirational middle class cliff face. Without a mortgage to worry about, the funds that they had received from the sale of their previous, modest abode provided them with a solid foundation on which to base their daily activities. The fisherman still caught sea bass when time permitted and he still sold them on, although usually to a higher class of establishment nowadays. His wife embellished her life considerably with good quality clothes and jewellery, buffing up her ego and fluffing her aura so much that she became a leading light in the social whirl at the country club. She even took up golf to while away the hours when her husband was otherwise engaged with lines, reels and lures.

The fisherman's was a happy soul and he thanked his lucky stars for the gift that they had made to him of a strong and purposeful wife. Even in those far off days in the caravan, she had known how to manage their affairs, limited though they may have been back then, and he was quite content to leave the day to day nitty-gritty of bills and services in her capable hands. As long as he had enough cash in his pocket to put petrol in his rather sparkly cabriolet and to fund his passion for angling, he simply didn't have a care in the world, and so things progressed for nearly two years until his wife made an announcement over breakfast one morning.

"Have you seen the local paper this week?" she asked.

"No, not yet", replied her husband.

"There's an interesting feature on the front page. Our mutual friend is opening a fish processing factory just down the road in St Austell, which might come in handy now that we've run out of cash".

"I beg your pardon", said the fisherman. "What do you mean, we've run out of cash?"

"All gone", said his wife. "I don't know how you expect us to manage with all of that expensive fishing gear you keep buying. Anyway, I was thinking, maybe we should ask him to give you a job. Factory Manager would do nicely".

“But I don’t know anything about fish factories. Catching the odd bass is one thing, but I’ve never managed anything other than my own time, and besides, he’s hardly going to take me on in my current state of health, is he!”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Tell him a faith healer or something has cured you. It’s a miracle, heavens be praised!”

“I really don’t want a job...”

His wife looked at him sternly, crossing her arms and assuming a position where her body language needed no translations. “Ask him...”

Reluctantly and with a heavy heart, the fisherman telephoned the businessman and they arranged to meet to discuss the possibility of the fisherman joining this new business venture. The truth of the matter, however, was that the businessman wanted to see for himself just how marvellous his saviour’s recovery had been. According to the man’s wife he had been knocking on death’s door for months now and it was quite amazing to think that he was fit and well once again.

During the telephone call the businessman decided not to remark on the fact that he had seen the fisherman sitting on the beach with his rods and his lines on more than one occasion during his recent trips down to the south coast to seal the deal on his new factory with the local council planning authorities. He also decided that it would be better to deal with the matter of his friend’s phantom offspring face to face.

On the businessman’s next trip down to review progress on the building of his new factory, the two men met for a pie and a pint in the local village pub. After exchanging some pleasantries and reliving that fateful afternoon once again, entertaining all of the drinkers in the place for a good half hour, the two men got down to business.

“So”, said the businessman, “you’re interested in working for me at the factory?”

“Oh, absolutely”, replied the fisherman. “My wife thought that with my extensive experience around fish you should make me your factory manager. She wants...I want fifty-thousand a year and six weeks holiday, plus healthcare and gym membership for me and my family”.

“Very reasonable for someone qualified to take on that sort of responsibility. When can you start?”

“A month or two, after the summer, probably”, replied the fisherman nervously.

It all seemed to be going too easily and although they appeared to be getting on famously, there was something in the businessman’s eyes that seemed to take all of the warmth and cheer out of the day. At the end of the meal the two men said their goodbyes to the landlord and headed for the car park, the businessman promising to drop his friend a line shortly to confirm the details discussed.

As his friend and benefactor walked over to a luxuriously large red saloon, the fisherman stood quite still in the middle of the car park and stared open mouthed at the space where he had parked his car. It was gone. He rushed over to his friend’s car and tapped on the smoked glass windows, gesticulating wildly at the vacant spot where his lovely sparkling convertible had been standing.

“Gone...stolen...car”, he stammered.

“Oh, don’t worry about that”, said the businessman. “Hop in and I’ll run you home. We can sort everything out there. It’s always happening these days, especially with popular models like yours”.

The fisherman sat in stunned silence as they drove towards his fine executive home at Seaview Park. He was shocked and hurt, feeling decidedly violated and dirty and angry. He was also deeply impressed by the sheer opulence on display inside his friend’s sumptuous motor car and in between fits of pique about the riff-raff who walked today’s streets, he wondered whether he could get a car like this as a perk of his new job.

They drove up the hill that led to the big electric gates at the entrance to Seaview Park just in time to see a large removals lorry pulling out of the estate followed by a ranting, screaming harridan dragging behind her a couple of suitcases and an old and battered fishing rod. In the background two large looking gentlemen in suits checked a clipboard list, closed the front door to one of the houses and put the keys into a black leather briefcase.

The businessman stopped his car, told the fisherman to wait and with the help of the two suited gentlemen, he put the screaming

woman's suitcases in the boot and opened one of the rear passenger doors for her so that she could get in.

"You bast...", was all that she managed to yell at him before one of the suited gentlemen clamped his hand firmly over her mouth and bundled her onto the back seat. The two minders then climbed in and sat on top of her, remaining seated upon the squirming woman all the way to their final destination. The fisherman stared alternately at the businessman, at his very big and burly associates and then down at his prostrate but still struggling wife.

After twenty minutes of driving, during which the fisherman's wife gradually lost the will to fight and bawl, the car pulled up at the head of the cliffs that rose up above the beach where the fisherman, his wife and their mutual friend had first bumped into one another. The newly homeless couple were manhandled out of the car without a further word being said by anyone and left standing on the loose stones and thinly grassed topsoil at the top of the cliff where they had once lived a spare and shabby life in a caravan. The businessman put a sealed envelope into the fisherman's hands, climbed into his car and drove out of their lives forever more.

The envelope contained a short note, which the fisherman gave to his wife to read.

Dear...

You and your wife are thieving bastards. You lied about everything. When you've saved enough of your unemployment benefit, sue me. Now you've got what you really deserved all along.

Sincerely,

Your one time drowning friend.

In the bottom of the envelope was a set of keys to a brand new second hand caravan that was parked on top of the cliffs in exactly the same spot where the fisherman and his wife had lived before they had met their no longer mutual friend.

Terry's Amazing Shin Pads

Not long ago in Stackton-on-Seam, a town that lies in the folded valleys to the west of Manchester, a town where the chimney stacks rise up to shake hands with the sky, there was once a young boy who desperately wanted to be a famous footballer. Every day, before school, during break times and in the lowering light of the afternoons, you could find him kicking a ball against a wall or running through the streets pretending to dribble past the greatest defences the world had ever seen.

Unfortunately the boy suffered from two serious disadvantages; he simply wasn't very good at football nor was he the most gifted substitute on the bench. His father encouraged him as much as he could but was, at heart, just grateful that his son had such a healthy hobby. No one expected young Terry to amount to very much in life.

One sunny summer day, when Terry was playing on his own at World Cup in his local park, an old man with a stoop, and who was accompanied by a sour looking fox terrier, called Terry over.

"Why are you playing all on your own, son?" asked the old man. "I thought football was a team game".

"I prefer it on my own", said Terry, jinking around the old man's legs. The sour looking fox terrier, which was called Pele, stuck out his paw and tackled the young boy with ease.

The old man looked wistfully down at the boy. "I think you're playing on your own because the other boys won't pick you for their teams".

Terry's cheeks went a very bright shade of red and he came to an abrupt and ball-less halt. Terry managed to stammer out a high-pitched "Course not", and then he just stood there frozen with embarrassment as the dog played keepie-uppie with all four paws.

"Well, I can help you", said the old man.

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a battered old pair of faded, blue ribbed shin pads. "Do you see these, boy? These are magic shin pads and you know what that means don't you?"

Terry continued to stand there, staring at the shin pads, his face displaying the mixed pleasures of vacant distrust and horror.

"These used to belong Golden Goals Nudger", continued the old man. "Do you remember him?"

Terry searched his mind's incomplete catalogue of sporting bubble gum cards, but there didn't seem to be anything filed under the name of Nudger. He continued to stand there dumbly, his mouth flapping open and shut like a goldfish trying to remember what it had eaten for breakfast.

"Well, perhaps he was a little before your time", said the old man. "What about Chazza, do you remember him at all?"

This time Terry had no trouble locating the bubble gum card, the tee shirt and the video, and he snapped out of his vacant trance with a sense of welcome relief. The great Chazza! He had been a teenage prodigy, a master of the beautiful game, who, in the prime of his career, had spiralled out of control in a whirlwind of drink, binge eating and late night brawls in discotheques.

"Yeah", said Terry, grinning. "Brilliant!"

"He owned these shin pads, just like Mr. Nudger before him", said the old man. "You'd never have believed that Chazza was just like you once upon a time. Aye lad, when he was twelve he was rubbish, but once he started wearing these magic shin pads, well, the world was almost his oyster".

The battered and bruised shin pads suddenly seemed to glow and to shine. Terry was convinced that he could hear the air around them crackle and fizz with electricity. Terry was mesmerised.

"I'll give these shin pads to you on one condition", said the old man. His dog was now keeping the ball in the air with his head. It sounded to Terry as though he was counting in doggy fashion and had reached nine hundred and ninety-nine.

"You can have these shin pads if you promise me you'll always love football more than anything else in the entire world".

Terry promised with every ounce of his heart and soul, for he knew that football was in his blood, that football was his reason for living. And so, with a flourish and a bow the old man gave Terry the shin pads, showed him how to tuck them into his socks and then told the dog to give the boy his ball back.

As soon as Terry started to kick his football around the park he could feel the magic in the shin pads start to course through his veins. By the time that he looked up to say thank you to the old man, both he and his dog were ambling away into the distance. They appeared to be in deep conversation and Terry was sure he heard the dog say, "It'll all end in tears, woof, it always does, woof." Terry shrugged his shoulders and got down to the serious business of dribbling successfully around all of the piles of doggy mess that littered the park's only proper football pitch.

Terry was amazed at the transformation in his skills. He seemed to possess a sublime accuracy and alacrity with a football that he had never been aware of before. By the time that he reached the far end of the football pitch both he and the ball were still perfectly clean, something hitherto entirely unheard of. Terry also noticed that his heart wasn't racing like it usually did after even a brief run. He breathed deeply, feeling his lungs fill with air. Terry felt as if he could run forever.

Terry quickly became a regular in his school team, scoring one hundred goals the very next season, which brought him to the attention of the biggest football club in the land. When he first signed junior terms with the club some of the older boys laughed at him, but Terry didn't care. With his battered old shin pads tucked safely inside his knee length socks, he ran riot through every level of schoolboy and junior football, scoring record numbers of goals at every age. By the time that he was sixteen he was ready to play his first game for his club in the country's Super League. In fact, Terry marked his debut by scoring a magnificent hat trick.

Terry was the happiest sixteen year old in the world and as he said in the post match interview on television, he was over the moon. From such raw beginnings here he was doing the one thing he loved most in the whole wide world and he even got paid for it.

Of course, Terry's father handled the money side of things. He bought Terry and his mother a beautiful mock Georgian mansion in one of the better parts of Cheshire, while he devoted himself to furthering Terry's interests from a penthouse flat in the city centre.

Everything went swimmingly for Terry over the next few seasons. His goal scoring reached ever-greater levels of perfection and he was instrumental in helping his country fight their way to

third place in the next World Cup. The fans, the press and all of those ex-footballer pundits on the television said that Terry was a legend in the making; that he was ten times the player Chazza had ever been. Come the time of the next World Cup every commentator expected Terry to lead his national side to the ultimate football prize. Indeed, some of the less objective newspapers even started a campaign to rename football. They wanted to call the beautiful game 'Terryball'.

One balmy spring Saturday afternoon, with his team leading by five goals to nil, Terry's manager decided to give him a well earned rest twenty minutes before the end of the match. He had, by then, scored all five goals and it had been a long and hard season. After all, you didn't end up leading the Super League by thirty points at Christmas without some very hard graft. And so Terry was substituted, about which he was quite happy. He settled down in the dugout to watch the rest of the match next to his less illustrious team mates, just another mucker doing his duty.

During a minor off the ball fracas between two of his own team's midfield players Terry happened to glance up from the match. His attention had been caught by a dazzling burst of light from one of the executive boxes in the opposite stand. Once Terry's momentary blindness had cleared and he had put on his airline pilot's shades, he was able to identify the source of this brilliant white light. Rays of sunlight were catching the diamond teardrop earrings of a stunningly beautiful young lady in the opposite stand and it was these bursts of pure radiance that were catching Terry's attention.

Terry nudged Crippler Cruncho, the reserve centre-half, pointed up at the executive box in the opposite stand, and asked, "Who's that?"

Crippler shrugged. "Dunno", he said, "looks some old twat an' a dog what's waving at us"

"No, up a bit, in the box, left a bit, left a bit, yeah there",

"Err...Oh, yeah, that's Bling", said Crippler, "you know, whatsername, she's a model-singer-actress, sort of".

"Bling", repeated Terry, turning the name over and over in his mind. It was the most beautiful name that he had ever heard and Terry gazed up at her adoringly for the rest of the game. He stared

so intently into her jet-black sunglasses that he completely missed the amazing comeback by his team's opponents that resulted in the match ending in a five-all draw.

Later that night in the Orgasmatron Nightclub, where the boys had gone for some shampoo and some dancing after another hard week at the tactical grindstone, Terry told his best friend, left-back and room-mate, 'Boozo' Van Honk, that he was going to marry Bling.

The world continued to turn as usual, although there were some who said that it had been turned upside down by Terry's magical footballing displays. Whether playing for his club or for his country, Terry set record after record with his amazing goal scoring exploits. No one, for example, had ever seen a player bicycle kick a ball into the roof of their opponent's net from their own goal line before. Terry and his magic shin pads were a phenomenon; they were a miracle.

The world was doubly amazed a few weeks later when Terry and Bling started to appear together at nightclubs, at film premieres and at all of the best parties. But no matter how many star-studded nights out Terry had, he never disappointed on the field of play.

Terry and Bling became what the world's press called an 'Item', appearing everywhere together. They attended every glitzy party, were invited to every celebrity bash, made frequent guest appearances on television and generally became the most famous couple on the planet.

Their world appeared to be one of endless shopping sprees, of choreographed photo opportunities, of expensive endorsements and high fashion extravaganzas. Their lives became so much a part of the general public's fascination with wealth and fame that Terry and Bling's heads filled up quite to the top with the sound of clicking and whirring cameras.

Of course, such things cannot last and eventually Terry and Bling settled into one another just as most couples do. Bling grew out of her modelling career and into the far more satisfying role of wife and mother. Terry continued to dazzle on the playing field and without quite remembering why, he stood firmly by his old and battered shin pads, even though he was offered bright shiny new ones nearly every week.

Eventually it came to the time of the next World Cup. Terry was brilliant. He led his country through all of the qualifying matches with an authority that mixed stern determination with the most sublime football skills that the world had ever seen. Everyone in the team camp, in the media and on the streets was convinced that this would be Terry's championship. This was the moment in time when he would become a true great, possibly the greatest footballer there had ever been.

Terry's brilliance knew no bounds once the tournament started in earnest. He was magnificent, scoring goal after goal and inspiring his countrymen in their fight to win a place in the World Cup final. In between games, and when not training, Terry and Bling held press conferences and photo-shoots. They even had special world cup tattoos on their shoulders and they introduced fashionistas the world over to the joys of diamond encrusted toe piercings.

Journalists, players and fans alike hung on every word that Terry uttered, paying particular attention to Bling when she told them nice little stories about Terry's life of domestic bliss. The prophecies and the fates conspired, it seemed, to remove every obstacle from Terry's now undoubted ascent to the peak of footballing achievement.

On the eve of the final, in which Terry and his country would meet their greatest sporting rivals to decide who would be champion of the world, there was a knock on Terry and Bling's hotel room door. Terry was sorting out his wardrobe for the champion's ball that would be held the following night, so Bling opened the door to find out who was disturbing their evening.

Standing there was a little old man, all stooped and grey, with a sour looking fox terrier attached to his wrist by means of a length of packaging string. In his hands he held a plush crimson velvet cushion and on the cushion was a pair of brilliantly glittering shin pads. They were sewn with real silver threads and were made of the most exquisite golden cloth. On each shin pad the letter 'T' had been embroidered in genuine, full carat diamonds.

Bling's first reaction on seeing this rather grubby man and his equally grubby dog was one of mild disgust. However, when the light from the hotel room's chandelier caught the golden cloth, the

silver threads and the diamonds, she completely revised her opinion to one of tolerant sniffiness.

"Tezza, babe, we've got a visitor", she called out, although she didn't invite the old man and his dog into their suite. Terry ambled out of the bedroom and joined his beloved at the front door.

"Hello", said Terry.

The old man looked at him. The boy from all those years ago was now a fine specimen of a man, a man with the world at his feet. He hoped against hope that this time things would be different.

"Do you remember me?" asked the old man.

"Erm... no, don't think so", replied Terry, after a few seconds rummaging through bubble gum cards filled with the faces of the rich and famous.

"In the park, when you were what, eleven? The dog and me? Blue shin pads?" asked the old man, hopefully.

Terry delved deeper into his collection of memory cards. "Yeah... actually... rings a bell", he said after a moment or two. "Talking dog, right?"

"What?" the old man blurted out, before regaining some composure. "Oh, yes, well, when he's in the mood. But that's not the point. Do you remember what I told you about the shin pads?"

Again Terry searched back through his memories. So much had happened to him, so many wonderful things, and he simply couldn't recall conversations from that long ago. He was aware that there was something he should say, but couldn't quite put his finger on it. Bling looked at her nails and sighed.

"To be honest", said Terry, "I can't say I do".

The old man sucked in his cheeks and shook his head. The fox terrier looked back up at him and seemed to give a knowing wink. The old man sighed, turned back to Terry and said, "Better get this over with, then. OK, this is how it's supposed to go...I offer you these bright and shiny new shin pads in exchange for your tatty old ones. Then you the tell me to bugger off because you understand what that means..."

"Sorry?" said Terry.

The old man had a tear in his eye and a lump in his throat as he wearily muttered the words he had longed never to say again. "Just go and get those bloody shin pads".

A few seconds later, the old man exchanged the bright, sparkling, monogrammed shin pads for Terry's battered old blue ones. As the door closed on him and his dog he heard Bling say to Terry, "Nice, aren't they babe, really you."

The old man and the dog turned back towards the lifts. The little dog cocked his leg and urinated against a large potted aspidistra before turning to the old man and saying, "That's five thousand Bonios you owe me."

Of course, Terry played an absolute stinker in the final. It was as if he had two left feet and he was substituted after just twenty minutes. The rest of the team fell apart without their great talismanic leader and the country went into a deep state of mourning for a whole week after the disgrace of the final.

The next season saw Terry's fall from grace accelerate. In fact, it was apocalyptic. He scored only one goal for his great club and that was only because he tripped over his own feet and accidentally kned the ball into his own net.

Terry retired from the beautiful game amid a welter of accusations, of public rows with Bling and general feelings of mutual betrayal. All that Terry could do, once the dust had settled and his divorce had been dragged through the mire of the gutter press, was to lend his name and his former glories to endorsements and dubious advertising campaigns. As new stars took their place in the footballing firmament, even these offers of work dried up. In the end Terry was forced to pawn his earrings and to buy a pub.

Terry pretty well disappeared from public life, earning a meagre living from his pub until that went into liquidation too. He really hit rock bottom when the invitations to play in charity golf tournaments stopped arriving on his doormat because the organisers were worried about Terry's drink problems.

However, some years later Terry did burst back into the limelight. His face, somewhat fuller and much more care worn by now, appeared on television screens and in newspapers across the world. Unfortunately his face also appeared in Crown Court

number seven, as it is likely to do if you get nicked dealing Class A narcotics.

The Faithful Gardener

(Loosely based on Andersen's The Gardener & The Lord)

Some miles to the south of London, nestling in the gently rolling, green swathed hills of the Surrey Downs, there stands an old country manor house, which boasts the thickest of stone walls, a small but nonetheless impressive little tower and ornate white painted wooden gables. This lovely old place was once owned by a famous television personality, whose claim to good fortune and favour was based upon his inestimable knowledge of all things horticultural. He presented a weekly show about gardening and had recently been seen in the nation's living rooms helping the poor and needy to fix up their allotments and their child friendly but dishevelled herbaceous borders. The television gardener lived with his lovely wife on his modest but beautifully proportioned estate in the country, when filming and international awards ceremonies permitted.

The manor house was beautifully appointed, inside and out, sporting a novelty coat of arms above the door and a beautiful wisteria that twisted and flowered around the porch and around the front bay windows. The lawns were of the lushest, velvet green and were matched for their smoothness only by the expensive Wilton carpets that lay in the sitting room. There was not a weed in sight and the flower borders exploded with colour and vivacity throughout the spring, summer and autumn.

Given the many calls upon his time, filming new and instructive programmes, making personal appearances and in advising the great and the good about their white flies and their black spots, our good television gardener and his wife employed a rather clever man from the local village to look after their own garden when they were away. The local man was blessed with the greenest of fingers, and everyone, be they an inhabitant of the locale or a distinguished

visitor, always remarked on the sheer beauty and splendour of the gardens at the manor house.

The gardens at the manor were extensive and with so many important assignments and projects to see to, neither the television personality nor his faithful gardener had ever found the time to finish remodelling every nook and cranny in the place. Adjoining the kitchen garden, to the east of the house, there was still a rough patch of ground upon which stood an ancient oak tree. This magnificent specimen stood all year round, in wind and rain and sun, standing bare and almost leafless. Instead of thick green leaves hanging from its branches, the ancient oak was covered in the large, round twig balls that made up a great city of rooks.

Ever since the tree had first raised its huge crown to the skies the rooks had made it their home, passing their history and their grandeur down through every generation until the present day, so that the bird city teemed with life and every resident rook knew that he or she was a true aristocrat. They had seen men and women come and go through the ages, but they had always been there; they were the old, the true lords of the land and the sky. It didn't matter to them one bit that men came along from time to time and raised thunder in their high-rise homes with shotguns. They cawed and wheeled, watching the fire and the thunder rise with a mixture of fear and utter disdain.

The faithful gardener often spoke with his employer about the patch of rough ground around the old oak tree. He was convinced that if the tree was chopped down he could make real use of the land and be rid of the screaming rooks to boot. Despite every good reason he could think of, however, his employer had no desire to be rid of the ancient tree. The famous television gardener always said that the great oak leant the estate an air of permanence and solidity; that it was a link with the past of this small but great house; that it was history and should stand, like himself, as a symbol of greatness and stability forever. "After all, Ted, haven't you got enough to do with the flower borders, the lawns and the vegetables?"

Ted did indeed have plenty to do in looking after the gardens, the vegetables and the orchards. He always worked with zeal, with vigour and not without considerable skill and expertise, but the truth was that the television celebrity and his wife were too busy to

see the merits of his arguments about the grand old oak tree. In fact, they were often at pains to explain to old Ted that as good as he was with their little garden they had often seen flowers or eaten fruit on their travels that surpassed the specimens he grew for them at home. These conversations, these descriptions of wonderful blooms and ripe fruits, distressed old Ted, because he wanted to do the best job that he could for his employer.

One day while visiting their country home the famous television gardener and his wife called for old Ted and told him quite bluntly that the previous day they had tasted the most exquisite tomatoes. Visiting some friends in London, they had been privileged to attend a summer barbecue, where everyone, they told him, had praised these succulent and flavoursome tomatoes to the heavens. They were convinced that these luscious fruits could not be of a domestic variety and the famous television gardener asked old Ted to make enquiries, to find out where they came from and to order some seeds for the greenhouse. He was to start growing them here at the manor house immediately.

They gave old Ted the name of the fruit dealer in the city where the tomatoes had been bought and so, the very next morning, old Ted drove into town and arranged to meet the fruit dealer. Arranging all of this was no problem because Ted knew the fruit dealer very well. He was, after all, the very same fruit dealer to whom, on behalf of his employer, old Ted sold the surplus fruit that grew in the garden of the lovely country manor house. When they met, and after a few pleasantries over a cup of tea, old Ted asked the fruit dealer where these wonderful tomatoes came from.

“Why, they’re from your own garden, Ted”, said the fruit dealer in surprise, and he showed him the very same tresses full of beautiful ripe, red tomatoes that old Ted had sent up to town just a few days previously. This, of course, made old Ted feel very happy. He rushed back to the country manor house and told his master and mistress immediately that the tomatoes came from their very own greenhouse.

The celebrated couple could not believe their ears. “Ted, it’s simply not possible. No, we won’t believe a word of it unless the fruit dealer can prove it in writing”.

And prove it he could. Within an hour there arrived a facsimile copy of a receipt, which clearly showed that the tomatoes had been sold to him by the gardener at Watersmeat Manor.

“Well, that’s amazing”, exclaimed the television gardener to his wife.

As soon as they had checked the greenhouses for themselves, they started to despatch punnets of their lush red tomatoes to all of their important friends. They were especially keen to send their tomatoes to the restaurants run by their celebrity chef chums in the bustling centres of expensive consumer consumption that shined amid the phantom lights of the capital city. They were over the moon that their modest little estate could produce such wonderful produce and did not hesitate to tell everyone and anyone about the wonders of their traditional approach to gardening. And yet, they felt compelled to tell old Ted that, after all, it was an exceptional summer and everyone’s tomatoes had turned out pretty well.

A little later in the year, the famous gardener and his wife were honoured with an invitation to attend a dinner at a famous politician’s house. They dined with minor royalty, with famous politicians and with an impressively ostentatious banker. They were even introduced to a famous footballer and his wife, but found the conversation wandering away from the arts of pruning rather too quickly for their taste.

The day after the grand banquet, old Ted was summoned to the hotel in the capital city where his employer and his wife were staying for a few days. They had been served with the most delicious, the tenderest and the most juicy plum pie they had ever tasted. Old Ted was told to make enquiries of the politician’s kitchen staff to find out where these plums were cultivated. He was to obtain the name of the fruit, to purchase some young trees and to plant them in the orchard at the manor without delay.

It so happened that old Ted’s niece was the pastry cook in the politician’s kitchen. She quickly introduced him to the head chef, who was delighted to make the acquaintance of the man who had sent him such wonderful fruit and vegetables for the previous night’s culinary extravaganza. At first old Ted was a little confused, but his state of mind changed to one of pure joy as his niece explained it all to him. A few months previously, when the

kitchen had a very bad experience with the government catering suppliers, she had shown the head chef some her uncle's home grown fruits that she was going to have for her lunch. Ever since then the head chef insisted on ordering fresh seasonal fruit and vegetables for banquets and special occasions through old Ted's niece, and all the while the unsuspecting Ted had been convinced that his niece was strangely obsessed by fresh fruit and vegetables.

When old Ted reported back to his employers they were quite stumped for an answer. Once again they couldn't believe what they were hearing.

"Ted, you can't pull the wool over our eyes, you know", they both said. "It's quite impossible. You can't have grown those plums",

This time old Ted was prepared. Written on official government notepaper and in the head chef's own hand, which the famous couple recognised instantly from the menus on the table the previous evening, there was a signed testament to the source of the wonderfully succulent plums.

After their initial shock subsided, the famous television gardener made sure that the whole land heard about his amazing plums. He sent fruit to every person pictured in 'Hi!' magazine that week, arranged visits to his orchards for the great and the good and started a small mail order business selling new young trees to anyone who wanted to grow their own. This particular specimen was so well appreciated that it even came to bear the famous television gardener's own name, which he thought absolutely thrilling.

And through it all, in their quiet moments, the famous television gardener and his wife made every effort to keep old Ted's feet firmly on the ground.

"It wouldn't do to let him get above himself," said the wife.

"Absolutely not", replied her husband. "We can't let him get big headed about all of this".

Old Ted, however, was not inclined to inflate his own ego. Instead, he strived harder every year to produce the most remarkable flowers, vegetables and fruits. All that he wanted was to be recognised as one of the best working gardeners in Surrey, and, with a great deal of hard work, he achieved just that,

producing some of the finest specimen fruits and vegetables from the country manor garden for many years to come.

But despite his successes, his employers often reminded him that the tomatoes had been the best of all. The plums were fine indeed, but of a different nature all together and everything else since, while very good, was not a patch on those original fruits. Indeed, as good as his produce was, it was no more than a match, at best, for the produce of other gardeners. When, one year, the rhubarb wilted and turned yellow at the stem, only those poor, unfortunate rhubarb plants were ever mentioned again. It seemed to old Ted that his employers found some sort of satisfaction in being able to say, "Well, Ted, my old friend, it didn't turn out quite so well this year, did it? Better luck next year, eh?"

As well as growing the most stunning fruits and vegetables, old Ted was also something of a wizard with the flower beds. Every Saturday morning he brought fresh flowers up to the manor house and created the most delicate or the most vibrant arrangements, depending on the patterns of the weather and the moods of his employers. One day, while reading one of his master's gardening magazines, which just happened to have an article about cottage gardens in it penned by the famous television gardener himself, old Ted read about a great national competition. Entries were invited from gardeners across the land, the prize being the chance to have your very own television programme about gardening on one of the satellite television channels. Old Ted had never considered a career in the media, having considerable first hand experience of the pressures and the trials of it all through his employers. He was, however, intrigued by the competition's rules, which stated that to win the competition you had to produce a most unusual and new flower.

It occurred to Ted that there might be something in this, as he had spent many years experimenting with grafts, cross-pollinations and rootstocks. Hidden away, in the roughest patch of the old manor's gardens where the ancient oak tree grew, was old Ted's private nursery bed. The more he thought about it, the more certain he was that he should enter the competition.

All through the next spring, while paying attention to the manor's gardens, vegetable patches, greenhouses and orchards, old

Ted carefully cultivated his special plants. It was a glorious year for growing and, amid the general praise for his floral displays and the usual comments from his employers; old Ted worked quietly and assiduously, waiting for the day of the great competition.

On the day before the competition, old Ted set off bright and early for Kew Gardens. He spent the day preparing the soil in his allocated spot, mulching, weeding and hoeing, before gently placing his prize specimen in its ornamental pot in the middle of his display. He watered his plant, brushed its stems and tenderly pricked out a few older leaves. As if responding to his loving touch, the magnificent red flower head threw up new feathers, filling out and flaming into glorious bloom at just the right moment. The next day, with the show ground full to bursting with every type of plant, with new roses, new fuscias, begonias, hostas and hebe, with the walkways full to bursting with eager competitors and excited crowds, the judging commenced.

To old Ted's delight, each judge stood for minutes on end gazing at his prize entry. Their eyes lit up when they saw the shape of the plant, its fullness and its glorious shades of green rippling in the sunlight. They seemed to melt into the dazzling display from his plant's fire-red flowers, flowers bursting with energy and vibrancy. At last, with the sun at its full height and with the crowds buzzing in anticipation, the famous television gardener and his wife arrived at old Ted's display.

They were amazed, once more, by what they saw. They walked around the plant, examined every leaf, every shoot and every stamen. They tutted and clucked, pressing their tongues against their cheeks, sucked in their breath and made notes on their judge's pads. After ten minutes they stood back and looked at each other.

"It's quite stunning", said Ted's employer. "To think that we should see an Amazonian Fritillary, and a red one to boot".

And the cries went up from the assembled crowd, "Hip, hip, hooray for the Amazonian Fritillary, three cheers for old Ted!"

All of the judges assembled next to Ted's amazing new flower, and busied themselves with their notes and their scores. The famous television gardener buttonholed each and every judge, telling them that he alone had recognised the new plant's sublime glories, that the entrant was his own gardener, who had learned his

trade from a kind-hearted master, and that there could only be one winner. Despite some wrangling, and the odd fraying of nerves amongst some of the better-known judges, eventually they all agreed that old Ted was, indeed, the winner.

The next few minutes were a blur for Ted. He was given a bright purple sash to wear, a sparkling shiny trophy to hold and was made to stand just to the left of the famous television gardener when it was time for the speeches. His employer rattled through some thanks, greeted the great and the good in the audience and continued to tell everyone about the new plant. He explained that, although new to them all, it was clearly a hybrid from the equatorial regions, a masterful admixture of the new world and the old ways of the English garden. It was, he said, a stunning masterpiece of the gardener's art. The flower was the fruit of his own garden and was blossoming now because of his love for teaching and the many years of hard work that had helped old Ted to attain such levels of skill. He wanted no thanks for these services, professing only that old Ted should enjoy his moment in the limelight, safe in the knowledge that, like himself and his plums, old Ted would have a new flower named after him.

After some polite applause, and to his absolute horror, old Ted was pushed forward to make his own speech. He stood there before the assembled crowd, before the bigwigs and the celebrities, like a rabbit caught in the headlights of an onrushing juggernaut. He cleared his throat once, twice, three times and stopped. He opened his mouth to speak and then shut it again. Finally, summoning courage from the deepest wells of his soul he mumbled, "s'not a flower. It's an artichoke, a red artichoke".

To be honest, most of the assembled crowd neither understood the difference between an artichoke and an Amazonian Fritillary, nor did they care. They burst into riotous applause and cheering wildly, they carried old Ted on their shoulders all the way to a brand new Winnebago that was parked at the far end of the show ground. As old Ted signed the contract for his new television programme, as the crowds cheered again and again, no one noticed the furious argument taking place between the judges.

"He's made a right bloody fool of you", screamed the famous television gardener's wife. "Amazonian Fritillary, my arse."

“He...he should’ve said something”, stammered her husband, as around him one judge after another jeered and called him every sort of stupid ass that their imaginations could conjure up.

Events moved quickly after that. The famous television gardener was ridiculed for not recognising a reasonably common vegetable, albeit one of an unusual colour. The rules of the competition were checked, but it said nothing about vegetables being banned, and so old Ted’s prize was safe. The world of television gardening was turned on its head overnight. Old Ted soon got over his nerves and proved to be a natural on the goggle box, with his old world charm and his unpretentious manners.

As for the once famous television gardener, he soon found that many years of proud and boastful behaviour makes for a rapid fall from grace. With everyone’s confidence in his gardening knowledge thoroughly shattered and with old scores being settled, his programme was axed from the schedules and his publishing deals quickly dried up. His newspaper column was rescinded in favour of “Old Ted’s Country Ways”, and before long he and his wife were forced to sell the country manor. They bought a little cottage in the village eked out a meagre living on a residue of royalties gleaned from discount store book sales and the odd spot of lawn mowing that came their way from lineage adverts in the parish newspaper.

Old Ted, on the other hand, went from strength to strength, earning a small fortune from his globally syndicated television show and from a chain of franchised garden centres bearing his name that sprang up across the whole country. Within a year he bought the old country mansion for himself and spent every spare hour he had tending the gardens, the vegetables and the fruits. At last, and with a sigh of relief from old Ted, the ancient oak tree was cut down and cleared away. In its place he carefully cultivated the most beautiful, the tastiest and the most famous patch of artichokes in the whole of the known world.

And although, as he grew older, he was tempted to get some help with the lawn mowing, old Ted could never quite bring himself to ring the telephone number of another old couple in the local village who advertised as odd job gardeners.

Where the Grass Is Greenest

(Loosely based on Andersen's The Butterfly)

As a young man, Tom Bowler was naturally keen to find himself a girlfriend. Progressing through his teenage years he committed all of the usual fumbling faux pas and awkward lunges that boys the world over are obliged to do before they become men. His chat up lines developed from monosyllabic grunting into the crudely embarrassing hope of youth before finally passing into the hopelessly threatening swagger of the seventeen year old. By the time that he was twenty, however, his urgent desire for a shag, for any shag, was growing and maturing into a desire to find a partner. Of course, if a willing young lady fluttered her come-to-bed eyes at him he was still game, but on the whole his thoughts were crystallising into shapes that combined the simplicity of out and out lust with the complexities of mutual respect and life-long friendship.

Tom had a system. He spent most Friday and Saturday nights in the pub and then went to his local nightclub. Whether stood at the bar or on the balcony overlooking the dance floor, he believed that he could classify girls into a number of different types. Depending on the state of their dress, their general fashion sense, their hairstyle and the amount of cleavage on show, Tom could calculate their "Naughty" ratio.

He was, as is only natural at his age, most attracted to those girls that he deemed to be pretty, and would watch girls huddle together in groups, gazing at them as they lost themselves in the rhythm of the dance, and he fell in love at least once every half an hour. Tom's trouble was that there were just too many lovely young girls for him to choose from. As soon as he spied his next great love and started to work out how he would introduce himself to her his attention would wander and be caught by another girl's smiling eyes. Girls seemed to like him and Tom was as convinced of his own beauty as he was certain that every pretty girl in the room really wanted to be on his arm.

After another engaging but ultimately unsuccessful foray into the beating heart of Saturday night, Tom spent a quiet Sunday

afternoon lazing in the summer sun in a local park. He lay on his back under the drowsy influence of the heat haze and pondered his future, concluding that he really must think about settling down. He rolled over onto his left side and looked into the gentle eye of a simple little daisy. Tom vaguely remembered that the French called daisies by a woman's name, and he ran his finger along the plant's stem while he tried to recall what that name might be. He settled on Deirdre and asked her very quietly if she could really tell the future. She did not deign to reply. Rather than picking her petals off one by one in the time honoured fashion of lovers everywhere, Tom elected, being in a romantic mood and disinclined to do harm to such a simple little bloom, to kiss each petal in turn.

With each kiss he asked, "Loves me? Loves me not? Loves me loads? Just a teeny bit? Not at all? Oh, sweet little Deirdre, oh wise little flower, tell me your secret, who am I to marry? If you let me in on the secret I'll go over to her right now and propose".

But Deirdre had no answer for the boy, knowing in her sap that boys were made up of many things but rarely of a constant heart. Tom grew impatient with her dallying and, placing his soft lips upon her petals, he bit off her head and spat it out onto the grass.

Over the next few months Tom worked overtime on his project. He met and dated young women of all shapes, sizes and temperaments. Some were still at school or college, some were working and some even had a child or two of their own, but Tom had an open heart and an open mind and he always tried to see the good in the person rather than the difficulty in the circumstance of their lives. His conquests ranged through prim and proper young misses all the way up, or down, to the most brazen of womankind. He tried girls who said yes and girls who said no and girls who answered his inevitable question in every shade of grey imaginable, but none of these relationships lasted. Like the daisy, they were too young and too green.

Tom's next revelation came one Thursday night at a music bar in town. He didn't usually go out on a Thursday, preferring instead to drop by the gym to work on his muscular definition, but he fancied a change that night. When he saw the "Grab-A-Granny" sign posted on the door of the bar he felt a gobbet of quiet revulsion rising from the pit of his stomach and was about to turn on his heel

and head for home when the command centre in his brain kicked in and flashed the words, "Older Woman" before his eyes.

Like many young men Tom felt the excitement inherent in the imminent promise of resting his head in the arms and on the bosom of an older and more experienced woman. There was no shortage of interest in the bar and Tom found himself at the centre of a veritable storm of hormonal posturing and pouting. It was great. He'd never had so much fun in public before and by the time that dawn's hopeful head rose above the far horizon of the duvet he was thoroughly and utterly shagged out.

Throughout his twenties and into his early thirties Tom played the part of a very willing Casanova, flitting from one bed to another, living for the moment and for the beauty of every freshly explored country. He tried on for size the role of lover, of the other man, of concubine and of predator, all of which thrilled and excited. He looked for many things in his partners, varying their age, their hair colour, their breast size and the length of their legs as if he were a dictator's wife in a shoe shop. There was, however, one significant drawback with the whole process. The girls and ladies who he really liked were invariably unwilling or unavailable to him for long. On the other hand he found that the women who wanted something more permanent from him were just too tart and cloying for his palette. Nonetheless, Tom swept into his mid-thirties with the absolute confidence of someone who knows that the chosen one is waiting for him just around the corner.

On his thirty-ninth birthday the stars crossed and the finger of fate wagged in Tom's general direction. He met a lovely woman called Rose, who was, in every sense, a true and natural beauty. Her smile was crisp and bright, her eyes shone with a wicked sparkle, and she knew her way around the bedroom, the living room and the kitchen. Much to Tom's delight, Rose even had a pretty good idea where the garage was. Tom dated Rose on an exclusive basis for nearly two months and was seriously considering the ring thing when disaster struck. Rose asked Tom to meet her parents and her older sister one Sunday afternoon and he willingly agreed to go along. After all, if he was going to pop the question he really ought to buy into the whole family kit and caboodle.

As soon as he walked through the door of her parent's modest semi-detached, Tom knew that it had all gone terribly wrong, there being something about paisley carpet that he just couldn't stand. Worse still was the fact that Rose's mother was four foot two inches high and at least six feet wide. The final nail in the coffin lid was the sight of Rose's older sister. She was clearly of the same breeding stock as her sister, although she was, being in her early forties, some seven years older, and those years had not been kind to her. Tom saw in her faded looks and in her dimming eyes a future that he was not inclined to embrace. Shortly after this visit the relationship with Rose foundered on a sea of unreturned telephone calls and ignored emails.

After his experience with Rose, Tom drifted through a series of ever more desperate relationships. He found that his disappointment in the collapse of his hopes and dreams for Rose carried through into each new liaison. He came to see the women that he met in pastel shades, as if the strong and vibrant colours that had once filled their lives had been bleached by the time they'd spent being weathered and beaten down by life. He tried to recapture some of the spirit and verve of his younger days by dating women in their twenties, but the effort of it all was rarely rewarded. More often than not he just got annoyed with these younger conquests because after sex, and even before it on some occasions, there was nothing that he wanted to say to them.

By the time that he reached his mid forties, Tom's good looks and the firmness of his buttocks were on that inevitable, gravitational slide southwards. In his mind's eye, of course, he was still the young buck about town, but the invitations to cuddle and schmooze on a Thursday night at the music bar were becoming increasingly rare and when they did arrive, it wasn't uncommon for the lady in question to resemble Tom's own mother. Of course, he knew that wasn't really the case, but once the thought had thrown its grappling hook and caught on the battlements of Tom's mental castle, there was nothing he could do about the waves of nausea that battered at the door of his mental redoubt.

In the autumn of his years Tom still watched the girls in pubs and at clubs. He watched them in the town's marble halled shopping mall of a Saturday afternoon and at work during the

week. He still found the beauty of fresh skin and bright, expectant eyes utterly compelling, but his flesh was weak and he was tired. That fresh, fragrant lightness of being that had once filled his heart was somehow lacking. Fragrance is what the heart needs to remain young and the sundry, intermittent associations that Tom engaged in were based on the satisfying of dull need rather than on the delicate perfume of hope and future expectations.

Not long after Tom had chalked up half a century of summers in the flower garden, he did meet a woman who he thought it might be possible to establish contact with. She was a divorcee with two grown up sons and while she might not be in raging bloom, she was, nonetheless, strong of stem and full of the subtle aromas of experience and a life lived well. Unfortunately for Tom, her history was the undoing of his hopes. She recognised in him a man of shallow roots falling into decline as the breath of winter touched his leaves, and she had no time and no inclination, now that she was free of encumbrance, to add Tom to her list of permanent worries.

She offered him friendship and an occasional night in by the fire, but nothing more. The simple truth was that Tom had searched for too long. The blooms of spring and summer were long gone from his garden and faced with the late flowering of honeysuckle women, Tom found that he was too set in his ways to flap his wings and fly up into the Indian Summer skies to greet them. He was a died-in-the-wool bachelor.

Winter set in as it always does. Tom settled for the comfort of a roaring fire in the snug of his local pub rather than the bright lights and the thump of whatever music the kids listened to these days. A pint of beer and a whisky chaser represented a little slice of heaven. Life was just about perfect if he could manage the price of a small cigar to accompany his drink.

Women still featured in his life, but only via the electronic highway of his one true indulgence. He found the plasticised, superficiality of staged Internet sex far more satisfying than having to deal with the real thing. Not that he actually did anything like that anymore. As he dwindled though his sixties and settled into his final decade, it was enough now to look. To be honest, he preferred

to watch the big match on the television on a Saturday night if he could stay awake long enough.

Towards the end of Tom's days on this earth he became a little forgetful. He was wrapped in blankets and given a new place to live in a municipal home, where forgetful people of all kinds and classes waited for the snows to fall and cover their heads. Sitting in a high-backed chair in front of daytime television soap operas, Tom would stare out at the world through glass eyes as a reel of film ticked rapidly as it spooled through the projector in his head. Tom flitted and flew across the silver screen of his mind's eye like a butterfly flapping its wings against a window pane.

His beautiful, his lovely, thorny, darling Rose stood there in her faded winter finery in the middle of the flower bed with her head lifted up to a pale noon sun. Around her the images of his summer garden were there for him to see in all of their wonderful glory but old Tom couldn't break through the glass. He raised a sallow skinned hand to his eye to wipe away a solitary tear because he understood now that he would never reach out to kiss the daisies again.

The Television Bride

(Loosely based on Andersen's The Most Incredible Thing)

The world has seen many marvels during recent years, and one of the many things that helps to illustrate the fusion of technical modernism with the established status quo is the way in which England's ancient feudal institutions have embraced the social and political structures of modern times. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the mutual fascination that the high and the low of the land have for the world of television. In fact, television is so popular in Great Britain that even the royal family, when not entertaining foreign presidents or giving the halls of Buck House a fresh coat of magnolia emulsion, spend their evenings with their eyes glued to the box.

In this febrile atmosphere of ratings wars and popular novelty, an executive producer at a small independent production company

came up with a marvellous new idea. Rather than employing actors to tell classic tales, to make people laugh, or to inform and to educate, he hit upon the novel idea of making ordinary people the stars of television shows. He called the idea by the following name, 'Dropped on your Head Television'. This was because he wanted people to understand that it was real, and like being dropped on your head, it sometimes hurt those who participated in it. Most of all, however, it was called by this name because it was funny watching other people making complete fools of themselves, and pretty soon nearly every television programme featured ordinary people trying to win small fortunes, to become movie stars and generally being the nastiest of nasties in the woodpile.

'Dropped on your Head Television' became so popular and so addictive that Betsy Windsor, our wise old Queen, called all of her courtiers and all of her political advisors before her and made an astonishing announcement.

"Whoever can do the most amazing thing on our royal television, whoever can show the most ingenuity and talent, will win the hand of our grand-daughter in marriage together with half of our personal estates and investments as a dowry."

The whole country went wild with excitement. All across the land hopeful suitors practiced their funniest party turns and their most amazing performance art works in the hope of winning the princess' hand in marriage. A sizable number of women entered the competition too, for the country has, in recent times, embraced social inclusiveness and is open to a wide variety of ideas.

True to the generally accepted format of such television shows, there were weeks of auditions held before an expert panel of judges, all of which were televised. The ratings were measured and found to be off of any known scale and every night, come the appointed hour, the whole country stopped dead in its tracks to watch one poor unfortunate after another being ridiculed by the judges.

The airwaves were filled by singers who couldn't sing, by jugglers who dropped their balls and by contortionists whose bodies were as stiff as boards and refused to do what they might once have been capable of. The viewers laughed at inventors who made thingamabobs that didn't work and at flu-riddled scientists

who claimed to have a cure for the common cold. Every sphere of human endeavour at every level of competence was represented in the auditions, night after night after night.

The experts sat and watched each contestant, and as all such experts are trained to do, they sat there in po-faced silence until, with a flourish and a wicked gleam in their eyes, it came to the time for judgement. Each desperate contestant was made to stand in front of the panel of judges on a spot marked with a silver star, and almost without fail the judges poured torrents of scorn and condescension down upon their heads. These ordinary people cringed and winced as the experts subjected them to crushing and horribly patronising witticisms, The ultimate aim of this personal degradation was focussed on one thing; to single out only the most exceptional talents, while ensuring that the audience at home was vicariously thrilled and titillated by the humiliation of those who failed.

And this was, as our dear and wise old Queen knew very well, the whole point. Only the strongest and the most robust contestant would be a suitable match for her grand-daughter's spirited nature. Only the most inventive and talented of her subjects would be able to engage with her grand-daughter on a mutually fulfilling and intellectual level. The weeks passed and the judges ripped contestants to shreds until at last there were only twelve of them left in the competition.

The whole of the country was ablaze with talk of the Grand Final. At every cross roads, in every bar and in every factory canteen, there was only one topic of conversation. For a whole week the twelve finalists were made to live in one of Betsy's smaller palaces, where their every waking and sleeping hour was broadcast to a mesmerised and adoring public. The Queen even forgot to attend a diplomatic dinner because she was so engrossed in the goings on in the 'Big Suitor House'.

With audience figures going through the roof and with advertising revenues hitting all time highs, the executive producer was, of course, paid a big fat bonus. He was also offered a promotion to the position of Head of Light Entertainment with the BBC, which would have been fabulous had someone on the board of governors not insisted on inserting a clause in his contract

forcing him to keep a whole twenty percent of the schedule for factual content.

On the given day and at the given hour each of the remaining contestants revealed their final masterpiece. The first contestant performed a stunning new aria. The second conducted the London Symphony Orchestra in a stirring rendition of his brand new symphony. The remaining contestants performed popular songs of wit and charm, painted pictures in sublime colours, formed living sculptures, delivered the world's first coherent theory of everything and even wrote a best selling novel live on television. Everyone, however, agreed that the most amazing thing of all was the human television.

The judges used every hyperbole in the thesaurus to describe their joy and amazement. The studio crowds went wild. The human television was astounding. It was incredible.

One of the contestants made a suit out of the finest electronic wizardry, which turned his body into the most beautiful, the most versatile and brilliantly clear television screen ever invented. He even made a special series of videos to show on his body and as he slowly revolved under the hot studio lights, as he turned from judge to judge, each programme was revealed in all of its glory. The Queen and her family, who were sitting on the judging panel for the final, could do nothing but gasp in sheer ecstasy.

On the contestant's back there was an image of Moses on the mount, typing the first of the Ten Commandments into a laptop computer; "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me".

On his right arm there appeared a video of an exhausted messenger falling to his knees in a crowded Athenian market place. Although in the throes of death he reported to his people that the Persians were defeated at the battle of Marathon.

On the contestant's left arm Adam and Eve danced around an apple tree in full bloom, bothered neither by their nakedness nor by the tambourine-playing snake that accompanied their wild gyrations.

On his bottom you could see depictions of the four seasons, each appearing in sequence, in full bloom and in sweet surround sounds that made the world appear so delicate and fragile.

Along the length of his left leg the great artists wove images and colours in a collage, in a riot of tone and line, just as if the contestant were a kaleidoscope.

His right leg showed the Muses, one for each of the arts, leading the great poets, writers, painters, sculptors and thinkers by the nose.

On his head played theorems and equations, numbers and symbols, representing the sciences. These images culminated in a sequence of grainy pictures depicting John Logie Baird, the inventor of television, as recorded at the dawn of the broadcast age.

Finally, displayed across the man's broad chest, there were images of riot and unrest, of the dispossessed and the establishment locked in mortal combat. As the image zoomed in, as a police baton was raised in anger, the images metamorphosed into flowers blooming around the heads of cherubs born aloft on rainbow wings. This, of course, was the triumph of hope.

Everyone in the television studio was absolutely mesmerised by the melange of imagery and by the cacophony that rose up from the merged soundtracks. It was, they all said afterwards, quite the most amazing thing. It was a work of art without compare.

All that remained was to crown the only possible winner of the competition, and after the ceremony to place a laurel wreath on his head was complete, the contestant removed his fabulous suit and revealed himself to be a fine looking young man. He was handsome, strong and tender. In short, he was everything that the princess could have hoped for and the Queen and her consort were overjoyed that their plan had worked out so well.

All in all, and after a few questions about prospects and family lineage, they were so pleased that they had found such a suitable young man for their grand-daughter that it was agreed the marriage should take place there and then with the cameras still rolling. Cheers and hurrahs went up in every living room in the kingdom. Bottles of fizz were popped and toasts were drunk. The director of the broadcast panned his cameras around the studio and zoomed in on every smile and every grin as the audience pulsed in time with the continual explosion of flash bulbs and the shouts and screams of the wildly happy crew.

All of a sudden the screams of joy turned into screams of dreadful fear and panic. In the middle of the studio set there was a

huge puff of black smoke followed by the loudest thunderclap imaginable. As the smoke began to clear, the shape of a large, muscular man could just be made out.

“STOP!” yelled the man. “That suit isn’t the most incredible thing on television. This is!”

And with an enormous sledgehammer the giant proceeded to smash every transistor, every microchip, every filament and every capacitor in the wonderful television suit. In a furious, seething storm of blows the stranger destroyed the suit right in front of Good Queen Betsy, her family and every member of the watching audience, both at home and in the studio. The royal family, the judges, the technicians and the watching public looked on in amazement as the stranger stood firm and roared, “I did that. I have power in these hands greater than life and death. I’m the victor!”

After much consultation and some legal wrangling, the judges reached an agreement. “It’s true.” they said. “In destroying this work of art, this marriage of the Muses with technology, this stranger has, indeed, shown himself to be the most astounding of all things.”

Of course, there were rumours. It was said in some quarters that the drama of the finale had been arranged as the final coup de grace in the search for the ultimate televisual experience. But, even if it were true, most of the general population agreed with the judges and so within the hour the stranger came to stand beside the princess in London’s great abbey at Westminster.

The princess was, understandably, not at all pleased with this turn of events. She tried to argue with her grand-mother, but mindful of the rules and of the power of the moving image, she could not change her grand-mother’s mind. The ratings and the weight of public opinion were too great. Any change of heart now would drive their poll ratings into the floor.

All around the princess the ladies of the court sang and celebrated the occasion as the great and the good of the England’s green and pleasant land, the celebrities and the superstars, assembled to celebrate the marriage. The streets thronged with revellers and the abbey was illuminated in the glorious ambers and reds of candles and torchlight. Beside her the stranger, her husband

to be, swaggered and gloated over the princess, with his head held high, sure and certain in the winning of his prize.

At a signal from the Archbishop of Canterbury silence fell upon the assembled crowds. The ceremony was about to start. Priests, pastors and holy ones of all religions stood and opened their mouths to begin the first incantation. As they uttered the very first word of the ceremony the most horrendous wailing drowned out their massed voices and the air was filled with the thud and boom of bass notes and percussion. All eyes turned towards the huge oak doors at the far end of the abbey and there, advancing down the aisle in the once famous television suit, was the beaten finalist.

Ladies swooned and fainted. Men gaped and started to sweat as the apparition walked. It was like seeing a ghost for the very first time, for there in the middle of the church was an ogre, a hobgoblin, a wraith, which moved, in vengeful fits and starts on two stiff legs. Every cobbled together panel on the suit showed disfigured and disembodied images. The patched together speakers broadcast sounds of groaning torment, growling like rabid dogs. No one but the man in the suit could move a muscle. Slowly, in an agony of horrific imagery, in a barrage of deafening vibrations, he staggered up to the altar and came to a halt directly in front of the princess and the lofty stranger.

The man in the suit raised his right arm. In his hand he held a television remote control, which he showed to the assembled crowd. He pressed a button. One by one the images that played upon his broken body writhed and bit at the air, spinning and rising up from their broken screens to take shape and solid form in the real world.

First Moses, then Adam and Eve, the marathon runner and all of the other famous and virtuous people in the videos appeared in physical form. Moses pinned the stranger's feet to the cold flagstones by dropping his laptop computer onto them, while Adam and Eve chastised him for his pride and for his covetousness. Each character appeared in turn, making the stranger quake with terror until, finally, a horribly disfigured cherub flew up above the stranger's head and laid him low with a police baton.

In every home in the land, on every sofa, the entire population of the country sat transfixed by this gruesome and entirely unexpected

scene. This vengeful, this fascinating series of events held them in total thrall. It was, without a doubt and despite all that had gone before, the most incredible thing ever seen.

The princess was the first to come to her senses. She stood before the man in the ruined and spectral television suit and called out to the assembled dignitaries, “He will be the one. He will be my husband.”

The young man pressed another button on the remote control and all of the phantom images faded into the shadows cast by the candles that illuminated the great abbey. The terrible discord that had filled the evening air wound down to nothing more than a faint hiss before falling into the deepest, darkest silence. The young man peeled the suit slowly from his weary body, walked up to the princess, took her hand in his and turned to face the awe struck line of ministers, priests and holy souls. As the young man leaned forward and kissed his bride to be softly on her ruby red lips, Betsy Windsor, the congregation and the viewing public all started to sob tears of pure joy. Throughout the land men, women and children reached for boxes and packets of tissues.

Outside of the abbey, in a pantechnicon in a fenced off area, the director of the television broadcast cut to close ups of the young couple. The young man smiled to camera and there was a diamond flash of light around his head. Speaking softly and warmly, like a close and beloved friend, the television show’s anchorman informed the viewers that they would be right back in the thick of the action after a short message from the programme’s sponsors...

The Only Way to Know for Sure

(Loosely based on Andersen’s The Princess & The Pea, and The Talisman)

You might remember a feature or two appearing in some of our glossier magazines recently about an eligible young man who wanted to get married. While this is not an uncommon thing and usually not worth too many column inches, the young man in question was no run of the mill Joe. The young man in question had, in fact, once sung a song so popular that he never found a

need, financially or artistically, to bother recording any other songs. Wives, mothers and daughters throughout Britain's suburban radioland knew all of the words to the young man's song and delighted in humming along to its very catchy tune whenever it was played, all of which helped to maintain its popularity long after the song's novelty had worn off and also helped to keep the young man's income at a healthy and quietly spectacular level.

Basking in the glow cast by his brief but perfect musical accomplishments the young man grew older living a quiet life in the countryside with his darling mother. He often thought about singing another song and had, as a result, kept himself in tip top condition, but as the years passed he found himself thinking more and more about settling down, and so it was that he decided to marry. Of course, he didn't want to marry just anybody. Whoever she might be, the young man's new bride would have to be what he called: "My Princess".

And that is why the article about the young man appeared in some of the country's glossier magazines. He was convinced that the simplest and best way to find his perfect partner in life would be to announce his desire to marry to the world by way of a celebrity photo-shoot. In fact, the article generated so much publicity that the young man found himself appearing on television and on radio shows throughout the country and his old but much cherished song was dusted off and given another airing by disk jockeys on every radio station that played popular music. For nearly a whole month the young man was the talk of the town. He was the brightest star shining above the airwaves. Once again, although in a far more mature sense, he was the dreamboat that drifted languidly through young girls' daydreams, which, given the fickle nature of the public's imagination, was a very considerable achievement.

Lured by the prospect of marriage to such a fine young man there were plenty of young ladies who made a beeline for his letter box and his lunch box. The only problem was that the young man simply couldn't tell if any of these young ladies might really be his darling princess or not. Undeterred, however, the young man travelled the length and breadth of the country, escorting each and every one these beautiful and hopeful creatures to nightclubs, to

restaurants and to his hotel bedrooms. He even managed a couple of quiet evenings in with some of the not so beautiful ones. But even after all of this most diligent research the young man still couldn't find what he was looking for. No matter how hard he tried to see these young ladies in their best light, there always appeared to be something wrong with them. Eventually he returned home, being both very tired and very sad, for he did want to find his princess so very much, and it was then that the young man's dear old mother came up with a very cunning plan.

"Invite all the most famous young ladies in the land to come and stay with us", she said." Not on the same night, of course", she added just to be sure that she could manage the linen.

Accompanied by paparazzi flashbulbs and reality television cameramen, one by one the young man invited each and every one of the most beautiful and celebrated young ladies in the land to come and stay at his country pile. No matter what the weather, the season or the time of day, the house rang with the laughter of happy young people enjoying each other's company. Every morning the young man's mother delivered a lovely tray of tea and toast to his bedroom and as the exhausted but glowing couple lay in the king size love nest that had been especially arranged for them, the young man's dear old mother asked each young lady in turn if she would give her a hand with the laundry. In particular she asked each fair maid if she would wash her son's crinkly boxer shorts and diamond pattern ankle socks.

To the grave and desperate disappointment of both the young man and his mother, the young ladies behaved perfectly because they had all been brought up properly by respectably stage struck parents, each of them agreeing immediately to the request for a bit of a scrub at the washtub. As soon as she heard the word "Yes" leave the lips of these kind and considerate young things, the young man's mother bundled the girls out of the house without a "by your leave" or any further kindness being offered.

"No, she's no good", cawed the old crow to her son as she slammed the door on yet another haplessly romantic soul. "No real princess would ever wash your smalls, boy. Ruin her nails, it would!"

This went on for weeks and weeks until, with the young man complaining about the effects of sleep deprivation, there was only one famous young lady left in the whole of Great Britain. The young man was, by now, emotionally drained, having lost count of the number of dates and encounters that he'd endured in his desperate quest to find marital happiness. The posts on the headboard in his bedroom were becoming dangerously weak as he whittled them away to nearly nothing with his little morning notches and aide memoirs. But, with time and the pool of potential brides quickly evaporating, the day came when the last of the country's suitable young women was due to arrive on his doorstep.

The young man was not hopeful. "OK", he said to his dear old mother, "we'll have some fun, but I think the socks idea stinks. Can't we just buy new ones every week?"

"You never know. A bird in the bed is worth two in the laundry, as they say"

The young man looked at his mother quizzically and let slip one of those long drawn out sighs that is the trademark of every thirty-something man who still lives at home with his dear old ma.

That evening the heavens opened upon the world and, depressed by the rain and the generally gloomy outlook, the young man all but gave up hope of ever finding true happiness. Nevertheless, and at the expected time, there was a knock on the front door. The young man opened the door with his usual flourish, a showman to the end, and was greeted by a storm of flashing electric light, and once his eyes had adjusted, to a positive vision in pink. The young lady, who was famous, as is every "glamourista", for the skiminess of her skirts and the translucency of her pure silk blouses, stood there dripping from head to toe.

The young man smiled his sunniest smile in an attempt to alleviate her damp suffering. The young lady, known as Burberry to the common people, glowered at him for a moment before barging him aside and striding purposefully into the hallway.

"Don't just stand there", she screamed at him as the world turned a brilliant shade of gloss white in a storm of paparazzi shouts and exploding flash bulbs. The young man slammed the door shut and wrapped the young woman and her dripping designer clothes in a towelling bathrobe that his mother hurriedly threw at

him. As he caught the bathrobe he thought he saw his dear old mother grinning the widest grin this side of Wonderland.

After a long hot shower, a manicure, a pedicure, two hours with her stylist and half as long again on the phone to her agent, the super-model known as Burberry was ready for the fun and games. She glided to the top of the large and ornate staircase in a positively charged shimmer of discotheque fashions and demanded champagne. Then, as she descended the stairs in large, but strangely and compellingly graceful platform boots, she explained to everyone that she had sold the picture rights for the evening to Howdy! - the celebrity lifestyle magazine beloved of the little people.

The young man's dear old mother was a true brick that night. She soaked the labels off of every bottle of Cava before it was served, and she handled with absolute tact and aplomb every request for pizza, for nail varnish and for some decent bloody music. The young couple got on famously all through the evening, cuddling up on the sofa, talking, eating Marmite on toast in the small wee hours and generally adopting every pose and every smile called for by the photographer. The evening was, despite the early rain affected shenanigans, a resounding success.

Eventually, with the photographers long gone and with the young couple safely tucked up in bed, the young man's dear old mother sat quietly in the kitchen with her gnarled old hands wrapped tightly around a steaming mug of cocoa. The grin on her face was as wide as the Grand Canyon as she flicked her top dentures forward absentmindedly to relieve the irritation to her palate caused by some very annoying biscuit crumbs. Her body swayed gently in time with the sound of creaking mattress springs coming from her son's bedroom.

Bright and early the next morning the young man's mother tapped on her son's bedroom door and walked into the room carrying the usual tray of tea and biscuits. She threw open the curtains, letting the room flood with glorious summer sunshine, and as she stood there, silhouetted in her curlers and her power-shouldered dressing gown, she started to sing. The old lady's gravel laden voice was perfectly suited to the tune: "Oh, what a beautiful morning".

“Aaaarrggghhh!” screamed Burberry, as the dulcet tones of cock-crow dipped in beneath the duvet cover and dragged her into the world of sunlight. “What the bloody hell is that?”

She yanked the duvet cover back up over head and started to swear loudly. The young man rolled over slowly, opened one bleary eye and made a slow motion lunge for one of the mugs of tea. From under the duvet cover the disembodied stream of oaths and imprecations continued unabated, and as the young man tried to sip from the life giving tannin elixir, his latest paramour started to thrash her legs around wildly.

Finally, and in a real one hundred and ten percent hissy fit, she surfaced from under the duvet and screamed, “Shut the friggin’ curtains. It ain’t nat’ral bein’ awake before bloody lunch time”.

It took all of the young man’s guile and persuasion to coax and persuade his new paramour to keep her head above the duvet cover and to accept that it was, indeed, a very beautiful morning. It was only with the greatest reluctance that Burberry allowed herself to become accustomed to the brightness of this early hour.

Once her eyes started to focus properly, she let out another, huge, lung-bursting scream. Stood there right in front of her was the young man’s wrinkled old mother and in her arms she was holding a plastic laundry basket full of crinkly, used boxer shorts and stiffly soiled socks.

“What the...” stuttered the young lady. “If you think I’m going anywhere near those things then you’re bloody barking. Haven’t you got a maid?”

The young man leaped out of bed and spun his mother round by her waist as they waltzed around the bedroom in a dance of pure joy. Teacups shattered and biscuits crumbled underfoot as they danced and sang. It was all over. At last they had found the perfect match; at last the young man had discovered a real princess. And so, with the pre-nuptials agreed and with the photographic rights sold to the highest bidder, the young man finally got his heart’s desire and married his darling princess.

The young man and his bride jetted off to their honeymoon paradise sponsored by a company that made coconut filled chocolate bars, and in return for a few more photographs, a short

video and some encouraging words, they were given a wonderful time on golden beaches lapped by azure seas. Their evenings were a riot of dancing, laughing and the after hours bliss of the marital bed, and after all of this the happy couple even found time to sit quietly as the dawn rose and talk of life, love and their plans for the future. They were so very happy and everything seemed to be working out perfectly for them, but as the honeymoon neared its end, they couldn't help noticing that all was not well between them. There were no fights, no disagreements, nor was there any petulant posturing, but nonetheless, during their long dawn conversations they became aware of a doubt nagging away at them beneath their true, true love.

The doubt that each of them felt was this: will I always be as happy as I am now?

They checked their legal agreements through, clause by clause and swore to each other in front of various newspaper and television reporters that they would always be true, but no matter how vehemently they protested their love for one another the doubt always remained. Finally, with that hook of uncertainty still snagging and scratching at their hides, they decided to seek out a talisman, a lucky charm that would protect their love for each other forever and ever more.

In their professional capacities they had both heard about a foxy old publicist who spent his summers on this very same Caribbean paradise isle, a wily old dog of a man who was held in the highest esteem by stars and celebrities the world over. He was wise and powerful, and it was said that he always knew how to give the best advice, even in the middle of the greatest of hardships and miseries, and so, over a mint julep or two by the side of the old man's pool, the young man and his princess told him about their problem.

When the wise old publicist heard their story and thought about everything they had told him, he turned to them both and said, "Journey to the four corners of the world. Ask every famous married couple if they're truly content. If they really are, then ask them for a couple of signed photographs that each of you can keep with you wherever you go to remind you of your love for each

other. That's the surest remedy for your problem. And if you want, I can arrange for a documentary crew to accompany you every step of the way".

The documentary idea was tempting, but the young couple resisted the old man's inducements. They wanted this journey to be a pure expression of their love, unsullied by grubby fingered commercialism.

The very next day Burberry read about a famous film star and his wife in one of her favourite glossy magazines, a couple who had been happily married for over forty years and even had a barbecue sauce named after them. What could be better? The young man and his adoring wife immediately flew to Hollywood and as soon as they arrived they telephoned the film star's agent, who happily arranged dinner for the four of them at a swanky restaurant on the strip. During dinner the young man asked his guest if his marriage was truly as happy as it was rumoured to be.

"Of course", was the reply. "Except for one thing. We have no children, unfortunately, at least not from our marriage".

The talisman was not to be found here then.

On their way back home the young couple stopped off in New York, where a wealthy business tycoon lived, who was rumoured to have found true happiness in a long and successful marriage. The tycoon was only too happy to entertain such well known newly weds and he invited them to a party with all of his friends, acquaintances and prospective business colleagues.

When asked the same question he replied, "Why yes, indeed, we really are very content. My wife and I lead the best of lives. Our only regret is that we have so many children. They cause us so many headaches and heartaches".

The talisman was evidently not to be found here either.

The young couple continued to seek out every happily married celebrity couple in every city and in every country where really famous people lived, but nowhere could they find anyone who could say a "yes" without adding a "but". Eventually, and with heavy hearts, they gave up their quest and headed for home.

When the happy couple disembarked from their Jumbo Jet and left their first class seats in the usual state of long distance disarray, they found themselves in the middle of another media scrummage.

Hundreds of reporters and photographers vied with each other to get the best quotes and the best pictures, and in the middle of this ruck and maul the young prince and his lady wife spotted a tired looking man and woman sitting in the middle of the airport concourse. These two frayed individuals were playing lovingly with their twin sons. They seemed oblivious to anything going on around them. The husband, his smiling wife and his happy sons seemed to exude a sense of calm that was quite unique and perfect in this rushed and bustling world. Breaking free of the media circus, the young man and his new wife rushed over to the happy family group and asked them the same question that they had asked all around the world.

“Yes, we are very happy”, said the man. “With my wife to comfort me and my children to keep me young I’m extremely happy and content”.

The young man grinned at his new bride. Remembering the words of the wily old publicist, the young man said, “If we make you famous, you know, fifteen minutes and all that, could we have a signed photograph of you? You can even kiss Burberry on the cheek if you like”.

The older man looked at his wife in horror and his cheeks burned red with indignation. He managed, however, to summon up his reserves of inner calm before turning towards the young man and saying, “Bugger off! Don’t you know who we are? Don’t you recognise us? How dare you be so patronising, you little shit, you one hit bloody wonder”.

The young man looked blank. His beautiful new bride looked blank. Around them pandemonium broke out. The gentlemen of the press surrounded the family and completely ignored the young man and his beautiful new wife. As the young starlets started to slink away, confused and not a little annoyed, they heard the familiar shouts and barks of the hounding press pack:

“Over here, Prime Minister...”

“Give us a smile, Brenda, love...”

“Any comment on the single currency, Sir?”

And so the young man and his wife returned to their new home, which they had recently bought in a prime location just to the northeast of London’s orbital motorway. They were tired,

disappointed and frustrated. The very next morning they telephoned the wily old publicist and gave him a piece of their combined minds, but having listened to their ranting and raving for nearly a whole minute, the old dog smiled to himself and asked the young couple, "Has your journey really been such a waste of time? Haven't you learned a great many new and wonderful things?"

The young man thought about this for a few minutes. His new wife also stopped short of her final insult and gave these wise words some serious consideration. The young man took his bride's hand in his and spoke gently to the old man on the other end of the telephone line.

"Well, I suppose we've both learned that to be content you need nothing more than just that - to be content".

He looked into his wife's hazel eyes and smiled. She looked back at him for a second, grinned and then taking the handset from him she said, "Or maybe we've learned that that there's more than one way to skin a cat...we're too young to settle down. I've been offered a part in an 'Adult' movie by Jean Paul Robespierre, you know, one of them blokes we met in Hollywood and I've always wanted to do some serious acting, so thanks for the advice but..."

With their respective lawyers flexing their considerable egos and with the press pack baying like wolves, Burberry hopped onto the next transatlantic red-eye. Despite his grief, and with his deeply tanned six-pack still in fine shape, the young man overcame his tragic flirtation with married life, secured a new recording contract and within a month he released a new disk full of sad little love songs, which sold millions of copies.

Burberry's film, while not a critical success, was watched by millions the world over and as the young man set off on a world concert tour, Burberry found herself on set playing the lead in a new film, this time with complete sentences for her to speak.

In their respective hotel suites on opposite sides of the world, the young man and his soon to be divorced wife considered the lessons they had learned from married life. True love might be a holy grail worth chasing, but in its absence a good marriage with plenty of publicity did wonders for the old bank balance.

In hotel rooms on opposite sides of the world the young man and the young woman looked at their reflections in the bedroom mirror and smiled to themselves.

“What a perfect marriage...” they both thought and as one being they picked up their bedside telephones and rang down to order more champagne.

Where There's a Will

Danny Craig lived for the future. His was a world of new technology, where television screens became ever bigger and where bandwidth expanded exponentially with the phases of the moon. When not at work patching network cables into routers and hubs for a local newspaper, Danny shared his home with his aged father and his demure, unassuming sister, Annie.

He shared his home but not his time, preferring, when not down at the pub watching Manchester City flatter to deceive in wide screen glory, to lock himself away in his room with his computers and his cable links to a very private world of digital opportunities. Danny found virtual reality far more rewarding than the unnecessary and irksome chores that comprised all manual forms of familial communication. Such things were, he told himself, outmoded. Unfortunately Danny and Annie were thrust unceremoniously into the analogue Dickensiana of real life when their father keeled over with a massive heart attack one Saturday evening while watching the family's favourite football team being trounced by Hereford United.

In the days that followed their father's untimely passing, brother and sister lived in a world of frayed tempers, compassionate overload and weary resignation. Death certificates were signed and lodged with the appropriate authorities, funeral arrangements planned and paid for, paperwork sorted and solicitors engaged to deal with the minutiae of closing down a life. Danny was sure that he could design a much more efficient way of dealing with the arcane world of paper and people, and regularly assailed his sister with critiques of off-line morbidity. If only they could deal with the stiff by clicking a button and filing its life away in some Interweb

repository. When it came to the reading of their father's will, however, Danny found, in a rather brooding sort of way, that the world of flesh and bone took on a sudden fascination.

Danny stood outside the crematorium after a sparsely attended service making little attempt to disguise his impatience as he bade their one solitary guest goodbye. Annie, who's mortal soul was grounded in a much richer vein of sensitivity, couldn't help feeling that if this was all a life was worth come the final reckoning, then there was something infinitely sad about the infinite plan they were all a part of. Their mother had walked out on the three of them some ten years previously and a combination of family arguments and mortalities had reduced them to this paltry dynastic circumstance.

"Thought he'd never go", said Danny, turning to his sister as their father's ex boss hurried back to his car and the comfort of paperwork. Rubbing his hands together as he blew on them Danny continued, "Ready for the grand unveiling? Shall we trot down to the solicitors?"

Annie sighed, stuck her hands in her coat pockets and followed her brother along Barlow Moor Road towards the offices of Dawson, Dawson & Dawson, chosen by their father in happier times because he could always be sure of remembering the name of his solicitor when exceptional circumstances required the expertise of a legal beagle. The other advantage of the partners Dawson was that, unlike the new super-practices located at the heart of Manchester's business district, their fees reflected their clientele's ability to pay, which in the case of the now deceased Mr. Craig had never been very much.

Over a plateful of slightly stale tractor-wheel biscuits and weak tea in chipped china cups, Danny and Annie found out that there were no savings, no insurance policies and no investments. The only inheritance was the small terraced house that they had grown up in and a few personal possessions. Much to Annie's horror, the elder Mr. Dawson spelled out the terms of the will in very short order.

"So, there you have it, I'm afraid", he concluded. "Miss Craig receives her mother's engagement ring and the... erm... Ming vase, while young Mr. Craig gets everything else, namely the

house, which is paid for, and the furniture etcetera. I must say it seems a little one sided, but mine is not to reason. . .”

“Yeah, thanks”, interrupted Danny, “I’ll make sure Annie’s looked after. Nice to have met you, Mr. Dawson.”

Annie followed her brother out of the solicitor’s office and back onto the street, where the weak light of a chill winter afternoon had given way to the dark pit of night like a coffin being lowered into the ground on a rain soaked headland. Car headlights flashed in her eyes, momentarily dazzling her, as if a stray flash of lightning had reflected brilliantly on a brass handle just before the lid of the box disappeared from sight. Her tears, held back until now by the bleak austerity of the day, began to flow.

Danny didn’t wait for her. He ploughed through the streets followed at some distance by his sister until, with the front door of their modest terraced home shut firmly on the outside world, Danny disappeared into his bedroom to play electronic games. Annie sat at the kitchen table and looked at her inheritance. She was the proud owner of some books, a few records, a wardrobe full of clothes and a bank account with approximately two hundred pounds in it, all of which was now enriched by one ancient diamond ring and a crudely painted blue and white vase. She spent the rest of the evening dabbing her eyes with used tissues and asking herself what other wonders life might have in store for her.

Despite his apparently uncaring treatment of her the previous day, Annie still firmly believed that her brother loved her and that he would, in time, learn to engage with the world in a more constructive way now that he was the effective head of the household. Breakfast that morning had been the usual hurried, monosyllabic affair, and when she returned home from work Annie was determined that she would sit her brother down and that they would have a thorough chat about the future.

“After all”, she reminded herself on the bus that evening, “he did tell the solicitor he’d look after me”.

Cold comfort awaited Annie as she stepped through the front door. Her brother had taken a couple of hours off work that afternoon and used the time to strip her bedroom, bundling her clothes, books and music into black bin liners. He had also packed

her toiletries, cosmetics and personal knick-knacks into an old rucksack and together with the Chinese style vase all of Annie's worldly possessions were stacked in a small, untidy pile in the hallway. The poor young woman stood in the hallway in dumb silence as Danny explained the facts of her new life to her.

"Sorry about this, but it's mine now and I've got plans, none of which include you. You can't have order in a house full of women..."

"But it's not full of women, Danny, there's only me".

"Today, granted, but what about tomorrow? I'm a man of property now. There's bound to be something turns up. I've been chatting to a nice Russian girl on the Interweb and you never know. Anyway, as I was saying, you'll be leaving tonight. Can I have your key?"

"But where... where will I go, what will I do?" Annie whispered, feeling as though she were being sucked down into a whirlpool.

Her sad and lonely inner child wandered the dark corridors of a huge adult world, while at the same time she could feel the steam head pressure of outrage building in the magma chambers that brooded darkly in the spaces between her quiet outward persona and her molten core.

"Not my problem", answered Danny and he turned away, heading towards the kitchen where Annie could smell beans or spaghetti hoops cooking and toast burning.

She followed him into the kitchen. The table was laid for one person, with Danny's laptop already hooked up via means of temporary network and telephone cables in the place where she usually sat. The history of eruptions, being by its very nature violent, would have been proud to record the effects of Annie's full explosive force as it hit her brother's online world with maximum venom.

"Bastard! Bastard! Bastard!" she screamed over and over again as she emptied the pan of baked beans onto the keyboard and then turned her attention to the boy himself. By the time that she had whacked him with the frying pan six or seven times, kicked his shins repeatedly and doused him in an entire litre of Vimto, Danny's other worldly cool had been completely shattered.

As volcano Annie subsided into a state of uncongenial dormancy, she and her brother came to a bruised and battered arrangement whereby she could stay on in the family house for a few days until she could find somewhere else to live. Given her brother's obvious lack of filial concern for his sister and given Annie's disgust at his behaviour, there seemed little alternative but that she should vacate the premises.

Armed with her father's old address book, and after many disappointing telephone calls to old friends and distant relations, Annie eventually tracked down an ancient great-aunt who owned a crumbling Victorian villa that had been converted into bedsits. At first the telephone conversation with the old woman went very badly, with her great-aunt being extremely hostile to the memory of her nephew's long forgotten children, but, as Annie described her predicament and as the old woman remembered that it had always been the men in the Craig family who had been the cause of the greatest unhappiness, she eventually found it in her heart to offer the young woman one of her flats at a very competitive rent. Arrangements were made, the bed sitting room was cleaned and a week later Annie moved her bin liners and her rucksack into her new home. By now she had grown accustomed to the weight of her mother's old engagement ring on her finger and the Chinese style vase stood proudly in its new position on the fireplace mantelpiece.

The villa had seen better days, having matured over more than a century of irregular neglect into its current state of generally poor repair. Where once a stout Edwardian family had warmed themselves by the great living room fire and eaten roast meats on Sundays in the capacious dining room, there now existed within these walls a selection of small private worlds inhabited by transparent people who warmed themselves next to two-bar electric fires, who shared bathrooms and cooked tinned meals on single ring electric cookers.

Fortunately for Annie, she was still in such a state of shock that few if any of the shortcomings in her new home had yet registered in her consciousness. She was also blessed with the good fortune to have moved into one of the two ground floor bedsits, which boasted high ceilings, large sash windows and more than enough room to swing a cat. The two-bar was not effective in heating such

a large space, but Annie's great-aunt assured her that the rooms were lovely and cool in the summer, which would be a blessing worth waiting for.

Over the course of her first week in residence Annie, who was naturally quiet even in happy times, impressed her great-aunt with her obvious inner sorrow, which the old dear thought only fitting for a woman of the Craig line, and the next Saturday afternoon Annie received her first invitation to call on her relative in her own apartment.

Annie knocked on the door to her great-aunt's apartment with some trepidation. In public the old girl bristled with an imperious air of confidence and hard-nosed, old-world defiance, but Annie was convinced that her private inner sanctum would be a shambling mess of decrepitude and cat infestations, full of strange smells and unfamiliar utility furniture that dated from the middle of the previous century. She steeled herself before entering the living room.

Annie was amazed to find herself in a most elegantly appointed salon, stuffed full of finely embroidered soft furnishings and antiques of obvious quality and refinement. In the middle of the room on an elegantly proportioned drop leaf table her great-aunt had set a Royal Worcester tea service, with one of those lacy three tiered cake stands at the centre of the display. Drifting languidly from the speakers of a restrained but nonetheless modern stereo system Annie was sure that she could hear the dulcet tones of Leonard Cohen. Annie greeted her great-aunt softly and settled herself into the voluminous folds of one of the armchairs.

Great-aunt Edith poured the tea, keeping one eye on the cups and watching her great-niece with the other. As she handed Annie her drink, she went straight to the nub of matter. "So, you've experienced the true reality of life as a Craig at last, my girl. Not pleasant is it!"

"No", replied Annie quietly, "at least not recently. It wasn't too bad when Dad was alive. I mean, it wasn't exactly a life of luxury and he could be a bit moody at times, but I'm sure he did his best. After Mum left his heart wasn't really in it anymore, but he did what he could. As for Danny, I thought it was a phase, you know, something he'd grow out of".

“And here you are”, said her great-aunt, “without a penny to your name, without anything that anyone would want to steal”.

“It’s true”, said Annie sadly. “But then I’ve got nothing to fear either have I? I mean, who’s going to bother with someone like me? All I’ve got is my mother’s old ring and grandma’s pot”.

“You’ve got a heart, dear. What would you do if someone stole that or worse...if someone broke it?”

Annie sat in silence for a moment or two pondering the question of a broken heart. There had never been much in the way of demonstrable love in her father’s house and she’d already cried enough over his death. As far as her brother was concerned she couldn’t really remember the last time she’d really thought of him in affectionate terms. At best she felt a cold numbness in her heart, which she supposed was better than feeling nothing at all. Sitting here in this lovely room with a real fire in the grate and with *Suzanne* drifting out of the stereo’s speakers, Annie felt that, even in her poverty stricken state, life was still better lived than made into an excuse for not trying.

Her great-aunt watched over her throughout the afternoon, revealing snippets of family history, and sketching pictures from her own life story, all of which seemed to consist of too many broken hearts and broken heads, until, with the football results due in and Leonard Cohen starting to become a little bit overbearing, she turned to her young relative and asked, “Do you want to stay for dinner? There’s a DVD I want to watch and we could phone out for a curry”.

By the end of the evening, which great-aunt Edith thoroughly enjoyed because of the company, two bottles of Lambrusco and because they watched quite possibly the best werewolf film ever made, the two women had become the best of friends. The old girl eventually retired, wobbling slightly as she went, and Annie returned to her own thinly proportioned bed on a promise to call round the next morning for coffee. She was to bring her mother’s ring and the old blue and white vase.

In the days following Annie’s departure from the family home and while she settled into her new bed sitting room, Danny Craig made changes. He no longer felt the need to confine his online

activities to his bedroom and had spent many a happy evening hour running cables around the house and setting up a new wireless router. His main file server now sat in the living room, together with various and sundry stereo and television appliances. By virtue of the addition of a new hub, borrowed from his place of work, Danny could attach his laptop to his domestic network in any one of the bedrooms, in the kitchen and even in the downstairs lavatory. In the living room he installed a fifty-six inch television monitor and was able to interact with online services in super-sized mode, which he found particularly useful when inspecting the assets and attributes of various potential brides from far flung lands such as the Czech Republic, the Ukraine and the Philippines.

Annie, knowing her brother from years of quiet observation, correctly suggested to her great-aunt that he would dedicate his new found personal freedom and financial independence to the pursuit of private digital excess, and it was this that great-aunt Edith was thinking about as she lay in bed after a very pleasant Saturday in the company of her poor, disappointed relative.

Over coffee the next morning great-aunt Edith inspected first the ring and then the Chinese style pot. She consulted an antiques guide book and after much humming and page thumbing, she turned to Annie and said, “Your father never was very bright, my dear. I don’t think he meant to leave you in the shit, you know, I really don’t. Unfortunately he believed what he saw on television and I’m rather afraid that he watched a little too much of the Antiques Roadshow. The vase is quite nice, and certainly Victorian, but not worth more than a couple of hundred. It looks like Ming but it doesn’t taste like it, if you know what I mean. It’s a reproduction. As for the ring, well, I remember the thing being passed down through various members of the family. It’s even been pawned on occasion, our diamond engagement ring, but its only glass and nine carat gold. Your father thought, no doubt, that a Ming vase and a vintage diamond ring would be worth quite a lot and that you would appreciate them better than your soulless brother. As it stands, however, they’re baubles and in no way do they compensate you for your father’s sad loss”.

Great-aunt Edith paused for a moment to let Annie take in what she was saying, pouring herself another cup of thick black coffee

from the cafetiere. Annie simply stared into the steam that spiralled up from her own cup into the lazy Sunday morning air.

“The baubles may not have much monetary worth, my dear, but there’s more than one way to skin a cat. Let me tell you a story”.

Annie looked into her great-aunt’s eyes and saw there a sparkle and an edge that quite disturbed her. She had always thought of centenarians as being small and spindly creatures with bent backs and osteoporosis, as dull animals with rheumy eyes and limited vocabulary, but her aunt’s eyes shone with a strange mixture of passion, venom and audacity.

“I remember”, began great-aunt Edith quietly, “when I first saw those baubles. Once upon a time I too had maiden aunts and one Sunday, just around the time of the first Great War when I was seven or eight years old, my mother took me to visit her sisters in a house they shared near Macclesfield.”

“I don’t remember much about the rest of the day, but I do remember high tea. The four of us were sitting in the front parlour and I was especially looking forward to a slice of Aunt Cecilia’s fruit cake. After tea was served my aunts opened a cupboard in their welsh dresser and fetched out a little green box and a blue and white vase, which they put on the table. My aunts and my mother seemed to drift off into a little world all of their own before, with a huge sigh, they put the items back into the dresser. Nothing more was said.”

“On the way home I asked my mother about the vase and the ring, but she refused to say anything to me about them then or at any other time. It was only after the war, when I was about thirteen and my mother was sickening, that she told me about the precious things I had seen that afternoon.”

Annie sensed that she was about to be initiated into a new world of family revelations and scandals. She sat up in her chair and gave her great-aunt the full weight of her attention.

“They were gifts, you see. Gifts from older, single gentlemen given to my aunts when they were teenage girls themselves. In those days, when the world was very different to this one, bachelor gentlemen of a certain class and attitude were often to be found in the company of young girls and boys. The camera was still a relatively new thing and artistic shots of fairies and such like were

not uncommon. Of course, the constraints of time, place and social custom precluded, for the most part, any of the more common occurrences, and indeed very many great men undertook such friendships. I mean, where would Alice be without the Reverend Dodgson or Peter Pan without dear old Mister Barrie?"

"Unfortunately for my aunts, the gentlemen photographers in question were not of a literary bent, far from it, in fact, and paid the girls in cash or in kind for making artistic photographic plates in a room above a fishmonger's shop in Salford. Not one of the Craig family's better known secrets. Your great, great aunts Cecilia and Florence were Boer War glamour models..."

Annie let out a small shriek made up in equal parts of horror and delight. In her mind's eye she could see gas lights flickering, shadows on red brocade curtains, and two nubile young ladies posing in shocking stocking tops for a row of whiskered bank managers and the outwardly respectable middle aged scions of ancient clerical families.

"Oh, yes", continued great-aunt Edith, "yes, indeed! And if you think that's shocking ask yourself how another maiden aunt of this benighted family came to own and run a house like this and to have filled it over the years with antiques and curios from around the world. You see, my mother died soon after she told me about my aunts, and left to fend for myself and my brother, that's your grandfather, I took it into my head to enter into what, at thirteen years of age, I deemed to be the family profession..."

"My God", squeaked Annie, "You mean..."

"Mmmm" whispered great-aunt Edith, with a smile on her lips and a gleefully naughty sparkle in her eyes. "I did a few artistic poses for a local photographer, you know, under the counter shots, and then managed to hook up with a rather forward thinking Archdeacon with a penchant for silk camiknickers and snakes."

"I remember thinking at the time how deliciously appropriate that was. Anyway, I kept mum about the whole thing for years, and as my darling cleric rose through the ranks of the established church, so my letters asking for financial assistance and moral guidance became ever more pressing, and that, my dear, was the pattern for my many years of success in trade."

Annie laughed out loud and long and then got up, plonked herself down on the arm of her great-aunt's chair and gave the old woman a huge, enveloping hug.

"You dear old rascal", she whispered as they rocked gently back and forth with the giggles and with the wide eyed sharing of new best friends. After a few minutes great-aunt Edith looked up, brushing Annie's fringe away from her eyes, and said, "Of course, its all different now. The world has got a lot darker since we gave up the Empire".

Annie stayed with the old woman for the rest of the day, sharing with her a light lunch and a couple of large cognacs. As the two of them sat and chattered away about the old days, great-aunt Edith outlined her plan for getting even with brother Danny. Annie was impressed by her aunt's knowledge of things electronic, especially when shown the old girl's study, which was full of the latest techno-wizardry and broadband connectivity. She was even more impressed when she realised that her centenarian relative, having dispensed with a life of genteel blackmail in her early eighties, had subsequently taught herself not only the arts of silver surfing, but had also majored as a writer of hacking and viral software on a par with any young eastern European hotshot. Indeed, with the decline in rental income caused by the ever increasing costs of insurance, red tape and health and safety initiatives, great-aunt Edith had financed some of the finer pieces in the apartment, including a real Ming chrysanthemum pot and a small Lowry, through her prowess at conducting phishing expeditions across the global email network in search of the details of other people's bank accounts. Digitally armed and dangerous, savvy and angry, the two women put their simple plan into effect; namely, he who lives by the Interweb shall die by the Interweb.

Great-aunt Edith showed Annie how to scan photographs and store them as images on the computer, using a collection of her very own black and white artistic poses from her early days in the glamour business, images which would now be considered at best cute but in most cases just as period pieces. Once the images were scanned the older woman copied down the details of Danny's email and web addresses from Annie's diary and set about the task of

adapting one of her more subtle Trojan Horse viruses so that it would work specifically with Danny in mind.

Using Danny's known liking for foreign brides, the two women concocted an email purporting to describe a particularly ravishing resident of Gorky, embedded the virus in a picture of the girl and sent the email to Danny Craig. Sure enough, within an hour a message popped into great-aunt Edith's inbox telling her that Danny had opened the email, spent some minutes scrutinising the picture and that the virus was now safely and surreptitiously installed on his hard drive. All that remained for them to do was wait for a week while the nasty little bug trawled the Interweb in the low, dark hours of the night collecting images of the most bizarre, disturbing and perverted kind.

After a week of clandestine activity the Trojan Horse virus despatched a summary of all the dreadful links, stories and pictures that it had found on its trawling expeditions in the howling hours and subsequently installed in a hidden area on Danny's hard drive. It then invoked a deletion routine, removed all trace of itself from the machine and let its digital DNA drift away on the ether that connects electronic super highways to Acacia Avenues the world over.

That same Sunday morning, following an anonymous tip off, various large and burly members of the Manchester police force's vice squad battered down Danny's front door, dragged him out of bed and bruisingly bundled him into the back of a white van. The house was stripped of the appropriate electronic devices and following a brief forensic examination of hard drives, flash disks and sundry other items of magnetic storage, the Detective Superintendent in command of the vice squad charged the young man with a number of crimes related to the storage and distribution of banned materials. The haul was sufficient, he said with a satisfied grin, to ensure that Danny would be spending the better part of the next fifteen years on the "Nonce" wing at Strangeways.

Danny protested his innocence throughout questioning, throughout his trial and well into his first few days on G wing, but he soon found that it was best to keep a low profile. Given the nature of the evidence against him, no one believed his claims that he had been fitted up, and in the far from private world of lock-

downs and slopping out, any mention of his sort of crime meant a bloody good beating.

Safe and sound on the outside and aided by the proceeds from Danny's own bank account, together with funds received from an unwitting, Canadian ice hockey player, Annie and her great-aunt employed the services of a very expensive legal practice in the heart of Manchester's business district. With the excellent advice of their own legal eagles easily overcoming the meagre resistance offered by the partners Dawson, they successfully overturned the terms of the will and shared the proceeds from the sale of the house, its chattels and the remaining technical gizmos that had not been confiscated by the Old Bill.

Annie settled into a life of sublime but quietly productive luxury with her great aunt, who, for her part had found an excellent reason to keep the home fires of her life burning brightly. She admitted to her great-niece that having crossed the Rubicon of a century of life she had started to get a little tired of things. Now, however, she couldn't possibly lay down the torch, not when she had so much to teach her rather naive young relative about living life to the full, the first lesson being how to behave and pose for glamour shots when in the company of rich, amateur photographers.

This Song is for You

(Loosely based on Grimm's The Juniper Tree)

Ken and Eileen Roach were a lovely couple. Everyone said so, everyone that is who didn't know or cared not to know about the gaping hole at the heart of their relationship. Even those close friends and relatives who knew about the hole were amazed at the couple's loving resilience in the face of such deep shadow, and unlike so many people who find that their strength and union is built on sand rather than on firm foundations, Ken and Eileen simply wouldn't let the darkness at the heart of their marriage tear their relationship apart, choosing instead to face their enemy in a committed search for the one thing that could complete the turn of the seasons in their lives. That simple thing was a child.

Ken and Eileen Roach lived on what had once been a decaying council housing estate in a small post-industrial town to the north-west of Birmingham, an estate that was by degrees being regenerated by a mixed bag of home owners, buy-to-let investors and housing trust managers. They took pride in their home and without the expense of youngsters nipping at their heels they were able to fill their lives with activities designed to displace their mutual sense of loss and longing. They tried keeping a dog, but found the urban sprawl too bleak a thing to impose on such an innocent creature. They kept a cat just long enough to form a deep, surrogate attachment to the creature's aloof singularity, before Eileen watched Mister Tibbles play a one sided game of tag with the postal service van one rainy May morning. Ultimately, facing the reality of time's drip southwards, and the sharp scythe wielded by the grim reaper of domesticated animals, the couple found solace in their passionate love for one another. Their love was born of hope and that hope always took the form of imagined blue lines and smiling doctors, but their loving was in vain.

As Ken and Eileen grew steadily into the trunk stiffening years of their mid-thirties, Ken, moved by an unconscious desire to nurture and grow, turned the back garden of their modest home into a vegetable grower's delight, with rows of broad beans, green beans, carrots and parsnips swelling with each alternate kiss of the sun and caress of summer rain. Both he and Eileen particularly loved the smell of their garlic bed and the way that sunlight thickened the broad, upright blades of their maturing crop. Man and wife tended their plants, made sure that their supporting canes were securely tied, weeded and hoed beds, watered and pricked out, and through their horticultural therapy they began the process of contemplation, of imagining their lives lived forever in the shadow of the hole.

They decided on one last shake of the dice. Ken and Eileen, both being able to work in full time jobs, saved and scrimped and carried each other all the way to the fertility clinic, where they found sympathy, helping hands, many months of pain and many dashed expectations. But hope is a powerful thing. As the couple's time of fecundity faded, and as their reserves of money and physical strength began to dwindle, Eileen prayed to every saint

under the sun for a child. Just when her faith was beginning to crack under the intense pressure of wanting, of needing, she was suddenly and wonderfully rewarded. On her final visit to the clinic she was greeted by the beaming face of her consultant, all of which made her death nine and a half months later, shortly after the birth of her son, that much harder for Ken to bear.

Bear it, however, he did. Following a polite if sparse cremation service held in the clean but anonymous halls of blonde wood and magnolia paint at the local crematorium, and with the memory of the pastor's mistaken belief that his wife's name was Aileen twitching behind his eyes, Ken carried out Eileen's last wish, which was to have her ashes scattered on the garlic beds. Her posthumous instructions were quite specific and Ken dug her ashes deep into the soft brown loam while his infant son sat wrapped in soft, white baby wools in his buggy, gurgling at the sky and staring out at the vaguely muscled shape of his perspiring father. The boy was called Alan, being as close to Eileen as Ken could get in the memorial naming of his son, and Ken perspired a great deal over the next few years bringing him up single-handedly.

Ken found company difficult, preferring the routines of parenthood, work and horticulture to the efforts and strains inherent in the pursuit of conviviality and social exchange with his peers. The seasons passed in a confusion of school uniforms and shoe sizes, just as much as they passed through the ever present need to prepare flower beds, to stake out fresh young plants and to harvest.

Through it all the boy matured into a quiet but strong thirteen year old who was never ashamed to scratch the dirt out from under his fingernails after grubbing up the last of the late potatoes. Ken still grieved for his wife, but the years made the tears taste less bitter and fall less frequently, and with his strapping son rapidly becoming his closest friend, he began to feel in his bones an old, familiar stirring. As young Alan blossomed, finding girls and music and the dreams of unchecked possibilities breasting the far hill scapes of his world view, so too Ken determined to be a part of his son's emerging life. He allowed himself to be dragged back into the maelstrom of human connectivity.

In short, following a cock up in the parental chauffeuring rota for one of Alan's school discos, Ken first, and quite literally,

bumped into, then dated and finally married Helen Morrison, the mother of one of Alan's classmates. For her part, Helen, who was recently divorced, saw in Ken a stability sadly lacking in her first husband, a stability backed up by a solid job, a ripe vegetable patch and a bank account in which her new husband had accumulated the not inconsiderable proceeds of a life lived quietly and productively.

At first, when the cherub's blush still burned crimson upon the new Mrs Roach's cheek, this new nuclear family, being father, son, mother and daughter, enjoyed the full warmth and vigour of recent fusion. Ken loved his son and did his best to welcome his new step-daughter into their lives, treading carefully and methodically through the minefield laid out before him by a new wife with strange new ways, by his own teenage son and by a new teenage daughter, about whom he knew very little.

Helen loved her daughter and, although giving a certain amount of leeway to the bachelor boys and their antisocial habits in the early stages of the marriage, she soon set about ordering the world according to her own particular preferences. This largely consisted of ensuring that her husband made generous provision for the necessities of life, and in ensuring that young Alan understood clearly and irrevocably that teenage boys were the scum of the earth.

Helen's view of youth was entirely sexist. She favoured her daughter in every way that she could and, when faced with the sullen and unresponsive glottal brutality of a pubescent teenage male, Helen rapidly came to the conclusion that something had to be done about the boy. If her primary aim in life was to secure her own happiness, her secondary aim was to ensure that her daughter, abandoned as she was by her own father, should become the sole heir to the Roach family fortune.

Alan's behaviour took a rapid turn for the worse, adding fuel to the fire of his step-mother's dislike and resulting in ever increasing levels of intolerance and maltreatment. Between the two of them a low-level, guerrilla war was declared. Helen Roach was a mistress of dissembling and guile, and so ensured that poor, short-sighted Ken's view of the wider world was unadulterated by fact. She left him with the glossed impression that all was well with his personal

kingdom and that Alan was a perfectly healthy, if moody, teenage boy.

The one saving grace amid the intense but unseen brutality was Lucy. She was quite unlike her mother, and although ravaged by the same hormonal imbalances and certain confusions that beset Alan, she tried hard not to allow herself to be brow beaten by her mother's general attitudes and specific goals, although her mother sought to make her daughter complicit in her disapproval of her step-son as a way of protecting both of their interests. The truth was, however, that Lucy had known Alan since they first started primary school together, and although she had never thought of him in terms of love during the occasional friendships of their early years, now that they were both at senior school, now that they were bound up together by contract, she found that she did love her step-brother.

Whenever she could she tried to soften her mother's blows and to create an oasis of calm at which she hoped the two of them might meet and overcome their differences and find some common ground. Unfortunately, as she and her step-brother grew up together and prepared to leave school at sixteen, the antagonism between step-mother and step-son only grew worse. Helen was determined that Alan should leave home at the earliest opportunity and made her plans accordingly.

In those last months before Alan was due to finish at school, Ken started to feel his age. Where once he could dig for hours on end and spend time out of doors on the coldest or wettest of days without complaint, he now found that his bones and his muscles, complained ever more loudly. At the end of a sullen afternoon of black clouds and driving rain, Ken stood by the back door dripping from head to toe and he turned to his wife and said, "You know, I don't think I can keep this garden going anymore, not like I used to".

Helen looked up briefly from the game show that she was watching on the kitchen television and nodded in his general direction. After a few moments, during which Ken struggled to reach down and pull his galoshes off, she turned to him, cigarette in hand, and said, "Maybe it's time we had a change. Why don't we

do like those tele gardeners and have it done over. I mean, we could have a nice patio or some decking, plant a few flowers and shrubs, and you could have a small veg patch up by the shed. I wouldn't dream of asking you to stop growing things, I know how much you love it, but what if we had somewhere nice to sit of an evening and have a glass of wine? What do you think?"

After a long hot bath and a stiff whisky Ken sat and pondered the garden. One part of him wanted to keep the vegetable patches exactly as they were, but it was a part of him that had been a long time buried under the turned topsoil of family life. He fetched one of his gardening books from an alcove shelf in the living room and leafed through the sections that showed keen gardeners how to build walls and fill holes with hardcore, and as he read the hints, tips and instructions, Ken realised that his weary bones ached for a change. It was a good idea and he told Helen just that, much to her pleasure and satisfaction. Ken started to sketch out plans for a patio. It would be somewhere to sit under a broad, green, canvas brolly on hot summer afternoons, somewhere that he could rest and admire the shapes and flights of colour that would fill his new flower garden.

The following weekend Ken returned to the damp soil and started to dig his vegetable patches one last time, but instead of preparing the soil for fresh planting he dug out footings and cleared the way for a bricklayer to come round as soon as the weather permitted. Over a couple of weekends he and the bricklayer constructed a wall and piles of hardcore, soft sand and gravel were deposited on the driveway. Ken and a reluctant Alan began to lay the base of their new patio right on top of the once blooming but now abandoned garlic patch in which the first Mrs Roach's ashes lay buried.

The next Sunday evening, with both of the Roach boys quite worn out by the wheeling of barrow loads of hardcore into the brick curtained hole where the new patio was taking shape, Helen Roach suggested her husband go down to the pub for a couple of beers. While not a common thing for her to do, she had, of late, started to encourage her husband to spend the odd evening in the lounge bar of the Red Lion, especially on a Thursday when his inevitable armchair snoring disturbed a particularly good night on the box. In

making her offer, which seemed at face value to be a kindness, she knew perfectly well that Ken would go and that he would stay in the pub until closing time. She also knew that Lucy would be out at a friend's house until nine o'clock, leaving her at home all alone, alone with Alan, who was at an age when he still preferred a set of headphones in his bedroom to the embarrassing company of his father in the pub, no matter that his father would pay for the beer.

Helen also knew that Ken would be uncomfortable with the idea of accompanying his son because of the inconvenience of age, for although the landlord sometimes turned a blind eye to underage drinking, he always kept Sunday evening as a child free haven for the exhausted parents of the parish. The family ate supper in tired silence, after which Helen washed up, Ken accompanied Lucy to the main road and Alan lay down on his bed with a motorbike magazine and the latest hard-ass bass lines thumping through his stereo headphones. The only sound that disturbed the otherwise quiet house was that of Mrs Roach using the electric carving knife to dismember the remains of the beef joint ready for the making of soup later in the week.

Alan nearly jumped out of his skin when his step-mother opened the door to his bedroom without knocking. He was even more surprised when, instead of standing there and making sarcastic comments about the state of the room, she smiled and asked him for some help.

"Sorry to disturb you, love, but I think I've broken the Moulinex, do you think you could have a look for me?"

Alan leaned over, killed the stereo and hauled himself wearily to his feet. As he walked past his step-mother he looked at her quizzically, saw nothing but bland middle aged smugness, and trotted down the stairs. Behind him Helen Roach's smile broadened into a black grin and her eyes flashed with the fire of pure hatred. She felt as though the blood coursing through her veins had been infused with raw, unadulterated gunpowder. It was as if, having opened her mind to the dark side in her plotting and scheming, she had welcomed in the spirit of the lycanthrope, although she remained sufficiently cold-blooded not to have changed her shape.

In the kitchen Alan unplugged the carving knife and checked the fuse. Finding nothing wrong he plugged it in again at the wall and

hit the start button. The twin electric blades flashed back and forth just as they should do.

“Oh”, exclaimed his step-mother, “Well, it seems to be working now. I don’t know what could’ve happened. They just stopped.”

“Yeah”, muttered the boy. “Might’ve overheated”.

“May I”, said his step-mother, taking the electric carving knife from him gingerly, and before Alan could nod his agreement or say another word, Helen Roach turned the blades to the horizontal plane, brought her arm up and embedded the knife’s whirring blades in Alan’s neck.

The struggle was brief. Alan saw the knife come towards him, but his mind couldn’t relate the physical position of the thing with the possibility that his step-mother intended to harm him. By the time that he did make the connection he was sinking to the floor and losing consciousness, his head and shoulders wrapped in an old bath towel that his step-mother had thrown over his head as she struck to soak up the inevitable streams of blood.

The incision and the severance of head from body was reasonably neatly done despite the violence of the electro-mechanical blades, a testament to Helen Roach’s culinary dexterity and carving skills. She soaked up the blood and spillage, tidied up Alan’s ragged edges, and with the needle that she usually used to finish stuffing the Christmas turkey, she loosely sewed Alan’s head back onto his shoulders. Then she put his body into a hooded top to hide the seam, and propped him up in a chair at the kitchen table.

By the time that the kitchen was spick and span once again it was one minute to nine and part two of her plan was about to commence. On cue Helen Roach heard a key in the front door lock, followed by the muffled sounds of Lucy taking off her coat and shoes, and padding towards the kitchen in her socks. The door swung open and Helen Roach turned from the kettle that she had just filled and asked, “Nice time, love? Fancy a cup of tea?”

Lucy nodded and went over and sat opposite Alan’s body, while her mother took a mug from the tree beside the kettle, crossing her fingers as she did so. Neither mother nor daughter said anything, preferring to listen to the hubble and bubble of rapidly boiling water, until, with the steam rising and tea bags in cups, Lucy’s mother asked Alan’s body if it wanted a cup of tea as well. Alan’s

body, in perfect mimicry of a real live teenage boy, remained silent and morose.

“He’s been like that all night”, said Mrs. Roach. “Came down here just after you left complaining of a headache. Do you think he’s nodded off?”

Lucy asked her step-brother if he was awake and receiving no reply assumed that he had fallen asleep at the table.

“Typical boy!” she snorted, reaching over to prod him awake. Her fingers pushed into the flesh of his shoulder, but instead of meeting the firmly relaxed muscle of a live body, they melted into soft, lifeless flesh, and so began the slow twist and turn of Alan’s corpse as it loosed itself from the temporary vice that held it between chair and table. The cadaver started to slide grotesquely to the floor.

Lucy’s eyes opened wider and wider as Alan’s body disintegrated in front of her. His trunk and limbs began to slide towards the floor while his head fell backwards, suspended in the hood of his jumper. The stitches holding Alan’s head to his neck snapped, making a brief and unnerving sound like the hem of a skirt ripping on a twig, and the hooded top spilled backwards, snagging on a splinter in the chair back, so that, after an awful, oozing second or two of scraping and sliding, there were two dull thuds and all that Lucy could see was a disembodied hoodie containing her step-brother’s severed head hanging from the back of the kitchen chair directly opposite where she sat.

Lucy screwed her eyes shut, willing herself away from this gruesome dream, praying for the darkness to smother her like it had when her real father had first left home and she used to run to her mother’s bed for comfort. This nightmare, however, had no happy ending and just as she tried to unglue her eyes and scream, her mother slapped a hand over her daughter’s mouth and whispered very softly in her ear.

“You did that...you broke your brother...which is very bad, very bad indeed...you’re a horrible, nasty little girl...but Mummy still loves you...Mummy still loves you...Mummy will always love you...”

The scream buried itself deep inside Lucy, tearing reason and rationale apart as it bit savagely into her psyche. Slowly, and in a

maddening whirl of confusion, recrimination and tears, Lucy begun to piece together the utter horror and enormity of what her mother was saying.

Realising that her daughter had briefly entered into a state of extreme shock, Helen repeated over and over again by rote the mantra that blamed Lucy for Alan's death. She was determined to ensure that Lucy, in taking the blame upon herself, would be her accomplice and her alibi, whatever it might cost in short term discomfort for them both.

Lucy wept and wept throughout the ordeal, hanging onto her mother's arm with feral strength as they dragged Alan's torso out into the garden and rolled it into the pit that had been dug for the patio. Then, while Lucy, working on auto-pilot, cleaned the kitchen up again, her mother moved the torso, the head, the hoodie and two black bin liners full of soiled cleaning materials to an as yet unfilled area in the new patio base and proceeded to bury Alan's mortal remains under lumps of hardcore and a layer of gravel.

In the two hours between finishing the evening's murderous chores and Ken's return from the pub, Helen Roach's insidiously persuasive skills were brought to bear on her daughter, convincing Lucy that she had killed her step-brother, but that her mother loved her so much that so long as Lucy never uttered another word on the subject of Alan's disappearance, then she would protect her forever and a day.

Fortified by her mother's understanding, loyalty and love, and by two Valium and a large, sugared brandy, Lucy managed to crawl up to her bedroom just a few moments before Ken stumbled through the front door. Lucy locked her bedroom door, buried her head under her pillow and gently wept herself into a fitful chemical sleep.

Monday morning's breakfast was unusually quiet. Lucy sat in silence at the kitchen table staring at the early morning news on the television while her mother busied herself with toast and tea, smoking the first cigarette of the day as if her life depended on it. Ken was nursing a dull head and an urgent desire for sugary drinks, but lacking the wherewithal to solve either problem he did his best to bury himself in the nutritional information on the back of the cereal packet. As the minutes ticked by and Helen Roach sucked

down on the butt of her third cigarette, it appeared as if no one in the Roach household had any intention of going to work or to school that day.

Eventually, however, Ken rose from the table, went out into the hallway and hollered up the stairs.

“Alan! Shift yourself! You’re going to be late”.

Hearing nothing from the boy’s room, not even the disgruntled creaking of bed springs, Ken trudged up to the boy’s room, ready to give him a bloody good earful. It wasn’t the boy, however, who had to bear the brunt of his hung over ill temper.

“What do you mean, he’s gone off with his mates?” yelled Ken at the two women in his life.

“Just upped and went”, said Helen, “right after you went out. Said he’s sixteen and can do what he likes. Took a bag and went... didn’t he, love?”

Lucy tried to bury her head in the neck of her school blouse, her cheeks and ears blushing crimson as she thought about the body under the gravel and how she had killed her step-brother. She couldn’t look at her step-father, knowing that if she did she would unravel, so she mumbled an affirmative and rushed out of the room, collected her school bag from the foot of the stairs and ran out of the house, her eyes brimming with tears.

“This bloody family’s falling apart”, said Ken, giving his wife a look of sheer exasperation. “I mean, he never even said goodbye. And Lucy? What was all that about?”

“I know, love, but they’re teenagers, all hormones and attitude. Alan’s bound to come back in a little while, when he needs something. He’s just flexing his muscles, growing up a bit, that’s all. You’ll see.”

Helen Roach put her arm around her husband’s waist and gave him a peck on the cheek. “Why don’t you phone in sick today. Stay at home and have a rest, you’ll feel better.”

Ken did just that, croaking down the phone to his boss to complain about a twenty-four hour bug. Then rather than sit around moping, he changed into his gardening clothes and went outside. Ken worked like a Trojan all day long, driven on by the ingratitude of all those he loved, each one of whom left him when it suited them, all that is except the second Mrs. Roach. By tea time he had

laid all of the remaining hardcore, covered it with gravel and soft sand, and raked it level and smooth so that he could begin laying the slabs the following weekend.

That night, unseen by her mother and stepfather, Lucy took Alan's St Christopher medallion from his bedside table and buried it where she and her mother had interred Alan's broken body. Before laying the medallion under the gravel Lucy kissed it and silently begged Alan for forgiveness. As she did this she was surprised but strangely comforted by a strong smell of garlic that rose up from underneath the levelled hardcore, and for some reason that she didn't understand she felt as though something good might come of this mess after all, although she couldn't imagine what that might be.

A few days later Lucy was listening to a late night radio programme on her MP3 player while lying in bed trying to fend off the nightmares that inevitably came after dark. The DJ introduced a new song by an unknown singer, a song that was, he said, all set to take the clubs and the charts by storm. Even at Lucy's tender age the seeds of cynicism had begun to take root, especially now that hope seemed so far away, and she mentally went "whatever" as the DJ waxed lyrically about the new voice on the block. However, as soon as the DJ shut up and the haunting melody of the new song began to drift through Lucy's headphones she knew that this was something different. Lucy had never bought into the concept that art or music could change lives or move mountains, but with every hook and drum beat, with every lilting nuance of the boy's soft voice, she sensed a shift in the world and she knew instinctively that she had to download the song immediately.

Within a week the song was being played everywhere. It was an instant hit, making number one in charts across the world and appearing as an essential tune on play lists and set lists wherever good music was played. A video appeared on television, but this offered no hints as to who the band might be, showing only shots of raw and wild nature in its many coated splendours.

Strangely, there were no public images of the boy, and no one who commented on popular culture seemed to have any idea who the singer or the band might be. Even the record label was a

mystery, no one in the industry having heard of Allium Records. In the end it didn't matter that the source of the recording, the name of the band and the identity of the singer were unknown, because you couldn't walk past any radio, stereo or television without hearing the sublime melodic phrasing of the hit of the year.

In the Roach house the new wonder song inspired a strange mixture of emotions and reactions. Ken Roach was indifferent to any outside stimuli, wrapped as he was in a blanket of personal suffering. That his boy, his one link back to his beloved first wife, should treat him in such a cavalier fashion, whatever the promptings of teenage hormones, was too hard to bear. He tried to respond to his wife and step-daughter, but apart from the odd brief conversation he preferred to occupy his time with work, well away from the sounds of the radio. If he had heard the song while at work or in the car, it simply hadn't registered.

Not that he would have heard the radio in the house. Immediately after the disposal of Alan's body Helen Roach found that coping with her daughter's stress and grief was far harder than she had ever imagined it would be. Rather rapidly, Helen Roach found that dealing with the world through a haze of cigarette smoke and vodka fumes was the only way in which she could make sense of her strange new world order. The booze and the nicotine worked wonders on her disturbed state of mind.

However, even with the benefits of chemical sedation she dared not turn on the television or the radio unless Lucy was in the room in case she heard about crimes that might remind her about the body under the patio. It was, of course, impossible that anyone had reported Alan missing, with the only two people who knew about the boy's unnatural disappearance being complicit in the cover up.

Ever since the moment when Helen convinced her daughter that she had knocked her step-brother's head off, Lucy sought solace in her own company in her bedroom. She withdrew from her mother and no matter how desperate the look in her mother's alcohol skewed eyes, she would not be drawn back into the bosom of her mother's awful love, which is why, as the days passed and the new song hit the headlines and the airwaves, the only person who knew anything of it or enjoyed its strange and comforting melodies was Lucy, who saw no reason to share her comfort with anyone else.

Apart from the tinny hiss from Lucy's headphones the Roach household was as silent as the grave for weeks after the murder.

The world of popular music moves rapidly at the best of times, with one hit wonders appearing and disappearing without trace all too frequently. This new song was, however a phenomenon, sitting at number one in the charts in England for week after week, during which time the unknown band were awarded a succession of silver, gold and platinum disks, a host of awards, and plaudits of the most outrageous kind. It was inevitable, therefore, that even Ken's indifference and Helen's defensive walls would be breached. The sheer volume of air time made over to the spiritual harmonies and spectral tones of the song made it impossible for anyone to ignore forever.

Ken first became aware of the haunting but strangely comforting melody down at his local pub one evening a few weeks after Alan's rude and abrupt departure. As he sat on his own on a stool at one end of the bar nursing a pint of bitter, ignoring the world from behind a face fit to curdle concrete, he suddenly started to hear the sounds of people's voices around him. For the last few weeks he had shut out the sounds of life, preferring the solitude of personal contemplation to the banality of human contact, but here in the soft tawny light of the lounge bar at the Red Lion those trivial voices broke through on the back of an ethereal sub tone that slowly built up throughout the evening until, towards closing time, Ken realised that he was listening to the same song being played over and over again on the jukebox. This song, a song that he had never heard before but seemed to know instinctively, filled him with warmth and life, and quite to the barman's shock and pleasant surprise, Ken ordered his last pint with a smile.

Unlike her daughter and now her husband, Helen found no comfort in the wonder song. She remained firm in her insistence that neither radio nor television should be switched on during any news program, telling her husband that the world was full of too much bad news already without adding to her misery. However, when Lucy was at school and Ken was at work, Helen watched daytime soaps, chat shows and old black and white films because she felt safe in the arms of Richard and Judy.

Unfortunately, Richard and Judy betrayed her one Tuesday afternoon by reporting on the wonder song and the mysterious singer, playing the track three times during the programme. The melodies stole their way from the television right into the core of Helen's brain, lodging there like a worm under the bark of a rotting tree. This worm wriggled to the beat of one particular song, and as it wriggled so it nibbled away at what remained of Helen's sanity.

For Ken and Lucy the wall to wall air play of the song was a great boon, providing them with many moments of peace and calm in their otherwise tormented lives. For Ken the song let him know in his soul that Alan loved him and that they would meet up soon enough, while for Lucy the lyrics and the bass hooks seemed to tell her that the singer knew she was innocent and that she had not killed her step-brother. Both she and her step-father insisted on turning up the volume on the radio whenever the song was playing, and even shared Lucy's MP3 player so that they could keep listening when all other services fell silent.

This obsession with the song caused huge rows in the Roach household. While her husband and daughter found comfort in its reassuring presence, Helen was driven to distraction by even the faintest note. So full of fear and loathing for the thing was she that she locked herself away in her bedroom whenever her family was at home, drinking vodka by the bottle and smoking anything up to one hundred cigarettes a day. Helen Roach rapidly became a recluse, a shambolic, unkempt creature living a half-life of darkness in her bedroom, where she filled her ears with cotton wool buds when sober enough to remember that the worm was turning in her poor, throbbing skull. On those occasions when the music filtered through the vapours that she drew around herself, she sunk her long, splintered fingernails into the woodchip wallpaper, ripping huge tears in the outer fabric of her bedroom walls.

The final straw for Helen Roach came one Saturday morning when Lucy announced to her mother during a now rare and troubled family breakfast that she had entered a competition advertised in her favourite music magazine, the prize being the chance to meet the mystery singer. The results were due that morning and Lucy fully expected to win. Ken smiled and nodded

his approval, believing in some uncharted way that Lucy was entirely correct in her assumption.

Helen, however, who was slowly emerging from her dark worm filled nightmares to greet another hateful day, suddenly felt a desperate need to claw away the mists and cobwebs that smothered her broken view of the world. Realising belatedly what it was that her husband and daughter were speaking about, she slammed her mug of coffee down on the kitchen table, sending waves of hot black liquid flying across the room, jumped to her feet and screamed at the top of her voice, "Of course you'll fucking win, you bitch, how could you do anything else?"

Helen collapsed onto the kitchen floor in a haze of adrenalin and alcoholic abuse. Ken, shocked and concerned about the strange way in which his wife had been behaving lately, carried her back up to the bedroom, where he made sure that the curtains were drawn and that the windows were safely closed and locked, taking the key with him to ensure Helen's safety. Then, and despite his own wish to hear the song again, he asked Lucy to try and keep the house as quiet as the grave for the rest of day so that her mother could recover from her nerves.

Upstairs in the bedroom Helen Roach listened to the silence of the house and started to cry softly into her pillow. Even when they turned off the radio and television, even when the world's volume dial was turned down to zero, she could still hear the song. The worm in her head was tuned to a permanent loop that played the track over and over again and no matter how hard she tried to shut herself down with drugs and alcohol the track played on in the shadows at a volume too low for anyone else to hear but always just too loudly for Helen to ignore.

Lucy prayed all day long, willing the phone to ring but there was no phone call from the competition organisers. At five o'clock she could bear the suspense no longer and switched on the television, keeping the volume down as low as she could, desperate to find out what was happening. She was so convinced that she would win the chance to meet the boy who sang her song that when the news reader eventually introduced the story towards the end of the early evening bulletin Lucy nearly fainted. She listened to the story unfold with a growing sense of unease and disappointment, a sense

that rapidly turned to despair and utter devastation when the pictures cut to the image of an ecstatic twelve year old from Grimsby who would be attending a gala bash in London the following weekend where the boy and his band would finally be unveiled.

Ken came in from the garden some twenty minutes after Lucy had given up the ghost and prostrated herself on the living room floor. By the time that he found her the poor girl was completely cried out and she crumpled like a damp towel in his hands, lifeless and almost comatose. Ken held her head in his arms and gently wiped her hot and sweaty fringe away from her fevered forehead, stroking her hair to try and soothe the poor young thing as she lay like a rag doll in his lap.

They both assumed that the song was being played on the television when they heard the now familiar first few notes settle on top of the thick walls of late afternoon air that folded around them like hot summer blankets. Ken and Lucy rocked back and forth in time to the gentle, spiritual beat, mouthing silent words as the boy's perfect voice soared in over the bass lines, the guitars and the unearthly breath of synthesised melody. The sound grew slowly, repeating refrains and phrases in a growing, circular pattern, quite unlike the recorded version, until the volume and intensity of these paradisiacal sounds overwhelmed them both completely.

The narrow horizon of Ken and Lucy's world, made up of the four walls of the living room, the French doors leading into the back garden and the television set, simply peeled apart, unskinning itself, letting in golden light where there should have been dusky purples and black shadows. All the while, as Ken and Lucy drifted on the sound of angels crying, the song built up to a crescendo of perfect harmony that lifted their mood and their awareness to an altogether higher plane.

Upstairs in the bedroom Helen Roach cowered down between the bed and wall, as far away from the sound of scratching demons as she could crawl. With every drum beat, with every up lift of note and every harmonised chord it felt as if her skin was being flayed from her bones. Her outer layers were crawling away from her inner core, and with each repetition of the circle she tried

desperately to make herself smaller and smaller, until she could reduce her presence in the world no more. Still the sound built, crashing through her head and tearing at her sanity until the last vestiges of her strength became impossibly compressed and ready to blow.

The pain in Helen's head started to swell and grow like a boil, forcing her up and out of her hiding place. Her ears started to bleed as she careened through doorways and down the stairs, tripping and stumbling on her dressing gown, but still she forced herself forwards, crashing through the living room door. Once in the room Helen was compelled to try and quell the rising storm, and screaming defiance one last time she thrust her bare foot through the glass of the television's cathode ray tube. The room exploded around her and Helen, bleeding from cuts to her leg and ankle, lurched out of the living room through the French doors and staggered to a halt next to Ken and Lucy, who were standing and holding hands in the middle of the new patio.

At the far end of the patio a young man stood alone humming quietly to himself, with his arms wrapped around his torso and with his eyes shut. From the air around him the song spiralled, swooped and skimmed across the roof tops, turning dead-head flowers to bloom and lighting the evening sky with full, bright star shine. Each element in the song intertwined with its partners to create a writhing mass of perfect, simple, harmonic resolution. The boy opened his eyes. He smiled. The air around Ken, Lucy and Helen snapped and snarled for a moment, before the entire world seemed to shut down around them until all that was left was pure, white silence.

Helen came to her senses as if emerging from a deep dive in thick ocean currents. She reached up to take hold of the light and to physically haul air into her burning lungs. She stood alone on the half finished patio in her dressing gown, madly sniffing the air and trying to wipe the smell of garlic away from the skin on her hands and face. Only very slowly, as the smell permeated every cell in her body, did she realise that Ken and Lucy were gone and that she was alone in a world where she dare not speak to anyone about the worm in her head, anyone that is apart from Alan, who stayed with her, silent and unmoving under the stones.

Helen never watched television again. In fact she never replaced the smashed set in the living room, preferring the certainty of silence that the broken machine gave her over any further contact with the outside world. Sometimes, when loneliness crawled over her cold skin, she went out into the garden, where she believed that Alan's ghost sometimes sat with her in the dark of an evening, but there was little comfort in that and there was no escaping the worm.

Having no television and no contact with the outside world meant that Helen never did see a star struck twelve year old girl from Grimsby get all tongue tied and nervous when she met the boy with the angelic voice and his band in London. When all was finally revealed, The Seraph, as they were called, were a three-piece from the Midlands with a rare talent for creating haunting melodies and harmonies, melodies that played on in Helen's head every minute of every day until the very second that she finally shuffled off her mortal chains.