

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

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Diary

AGM

19 May 2012

Poetry Workshop Weekend

20-22 July 2012

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

Paul Williams

It was good to meet up with members who attended the New Year Party in January, especially those who had to travel some distance. Special thanks should go to Ethel Corduff, the unsung heroine who organises all our get-togethers. It is very difficult to maintain a sense of community when members live all over the UK and beyond, and it is only through the pages of the magazine that many members can keep in touch. For that reason I am happy to be able to publish the first letter to the Editor in two years and hope this is the beginning of a trend.

Banana skins are always a danger, especially to editors, and it's ironic that one particular banana skin came in the form of 'ed'! Beryl Jones's story in the last edition, originally 'Hoist With His Own Petard', had an 'ed' added to the hoist. It was 'hoist' when I sent it, honest! I suspect a computer auto-correct somewhere along the line. According to Wictionary, which seems to have become the default online thesaurus, 'hoisted by his own petard' is given as an alternative. It also informs us that 'hoisted' is about fifteen times more common than 'hoist' in US usage. Hmm. The original 'hoist with his own petard' is, as I need not remind readers of this magazine, from *Hamlet*. Now here's the rub: it was 'petar', not 'petard' in Shakespeare's original version of 1602.

The Society is currently in search of volunteers, specifically for the post of Membership Secretary. Joan Lewis, who has given sterling service in the post for as long as most of us can remember, has signalled her desire to retire. We can only consider ourselves lucky that she has served us so faithfully for so long. Joan has provided a job description which can be found in this edition. We are also on the lookout for members with computer skills who can help to keep the website up to date, though all members who think they could contribute something are welcome to make themselves known. Without new blood (or even not so new) coming forward, the society's future cannot be guaranteed.

Finally, I would just like to remind members that A4 envelopes require large envelope postage!

Chairman's Chat

Terry Rickson

I should like to endorse the Editor's plea, the end-piece to his editorial in the winter 2011-12 Author, for feedback on contributions to the magazine. It would be good to know 'what you think' be it stories, poems or articles. It goes without saying, of course, that comments should be constructive and helpful to the writer. So perhaps some of you might get clickety-clicking on your keyboards or, dare I say it, put pen to paper – by that I mean typed hard copy! You'll bring joy to the Editor's heart.

The Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics apart, this year, as you may know, is the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Dickens, one of Britain's greatest and most prolific writers. Our President, Alan Watts, was for many years Secretary to the World Wide Dickens Fellowship, a Trustee of Dickens House in Doughty Street, London, and Editor of The Dickens Magazine; he travelled and lectured widely on the subject. I feel sure the celebrations will bring him much pleasure.

Centenaries would appear to be order of the year, with Scott's ill-fated expedition to the Antarctic and the Loss of the Titanic. The latter is seen by some commentators as a metaphor for the forthcoming collapse of the 'old order' in Europe. One centenary least known, perhaps, is that of the Royal Flying Corps formed in April 1912, the forerunner of the present RAF. A picture may come to mind of the 'gallant lads' who took to the air in their little bi-planes over the battlefields of France or in the skies over England hunting the Zeppelins. On this note, may your thoughts and ideas take wing and produce some good writing.

Membership Secretary Wanted!

As mentioned in the Editorial, Joan Lewis intends to retire as Membership Secretary and we are looking for someone to step into the breach. Joan has provided the following job description.

The Membership Secretary receives enquiries from civil and public servants who wish to write and who are responding to publicity put out by our Publicity Officer, Jenny Chamier-Grove or have been told about us by colleagues.

These enquiries come by post and by email – the latter are very welcome as they save the Society a fortune in postage. The

Membership Secretary sends out an information sheet/application form, receives replies with cheques which she forwards to the Treasurer. She also informs our magazine publisher of our quarterly magazine, who will add the new member to his distribution list.

As her details will be on the website she must be ready to answer queries from publishers, other organisations and the general public – these are not frequent or onerous. The post can, of course, be held by a male member of the Society.

Letters to the Editor

Dear Paul,

Here we are, one twelfth of the year already passed and day by day the sunset recedes.

In your editorial for the winter issue you commented on the absence of letters or feedback on contributions. I am surprised, particularly when I recall how the letters sections of the science fiction pulps I devoured in my teens were always fascinating, colourful, adulatory to the point of hero-worship, with pithy commentary, usually generous analysis, mock feuds; one or two regular contributors affected eccentric styles. A thread running throughout was boundless enthusiasm. Those fans (in fannish jargon, fen) loved science fiction and the magazines to the point of distraction.

I thought my article, *The Case Against Editing* (*Author*, Summer 2011), would result in a mob pursuing you, Paul, and myself, equally divided between those who wanted to burn you at the stake, while deifying me, and those who craved the opposite. Not a whisper... No-one even telephoned or e-mailed me for an explanation of NWCMP (and there was I all pent-up!)

Possibly the answer lies in the type of readership. The readers of *Astounding Science Fiction*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Planet Stories*, to name three giants of the field, were largely seeking escapist entertainment at a time when life for many was fairly humdrum, bleak even. Those who read *Author*, however, I would imagine to be members whose motivation is principally to see their own work in print. Unlike the near-fanatics who were passionately fond of the science fiction stories they read and treasured, the readers of *Author* are perhaps not inspired enough to comment on the efforts of their peers. Could it be that rivalry plays a part?

Comparisons are odious. This quotation by a person unknown to me haunts me at times, since it is undeniable. Yet anyone who is obliged to make a choice, for example when judging a writing competition, or buying apples at the supermarket, has no option but to make comparisons. They can also be very hurtful, which is one reason why I hesitate to comment on the contents of the winter ish. Suffice it to say I liked Beryl Jones's *Hoist With His Own Petard*, and Una McMorran's charming *Faberge Is Not Just For Easter*, a gem... Full marks for your striving to achieve a balance between fiction, poetry and articles, Paul.

Are there those who still write their manuscripts by hand, or laboriously tap them out on manual typewriters? Maybe, like me, they are less than enamoured with the computer age and all the baggage dragged along in its wake. Perhaps they are apprehensive. To the latter I can only say that, once mastered, you will find typing your masterpiece infinitely easier on a word-processor. Corrections, additions or deletions of single words, commas or entire chapters, capitalisations, italicising, underlining, transfer of sections: all these operations are infinitely simpler, and you can easily store your two hundred thousand word novel on a tiny memory-stick (retention of a paper copy is nevertheless advisable—for example, the cat might mistake the memory-stick for a liquorice bar, taking the shine off your polished prose, so to speak.) And spare a thought for the editor, not my favourite animal (Paul, that was a joke, honest.) Life for him will be a deal simpler if he is not charged with typing up someone-else's work.

Frederick Pohl, eminent science fiction author and editor, advised would-be writers to first learn to touch-type, a skill which, to my endless regret, I have been unable to master. My advice is, first get a computer. Choose one with a minimum of high-faluting features; they will bump up the price appallingly and you will never use them. (If you *should* need them, many can be bought piecemeal as required.) Choose a desktop model for comfortable use in a fixed position, or a laptop, with its advantage of portability, although heavy to carry around, and just possibly a burden on ageing knees. Enrol on a computer course, avoiding those which metaphorically take you up remote creeks of the Orinoco or lost valleys of the Himalayas, then leave you stranded--all you want are basic skills, not spreadsheets and similar rubbish. A word-processing course will guide you through the principles, and you can pick up *slightly* out-of-date books on

computers and word-processors for a song at charity shops or public library sales. If you can fit a touch-typing course in meanwhile, go for it. Be very careful in buying a printer, since many manufacturers make their profit, not by selling printers but by charging exorbitant prices for ink-cartridges. Epson printers are inexpensive and have the advantage that “compatible” cartridges, supplied by other manufacturers, are available at a fraction of the price and are just as good. Finally, take that virgin sheet of vellum, and prepare to ravish it with the efflux of your most intimate secrets.

My short story, *Afternoon Tea*, which appeared in the Winter 2010 *Author*, was printed recently in the *Journal*, a regional newspaper based on Tyneside, accompanied by a striking, full-colour sketch of a magpie, about to dip into a poisoned egg. That’s right, I didn’t get a penny, although I am sure the staff artist who did the illo was paid, and there wasn’t even a mention of copyright. Such is the lot of authors.

Douglas Fulthorpe

Winners of the Froud Children’s Short Story Competition 2011

First Prize went to Patricia Rissen for ‘Farmer Terry’s Tractor’. In second place was Janet Turner with ‘Julie and the Pony Rustlers.’ Third prize went to Peter Richardson for ‘The Conker Conspiracy.’ The winning entry can be found in this edition of *The Author*.

The judges’ comments included the following:

‘Practically every manuscript carried mistakes in punctuation, spelling and grammar. Overall, these weaknesses seem to indicate that the writers failed to check their stories before submitting. For example, the misuse of very simple words like **bear** and **bare** must be due to carelessness. There are several other examples. We suggest all entrants check through their entries, actively searching for such mistakes. This will ensure they’re not repeated in future work. Most entrants observed the rules, but a small number had to be disqualified for ignoring them. Double spacing was requested, but a few writers failed to conform. At least one entrant gave a full name and address on the first page, despite this being a clear no-no.

‘All three winning entries were well-suited to the designated age groups. It’s essential, when writing a story, to be absolutely sure of the age group for which you’re writing. Several entries failed in this respect, and gave the impression that they were submitted merely because the

writers had enjoyed writing them. That's fine, of course – you should enjoy your writing – but if the reader is also to enjoy it, your story must be suitable for their age group. Bear in mind that we're in the 21st century and children of today are vastly different from those of your own childhood. This aspect played a large part in our winning selection. All three winning entries were “spot on” for the age group chosen. Make a point of reading children's books and magazines. Talk to those in the age group for which you're writing – but not your grandchildren. When they praise you to the skies, remember that they love you and want to please.'

The judges also listed a few hints, which in summary were: read the rules carefully; ensure the plot flows smoothly; write the first version immediately so that you have time to make alterations and corrections before the deadline; be careful about names and be consistent (eg don't change Joan to Jane half way through); never forget an extra-careful last check; believe in yourself.

Annual General Meeting 2012

The Society's AGM will take place at 1.30pm on Saturday, 19 May 2012 in the Elizabethan Room, Civil Service Club, Great Scotland Yard, Whitehall. An insert is enclosed for those wishing to order refreshments (£16). This should be returned to Ethel Corduff. Refreshments will be served from 1pm.

The Committee would appreciate as big an attendance as possible (though we realise the difficulty for those who live a long way from London), especially as the question of a new Membership Secretary, among other matters, will have to be discussed.

Vee Bradley Annual Humorous Poetry Competition 2012

The poem should be humorous, no longer than 30 lines, typed using a pen name with name and address on a separate sheet of paper. Include SAE if you would like your entry returned. There is no entry fee and the prize is £30. The closing date is 31 May 2012. Entries should be sent to Nina Mattar, Competitions Secretary, 4 Redruth House, Grange Road, Sutton, Surrey, SM2 6RT.

Members' Activities and Achievements

Stephen Bibby has recently published a novel electronically via Kindle Direct Publishing. The book is called *Collingwood's Club*. Here is a plot summary.

Young financial trader Ben Turner scoops a huge bonus which propels him into the ranks of London's elite. Cultivated by the upwardly mobile Crispin Collingwood he is persuaded to join an exotic club. Taking on financial responsibilities he travels briefly to South America where he experiences a bizarre and frightening jungle encounter. But a banking collapse sweeps away his employers and threatens his comfortable existence. This becomes the catalyst for his departure on a hazardous adventure in which after encountering love, death and danger he is forced to confront his greatest weakness.

The book is available for download onto a Kindle or other compatible e-book reader. It is offered at the lowest price possible - 77p. To find it you need to go to Amazon.co.uk: Kindle ebooks and then enter *Collingwood's Club* in the search box.

I wish Stephen the best of luck and hope that he keeps us informed of the novel's progress, as I'm sure there are many here who would be curious about this method of publishing. Perhaps there's also a member somewhere who might be interested in reviewing the book.

Market Profile

Ethel Corduff

Sometimes when I go to London I arrange to meet a friend in Victoria at WH Smiths. I usually arrive early on purpose so I can browse inside; I find it a treat that one can browse uninhibited among the publications.

I head first for the magazines; my first targets are the antiques and genealogy ones. Despite the vast amount of TV programmes about antiques and collectibles there are now hardly any magazines about them on the market. The reasons for this are not clear, unless it is because one can look up so much on the internet now.

There are quite a number of family tree/genealogy magazines on the shelves so if you have been researching your family perhaps there is an opening for some aspect of your research in one of them. Usually after much reflection I buy one of the magazines. In December I bought

Family History Monthly which does have openings for social history articles. I did have one article ‘Christmas past in Hospitals’ published in it last year, and even though I was well paid, some details of my research were changed. Is this editing? I did not complain as I thought they might not want to take another article from me. What do you think?

What was blatantly obvious was the large amount of craft magazines on display, many of them dealing with making greeting cards, bearing in mind it was Christmas time; but what can you write about card making? Unfortunately nearly all of these magazines are sealed in cellophane as they have a freebie, so one cannot glance through them unless one buys one. Other craft publications are also on show such as knitting and sewing, both of which have come back big time. I wonder if the public libraries have any of these now clearly popular magazines. I would like to find out what we writers could find to write about in these ‘make it’ magazines. In the next issue I hope to discuss my findings.

Poetry Workshop

Mike Boland

Bill Barnes Competition Results

The results of the 2011 Bill Barnes Poetry Competition are now available. They are as follows:-

First Prize:	Jane Arthur
Second Prize:	Alison Michell
Third Prize:	Norman Bissett

In addition, the judge singled out poems by Jane Arthur, Alison Michell and Ivy Hudson for Commendation.

All Winning and Commended poems appear in the current (spring) issue of **wavelengths**.

Congratulations to the winners, and our thanks to Sylvia Neumann for judging the 2011 competition. Details of this year’s Competition and how to enter will be given in the summer issue of **wavelengths**.

Waves 2012

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**.

Contributions preferably by email as an attachment to valerie.tigwell@ic24.net, or by post to Val Tigwell, 155 Rectory Road, Farnborough, Hants GU14 7HS.

wavelengths

As well as the annual anthology **Waves**, the Poetry Workshop also produces a quarterly magazine called **wavelengths**, issued free to all its members. The spring edition 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 Sylvia Neumann considered as worthy of Commendation. Running to 20 pages, it also contains an article on the Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson by Val Tigwell, poems by PW members and finishes with the Newsletter section.

Subscriptions 2012

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1 January 2012. 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 PW 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 2012	wavelengths Spring issue published
31 March 2012	Closing Date for Submissions to Waves
June 2012	wavelengths Summer Issue published
20-22 July 2012	Poetry Workshop Weekend

Poetry Pages

Edited by Terry James

Siren Song

Bill Torrie Douglas

She played with her turbulent locks
gazed to the sea and grieved
for her young loss.
Weeks into months she wept and dreamt
of the powerful sea and the weeds
and the stifling fronds where he was captive.
In her dreams she heard his cries
she felt his pain in her soul
the despair in his voice.
One night at Martinmas

when clouds painted shadows along the shore
she walked into the waves
her gown spread behind like
a drowning gardenia on the water.
She laughed and sang before
she dipped beneath the waves
knowing that soon she would be with him
and he would enclose her in his arms.

Each Martinmas night when the clouds
cast shadows on the shore
you can hear her siren-song
and you know that she is with her love
forever.

Contentment

AE Hobbs

Dusk
Curtains drawn
Warm Cosy Fire
Buttered Crumpets for tea
Bliss

Dancing Dean

Norman Bissett

Soberly pious,
John Cowane, benefactor
and philanthropist
impelled by religious zeal
endowed a small hospital

near Stirling Castle
around 1639
a gift to the town
for the sole 'entertainment
of his decayed gild brethren.'

Gracing the lintel
above the central gateway,
a life-sized statue
in naïve vernacular
surveys his little fiefdom.

Legend has it that
when midnight strikes at New Year,
Auld Staney-Breeks stirs,
descends from his pedestal
and dances in the courtyard.

Spider

A Grant

Amidst
bark and branch
a spider
minding
her business

meticulously
spinning
weaving
between
autumn
winter

invisible
webs,
complex,
connecting
phases,
spans.

Down

a Fibonacci poem

Terry Rickson

hut

circle

Iron Age man

lived here before the

Romans: coned the stars; read omens

in flight of birds; foretold the future in the hearth flame.

The Twerlies

Steve Glason

Loaded with the shopping

Hoping for a bus

Oh the little Twerlies

Kicking up a fuss.

Waving down The Driver

With their pass in hand

They will bet a Fiver

To Surbiton they stand.

Lively general chatter

Airing their own views

Discussing "What's the matter"

"281 in twos".

"At Tolworth – waited ages"

"Same the other way"

Anger rightly rages

People have their say.

Ah the bliss/contentment

Resting weary feet

Banish all resentment

They've found their cherished seat!

At Florian's
Norman Bissett

The four bronze horses
and multiple onion domes
survey St Mark's Square,
disenchanted by the schmaltz
of Rogers and Hammerstein.

Big Spender
AE Hobbs

I dreamed that I had a crock of gold.
This thought gave me much pleasure.
Now, to sit back and enjoy
A life of ease and leisure.

Waiters will find tables.
Flunkeys will defer.
In the halls of commerce,
They will call me 'Sir'.

Items that I have wished for,
Are now within my reach.
Accountants now will pay the bills
Whilst I am on the sunny beach.

Now the dream is ending,
The wealth has gone away.
Ideas of lavish spending,
Will be on another day.

So, I am awake and fully dressed
There's something I should mention.
Today's the day I take a walk
And collect my old age pension.

Notes and Queries

Fred Jeffery

Q. Headmaster, re my eldest son,
Could you please tell his Mamma,
Why, though I paid you half a ton,
He failed his English Grammar?

*A. Lady Trumplightly, your young dooke
Mecks all us teachers weery.
He will not lern, just take a look.
Still, thank you for your query.*

Q. As my MP could you explain
(I feel I ought to mention)
You gave yourself a rise, quite plain,
And yet reduced my pension.

*A. Dear Sir, MP's work hard; it's TRUE,
Go home with eyes quite bleary.
While your expenses must be few.
No thank you for your query.*

Q. Mr Quick-Seller, that new car
You sold me for a packet,
The wheels fell off not very far;
The engine makes a racket!

*A. Mate, of the buyers to our shack
(For we're both cheap and cheery)
Not one of THEM has dared come back.
So stuff your rotten query!*

Q. Sirs, I enclose verse in my style;
Take pity on a widder
And I will make it worth your while
To publish. Please consider.

*A. Your Love odes, ma'am, were good, by heck;
Those ghostly bits quite eerie.
We thank you for your welcome cheque.
(And also for your query.)*

Q. Miss Stone, with eyes like stars above,
(Be sure I am no sinner)
I worship you – and I would love

To take you out to dinner.

*A. Dear Rick, your notelet brought a sigh,
Those kind words made me teary.
I'm free in Vegas next July.
Thanks so much for your query.*

The Tree

Nina Mattar

Mid winter,
motionless clouds
lovingly straddle the sky.
Icy flakes emboss magical
figurines upon the branches,
then a passing breeze caress
bark and trunk.
This dazzling silence
reaching me, reminds
me, how to love this world
as it speeds across the seasons
tenderly touching our inner
beings, tree and I.

Greystone Farm – A Pennine Picture

Terry Rickson

Well named she said.
There's nowt here but grey stones,
the grey dawn at daybreak:
heartache,
backache
and the cold wind off the moor,
the grey hill beyond:
and my man gone.
I die every day in this place.
The cow lows uneasily in the byre
when the storm howls
on a winter's night.
I sip my tea alone
and the rust-worn gate creaks in the dark.

Farmer Terry's Tractor

Patricia Rissen

This story was the winner of the Froud Children's Short Story Competition 2011

Farmer Terry was driving his rusty old tractor along a very narrow road. He was taking a trailer load of hay to his sheep. Suddenly he heard a loud noise behind him which made him jump.

'Get out of my way Farmer Terry,' cried Alice the Ambulance driver angrily. 'I've got to get these people to hospital.'

Farmer Terry sighed. It was Wednesday afternoon. Alice would be taking her patients to the Out Patient's Clinic in the town. The blue light on the top of the ambulance wasn't flashing, so it wasn't an emergency. Farmer Terry always got out of the way as quickly as possible when he saw a blue light flashing, but he knew that Alice wouldn't stop complaining until she had overtaken him.

As quickly as he could Farmer Terry pulled on to the grass verge and let Alice squeeze past.

'Thank you,' Alice tooted merrily as she hurried past, closely followed by Pete the postman who was on his way to deliver the afternoon post. He didn't like being stuck behind Farmer Terry's tractor either.

Early the next morning it was Tina the taxi driver who complained loudly as she followed Farmer Terry's tractor all the way along the busy road to the market.

Poor Farmer Terry thought he must be the most unpopular man in the whole village. Even Mike the milkman, whose milk float didn't move very quickly, complained if he found himself following the tractor on his way back to the dairy.

Farmer Terry was a busy man and he used his tractor every day when he took trailer-loads of carrots, potatoes and swedes to the nearby markets. But his tractor was getting old and it was very slow.

As the days grew colder Farmer Terry was kept busier than ever carrying hay and straw to the animals on the farm to keep them fed

and warm. And every day he had to put up with angry complaints from Alice, Pete, Tina and Mike as he drove his tractor up and down the narrow country lanes.

One morning, Farmer Terry opened the door of his farm house to find that it had been snowing during the night. Everywhere was covered with a crisp white blanket of snow. Farmer Terry wrapped himself up warmly, loaded his trailer with parsnips and turnips and set off for market.

Farmer Terry was surprised at how quiet it was. No one screamed at him to get out of the way because there wasn't any traffic on the road. It was much too slippery to travel far. But the slippery roads didn't worry Farmer Terry because the big heavy wheels on his tractor made it possible for him to move about easily.

'Hello, what's happened here?' exclaimed Farmer Terry as he turned a bend in the road. Mike's milk float had skidded on a patch of ice and lay almost upside down in a ditch. Broken milk bottles littered the road while poor Mike stood miserably beside the ditch looking very sorry for himself.

'Can I help?' asked Farmer Terry parking his tractor quickly. 'I've some rope in the trailer. I could try pulling your milk float out of the ditch if you like.'

'Yes please,' said Mike, scrambling over a box of broken egg cartons to give Farmer Terry a hand with the rope.

First Farmer Terry tied the rope to the front of the tractor, then he tied it to the front of the milk float.

Farmer Terry climbed back on board his tractor, then slowly but surely he pulled the milk float out of the ditch and back on to the road again.

'Thank you so much, Farmer Terry,' said Mike as he scrambled back on to his sorry-looking milk float. 'I'll never complain about you and your fine old tractor again.' Farmer Terry smiled as he continued on his way to market.

As he went on his way he passed Tina's house. Tina was standing in her driveway beside her taxi looking very worried.

‘Can you help me Farmer Terry?’ Tina cried as the tractor trundled by.

‘What's the trouble?’ asked Farmer Terry.

‘I don't know,’ wailed Tina, ‘I’ve checked the oil, there’s plenty of petrol in the tank, and there’s anti-freeze in the radiator, but it just won’t go!’

‘I’ve got some rope in the trailer,’ said Farmer Terry, ‘I’ll give you a tow to the nearest garage.’

On the way to the garage they met Pete with his post van and Alice with her ambulance. The post van and the ambulance were slipping and sliding all over the road.

‘I can’t get my patients to hospital with all this snow and ice about,’ grumbled Alice crossly.

‘And I can’t get to the Post Office to collect the post,’ cried Pete.

‘Follow us,’ said Farmer Terry. ‘The tractor wheels will make a pathway in the snow that you can use, then you’ll both be able to get on with your work.’

‘Thank you, Farmer Terry,’ said Tina as Farmer Terry untied the tow rope at the garage. ‘I’ll never complain about following your old tractor again.’

Farmer Terry smiled as he continued on his way to market with Alice and Pete following closely behind him.

‘Goodbye Farmer Terry and thank you,’ called Alice as they reached the hospital, ‘I’ll never grumble about following your tractor again.’

‘Thanks a lot, Farmer Terry,’ called Pete as they arrived at the Post Office. ‘I won't complain about following your tractor in future.’

Farmer Terry smiled as he went on his way to market. It was nice to be popular on a cold snowy day.

That Special Smile

Michael O'Connor

Will you just have the one more, Joseph?" The little man in the check jacket and crumpled green shirt leaned conspiratorially towards his companion, breathing cigarette smoke and Guinness fumes over him. "You can't go now, just when we're starting to have a bit of fun!"

Joseph glanced briefly at his watch. He was a tall, large-built man with thick greying hair, and he wore a dark blue blazer and neatly pressed grey trousers. He considered himself to be something of a dandy amongst his social circle, although outsiders might have seen him as over-dressed and rather fussy. "You're an old devil, Patrick," he smiled, his voice deep and steady. "I suppose that means it's my round again?"

Without waiting for his friend's reply, he signalled to the plump landlady, who responded immediately. She ignored the noisy demands of several jostling drinkers lining the short bar of the Harrow Inn to come and serve him. Although in his middle years, Joseph Wood was still a fine looking man, and he was popular with the ladies.

"Is it the usual, Joseph?" the landlady asked, filling a glass with rum without waiting for the reply.

"Sure, one of these days I'll have a shandy and you'll faint from the shock," laughed the big man expansively, taking the glass from her and handing over a ten pound note. "Get another Guinness for this reprobate here while you're at it, Maureen. And one for yourself."

"You should be on the television, the amount you can put away without falling down," smiled Maureen, letting her hand linger in Joseph's as she gave him his change. For a moment, their eyes met, and he gave her the special smile that every woman he knew thought he shared with no-one but her. Every woman but one.

"Aren't you going to give us a song tonight, Mr Wood?" called one of the young men at the other end of the bar. "I've been telling my Linda what a fine voice you have, and she says she'll believe it when she hears it." A short red-faced girl beside him slapped the youth fondly.

"Yes. Give us one of the old ones," agreed two or three others, and the talking died down as every eye turned towards Joseph.

“I suppose I'll have no peace until I do,” sighed the big man, feigning unwillingness. He stood up from his bar stool. “Can you play me something to sing to, Annie?”

A thin woman with a mane of deep red hair got up from the table she had been sharing with two female friends and pushed her way through the crowd to a battered piano on a raised platform in the corner of the bar. Dropping her half-smoked roll-up onto the bare wooden floor and crushing it beneath her foot, she sat down and began to play 'When You Were Sweet Sixteen'.

After a few notes, Joseph started to sing. His voice, distinctive enough when he merely spoke, brought immediate silence to the drinkers now. Pure, and reverberating with nostalgia for a time that had never existed, the words of the sentimental old song soared above the acrid blue smoke and through the stale odour of alcohol and, for a few wonderful minutes, transformed the busy saloon into the finest concert hall in the county. There was more than one woman with tears in her eyes when Joseph had finished, and two or three of the men made their way across the room to shake him by the hand. He offered little resistance to each of their offers to buy him and Patrick a drink, and laughed even more expansively than before when his old friend passed out and had to be carried home to his cottage on the opposite side of the village's narrow main street. Taking Patrick home was one of the regular duties of Maureen's strapping son, Colin.

“Indeed you do have a lovely voice, Mr Wood.” Joseph lifted his head, which had become rather heavy since Patrick had gone, to see the red-faced girl Linda standing by his side.

“Ah, it's not all that,” he said, summoning up his special smile. “Come and sit here by me, and I'll sing a song just for you. 'Tis your beauty that will make it lovely then, not my old voice.”

“Oh no, please don't,” pleaded the girl, blushing. “I'd be embarrassed out of my life.”

“Embarrassed is it,” said Joseph softly, his heavy hand coming to rest on hers. “And what will you give me then if I don't embarrass you?”

“What would you like?” She pouted, perhaps unintentionally. Mr Wood was very good looking for a middle-aged man.

“How about a little kiss?” He moved his head closer towards hers, oblivious to the self-absorbed groups of people around them. Slowly, she began to lean forward.

“There you are, Linda,” said her young man, emerging from the public bar next door. “I thought you'd got bored waiting for me to finish my game of darts and gone home on your own.”

“I wasn't bored at all, actually,” she told him archly. Joseph had sat upright and was staring disinterestedly at the window. “Mr Wood was keeping me company like a proper gentleman.”

“The Harrow would be nothing without you, Mr Wood,” said the young man, nodding his head rapidly. “Old Maureen ought to pay you for coming in here every night.”

“Less of the 'old', Dennis Nolan,” snapped Maureen, bearing down on him from behind the bar. “Get that poor girl home before her mother realises what time it is, and mind your manners if you want to drink in here again!” She smiled to ensure the youth did not take her too seriously.

“We'll finish our conversation another day, then, Mr Wood?” said Linda, looking up at him from beneath her long eyelashes.

“Oh, I'm sure we will,” said Joseph, dragging his attention back to the scene. “I'm sure we will.”

“I suppose you'll have to be going back to that lucky wife of your's now, Joseph?” asked Maureen, as the clock struck eleven and the bar began to empty. The Harrow was the only inn for several miles around, and none of the villagers wanted it to risk losing its licence.

Joseph looked at her and blinked. “Indeed I must,” he said, suddenly attentive. “I should have been home hours ago. I'll be for it tonight!”

Maureen nodded, understanding and regret mingled in her eyes. “Take care,” she murmured.

“Isn't he a great man,” declared Colin as Joseph walked carefully out of the door, and the young man locked it behind him. “He's the life and soul of the whole village, yet he's never too busy to listen to anyone and he has a kind word for everybody. Did you see the way he was cheering up poor Linda Flavin when Sean went off and left her on her own? It's not many people who'd put themselves out for a timid little thing like her.”

Maureen was gazing wistfully at the locked door. “He was a good friend to your father, and helped me a lot when the cancer took him,” she sighed. “It's a shame he ever married that stuck-up Tessa O'Rawe. There's no wonder he's in here most nights until closing.”

Joseph's three bedroom house was one of the biggest buildings in the village, and stood in an acre of ground a brisk twenty minute walk from the Harrow. It was an isolated building which Joseph had bought almost thirty years before, when his father had died and left him enough money to do so. Although a qualified and adept electrician, Joseph had never found, nor sought, regular work, and so the house was sorely in need of decoration. A building firm in the nearest town employed him often enough to keep him comfortably in funds, but there was never enough money to squander on luxuries like paint.

Having found the keyhole with some difficulty, Joseph opened his front door and went inside. He felt along the wall for the switch and turned the hallway light on before closing the door behind him. Then he stood there, swaying slightly from side to side. Waiting. After a few minutes, the landing light went on and his wife appeared at the top of the stairs in a brown dressing gown. She stared at him for a moment, trying to gauge his mood.

Joseph sniffed the air exaggeratedly. "Mmm," he said loudly. "What a lovely smell. Is it roast chicken we're having tonight? Or roast beef? What dinner have you cooked for me after having nothing else to do all day?"

Tessa came slowly down the stairs. "I thought you wouldn't be coming home," she said quietly. "When it got late, I threw it away."

"Thought I wouldn't be coming home," repeated Joseph, his voice instantly tense. "So you threw my dinner away and turned off all the lights. Perhaps you were hoping I wouldn't be coming home, is that it?" With that, he took an unsteady step forward and gripped her tightly by the arm.

"You said you'd be back early. Please let go. You're hurting me." The woman was shivering.

"Be back early," he hissed. "And what the hell have I to come back for, eh. Eh?" He shook her as he spoke, making her dance in time to his words.

"I'm sorry, Joseph. Please don't ..."

He threw her back so that she hit the wall. A mirror fell down and shattered, and Tessa froze, transfixed in terror.

"You're always sorry," he murmured, taking a step towards her. "But you never do anything about it, do you!" He raised his heavy hand and

brought it down in a stinging slap across her face. She staggered to one side. “Why the hell is it that everyone else in this accursed place is pleased to see me, and you never are?” His arm swung back, and his knuckles struck her nose a glancing blow. It began to bleed.

“Please, Joseph,” she begged. Blood and tears ran down her face. “Please let me go back to bed.”

“From the state of this place, it looks as if you never get out of bed, you idle bitch!” he shouted. His eyes bulged, and he punched her full in the stomach. She doubled over and fell to her knees. He started to kick her. “Stand up, you useless cow. Stand up and get me something to eat.” He grabbed a handful of her long dark hair and tore at it until she dragged herself to her feet.

“No more, please, Joseph,” she whimpered. “I'm sorry. It won't happen again. I'll go and cook you some sausages. You like those. I got you your favourites.”

He pressed her against the wall, his hand around her throat. “In future, you lazy bitch, I want you waiting here when I get in. I want the lights on, and I want my dinner ready. Do you understand? Is that clear?” He banged her head against the wall, one knock for each of the last six words.

“Yes, anything you say, only please let me go. I won't upset you any more.” She could scarcely breathe, and her face and hair were sticky with blood. The stench of alcohol on his breath was the only thing which kept her from fainting.

“Just remember, I'm an important man around here,” Joseph hissed, as he released her. “I expect to be treated like one!”

She used her sleeve to wipe her face, and waited for his permission to go. He said nothing, and she glanced fearfully up at him, anticipating yet more pain. And as she looked at him, he sneered at her. He sneered in mockery of her weakness, sneered in celebration of the power he had over her, sneered at the terror which had kept her his uncomplaining slave since the day after they had married.

She knew that sneer. She had seen it more times than she could count. It was the special smile he shared with no-one but her.

Buffy Buys Anubis

Chester Guttridge

Anubis was a racing failure, a greyhound, sold into the domestic market by a disappointed track man. Still young, he had been happy with his first new owners, but when they moved into a flat, they returned him to the dog shop for resale with a warning note saying that he chased cats and birds but had never caught one.

Colonel Buffy Spiff-Medlar (ret'd) and his wife, Carterbelle, read the note and bought him. Just what they wanted. He soon showed his prowess. Pigeons were his *oiseaux noirs*. He brought a new balance of nature into the Spiff-Medlar garden. Cabbages now had a 50:50 chance of reaching the kitchen, where the slugs could be picked off. Had the electric hare been an electric pigeon, Nubi could have been a champion, such was his desire to catch one. Blinky, the neighbour's cat, had a narrow escape on Nubi's first outing and sensed that her life had entered a risky phase, and realised that she would have to dig her comfort holes in the comfort of her own garden.

Buffy and Carter also had some realising to do. In his pursuit of fur and feather, Nubi destroyed vegetation indiscriminately. Weed, flower and vegetable all fell in his wake, tulips and alliums were particularly vulnerable, having no power of recovery. Built and trained for the racetrack, Nubi knew only fast-forward, although he showed signs of learning to veer to the left. Because the pigeons were not always in the same place in the garden, Nubi's path of destruction was fan-shaped. His combination of fast legs and slow brain was part of the trouble. He ran so fast that, by the time his brain had interpreted what was ahead, he had destroyed it. That was Buffy's theory, although Carter thought it was just Nubi's enthusiasm for the chase.

Either way, Nubi had to be restrained. They bought him a shoulder harness and a chain with sprung links and attached him to a four-pound drag weight. It bounced along behind him, slowing him down and allowing Blinky and birds more time to escape. But there was a problem, the weight didn't stop when Nubi stopped. He never ceased to be surprised when it bumped into his back legs, or higher up if it was on a big bounce. Although Nubi was unharmed, the Spiff-Medlars were concerned when Nubi developed a sore bottom. The vet advised anal spectroscopy, but there was no damage except to Buffy's pocket,

ten times what Nubi had originally cost. On veterinary advice the drag-weight was abandoned and Nubi was chained to a post instead.

It was then that the Spiff-Medlars discovered Nubi's defiant streak, a militant tendency. When chained up, his bowels went on strike. He missed a day and never regained it while under restraint. Carter thought it was constipation but Buffy thought it was bloody-mindedness. It would not have mattered had it not been for gasification. Friends, finding the atmosphere nauseating, stopped coming round for drinks. Even Carter's sandwiches seemed to be tainted and the lavender bouquet was overwhelmed. On a social visit the vicar, Rev Patrick Thistle, gulped down his tea, offered his excuses and left early after Nubi had devalued the air. The Spiff-Medlars were irritated by what they saw as the smug expression when Nubi had experienced relief. Annoyingly, Nubi was intolerant of human indiscretions and whined to be let out on such occasions.

'Did he have to float one when the vicar was here?' Carter asked.

'Got rid of the Thistle pretty smartly,' replied Buffy, 'which was a good thing, I thought.'

Esme Scrubwell came every Wednesday to help Carter in the house, giving Buffy time off and Carter a Buffy-free morning. Being of country birth, Esme had a nose for farmyard smells and a vocabulary of descriptive words. Carter enjoyed listening to Esme's stories of matings, marriages and misbehaviour, and entertained Buffy with pasteurised versions in the evenings.

'Is that Nubi that's farted?' Esme asked, looking at Buffy and leaving the door open for a confession. 'When my husband blows off I gives 'im pea soup, works a treat.' Buffy, who also had fluency in this regard, decided to go out to avoid further suspicion.

'He's gone quick,' said Esme. Buffy was happy for Nubi to be blamed for human indiscretion but not vice versa. Squirty, the parrot, said with unfortunate timing, 'Is that you again, Buffy?'

Nubi wouldn't eat pea soup. Carter suggested aroma massage which was offered by an enthusiastic lady in the town who kept a range of oils in her canine parlour, but Buffy wanted more than temporary easement, he wanted a cure. Then Sam Froglet, manager of the local pet shop, Froglet and Froglet, suggested a simple solution: attach Nubi's chain to the clothes line with a running loop. He could then run

the length of the line and, hopefully, get enough exercise to loosen things up.

It was easily done and Nubi responded. It worked well, causing avian alarm and reducing Blinky's safe area. Buffy considered extending the line but Carter was not happy. It was her line. On wash days Nubi was chained to the post. After a few weeks the ground got muddy under the line and Carter slipped one Monday morning. With her bottom muddy from the fall and her knees muddied in the recovery, she went into the house, found Buffy and put a muddy foot down, only just missing his slippered feet. Buffy, knowing the power of Carter's foot, didn't argue. He cleaned up and wiped Carter's shoes. Buffy thought that a bit of mud was a small price to pay for Canine evacuations, but changed his mind after Carter's fall. Nubi was never connected to the line again, although when on it he hadn't fermented.

But mud was not the only problem. When Nubi rushed along the line with extra enthusiasm he ended his run with his feet off the ground as momentum swung him into wingless flight, like a ball on a string. Empathising humans interpreted Nubi's expression as apprehension. Although he learned to slow down before reaching the end of the line, there were occasions when he forgot, particularly when tantalised by Blinky who knew Nubi's range to the inch. Fortunately his harness and sprung chain saved him from harm but the Spiff-Medlars agreed it was unsatisfactory.

To avoid the risky upswing, Buffy lowered the clothes line to ground level and laid a gravel track alongside it. Nubi's aerial flights were replaced by minor low-level circuits and rebounds. Carter bought a rotary clothes drier from Mr Naile's shop. Although he never told anyone, Buffy considered attaching Nubi's chain to one of the wings of the rotary line so that the animal would be restricted to a circular field and, given sufficient speed, he might do a circuit or two in the air for effect. With the new ground line in operation, Blinky and the birds occupied the far end of the garden peacefully, Blinky again enjoying the convenience of soft earth. The Spiff-Medlars' friends returned to appreciate Buffy's radish wine and Carter's dunking biscuits, the one improving the other. The vicar visited more often, and everyone enjoyed the sweet country air.

Fuchsias

Bernie Bickerton

Through the heavy, black binoculars, Gladys sees that Mr Delft is still planting fuchsias in his front garden. In her best handwriting she carefully notes the time and a description of the suspect in her notebook and returns both detective tools to their strategic position, on the sill of the bungalow bay window. Gladys is one hundred per cent certain he's been there since 7a.m. because, she remembers, that's when she peered through the net curtains and her Teas-maid produced its familiar noise and produced the first cup of the day.

Content that the most recent evidence of her neighbour's behaviour has been accurately recorded, Gladys moves towards her favourite, burgundy armchair and adjusts its lace headrest. Then, comfortably ensconced in furniture that was once considered to be of superior quality, she opens the morning correspondence and fears that the brown, official envelope contains yet another bill. Her thoughts are interrupted by the doorbell and as it's just gone 11a.m. Gladys knows it will be Mavis. She reaches for her walking stick and hoists herself out of the chair and slowly walks the few yards to the front door.

"Mavis, lovely to see you," she kisses her on the cheek. "Come in and sit down, I'll just put the kettle on." Gladys signals to Mavis to go to the front room and then walks down the hall to the kitchen to prepare Elevenses. Mavis makes herself comfortable in the matching burgundy armchair, reserved for guests, and can't resist picking up the binoculars to witness potential drama at Number 3, across the road.

Gladys returns with steaming tea in Royal Worcester cups, accompanied by home-made biscuits. Putting the binoculars down onto her lap, Mavis, says "I see Dutch Boy is up to his tricks."

With a look of disdain and visibly shaking off a shiver down her spine, Gladys replies, "I know, he was out the front at quarter past 10 last night when I closed the curtains."

Mavis says, "Gladys, I've been thinking about our conversation yesterday. I agree with you that we just don't know what is going on but I've got a nagging feeling, I can't help thinking that perhaps we're being a little bit hard on him. He's only been here six weeks; let's give him time to settle in. It's far too early to think about implementing

your plan about going to the authorities. It probably won't even be necessary. If I had to put a bet on it, I'd say we won't be doing that."

Gladys shifts, and with an air of irritation in her voice, "Mavis, that's what I'm worried about, I don't want his sort settling in. Just look at the evidence: he's a single, retired man; he's bought a property which, from the second bedroom, has a perfect view of the school gates; he doesn't usher the boys away when they sit on his garden wall, in fact sometimes he even talks to them; he spends hours in the garden but only has fuchsias to show for it. He obviously has an obsessive personality, why else would he only grow fuchsias and why does he have a camera draped round his neck when he's in the garden? In my view there's something very, very, very odd going on."

Mavis pulls an exasperated face and neither of them says anything for an uncomfortable minute.

Mavis, as upbeat as ever, "Gladys, he has a lovely smile, he always says 'hello', he has the time of day for his neighbours. Surely that means something?"

With a stern, unflinching look, Gladys's forensic and analytical mind races ahead but very calmly and slowly she looks Mavis in the eyes. "Hang on a minute, Mavis," she pauses, "why don't you want us to go to the authorities? What have you got to hide?" There is a painful pause. Gladys continues, "It's your son again, isn't it?"

Mavis's face is ashen; she touches her chest, as if pierced in the heart. Visibly shaking, she puts her tea and biscuits on the coffee table and abruptly stands.

"Gladys, how dare you speak to me like that." She quickly brushes away a tear. "I shall not be insulted. I'll see myself out."

Mavis goes to the door and turns just before she exits, "Gladys, I've wanted to say this for a long time. I've known you ten years. You're a friend. It hurts me to have to tell you this but ... but you're the one who's obsessed. Look at the notes that you fastidiously make about the Dutchman. And the other neighbours who've had the misfortune to live nearby. You never take people at face value. You always think they have ulterior motives. You're so suspicious! All those years you spent in the Metropolitan Police typing up crime reports. All those crime dramas you watch on TV. The only fiction you ever read is

crime. It's made you go funny in the head! That is the truth, Gladys. Now, goodbye." Mavis leaves.

Gladys doesn't move from her favourite armchair. She sits in silence and questions whether Mavis is right. No, she's got something to hide, she concludes. She's putting the blame on me to take attention away from her son.

Gladys gets up from her armchair and concludes that she doesn't have time to waste on this matter. She has more important things to do. She makes her way to the writing bureau in the corner of the room. She puts pen to paper and writes, in her best handwriting, identical letters to her constituency MP and the Prime Minister. She urges them to increase the State Retirement Pension. She writes a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* to inform readers on her civic action.

"Smithy!!! Smithy!!!" roars a 12-year-old boy on a bicycle as he speeds past the bungalow, "wait for me!" Gladys tuts, she looks at her watch, 3.01p.m. School's out. She returns to her favourite armchair and reaches for the binoculars and notebook. She watches. Mr Delft is planting fuchsias. Familiar-looking boys sit on his garden wall. Three are frantically texting, two are laughing at a video on a mobile phone and an older boy, lost in thought, is smoking a cigarette. Mr Delft finishes what he is doing and goes to the older boy, a conversation ensues and the boy accompanies Mr Delft into the house. Gladys isn't sure whether to start taking notes or keep watching, her arthritic hands can't manage both. She continues her observations for as long as her hands and arms can sustain the weight of the binoculars. Then, with sweat forming on her brow, she puts the binoculars back on the sill and picks up the telephone, conveniently positioned nearby, and calls the Police.

Gladys is sitting in her favourite armchair, listening to the ever so young-looking policeman.

"I understand you want to help, Mrs Christie, I really do, but it doesn't always help you or us to act out your suspicions. There's the risk that you see harm where none is intended or even evident. I think we should agree that if you have further suspicions you speak to your friends first? I know your next door neighbour, Mrs Mavis Sage. What about having a word with her as your first port of call?"

As quick as a flash Gladys replies, "I don't trust her. She is trying to cover up the misdemeanours of her son, you know, DCI John Sage. He was at your Station. Don't you remember?"

“Yes, I do, but I may remind you that 3 months later DCI Sage was completely exonerated, on Appeal. The case against him was a fabrication by a colleague who put two and two together and got five. Poor chap, his wife never got over it. I obviously can’t say more.” The Policeman stands up, “I really must go now, I have another evening visit to do. Thank you, good evening.”

Ignoring his protestations that she not get up, Gladys sees him to the front door. She closes the door behind him and with her back to the door, leaning against it, she starts weeping uncontrollably. What had she done? She’d lost a dear friend in Mavis and made her upset and hadn’t even realised that her son and daughter-in-law were carrying heavy burdens.

At nightfall Gladys doesn’t draw the curtains in her front room as she doesn’t want to be reminded of her own misdemeanours. She cries herself to sleep after struggling to work out how she can possibly apologise and make amends.

Gladys wakes up with the dawn chorus and knows exactly what she has to do. She will visit Mavis at 11a.m. and say sorry, but first she will put the detective tools in the dustbin in the back garden.

Gladys gets a sense of relief when tearing up the notebook, as if she is freeing herself of restrictions and she is now open to new horizons.

Exactly at the planned time, Gladys knocks at the front door. A smiling Mavis answers. Her expression changes when she sees it is Gladys. After an uncomfortable apology on the doorstep, Mavis invites Gladys in for a cup of tea.

Walking to the kitchen, Gladys glimpses a magnificent fuchsia plant in full bloom on the dining room table in the lounge.

Mavis smiles broadly as she directs Gladys to a chair in the kitchen.

“You seem happy with yourself, Mavis. What’s the good news?”

“I found a new dance partner at the Tea Dance yesterday afternoon. He’s a real pleasure to dance with and he’s terribly charming. We went out for dinner last night. The good news is we can practice new dance steps regularly as he lives nearby.

“Really, where does he live? I might know him.”

“You do. His name is Albert Delft.”

The Dawn of the Elephants

Shafi Ahmed

It was about 50 years ago. I was working as a temporary lecturer in engineering in a remote Academy in a far flung corner of Bangladesh. One early dawn in January, I with my gardener Abdul and his 12 year old son Sanu had set out on a bird shooting expedition.

It was the time of year when cobras and other snakes, native to the land, were hibernating. Our path was neither clear nor continuous. Between hills and valleys, across patches of farm-land, over rickety bamboo bridges, the trail was uncertain. There were overgrown grass, bamboo groves and tough vines which needed constant watching and negotiating.

A few days ago Abdul saw me cleaning my shotgun, which I inherited from my father. From that moment he began his plea with me, stating how good a shot I was, and why I must go with him hunting for deer, boar, fowls and ducks which thrived in the surrounding countryside. He specially kept on about some wild fowls which are reported to be sighted about six miles to the east. The fowls were only likely to be there a few days before the winter harvest began and the farmers drove them out.

And so it was that we were travelling that tricky trail many years ago.

Sanu was gathering twigs for firewood as was the custom with all villagers. After about two miles he made a fair sized bundle on his head. Then the bundle was carefully removed by his father and was tied firmly around his back. Further collections by Sanu on his head continued.

We walked on. Abdul indulged in his flattering patter from time to time to pep me up. He also talked with Sanu in their dialect to give him encouragement. We came to a large patch of flat farmland full of various kinds of winter crops well on the way to ripening for harvest. There were maize, seed mustard, lentils and other pulses; turmeric, ginger, onion, garlic, sugar-cane; and some other crops I did not recognise. A foot-trail wound lazily through the crops before us. In the natural light we could see for about thirty yards, beyond which the path and the fields were swallowed up in a greyish mist. By this time Sanu had a large bundle of twigs also on his head, held in place by one of his hands or sometimes both as he walked. From his style of balancing the loads and walking, it was clear that he was well used to this kind of work. Abdul was looking for a suitable place to hide the bundles (to collect them on our way back)

and we were more than midway towards our destination.

Suddenly Abdul, who was walking in front of me, froze his gait, and I bumped into him. He whispered and pointed towards the mist ahead and I could discern the outlines of two elephants. There was a mother elephant with her baby slowly walking across the fields in the same direction as ourselves with the mother in the lead.

Sanu came up behind us and as soon as he saw the elephants he threw the bundle from his head and ran backwards. The baby elephant turned at the noise of the bundle hitting the ground, and on seeing us let out a frightened screech. At this the mother elephant turned. She charged at us, her trunk up-raised and trumpeting with a blood-curdling shrill. Her thundering rush shook the ground. We ran towards a hill which we had passed a short while back. We ran for our lives and clambered to the top which was only about 30 feet from the ground.

The elephant could not quite catch us. It tried but could not climb the steepness of the hill. But it knew we were sheltering there and in an outburst of futile rage it trampled the vegetation around the base of the hill. We were shaking with dread. We laid ourselves down on the ground amidst the long grass to hide ourselves. But the elephants were not deluded. They kept on their destructive work at the base of the hill..

We frequently called on the Almighty for protection and deliverance. I was angry with Abdul for not letting me know about the likely presence of elephants. He cried, and with tears in his eyes said that if he knew he would not put our lives including the life of his own son in jeopardy. He had no idea why the elephants were there! The unspoilt farms, through which we had travelled that morning were ample proof that this was no elephant country. Perhaps these elephants were strays from their herd for some reason; may be the result of an elephant-drive far to the north which was their normal habitat.

The mist soon vanished and two further agonising hours passed without any lessening of tension. Abdul suggested that I fire a shot or two in the air to scare the elephants away. Sanu also joined in this plea with alacrity.

So I loaded the old gun and fired a single shot aiming at the sky. And we got a more shocking surprise! The shot so angered the mother elephant that she burst into a fresh rage and charged up the hill. Thankfully the hill prevailed. But in fresh anger and frustration the elephants started destroying more vegetation at the bottom of the hill with renewed vigour and fearful noise. After about half an hour things quietened down again. It was obvious that playing a waiting game was the safest approach. So we laid ourselves doggo on that hill-top within the long grass.

Sanu was crying intermittently at a low moan. As he ran for the hill, he had no time to take off the load from his back. When we all reached the safety of the top Abdul had released the load. The bundle of dry twigs was certainly looking odd amidst the greenery.

Around ten, as quietly as possible, we had some refreshments, prepared and packed by my wife, from the bag which Abdul carried. Sanu stopped crying. I poured myself some coffee from the flask and lit a cigarette. The elephants were very much present.

I desperately tried to think a way out of the dangerous situation.

Lying on the grass, I stretched my arm to flick ash. I felt a piercing pain on the back of my hand. The hard, sharp end of a twig from Sanu's discarded bundle had lacerated me. I bandaged it quickly with my hankie to stop the bleeding, remembering too late that we did not bring a first aid kit..

I looked at the bundle of twigs with utter distaste and wanted to destroy it there and then. I took a position to kick it down the slope, but suddenly had a better idea. I decided to set fire to it hoping it might scare the elephants away because of their instinctive fear of forest fires; also perhaps some villagers might see the smoke and come to investigate. I whispered to my companions about the plan and asked them to crawl away from the bundle. Then I ignited it and as the fire took hold, I crawled away to join them.

The fire crackled and burned. The usual smell of wood-fire floated in the air. The smoke went straight up and then dispersed all around. Some grass and bamboo shoots also caught fire and a small blaze started with lots of thick smoke as the vegetation was green and wet.

The elephants received the whiff of smoke and fell utterly quiet. They looked around. The mother snuggled up to the baby and rubbed it with her trunk. They stood head to head, as if conversing. They looked up to see the actual place where the smoke was originating from.

After about ten minutes, they slowly moved off round the bend of the jungle in the direction they were heading before.

We stayed on the hill-top for a further hour by which time the fire had burned out. Then ditching our adventurous quest of shooting wild fowls we hastily climbed down the hill and headed back home, still full of trepidation and looking back anxiously from time to time.

Sisters

Brian Lockett

There was an age difference of four years between the sisters but, as far as Olive was concerned, it could have been forty or four hundred. They went to the same local grammar school and then split up, Olive going to teacher training college and Isobel to a technical college to study photography.

When Olive got married Isobel was her chief bridesmaid and, later, godmother to the three children. Preoccupied with rearing a family and tending a husband, Olive didn't have a lot of time to think about her sister. They met from time to time and Olive deliberately curbed the natural tendency to talk about the children out of consideration for her sister's continued lack of a partner. At that stage she made an assumption that Isobel was dating men, but preferred to keep quiet about it. There was never an exchange of confidences. As the years went by and Isobel remained unmarried, Olive concluded that her sister's requirements of a husband must be unrealistic, impossibly demanding. When her husband gently suggested that Isobel was 'not the marrying kind', she looked at him closely.

"Do you think ...," she began.

"Well, it's possible, you know. And why not? Nobody gives a damn about these things nowadays."

"She hasn't said or hinted anything like that."

"Why should she? It's none of your business."

Olive thought about what he said. It was possible, of course, and he was right: it was none of her business. Her sister's friends were for the most part girls she had been at school with. None of them married. But it really was not possible to conclude on that slender basis that... It was all rather confusing. Something in her childhood, perhaps? Had she, Olive, been partly responsible? She began to think back. They had never shared boyfriends, in fact they had done very little after-school socialising of any kind together. They had both sung in the choir, she as soprano and Isobel as contralto. That couldn't mean anything, surely?

She knew that both she and her husband found Isobel difficult to talk to. She always wanted to cap his stories by giving examples of the ways she had helped friends - driving them to hospital appointments, looking after their pets, fixing holidays for and with them. Her interest in what anyone else was doing was always perfunctory. Come to think of it, this perfunctoriness characterised almost all the questions she ever asked. In fact, she sometimes interrupted before the answer was finished. Defensive, yes, that was the word: defensive.

Then there was the smoking and drinking. Olive did not smoke but drank a glass of wine occasionally with a meal and her husband, a life-long teetotaler, had given up smoking. Isobel, on the other hand, was rarely without a cigarette in her hand and, on the rare occasions when the two of them were together, always found an excuse for pouring herself a glass of something. The effect of both habits was becoming evident in her experience and behaviour. From a chubby teenager and slightly overweight twenty-something, she had changed into a sallow-faced middle-aged woman with restless hands and a permanent fluttering of one eyelid.

As the children left home for jobs and adult commitments of their own, Olive found herself worrying more and more about her sister.

“I don’t understand her. I never have done,” she said to her husband. “We’re not like sisters at all. Something’s wrong somewhere.”

“Your sister is an alcoholic lesbian.” he said brutally. “There’s nothing to understand. She’ll collapse in the street one day or be discovered slumped in an armchair after three days. If she doesn’t set fire to the whole building first.”

Olive stared at him.

“You may be right,” she said.

He seemed to relent.

“If you’re after an ‘explanation’ - whatever that may mean - have you considered the possibility that she may not be your sister?”

“What do you mean?”

“Could she have been adopted or taken in as an orphan? The illegitimate offspring of some poor girl in the neighbourhood who got herself in the club. Don’t forget - no legal abortion in those days, lots of shame attached to being an unmarried mother. These are the sorts of possibilities. This could be an ‘explanation’ of sorts. Does it satisfy you? You still don’t know why she turned out the way she has. Are you going to tell her all this?”

Olive paused.

“There wouldn’t be much point, would there?”

“I agree. You could hardly say *I was curious to find out why you have ended up a lesbian lush. Want to know what I discovered?*”

“You can be very crude sometimes, you know.”

“Realistic, direct. You should know me by now. Well, that particular non-problem solved, you’d better let me have your ideas about when we should visit Paul and Rosalind and the grandchildren in Australia.”

“Yes,” said Olive. “But I think it’s all very sad.”

The Writing Group

Tony Oswick

Loneliness is a crippling disease. It pinches, starves and destroys. It grips around the throat like a tightening noose until every last breath is extinguished.

A knew about loneliness for he was all alone. (The fastidious, finicky or just plain fussy may wish to substitute 'she' or 'it' from now on- for no-one knows if A was actually a 'he', 'she' or 'it'). In his isolation, A had time for contemplation aplenty. "Why," he would say to himself- for he had no-one else to talk to -"I feel I am definitely an article. And yet somehow, I am indefinite." He would console himself he was top of the class. But what class? To be top of one was just - to be top of one. Yes, without doubt, A knew the depths of loneliness.

Then along came B. Now please, don't ask me why or how or when- it would take too long and, in truth, I really don't know why or how or when. Of course, I could make up a story about the Garden of Eden, or big bangs and black holes. But you'd probably think I was being silly. No, just take it from me that B came along.

And how to describe A's emotions? Well, imagine it yourself. One day, you're sitting alone hermit-like with your thoughts, then along comes someone like you- although just a little bit different- and you know from the start the whole will be greater than the sum of the parts.

It would be fair to say A's greatest emotion was one of elation. Yesterday there was just him, today he was part of a pair. They could do so many things together. They started algebra (especially when squared) and learned, by degrees, that when they repeated themselves, they could sing in Swedish.

But then came the seven-year itch, or its equivalent. Familiarity started to breed- not contempt -but familiarity. There was a limit to their capabilities. They became frustrated and bored- isn't it the same with all couples when the novelty wanes? Which is why they celebrated when they found C.

Now some may think two's company and three's a crowd. Not them. This was ace. And please do not imagine a salacious *ménage à trois*. Oh, no, it was all strictly platonic. Getting on together was as easy as, well, ABC.

But life isn't always simple, is it? Just when you think you've got things on an even keel and everything's hunky-dory, along comes a problem to cloud the horizon. It happened with D's arrival- and they started to develop little cliques. AD and BC. Nasty! But many of life's problems are only

temporary and time is a wonderful healer. And as someone once said, "Something usually turns up".

And you can probably guess who turned up, can't you? How predictable. But E proved the most popular of the lot."Prolific," said some. "Ubiquitous," said others. "Indispensable," said them all. E was the key, he was the energy and the ecstasy, he was the bead who bade the deb to bed. He was everywhere.

Now to save paper - and we should all be aware of our carbon footprint these days - I won't go on about all the others. But let it be said they eventually found another twenty-one like-minded characters to make a family of twenty-six. Some like G had the wow factor, some like I were egotistical, some like O were a surprise- and some like Z sent everyone to sleep.

And why twenty-six and not twenty-five or twenty-seven? And why did they decide against rounding their number up to thirty or down to twenty? Well, that's not how relationships work, is it? How many friends have you got? An odd number, an even number, a prime number, a number divisible by five? You don't just think of a number, do you? Unless, that is, you're Derren Brown or David Copperfield- the illusionist, not the Dickens character, of course. The number just evolves. That's Darwinism for you.

But it didn't quite stop there. I suppose it was natural and inevitable that they all had little ones. There was a little a, b, c, d and e, and all the rest. And weren't they useful! I have to say, it made them, the big ones, just a teeny-weeny bit lazy because they made the little ones do all the hard work. And the big ones decided they'd just do important jobs, like starting things off or being used properly.

Eventually, all these wonderful creatures decreed they should be known as letters, because they let people take them, and mould them, and put them together into all sorts of permutations and combinations, and create the most marvellous creations you could ever wish to imagine. They were indeed the ultimate writing group.

And that's the end of the story really. Except to say I understand that in honour of their founding fathers (or mothers if you're still pursuing the politically-correct line- although I'd hoped by this time you'd forgotten about that) they called themselves collectively the alphabet. The alphabet? Well, that's what they told me. Very, very strange. And, honestly, I don't know why. It's all Greek to me.