

# The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

## Former Presidents:

Humbert Wolfe (1935-40)  
Lord Vansittart (1940-57)  
Sir George Rostrevor  
Hamilton (1957-67)  
Bernard Newman (1967-68)  
James Laver (1968-75)  
Lord Snow (1975-80)  
Charles Neilson Gattey (1980-2005)

## President:

Alan S Watts

## Vice Presidents:

Richard Adams FRSL  
John le Carré

## Chairman:

Terry Rickson

## Vice Chairman:

Vacant

## Membership Secretary:

Joan M Lewis  
17 The Green  
Corby Glen  
GRANTHAM  
NG33 4NP  
membership@scpsw.co.uk

## Meetings Secretary:

Ethel Corduff  
10 Malcolm Road  
Woodside  
South Norwood  
LONDON  
SE25 5HG  
meetings@scpsw.co.uk

## Treasurer:

Beryl Jones  
37 Lingham Lane  
Moreton  
WIRRAL  
CH46 7SA

## Competition Secretary:

Nina Mattar  
4 Redruth House  
Grange Road  
Sutton  
SM2 6RT

## Publicity Officer:

Jenny Chamier-Grove  
jchamiergrove@hotmail.com

## Diary

AGM, Civil Service Club:  
Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> May 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.**

## Poetry Editor:

Terry James  
1 Thornleigh Park  
Bangor  
County Down  
BT20 4NN

## Editor:

Paul Williams  
25 castle Road  
Ipswich  
IP1 5DY  
wanstader@ntlworld.com

ISSN 0959-0064

# THE SCPSW AUTHOR

NUMBER 193

SPRING 2011

## CONTENTS

- 3 Editorial
- 4 Chairman's Chat
- 5 Winners Froud Children's Short Story Competition 2010
- 6 Member's Successes
- 7 Poetry Workshop *Mike Boland*
- 10 Poetry Pages *Edited by Terry James*
- 15 Prison Shoes *Nicola Lang*
- 21 A Disturbing Woman *Sheridan Brenchley*
- 28 Greek and Roman Artillery *S Raymond*
- 30 The Good Old Days *Ruth Sear*
- 36 Playing the Rat *Paul Williams*

## **Editorial**

Paul Williams

First of all, I should start by thanking Adrian Danson, our former editor, for the sterling work he has put in over the last ten years. His is going to be a hard act to follow, and only now am I discovering the myriad of tasks required of the editor of *The Author*, not to mention the legion of pitfalls and (albeit minor) irritations that have to be endured along the journey from receipt of submissions to the production of the final product.

Perhaps I should say a little about myself. After a brief career in teaching I was a Civil Servant for twenty-one years, first with the Crown Agents and then in the Department of Energy, which was later absorbed into the DTI. I then worked in the Health Service for nine years. Throughout my working career I lived in London but three years ago I decided to return to Suffolk, where I had lived for a while when I was younger.

For part of my time at the DTI I was editor of the official annual yearbook for the oil and gas exploration industry, so this is not my first foray into editorial work. That was, theoretically, a far larger undertaking than this one, but then I had staff to shout at and an IT section I could call on for advice. I have missed those IT people recently, for it took me a long time indeed to work out how to convert submissions that needed to be scanned into text, and for a while I gave up and copy-typed most contributions that had not been sent electronically. Even scanned documents require considerable editing to make them coherent, not that contributions sent as attachments to emails don't sometimes require editing too! Where possible I will always try publish contributions as submitted if they seem to have merit, but from time to time I have noticed repetition of phrases, clumsy sentences and other blotches that I feel do require a little polishing, and I will tweak very slightly rather than reject a story outright. As Adrian hinted in his last editorial, however, there is now a cluster of contributions in the pipeline, so even promising stories may not be included in the edition immediately following submission.

While it's probably inevitable that most contributions will be short stories and poetry, travel articles and other interesting, well written pieces on almost any subject are welcome. Hopeful novelists and non-fiction writers may also like to submit a short section from their work (max 1,500 words) and a brief introductory piece (max 300 words) to put it into context. Letters commenting on stories and on other literary matters would also help maintain a sense of community and give some contributors useful feedback.

Happy writing and, one hopes, happy reading!

## **Chairman's Chat**

Terry Rickson

For this edition of *The Author* we welcome our new editor, Paul Williams, and wish him every success in undertaking the post.

Reading in the Winter 2010 Author of Douglas Fulthorpe's success having two plays published, stirred a memory and cast my mind back many years, when several of the Society's members wrote plays and often entered them in competitions. This set me wondering whether any of our present membership do or have ventured into the play-writing scene. It would be good to find out if any members write plays, have attempted to do so or 'it's just something I've thought about'. Let us know: a short article perhaps?

Matters literary have been to the fore in no small way in recent weeks. It has been good to see poetry taking a lead with Jo Shapcott awarded the Costa Book Award for her collection, *On Mutability* and Derek Walcott winning the T S Eliot prize with *White Egrets*, giving a Caribbean flavour. Something on which to spend those Christmas book tokens!

I see too that book-lovers are gearing up to fight library closures, as one reputable national daily put it, 'taking the battle to the enemy', namely, the Coalition's proposed cuts. Somerset, apparently, will now close only eleven local libraries instead of the planned thirty-four and the London Borough of Hillingdon is to close none at all. Activists in Buckinghamshire and the Isle of Wight organised mass 'take outs' to make their point. So, friends, to the barricades!

I'm sure that many of you will be aware that the film Brighton Rock, based on Graham Greene's novel of that name, is to be re-made. The action has been updated to the year 1964 – an interesting experience in store for book/film lovers. Who can forget that classic, *The Third Man*?

With my best wishes and may you enjoy your writing in 2011.

### **Correction to Winter Author:**

"Critics.....500 words of muddle, incomprehension, what? These words were annotated on the following competition entry," (Page 5 of Winter Author)

This was then quite erroneously followed by Member's Successes.

The gremlins had been at work, creating a situation where these words now seemed appropriate. My invitation to comment on their relevance in fact relates to "Taken by Angels by Wendy House" on page 20. Perhaps members will now reconnect the words to the story and respond to my invitation to comment on the relevance of the criticism to the story.

Adrian Danson

## **Winners Froud Children's Short Story Competition 2010**

There were 72 entries and the competition was judged by author Jean Bowden ( known as Tessa Barclay) author of over 100 novels . The competition is sponsored by member Roy Froud.

### **First Prize**

'Prison Shoes'

Nicola Lang, Kingston, Surrey

('Prison Shoes' can be found in this edition of The Author. Ed)

### **Second Prize**

'How Rainbows came to be'

Phillipa Rae, Claygate, Esher, Surrey

### **Third Prize**

'Just call me Beckie'

Fiona Crinks, Clutton, Bristol

Thank you to all who entered and better luck next time.

## **75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Lunch 2010**

The Society's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary lunch was celebrated in the Civil Service Club on 23 October. Our retiring editor, Adrian Danson, was our guest speaker and he enlivened us with his wit. Chairman Terry Rickson thanked Adrian for his dedicated ten years as editor of 'Author'. Our new editor Paul Williams was among the guests. A delicious 75th anniversary cake was enjoyed with our coffee.

The Writer of the Year 2011, Oliver Eade, is a London born retired doctor and writer, now living in Scotland. He was presented with his award for his prize winning first book *Moon Rabbit*, published by Delancey Press. This is a Yin-Yang fantasy which takes a Scottish boy and a Chinese girl on a fantastical journey into mythological China. It was a winner of the Writers' & Artists' 2007 Yearbook New Novel Competition and long-listed for the Waterstone's 2008 Children's Book Prize.

He has recently had another book published by Austin & Macauley, *Northwards*, a children's dark fantasy. Also Oliver's book *The Terminus*, a futuristic teenage novel about the last two days of London, has been accepted for publication by Little Acorn Press.

Oliver enthralled and inspired us with his fascinating talk on his writing experiences. After lunch we queued to buy his books.

Ethel Corduff.

## **Gordon Gompers Article Competition**

Any topic. Maximum 2,000 words. Prize £50. Closing date 31st July.  
Entry £3.00.

The usual rules apply. Double spaced with word count , nom de plume, provide name and address on a separate sheet, SAE for return.

Entries to Competition Secretary, Nina Mattar, whose address can be found in *The Author*.

## **Members' Successes/achievements**

Roger De Boeur has self published another well illustrated transport book, this time on bicycles, called *Cycling in my blood*. ISBN 978-0-9541182-5-7.

Ethel Corduff has had an article, *Bedpans and Baubles*, published in the December issue of Family History Monthly.

Agnes Kabdebo-Gedeon's book, *Bye Bye Budapest*, is coming out in May. Spanning more than fifty years, it charts her early years in German-occupied and later Stalinist Hungary, her escape to Britain and subsequent adventures in Guyana and elsewhere. The book will be available direct from Agnes at the following address.

107 Old Hall Lane, Manchester, M14 6HL Tel: 0161 225 6098

## **New Year Party**

Two of the Froud Children's Short Story competition winners came to the New Year party at the Civil Service Club on 29 January 2011. Dr Nicola Lang, who is at the Department of Health, won first prize for *Prison Shoes* which she read out, and Phillipa Rae, who works for the BBC, came second with *How Rainbows Came to Be*. They were presented with their prizes by Chairman Terry Rickson. Roy Froud was unable to attend this year. Apologies were also received from Joana Crawford and Una McMorran.

Our competition theme for the party was 'Photograph'. First prize for poetry went to Val Tigwell, with Ethel Corduff second. The short story was won by Beryl Jones and second was Paul Williams, our new editor. Paul suggested adding an article section for next year. As usual the club provided ample food and drink and a raffle was held. Though we had less attending than last year, thanks to all who came and made it an enjoyable afternoon.

Ethel Corduff

## **Annual General Meeting 2011**

The Society's AGM will take place at 1.30 pm on Saturday, 21 May 2011 in the Elizabethan Room, Civil Service Club, Great Scotland Yard, Whitehall. An insert is enclosed for those wishing to order refreshments (£15). This should be returned to Ethel Corduff.

## **Vee Bradley Humorous Poetry Competition**

Ethel Corduff received a letter from Peter Denison on behalf of Vee Bradley's family. The main section is reproduced here:

'Thank you for sending me a copy of the winning poem in the Vee Bradley Humorous Poetry Competition. I made copies for others in the family. We were all impressed. We liked the Poem, Man for All Seasons. Congratulations to Tony Oswick. And we were pleased to remember Vee.'

Editor

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Poetry Workshop**

Mike Boland

---

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

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

Events Co-ordinator: Steve Pilley

---

## **Bill Barnes Competition Results**

The results of the 2010 Bill Barnes Poetry Competition are now available. They are as follows:-

First Prize: Alison Michell

Second Prize: Norman Bissett

Third Prize: Andrew Millican

In addition, the judge singled out poems by Tony Oswick, Jane Arthur and Barbara M Stewart for Commendation.

Congratulations to the winners, and our thanks to Bill Douglas for judging the 2010 competition. Details of this year's Competition and how to enter will be given in the summer issue of *wavelengths*.

## Poetry Workshop 2011

The 2011 Poetry Workshop Weekend has been booked for the weekend of the 15, 16, & 17th July. The venue will be the Hillscourt Conference Centre, Rednal, Birmingham. Their website is: [www.hillscourt.co.uk](http://www.hillscourt.co.uk). The cost of the Weekend is £220 per head which includes accommodation, full board and conference facilities.

We are booked in from 1pm on the Friday until after lunch on Sunday. Food is available at the bar on arrival, if needed (to be paid for separately). As usual, we ask for a £30 deposit on booking, with the balance due by 31 May 2011. Alternatively, payment may be made in installments, by arrangement with our Treasurer, Terry Rickson (address at back of magazine.)

## Waves 2011

PW members are reminded that the deadline for this year's edition of *Waves*, the annual anthology of PW members' work, is **31 March**. Send up to six poems, preferably 3 or more to give the editor a selection to choose from. There are no restrictions on theme or form. Entries should be no more than **37** lines including stanza breaks and should not have been published previously, apart from in *wavelengths* and *The Author*. To assist with marketing costs, contributors of published poems will be asked to purchase **4 copies** at a total cost of **£10.00**.

Submissions should be sent, preferably by email, to [angus@livxx.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:angus@livxx.fsnet.co.uk) or by post to Angus Livingstone, 1 Scott Street, Largs, Ayrshire KA30 9NP

## wavelengths

As well as the annual anthology *Waves*, the Poetry Workshop also produces a quarterly magazine called *wavelengths*, which is free to all its members. The spring issue is out now. This edition of the magazine is traditionally devoted to the Bill Barnes Competition and this year is no exception. It contains the Judge's Report, all three prize winning poems plus those that Bill Douglas considered as worthy of Commendation. Running to 20 pages, it also contains several short features, poems by PW members and finishes with the Newsletter section.



## **Subscriptions 2011**

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1 January 2011. Please note that the cost of membership for this year remains unchanged at £5 for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. A Renewal Form was enclosed with the winter issue of *wavelengths*. Please complete and send it with your cheques/postal orders to **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears above. **Please** remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

Prospective new members should contact Terry Rickson at the address given above.

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

- four issues of our magazine *wavelengths* each year
- 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 efolio scheme
- eligibility for the Bill Barnes Poetry Competition (open exclusively to PW members)
- eligibility for the annual Poetry Workshop Weekend

If anyone is interested in joining the Poetry Workshop, please contact Terry Rickson at the above address. He will be pleased to provide further details.

### **Dates to Remember**

March 2011 *wavelengths* Spring issue published

31 March 2011 Closing Date for Submissions to *Waves*

June 2011 *wavelengths* Summer Issue published

15 -17 July 2010 Poetry Workshop Weekend

## **Poetry Pages**

Edited by Terry James

### **Southernland**

Steve Glason

Past Tolworth Rise – near Malden New  
There is a quaint suburban view  
Serried ranks of Thirties homes  
With timbered frames and stuccoed gnomes.

The empty fields in which one stood  
Have disappeared at Hinchley Wood  
In their place these houses stand  
They're seen to sprawl in Southernland.

Doorbells ring out in Ewell East  
Or so it seems to me at least  
Electric trains through stations spark  
Like Epsom, Cheam and Worcester Park.

Thus from dwellings built by Wates  
Commuter and his merry mates  
Whitehall-bound via Waterloo  
And other parts of London too.

### **Frustration**

Steve Glason

I'm penning this ode feeling distraught  
Waiting in vain at draughty Earls Court  
For trains which might stop – or start now and then  
Or maybe diverted via High Street Ken!

### **Almond Blossom**

Norman Bissett

Never before or afterwards such calm,  
such delicacy, such certainty of touch,  
such celebration. Soothing as balm,  
The birth that January thrilled him very much.

At last, a grandson for his widowed mother,  
bringing a sense of dynastic continuity.  
Joy for Johanna, and for his beloved brother  
fulfilment unconfined, in perpetuity.

The pink-tinged petals, full of awakened energy,  
smother dark branches, stark against the sky,  
the azure blue transmitting electricity  
as with a deep symphonic harmony.

Within the asylum walls at Saint-Rémy,  
He wipes his brush and puts his paints away.

### **The Kiss**

Norman Bissett

With stonemason's hands,  
muscular as a wrestler's,  
He taps his chisel.  
From marble depths emerges  
A flower in female form,

A naked lily,  
Smooth, delicate, undefiled,  
Virginal, glowing.  
Paolo kisses Francesca  
And their limbs entwine, trembling.

### **Convalescent**

AE Hobbs

Travel with the wind  
For all of time is there.  
Listen to its tales,  
As it gently moves the air.

From Samarkand and old Thailand,  
Down the Caspian Sea,  
Through the temples of Bangkok,  
To the square of the Holy See.

Mountain range, and desert sands,  
Valleys, hill and dale,  
Fluttering the flags of many lands  
Where ships of nations sail.

Polar caps, the snowing miles,  
To the green of temperate climes.  
Legends of life and its trials  
Lived by man in his troubled times.

Constrained, the body lies,  
The mind is moving, alert and free.  
Through the window, the wind gently sighs,  
Come, why don't you journey along with me.

### **Mam'selle**

Terry Rickson

She taught us French.  
We were required  
to call her, 'mam'selle.'  
Stubby figure in a frumpish two-piece;  
It was the late nineteen-forties.  
"Bonjour mes enfants,"  
she would say on entry.  
We rose, to a clatter  
of desk-tops and scraping chairs,  
"Bonjour mam'selle,"  
our less than enthusiastic reply.  
To encourage us in the language  
she would institute a game  
of, 'Simon dit,'  
standing at the back of class.  
"Simon dit, levez les mains."  
"Simon dit, tournez ces pouces,"  
we to express the actions.  
Occasionally, the roles were reversed  
and we put the commands to her  
in French, of course, around the class.  
Hesitantly at first, then  
someone, a little more daring,  
"Simon dit, touchez les pieds."  
Silence.  
Mam'selle's face grew redder and redder.  
"Oh, Simon dit, touchez la tete,  
er, sorry, Miss,"  
to suppressed giggles.

## **Reflection**

Terry Rickson

In the pattering  
of dry autumn leaves,  
Edmund Blunden  
imagined the light step of Thomas Hardy,  
half expecting his coming.

## **Complacency Can Damage Your Health**

Alan C Jones

I dream of the day I can sail away  
On the back of a fag packet.  
Since time began, a tool of man  
Is the back of a fag packet.

We've calculated, formulated  
Scribbled names, played at games  
Illustrated, estimated  
Worked out angles, doodled tangles  
Recorded jokes and anecdotes,  
Knocked walls through, wrote IOUs  
And mopped up booze.  
All on the back of a fag packet.

To me it makes such little sense  
To ridicule its influence.  
If only it were more adored  
Like the well-respected drawing-board.

## **Hard to Swallow**

Alan C Jones

Yesterday I ate some of your cake  
It was like carboniferous limestone  
It made my jaw ache.  
Never have I chewed anything so solid  
I coughed and told you it was nice  
But really – it was horrid.

My digestive system started to falter  
I'd have preferred swallowing a piece  
Of the Rock of Gibraltar.  
With cooking like this you could make provision  
To create pigeon pie  
Using only clay pigeons.

Scoffing it was the worst mistake yet  
Since the misguided words of  
Marie Antoinette.  
Now the cake's nearly gone and against sound advice  
I'm tempted to say perhaps I could manage  
Just another  
Small  
Slice.

### **Places where I see my Uncle**

Ivy Hudson

Waiting in the garden with him  
to be called in, to dinner of meat and two veg.  
Time was at a premium, so we didn't wait long.  
After he'd come back to the sunshine  
and help with our kite –  
his boiler suit, dusty from his joiner's shop,  
he found time to concentrate.  
The garden was a sunny oasis, but we beware of  
the unfilled-in well, the fierce saws he worked with,  
traffic front and back, and unsafe beach.

In the dark one evening we were shepherded  
into the kitchen, while he trapped the rat

## **Prison Shoes**

Nicola Lang

*(This story was the winner of the WF and FG Froud Annual Children's Story Competition 2010)*

**O**n visiting days, I have to wear my good shoes. I only have one pair of good shoes: red platforms with a black strap. My mum found them outside someone's house, or that's what she tells us anyway. I think her ex-boyfriend Steve stole them, because they look brand new and they are not the sort of shoes that people forget outside.

Anyway, I only go for visits every two weeks, and I have to get the shoes ready, wipe the leather with a damp cloth and line them up by the door. It is three bus rides to prison to see mum and I go with my Nana.

Nana sighs and acts like it is a huge deal for her to take me, when really she is just very tired of my mum. When we visit together she sits and looks at the prison officers and doesn't make any eye contact with my mum except when she drops one of her bombshell-type statements on her. God forbid I could ever get pregnant, she would literally announce it to the whole visiting suite (they call it a suite, no, not a sweet).

Nana works in a hospital laundry near our flat in Elephant and has strong arms and the same mousey coloured hair like me and my mum. Except Nana doesn't dye it, and she wears a gold chain with a picture of me around her neck in a gold-coloured locket.

I call her my mum but really I don't know her so well.

Last visiting day we all sat together again and I said

'Hi how are you?' to mum just to make some conversation.

My mother says back

'I'm good, I'm good' like they do on the X factor and then 'how do you like those shoes, do they fit alright?', kind of fiddling with her hair which is short and blond and now with some grey bits.

‘They’re really nice’ I say. We are like this a lot, very polite with each other and we don’t hardly say a thing. But my Nana is not so shy about holding back.

‘Them shoes’ she snorts. ‘Where’d Steve find ‘em?’ She knows that Steve is not exactly a tax paying citizen and once chased him out of our flat with a mop when he tried to lift our toaster, holding her mobile to her ear and pretending to call the police.

So my mum is looking a little better, put on a few pounds here and there and seems not so nervous.

‘Steve found ‘em, for definite’ she says, looking at the floor, then ‘can’t you say anything nice, especially in front of Didi’ says my mum.

Nana: ‘Nice? Didi knows them shoes are stolen. And where is old lover boy anyway?’ Nana says. ‘Last time I saw him he was lookin’ like a sack of old asparagus. Saw him outside A&E trying to pretend he had appendicitis or something bad’.

‘Christ cant’cha keep your voice down Ma-’ my mother is getting a bit frantic. It’s not that you can add anything to her sentence now and a pair of shoes isn’t going to make a difference one way or another, but still.

I want a cigarette but think that if a fourteen year-old struck a match in here either the officers (one is pretty good looking, Dave) would step in or more importantly my Nana would give me a slap.

‘Anyway’ my mum says, ‘isn’t it the thought that counts’, and stares at the ceiling, fidgeting. And when she rolls up one sleeve and I see two things that are a bit different. One, her injecting tracks are healing pretty well. And two, she has a new tattoo that says ‘Didi’. Oh well. Nana sees this too and jumps right in.

‘Nice tattoo’ she says, packing up her bag. She never wastes much time with my mum, starts leaving well within the visiting time. And when we are walking out she calls over to mum, making me want to positively die, ‘Oh, and Didi’s failing English.’

Damn, Nana is excellent at bombshells.

The day after I am in English class, looking out the window. Leaves are starting to fall outside, yellow and orange on the ground. I wore my



red shoes accidentally today and a boy in class Reginald (who hates me) said

‘Red shoes. Get ‘em in jail?’ and he said it nice and loud so the teacher could hear. Now usually this is fine but today it was a new teacher Miss Evans who looked over to me.

‘Now class’ she says. Today I would like you all to write a poem about your summer holidays.’

Lots of groans and moans from the class. I haven’t written much half an hour later when Miss Evans picks up the pieces of paper, so I quickly scribble something down and hand it in.

Next visiting day I am wearing the stupid shoes again and now I hate them because of what Reginald says. In fact I feel my blood pressure begin to boil (my Nana’s favourite expression) when I do up the shoes, thinking of Reginald’s fat face.

My mum is now looking even better and seems to be calm, instead of sneaking little looks at the officers she is relaxed almost.

‘So Didi’ she says, ‘how are you doing?’ I feel that we are on some sort of TV show about families who are being re-introduced to each other after being on a desert island or something.

‘Okay’ I say, ‘not bad.’

My nana says helpfully

‘Didi is smoking about half a pack a day now’ and she leans back in her chair, jiggling her left foot which is crossed over the right.

My mum looks a bit shaky ‘Didi is that right?’ she says.

‘Not half a pack,’ I say ‘maybe a quarter. And lights, filtered.’

My mum starts to fiddle with her hair but it is so short now it’s hard.

Then my mum says something that catches me and Nana totally by surprise.

‘I am learning’ she says, ‘to read.’

We don’t know what to say to that, so we just look the three of us at each other, ‘gobsmacked’ like they say on the X factor.

Like when Dermot says to some crummy group ‘what d’you think of those judges comments then’ and the group says back ‘well I am gobsmacked’ etc.

Since me and my Nana are not saying a thing my mum says,

‘I can’t read for crap, you know. My personal officer is teaching me. She’s called Danny.’

For once in her life my Nana is unable to speak. When we leave she doesn’t even make some wise crack at my mum like she usually does, like ‘hope the food is as good as Steve’s’. She just puts on her warm coat (the weather is pretty crappy today) and walks out with me trotting behind her.

That is the longest thing my mum has ever said to me.

Next week in English class we have Miss Evans again. Reginald is sitting at the front and when the register is called he turns round to me and says ‘do they have a register in prison to count people in?’

And right off the bat, a bit like when Simon Cowell and Louis Walsh are having a domestic, Miss Evans says, ‘could you wait outside’ and he has to sit there out the door for the rest of class. Nobody else makes a sound and those little morons are usually the first to join in with him.

At the end of class Miss Evans says ‘Didi can you please come up to the desk.’

And she holds up the piece of paper she is holding from last week.

‘Yes miss,’ I say, waiting for the crap to hit the proverbial. Or as they say on Xfactor, for ‘feedback’.

‘Didi, did you write this?’ She asks.

‘Yes’ I say, not moving a muscle.

‘Well, she says. Miss Evans is actually pretty nice-looking for an old person. I will guess she is about thirty, with white teeth and purple hair tied up in a bun. She is one of those tree-hugging types (I know because I heard her say once that she doesn’t have a TV), but still.

‘Didi, I have to say that for someone who doesn’t speak in class you are quite a wordsmith.’

I do not know what a wordsmith is but I am guessing it is okay because Miss Evans has a sort of dreamy look on her face.

‘Oh’ I say.

Then she says ‘I really liked your piece... granted, your punctuation and grammar could be described as creative at best, but the flow and the emotion were just right.’

I decide to come clean. ‘I am failing English’ I say.

‘Yes Didi, she says ‘But I think that is because you never hand anything in. Does that sound right?’

‘Yeah I guess’ I say.

‘How about if you start handing in some work? And I want us to do some reading after class, to get your spelling perfect, and whip your poetry and flow into shape.’

I have no idea what she is talking about but I say okay.

That night when I am at home with Nana I go out on the roof again, this time with a half pack of cigarettes. Nana says we should quit together as she says she is getting out of breath at the laundry and we should quit as a duo. I like the word duo. That is something a little crappy they say on the Xfactor but I like how me and Nana are a duo, even though I am not hot on the idea of giving up my cigarettes.

I take my poem out, the one that Miss Evans liked.

Red shoes

*Steve stole a pair of red shoes for mum, red like candies, red like a heart.*

*My mum was remanded the day after,*

*Nana put the shoes in the cupboard,*

*Way in the back.*

*I found the shoes when looking for the Hoover*

*Hoover for the spider, black and hairy.*

*Hoover was on top of the shoes, red with a black buckell, red like a candy, red like a heart.*

*The shoes squished the spider, perfectly, quickly, neatly*

*Eight is the times I have worn those shoes*

*Nine if you count the spider.*

*Steve isn't much, but*

*I like those shoes,*

*Red like a heart.*

I am so proud of the poem that I am thinking maybe I should show it to my mum. Except for the Steve part.

Anyway, next time I visit prison it is November and my mum is looking pretty good now. She says to my Nana

‘I have been to see the dentist and Dr Frame says she can sort out my teeth.

‘Oh well, good’ my Nana says, picking something imaginary out of her wedding ring.

‘I am learning the alphabet... again’ my mum says, sort of casual.

‘That ain't bad... Sandra.’

That is the first time in a long time that my Nan has called my mum by her first name.

When Nana leaves this time she turns and says to my mum ‘Didi and me are going to quit the cigarettes together, as a duo, y’know. Maybe when you get sorted with the... other stuff, we can do it together, like a... trio.’

Man, we are sounding a lot like one of them groups on the Xfactor. My mum looks up at Nana and tried to smile even though she is ashamed of her teeth, which are a bit sorry-looking right now.

‘A trio’ Nana says... ‘that sounds pretty good.’

Sounds pretty good to me too.

## **A Disturbing Woman**

Sheridan Brenchley

(Commended Lewis Wright Competition story)

“I did not kill Alison Frobisher.” Birgetta Lindstrom’s voice was clear and firm. Inspector Silberschmidt of the Interlaken Police had rarely heard such a convincing denial of an accusation. However years of experience had taught him that some people possessed an incredible ability to mask their real personas. He hoped the attractive and petite Swedish woman in front of him was not one of these, but kept a totally open mind about the circumstances surrounding Alison Frobisher’s sudden and dramatic death.

“You say you did not kill her, but there is a witness who says otherwise. There is also the matter of this letter” Silberschmidt tapped the letter on the desk in front of him.

“I don’t deny writing it, but that doesn’t prove I killed Alison.” The Inspector’s eyebrows twitched imperceptibly at this defiant comment and he settled down to what would probably be a lengthy interview.

“Then let us return to the beginning. Tell me everything that happened from the moment you arrived in Switzerland two weeks ago.”

“I will try, but my German is not good so I would prefer to speak English.” Birgetta had been speaking passable German up till then so it seemed a strange request, but Silberschmidt acknowledged this with a nod of his head.

“I arrived in Murren with the rest of the party on June 20th,” she began, speaking slowly and carefully for the benefit of the tape. “There were twelve of us, all British except myself.”

“The leader was Swiss I believe?”

“Yes, Hans-Peter. He lives here in the town.

“You did not know any of your fellow walkers before you arrived in Switzerland?”

“No. It was a strenuous walking holiday and we were hoping to climb a few peaks, but most were less than 2,000 metres.”

“How did you get on with your fellow walkers?”

“Very well. We had all been to Switzerland before and loved the mountains.”

“Indeed,” murmured the Inspector, pausing to drink from the glass of water at his elbow. “Tell me about Alan Frobisher.” There was a brief silence before Birgetta resumed speaking. Only the quiet whir of the tape

broke the stillness. Silberschmidt thought she was holding up well to questioning, although her eye contact with him was erratic.

“Alan was on his own the first week. His wife was to join him for the second week.”

“So you knew from the beginning he was married?”

“Of course, he mentioned it the first night.”

“You found him attractive?” Birgetta took a deep breath as though she needed extra oxygen before answering the question.

“I admit I found him pleasant and attractive. He had a good sense of humour.” Silberschmidt nodded and wrote in his notebook. The circumstances reminded him eerily of case in Grindelwald a few years ago when he interviewed a French walker accused of poisoning a rival after a fungi expedition.

“I’ve been told he was good at entertaining the group with stories of his travels. Perhaps he enjoyed being the centre of attention?” suggested Silberschmidt, deciding it was time to turn on the heat a little. Birgetta looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“You make him sound vain and egotistical, he is not like that.”

“Then he is just a man who enjoys socialising, particularly with women.” Birgetta nodded.

“Did you find the walking holiday tiring during the first week?” asked the Inspector, feeling it was time to get to the heart of this tragic triangle.

“At first, but my muscles strengthened after the first few days.”

“Of course,” said Silberschmidt consulting his notes. “On the fourth day I believe it was suggested to Hans-Peter that the group was capable of climbing the Gerihorn, a mountain not originally on your itinerary.”

“We all seemed strong walkers and he was happy to guide us.”

“I understand you had some difficulty on this mountain. Alan Frobisher lent you an extra stick.”

“Yes, he gave me his stick to help my balance.”

“Other walkers say he was very attentive.” Birgetta shrugged her shoulders.

“He was kind and sensitive. We were all tired after that walk, although the views were wonderful and the weather was superb.”

“After dinner that night a few of you went to a bar for drinks.”

“Yes,” said Birgetta. “it was a warm evening so four of us went to a bar and celebrated the walk with cognac and watched the sunset over the mountains.”

“The other two walkers left you and Alan alone after they returned to the hotel.”

“We went for a walk around the town. It was so peaceful and clear.” The Inspector nodded sympathetically. The alpine air of Switzerland had proved therapeutic for many troubles over the years, from TB to broken hearts. It did not however usually end in murder.

“And after your walk?” Birgetta was silent and the Inspector tapped the desk sharply with his pen. “Frau Undstrom this silence is not helping you.” Still she said nothing, staring absent-mindedly into space.

“You became lovers that night so there is no need to be coy.”

“Coy?” echoed Birgetta almost laughing at his choice of words. “Swedish people are not coy about something normal and natural.”

Is it normal to enjoy another woman’s husband while she is away?” Briefly Birgetta looked at Silberschmidt with something bordering on hostility in her eyes. He found himself wondering if she could indeed commit that most heinous of crimes in the heat of the moment.

“I admit we became lovers. He came to my room every night for the rest of the first week.”

“You knew it had to end when Herr Frobisher’s wife arrived?”

I tried not to think of that.” Silberschmidt sighed softly and wondered if he would ever understand women.

“Did you know Frau Frobisher was a wealthy woman in her own right?”

“Of course not. Why are you telling me this?”

“Because Alan Frobisher would be an astounding catch if he was free.” Birgetta appeared shaken by this revelation and beads of perspiration began to appear on her forehead. Money and sex were explosive enough to fuel a murder.

“Let us talk about Frau Frobisher and your quarrel with her the day after she arrived in Murren.”

I found her arrogant and unpleasant, particularly in the evening when she drank a great deal of spirits.” This certainly tallied with comments from other members of the walking group. No one seemed to like Alison Frobisher.

“The day of the quarrel you were going to attempt the Elshorn.”

“Yes. Hans-Peter felt we were ready for it and Alison said she would have no problems, claimed she had climbed the Schilthorn last year.”

‘Were there any problems on the way up?’

“Alison was at the back all the time. She complained of shortage of breath, even though we had regular stops. She slipped a couple of times. The weather suddenly changed and clouds blew in from nowhere and hugged the top of the mountain. When we reached the summit it was sleeting. Hans-Peter hurriedly took a photo of us, we had a bite to eat and then we started the descent.” Birgetta fiddled with a ring on her right finger, twisting it round and round as though agitated. She scarcely looked at Silberschmidt now and seemed to be reliving every moment of that fraught day on the mountains. The Inspector was a keen climber himself and knew how remorselessly tiring the mountains could be, particularly in the late afternoon, the long drag of the endless descent straining body and spirit.

“Alison was continually complaining about the pace, the weather, her boots, even HansPeter. When we paused yet again for her to catch up I said she just was not a good enough walker to tackle these heights. She reacted violently and hit me on the chin. I still have the bruise.” She touched the lower part of her face, a darkly purple area still visible. “Everyone was appalled by her behaviour, particularly Alan.”

“You must have been very upset about Frau Frobisher’s unwarranted attack.”

“Of course it upset me. I thought she was probably an alcoholic.”

“What happened when you returned to the hotel?”

“Alan apologised for his wife’s behaviour. She did not come down to dinner that night. The other walkers said she was too ashamed.” Silberschmidt had already interviewed the other walkers and they confirmed this.

“And how was your relationship with Herr Frobisher?”

“He came back to my room and we made love,” she said staring hard into the Inspector’s impassive dark eyes. It was Silberschmidt’s turn to look awkward and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Did Herr Frobisher say anything about the future of your relationship?”

“No, we both knew it was just a holiday fling.”

“Perhaps for you it was more than that?”

“Of course I wanted to continue seeing him, but I did not see how as we live in different parts of the country.”

“The following day Frau Frobisher did not walk and stayed in the hotel.”



“Yes. We did a short walk near the Eiger Mountain and then boarded the rack railway to the Jungfrauoch. We went out on to the Sphinx lookout terrace. I remember the hot sun on my face and the glare of the snow...” Birgetta stopped speaking and put her hands over her eyes as though still blinded by the dazzling whiteness. She seemed overcome with emotion and cried quietly for a few minutes. Silberschmidt turned off the tape recorder. If this was acting it was first class. Eventually Birgetta cleared her throat, drank some water and indicated she was ready for the interview to continue.

In his statement Hans-Peter said he was so impressed with the stamina of the group he suggested you climb the Armighorn on the last day.”

“Yes, even though it was almost three thousand metres.”

“How did Frau Frobisher feel about that?”

“She said there would be no problems, claimed she had just felt “under the weather” the day we climbed the Elshorn. She seemed overflowing with confidence, kept buying the rest of us drinks as though to ingratiate herself with us.” Silberschmidt suddenly held up the letter in front of her.

“What made you write this letter to Herr Frobisher?” Birgetta lapsed into silence once more and stared at her clasped hands.

“Fraulein Lindstrom I am trying to help you, I must have the whole truth from you. Please help me and tell me your thoughts.”

I had to release my feelings some way as the second week came to a close. I managed to give him the letter at breakfast.” Silberschmidt opened the letter and read two pertinent sentences. “I can’t bear the thought of never seeing you again. I want us to be together always.” Birgetta bowed her head as the Inspector read her intimate words. They would certainly give good ammunition in a prosecution.

“Tell me about the last day when you set out to climb the Armighorn.”

The weather was good as we ascended. Alison was up at the front with Hans-Peter and the other strong walkers.”

“You were at the back most of the time with Herr Frobisher?”

“Yes. I felt tired after two weeks climbing. At one stage I felt breathless and Alan stayed with me while I rested. I made it to the top eventually. I did not want to eat or drink anything, but Alan forced me to take some nourishment.”

“What of Frau Frobisher during your difficulties?”

“She seemed exhausted. She was at the back when we began the descent after lunch. I remember seeing a small group of French walkers from our

hotel. They were also climbing the Armighorn, but they left the hotel before us and were using a longer route. They waved to us and I remember waving back to them.” This was something the Inspector knew nothing about and he made a note to interview the walkers if they were still at the hotel, or indeed still in Switzerland.

I understand the leader was taking you down a quicker but steeper route?”

“Yes, there were a number of narrow paths, quite steep and with loose scree, but he thought we could all manage it safely if we took our time.”

“And it was on one of these paths that Frau Frobisher fell over the mountain ledge,” said Silberschmidt quietly. His stem gaze met Birgetta’s and both knew they were at the critical point of the interview.

It was an accident. It must have been. I did not push her over!”

“Frau Blake says you did. She has signed a statement saying she was in front of you, turned to warn you both of the danger from slippery scree and saw you push Frau Frobisher over the side.”

“It’s not true she’s lying.”

“Why should she? She’d never met you before the holiday”

“She was behind me, not in front of me.”

“Unfortunately no one else can confirm this as the rest of the party, including Herr Frobisher had carried on descending before you and Fraulein Blake raised the alarm.”

“I don’t understand why Frances is accusing me of this terrible crime.” Birgetta was fighting back the tears and she looked fearfully at Silberschmidt. “Are you going to charge me?”

“That is up to the examining magistrate when the case is presented. It does not look good for you, but the magistrate may think otherwise.”

“You think I’m guilty.” It was phrased as half question half gloomy statement.

“It is not for me to judge. I simply present the facts.” Her pale blue eyes radiated honesty and he was touched by her aura of apparent innocence. He could only hope the magistrate was similarly persuaded of insufficient evidence.

In a hotel room in Murren, Frances Blake lay naked on a bed. She was tired but pleased. They had taken huge chances, been incredibly lucky, but it looked as though it would pay off in every way. Her lover came out of the bathroom and told her she should get dressed. She yawned and pulled some clothes towards her.

“It’s all working well. They should charge her to-day.”

“Supposing they don’t? Supposing they free her and interview you again?”

“Sending you that note was helpful, better than we could have hoped. You had the woman really hooked. I should be jealous.”

“We’ve got rid of Alison, isn’t that enough?” Alan Frobisher stared gloomily out of the bedroom window. He was trying to forget Birgetta’s trusting face, but her look of bewilderment when the police took her away for questioning would always haunt him. He had given Silberschmidt the letter and together with the statement from Frances it gave the policeman no alternative but to investigate. All they had to do was lie low until the trial was over. By then all the money, including a life cover policy for a million pounds would be theirs.

“I hope you’re not going soft on me,” said Frances as Alan continued to gaze lifelessly out of the window.

“You took a terrible risk that Alison could have survived the fall,” said Alan as Frances began to dress.

“Over that cliff edge?” She laughed. It must have been a thousand feet drop to the next ledge. I knew we would never get a better chance of getting rid of her and keeping all that lovely money.” Frances knew how weak her lover was. She had lost him once to Alison, now they were bound together more tightly than a climber’s rope. She had just finished dressing when there was a knock on the door. Frances slipped quietly into the bathroom. Alan opened the door and was surprised to see the tall, bespectacled figure of Silberschmidt, flanked by two uniformed policemen. The Inspector looked grim faced and forbidding. He thrust a photograph into Alan’s hand.

“Your party were not alone on the mountain that day. Do you remember a group of French walkers who left the hotel before you? One of them had a camera with him. He paused to take plenty of photographs, including some of your group, including the walkers at the back. Because of a hard evening drinking he had a hangover and had not yet checked his camera until I visited him to-day. We went through his pictures and the results were very interesting. I think this is my favourite.” The photograph showed Frances exactly at the moment she pushed Alison Frobisher off the mountain. It was a frighteningly clear picture, even to the look of terror on Alison’s face as she realised she was going over the edge. Please come out of the bathroom Fraulein Blake. As you say in England, the game is up!”

## **Greek and Roman Artillery**

S Raymond

**A**ccording to the historian Diodorus Siculus (circa. 35 BC), artillery was invented by Greek engineers employed by Dionysius 1, tyrant of Syracuse, in 399 BC. He equipped his armies with weapons whose superior firepower destroyed his enemies and sparked a deadly arms race which enveloped the Greek world.

It was Greek mastery of cube root equations that enabled them to devise horizontal sliding dovetails, rotary ratchets, variable pulley systems, universal joint bearings, double chain drives, cam mechanisms and compressed air pistons. Their torsion (twisted sinew) powered catapults were later developed by the Romans and were still being used by the forces of Babylon in the eleventh century AD. These missile shooting weapons dominated the art of warfare for almost one thousand years after the fall of the western Roman empire.

Greek engineers developed a powerful crossbow called the Gastraphetes (belly bow) which was operated by the archer resting the stock of the weapon on the ground and using the stomach to push against a curved bar at the other end. Along the stock was a slider mechanism holding the arrow or bolt. As the slider was compressed a trigger pawl locked into position along toothed ratchets on the slider. The trigger release handle would then allow the bolt to be shot. The maximum range of a composite hand held bow at the time was about 200 metres, while the gastraphetes was at least 250 metres, sufficient to gain an edge but this was only the beginning.

The belly bow was improved when Greek engineers produced a wooden frame mounted weapon now operated by a winch drum permitting the artillery men to achieve tremendous drawstring power. This bow could shoot two bolts at once but it was the Romans who developed the weapon further with a better all metal design capable of a drawstrength of 335 kg, (one third of a tonne) almost five times that of the gastraphetes. The legions carried sixty of these weapons into battle and most infantry attacks were covered by artillery fire. The use of these shock tactics could demoralise an enemy who in many cases were without armour.

The accuracy of the scorpion (as the Romans called these weapons) under a trained crew has been well documented in ancient sources and modern archaeology. One of the more visible examples is in Dorchester museum where a casualty of the bolt shooter lies with a bolt embedded in his spine. The missile was shot uphill and struck the unfortunate warrior through his stomach.

In use alongside catapults were the stone throwers (Ballistae). These were heavy complex, machines requiring large amounts of spring rope or hair to provide torsion and required several artillery men to operate them. The largest of these machines were too cumbersome to accompany the legions and were used to attack or defend strongholds. They were so heavy that reinforced positions were required to cope with their weight and the problem of recoil. Such were the engine stresses involved they had to be built with extreme precision incorporating the use of third degree mathematical equations.

The usual type of ballista was a one talent (26.2 kg) machine used by the legions shooting a grapefruit sized stone. In the days before explosives the Romans could propel such a missile almost three hundred metres damaging fortress walls and annihilating any body of troops in the way. In his history of the Jewish war AD 66-73, Josephus a former Jewish rebel who changed to the Roman side, stated that the Jews could see stones (carved from the white limestone of the Mount of Olives) coming towards their positions and were able to dodge them. The Roman answer was to paint the missiles black so they were not visible against the landscape and struck their targets, killing many with a single shot.

As late as AD1050 a Byzantine historian, John Scylitzes, recorded the fate of an enemy cavalryman who was pinned to his horse through his mail armour by a catapult bolt. Roman mastery of torsion artillery would only be supplanted by the invention of explosives, the arrival of which was a quantum leap in the history of warfare.

## The Good Old Days

Ruth Sear

Joan was arranging flowers in a tall glass vase one evening.

‘It’s very easy,’ she said.

Archie, sitting in his armchair and smoking a cigarette, was reading the *Daily Express*. He didn’t reply.

‘In fact, there’s nothing to flower arranging,’ continued Joan, ramming down the stems so hard that they bent and broke. She was still a strong woman despite her years. Water slopped over the sides of the vase as she stood back to admire her arrangement of yellow flowers.

‘Dandelions make folk wee,’ came a voice from behind the newspaper.

‘These ain’t dandelions, they’re daffodils.’

‘Same thing.’

‘No they’re not. They’re nothing like ‘em.’

‘They’re yellow an’ all yellow flowers look alike to me. Now shut up and let me read.’

Joan sighed. ‘You’ll never be a botty – a bottyist. Never mind. What’s in the news?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing? Then why spend good pennies on a rag like that, Archie Adamson? They say a fool and his money are soon parted.’ She snorted. ‘Isn’t there at least a good murder in there?’

‘No. People get murdered every day, all over the place, in this country. It’s got to be extra special to make Fleet Street. But listen!’ The reader’s eyes gleamed. ‘I’ve just read an article about how watching them new-fangled televisions can cause memory loss. *I’ll* never have a set in this house. I *hate* ‘em!’ He pointed a nicotine-stained finger at Joan. ‘And you went over to watch Mrs Thingy’s last week; she’d just got ‘er fool of a hubby to buy one! Perhaps that’s why *your* memory’s been worse than usual.’ The yellow finger continued to point at Joan accusingly. ‘Perhaps it’s addled *your* brain already, missus. Television! Pah!’

Joan turned angrily to her flowers. She sniffed the inside of the yellow trumpets, and tried to calm herself. The flowers reminded her of happy days when she was young. She remembered the farm where she grew up.

There was a little pond where in spring the ducklings swam, and clumps of golden primroses and daffodils grew on the bank around the water's edge. She sighed. Happy days. She gazed admiringly at the golden petals and long green leaves in her vase. Beautiful. She would like to fill the house with them. And you could hardly tell they were plastic! How had her husband described them when she brought them home from the market? 'Nasty plastic rubbish!'

She turned to the Television Hater. 'Is there any gossip about the Royal family in that paper? Or has anyone done a big robbery? Are you sure there ain't a nice juicy murder? After all, the press has a responsibility to keep the public entertained.'

'When I find a murder I'll tell you. Now stop titivating about with them useless weeds and get me grub.' Archie tapped his cigarette ash on the floor.

Joan scowled. 'I've had a busy day. I thought we'd buy fish and chips tonight.'

'Well, hurry up and get 'em, then.'

'It's dark out there. *I* might get murdered.'

Archie quickly jumped up from his chair. 'I'll get a torch for you.'

Joan shivered as she looked at the inky blackness through the window. There was a splattering sound on the glass.

'It's raining,' she said.

'I'll get an umbrella. It's only a drizzle,' came her husband's reply.

Joan made one last attempt. 'I'm scared to go out alone at nights; you never know who's about.'

Archie nodded. 'I know what you mean. But I've had an idea. I'll get Rover to come with you.'

Ten minutes later Joan walked falteringly down the dark street. In her right hand she held a dog lead to which a reluctant Rover was attached. He moved slowly, for he was asleep when Archie had dragged him away from his warm kennel. In the same hand Joan awkwardly carried a torch which her husband had thoughtfully taken from her bicycle. In her left hand – also awkwardly – she held up the umbrella (for the rain was now descending in earnest), and her basket in which to transport the fish and chips. She sighed as her arms began to ache, and shivered as a cold

trickle slid slowly down her neck. As the wet began to penetrate her thin raincoat her pinafore became sodden, and drips fell into her wellingtons. Joan battled through the rain, cursing the old man at home and imagining him with his legs stretched out in front of the fire. But, by the time she entered the brightly lit fish and chip shop, she'd devised an artful plan. She felt glad to feel the warmth of the premises and the aroma of the frying food made her feel hungry. Rover suddenly became alert and interested, sniffing the air and licking his lips.

'Cod and chips for one please,' Joan said to Maisie, the fryer. She chortled to herself. 'I'll tell him the shop were shut unexpectedly tonight. That's what I'll say! But I'll have mine first, at our Barry's. Thanks, Maisie.'

'G'night, Mrs A!' Maisie coughed over her next customer's supper and the cigarette hanging from her lower lip quivered, the ash hanging over the vat of sizzling chips.

As she staggered back to the street where she lived, Joan said to Rover, 'Come on, I'll give you some chips for keeping me company.' A big hairy wet tail slapped her legs in reply. As she passed Shardlows the off-licence, she wished she'd brought an empty bottle with her. 'Pity I didn't think of it. A drop of summat with me supper would've slipped down a treat.'

She peeped through the uncurtained window of her house on her return. Seeing Archie asleep in front of a very low fire, she chuckled to herself. She entered the kitchen of the house next door as Barry, her son, was putting more coal on an already roaring fire.

'Hello Mum. Brought your supper? Good idea. Hello Rover. Oh, damn you!' The dog shook itself, treating Barry to a sudden and unwanted shower. 'Shall I get you a knife and fork, Mum? Salt and vinegar?'

'No thanks, son. Maisie put a nice amount on before I left the shop, and I prefer to use me fingers. Yer Dad's not eating tonight,' she lied. She sat in front of the fire and unwrapped the greasy newspaper. Rover sat next to her, watching the proceedings intently. The dog's unwavering gaze was fixed on the rustling paper with its savoury contents, and saliva drooled freely from his jaws.

Barry said, 'So why isn't Dad having supper tonight, Mum?'

'Said he didn't want owt.'



‘Why not?’

Joan quickly remembered an article about slimming that she’d recently read in a magazine.

‘He’s on a diet. Says he can eat as much as he likes, as long as it isn’t meat, fish, dairy food, sweet stuff, fruit and vegetables.’

‘That doesn’t leave him with much choice!’

‘He gets more and more daft. One day they’ll have to cart him away to one of them specialised places. Ain’t there one near here? I’d better find out where it is, in case I have to visit him.’ She swallowed a lump of fish, coughing as it went down. The supper was delicious; the old man didn’t know what he was missing.

‘There’s a lot of alcoholics in them places,’ said Barry, as he poured out his third bottle of beer. ‘Have a glass, Mum? Here you are.’

Joan finished her supper and inserted a cigarette between her lips. She inhaled deeply. ‘Ah, that’s better. Nothing like a fag to finish a meal. Yer Dad’s memory’s getting worse, Barry.’

‘Mum – you forgot to light your fag!’

‘Oh! That dog made me forget, it’s trying to hypnotize me. Here Rover, I saved you some of me chips. Like I said son, your Dad’s memory’s bad. He forgot to put the fireguard up when we went to bed last night. There were all the wet clothes on the clothes ‘orse, in front of the fire.’

‘Do you mean to say you actually washed clothes yesterday, Mum? It *was* a red letter day!’

Joan placed the remains of her supper on the floor in its paper, and Rover immediately devoured the last tasty morsels.

‘Goodnight, Barry. Now Rover’s finished, you can read the newspaper, except the greasy bits. Don’t forget to light the fire with it, in the morning.’

‘Night, Mum.’

Joan returned Rover to his kennel. Then as she opened her back door the cold night air swept into the kitchen, penetrating the heavy atmosphere of smoke from the dead fire, stale cigarettes – and the old man. His sleepy voice greeted her.

‘Oh, you’re back. God, I’m cold. Fire’s out. Where’s me grub?’

Joan’s answer was similarly polite. ‘Shop were shut. So I brought nowt. Mend the fire yourself. Get your own supper – boil an egg or summat. I’m off to bed, to listen to the wireless.’ She added, ‘There’s a play on, a murder play. You’ll be pleased to know that no one attacked me tonight.’

She made her way upstairs, and didn’t hear Archie’s scowling reply: ‘Pity!’ He stared at the ashes of the dead fire and shivered. He went to the pantry and found the egg rack, in its usual place inside the bread bin. One egg remained. He plucked it from its rest, and glared at it. A sticky bubble had emerged from a crack in the shell. He replaced the egg, and searched through the tins in the cupboard. He found soup, paint, golden syrup, caustic soda, spam, car grease, and evaporated milk. Why did she buy so much of everything? She was always going on about stock piling, in case there was a World War Three. He reflected grimly that every day was war zone living with her. Look, packets of this and that all piled on the shelves, and even some on the floor. Dried peas, lentils, washing powder (heaps of that, goodness knows why, the poss-stick rarely made an appearance), flour, plant fertilizer and dog biscuits.

Dog biscuits! Enough to supply a score of Rovers!

It began to dawn on him that the stews Joan sometimes cooked for hours in the oven always tasted a bit funny. Damn the woman. He found a bar of chocolate and broke a piece off. He popped it into his mouth whilst continuing his investigation of the pantry. He suddenly gasped, and spat the chocolate on the floor.

‘Urggh! It’s ‘orrible! She’s gone and bought diabetic chocolate again! I keep telling ‘er, she needs ‘er eyes tested. She can’t read labels properly, she’s dangerous.’

He studied a packet of washing soda. He could have sworn she put some in a cake yesterday; it looked like the same packet exactly. Here was a tin with a colourful label: Liver Salts. Then he found a bottle of bleach next to a bottle of sauce. He lifted the Oxo box and shook it. Several little brown tablets fell out, they looked suspiciously like Senokot.

There was a bottle of Wincarnis that Joan said helped her depression, with a thick sludge at the bottom. It stood next to a tin of Bisodol, a jar of Seven Seas Cod Liver Oil, and a large bottle of Aspirin that Joan swore

was really vitamin C (Acetylsalicylic and Ascorbic acid were the same to her). He looked inside the jar marked Flour, and found washing powder. More of the stuff! Perhaps there was flour or sugar inside the washing packet? Washdays might become interesting! Why was she so doolally? If scientists could invent televisions and atom bombs, why couldn't they do a brain transplant on people like his missus? But even if they did, she was an ugly old witch, and it would need quite a lot of science just to correct the defects on the outside. If she had some new false teeth, and got her hair cut, she might look a bit more presentable. And a change of clothes would be... well, a change.

He sighed wearily and returned to his chair, with the *Express* for solace. Marilyn Monroe looked out at him from the page. Her lips were pursed provocatively, her eyes half closed, and she revealed more than a bare shoulder. Now, he thought, there's a beauty. If only Joan looked like that! What a woman that Marilyn was. If only he was a few years younger – well, quite a number of years – he'd be off to America to meet her. Hollywood! Yes, he'd have gone to Hollywood. People were beautiful and glamorous over there. And rich. He sighed. It wasn't fair.

He found a Kit Kat, and ate his solitary supper in front of the cold grate. Still feeling hungry, he went to bed. Joan was snoring. He shivered as he climbed between the cold sheets. She'd forgotten the hot water bottle, and he couldn't face going downstairs again to boil the kettle.

Eventually he fell asleep, and dreamed. Humpty Dumpty was sitting on a wall with a cracked face. A sticky substance was running from the crack. But Humpty's face was that of a beautiful woman, with sensuous lips and eyes heavy with mascara. Then to his horror, the egg fell from the wall and smashed into thousands of pieces. He woke with a start and looked at the time on the luminous face of his clock. 2 am. Hadn't he read somewhere that the phosphorous from these timepieces damaged the brain whilst asleep? To be on the safe side, he quietly moved the clock from his bedside cupboard to Joan's. He looked at her face on the pillow, bathed in the moonlight shining through the uncurtained window. Her mouth was open, and she was still snoring. The curlers in her hair looked like twists of barbed wire. He eventually fell asleep, dreaming that Marilyn Monroe lay beside him. But as his wife's snores rose to a crescendo, his dream, like the egg, shattered.

## Playing the Rat

Paul Williams

**E**ddie carefully counted his money before leaving for the pub and was relieved that he could afford a couple of rounds as long as he bought the cheapest beer for himself. Justin, he knew, would have his usual Stella. Reassuringly expensive, the advert called it, but Eddie didn't find it reassuring at all.

Eddie wished he could be more like Justin. Eddie knew he was a plodder, only just managing to see his way through university with a lot of hard work, whereas Justin was sailing through with the minimum of effort. Eddie could only just make ends meet, while Justin always seemed to have money to flash about, largely through the series of little schemes he always had on the go. Eddie found it difficult meeting new people, while Justin had loads of friends and seemed to know the right things to say in company. Eddie sometimes wondered why Justin hung around with him, though someone had suggested it was because they looked so similar and it was typical of Justin to want to be friends with someone who looked like himself. Not that anyone was ever likely to confuse them, for Justin was usually in the latest designer gear while Eddie's only recent clothes purchase had been from Primark. They arrived at the pub almost simultaneously and Justin insisted getting the first round in. Eddie, the nervous friend anxious to please, was usually the first at the bar. Eddie noticed the wodge of notes Justin took from his pocket.

'Had a bit of luck?' Eddie asked.

'Just a bit more money for old rope. That Chinese guy whose dad's a millionaire gave me a hundred quid to write his essay for him.' He laughed when he saw the expression on Eddie's face. 'Sorry, it's a sin isn't it? I suppose you'll worry about it all evening.'

Eddie was silent as they found a table. He didn't approve of some of the things Justin got up to but in an odd way he admired his boldness. Justin told him his latest joke about the nun and the camel and then looked more serious.

'I've got a favour to ask,' he said, obviously confident that he would not be refused. 'How would you like a week in Paris, train ticket, board and lodging all paid for?'

‘You’re joking!’ said Eddie.

‘Not a bit of it. My Aunty Rose lives there. She married some banker though he’s been dead since before I can remember. She has an apartment on the Place des Vosges. She wrote to me a couple of months ago asking me to go over, God knows why after all these years. Lonely, I suppose. I said I couldn’t manage it till the end of term and yesterday she sent me the train ticket for the first week in July.’

‘So what’s that got to do with me?’ asked Eddie.

‘Well, I can’t go. Fiona Blakeman’s asked me to join her on her dad’s yacht and I’m not going to turn down Fiona Blakeman for Aunty Rose, she was always a miserable old bag despite all her money. The trouble is I can’t afford to offend her so I thought you could be me for the week. Don’t worry, she hasn’t seen me since I was twelve. She fell out with my mum about something and my mum’s dead now so they can never make up. It looks like I’m in for a few bob when she snuffs it if I play my cards right. She’s got no kids of her own.’

‘You mean you want me to pose as you?’ asked Eddie, horrified.

‘Why not? I can give you a crib sheet about the people she’s likely to mention and about a couple of things we did the last time I saw her when I was a kid. By the way, she’s into Chinese horoscopes. She remembered when I was born and reckons I’m a Rat.’

‘Well, we all know that!’ laughed Eddie, then added an apologetic, ‘sorry.’

‘Don’t apologise,’ said Justin enthusiastically, ‘that was witty by your standards. If you can keep that up she’ll be convinced you’re me. I looked up Rats and they’re supposed to be sharp, funny, quick witted, clever and charming.’ He paused to look at Eddie with the first hint of doubt. ‘They’re also supposed to have excellent taste, so I’d better lend you some clothes too.’

Eddie remained reluctant but after a few pints he was persuaded. He regretted it the next morning when he was sober but a promise was a promise. Besides, a free week in Paris was not to be sniffed at. His only foray into France had been a few hours in Calais and his only other foreign trip an off-season week in Benidorm.

In the fortnight before the trip Justin filled him in on family details and gave him a photograph of Rose taken ten years earlier. He also wrote down the characteristics of the Rat so that Eddie could consult them.

The trip started off swimmingly. Eddie was able to recognise Rose at the Gare du Nord before she saw him. He was impressed by her flat and did not find her the miserable old bag Justin had described. Before they went for a stroll he looked up the characteristics of a Rat again. Charming and funny. While out he told Rose how beautiful and elegant she was looking, which went down very well, and told her the joke about the nun and the camel, which didn't, but she laughed all the same and said it was probably an age thing. On a couple of occasions he failed to answer to Justin but he gradually picked it up.

The following day Rose told him that she was visiting a friend and asked if he minded being left to his own devices. Consulting the crib sheet he saw that Rats were seekers of knowledge, and told her he would spend the day visiting museums. While out he wondered if it was possible to think oneself into having the characteristics of particular signs, in a sense to think himself into being Justin. Now he thought about it, he would have to do this if the thing were to work. He already felt himself slouching less as he walked along in Justin's stylish jeans and shirt and noticed a couple of admiring glances. A girl at college had told him that if only he had more confidence he would actually be considered the better looking of the two. Yet as he was walking along the rue de Rivoli an incident happened that reminded him just how unlike Justin he was. An American tourist dropped a twenty euro note and Eddie immediately picked it up and handed it to the man. A similar incident had once happened when he had been out with Justin, who had hastily put the money in his own pocket. 'You have to seize your chance,' Justin had said scornfully when he saw the shocked look on Eddie's face, 'otherwise you'll always be a loser. Let's face it, the guy looks wealthy enough. He probably won't even know he dropped the tenner. How can it be wrong if he doesn't even know he lost it?'

That evening Rose said that she wanted to take him for a ride in the country the following day, Sunday. It was only when they were in the car that she informed him that they would actually be visiting a friend of hers, the same friend she had visited the day before. He lived about

thirty kilometres outside the city and he and his family were having a celebration. Until then Eddie had assumed the friend was a woman. He was introduced to Marcel, an amiable widower with an abundance of children and grandchildren in attendance. Eddie could not help noticing that Rose and Marcel were more than just friends and was pleased for them both. Everyone was very hospitable and a couple of grand-daughters in their late teens seemed to take a shine to Eddie. It was a wonderful, balmy day and the food and wine were as delicious as they were plentiful. As Eddie conversed and joked with them in his schoolboy French they all laughed and said how charming he was. He wondered how long he could keep it up. But for this week you are Justin, he told himself. Keep remembering that and all will be well.

Rose looked a little pensive during the drive back to Paris and it was not until they were having a nightcap that she revealed what was on her mind.

‘I wanted to introduce you to Marcel and his family, that’s really why I invited you. The truth is, Justin, we intend to get married soon. I know that might come as a shock to you.’

‘But why should it? I’m really pleased for you.’

‘I really think you mean that,’ she said, surprised. ‘I thought you’d be annoyed. The thing is Marcel has a big extended family as you saw. You must have had hopes I’d leave you quite a lot in my will, what with being one of my few relatives until now. You were born under the sign of the Rat, and Rats love money. I don’t hold that against you, it’s just the way things are. And quite apart from your expectations, you must probably think a romance at our age is ridiculous.’

‘No, I think it’s cool. They seem like a very pleasant family.’

‘Yes, I sensed you liked them. Maybe you remember what a dried-up old thing I was the last time you were here. I thought I’d never get over your Uncle Victor’s death and assumed happiness was over and done with. All that changed when I met Marcel last year. And you know, you’re also much nicer than I remember you. I know you were much younger then but there was something in your character I was nervous about. What I’ve decided to do is to give you a gift now in lieu of leaving you something in my will. I know you’re a student and it would probably be more useful to you now.’

Eddie hoped that, whatever the gift was, it would not be too heavy to carry back to Justin. Rose got up and went to her desk. She took out a cheque book.

‘I thought thirty thousand euros,’ she said.

Eddie suddenly felt guilty. How could he be part of this subterfuge? Justin didn’t deserve a penny. But you are Justin, he again reminded himself. Think and act as Justin the Rat would think and act. He had promised Justin that he would do that, after all.

‘That’s incredibly generous of you,’ he said, seizing the moment as Justin had always told him he should, ‘but if you don’t mind, could you wait and give it to me in cash? It’s just that I’m not sure if my bank will take a French cheque, at least not without some sort of kerfuffle.’

‘No, I don’t mind,’ she laughed. ‘We can go to my bank tomorrow.’

‘It really is very generous of you,’ he said again when she sat down.

‘I didn’t think you’d be that pleased,’ she smiled. ‘It must only be a fraction of what you expected.’

‘I never expected anything,’ said Eddie, truthfully enough.

‘And will you be coming back for the wedding? You were quite a hit with Marcel’s family this afternoon.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Eddie, ‘I’ll definitely be back for that.’

‘Marcel and I are buying a place near Nice to live in after we get married. You’d be more than welcome to come and stay with us there any time you want a bit of sunshine.’

‘It sounds wonderful,’ Eddie assured her. ‘I’ll really look forward to it. Oh, by the way, I’ve recently moved. You’d better have my new address and phone number.’

‘Write them in my address book,’ she said. ‘Don’t forget to cross out the old ones.’

She handed him the book and Eddie dutifully crossed out Justin’s details, putting his own in their place.