

The Exeter Authors Association



We are an association of professional authors, poets, playwrights, and screenwriters from across the South-West of England. The EAA was set up in 2017 with exactly two members from completely opposite sides of Devon, who managed to meet occasionally in mid Devon as a central point.

It was set up for the simple reason all the other main writing groups were full.

Therefore I decided to set one up and create our own unique stamp on literature events across England.

Over the years the EAA has expanded our membership to professional writers from across Devon and Somerset.

P.J. Reed

Tales from Deepest, Darkest Devon. Volume 2

From

The Exeter Authors
Association

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Devon Air Ambulance.

Devon Air Ambulance (DAA) is the Charity that raises the funds to keep two emergency Air Ambulances flying, to relieve injury and illness in the county of Devon. In 2018 it cost £7.5 million to run the service.

We are proud to be independent of Government and National Lottery Funding; this safeguards the service for the long-term and ensures we can deliver what the people of Devon tell us they want from their Air Ambulance.

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In addition, DAA has substantially improved patient care through the creation of a ground breaking Master's Degree for air paramedics aimed at making them amongst the highest qualified in the profession.

Devon's Air Ambulances are an essential part of the community we live in and the service would not be possible without the generous support and donations from the people, businesses and communities in and around Devon, every penny raised is making a real difference.

For the memory of
Richard Lappas

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The Last Fish in the River.

Richard Dee



I come from a fishing family, but I couldn't see a future in it. So I decided to be the first one to go to university. I studied marine biology and coastal ecology. My father said that it was because I couldn't tear myself that far away from the wet stuff.

"It's a bit late for all that," my father grumbled, when I told him about the conservation element of the course. "We've been let down by officialdom so many times, there's hardly anything left to conserve anymore." Even though I thought he was right, I still wanted to make a difference if I could.

I went out on his trawler in the holidays, which meant I was there when he pulled in the box.

On this trip, we had gone further afield for fish, we were off the mouth of the River Dart, with Start Point a hazy line on the horizon, when he hauled the nets.

As I tugged on the line and opened the Cod end, the catch poured into the hopper. I saw mixed fish, a few dogfish and a big lump of something suspicious.

"Check that," Dad called, from where he was leaning out of the wheelhouse window. "Make sure it's not a bomb."

Cautiously, I peered, it was about a foot along each side, covered in weeds and barnacles. It was square sided and unlike any ordinance I've ever seen. Which was a relief.

"It's some sort of box or container," I said, reaching for it.

"Boom," shouted Alex, the deckhand and I pretended to flinch. Mind you, it had shocked me. I picked the box up, it was heavy and slippery. "Chuck it back in," Alex said.

"Nope, I'm keeping it," I replied. "There might be something valuable inside." I dragged it off the deck and into the stores, where I found an old bag to put it in.

On the way back in to Brixham, Alex tried to negotiate for a share of any treasure. I told him to get stuffed. Then we all laughed. Trevor, the Mate, kept his thoughts to himself.

Dad looked at it, "I suspect it's from a wreck," he said. "Currents have sloshed it around. See if you can open it, you never know what might be inside."

I dragged the box home and put it in the shed. Water dripped out of it, whatever was inside had better be made of Gold, or Silver.

We had a barbecue that evening, with my girlfriend Kes, her sister Sarah and Dave, Sarah's husband.

Dave ran some inshore crab and lobster pots. As well as selling direct to local restaurants, Sarah sold the meat from a cabin in the harbour to tourists. Naturally, that meant the talk was all about fishing, my mother used to hate it, now she wasn't here, there was nothing to stop us. Mum wouldn't have stood for it. "We don't talk shop while we're relaxing," she used to say.

After the cancer had taken her, Dad had thrown himself into fishing. He was off again tomorrow, for a three-day trip. I was staying this time. I had another day off, then two days of lectures to go to.

We sat in the garden relaxing with beers and some grilled mackerel, when the talk turned to my find.

"Show them what you found," Dad suggested. I went to the shed and dragged the box out into the late evening sunshine. We all stared at it as I pulled some of the thicker weed away, revealing a metal-bound box.

“What do you reckon it is?” asked Kes.

“I have no idea,” I admitted, “but at least it wasn’t a bomb.”

“I’ve seen some stuff pulled up,” said Dave. “But never anything like that.”

“I think it’s a sailor’s ditty box,” Dad said.

“What’s a ditty box?” I hadn’t heard of one.

“It’s a box for keeping odds and ends, not always valuables but you never know. I’ve found a few in my time. Clay pipes, letters, souvenirs, even a gold ring once.”

“Do we have to report it to anyone?” I asked. “The Receiver of Wreck or someone.”

“Officially, you have 28 days if you think it could be treasure. So you’d better get started, let’s see if there’s anything to report first, then we’ll decide what to do.”

“Shouldn’t it have rotted away?” asked Sarah, “after all that time in the water.”

“I think this one’s made of *Lignum Vitae*,” he said. “It’s the hardest wood known, so dense it sinks in water and almost impervious to rot. It’s native to the Caribbean and Venezuela. From the style of the box and the metal banding, it looks like it could be Spanish. The wood has been treated with some sort of preservative, probably Shellac, that’s another clue, the lac beetle comes from Asia, where the Spanish had territory.”

Let us know what happens, they said as they went home, it was early starts all round.

The next day, on my own, I tackled the box.

I started to clean the wood, it was beautifully preserved, a thick coat of what looked like varnish had protected the surface. Once I had removed the barnacles, with a combination of weak hydrochloric acid and a scraper, I found that there was hardly any rot in the wood. I looked *Lignum Vitae* up online. It was a dense hardwood from Central America, which fitted with the Spanish provenance. The wood was filled with natural lubricants, it was used to make stern bearings for ship’s propellers. The metal bands surrounding it had not fared so well, they were rusted and fell apart as I tried to

clean them. Even so, I could not prise the lid off, I could see the join, the gap was too thin to insert a blade.

There had to be something else keeping it closed, a secret locking bar somewhere. I turned the box over and over, looking for anything that stood out. It had to be wooden, all the metal had fallen off.

I found it in the corners, four pieces of wood that I thought were just part of the joints. They had to be rotated on wooden pins, then it was a matter of pulling and levering until the lid reluctantly lifted.

Inside, it was still half-filled with water. There was a lump of something, probably parchment, a plain brass ring and a string of rosary beads. I was disappointed and about to close the lid when I realised something. The box was not as deep inside as the overall size suggested. The base was lined with padded fabric, now faded and rotten, over a board that matched the rest of the box. Bits of the fabric were stuck between the frame and the base. I fetched some tweezers, carefully held a corner of it with them and pulled.

The false bottom lifted out. I saw another layer of rotten cloth. Under that was a flat glass bottle, the wide neck stoppered with red wax around a cork. The glass was dark brown, I couldn't see what was inside. Maybe it was four-hundred-year-old rum? I shook the bottle, it rattled and felt almost empty. I carefully chipped the wax away until I could pull the cork out. There was something inside, a roll of something. Using the tweezers, I carefully pulled it out.

About twenty sheets of parchment were twisted together and held with a narrow ribbon. Most of them were filled on both sides with lists and short paragraphs. The top one looked more like a letter, perhaps it was an explanation.

I couldn't read much Spanish, I'd only done a little bit at school, and certainly not the four-hundred-year-old version of the language. But I could read the odd word in the title. In a bold and flowing script, as clear as the day it was written, it said.

Ultimo Pez en el Rio. Para la gloria del Rey Felipe II y el Papa Pablo IV.

I got Rio, that was a River. Papa was Father. With the number, it was probably a Pope. And Rey meant King. What had I stumbled on? The writing was clear, if only I could read it.

It was signed with a highly curved signature.

The text on the other sheets was in smaller writing, as if the space was at a premium and the words had to be made smaller to fit. I could hardly make out the individual letters. I needed a copy of the sheets, they were far too fragile to withstand constant handling.

I went inside, fired up my computer and scanner, made copies of all the sheets. Then I printed out a set, took the originals and sealed them in a sandwich bag. I put it in Dad's safe.

As I tidied everything up, I realised that what I had thought was a ball of rotten parchment was actually a wrapped object. Peeling back the layers, I uncovered a tiny silver Salmon. Scarcely an inch long, it was perfect in every detail, with a pattern of scales on its flank and an adipose fin. It had a small hole in the tail, so that it could be threaded on a chain.

When I looked at my watch. I realised it was well past dinner time. I phoned. Kes. "Sorry, I didn't call," I said. "I've been really busy."

She sounded flustered. "That's OK, Sarah and I have been rushed off our feet. Dave's come back with a huge catch, we've had to prepare it ready for tomorrow."

"Are you coming round?" I asked. "No," she said. "We haven't finished here yet. It'll be too late."

"I've got lectures in the morning," I told her. "I'll see you tomorrow evening." As the call ended, I realised that I'd never mentioned anything about what I'd found. More than that, she hadn't even been interested enough to ask. I showered, ate a sandwich and went to bed.

In the morning, I headed off to lectures in Plymouth. I was sitting at my desk in the classroom, looking at the scan of the letter, trying to decipher more of the words, when I saw Consuela De Silva come in. She was a student on my course. Petite, dark and intense, she was from a fishing family in Bilbao and had the same passion for

conservation that I did. I wondered if she could help me make sense of the bits I couldn't understand.

"Can I ask you something, Consuela?" I said. "Of course," she answered.

"What does the word Pez mean?"

"That's a fish," she said. "Why?"

"I've got this letter, it's titled El Ultimo Pez en el Rio. I know Rio means river, I wasn't sure about the rest."

She sat down next to me, peered at the scan. "That's old-fashioned grammar," she said. "It means the last fish in the river. Where are you getting this from?"

I showed her the scan of the letter. "I've got this letter," I said, "that I found in an old box. I'm just wondering what some of the words mean."

"Let me have a look." She snatched it from me and started reading. "It's hard to decipher," she said. "It mentions a man called Raphael. And something here about Militia, a brotherhood. It's very old, where did you find this?"

I took it back. "Thanks," I said. "It sounds interesting. Please don't mention it to anyone."

"Wait a minute," she said. "Can I see some more?"

"I'll have to ask my friends," I said. "It's not really mine to share."

Before we could continue, the lecturer arrived and we settled down for work. Instead of asking again when we broke for coffee, she went straight out of the room. As she walked away, I saw her pull her phone from her back pocket and press it to her ear. I didn't see her again that day and couldn't help wondering if I shouldn't have shown it to her.

When I got home, Kes was there. "Sorry I missed you yesterday," she said. I told her what I'd found, showed her the scans and the Silver Salmon.

"That's incredible," she said, when I told her the title. "I wonder why the writing was hidden like that? That charm is definitely old. Did you know that Salmon used to thrive in the River Dart? They

fished for them, in the East and West Dart, right up to Wistman's Wood on Dartmoor. Is there a date anywhere?"

I looked at the letter. At the bottom, under a signature, it was dated, October 12th, 1588.

"You know when that was, don't you?" she said.

Everyone knew when that was. "The Armada was in 1588," I said.

She nodded. "That letter is dated about two months after the battle of Gravelines. It was the encounter where Drake and Effingham wreaked havoc on the Spanish fleet, with guns and fireships. Now, what would a Spanish man be doing then?"

"Perhaps he was wrecked in his ship, the letter was something secret, that needed to be hidden?"

When I told her that Consuela had seen the letter, she was furious. Kes didn't like Consuela, they had met at a social event and, like two cats, had circled each other warily.

"You let her see it? "Why didn't you tell me yesterday, when we spoke?"

"You were busy, you didn't seem interested," I said. She was silent for a moment. "Fair enough, I suppose, but it had slipped my mind. It's done now, the question is, can you trust her?"

"I think so," I said. "She only saw it for a couple of moments. She can't have had a chance to read it all. And even if she is Spanish, she can't be that good at reading and deciphering four-hundred-year-old documents."

"When do you see her again?" She asked. "Tomorrow, we have a lecture. I'll see her then."

"We'll just have to hope she keeps her mouth shut," she said. "Where are the scans? the digital copies."

"They're on my computer," I said.

"Right," she headed towards it. "I have an idea, and there are no dubious Spanish ladies involved."

"What are you going to do?"

"Did you think to download an OCR translation programme and run the scans through that?"

“No, but I’m not a computer geek like you are. Can you even do that?” I thought it best not to ask what OCR was, I could find out from my phone when she wasn’t looking.

She smiled. “Yes, get me a glass of wine.”

When I carried it through, she was bent over the screen, with a magnified scan and the rotating circle indicating that something was happening. I’d taken a sneaky look, OCR was optical character recognition, at least I knew that now.

The printer started up. “That’s the first sheet done,” she said. “I did the letter first, I thought it might be the most important.” She handed me a printed sheet. “Especially as someone else has already seen it.”

She wasn’t letting this go. “OK, OK,” I said. “Message received.”

“Good. The other sheets need a bit more work, at least you scanned them at high resolution. It’ll take the programme a while to go through them all.”

I sat on the couch and read the translation.



The Last Fish in the River. For the glory of King Philip II and Pope Paul IV.

My children, this is a message from your father, entrusted for delivery to you by my brother in arms Raphael De Silva e Coruna. By the time you read this, I will be dead from my wounds but rest assured your legacy is intact and awaiting your arrival, once the situation in this beautiful yet benighted country has improved and old enmities have been forgotten. Because at the end of it, we are all creatures of the Almighty, even the heretic English, I can see that now my end is near.

I do not fear death, I welcome it, secure in the knowledge that I did my Saviour's will. For the same reason, you should not mourn me. What I could not tell you was that, three years ago, the Holy Father, yes, the Pope himself, through our glorious Monarch, gave me a sacred

duty to perform. I was to save the heretics of the English Isle and bring them back into the Papal fold, to the glory of His name.

In total secrecy, even from you, my family, I was ordered to go to England, to the town of Dertemouthe, posing as a merchant in wines and wool. What I could never tell was that our vessel carried gold, as well as letters to the brave Catholics who resisted the heretic Elizabeth's persecution.

And the reason, it was to prepare the way for the inevitable victory of the coming invasion. We were to unsettle the population in their heretic beliefs with insinuations of damnation and suggest that revolution was their only chance of salvation. When we learned that the arch-heretic Drake and his acolytes had destroyed our ships by fire and the minions of Satan caused the winds to scatter the remnants of our fleet, I knew that all was for nothing.

Wishing only a speedy escape and return to the bosom of our families, we secured our treasure and papers for safekeeping and set off for our ship at Dertemouthe. Near the ford at the hamlet of Hareburtonne, we were set upon by three men of the protestant militia. In fighting them off, I was wounded by an arquebus ball, which passed through my leg. Although no bone was broken, the wound has mortified and I can smell the sure scent of corruption.

So, I have put my affairs in order. The gold is safe, as are our papers, revealed in the place where the heretics Drake and Rawleigh sat. Let the enclosed token, which is a symbol of our brotherhood, be your guide. May the scales of misunderstanding fall from your eyes, as you behold the last fish in the river.

With my love and God's blessing,

Your father,

Sebastian Alvarez Du'Que.

Dated the 12th day of October in the year of our lord one thousand five hundred and eighty-eight.

I sat back. What had I found? It sounded to me like a hoard of treasure was hidden somewhere on the River Dart. The fish was the clue; all I had to do was solve the riddle of what was meant by discovering where Drake and Raleigh had sat.

Kes was silent as she worked with the keyboard and mouse.

"What do you think will be on the other sheets?" I asked her.

She frowned. "Goodness knows," she said. "It'll have to be something special to follow that letter. Perhaps it'll be a list of treasure and a map that takes us straight to it?"

"Anyone about?" shouted Dave, as he and Sarah came into the house, carrying Pizza and bottles. "What are you two up to?"

Leaving the computer to do its thing, we sat and ate the pizza. I told Dave and Sarah what I'd found in the box. I showed them the silver Salmon and the letter, which they read together, their mouths dropping open as they got to the end.

"What's on the other sheets?" asked Sarah. "Are they a treasure map?"

"We don't have any idea yet," Kes said. "The computer is still deciphering them." She looked at me, I didn't mention anything about Consuela, and she didn't embarrass me by bringing it up.

"Well, this is something to work on," Dave said. "If you can get the name of the ship from somewhere, you can go to Dartmouth. The museum will have all the old harbour records."

"What do you make of it all, Dave?"

I think it's a part of the story of the Armada," he said. "It stands to reason, they would want a fifth column on land, ready to assist an invasion. They must have been here preparing the Catholic loyalists, the ones who were in hiding. I guess they were telling them about the Armada, what was going to happen. They might have been organising them into some kind of resistance. They probably intended to rise up when the Armada landed. The gold would be to pay for things."

"Except that they didn't rise up. It's all conjecture, isn't it?"

"Well, of course, the fact that the Armada failed changed everything. But, we don't really know what actually happened or didn't happen on the ground, at the time. The thing is, it all fits, look in the letter."

We talked about it a while longer. I had to agree with Dave; it made sense. It was now even more important to find out what we

could before I had to report my find. Dave and Sarah drifted away. Kes and I cleared up.

“Are you staying the night?” I asked as we washed up.

She smiled. “I suppose I can.”

When I got up and left her in the morning, my computer said the translation programme was 76% completed, so I left it and headed off to university. I needed to speak to Consuela.

While I was driving, Dad sent me a text. I took a look when I’d parked up. He said he was going to stop out for a couple of more days, he hadn’t caught much and wanted to at least make a bit over his expenses, so he could pay the crew something.



Consuela was absent from lectures. I asked Beth, her friend, where she was. “She had to go back to Madrid,” she told me “Her grandfather’s been very ill. She’s always racing off to call him. Apparently, he’s on his last legs now, she’s asked for leave to go back and see him one more time.”

When I got home, it was mid-afternoon. Kes wasn’t there, she’d be down at the harbour with Sarah, selling crab sandwiches to tourists. The roads were busy, there was quite a queue of cars waiting to get into town. Being local, I knew the back roads and turned off when I saw them jammed up. If they were all headed for the harbour, she was probably busy.

There was a stack of printed sheets by the kettle, and a note, in Kes’s familiar scrawl.

“Take a look at these,” it said. “Wow! We need to talk, see you tonight. I’ll be in the pub at seven.”

I made a cup of tea and sat down to read the translation of the rest of the papers.

I picked the first one up, it was part of a list of items, with their weight, size and position. It said at the top that it was the loading

manifest of the *Rebuff*. So, we had a ship's name, which was a good start. Now we could find out more about it.

As I read on I realised that what Dave had said was possible. There were mentions of gold bars and coins in barrels. Boxes of proclamations were itemised, printed and in bundles, all ready for distribution.

There was a list of names, which was titled *Peoples Loyal to our Blessed Cause of the Brotherhood of San Faustina*. They must have been the Catholic sympathisers of the day, in the Devon area.

There were family names I recognised on the list: Gleaves, Squires, Edgecombe's, and a whole lot of others.

It seemed we had stumbled on a piece of history that was unknown. It was a pity that my father wasn't here. Or was it? I knew what he would say. He would have told me to report it all to the Receiver of Wreck and walk away. On the other hand, I wanted to find out more. I thought that if I could find the gold, then hand it over, I might get some of it back. Plus a bit of fame.

I had a meal, showered and changed and was walking to the pub by half-past six. I left all the papers at home. We had a safe hidden behind a false panel in the garage. Dad kept all the fishing boats' papers and family legal stuff in it. I copied the scans onto a flash drive, put everything in an envelope with the originals and the Silver Salmon and locked it all away.



The four of us were sitting in the pub. Kes and I had filled the other two in on what we had found. Her first question had been, “What did Consuela say?”

“Who’s Consuela?” asked Dave.

Which meant that I had to admit to her involvement. Like Kes, Dave and Sarah both agreed it had been a bad idea to let her see the letter.

Then, I had to tell them she'd gone back to Spain. There were groans. "Do you think she'll tell anyone?" they asked me.

"I asked her not to," I said.

Kes punched me on the shoulder "You're so naïve," she said.

"Who can she tell? It's four hundred years ago, sure, the letter was in Spanish, but it's hardly likely it was her great-great relative, is it?"

"But," said Sarah, "she might know people."

"What about this brotherhood?" said Dave. "Maybe they still exist?"

"That's what we've been doing this afternoon, in between customers," said Kes. "We've been doing some research."

This was better. "What have you found?"

"We checked out the Brotherhood of San Faustina, but there was no information at all," Kes said. "Just a Polish Saint from the early 1900s," added Sarah.

"It must be one of those Catholic societies," I said. "Perhaps it was a secret one, specially formed for the Armada and the expected aftermath. Now its purpose has gone, it's just ceased to exist."

"I think we should go to Dartmouth," Kes said. "To the museum. We can see if they can shed any light on things."

"Let's do it tomorrow," I suggested.

That night, I sat and thought about the letter, the last days of Sebastian. He was dying in a foreign country, knowing their grand plan had failed. He might have been able to write the letter and seal it in that bottle, but he knew that his wounds would eventually be excruciatingly fatal. How did that make him feel, knowing that all he had sacrificed and worked for was lost? It said a lot about him that his last act was to try to salvage something for his family.

When I slept, I had strange dreams. In them, I was being chased through the woods. I could hear people shouting and getting closer. I woke up sweating.

I picked up Kes, and we headed off to Dartmouth

After getting the ferry over from Kingswear, we parked and walked to the museum. It was situated in an old part of town, above shops.

We met someone called Vic Broad. He was an archetypal librarian, if you know what I mean. Leather patches on his jacket elbows, a knitted tie, thick glasses and tufts of random hair on a semi-bald pate. "How can I help you?" he asked.

"I'm looking for some details about a ship, from just before the time of the Armada," I said

"What name?" he asked me. I got the feeling that this was his thing. He could probably tell me all about the *Rebuff* without reference to any of the exhibits or archives.

"*The Rebuff*." His brow furrowed, I've not heard of that one, but I'll show you where all the old ledgers and port records are. You may find something."

He led us to a room filled with old ledgers and showed us where to look for the years before 1588. Then, once he had done that, he wandered off and left us to it.

After a lot of searching, we found it in 1586. A full two years before the date on the letter. The *Rebuff* featured in the Harbour Master's logs of vessel arrivals,

June 12th, 1586, said the scrawled entry in the ledger. This day, *Rebuff*, a three-masted Carrack, arrived from Bilbao with a cargo declared as empty wine barrels. Captain Howell, of Totnes, in command. No deaths or disease on board. Clearance given, fees paid. Vessel headed upriver to Tuckenhay wharf to load wool and cider from..., the word was unreadable.

"They could only navigate upriver as far as Totnes," said Kes. I looked at the maps on my phone. Tuckenhay was just before, up a narrow inlet called the Harbourne River.

"Do we have what we came for?" asked Kes. "Only I could do with lunch."

"It would be nice to know when the ship left again," I said. "I'll get you lunch when we're done."

We went back to the books and found the later ledger. We knew it would be after September 8, 1588, the date on the letter, and we found it at the end of October. In the same hand that had recorded

its arrival, it said Departed this day, Carrick *Rebuff* in ballast. Captain Howell, all fees paid. Bound unknown.

"It must have gone out and got caught in the storm," said Kes. "In ballast, it would have been high in the water and less manageable. Then it sank somewhere in Start Bay."

"I want to speak to the man again, then we can go to Tuckenhay and take a look, it's on the way back."

On the way to find him, we saw a silver salmon in one of the display cases. It looked the same as the one that I found in the box, except the pattern of the scales was slightly different. The card said it was found in a field near Harbertonford. I took pictures of it

"Isn't that where the fight was that Du'Que mentioned in the letter?" Kes said.

"I know," I said. "I was thinking that. Do you think that could have belonged to one of the people?"

"It's possible," she said. "But why is it different from the one we've got?"

"Who knows, after all, it was handmade."

"Unless it's part of a clue, remember what it said in the letter. Let the scales fall from your eyes. Perhaps the pattern of the scales is significant?"

"Did you find the *Rebuff*?" Vic had returned.

"We did, thank you," said Kes. "But we have another question."

"Ask away."

"Do you have any idea of a place where Drake and Raleigh might have been together?"

He thought for a moment, "There's that pub in Ashburton, the Old Exeter Inn. Raleigh used to go there. In fact, it's where he was arrested for treason. Drake might have been there with him at some time."

Then what should we do now? Go to the Old Exeter Inn, I suppose.

When we left Dartmouth, instead of going across on the ferry, we headed up the road towards Totnes. At Harbertonford, I turned off to go to Tuckenhay. The lanes were narrow, even now, it was out of

the way. Over 400 years ago, it must have been totally isolated. The road passed through thick woods and fields, with few houses or signs of people.

Kes was studying her phone. "There are two pubs," she said, "both do food. The Watermans Arms, at the head of the river and The Maltsters Arms. It looks like that one's by a wharf, from the pictures on the website."

"Maltsters Arms it is then," I said.

When we got there, The Maltsters Arms was one of those fancy pubs, with overpriced food and drink but a beautiful view. And it was crowded, with tourists. Who could blame them, the river was wide, wooded down to the water's edge and at nearly high tide, the creek looked stunning. There were a few yachts moored to a string of buoys in the middle of the creek. The pub garden was set on an old wharf, the piles jutting up, used as mooring posts by a visiting yacht. We found a table overlooking the water, decided on food and I went back to the bar to order.

"Can you feel it?" said Kes. "This place has an atmosphere." She pointed out at the water, "Isn't it weird to think that what we've read about happened just out there?"

"I could almost imagine the *Rebuff*, sitting at anchor out in the middle of the creek, or tied up alongside the wharf not six feet from us, unloading the barrels that contained gold, or the makings of a new government. Being totally out of the loop when it came to knowing what was happening. Waiting for news, then finding out from the people who made it back that the Armada had failed. Hastily running for the sea, only to be wrecked. It was a kaleidoscope of conflicting images.

I was interrupted by the arrival of our food. It may have been expensive, but it was delicious.

"What should we do next?" Kes asked, as we finished. It was idyllic sitting here. I didn't want to move, but lectures beckoned tomorrow. Kes had the shack to open. I looked at my watch, there was time for one more thing today.

"We should go to the Old Exeter Inn in Ashburton," I said.

We left the pub, I didn't go back the way we had come but carried on down the road towards Tuckenhay. I was still imagining the past and hardly thinking about the road when we came to a junction. "Which way?" I said.

"Left," Kes replied. We'd hardly gone fifty yards when she changed her mind. "Sorry," she said. "I should have said right. My mind was elsewhere."

Now I had to find somewhere to turn around. There was a driveway ahead and I reversed into it to complete the manoeuvre.

"Did you see the name of that place?" Kes asked me as we drove off in the right direction.

"No, I was too busy trying not to hit the hedge or the gateposts."

"It was Edgcombe Barn, wasn't that one of the names on the list?"

It seemed the whole area was tied up with the letter and what we knew.

We eventually found the main road and headed to Ashburton. Parking in the centre of town, we walked back to the Old Exeter Inn. There was a blue plaque on the wall outside, commemorating Walter Raleigh and a grey sign giving the pub's history.

"How can I help you?" asked the man behind the bar.

"We're just looking around," I said. "We both have an interest in history, especially around the Armada. We were told that Raleigh used to come in here."

"This place has a lot of history," he said. "We get all sorts of people, from all over the world, in here. Taking pictures and asking questions. Only yesterday, we had a Spanish TV crew turn up. They were filming a documentary about the Armada."

He handed me a card. *Son Festina Productions*, it said. Bilbao. Manuel De Alvarez, producer.

We exchanged glances, the name of the company and the producer were worryingly similar to those on the letter.

"Drake and Raleigh certainly came in here," the barman added. "There are records of it. In fact, Raleigh was arrested here."

We brought drinks and went to sit at a table. Kes's phone pinged as she got a message.

Who's that from?" I asked, as she squinted at the screen.

"It's Sarah," she said. "She wondered where I was."

She typed for a while, "I've told her where we are," she showed me the screen. "I'm at the Old Exeter Inn in Ashburton with Steve. Important research. XXX."

"Perhaps we'd better do some, then," I suggested.

We took our drinks and wandered through the half-deserted pub, looking at the old smoky wood panelling. I could imagine Drake and Raleigh sitting here sharing a drink and chatting about beating the Spanish. Then a map on the wall caught my eye. It was a beautifully drawn representation of the river Dart, going from left to right, from Dartmouth, the same spelling as the letter, up to its source near Wistman's Wood.

But that wasn't the most interesting thing. It was the picture of the salmon drawn in each corner, and again, right by the source. It was almost identical to the salmon charm that I had. And the one we had seen in the museum. I took pictures of it all on my phone.

"We have to compare the salmon," Kes said. "I think there will be a clue to the location of the gold on them."

"Well, the two we've seen were both different, maybe all the owners had to be together to see the whole picture?"

It certainly seemed feasible.

"Did you find what you wanted?" asked the barman as we prepared to leave.

"There is one thing," I said. "That map in the backroom, of the River Dart, is that the original or a copy?"

"That's a copy," he said. "The original is in the Totnes museum. If you look carefully, it says 1837 in the corner."

We went back to take another look. "You realise what this means," I said. "If this map is a copy, it might not have the same information on it as the original one. There could be errors in the copying."

We looked more closely at the salmon. Each of them had a different pattern on its scales. "That has to be part of it," said Kes, "it must

indicate something. When we work out what the differences mean, I'm sure there will be a way we can make sense of it all."

"We need to meet up," I said. "All four of us, we can throw some ideas around based on what we've found. Perhaps one of us can spot a pattern."

"And go to Totnes Museum, take a look at the original of the map."

We left the pub, as I turned to head back to the car park. Consuela was standing in front of me.

"What are you doing here?" I said. "I thought you'd gone back to Spain to see a sick relative."

"I'm sorry," she said. "But the treasure is ours and we want it."

"What are you talking about?" said Kes.

"I told my father what I'd seen on the letter you showed me. He knew some people. They asked me to help. They are the Brotherhood of San Faustina," she said. "They are the descendants of the people who sent the Rebuff."

I had to pretend that I didn't know what she was talking about. I noticed that several people were walking towards us and hoped that they might help. I turned and looked over my shoulder. There were more of them approaching from the other side. Then a seven-seater car pulled up, blocking us from crossing the road. It had tinted glass, the side door slid open.

"Get in," one of the men said, in heavily accented English. "We're going on a little trip. You can tell us what you know."

We climbed into the middle row of seats. Three men got in behind us. The door slid shut. Consuela got in next to the driver, and we set off.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"You'll find out when you wake up," said the driver. I felt hands reach around my neck from behind. Kes must have felt the same, as she suddenly screamed. Then a rag was pressed to my face. I smelled something sweet and cloying; it was the last thing I remembered.

The Scone Affair.

Richard Dee



Joyce sat at her usual table in the crowded café. Befitting her status as a regular customer, the reserved sign had been placed out for her, she was here every afternoon at two, enjoying her favourite, a pot of Earl Grey and a cream tea.

She had only been sitting for a couple of moments when her food arrived. It was brought to her by a waitress she didn't recognise, she looked at the badge on the dark apron they all wore. 'Sally', it said.

"Here's your cream tea, Madam," the girl said, placing down a large silver tray and setting it out just so. Joyce looked at her, she had dark straight hair parted in the middle like two curtains, and an over-made-up masked face with the large eyebrows that all the girls these days seemed to affect. It made them all look the same. Joyce recalled it was called the Instagram look, whatever that was. She found the desire for similarity among them strange, when she had been younger, everyone had tried to look different. When she had departed, Joyce poured herself a cup of tea, added a little milk and turned her attention to the scones.

Carefully, she cut one of them in half, put the jam on and followed it with a dollop of clotted cream. Inside, she felt pleasure at the small act of rebellion. She might have been in Devon, and this was the Cornish way. But then, she was a proud Cornish woman.

Derek, her late husband, had teased her about it when they first met. "When we get married and move to Devon," he had said, "you will have to do it the correct way, or there will be trouble."

She smiled at the memory. Derek had been gone a long time now, and she missed him. She had loved him deeply despite all his little flaws. Fortunately, having lots of money and leaving it all to her had not been one of them.

"Is everything alright with your cream tea?"

Sally had returned, "yes, thank you," she said, "as usual, it's excellent."

"I hope you don't mind me asking," said the girl, "but are you Cornish?"

Joyce smiled. The girl had spotted the way she had put the Jam first on her scone

"Yes, I am," she said. "My late husband, Derek, used to tease me about it. I think of him every time I do it."

"That's a nice memory," said the girl. "But we are in Devon, so technically you're doing it wrong."

That was a bit cheeky, thought Joyce, but then perhaps a girl was just trying to make conversation. She turned, as if to go, then she leaned in close.

"I know what you did," she whispered. The words struck fear into Joyce's heart. In fact, she dropped her scone in shock. How could she know? After a second, she looked up, ready to deny it and call her a silly girl. But Sally had gone.

Joyce tried to eat another mouthful, but the sweet scone and toppings had turned to ashes in her mouth. She got up and went to pay. She had to get out into the fresh air. She felt like everyone was watching her.

"Excuse me," she said to the girl at the till, "but the waitress, Sally. I haven't seen her before."

"Sally," said the woman, taking Joyce's money. "We haven't got a Sally working here."

Joyce felt faint. She grabbed at the counter to stop herself from falling. "But she just served me," she said. "Can I speak to Heather?"

Heather was the manager and a personal friend.

"Heather's on a day off," said the woman. "Here's your change, have a good day."

Not knowing what to think, but feeling more and more uneasy, Sally headed out into the street. As she walked back towards the bus stop, she saw a black apron poking out of a rubbish bin. Quickly, she pulled it out; before she looked, she knew what the name badge on it would say.

Later that evening, Joyce was at home, feeling a cold dread. Her head throbbed, and her stomach churned. Who was that waitress? What did she know? She had kept the secret for nearly 20 years. Derek had not turned out to be the perfect catch. Starting with his criticism of the way she ate a cream tea, he had proceeded to undermine her confidence at every level. In desperation, she had taken to putting tranquillisers, prescribed for her, into his food, including his favourite scones. They had helped to quieten him down and give her some peace. When he had tripped and fallen down the stairs in the middle of the night, the police had thought it was an unfortunate accident.

When she finally slept, her dreams were of that night. She saw Derek's face again, the shock when he realised that she was pushing him, not stopping him from falling.

The noise he made, as he bounced down the stairs, was replaced by the hammering on the door.

Murder at the Wedding.

Richard Dee



The road narrowed and became even more potholed. The suspension was working overtime as we bounced along, the hedges were taller than the roof of my camper van, blocking out the view. I had no idea where I was, the last sign had been over a mile ago. I just hoped that nobody was coming the other way. It seemed unlikely, I hadn't seen another soul since I'd turned off the busy main road and entered the warren of Devon lanes.

I glanced at my watch. At least I had plenty of time. It was my first official job and I had left well before I'd really needed to.

At last, when I thought that the lane would never end, it did. There was the gate. With a sign, as I'd been told. *Honor and Liam's wedding*, it said. There was a man, too. As I stopped, he appeared from behind the hedge and leaned on the gate. I wound down the window and stuck my head out.

"You must be here for the wedding," he said. I suppose his eye was drawn to the word *Confetti* on the side panel and the flowers on the door. "But you're not the florist. Are you Bride or Groom?" he added.

"Neither," I said. He looked puzzled. "Catering then."

"I'm the celebrant," I said. "Laetitia Coin-Toft, you can call me Tish."

He opened the gate. "Come on in then, Tish," he said. "If you're in charge of the official bit, I suppose you can park where you like."

"Thanks," I said, "I need to go at the front, the van's part of the deal. I have a fold-out stage and sound system."

He opened the gate, as I drove through, the vista opened out, and it was stunning. A grassy field sloped away towards a gorse-covered tor, with grey rocks catching the bright, slightly hazy August sunlight. Small clouds drifted across a blue sky. Trees were grouped around a river. It was like a slice of heaven and the perfect place for a wedding.

I could see rows of chairs set out. Decorated with ribbons, they faced the river and the trees. There was a line of cars parked against the hedge, and a few people milling around.

Closer to the trees, I could see a large white tent. That must be where the wedding breakfast was being prepared. It was surrounded by tables, covered with umbrellas and awnings. Hopefully, I could get a coffee somewhere. After the drive, I was in serious need of caffeine.

I parked side-on to the chairs and about six feet from the front row. That should do it.

As I opened the side door and pulled the awning out, a couple walked over to me, arm in arm. A blonde woman and a handsome man, both well-dressed. Holding hands, they radiated happiness. They must be my customers, the soon-to-be happy couple.

"Are you the celebrant?" the woman said, "I'm Honor, the bride-to-be. This is Liam. We spoke on the phone."

"That's me," I shook hands all round. "I'm Tish. I'm just setting up."

"That's great, thanks for coming in at short notice. Everyone knows what's going to happen. We had an informal rehearsal with the other person, before they had to cancel on us. Help yourself to coffee in the tent, and if you need the loo, they're behind it."

They wandered off and I got on with setting up. This had been a rush job. Their original celebrant had cancelled and they'd called me, would I mind officiating without a rehearsal? The service was pretty standard, so as long as they knew what was going on, we could wing it. It would be a good one to start with, no pressure on me, and little in the way of expectation. If it went a bit wrong, nobody would mind too much. But, if I got it right, the word of mouth about the person who saved the day and how good they were would be priceless.

The custom-made stage, with its loudspeaker system, wouldn't unfold. As I struggled with it, bent over and mumbling very un-celebrant-like noises, I heard a cough.

"Can I help?" said a deep voice with a strong accent, "I'm Laurence, the best man."

I straightened up and turned. Tall, dark and handsome, he was the spitting image of the groom. His suit was identical, too.

"Thanks," I said. "I'm Tish. It's the first time I've done this, and the hinges are a bit stiff."

He grinned. "Let's take a look then."

"Are you related to the groom?" I asked, trying not to gabble.

"He's my baby brother," he said, "it's about time he got himself caught."

With his help, we got the platform out and unfolded the speakers on their poles. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" he asked.

"No," I said, "I'm ready. I just need a coffee now."

"Laurence," shouted a woman, coming towards us. Dark-haired and wearing an expensive summer frock, she looked annoyed. "Why aren't you helping me with the children?"

"I saw the celebrant was struggling, Roz, just doing my best man duties."

"Well, it's not on." She looked me up and down. Did she think I was some sort of threat? Or was I just an innocent bystander in an ongoing quarrel?

"Thanks for your help, Laurence," I said. "Please excuse me, I'm going to get a coffee."

I walked over to the tent. More cars were arriving now, the place was filling up. I still had half an hour, plenty of time.

Inside the tent, it was cooler and the caterers were unpacking plates and glasses. There was a full kitchen and servery in here, people in cooks' checks were preparing food. I could hear a generator humming. I went over to a girl by a coffee machine,

"Hi," I said. "Can I get a black Americano?"

"Sure," she grabbed a paper cup and fiddled with the machine. "Who are you with, bride or groom?"

"I'm the celebrant."

"Oh, right," she said. "I've never met a lady vicar before. Without the collar, you'd never know." She handed me a cup, "Here you go, sit where you like."

It didn't feel worth explaining that I was civil, not ordained. Trying not to spill my coffee, heels were a bad idea on the uneven surface, I went to a small table and sat down. As I sipped, I had the strangest thought.

I kept saying I was the celebrant, implying that I knew what I was doing, but this was my first job in charge. I was really a florist with a mobile market stall who had spotted a gap in the market.

I finished my coffee and went outside. One of the small clouds had covered the sun. It was suddenly darker. There were a lot more people about now. I tried to remember how many people Honor had said were coming. I was pretty sure she had said it was around two-hundred.

I'd have preferred a smaller audience for my first, but it was too late to worry about that now. There was just time for a comfort break before I got the ball rolling.

While I sorted myself out in one of a line of plastic cubicles, I heard voices,

"Is he ready?" said a man.

"Yes," replied a woman. "He has no idea."

"Good," said the man. "Let's relax and act innocent."

What were they talking about in such a secluded location? What my mother used to call my suspicious mind went into overdrive.

Stop it, Tish, I thought, it was probably nothing, some detail about the speeches, or a going-away prank.

When I came out, there was nobody around. It was about time to call everyone in and get the show on the road. I went back over to my camper and turned the sound system on. The sun was bright again, we had been placed so it was off to one side and not blinding me as I stood in front of the rows of chairs. Whoever had laid out the seating had thought of photographs; there would be no squinting or glare.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” I said, my voice booming out, startling the birds in the trees. “We’re nearly ready to begin. Can you all please be seated?”

The seats filled, the bride and her father took their places at the rear, and the best man arrived. People at the outer ends of the rows took their phones out and started recording the ceremony. It was like watching a machine start up, they had clearly practised.

Except for one thing. I was about to ask the best man for the rings when I spotted the missing detail.

“Where’s the groom, Laurence?” I asked.

“He was having a last vape, in the trees by the river,” he said. “He asked me to leave him alone for a minute. I think he wanted to calm his nerves.”

We waited a couple of minutes, but Liam didn’t show. People started to shuffle around in their seats.

“Can you go and get him, please?” I said. Laurence nodded and walked off. His wife glared at me again. I smiled right back at her.

There was a buzz of conversation as people fidgeted. I decided to introduce myself.

“Good morning, everyone,” I said, “I’m Laetitia, your celebrant today. Welcome to this beautiful location, where we’re gathered to witness the...”

There was a high-pitched shout from the trees, “Help, someone.” Whoever that was, it sounded awful.

“That’s Laurence,” said his wife. “What’s going on?”

Laurence appeared from the trees, running towards us. He stopped, dropped to his knees and vomited into the grass.

I ran towards him. We all did. "What's happened?" said one of the men. I recognised the voice. It was one of the two I'd overheard, but I couldn't pick him out in the group that was running towards Laurence.

"It's Liam," Laurence panted, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. I caught the acrid smell of vomit on his breath. "He's down by the river. I think he's dead."

A cloud covered the sun. There was silence.

"Somebody call the police," I shouted. People reached for their phones.

"We can do better than that," said an older man, "I am the police."

"What should we do, Terry?" one of the men asked. This time, I didn't recognise the voice.

"Get your car and block the gate, Eddie," he said. "Nobody leaves."

There was a flurry of activity. "I'm a nurse," said one of the women, "should I go and see if there's anything I can do?"

"No," said the man, "We can't contaminate the scene."

"With respect," she said. "How do we know the man is dead? He might just be unconscious, badly injured."

He thought for a moment. "Fair enough," he said. "Just make sure you don't move too much." Together with a man, she set off towards the trees. Then, he turned to me.

"You must be the celebrant?" he said. "You're about the only person here I don't know. Don't you have to do last rites or something?"

"No," I said. "I'm not ordained. I'm a civil celebrant." Then I remembered, "I overheard a conversation while I was having a comfort break. It might have been innocent, but now, I'm not so sure."

"Can you write it down?" he said, "everything you can remember. Make a record, before you forget it."

"Sure," I went to the van and found some paper. I wrote down the conversation, using the words man and woman for the two speakers.

When I came back out, the gate to the field had been blocked by a Land Rover. Everyone was sitting down at the tables, where we

should have been having the wedding breakfast. Honor was sobbing, surrounded by a group of women.

The policeman had taken over. "Some of you know me," he said, "for those of you who don't, I'm Detective Inspector Terry Kenton, of Devon and Somerset Police. While I'm a guest here today, I know what's required to get matters sorted as quickly as possible. A serious crime may have been committed. I'm going to have to ask you all to remain on site until officers get here to process the scene."

There was grumbling, "You were happy to be here all day," he said. "Most of you wouldn't have left until after the party. What's the difference?"

When you put it like that, I suppose he was right, but you wouldn't normally spend the day with a body in the trees behind you.

"I'm not," I said. Everyone looked at me. People gasped, and there was muttering.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm not prepared to be here all day," I said. "I have places to be. I was only booked till two." I know, it sounded terrible, but it was true. I had no connection to these people, sure I was sympathetic, but that was about it.

The nurse and the man returned. I noticed that her dress and hands were bloodstained. She looked at the policeman and shook her head.

Sirens broke the silence, reinforcements had arrived.



Three police cars and an ambulance arrived in a sort of convoy. Terry went over and introduced himself to the senior officer, whom he clearly knew, judging by the way they greeted each other.

The nurse spoke to the paramedics and took them over to the trees. The rest of the policemen started taking statements.

One came to me. He started by asking my name and what my relationship was to the wedding party.

"They employed me as a civil celebrant," I explained, handing him one of my business cards. "For three hours, which is more than up now."

He made a note in this pocketbook. "And, do you know many of the people here?" he asked.

"I don't know any of them," I said. "I had a call from the bride, Honor, a couple of days ago. The person who was supposed to be officiating had cancelled, and they were in a panic. All the arrangements had been made and they needed a celebrant in a rush. My name came up."

"Do you know who recommended you?"

"We have a mutual friend, Sue Holsworth, although I didn't know it at the time."

"I suppose you want to go?" he said. "Now there won't be a need for you."

"Well, I have no attachment to anyone here, apart from getting paid to perform a service, so yeah." I stopped, it sounded callous "Of course, I'm sympathetic to what's happened and I'll do whatever you say...but."

"And did you see anything?"

"The best man and his wife were arguing when I was setting up, and I overheard a conversation."

His ears pricked up and he suddenly became more interested. "What was said?"

I told him, reading it off the sheet.

"You made a note?"

"The policeman in the entourage, Terry, told me to, when I mentioned it to him. I didn't want to forget the exact words, in case they were important."

"And do you know who was talking?"

"No. I heard one of them again, the male voice. He was in the crowd running towards Laurence, but it was all so confusing."

“OK, we will probably want to talk to you again. I’ll check it with my boss, but I expect you can go.”

I went back over to the camper and started dismantling the stage and speakers, slotting them back into the cabin. I slid the door shut and got into the driving seat.

That was a strange way to start my career, and even more awkward, I hadn’t been paid the balance of my fee. Asking for it would be a problem, as I hadn’t actually done anything.

I started up and drove over to the gate. The Land Rover had been replaced by a police car. “Where do you think you’re going?” the uniformed officer asked me.

“I’ve been questioned,” I smiled sweetly. “Your colleague said I could go.”

“Wait a moment, please,” he said and walked away while talking on his radio. He must have been told it was OK, as he got in his car and drove it clear of the gate. He got out and came around to my open window.

“Do we have your address?” he asked.

“You do, I gave the officer a card,” I said. He nodded and opened the gate for me.



By the time I got home, all I wanted to do was grab a meal, have a shower and go to sleep. I could sort the van out in the morning. But I still had things to do. There was an order to put in to my wholesale agent, for Monday’s delivery. I had to rotate the stock in my cool room and make space for it. I had a deal with a care home, they took anything I couldn’t use, that had to be prepped for delivery on Monday afternoon. I parked the van in the courtyard behind my shop and spent an hour sorting things out. Then I went upstairs to my flat and tried to forget that the whole day had just happened. Wine helped.

In the morning, I was up early. I realised that I had left my bag in the van. Hoping it hadn't been stolen, I dressed and went out to the van. To my relief, I could see it on the passenger seat. Then, I noticed that the side door wasn't completely closed. I was sure I'd secured it properly when I'd packed up yesterday. Wouldn't I have noticed if it had opened on the way home, although with all the shaking in the rough country lane, it was possible. I shut it up, opened the front, grabbed my bag and took a quick look inside. At least nothing appeared to be missing.

I was opening the shop when the police arrived. Two uniforms and a plain-clothes man, who introduced himself as Detective Sergeant Huston. I recognised him from yesterday.

"We need to search your camper van, Miss Toft," the detective said. "We should have done it yesterday, but we didn't have the manpower, and you said you had to be somewhere else. It's purely routine. There's a S.O.C.O. squad on the way. Have you used it since you came back from the wedding?"

I was about to tell him that it might have been broken into when the shop door opened and a woman came in. She had dark glasses and dark hair but looked vaguely familiar.

"Of course you can," I said. "Excuse me a moment." I turned to the woman, "good morning," I said. "How can I help you?"

She looked stressed at the sight of the policemen, "I just wanted..., a business card," she muttered. She grabbed one from the counter and practically ran out.

"Did you know who that was?" The female constable asked me. "No."

"I think she was at the wedding," she said. "The shoes had grass stains on them. Now, why was she here?"

I had no idea. This whole thing looked set to take up far too much of my time. "Let me take you to the van," I said.

We left the shop by the back and went into the courtyard. Vince, my landlord, was coming out of his bakery door. He had probably been up since three, making the day's bread supply for most of the local businesses.

“Hi, Tish,” he said, almost running towards me. “I was just coming to see you. But you’ve beaten me to it and called them already.”

What was he on about? “What’s that, Vince?” I said.

The van,” he waved at it. “I was taking a break just now, when I saw that the CCTV had been activated. At four a.m. The CCTV in the courtyard saw someone getting out of the side door of your van. They ran away, down the alley.”



That kind of stopped me in my tracks. The police looked interested; you could sense them flexing their investigative muscles.

“Who are you?” asked the detective.

“I’m Vince Blackthorn. I own the building and run a bakery, over there.”

“I see,” said Huston. The male constable made a note. “Can we see the footage?”

“Of course,” said Vince, “come over to my office.” He set off. Huston stopped.

“You two, make sure nobody touches the van,” said Huston to the uniforms. “One of you, wait outside and direct SOCO in when they get here.”

“That’s interesting,” said Huston. “If someone used your van to leave the wedding.”

“Why?”

“Because we have no one on the list of people who were supposed to be there that couldn’t be found and questioned.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Well, he said. Whoever it was wanted to get away, for some reason. Perhaps he’d crashed the event, maybe he was going to raise an objection or, and this is right out there, he was guilty of murder.”

“So it was murder?”

“Oh yes. It looked like it at the scene, confirmed when we got the body back to the hospital.”

I had to ask, "How?"

"He was hit over the head with a rock, it smashed his skull. Whoever did it was strong, hit from behind, a single blow."

The dry facts didn't make it seem any less awful. I'd been talking to Liam, not an hour before, he had been full of life. I shuddered.

We went into the bakery, with its aroma of warm dough. Vince was sitting at his desk. He fiddled with his computer for a while and got us an image of the courtyard.

"Here we are," he said, as the screen lit up. "The lights and camera are motion sensitive. It's Insurance Company specification equipment. The tiniest motion sets it off. Look."

The image was so clear, you could see inside the camper van. Someone was moving about inside, then the door slid open. Apart from the shoulders straining at the seams of the jacket, there was nothing special about the figure who emerged. He was wearing a grey suit, but you couldn't see who it was. Somehow, his face never turned towards the camera. He slid the door shut and ran off out of shot.

"I need a copy of that video file, sir," said Huston.

"Of course," said Vince. "I'll sort it out for you."

"Is there any earlier footage?" the policeman asked. "Maybe a clip showing him entering the van?"

"Vince opened another window on the screen. "No," he said. "The last video before that was at nine pm." He clicked on the file. My van was parked in the same place. We watched as a cat strolled leisurely across the courtyard.

"See what I mean?" Vince said. "Very sensitive." He turned to me. "Have they taken anything, Tish?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "I haven't looked inside properly. I noticed the door wasn't quite shut when I got my bag this morning, but I thought maybe I hadn't shut it yesterday. I was in a bit of a state when I left the venue to come back."

"We'd rather you didn't look until my teams finished," said Huston.

Vince made us tea while the machine made a copy of the CCTV file. We were finishing it off when the SOCO team turned up. I left them to it and went to the shop. Even though it was Sunday, I still had a business to run. The deliveryman had arrived, and he was looking annoyed.

When Huston came in, I was quite busy with customers. He waited, shuffling about while I sold flowers and took orders. Finally, the shop was clear.

"My team have finished," he said. "They're just packing up. The vans all yours. Can you just come over with me and have a look? I'd like you to tell me if anything's missing. Then I have a few more questions to ask."

"I gave a statement yesterday," I said.

"I know, there are some things that need clarifying."

"Sure," I said. "Let's go over now while there are no customers."

I turned the sign and locked the door. Together we strolled across towards my van. and while you're doing that perhaps you can just repeat what you told my officer yesterday about your recollections of the day.

"Did you find anything?" I asked.

"It was quite interesting," he said. "We got quite a lot of fingerprints, but my man tells me a lot of them were smudged. It was as if someone was wearing latex gloves. I'll need a set of yours, as a control. The officer will be over to take them shortly. It makes me wonder if maybe our suspect had his escape route planned, using your vehicle to get away."

Was he implying that I had something to do with it? Surely not. "But I didn't know I was going to be there until Wednesday evening," I said.

He looked at me. "So I was told. But quite a few people would have known. I need you to tell me how you got the job at the wedding." He took out a notebook.

"Sure," I said. "I know someone called Su Tollen, from Uni. We became friends because we both loved crafting. I didn't know that she knew Honor, the bride-to-be, but I found that out later. She

happened to phone me up on the Tuesday before the wedding. We hadn't spoken for a while. Anyway, she called to say that she was going to Honor's wedding on Saturday, and the bride had phoned her in a state. The original celebrant had called to say she couldn't officiate. Would I be available on Saturday to do it at short notice? She knew I'd got my license and that I was looking for a first gig. She would have seen it on social media. She said they were a friendly bunch of people. Everything had been organised. There'd been a rehearsal and all they needed was someone to turn up with the authority to do the service. It seemed like a great idea. So I jumped at it."

"I see," he said, "and you arranged all this on Tuesday?"

I shook my head. "No. It was Wednesday by the time I'd spoken to Honor. I told Su it was all right for her to give her my number. I thought she would call me straight away, but it was Wednesday when she actually called me. And we agreed on it by email on Wednesday evening.

He had taken notes, "Got it," he said. "Do you know why the other celebrant cancelled?"

"No," I said, "I have no idea, just that they had."

That's useful," he said, shutting his notebook. Now, if you'll come over to your van with me and tell me what you see."

We walked over together; everything that should have been in the van was there. I noticed that there were wet footprints on the carpet and a wet patch in one of the storage lockers under the bench seat.

"They weren't there," I said. "There was no water in the van, I had no flowers with me."

"We think they're from whoever was hiding in the van," Huston said.

"It would mean that he must have been down by the water, where Liam was,"

"Then that must be where he was hiding," I said. "The lockers were empty, they're where I keep the flowers for transit, and I didn't have any with me. He must have been quick getting inside, I looked when I closed up and then couldn't see anyone there."

“What happens next?” I asked.

“I’d like you to come in and make a formal statement, just a written record of what you’ve told me and anything else that you can think of. We’ll type it out and you can sign it. We’ll need your fingerprints as well, to eliminate you from our search of the camper van.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Would Tuesday be alright, only Mondays are a bit hectic. By the way, is there anything to stop me from visiting Honor?”

“The bride to be?”

“That’s her. I want to give him my sympathies. And I suppose I need to sort my bill out as well.”

“I know she is being interviewed again today,” he said. “So you’d be better off leaving it till tomorrow afternoon. Apart from that,” he added, “there’s nothing to stop you seeing her, but we would ask that you don’t mention what we’ve been doing here today. And certainly nothing about stowaways in your van. But yes, Tuesday will be fine.”

When we walked back over to the shop, there was a policeman waiting outside. He was dressed in a white boiler suit, carrying a bag.

“Can I get your fingerprints?” He asked.

“I’ll leave you to it,” said Huston. “Thank you for your help. If you think of anything, just get in touch.”

When he’d gone, I put the closed sign up and locked the door. I didn’t want customers to see me getting my fingerprints taken. They might easily get the wrong idea.



On my way back from the care home, on Monday afternoon, I went to see Honor. I almost got there at an awkward time. Laurence answered the door and it was pretty obvious from his

body language that he hadn’t been sipping tea, if you get my meaning.

“What do you want?” he said.

“Who is it?” shouted Honor, coming to the door looking flushed and tying a dressing gown around her waist. “Oh, it’s you,” she said. She sighed. “I suppose you’re here for the rest of your cash.”

It was the way she said it that annoyed me. I was sympathetic to her plight, sorry for her loss and was about to tell her that, when I stopped. There was just something about the whole set-up that felt wrong. Why was she spending the afternoon with her less-than-a-day-dead prospective husband’s brother? I’d been going to let her off the rest of the money, in a spirit of compassion and because I actually hadn’t done anything apart from arrive and leave. The deposit covered my mileage, but the fact that my van had been used as a getaway vehicle by someone and that they seemed to consider me no more than the hired help was a bit much.

“I’d actually come round to offer my condolences,” I said. “To ask if you were OK and if there was anything I could do.”

“Oh,” she said.

“She’s fine, I’m looking after her,” added Laurence. “She’s family.”

That was a bit of a stretch, surely she was not-quite family. Unless he meant that she was the current third in his possibly clandestine throuple.

“The police came to see me,” I said. I had to be careful but I wanted them to know that I was aware of what was going on.

I expect they did,” she said. “They were here yesterday, made me repeat everything I said in that bloody field.” She stopped as she realised what she’d said.

“I’ll send you the invoice,” I said,

“Send it to my solicitor,” she replied. “They can sort it out. Now, if you don’t mind and if that’s all you want, we’re done here.” I’d been dismissed.

“I’ll show you out,” said Laurence. Get rid of me so you can do more horizontal grieving, I thought but I didn’t say it. I said nothing as I drove away. I realised what I had just seen was a motive for

murder. I also wondered what Laurence's wife would say if I told her where he was. And she hadn't told me who her solicitors were.

The next morning, I found an envelope on the floor, when I got downstairs.

Keep your nose out of things that don't concern you, it said in large, mismatched stick-on letters, the sort you could get from a craft shop.

This was something else; it scared me. I put it in a cellophane wrap, I was glad that I was going in to see Huston.

Well, he said, when I was settled in his office. "That throws a different light on things. It's a worrying threat, and we'll take it very seriously. Can I ask you to read the statement I've had typed up? If you want to add anything, you can, then we'll get it signed."

He handed me a sheet of paper. It contained what I'd told the officer at the scene and the notes he'd taken on Sunday. It seemed comprehensive, I signed it at the bottom.

"Thank you, he said. "Normally, I'd ask you to let us know if there was anything else and you'd be off." He paused, "but. Given that you've now received a threat, I'm going to want more. It's to do with the wet patches we found in your van."

"Have you worked out how it was?"

"No, but we've narrowed it down. Can you remember who had a grey suit on, like Liam's?"

I tried to think, "Well, there was Laurence, a couple of the ushers, I stopped. Maybe some of the people I saw running, it was all a bit of a blur."

"We spoke to the suit hire company," he said. "One of them was returned with damage, a trouser calf was torn, and there were mud and grass stains on the fabric of the legs, which were water-stained up to about the knee."

That was interesting "So whoever was wearing them was in the river? And you think that he was in my van, too?"

maybe he said they weren't the ones that were on the body though because they're still at the Mortuary

can you tell which suit belonged to which person he shook his head no they all came back together but there were only three with that size trouser. 1 was the groom, 1 was the best man and one for was a guest who didn't turn up. We're trying to track him down now the best man said he had to cancel at the last minute. Laurence, the best man, signed for them all.

So there had been a mystery man about. And I had things to tell him. Do you remember, I said I was going to see Honor?"

"I do," he said. "Anything come up in conversation?"

"Laurence was there," I said, "and, how can I put it?"

"They're more than friends?" he suggested.

I nodded.

OK," he said, "that throws a new slant on things. Was your friend Su at the wedding?"

I hadn't seen her on the day. "I didn't see her, but I could have missed her, with everything else that was going on.

"She wasn't there", he said, "her boyfriend Ryan had a business weekend in Bristol. He had a suit booked. As all the returned ones were worn, we don't know which was his."

"Why wear it if he wasn't there?"

"Exactly, unless he was."

"We spoke to the cancelled celebrant," Huston continued. "She had a call from a gentleman with a hidden number who explained to her that there'd been a change of plans and her services were no longer required. She thought it was a bit funny, but they had already paid her in full, so she just shrugged her shoulders and put it down to experience."

"And you think that everything's connected?"

"We're looking for Ryan now," he said. "He was certainly at the conference on Saturday and the lunch on Sunday. You don't know where he might be, do you?"

"I have no idea," I said. "What does Su say?"

"Su says that she doesn't know. She didn't go to the wedding because the only people she knew would be you and Honor. She

thought you'd both be too busy to talk to her much. Apparently, it was Ryan who was friends with Lawrence and Liam."

"Now that is interesting," I said.



When I got home and opened the shop, I was surprised to see Laurence's wife come in. She had been strange at the wedding, but I'd put that down to the occasion. Now I thought differently.

"Hello," she said. She seemed nervous. I realised that it had been her who had come into the shop on Sunday morning. When she saw that the police were here, she had made an excuse and left. "Can we talk?" she whispered.

"Sure," I said,

"We got off on the wrong foot at the wedding," she said, "I'm sorry."

"That's OK," I said. "Weddings are stressful and you weren't expecting me. But honestly, Lawrence was only trying to help me set up."

"I get that," she said. It's a trigger."

"You mean he's got form?" This wasn't an easy subject to talk about. I didn't want to say anything awkward, but I wanted to know all the details, if you get my meaning.

"Of course, I knew he was playing away," she said, "but I never wanted to know all the details. He always came home, he was discreet, and he was a good father. When I saw you and him, it just set me off. I knew you'd soon be another one on his list. I didn't hate you, I felt sorry for you because I knew you would never resist him." She sighed, "None of them ever could."

"I think I might be able to manage it," I said.

She got my meaning without me having to spell it out. "Oh," she said. "Good for you. There's something you need to know."

"What?" I wondered if it was to do with the message I'd got.

"I overheard Laurence talking to someone the week before the wedding. He was asking them if they'd managed to get rid of her."

"Who?"

"That's what I don't know," she said. "I should tell the police, but I'm scared it'll incriminate Laurence. If they start looking, they'll find...", she stopped, and I thought she was going to cry.

"I understand," I said, "the thing is, it's going to come out in the end...",

"Laurence and Honor?" She said.

I nodded, "You knew."

"Yeah," she said, and I thought I saw a tear. "Liam came to see me, he was almost crying. Laurence takes everything of mine," he said, "from when I was little, he was the older brother, if I had something and he wanted it, it was his. I couldn't fight him; he was too big."

There was a look in her eye, and I suddenly knew why Liam had died, he had finally taken something of Laurence's. But why did Laurence get Ryan to do it? Probably for the usual reason, Laurence was a bully, and bullies were cowards.



I had settled down in front of the TV that evening, with a nice glass of white, when there was a knock at the front door.

I peered through the security peephole, it was Laurence. I took the chain off and opened the door. "Come in," I said.

I hadn't seen the other man standing off to one side. He was of normal height but heavily muscled across the shoulders. He barged in and grabbed me, pinning my arms behind my back. God, he was strong. I struggled, but he picked me up easily and carried me, kicking and screaming, back into my house. He threw me down on the sofa. "Sit there and shut up," he snarled. Behind him, Laurence had shut the door.

"You must be Ryan," I said. "I might have guessed Laurence wouldn't come here on his own."

He looked puzzled. "Why's that?" he said.

"Well, think about it, Ryan. He didn't have the balls to kill Liam himself. He had to get you to do that. I suppose you threw the rock in the river, after you'd bashed his head in. But, why do you hide in the camper van, Ryan? That can't have been your escape plan."

"I couldn't get back across the bloody river," he muttered. "There were some bloody grockles on the other side. I threw the rock in and started wading across. Then I heard a kid shout that he'd just heard a fish jump and suddenly there were a load of people there. They would have seen me. I had to turn back and keep under cover. I circled around and managed to sneak into the camper while you were all gathered by the tent."

His voice wasn't the one I'd heard; that must have been an innocent conversation.

"I managed to get into one of the spaces under the seat," he added. "It was a tight squeeze, but I made it. Then I waited. The journey back was like torture. When we stopped, I waited. I was going to leave at midnight, but I must have fallen asleep. I woke up and left at four a.m. I knew I'd been spotted when the security light came on, so I tried to keep my face hidden."

"I suppose you had to leg it back to Bristol, where you were pretending to be at a conference."

He nodded. "Took ages, I had to go on a replacement bus, bloody engineering works."

"This is all very cosy," said Laurence. Suddenly, there was a gun in his hand, a small pistol. He pointed it at me. "That's enough, we're going to have to trash your house," he said, "make it look like a robbery, shall we kill you first?"

"Why did Liam have to die?" I asked.

"He had my wife," Laurence said. "He told me, as if he was proud of it. I already knew, Roz could never keep a secret. She said if I could do it, so could she. That was when I decided to set Ryan up to do the business."

"But you'd done the same, with his wife, well, wife to be."

He looked like I'd told him black was white. "That was different, don't you see. I'm the eldest."

I suppose it made sense, in his world. "What about the celebrant, the one who cancelled?"

"She had to be put off, she knew Ryan. There was a chance that she might see Ryan, when he shouldn't have been there. We were trying to be careful."

"Good job we did," said Ryan. "Thanks to you, I was able to get away. Let's get on with it."

"Hang on," I said. I was desperate to keep him talking. While he was doing that, I was still alive. And that was important, I liked being alive. "I want to know, was I chosen to replace her because I had the van, so you could get away?"

"Don't flatter yourself, and shut up," said Laurence. He moved closer. The gun was pointed at my head, about six inches from my eye. I focused on the barrel; it looked like a drainpipe.

The door flew open. "Armed police," shouted a man. "Drop the gun and stand still!" Laurence and Ryan turned. I realised that I had been holding my breath and let it out, in a deep sigh of relief.

"How?" Laurence said as he was handcuffed. Huston didn't answer, the constable read them both their rights, and they were bundled away.

"Are you alright?" Huston asked me when they'd gone.

"Apart from Ryan throwing me across the room and having a gun shoved in my face," I said. "I'm fine, just glad you got here when you did."

"We tracked Ryan down," said Huston. "Someone saw him, on a bus heading back to Bristol on the Sunday morning. He was the worse for wear; they thought he'd been out drinking all night. He was wearing a crumpled suit and had wet legs. We've been looking for him ever since."

"But how did you know he was here?"

"We've been keeping a protective eye on you. Ever since you told us about the threatening letter. When Laurence and Ryan turned up here, our man called us."

A couple of days later, when it had been all over the news, Roz came to see me. She wore dark glasses and a hat pulled down to hide her face. "I had to come and see you," she said. "I found out what he did to you, and it sickens me."

"Thanks, but I'm OK," I said. "Ryan gave me a few bruises. Laurence waving a gun in my face was scarier. How are you bearing up?"

It's a shock," she said. "That he would go so far. I can handle it, we were over long ago, it's my kids I feel sorry for. They adored Liam as well as Laurence."

"What's happening?" I asked, "if you don't mind telling me."

She smiled. "I'm officially in the clear, which is a relief. As for the three of them, they're falling over themselves, blaming each other for what happened. The thing is, they're all guilty in one way or another. They're being kept in custody, bail refused, while a trial date is being arranged."

The person I felt most for was Su. But was I right? Had she known or suspected what her man was capable of or how I would get involved in it when she recommended me for the job? She wasn't mentioned in the papers, it appeared that the police didn't think she was a part of it. I was frightened to reach out to her in case her loyalty to Ryan was stronger than our friendship. I couldn't help noticing that she'd vanished from the socials, not that I blamed her for that. I tried to call a couple of times, but her number wasn't recognised.

Then, she came to see me in the shop.

"I'd like some flowers," she said. "A bouquet to cheer me up."

Su, are we OK?" I asked.

"Sure, we are," she said. "I'm only sorry that I got you involved. The police found a sheet of my craft embellishments, with letters missing. I hope Ryan didn't frighten you too much."

"Ryan assaulted me," I said. "But Laurence had the gun pointed at my head."

Her face went pale. "I'm sorry," she said. "Ryan has too many muscles for his brain to handle. And I never liked Laurence; he tried it on with me once and got a slap."

It was probably a good job she hadn't told Ryan that.

"What do you want in the bouquet?" I asked.

"Something yellow," she said. "That's the colour of happiness, isn't it?"



Summer Showers

Richard Dee



The weather will be fine today, the presenter had confidently said.

I'd believed them.

Now it was pouring with rain. That was typical for Devon. I hadn't learned or been prepared. At least I had a baseball cap on. But my shirt was getting soaked. I needed a coat. I dodged into the nearest shop to try to keep myself dry. I was meeting a girl for lunch, and I wanted to look semi-presentable.

As it happens, my refuge was a charity shop, stacked full of second-hand clothes.

"You could do with a coat, dear," the woman tidying the racks said. "We've got a large selection, just over there."

I had a look, not really expecting anything stylish. To my surprise, I saw a fashionable leather jacket, one that I'd nearly bought a few days ago. It looked brand new and fitted me like a glove. I took it over to the till.

"How much is this one?" I asked.

"Good choice," she said, "that's only just come in. Five pounds to you."

I paid her and put it back on. "Thank you, that's saved my day."

I walked out into the rain. Now I had to rush. I didn't want to be late. I got to the pub, took my new coat off and put it on the chair next to me as I waited.

I needn't have worried about being late. It was half an hour after the agreed time, and she still hadn't arrived. I finished my pint and decided to call it quits.

When I picked up my coat to put it on, I felt something in one of the zipped pockets. I opened it, reached in and pulled out an envelope.

Help Me, was written on the front, in place of an address.

With trembling fingers, I opened it and found a folded sheet of scruffy paper. Written in a childish script and dated three days ago, the note said.

Whoever finds this, my name is Sean Evans, I'm nine years old. My father is Daniel Evans, the owner of Evans Industries. I've been kidnapped and I'm being held on a farm somewhere in Devon. I'm being kept in a cellar. I managed to write this when nobody was looking. They let me out for a walk and I hid this letter in a bundle of clothes. I'd overheard my captors talking about them, they were destined for a charity shop. I don't know where I am, it's on Dartmoor somewhere. The man holding me is being called Griff by his men. Please tell the police and get help. Thank you.

I realised that I'd been holding my breath. That was one smart kid. I suddenly didn't care that I was sitting alone. Or even that the girl hadn't shown up. I had a feeling that what I did next would be much more interesting.



The Unicorn Castle

Emily Cullerne



Lydia giggled as she marched along the winding path. Leaves, discarded months ago by the autumn trees, crunched as her wellies crushed them, and the golden glow of the evening sun radiated off her face as the cold air surrounded her. A gull screeched overhead.

‘Mummy, come here. Look at this,’ she called out.

Running over, Melissa caught up and stopped as she took in the scene before her. The early evening sun peeking through the trees interspersed along the traditional Devon hedgerow.

‘That’s amazing. I’ve never seen it before. What do you think it is?’

‘Well, Mummy. I think it’s a unicorn’s castle waiting for us to explore it,’ Lydia said, gazing at the perfectly formed building. It resembled a castle, but was minuscule, with turrets, ramparts, slit windows, and a gigantic wooden door. The surrounding garden was very formal, laid out in a typically Victorian style. Flowers lay dormant; overshadowed by the amazing topiary symmetrically bordering the building.

‘That would be wonderful, but we can’t just go over and investigate somebody else’s home.’

‘Why not? It doesn’t look like anyone is there.’

‘You know we can’t do that. It’s rude. What if they came home and found us there? Come on, let’s carry on. I might have a treat for you later, if you’re good.’

‘Yay!’ screamed Lydia as she tore her eyes away from the building, not noticing the figure looking back at them from the front window and skipped in front of her mother. Melissa smiled as she touched the small packet of sweets she had bought with her last few pounds.



They walked home, Lydia chatting about everything they passed along the way and Melissa providing appropriate ‘yes’ and ‘no’s’ when required.

‘You know, when we get back, we need to decorate the tree,’ Melissa said.

‘Wow, am I old enough to do that? I’ve never done it before.’

‘Yes, you’re old enough now.’

‘Thanks, Mum.’

Later that evening, Lydia curled up on the sofa, cuddling her mother and looking at the small tree adorned with gold and silver they had decorated. The lights twinkled and cast shadows around the room; a small angel balanced on top, and the baubles Melissa had kept safe for years filled the branches.

‘I promised you a treat. Here you go,’ Melissa said, handing the packet of sweets to Lydia.

‘Thanks,’ Lydia smiled, ripping open the packet and devouring them. ‘I’ve had the best day, Mummy. Thank you. Can we find the unicorn’s castle again tomorrow?’

‘Of course, my sweetheart,’ she said, kissing her daughter gently on the head, ‘we can go out after the Christmas fair. Now it’s time for bed.’

‘Do I have to?’

‘Yes, you know you do. It’s late and you’ll be tired. If we want to go to the fair, we need to be up early.’ She stood, took Lydia’s hand, and walked her to the stairs. They headed upstairs and into the bathroom. ‘Let’s get those teeth brushed.’

Once Lydia was asleep, Melissa sat on the sofa and opened her online bank. She sighed, every way she looked at it, she never had enough to give Lydia the things she wanted. Tears trickled down her face, blurring the numbers. She closed the app and slumped onto the sofa. The phone dropped, and she rubbed her hands to liven them up. The cold seeped into her bones. She thought about the constant images online of perfect families wearing Christmas pyjamas, opening Christmas Eve boxes and Advent calendars, and more tears flowed. There are just not enough hours in the day; how will I ever earn enough to make our lives easier? She thought. I could ask Dave, but then he’d only gloat and tell me I should have stayed with him. Oh, it’s impossible. Wiping the tears with the back of her hand, she sniffed and pushed her hands through her hair. Pull yourself together. She stood, turned the light off as she left the room and checked that she had locked up as she retired for bed.

The light filtered through the gap in the curtains; Melissa opened her eyes and groaned. She heaved herself out of bed and shuffled to the bathroom to take a shower. As the water hit her body, she woke up, and the aqua shower gel helped drag her out of her bad mood. After dressing, she sat at her dressing table and applied makeup. Fake it until you make it, was one of her favourite sayings and it was getting plenty of use lately.

‘Mummy, come on. We’re going to be late,’ Lydia yelled from the bottom of the stairs. ‘The fair starts in half an hour.’

‘Okay, I think I’m ready,’ Melissa replied, coming down the stairs to join her daughter. ‘I’ll just get our gloves.’ Pulling out the box of winter items, Melissa felt something smooth between her fingers. She lifted it out and realised it was a twenty-pound note. ‘Where did this come from?’

‘Yay, now we can buy some toys,’ Lydia screamed, noticing the crisp note in her mother’s hand.

‘Yes, we can,’ Melissa said, trying to remember how she had misplaced the note. Relief surged through her body, and she forced back a tear as she realised she could treat her daughter. She remembered last night, pleading for a miracle. Maybe prayers get answered, she thought.



The fair was in full swing as they arrived. The school hall was heaving with bodies waiting at the stalls which lined the room; voices filled the air and the smell of fried food and mince pies hit their nostrils. Melissa took off her scarf and undid her coat as the warmth of the room contrasted with the coldness outside. Tinsel glittered all around, and the enormous Christmas tree buckled under the weight of baubles of every colour. The sound of Shakin’ Stevens singing, “The snow is falling, all around us...” made her smile as Lydia said, ‘Mummy, it’s your favourite song.’

‘You’re right. It is my favourite. Let’s have a look around first, see what there is to do before we spend any money,’ Melissa said to deaf ears, as Lydia grasped her hand and dragged her across the floor. Carol singing cut through the chatter of delighted children at the wonderful stalls exhibiting their wares.

‘I love it all,’ Lydia declared. ‘How will I ever choose?’ They stopped in front of the grotto. ‘Please, can I see Father Christmas?’

‘Of course, let’s join the queue.’ Fortunately, it wasn’t a huge one, and they were at the front within a quarter of an hour. ‘Do you know what you are going to ask for?’

‘Oh yes, I know exactly what I want. Look, it’s my turn now,’ she said, as the elf helper ushered them in through some gold streamers into the darkness of the grotto. It took a few seconds to adjust to the dimness; the walls were black and decorated with stars and twinkling

lights, and in the centre was Santa himself, sitting on a chair and smiling widely as they entered.

Lydia glanced at Melissa and held her hand as they approached him.

‘Well then, my dear, what’s your name?’ He asked.

Lydia looked at the floor, fiddling with her fingers. Melissa squeezed her hand gently,

‘Go on, sweetie.’

‘Lydia,’ she whispered.

‘Lydia, eh? That’s a lovely name. Have you been a good girl this year?’

Lydia looked at her mother before replying.

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘She has been wonderful,’ Melissa told Father Christmas, smiling.

‘That’s good news, so what are you hoping for this year?’

‘Well, I’d like a Designafriend doll and some Lego, but there’s something I want even more.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Mummy and I found a castle yesterday, and I’d love to know who lives there and visit it.’

‘Well, let’s hope I can find out for you, then,’ said Father Christmas, smiling. ‘And here’s a special present from me. I hope you have a wonderful Christmas.’ He handed Lydia a small gift wrapped in red patterned paper.

‘Thank you,’ they both said in unison as they left the grotto and walked back into the main hall.

‘Follow me,’ Lydia said as she sped off through the stalls with Melissa chasing behind her. ‘Let’s look at the craft stalls, can we Mummy, please?’ She looked up with her bright blue eyes shining, rosy pink glowing cheeks, and a beaming smile. ‘Pleasssse.’

‘Yes, okay.’

They browsed the plethora of handcrafted gifts, some made by artisans, others clearly from younger hands, but equally delightful. Suddenly, Lydia froze.

‘What is it?’ Melissa asked.

‘Look, it’s my unicorn castle.’ She pointed at the table. There, nestled between the crafty offering, Devon pasties and scones, was a tiny, almost identical replica of the building they had come across yesterday. It was only ten centimetres tall but had the same features they marvelled at.

‘Hello,’ Melissa said to the stallholder. ‘How much is the little castle?’

‘It’s five pounds. Would you like it?’

‘Yes, yes,’ Lydia said.

‘Okay, yes, we do.’ Melissa said to the stallholder, pulling out a five-pound note from her almost empty purse.

‘It’s actually a copy of my great-great-great-grandfather’s castle, you know.’

‘Really, I think we saw it yesterday along the path behind the old hospital. It’s very cute,’ Melissa said.

‘Well, that is where it was, but you can’t have seen it.’

‘I think we did. It had turrets and ramparts and everything,’ Lydia said.

‘I’m afraid it’s been gone for over a hundred years,’ the lady replied.

‘Really? What happened, if you don’t mind my asking?’ Melissa said.

‘It’s fine. A huge fire destroyed it. My great-great-great-grandfather and one of his sons died. Most of the rest of the family got out, but they never rebuilt the castle.’

‘That’s so sad. I’m sorry.’

‘Thank you. Obviously, I didn’t know them, but it is still a sad family story.’

‘It is strange; I’m sure we saw it,’ Melissa said.

‘To be honest, it’s always been said that seeing it will bring good luck, but I’ve never heard of anyone doing so. I thought it was just a family myth. That’s incredible.’ Lydia and Melissa smiled as the lady handed over the castle and said goodbye.

Walking home later with a handful of goodies she had won, Lydia looked at the castle.

‘Oh no! We won’t be able to find it again. That lady said it isn’t real.’

‘Maybe we won’t, but think of the magical luck it’s given us today. If I hadn’t found the twenty-pound note, we wouldn’t have had such a lovely time.’

‘Yes,’ said Lydia thoughtfully. ‘And it was great that Father Christmas used his magic to send us to the stall.’

‘I agree. It was magical all round,’ Melissa said, kissing Lydia on the head. ‘Now let’s get home and play some of these games before we freeze.’



The Pursuit

Emily Cullerne



Melody ran; her lungs screaming as she ignored them.
The thick undergrowth clawed at her bare legs, and she winced in
agony.
She darted in a different direction at the sound of breathing behind
her.
The zigzag pattern repeated over and over.
Up ahead, there was a light.
Her body relaxed as it drew her in.
As she ran, the sound of silence comforted her, and the hope of
escape peeped into her thoughts.
She slowed down as she drew near.
A loud thud was the last thing she heard as an enormous paw en-
veloped her and crushed her body.

Tudor Tumult

J.E. Hall



A story in the context of
cataclysmic events around
Ottery St Mary, July 1549
By J E Hall



First in a mornynge whan thou arte waken and purpose ryse,
lyfte up thy hande and bless the, and make a Synge of the holy
cross, In nomine patris et filly et sprites sancta, Amen...

And if thou say a pater noster, an Ave and a crede,
and remember thy maker, thou shalt spede moch the better.

John Fitzherbert – The Boke of Husbandry (1533)



In the 3rd week of July 1549 Lord Russell is ordered to get foot
soldiers from Somerset and Dorset – If they won't fight against
the 'rebels and papists of Devon' - they shall be deemed traitors,

forfeit their lands, homes, goods, wives and children without hope of pardon.

Eamon Duffy – Voices of Morebath p133



Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord;
and by thy great mercy defend us
from all perils and dangers of this night;
for the love of thy only Son,
our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Church of England's Third Collect at Evening Prayer



The name's Bo, as in Bo Peep, sheep. Real name Robert Yeo, sometimes Bob the shepherd. Got it?

Big trouble. I'm in the middle of it, on the front line. No way out. It's as bad as it gets. An ongoing nightmare. When men hate each other so much they see rats' eyes and tails in one another. We are plague carriers, creatures fit only for killing, and themselves, pure, precious as a gold coin and loyal to the king whose head is on the coin. When people see others as vermin, you know it's real bad. I've seen the hard glint in their eyes, from the gold I guess, and then there's nothing else for it, 'cept they want to purge you with sharp metal and fire. As I say, it's a hell of a time.

Everyone's against everyone right now, or should I say us ordinary folks, us commoners, are against the masters; and masters are against the likes of us. The rich gentry bubble like foam floating to the top in a barrel of ale. The rest of us, like so much brown sediment sink to the bottom waiting to be sluiced away as so much soil water.



My grandad trapped rats, then he drowned them. He'd search them out by our chickens every morning and then he'd push them under the water with a forked stick. I watched him. He knew what he was doing. He just got on with it. I know killing when it's going on. Don't like it, but it's chickens or rats isn't it, no more complicated than that? There's us in the west, and the gentry and the kings men up against us. I'll come on to that presently.

It's late in the day, well into July, maybe three weeks in, the height of summer. Normally St James Day 'bout now, – but all that's gone... We've all been ploughing, killing the weeds. Crops are showing signs of ripening, first hay's been cut. The trees are heavy with leaf, a darker shade of green, and the air smells of dry grass and wild flowers. However, Ottery minds are not on the land, no-one's thinking about the coming harvest, no, all the talk is about the rising in the west and the need to defend ourselves against the new false religion.

Vast numbers of good Devon men are on the move across the whole shire and word is they're heading our way, men on foot with pitchforks and bill hooks and bags of determination. We're rising up and thousands upon thousands I've heard are gathering on the north side of Exeter at St David's Down. Then there's the Cornish, thousands more fighting men coming to join us under Humphrey Arundell's leadership. Like an incoming tide, men are sweeping in, making their way north and east and into the River Otter Valley. Yeah, right here!

Last month, the Carew brothers, Peter and Garwen, two local governors, well known Otter Valley gentry and even better known now since everyone's moanin' about them, really stirred it. They acted so bad. Instead of meeting us, listening, hearing our grievances, they aggressively proceeded to fire the barns and then people's homes in Crediton. The knaves! Word is, it was Peter Carew pointing at the houses he wanted torched! They went further, topped those misdeeds having ten good people killed. All this just seven miles north of Exeter.

That's not all they've done neither! Mid-June trouble brewed over the Whitsun Festival the other side of Crediton, at Sampford Courtney. When the priest and good people there objected to the King's new prayer book they also got badly treated. Those Carews have played their part in causing panic across the west. We've had more than enough. Things have come to a head like a boil ripe to be lanced.

Well, that was the trigger point, though we were already a much wronged and grumbling people.



Today, Exeter's already surrounded, cut off and has been under siege since the beginning of July. God's bones! What a bad decision – they've signed themselves up with the King's cause. Couldn't they see sense and fall in with Plymouth and all of us? What hurts me most about Exeter is how the cathedral under Dean Haynes has betrayed our faith for years – how that man is hated! He went about saying, "I'm cleansing the cathedral and city of the sin of idolatry". That was his way of abusing the old religion, the true faith, the way we all love.

Let me tell you more gossip I've heard. Other Ottery gentry have also betrayed us. I'll give you their names – John Bodley, John Prestwood and John Periam, yes them – three Ottery men, but also Exeter merchants. Well, once the siege of Exeter started, those three came over this way and told the King's military man in these parts Lord Russell, they'd help him raise troops! Knaves! He was all set to run away east, but hey've been persuading him to resist the people. It's scandalous. I'd love to know where those three are hiding now?

Our peaceful little Otter Valley is changing. Battle lines are being drawn by the day. Russell, based in Honiton, maybe less than ten miles to the east wants to relieve Exeter before it falls or comes over to us. Put simply and starkly, that leaves Ottery where I am right now, and Alington where I live, and all our neighbouring villages,

caught where tinder strikes flint, right in the middle of an explosive conflict. As for us local people, all our sympathy is with the cause, but what can we simple folk do? Much as we support the Rising, we're caught between a rock and a hard place.

What happens to us now? All I know is Russell's army's been on the move today. You could hear them, several hundred men, half on horse. An army can't move silently. Earlier, soon after first light, they were seen skirting Ottery following the river, before trying to head for Exeter on the main road. This morning you could hear the sound of armour and horses and the ominous regular beat of military drums and marching feet. Tonight, angry, tired and frustrated they've come straight here into Ottery. Pretty well everyone's hidden inside their homes.

The place is crawling with both men on horse and foot soldiers, some of those from foreign parts with huge long swords, the height of a man. They'll want, they need a victory and I can tell they haven't got it. They wanted to free Exeter today from those who are besieging it and they haven't. Exeter's just over ten miles from here, normally a half day walk along a straight road and easy to reach, up and over the commons and down the other side – normally I say, 'cept now I know, because I helped, along with everyone else, the way's blocked, closed off to them, because over the past couple of days we felled every tree we could, giant oaks as well as holly and left them across the road, shutting it, rendering it impassible.

Even horses couldn't jump or find a way through what we did, let alone Russell's foot soldiers. Those poor people in Exeter, a bad business, they could soon one way or another be dead too, or not... if they had any sense, like I said, they'd switch sides. What'll they do? Hunger often makes a man's mind up for him... no-one knows. The whole world's gone mad. Everything's upside down. We could soon all be butcher's meat, so much red blood on Devon's red earth, waiting to be washed into our ditches and rivers.

Tonight there's going to be burning in Ottery. I can see small fires have been lit by the soldiers, surely a sign of what's to follow. I'm watching Russell's tired and frightened men, having given up

getting to Exeter, knowing the whole county's against them, now turning on Ottery, just because they can. They pause in the Flexton, an open space in front of the church, where we have our weekly market. They linger, talking in short tempered bursts, arguing together with one another in malcontent, in angry plotting, with raised and furious tones.

It's decided. Then I see them rise, faces aglow. They split into small groups and start firing good Ottregian homes, all on Lord Russell's orders I guess. He's supposed to be here – somewhere. Word is he's shitting himself like sheep on wet field days. We think he's so frightened he could do anything. People say he just wants to run back to Honiton, but he'd rather run much further east, Dorset, Somerset even. He could be a loser and that's scary for him, would be for anyone. In times like this there's no safe sanctuary to be found. This isn't a bad place where I'm watching from – I can see what's going on.

I'm sitting in the grassy, unkempt Ottery churchyard; which no-one cares for any more. It's all overgrown with high grass and nettles and cow parsley. I'm sitting low, keeping my distance, leaning on a headstone watching the firing of the houses opposite; soldiers, like hungry feral dogs are walking hurriedly from house to house seeing what they can find, then holding out burning fire brands, teasing and laughing as they bother occupants and torch their precious homes. There's nothing I can do... 'cept watch...

They're swaggering in the arrogance of power, smiling, holding their orange flaming torches up against low hanging thatch waiting the seconds it takes to catch, which it does, all too easily, every time. In these dark days I've learned that death and destruction's a quick process. Creating hell takes just moments, believe me, I'm seeing it all. I'm watching it again right now. What's nearly as bad is that there's nothing, not a bloody thing I can do to stop them. No-one knows when they'll have had their fill.

I'm sitting still, keeping quiet, staying low, keeping out of the way. I don't want to draw attention to myself, it's my way of surviving. Learnt that a long time ago. As a shepherd lad, poorly dressed, small

for my age, I've a life time of being picked on and pushed around. I'm carrying a four month old lamb under my arm. The last one, she escaped from the sale of one hundred assorted sheep, happened to have found herself a way out, so I picked her up. Finders keepers.

Just so you know about me and Lambkin; it's me trying to tell them I'm no soldier, trying to convince I just mind sheep, I'm only a lad, and I'm absolutely no threat. But whether they'll see me as not worth the bother – no-one knows, so I'm keeping my head down, my body still.

If they spot me, I can't be sure they'll swallow it. I'm poor, skinny, inconsequential, definitely no hero; I keep telling myself they won't be interested in me. I watch, I see what they do. I notice things, I remember things, I will remember it all. I always have. It's a gift I can memorise – even recall the old prayers we're not allowed to use. They can't see that. It's all my secret.

The wind shifts, there's a new tang to the warm summer air. I smell the job in hand – the acrid, smoking timber and thatch; I taste the bitter ash. I hear the crackling flames, the yells, squeal of pigs, barking of dogs, screams as families try to pull children out of harm.

I hear shrieks and the groaning of men on being roughed up, watch animals and whatever else hastily thrown out of homes as familiar faces gather powerlessly to watch helplessly as everything goes up in flames. I look on, watch still others throwing things from upper windows into the street hoping they won't smash their cribs, pails and tables into pieces; that something, however small, might be saved.

If I were braver I might go and help. I hope no-one knows I'm here, I feel my skin crawl anticipating the the accusations and re-criminations to come later. I know everyone, that's the trouble with a village like Ottery. I'll have to face them when the time comes – if I live that long...

Suddenly it gets brighter as a gust of wind spins sparks high and yellow flames dance furiously in the darkening sky. I watch mesmerised, never seen anything like it. It's followed later by charred debris spilling down from above like Satan's sooty snow. It begins

to leave a dark grey dusting on the beaten earth of Paternoster Row. The days of processions along this road, reciting the Lord's Prayer, to finish at Amen Corner have turned to ash. There is death in the air. I watch quietly, taking it all in, still as a gravestone, watching like a stalking cat.

1549's been such an angry year; these past weeks especially so. It's like a beehive's been kicked over, the bees go wild bringing trouble, getting angrier and angrier, everyone diving for cover, no-one knowing if it's their turn to get stung next. Disabling shock and hurt feelings are all around like a plague. The bees anger spilled east, took off in Devon and Cornwall to land in Ottery and the River Otter valley, sparks fly and flames blaze. Fate's made us the battle zone, where it'll all get decided, maybe...

Presently the West's up in arms against the king, with Exeter isolated, besieged this past month. Who can imagine how difficult that is? The boy King Edward's no more than Somerset's performing or is it reforming puppet? It's not Edward who upsets me, but the Duke of Somerset. Somerset's the one who rules supreme, we all know that. Somerset's King in all but name, and he's hated for it.

And it's Russell who's been sent to fight that fiery redhead Somerset's battles. Word is that Russell's scared and so he ought to be. These past weeks he's been trying to recruit local soldiers, but I'm telling you he can't get a single man worth calling a man to join him! What does that tell you? How's that for a measure of where true sympathy lies? That's if you don't count the gentry, people with big houses and money to protect. It's a foregone conclusion they'd all signed up as loyalists, they always have, since before time began. Them and us, I've mentioned that already, but there it is.

Why don't those in London leave us be? Things weren't so bad a few years back, until they began taking everything from us, and I mean everything. You've no idea how much we've been provoked, how much they've stolen. I'm telling you, they robbed us all until there was nothing left but a little bit of fight to try and make them stop.



I need to tell my tale because no-one else can. All are too afeard. While I sit and watch these flames what else can I do but reflect and reminisce? I hope you're listening carefully. These flames are just the latest manifestation of the destruction being wrought upon us.

Where to start? You attack a man's religion, you attack his very soul and that's what's been happening here. Not just once or twice, but time and time again. That's where the root of it all lies in my humble opinion. Ask any Devonian or Cornishman. We're a proud people and we won't be told how we should practice our Christian Catholic faith. We're free and want to stay free. Why has what we've always done suddenly become treason.

Bear with me.. I need to go back three, four years, and tell you what happened when I was a lad of eleven. I remember 1545 so well; back in King Henry's time, though by then he wasn't the fit man he used to be. It hadn't been going well for Henry, had it? He needed money for his wars, his court and God knows what else. No-one knows where all that money he took went. He holds his money like a sieve holds water – he just isn't made to do it. My friend Peter, south field ploughman's made the same, a whole weeks 5 pence spent on ale before Monday night.

Henry had fallen out with the Pope trying to get his divorce from Catherine of Aragon, giving us yet more problems. His Archbishop, Cranmer, levered crafty reforms; so that everything we knew became tainted by his attacks on our commoner's religion. We knew what direction the wind was blowing, we didn't like it, no-one did, but we couldn't do anything.

One time stands out. Was December 1545 worse for us in Ottery than what Russell's troops are doing today? Hard to say, the evidence isn't all in, no-one yet knows... but as I see it, these past three, four years have taken us into the very fires of hell.

Money! King Henry liked his lavish lifestyle, his run of wives, his fancy hunts, his wars. Can't tell which came first, probably the lavishness because he needed money, loads of it – but what do I know? Where did he get it from? I know the answer to that one – us, the ordinary people; but you're not allowed to say that – "tis treason", my Mum always tells me.

She always calls me "wayward", her word for my thinking what I shouldn't. Sometimes I used to say what I shouldn't say too, but I'm wiser about that now and button my lip. "You were born the wrong side", my Mum says, and "that makes you a wrong'un. You'll never need to find trouble, it'll always will find you my lad!" Guess I'll always be "my lad" to her.

She also says most days presently, "Keep your mouth shut, mind yourself, forget it!" She's always saying that to me, means well, but she says it too often, like she says her rosary, it's become her creed. Even rosaries are something. You have to hide them now. I tell her, "tis treason to have a rosary", but then how's she supposed to say her prayers? That's the only way she's ever known. Why doesn't Cranmer know that – common sense if you ask me...



She worries a lot, but then with good reason, the world's gone crazy and since Dad died she relies on me, her only one. I'm the church shepherd, the bread winner, well... I was the church shepherd, until all the sheep were sold off... and looking after Lambkin hardly qualifies me as being a shepherd, now does it? Who knows how we'll manage now? There just isn't any money and what there is won't buy enough.

Let me tell you about sheep, because that's what I really know. Since I was a boy, shepherding's been my thing, like my Dad before me, but it's also been the king's thing, because he's been rustling our sheep out of our possession since I was small. I'm not joking. In a sheep county, like Devon, he took a particular and spiteful aim at

us, it was personal and he hit us hard. All men and lads have to go and practice archery, go down to Butts Lane to do it, so I know what taking aim at a target is about and Henry took aim at us, at our sheep. I mean, it was only at the start of lambing this year there he taxed our sheep. Listen here, tax starts at 3 pence on every ewe. Just think! A grown up shepherd only earns 5 pence a week, that's massive! Yes, I can hear your question, it was 3 pence on every sheep we had.

Somerset's Commissioners, his taxmen, have been round in a gang of three, one of them a bought-off priest in tow the whole time. Tax collectors – we know what the Bible thinks of them! They went round the whole of Devon I'm told, taxing every sheep they could count and what's more, if people didn't sell them quick enough they were done for. So many are bankrupt – livelihoods gone, and forced out of house and home. That's why I'm an ex-shepherd. You won't find any sympathy for loyal subjects round here! We've been fleeced! Sorry about that. And Lambkin, she's not got any friends but me.

Yes, Henry wanted money, loads of it, but worse, those round him, they wanted even more, to rob us of our very selves. Don't believe me? Well listen here, no-one else will have the guts to tell you. Taxes on sheep, lamb by lamb, taxes on wool pound by pound. Even the church bees have been taken! No-one can tell you when taxes were ever levied so high – that's because there never was a time so bad! But like I say, robbing men of money is one thing, stealing their faith and forcing them to take on another religion, that's another. Some say that's worse, but I wouldn't know. I'm a lad.

So that's what's been happening. What do you think of that? Since '45, everything round here's got sold off to pay bloody Henry! We're all starving paupers. Except, that is, what cunning people and of course the lofty aristocracy and well to do gentry squirrel away. We all know they still have meat on their tables, four meats for lunch is what I hear. All we get is bread and pease pottage if we're lucky.

And there's another thing that rancors. Henry's been debasing our currency for years, taking gold and silver coins and replacing them with base metal, copper if you were lucky. That's one more of his ways of robbin' the common people. Not that I've ever seen a

gold coin, I might add. It's just what I've heard and as I keep saying, what do I know? All I see is no-one with money any more...

Henry started robbin' the monasteries, the priories, the churches ages ago, can't say when, well before my time. There's been a full frontal attack on our religion, our faith, our church and before long he'd turned his gaze on us, his greedy eyes fixing on Ottery and he thought, "Huh! I see more rich pickings". Not that any of that had ought to do with me. Money was so rare I was lucky to see a farthing let alone a halfpence, but he had his eye on our Ottery's prized assets and he said to himself, "they've got my name on them". Let me tell you what happened because no-one will tell you. Everyone's silenced by dread and terror. 'Tis true!

Back in the past, the one thing Ottery St Mary was noted for was its grand Collegiate Church; its fine buildings and magnificent two lofty bell towers; and its ever whistling weather cock – the pinnacle of the church builders work, a bird without pity, keeps us all awake with its incessant blasting noise, even whenever there's the slightest breeze. Come a strong wind, you can hardly think for the noise. He never lets up in trying to get us down, so I've started calling him Cocky Henry! There must be some church cock maker laughing his head off in heaven at the centuries of misfortune his bird's inflicted on generations of Ottregians. Trouble is that cock's so high and out of reach there's no stopping it. No-one knows how to kill a noisy cock. And how do you stop a Henry or a Somerset for that matter?

Two centuries ago, maybe more, Bishop Grandisson built this monumental church to mimic his cathedral in Exeter. My... it's fine and splendid. and back then no expense was spared to give us something really good. Proudly stands in gleaming white Beer Quarry stone. Look at it, behind me, over my shoulder, a church on a hill, a light shining above the river and the village. Look at the sunset behind setting it off, a real picture; a seat of learning; some say Devon's answer to Oxford and Cambridge, but I wouldn't know about that.



What a place this was back then. So many lived and worked for the church – clergy, laity and the businesses of Ottery thrived on, depended on it. The choir, all the priests, and talking of learning, we're so proud of our Alexander Barclay. Yes, he's a very old man now I'll grant you, but his book, 'Ship of Fools' still amuses us. Showed the church clergy to be as debauched, ordinary, and as open to the vices common to man as the next person. We all knew it and Alexander told it how it was, truly a man of the people!

Perhaps the day will come again when we can all tell it how is without being told we're committing treason. There's power in telling it straight. Too often truth is what we're told it is, not that secret thing what we know it to be.

We love all the characters that made our village. But these past few years, since '45, what once was vibrant colour has latterly become but grey shadows. Our lifeblood's been leached from us and I fear things will get worse, it's so bad it's taking the very heart out of the place.

Good grief! My God! Look! Yellow flames are bursting high in the darkening sky, twice the height of that house. Thank God the wind's from the south west or the church and the rest of the settlement will go up too. Those burning cottages in Silver Street and Sandal Street are sending bright sparks high in the sky. Can't tell where else is burning, possible over on the Ridgeway, but I can't see from here. It's such a hot summer's evening, everything's tinder dry. The whole place could go up and then we'd be entirely finished.

The minutes pass. I'm watching scurrying men about their criminal business. My guess is half are foreign, mercenaries, paid soldiers, men of grunts and swords, with no mercy. Not for long though. Look! Those soldiers are being called off by a bearded man in charge, him with the brandished sword, swinging round and round, glancing this way and that frightened he'll miss something, the guy on

a surly brown horse, a horse with a weepy eye. Could it be Russell himself? “Your job’s done!” he’s shouting. He’s desperately waving them on, shooing, swinging his horse round in tight circles, wanting to get them away. I know a scared man when I see one.

They’re moving up North Street, making for safety. But two of those arsonist infantrymen are so enjoying their task they want to carry on. Scoundrels! How can you want to burn down people’s homes? Burning, flames, chaos, destruction inflicted on ordinary commoners. Ah ha! they’re coming away now. Orders are orders I guess. All are strangers, not from round here, they’ve no doubt got their own reasons for taking the king’s blood money.



Where was I? Well, until 1544, our Warden of the College, long-suffering John Fyssher, ran things round here. But then Henry, greedy, grasping Henry, needing yet more money saw our college and church as so much scrappage, precious metals and quality cloths all his for the taking. Dissolution it was called. I’d never heard the word before. Rape or murder, robbery too, I call it.

Henry’s inventory writing ruffians, his fat tellers, his greasy accountants with grasping claws and penning fingers – they drained the valley’s lifeblood, line by line, item by item. Together they brought everything that had been our tradition, the world we knew, to an end. Killed this place, bled it dry. It was riches to rags for all common people. Centuries of good, that’s if you forget for a moment the Black Death that killed half the folk; centuries of good religion, good living, when everyone knew their place – it was all just taken away.

Yep, by the end of ’45, Henry’s men had destroyed Ottery. It’s treason to say so, but hear this – I BLAME HIM. Like some robbing Barbary pirate, Henry looted all our treasures and sacked our communities. Look around here on any market day these days, every head round this place is stooped in sadness, good people felled into

dire poverty, no religion to fall back on. Everyone left heaving with resentment; yes, all that and more...

Other good people have left us, those landless, jobless, homeless sods; gone to live with family or friends elsewhere, anyone who could have them. Whoever heard of refugees in our own valley before? Not me! Thereafter, after dissolving the church, dissolution-ing it, if that's the word, there was no singing, no bell ringing, nothing – just a silent vacuum where once there'd been life. All the employment, all the processions, all the saints days, colourful festivals, all the lights, all the wealth, all the jobs – gone, for the King said he had need of it. "Huh!"

There's the thing. I grew up thinking soldiers were to defend us.... That was before...

"Hell!" That soldier's seen me. He's coming my way. No way out, nowhere to run. Time to look innocent. What does he want? "Lambkin, come closer, look who's coming."

I stand awkwardly, raising myself slowly, not wanting to look tall, one hand half lifted in innocent greeting, the other still clutching Lambkin tight to my chest. I try a goofy smile. It doesn't seem to work, he draws his sword. My heart is racing, my mouth drops open.

"It's only me, Shepherd Bo, watching the fires..." I plead. I don't know whether he's listening or heard me and my voice sounds child-like, pathetic.

He's right up close, too close, towering over me, smells of smoke and unwashed soldiering, wet sweat marks staining his grey shirt, black smears across his nose, his hairy cheeks and heavy brow. A savage face with tired, black rimmed eyes. He draws his sword drawn, raises it up, shoulder high. With his other hand he's reaching out, for me... but grabs Lambkin round the neck and roughly pulls, snatches him from my grasp. I don't resist, and he smirks as I stagger back and fall, my back against a grave. Will he leave me dead... it's a fitting place?

He pauses, raises his sword above me. My head drops, I don't breathe or dare move. I sense him bending lower and then growling he whispers in my ear with a snigger and a London accent, "Thanks

for supper, Bo,” before turning, running with his now bleating prize, chasing after his waiting mate up ahead to tell him of his unexpected bounty. Then they’re gone, all the soldiers following the man on the horse, Lambkin too.

Breathing deeply, relief washing over, I see the tail end of them gathering, to retreat in some kind of order, finally disappearing round the corner into Paternoster Row, heading north in the direction of Alfington and their base camp of two weeks near Honiton. Someone’s begun tapping out a regular drumbeat as they fall in line.

I don’t feel I need to hide any more and cautiously look on at the devastation around me. I could see they were unpredictable, frightened and frustrated men just waiting to take it out on us because of what had happened earlier in the day. This morning they’d followed the river, skirting Ottery, only to find their progress to relieve Exeter blocked. They knew it was us, the common people of Devon rising against them, that’d done it. They were spot on, of course we did it! Adding to their sense of frustration, they’d failed to engage any meaningful enemy force; just small skirmishes had occurred here and there, was all I’d heard, but nothing decisive. The Rising was still a growing threat for them. They’ve gone for now, but like lice, they’ll be back. Our adversaries won’t ever leave us in peace. The King, sorry, Dooky Somerset, won’t allow it.

Apart from the roars and hisses of still burning straw and timber, there’s nothing but the occasional wail from women on the warm breeze. Darkness is beginning to fall. On July nights like this, the reality of darkness comes slowly, night steals upon you as the day keeps hanging on, like a lover, reluctant to leave its beloved.

More loss to bear, and apart from life itself, what is still left for us? Sometimes I think futility and hopelessness are as deadly an enemy as soldiers. Only those away from the front line can have the luxury of dreaming of victory. Make no mistake, Ottery and our neighbouring settlements are on the front line in this war, and being here means no-one knows which way all this will turn out.

I turn my gaze away from the smouldering ruins to spy the houses of the wealthy. Unsurprisingly they’ve been left untouched. To be

sure, this was an attack on us commoners, ordinary folk. The powerful punishing the powerless, seeking to cause us fear and dread – not hard to do. Life's become all about us and them when once we rubbed shoulders and kind of got along most of the time.

I've recently learned it's the time to shut up, the time for non-conversations, a time for silence, when having only underground private thoughts is safe. It stands to reason. The use of open words, careless talk, simply paves the way to more suffering and death. And I mean really suffering, inflicted by the experts in pain, those practiced and equipped in their dark art and their Tudor masters, their paymasters; those who until only a couple of years ago happily used boiling to death as a means of execution. Cruel times demand careful use of words.

I'm not sentimental about sheep. Life's too hard for that. Lambkin was going to one pot or another. Better Lambkin taken than me. I'll need to go foraging now all the lambs are gone. Not my favourite, but peas, beans and roots boiled up will have to do. Now Russell's troops have all gone for the night, there'll be no more action, unless... unless they lay waste to Alfington on their way back. Alfington folks, like Ottery folks sent men to the fight. They too could face a firing, or worse. I need to get home and so you know, I'm an Alfington lad, that village is, and always has been, my first home.

I'm telling you this as I get up from my grassy graveyard eyrie and carefully begin my walk home, keeping a watchful eye out for stray soldiers. Adjacent to the dark church, I pass the derelict stone buildings of the ruined College and make my way past the empty Warden's House. It looks like an abandoned builders yard, stones everywhere. Stones that people help themselves too! I'll tell you more presently.

I'm taking the back way home, safest down beside the River Otter, avoids meeting those soldiers again who'll be on the road. I'm thinking they'll be tired, scared, wanting to take the quickest route back to their HQ. This way's usually a slow, muddy overgrown track, though dry now as it's mid-summer. The path runs north and

west of Ottery, beside riverside apple orchards and fields, straight back to our cottage on the north western edge of Alington, maybe not fifteen minutes away.

A sudden panic, a sense of dread stops me in my tracks. Will Mum be OK, will our home be spared, will...? I must move on and faster. Running, I dodge low branches in the increasing gloom and curse whenever one I miss smites me across my face. A pair of owls make early calls to each other with their tu-whit tu-woos sing song, which feels all out of place, as if nature is out of step with reality; wise owls should know and respect this time of human suffering. No-one is sure of things any more; some are saying even the earth is no longer the centre of the universe but the sun is. I feel all is now disorder.

I mentioned the stones by the church earlier. You might think with shepherding at an end I'd be a begging vagrant too; some might say I'm one of the luckier ones. I get work sometimes at John Haydon's Cadhay Manor. For those who don't know Ottery, Cadhay's one of the three under-manors. With the dissolution in '45 Somerset took the main Ottery Manor, the one by the church with all the land. How come? – a just man might ask. I can't answer.

Yet so far as I know, Somerset's never been there, let alone lived there. He's got his own fine place in London from what I hear. Word is, he demolished the church of St Mary, in the Strand, to build his own stately pile – a fine, top dog, city mansion no less. I'm surprised he stopped at that. I imagine it's probably a palace in all but name! I heard in the ale house, some poor London labouring lads like me were paid to carry the stones from St Paul's Cathedral to build it, yeah! I believe it. Somerset also took the cathedral wainscoting from St Paul's I hear; so when you hear that kind of detail, well, it's got to be true, hasn't it? Same's happened here, gentry help themselves, think they're entitled, though a few stones have gone into other houses, one along the Ridgeway... Henry and all his thieves, I hate the lot of them.

What I'm telling you is – this is what they euphemistically call the reforming dissolution, but it's probably not the message you hear from the powers that be. You know what I mean, the system that

lets the rich tell the story and take their pickings. It all means Dooky Somerset and his friends can all live like kings.

It's commonly held that the First Duke of Somerset and God knows where else, is truly the King of England in all but name... that's the gospel truth, that's the reality, I've made it clear already, but I'm telling you again in case the penny hasn't dropped. Loyal subjects, and you might be one, don't like to believe these things are true, now do they? Think about it. I'd swear to it on the Pope and Blessed Virgin's name...

Like I say, think about it. What can that small eleven year old kid King Edward, two years younger than me, know about ruling, know about anything for that matter? Nought! The world is really run by Somerset and his men.

Somerset might be Lord of the Manor but he doesn't show his face round here. He's always been an absentee landlord. For all I know he's happy just taking Ottery's money. His stooge Lord Russell's his man of the moment, sent down here from London to knock us in the west into shape. Keep the peasant buggers down...



As I was saying, well beginning to explain, Ottery Manor is the main manor, but Cadhay, Knightstone and Holcombe are the under-manors. These three places all have their own gentry in charge, but for me, Cadhay's been the place for me to make some money.

I have to confess I'm ashamed of what I do, though proper confession to a priest is hard to make these days; but I only do exactly what John Haydon tells me. Yes, I filch those very stones from the church's old college buildings – stones from its library, cloisters, chapter house, any good building stones I can chip off and make away with, anything I can take from the many buildings that have

been forced to close. There's so much there, I think I'll be busy for years... maybe...

All I do is take and clean the stones, and with Geoff's help I take them all with him in his cart to Cadhay. There we unload them for the stonemason to use. Whilst we all struggle and get poorer by the day, he and the gentry get richer. John Haydon wants those stones to build himself a fine new Cadhay Manor House. Oh, I get paid by the cart load, works out three pence a week. Perhaps he and Somerset share plans? I wouldn't know, but he has to get his lofty ideas from somewhere. I like the Bible story, the one Jesus told of the rich man who builds ever bigger barns... you know the one, where the rich man gets his comeuppance. It's become one of my favourites. I think there's a judgement and we reap whatever we sow.

I've done a few trips now and the money's enough for me and Mum. Guy, the steward who runs Cadhay house for John Haydon says, his Master, being a lawyer, has been much used by Henry to carry out the dissolution orders and then by Somerset to continue closing priories and religious houses all over Devon. We all know that man Haydon's done well out of it, like his fellow criminal Somerset. No-one locally dares cross him, he's untouchable, he gets first pickings from the spoils left by the king. Like, he's the local governor round here. What I mean is, he's the king's man on the spot, and well, he's Somerset's man isn't he? First he had Henry's ear, now he has Edward's. That's how it is. The rich get richer, and me, I just move stones.

What choice do I have to do any different? There's no other job. I don't like what I do. Every cartload is a hollow reward. With every stone taken off site, it's like taking the soul from the church. All the choristers, clergy, trainee priests, chantry intercessors, sacristan, vergers, bell ringers, cooks, candlemakers, librarian, clerks, maybe forty or more people, I never counted, all gone too. When will it stop? What'll be left of Bishop Grandisson's gift to this place? Will the fine old church building itself be next in line for the chop? Who knows? It's already a shadow of what it was and there's no-one caring for it.

Huh! That reminds me, in the vacant space since the position of Warden was dissolved, the church has been left neglected, the income it once had all gone. Under the King's say so, Haydon's been made one of four so-called Governors to run what's left of the church. That's a laugh. Already townsfolk are taking a case to court for his abject neglect in his duties as Governor. My guess is, he'd be quite happy to get the very best remaining stones from the church building itself and create an even bigger, grander Cadhay Manor. But what do I know? We'll have to wait and see. Maybe he'll keep the church for his own fine memorial chapel? No-one says mass for souls or lights candles any more. So who knows what will happen? Who knows?

Alfington! Nearly there, best be careful, make a slow approach. There's a noise, a murmuring on the night breeze. The soldiers must have stopped up as they were passing by. Some disturbance is under way. It's in the air, the sounds of night are all wrong. Alfington's under attack. Definitely time to lie low. I've already had one scare too many. I can't be invisible much as I wish it, for there's still a hint of light in the clear summer night sky. The moon and stars are already providing more light to see by for mischief-making in the shadows. As I get nearer I hear yells, shouts and screams and crouch down. I think it's over to my right hand side on the east side of the village, nearest to the through road from Ottery to Honiton.

I'm imagine Russell's soldiers moving from cottage to cottage in Alfington, beating, abusing, thieving... These are my neighbours, my friends. I hear more cries. These heart rending yells continue... How long? I want to stop my ears but can't...

After a while, just as in Ottery earlier, there's a worrying silence followed by a sudden firing of houses, maybe just those nearest the road. Looks like several homes have been fired. Maybe Mum is safe. She always listens out and hopefully she heard what was coming and escaped toward the river, hiding amongst the oaks and holly trees along its steep bank. The isolation of our tiny cottage on the outskirts might save her and our home.

Another half an hour has passed and I think the soldiers have had their sport and are moving off again toward their camp. They haven't stopped long. It's time for me to begin approaching home. On the one hand the advantage is all mine, these paths, these hedges, these trees are all my playground and I know all the hiding places and how to best disappear. But on the other hand even that offers little comfort, tonight every dark corner feels hostile and I am easily afraid. I'm reminded of once, when I was naughty as a small child, I ran out into the night, hid outside the house to escape a beating. The same anguished feeling of fear lies there in the pit of my stomach.

So I pause and watch our tiny cottage from afar tucked in low by the Warren Field hedge before creeping slowly toward the wooden front door. I'm casting glances in every direction, and nowhere feels safe. I'm right upon her before I make her out, she's totally still and silent. I spot her before she hears or sees me. Now I see she's sitting all hunched up under the apple tree, looking scared, her face fixed upon our tiny home. Startled at my final approach, she soon realises who it is and moves quickly to seize and embrace me in pulsating emotion, flowing tears and gasping sobs.

"Bo? You're alive," she murmurs, "alive. My Bo..." and holds my face tenderly in her rough hands.

"But Lambkin's gone and we won't be getting him back... Don't suppose the soldiers came up as far as here?..."

"No, I heard them the other end of the village, I watched from the orchard. Someone called those dogs off, I heard them, they're rightly worried about rebels. For soldiers, they sounded very frightened, worried about obstacles in the road, getting ambushed at night. They've gone, I'm certain of it, but I fear some of our neighbours have fared badly... come on, let's go and see what we can do... but be careful and mind what you say..."

Arm in arm slowly and silently we wander up the dirt track toward our nearest neighbours and then on to the houses nearest the road. Once more I smell bitter smoke, it stings my eyes and hear the crackle of embers. I spot Jack, my best friend, sitting on the ground

opposite what was once his home. He half smiles in greeting and shrugs in despair.

“Bo! It can be rebuilt. It would be worse if it had happened in winter,” he adds, always the one to see a brighter side, but quite unable to hide the streaks tears had made on his ash stained cheeks. He waves his arm toward the side of the track, unable to speak. Two men lie there, in dark pools of blood, all too visible in the gloom. I can just make them out, two good men, Joseph and William, friends. Both worked the same fields all their lives often side by side together, Joseph the whistler and William the singer, now dying together. I picture them both in happier times....

“Come and stay with us tonight,” I offer. “Bring Mary and your Mum and Dad,” I tell Jack. He nods and gets up, heading out down the lane to find them.

“There’s bread and pottage,” Mum calls after.

He turns and adds, “The soldiers killed any man who looked useful, anyone they thought might be a rebel soldier. They knew we’d helped in the rising. It was to be expected I suppose. Someone must have spilled the beans though, betrayed us, grassed us up... We’re on the leading-edge here. Everywhere west of where we are is held by those defending the way we choose to do things. Have you heard how passionately those Cornishmen are in defending their traditions? I hear they’ve come with Arundell leading them, and have already reached Exeter to reinforce our Devon men. They’ve marched non-stop east for days to get here. Like us, they’ve had enough of being told how they must worship God and what language to use. Mind you half the time I can’t tell what them Cornish are saying, but why shouldn’t they do things the way they always have, the way they understand things. If it was alright in Henry’s day, it’s still alright now by my reckoning, but don’t tell anyone I say so...” Then he’s gone.

“Mum, however this turns out, we’ve got to find a way for those in power to remember that we the commoners carry the cause of truth. There must be a way we can burn our own bright lights on dark nights, to show we rule our streets not them. They try to snuff

us out like candles. Can't we light and hold a new flame and send them packing?

Tomorrow, I'm going to take Jack with me with any other lads I can find. We'll walk over to the rallying point in Feniton to join the fight. The word is, that's where the Rising will take its stand. After what I've seen I know it's time to stand and fight for all we hold dear.

One day, when things settle, when the Rising's done and the soldiers have all gone, when the history writers have made up their own story of what happened for everyone to believe; then us lads will meet again in the Ottery Ale Houses and we'll find a way to show the truth of it all, you wait! We'll roll a flaming barrel."

"Bo! You and your big ideas!"

Gareth and Devon's Green Men

J.E. Hall



*'Indeed I have not seen them roused like this for many an age.
We Ents do not like being roused; and we never are roused unless it is
clear to us that our trees and our lives are in great danger.'*

Tolkien, The Hobbit

*"I speak through the oak", says the Green Man,
"I speak through the oak", says he."*

William Anderson, The Green Man

Gareth Fencer was an only child. Tall, thin and angular he had the habit of tilting his head and leaving it at unusual angles. He would get in the way, lean across a doorway or lie on the floor, but Gareth felt he had every right to the space, his piece of earth.

People used to say to his Mum, 'Your Beanpole, is he alright?' Mum would glance at him with a wistful air, then huff, turn and ignore them. Gareth had a mind of his own and was usually so pre-occupied with getting his own thoughts straight it never bothered him what other people thought. Being six foot tall he was often

mistaken for being much older. What he saw as the trivial concerns of others simply washed over him, just like one more moorland shower. He was fine in his own world.

The two lived on Dartmoor where frizzy haired, red-head Mum, home-schooled him. Since his parent's divorce, Mum had rented the back of an ancient stone cottage from the Giles's, an elderly couple who noisily occupied the larger part of the house. The Giles's overcame mutual deafness by forever shouting at intervals: regularly three times daily for a pot of tea to be made and intermittently to enquire after the whereabouts of lost items. They had no concept of noise. Gareth heard not only the flush of their toilet but also every banging shut of the toilet door on entry and exit. He could tell you, with a smile, if you were to ask, the number of times their toilet was visited each day together with any other number of other random facts, like... which TV programmes they watched and on what days. 'How can anyone drink so much tea or lose so many things?' asked Gareth. Mum glanced understandingly in his direction before giving a 'Harrumph' and carrying on with whatever chore she was busying herself with.

A large part of home schooling involved learning to look and listen. His Mum placed great store by the art of noticing things. Ironically, she didn't notice that Gareth was different to other boys of eleven. She put everything down to his gifts of character and individuality, qualities she greatly prized. In particular she was impressed by the way he fixed his gaze and his acute powers of observation. It led he to call him 'my special', but didn't much like it when other people did.

Once, when he was just five years old and they were two miles out into a summer's day walk, she'd sat him down, stilled him and told him to listen first for the shrill call, then watch the ascending sky lark. It could be heard mixing its melodious notes with trills and buzzes. 'Wait, Gareth, keep very still, follow its rising ever higher in the sky. Eventually it will fall and land. Look!' Still, down on the pointy green moor grasses and sharp heathers.

Ten minutes later and Gareth had led his Mum and found the hidden grassy nest with four perfect, grey-white spotted eggs. 'See the signs,' was one of Mum's catch phrases. He was always hearing her say it. If he ever went to school one day he'd fancy it as his school motto.

There was no broadband nearby and Gareth's education greatly depended upon a well thumbed pile of text books in English and Mathematics sitting on the faded, blue brushed velvet window seat, which served as his place for tuition at the start of each weekday. Mum always sat on the floor, legs crossed like a guru. The only other educational resource was a small pine bookcase holding Mum's collection of novels – Jane Eyre, Terry Pratchett, JK Rowling, some thirty eight novels in various shapes, colours and sizes. In the absence of a TV, the bookcase was Gareth's go to place. However, whatever the weather, most of his learning took place later in the day. Mum's enthusiasm for teaching indoors invariably ran out by mid-morning and she'd, 'Hear the call of the wild.' She loved nature and the great outdoors.

Gareth sat next to his Mum as she drove. She called the 1960, Wolseley 1500, 'her classic car', part of the divorce settlement, but to Gareth's eye there was very little difference between its dented grey finish and the Giles's centuries old corrugated iron framed compost heap propped up by old car tyres. 'Hand built', was how Mum proudly described the oil thirsty engine. Nonetheless Gareth liked the familiar smell of the tattered old red leather seats mixed with the real engine fumes that somehow found their way to the front passenger seat. He would run his finger over the grainy wood dashboard wondering where the tree that made it had once lived. How could he find out? Some things are not for learning.

Today it was a 'wherever it takes our fancy' day, which Gareth knew usually this meant taking a few minutes to drive down the steep sided narrow Devon lanes to get to Widdecombe. It was the nearest settlement of any size and it had a proper school. He knew Mum carefully avoided school times. She had long since

tired of arguments with other Mums as to why Gareth was being home-schooled.

A swerve left, a squeak of brakes, a growl and shush of tyres on gravel and the Wolseley came to a stop in the square right outside the old stone built, last for ever, Widdecombe church. Mum yanked the ratcheted handbrake up high and hard.

‘This isn’t where I fancied,’ retorted Gareth, his head leaning on his left shoulder away from his Mum’s scanning eyes. She briefly considered whether this was a hint of pre-teen rebellion before dismissing the notion.

‘All clear,’ she said, ‘now come on!’

Gareth’s head lolled over to the right shoulder and then back and stopped in a vertical position. He got out slowly and waited beside the car, noticing steam rising from the last of the damp on the old car’s bonnet. Maybe the same was happening from his ears, only he couldn’t see them. Can anger cause heat and steam, he mused. No conclusion was reached and he took a deep breath and calmed himself. There was some creaking as hidden parts inside cooled showing that the car was alive after all.

‘Look, it’s just a few yards,’ his Mum said gesturing toward the church door. ‘It’s cool. Let’s call it a history lesson.’

‘I’d rather have playtime!’

Ignoring his protests, Mum led the way, Gareth was once again lost in his own thoughts. If he was asked he’d have said, ‘I’m thinking about the miracle of water turning to vapour on the Wolseley’s bonnet. That’s science. Will all the water in the world eventually turn to vapour?’ Then, before he knew it, they were inside. Not their first visit, but the first of the week. The place was empty.



Mum went down near the front to look inside a side chapel where there was a metre high model of Uncle Tom Copley, his famous horse and a party of other characters. He’d seen it a hundred times.

She was happy just having what she called 'head space.' Meditation wasn't on most school curricula, but Mum's Buddhist leanings made certain it was also on his. He left her to it.

With his Mum's attention occupied elsewhere, Gareth carefully laid himself down on his back on the cold flagstone floor, strangely enough on top of a worn out memorial stone to some long dead Devonian. He found himself lying east-west like one more body awaiting resurrection. He became very still. This must be like what it is to be dead, he thought. Lying in the centre of the nave he gazed upward at the distant ceiling high above. It was a different perspective and it intrigued him. 'How many people get to do this?' He said out-loud. Then he realised that apart from his meditating Mum he was absolutely on his own.

Only he wasn't alone. As if looking down into the hull of some large wooden boat, he saw right at the bottom, a green man's face looking back straight at him. Mouth open wide he looked about to vomit through his white teeth framed by his gaudily painted red lips.

'Why do they always look that?' he wondered. 'No-one goes round with a face like that, not even Odd Bill, the postman.' He met the green man's gaze with an enquiring stare, seeing a face which he reckoned to be frozen in time. He began wondering what it was like to hold the same expression consistently for around six hundred years. 'Now that's a very long time not to even twitch or smile.'

A glance sideways and he noticed his Mum had moved across to the central aisle and parked herself in a pew. He could see the back of her head. She wasn't going to turn round. Her arm reached down at her side to take a book out of her plastic shopping bag to read. Strange how from down here the orange of the bag and her hair seemed to blend as one. He must ask her whether she chose the bag to match her hair.

Mum was like that, she left him alone with his thoughts, which suited him. He shuffled his head on the cold floor, quickly finding, his eyes drawn back, as if drawn by some invisible magnetic force, to return again to the vomiting face of the green man. Was that a wink,

a shudder or just a trick of the light? Can't be sure, the face is, after all, a huge height above.



His mind wandered. Some onetime medieval craftsman had carefully carved the roof boss from hard oak. It must have taken him ages, much longer than it took himself to make his model boat and unlike himself he'd made good job of it. But, after all that effort why had he fastened it so high up on the ceiling so that most people would never notice his work? It could only be because either it wasn't good enough, well it was a bit crude but not that bad; or, it wasn't quite kosher, didn't fit, was a bit on the edge... Do trees communicate? Someone was saying they did. Was the wood in Mum's car related to the wood in the green man? Maybe they came from the same wood. Wouldn't that... He laughed at all the wood and woulds before he could complete his thought.

Gareth imagined the medieval craftsman with his iron chisel and wooden mallet, bent over his bench tap tapping away until the rough hewn timber became a living face. Questions, questions – where did he get the idea of that face from? Was it like someone he knew? Why surround the face with green foliage growing out of the corners of his mouth, his nostril, eyes and ears? Why go to all that trouble when it's so hard to carve those curves? Oak was an unforgiving brute, so hard, and it splintered and split so easily. Was this art, the green frame for the face? And whose face was it anyway, the carvers, the local Lord's, God's? 'Hmm,' he said out-loud.

He became convinced the green man was watching him with his wide open eyes. Something to do with God? What else in a church? The face was held in space, like the moon, between earth and heaven. There were other bosses with old weird symbols – on a nearby boss three rabbits or hares were chasing furiously in a circle nose to tail. A race was on, but as he looked carefully he counted only three ears between them yet they ran with every appearance of having two

ears each. Very clever, a nice carving of living things. 'Respect,' he muttered.

Eyes back on the green man. 'You're not the only one,' he said raising his right arm to point at him, carefully lining up his right index finger as he did so. He'd heard somewhere there were over seventy churches in Devon each with their own green man in wood or stone. Some churches even had several faces, so that made an army, maybe a hundred strong. They were all relations, brothers in a cause. No green women he'd heard of, so an army, they had to be about men's work.

The floor was cold and he could feel a damp coolness penetrating his quilted jacket. He wriggled and shook himself, but he wasn't yet for moving. He was on to something, like following a skylark.



Some years back he'd joined the local Scouts, first as a Cub, just recently as a full Scout. It meant a uniform, signing up to a cause, belonging. He imagined the green men to be the same, they'd signed up to a cause, or rather their creators had; their uniform was their green foliage, so much a part of them it lived on and grew out of them. But their badges of green marked them out as no mere ordinary men, but a troop, a band of militants. Perhaps their open mouths meant they were singing? Was it an anthem? No, surely not with such an open gabbing no... here was a gobbing mouth.

The face felt incomplete without seeing the spewing. The skilful woodcarver had suggested, but omitted to carve and paint the invisible stream of vomit. 'That was clever!'

The face is intended to be mysterious, deep and dark, he thought. What might this army of green faces be saying? 'Foe or friend?'

Can't think there's anything very Christian about them. They're no depiction of God in heaven I know of. Paintings show God as an old bearded man sitting on a throne in judgement or being nice with a benevolently smiling face. This green man is no God I know.

‘Who is he? A foot soldier for some other cause? A messenger? What does he mean?’

These ancient churches are their homes, places of permanence in a world of change; hallowed, sacred, eternal spaces where many mysteries are held together. Perhaps something very old is imagined here? Surely this green man is a momentary expression of much older ancient ideas and beliefs. It’s like he’s sneaked in behind the back of the vicar and found a high and dusty niche in which to hide, like the bats in the roof.

He’s got to be a man linked with nature, with really old beliefs that were once more widely held! The face above seemed to smile knowingly.

A noise, feet scraping on stone floor. ‘You alright there, Gareth?’ his Mum asked, now standing right next to him. I’m going to look at the National Trust exhibition next door, ‘Coming?’

‘No.’

‘Please yourself then.’

‘I’m fine. I’ll stay here, won’t be long. The roof’s really interesting.’



‘OK,’ she said, not convinced, her retreating footsteps pattering ever more quietly in the direction of the south porch door.

Mum was good like that, never demanded too much. Where was he?

His eyes returned to the zone, focussing on the distant face above, trying to harness his thoughts.

A green man, ancient, part of a wider movement, made from natural things with a green headdress. His Mum had told him in ‘History’ about Stonehenge, about the stone circles on the Moor and also of the Jack in the Green festivals. Where did the green men fit in? They were old, really, really old too.

Then, as it sometimes did, his mind took a sideways turn. There had been a picture of a lad called 'Son of Swampy' on the village shop news stand. Whilst his Mum had bought the week's shopping he'd stood there waiting for her and read all about it. They were being called green men, and the Dad, 'Swampy' was passing down his green credentials to his teen son Rory. A continuity then – old nature beliefs, green men past and green men present...

A pain near his shoulder blade. His long and bony back was beginning to feel more uncomfortable, yet he was fully alert, vibrantly alive and determined to follow his train of thought to its conclusion. He was so very close to the earth; were the dead within reach? Only just above, on solid ground, this was nature too. Foliage above, soil below.

Those two Swampys were known for getting into the trees and then under the earth like green moles on a mission. They'd tried and failed time and again to stem the flow of concrete roads and metal railways. These guys had plenty to say about human impact upon nature. Were these the modern prophets, today's green men giving voice to a long tradition of protest?

Gareth thought of his Mum and the way she had persuaded the Giles's to let her grow things in part of their garden. Sometimes he'd help her, turning over the dark earth before planting things. They prepared seed potatoes together. First they had to let them chit before planting out in spring, then mound up the earth over them later to encourage the tubers and keep away the light, before finally digging them out at harvest in summer. Nature, all around, taken for granted, intimately bound up with food to eat. What you ate made you vomit.



'Vomit! The green man's over-riding urge is to vomit! Something he's taken in, doing him harm. He's vomiting in protest.'

He's as rebellious a spirit as a modern green protester, he and his hundred friends are a siren's warning voice. That look on his face, that's a captivating, haunting, accusatory look.

It was time to get up.

'I know what I have to do,' he said. He stood, took a pace toward the door and paused.

As he tilted his head over his left shoulder, then back to the right, there was an almighty crash. The green man boss hit the floor and shattered, sending splinters flying.

That green man's delivered his message, his message is sent, his task now done, thought Gareth Fencer. It was for me.

He went to find his Mum, leaving the church feeling taller than ever, conscious he was a changed young man, a green man, with a green message to deliver, and a cause to fight.



Hidden Things

Paul Harrison



In a graveyard in the West of England squats a low pile of sandstone blocks. For centuries it has withstood the wet westerlies that define the Devon weather. A simple memorial placed by men whose names have been lost. What purpose drove them to toil for days? Pulled them from their fields and their cattle? What event were they marking? Was it to honour a great man or to celebrate a joyous event?

Or was it the opposite? Could it have been fear? Or even shame? Were they hoping to atone for some dark deed? Some foul, heinous crime.

Was it their own salvation that moved them? Or were they attempting to pass on a warning from their forbears, to those that would follow.

Around this memorial stretch rows of headstones. Each marking the remains of a body with perhaps a few words to sum up a life. Nearby stands the mongrel church - Norman bones, medieval stone and neo-classical additions - that serves this hamlet, Nymet Tracey, and its surroundings. Now a mere cluster of buildings, Nymet Tracey once teemed with life before a cleansing fire razed it to the ground. Was it a sign? The population may have thought so as they moved to the newly formed village of Bow.

So this pile of rough-hewn stones sits watching the weather and the years pass. It watches over a graveyard that continues to carry out its own purpose of transporting remains and reputations across the ages, because some deeds of men do deserve to be remembered.

But there are also other things men do that seek to be forgotten.



The small Renault Kangoo sped through the early evening transporting its own cargo: several crates of old books, an overhead projector with assorted electrics, and a tense atmosphere. It made its way along the A377 passing a signpost marked *Copplestone*. Behind the steering wheel a young man focused on the road ahead.

‘Nearly at the next turn,’ said an older woman sitting next to him. She spoke just loudly enough to overcome the noise of the engine and the radio, trying her best to sound positive.

The young man grunted, eyes fixed on the road.

They continued on into the village. ‘Which turning?’

She glanced at her phone, ‘This one. Coming up now. Then about three miles more.’

He kept his focus straight ahead. The radio continued to play quietly as if trying not to upset anyone. A few minutes later the tune changed.

‘Ooh, Simple Minds!’ said the woman, reaching over and turning up the volume.

‘Not my era, really,’ said the driver.

‘Oh come on. This is a classic. Surely your generation has heard it.’

The woman was older by at least twenty years. She wore simple jeans but matched with a smart light green shirt. Her auburn hair hung loose almost down to her shoulders exposing a hint of her neck above the collar. Her makeup was pragmatic rather than dressy. She started singing ‘*Don’t, don’t, don’t you forget about me.*’

The driver scowled.

‘Look,’ she sighed, ‘we’re nearly there. You can do your thing. Take as long as you want. I won’t mind, honest.’

He studied the horizon. ‘If there’s any light left.’

‘There’ll be plenty.’ She studied him for a minute. ‘Alex, I’m sorry - *again* - for staying late.’

Alex humph-ed.

‘I’ve told you how important it is for my work.’

He still didn’t speak.

She paused. ‘Alex?’

‘I know,’ he conceded.

‘And I’m sorry for how we got all mixed-up with you offering me this lift ...’

‘I don’t know how that happened,’ exclaimed Alex.

‘... and yet you still kindly helped me.’

He locked his jaw.

‘Alex,’ she said softly, ‘I don’t know what I would have done if I’d missed the seminar.’

Alex’s face softened. He let out a deep breath.

‘That’s OK. I s’pose.’ he said, then added, ‘Dr. Chambers.’

She watched him for a few minutes. He also wore jeans but these were dark grey, very tatty and held up with a silver studded belt. His top by contrast was a smart - and expensive-looking - beige and dark blue Jack Wills jacket. His face was pale and made paler by his frizzy ginger curls.

‘So,’ she said, ‘tell me about this relic you’re after?’

‘Well, it’s described as a memorial.’

‘Okay ...?’

‘It might be connected with one of the de Tracey family.’ He looked like he was wrestling with a thought so she stayed quiet. ‘The de Tracey family, actually William, was involved in the murder of Thomas Becket in 1170.’

‘Now you’re talking, and ...’

‘The place where we’re going, Nymet Tracey, is named after them.’

‘And there might be something related to the murder?’

‘Well, locals say the church was built as a penance, so there might be a reference to William, or at least maybe the family.’

She pondered this. ‘So what information do you have?’

‘Not much,’ he admitted.

‘You must have *something*, though?’

‘It’s from the Exeter Cathedral Library.’

She stayed quiet again to draw him out. He continued, ‘It’s an old photocopy from about twenty-five years ago that I found stuffed in a book.’

‘Book?’

‘An old catalogue.’

‘Sounds interesting!’

He glanced sideways at her and answered her sarcasm with silence.

‘Sorry. I *am* interested. You know I only do clay tablets. As for actual paper?... Well, that’s too modern for the likes of me.’

He smirked. She smiled in return as they both relaxed a little.

‘Alex, you *can* call me Jean you know. I haven’t been your lecturer for over a year now.’



The summer wind whispered through the trees around the church. All was quiet as the minutes slipped by just as years and decades had done, unobserved and unwatched by a living soul. The church was also ignored by the occupants of a car as it wound its way through the lanes from Bow. It skidded to a halt on the gravel next to a dishevelled white van opposite a small row of cottages that cosied up to the church gate.

The passengers held each other close for a long moment before a young woman exited. She had long dark hair and she was dressed in a smart business skirt and half-unbuttoned chemise. She pulled off a strapless bra from underneath and threw it back through the passenger door hobbling in heels towards the gate.

‘Come on! Quickly!’ she whispered loudly.

She followed a path that approached the church before turning south between the graves.

A young man also got out, removed his tie, and followed her across the road through the gate. He wore his hair short and was dressed in the remnants of a smart suit, shirt now hanging out of his trousers. He saw her waiting for him under a large tree to his right which overhung a number of the graves.

‘Are you sure?’

She stood next to a stone wall looking up at the last of the afternoon’s blue sky. The rising moon smiled down at her and she smiled at him as he approached.

‘Why here?’ he asked.

‘Because.’

‘Because what?’

‘Just because ...’

‘But isn’t it all a bit ...?’ Her lips prevented him from finishing the question and their bodies entwined. Then he stopped.

‘Hang on a second.’

‘What?’

‘This is all very nice and everything but ...’

‘But what?’ she stroked his jaw with a red nailed finger. ‘You don’t want to?’

‘Well of course. Having bought you dinner, I’m up for some dessert ...’ he grinned.

‘Oh, you tease...’ They kissed again.

‘But...?’

‘But what?’

His brow furrowed. ‘But why here?’

‘What’s wrong with here?’

He didn’t have an answer.

‘You never done it in a graveyard before?’

‘Can’t say I have.’

‘Graveyards freak you out?’

‘Well, not *freak* exactly.’

‘Well, I love graveyards.’

‘So, um ... I was told.’

She started kissing him again. ‘And I love this one. I mean, *I really* love this one.’

‘But what was wrong with my place? Or yours?’

‘Too stuffy,’ she managed between busy lips.

‘What?’

‘Hmmm. Too uptight. But here I can breathe, I feel like I can let go.’

‘Oh, OK.’ He wasn’t sure where this was going.

‘I feel uninhibited. No secrets. Just complete and utter’

She placed her hands around his face and smothered him again.

‘Well, if dessert and disinhibition are on the menu, then I have to say...,’ he paused.

‘What?’

‘All evening, I’ve been wanting to get my hands on your ...’ he looked down at her chest, ‘... nip-nips.’

‘My what?’ she shrieked.

‘Your nip-nips.’

She screamed with laughter. He tried shushing her and looked around hoping no one had heard but said nothing more and joined her giggles. ‘I don’t know where that came from, but I like it. And I also like *them*.’

He reached out with his hands. She didn’t resist and they were kissing again.

‘Do you get it now?’ she asked.

‘I think I’m about to, yes.’

‘No. not that,’ she looked about. ‘This place?’

He thought for a second.

‘I think I do. It’s weird, but I’m beginning to like it. It’s doing things to me.’

‘Oh, good.’

‘And making me want to do things to you,’ then kissed her again. ‘And your Nip nips!’

Soon they were on the ground lost in each other. Every so often the man would look up to see if they were being overheard but soon he no longer cared.

They were fortunate that Nymet Tracey was a tiny hamlet with few inhabitants and fewer visitors. Lucky, too, that no bell-ringing practice was happening this evening. Even the little cottages next to the gate stood dark and empty. And as for the residents at the far end? Well, they were gathered around the screen in the village pub watching the football.

When their own game was over they held each other on the grass, under the tree by the wall. They lay there for a time and shared the inevitable sweet nothings and sighs as they counted the early evening stars. Eventually, they made their way back to their car laughing together as he chased her. 'Nip-nips,' he called, 'Nip-nips!' They embraced one last time before speeding off into the night.



The graveyard once again cloaked itself in its familiar stillness. The clock on the tower, still illuminated by the dying glow of the setting sun, showed the hour hand creeping further towards the nine.

A head popped up over the wall.

'It's OK, they've gone.'

Jean looked down at Alex who held his hand over his mouth, face red and eyes damp. They looked at each other and smirked.

'*My what?*' Jean mimicked.

'*My nip-nips!*' Alex replied. They broke down in fits of laughter. 'Oh. My. God. Did he really say that? That was sooo embarrassing ...'

'I suppose you would think that,' she smiled, brushing her top down. 'Actually, I thought it was quite sweet.'

'No it wasn't!' he countered.

'Of course it was!'

'Who even talks like that?'

Jean looked him in the eye. He couldn't face her, his cheeks red.

'Nip-nips!' she teased, grinning.

'No,' he laughed. 'I can't unhear that.'

'Nip-nips!' she said again.

'No. Please. Stop it,' he couldn't control his giggles. 'Do people really say that? ...'

'People say lots of things.' She smiled again and studied him for a second. 'I envy you, in a way.'

'Eh?'

'You're so ... young.' She was going to speak again but held her tongue. Then she hopped over the wall landing in the circle of flattened grass by the tree.

'Lights going. This memorial. What're we looking for?'

Alex joined her, glad to talk about something else, and headed back to the west end of the church. The half-moon hung behind it in the darkening blue sky. He reached into his rucksack and took out a dog-eared notebook.

'No idea, really. There's no details but there is a clue to its location. There's supposed to be a grotesque somewhere that points to it.'

'A what?'

'A grotesque.'

'You mean a gargoyle?'

Alex looked at her and answered quite deliberately, 'It's not a water spout. So no. Absolutely, definitely *not* a gargoyle.'

He looked up at the tower in front of them. Any brick- or stone-work that had an ounce of character had been rendered over. At the top a bare flagpole and a weathervane pointed the way to heaven. Alex retrieved a small slip of paper from his notebook.

Jean wandered over to him. 'Is this what you've got to go on? What you mentioned in the van?'

'Yes, some information from a researcher's notebook. It mentions a memorial restoration from the late eighteenth century. Or rather a photocopy ...'

She took it from him and peered at it. 'It looks like a scribble to me.'

'Here, let me,' he took it back then repeated the words he had painstakingly deciphered.

'Readers Letter MT 1899 Volume XV speaks of de Tracey memorial, St Barts, Nymet Tracey. Grotesque of William de T. South fifteen paces. Repairs. 12s. Originally 14C. Churchwarden Accounts 1792. Okehampton. Strange occurrences.'

'Strange occurrences? What does that mean?'

'No idea. But I like the sound of it.'

'MT?' she asked again.

'Miscellaneous Tract. Volume fifteen.'

'What's that, *another* book?'

'Well yes, they were popular reading journals in Victorian times.'

'Have you read the original?'

'No. Doesn't seem like any copies survived.'

'So, hang on...' she took a slow breath. '... you have a twenty-five year old photocopy. An actual photocopy from a photocopier machine?'

He nodded.

'Of someone's scribbled notes ... from when?' she prompted.

'1930-ish.'

'From the 1930s?'

'Yes.'

'From someone's notebook?'

'Yes.'

'With details about some sort of restoration.'

'Yes.'

'That they had read about in this 120 year old Victorian Journal ...'

'Only thirty years old when they read it, mind,' he interrupted.

'Quite. But this Journal. This also cannot be found?'

'As I said'

'... but mentioned some church accounts ...'

'In a letter from a reader ...'

'OK, whatever. And these accounts?'

'Burnt in a fire, I think.'

'Of course they are. But mentioned a restoration to a memorial in *this* graveyard?'

'Yeah.'

'A memorial that no one has been able to confirm the existence of ...'

'Correct.'

'... since?'

Alex waved the paper. 'This guy reckons fourteenth century,' he added as if it was all obvious. 'Pretty straight-forward, really.'

She stared at him, mouth open, then asked, 'But... why?'

He thought for a second, 'It's a mystery. I like mysteries.'

'I'll say. Preferably mysteries in the middle of nowhere in God-forsaken places like this.'

Alex leaned into her. 'But don't you get it?'

'Get what?'

'Look. Somehow, someway, this small clue survived ... what? Two hundred and thirty years? It bounced around between old accounts, unknown researchers and lost books and now here it is. Every place or person it passed through has now vanished. It's like this memory is clinging on for life, Dr Chambers. I can't ignore it.'

Jean had no answer. All she could do was watch him wander off towards the church building itself. He walked east to the chancel and the older part of the church which was constructed from medieval stone. There was a porch which extended out about six feet. A sundial was placed into the stone above the entrance. Alex disappeared into the shadows. A few seconds later he popped his head out and waved her over, 'Here he is. This is him.'

She found him pointing up at a craggy worn lump of stone embedded into the wall above an old wooden door to the church.

'Here we are! This could be William.'

She saw a crudely-carved face looking down at her in the gloom. It could have been a trick of the light, or the fact it was covered in lichen, but it greeted her with a distinct scowl.

'Could be?' she asked.

‘Well, maybe.’ He waved his piece of paper in the air. ‘But it gets a mention.’

Alex studied the scribble again, re-reading it to try and make sense of it. He looked out along a path that curved to the left. A grassy bank faced them upon which sat rows of headstones. They stretched all the way down past the tree to the far end filling the space between the wall on the left and the road.

‘What do you reckon? See anything that resembles a memorial?’

‘What does it look like? Any information?’ Jean scanned the graves.

‘Dunno, could be anything. It’ll be centuries old.’

‘Probably worn away then. All I can see is regular graves. What did it say? Fifteen paces?’

Alex walked down the path counting under his breath and climbed the bank. As he reached the top he tripped. ‘Careful, Jane. Mind the step up.’

Jean stopped behind him. ‘What?’

Alex inspected the ground, ‘Tripped on something. Not sure what.’

‘No!’ she demanded. ‘You said *Jane*.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ Alex blurted, turning his back to her.

Jean let the pause linger then said calmly. ‘So, what was the plan?’ ‘Plan?’

‘Yes. With Jane. You know. *Jane*. My *daughter*.’ Jean’s eyes narrowed.

‘I ... I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Was it to spook her? Were you going to be the brave protector for her?’

‘Um, no ...’ he responded, his irritation apparent.

‘*Strange occurrences*’, it said.’ Jean quoted, ‘What kind of strange occurrence were *you* planning?’

Alex made a real effort to look like he was studying the headstones between himself and the tree. She stepped up the bank to join him, where she too tumbled. Without thinking he held out his arm for her to hold. ‘Mind your step, there’s something there ...’

‘Ooh, my hero,’ she said sarcastically. ‘Is that what you were intending for Jane?’

Alex hurried to let her go, his cheeks turning red. Jean watched him take a few steps away. She then let out a long sigh.

‘It’s OK, Alex. I know what young men are. I also know what they’ll do to engineer being alone with someone they like.’

‘How did you know...?’ his face was now burning.

‘You thought her Uni email was j dot chambers, didn’t you?’

He remained quiet.

‘Sorry buddy. That’s me. I nabbed the *j* a long time ago. She’s *j* dot I dot chambers.’

Alex sighed and mumbled ‘Shit! I did wonder ...’

‘You could have just asked her, you know. Do young people do that any more?’

He ignored her and resumed studying the graves in the fading light, but then spun round to face her.

‘Hang on. If you knew I had the wrong email, why did you reply and accept my offer of a lift?’

‘I ... I don’t know.’ It was Jean’s turn to be flustered. ‘I’m sorry. I really needed the lift.’

‘What?’

‘Yes ... um ... Jane’s father just walked out on me, and’ she froze, her hand sprang to cover her mouth, eyes wide. ‘No, no. I didn’t mean to say that. No one is supposed to know. You weren’t supposed to know. Oh my God! Even Jane doesn’t know!’

Her composure collapsed and she gasped. Tears welled up in her eyes.

She turned away from him. Her shoulders shuddered briefly and she fumbled in her pocket for a tissue.

‘I ... I’m sorry, Dr Chambers,’ Alex managed.

The silence stretched between them. After dabbing her eyes and blowing into a few more tissues Jean was able to face him again. She gently rubbed his arm. ‘Well, we all have ... lives ... I suppose.’

Alex didn’t know what to say.

‘Why did I say that?’ Jean murmured, ‘I’m not normally such a blab.’

‘Well, that makes two of us.’

Jean let out a small chuckle and cleared her throat. ‘Well, if it’s any consolation I can’t see you two together. Jane wouldn’t come within a mile of a graveyard at night.’

Alex stared at her.

‘She’s like her mother,’ she answered his unspoken question and glanced around at the stones in the last of the dusk.

Alex noticed the disappearing light and gave her a slight smile. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, Dr Chambers, but I would like to explore some more.’

‘I am getting a little bit spooked now, if I’m honest.’

Alex smiled. ‘Yes, like mother, like daughter. But maybe a little longer? You know, “strange occurrences”?’.

‘Surely, it’s just some old grave....’

She was cut off by two sets of headlights approaching up the road. A Land Rover came to a halt on the gravel, followed immediately by a silver Alfa Romeo. The beams blinded their dark-adjusted eyes.

Alex whispered ‘Quick! Hide!’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. A hunch.’

‘It’s probably the people in the cottages ...’ Jean protested but saw figures walking unsteadily towards the church gate.

‘Follow me.’ Alex headed towards the far end past the wall. He motioned for them to duck down behind two of the largest headstones then peered back toward the church. The light of the half-moon was enough to make out two elderly gentlemen. One waddled along in a pair of muddy wellington boots while the other sported a large red beard.

Alex risked a look over one of the stones. The two men came to a halt at a fresh mound of dirt twenty feet away. Sad, rotting flowers were piled on top. Alex’s nose twitched at a sharp smell.

‘Jeez. It stinks of wee,’ whispered Jean. ‘Is this where you would have brought Jane? Such a romantic.’

Alex shushed her, 'Something's about to happen.'
'Something strange, perhaps?'



'Thanks for coming,' said the man with the boots.

'You said it had something to do with ...' The man with the beard looked down at the mound, '... 'er.'

Boots also looked down and spoke to the pile of dirt. 'ere I am again, my dear. And this time I brought someone you know.' He spoke to Beard. 'Go on, say "ello.'

'You're drunker than I thought.'

'That I am. That I am.' he swayed slightly then caught himself. 'But no, no, stay with me. There's something I thought you might enjoy.'

Beard was silent.

'It's okay on your own but It's better with two. So I thought of you as you were the first poor sod to marry 'er.'

'Jeez.'

Boots fixed his gaze on the soil then spoke with mock-solemnity. 'She was one of a kind. Once you met 'er she made sure you never forgot 'er.'

Beard rolled his eyes and scoffed.

'Now, don't be silly. I brought you 'ere to give her a proper send-off.'

With his back to Jean, Boots stood facing over the mound and smirked at Beard. 'Come on, man. Get yer cock out.'

'You what?'

'Come on! Let's see it.'

Boots began attending to his flies. Beard watched him for a few seconds and slowly reached down to his own trousers. Jean strained for a clear view. She glanced at Alex who had screwed up his face. From her position he watched Boots take Beard's arm and pull him closer.

‘Not done this before ‘av you? Trust me, it’ll be fun. Ready?’ asked Boots. ‘Let’s go.’

Jean wasn’t sure where to look. Then as she was beginning to wonder what was happening she wrinkled her nose at the unmistakable whiff of urine. Steam rose in the air between them.

Jean nudged Alex, gesturing toward the men. Reluctantly he turned his head, although kept his ears covered.

‘Feel better?’ said Boots.

Beard thought for a second then chuckled.

‘Feel relieved?’ Boots asked again.

‘Yes,’ replied Beard. A few seconds later he laughed out loud, ‘Ha! Good one! *Relieved!*’

Then between sniggers added ‘So, ‘ow long you bin doing this?’

‘Couple times last week and again two nights ago.’

Beard thought for a moment then laughed again. ‘Should’ve called me sooner.’

‘First came up the day after they put her in the ‘ole. I thought it was grief, but somehow ended up shouting at her. Don’t know why, just couldn’t help me’self. Then I took a leak ... and ... well, ‘ere we are.’ He chuckled. ‘ere, watch this!’ Boots looked down at the pile of earth before him. ‘Oi, you stupid tart! You interfering old cow!’ he bellowed with laughter then turned to Beard. ‘You ‘ave a go.’

Beard looked uncertain then added feebly, ‘Bitch!’

‘Go on. Give it some.’

‘You bitch!’ he said more loudly but nervously scanned the graveyard. Jean pulled her head in, worried she had been spotted.

For the next ten minutes the two old men swore, cursed and blasphemed, adding their invective to the heap of dirt, as if pushing what lay beneath even further into the ground. The tirade ended with Boots bent over coughing harshly.

‘You sound bad.’ Beard took a step closer and put an arm on his shoulder to steady him. ‘You can’t drive home in that state. I’ll drop you off in the village.’

‘Best make it The Duke, then.’

‘In your state?’

‘Yeah, ‘cos then you can drive me to drink.’

Beard laughed.

Boots hoiked up some phlegm and spat it on the grave. ‘Well, that’s what she did. Drove me to drink.’

‘Well, if we’re talking about driving then she drove me to despair,’ countered Beard.

They laughed again before Beard added, ‘and then to wrack and ruin.’

Boots got his cough under control then blurted out, ‘Well, she drove me to murder!’ He snickered to himself. Then went silent. ‘Shit! Why did I say that?’

‘The coroner said it was natural.’ Beard studied him for a long moment. ‘Din’t ‘e?’

Boots thought for a moment. ‘Well, between you, me and the gatepost. I ‘ad a chat with him. I was actually thinking of bunging him a few quid to look the other way.’

‘Yeah?’

‘But, I didn’t have to. Turns out he knew her from the Rotary Club.’

When they had both stopped laughing, Boots affected a well-mannered accent ‘it wasn’t the best use of my time to do a full battery of tests.’ Then dropped to a half-whisper, ‘Awful shame how her heart medication got mixed up.’ A drunken finger reached up and tapped his nose.

Beard grinned. ‘Oh, awful. I’m sure.’

They both stood there giggling for a long while.

Beard spoke next. ‘You probably saved us an ordeal. If she was dying, you know, of something normal I’d always thought the cow would’ve made a big drama out of it. You know? “*Look at me everybody. I’m dying. Woe is me. It’s all about me*”.’

They both shared a laugh before both spitting on the grave again.

‘Lordy me,’ said Beard. ‘Feels good to get that out.’

Boots slapped him on the back.

‘Told you it’d be worth it, din’t I?’

Both men spent the next few minutes staring down at the mound sharing the moment, before Boots slumped to his knees coughing again. Beard walked over to him and dragged him back up.

‘You’re ready for bed, I think.’

‘Only after a drink first.’

‘Come on. Might even have one meself, now’.

Beard steadied Boots and they made their way down the path and through the gate. The dark church tower watched on as they climbed into the Land Rover and sped off.



Jean and Alex peeked out from the headstone and watched the rear lights disappear up the narrow road. A long moment passed before either thought to move and when they did Alex realised she had been gripping his forearm for quite some time. He jumped up and Jean, realising, let go. They both stood there in the moonlight, the gentle breeze barely making a noise in the trees.

‘This is becoming a bit of a habit, isn’t it?’ Jean whispered. ‘Eaves-dropping on other people’s secrets.’

Alex sniffed the air. ‘I would have preferred it if they’d kept that to themselves.’

‘That kind of stuff freaks me out.’

‘What, you mean ...’ he paused, half a smirk on his lips, ‘strange occurrences?’ He chuckled, but not unkindly.

‘Look, I wasn’t feeling too good about those two. Anything could have happened.’

‘Ohh, they’re probably more harm to themselves ...’

He was interrupted by a squeal from not too far away.

‘What was that?’ Jean reached out and found Alex’s arm again. He didn’t reciprocate but didn’t shirk either.

Alex peered into the dark. ‘Who knows? Fox maybe? Or a bat?’ He smiled then realised the twilight hid his expression.

‘Stop it! I think I’ve had enough of graveyards for the rest of my life.’

‘I’m only joking. If you want to go then let’s go.’

‘Yes, please.’

Jean made a beeline straight for the gate and waited for Alex. He turned and studied the churchyard in the dim half moon, the clock face had vanished into shadow.

‘Strange enough for you?’ she asked.

‘I’ll say.’

‘Must be the moon.’

‘Yes.’ he replied, ‘... or ...,’ He pulled out his notebook and flipped it open, before searching his pockets. ‘Did you see what I did with the paper?’

Jean shook her head.

‘Damn!’ he muttered and marched back to the church.

‘You surely can’t go looking for it now.’

‘I’m sorry, Dr Chambers. I have to. I’ll just retrace my steps. Won’t be long...’

He dashed off into the dark leaving Jean alone with the shadowy tower and the moon. He returned a minute later holding the fragile piece of paper by his fingertips. It was crumpled. It was also soggy. Jean noticed the smell straight away.

‘Our eulogy friends ...?’

‘Fraid so.’ He tried to tease the fibres apart but it broke into smaller pieces. Frustrated, he dropped the remnants at the foot of the stone wall by the gate. Jean handed him a tissue.

‘Did you make a copy?’

Alex remained silent.

‘Can you remember what it said?’

‘I think so.’ He screwed his face up as he tried to recall. ‘Something about the porch ... twelve shillings ... it’s all gone a bit vague.’ Alex looked back at the headstones and thought for a second. ‘It’s there somewhere. I know it.’

‘Perhaps it was just a misremembering or a story or ...’

He stared towards the rows of graves. 'If it did exist it's doing everything possible to stay hidden.'

'Almost like it doesn't *want* to be found,' she turned and studied his face. 'Alex.'

He continued staring at the church and let out a long sigh. 'I don't know, Dr Chambers.'

'Jean.'

'What?'

'It's Jean. For God's sake. Can you call me Jean, now?'

He thought for a second then faced her in the moonlight. 'No. I couldn't. Feels weird.' Even with little light she knew he was blushing.

'So, are you done with graveyards now?'

Alex's face broke into a large grin. 'Absolutely, definitely not.' then added. 'Dr Chambers.'



The high moon kept watch over the neat rows of headstones of St. Bartholomew's. The church continued to offer a place of worship for the faithful and a quiet refuge for the lost, while the graveyard fulfilled its sole, unending purpose of transporting the remains and reputations of the dead across the centuries.

And if some stories went amiss along the way, then so be it.

A Frightful Mess

Paul Harrison



It has been a lifetime since I first set foot in my beloved Library. If there is one place that defines me, then this is surely it. I feel as though I have spent my whole existence here, and when I am elsewhere, I find myself being irresistibly drawn to this quiet world within a world.

When Sir John, 13th Baronet of the County of Devon, took me on as a kitchen boy, little did I know what would await me. Little did I know I would become irrevocably bound to these four walls and their bookcases in ways I am still not sure I fully understand.

My service started young at the House on the Moor. I was diligent, and I considered myself fortunate to be blessed with a hunger for knowledge so that by my mid-twenties I had risen to the eminent position of Butler. My relationship with Sir John was mutually beneficial. I was good male company on his hunting trips and he repaid that by allowing me to spend my free time amongst the great works of literature. A passionate reader himself, he would lose himself to far away places all while sitting in his favourite reading chair sipping a cocktail. His eyes might have been on the bleak moor but his mind was who knew where.

Sir John did more than mentor my love of books; he was also a role-model. A man of impeccable morality, he showed me how a

gentleman conducts himself properly at all times, not only in service, but in life. Heaven forfend that I should ever act improperly.

Except, briefly, one day. That fateful day.

There have been many owners of the House since Sir John's time but I somehow seem to be considered a fixture. Particularly of the library, which I, informally at least, consider myself the custodian, perhaps even its protector. I would allow nothing or no one to sully its peacefulness and tranquility. It is a sanctuary of quiet contemplation and to that end I go to great lengths to ensure it is kept spotless.

Unfortunately, this appreciation is not reciprocated by others. Take the most recent owner for example. As if being an American wasn't bad enough, this one possessed great wealth, even compared to his countrymen, and was as loud and uncouth as you'd expect. In fact I believe he bought the Old House without even knowing its location. I'm sure he was very disappointed to discover it was perched on the edge of a barren moor far to the west of England. It's fair to say I took a modicum of enjoyment from this fact.

His prideful ignorance might very well explain his son. A precocious upstart who would appear to have inherited all of the most egregious characteristics of the father. Brash, arrogant and that worst sin of wealth, entitlement. I had thought he was of more harm to himself than others. Until, that is, I encountered him in the Library.



I was patrolling the south wing one afternoon, and as I proceeded along the hallway outside I overheard the sound of girls giggling. I seized the long brass handles and pushed the double doors open, something I had done a thousand times before. Normally, I would look forward to walking into an oasis of calm. A place I had come to associate with the finer things. And even finer company.

Before me was a sight that assaulted all of my sensibilities. Bottles of wine lay abandoned on the carpets, their contents either con-

sumed or soaking into the oriental rugs and the polished parquet. Smoke of a particular sweet earthy aroma floated in the air.

But my precious books, heaven forbid, lay strewn across the room. As I stood there another one flew through the air and landed with a heavy thump, its pages forced open and creased. The book landed next to a youngish man kneeling at an occasional table. He held a torn page rolled up into a tube. One end he attempted to hold close to a nostril as he swayed back and forth - presumably under the influence of the wine - the other hovered over a line of white powder. With a sharp snort the powder disappeared. He blinked and rubbed his nose. A grin began to blossom across his face. He looked at a thuggish, heavy set chap sitting on the couch. This was the owner's son. Two young women sat either side, both attempting to kiss his neck and ears while their hands roamed across his chest and inside his shirt. I could tell straight away these were definitely not ladies of good stock, and not because they were clad only in their undergarments. They giggled like teenagers; perhaps they still were. Meanwhile, the object of their attention talked at high speed into a mobile telephone.

'No, buddy! Don't miss the boat on this one! ... Yeah? ...that's right!' he paused. 'Good! ...thank you my friend. I can guarantee this is some serious triple A shit on offer ... you will *not* regret it.' A fat finger stabbed the phone to end the call. He looked over at his colleague who was wiping his nose.

'Ooh, I love the smell of sludge in the morning,' he snickered. 'A few more like that and we might get out of this yet.'

I stood there, still unnoticed. Another book hit the pile on the rug. It came from another gentleman standing at a glass fronted door of a floor-to-ceiling mahogany bookcase. Attired in a smart shirt and tie, he held a large smouldering reefer in one hand that gave off the thick heavy smoke, whilst with the other he proceeded to pick another item off the shelf - a beautiful 1920s print of *Dickens* no less - then, making a derisive remark to the amusement of his colleagues, sent it on a looping trajectory towards the heap on the

carpet. I consider myself a temperate fellow rarely prone to a loss of composure, however, I had seen enough.

‘Well, I never! This is outrageous!’ I cried. ‘What are you doing with my books? What are you doing to my beloved library?’

One of the girls looked up at me. She shrieked.

The man on his knees sniggered. ‘Oh, Geraldine. Such a racket.’

No one else reacted but the girl snatched up her dress to cover herself and shrieked again. This time the others followed her gaze.

‘Holy f...,’ said the man at the bookcase. The man down on the rug looked up at me, eyes glazed and unable to focus, while the owner’s son gasped and shoved his admirers away.

The girl who had first noticed me raised her hands to her face, screamed again and began to utter a wailing noise. She then turned and raced for the doorway at the far end. Her friend scrambled for what clothes she could salvage and dashed after her. The men weren’t too far behind and, glancing over their shoulders, bolted from the room calling out to their companions. I demanded after them. ‘Well! What in blue blazes is going on?’

It was to no avail and my voice echoed off the walls and bookcases. It would appear my reputation had gone before me. As guardian - albeit self-appointed - of this, my beloved, library, I have to admit to taking some small pleasure in that.

I was alone once more feeling quite shaken. I had not been so furious in many a long year. Overturned tables, spilled wine and torn pages littered the floor. Treasured books scattered like rubbish. It was a frightful mess.



I look back at those distant years with Sir John with warmth. Sadly, he was taken from us too early. His son, Sir Richard, while possessing potential, soon lost his way and began to harbour designs above his station and, quite frankly, his ability. Most of his time was spent in London attempting to pursue a political career.

The House was no longer like it was with Sir John. Sir Richard may have inherited the estate but had completely failed to inherit the breeding attached to his title, even if he did half-heartedly try to keep up the appearance.

‘Enough of this drivel. I can own as many books as I need,’ he would snap when I would try, on those rare occasions, to point out the value of his library. ‘But I don’t have to read a single damned one of them!’

I would concur of course. It was not my place to disagree. It was a tragedy because his utter disinterest in the world of literature was, in a way, a contributing factor to his demise.

Why anyone would leave behind such a beautiful residence is beyond me. He had no more interest in the property than a moth does in its discarded cocoon. However, there was also something else he left behind: his wife. A lady of frail build but impeccable character and an absolute charm.

The days of Lady Howe were many years ago, of course. In those days, if the gentry had no genuine interest in literature they knew to make an effort for appearances sake. Even before the Americans, attempting to flatter the rich and famous was *de rigeur*. Sometimes these attempts were woefully ill-advised. For example, there was another incident some years prior to the market traders...



I was alerted one evening by a tremendous crash from the library. Our guests were apparently something in the music business, staying over en-route to a performance nearby. I was unfamiliar with their particular style of music being somewhat a fan of Count Basie myself and perhaps even some Benny Goodman.

I flew up from the scullery, grasped those familiar polished handles and flung the doors wide open. To my horror the windows were wide open. One chap with short hair, grimey t-shirt and jeans, was hurling books out into the night. I watched in sheer disbelief as he

counted, ‘nineteen ... twenty ... twenty-one ...’ and at each increment he tossed another hard-back through the opening with a smirk.

His friends egged him on, some had started counting with him, ‘twenty-nine ... thirty ..., thirty-one ...’

Yet another chap, with long curly hair, struggled drunkenly up from his chair. He threw his bottle of whisky into the seat behind him, its contents spilling out into the brushed leather of the wing-back.

‘Watch this Keith!’ he slurred, walked over to a small table, picked it up and carried it over to the open window. He then threw it clumsily out into the void breaking two panes of glass in the process. God forbid! I felt physically sick.

‘Good Heavens!’ I wailed, giving vent to my pain. All five of the men turned to look at me. They were young men in their twenties, most had long hair and moustaches. Flowery shirts and flared trousers seemed to be the style of the era. All of them were unkempt and could have done with a visit to a decent tailor. I had been led to believe they were a very popular and successful music ensemble and, consequently, expected them to be well mannered as would befit their status. But this! This was unforgivable! They were just drunken ruffians.

I charged towards the window to stop any more damage being done. ‘Enough of this!’ I cried out. The young man stared at me slack-jawed, dropping a green-bound *History of Thrace* to the floor. He eventually gathered his senses and bolted for the door. ‘I’m sorry, man! I’m sorry!’ he shouted over his shoulder as he fled the room, arms raised protecting his head as if avoiding a clip round the ear.

His friends weren’t far behind him, dashing after him like errant schoolchildren.

The smell of sweet alcohol and acrid cigarettes hung in the air. I composed myself before surveying the damage. Tables upended and thrown about, sodden leather, and books everywhere. And the rugs I had spent so much time cleaning, ruined with cigarette burns and shards of glass.

Such a frightful mess!



With the arrival of Lady Howe it became one of my primary duties to maintain and tend to the library. It was quite apparent that she and her husband were mismatched. She was, for him, yet another attempt to improve his standing in the world. He had managed to woo her with his not inconsiderable charm, while her family's fortunes were on the decline. Lady Howe knew what was required of her and did her duty with the grace of a true English Lady.

As I had alluded to earlier, Sir Richard did not appreciate the world of literature. His wife, on the other hand, was of the entirely opposite conviction. She could think of nothing better than to spend an entire afternoon perusing the vast catalogue of titles and filling her mind with, as her husband would say, 'nonsense, fairy tales and hog-wash'. A more pleasant creature I could not meet. A woman of singular wit and intelligence.

Looking back on those distant days I recall happily spending hours cleaning, rearranging and providing fresh flowers all to cultivate a sanctuary of quiet reflection. It may have been for myself at first but now it was also for Lady Howe, and over time we settled into a routine of two or three afternoons a week discussing our latest reading.

I like to think I provided an escape, a harbour if you will, for her imagination to take flight. Or at least the library did. Far be it for me to presume it was my company she sought, but I'm sure she anticipated our afternoons and came to love the library as I did. Behaviour such as the aforementioned music performers' would have caused grievous anxiety to Lady Howe if she had still been around.

Some people, like the musicians, fail to comprehend what duty truly means, or the heavy burden it places on one's soul. Although, years before that ugly incident we were lucky to have guests for whom duty was a way of life.

The House's position on the wild moor had an attraction which, in hindsight, was obvious. It provided an opportunity for the truly great and good to steal a moment of respite away from their obligations. Yes, nobility itself even deigned to visit, much to the glee of the then owner, an Indian shipping magnate. But as much as the House benefitted from their rarified company, I must confess that even I raised an eyebrow when they too were less than discreet. I can only surmise that since the days of Lady Howe the world had taken a turn for the worse.



It was a late afternoon and the sun hung low casting shadows into the vales and clefts between the tors. I found myself near the library and thought I would drop in on our guests and enquire if they would like a drink, perhaps a gin and tonic, before dinner. I strolled up to those familiar doors, wholly expecting a scene of quiet discourse or perhaps some playful amusement over an interesting publication.

The doors swung open and what did I see? Alas, my composure almost failed me. The library was in an utter state of distress. Tables and more of my precious books scattered across the carpet.

But the worst of it was hidden from view by a blizzard of feathers hanging in the air. They filled the room and covered everything in a white layer. The tables, the upturned chairs, the rugs. Everything. Including, I now saw, a tall man - buck naked - who was literally the centre of the storm, for he held the remains of a cushion, its seam torn asunder, and was waving it back and forth spreading the contents high above his head. The dispersal wasn't totally random, however. The majority fell over a chaise-longue in front of him.

From underneath the pile of down came a giggle. Through the fog of feathers I discerned the pale form of a young woman, similarly naked.

In one hand she held a cocktail glass - holding more feathers than liquid - and between her lips she was attempting to hang on to a cigarette. The contents of the cushion had almost completely covered her from head to toe. She giggled so hard that the plumage shook free from her.

‘Shhh! No! Stop laughing!’ the man slurred, ‘How can I hide my princess if you don’t stop laughing?’ He snickered like a loon, clearly drunk.

I discerned no bottles under the mess but I did spot a blue RAF uniform discarded some distance away. The young woman screeched with pleasure, shedding more feathers and exposing flashes of pale skin.

I was beyond words. I fear I must have presented quite a sight, mouth moving but making no sound. Eventually, the lady noticed me.

‘Oh, Peter!’ she gasped.

‘What, my love? My little turtle dove. My ...’ he noticed his partner’s face and turned in my direction.

‘But ...but ... but ...’, the handsome man stammered.

The drink and cigarette fell onto the rug as the lady finally gave vent to a scream. This time not from their childish game nor from excitement.

I stared at them forcefully. As she jumped up from the chair her feathered attire dropped to the floor, revealing her nakedness, I averted my gaze but my act of discretion did not prevent her from shrieking again. She rummaged underneath the feathers nearby, for what I can only presume would have been some cast off clothing, but she found nothing. Her companion, however, quickly found his shirt and, in a show of gallantry, wrapped it about her. They both fled the room leaving a whirlwind of white behind them.

This would take some time to clean up. They had left behind an utterly frightful mess.



Yes, even the nobility were capable of impropriety. Such irreverence, such disrespect from people one would expect should know better.

As mentioned, owners came and went and guests of all varieties visited and passed through. But I remained steadfast through all these changes anchored by my devotion to my beloved library and a fierce desire to keep it in tip-top condition at all times. Even if this meant clearing up the occasional mess from disrespectful guests. Some messes, however, were worse than others.

I must assure the dear reader that I am a man of moral integrity. I strive to uphold the highest standards of behaviour and feel I lived up to Sir John's example for many a year. Except, of course, on that previously mentioned fateful day.

In the days of Lady Howe - before the bankers, before the musicians and even before the feathers - there occurred an earlier event that casts the longest shadow. A moment I can never forget. Indeed it consumes my thoughts to this very day.

I was bringing a gin and tonic to the library. It was Lady Howe's custom to call for an afternoon refreshment, at which point she might invite me to stay. I had, as usual, assigned the staff to other duties so we would not be disturbed.

On this occasion, she seemed rather dejected and in an unexpected confidence said she had received some rather unfortunate news. Sir Richard had found it hard to maintain his profitability - or, as I interpreted it, his lifestyle - due to the economic problems that had rippled out of America some years prior. The bulk of his assets squandered, he had fallen on hard times. Consequently, Sir Richard had decided to sell the House and they would be relocating to London.

Whilst I was most perturbed at the news, particularly concerning the uncertainty of my own tenure, I attempted to console Lady

Howe by pointing out that the capital would give her abundant opportunity to mingle with like minds.

She drew close and whispered 'But it just won't be the same.'

I had never stood so close, indeed, I cannot recall us ever sharing a physical touch, but now I was close enough to see her eyes moisten. For the first time I caught a glimpse of the softness and vulnerability kept in check behind that dutiful resolve I had come to admire. As she spoke she unwittingly placed a palm on my chest.

Without thinking I reached for her fingers. Everything stopped. I caught the delicate aroma of her perfume. I was close enough to feel the flush on her cheeks. She gently returned my squeeze. Our eyes locked.

A whisper escaped gently under my breath, 'My beloved'.

The moment could have endured for seconds or minutes, I cannot be certain. We were dragged back to the world around us by the sound of the double doors slamming open.

'Divorce may be acceptable for that fool of a King,' Sir Richard bellowed, 'but it will never happen to me! Catherine! Get away from that man now!'

'Oh, Richard. No!' was all Lady Howe could gasp. Her cry was pained in a way that tore at my soul.

The back of Sir Richard's hand struck Lady Howe hard across the cheek. She shrieked and collapsed into a nearby chair.

'As for you, you scoundrel,' he glared at me. 'I let you into my home and this is how you repay me?'

He advanced towards me. I stood my ground, years of silent contempt finally finding expression. Then I noticed the Webley service revolver gripped in his fist. I took a step back. He continued to close the distance.

'Forgive me, Sir Richard. This is not how it appears. The Lady is quite upset at the news of ...'

'Quiet, you!'

The gun roared. The sound of the shot deafened me. I ducked in some futile attempt to avoid the bullet, but failed, and I crashed to the floor. Struggling to comprehend my predicament, I looked

down at a growing red stain under my right armpit. I tried to move. Agony. I feared my end was imminent: to walk over and finish me off would take mere seconds. I threw myself at the mercy of God.

My preoccupation with my end was interrupted by a piercing scream. I forced myself to open my eyes and watched helplessly as Sir Richard struck his wife repeatedly with the grip of his revolver. Finally, when she was reduced to a terrified, sobbing ball at his feet, he cocked the hammer. With a yell he pulled the trigger.

She went silent.

Something welled up in me from a place I didn't know existed. I struggled to my feet, intense fire burning in my ribs. I looked past it. My wound, while bloody, appeared worse than it actually was - the bullet must have made a clean exit through my side.

I stumbled towards the man now hunched over the unmoving form of his wife. He had dropped the weapon and was now breathing heavily, racked with sobs.

I grabbed the discarded revolver and pointed it at him, arm shaking. He finally noticed me, staggered to his feet and started backing away. He stared at me, tears in his eyes, pleading. A broken and pathetic man.

Weak and dizzy, I levelled the gun at his chest. My rage pulled the trigger.

The force threw him backwards and he slid down the wall, leaving behind him a crimson smear that mapped out his last living moments.

I let the weapon slide from my grip then kneeled painfully beside Lady Howe. Catherine. She was still warm but had ceased breathing. Blood seeped from the wound in her chest. I made a useless, desperate attempt to staunch the flow, but receiving no response from her eyes, I lifted her head and cradled it in my feeble arms.

'My beloved. No, my beloved!' I howled with grief and raged aloud at the world.

'Sir Richard! Sir Richard!'

It was the maid. She stood frozen in the doorway for a few seconds, eyes wide, before comprehending the sight before her. Her piercing shrieks shook me to the bone.

As I'm sure I have made plain by now, I simply cannot abide untidiness. I reached down for the gun and, since my right arm lacked all strength, I cocked the hammer with my left. I pressed the barrel beneath my throat and pulled the trigger.

Needless to say there was a frightful mess.



William, by Poison.

Christine Jones



A SPECULATIVE DEVONSHIRE WHODUNNIT

Was it the jar of Wm. Radam's Microbe Killer...or not?



This jar was found in a shed at my parents' home after they had both died...ever the pity, as the chance to ask about the story behind it was gone. From various passed down tales, some of which were outside of her parents' memory, I have speculated on this jar.

My paternal great-grandfather (William) died in 1904 at the age of 59 at Cove, near Bampton, Devon, following an agricultural accident which left him unable to return to work for the last two years of his life...this told to her by her mother. My father was not born until 1920 and this was the only story of William which filtered

through and his injuries were never known. This man fascinated me (quite typically, keep information away from a woman and she will always want to know!) and the first thing learned was that on William's death my grandfather, then 10 years old, started work at the local quarry as a matter of financial necessity.

Back to the jar...I Googled Wm. Radam's Microbe Killer and it was discovered that although first developed for garden use (it seemed) it was soon hailed as a cure-all and production expanded from Texas to London. Radam was eventually regarded as a Quack and the ingredients of the liquid were found to comprise 0.59% sulphuric acid and 0.016% sulphurous acid, amongst other things. Well, you are now up to speed and have probably come to the same conclusion as me. I now believe that he had hoped Wm Radam's Microbe Killer was, as advertised, the answer to any pain known to man. I suppose the accidental bit due to illiteracy was that he didn't know how much, or little, he was supposed to take. What a dreadful way to die.

Naturally, there are other possibilities which my rampant imagination likes to indulge in. Perhaps it wasn't William so wracked with pain that he found a way out. Maybe the accident had affected his head. The accident had been told to me, by my mother (not even her grandfather...it was dad's), as William being struck on the head of falling lodes (sides) from the haycart. Maybe it changed his personality for the worse and we all know what to think here...erratic, complaining, forgetful to the Nth degree, angry or even violent. Perhaps it was his wife who could take it no more and gave him the drink.

On the other hand, through counselling it has been interesting, revealing and comforting to find out that a lot of what my mother said was not right, and it was after my younger, tech-savvy cousin showed me how to access archived local newspapers that a different story came out. Apparently, in 1902 William had swallowed linament (main component ammonia) which was recorded as accidental as neither he nor his wife could read or write. So that was the agricultural accident. He was a farm labourer so there is a tenuous

link. But then I thought about the brown, blue or ridged bottles and couldn't understand how it could possibly have been an accident. The doctor claimed the patient was improving. He lived two more years.

Two other possibilities are that someone gave it to him either deliberately or as a prank, unaware of the consequences, or the simplest of all....he was drunk, maybe to alcoholic proportions, and that was the "accidental" taking of the poison.

William and his wife, Mary, who was 9 years his junior, had 10 children, my grandfather being the second youngest. When William died the family who weren't already married and away from the home moved into Bampton and my grandfather, at 10 years old, began work at Scott's Quarry, leading the ponies pulling carts laden with stone. Where they lived no longer exists; Scott's Quarry no longer exists and is now the site of many newish houses. Time moves on, people move on, but somehow William and Mary, who lived into her 80's, will always intrigue me and when visiting my parents' grave at Bampton a few flowers will also be placed on their grave.

The Old Chapel

Christine Jones



There was no point in arguing with her parents or even trying to tell them how she felt about their ceaseless crusade, brought up at every possible opportunity. But on Christmas Day? Really?? Just one visit without them trying to shape her life the way they wanted it to be is all she looked forward to. She had to endure the afternoon and evening yet and, worst of all, breakfast time before she could make her way to Okehampton to spend Boxing Day with her cousin and her family. She couldn't wait to get there and join Sophie's hunt for her family's history. By all accounts it was riddled with tales and hearsay and Sophie wanted them proved or dispelled.

"Mum, Dad - I'm going out for a walk to get some of your country air and walk off some of that lovely lunch...I've eaten far too much...and it will give you two time for a nap. Don't worry, I'll be back before it gets dark and I've got my phone to ring you if necessary", Annabelle announced. She donned her coat, scarf, hat and gloves and cheerily stepped out of the house. That done, her face could relax and she could look and feel as aggravated as she liked. Familiar with the roads, there was no chance of her getting lost and she strode out with confidence, leaving the growing village of Willand behind.

She walked past the weir, stopping momentarily to watch the water crashing over the big stones, then on towards the next village of Kentisbeare. As it happened, she didn't get that far because she caught sight of a small country church or chapel which, although she knew of its existence, had never taken the time to take notice of it. That is the joy of walking rather than driving - there is time to look around.

Annabelle stepped into the little chapel and immediately felt relief from the outside air and the complete stillness it offered. All thoughts seemed to disappear bar wondering if this is what it felt like to be in a vacuum. Cows mooing outside brought her back to herself and she gazed around at the plain but adequate pews, the small organ in the corner and realised this was somewhere which had evaded modernisation. The walls were white, a cold white, and bare which almost gave a hostile feel to the room.

Drawing her coat closer to her neck, she stood in front of the small altar, thinking of nothing in particular when, with a slight jolt, she first felt and then saw a tall and handsome young man standing nearby. He moved closer to stand beside her, apologising for making her jump. Annabelle said she must have been in deep thought as she hadn't heard him come in and he told her she had left the door unlatched.

"Hi," she said, "I'm Annabelle. I came out for a long walk as my parents and I have differences of opinion shall we say. They like to run my life for me...sorry - too much information".

"That is quite alright, Miss. I'm Arthur and, for what it's worth, your plight is understood". Arthur gave a quiet wry laugh and looked at her steadily with a hint of tears welling in his slate-blue eyes.

"You have a similar mother or father?" Annabelle asked, and continued, "Mine have brought out the same old cookie that another year has passed and there is still no sign of me getting married and giving them a grandchild. Oh my word! I'm so sorry, Arthur - that is way too much...". Enigmatically Arthur simply said, "Ah".

It occurred to Annabelle that it seemed odd that a man of...what?...25?...should be under his parents' thumbs. Her eyes took in his appearance - baggy trousers with turn-ups, the slightly oversized jacket and what looked like a folded flat cap in his pocket, not to mention the shiny lace-up shoes. She tried to place the look and came up with the 1920s or 30s.

"Sounds like you have a story. Want to share?" she asked with a bright but empathic smile. Arthur slowly began, "I was to be married here, but my mother..." Annabelle kept silent, allowing him space to carry on. "Florrie and I were engaged before the war started..."

Annabelle controlled her face and stance but her head was spinning - War? Which war?

"...but I was not in a good shape when we came home. It was a rotten time and we had been through things no-one should have to witness. Florrie and I were to set a date...it was what had kept me going through the war. Being so long apart was unbearable. Mother put a stop to our marriage - said I wasn't fit enough to support a wife, much less any children should they come along. We were crushed, angry and argued but were all but forced to bend to her will. My father died when I was a boy and I suppose Mother had a tough time keeping her life together whilst bringing us all up alone. That's probably what made her a formidable character". Arthur fell silent again. Then, as he stared at the floor, his sadness showed as he said, "This is where I would have stood on our wedding day..."

"And I'm standing where Florrie would have stood" whispered Annabelle more to herself than to

Arthur.

He looked up at her but said nothing. Given a little more time he continued, "Florrie married my brother a few months later. I should be ashamed to tell you this - we couldn't make the break and carried on our liaison even after Mother's intervention - but we had to stop after Florrie and Ernest married". Annabelle looked at him fully in the eyes, willing him to tell her more; she could feel his need to tell her something important.

“Florrie told me she was carrying our child just days before she and Ernest wed - here, right here, where I should have stood with her. Mother was right in that the war made me suffer badly - Florrie and I both knew that but Florrie was willing to accept me as I was. However, Mother made it impossible for us”. This time Arthur fell completely silent and Annabelle dug deep for the courage to say what she felt she needed to.

“Arthur? If I ask you something will you stay and answer? I don’t want to see you go and it seems you are telling me this for a reason but I don’t know what it is”.

“I won’t disappear” he promised. “We are both here for a reason. As you correctly say, I needed to tell you my story, and you are here because you are seeking answers to your parents’ incessant niggling about not having grandchildren. What do you want to ask, Annabelle?”

“The war? Are you talking of the 1914-18 war?”

“Yes” he answered truthfully.

“Arthur - you are a young man...what happened after the marriage - if it isn’t too painful to tell?”

“It is - was - painful, for both of us. Too painful to bear. The child was born - a boy, William Arthur - but one day it became too much to see my son acclaimed as my brother’s child and us unable to publicly acknowledge him as ours; I took my motorcycle and raced at full speed around the country lanes until the road took a bend and I didn’t. The cycle and my body were found a couple of days later at the bottom of a steep embankment. Florrie was distraught. She didn’t have any more children”.

“Thank you for telling our story, Arthur” came a woman’s mellow voice from behind them. “We come here every Christmas Day and stand where once we should have. You, my dear, know where this story needs to go. Sophie, your cousin, has been searching a long time for the truth of what has become a family tale. Tell her what you learned today and to follow the letters. They are there - just hidden”.

“Florrie?” asked Annabelle.

“Indeed, dear. We have a message for you, too. Don’t allow your parents to dictate your life. It is yours to live. At the same time try to stay on good terms with them”.

“Time for you to head back home now, Annabelle” said Arthur, “and be careful of these roads. You have time before the light begins to fade, but first allow us to show you something. Gloves on, my dear”.

The three of them walked outside together, along a path until they stopped at a gravestone inscribed:

Arthur Heggadon

1896 - 1922

William Arthur Heggadon

1920 - 1944

Son of the above

“War is terrible”, murmured Annabelle. “I will bring Sophie here - thank you both...” but when she turned to face them Florrie and Arthur were already gone.

As she walked away two now familiar voices called, “No...thank you, my dear”.

Chairs outside

Christine Jones



Anton had lived by the notion that old traditions are the best but little did he know that when he booked a cottage in Lydford, on the outskirts of Dartmoor, he was to encounter one he had not heard of before.

It had been a stressful couple of years for Anton and, as is often the case, the time had come to sink or swim with it. He, wisely, chose to swim with it in the form of a three-month quiet holiday, far away from everything that had been making him increasingly unwell. Having scrolled through umpteen possibilities his interest was keened by what Lydford had to offer; it could feed his hobby-interest in old settlements and the beauty of even the pictures of the White Lady Falls he found calming and inspiring. He could barely wait to explore the Upper Plym Valley, a site of some 6 sq. miles, so the blurb said, which was the home of Bronze Age, Medieval and later sites; then there was the centrally situated square box-like tower that had been built as a prison - a foreboding and miserable looking place which would surely make him appreciate his life; to the south there was an even earlier earthworks castle of the Norman period and to the north sat Saxon town defences.

The three weeks before he could be at Lydford seemed to drag by but now he was here, seeing winter out and looking forward to

some sunshine. He had been diligent in exploring his immediate surroundings and chatting to the locals in shops and, naturally, the pub - always a good place to facilitate integration. He was a little concerned about not being accepted into the fold but after the first few days he was being greeted by name and enjoying good conversation, the surprise was being told of Lydford's ancient custom of putting a chair outside the home on 1st March. He asked why it was done and everyone looked blank, then heartily laughed when they had to admit that no-one actually knew. Even more surprising to him was that they invited him to join in the tradition because "Thee's bin yer 4 wick now, biy, tiscudnuf" - that is what he heard and translated it into "You have been here 4 weeks now, boy, that's good enough"

From the day he arrived Anton had decided to keep notes of anything interesting and although he was no Samuel Pepys he found himself as a diarist. This tradition was most definitely going in the diary even if he might never know the story behind it. What better gentle challenge than to stay awake to see what happened?

Tonight was the night so he placed a chair outside by the door, surrounded himself with coffee, biscuits and anything else he might need as he settled by the window to watch. Midnight - that was the time between the last of February and the first of March. Whatever was to happen could likely be then. The few street lights gave enough illumination to see all the chairs outside each home, and he waited.

A gentle wind to make plants sway sprung up, and then a little later the wind picked up just enough to make signs and hanging baskets swing. A silence seemed to envelop every corner; he watched as some chairs twitched in the wind. Then came the silent conversation which, oddly, didn't worry him and he sat, riveted, concentrating hard on what he couldn't hear.

"Hello, old friend", spoke the gentle wind, "Which of us will win this year?"

“Greetings, my friend”, spoke the slightly harsher wind, “Let us do battle to find out. Let us sit in each chair and our essences will decide”.

Anton heard his own voice murmur, “Decide what? How?”

“Which spring will arrive today”, was the joint reply, “We are the springs”.

He thought for a moment... “Two springs?”

And again the winds gave the reply, “Some say 1st March is the start of spring and others say

21st March. Which of us has the greater acceptance of our essence becomes the winner”.

“What’s the difference?” He asked, now realising he would be given answers.

“I am the Equinox spring”, said one.

“I am the meteorological spring” said the other.

Anton acknowledged his understanding to them and was astounded by their question to him.

“Which of us will you accept? You are an outsider yet you are inviting us by tradition. You have our permission to take part in this ancient custom”

“I don’t want to upset or disappoint either of you”, Anton whispered.

“None will be taken. We each just need the invitation”.

“Well, then,” began Anton, “I have to say that although I love the spring season and look forward to it always, I am very much an Equinox person”.

“Thank you - we now know what to do”, and with the lightest of whistles the winds went on their way, the sounds of the cottage came back, and Anton felt the most privileged person in the world to have been made privy to Lydford’s prized and ancient custom. He could never tell the locals though.

The White Lady

Christine Jones



2007

Holwell Farm, just two miles out of Bampton on the road to Shillingford, in this beautiful county of Devon, is where I lived. The farm is old, dating back to the 15th century, but I didn't live there until eighteen hundred and five when I was newly wed to Samuel. We had no children but I was content enough, although Samuel wanted a son to pass the farm on to. Maybe given time we would have had a son; I knew he was harbouring a resentment that it hadn't happened and I sensed that with every passing year he became increasingly unhappy. He sometimes looked at me darkly when he thought I couldn't see. That is when I took my prized possession and hid it deep where no-one would find it. Samuel never knew about it and that is the way it would stay but something made me feel uneasy about his manner towards me. Just small things at the beginning, glances, not speaking as we used to, a shortness in his words. I died here, too, as did Samuel some years later. I am still known around here - Bampton, Morebath, Shillingford, Petton and further. They call me the White Lady.

New custodians have bought the farm and I watch now as they move their housewares and furniture in to the rooms familiar to me. They are a family of husband, wife and three children, the youngest

of which, a girl with long, dark, wavy hair, appears to be of around 4 years of age. The animals will be here soon and I look forward to seeing what they bring.

Samuel and I were dairy farmers with chicken, goats, ducks, geese, always one dog and some cats. If we didn't have any ducks some would soon appear on the pond, quacking merrily and turning bottoms-up as they dived for food. One of the ganders was a nasty piece of work and would try to attack at every opportunity. It wasn't until the day Samuel hit the gander with his shovel knocking its head clean off that I began to see a different side to him. The look on his face was thunderous but satisfied. After that day I looked for expressions as a marker for Samuel's mood.

I have to warn this family. I have to find a way. There is something they need to know before something befalls them. There have been many families here since Samuel no longer owned the farm, all of them except one falling to the curse of this place. Some lost their children to illness, the land failed for others, or the stock stolen by thieves, savaged by wild dogs or a lack of milk production or breeding stopped income. There have been so many terrible things happen here; the wars could not have been caused by the curse but perhaps the deaths of the youngsters who grew up on the farm and sent off to fight were. I like this family - they need to stay and happily so.



1820

"I want that man's land and I shall have it. It is time to show that I mean business", barked Samuel at Eliza.

"Why, Samuel? What drives you so?", asked Eliza with concern in her voice.

"If I can't have an heir I shall have money and that means increasing the size of my farm.

His land is good and I want it", was his adamant reply.

“But how can you ruin another to gain advantage?” , Eliza almost begged.

“You don’t understand business, wife, now go and busy yourself with my dinner”, was Samuel’s harsh dismissal and he stormed out of the farmhouse to ride Boxer the faithful farm horse to Cyril Vickery’s farm at Petton.

He had been simmering all the way there but could hold his tongue no more when he found only Martha Vickery at home. Martha was a fiery woman, her small size belying her ability to match any man’s belligerence, and he rode back to Holwell Farm at a furious pace. Eliza heard the crashing hooves as Boxer delivered his master home and instantly saw he was in an evil mood. She didn’t go to speak to him. He took himself off somewhere to calm down she assumed.

It was later in the afternoon when horse hooves were heard again, this time not Boxer’s.

“Where are you, Cottrell”, the rider hollered. “What is the meaning of threatening my Martha! What is wrong with you, man? Show your face and explain yourself!”.

Eliza was instantly fearful and rushed to the door and in a state of controlled alarm asked, “Cyril! What is going on?”

“That louse of a husband of yours all but whacked Martha. Where is he?” Cyril looked kindly at Eliza, his voice back to normal.

“I’m here. I knew you’d come running to me”, Samuel smirked; “You know what I want”.

“Why the hell should I sell my land to you, Cottrell?”

“I’ll tell you why, Vickery. If you don’t, I’ll just take it anyway. What will you do, eh? What can you do? You’re piss poor - can’t afford legal help. I’ll have it whether you say so or not”. Samuel was swaggering towards Cyril with the nastiest expression on his face Eliza had ever seen. Cyril stood tall, a bigger man than Samuel.

“You shall not! Haven’t you taken enough from me, you weasel?”

Eliza stood rooted to the spot, her mind racing with imaginings of how this scene would play out; no scenario was good. She knew what Samuel had taken from him. Her.

"I took what I wanted, Vickery. Do you want her now - my barren wife?"

Eliza ran in between the two men and squared up to her husband.

"You lied to me, you hateful man. You told me Cyril had left the area for good but I know you had him imprisoned for nothing and to make his life worse then pursued me. You played on my broken heart - took complete advantage of my grief until I married you. Thank the good Lord we had no children!". Eliza's eyes burned with pure anger driven straight into Samuel.

He could not control his vitriol and struck Eliza so hard her feet left the ground before she collapsed to the ground. Cyril bent to her, cradling her shoulders, quietly asking, "You got the ring?" She nodded and gave a watery smile, knowing what he was saying without the words having to be spoken or heard. They were written already.

"What ring". When?", Samuel demanded of them both

Not ready to stand, Eliza looked at Cyril and said, "A year after I'd wed - too late for us. I'm glad you've got Martha".

Cyril rose and landed a hefty punch in Samuel's unprepared paunch followed rapidly by another to his face and a kick to his arse as he lay crumpled and bleeding, whimpering. Eliza was helped up by Cyril but rejected his plea to take her home to Martha who would tend her injuries, saying it would only make matters worse. She told him to go and she would sort Samuel out. Reluctantly he left and didn't hear any more about the land-grab Samuel had threatened but he did keep an eye out for Eliza's safety until one day he heard that she had gone from the farm. No-one knew where she was, apparently not even Samuel. Cyril had niggling doubts, as did Martha, but proof of nothing. Samuel had brooded for weeks until he finally boiled over. Eliza was fetching water from the well when he confronted her, grabbing her by the shoulders and twisting her round to face him. "What ring?"

Defiance rose in her, "You know what ring - the one Cyril sent me before he knew I was wed".

"What did you do with it?"; his temper was holding.

She stared him straight in his evil eyes, “Kept it. Burnt the letter so you’d not see”. “Where is it?”

“Why? What you going to do with it? Wear it?”

“Where is it, woman? Tell me now...” and not for the first time Samuel struck Eliza, this time knocking her backwards and she hit her head hard before landing in a heap on the ground, a nasty gash across her forehead.

“Where is it? WHERE IS IT?”, he kept yelling louder and faster.

Eliza had time to whisper, “Hidden...” before she became still and silent. Samuel didn’t even bother to check if she was still breathing and with a shout of “WHORE” he threw her slender frame into the well.



2007

Desperate to warn this lovely family I have stayed close to them watching, listening, talking. I am particularly drawn to the little girl and tried to join in games with her, all to no avail, until a couple of weeks ago when little Sophie was playing outside on her own.

“Hello,” said her young voice, “Do you want to play hide and seek?”. I looked around but saw no-one else except Sophie’s mother hanging out the washing.

“Not now, Sophie,” answered her mother.

“Not you, mummy, this nice lady”, she told her mother, pointing at me.

“What lady, Soph?”

“This lady...she’s been here since we moved in”.

“Oh, I see”, said her mother, thinking I was another invisible friend. “I can’t see her - what does she look like?”

Sophie’s description was, “She’s got brown hair and is wearing a long white apron”.

“What’s her name, Soph?”

“What’s your name, nice lady?” relayed Sophie.

“Me? I’m Eliza. Eliza Cottrell. I used to live here,” and Sophie repeated the information to her mother, whose response was a natural “Oh? When?”

“When, Eliza?”

“I came here in eighteen hundred and five, Sophie, with my husband Samuel”.

“Eighteen hundred and five, mummy, and she wants to know your name”.

At that, her mother stopped hanging the washing and asked her little daughter to keep talking to “her new friend” while she went to get a pen and some paper. She wrote down Samuel and Eliza Cottrell 1805. Many questions were asked and answered through Sophie but there were things I knew a four year old shouldn’t hear so I told Sophie to ask her mother to concentrate; “I’ll see if I can help her to hear me, better still, see me - like you can”. It was a slow and rocky start but it wasn’t long before Debbie could feel me touching her shoulder or hand. Good. The rest would come. With Sophie conveying my words, I asked Debbie to go and sit somewhere she felt safe, comfortable and wouldn’t be disturbed which would be after the children had gone to bed. I would find her.

The first night Debbie saw a shimmer - a heat haze - asked if I was there and was rewarded by feeling my hand holding hers. A channel of communication had been opened and by the end of the week Debbie could see me, just as Sophie had described. I told Debbie the story of how I died and that if she heard tales of a white woman rising from a well it was me they were talking of. Samuel had filled in that well and built another but I still rose from the original well.

“Debbie, I need to warn you all of the other thing that haunts this place. A house will absorb what it’s inhabitants give out. You have to know that Samuel’s jealousy and malevolence remains here. It is like an invisible mould that creeps over the walls invading every pore of those who live here and it causes strife in different ways. Many children have died in this accursed place leaving the parents grief stricken to the point of their own deaths sometimes by their own hand. Haymaking has failed more than once and not because of the

weather, stock has failed by way of death or barrenness, there has been a murder here. Horrible, terrible strife. Samuel is still here, in the walls, on the land, spewing his evil. Do not let it ruin your lives. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

It wasn't long before Debbie and Tom researched the property and everyone who had lived here and, learning of the disasters that had befallen them arranged for an exorcism and cleansing of the whole farm. They learned of me and Samuel, just as I had said, but nowhere was it recorded that Samuel had killed me. They learned of Cyril and Martha by following my direction. And the ring. They learned of that, too, and of its hiding place. I had buried it in the field at the place where the oak tree nearest the house stood. For as long as Samuel lived, I watched him search for the ring, upturning furniture, even knocking down a wall, convinced it was in the house. So angry would he get that more than one dog had been kicked until it could live no more. He died a lonely, angry old man and never did find the ring, nor get Cyril's land.

There was something about Cyril and Martha that led to Debbie's research taking a different direction. Nothing could be proved because some records don't go back further than eighteen hundred and thirty five but her discoveries strongly hinted that Tom could be their fifth generation grandson. A William Cyril Vickery of Petton had been found in eighteen hundred and forty. Debbie doesn't believe in coincidences but believed me when I could confirm that Tom is a direct descendant of Cyril.

I led them to the tree which had been not much more than a sapling when I buried the ring in a small tin. Now, 200 years later, it has grown into a majestic tree providing shade or shelter for any animals in the field. Tom dug where I pointed and after allowing for land movement he finally found the tin which looked very old now. I cried with delight and many other emotions when it was opened, revealing a simple gold band engraved with "I love you".

"Are you sure?", asked Tom, unaware that he had heard me telling him to give it to Debbie, then to be passed on to Sophie eventually.

Sophie looked up at me and asked, “Can we go and play, please, Eliza?”, to which the only reply could be “of course, my dear”. I knew that now the ring had been found Samuel’s essence would have no reason to be in the house. It was no longer my ring. It was back with the Vickery family. Cyril’s family. Even so, I do not trust that it will be an easy battle won so will stay until I see the fibre of the house free of Samuel Cottrell. Nobody needs that kind of evil around them and may the good Lord forgive me for saying

“Go to Hell Samuel Cottrell. May your soul never return”.

The Past Came Looking

Christine Jones



She felt both lucky and happy living as she did halfway between Devon's north and south coastlines, with both Dartmoor and Exmoor in easy reach. Not only that, her home was equidistant from Bristol and Plymouth. It suited her perfectly. Amelia's life had always been rural and in childhood found a certain solace in climbing trees to sit as high as possible in order to survey the landscape. It amused her to think she could see three parishes. Often her thoughts and imagination drifted to who had walked, lived on and worked the land during the Bronze Age, Iron Age or any Age she felt like. Did dinosaurs ever roam these hills she could see? Probably not; the south west peninsula was largely submerged in those times.

About 7 years ago she had found a fossil in the little river flowing through the village which she took to the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter who confirmed it was of a sea urchin, dating it from as young as 100 million years old up to as old as 300 million years old. The flint/clay compound in which it was set - Chert she thought it was called - had been washed down from further up the county, or maybe Somerset. It definitely showed that that part of the

south west had been covered by sea at least during that timeframe. She treasured that fossil, common as it may be.

Now, in adulthood, whenever life took the liberty of upsetting her equilibrium she would often take a trip to the moors, letting the purer air whistle through her thoughts in the hope order would resume. Mostly it did, maybe not immediately but it started the process. On this particular day as she took the familiar road to Exmoor nothing was feeling any easier, with not even the promise of relief coming along. Later she found she was not walking the moor as usual, she was pounding it and realised nothing about the surroundings was registering. If anything, she was becoming more agitated.

Whatever was it that had upset her rhythm so badly? There had been the nights of disturbed sleep brought on by the bad dreams which annoyingly could not be remembered five minutes after waking. If this was the case, could they hold any meaning at all? Usually only remembered dreams carry any meaning, symbolic or literal. She'd had lots of those but none had worried her. The childhood dreams had worried her - the giant spider on her back, running but getting nowhere, impossibly disproportionate settings, the bogey-man under the bed - but she had been too young to understand then. What had been the most recent dream? Ah, yes - waking in fear, afraid to extend her arm to switch on the bedside lamp because someone would chop it off if she did. Amelia wasn't just afraid, she was terrified so she became still as the dead, listening, swivelling her eyes into the bedroom darkness. No sound, no shadowy movements until the door slowly opened and her cat jumped on the bed asking for cuddles. She relaxed, realising there was no danger lurking in the bedroom. The cat would not have been so happy if there was. She put the light on, had a pleasant chat with Eddie, only switching the light off when he settled down, stretched out in bliss beside her.

None of that explained the indescribably deep feeling that had left its mark. So deep that it must be in her soul she surmised. It was something she could not truly name but finally agreed with herself that "the unknown" was the culprit. That turned into a rabbit hole

that would take Amelia to the edge of her limits. Had she known that at the beginning would she have gone? What guarantee was there of coming back?

The following weekend when her boyfriend was working away again she set off once more for Exmoor, desperately in need of some clearing and cleansing. Amelia tended to feel more in need when Alec worked away. It wasn't until she arrived at Exmouth it dawned on her that she had no recollection of the entire trip and it had been made on autopilot. She had expected to arrive at Exmoor. No matter; the solitude was here, very few people on the long sandy beach stretching between the docks where the fishing boats unloaded their catches and Orcombe Point which was beautifully bountiful with rock pools and cliffs. One day she would walk the coastal path to Budleigh Salterton, but not today. The tide would turn soon so she sat on the warm sand clutching her knees and idly wriggling her toes, letting the sand run over, under and between them, whilst she watched the sea, salty air in her nostrils and losing herself in a nothingness. Nothing heard, no thoughts, not even aware of the water sparkling with dappled sunlight. Time had become irrelevant.

But something wanted to be relevant and with the slight jolt of reality kicking in Amelia's gaze was drawn to a shadowy figure on the water's edge. She stood, realising without reason that this figure was directly in front of her albeit at a little distance. Each frothy surge of the ocean gave the illusion of the shadow coming closer rather quickly; as she turned to look behind her she realised that she had been taking steps towards it. The gap was closing between them. She couldn't see clearly but there was something eerily familiar about this figure. Amelia couldn't recognise what she was feeling - apprehension was near enough, yet it was an interested apprehension, almost an excited apprehension. Her eyes focused, the figure lifted its head to look at Amelia. She froze as she stared at her own face, transfixed by the accented voice but only able to pick out two words - "Death. Coming". Her next memory was of sitting in a pub with a young lady asking if she needed any help. They sat together for the duration of a Latte, nothing much being said about

whatever had occurred save that she had had a bit of a shock. When the young lady saw a big improvement in Amelia she let her drive home. That was an unnoticed but very necessary act. That young lady would become heavily involved in Amelia's life.

Alec's smooth voice offered a viable explanation - she had simply misheard the time he had suggested they meet. He clearly remembered telling her 8pm, not 7pm. She felt foolish and apologised for accusing him of being embarrassingly late, yet....there was a yet. Yet this was the third time she'd got the time wrong even if it was she who'd suggested it. A niggling doubt was gaining ground but she swallowed it, telling herself that her boyfriend was right. She had been stressed lately - that must be it, stress was getting to her. Amelia vowed to be more attentive to detail from now on. Life would be awful without Alec and if she kept getting things wrong he would surely leave. That thought gave her a physical pain and tears prickled her eyes. He couldn't leave, he was her reason for living. That sounded Over The Top but it was genuinely how she felt. When Alec and Amelia met it was an immediate magnetic force. The impact was that strong for both of them, why should she question it? It was unfathomable, inexplicable, unusual to say the least but there was no denying the strength of the pull between them. In truth that strength could not give room to any doubt at all. That voice by her ear was irritatingly still there.

Getting married at 21 was the biggest mistake Amelia had ever made. Four years in that marriage was more than long enough to have made an enormous mental impact which took almost a decade to get over, although that wasn't wholly true. At 37 she was still affected by those years in unexpected but not always big ways. Thank goodness for Alec. The rapidly development of their mutual attraction seemed unreal but she was happier than she'd been in a long time. He brought a general calmness, never spoke sharply and if she ever got cross he would say, "I'm sorry you feel like that", and it would all blow over.

Yesterday was the first time in the several months they had been together that it was different. Amelia had stood her ground on

domestic violence against women. He hadn't argued per se but she noticed a stiffening in his manner and a slight edge in his voice. It didn't last long but long enough to stop her. Alec's usual demeanour soon returned and later he told her he would be working away in Bristol on Saturday. The lightbulb moment in her head indicated his edginess must have been about that. Working again at the weekend must have been playing on his mind. She didn't recognise the dullness of the lightbulb.

Amelia didn't enjoy having their time together cut down so much but she understood. Heaven forbid that she become too clingy. Alec had said his ex-girlfriend had been clingy and he loved how Amelia was not. But here she was, lamenting all the weekends cut short by his work. That, she decided, was the peril of being so good at his job. She didn't understand technology like he did and the jargon often put her in a spin but Alec would calmly and smoothly say in lots of words that it was nothing for her to worry her pretty little head about - he was there to combat any problems. That was truly wonderful but she mustn't stop trying to understand technology.

With a whole Saturday free ahead of her she planned to drive to the moor. It got to the stage where more often than she thought about it that inconvenient voice would override her intentions and insert Exmouth instead of Exmoor into her head. Amelia had to admit that, scary as it had been to see her own face staring back at her, there was an increasing curiosity to visit the beach again just to see if the figure would reappear. Was that her own thoughts or did the voice have anything to do with it? Of course it was her own thoughts...she wouldn't let a voice sway her, and so she decided to do the coastal walk from Exmouth to Budleigh Salterton on Saturday, a day with no time constraints and no one but herself to please. It sounded perfect.

On Saturday morning she parked at Exmouth and began the walk knowing she could do it at any speed she liked. She stopped to look out over the still sea a few times realising at last that she didn't like the ocean, or any expanse of water for that matter, and somehow when it was still it gave off a sinister air. Water was deep, dangerous,

too powerful and it killed. Even so she found her eyes pinned to the horizon, wondering about all the countries beyond. The sun was playing hide and seek and only once did the thought of shadows invade - momentarily at that. A micro thought holds too many nano thoughts she discovered and all manner of strange things began to hang in her mind suspended in a broth of “who, where, why, what, when, how?”. Amelia shook herself out of it and continued her walk, legs starting to ache, head feeling tangled. Was she consciously thinking or was whatever that was going on forcing itself upon her? It was just the heat, it had to be.

Hunger and heavy legs dictated a pub lunch at Budleigh, a place she had probably only ever visited once, before making her way back to Exmouth by bus. Three minutes into the journey a casual peek out of the window turned into a hard glare of questioning and disbelief. There was Alec with a woman - a woman wearing an identical dress to one of hers hanging in the wardrobe at home. Was it? Was it still in the wardrobe? The woman's hair was dark and she was willowy. Amelia suddenly felt inadequate, undesirable, hurt beyond repair and a myriad of other negative emotions. After a short while and they were out of sight she involuntarily gave a single cough of laughter, directed at her own silliness. It wasn't Alec, he was in Bristol all day. Her mind was playing tricks. She must be far more stressed than she'd imagined and the impulse to get off the bus to follow them subsided.

The figure on the beach didn't appear again but she did see the young lady with whom she had spent time over a coffee after seeing the apparition two weeks ago.

“Hello,” she'd called, “I thought I'd see you again, how are you? I'm Katharine, by the way”.

“I'm fine, thanks, Katharine, I'm Amelia...it's good to see you. How are you? Do you live here?”.

“No, I visit now and again, sometimes for work others for pleasure. What about you?” asked Katharine, knowing full well that “fine” as an answer was the ultimate deflection. Amelia was not fine.

"I usually visit the moors but the day we met I ended up here. Didn't intend to and didn't remember driving here. Weird." answered Amelia.

Katharine took the bone that her "job" threw her and piqued with interest to learn more asked, "What happened on the beach that day, if you don't mind me asking? It felt like you needed to tell me but couldn't".

Amelia felt completely at ease with Katharine but also a little silly about what she had seen. "Working Katharine" picked up on it and probed a little deeper.

"Don't tell me if you can't but I will tell you I am a trauma counsellor. I'm also a medium, which a lot of people can't or don't want to accept. There is nothing that will surprise me, nothing I can't deal with and I don't judge", and then Katharine waited.

They had another coffee together and after talking about mediumship and reincarnation Amelia felt comfortable enough to tell her about the apparition and finally about the two words... "death" and "coming".

"Firstly", began Katharine gently, "I don't feel this was strictly an apparition. It feels like the manifestation of another part of yourself which is trying to join up again, and certainly to tell you something. It also feels that the word "death" in this case doesn't mean death is coming to you; it might mean that death was the separation or split of your soul and this other "you", the manifestation, is part of your soul. Let me explain a bit better if I can. When something truly traumatic occurs the soul becomes fragmented, like a smashed mirror if you like, and one or more parts of it stays stuck in that lifetime whilst the rest goes on to future lives. If those pieces aren't retrieved you will always feel that something is missing. A lot of us will have fragments of our soul left all over the place. Each time we die a piece may be left behind. Part of my job is to help with the retrieval of these fragments. Not all traumas are from our current lives but any unresolved traumas in previous lives will have an effect on a current life. The counselling training combined with mediumship works well together".

Amelia wasn't sure what to do with that information but something sat comfortably in her core. After long discussions, and disclosures on Amelia's part, Katharine said that if she ever felt she could help she was to contact her and passed over a card with all points of contact, including a website.

When she arrived home, Alec was there asking where she had been. She wasn't expecting to see him at all and then felt a little cheated of her completely free day especially as she had a lot to think about. She told him where she had been but offered no other details. She asked how his day had been, it must have been busy, etc., and waited for his response. The words next from her mouth surprised her - she told of how she thought she had seen him at Budleigh but he curtly countered with, "Don't be ridiculous, you know I was in Bristol. I've come back to see you and then you all but accuse me of being in Budleigh all day". Her head went back to her first husband and coolly said it had been a fleeting and mistaken thought and she was sorry for making him feel accused. What she didn't say was, "Just then you didn't say you were in Bristol all day, but you did say I'd accused you of being in Budleigh all day...which I hadn't. She was on alert now and noticed the tiniest smirk of satisfaction on his face.

At her first opportunity she rang Katharine and asked for help. They covered everything over the ensuing months from childhood to first marriage to Alec. Katharine was kept a guarded secret from him. Amelia knew he was seeing changes in her and detected an unease in him. Then came the day she met Katharine's husband. Her therapy room was at her home and that day it was he who answered the door.

"Hello Amelia," said this man of diluted Asian descent with a look of quasi recognition on his face and he gave her a big hug which surprised them both. "Come in, come in...", and Katharine appeared with her characteristic sunbeam of a smile. It horrified Amelia when that smile turned to a very straight face and there was silence until she quietly said, "I know who you are....." and after a knowing exchange of glances between Katharine and her

husband she continued, "We know who you are...". Amelia felt she had done something wrong, but what? She felt out of her depth. She had no understanding of what had just happened and wanted to turn tail and leave immediately but there was another look on Katharine's face - one of incredulity, nothing short of utter disbelief, all comprehension there but not communicable. There was a tear in her husband's eye because of his own final recognition, Katharine was seeking words and Amelia's heart was pounding.

Three teas were made, husband disappeared to elsewhere in the house, both she and Katharine ensconced themselves in the therapy room where Katharine gabbled out the bare bones of what she now irrevocably and intuitively knew. But it all began with, "You must get Alec out of your life NOW". It wasn't a request, it was an order. With the most urgent message given, the rest came tumbling out.

In Persia a very long time ago Amelia had been the Matriarch of the town where she provided the physical guidance and needs of the population. There was a Holy Man who provided the spiritual and healing needs. Katharine had been attacked and killed by one of the merchants who was hell bent on taking her and her death left behind a husband and young children. Being responsible for their safety, and given the heinous nature of the death of the young mother, Amelia removed Katharine's family to a secret place where no man was to know about. The women who knew were sworn to total secrecy and took oaths to talk to no-one, not even their husbands or children, about it. The men were to be frozen out. That didn't explain why Alec had to be ejected from Amelia's life until she heard her own voice saying, "Alec was my husband and he killed me".

Each week during sessions the story would unfold a bit more, some information coming from Katharine and some from Amelia. Amelia had begun dreaming weird and wonderful dreams, sometimes given clues via symbolism, and together they would decipher them. Sometimes she would find something or have incredibly strong memories or intuition or, almost disturbingly, strong feelings for someone. The help from Katharine's guides was invaluable...a guide being an attached higher evolved being. The unfolding story

was a classic case of fragmented souls and it became clear that they were helping each other to retrieve fragments of their respective souls.

The strongest feeling for a person that Amelia had was for the boyfriend of her teenage years - much stronger than she remembered from the time. She hadn't seen him since she was 20 but now, suddenly, her heart flipped and she smiled every time she thought of him. It turned out that he had been the Holy Man for the Persian community and as such would have worked closely with Amelia. Alec, her aggrieved husband, likely jealous of the power and prominence his wife had, fell in with equally aggrieved merchants who would have baulked at having to pay for one of their own's unlawful and dishonourable behaviour by being frozen out. Her husband accepted money and promised recognition to get his wife, the thorn in his and their side, and her ally the Holy Man out of the way. With both gone, the merchants would have carte blanche within the community. His part became the killing of his wife and disposal of her body.

It took weeks of dreams, symbolism, memories from about 3,000 years ago to get as much of the story as they could. Alec had drugged his wife with perhaps slow acting snake venom in order to walk her to a disused shaft and pushed her in before she was dead. It was in that drugged state that the reality of the depth of betrayal by her husband hit her so severely that her soul fragmented.

When she felt emotionally and mentally strong enough to contemplate letting Alec go, Amelia decided to put his loyalty to the test. Her acceptance that it had not been him she had seen in Budleigh that day with another woman had waned. She opened her wardrobe doors and began moving the hangers as she looked for the dress. He was so quiet that she hadn't heard him come into the bedroom and it made her jump when his quiet voice close to her asked what she was doing.

"Blimey, Alec. Don't creep up on me like that! I'm looking for my green dress...you know the one. I told you, when I mistakenly thought I saw you in Budleigh that the woman accompanying

whoever it was that looked so like you was wearing a green dress like mine..." and she let the words dangle in the air. She knew very well she hadn't mentioned the woman. This was his test.

"I know the one," he said as he took a step to be beside her, pulled it off the rail and handed it to her, "It is here, right on the end."

He had failed. It was all she needed to know. Never had she ever put it on that end of the rail - in all the time he'd known her it had never struck him that she had a particular system for hanging her clothes. The slimeball had had that woman in her home and for some obscure reason which she didn't want to know he had allowed her to wear that dress. Amelia was now a lot wiser after the counselling sessions with Katharine who had explained about narcissists, psychopaths, the danger they presented and, most importantly, how not to react to them. So she smiled and thanked him.

That night as they slept she had a terrifying dream. That is what it started out as but she was actually living it and very much awake in her mind. A black tornado was advancing rapidly towards her and trying to suck her in; if it succeeded she knew the end game would be death. Fear gripping her to the core, she found herself reciting the Lords Prayer, first of all not being able to get past the first line, then having to start again and achieving two lines, starting again and achieving three lines, until eventually she got to the end and she was safe. The tornado disappeared and she felt spent and frightened. Intuition didn't need to tell her it was Alec who was controlling the tornado. She didn't sleep again that night.

The next morning it was difficult to pretend all was well and luckily it was a pretence not needed for long as they both went to their respective employments and she wouldn't be seeing him again for a couple of days. The relief running through her was almost overwhelming and a sense of foreboding nestled in with it. She listened to it.

The next night as she prepared the vegetables for her dinner she heard his familiar quiet, but this time slimy and menacing voice saying, "You said you were going to Exmoor that day. You should have done that, Amelia. You should not have been skulking around

Budleigh. I've had to come back here tonight now". He had a plan, ending with the flat being ransacked.

She didn't turn immediately, but instead looked ahead, out of the window above the sink. He wasn't prepared; she was, but not for the way it would turn out. His reflection in the glass told her exactly where he stood and when he moved. She felt his hands grab her neck and as an automatic reaction Amelia swung her hands down, grabbed him by his balls, squeezing hard and twisting at the same time. Wet warmth spread over her hands and she felt satisfied that losing control of his bladder would fill him with humiliation; she had to get out of there and find help. He crumpled, letting go of her neck, screaming. Not sticking around for him to rally and attack her again she ran to the couple in the flat below, hammered on the door, all the while shouting for someone to open the door quickly. When she was safely locked in their flat and Mitchell was phoning for the police and an ambulance Sarah sat Amelia down to tend to her bleeding hands. Then she asked if she could take the knife from her. Amelia had no idea she was still holding the vegetable knife; not only that, she had no injuries to her hands, no injuries at all. Her reactions and her face told the police she was in a state of shock but they still had to take as much information as they could safely get. The ambulance crew and one of the policemen hurried upstairs to Amelia's flat and found Alec surrounded by a pool of blood. As they stretchered him down to the ambulance Mitchell heard him say, "Tell her we are even now", as he passed. It was not much louder than a whisper but he heard it.

Alec died two days later from complications arising from surgery to repair the cut artery but his urgent, whispered messages to the nursing staff and attendant policeman made it clear that he had tried to strangle Amelia thus implicating himself. The forensic team pieced the whole thing together. The bruises on her neck confirmed his admission, and the angle of the puncture in Alec's groin confirmed that it was not a deliberate stabbing. As she flung her hands behind her the knife she was still unknowingly holding plunged into him, damaging the artery. He must have instinctively felt he was

going to die and their past, or at least his part in Amelia's demise in Persia, was made known to him which made him recognise that this was his time to pay his debt.

She faced a court hearing, of course, but it looked likely that there would be a great deal of leniency for her. It took a very long time to come to terms with everything that had happened and she eventually grew accustomed to him being gone and that nothing was her fault. Amelia was learning to feel whole. The two words she had heard at Exmouth finally made sense. "Death...it was time for the death of the past, and Coming...I'm coming back to you". Amongst her dreams had been a word in large print and unspoken knowledge that this had been her. AMERA. There was also the beautiful, dark haired young woman leading a camel through the desert dunes, heading towards her with a smile. And there was the dream of monks on the mountain. As often happened, Amelia would be able to write about situations, dreams, meditations, in a way she was unaware of being capable of. She looked for these writings and was surprised to find one from when she met Alec and was surprised at the information in it. The warning was there, she was meant to listen. Had she listened the domino effect would not have happened and her soul would not have had the chance to be healed. She'd had to keep Alec around because it led to Katharine, her husband and the unravelling of a very old lifetime.

The woman with the camel remained a beautiful picture in her memory - Amera with a smile of recognition and thanks. And it was Amera who had appeared to her as a shadowy figure on Exmouth beach. Death to the past...I'm coming to join you.

Poems

Christine Jones



Broken Human

Three thousand years
Fifteen lives
Ties that bind
Love that doesn't die
A heart that aches
It's beat shaky and troubled
A smile that fades
The eyes that die
A will that cannot go on

Amera

Silent knowledge lay dormant in the soul
Until it made its way into the dreamworld
Where it whispered, and whispered louder
Needing to be heard

The conditioned brain could not comprehend;
 Flailed and failed many a time
 The soul screamed as it had never before
 And spilled the tightly held silent knowledge
 Into consciousness
 Piece by piece
 As there was no other way
 Yet all the knowledge was there, all around
 In physical forms, waiting to be found
 Hailed, blamed
 Regretful, contemptuous
 Murderous, caring
 The knowledge howled
 Screamed
 Jettisoned itself into the conscious
 It was time
 It is time
 Three thousand years of silence is over
 I am Amera from the dark
 I am Amera, safe now in the Light

Monks on the Mountain

A striated black mountain, severe, dark and unrelenting
 Where just a few, clad in black robes as those of a monk,
 And just one clad in maroon,
 Walked confidently along the narrow ledges
 To form an unreadable huddle.
 Today, as my story unfolds, it is clear that this group
 Is of those who attacked, wishing for me to fall and break
 Before I could become me.
 The mountain shows its truth as a black tourmaline

Absorbing hate and negativity, ensuring the fall is not complete.
I am now encouraged to find the strength to face
All that happened over decades, to
Relive the years relegated to memory, of worry, fear,
Uncertainty, disbelief and self disrespect, inability.
Book-cover happiness a step too far to face past decades.
I don't want to do it. Can I take the pain again? Will I survive?
I can cope as I am, but is that living?
Challenge is one thing, bravery another.
Wisdom is the winner, advising to always remember
The real self and cast out for all time
The parasitic destruction
Which I so wrongly accepted.



It was just a bike in the lane.....to start with!

Richard Lappas



A weekend shift on duty one or two jobs on the diary, football on the Saturday, all in all a mundane weekend until Saturday night heard the rumbling of the phone in my room as I walked through the door.....A young girl had gone missing while on her paper round that very afternoon and all that was to be found was a bike laying flat in Within Lane on the outskirts of Aylesbeare.

By 6 00 am Sunday morning, it was crystal clear that we had a major search on our hands for a missing school girl called Genette Tate who had bumped into her pals Maggie Heavy and Tracey Pratt at the top of the lane but had vanished into thin air before she got to the bottom of the lane!

Aylesbeare is a pretty quiet place at the best of times, a sleepy village on the outskirts of East Devon with most people only knowing of its existence because the signs for the village are on the road where you turn off for the airport....but all of that changed in an instant as the quiet stillness was shattered by the arrival of hundreds of police and the media circus of which I was a part.

For me it felt like an intrusion, these people are decent, honest country folk who live their lives as normal but it had become very

obvious that life for everyone in the village was about to change, it had changed and there would be much more to come.

The picture of Genette's bike is exactly as it was found but it is a reconstruction which took place under the watchful eyes of Supt Eric Rundle and his media chief Roger Busby .The bike had been returned to Genette's home by Maggie and Tracy as they thought that their best pal might get into trouble for leaving her bike in the road.

Little did they know what was to unfold as the National spotlight was cascading all over this tiny East Devon village as the biggest missing persons inquiry in history, began to unfold. The image of the bike in the lane, described as haunting by many, was to me exactly what it is, a picture of a bike in the lane, but what it achieved was to illustrate the story which is what I have always set out to do. Its very likely that this image has been published more than all of my pictures put together as the story still rolls on, the search for Genette Louise still continues, the young, happy go lucky, 13 year old newspaper girl remains missing nearly 40 years on.

Through that time, I've revisited Within Lane on a number of occasions, I've also photographed and interviewed her mother Sheila Cook and with hand on heart, every visit has felt like an invasion of privacy, there is an eerie atmosphere around the lane, its like nobody goes there, maybe that nobody should go there. In the dozen or so times I've been there and sometimes for an hour, I've never seen a car driving along Within Lane and news photographers are supposedly hard nosed, maybe they are but this story is something else, its different probably because it has remained unresolved. A few years ago, I visited Maggie Heavy with my colleague Simon Trump and I could see how Genette's disappearance had wrecked her life and her hope even though she managed to put on a very brave face for me which you can read about later.

I've often been asked what my thoughts are about Genette's disappearance and instinctively I've never been convinced about Robert Blacks involvement , without some kind of help anyway and

for that I've thought that a good look "closer to home" would be a place to start.

The picture was taken on a Pentax K1000 with a 24mm lens.



Under the Southern Cross

Chip Tolson



She had been warned, she'd even bought herself a woollen coat before she left home. Hampered by luggage, her case trailing behind on wheels, her travel bag slipping from her shoulder, she stepped out from the terminal into a bitter wind.

January in England, near freezing, it's a shock when you've left behind your mid-summer homeland with a stop en route in Singapore.

There was no welcoming face to greet her. Departure twenty-five hours ago had been a family affair gathered round in tee shirts, shorts and flip flops waving good-bye, fun and a few tears.

She repeated the name of the hotel the company had booked for her under her breath, 'St Ermin's Hotel, St Ermin's Hotel', surely every taxi driver would know it.

As the afternoon wore on, Yvette was unable to adjust to the time difference. Determined to stay awake until local night time, she wrapped-up warm and went out to walk along crowded afternoon streets.

Using the map in the company brochure, she found the building housing the London office, her workplace for the next six months on attachment. She walked on through St James Park, over Horse Guards Parade into Whitehall, eventually finding herself in Parliament Square looking toward the legendary silhouette of the tower housing Big Ben.

Yvette had supper alone in the Caxton Bar, a meal she didn't need after hours of airline meals, uncertain whether they were serving breakfast, lunch or dinner.

Her plan for a sound overnight sleep was interrupted by wide-eyed wakefulness at what her mobile told her was two in the morning. She checked her emails, replying to those from home.

Realising sleep was not returning, Yvette searched in her bag for her grandfather's notebook. It was one of the series he'd left to her a couple of years back knowing she was the family member most likely to follow-up on his studies into the family's history.

Her grandfather had spent hours on the internet and in libraries, researching arrivals from various countries over the decades linking into the family history. The one forebear he had spoken to Yvette about and which had given him his greatest interest and pride was her six times Great Grandfather, Thomas Chater.

He'd stepped ashore in January 1788 at what became Sydney Cove, coming off a vessel of the First Fleet.

The eleven vessels of the First Fleet landed seven hundred and thirty-six convicts, the first of many men, women and children to be transported to the new penal colonies being established in the recently claimed British Colony of New South Wales.

From numerous sources, Yvette's grandfather had established that Thomas, an eighteen-year-old farm labourer had been caught poaching by gamekeepers and eventually sentenced to Transportation. There must be more facts for her to establish while in England. High on her list was to locate the village of Thurloake in the County of Devon. This was the place where Thomas had been born and where she guessed he'd fallen foul of the local landowner and his gamekeepers.

After five months at sea having called at Santa Cruz and Rio, the fleet arrived at The Cape of Good Hope on the toe of Africa. Their stores were replenished and livestock purchased to be taken onboard the supply vessels.

Thomas seized his chance. He volunteered on the strength of his rural background to trans-ship from his berth on the vessel *Charlotte* across to the *Friendship* for stockman duties with the cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry on the long passage across the Southern Ocean.

On arrival in New South Wales all the livestock, together with Thomas and three other convicts, were put ashore onto Cattle Island, renamed from the indigenous people's Tubowgule. Two centuries later, that same ground became the peninsular site of the Sydney Opera House, a place that now held added interest for Yvette.

After his time working with the livestock, Thomas was sent in a team of convict labourers to clear land licenced for development as a sheep station to build the merino wool export trade to Europe.

In the 1820s, by then for many years a freed man, Thomas left employment at the sheep station to journey into the outback with his wife and their two sons to establish their own flock to join the burgeoning Merino wool export trade to Europe. Thomas died in his eighties in the mid-1850s with Queen Victoria on the throne and having never breathed the clear air of Devon again.

Yvette's mother had teased her daughter when she'd talked of her family research mission whilst in England, branding it a 'reverse transportation'. Her journey by air in 2015 was scheduled to take twenty-five hours; her six times Great Grandfather Thomas's journey by sea had lasted eight months.

'How is hotel life treating you, Yvette?' Debbie, her workmate in the office, asked during her second week in London.

'The hotel is fine, quite grand for a few days. Now I'm finding my way about I need to move into digs someplace. Where do you hangout?'

Debbie was in a flat sharing with two others. 'As it happens one of my flatmates is moving out. You're welcome to come round to have a look or do you think work and play don't mix?'



Two weeks later Yvette met Debbie's remaining flatmate, Jenny. She transferred her few possessions into the neat first floor flat near Turnham Green. As soon as she was settled the three went round to the nearby Tabard Inn. After they'd got their drinks in and ordered food, they sat at a table close to the open fire.

'How did you two meet up?' Yvette asked her new flatmates.

'Chance, both on the lookout for somewhere to live' said Debbie.

'Are you from London?'

'No, both brought up in the Midlands, but we'd never met.'

'We went to universities at opposite ends of the country before gravitating to work in London,' Jenny added

'I went to Edinburgh and Jenny to Exeter.'

'Exeter, that's in Devon isn't it? I have a forebear who was born in Devon. I hope to find out more about him while I'm over here.'

'Devon was great, I have an Uncle and Aunt living in the county, I often stayed with them. Good to get away every now and again when student life got too heavy.'

'What did you both do at Uni? I did Law at Monash.'

'That's in Melbourne, isn't it? I thought you were from Sydney.'

'I am, I wanted a bit of space from my brothers.'

'That's why I went to Edinburgh,' Debbie laughed, 'it was a four-year course. I did Economics and Politics.'

'History for me at Exeter, specialising in local judicial systems through the centuries,' added Jenny.

Their meals came and broke into their conversation.



Lying in bed on Sunday morning, Yvette read again her grandfather's notebook. She wondered whether to open up to Jenny about her forebear. After University at Exeter with her interest in matters judicial she had to be a good source of relevant knowledge.

A month later, taking a Friday off work, Yvette was being driven past Stonehenge on the A303 bound for Devon. Researching with Jenny, they had already established that Thomas Chater had been tried at the Exeter Assize in 1786 and might have been hanged days later that summer had his sentence not been commuted by the King's Pardon to Twelve Years Transportation, first sending him to a prison hulk lying off Woolwich.

With typhoid rampant on the decaying vessel, Thomas's health declined before he and others were transferred to the transportation fleet in Portsmouth harbour waiting to sail to the other side of the world.

Despite the harsh conditions on board, with regular feeding and sea air, Thomas's health improved.

From reports at the time of the trial it was clear that the then heir to the landowner of the huge Thurloake estate, Frederick St John Bradleigh, owning the village and the land for miles around, had argued forcefully for the original capital sentence to be carried out to set an example to the local population.

Yvette wanted to know if Bradleigh's descendants were still living in Thurloake. She'd persuaded Jenny not to tell her Uncle Giles and Aunt Mary that Thomas had been transported, just that he was local to Thurloake before he emigrated. If they thought about it, they would no doubt guess he'd been a transported convict.

In the village church, they found Thomas's name listed in the record of baptisms. They even found a collapsed gravestone with several Chater names on it.

However, the story that emerged that evening when they had a pub supper together with Jenny's uncle and aunt at the Bradleigh Arms, was of the Bradleigh family not finding success. As the evening progressed, the landlord and a few pub regulars were encouraged to reminisce about local history.

A tale emerged of Bradleigh misfortunes. The family had persisted as landowners into Victorian days, but their wealth had been gambled away by a young heir to the fortune. The house and estate had fallen into ruin and little remained in the Twentieth Century to be seen of Thurloake Hall, only the footings of walls and a derelict fire-damaged tower.

Over Sunday lunch before they set off back to London, Jenny's Uncle Giles told them that after the gossip in the pub he'd been looking through local history pamphlets remembering he'd read of an Australian connection with the Bradleigh family.

It was told that the heir to the estate in late Georgian days travelled out to Australia believing there might be good money to be made shipping wool back to Europe to be worked in the family's West Country woollen mill. Weeks after he arrived in Sydney, he'd gone missing travelling deep into the outback sheep country, possibly waylaid, his party thought to have been robbed and killed. No trace of him or his guides was found, a mystery never solved.

It was the missing Bradleigh's young son, aged only ten who inherited the estate and the Baronetcy on his grandfather's death. As a young man he frittered away the Bradleigh fortune, selling land, the woollen mill and family treasures to finance his dissolute lifestyle. He'd died friendless and diseased in a London poorhouse in his late twenties, the Baronetcy dying with him. He left only his grieving mother and unmarried sisters to end their days as Thurloake Hall fell into ruins about them.



Motoring back to London Yvette said little.

Jenny couldn't resist. 'You didn't see that one coming, Yvette.'

Her companion, deep in thought, didn't answer.

Jenny, watching the growing traffic, tried again. 'Maybe you have unravelled a cold case of revenge, finding the solution to a long-standing mystery.'

Yvette countered, 'there was never any proof Bradleigh was murdered. Maybe he just got lost and went missing in the outback. He wouldn't be the first, or the last, to suffer such a fate.'

Jenny drove on into Town in the flow of cars carrying weekenders returning from their breaks.

'I agree with you, Yvette. That must be what happened. However, when we get back to Town, let's drink a toast to the Bradleigh's unfortunate visitor to Australia and to the spirit of your six times Great Grandfather, Thomas Chater.'

'Maybe my forebear wasn't the loser the people of Devon might have thought him to be. We'll toast them both tonight. A toast with a fine Australian wine.'

Yvette gazed at the traffic ahead as their journey slowed. 'Thank you, Jenny, it's not the tale I was expecting. The two men, Bradleigh and Chater, may or may not have met under the Southern Cross in those long-ago Victorian days.'

Dead Artist

Chip Tolson



Amanda clattered down the stairs from the studio, buttoning her coat as she went. Once out in Greek Street, she pushed her way through the Soho crowd determined to have it out with her agent, Agnes Sinclair.

An hour later, she was sitting in the Soho Theatre bar with a glass of red, seething over her exchange with Agnes and coming to terms with life without an agent.

It had been abrupt and loud. What did Agnes think she was doing by sending her to that sordid audition?

Amanda had been surprised that no other candidate was waiting in the ante-room. Once inside the office, it became obvious it was not the sort of opportunity she was expecting.

‘OK dear, grab a robe, you can strip off behind the curtain.’

‘What the hell do you mean?’

The man looked at her with his mouth open, revealing a dental horror story. ‘Get your kit off so we can get on with the audition.’

‘Not bloody likely, what do you take me for?’

‘Up to you, love, if you want the job strip off, otherwise go home and stop wasting my time and yours.’



Amanda woke the next morning regretting the evening. One glass of red had led to an evening of red wine, linking up with others to watch a mediocre comedy sketch on the basement stage before taking a pizza back to the flat for an unsettling late supper.

Amanda resolved to get out of London, to go down to the West Country and stay with her cousin Chrissy at her cottage deep in rural Devon.

Breakfast at the cafe on the corner, a source of reviving coffee and warm croissants, helped get things onto an even keel. Fully awake, Amanda sent flowers to Agnes as a peace offering. You never know when you might need an agent again, even Agnes.

Back at the flat, her suitcase packed, she rang Chrissy, who sounded bored yet welcoming. She asked Amanda to ring once her train was underway from Paddington. Chrissy would meet her at Tiverton Parkway.

Crossing the Somerset Levels that afternoon, the train slowed to a stop. The train guard was working his way along the carriage, talking to passengers.

There was a problem, a tree had fallen across the line beyond Taunton. Alternative arrangements would be made to relay passengers beyond the blockage.

Amanda rang her cousin. 'Chrissy, you haven't left home, have you?'

'No, but I've got my coat on and was about to go out to the car.'

'There's a problem, a tree is down across the line. I'm going to be stuck in Taunton. I don't know whether I'll be coming on by bus today or on a train tomorrow.'

Amanda asked Chrissy about their mutual cousin, Timothy. 'Doesn't he live in Taunton? If I have a long wait, I could go and see him. Do you have an address for him?'

‘Aunt Charlotte’s old address. He still lives in the house. I did call on him once. He was out or not answering the door. His house is not far from the station.

‘Send me the address, I haven’t seen Timothy in years.’

‘I believe he spends all his time painting? I looked through the glass beside the front door. The place looked a mess.’

‘Is it just him living alone?’

‘As far as I know, it is?’

‘I don’t know when I last met him; I was probably still at school. I never got to Aunt Charlotte’s funeral.’

‘You didn’t miss much, a hurried service at the Crem followed by a salad lunch in a pub.’

‘Not a good family get-together, then.’

‘For a final gathering of the three brothers, Timothy’s and our two fathers, it was a poor do, but they never were the best of friends.’

‘Just as well that I wasn’t there.

Once the train pulled into Taunton station, there was no information as to what would happen next. Although buses had been mentioned on the train, no arrangements had been made.



It didn’t take Amanda long to find Timothy’s house, at least the house at the address Chrissy had emailed. It took her an age to get Timothy to come to the door. She knew someone was at home from the bright light coming from the dormer window looking onto the street. She could see a moving shadow.

Amanda was certain she could be heard; the doorbell was loud, then she used the door knocker with increasing blows.

A man passing by with a dog on a lead looked over. ‘You’ll have difficulty getting Mr Sanders to come to the door this time of day, not if he is in his studio.’

‘I’m his cousin,’ Amanda replied.

In the end, she resorted to shouting through the letterbox.

‘Timothy, I know you are there. Come to the door and let me in. I’m Amanda, your cousin.’

At last, there was a sound of movement, then heavy steps on the stairs. ‘Timothy, it’s me, I’m Amanda, your cousin.’

Chains were unfastened, but one remained in place; the door only opened a few inches. Timothy, with flashes of blue paint on his forehead and fingers, stared out frowning.

‘Go away and stop banging on my front door.’

‘Timothy! For heaven’s sake. I am your cousin, Amanda. Let me in, I have come to see you.’

The man on the other side of the door stared out. In truth, Amanda didn’t recognise him as her cousin. It had been years since they had seen each other on his last school summer holiday at their grandparents’ farm.

‘Come on Timothy, stop messing about and open the door, I am getting cold out here.’

‘You don’t look like Amanda; you haven’t got pigtails.’

‘Of course, I haven’t got bloody pigtails, they were cut off the day I left school. Now get the chain off the hook and let me in.’

With reluctance, the door was unchained and slowly opened. Amanda pushed in, entering a cluttered hallway lit by a single unshaded bulb hanging from the ceiling. Timothy reconnected the door chains before turning to look at Amanda. ‘How do I know you are Amanda? You don’t look at all like my cousin.’

‘Timothy, it’s years since we last met, I’ve changed, you’ve changed. I am on my way to stay with Chrissy in Devon. My train is stuck in Taunton. Something about a tree on the track.’

‘Prove who you are.’

‘Timothy! Must you?’ Amanda searched in her bag. ‘This is no way to greet a girl.’ She pulled out her wallet. ‘Here, my driving licence, is that good enough for you?’

Timothy held her wrist to the light. ‘It doesn’t look like you.’

‘Whoever has an ID photo that is the least bit like them?’

For a moment, she wondered if the man was Timothy, maybe someone else lived in this house.

‘This fiasco with the train has allowed me to come and see you, Timothy, if you are Cousin Timothy with blue paint on your face.’

He made no reply.

‘How about a cup of tea, or something stronger, if you have it? Point me to your kitchen. I’ll put the kettle on.’

‘It will have to be black tea. I have no milk. You are interrupting me. I am painting. I do not like being disturbed.’

‘Come on Timothy, I’ve come to see you, you have every day to paint. Let’s make tea, or have you got instant coffee? We can take it to your studio. Then I can see what you get up to in your spare time.’

‘I don’t let anyone see unfinished work.’

‘Timothy. I want to see what you do. I might want to buy a picture if you have any finished pictures.’

‘I’ve got several hundred around the house.’

‘Hundreds! Do you ever sell any?’

‘No. I give a few away, from the early days after my time at Art College.’



Timothy’s kitchen was a bad experience, stacked with unwashed dishes, the worktops heavy with empty and unopened tins of soup, baked beans and rice puddings. Amanda found an open jar of instant coffee, washed a teaspoon in the grimy sink and looked for a mug. Timothy, standing in the doorway, pointed to a cupboard, declining her offer of a cup, reaching over to switch on an ancient electric kettle. Without talking they waited for it to boil. Once she had poured boiling water into the mug, she looked at her cousin unmoving in the doorway.

He returned her gaze, debating whether to let her come up to his studio. She smiled in response. Timothy turned to lead the way upstairs, painted canvases balanced on every step, propped against the bannisters. On the first landing, more pictures. Going up to the room in the roof needed care; the stairway was steep and narrow.

The studio was lit by two bright neon tube lights on the ceiling, together with the dormer window looking north out onto the street in the gathering gloom. On the other side of the room, a floor-to-ceiling French window looked out over a balcony to the railway tracks. Nothing was moving.

Half an hour later, they were chatting as Amanda picked through a pile of pictures from the multitude of paintings stacked around his studio. Timothy had started to talk after she told him she had studied a History of Art course at Goldsmiths for a year. She implied it was a full-time course - it had been weekly evening classes threaded into her shift routine waiting tables between minor acting jobs. Luckily, she'd picked up enough knowledge to enjoy regular visits to London Galleries. Amanda had followed up her classes at Goldsmiths with life drawing evenings at St Martin's.

Amanda knew the subject well enough to take a constructive interest in Timothy's paintings, probing the thinking behind his work and asking questions that took his interest. Once Timothy relaxed, she suggested she should go to the corner shop she'd passed on the way to the house to get something to drink and maybe eat. She had not expected him to agree.

Having made him promise he would not put the chains back on the front door, she went to the shop and bought two bottles of Californian Merlot, packets of nuts, crisps and a couple of sausage rolls.

Before she returned to Timothy's house, she rang Chrissy to tell her there was no point in continuing her journey until the next day.

'You are not going to spend the night with Timothy?'

'Not with Timothy... at Timothy's place. If I cannot find a bed, I'll sleep in an armchair.'

'Best of luck, the one time I called it looked a mess.'

'It still is, but his paintings are good, very good in fact, fascinating subjects. I think he does little else, just endless paintings from ideas in his head. And he never sells any. An exhibition in the right place might do very well. He could make some money and get help to clean the place.'

At the end of the line, there was silence before Chrissy added, 'I've always thought artists had to be dead before their pictures made good prices.'



Amanda hurried back to Timothy's house, the bottles clinking in the carrier bag supplied by the shopkeeper. Unlike her earlier greeting, he was waiting for her at the front door, brandishing two wine glasses. Later, examining her wine with a light shining through the glass, Amanda was sure the glass was old, even Georgian. She wondered what other treasures there were lurking about the house under the domestic debris.

With the first wine bottle empty, the second going the same way and the food eaten, Amanda's eyes were blinking into sleep. When she told him she was going in search of the 'loo', Timothy suggested she go downstairs to find the WC off the front hallway.

Instead, she found a surprisingly neat bathroom on the first floor. Its walls and the ceiling were painted with the orgiastic happenings of ancient Gods and Goddesses, little left to the imagination as the lush figures portrayed their erotic lives to the full.

'Timothy, you have the most wonderful bathroom I have ever seen. Someone should make a documentary film of it.'

'That room is strictly private, Amanda. You were not meant to see it.'

'Private, maybe, it is also tremendous. It has made my visit here all the better.'

It had gone midnight by the time Amanda wrapped herself in a musty blanket, stretching out on a drawing room sofa, offering a surprising degree of comfort, exaggerated by the contents of the best part of a bottle of wine.

There was one thing Amanda had discovered in the last few hours: her much older cousin, a figure of awkward amusement to

be teased by his younger girl cousins in their youth, was a person of considerable artistic talent, even if he lacked easy-going social graces.

Early in the morning, once Amanda had got her eyes open, she put on a shirt and jeans and went upstairs to the bathroom to freshen up and get a drink of water to sluice out her mouth from the evening's excess. She lost all sense of time sitting on the closed loo seat, gazing around the room, taking in the whole scope of Timothy's imagined orgies of the deities. Ogling the fresco, she wondered how Timothy had figured out a way to combine the whole tableau into one flowing epic picture.

Make of it what you will, it had to be a significant piece of work; ancient masters would have cast envious glances at such artistic skill.

Amanda knew that she should not do it, but she did it anyway. She panned her mobile around the room to put everything on record.



Amanda found Timothy in his top-floor studio, concentrating on his painting. He said nothing as she stood in the doorway.

'Are you always up at this time, Timothy?'

He stared at a detail, a spot, in the picture.

'Not talking to me this morning, Cousin Timothy? Is there somewhere nearby where we can get breakfast? I can't be too long as the trains will be running again. I must get down the line to meet up with our cousin Chrissy.'

'I seldom have breakfast. There is a place near the station where you can get something reasonable to eat. It opens early.'

'I've got to eat before long, will you come with me, Timothy; you must eat something during the day.'

'I'll come in fifteen minutes when I've done this bit, I've been thinking about it all night.'

'You have been to bed, haven't you?'

'For an hour or two. After your interruption yesterday. Now I need to get this done, or it will bug me for days.'

'I'm sorry I interrupted, Sir. Do you always work like this? I would have thought you needed your sleep.'

'I can sleep in the day as long as no one comes hammering on my front door.'

'I don't think you are such a grumpy old man as you are trying to make out, Timothy.'

'If you want me to come for breakfast, go downstairs and sort yourself out. I'll join you in fifteen minutes.'

Dismissed from the studio, Amanda went down to the kitchen. She was pleased to find there was hot water; she began to make an inroad into the washing-up pile of dirty dishes.

It was half an hour before Timothy appeared.

The cafe Timothy took her to presented a simple breakfast menu written in white chalk on a blackboard suspended over the counter, a choice between a Farmer's Breakfast or a Basic Breakfast. Amanda didn't bother to ask the difference, opting for the heavier breakfast, half-expecting it to come with a pint of cider. Timothy stuck to the 'Basic'. Both were served with hot black coffee.

Having eaten, Timothy walked with Amanda to the station and waited while she sorted out the timetable. She had twenty minutes to wait for her connection to Tiverton Parkway. She suggested he didn't need to wait, guessing he wanted to get back to his studio.

'Let me have your telephone number, Timothy. I want to keep in touch. There is something very special about your paintings. Thank you for the one you gave me.'

To Amanda's surprise, he reached into a pocket and pulled out an embossed card, the kind seen years back, with his father's initials crossed out and 'T H, for Timothy Huntriss' inserted, the address and phone number remaining.

'Just a landline? Have you got a mobile number or email?'

'A proper telephone is all I need.'

'I thought everyone had a mobile these days, they are very useful.'

'No, Amanda, everyone does not have a mobile. I have no wish for one. I have a reliable camera which I've had for many years and a house phone is all I need.'

‘Do you have to take your films to the chemist to get them developed?’ she asked with a laugh.

‘People only use their phones to take photographs these days. No doubt you have been snapping away at some of my pictures during your stay.’

Amanda smiled at her cousin. ‘Just a few, I want to remember them.’

‘I thought you were a long time in the bathroom this morning. Remember they are my copyright.’ Timothy looked sternly at Amanda, meeting her guilty grin with raised eyebrows.

‘I must ring Chrissy.’ Amanda reached up to kiss Timothy on both cheeks. While he didn’t return the compliment, he held her firmly, his cheek pressed to hers.



Chrissy collected Amanda at Tiverton Parkway. Once they were driving on the North Devon link, the trees alongside the road showing the first flush of springtime green, Chrissy quizzed her cousin about her stay with their cousin, Timothy.

‘I’m surprised he let you in.’

‘It was touch and go. I had to hammer on the door and shout through the letterbox.’

‘What did he think of your antics?’

‘I had to produce my driving licence to prove I was his cousin! He appeared to think I should be in school uniform with pigtails. Once I was in his house, he was not so difficult. He even let me out and back to get something for our supper from the shop on the corner. That was when I rang you.’

‘I thought we might go back there after Aunt Charlotte’s funeral. Not a bit of it – a corn beef salad in the local pub, then he and Uncle Charlie were the first to go. We thought we might have to pay the bill, but they had done that.’



Chrissy turned off the link road North of Tiverton, setting off for Mid-Devon country.

‘So, you have never seen his paintings, they’re stacked everywhere, along the corridors, up the stairs, hundreds, no, there could be over a thousand.’

‘What does he do with them, sell them?’

‘Not a bit of it. He says, why should he? They are his to keep.’

‘Are they not much to shout about?’

‘No way. They are good. I buttered him up a bit, exaggerating the courses I did at Goldsmiths and later at St Martin’s. I implied I majored on the History of Art. He was easy to talk to after a while.’

They were travelling through ever-narrower lanes, twisting across the countryside between high hedge banks.

Amanda’s memory was stirring, recalling long-ago journeys in the back seat of the Ford Zephyr, her mother driving, lecturing her to behave well while staying with her grandparents, not that the Two Old Gramps, as the cousins always called them, ever saw what the three youngsters got up to out on the summer-time farm.

‘You won’t have seen the mural in Timothy’s bathroom.’

‘I haven’t seen anything of his,’ Chrissy replied, intent on driving rather faster than Amanda, used to London’s bus-crowded streets, thought was wise.

‘We will have to mount an invasion on Timothy in his studio, descend on him mob-handed. I’ll get him to open the door, then we can both go in. You must see his bathroom. When we get to your place, I’ll show you the short bit of video I took.’

Chrissy drove on, expertly backing thirty yards to a gateway to let a tractor and trailer squeeze past.

‘That was neat.’

‘You soon learn to back a car when you live in these parts.’

‘I could swear this is the way to The Gramps farm.’

‘Not any longer, it isn’t. It is the way to my farm.’

‘Your farm?’

‘Did I not tell you my late, but elderly husband, was rich, very rich? He made me happy and I made him very happy. Sadly, it was not to be for long.’

‘I never met him. Are you a farmer, now?’

‘No, dear. The farmhouse, the stable block and the ancient stone barn, all upgraded to twenty-first-century living, with two fields attached, make up my ‘cottage’ as you so sweetly called it over the phone. This is where I live. The other land was sold off between The Gramps selling up and my late husband buying the place.

Chrissy swung the Range Rover in through a gateway between two stone walls; Amanda’s mouth fell open as she gazed at the farmhouse she’d known as a child remodelled into the Twenty-First Century.

‘What do you think, Amanda? You are seldom lost for an opinion.’

‘I’m staggered! I’ll have to explore.’

‘Coffee first, toast and marmalade. I didn’t have any breakfast.’

‘I’ll join you for coffee, my breakfast was huge, a so-called ‘Farmer’s Breakfast’ with Timothy in a cafe between his house and the station.’

‘You seem to have got on well with our cousin Timothy, spending the night with him and escorted to the station.’

‘As I explained, dear Chrissy, I spent the night at his house, not with him. He was painting most of the night.’

Over the next few days, dodging rain showers, Amanda was led by Chrissy to some of the favourite places they had known as children. Chrissy was confident of her bearings, even on the sold-off land, but Amanda was uncertain until suddenly each scene became familiar, but somehow changed.

On a day when it rained heavily, Chrissy enjoyed showing everything she and her local builders had done to the house and particularly the old stone barn, now converted into three cottages: one with

a single bedroom, the other two with three double bedrooms, all en suite.

‘Why the big difference? Anyway, what are you going to do with them? Not selling them off, I hope. They’re too close to have strangers on your doorstep.’

‘It was Harold’s idea. His background was rather upmarket. He said they were for visitors with staff. That’s not for me. I just went along with the ideas he had discussed with his architect friend, Ronald. I didn’t want to rock the boat; Harold and Ronald went back a long way.’

‘That barn has made a wonderful cottage conversion. Will you do summer lets?’

‘I’m not keen on that either if the truth be told.’



Relaxing, warmed by a log fire, in the sitting room of the old farmhouse, eating scones with cream and jam, Devon style, the cousins talked of their exploits during their teenage summer visits to The Gramps.

Amanda felt something was missing.

‘We must get Timothy down here to see this wonderful place, Chrissy?’

‘He’ll never come. From what I know and what you have told me, he won’t venture out from his sacred studio?’

‘I’m not so certain,’ Amanda smiled. ‘I could take photos of our favourite places on the farm, the places we used to go to on those summer holidays, places he might want to work into his paintings.’

‘Why would he want to do that? Surely, he is happy where he is.’

‘He has great imagination, but I think a bit of real countryside, “en plein air” as the art world says, would galvanise him into a frenzy of new paintings. Let’s try to persuade him to come to visit, maybe stay a while in one of your cottages.’

Chrissy smiled, 'He could live there for as long as he wanted, setting up a studio. We could keep him fed and watered while he concentrates on his painting.' Chrissy warmed to her idea. 'Then, we could gather up paintings from his house in Taunton, set up a website and market them. That's ideal, the artist disappears. To the world and the art market, he becomes "a late artist, a dead artist". Then we drip-feed his work onto the market. I like it.' Chrissy beamed.

Amanda raised her eyebrows. 'Not so fast, Chrissy. They are his paintings. You must cut him in on the proceeds.'

'We'll be giving him free board and lodging. We can get someone in daily to do housekeeping for him. He can paint all day. What more could he want?'



The next day, Amanda was surprised to find that Chrissy owned three cars, with two parked in the garage, in addition to the Range Rover. There was a classic drophead MGB for summer days, as Chrissy put it, also a Mini Clubman.

Amanda had never owned a car of her own, having borrowed from her parents on occasions such as moving flat. Otherwise, she saw no point in owning a car in London. She could understand why a car was essential for living deep in the country, but three cars for a single person had to be excessive.

She chose the Mini for her expedition back to Taunton, armed with her photos of Chrissy's "cottage in the country", seeking to persuade cousin Timothy to visit for old time's sake. She arrived at his cluttered Taunton house bearing motorway-bought sandwiches, having said she would bring lunch for them both.

Amanda was surprised at his enthusiasm as she arrived back at Chrissy's "cottage in the country" later that afternoon with Timothy in the car with her. He was excited over the photographs of the one-time "Gramps Farm" and the idea of painting out in the open

air. He had quickly put sketch pads, acrylics and watercolour paints with a folding easel into a well-used rucksack and been impatient for Amanda to set off, chiding her for her belief that he never left his house.

If Amanda was surprised at Timothy's enthusiasm for his visit, Chrissy was astounded. Hearing the car return earlier than expected, she went out to commiserate with Amanda, stopping only when she saw she had a passenger, then stood with her mouth open as she realised who it was.

'And you must be grown up Christine,' Timothy greeted her.'

'How...'

'Chrissy, Timothy wants to have a real look around and do sketches of The Gramps old farm. He's told me he did a few sketches during that last summer we all stayed here, but the sketch book has gone missing over the years.'

'Timmy... Timothy, welcome back to the Farm. You should have come...' Chrissy managed to say in welcome, still puzzled to see him after Amanda's tale of how she had to persuade him to even open the door to her.

'I had no idea you were here in Devon. Let alone that you owned this place,' said Timothy. 'It looks a bit different. The farmhouse was covered in ivy when we were here all those years ago.' So saying, with no more delay, Timothy strode off toward the fields, away from the girls and the buildings, his rucksack on his back.

'Timothy, supper tonight, seven o'clock.' Chrissy called after her cousin. 'Don't be late.'



'I'm as flummoxed as you are, Chrissy,' Amanda watched the bubbles rise in her G&T. 'As soon as he saw the photographs of the farm, he was ready to come.'

‘He used to stay up late with The Gramps after we had been dispatched to our beds.’ Chrissy was thinking out loud. ‘He must have had a far better understanding with them.’

‘He has been very sweet all day, so changed from the reception I got when I went to see him on my ill-fated train journey stuck in Taunton.’

‘Did you manage to bring any of his paintings with you?’

‘Yes, a boot full, Timothy helped to load them into the car without asking why we wanted them.’ Amanda laughed. ‘I said I must show them to you as you didn’t believe me when I told you they were good and all over the house,’

Chrissy decided. ‘Tomorrow, we start a website to drum up the market for our dear, lamented cousin, the late Timothy, artist of Taunton town.’ Chrissy smiled.

‘Guess so.’ Amanda had her reservations over the scheme, but she could fight that battle another day.

‘Oh, that sketch-book Timothy spoke to you about. It must be the one The Gramps gave me when I stayed here on my own years later, before they sold up. They thought the book was mine. It must be at my flat.’

‘Your flat?’

‘Yes, I still have a flat in Exeter, the last place I lived, before I married Harold.’

‘I’m sure Timothy would like to have it. He mentioned the sketch book as we drove down. He had wanted it for his portfolio at Art School.’

‘I’ll get it when I next go to Exeter.’

Timothy was not back before they started supper.

‘Where can he be?’ Chrissy worried.

‘It’s almost dark, do you think he’s lost?’

‘Probably, I doubt he has too good a memory of the land. He’s either lost or fallen into a pond. Do you remember that?’ Chrissy laughed.

‘When the branch broke. He was trying to impress us with his tree climbing skill. That awful cracking sound.’

‘At least he got out on his own.’ Chrissy added.

‘The Gramps were very cross. They threatened to send him home. They told us a cow had drowned in the pond.

‘We can’t wait any longer for him. Let’s eat.’ Chrissy brought a dish from the Rayburn to the table revealing a shepherd’s pie she had made. ‘Probably not enough for three of us anyway.’



‘They had almost finished their supper when the phone rang.’

‘Timothy hasn’t got a mobile.’ Amanda stated.

Chrissy went into the next room to answer the landline. ‘Timothy, where are you?’ She listened for a while.

‘You are in the pub! The Royal Oak?’

‘With who?’

‘Dickie Netherby?’

‘I’ll come and get you, Timothy. We both will.’

Chrissy came back to the dining Room. ‘Come on, we’re going out, Amanda, Timothy is in the Royal Oak with Dickie Netherby.’

‘Dickie who?’

‘Netherby, he worked on the farm for The Gramps.’

‘The old man? He always looked frail, but he could lift sacks of corn, no bother.’ Amanda shook her head. ‘Frankly, I realise I’ve misjudged our cousin Timothy.’

Chrissy looked at her younger cousin. ‘Maybe, Amanda. However, I think he is an ideal subject for testing my theory of the increasing value of works by “Dead Artists”. We have to persuade him to come and live in one of the Barn Cottages, to disappear for a lengthy stay.’

‘Not that many people know about him.’

‘That’s our first task, to build up his story as an important, but late artist.’

After two weeks, Timothy was happily living in No 1, Barn Cottage, taking early morning walks into the fields to sketch. Then back to the Cottage and his new studio in the second bedroom, to work

up his pictures. Judging by the lights, he worked most nights for long hours.

The two cousins, in the main house, were surprised at the extent of his meals. At first, he had dined with them in the house, but was happy when it was suggested that his meals could be delivered over to the cottage. However, he didn't agree that a cottage cleaner should be arranged, say once a week, to visit and tidy up for him. He'd said he had a plan for cottage maintenance.

The website went live in the same week that the Government, fighting to stave off a National Epidemic, told the nation to stay home and not make any unnecessary excursions.

Amanda was happy to stay as a guest with Chrissy. Through an open window, Timmothy said he was happy to stay as he was. He had two notebooks of sketch ideas to paint into finished landscapes in his converted studio.



After a few weeks of the national lockdown, Amanda admitted to her cousin that she watched the lights of No 1, Barn Cottage at night, easily seen from her bedroom. The curtains were always drawn, but the lights in the rooms were turned on and off. This surprised her; she expected Timothy to be keeping long hours in his studio.

'I guess we are not meant to, but might we investigate?' Chrissy said.

Amanda agreed, 'The next time I know he has gone out sketching, I'll sneak over and look around to see how he is coping in his new home.'

A day later, Timothy was seen striding out into the fields with his rucksack over his shoulder. Amanda watched No 1, Barn Cottage, from her bedroom window. A curtain was pulled over, but no hand was seen of the person who cut out the daylight. Amanda waited a while longer before she crossed over to the cottage.

The kitchen was surprisingly tidy, no overdue washing up on the draining boards, all the cups and saucers, plates and cutlery tidied away in their rightful places, the dish towels hanging from hooks. Amanda doubted it was all Timothy's doing.

The studio was different. Beside his easel, on a small table, there was a half-full whisky bottle and two empty glasses, one with a lipstick smear on the rim.

Amanda lifted the cloth covering the canvas on the standing easel. It was not a country scene. She had to admit the model was beautiful; she was someone younger than either Chrissy or herself, yet there was a familiarity about the girl. Chrissy took a photo of the painting.

She resisted going into the other bedroom, its door was closed. Without a sound, she let herself out of the cottage and crossed back to the old farmhouse.

With a cup of coffee, she waited for Chrissy to get back from Tiverton. Wearing a mask, she'd told Amanda she had to do a big shop as they were running out of essentials.

Amanda looked again at the photo of the life study Timothy had on the main easel in his studio. There was no doubt he was a skilled portrait painter and excelled at figure painting. There was also little doubt the model had a familiar face, but Amanda couldn't place where she had seen the girl, maybe amongst the younger actors at the Soho Theatre. Or could the painting be from Timothy's imagination? But Amanda was certain there was someone else, no doubt the model, staying in the cottage with Timothy. Or could it be somebody in the public eye, sitting naked, glimpsing a confident smile at the artist?

Amanda went to the kitchen to pour another coffee. She heard a car turn into the yard. Chrissy was still wearing her face mask.

'It's all in the back. It should last us weeks unless Timothy invites more friends in... if he has any.'

'I think he does... have at least one friend with him in the cottage. I'll show you when we've got this lot stacked away in the fridges.'

A huge pile of boxes, tins, bags of fruit and a round cheese was brought in from the car.

‘I’ll make us both a coffee, strong mugs of coffee. I really don’t understand how I totally misjudged our cousin Timothy.’

‘But that was the Timothy you saw the night you were stranded in Taunton.’

‘It was, but maybe I should have read more into that incredible mural he has painted in the bathroom of his home, Aunt Charlotte’s old house. What would she have thought of his work?’

Chrissy laughed. ‘Amanda, you have to take the credit for getting Timothy to come down here, to see The Gramps old farm. That’s what has worked the transformation.’

‘Maybe... but does Timothy still measure up to your idea of a “Dead Artist?” He doesn’t fit the bill at all, sketching outdoors every day, even when it rains.’

‘It will be difficult,’ Chrissy conceded.

‘And the model in his latest painting? I’m certain he painted her from life. She is a familiar figure – to put it mildly. I’m sure I’ve seen her before, maybe on television or acting in some failing play. I think there is somebody staying with him in the cottage.’

‘Did you see who it is?’

‘No, but the place is too tidy for Timothy to be doing the house-keeping and there was a lipstick smear on one of two glasses in his studio.’ Amanda took out her mobile to find the picture on Timothy’s easel. ‘Have a look.’

Chrissy looked at Amanda’s mobile, a smile breaking on her surprised face. ‘Oh yes, she is familiar. We have both seen her, Amanda, and recently.’

‘Where?’ Amanda was puzzled.

‘In the Royal Oak, that first night you brought Timothy down here. She was behind the bar, mixing cocktails.’

‘No way! Perhaps you are right. I wonder who she is.’

‘Wonder no more. Amanda. She is Dickie Netherby’s granddaughter, Cassandra. Dickie described her as being at a loose end

and unable to get a job after doing her Master's with flying colours at Exeter in some rather technical field.

‘How did you learn all that?’

‘Dickie bent my ear as we extracted Timothy from the pub. Maybe we didn’t get him out quickly enough.’

‘How could my judgment of Timothy have been so wide of the mark? What has happened to him?’

Chrissy laughed. ‘Cassandra, has happened to him. You let him loose and off he went.’

‘What if that tree hadn’t fallen onto the rails that day. Would he still be the hermit painter of Taunton? I can’t make sense of it all. What do we do now?’

‘I know what we do. We invite Mr Timothy Sanders and his partner, Miss Cassandra Netherby, over here for dinner.’

The next day, an invitation was pinned to the door of No 1, Barn Cottage, asking Timothy and his partner to dinner.

Chrissy made an effort remembering the occasions she had played hostess for her husband Harold’s business contacts in their all-too-brief marriage. She managed separate courses, after making another trip to the shops, the morning before the planned dinner.

Salmon terrine with asparagus

Roast leg of lamb with sauteed potatoes and runner beans

Devon style Tiramisu or strawberry crumble

Local blue cheese and French biscuits

You can sort out the wines, Amanda, saying which, Chrissy gave her the key to the wine cellar Harold had stocked before his terminal heart attack.



Timothy was a changed man, constantly smiling, wearing an old, ill-fitting suit bought for a younger Timothy, if not a leftover from his father’s wardrobe, as he introduced his fiancée, Miss Cassandra

Netherby, a dashing young lady, dressed in a gown that would impress a whole ballroom given the chance.

Timothy's cousins were struck in silence for seconds before Chrissy half-stammered out the question of how long had Timothy and Cassandra been engaged.

'Since yesterday evening,' was Timothy's confident reply. We fixed it with Cassandra's grandparents this morning.'

'But aren't you a scientist, Cassandra?' Chrissy took the beaming young woman's hand.

'To be correct, I'm an unemployed scientist who will be marrying a secret artist while we set ourselves up as farmers over my grandfather's few remaining fields.'

'And Mine?' asked Chrissy.

'Given the offer, yes please.'

Later, while dinner was served, Cassandra again led the conversation, turning to Chrissy. 'I've seen your website, Chrissy. It is very good how you present Timothy's paintings, but I do think much of the wording will have to be changed if we are all going to enjoy the benefit from the sale of Timothy's paintings.'

For a moment, there was silence. But his cousins couldn't resist the broad grin on Timothy's face.

'My dear younger cousins, you have done me a great favour. Little did I know what a favour you were doing, Amanda, when you forced your way into my house that evening, the day my painting was stalling, however many weeks ago it was. Since then, everything has fallen into place. Dear Chrissy, you have taken me into your wonderful home, I have a new impetus in my life.'

For a moment, Timothy, his younger cousins and his even younger fiancée all looked from one to the other around the table, waiting for Timothy to continue.

'Maybe I am "a dead artist waking". I have broken free from my attic. I am saved from my secluded life by my wonderful cousins of such happy memories of The Gramps, and by Cassandra, a frustrated young scientist and wannabe farmer, who has awoken my agricultural being and agreed to be my partner in life'.

The three women were silent for a moment before Chrissy reached for the open bottle of wine. ‘Let me fill your glasses. Timothy, that was a wonderful speech. To The Gramps, they would be proud of you, dear Timothy.’



When the meal was over and everyone was sitting in relaxing chairs in a half circle in front of the log fire, Cassandra suggested cocktails would be a great way to celebrate the evening and all that had happened in the last few weeks.

For a while, Cassandra was busy with the tools of the cocktail trade before all were given her latest and greatest vivid concoction.

‘Here’s to everything,’ Chrissy announced, ‘I name this brilliant new cocktail, “THE GRAMPS SURPRISE”.

And congratulations to two new Devon Farmers, the Scientist and her Painter-man.’

It was late before they all weaved their tired way to bed after several more cocktails on that happy night in the old Devon farmhouse.



Summer Vacation

P.J.Reed



Amelia Taylor turned down yet another winding lane.

There was a scraping sound as untamed bramble branches dragged across the passenger side of her car. The paintwork squeaked. She groaned and steered to the right. A branch whipped across the side of the car, narrowly missing her face. Amy quickly retracted her arm and pressed a button. The window slid majestically upward. It was better to slowly desiccate in the unnatural summer heat than be ripped by the towering banks of green that lined the tiny lane.

The ‘Country Cousin Cottages’ advertisement had spoken of the converted barn being down ‘a series of quaint country lanes’ but had not prepared her for the ninety-degree turns or the wide strip of scrub grass growing in the middle of the road. According to the sat nav, which was wavering precariously on her dashboard, she was still on a road, but it looked to her more like a farm track.

Amy turned another blind bend and breathed a sigh of relief.

Peering down at her from above the dense green undergrowth of wild bushes was a grey stone farmhouse. She steered into a clearing in the woods, her car tyres crunching over the gravel driveway, which swung around to the back of the farmyard.

She slowed the car; parking between two flowering plum trees.

Cautiously, Amy opened the car door, slung a battered brown leather handbag over her shoulder, and manhandled an ancient leather suitcase from the boot. She looked at the instructions one more time. Satisfied that she was indeed in the correct place, Amy grabbed her suitcase and, with two hands tugging on the detaching handle, heaved the suitcase up the narrow muddy pathway, which opened out onto the silent farmhouse courtyard.

The farmhouse dominated the little courtyard, which was a rather grandiose name for a concrete car park edged with an assortment of ornamental grasses and the odd flowering bush. The farmhouse itself was a much grander affair with towering grey stone walls and a steel grey roof split into two wings, which formed one corner of the courtyard. Their roofs were topped with tall stone chimney stacks, which ended in red chimney pots.

The large white farmhouse door swung open, and an enormous middle-aged woman appeared. Her clothes were hidden by a bulging green apron gaudily declaring the delights of Devon fruitcakes.

‘Welcome to the Old Barn holiday cottage, m’dear. You be Miss A. Taylor?’ the lady said, squinting at the crumpled piece of paper in her hand. She shoved the paper into a substantial bra, which peered out from her white shirt, and thrust out her hand. Amelia shook it and nodded an affirmative.

‘Yes, Amelia, but my friends call me Amy,’ she smiled.

The lady smiled.

‘Good afternoon... err... Alison, wasn’t it? I’m Winnie Little. Let me show ’ee around the cottage. But I must be quick. I’ve thee family coming over an’ they’ll be wantin’ their tea.’

Amy was going to correct her host, but Winnie had disappeared. She rolled her light blue eyes and followed Winnie into the Old Barn Cottage, a small barn conversion nestled between the farmhouse and the surrounding woodland.

The first thing that hit her was the smell.

It was a mixture of old dog and mould.

Amy felt her heart sink. She gripped her suitcase tightly, her fingernails digging into the palms of her hand.

‘This be the kitchen, an’ next to it is the downstairs bathroom.’ Winnie swept a hand across the open space comprising all the electric goods necessary to create a kitchen. She opened the downstairs bathroom door. Sitting on the shelf to the left of the door, a Henry Hoover stared out mournfully. Obviously, the bathroom also doubled as a cleaning closet, which was quite ironic, as the room itself had rarely been cleaned. Its window, covered in a collection of dust-lined spider webs.

‘Upstairs be the bedroom to the left an’ main bathroom on the right.’ She looked at her watch. ‘Well, I must be goin’ there’s lots to do before thee children arrive.’ Winnie turned and bustled out of the Old Barn.

Amy called out, ‘Thank you,’ to her host’s back.

She puffed out her cheeks and climbed the narrow staircase, which seemed to twist back on itself as it rose. The suitcase bashed into the whitewashed wall several times and narrowly missed the piece of twisted wood on a slit window cut into the barn wall, halfway up the staircase.

The staircase opened onto a small landing.

Amy took the left turn and entered her bedroom for the weekend.

It was a cheerful little room with a pair of large French windows situated opposite the double bed, through which Amy could see the end of the farmhouse standing only ten metres away. A wall of low-lying windows ran around the right side of the bed. Amy grinned and pulled the amber leaf-print curtains shut. She didn’t want Winnie or any of the incoming relatives accidentally seeing her lounging in bed.

She jumped on the bed, which softly gave way under her body, as she stared at the beautiful wooden beams that formed an arched roof to the room. Amy smiled as she relaxed into the bed and felt the stress fall from her body.

Coming to Ashdurton has been a great decision.

It was ironic how one book could change your life.

She had picked up the battered copy of *Escape Your Fear Bubble* by Reverend P. Radcliffe from her local charity shop. Initially sceptical of first having a fear bubble and second escaping it, she had read the book from cover to cover... twice. It was then she had realised that her life consisted of work, housework, and pleasing her family and boyfriend. All of which was confined within a ten-mile radius of her East London flat. The realisation had hit her almost like a physical blow to her stomach, and she had decided to escape the microcosmic bubble that her life had become.

Amy had found the Old Barn Cottage while searching the internet. It didn't have many reviews, but it has everything she longed for – tranquilly, peace, and isolation.

She felt her eyes close and rolled over onto her side, wrapping the lavender-smelling, purple duvet around her body like a cocoon.

It had been a long drive.



Amy woke to the sound of screaming.

She lay in bed for a moment, uncertain of where she was, clutching the duvet to her chest. The screaming broke into giggles as gravel crunched outside her window and a child sang 'La- la-la,' in a high-pitched scream.

Amy groaned, discarded the duvet, and wandered across the green carpet towards the French window to see her new neighbours. Two little girls in summer dresses, their dark hair cut in severe lines just above their shoulders, were taking turns pushing a battered 'Little Tikes' police car across the gravel courtyard just in front of the main house. The eldest girl looked up. Amy waved. The girl watched her for a moment and carried on screaming across the courtyard.

Amy smiled ruefully.

So much for her quiet country retreat. She stretched and ran her hand through the knots at the back of her blond hair.

From the corner of her eye, she saw a shadow move across a small window set in the gable wall of the farmhouse, which looked directly down upon her bedroom. She squinted upwards. A dark-haired man stared back at her.

Amy blushed and waved at him.

The man took a sip from a brown glass bottle and continued to watch her. She backed away from the window and stumbled backward until the backs of her legs touched the bed. Amy sat down. A familiar feeling of panic started to rise from the pit of her stomach and squeeze at her chest. Amy tried to breathe deeply, in a relaxed manner, but felt herself hyperventilating as she gasped for breath. She jumped up, flung her suitcase open, and rummaged through the neatly packed layers until she found a scuffed, dog-eared book.

Amy sat cross-legged on the carpet beside the suitcase and flicked through the pages, stopping at a down turned page signalling the start of Chapter Five.

She read the first line. 'There is nothing to be scared of except your imagination; rationalise your fears and move on with your life from a position of strength. Do not let your own weakness define your life.' The first line had been highlighted in yellow. Amelia ran her hand through her hair. 'Rationalise your fears,' the word floated into her brain.

All she had seen was a man drinking at a window.

It was nothing.

She had to push past her fear bubble and move on with her life.

Amy got up and walked down the stairs, casting a furtive glance through the split window. As she suspected, no one was there looking back at her wearing a hockey mask and carrying a chainsaw.

She really had to stop watching so many horror movies.

Once downstairs, she made her way to the kitchen and filled up the kettle. Then, she opened one of the spacious pine cupboards, searching for a mug. Amy sneezed as a pungent odour oozed across the room. It was the acrid, earthy smell of mould, even though the kitchen glowed with freshly whitewashed walls. Amelia opened

another cupboard, sniffed, and closed the door. The whole kitchen reeked of decay.

The only place the mould could be hiding was behind the kitchen units. It was annoying but not catastrophic. She took a sparkling white mug from the cupboard, quickly closed the cupboard door again, and washed the mug thoroughly in the gleaming silver sink.

Amy poured herself a mug of tea and wandered into the living room.

A large, open-plan room filled with green settees arranged on three sides of a square around a pine coffee table, facing the television. The room itself was tastefully decorated with relics from the countryside: a jam jar, a large brown china jar marked 'Finest Scrumpy,' several vases of dried flowers, and assorted flowered china.

Unfortunately, the clean walls and polished woodwork could not detract from the fact that the room smelled of mould. Amy sneezed again and opened the horizontal window, which ran along the right-hand side wall of the living room.

The front door rattled and groaned as it swung open.

Amy froze. Her heart thumping in her chest. The cup in her hand spilling hot tea over the pale green carpet.

'Only me... Alison!' Winnie called out as she walked into the cottage and placed a large tray of sturdy looking scones on the kitchen table, closely followed by the two sombre girls, one carrying a plastic pot of clotted cream, the other a jam jar. 'I forgot to bring 'ee my little welcome to Ashdurtton, a traditional Devonshire tea. I made 'ee some scones, homemade blackcurrant jam, an' some clotted cream.'

She turned and spoke to the girls. 'Put the things on thee table, my loves.'

'Oh yes,' she smiled. 'I forgot to leave this with you.' She handed Amy a flower-covered book entitled 'Guest Comments.' 'My guests always leave such nice comments. Make sure 'ee don't forget to write in it before 'ee goes on Sunday morning, before ten o'clock.' She handed Amy the book and bundled the girls to the door.

'Er... thank you,' said Amy as she walked into the kitchen diner and stared at the plateful of scones. She paused for a moment. 'Um...

it's a beautiful place here. I saw cattle grazing in the field when I drove in. Is your husband a farmer then?' She asked as casually as possible.

'He was but poor Mr Little died near five years ago in a tractor accident. God rest his soul. It's just me an' the kids. My son Peter, daughter Kayleigh, an' thee grandkids now. Peter sees to thee cows an' chickens, but 'ee's out this evenin'. It's just the five of us 'ere. So, 'ee can 'ave a lovely quiet stay.'

She patted the youngest child on the head, took both children by the hand, and left.

Amy smiled and waited for them to leave, then dashed to the kitchen and wiped the wet tea from the front of her light blue sweat-shirt. An ominous brown stain appeared on the blue. She stripped the offending garment off and left it soaking in the sink. Perhaps she had just imagined the face in the window?

It had been a long drive, and her parents had always warned her about the dangers of an overactive imagination.

She walked into the living room and sat on the green high-backed sofa as she flicked through the visitor's book, wondering if any previous guest had complained of the mouldy smell or more importantly, a strange man staring at them through the bedroom window.

Unfortunately, apart from the lack of a Wi-Fi signal, nothing negative had been mentioned at all. Everyone who stayed had loved the quiet Devon countryside of dark green fields intersected with hedges teeming with wildlife, or walking through the ancient, twisted trees of Ashdurton Wood. Some holidaymakers had even drawn pictures in the book - a favourite plant, the hedgerows or the local ginger cat, which looked more like a tiger/spider cross with overlong legs and a tall, pointed tail. Someone, probably a child, had graffitied in the book, writing a random letter in the corner of each right-hand page.

She flicked through the pages; the letters spelt - GETOU.

It obviously meant something to the kid, but Amy knew little about children, except they seemed to make a lot of noise for their size ratio and should be avoided at all costs. She placed the book on

the wooden coffee table. It served Winnie right for forcing people to write in the bloody book; she thought with a grin.

Amy sneezed and wiped her nose on a neatly folded napkin.

The mould smell was definitely strong in the living room, and the bricks of the open fire, which dominated the little room, were sprinkled with dust. Here and there, spider's web dangled from the white ceiling like forgotten Halloween decorations.

The old barn conversion had been cheap and empty in the height of the summer season. It had been too good to be true, but it would be an excellent base for exploring Exmoor and the beaches. If she didn't contract some sort of flesh-eating disease first. Amy shook her head, physically cleansing her brain from such negative thoughts – a tip she had learnt from reading the Reverend P. Radcliffe.

She shook her head one more time and turned the television set on.

The light flashed red and died. It was not a promising start, but she had her iPad in her suitcase and luckily, had the world of Netflix box sets to enjoy. Perhaps an early night would do her good? Everything always looked better in the morning. She went to the kitchen to pour herself a cup of metallic tasting water and went upstairs to her bedroom. Netflix in bed sounded like a great night in after the trauma of the breakup.

Amy walked into the little bedroom and stopped.

A frown swept across her forehead.

Her suitcase was on the floor at the end of her bed, just as she had left it. Except she did not understand why her best white lacy bra and matching knickers set were lying on top of the rest of her carefully folded clothes?

'Shit!' she cursed. 'I must be in a worse state than I thought.' An unwanted thought settled in her brain. Perhaps she should go and get some tranquilizers like her ex had suggested? After she had finally broken free of her fear bubble and thrown him and his soul-crushing asides out of her life.

She carefully refolded the garments and collected her 'Prosecco Princess' pink pyjamas from the bottom of the case, stepped towards

the bathroom, and promptly fell down the step which led to the slightly sunken room.

A large black spider watched her in terror from the sink.

Amy struggled up from the green carpeted floor, quickly rubbing her sore knee and apologised to the spider.

Minutes later, she was wallowing in the bliss of a deep, hot bath. The stars thrown across the falling velvet blue sky twinkled at her through the skylight placed just over the bath. She closed her eyes and slid further into the water. The day's tension ebbed slowly from her pale body. The Old Barn Cottage might not have been as idyllic as the Country Cousins website had stated, but it was good to get away.

She could heal here.

Low voices cut through the silence.

Amy's eyes blinked open. She looked up at the skylight, which had been left slightly ajar on the hot summer evening. More muffled chatter floated through the open window. Amy bit her lip as she stared suspiciously at the window. The Old Barn Cottage was lit up like a beacon in the darkness. The skylight was angled diagonally towards the garden behind the cottage. There were people outside the cottage, standing just below the bathroom. Why would anyone do that she mused?

Amy gasped in horror as she realised that they were watching her through the angled glass reflection.

Amy stifled a scream and leapt from the bath, backing into the far corner of the bathroom, between the radiator and the toilet. She quickly dried herself with the complimentary white mini-towel and threw on her pyjamas.

She stood there panting for a minute.

The voices outside grew louder, and feet crunched across the gravel as they began to circumnavigate the barn.

Amy's fear bubble exploded in terror.

She thought back to the guest book. The random letters scribbled in the corner of the pages. GETO. Amy spelt them out and gasped as the words 'Get Out' burned into her brain.

She ran from the bathroom, threw her suitcase together, and leapt down the stairs. Amy grabbed her handbag from the kitchen table and ran to the door. Her shoes, which had been neatly positioned by the front door, had vanished.

Discordant voices came from the side of the cottage.

Amy ran to her car, the gravel pricking into her bare feet as the suitcase bumped against her legs. She rummaged through her handbag. The keys were hiding in the broken lining, with shaking hands, Amy pressed the unlock and jumped into the safety of her car. She locked the doors. Then turned the headlights on full. Caught in the full beam, Winnie and a younger version of herself backed away from the blinding light, covering their faces with their arms. Amy slammed the car into reverse and roared backwards down the gravel drive. The car turned sharply to the left and disappeared down the lane.



Winnie and Kayleigh looked at each other and shrugged.

Some city people just could not cope with the deafening silence and blackness of the countryside once night fell.

The youngest grandchild picked something up from the gravel and gave it to Winnie. It was a mobile phone, one of those expensive iPhone things, the city people liked so much. Its case sparkling in the lights of the farmhouse. It was useless. Ashdorton Wood stopped all mobile signals and was what the man from BT called a 'black spot.'

'Look at this girl! It must have dropped out of her handbag.' She waved the book under Kayleigh's sharp nose. 'We'd better check the cottage an' make sure 'ee didn't leave any valuables or inappropriate items behind. You'd be surprised at what some holidaymakers pack in their suitcases. 'Tis enough to make 'ee blush.'

She took a crumpled piece of paper from her bosom.

‘Miss A. Taylor, 14, Burridge Court, Tower Hamlets, London, perhaps next time Petie goes off on his wanderings, ’ee can deliver ’er the mobile in person. He’d like that. He’s always such a friendly boy.’

‘Oh Ma, there you go always thinking ’bout your guests,’ Kayleigh’s expressionless face almost cracked into a smile.

‘Come on, kids, back to the farmhouse. We need to get up early tomorrow. Chickens don’t feed themselves,’ Kayleigh shouted into the shadows. The four of them trooped back to the tall farmhouse, its yellow lights blazing through the black night sky.



Peter swore furiously under his breath.

He rolled out from underneath the double bed, carefully putting the arm with the skinning knife above his head, so he would not accidentally slice himself. Petie crawled to the end of the bed, and with the help of the heavy amber curtains, pulled himself onto the bed. His joints moaned painfully at him for being rigid for so long. His head pounded with disappointment. The pulsing adrenaline ebbing away as a feeling of crushing depression washed over his body. Petie kicked at the trail of clothes strewn across the light green carpet.

The lacy bra and pants fell at his feet, and he sniffed them one more time. They smelt exotic, like some brand of fancy perfume that the scantily dressed women on TV wore. He quickly stuffed them into his blue boiler suit pocket to use later, when his Ma and the girls were sleeping.

Peter was about to leave the room when he noticed the book that had been dropped carelessly onto her bed.

He turned it over and read the title, *Escape Your Fear Bubble* by Reverend P. Radcliffe.

He flicked through the book.

Then sniffed the browning pages.

It was in relatively good condition. Perhaps it was just what he needed?

He slid the book next to his naked skin under his boiler suit and headed to the back to the shabby Land Rover he had parked in the woods behind the farmhouse. He could read it while he waited. He wasn't due to return from Ashdurton until after pub closing time.

Perhaps the book would give him the confidence to leave this godforsaken shithole once and for all? Single female holidaymakers were so rare in Ashdurton. The ache between kills was getting almost unbearable. He unzipped his boiler suit, took the lacy knickers from inside, and rubbed them against the slight rash of dark stubble spreading across his face. They felt warm and soft to touch, like a freshly dead body. Her odour still lingered on the delicate fabric.

In the distance, he saw the upstairs lights of the farmhouse go out and his home fade into blackness. He leant over and opened the glove compartment, an array of delicate underwear spilling over the little door. Petie shoved the bra and pants inside the straining compartment.

He turned the key in the spluttering ignition and smiled as he drove home through the black lanes. Next weekend he might even pay her a visit. If only he could find her address.



The Woolcombe Werewolf

Brian Willis



Wolves were hunted to extinction by the 18th century.

There are many legends of wolf-like, devilish creatures, particularly around Dartmoor and Exmoor. Devil's Footprints and the Beast of Bodmin Moor come to mind.

There is a mention of an archaeological find of a human skeleton in the area around Lynton and Lynmouth, with a wolf's head.

Folklore has it that "were" animal transformations, involving wolves or similar beasts. As with the "Devil's Footprints" mentioned earlier, in 1855 in South Devon, it is said, "there were tracks of a cloven-hoof-like beast in the winter snow stretching for over 100 miles."

These were believed to be made by a supernatural demonic entity. Cutty Dore (Ashburton). There is the legend of Cutty Dore, a local menacing creature described as a demon or monster that haunts the River Yeo (now Ashburn River), believed to snatch children. While specific "werewolf" myths are rare.

The combination of Devon's sparse population and moorlands provides a backdrop for supernatural wolf-like creatures, stories often linked to devil lore.

A werewolf can be destroyed, it is said, a silver bullet is the favoured method, through the heart or the head. Mercury is as good as a silver bullet, hence the name “quicksilver”. Removing the heart or head is another way of destroying a werewolf or lycanthrope, to use another name for such creatures. Both are humans that turn into wolf-like creatures, often when there is a full-moon. January 2, 3, or 4, this year of writing, 2026, was a “wolf” moon. The moon comes closest to Earth, and it appears to be 14% larger and 30% brighter than a normal full moon, so called in the Northern Hemisphere because it was believed to be the time of the year when wolves howled more due to a scarcity of food.

So, wrote Tarquin Smith, seated at the table in his motor caravan parked in an out of the way, woody spot overlooking a remote valley in Exmoor, North Devon, he was writing a treatise of Exmoor legends. His intention was to submit it to the Barnstaple Gazette, which had previously published some of his work. He was a freelance writer, more than a journalist. He did earn money from his writing work, not enough to live on, though. Finally, he was well set up, having been left a large legacy from the passing of a maiden aunt whom he didn’t even know of.

Both his parents had passed away nearly 4 years ago. He was an only child. He had once been married, but his wife had been killed in a terrorist bomb attack in central London. Needless to say, this left him devastated.

His 60th birthday was fast approaching. He was unmarried, attached to no one in particular. Although he got on well with most people, he was basically a loner. He was very much, in life, an observer of life, an outsider looking in. A gibbous-humpbacked moon shone down, sometimes obscured by nebulous clouds of ill-defined shapes. All was sinister. Still, not even an owl screeched. The silent curtain was violently ripped apart by a vibrant and terrifying howl. The moonshine was obliterated by the awesome shape of a gigantic wolf. Its howl shattered Tarquin’s eardrums.

Near to where Tarquin was staying in his campervan was a large private estate surrounded by high brick walls with razor spikes all over the top. It was virtually impossible to surmount in or out.

The great iron gates that were the only entrance, were wide open. Inside was a large flatbed lorry with its tailgate dropped. A huge cage, which had been burst open, had unsuccessfully retained the huge occupant that was intent on giving Tarquin some severe pain.

One of the flatbed lorry's occupants held up what looked like a large bazooka. He discharged it. His aim was true and accurate; the creature was felled so close to Tarquin he got the full blast of the great beast's hot and foul-smelling breath.

In an instant, he was surrounded by heavily armed men, then forced by gunpoint to another lorry, the convoy. He was strapped down on a gurney, then injected using a hypodermic.

He blacked out.

When he finally came to, struggling to open his eyes, everything seemed jet black. Finally, his vision cleared. There was a thin shaft of light from high up, in what can be described as a dungeon. He stood up unsteadily and stumbled forward, but only managed about 6 ft. He had an iron clasp on his right ankle with a heavy-gauge iron chain attached; this was riveted to the dark, towering granite wall of the prison.

Why on earth was he here? What had he done to incur this unwarrantable incarceration?

There was the sound of a hefty key being turned, a formidable lock. The metallic grinding of a heavy door being opened. As it slowly opened, bit by bit, light flooded in. When it finally opened, Tarquin could see a group of a hundred men in dark, nondescript, what could best be described as uniforms. This gang was completely black. No colour visible. Their headgear too, was black. It resembled the type of flying helmet worn by RAF fighter pilots in shape. All were wearing reflective glasses. It made it impossible for Tarquin to assess anything about them as individuals.

The huge door was now open wide; Tarquin found himself surrounded and hemmed in by this homogeneous unit of strange beings.

Could they even be human?

He was marched along what seemed to be an endless corridor with monotonous walls and ceiling, which finally led into a holding prison. He became extremely fatigued and finally blacked out, which was just as well. If his conscious mind had not shut down, he would have lost all reason and become a zombie-like incompetent. Time, which to Tarquin was like the passing of eons, moved on. Slowly, he awakened from his extreme torpor. He became aware that he was in a richly furnished room.

Seated on a throne-like chair was a conservatively dressed gentleman sporting a monocle with a mild grin across his lips.

"I suppose you are wondering where you are and why you're here. Furthermore, why the complicated subterfuge used to get you here? I will explain. I am the head of an unknown, secret department of the Ministry of Defence. Its brief is to follow up any strange, unexplained phenomena that has been reported to any government department or branch of the armed forces. Well, you wrote about one of these events in North Devon without knowing what you were doing. Your intention, as a freelance journalist, was to submit it to the North Devon Gazette as a story of interest.

We could not let this happen.

It was reported to us that an object from outer space crashed in Antarctica and penetrated deep into the Antarctic ice cap, releasing something that had frozen for eons. It was huge and now alive.

Alive but comatose, this unknown species of creature floated on the surface of the Antarctic water with blocks of sporadic icebergs all around it, which helped to buoy the creature up. A British Antarctic survey vessel had spotted this phenomenon and radioed its base. Arrangements were made to deal with this situation. This was done and the being was transported in a van, in a very complicated and roundabout way.

How this was done is not important to you.

What is important is that it was being taken to a remote North Devon secret research centre to be secured and observed. Before this could happen, it woke up and escaped from the lorry that was transporting it, which is when you came across it. The rest, up to a point, you know.”

“I am afraid,” said the monocled man, “you will have to be incarcerated for the duration of the ‘unidentified creature’ situation is resolved.”

Tarquin started an outburst of protest; he was silenced immediately.

The monocled man continued, as I said, “you will be retained in our care, not in a prison; perhaps my choice of ‘incarcerate’ was the wrong one to use. Your accommodation will be five-star equivalent; you will remain there until the whole creature situation is resolved.”

Tarquin mentally shrugged his shoulders. He thought to himself, things could be a lot worse. He could have been ripped apart by the creature when it escaped from the lorry.

Captain Tarquin Morgan looked from the bridge of the ice breaker ship that he commanded.

Although an icebreaker, which was meant to cut through thick ice to clear the way for other vessels, instead it was stuck fast itself, in ice up to deck level.

It was going nowhere.

This was in Antarctica, the coldest place on Earth, with temperatures ranging from between -45°C to 60°C . It can be as cold as -100°C due to wind chill.

The first mate, Jack White, scanned the horizon with his high-powered binoculars. He saw something that intrigued him. It looked like an iceberg. This was strange. The rest of the area was an ice plain that had been that way for possibly eons in time. So, an iceberg suddenly being there, Jack called over the captain and drew his attention to the anomaly.

Captain Morgan’s ship was also used for surveying, so checking this out came under its remit, so he beckoned to ask for volunteers from his crew to man a five-man task force and go and check it

out. The men loaded it up with as much equipment and supplies as it could, this would take some time. The prospective journey would be fraught with danger. Although the terrain looked level, it undoubtedly would have splits and even chasms which had to be negotiated. Captain Morgan was checking any natural or meteorological phenomenon that could have caused the iceberg situation. He noticed that some weeks previously, a fishing vessel at the edge of the vast icefield saw a fireball or meteor crash down from the sky, breaking through the Antarctic ice sheet.

It was then when the iceberg slowly appeared. This was noted in the ship's logbook, and it went on its way.

It must be the inappropriate phenomenon that he saw before him, mused the captain. It seemed to him that the fireball had melted the surface of the ice sheet, allowing the iceberg

object to rise to the surface. Looking through his binoculars, he could see his volunteer crew making painstaking progress to the iceberg. He could only wait the outcome.

The first mate of the crew manned the harpoon gun at the bow of the exploratory ice tractor, in case something untoward happened.

The ship had formerly been an Icelandic whaling ship, so it had all the accoutrements of an active whaling ship. When the tractor got up close to the iceberg-like object, the first mate discharged the harpoon gun. It struck its target and stuck fast. The harpoon was attached to a strong cable on a heavy metal reel. The first mate slowly reeled it in. In so doing the "iceberg" began to break up for it wasn't a true iceberg; it had no depth. Also, it was clear with apparent air bubbles in it.

In the middle of it was a huge dark shape; the harpoon hitting the iceberg caused it to split apart, disclosing the massive outline of the object retained in it.

The first mate told the boatswain to steam the boat alongside the strange entity. Up close, the first mate was perplexed as to what this was. It was about twice the size of a gazelle, which would be 8 ft. Its head was, however, wolf-like.

The monocled man and his team from the obscure Ministry of Defence department with no name, virtually unknown. Having no rank as such, but seniority counting for leadership, gathered around the creature. Heavily sedated as it was, they had to decide what was their next move. All biological tests and examinations had proven inconclusive; it did not fit into any known living group or species.

The unanimous decision was to deep-freeze it and secure it in a former World War Two deep bunker and pack it with large blocks of ice, and seal it up like a time capsule for future generations to deal with.

The situation was dealt with to the satisfaction of all.
Deep under the Antarctic ice, something stirred!



‘Trapped’

The Winning Flash Fiction pieces
from Ottery Literary Festival 2022



My Safe Place – Bella Tiley (Age 11)

This is my place. Confined. Confronting. Yet mine.

For as long as I can remember, I have been patrolling these corridors, searching, scrutinising for a subtle change, a chance for the infinite twisting corridors to end. Robust brick walls loomed over my every turn, yet this was comforting, homely.

I am the ghost. The ghost of the castle. Darkness is where I belong. Gliding silently over the paving, mist meeting with granite. I know these tunnels like the back of my hand (not that I can see it) and I will always belong here, for ever more and beyond. Or so I thought.

Hissing taunts at the deer heads on the walls, rasping orders at the rusty suits of armour. Juggling the bullets in the cabinet, whispering to my shadowy friends, I am the ruler of my prison.

Unknown and insignificant, I make use of my lowly life; marveling at the banshees, and wishing their honour were mine. I snigger

at the poltergeists, admiring their common heists, and whisk hurriedly after the orbs, their fun, I soak up and absorb.

All was peaceful and safe: the occasional skeletons waltzing past, the ghost children giggling as they raced to be first in line.

Then one day, everything changed. Sunlight slapped us all in the face with the force of a tsunami as the large oak doors that had been sealed for so long, swung open. Spirits who had been directly in front of the doors, including the choir of beautiful banshee, withered before my eyes and dropped to the ground, letting out terrible shrieks of pain and despair. Skeletons, ghosts, vampires and shadow fiends began fleeing for their lives, sobbing and begging, shepherding their infants towards cupboards and trapdoors.

I am no longer trapped, but freedom isn't always a good thing.



The Crash Scene – Alyson Hilbourne

See ...

... the straight road, lined with sentinel spruces, the lorry, jack-knifed across it like a wounded animal, the driver's white face looming behind the windscreen.

... the car overturned on the verge, bonnet crumpled, one wheel spinning forlornly in the air.

... a child's plush toy dinosaur, its paint box colours gaudy on the grey tarmac.

... the police car arrive, the young constable view the scene and suck in his breath.

Taste ...

... the ferrous tang as the constable bites his lip. His first accident scene. His first day out alone.

... bile rising sourly in his throat. He swallows and girds himself to investigate.

What will he find? Could anyone survive? He turns off the siren and steps out of his car.

Smell ...

... the resinous aroma from the trees, reminding him of family Christmases, a warm room, fairy lights and presents stacked under the tree.

... a sharp chemical odour that tickles inside his nose and sticks to the back of his throat.

Something is leaking. He gives an involuntary shudder and bounds towards the car.

Hear...

... boots crunch on the tarmac.

"Wasn't my fault, mate. She came out of nowhere." The lorry driver stands beside him.

The constable looks up. The driver's eyes are dilated, his skin pale. His forehead carries a slick sheen.

Shock, the constable thinks, but his attention is on the overturned vehicle.

"Can you help?" he asks.

The shadow of the car driver, trapped upside down by the seat belt is visible through the splintered windscreen.

He grips the door handle and pulls.

"Come on!"

He tugs and braces a foot against the side panel.

The sharp click as the door releases echoes round the trees. He takes the woman's weight as the lorry driver releases the clasp. Together they half lift, half drag her from the car. A jammy smudge of blood congeals on her forehead.

Laid on the grass, she opens her eyes, and starts, searching for something she cannot see.

"My baby!" Her shrill voice slices through the forest silence.

He breathes deeply to slow the hammering in his chest.

A baby?

He didn't see a child.

He approaches the car again, the smell of fuel stronger.

The forest is brooding, the quiet oppressive. He swallows and licks his lips.

The rear passenger door is open.

A wail, like an alarm, engages from somewhere beyond the vehicle, low at first and

cranking up to a higher, fiercer pitch.

Before he can move, the air around him is sucked away, in a loud whoosh, as the car erupts in flames.

Heat tries to scald him as he circles it, eyes stinging, to find still strapped in a car seat, a toddler, face twisted in fury, fists tight, mouth opening for another yell.

Angry, but alive.

Feel ...

... relief hit him like an uppercut, making him stagger.

For a moment he shuts his eyes, letting the warmth of the flames wash over him,

before he releases the catch and lifts the writhing toddler into his arms ...



Wenna's Walls – Max Bowler (Age 10)

No one remembered why the walls were built, no one wished to leave either. No one except Wenna.

Wenna was still young, but her bright black eyes looked weary. She wore a rough cloak that floated over her thin, bony body and

her long hair hung lifelessly, soaking wet from her walk in the rain on their hunt for food.

'You must follow the rules, the rules keep you alive,' commanded Wenna's mother.

Wenna knew the rules off by heart.

1. No one can leave the forest.
2. Never go outside of the cave after the sun goes down.
3. No asking questions.

But Wenna had asked many questions, until her mother had become angry and stopped speaking at all. Her mother meant well but her words were sometimes unkind. Wenna wondered about the mysterious scars on her mother's back or why her mother never allowed her to go out alone, and the strange noises that she heard outside in the darkness of the night.

Until that night, the night when Wenna woke up with a jolt. Her ears pricked up at the strange shrieking sounds coming from outside her cave. Cautiously, Wenna crawled out of her rough straw bed and tiptoed towards the entrance to the cave. She held her breath, looked back at her mother sleeping in her bed and swiftly left her home.

Wenna stopped. She stared at the serene sky. It was a cloak of darkness, like the one Wenna wore on her back. Except this sky cloak had been sprinkled with precious gems that shimmered and twinkled in glistening colours. She stood mesmerised by it all.

Just at that moment, they saw her. The creatures. Gliding effortlessly, they swooped down towards her. They pulled at Wenna's cloak, picking her up, high, high into the darkness of the night sky. Just as quickly as they had picked her up, they let her go.

Shadows surrounded her as she fell. Wenna felt the wind rushing through her matted hair. She was like a magnet attracted to the ground. Faster and faster, she hurtled towards the mossy earth. Wenna closed her eyes and braced herself for the impact. As she closed her eyes, she felt a strange sensation and then the rush of wind stopped.

Slowly opening her eyes, she realised she had stopped falling and was hovering in the air. She looked over her shoulder and saw why.

Her wings were nearly as tall as her body and were a beautiful blend of brown, speckled with gold. With a heavy stroke of her wings, she soared through the heavens.

With a sense of unease, she realised the creatures were now flying beside her. Looking closely at them, she recognised they had the same bright black eyes and long hair as she did. Wenna realised that she was one of them, a bird. Together they flew over the forest walls and into the vibrant glow of a new sunrise. A new life where she could be free.



Unravelled Life – Rosemary Gemmell

Ellen picked up the tiny pearl, translucent with promise, a perfect sphere. Fashioning an eight knot to secure the bead, she threaded the next pearl, taking her time to admire her work. She looped the thread once then brought the end over and under, tightening it to form the knot to hold this one in place.

Her mistress expected perfection even now.

Pausing to dash a sudden tear from tired eyes as her work was nearing its end, Ellen tried not to think of the coming days. She had been a good and loyal seamstress to her young mistress, mending rich fabrics that had protected the wearer from cold castles and hard rides over rough ground. Sewing elaborate Turk's head knots to attach small buttons on silken gowns for grander affairs.

How could a life unravel so completely? Like the unpicked hems of the little girl who had returned from foreign shores, promised a kingdom that now proved her undoing.

Ellen stood to rub her lower back before her mistress returned from the short daily walk that was her only release from the imprisonment she now faced. Ellen knew of the ill-fated marriages, of the courtly plots and political turbulence. But most of all she appreciated the tall, noble woman who loved her people, who showed kindness to those undeserving of it, and who allowed tolerance in worship that many denied.

Lifting the pearl-studded headdress, Ellen set it aside for approval, admiring the way the scant light from the narrow window illuminated each bead. She picked up the favourite pearls that would never again encircle the pale slender neck at courtly balls and colourful pageants. It lay heavy and cold in her gnarled, knotted fingers, swollen with age and intricate sewing tasks.

Hearing light footsteps approaching the door, Ellen waited.

Her mistress seemed in good spirits today, pacing about the room as though her energy could not be contained in such a small space.

"It is such a beautiful day, Ellen, that I wanted to ride across the countryside, the wind tugging at my hair, the sun on my face, thawing this ice gripping my heart. Why do they still lock me up when I mean my cousin no harm?"

Ellen stood silently, while her mistress removed her warm plaid and settled in her chair once more. No answer was expected, but she always listened with discretion and love for the girl who waited in vain for freedom.

"Pass me my embroidery, please, Ellen. I see you have finished securing the pearls to my headdress. Thank you."

Ellen curtsied and passed the embroidery and threads, for her mistress was as fine a needlewoman as any.

"I must finish this before..."

Mary's voice faltered for the first time, as Ellen watched her sew the next French knot that showed her fine stitching. And her heart broke for this beautiful young woman, Queen of Scots, whose life would end too soon in cruel execution.



It May be Futile – Annabelle Harper (Age 15)

Emma's pen pattered against the desk in a sporadic rhythm as she rested her chin in her other hand, slouching in defeat while her eyes drifted to the window. Through the glass, a lone sparrow fluttered about the chain link fence that separated the school from the outside world. It danced and bounced on intangible platforms, daring to get closer and closer with every flap. Eventually its game of cat and mouse with the stationary object came to an end as the small bird darted through the gap.

Well, it tried to fly. It tried to dash through the diamond shaped hole. It tried to leave. Emma didn't quite understand how it'd happened but her head perked up slightly and posture straightened in anticipation as the little creature managed to wedge itself between the wiring. She could see the sparrow still momentarily in shock. Complete paralysis overtaking it. She watched in fascination as the realisation of its predicament settled in like morning dew. She could almost feel the panic and dread begin to rise, and rise it did.

The little bird beat its wings experimentally, once, twice - brown and black speckled feathers slowly increasing their tempo, testing the limits of its freedom. Then it grew frantic. Its wings mocked a hummingbird as it thrashed its tiny body, delicate feet clawing at the sleek plastic. The tapping of Emma's pen accelerated in tandem with the bird, sympathetic background music to its struggle.

Her face was blank despite the pitiful scene. She really should've been paying attention to her teacher, droning on and on about the importance of quadratics, but the sparrow commanded her attention with the same level of mercy it received from the stoic fence. She couldn't wrench her eyes away from the embodiment of futility, it's endless endeavour to be free, and eternal perseverance gaining it

nothing but exhaustion and pain. The window was closed, but she could see the wailing chirps that would've spilled from its open beak. It wriggled uselessly, trapped between the bars of a cage not meant for it.

Pitiful yet mesmerising.

Eventually the bird slowed and with it, Emma's morbid interest dwindled. Her hand grew tired and she slowed the sympathetic battering of her pen. Turning the other cheek to the now dull sparrow in favour of algebraic equations. The teacher was now handing out worksheets they had to complete for homework. Emma wondered what the canteen would have for lunch. There was only twenty minutes left of the lesson and the walls of the classroom weren't getting any more interesting with the passage of time.

Only a passing thought held questions of the unfortunate sparrow's survival. Maybe the caretaker would spot it and free it. She didn't bother wasting any glances out the window, where she was sure it hadn't yet given up.

Ten minutes later, she finally stopped tapping her pen.



Peacock Kite – Cheryl Burman

The boy is too small. The kite too big.

Blustering squalls which whip the grasses sloping to the cliff edge tumble the kite through a louring evening sky like a nest-less fledgling. Its ribboned tail tangles in a snarl of colours. The boy clings to the line, arms tight against its drag. His head bobs, keeping time with his flying toy.

I squint into the wind. Where is the father who this morning laughed with this boy on the sunny beach, guiding his small hands on the line?

Petrichor had hung in the air, as much proof of the passed shower as the glistening drops which turned the sea thrift to pink tourmaline. I had stooped to gather the rosette-hearted flowers, curious if their semblance to the jewel might keep the devils in their hells. For a time.

Roused by a child's joyous shriek, I lifted my head to find the father, son, and the glorious kite. Peacock-shaped, brilliant wings outstretched, its tail feathers coursed across a fresh-washed sky.

Turning back to my gathering, my hand hovered over the tempting yellow poison of horned poppy. No. I touched a finger to my 'tourmaline' and snipped grey fronds of wormwood. Healing fronds, pressed to cuts and bruises. Should they be called for.

The boy had run along the sand, the kite filling his world. The father proffered me a quick glance and strode away.

Now, on the cliff top, a tumultuous wind eddies around the kite, tosses it higher, still higher. The kite surges, falls, gorging on the gusts to soar above the white-capped waves thundering against the rocks below. Gulls rise from their nests, screeching reproof.

The boy's eyes are fixed on the kite. His feet slither on wet grass, legs taut, body unbalanced. The peacock wings swallow the turbulence, swelling and collapsing in imitation of the billowing waves. They yank the boy, tugging, hauling him towards the gulls – towards the plummeting drop.

Four more stumbling steps. Three. Two ...

Let go! I scream against the wind. Let go!

He cannot let go, cannot escape the kite's unrelenting drag. The boy is as ensnared as a fish on a worm-laden hook.

No time to ponder, to consider the consequences of confirmation.

I spread my arms, body lifting ... and I am flying ... fighting the storm ... arms braced, fingers clawed to pluck and save ...



Lament of a Poet's Wife – Melanie Barrow

Toil from day to dusk I do, in this damp, rat-infested cottage. Yet *he* grandly announced that *he'd* keep no servant, *he'd* work hard tending the pig, gardening, cooking. Huh! Fancy words - oh yes he's good at those, but it's me that's left working till my back aches.

Rest, that's what he does best, lying in bed all day with some illness or other, drinking that poison which those Wordsworths say fuels his creativity. *I* can read, *I* can speak French, *I* can write, *I* was proficient in mathematics, does he ever consider that *I* might like to sit at a desk and scribble about the baby at midnight instead of changing and feeding it? How can *I* rest when there's water to fetch, meat to be taken to the baker to cook, the pig to feed, and now even a lodger for me to care for?

Artist's like him don't earn a regular wage. 'Get a proper job,' I implore 'so I can pay the tradesmen's bills - poems don't pay them.' If only he were more like that nice Mr Poole - so courteous and friendly and with such a lovely house and library. 'Help yourself' he said to me - not just to Samuel. Those Wordsworths never talk to me like that, I'm just their skivvy. He does such a lot for the village too, setting up the women's society and a bank and school too.

Politics and Pantisocracy! That's why we met and why I suppose Sam married me in the end, so he could follow his utopian ideals - his big American dream which seemed so exciting then.

Philosophy he wants to study now, so he's off to tour Germany with those Wordsworths, spending the Wedgwoods' annuity and leaving me behind nursing the new baby. Doesn't he think I'd love to go too? There was a time when Robert Southey and I discussed

philosophy - perhaps I should have married him instead of Sam and then I'd have my own house like my sister.

Edifying he says it will be. Oh yes but it doesn't put food on the table does it? I'm lonely here in this hovel with nothing to do for fun. Stowey's not exactly Bath - how I miss it, and the fashionable clothes - if only father hadn't gone bankrupt. But then what does it matter, I won't have time to do anything other than chores anyway.

Death of our baby wasn't enough to bring you home then? Why didn't you hurry back instead of taking a five month walking holiday? I had no husband to comfort me and share my grief. Nine months I watched over him, the responsibility of his life weighed so heavily upon me, and now, despite my care, he's gone. My beautiful brown hair all fell out and now I wear a wig. Oh where are you? Once you wrote 'I'm married to the woman I love best of all Created Beings.' How easily you've forgotten. Oh how you've left me trapped.

Meet the Authors.



Emily Cullerne
Richard Dee
John Hall
Paul Harrison
Christine Jones
Richard Lappas
P.J. Reed
Chip Tolson
Brian Willis

Emily Cullerne



Emily Cullerne was born in North Devon in the early 1970's and has lived in many parts of the UK. She was a primary school teacher for 15 years and is currently a stay-at-home mum, fitting in writing around her children.

Emily is a member of both the Exeter Authors Association and Twyford Writers. Her first short story submission resulted in a third place at the Tiverton Literary Festival competition in 2016, which inspired her to expand her ambitions and write a full-length novel.

She has since written two novels and is drafting her third. The first is set in North Devon and is a cosy mystery drawing on Emily's love of her childhood home and her experiences as a teacher. The follow-up novel sees the protagonist move to Normandy, France, to solve an old family mystery dating back to World War Two and a modern-day murder.

Away from writing, Emily has a black belt in the martial art of Aikido and enjoys running, which she could do with doing more often! She also loves reading and watching mysteries, particular favourites being Midsomer Murders and Poirot.

Richard Dee



I was never a writer, at least not for ages. I made up stories in my head, based on dreams and events in my life, but I never did much with them. Life, a wife, three daughters and now five grandchildren have kept me busy.

I spent forty years in shipping, firstly at sea, then in Port Control and as a Thames River Pilot, with adventures to match anything I could imagine. When I retired, I just moved them out into space, changed some of the names and wrote them down.

I write Science Fiction and Steampunk adventures, as well as chronicling the exploits of Andorra Pett, reluctant amateur detective.

When I'm not writing, I bake bread and biscuits, cook delicious meals and walk the Devon coast.

I've published thirty novels and written over 200 short stories. I'm currently working on more prequels, sequels, and a few new projects.

You can find me at www.richardeescifi.co.uk

J E Hall



J E Hall has recently produced a number of contemporary thrillers on the challenging threat posed by extremism and issues of our time. Set in London the Middle East, Turkey and Devon they are a great read. Though his novels are all linked, they can be read independently of each other. Accolades have come from Rowan Williams, Ann Widdecombe amongst others. His inspiration is drawn from his personal experiences travelling and meeting people at home and abroad.

A one time Academic, Probation Officer and Church of England minister, the characters he draws have depth and the stories he tells are gripping.

His books are *Flashbacks* (2016), *Istanbul* (2017), *Harry's England* (2017), *Domain* (2018) and *Truth* (2019) *Harry's Awakening* (2020) *Deactivation* (2021)

John has since written two very different books, *The Modern Trooper* (2022) which is an illustrated poem in the style of ST Coleridge's *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* and to celebrate the 250th anniversary of this son of Devon's birth.

Then in 2024 John published his first Tudor novel *Murky Waters*, set in the Otter Vale in the tumultuous 1540s. A much anticipated sequel is planned!

Paul Harrison.



A West Country lad; born, bred and buttered in Bath. Paul took up mountaineering and travelled the world.

When his arms gave out he took up long distance running, when his legs gave out he dusted off his notebook and pen and had another crack at that thing he had enjoyed since his teens.

Writing.

Christine Jones



Christine Jones was born shortly after ERII's coronation near Uffculme, Devon, a village listed in the Domesday Book which was completed in 1087.

Her way of thinking is that it was only roughly 12 lifetimes ago, based on living to 78 each time.

She has always lived in Devon, as did her parents, grandparents and some great-grandparents.

Widowed, she lives with four idiot cats and wishes she had listened when her father tried to teach her about gardening.

She has two children and one very active and interactive two-year-old grandson, all of whom mean everything to her.

She doesn't much care for cooking or cleaning, shops mainly for food and unintentional things, loves tracing ancestors, helping hedgehogs survive winters, Classic FM, and crime stories.

But can never work out whodunit.

Fun facts: first love - Stephen (when 7); second love - Beethoven. Age when first roller skated and went down a slide - 32. Age when abseiled 90ft and got first and only tattoo - 63.

Richard Lappas



For over 40 years, Richard worked for a wide range of clients, including corporate and PR, national newspapers and magazines, sport, fashion, the NHS and local government.

Hundreds of his photographs have been published around the world.

As one of the founding members of Exeter Authors Association, he enjoyed a second career as the author of children's fiction and was working on many new projects at the time of his death in July 2026.

Richard was always ready to tell a fascinating tale of his paparazzi life and will be greatly missed for his warmth, humour and willingness to help anyone.

P.J. Reed



Writer of Warlocks. Destroyer of Worlds.

Hi! I'm an archaeologist, teacher, and historian by trade and an author by chance. I'm a 'genre-fluid' author, so I can turn a page to most things. For younger readers, I write magical animal and fairy adventures under the name Pami Reed.

Explore My Writing:

The Dark Worlds: Speculative fiction and dark literary works.

Haiku Whispers: The home of haiku, senryu, and seasonal collections.

The Therwen Wood Books: Children's fiction by Pami Reed.

Chip Tolson



I grew up in the West Country. After National Service in Germany, I worked in the ship-owning industry in Liverpool, Plymouth, London, the Far East and Edinburgh. My wife and I then came back to the West Country and now live on Exmoor.

In the business world I wrote a multitude of words. On my retirement, I decided to turn my writing to creative fiction. I first independently published a collection of 23 of my short stories titled PEBBLES, some of which have won prizes.

Since then, I have written and published four novels; the first, REQUIEM FOR PRIVATE HUGHES, is set in the 1950s Malayan Emergency and in West Somerset, the second, BIRCHLAND HALL, is set in West Yorkshire, the third, PUFFBALL PARADOX, is set on Exmoor and in Battersea, London and the fourth novel, THE REGISTER OF JOE'S TREES, an Anglo/American novel, is set in Suffolk, London, South Dakota and Boston, USA.

I am now working on my next and fifth novel, which has the working title of DALTONFORD HALL, set in the West Country with links to Hong Kong.

My film script, SANDSCAPE, was directed and produced by Somerset Film and is available on YouTube.

My website can be found at: *www.chiptolson.com*

Brian Willis



I'm Brian Willis, a retired Cambridge University Technician.

I moved with my wife Barbara to Tiverton, Devon, from Suffolk some sixteen years ago.

I am a short story writer and poet and a member of the Exeter Authors Association.

My first short story: War Story:- was inspired by visiting a churchyard with a memorial to the German First World War dead while on holiday in Austria in the Nineteen Seventies.

The second: The Twyford Curse :- was whilst driving through a Mid-Devon village on a winter Sunday evening and not seeing any sign of life.

Thank you for reading..



We hope you've enjoyed this book.

If you have, please take a minute to leave a review.

Even better, tell all your friends.

It would mean a lot to us