

The Society of Civil & Public Service Writers

Diary

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

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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

The Author celebrates its 65th birthday this year. To mark this event, back numbers of the magazine can now be found on the SCPSW website. Actually, it's sheer coincidence, but it always looks better to pretend these things are part of a plan! Nevertheless, hearty thanks should go to Alan Gibb, our webmaster, for the work he has put into this.

At the AGM on Saturday, 11 May, several other decisions were made to try to raise the Society's profile. I hope to put the Society onto Facebook shortly, which will not only make others more aware of us, it will also enable members to contact each other and keep abreast of events. The Committee would also be grateful if those who are willing at some stage to take a more active part in the Society could make themselves known. In particular it would be useful to have someone with IT skills, however rudimentary, on the Committee. Many societies like ours are not only on Facebook but also on twitter, so those who are at home with these communication tools would be particularly welcome. In addition, although the current post-holders are not quite past their prime, it would be reassuring to know that there are others willing and able to step into our shoes should the need arise. Even Popes are allowed to retire now! One of the problems of a nationwide society such as ours is that many of us have never met in person, so there is almost no way of knowing who could be asked to step into a breach, either temporarily or permanently, should the need arise.

This year's literary lunch will take place on Saturday, 19 October. Further details will be found in the next edition of *The Author*, but members may like advance warning so that they can book their saver fares. Details of the Children's Short Story Competition will also be appearing in the next edition, but some members may like to start thinking about it now.

Chairman's Chat

Terry Rickson

Helen Jackson's article, *Traveller's Tales*, in the spring edition of *Author* made interesting reading and the fact she went on to gain success by her efforts. My mind was 'blown away' by her winning holiday trips!

I do hope members will have responded to our editor's request for views and comments in his article *Author Online*. It is important to hear what you have to say on the matter.

I have been reading Matthew Hollis's book, *Now All Roads Lead to France*, a study in the final years of the life of the poet Edward Thomas. For several years Thomas and his family lived in Steep, a village a mile north of Petersfield in Hampshire. It was here one hundred years ago, in 1913, that he met the American poet Robert Frost, who was to be instrumental in encouraging him to write poetry. I visited Steep, set in the pleasant Hampshire Downland, a few years ago. In the south wall of the village church are two lancet windows containing glass engraved by Laurence Whistler, unveiled to commemorate the centenary of Thomas's birth in 1878. A sarsen stone on Shoulder of Mutton Hill is dedicated to the poet's memory. Edward Thomas was killed by a shell blast at Arras on Easter Monday, 1917.

Reading Gordon Thynne's story, *A Case of Shared Identity*, brought to mind a memory from my time undertaking National Service. At one unit where I served, we had a pair of inseparable identical twin brothers. I don't think many of us could work out which was which!

I trust members will enjoy the summer and find plenty of inspiration for their writing.

SCPSW 75th Anniversary Anthology

As we still have several dozen copies of our 200 page 75th Anniversary Anthology gathering dust, this entertaining book will now be made available to members at the bargain price of £5.00. (Printing cost was £13.50) The Society will pay the postage. Requests for copies should be addressed to Adrian Danson, 78 Palace View, Bromley, Kent BR1 3EL, together with a cheque made payable to SCPSW, with the name and address to which you wish the book to be sent.

Members' Emails

Ethel Corduff has asked that as many members as possible let her know their email addresses so that she can send reminders of competitions and closing dates. The emails will only be used for SCPSW matters. Ethel can be contacted on meetings@scpsw.co.uk.

On the same subject Mike Smith, the Membership Secretary, has also asked that members ensure he has an up to date email address for them where possible.

Author Online

Paul Williams

As I mentioned in the editorial, back numbers of The Author can now

be found on: <http://www.scpsw.co.uk/author-online.php>. There is also a link on the home page of the Society's website. This means, of course, that members' contributions now have a far wider potential readership.

Thanks to those who responded to my request for comments about the proposal to put *The Author* online. Just to clarify, there are no plans to get rid of the hard copy magazine. Only back numbers will be online.

Local Interest

Ethel Corduff reports that a member in Cardiff would like to meet with other writers for discussion. If any members in that area are interested, Ethel can put them in contact with her. One advantage of going onto Facebook is that members can more easily contact each other should they wish to do so.

The Lewis Wright Short Story Competition 2013 – Results

The Judge was David Tickner, Editor of the Civil Service Retirement Fellowship magazine, *Avanti*. The judge made the following general comments.

‘Having judged the competition last year it was wonderful to see another bumper crop of submissions. The range of subjects covered made the judging process very enjoyable and it is clear the writing standard is getting better and better. Writing a short story is no easy feat, not least due to the word limits imposed, and everybody who took the time to enter should be proud of their achievements.’

The competition was won by Patricia Risen for *The Gift*. David Tickner wrote: ‘This was the clear winner this year. The entry was excellent. It ticked all the boxes for me and was extremely well written, nicely constructed, had a clear story structure and even managed to touch the emotions as well. I hope I have the opportunity to read more by Patricia Risen.’

Second place went Lyn Potier for *The Silent Roar*. ‘I incurred the wrath of early morning commuters when reading this story as it made me laugh out loud! I thoroughly enjoyed this ‘cautionary tale’. It was well written and humorous, not to mention totally believable. I’m certainly going to make sure I check the details of any online order I make from here on in!’

The Gift is reproduced in this edition of *The Author*.

Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition 2013 – Result

The winner of the Herbert Spencer Poetry Competition 2013 was Angus Livingstone with *A Poem Speaks to Its Master*. The judge liked the way the final two lines of each stanza set up an echo. ‘The poem has an almost wistful feel to it and it is a lovely poem to read aloud.’

A Poem Speaks to Its Master

Think of me and write me down.
Feel the sadness of a clown.
Read me loud in a cloudless day
Then I will fly away, away.
I will fly away.

For I must find the wistful road
that’ll take me to my own abode
and there, I pray, I will stay
forever and a day, a day –
forever and a day.

Don’t question me re anything.
I am a vassal, you are king,
or treat me as some *art nouveau*
I’ll only tell you what you know –
what you already know.

If Bang was made by mind,
the watchmaker wasn’t fully blind
no mind can die or yet perspire
where black is the whitest of white fire –
the whitest white of fire.

What is beyond all this
some other poem will not miss?
Learn the secret of the breeze
that whiffles through the trees, the trees –
that whiffles through the trees.

Market Profile

Ethel Corduff

Magazines can be expensive but they need to be studied if you want to write for them. Some free magazines and many other things can be obtained from the website freebiesite.co.uk. Some current magazines of interest are *Marie Claire*, a women's magazine. *Moneywise* contains news and information about money with ideas, bargains and scams to avoid. If you are keen on sport there is *Spikes*, filled with news and reviews from track and field. The popular *Saga* is also listed.

I have been in touch with the very popular *Yours* Magazine for their current requirements and guidelines. Here is a summary of what you need to know to write for them.

Non-Fiction Guidelines. They receive more than 100 manuscripts a month and publish only one a fortnight. Submissions should be up to 300 words approx for a half-page article. Typed on one side of the paper, the title page should include an accurate word count and your full name, address and telephone number. Try to enclose relevant photographs to illustrate your article, marked with your name and address on the back. SAE is essential

You should include a short CV, with a clear, colour head and shoulder picture. All photographs should be marked with your name, address and telephone number. Any article submitted must not have been published elsewhere and, if published, become exclusive to *Yours* magazine on an all-rights basis. The magazine reserves the right to edit, alter or shorten any article submitted. It may not appear in its entirety and it may appear in any of their publications.

It is essential that you study several issues of *Yours*. It is currently looking for inspirational stories and adventures. Send your manuscript marked 'Follow Your Dream' to:

Yours Magazine, Bauer London Lifestyle, Media House, Peterborough Business Park, Peterborough, PE2 6EA. Mark the envelope: 'Non Fiction Submission', or email to yours@bauerconsumer.co.uk

Fiction Guidelines. *Yours* is always looking for good short stories. Every submission is read but they receive more than a hundred manuscripts a month and are able to publish only one short story per issue. Allow up to six months for reply and enclose a stamped, addressed envelope if you would like your manuscript to be returned.

Submissions should be 1000-2,000 words long and not have been published elsewhere before. Manuscripts must be TYPED on one side of the paper and the title page must include 100 - 150 word synopsis and an accurate word count. You should include your full name (and real name if you write under a pen name), address and telephone number. It is essential that you study three or four published stories in *Yours* before writing anything for them. Their readers range in age from fifties upwards, with most in their mid-sixties and seventies. They are mostly women, although *Yours* is read by some men, so don't ignore their interests! Some of the most popular themes with *Yours* readers are romance, families, grandchildren, nostalgia and wartime comradeship. A lot of their readers did war work and/or had husbands or boyfriends serving in the Forces. Don't be limited to these subjects though; the style and tone of what you write about must appeal their readers as much as the content.

The first line of your story should grab the attention. Avoid stereotypical images of older people as ill, frail and lonely. Make sure your story is plausible and realistic and do not rely on unlikely coincidences. Try and avoid the hero turning out to be a cat or dog. Avoid downbeat subjects such as death, widowhood, illness and loneliness, or write about them in a positive way that does not dwell on negatives. Try not to rely on obvious plot devices such as twists in the tale and memory flashbacks. These are very common and, unless cleverly written, can be predictable. A good story does not always need a surprise.

Send your manuscript to Short Stories, *Yours* Magazine, Bauer Media, Media House,

Peterborough Business Park, Peterborough, PE2 6EA, or by email to: yours@bauermedia.co.uk (Subject: Short Story Submission) – email submissions must include contact telephone number and address details.

All successful submissions are accepted on an All Rights basis that gives Bauer Media exclusive copyright

Poetry Workshop News

Mike Boland

PW Chairman: Jane Arthur, P6 Wexler Lofts, 100 Carver Street, Birmingham, B1 3AQ

Treasurer/Membership Secretary: Terry Rickson, 48 Marlborough Rd, Ashford, Middlesex, TW15 3QA

Events Co-ordinator: Steve Pilley

Editor of 'wavelengths': Mike Boland, 11 Boxtree Lane, Harrow Weald, Middlesex.HA3 6JU

Wavelengths # 35

The summer issue of *wavelengths*, the quarterly magazine provided free to all members of the Poetry Workshop, has now been published. If you haven't already received it, it will be with you very soon. As usual, the issue runs to 20 pages, and this time features a short essay on John Keats by Brian Jones and a humorous article relating Tom Riley's experiences at poetry slam events. There are also poems by PW members and the usual Newsletter section, which gives details of all the Workshop's activities, including the Rules for this year's Bill Barnes' Poetry Competition and news of Waves 2013.

PW Weekend 2013

The Poetry Workshop's annual get-together will be held over the weekend of **26-28 July**. The venue is Launde Abbey, East Norton, Leicester. A full report of the Weekend will be given in the autumn issue of *wavelengths*.

Annual General Meeting

The AGM of the Poetry Workshop will be held during the Summer Weekend. If any member has any points to raise or motions they would like to submit for discussion, please send them to **Jane Arthur** at the address above by 1 July. The Minutes of the AGM will be published in the autumn issue of *wavelengths*.

Bill Barnes Competition 2013

Details and Rules of Entry for this year's Bill Barnes Poetry Competition will appear in the summer issue of *wavelengths*. Closing date for the Competition is 30 September.

Subscriptions 2013

Subscriptions to the Poetry Workshop fell due on 1 January 2013. Existing members should have received a subscription form with the winter issue of **wavelengths**. Any member who has not yet renewed will not receive any further issues of the magazine, so if you haven't already renewed your subscription for 2013 do so now.

Please complete and send your form together with your cheques/postal orders to **Terry Rickson**, whose address appears above.

The cost of membership is £7 for members of the Society of Civil & Public Service Writers. **Please** remember to make out your cheques correctly: they should be made payable to **SCPSW Poetry Workshop Account**.

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.

Membership of the Poetry Workshop provides:

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

Dates to Remember

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| 1 July 2013 | deadline for motions for the AGM |
| 26-28 July 2013 | Poetry Workshop Weekend |
| 1 August 2013 | deadline for wavelengths # 36 (autumn issue) |
| September 2013 | publication of wavelengths # 36 |
| 30 September 2013 | closing date for entries to the Bill Barnes |
| Competition 2013 | |
| 1 November 2013 | deadline for wavelengths # 37 |
| December 2013 | publication of wavelengths # 37 |

Best wishes,
Mike Boland

Poetry Pages

Edited by Terry James

Leiden

Norman Bissett

We went by train to Leiden,
hoping to see the Rembrandthuis,
the Korenbeursbrug over the Nieuwe Rijn,
the ethereal tombstone of the 15th Century merchant,
Floris van Boschhuysen and his wife,
standing, like Adam and Eve,
in naked bas relief,
inside the Pieterskerk,
the ancient, venerable University
and other miscellaneous antiquities.

Instead, we took in the Jazz Festival
in the Railway Station concourse –
a dozen moustachio'd old boys on the side of life,
in bow ties, fancy shades and striped gilets,
rocking the rails with *Basin Street Blues*
and *It Don't Mean a Thing if it Aint Got That Swing*.
Contemporaries of Cab Calloway and Jack Teagarden,
their average age was 80-plus.
Later, we ate battered, deep-fried fish
from a polystyrene tray beside the Botermarkt.

Siren of the Paperclips

Steve Glason

Oh Secretary – behind a desk
(Immaculate - from head to toe)
First Port of Call – Appointments page
Boss in Boardroom – busy man.

Your makeup was bought in Boots
Applied with skill on moving train
That lovely smell of scented soap
Handbag full of treasured things.

You're never bored – a thousand jobs
Daily typing those reports
(Bedtime Reading they are not)
Dull & lengthy – doublespaced.

You fit in to Office Life
Governed by the mobile phone
Sending emails – instant now
Keep in touch across the world.

Come 6 o'clock you head for home
And catch the Tube to Golders Green
North London suburbs – Edgware Line
Once Open Country – long ago.

I am on a Committee

(Steve Glason writes: 'I must confess that this witty poem was not written by me but by that celebrated poet, A Non. It first appeared in the Kingston-on-Thames Youth Hostel magazine in the early 1990s.')

Oh give me your pity – I'm on a Committee
Which means from morning til night
We attend and amend and contend and defend
Without conclusions in sight
We confer and concur, we defer and demur
And re-iterate all of our thoughts
We revise the agenda with frequent addenda
And consider a load of reports
We compose and propose, we suppose and oppose
And the points of procedure are fun
But though various notions are brought up as motions
There's terribly little gets done!
We resolve and absolve but never dissolve
Since out of the question for us
What shattering pity to end our committee
Where else could we make such a fuss!

Three Animal Poems – In Haiku form

Terry Rickson

Weasel, past master
of stealth, flows like quicksilver,
grins and snaps his prey.

By a field gate, stands,
in the sun, an old horse that
idly flicks its tail.

Watch a wind blown leaf
delight a playful kitten,
who leaps and tumbles.

I, the Forest

Mike Boland

The Forest breathed;
A moist green breath,
Its soft caress
Contained a primal trace
Of wilderness.

The Forest rolled;
A living sea, breaking free
To clash in verdant surf
Against the cliff-like hill
Peninsularing me.

The trees stretched like an ocean.
Oak, ash and beech; a swaying motion,
Timber threshed against the sky.

Thoughts swell like restless sea,
Sounding, shifting endlessly;
Their patterns ebb and flow in waves.

Mine took on a rhythmic surge,
That filled me with a strange, strange urge
To plunge in those arboreal deeps

So I could merge in harmony
Within that ancient entity,
Earthed in dark fecundity.

The Forest sighed;
Wind-thrown leaves leapt
On the breeze like spray,
Salt-tainted, from
Off the tide.

The Forest called;
I answered, diving down the hill,
Drowned in greenness, rooted.
Still we stand,
The trees and I.

Riddle

Terry Rickson

Listen, my friend

I was born in a forest.
The Northern Lights were my lamp.
Many winters passed before men
came to shape my future;
lovingly was I planed and honed.
my head is held high.
I see through a dragon eyes,
a raven my talisman.
Flashing blades speed me
over the whale's road.
Fierce men roar with delight
as I cut a clean furrow,
salt-spray in my face,
driven by the wind.
The north star guides me
to lands of ice and snow,
forests and deep, calm inlets.
What am I?

That Afternoon

Nina Mattar

The afternoon gathered
as I walked expectantly
wanting to observe
bird and flower.

As gentle as light breeze
my stroll led me to
a country walk.

The silence of the fox
as it lay by the hedge
shattered the moment.

Yet humming time
flirted with nature,
then colluded to by-pass his death.

Hurting, I hid within that afternoon.

The Gift

Patricia Risen

(This story was winner of the Lewis Wright Short Story Competition 2013)

Molly sat in the corner of the lounge of her new home admiring the tall Christmas tree with its shimmering lights and glittering baubles. She loved Christmas time. Despite her great age it still seemed such a magical time of year. Through the large window she could see the fading afternoon light. It had been a frosty day and the staff coming on duty had complained about the cold but inside was snug and cosy due to the blazing fire in the hearth and definitely Christmassy.

Molly's grey head nodded as she struggled, along with many of her new companions at the Sandy Lodge Retirement home, to keep awake and listen to the visiting carol singers, small boys and girls from the local primary school with big grins on their little faces as they earnestly trilled out the familiar old Christmas songs.

As she listened to *Away in a Manger*, Molly's mind wandered back to the first Christmas that she could really remember. She had been five years old, just the age of many of today's little singers, and overwhelmed by the smell of the pine tree in the front parlour. It had looked lovely with all its shining glass ornaments. No fairy lights then of course, just a few red wax candles which would only be lit on Christmas evening. But that didn't matter, for the most exciting thing about that tree had been the parcels in brightly coloured wrapping paper that were waiting beneath its branches to be given out on Christmas Day. These were the three parcels waiting there for her and her brothers, James and Joey, who at nine and seven were almost as excited as Molly. They had been so eager to get at their presents, Molly remembered, but their father had been very strict and insisted that they wait until after Christmas dinner had been eaten and cleared away, then at last they were allowed into the front parlour for the presents.

James, as the eldest, had opened his parcel first and had been delighted with the shiny new clockwork train set that it held, holding it up to his siblings to be admired, while Joey had been equally pleased with his new wooden fort and lead toy soldiers. At last it had been Molly's turn. Carefully she had pried off the string and peeled back the wrapping paper. As she lifted the lid of the box that had been hidden by the paper she had giggled with delight at the most beautiful doll that she had ever seen. She had long brown hair, brown eyes and wore a blue and white cotton dress with white socks and shoes. With her mother's help, Molly had lifted the doll free of its tissue paper nest and cradled her gently in her arms.

'What are you going to call her?' Mother had asked.

'Rose,' said Molly, 'after my new friend at school.'

'Rose', Molly murmured, all thoughts of the carol singers abandoned. Where was she now? Molly struggled to remember. Her friend Rose, she remembered, had emigrated to America many years ago and hadn't been heard of again. It was the doll, Rose, that concerned her. Where was she?

Her family had brought Molly here to Sandy Lodge from the hospital that she had been taken too after her fall. The fall had broken her leg badly and she had taken such a long time to recover that it had convinced her sons that it was no longer safe for her to live on her

own. Her daughters-in-law and their families had packed up all her belongings. Some of her favourite pieces of furniture and china had been moved into her room here at Sandy Lodge, some had been distributed under Molly's instructions among family and friends but others, she suspected, had simply been thrown away. The boys, kind as they were, had often poured scorn on some of the things they considered clutter.

Molly sighed. She could barely remember life before Rose. She had spent many happy hours with her over the years, telling her all the secrets that she couldn't possibly tell those strapping brothers of hers. When she was eleven her mother had suggested that she was perhaps too old to play with dolls, and Rose had been consigned to the bedroom shelf, from where Molly continued to take her down from time to time and whisper her secrets. When, at nineteen, she had met Tom Brennan, a young Naval Officer at a local dance and fallen head over heels in love with him, Rose had been taken down from the shelf in the bedroom and been the first to share that secret too.

After the wedding Rose had been wrapped in a blanket and stowed away in a safe place out of sight, and Molly cherished the idea that she would be passed on to her own daughter in the fullness of time.

A year after the June wedding young William Henry had made his appearance, followed two years later by Adam and, two years after him, Rory. Molly, the fates had decreed, was not destined to have a daughter.

From time to time during those fun-packed, rough and tumble years of tree climbing, football matches, fishing trips and picnics, when Molly needed to take a trip down Memory Lane she had taken Rose down from her safe shelf well out of reach of those heavy handed lads of hers and, cuddling her gently, had whispered the hope that she would in time be passed on to her granddaughter.

But there again Molly had to be patient. As the years passed a parade of young ladies, some charming, some friendly, others not so, were invited in for Sunday tea. But Molly's sons did not succumb to matrimony easily. Eventually, however, to her relief all three married and settled down happily.

Disappointingly, there were no granddaughters. William and his wife had one son as did Adam, while Rory had two. The rough and

tumble years of football matches and walks in the wood started again. Tom and Molly loved having all four lads for the school holidays and long weekends. Then came the day when Tom, coming in from the garden at tea time, complained of a severe pain in his chest. Molly had called an ambulance and travelled with him to the hospital, but nothing could be done and within hours he had gone. A heart attack, the Doctor said.

The boys, with good natured concern for their Mother's welfare, had suggested that Molly move house. She needed to be closer to them, she needed to be closer to the shops, she needed somewhere smaller, the garden was too big. There were so many well thought out and well intentioned arguments.

But Molly didn't want to move. The house was her home. The house and the garden kept her busy, filled in the empty hours without Tom.

One evening shortly after losing Tom, feeling lonely, Molly had taken a now somewhat aged and faded Rose down from the shelf, unwrapped her and sat her on a chair in the bedroom. And suddenly she didn't feel quite so lonely any more. Soon she was once again telling Rose all her secrets and all her fears as she had all those years ago.

Rose had watched her getting ready for her eldest Grandson's wedding just a few months before her fall. Molly had twirled around the bedroom in her pale pink dress and cream straw hat. It had been such a happy day, she remembered. The bride, Lauren, had looked beautiful in a froth of silk and lace and Tommy, her grandson, had been so proud. How long ago that glorious spring day now seemed. They had all been so happy. How precious now were the memories of that last spring. The last to be spent in her beloved home. Strange looking back and remembering how all the colours of the spring flowers had seemed that much brighter this year, more vibrant than ever before. The lilac and the roses that she and Tom had planted over the years had seemed more fragrant too. Even the skies had seemed bluer and brighter as Molly regarded them fondly with hindsight.

Unfortunately the fall that had eventually led her to Sandy Lodge had been in that very garden under those same brilliant skies. Rushing in from the garden one Sunday morning to answer the telephone, she had slipped awkwardly on a step and fallen. She had lain in the garden all afternoon drifting in and out of consciousness, unable to move.

Tommy, his call unanswered, had continued calling at intervals throughout the day until eventually, puzzled by his Grandmother's lack of response, had called his father. William, after calling his brothers and ascertaining that Molly was not spending the day with either of them, had driven round to the house.

Once Molly was safely in hospital the boys had held a family conference and her future had been decided. She had never gone home again.

Molly fumbled in her cardigan pocket for her handkerchief to wipe the tears from her eyes. It was almost tea time and she was far too proud to let her fellow residents know that she had been crying. And it would certainly never do to let them know she had been crying over an old china doll. Let them believe, if they noticed at all, that she had been moved to tears by the carol singers.

‘Ah, there you are Gran, we’ve been looking for you!’

Molly looked up in surprise as Tommy burst into the lounge. She had not been expecting visitors. Her sons had been very good at visiting her in hospital, taking turns to see that she was never without a visitor at visiting time, and they had continued to visit her in turn since her arrival at Sandy Lodge. But she had already been visited that morning by Adam and his wife.

‘We’re on our way to Lauren’s parents for Christmas but we thought we’d pop in with your present on the way.’ He placed a large parcel in her lap as he spoke. ‘Go on, Gran, open it,’ he urged.

Molly pulled back the paper and gasped in surprise. Staring back at her from inside a clear glass case was Rose. And such a smart Rose too. Molly hardly knew her but it was Rose nevertheless.

‘It was Lauren’s idea,’ Tommy explained. She found her on the chair in your bedroom. We knew she was old so we took her along to the dolls hospital to have her checked out. They’ve retouched her face, her fingers and her toes, replaced her strings and given her a new dress. They suggested the case to keep her safe so that you can enjoy her and perhaps if you want to pass her on to the next generation. The people at the Doll’s Hospital reckon she’s an heirloom.’

‘I’ve kept her safe all these years,’ smiled Molly, so pleased to be reunited with her old friend, ‘waiting for another little girl to pass her on too.’

‘Your wait’s over Gran,’ grinned Tommy. ‘Come Lauren,’ he called.

Lauren, as pretty as ever in a soft red dress, stepped out from behind him carrying a baby carefully wrapped in a cream white shawl. Tommy gently lifted Rose from his grandmother’s lap and placed her on the floor.

‘There you are Gran,’ he whispered as Lauren laid the new baby in Molly’s arms, ‘meet your new great-granddaughter, Molly Rose. She only arrived two days ago but we thought we’d pop in to see you on the way home from the hospital.’

Molly smiled proudly as she looked down at the beautiful sleeping child in her arms. A Christmas baby.

‘I’ll keep my Rose here with me,’ Molly said, ‘until this little one is old enough to take care of her.’

To Soothe the Savage Breast

Tom Riley

Nineteen thirty-seven, St Edmonds Orphanage, in the Band Room, and there was muggins, standing with a fine brass tenor horn grasped to his bosom, glassy-eyed and motionless. I was transfixed by that beautiful euphonium solo being played by McMahan in the *American Beauties* piece, but I played not a note. Mr Kelledy, our benevolent band-master, rapped impatiently on his music stand and the spell was broken. I had neglected my duties once too often and was told to remove myself.

But my musical Guardian Angel was still rooting for me and it came to pass in a few months’ time, that the hulk - who played the big bass drum - was due to be inflicted on the unsuspecting world at large: a drum banger was sought. We were primarily a marching band, being hired for all the religious processions as far away as Hyde and Sandbach, in Cheshire, and Llandudno by courtesy of the North Wales Steam Packet Co, so the big drum had to be carried and walloped at the same time. Most of the boys were wizened little runts; I was as thin as a workhouse rat but I had altitude. I was head and shoulders above everybody else and could lift the Great Drum of St Edmunds well clear of the ground: my musical career was resumed in ideal conditions. I

had an excellent sense of timing and rhythm, and could proudly lead the band and listen to the tunes.

Nineteen Forty; a sparsely filled war-time classroom at St Johns Elementary, under the benevolent rule of Miss Kendal, top lip shining with *Vick* as usual, the BBC schools programme issuing from the radio, the class dozing a bit in the central heated atmosphere. It dawned on me that I was listening to something very attractive, an orchestral piece; I wasn't used to a string section. I was riveted by Schubert's *entre-acte* music from *Rosamunde*. Here was a new horizon and within a couple of days I could play it on my harmonica: only in the key of C of course.

We had churches attached to both the Orphanage and St. Johns Elementary School, and I performed in the choirs of both churches: musical comfort as our bandmaster had been called to the colours. We specialized in Latin plain chant but I enjoyed all the hymns of the Catholic Hymnal. Wickedly we often used to sing 'Et unam sanctam' and follow it up with 'Eat all you can' in the Credo.

The dear Sisters of Charity (?) decided that I had had enough of this luxury life and exported me to Liverpool to survive as best I could. A spell at making clogs in Scotland Road, and later, heaving carpets about for a department store, kept the wolf from the door, although at times it seemed the wolf would have made a tasty meal for me. There was no music.

I was very fortunate when three or four short-sighted youths turned down a job charging batteries in a radio shop, at the Labour Exchange, allowing me to enter the field of technology and do a little black-market trading in batteries and torch bulbs on my little counter at the back of the shop. Attention to the shop's stock of technical manuals and assiduous ploughing of the night-school furrow stood me in good stead for the next fifty years, ending up as head of the central maintenance section that was charged with the installation and major maintenance of the Civil Aviation radar stations and one RAF ancient Marconi heap.

When a surplus half-crown or so was generated it wasn't spent on food; a red headed girl on the cash register in the British Home Stores cafe kept me just above starvation level. In my acid-eaten

rags and unwashed, I enjoyed the luxury of the new seating in Hope Hall, the residence of the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, amply rewarded for my half-crown with admittance to the wonderful world of Vaughan Williams, Schubert, Mozart and Beethoven.

A kind Midland bank cashier, Bill Emans, took me under his wing and, after improving my appearance with some hand-me-down clothes and the occasional bath, we roamed the countryside together; Bill on a fine bicycle and myself on a machine made from salvaged scrap: a hundred and ten miles we rode one day to North Wales. Evenings, we studied music, Wagner being the favourite as Bill's family were regular visitors to Bayreuth in the season. Wagner's *Forest Murmurs*, *Siegfried Idyll*, and Ponchielli's *Dance of the Hours* were great favourites at the time and I was beginning to get a taste for the human voice at full belt, a few bits of *Das Ring* being available.

Several years followed in His Majesty's Royal Air Force and, although a loner, I spent many a happy evening listening to records in the station gramophone circle; Vaughan Williams's *Variations on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* and Dvorak's *From the New World*: great favourites as I remember. Having made our own little radios, we lads always listened to Mary Malcolm's BBC programme bringing the big smash-hit musicals from America: *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, *Annie*, *Get Your Gun*. Yes, I was a pop and swing fan as well.

Posted to Ceylon to mend His Majesty's aeroplanes, my career as a disc jockey came to an end when I left the records near the edge of the table holding the gramophone. In the blazing sun the shellac records melted and the unsupported edges folded neatly down over the edge of the table. There wasn't much classical musical comfort from Radio SEAC but Bunny Berrigan's *I can't get started with you*, which I heard only a couple of months ago, takes me right back to those steaming mosquito and snake riddled billets. His Majesty disposed of my services, with relief, in forty-nine.

In my digs in Liverpool we bent our best efforts designing amplifiers and speaker systems to improve our enjoyment of music. Ponchielli was still high up in the classic pops but rapidly being overtaken by the *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2* the all-time pot boiler. We had some good records of Paul Robeson in his prime, and my

then current favourite Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture*. During the six months it took me to find employment I spent many an hour in Crosby Library with the scores, learning the tenor arias of Grand Opera. I could give quite a reasonable rendering of *On with the Motley*, *La Gelida Manina*, the flower song from *Carmen* and, if I'd had a willing soprano handy, I could have made a not unmusical attempt on *Tell me of my Mother*, a duet from the same opera: oh how I loved duets, and how I longed to sing *Vieni La Sera*, that powerful duet from *Butterfly*. I could have killed Pinkerton.

Decca Hi-Fi was now on the scene and we were able to explore the gut wrenching limits of the well-played violin; even more brain time was devoted to amplifier and speaker design and some very strange contraptions were forth-coming.

Moving now to Birmingham, the girl friend was studying the violin, her homework being the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto in which I helped where I could as a benevolent critic, and I got to know the piece by heart. The musical offerings of the big town were limited to recitals by George Thalben Ball at the town hall organ, which I much frequented, and the occasional performance by the City of Birmingham Orchestra. My Perry Barr landlady was my delight. Short and comfortably round, ex-professional stage performer, she could play anything on the piano at first sight. Here was Nirvana, and I must say, my rendering of that lovely Victorian song might very well have graced the Halls. We explored all the Victoriana and a good slice of Ivor Novello, my favourites being the duets. With hindsight I can see a psychological significance there, being unaware in my very innocent sexuality that there were three ladies fighting for possession of the skinny singer's person at the time. No, my landlady only played the piano.

One of the young ladies, an Air Hostess, won the fight for my carcass. I secured my future by joining the Ministry of Aviation and ended up married and resident in Hampshire. It was a lean time for music although there was plenty of swing. It was the hey-day of the Beatles.

Moving to East Grinstead was the saving of my barren soul. I joined the East Grinstead Choral Society and there followed a triumphant fifteen years of bellowing to my heart's content. I

remember some wonderful choral performances, although the most chilling spot was when rehearsing Benjamin Britten's *St Nicholas*. That particular night was during the Cuban missile crisis and when hearing St Nick singing *Death I hear thy summons, and I come in haste* we were expecting the Russian rockets to land on us at any minute. I wished fervently that Nick wouldn't go on so jollily about it.

We did all the usual, Messiah, Elijah, and Mozart's Requiem; oh, that savage *Dies Irae*, the heart wrenching *Lacrymosa* and the jolly battle with the *Kyrie* at the end. Some lovely Elgar pieces, but the memory I will never forget is when we did a choral version of most of *Carmen* and the lady who was to sing Michaela being indisposed on the day of the concert, we recruited a young lady, not yet eighteen years. After only a day's rehearsal her performance of *Parle-moi de Mamera*, Michaela's high spot, was faultless. Talk about 'the next day on your dressing room they hung a star'; she definitely warranted the accolade.

About this time, I was relieved of the flying person, although to be truthful, she relieved herself of me, which seemed a bit hard at the time but, the Lord moving in mysterious ways etc, it turned out to be the luckiest day of my life.

My present wife - a consummate artist - seconded me in every cultural enterprise I was interested in, and I'll never forget the day she introduced me to Rachmaninoff's Symphony No 2. We listened to it over and over again and would not let it go until I'd heard a live performance by the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra at Crawley. We sat in the front row and even the little Cello rejoinders to the main business of the second movement were electrifying: then that gorgeous third movement.

Suzy came fully equipped with a Father and Step-Mother, both stars of the Carla Rosa Opera Company. Later in the 'D'oyale Carte', whose speciality was Gilbert and Sullivan my musical education extended in that direction for some time.

One of the last pieces towards the end of my career with the Choral Society was Fauré's *Requiem*, and I always swore that if the *Agnus Dei* was played at my funeral I would sit up and take notice.

Now being able to tell the difference between two similar renderings of the same piece, being sensitive to those tiny stretches and shortening of the composer's punctuation which make a virtuoso performance, I underwent a sort of Pauline conversion: no, not on the road to Damascus, but in the interface world of poetry and music. I was now able to buy records as I pleased, building a decent collection; and while listening to Janet Baker singing a setting of Shakespeare's *Come away death*. Janet had the phrasing just right and I suddenly realised I was listening to a poem. I have been interested in poetry since the age of six but had never quite mastered the art of recitation, but now, speaking the poem which is word music, with the phrasing of Miss Baker, brought it into electrifying life. I was on to something and I started to hunt down all the poems I knew set to music, but the finest of all I found was a setting of W.E. Henley's poem *A Late Lark* by Delius, the orchestration and the phrasing raised the poem to brilliance.

Elgar has always been my favourite, having done quite a few pieces in the Choral Society and my fondness for Victoriana, my only regret is never having sung in *The Music Makers*. It has gorgeous choral work, and a wonderful Mezzo part. When travelling on my long car journeys sorting out the radars of the Scottish airports, I always travelled with a good collection of tapes: All the Brandenburg concertos, a good selection of Vivaldi, no, not the poor old *Seasons* but his recorder and mandolin concertos and that lively trumpet duo. A *Te Deum* and *Benedictus* by Elgar that we had performed was always with me, and being on my own it could be belted out with impunity.

Well now, the question; which piece has most affected me? Strangely it isn't a classical piece at all, although a classic of its kind from *My Fair Lady*, an illustration of the immutable physical law of opposite poles' remorseless attraction, which, in the human context may coalesce into that formidable synergy of a happy marriage. It's a song half sung by an indifferent voice, and half spoken by a superb speaking voice at the end of the story, when Henry Higgins suddenly realises, wonderingly, that by bread alone man cannot live: *I've grown accustomed to her face*. And Suzy's lovely face is smiling at me; wife and companion of forty odd years, the final link in the velvet-soft steel chain that binds me to life.

Diamond Avenue

Ruth Sear

The night sky filled with countless coloured stars. Cries of admiration came from the small crowd of people gathered below.

‘Wow, look at that! Ooh, look at those colours! Aren’t they lovely!’

The stars cascaded, and quickly disappeared. Then a startlingly loud explosion from above reverberated through the streets. Everyone jumped. A brilliant flash of light followed, and for a moment night turned into day. Seconds later there was a siren-like wail from a rocket speeding skyward. It was accompanied by yet another dazzling display of lights, bursting through the inky blackness into a myriad of gorgeous colours.

As you might guess, it was 5th November. As child I lived in Diamond Avenue in a colliery village in Nottinghamshire, in the years following the Second World War. The surrounding countryside – hills, streams, woodland and farmland – was a haven in contrast to the ugly, dark, smoky village nestling in the shadow of pit heaps where I lived. In later years, through the pen of D H Lawrence and the brush of Lowry, I came to understand and appreciate the industrial landscape in which I had been nurtured.

As more fireworks whooshed into the sky there were gasps of excitement. Someone exclaimed, ‘Look! What a beauty! Oh, there’s another! Cor! Here come some more rockets!’

Bang! Fizz! Crash! The fireworks were deafening, vibrant, and exciting, if a little alarming at times. What a spectacular display! The pungent smell of the acrid contents of a bonfire hovered hazily over the scene. The windows of the terraced houses on Diamond Avenue reflected the lights from the fireworks and the flames of the bonfire.

In the back yard was a small group of cheerful chattering people. Children, shrieking with excitement, were running about waving sparklers. Some youngsters were standing and staring at the fireworks; others were mesmerised by the billowing flames of the bonfire; a few were playing ‘tag’, darting in and out of the crowd.

My friend Mary Johnson had suffered a painful encounter with a firework an hour ago. Her nose was sore because she’d stuck her face

next to the Roman candle. She'd been curious to know why it had been slow to ignite!

Nobody ever saw Mary's dad. 'My husband's working abroad, helping rebuild Europe,' was her mother's explanation for his absence. People only saw Mrs Johnson, Mary, and the three younger Johnson children around the house. It was not uncommon to see male visitors arriving in the evenings, and not depart until the next morning.

'They're my uncles,' Mary once explained to me. 'We've got a big family.'

Suddenly a voice said 'Hello!' and I jumped. It was Mrs Johnson. She appeared, wiping her hands on a damp tea towel. A cigarette hung from her mouth. She turned to Mary, from whom an occasional sob broke, due to her recent fright.

'Time you stopped blubbing and enjoyed the show. Push off.' She looked around her as if she was hoping someone would take the weeping Mary. She wasted little sympathy or affection on her children. 'She'll soon shut up,' she said. 'She'll not do that again, I'll warrant. Off you go Mary and watch them fireworks. Look at that one! Oh look at them sparks! They look like diamonds!'

She pushed her daughter away, with instructions to 'Get lost.' Mary drifted away like her mum's cigarette smoke.

I said, 'Diamonds, Mrs Johnson? And we live on Diamond Avenue.'

'Do you know why it was called Diamond Avenue, youngster?'

'No'

'Um.' Mrs Johnson smiled as she exhaled smoke from her mouth and nostrils, like the steam trains at the local station. She thrust her face close to my right ear.

'Because there's diamonds buried near here. Buried treasure.'

I felt my heart pounding.

'Buried treasure?' I gasped.

'Shh! Don't talk so loud. Someone might hear.'

'Where is it? Who buried it?'

'I'll tell you if you promise not to blab.'

'I promise,' I replied, wondering who I could pass the gossip to.

‘Well, years ago, before the town was developed, before the mines opened, all this were farmland.’ Mrs Johnson threw out her arms in an expansive gesture. ‘There were a big house nearby where some rich folks lived. This was ever such a long time ago, I dunno when, Roman or Victorian. Well anyway, one of the sons was an explorer in Africa, or somewhere hot and foreign. One day he came home. They said he looked awful, all yellow, and all skin and bone. He brought lots of them animal heads they hang on walls; you know, lions, tigers, elephants, polar bears, seals, and such like.’ (It seemed her knowledge of geography was akin to her knowledge of history.) ‘This bloke also brought home diamonds, rubies, silver, gold and opals.’ She paused for breath.

I thought, don’t opals come from Australia? Never mind, the story held my interest and sounded convincing! She continued, ‘So he sold all the jewels and gold he brought home, on wicked living. Except the diamonds.’

‘Why didn’t he sell the diamonds?’

‘I dunno. He just didn’t, that’s all. P’raps there were a wench at the bottom of it all who fancied keeping ‘em. Anyhow, he – the Africcy explorer – buried the diamonds, somewhere. Near where they built this street. No one ever knew exactly where. So that’s why it’s called Diamond Avenue,’ she finished triumphantly.

I gasped. ‘But is the story true?’

‘So they say.’

‘Why should we keep quiet about it?’

Mrs Johnson jerked her thumb in the direction of the moon. ‘Because when *he* comes home *he* wants to find the diamonds for himself!’ By *he* she meant her absent husband.

At that moment Mary ran to her, and pulled at her skirt, claiming attention.

‘I want a drink,’ she said plaintively.

‘I’ll get one for you, just wait here. All kids do is want, want, want,’ sighed the mother.

When she came back she gave a glass of water to Mary, who frowned; I think she’d expected lemonade, so she emptied the water on the ground and wandered away.

I tried to get Mrs Johnson's attention. 'Ahem! He looks for them?'

She stared at me in a puzzled way as if she'd forgotten what she'd been talking about. She said, 'Who looks for what?'

'Your husband. The diamonds. You were telling me he wants to find them. So why should we keep quiet about it?'

But Mrs Martin came to join us and the subject of treasure was dropped. The two women chattered for a few minutes, and then went their separate ways.

Mrs Johnson turned to me. 'I'm off inside now.' She returned to her kitchen I heard her mutter, 'Silly bitch, she'll believe anything'.

As I watched her retreating form I muttered, 'Silly bitch? She thinks I'll believe anything.'

Soon the bonfire celebrations subsided, the last firework fizzled out, the bonfire feebly flickered before it became ashes, and people began to make their way home. I slept badly that night. I kept imagining poor Mr Johnson, weary from work and travelling abroad, digging in the nearby recreation ground or any piece of land that wasn't covered by concrete ... searching for diamonds ...

Several months later I saw Mrs Johnson scrubbing her front doorstep. I said, 'Mrs Johnson, when your husband came home, did he ever find the diamonds?'

Glad of an excuse to stop she stood up and foraged in her pocket. She lit a cigarette. 'My husband? What do you ... oh, you mean it's about that yarn I told you last bonfire night. No. They never existed, it were simply a myth.

'So why did he spend time searching?'

'I encouraged the idea to keep him out of my way. Told him it were good exercise, all that digging.' She inhaled deeply and grinned.

Through the open doorway I glimpsed at a man I'd never seen before. It certainly wasn't Mr Johnson.

Mrs Johnson smiled at me and winked. She tapped the ash from her cigarette into the gutter, where the water from a recent shower of rain sparkled like diamonds as it reflected the sun. I thought about poor Mr Johnson, beavering away in the hope he would obtain treasure – and improve his health.

The Lonely Coconut

Alan Jones

(This story, for children of 5-8 years, came 2nd in the Children's Short Story Competition 2012)

High in a palm tree, far away on a tropical island, grew a coconut.

The coconut grew inside a large husk, rather like a giant conker. It was very dark inside the husk and the coconut could see nothing at all. He was only aware of the outside sounds - the screams of the passing seabirds, the gentle lap-lapping of the ocean, the occasional chirruping of the tiny birds that played in the tree and, of course, the gentle swaying motion of the tree itself as it moved to and fro in the tropical breezes. Life had been very easy for the coconut so far and he couldn't wait to grow up. The tree had spoken to him of travel and exciting adventures, but for the moment he was stuck there in the darkness of his husk, not knowing what was going on in the outside world.

There he remained for what seemed a very long time until suddenly, one night when it was very windy, he heard a loud snapping noise and then he felt himself falling, terrifyingly quickly, down and down until finally he landed with a thud into the tropical sand. He wasn't hurt, although his milk was shaken up badly and he lay there in the sand wondering what would happen to him next. The large husk that he was inside still hadn't broken, so he still couldn't see anything, but because he was no longer hanging in the tree everything was very, very still and he could hear the waves, much louder now. Suddenly, without warning, a large wave threw itself up the beach. The coconut felt itself being lifted and then drawn along as the wave took him out to sea. His long-awaited adventure had finally begun! The motion was a little like being back on the tree, but the waves were bumpier and he was thrown first one way and then the other. He began to feel rather frightened and wondered what might become of him.

When he was smaller, the tree had told him tales of what had happened to other coconuts long ago. An ancestor of his had travelled halfway around the world, only to end up on a coconut shy

at a fairground. There he was placed in front of a lot of people and a boy threw hard things at him until he was hit on the head and knocked to the ground. Everybody had cheered and laughed and the coconut shuddered at the thought of how awful and humiliating that would have been.

Fairgrounds - Yuk!!!

Another relative had ended up as a bird feeder. Holes had been drilled into his shell and he had been hung up outside a windowsill, where Blue Tits and Finches visited to feed. Worst of all, some of the birds had pecked at the fibres on top of his head and stolen it to make a nest, so by the end of the week he was completely bald!

As he drifted on, the lonely coconut thought about what might happen to him. He didn't mind being eaten - oh no, that's what coconuts were for - but he hoped that when it happened it would at least happen with some dignity.

On and on the coconut floated, until at last, rocked by the motion of sea, he fell fast asleep.

Suddenly, there was a grating sound, a loud crash, and a bright, bright light was shining all around him. The husk he was inside had been washed ashore and had split open. He could see!!! The sunshine was unbelievably bright as it was reflected off the white sand. He could see the tropical blue sky above and even the sea birds. He could never have dreamed just how beautiful everything was.

This was sensational! He lay there for a while, marvelling at everything around him. The wave had carried him high up the beach and, as the tide had now turned and was going out again, he lay there happily washed ashore on the warm sand.

Just how long the coconut lay there for was difficult to say, but suddenly he was aware of a man running along the beach towards him. The native stopped when he reached the coconut and picked him up. He shook him rather hard and roughly handled him, banging him against the top of his leg and biting with his teeth in an attempt to get him open. This of course, failed hopelessly. The coconut was much tougher than that! After a while, the native carried him to the

far end of the beach where some rocks stretched right down into the sea. The man walked almost into the sea before lifting the coconut high above his head and throwing him down onto the rock.

‘Ouch! That was sharp!’ thought the coconut, but his shell didn’t break. Instead, he rolled backed down the other side of the rock and into the sea again. He felt the tide pulling him out away from the shore. The man could only stand there watching him drift away, angrily shouting for the coconut to come back.

The coconut was well and truly back at sea again, only this time without the husk. He could see everything around him. He saw the sun drifting across the sky, the beautiful tropical sunset, the stars shining like jewels against the velvet-black darkness at night. The next day he saw shoals of fishes beneath him in the water and sea birds skimming the waves. On and on he floated. The hours turned to days. The days turned into weeks. He saw many more fishes and on one occasion, the white sails of a sailing boat. Two men from the boat had spotted him bobbing up and down in the water but had mistaken him for a turtle’s head and so didn’t bother to rescue him. Then there was the time he had looked down and seen a shark. The shark had swum towards him, looking at him menacingly, and baring his sharp teeth. Although frightened, he needn’t have worried, because everybody knows that sharks don’t like coconut, so really he was perfectly safe.

Gradually, the coconut became very tired of his adventures. He was getting fed up with floating aimlessly in the ocean. He was very hot every day and cold at night and wished for all the world that he was hanging safely from the old tree where he had grown up. His coat was now becoming matted with salt and he felt very bedraggled and scruffy. He didn’t care what happened to him anymore.

Now whenever you get really tired with things and you are about to give up, sometimes something wonderful happens quite unexpectedly. In this case the coconut spotted land far off on the horizon, and as he floated it came slowly but surely nearer and nearer. He gradually inched towards the shore. He could see the trees on the land and even some people on the beach. He hoped he would get ashore before anything else happened.

Then one last big wave and yes!!! He was back on dry land again.

Two men ran up and picked him up. After looking at his soggy shell, covered in sea salt, one man said ‘Naaar, ‘im no good to eat. He gone rotten! Might as well chuck ‘im back in water!’

‘Wait,’ said the other man, ‘me keep ‘im for carnival.’

The coconut had no idea what the men were talking about and didn’t know what would happen to him next, but at least he was out of that sea at last.

The men took him home to a big white-painted house. There, they cleaned the coconut up, painted two eyes on his shell and a great big smiley mouth. They combed his hair and on top of his head put an old straw hat. Then they tied a red and white scarf under his chin, stuck him on top of the body of an old scarecrow that had been out in the fields and finally laid him down gently in a blue and white striped deck-chair.

The next morning, they carried him out in the deck-chair to the back of an open-topped lorry.

The lorry drove away in a cloud of smoke. The coconut could hear the men inside the cab of the lorry, laughing and singing and sounding very happy indeed. After a while, they came a town and there were lots and lots of people in the streets, music playing and flags waving from the windows of buildings. Then other lorries joined the parade of people in the street.

He was in the carnival and more importantly it seemed, at least to him, that he was the main attraction! Everyone waved and cheered and pointed at him as he went past. The people laughed and danced and threw coins onto the back of the lorry.

He doubted whether any coconut had ever had a happier life and almost split his shell with excitement. The lonely coconut was perhaps now the most famous ever and for that he would never, ever complain again.

He was truly the coconut king!

Little Crystal Balls

Martin Jones

He shrugged himself deeper into his overcoat and stamped his feet. The drizzle was getting heavier. God, this was a forlorn spot. The train halt was, apart from him, empty of life. There was no shelter, just an ancient wooden bench and bedraggled weeds sprouting between the paving stones. There were two cast iron lamp-posts, one on either side of the platform, bearing placards giving the name of the village the halt served. The words were barely discernible under flowers of rust.

On the far side of the track was a steep bank, perhaps 30 feet high, thick with dark conifers and underbrush. On the side nearest to him were more trees, shedding their leaves. They lay as a thick carpet around the rain darkened trunks. Through the trees in a shallow valley could be seen the village. Well, hardly a village. A few cottages, shuttered up against the coming night, skeins of smoke leaking from their chimneys. In the gloom he could just make out some despondent chickens pecking at the mud around the houses.

‘This’ll teach me to stick my nose in other people’s business,’ he said to himself.

He looked up at the sombre sky. It was getting late. He felt a twinge of alarm. What if no train shows up? Where could he go? Not back to the village, that was for sure.

Gazing along the tracks he could see something moving in the murk. At first it was indistinct but then he realised it was a person moving with deliberate slowness as if looking for something. He shielded his eyes with his hands to keep out the rain, which was getting steadily heavier. Whoever it was, they were standing on the track.

He called out. ‘Hey, be careful. A train might come.’

The figure made no indication of hearing him. As it came closer he could make out the shape of a woman. She was wearing a long black overcoat and high boots. Even to his unpractised eye he could tell they were of the finest quality. Her hair was thick and dark but

her head was bowed and he couldn't make out her features. As she drew closer she glanced up. Slavic looking with high cheekbones, dark eyes ringed with fatigue. She showed no surprise at seeing him there.

'Have you seen a boy?' She had a strong accent, Eastern European. 'About seven years old. My son. I was to meet him here.'

'No, I haven't seen anyone.'

She gave a great sigh, a sigh of utter desolation. Her shoulders slumped forward and she buried her chin on her chest. She started to sob, quietly. Standing there in the dark and the rain she seemed to him the epitome of grief. He moved forward, instinctively in a clumsy attempt to comfort her. Yet something stopped him. There was something about this woman he couldn't place. Something strange he couldn't put his finger on.

Just then he noticed a light speeding down the track towards them. The train. Thank God for that.

The train juddered to a halt. He jerked open the carriage door and turned towards the women. There was no sign of her. He peered into the gloom.

'Hallo,' he called out, but there was no reply. He pulled himself aboard and once more looked for the woman. The platform was deserted. He scrambled into a seat and tugged the door shut. The window was clouded with condensation and he cleared it off with his hand. As he did so, he noticed the sleeve of his coat. It was beaded with little crystal balls of rain.

That was it. That was what was wrong. He felt a cold chill run down his back.

The Man

Steve Cross

Lord, he was tired. He had been driving for hours and he was getting low on gas. Flashing images of the day passed through his mind, why did that idiot security guard have to pull his gun? Everything would have been much simpler and nobody need have died. It wasn't even as if it was their own money they were defending.

He never knew there were so many trees he had seen nothing but trees for the last 200 miles. He decided to pull the car over to the side of the highway, he needed to relieve himself. He got out of the car leaving the engine running and the lights on. He looked around. There was a full moon and there were no clouds in the sky. He could see clearly. The highway was deserted and there were trees all around. He walked quickly across the road and passed through the first trees, there was a slight rise. He didn't want to go too far as he had heard people getting lost in these woods just a few yards from the road. He looked around and saw the headlights of the car behind him.

This will do, and finishing he looked up involuntary to the sky. It was easy to see the stars but that wasn't what caught his attention. A bright orb of gleaming light was streaking down across the hills in the distance lighting them up as it went. The orb was heading in his direction. He stood transfixed as it approached and then instinctively threw himself to the ground. He waited, not sure for what, for it to hit the ground perhaps. It was light all around him now. Streaks of pure white light were streaking down between the trees. He waited for what seemed a long time but was probably just a few minutes.

As he lay there he cursed himself for taking this particular highway. The light faded and it was dark again. Still he waited but there was nothing. He stood shakily to his feet and looked down into a valley that stretched away in front of him. He stood mouth open as a large red orb slowly settled to ground level a mile or so in front of him. Then a warm gust of air rustled through the trees and around and over him. He shivered despite its warmth. It was still and deathly quiet around him. What had happened to the sounds of the night creatures? It was as if the world was holding its breath.

He felt a fear sweep over him as he turned and stumbled towards the car. He found the highway, where was the car? It was over to his left. It was in darkness, the headlights had gone out and the engine had died. That was strange. He pressed the ignition button, nothing. He looked back to where he had just come from with trepidation and an inner voice telling him he shouldn't be here. He tried the ignition again and car came to life. The lights came on. He felt relieved. He put the car into drive and drove off but he was going too quickly, swerving across the road he nearly hit a tree on the other side.

Damn, I need to calm down he thought. Righting the car he slowed down. Five minutes later he was cruising down the highway and had already put a couple of miles between him and the orb. He didn't know what the object was, he simply thought of it as an orb. What he did know was that he didn't want to be anywhere near where it had landed. Landed!! That conjured up strange images in his mind that reminded him of the comic books he had read as a child, of bug-eyed monsters from outer space trying to take over the world.

Suddenly he was shaken out of his thoughts by the flashing lights of a cop car in the distance coming towards him at speed. He felt a momentary panic as he remembered what was in the trunk of the car. The cop car sped past him going in the opposite direction and was soon lost in his rear view mirror. Was it something to do with the orb? What else was out here, he hadn't passed through a town for over an hour.

He continued to drive he must have covered 30 miles or more passing the silent trees on either side. He saw lights up ahead and came across a motel. He decided on a whim to turn into it, he needed to sleep. It was one of those cheap places where only truckers stop. Sure enough there was a large rig parked out front.

He parked in a darkened corner of the car park. He turned off the engine and got out of the car. It was deathly quiet with just a slight breeze. The forest came up to the edge of the car park. Damn trees gave him the creeps. He looked at the trunk, was that a bloodstain on the fender? It was too dark to see properly. He opened the trunk and took out the bag. A dollar bill floated down from it, he stooped down

to pick it up, a \$100 bill. Don't want to lose these he thought and quickly stuffed it into the bag.

It was a cheap looking reception area. He had to ring the bell a few times before a scruffy-looking guy in vest and jeans appeared. He didn't seem to think it was unusual to have a potential guest turn up after midnight. The cost was 35 bucks but he didn't care, he was so tired, he would have paid any price.

There was a TV in the corner with 'snow' on the screen. 'What's wrong with the TV?' he asked.

'We had a blackout about an hour ago,' replied the proprietor, 'everything went off for a few minutes'.

The room was as shabby as he had expected. He threw his bag on the ground and fell on the bed. It was soft and creaky, cheap mattress he thought.

The TV was buzzing in the corner just like the one in reception. It then occurred to him what the guy at reception said, a blackout about an hour ago. Wasn't that the time that he saw the bright light and then the red orb? Was it connected?

He must have fallen asleep because the next thing he knew was when he awoke with a start. He could hear noises, lights, flashing lights. He looked at his watch. Just after 2am. He had been asleep for a couple of hours. He got off the bed quickly and moved to the window. The car park was filled with cars and trucks, police, state police and National Guard. There were a lot of guys standing around talking and conferring. Had they come for him? If they looked in the trunk of his car...!!! No, they would have come crashing through the door. He knew that from past experience.

One of the cops, almost a cliché for the big fat sheriff with a large gut wearing a cowboy hat, was talking more loudly than the rest. He was standing just a few feet from the door and seemed like the guy in charge. The man overheard him say, 'Jessie went missing about three hours ago after we got reports about that light. He went to investigate'.

I wonder if that was the cop car he had seen racing past him. He looked up and saw a large guy hanging over the balcony of one of

the first floor rooms of the motel opposite. He was smoking a cigarette and taking a keen interest in the proceedings. The man thought instinctively 'He's the trucker'.

Suddenly there was movement, a lot of movement with cops jumping in their cars, reversing and racing out of the courtyard sirens going, trucks revving up and taking off. It was a cacophony of noise. But in fifteen minutes it was quiet again. He went outside onto the veranda. He could hear the distant sound of vehicles and sirens racing away into the distance. Then the deadly stillness settled again. He looked across at the rooms opposite but the trucker had gone. He went back into the room. Time to go, he thought.

He quickly packed his stuff and headed out to the car. It was still after the recent hectic activity. Turning onto the road he headed north again. He felt better to be travelling again. He no longer felt tired although he had only slept for a couple of hours. He had only gone about ten minutes when he was startled by the roar of helicopters overhead. He looked up through the windscreen, there must have been about ten or more of them roaring low overhead. Then he saw lights and the rumble of trucks ahead. More National Guard, truck loads, armoured personnel carriers and mobile guns, and loads of cops went whizzing by him at speed in the opposite direction. As he watched all this exercise of authority the thoughts of what was in his trunk receded. All he could think of was the light and the orb he had seen.

After a while the highway was quiet again and he was alone, his headlights picking out the endless trees by the side of the road. He pulled over he needed to relieve himself again. The road had climbed and he was standing on a slight incline.

It was starting to get light. That was funny he thought, he looked at his watch, it was only 3am and the light was coming from the south not the east. He felt a gust of warm air, then another and another. The air was hot, suffocating now. Then he saw, a wall of flame as far as the eye could see racing towards him. 'What the.....'

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