

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

New Year Party, Civil Service Club:
Saturday 29th January 2011

DATA PROTECTION ACT

Members' names and addresses are held on a computer database which is used for mailing copies of the Civil Service Author.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in the SCPSW Author are those of the contributors and are not necessarily those of the Editor or of the Society.

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Editorial

Adrian Danson

On behalf of your committee, I wish you all an enjoyable Christmas and a healthy and successful New Year. As you are aware, this is the last “Author” that I shall have the pleasure of editing. May I offer my thanks to the many members who provided me with such excellent material for publication during the past ten years. I wish Paul Williams every success as our new editor and trust you will support his efforts with the same enthusiasm and high quality contributions that you have given to me.

You will note that his address and email details have replaced mine on the first page. Please send him your contributions for the next issue by no later than 31st January 2011. It is hoped that he will soon master the conversion of typed work by OCR through his computer copier. However, he too would prefer contributions to be provided as email attachments in Word for Windows, by those who have the facilities to do so.

It is, of course, that time of the year when we must dig into our pockets and send Beryl our membership renewal fee, following which we will be able to admire the work of our new editor. I am happy to say that, although any additional contributions that your generous nature compels you to make would always be welcome, we do not need to use the begging bowl this year.

I must mention Vee Bradley’s Humorous Poetry Competition. Quite how it happened is beyond me but, although we published the winning poem, I failed to record the name of the winner. With my sincere apologies for such incompetence, it is Tony Oswick.

I shall now be filling my time as President of my local Bowling Association, whose members will have to put up with my jokes after each match. At least you will be spared that. I wish you all good fortune with your writing and look forward to celebrating our centenary.

Having received a present in appreciation for my efforts as editor at the conclusion of our annual luncheon, may I thank everyone for this kindness.

Chairman's Chat

Terry Rickson

In the Autumn 'Author' I wrote expressing some anxiety about the future of the bookshop. I was heartened when only a few weeks later, a national newspaper published an article 'The 50 Best Bookshops' to be found in the British Isles. So, from Wadebridge in Cornwall to Inverness, from Aldeburgh in Suffolk through Liverpool, Mold to Limavady in Northern Ireland, the bookshop appears to be thriving and long may it remain so. I was interested to read about Foyles in Charing Cross Road, London, a one time favourite haunt of mine, having had a makeover to become a 'truly metropolitan indle' -see, your Chairman is catching up with modern speak! All to the good, although I have a sort of fond memory of the labyrinthine lines of bookshelves, the dusty, semi-dark corners and the rather ancient lady cashiers. That said, good for Foyles and other bright and welcoming bookshops.

We are approaching Christmas and the New Year in the heart of winter, the time, I always think, for the ghost story. The latter is more often than not dismissed and regarded with some derision but it is very much a British tradition and one in which writers have excelled and do still, think only of M.R.James. A good ghost story is not necessarily one of horror and gruesomeness but one that builds up a sense of unease, leaving the reader feeling uncomfortable and, perhaps, just a little fearful. Now there's a good writing exercise for a winter's night in a shadowy room with the wind and rain beating against the curtained windows. Good writing!

Next year we will have a new editor for the 'Author,' Paul Williams, who is stepping into the role from Adrian Danson. Adrian has given sterling work to the editorship of our magazine, for which we thank him heartily. Welcome, Paul.

With my best wishes for Christmas and the New Year when I look forward to the pleasure of reading your contributions to the 'Author.'

(The only references I can find for "indle" are as the name of a murderer and an Indonesian using it as an abbreviation for indolent, but maybe I'm not as up to date with modern speak as our Chairman. – Ed)

Critics – Should we believe them?

Adrian Danson

In the past I have commented that we may not agree with critics' advice, at least not all of it, but that it usually contained something that is valid; something that we might use to our benefit. However, when it comes to the brief comments sometimes offered on competition entries, when the judge may have little time to spare and is unlikely to receive any payment for their efforts, perhaps one might be forgiven for thinking that their comments have no value.

“500 words of muddle, incomprehension, what?”

These words were annotated on the following competition entry, whose author has given permission for it to be used. I invite members to offer comments to our new editor, Paul Williams, to say if you agree, or disagree and what could be learnt from the comment. I do not think the psychologist who said that criticism says more about the critic than the subject applies here, it more probably reflects too hasty a reading and even hastier comment.

Member's Successes:

Page 13 of the autumn issue, except for the first verse of the poem, should have been a continuation of Page 4, i.e. member's successes. The member whose work was included in Life's Too Short..... is Fiona Burrell. My apologies for the confusion caused by the migration of these words – could be the wretched computer again, but more likely it was something else.

We congratulate Oliver Eade, Brendon Lancaster, Fiona Burrell and Malcolm Noble on their success and wish them more of the same in the future.

We can now add Douglas Fulthorpe, having had two of his first three plays published by New Theatre Publications (www.plays4theatre.com).

The View From The Gutter (ISBN: 9781840947311), and Out Of The Sewer (ISBN: 9781840947724).

Anyone who would like a free reading copy or is interested in performing the plays (gulp-gulp, says Doug) please contact Doug on d.fulthorpe@btinternet.com

SCPSW Annual Competitions for 2011/12

Lewis Wright Short Story Competition

Maximum length 3,000 words, double spaced on A4 paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by S.A.E. Entry Fee £4.00 per story. Prizes as follows: 1st prize £75, 2nd prize £25.

Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition

No restriction on theme or form, but maximum forty lines and one poem per sheet of paper. (Writers of humorous verse should consider the Vee Bradley Prize.) Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry fee £2 per entry. 1st prize £50, 2nd prize £25.

Vincent Brennan Travel Article

Maximum length 2,000 words, double spaced on A4 paper. Entries will be returned if accompanied by s.a.e. Entry fee £2.50 per entry. 1st prize £30.

Two or three further competitions will be held during the course of the year and details will be published in future "Author" editions.

Notes for Entrants to All Competitions:

Unless entrants state on entering competitions that they do not wish their entry to be published, all winning entries will be published in the *Author* if space permits. The entrant's name will also be quoted, unless entrants advise on entry that they prefer to use a pen name.

Entries must be the original work of the entrant and must not have been published at the time of the submission. Entries exceeding the specified number of lines or words will be disqualified.

All entries should bear only the pen name (which should be varied to avoid recognition) and a separate sheet quoting, pen name used, title of entry, real name and address. (Optional for serving members, Department and staff association mainly for publicity purposes and society members' interest.) All entries should be sent to the Competition Secretary, Nina Matter, 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton SM6 6RT not later than 28th February 2011.

Nina Matter
Competition Secretary

Jean Bowden - Gordon Gompers Article Competition Judge

Jean Bowden is a successful professional writer, writing under several pen names - look for Tessa Barclay novels in your local library. She has had more than 100 novels published. Jean has edited magazines, writes poetry, stories, articles. She is President of Croydon Writers and is a source of inspiration to writers.

Service From a Young Age

Ethel Corduff

Gordon Gompers' Article Competition - Winning entry

We had a small shop on the poorer end of the main street, ironically called Upper Castle Street. Equally ironically, the important end with the banks and big shops was called Lower Castle Street. It was what was often called a husker's shop selling anything and everything. Bread, buns, ice cream, sweets, fruit, small groceries, delisk (edible seaweed that was gathered and dried on the seashore, often by us). We also sold periwinkles, cooked in our kitchen in a big pot with a whole packet of salt. Vegetables were usually bought from relatives who had farms outside the town. Eggs were often brought in by the farmer's wives and exchanged for tea and sugar on Sunday mornings after Mass.

Bread was the most important food in the forties, especially as it was very scarce during and after the war years. I remember, when I was about three and a half, hiding behind the counter while Mammy served customers. A woman asked for a loaf of bread, of course I did not realise my Mother kept the bread for regular customers. When Mammy said we did not have any, I piped up 'Oh, yes we have', which of course must have been very embarrassing.

My father did not like the shop, after all he had worked on a ship and had even tried to get work as an actor in Hollywood, but he liked to introduce a new idea. I must have been about eight when Thompson's, a big baker in Cork city over sixty miles away, started making sliced bread. It created a huge interest. My father who was the only man in County Kerry who read the 'Manchester Guardian' quickly heard about this and he contacted Thompson's. I am not sure how he did that because making phone calls was rare then and only the bigger shops had phones.

Anyhow soon we were one of the first shops in our town to have sliced bread delivered from Cork. I was so excited on Tuesdays and Thursdays because the big Thompson's van pulled up outside and the bread was lugged in to the shop in a big basket. People were queuing up to buy it. We had to ration it to one loaf per person.

We had a shelf going along the length of the front shop window laden with trays of buns. The favourites were vanilla slices. The confectionery came from Havercrofts the bakery opposite. We did well because Havercrofts was closed in the evening and on Sundays when we were open and busy.

At lunchtime the children who went to the local technical school bought buns and ate them with red lemonade. The factory girls from Denny's meat

factory and from the Traly boot factory got off their bikes to take them home to have with their dinner. In a small town everyone walked or cycled home for dinner at one o' clock.

I only lived ten doors away from the Presentation Convent where I went to school. Mammy always had dinner ready despite running the shop. My father was often out inspecting any new building been built, especially if it had a flat roof as they had just come in. He ate his dinner first at twelve o' clock.

I often served customers in my lunch break and helped myself to some sweets as a reward. On top of the counter we had a glass display case. The top was partly worn from the passing of coins. You had to peer in to select from the penny sweets, cough no-mores, plug tobaccos, money balls, marshmallow mice, Peggy's legs and aniseed balls.

No wonder I used to suffer from severe toothache. I would go into the chemist next door and Mr. Irwin would dip some cotton wool in a tooth tincture and put it in one of the painful crevices.

Other children because of the sweets blackmailed me; they often would not play with me unless I brought out sweets to them. They would give me an order for a particular favourite. I risked my father's wrath if he caught me, which was frequently as it was difficult to hide a vanilla slice or doughnut up your sleeve.

Poverty and austerity were rife in Ireland in the 40's and 50's; sweets were often a rare luxury especially as most people had big families. We were envied because we had access to them without paying. My Mother was very easy going and would not stop us taking them to give away; she had great sympathy with the poor children. Been the eldest I was of course number one for helping in the shop. We were often very busy especially on Sunday nights when many married and courting couples went to the pictures

We were only a few doors up the street from the Picturedrome and everyone brought a quarter of sweets to take to suck. When we were young Mammy would buy us comics for Sunday evening to keep us quiet as both she and Daddy had to serve, as there were so many sweets to be weighted.

We sat in the room behind the shop reading the Beano, the Dandy and Schoolfriend. Mammy could see us through the window in the room and we could see her. When we had read the comics, my father folded them tidily and put them inside the scratched display case and sold them for half price.

My brother Eddie nearly two years younger than me hated serving in the shop and if he was going out and saw customers standing there he would shout 'Shop!' and rush out into the street. I used to get very angry about this. It was ironic that years later he would have a shop himself.

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

Chairman: Barbara Stewart, The Old Malthouse, Brockhampton Mews, Bringsty, WR6 5TB

Treasurer: Terry Rickson, 48 Marlborough Road, Ashford, TW15 3QA

Secretary: Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, HA3 6JU

Review of the Year

And so, as another year nears its end, it's time once again for me to write a short review of the last twelve months in the life of the Poetry Workshop. I'm pleased to be able to report that the Poetry Workshop continues in a healthy and vibrant condition, with membership currently standing at 73, a slight increase on last year. Once again, all our activities have proved well supported and popular. A report on the PW's main activities follows:

PW Weekend

The annual Poetry Workshop Weekend took place at the end of July. The venue was the Hillscourt Conference Centre at Rednal, Birmingham . PW members attending enjoyed a varied programme of poetry-based activities. At the time of writing the date and venue for next year's Weekend has yet to be decided, but full details and a Booking Form will be included in the winter issue of **wavelengths**.

Bill Barnes Competition 2010

I'm writing these Poetry Workshop Pages shortly after the closing date of this year's competition, and therefore judging has yet to take place. Hopefully the results will be available in time for inclusion in the winter issue of **wavelengths**. The winning entries and the Judge's Report will be published in the spring issue of **wavelengths**.

Waves

This is the annual showcase anthology of PW members' work. Edited by Angus Livingstone, the 2010 edition was published in July. Running to 30 pages, it contains 45 poems by 23 poets and is, as usual, of a very high standard. Copies of Waves 2010 are available at a price of £2.50 (inc p&p) from Terry Rickson (address above). See the winter issue of **wavelengths** for details of how to submit work for consideration for the 2011 anthology, but PW members should note that the closing date for submissions is 31 March 2011.

Postal Folio

There are four circulating postal folios in which participating members can exchange critiques of each other's poetry, encouragement and news. There is room for any member of the Poetry Workshop who would like to take part. If you are interested, contact me, Mike Boland, at the address above or by e-mail to gothic.garden1@btinternet.com (note new email address)

e-folio

The PW now runs an efolio for members who have access to the internet. Anyone interested in joining the e-folio should contact Sylvia Neumann. Her email address is: sylvia.neumann@btinternet.com

Wavelengths

This is the Poetry Workshop's quarterly magazine, issued free to all its members and averaging twenty pages in length. The winter issue contains the text of one of the talks given at Birmingham in the summer (by Angus Livingstone on 'The Zen of Pretty Woman'), poems by members, plus the regular Newsletter section giving all the news.

Subscriptions

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop will fall due on 1 January. A renewal form will be enclosed with **wavelengths**. As decided at the AGM, the fee for 2011 remains at £5 for Society members.

The Poetry Workshop

If you are a member of the Society, have an interest in poetry but have not yet joined the Poetry Workshop - what are you waiting for!

The cost of membership is only £5, and for this small sum the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our magazine **wavelengths** each year - contributions of poems and articles on poetry are welcomed from PW members
- the chance of publication in **Waves**, the PW's annual anthology of members' work
- access to the popular Postal Folio scheme
- access to the new e-folio scheme
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual PW Weekend.

If you are interested in joining us, contact our Treasurer and Membership Secretary, Terry Rickson, at the address above. Cheques should be made out to: SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account.

Dates to Remember

December 2010

wavelengths # 25 publishing date

1 January 2011

PW Subscriptions due

1 February 2011

deadline for wavelengths #26

1 March 2011

wavelengths # 26 published

31 March 2011

deadline for Waves 2011

I'd like to wish all members of the Society a very Happy Christmas and a successful New Year.

Poetry Pages

Edited by Terry James

Size Matters

Alan C Jones

Some say -the glass must be half-full
To others it's half-empty
Depending on your point of view
And if you've less or plenty.

But one thing's evidently clear
Without appearing greedy
The glass that holds the liquid thus
Is twice the size it need be.

Memorial Lines On An Old Poet

Terry Rickson

I cannot see a vale, a cot, a lonely tree,
for all it's haunted by some speck of frail humanity.
Some heath, some moor, some distant crest,
from Egdon out to Mendip in the west.
The old Wessex Wizard from whose pen
flowed the tragi-comic fate of men.
Conjuring a tale, a poem, that could inspire
or visioned in the dying embers of a fire.

Steam

A E Hobbs

I dreamt I was in the age of steam
Where furnaces glow and pistons gleam.
The train is by the station side
Waiting to start the nocturnal ride.

We glide out of the station
Leaving behind the city light.
No one knows our destination
As we journey through the night.

The station was all bustle,
Passengers hurrying to and fro;
Some seeking destination boards,
Others asking "Where to go?".

Now the dream is fading
And I wish that I could stay.
Already it is morning
Yet another working day

In the Doctors' Waiting Room

Ivy Hudson

Three old men,
one bravely wearing shorts,
are engrossed in conversation.
“She may be batting for the other side,
but is a nice person.”
They all hold a yellow card
in a clear wrapper,
diabetes? Prostate cancer?

We wait silently
correctly dressed,
then see the doctor together,
my husband
gets a clean bill of health,
nothing to worry about
no yellow card
this time

Nithsdale Martyrs

Norman Bissett

From Kirkland Cottage
a rutted track leads downhill.
Fields of plastic sheets

shimmer in the sun
like a sea, the vivero
a mirage of faith.

The ancient graveyard,
shrouded by a grove of trees,
nestles in a dip.

Many of the stones
lie fallen, lichen-covered,
dates illegible.

Taller than the rest,
a Celtic cross of granite
looms imposingly,

fifty seven names
of long-dead Covenanters
inscribed on its back.

Geese

Steve Glason

A flock of geese near Chessington
Headed south past Leatherhead
Turning now to Tolworth Tower
Changing course a thousand times.

Following a railway track
Malden Manor - Motspur Park
Stoneleigh with its Thirties sprawl
Not content to hurry back.

I wish I could be with them
Soaring high without a care
Searching for that thing unknown
Escape awhile from daily toil.

You lucky geese - a fond farewell
Go in peace and fly at will
I must remain chained to my perch
An office cage in London Town.

Paradox of Modern Life

Alan C Jones

If all the world were paper
And all the sea were ink
You couldn't shave
Or even bathe,
We wouldn't 'arf all stink

If half the world were Chinese
And half the world were Greek,
We'd all be eating takeaways
From now until next week.

If all that's good was painted white
And evil painted black.
We'd all be running out at night
Like badgers in a pack.

If all our greatest dreams came true
And truth was ours to keep
It wouldn't matter anymore
--- We'd all be fast asleep

Fenland Winter

Terry Rickson

The bitter, driving winter rain
sweeps across a Fenland drain.
The moorhen to the banks will fly
until the storm has hurtled by.
The sodden fields, November bare,
receive another icy share;
it spins the old church weather-vane
and beats upon the windows
of a passing local train.
But where the salt-marsh oozes suck,
it's summer fresh to Arctic duck

A Kingston Sunday

Steve Glason

Sunday morn in Surbiton
Chiming bells - St Matthews Church
Beckoning Tolworth folk
From their homes near Ditton Road.

Chestnut trees in autumn tints
Thread my way through conkers strewn
Papers bought in corner shop
Choice of viewing on TV.

And afternoon a gentle stroll
Beside the Thames at Raven's Ait
A riverscape so picturesque
Bide my time at Hampton Court.

Watch the boats in Molesey Lock
Queue up to berth by rushing weir
Homeward bound - electric train
October's lovely golden light

St Andrews

Norman Bissett

Like the French Lieutenant's woman
billowing seaward along Lyme Regis Cobb,
I walk to the end of old St Andrews' pier,
bending into a blustery nor'easter
blowing from Eden on a studentless day
of no scarlet-gowned processions.
Gulls glissando overhead, whirling
like pocket hankies drying on the line.
White horses career towards famous sands
where chariots of fire await them. Landward
I drink in the panorama, the sweep of history.
Cliff-top ruins, a dungeon, secret passageways.
St Rule's Tower guarding weathered stones.
The sleepy harbour offering a silted haven.

(Fours years after suffering a serious fall, Terry's wife Nessie has passed away. I am sure you will all join me in offering our sympathy to Terry for his sad loss. I suggest this can be best expressed by continuing to offer him your poems for inclusion in Author – Ed)

The Woman of the Wood

Michael Smith

Aidan checked his map, took a compass bearing, and decided that the wood two fields away was the one he would have to go through. He took a swig from his water bottle, packed the bottle in his rucksack, and continued on his way. His wide-brimmed hat provided excellent protection from the July sun, now at its zenith. This is the life, he thought, far from the hubbub of the City.

He entered the wood through a gap between two oak trees, straight on to a bridle path. After about five minutes, he saw a horse and rider coming towards him. The horse was a chestnut stallion, ridden by a young woman wearing a white vest and faded blue denim shorts frayed at the hems. Aidan judged her to be in her mid-twenties. Her complexion was coffee-coloured and her eyes dark brown. She had a broad nose and full lips. Her black hair was short and curly. She sat proudly upright, her strong brown legs gripping the shining flanks of her mount. Aidan was surprised to see that she was riding bareback.

‘Hello there,’ he said and took off his hat.

‘Hello yourself.’

‘What a magnificent horse.’

‘The finest.’ The woman reined in the stallion. ‘Do you know about horses?’

‘Not much, but I appreciate beauty when I see it, be it in an animal such as your steed, or the flowers and trees in this wood.’

The woman looked at him with interest. ‘There is much to wonder at in the natural world. Too few folk seem to notice these days. It’s gratifying to meet someone who does.’

‘I get out into the country as often as I can’ said Aidan. ‘It’s a refreshing change from being stuck in the office in London five days a week. I feel at one with nature, especially on days like today.’

‘I know exactly how you feel,’ she said. ‘That’s why I took one step further. I think you will one day. Good day to you.’

‘And to you,’ He watched her as she rode on, and felt a stirring in his loins at the sight of her straight back and shapely derriere. He wondered what she had meant about taking one step further.

As he walked deeper into the wood, the trees seemed to be closer together. Sunshine no longer percolated between the branches. At last, he emerged from the wood, and was dismayed to find that storm clouds now sullied the sky, previously a canopy of azure blue. The sun was no longer visible and the slight breeze was unpleasantly warm on his face.

He followed a faint path across the field. A drop of rain plopped on to his forehead, and then another. He was now about two hundred yards from the wood. As he ran back the heavens opened, and by the time he had reached the relative sanctuary of the trees, his clothes were sodden.

A large oak tree offered temporary protection from the downpour, not that he needed it - one couldn't get wetter than soaked to the skin. He heard a loud crack above him. He looked up and then leapt aside, but his reaction was a split-second too slow.

When he regained consciousness, he was lying on a bed in a small room. The young horsewoman he had met in the wood was bending over him.

‘What happened? Where am I?’ he mumbled.

‘You are in my home. You were hit on the head by a falling branch in the wood. I found you and brought you here.’

‘How on earth did you manage that? I’m six feet one and weigh nearly thirteen stones.’

‘Fireman’s Lift. That way even a small woman, if she is strong, can carry a person of your size, and I’m a big lass. Besides, Leofric, my horse, carried you most of the way here.’

‘My name is Aidan,’ he said. ‘What’s yours?’

‘Nadia.’

‘Well, Nadia, thank you for being a Good Samaritan.’

‘I did only what was right. Now say no more and drink this. Gently, she raised his head and held a cup to his lips. The contents of the cup had a slightly sharp taste, which he couldn’t identify. Almost immediately, he became drowsy.

‘You will sleep for several hours, and will feel much better when you awaken.’

Nadia was at his side again when he awoke. She was clad in a light blue bathrobe which barely concealed her ample bosom.

Strange dreams had pervaded his slumbers. In the most vivid one, Nadia had been standing naked by the bed. He had gazed spellbound at her comely form, his desire rising. Then she had straddled him and they had coupled. His recollection was so graphic that he wondered if in fact it had been a dream.

‘You are feeling better?’

‘I feel great. What was in that drink?’

‘Herbs from my garden.’

He realised suddenly that he was naked. ‘Where are my clothes?’

‘They were wringing wet. I had quite a job getting them off you and then drying you.’ She smiled at his discomfiture. ‘Don’t worry, I’ve seen men in the buff before.’

‘I had a dream, or I thought it was a dream - you and I..’ He broke off, she was smiling.

‘It was no dream. At first you slept peacefully, and then you became restless, sometimes hovering between sleep and wakefulness. You called my name again and again. I came to you and we made love. I will bear your child and we will never be parted.’

‘You raped me!’

‘No, Aidan, I led you further along the path of your destiny.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘The moment I first saw you I knew you were the one.’

‘What do you mean, the one? You are talking in riddles.’

‘You are the tall, blond man for whom I have waited all these years.’

‘How do you know I’m not married?’

‘I am the only woman in your life.’

‘How can you know that?’

‘I see things other people don’t. Our meeting was preordained. We are meant to be together. Even our names are exact anagrams of each other.’

‘That’s just a bizarre coincidence.’

‘No, it isn’t. It’s fate. Our destinies are linked. Aidan and Nadia, Nadia and Aidan.’

Aidan shook his head, trying to make sense of the situation. That morning he had set off on a ten-mile walk, which even stopping for a pub lunch, should not have taken more than six hours. By now, he should be home in his flat. Instead, he was lying in the bed of a woman he had never met until a few hours ago, being told he would spend the rest of his life with her.

‘Who are you? Where is this place?’ he demanded.

‘I am your soul mate. This place is my cottage in the wood where we met.’

‘I don’t mean to sound patronizing, but you sound well-educated.’

She smiled. ‘Too well-educated to be living as a recluse in a wood, you mean? Oh yes, I went to the best schools, and then I was supposed to go to Oxbridge. But I couldn’t go on with that life, I felt stifled. I’ve lived in this cottage for the last six years, the happiest years of my life.’

‘How do you survive?’

‘I keep body and soul together by selling some of my paintings and doing casual work on a farm a couple of miles away. Also, I speak French fluently and I translate legal documents from time to time. I grow all my own vegetables and I keep chickens and ducks, so I have a plentiful supply of eggs, some of which I sell. There was only one thing missing, one person - you, and now you are here.’

‘This is madness. You don’t know anything about me.’

‘I know that we belong together. You will never leave me, will never want to. We will raise our children in this cottage. Will they be dark like me, or fair like you?’ She took off her bathrobe and stood in naked splendour.

Aidan tried to speak but the words caught in his throat. Throwing off the bedclothes, he reached up to her. ‘Nadia,’ he whispered hoarsely. She smiled, showing her white, even teeth, and then she lay beside him and pressed her full, sensual lips on his.

Taken by Angels

Wendy House

It was such a shock when Daddy died. “You mustn’t be sad Laura,” Mummy said, “the angels have taken him.” But I was still sad.

Then we then moved to a semi-detached house miles away and I had to make new friends.

It was hard at first, then I met Belinda and everything changed. She lived a few doors away and seemed to know everything about everyone. She even knew about the house next door, where strange noises could be heard after dark.

Belinda said that the people who lived there were aliens and didn’t speak our language. “How do you know?” I asked.

“Because I saw them, said hello and they just gave me funny looks.”

“What do you mean funny?”

“Well, sort of raised eyebrows, squinty eyes and their heads tilted to one side.”

“What both of them?”

“Yes, like twins. Both had long white dresses, moved the same way at the same time, but they said nothing.

“Perhaps they’re foreigners.”

“Ah!” said Belinda, raising her eyebrows, squinting and tilting her head to one side. “Hadn’t thought of that. You could be right.”

“Let’s look through their window?” I said.

“Yes round the back. There’s a hole in your fence that we can get through. Careful though, don’t catch your dress on the nails.”

“How do you know so much about our garden?”

“Uncle Bob lived there, until the angels took him away.”

“What! Your Uncle too? That’s what happened to my Dad.”
“I know, Aunty Freda told me.”

“Who’s Aunty Freda and how did she know?”

“She’s Uncle Gordon’s wife. He’s the school caretaker and knows everything.”

“Seems to run in the family,” I said.

“Don’t be rude,” Belinda replied with a frown. “Anyway let’s go, or do you want to talk all day?”

We crawled through the gap in the fence. Belinda stood on the dustbin and looked in.

“Can you see anything?” I whispered.

“Not a sausage. Try the door.”

“We can’t, if someone’s there and they catch us. What then?”

“Don’t be such a scaredy cat,” said Belinda impatiently. “You’ll never do anything, if you think like that. We can say we heard something and came to investigate.”

I didn’t think that would fool anyone, but didn’t like being called a scaredy cat, so I gave the back door a push. It opened without a sound, no creaking like the doors of Count Dracula’s castle. Belinda didn’t hesitate, she went straight in and I followed. Then the light became shimmering colours, everything changing shape like the hall of mirrors at the fair.

Belinda grasped my hand as everything returned to normal, except it was like spring, flowers blooming, birds singing. It had to be a dream.

“Hello Laura, Belinda.”

“Daddy?”

“Uncle Bob?”

“MUMMY?”

* * *

“Those houses should have been demolished years ago,” said the Inspector. “Timbers rotted and the roof caved in. Strange we found no bodies though. Perhaps the angels took ‘em,” he laughed.

Florence's Physic

Ruth Sear

“I ate too much last night,” Rita sighed, gazing into her cup of coffee. “I still feel full up; I wish I wasn't so fat.”

Brenda laughed unsympathetically. “You've been on every diet under the sun and still eat too much!”

Brenda and John Hunt had recently become Rita Bird's new neighbours. But Brenda soon discovered that plump and pretty Rita was not only interested in losing weight, but gaining a husband – Brenda's husband!

“Show me that bottle of powder you found,” said Rita. “You said something about it being a slimming cure.”

Yesterday Brenda had discovered a small old fashioned medicine bottle full of white powder whilst exploring the loft of her new home. The bottle, judging by its dusty appearance, had lain there for years. She went to a drawer, withdrew the bottle, and placed it on the kitchen table.

“These two torn pages of an old letter, from someone called Florence, were wrapped around the bottle,” she said. “I think it's from Canada.”

Rita took the pages and read the faded but legible writing.

'...the physic, a sample of which I enclose. The medicine man claims it cures obesity! The fat Indians simply take some of the powder in water, and it really works...' Rita became very still. How excited she felt as she read on! '...there is a local fungus called a 'flying fruit.' The medicine man dries it then grounds it into a powder. Whoever takes the physic loses weight! It's a complete cure, they never put on weight on again. It's amazing what effect some of these plants can have – for example digitalis from foxgloves?

Now here is the reason why I enclose some of this wonderful powder. In your last letter you mentioned you had put on weight recently, so I want you to try the powder! It is harmless when taken in the PRECISE and EXACT amounts I am going to describe to you. Take a gr...' Here the paper was torn, and the top of the next page was missing. Rita read on. '...so many birds. Please don't forget to adhere to the instructions very carefully. I've warned you what will happen if you take too much powder. From your loving Florence.'

Rita exclaimed, “It's just what I need! I think I'll try some. I'd do anything to get slim. Anything!” She frowned. “But I wonder how much I should take? I wonder what was written on the missing paper? I wonder what gr... meant? Grain or gram? Or great? Or grand?”

“You could try a little, I suppose,” replied Brenda casually. “Take the bottle home.” Ten minutes later she sniggered as she watched Rita hurry next door. “I hope she takes some,” she thought. “I hope the stuff makes her ill! Serve her right for ogling John.”

Meanwhile Rita, having breathlessly arrived home, dashed into her kitchen. She mixed a pinch of powder in a glass of water. It dissolved rapidly, sparkling and fizzing.

“It’s like Alka Seltza,” she thought. “Well, here goes. I hope it makes me slim. Thank you Florence, whoever you were.”

She stared at the contents of the glass. The mixture had assumed the colours of a rainbow. And weren’t there bright lights and strange patterns weaving throughout? It was happening so quickly; perhaps she was wrong. Was she starting a migraine? She’d never had a migraine, but people said they sometimes saw flashes of light beforehand. She raised the glass to her lips then drank the mixture in one gulp. A burning sensation descended from her mouth to her stomach, but soon stopped. She began to panic. What if something horrible happened to her because she’d taken the powder? She was alone in the house. What if she was dying? Would her life flash in front of her, like it said in the novels? She wondered how a lifetime could whiz by in a few seconds.

She stared at the clock. Five minutes had passed since she’d drunk the contents of the glass, and she wasn’t dead. She didn’t even feel ill. Apart from a bit of indigestion she felt normal. She placed her fingers on her wrist; her pulse was beating steadily.

Another five minutes elapsed. Rita hoped there would be no side effects. She went to the hall mirror and gazed at the reflection that stared back at her; she looked the same as ever. Fat.

Her thoughts turned to food as usual; something sweet would make her feel more cheerful. She returned to the kitchen and opened the fridge door. A small magnet fell with a clatter on to the floor. The wording stared at her, mockingly: *A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips*. She found a square of chocolate and pecked at it.

How long would the powder take to have its effect? Would she really lose weight? She sniffed at the faint smell of garlic and onions that hung about the kitchen, from last night’s supper. She leaned over the sink, over the taps, opened the window and took a deep breath of air.

“Ah, that’s better. Nice and fresh.”

Suddenly she leapt from the floor and landed on the window sill. She hopped through the open window and stood on the ledge outside, feeling the breeze ruffling through her feathers.

“This is better than being with those smells indoors,” she thought. “I’ll just pop into the garden. I might be lucky and find something tasty to eat.”

She flew into the garden, and settled near a patch of yellow daffodils.

“I love daffodils,” she chirped. “So bright and cheerful after the winter.”

As she hopped towards the flowers a slight movement in the soil caught her attention. It was a worm!

She bent down; there was a potential meal desperately trying to escape. Too late! She grabbed it with her beak and pulled. There was some resistance, a short struggle, and suddenly hey presto, it was captured. She soon ate the worm. Delicious!

Rita opened her wings and flew upwards, landing in the branches of a cherry tree. By now she knew she was a bird, but strangely she didn’t feel worried. From her elevated position she saw the Hunt’s garden next door, and their bird table with a few pieces of bread on the top.

She opened her wings, flew quickly down and pecked at a crumb. Suddenly a robin landed next to her.

Birds that had always appeared small to her were now large and threatening. She saw the robin’s sharp beak and quickly flew to a nearby bush, and watched in dismay as the red breasted bird ate the bread, including the crumbs.

Then her heart leapt with fear. A Siamese cat on the ground below was creeping towards her! Rita rose hastily in fright, her wings flapping loudly in the quiet of the garden. She landed on a nearby tree and to her horror found she was gazing into the eyes of a different cat! She shot into the air.

She flew along the street and began to feel calmer; she flew away from the familiar village. The panorama below reminded her of being in an aeroplane. She enjoyed the sensation of flying and soared higher and swifter, sometimes swooping low.

She flew over houses, gardens, hedges, brown fields, green fields, meadows, hamlets, villages and towns. Footpaths, bridle paths, lanes and roads. She spotted the bloody corpse of a magpie by the side of a motorway and a solitary kestrel hovering nearby.

She flew near warehouses, pylons and chalk embankments. As she skimmed over a church, its tall spire pointing towards her, she caught a glimpse of the sea.

She began to feel hungry. Could she find her way home?

She saw the tiny figures of people going about their daily business. Soon she recognised a country lane bordered by woods; it was near where she lived. The bare canopy of the branches of the trees would soon turn green. There were white wood anemones, and glossy yellow celandines on the woodland floor. In a few weeks there would be patches of bluebells, their spiky leaves were already thrusting through last autumn's brown carpet.

She felt thirsty, and saw a house with a large garden and a pond. She flew towards it, idly wondering if the flying would help to burn off calories. She hadn't forgotten her weight problem!

She landed, overbalanced, and fell head first in the pond with a loud splash. She gasped, spluttered, and thrashed her wings wildly in the water. Suddenly she heard a man's voice shout: "Ere, what's your game? Get out of me pond you fat woman!"

Rita rose, feeling very wet, cold, humiliated and frightened. She gasped an apology and ran, the man's complaining voice following her. Her legs no longer ended in claws, but in feet – her own human feet encased in shoes! She hurriedly flapped her arms and tried to rise but they were no longer wings. Feeling tired, confused and hungry she arrived home two hours later as night approached, entered the unlocked front door, poured out a brandy and drank it in one gulp. Her kitchen window was still open.

She saw the bottle of Florence's powder and emptied the contents in a piece of newspaper. She knew what she must do and strode determinately into her back garden with a box of matches and reached the bonfire site and set fire to the paper.

Whoosh! The flames roared skywards.

If Rita had soaked the paper in petrol it would have had the same effect.

Bang! Flash!

She leapt back in fright, feeling her face burn and smelling her hair smouldering. She screamed, and the fire went out just as suddenly as it had ignited.

She heard John Hunt shout from next door, "Who's playing with fire? It isn't bonfire night; are you having a late barbeque?"

She went indoors, shaking, poured another brandy, and said, "Coo!"

What was happening to her voice?

“Coo!”

She raised her hand, now covered with feathers, to her lips. Lips? There was a beak! A hard horny beak. She walked to the mirror; this time she was a pigeon!

She felt a momentary pang of regret that she couldn't finish the brandy before she spread her wings and flew straight through the open door which she'd forgotten to close. She flew towards London, to Westminster. She perched on an ornate carving, part of the Houses of Parliament. Soon she slept, and in the morning looked over the city with interest and awe. What a view! She could see Westminster Bridge, the London Eye, St James's Park and Westminster Abbey.

She flew down to a pavement and found a few crumbs. During the next few hours she found scraps of stale bread among some of the dirtiest and noisiest places in London. She narrowly missed being hit by traffic many times, and wandered miserably around underground stations, railway stations, parks, streets and near shops and restaurants. If only she could explain her problem to a policeman!

Presently she found herself sitting in a street gutter. A man passing by looked at her and said: “Pesky pigeons, they get everywhere. That one's old, and too fat, I bet it gets run over.” He waved his hand. “Taxi!”

The taxi drove to the edge of the kerb. Rita couldn't move out of the way in time and found herself underneath. The taxi moved away, and she gasped as the diesel fumes swirled around her head. She flew feebly until she saw a street sign. Downing Street! She fluttered towards the rear of Number Ten, landed in the back garden and looked up the windows. Were there state secrets being discussed inside? That was her last thought before a cat, which had been watching her, pounced!

Later the Prime Minister's wife peered from a window. “There's a pile of pigeon feathers on the lawn,” she said to her husband.

Weeks later Brenda tore the missing parts of Florence's letter (that informed of the consequences of consuming too much powder) into tiny pieces, and put it in her rubbish bin. Glancing through a window at the empty house next door, she noticed a ‘FOR SALE’ board had appeared.

She chuckled maliciously.

Shalom, Sally!

Ruth Sear

The narrow roads, crowded with people, forced traffic to a standstill. But King George V Street was clear, awaiting the military parade. It was lined with men and young boys, held back by police.

Sally and I, cameras poised, had a splendid panoramic view from the balcony of our hotel bedroom. In future years we would boast: 'These photographs were taken in Jerusalem, on May 7th, 1973, the day Israel paraded her military might, to celebrate twenty five years of independence.'

Suddenly the sky was full of jet fighters. They screamed overhead very swiftly. Just as suddenly, they were gone. A short time elapsed, then gradually we heard a low droning, which became louder and louder. The droning became a rumble, and then a roar, then the whole sky jangled and crashed above us. The noise was tremendous, overwhelming. The bombers had arrived.

We stuffed our fingers in our ears to try and deaden the sound, with little effect. How cumbersome yet majestic those slow monsters seemed, compared to the jets! Would the noise never cease? Eventually they departed, then came helicopters, whirring and clacking in the sky. The crowds cheered and yelled.

A military band heralded the arrival of a parade of marching soldiers, tanks, and other weapons of warfare. It didn't last very long, nothing like those May Day parades seen on TV from Moscow.

Despite the cheering crowds, there wasn't the usual air of joviality associated with celebrations. There was an atmosphere of tension. It was alarming to see several young men walking about with guns, occasionally firing in the air.

Were they blanks or live ammunition? Difficult to comprehend that the meaning of the word Jerusalem was: 'City of Peace.'

Later that evening as dusk fell, we went out, and found the atmosphere had changed to one of good humour. In the sultry heat we threaded our way through the jostling, crowds of Israelis, singing and dancing to loud music. The day had passed peacefully, and there were no incidents.

We were determined to visit the magnificent King David Hotel. In the foyer, display cabinets exhibited beautiful and expensive jewellery made of gold and sparkling precious stones. There were exquisite souvenirs, and lovely handbags and shoes, and glass showcases containing clothes of superb quality. At the bar we asked the price of a glass of wine. Too expensive, so we ordered a small orange juice each, price 50 pence a glass. That seemed dear enough! We returned to our hotel, and opened a bottle of cheap local wine that we'd purchased the day before. It was delicious. We raised our glasses. Cheers! Shalom! What a wonderful view through the window. Lights, shimmering and glittering in the darkness, stretched for miles and miles over the hills. Jerusalem was tranquil and beautiful that night.

Sally and I shared a flat in London, and had decided to holiday in Israel. Last week we'd joined an organised tour, departed from Heathrow amid strict security, and flew with El Al to Tel Aviv. More security on landing, then we boarded an ancient coach to Jerusalem.

The seats were wooden planks, with no padding. The excitable driver was, I believe, under the impression he was at the wheel of a dodgem car! We set away at top speed, and a number of abrupt stops and starts flung us about our seats, leaving us breathless. We jolted, jerked and creaked for a long time, until we reached a hotel. By now we were feeling stiff, sore, hot and dehydrated. A deliciously light, refreshing supper awaited us, consisting of strange salads and cheeses, honey cakes and a variety of fruit juices.

The next morning, in brilliant sunshine, we were taken on a tour of the noisy and bustling City. Among the crowds were many tourists, and Arabs in traditional dress. Jerusalem was divided into three: East Jerusalem, West Jerusalem, and the Old City with its ancient walls, eight gates, and over a hundred streets. Pale stone houses of varied architecture, flats and cheap modern houses (rapidly constructed after World War Two for the surge of immigration) jostled for space everywhere. Churches, temples, synagogues, chapels, abbeys, and mosques constantly reminded us of many faiths. There was a Russian Orthodox Cathedral, an English Cathedral, and an Ethiopian Monastery; a Scottish church, an American church, and a Greek Orthodox church.

The bazaars sold abundant fruit and vegetables. And jewellery, rugs, carpets, and cheap souvenirs: olive wood, pressed flowers in

paperweights and key rings, seven branched menorah, metal ware, coffee pots., trays, worry beads, and carvings of biblical characters, and Star of David flags.

During the next few days we visited the usual tourist spots. The magnificent gold topped Dome of the Rock, the Israel Museum containing the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Via Dolorosa, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Garden of Gethsemane. And the Western (Walling) Wall, through a maze of narrow old streets. It was high and long, with little scraps of paper sticking out of the cracks containing prayers. Orthodox Jewish men, wearing black hats, long black coats, beards and side curls were holding books and muttering prayers, rocking to and fro, as was their custom. Then a policeman spotted that Sally's arms were bare! She quickly put on her cardigan. (We had already donned headscarves.) We saw the women's section of the Wall where some of the prayers were wrapped in little ribbons, flowers, and photographs.

We'd seen an advertisement for a disco, in a place with an unpronounceable name, several miles away. So after our wine that evening, we sped through the streets in a taxi at what seemed like 100 miles per hour. The roads were surprisingly good, but the standard of driving was terrible. If the driver saw someone walking across a road, he would accelerate. It was a scary experience, both for the pedestrians, and us! We entered the dance hall, packed with young Israelis dancing to the latest western pop tunes. Many soldiers, young men and women were amongst them, some brandishing guns as they danced! They always carried their guns wherever they went, even off duty, because if they lost them they were liable for imprisonment. Traditional Yiddish songs and dances were performed with great enthusiasm.

When we chatted to the soldiers, they were full of curiosity about England. Conscription in Israel was compulsory at the age of 18, straight from school. Three years for men and eighteen months for women. Did we want a ride in an army truck, they asked? Certainly we did, so we drove in the dark for half an hour in a jolting, bone shaking noisy vehicle, to heaven knows where in the countryside.

We clutched anything for stability: straps, metal bars, and soldiers. Then we returned to the dance hall.

We eventually waved goodbye to our military friends, having exchanged addresses and promises to write.

‘Don’t forget to visit us when you come to England!’ we yelled, before we returned to our hotel in the same taxi, racing at the same breathtaking speed.

During the rest of our stay we visited Bethlehem and the Mount of Olives. And the Dead Sea. Desolate, almost 400 yards below sea level, it lies on a geological rift between southern Turkey and East Africa. Dry parching heat enveloped us. A ramshackle hut sold postcards, bottled drinks and plastic shoes. Everyone bought some, otherwise our feet would have been cut to ribbons on the razor sharp stones in the hot, dry, sandy shores. We donned swimsuits in a primitive cubicle. We made our way gingerly into the salty, still, warm waters, and floated: we were soon covered with fine white powder. Few birds fly over the Sea and there are no fish in the waters.

After a week in Jerusalem we departed. We visited Jericho, the West Bank of the Jordan, and Samaria. The beauty of the flowers, olive trees and orange groves was refreshing after our long hot journey through miles of barren desolate dessert, with an occasional settlement or village containing donkeys, sheep, banana groves and palms. We stopped mid-way and everyone purchased a short ride on a camel. The smelly animals rose from their kneeling positions, and we swayed unsteadily.

We arrived at the port of Haifa, with its nice beach. Our accommodation was a government convalescent building, modern, light and spacious.

We visited the lovely Persian Gardens, the Sea of Galilee, Tiberias, and Nazareth. But the Holy Land had the usual problems of the 20th century: the threat to security, pollution, indiscriminate building, traffic problems - and beggars!

We returned to England and drizzly grey skies shivering in the cold. But the fields and hedgerows were green, making a refreshing change from some of the barren expanses we’d seen.

I returned to Jerusalem several months later. Sally and I drank wine at the King David Hotel. (She paid.) The following day she was married - to one of the soldiers we’d met at the disco!

Afternoon Tea

Douglas Fulthorpe

Some things never changed, mused Fred. Take the armchair: advancing years had robbed it of some of the firmness of youth, and in return had bestowed a worn, slightly moth-eaten look. A bit like him, he chuckled. It was an old friend, however, and its cushions were soft. A bit like the wife. He chuckled again, and settled comfortably. On the radio the afternoon play was moving to its climax and predictable finale.

“Charles, Charles, what are you doing?” asked a highly pitched female voice, to a background of anxious violin chords.

“Corin, don’t you see? I have to.” The man’s voice was an insidious caress. “You shouldn’t have been there, Corin, but you were. You saw it all. You do understand, don’t you, Corin?”

Both voices were modulated and over-accentuated, with almost mechanical pausing: the actors were clearly reading from a script.

“I won’t tell anyone,” the woman pleaded. “Charles, keep away. Charles, don’t come any closer. Charles---!” The strings, now augmented by timpani, rose to a crescendo, followed by a shriek which threatened to burst the diaphragm of the radio, if not the lungs of the actress. A long pause followed, then, very softly, the chuckle and clucking of hens was heard.

“That was Count Your Chickens,” a friendly, woman’s voice explained, “our mystery, country play in the series, Tales From The Dungheap. Our next presentation---” Fred reached out and turned off the radio.

He returned to his earlier reflections. Why was everyone so fascinated by death, particularly violent death? Murder films and novels; lurid accounts of crimes on television and in the press; all attracted an avid readership, who, realistically, should be repelled, rather than entertained.

Afternoon tea, now; that was a tradition worth preserving. He had better make a start, he supposed. In a few minutes cups, saucers, and plates for three were on the small table, along with milk, a tray of home-made scones, jam and butter. He crossed to the sink to fill the kettle, then paused to look appreciatively at his back garden, with its

tidy shrubs, his wife's cherished flowerbeds, and his vegetable plot. Beyond stretched a patchwork of arable land and broad-leaved woods, while above the summer sun played hide-and-seek with a few high, white clouds.

Fred was thinking again. When was the last time he had seen children playing hide-and-seek, or chasey? Some things had changed, he concluded sadly.

With the kettle on a low gas, he returned to his armchair. They had lived for thirty years, since marriage, in this house. At first sight they were put off by its dark, towering, and forbidding appearance, and the long list of remedial measures which their surveyor, with much head-shaking and lip-pursing, compiled. While their friends opted for boxy semis, with stucco fascias and midget gardens, they bought this big Victorian house for a song, then set to licking it into shape, restoring, and removing the dust and layers of paint accumulated over decades. Even the kitchen was bigger than the same friends' lounges.

Fred surveyed the solid timber cupboards and traditional furniture with satisfaction. No regrets.

He picked up the Wessex Weekly. "Wool Woe," wailed a headline. For the third consecutive year, local farmers were not receiving payment for their virtually worthless sheep's wool, shearing having been performed as a service. "Drugs 'Bust' At The Ram And Plough", proclaimed another headline. Fred laughed as he read how a police-woman had searched the barmaid, who was found to be concealing heroin in her bra. Then in bold lettering: "Barminster Priest And His 'Priestess.'" He grinned. Truly, some things never changed.

There was a footfall in the hall.

"Joan?" His wife entered, patting her hair, then took a seat at the table.

"How was the bingo?"

"All roight. That 'ilda Smith won three games. They do say you're just winning your own money back."

"Well, not quoite," Fred corrected her kindly. "But you enjoyed it?"

"Oh, yes."

"And you met your friends?"

“Of course.”

“Well, that’s everything.” Fred’s voice was gentle.

Joan smiled. “Did you go over to Joe’s?”

“Yes, oi ‘ad an hour there.”

“How was he?”

“Down in the dumps, oi’m afraid.” Fred gave a sigh.

“Oh?”

“Well, he has good reason to be. The local shops can’t take a lot of his produce, and Fresco and the other supermarkets are always trying to beat down his prices. He’s thinking of giving up the small-holding.”

“What a shame!” Joan’s voice reflected her dismay. “What will he do?”

“Oi don’t know. Work as a jobbing gardener. He’s good at that.”

“But it’s his loife,” his wife protested.

“Oi know.” He paused. “He showed me a strange thing. You know how everything he grows for the supermarkets has to be perfectly formed and unblemished, or else they won’t ‘ave it. He’s got this pesticide which they’ve told him to use. It’s a blue powder that looks like that silly soap powder; the one the ‘ousewoives can’t tell from butter---”

“Fred!” Joan laughed.

“He applies it in greatly doiluted form to his brassicas, to kill creeping vermin such as caterpillars and slugs.”

Joan shuddered. “Then it ends up on our Brussels Sprouts. It sounds horrible.”

“It *is* horrible. He gave me a demonstration while I was there. He cut the top of an egg off, sprinkled some of the powder onto it, then stood the egg up on its end on the soil. After about a minute a magpie landed, and, without hesitation, went straight to the egg and dipped its beak into the yolk, then straightened up--dead! It didn’t even fall over. God, it was quick.”

“Fred, that’s awful. It’s not a bird oi care a great deal for, eating up all the little birds and that, but even so...”

The kettle, a novelty from Blackpool, gave its characteristic wolf-whistle. Sometimes it startled and amused female visitors. Fred got up and went to make the tea.

“That’s not all,” he continued as he returned with the tea-pot. “Another magpie landed, presumably its mate It stood for a short while, puzzled as to whoi the other bird was so still, then dipped its beak into the yolk. Same thing; it straightened up--dead. The pair of them stood like statues.”

“Well...”

“Joe ‘ates using the stuff. Oi said oi wondered whether it would sort out those voine-weevils which have been killing your primulas. He gave me a little.”

“Fred!” Joan was horrified. “You shouldn’t have. You’re not going to use it, surely?”

“With discretion, moi dear,” Fred pacified her. “With discretion.” There was a noise from the hall.

“That’ll be Meg. Come to give me my twice-weekly lesson on ‘oigiene.”

“She means well.” Joan laughed, in spite of herself.

“It’s me.” Their daughter’s educated, pleasant tones were unmistakable. “I’ve something to show you.”

“We can guess.” Joan’s voice was happy.

Scones and tea waiting,” added Fred. Just then the sun emerged decisively and gloriously from hiding, dazzling them both.

“I’ll shut that.” Fred rose and drew the curtains. A measure of shade returned.

Joan sliced and buttered the scones, while Fred poured the tea. They waited a minute or so.

“Tell you what.” Fred leaned across the table and whispered in his wife’s ear.

“Fred! No!” She was appalled.

“Come on; it’ll be all roight.” Fred assured her She nodded, very uncertainly.

The door opened. A younger, more buxom version of Joan hurried in. Having left her uniform smock at the lab, she was fetchingly attired in a

pristine, white blouse and navy-blue trousers, with her hair gathered at the neck. Her expression was flustered.

“Dad, I’ve just seen what you’ve got on the top shelf in the shed. Dad, that’s NO!”

“NO?”

“Yes, NO!”

“I know it’s NO.”

“Dad, don’t joke. You’ve got Nik-Off, the most deadly poison on the go. It’s going to be banned. Dad, it’s *lethal*---” Her voice cracked. She turned pleadingly to her mother for help.

“Meg,” her father answered, “everything’s lethal where you’re concerned, ever since you got your diploma in public ‘ealth and ‘oigiene. Sit down and have a cup of tea with me and your mother.”

“Dad, promise me you’ll get rid of that stuff. It’ll have to be disposed of properly. I can arrange it. *Dad, promise me!*”

Her parents each picked up a scone.

Meg panicked. “Dad, did you wash your hands?”

Fred laughed. “Meg, ‘oi wonder you have any ‘ands left at all, with all that washing.”

“Dad---!” Meg watched, horror-stricken as Fred and Joan each bit into a scone, then halted, transfixed. With the scones still clasped to their open mouths, they sat, each staring into the other’s glassy eyes, their faces frozen in a rictus of death.

“Mam--dad,” Meg shrieked; “Mam--dad!”

At that moment the capricious sun decided to sulk, and fled abruptly behind a cloud. In the sudden gloom the three figures were posed in an eerie and silent tableau.

The cloud, impishly testing the sun’s mood, edged away. Gradually the room lightened, and slowly, barely perceptibly, Fred and Joan came alive again. They lowered their hands and the uneaten scones, as their daughter watched with goggle-eyes and gaping mouth worthy of a cartoon character.

“She fell for it!” Fred closed his eyes and rocked helplessly, wiping a tear from his cheek.

Joan turned anxiously to her daughter. Meg did not laugh: she uttered a scream, which, had the manufacturers of Nik-Off been able to encapsulate and distribute it commercially, would have sent the garden pests fleeing to far-off shores, or trooping in, bearing little white flags of surrender.

She slumped heavily at the table, buried her head in her hands, and sobbed abandonedly. Her mother put her arm around the heaving shoulders, her eyes fixed accusingly on her husband.

“Meg, ‘oi’m sorry. It was only a joke,” Fred stammered. “You’re always at us to wash our ‘ands.”

Meg continued to sob quietly. Finally she raised her head. Her face distorted, and, when she found utterance, her voice was harsh and masculine. “I hope you never play any more jokes like that, you despicable man. God, you never change, do you?”

“Have a cup of tea---” Fred’s voice faltered. He fidgeted. Her arm still around her daughter, Joan was quiet and contemplative. A minute passed.

“It was going to be a surprise.” Meg was calmer, her voice now remote and cold. “I had come to show you the puppy.”

“Oh, how lovely!” Joan was visibly cheered. “What are you calling him?”

“He hasn’t got a name yet. “I thought we could make one up together. A nice name.”

““Oi had forgotten about the puppy,” Fred ventured, relieved at the change of subject. “Where is he?”

“In the potting shed.”

Fred started. “The potting shed? You didn’t leave the door open, did you?”

“I can’t remember,” Meg replied wearily. “Yes, I think I opened it. I was going to let him have a look around the garden. Then I saw that stuff you’ve got.” Her animation returned: “Dad, you must get rid of it before somebody gets killed!”

“Oh, moi Gawd.” Fred was distracted. Jaw sagging, he went to the window and wrenched the curtains apart. Cruel, brilliant sunlight transfixed their faces. Fred’s mouth was slack and unresponsive. At the third try he managed to speak. “The puppy...”

The Summit at Sixty

Stephen Bibby

‘**D**id you get lost on Loughrigg Fell?’ jibed my son, repeating the family joke about previous misadventures negotiating this bumpy summit.

But my wife and I got straight to the trig point and enjoyed a glorious view across a sparkling Grasmere nestled in the loveliest Lakeland vale. It was May, the start of the week in which I turned 60 and the first accomplishment of my ambition to scale all 214 peaks depicted in the famous Wainwright guides.

We rented spacious ‘Cobblestones’ in Ambleside from Cumbrian Cottages, Windermere. Ideally located in the very heart of the Lake District, its bright conservatory gave a splendid view of Loughrigg, easily within walking distance through the town and over the burbling River Rothay.

Invigorated by this taster I determined to impress my son, exactly half my age. He accompanied me to bag five challenging summits in one day. From the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel tucked into the fellside beneath a beck plunging down from the Langdale Pikes, we strode out to Pike O’ Blisco. Our next objective was Crinkle Crags but we firstly made an energetic detour via Cold Pike. Low grey clouds gave drama to the five rocky Crinkles as we ate our packed lunch spotting matchstick figures plodding up the steep direct route from Oxendale Beck. Then it was onwards past the famous sheet of rock (‘The Great Slab’ says Wainwright) up to the splendid pointed peak of Bowfell, like a remote turreted lookout. Wistfully we left this pinnacle to scramble down to Ore Gap and make our final ascent to Esk Pike.

On a brighter day we motored up the aptly named ‘Struggle’ from Ambleside over Kirkstone Pass to take the Glenridding steamer up stunning Ullswater to Howtown. Then it was steeply up to the first of the day’s Wainwrights, Loadpot Hill. There followed a splendid blowy ridge walk, the long purple lines of the Pennines to our east, the Lakeland peaks etched on the western horizon exactly as depicted in Wainwright’s meticulous illustrations. We hiked swiftly over springy turf, such a welcome change from the stony or eroded paths elsewhere in Lakeland, finally reaching Angle Tarn Pikes, our eighth summit that day.

But the highlight of the week was on the day of my 60th birthday. Eleven of us scaled the highest mountain in England – Scafell Pike. As if joining the celebration the sun pierced some rather lowering clouds as we reached the summit. Sellafield seemed a benign Toytown below us, a distant oilseed rape field glinted bright yellow and the Isle of Man floated dimly in a misty sleep. Euphoria replaced summit exhaustion; our celebratory champagne tasted like nectar.

We rounded off the day with a splendid dinner for twenty friends and family in ‘Lucy's on a Plate’ in Ambleside. There was more champagne, excellent company, summit highlights to relive, and aching legs to rest. There was also much talk of the 15 Wainwrights of that week; only 199 to go before I'm 70!

Voices Off

Tony Oswick

Commended story from the Lewis Wright Competition

Jennie looked out of the window. The sky was as blue as she could ever have imagined, the sea was as calm as she could ever have wished and the setting sun shone as romantically as she could ever have hoped. But her view was misted, misted by the tears welling in her eyes.

It had been a disaster. She'd been so looking forward to yesterday evening - the first chance to meet Rob since last year. Same time. Same place. Same occasion. She'd secretly hoped something might happen. And it had. Of all the people there, Rob had made a beeline for her. She'd been flattered by his attention and enchanted by his company. But then it had all gone wrong. Her and her big mouth.

Sabrina sat on the settee beside her, unmoving, inscrutable, her large blue eyes fixed unblinkingly ahead.

“What should I do?” Jennie muttered, as much to herself as to Sabrina. “Should I apologise? Should I tell him I didn't mean to be hurtful? Should I tell him how I really feel?” Sabrina was silent -which was unusual because Sabrina was usually very talkative.

In the hotel room below, Rob was looking at the same sky, the same sea and the same sun. And similar thoughts were going through his head. He'd loved Jennie from the moment he'd set eyes on her twelve months ago. At first, he'd thought it might be infatuation. But now, seeing her again, he knew it was the real thing.

Rob had been going to tell her last night. He'd had a whole year to rehearse the words to express his love. Between engagements at undistinguished working men's clubs, Rob had had many an hour to while away. Perhaps Jennie was right. Perhaps he should settle for life on the club circuit? As she'd said, it wasn't such a bad life after all, was it?

It wasn't like that for Jennie. Booked for countrywide theatre engagements and hired for the cruise liners, there was no doubting her superior talent. And that had upset him. Jennie hadn't meant to be unkind. She'd just told him the truth. But he'd stormed out, his pride wounded. Last night he'd vowed never to speak to Jennie again.

Rob looked at Henri as he sat across the room, an inane smile imprinted on his wide-eyed face. But Henri was Rob's constant companion, had been for the last twenty years.

"Come on, Henri old friend. You're the intelligent one of the duo. What happens now? But please don't tell me to make the first move. Not after what she said. I've got my dignity, you know."

Rob stared out of the window. Seagulls flew high above, searching for their last meal of the day. Henri said nothing. But an idea had begun to form in Rob's mind.

"Blast it. I'm not going to telephone her. But ..." He looked at Henri. "---you could!" Henri sat there blankly. But Rob knew he would. Knew he couldn't say no. And even better, Henri could speak to Sabrina. Yes, that's the way to do it!

Two minutes later, the telephone rang in Jennie's room. "Bon soir Mademoiselle. I wonder if I could speak to Sabrina, s'il vous plait?." Henri's voice resonated down the line.

"Oh Henri, it's you". Jennie hesitated. "Yes I suppose so. I'll put Sabrina on."

"Henri darling?" Sabrina drawled. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you tonight. How's my favourite Frenchman?"

"Tres bien merci. Tres bien. But I am not calling to discuss my health. I am calling because Rob asked me. He's feeling a little --'ow you say - distressed."

"But Henri dearest, what would Rob want with a young girl like me?" Sabrina was at her teasing best.

"Oh, do not get me wrong Mademoiselle. Much as Rob admires you, his message is for Jennie". There was silence but Sabrina did not seem in

the least disappointed. “Mademoiselle please understand. Rob is just, well well, he would like to start again. He understands what Jennie was saying last night. He knows his talent is limited - but sometimes the truth hurts.”

“Oh Henri sweetie, Jennie is feeling bad as well.” Sabrina’s voice was as smooth as dark chocolate. “She didn’t mean to cause offence. She only said what she said because...” Sabrina hesitated. “... because she loves him.”

There was a long pause. “Mademoiselle Sabrina! Did I hear right? Oh Mademoiselle! L’amour! L’amour! But that too is why I am calling. To tell you Rob loves Jennie.” There was an even longer pause. “Mademoiselle? Mademoiselle? Are you still there? Have we got cut off? Did you hear what I said? Rob has loved Jennie from the moment he first saw her. He was so looking forward to yesterday. But when everything went wrong.....”

Henri’s voice drifted away.

“Henri, my angel!” Sabrina had recovered her composure. “Thank you, thank you, thank you. Oh please tell Rob his love is reciprocated”.

“Reciprocated Mademoiselle? I do not understand.”

There was laughing on the other end of the telephone. ““Oh Henri, my love. You are funny! So, so funny.”

“Mais oui Mademoiselle. I am pleased everything is now sorted out. Why don’t we all forget about yesterday? Why don’t we all go downstairs for a romantic dinner? And who knows what the night may bring?”

Sabrina giggled. “We’ll see, cutie-pie. But I’ll be safely in bed by ten o’clock tonight as I hope you will be. And before you say anything else, we will definitely be in separate rooms.”

And so it was that half-an-hour later, Jenny and Sabrina met Rob and Henri in the hotel dining room. Sabrina, her long blonde hair flowing over her sequined dress, and Henri, his beret at a rakish angle and his string of onions draped over his hooped shirt, were quiet now. They did not move. They could not move. Because Rob and Jennie were silently holding hands across the dining table, looking lovingly into each other’s eyes.

Yes, this was an annual convention of ventriloquists that neither Jennie nor Rob would ever forget.