

BEST LAID PLANS
& OTHER SHORT STORIES



Wendy Webb

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Wendy Webb

This collection is dedicated to Norfolk Poets & Writers

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ALIEN LANDING

Her arm felt like it was exploding. She couldn't bear it any longer. If only she could... but there was more to come. She was deep-breathing now. Her heart was thumping in her chest. She could not take much more of this. There were footsteps, a board creaked. Her right side was cold, exposed. She knew she had to wake up, roll over, before it was too late. She could feel a tightening band around her head. Then her hand twitched.

Every digit stretched before her, bending, bending, round and round and... breaking into glass shards around her. They had come to get her, in their operating theatre. She couldn't breathe; she couldn't escape.

'I want to go HOME.'

A rush, a hissing in her ears, a throbbing in her eyeballs. Sweat chilled her breasts; her thighs. She was shivering, as Fred switched on the main light. Why did he always wake her up suddenly? It wasn't fair. She could have enjoyed another 30 minutes lie-in. Enjoyed. She shivered and rolled herself out of bed. Her head thumped, a Christmas walnut cracking.

'You daft aypeth, what you getting up at this time? I was about to make you a nice cuppa tea.'

‘My eyes feel like they’re bursting. I need my headache pills. Now.’

‘Just a mo, love. You just slow down, there. You do look a bit peaky.’

‘Peaky. Ow. Mustn’t talk.’

It always happened now, her LITTLE trouble. Fred was expecting her to sail through, like she always did. This was different. Fancy dreaming about aliens; they weren’t real; they couldn’t get her – could they? She wasn’t sure about anything anymore. Well, she was determined to enjoy herself first, and then, well, she would face the rest later.

‘Hi, Mum, it’s only me. You look nice.’

‘Yes, well, got to make an effort. Murderous headache, earlier.’

‘Oh, poor you. You do look a bit flushed, now you mention it. You haven’t been having that bad dream again, have you? You really do worry too much.’

‘Susan, you weren’t there the last time. It really is too much. I’m dreaming about aliens. It’s horrible.’

‘Oo-er, you and your aliens. You should have a good laugh about them, Mum. Aliens are hardly going to abduct you, with their long green fingers and surgical masks.’

‘You don’t understand. You’re just like your Dad.’

‘Now come along, Mother, you mustn’t be late.’

Brenda was bored. That Mrs Parsons had barely listened to her woes. Too self-absorbed, that woman. She had jumped every time someone brushed past

her. This was slow torture. Well, she didn't care what they thought of her. This time was different; she was at their mercy. Those horrible dreamy green hands; like skeletons stretching out in front of her. Every bone, clear as an X-Ray. Then there were the unmentionables those shapes were doing to her. Every night for the past week. She hated waking up in a cold sweat. Ageing was no fun, that's for sure. It was all very well, Susan planning a nice meal out for Mother's Day. But how was she supposed to relax for that. Dress up? Shop? She shivered. 'Brenda Mitchell. Mrs Brenda Mitchell? This way, please.'

She woke up – if last night could be called 'sleeping' – with a dull acceptance. She was too worn out to be scared now. All night she had drifted in and out of spaceships, bright lights, and green hands winding round and round and stretching, stretching, until they shattered into glass pieces. Her bones were glass, and every nerve and tendon was taut as playground elastic, the moment before the conker pinged. She hated the bright light; the early morning tea trolley; the whirl of fans.

Today her spaceship had landed. She felt woozy as she floated around long corridors. She didn't care any longer. They could do what they liked to her. She had faced every inconvenience. It would be wonderful to go home. To leave all this behind. Let Fred wait on her a little. How could she teach him to only switch on the bedside light? It could not be

beyond the bounds of human intelligence, to change his routine just a little. Men!

She was fed-up of being pushed and prodded around. She wanted it to be all over. The room between the worlds, beyond the wardrobe door, had given way to an alien theatre. She was mummified in green swathes, none protecting entry points. There was a bright light above her; it looked like a spaceship. Lots of noise, instructions, surgical implements. She wouldn't look. It was too scary. She stared at the ceiling. Fred had a list, as long as her arm, of all the 'extras' he would be doing from now on. Susan would keep an eye on him; she knew just how she liked everything.

That woman was really annoying. She just kept on talking; just when she needed time to think. She wished they would hurry up. Prodding and poking her around. So what if she couldn't feel it, but it didn't feel like her own body any longer.

'Want a look? We're just finishing off, Mrs Mitchell. Forty-five minutes; much faster with a regional.'

'Fast? I thought it was going on for ever, like my dream.'

'Bad dream? You were conscious throughout, Mrs Mitchell. We always look like this.'

'Better behind their masks, you know.' The chatty nurse had barely paused.

'Are you sure they're OK? Stitching, I mean. It's just, well, men...'

'Mr Harman is a sailor in his spare time. He's used to mending sails. Best stitcher in the department.'

‘Well, Fred would never... Sailing, hey?’

‘Ooh, Mum, you look like a true Lollipop Lady now. Look at the size of that plaster.’

‘And you can’t write on it, neither. Writing? I wouldn’t dream of touching it. Looks sore.’

‘Oh, it’s just heavy, that’s all. At least the feeling’s coming back. And, you know those bad dreams I’ve been having?’

‘Don’t tell me. Mum, you met the aliens with long green hands, and...’

‘Listen! That was my X-Ray. I saw every bone in my hand and, well, the surgeons did have green gowns and masks, but... some of them really looked like aliens, behind that bright light inside the operating theatre.’

‘So, no more bad dreams, Mum?’

‘I haven’t got time to dream, Fred needs to go shopping for me.’

‘Shopping? I’ve just been shopping. And here’s some grapes; seedless, just as you like them.’

‘Hello, dear. No, this is alien shopping. I will need some loose tops and front-loading bras. Just look at the size of this plaster. Nothing will fit over that.’

‘But, Brenda, you have some nice clothes for Mother’s Day.’

‘Don’t worry about it, Dad. I will get the necessary. But I do have a little job for you; something about spaceship lights.’

‘Spaceship? Not more nightmares?’

Brenda was spaced out this morning. She couldn't work out where she was. She had just enjoyed a very nice dream about the doctor with the nice eyes. Although the nurse had teased about 'aliens behind their masks', she could recognise a dishy doctor when she saw one. The one who was so good at sewing. Not like Fred.

It had begun like her earlier dreams. The green hands stretching and winding round and round corridors and into the bright light of a spaceship. She was about to be abducted, subjected to all sorts of pushing and prodding of delicate bits – like hands. And then she remembered the X-Ray. Somewhere, as she looked up from the bright plates of her digits, in their full skeletal glory, there he was. The doctor with the nice eyes. She would never dream about aliens behind surgical masks again. She would have quite liked to see the rest of his face; the face of the sailor with those dark eyes.

'Cuppa tea, love? How are you feeling today; do you need those headache pills again?'

'Pills? What do I need with pills? Ooh, this cuppa's lovely, dear. Now, what time must we be out?'

'Plenty of time, love, it's only 8.30am. You can have a nice soak in the bath, if you like. Susan got your purchases for you.'

'Purchases? Ah, yes, well I can see that you've been busy too.'

'Nice dimmer switch for the invalid. Well, I am a qualified electrician. Easier than searching around lingerie departments.'

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‘It was very thoughtful of you, Fred; I had a lovely dream this morning.’

‘No more aliens staring at you through surgical masks, then?’

‘Well, not exactly. Now come and help me dress, Fred. This arm in plaster is a nightmare.’

‘Nightmare? You don’t want me to have to fasten a bra, surely? It’s alien, I tell you.’

‘Alien. I’ll give you alien, if I’m not dressed and ready when Susan arrives to take us out for lunch. I think I fancy Italian. Italian must be easy with one hand.’

‘Not a traditional roast, then?’

‘Roast? With my arm in plaster. Ooh, I think Italian. Lovely dark eyes...’

THE END

SATURDAY NIGHT, SUNDAY MORNING

Pips was annoyed. It was about time Stella showed some responsibility.

What a waste of money. Missing the train. And you can't cancel nowadays. She promised there would be no problems with advance tickets.

She stared angrily through the window.

Talk of an Indian Summer. That was yesterday, today it looks like November.

She hated the annoying ghosting of her face in the glass. It was hardly worth smiling nowadays.

Nothing worth looking at. Why do grey hairs always look worse when I travel?

The ring tone from the seat in front made her stare; just for a moment.

Well, at least SHE'S made her connection.

Pips was hopeless at judging ages nowadays, but the attractive young girl on the seat in front of her certainly didn't look much older than her own daughter.

'It was awful. He's been ARRESTED.'

Pips could not help but stare at the back of her head. The girl with a neat bob, smart clothing and – until that moment – with none of the loud and annoying tendencies of the young, was obviously describing her late night experiences.

‘No, I’ve no idea. The police took him. I don’t know when he’ll be out.’

Pips flicked through her magazine too quickly. It would be a long call.

‘My ribs hurt, I don’t know how it happened.’

Pips could barely think about Stella now.

I hope she phones the minute she’s on a train. If that young lady can manage it, my daughter can.

‘Well, I was on the floor, and I didn’t notice then, but when I got up this morning, they... I couldn’t lift my arm.’

Well, really, her mother should keep a closer watch, I expect she’s...

‘I must have been really stoned out of my brain. No, I’ve no idea...’

Pips shuffled in her seat. It was uncomfortable travelling nowadays, and there was no trolley. She could have murdered a hot coffee.

‘I’ve no idea how I ended up there. No. I expect they will charge him and release him soon. Poor Sammie, he will have a criminal record.’

Thank goodness for that. I thought she would never stop. Rib ache? Jaw ache, more like.

Pips was back home, feet aching in comfy slippers, when the phone rang. It was Stella.

‘Hi Mum. Now you haven’t been worrying again, have you? Course I’m fine. I just didn’t have enough for another train ticket. No, I caught the bus. It’s fine. Yes, I’ll be home... no, it’s OK, everyone’s got a mobile nowadays, anyway.’

Everybody, indeed. I expect that means I’m nobody. Why do we have a mirror in the hallway, I’ve never seen that hair before.

‘Ow!’

‘OK Mum? Honest, I won’t be late. Got to go, service stop.’

By the time the doorbell rang, Pips was feeling much happier. A long soak in the bath, lotions and potions, and that all-important lather and rinse. Now that had put the colour back into her travel-weary face.

‘Come in, come in. Help yourself to something from the fridge. I really haven’t had time to think. I thought you would have spent more time, no, I know you’ve got friends to see, but, really...’

‘Pour me a glass, Mum, don’t be tight. I’ve had a helluva night. But, I won’t be seeing Sam anymore.’

‘Sam? You were seeing Sam, but, I thought you were having an evening out with your girlfriends?’

‘Er, well, actually I was out clubbing with Sam – you know, Samantha – but her brother Sammie was there, and, well, he spoiled things.’

Sammie? Does she mean Samuel?

‘You haven’t met them, Mum. But Sam’s not cool. She must have a terrible hangover today. She was rolling around on the pavement, stoned out of her brains.

This was her daughter’s evening out?

‘The police were called. That nerd of a brother tried to thump a police officer, got himself arrested. That’s why I missed the train – I was his one telephone call – I had to phone his mum, tell her he was *detained*. He had got my mobile number off Sam last week. As if I would ever have gone out with him.’

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‘You mean, you weren’t there? I mean, you didn’t go out with Samantha, I mean, Sam?’

‘Mother! You don’t know what they’re like. I got out of there EARLY. Went to a movie. Then I picked up Sammie’s message on my mobile.

He’s going to be charged: drunken disorder, assaulting a police officer. They’re history.

By the way, nice hair colour, Mum.’

THE END

REMEMBRANCE

Margaret would not be going for her next hospital appointment. And now there was so much to plan and so little time.

Remember, Remember, this was her eleventh hour. She couldn't move around like she used to, but never mind. Brenda said she had a new lease of life and must look forward to her birthday party. Brenda knew nothing. Asked if she was named after Princess Margaret; Brenda failed at History. Margaret's first child was born during the last war and she was a baby of the Great War. None of that mattered now.

She had lived too long. The doctors knew nothing; they always sent her away with more pills. No idea what they were for. That Brenda bullied her all the time; tricked her into taking more, when she could barely eat.

She would show Brenda. She'd lived through two wars and was not waiting around until the next. Jack would understand. Jack would never have wanted her to wait this long. To celebrate her 90th birthday. What was there to celebrate, she wanted to know.

Daytime television, she couldn't be bothered with it. They mumbled, these days. But that thing in her ear; Brenda always bullied her into wearing it. Said she could listen to her visitors. What visitors. There wasn't anyone left to visit

her now. Except Geoffrey. Geoffrey never visited; not since that new wife of his.

On the eleventh day, she always remembered Jack then, anyway. Jack was lovely. She met him at a dance. She shouldn't have gone really. Tom told her not to go. Tom was her fiancé; he begged her not to go to the dance. Tom with two left feet. There were years enough for milking cows and collecting eggs. Margaret loved to dance; she couldn't smell the farm when she was in her best frock. She floated away, away from the smell of pigs.

Who's that? Brenda...?

Hello, Mum, it's only me.

Geoffrey? But you moved up north... has she kicked you out then?

Mother. That was twenty years ago. Me and Susan are very happy. Brenda's given you your pills, hasn't she?

Bloody pills. It took less pills to knock out the bull. Susan, who's Susan?

We're married, Mum. You came to the wedding, years ago.

I'm not losing my marbles, you know. Just because I cannot get about so fast. I bought the milk.

You shouldn't go out after dark, Mum. It's not safe.

Stop treating me like an invalid. Why can't I go to the local shop. I can manage.

Mum. People are looking out for you. You must stay indoors when it gets dark. Remember that fall you had. You were in hospital for weeks.

And I don't need that bloody wheelchair. Who will push it, anyway?

I do my best, Mum. Now, a nice cup of tea?
I'll make it. Don't fuss over me. Jack wouldn't have let me sit around like an invalid.

There was so little time. But she would manage. She had to. Jack would understand if she wasn't around for their Anniversary. Nothing but bloody hospital appointments. And that wedding she had to go to. Geoffrey's youngest. Well, it's a remarriage anyway. Still, there was something special about a December wedding.

Her and Jack were married in December. Well, it was wartime; they had to marry when they could. He'd been called up. There was so little time together. He was a lovely man. He swept her off her feet; on the dance floor. Well, she'd had to break her engagement with Tom. Tom had begged her not to go to the dance. Oh, she loved to dance. And she met Jack there; Jack with feet that flew across the dance floor. Well, Tom sulked for ages. Right up to the wedding. But she never wanted to be a farmer's wife. Headless chickens still running when you put down each carcass. Well, they fell down eventually. Obviously. But those pigs.

Hello, Mrs Browning. It's me again. BRENDA.

Here. Where's my handbag. I need my purse.

What do you need that for?

I need to pay you...

No, no, Geoffrey sorts that out. He leaves me the money in an envelope. Remember?

I'm not going in that wheelchair. What's it doing in the hallway, anyway. It takes up all the room.

You need it, Mrs Browning. You can't get about without it.

I can manage. And I can fetch my own milk, thank you. I'm not an invalid. If Jack were here now,...

It's nearly Remembrance Sunday, isn't it? Are you going to watch it on TV?

Can't be fussed with that. I always visit the memorial. When I can...

Oh, is your son taking you, then?

Where? I don't go out anywhere. I don't have any visitors.

Hasn't Geoffrey been over today? It's in the diary.

Diary? I never look at diaries. There's so much to do. Now, where's my purse?

I've been paid, Mrs Browning. Now, how about a nice cup of tea?

Margaret didn't bother with her hearing aid. It was all too loud anyway. It hurt her ears. No point getting up too early. Had she brushed her hair? Jack shouldn't see her like this. She was going out today. Brenda said she had to get ready. But the days were long enough. No point in getting up too early. Not like going to bed in the old days. Trying to miss the creak on the stairs, so the landlady wouldn't hear and come to gossip. Jack always went bright red after a half-pint. They liked a half, when they could afford it. Jack didn't like to see Mrs Fraser after a night out. No creaking floorboards nowadays. Her bed was downstairs. Her clothes were downstairs. Brenda told her to stay downstairs. Well, it was her house. She had papers to find. Before it was too late.

On the eleventh day at the eleventh hour...she could remember Jack's fine features. A lovely

man. No-one ever matched up to Jack. The telegram had been the worst day of her life. A wartime baby, a wartime bride, and now a wartime widow.

Come on, Mum. We're going out. Remember? Out? What are we going out for? Well, I'm not using that wheelchair. I can manage on my own. We'll take it just in case, Mum. Come on, we mustn't be late.

I haven't brushed my hair. Where's my brush? You look fine, Mum. Brenda's only just gone. You're all ready. Very smart. Now, I've got the wreath in the car.

I'm not dead yet. And I'm not going in that wheelchair.

Come and get in the car, Mum. You don't want to be late for Jack. We're laying a wreath this year.

Margaret never got out any more. And that Geoffrey was always busy. It's a shame Anne didn't come with him sometimes. She's such a nice girl. His wife. But she was probably busy. They all were, nowadays. But they really should match their colours for a wedding. After all, Anne was mother of the bride; and she was mother of the bride's mother.

On the eleventh day at the eleventh hour in the eleventh month. How many times had she heard that? Too many. Well, she wasn't going to be around for her next birthday. Fancy celebrating her 90th Birthday. She should have been shot years ago. Celebrating, indeed. What's to celebrate?

She hadn't sorted her papers. Well, too late now. But she was going to be with Jack. It was the right time. What better date could there be

than Remembrance Sunday? Of course, she would like to lay a wreath. It would be an honour. But Jack didn't need all that. She could float across the dance floor with him; giggle at what she was going to tell her fiancé. Poor Tom. Quite broke his heart. But he'd got over it by the next summer. Anyway, he was bloody lucky. Not like Jack. She had nothing left from those few years with Jack. Nothing. Except Geoffrey.

She knew a way. And she wouldn't wake up. On the eleventh day at the eleventh hour of the eleventh month she would be with Jack. Finally. But Geoffrey would manage; he wasn't the sentimental sort. And he had Anne. A nice girl, Anne.

Brenda, what are you rushing me for? I don't like to hurry. The days are too long. I like a lie-in.

You're going out, remember? I've got to get you dressed, Mrs Browning. Looking your best. No, I don't need paying today. Geoffrey sorts it all out. Remember?

It's not Remembrance Sunday already? It can't be, I've not had time. Jack's waiting for me.

That was last month, Mrs Browning. We've got to get ready, now. Your son will be here soon; with Susan. It's your granddaughter's wedding today. 12th December at 2 o'clock. Remember? Susan? Who's Susan? What's that pinned to my coat; that's not a poppy.

THE END

THE SUGAR BOWL

“I wish...” Cindy sighed. But it was useless, nothing ever changed, except for the worse. Her two sisters, ugly and demanding, but she needed this holiday. Cindy had precious little time to herself nowadays. Of course, she tried to treat them like real sisters.

“Since Dad remarried...” she grimaced. “But it was his choice.” Sheets of white spray rolled beneath her, foaming on the promenade at her feet, making Cindy shudder. “Time for a coffee. This wind is perishing.”

She sat uncomfortably in the corner of the bar, wishing she dared stoke up the burning cinders. She giggled at the little old lady bustling around her table – like a fairy godmother. Carefully, Cindy uncreased the corners of her mouth. Perhaps that fire was warmer than she thought.

“A little sweetness, dear. Go on, stir it up.” .

“Er, I’m meant to have given it up. But, why not.” Cindy stirred the sticky-sweet liquid, frowning as it splashed in the saucer. Why was she thinking of Priscilla and Miranda; it wasn’t as if they weren’t grown up. She was the youngest, but no-one paid her attention.

“Soon have this mess sorted out for you.” The old lady smiled like her earliest memories: her Grandmother.

“No, please, I’m fine.”

“Mmm, I thought you needed something sweet; take that bitter taste away.”

“Excuse me.”

Cindy frowned.

“Only there’s no sugar bowl on my table. If you don’t mind?”

She blushed, pushing the bowl towards him, looking into the greenest pair of eyes she had ever seen.

“Sorry. It’s foul holiday weather. Are you sheltering from the rain, too?” Cindy was puzzled. The woman had practically vanished before her eyes and now she was having to concentrate on small talk to the most charming stranger she had ever seen. Bewitching.

“Oh, I’m not on holiday. Just pausing, while visiting the relatives. Bit of a duty. May I...?”

Cindy frowned at the word ‘duty’ and inched forward on her seat. “So you live in these parts?”

“Well, not far; I’m a black sheep. My name’s Cal – Charles really, but...”

“Cindy,” she smiled, her hand brushing through her hair. “I know what you mean about families; I could only get away for a few days.”

“You live at home? I got itchy feet. My folks aren’t so bad, just not my style.”

Little by little Cindy relaxed in her seat, her shoes almost brushing his. The pub seemed much sweeter, somehow, her family simply an annoying fly in the corner. Her coffee was cold long before she finished it.

“I hope I’m not being too pushy, but perhaps I could show you round Corfe Castle this week? It’s not far.”

Cindy arrived promptly at Corfe Station. It was 2 O'clock on the Wednesday and she strolled happily down the platform, admiring the uniform green engine and smart carriages. The lovely old steam railway was exactly as Cal had described it. The driver climbed down from his cab, swinging his Billy can. Cindy emerged from the station, looking anxiously round for Cal. There was no sign of him. Cindy blamed herself for taking no contact number. She had no idea which firm Cal worked for. She paced along the pavement. What a fool. She wandered through the village, scuffing her shoes. Armed with a guide book she stared in disappointment at the Castle, certain that Cal's account would be far more graphic. Cal had informed her, almost shyly, about his genteel family connections on his mother's side. He had even visited the Kingston Lacy Estate as a small boy, a distant cousin thrice removed. Cindy smiled. Almost a prince - traces of royal blood from the distant past, an estate that now belonged to the National Trust, and a name like Charles. Cindy frowned, trying to imagine Cromwell's supporters massed against the castle, and the horrific destruction of the gateway. Not quite a charming fairy tale. A shrill whistle across the hillside jarred Cindy's nerves and she stumbled, retracing her steps.

She had made a decision. The village had lost its quaint attraction, since Cal was not there to share it with her. She rushed back to the station, to catch the next train to Swanage. What did she care, if Cal wanted to stand her up. She still had a huge shopping list of knick-knacks for her sisters. Her father had asked for

nothing, as usual. Men, she could manage without them.

The train shrieked its departure, as Cindy huddled in a corner of the carriage. She removed her shoes, rubbing the damp insoles clinging to her feet. She hugged her knees, taking deep breaths to repress trickling tears, as the train rocked and clattered along. She was in a long ballroom, dressed with flowing gown and a pair of dainty slippers, hard as glass. Sweeping circles of dances around the floor. Chandeliers sparkling from the ceiling. She was captivated by a pair of green eyes, set in the sweetest, handsomest face. She ran shrieking from the room, the clock striking the witching hour; jolted into cold air.

She jumped up cursing. Grabbing her bag, Cindy climbed off the train and slammed the door. Why the sun was still shining so brightly? Her cheeks were pale and chill.

Mascara smudged, but why did the old ladies stare so? Leaving the corner store, her carrier bag bulging, Cindy stopped abruptly as paving stones froze her feet. She turned beetroot as thin insoles greeted her stare.

“My shoes. Oh no, the train.” Cindy scuttled across the road, too late in the mass of departing metal and steam. She imagined her shoes returning to Corfe Castle to meet, who?

Next morning she was back in the pub bar, ordering morning coffee. Perhaps Cal would reappear with a perfectly valid apology for his absence, although why someone as handsome as

him would look at her twice was a complete mystery. Her cheap shoes felt uncomfortably new; she would have to retrace her steps. She wondered whether she would ever be reunited with her shoes. They may have been dainty, but the fit was perfect. Glass, indeed!

She stirred her coffee slowly; pushed the sugar bowl away, deliberately.

“May I?” She had not seen the door swing open, but that gentle voice she would recognise anywhere.

“Cal!” She stared hard into a pair of green eyes. He smiled triumphantly, holding up a pair of comfy, petite shoes. “I think you will be needing these. I’ve knocked on every apartment door, the full length of the promenade.”

“But when I said I was staying on the seafront, I didn’t actually mean...Oh dear,”

“Come on,” he slipped his hand into hers. “We’ve got a train to catch. Anyway, you always let your coffee go cold.”

“It wasn’t sweet enough,” she returned his squeeze. “Though I was trying to give it up.”

“Well thank goodness you didn’t. I’ve never tried to include a sugar bowl in the chat-up line before.”

The bar door slammed shut. Somehow, life was much sweeter.

THE END.

THE OFFICE PARTY

Nick stared out of the window. Soon the postman's footprints would disappear in the snowfall. It was annoying. He really wanted to get out of the house later. This would make life extremely difficult. He fidgeted his spare pounds into a more comfortable position in the chair, flicking through TV channels.

He was determined to get to the office party this year. They wouldn't expect him. They were used to his excuses. But Nick really fancied letting his hair down and having fun. Life was getting too serious nowadays, anyway... He blew the chill from his fingertips and considered the best plan.

If he hurried, he could make it to the shops before closing time. There was only one programme he would miss, but that's what videos were for. He muttered under his breath at the distasteful reminder. Kids! They wanted so much nowadays. But his nephew, well that was different. Nick was rather taken aback by his present request. It would take some serious thought.

Entering the department store, he could feel his cheeks smarting in the sudden heat. He peered around the displays, a major planning his military campaign. Ramming his cap firmly in

place, he headed for Sportswear. A moment's distraction stopped him mid-aisle. That was a strong whiff! Expensive perfume, well, he may be getting on a bit, but he wasn't short in that department and SHE wouldn't settle for eau-de-toilette in bargain wrapping paper.

Anyway, back to the shopping list. He would give Toys a miss today. He would much prefer Sumo-wrestling, than that department during school holidays. He didn't like the look a middle-aged woman was giving him. Just because his designer stubble was rather out of control, it didn't mean he had a screw loose. He sniffed, a little too loudly, and peered at a depressing pair of walking socks in a dull shade of burgundy.

No, he was running out of time. The shop would be closing soon and he still hadn't decided what to wear for his office 'Do'. He wanted to cause a bit of a stir. But his mates were far too traditional. No, he needed something with a bit of individuality, to suit his position.

Back home, dinner was prepared for the slow cooker. There would be no time later. He had finally decided. His nephew would be pleased with the unusual gift: it would take more courage than he realised and would have a serious impact on his bank balance. Nick rewound the tape recording - he needed a good laugh - light-hearted entertainment before the party. He was beginning to enjoy himself. If his nephew wanted to be given flying lessons for his

Christmas present, he wasn't going to argue. He just hoped he had a good head for heights.

He pressed 'Play' but his nephew arrived, nervously early. Nick could tell he was having second thoughts. He would need the patience of a saint to relax the boy.

"Now, wrap up warm Chris. I'm only showing you once. Then you're on your own."

Well, he certainly looked the part. It was time for Nick to take early retirement anyway. He could do with an early night and the office party would manage just as well without him, as it had done every year. All his mates knew the score; they could party without him.

This time it was for real. Chris was at the controls and his cheeks burned with excitement. Nick resisted the urge to take over. He huffed at the unsteady take-off and, with the vehemence of a loudhailer, he bellowed at the craft's tails.

"Farther, Chris! Farther! You must go farther this Christmas."

Nick ignored the excited little girl next door, positively hopping in the slush on her doorstep. Her mother was already pulling her into the warmth and music emanating from the open door.

"More TV fantasy! Why do they fill the kids heads with such nonsense."

Nick slammed his own door and rolled into the comforting corners of his heavy-duty sofa. He flicked buttons on the remote control. Too late. He had messed up the start time on his video:

the final credits were rolling on his favourite comedy film, 'Father Christmas'.

THE END

THE COFFEE BREAK

Joan looked around the pub with approval. This was certainly a very pleasant atmosphere. The stonework curved around the bar and rows of bottles were neatly presented. Horse brasses gleamed around the hearth. Every ornament was as carefully arranged as at home. She left Fred to buy the drinks and headed for the comfy window seat. That would do nicely, she thought. Scanning the sturdy tables and benches, Joan was enjoying the olde worlde atmosphere.

“Fred, put it down there. You’ve brought the sugar?”

“Yes, Joan. And there’s a little biscuit. I thought maybe some crisps as well?”

“No, that’s quite enough. Mm, it’s a bit strong, isn’t it.” Joan grimaced as she sipped the hot coffee.

“I could ask them to add a little more milk?”

“No, no. I don’t want any fuss. Come and sit down here. Oh, just look at that.”

“What, the traffic? Well it is a through road, Joan.”

“Well it ought to be diverted, it just spoils villages like this. The pavements are rather narrow, too.”

Silence greeted her and Joan noticed that Fred was smirking at pictures around the wall.

“Oh, postcard humour. I might have known you would laugh at that.”

“But it’s a nice pub, Joan. Anyway, we had to try it out. After all, it’s the local.”

“Not exactly much choice. But the accommodation’s quite decent.”

“I thought you would enjoy it here, with all the thatched roofed cottages. Anyway, you always like pottering around bric-a-brac stores. Staying above the shop is very convenient.”

“Mm, I prefer going out to shop. It’s different when it’s on the doorstep. But at least we’ve got en-suite. Now if you will excuse me a moment,” Joan stepped consciously round the bar to the rear of the pub. She noticed the Ladies sign, but something on the wall caught her eye. She froze.

A collection of rifles and ancient pistols were displayed on the wall. They were an original feature of the pub, causing no concern to the locals. But Joan swallowed nervously and scuttled past them. She peered into the mirror, arranging her hair, but she felt sick in the pit of her stomach. She was uncomfortable and wanted to leave the pub. It was a shame. She had been rather enjoying herself, though she would not admit as much to Fred. Well, he was used to her ways. She frowned.

“Fred, you should see what they’ve got round there. Go and look. On the wall.”

Fred strolled round the corner unperturbed. He returned with a somewhat quizzical expression.

“You mean the guns? Very nice. They seem rather old.”

“Old? Is that all you’ve got to say. They’re guns, Fred. They shouldn’t be allowed. Not after, not after that massacre.”

“You mean Dunblane? But they’re only display guns, Joan. I’m sure it’s all perfectly legal.”

“Legal? What’s that got to do with it? They haven’t tightened the law up nearly enough. Those poor kiddies.”

“Come on, love. Don’t worry so much. It was just a once off. These guns probably aren’t even in working order.”

“But they could be stolen. Anyone could get them. They’re dangerous, Fred. I couldn’t bear it if anything happened to little Sophie.”

“Nothing’s going to happen. Our Sophie’s perfectly safe.”

“I wish we could see her more often. She’s so far away. I can’t even help look after her now.” Joan stared into the open fire and shivered. The coal container glinted menacingly in the firelight and even the basket of logs failed to reassure her, with their homely atmosphere.

“Why did they have to leave us, Fred?” Joan suddenly turned to face him. A screech of brakes broke into their conversation. Joan leaned further into the window for a closer look. The car turned the corner rather dangerously. Joan muttered at the inconsiderate occupants who were in such a hurry to catch the post.

“There could have been an accident. Some people,” Joan gave Fred the fullest version of how to teach them a lesson. She resumed her favourite subject. Kate and her husband were so thoughtless, taking their precious first granddaughter so far away. They jumped to a sudden bang.

“Fred, what’s happening? Was it a fire cracker?” Joan froze in her seat, whilst Fred leaned forward for a better view. Shouts could be heard, and another screech of brakes.

“They’ve gone, Joan. The car’s just disappeared round the bend. I think, maybe someone ought to call the police.”

Joan remained idiotically staring at the bellows by the hearth.

“Sophie. Who’ll look after Sophie. Kate works all hours. My poor little Sophie.” Whatever was Fred talking about. Surely their granddaughter was more important. Those stupid guns.

Sirens wailed past the window and Joan jumped as she turned to see the flashing lights. “Fred, what’s happening?”

“It’s all right, Joan. The police are here now. Everyone has to stay where they are. They are cordoning off the area.”

“But what’s going on?” Joan began to feel rising panic.

“It’s over now. There’s been a raid on the post office.”

“Oh Fred. I want to go home. We must phone Kate.”

“We have to wait here. I think the police will want to question us. We may have seen something important. You were right in the window seat. Perhaps you noticed something. That car we saw. It came straight past the window.”

“But it was so sudden, Fred. It’s been two weeks now since Kate phoned. They said they would get in touch.”

“When we get home, Joan. They will have been busy settling in. They said we could visit as soon as they got straightened out.”

“But that will be months. Oh Fred, it won’t be the same any more. It wouldn’t be so hard if we had other children, but Kate’s all we’ve got. What will we do now?”

“You’re wrong, dear. Once they’ve settled, you’ll be visiting them all the time. You’re good with Sophie. After all, it gives them a break.”

They were interrupted as a police officer peered round the door. He paused to speak to the barman, before striding across the room. He seemed a nice young man and his quick smile reminded Joan of Kate’s husband.

“I must ask you a few questions. Do you live locally?”

“No, we’re on holiday here. We’ve always liked Dorset. We’re staying just down the road. Above the Tea Shop and the bric-a-brac store,” Fred explained.

“Mr?”

“Brownlow. Fred Brownlow. This is my wife, Joan.”

“We will need full details and a number where you can be contacted. I will need your home address too. When does your holiday end?”

“We go home on Saturday, officer.” Joan decided to assist the young policeman. She would have liked to offer him a cup of tea.

“You seem to have a good vantage point from this window, Mrs Brownlow?”

“Oh yes, I’ve had a lovely view of the village. The traffic is rather too fast for my liking, but they serve good coffee here.”

“Yes, of course. But the Post Office is just round the corner. Perhaps you saw something suspicious, maybe someone hanging around outside?”

“Oh no, just the usual people wandering along. It would have been perfect, except this rather rude young man kept leaning over my shoulder. I didn’t tell you about that, Fred. He had no manners at all.”

“What? There was someone in here, looking out of the window?” The police officer sounded interested in what she was saying.

“Yes, but I soon let him know we had the window seat already. I wasn’t going to take any nonsense from him.”

“Would you be able to describe this man for me?”

“Well, he was a bit scruffy, really. I suppose you would call it designer stubble. He would have looked better with a shave, if you ask me. But he didn’t stay very long. He left soon after we arrived. Then, of course, we heard this squeal of brakes, it was very upsetting.”

“Now what time would that have been, Mrs Brownlow?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Fred, you’re the time-keeper.”

“10.45 am, more or less. But I was at the bar, so I’m afraid I didn’t really notice him.”

“Then there was that nasty fire-cracker. Tell him, Fred.”

“Fire-cracker? You heard something then?” Joan almost launched into the state of her nerves, but Fred broke her train of thought.

“Yes. Shortly after the car braked round the corner. I wondered then, but...There wasn’t

anyone injured, was there?" Fred paused, but his wife was already enlightening the officer further.

"Well, they leave guns lying around here. Tell him, Fred."

"Guns?"

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing. My wife noticed some display guns at the rear of the bar. She was rather concerned about them."

The officer ushered them to the back of the room, but he quickly dismissed the firearms.

"You're perfectly safe with those, Mrs Brownlow. They would do less damage than a peashooter. But thank you for showing them to me. Now, about that car you saw." The policeman led them back to their seats, leaving the barman frowning in their direction.

"It was a black car. No, blue. It screeched round the corner. But it all happened very fast." Joan stopped, having completed her description.

"Could you be a little more precise, did you notice what type of car it was? A registration number?"

"Oh, it was much too fast. But when it reversed round the corner, I thought it would hit the window. That's why I jumped. Fred, you saw it."

"Yes, it was an M Registration. A Ford Mondeo." Fred tidied up his wife's description.

"You have been most helpful, Mr Brownlow. Mrs Brownlow." The policeman stood up and shook their hands. "Of course, I will need to trouble you for a Statement down at the Station. You could be witnesses if this reaches the Courts."

“Certainly, officer. Only too happy to be of help.”

Joan noticed Fred smiling at her for a moment. “But we shall be moving house shortly,” Fred continued. “Perhaps we could contact a more convenient Station? Dorset will be rather a long way to travel.”

“Moving far, Sir? If you could keep us informed of your new address.”

“Certainly, we will be moving North at the earliest opportunity. We’ve got family there - the grandchild, you know.”

Suddenly Joan decided it was a lovely village, after all. But she was already mentally packing. After all, someone had to organise Fred.

THE END.

CASTLES IN THE SKY

“Sue, look, I’m going to be late. We’ve got a problem.”

“Oh, Allan, today of all days. Well how late are you going to be?” Sue twiddled the telephone wire in annoyance. Her mental check list was growing by the minute, she hardly bothered to listen to her husband.

“But there’s packing to be done, Allan.” Sue was mulling over the location of Katie’s favourite Barbie doll. It would be hell on the journey without it. It was pointless mentioning that Jonathan had fused the video. Mid-sentence Sue jotted down, ‘tyre pressures’. She sighed. The kids were excitedly running around like banshees.

“Sue, I’ve had a disastrous day. I’d almost finished and then the system crashed.” Allan droned on for some time. “It took an hour to get it fixed. I had to start again. I’ve got so many files to check. Look, just slip in a few clothes for me, it won’t take you long. I’ll sort things out when I get home.”

Sue dropped the receiver rather hurriedly.

“Katie, bed. Now!”

An hour later the phone rang again. Sue did not bother to announce herself. She knew it would be Allan.

“Terribly sorry Sue, I’m packing up now. I’ve just got time to catch the last connection. Have you packed my shoes? Oh, and find my other

briefcase for me. I can't take my office one on holiday, it really doesn't hold very much. Look, I've got to go. God, I've got so many papers to read." Sue's heart sank. Mentally she juggled the growing list: Jonathan to bed, find Katie's doll, pack, check the tyre pressures, find Allan's briefcase.

Just as Sue was collapsing on the sofa for a quick coffee, the phone rang for the third time.

"Sue, I've missed my connection. I had to wait for the boss to get out of his meeting. He needed a file urgently. You can collect me from the station, can't you? The next one's a through train. The kids will be OK for a bit."

"Allan, I won't have time to pack the car."

"I'll load up in the morning, it won't take long." The phone went dead and Sue sighed in exasperation. She expected it would be a repeat of their previous holiday fiasco. Sue resigned herself to a revised list: check the tyre pressure, finish packing, collect Allan from the station and rehearse the supper.

The next morning was total chaos. Allan wandered around the house muttering about some papers he dropped the night before. He was trailing a large briefcase, bulging at the seams. A jumper thinly disguised his office trousers and Sue recognised the mobile phone stuffed in his pocket. Her heart sank. Allan didn't seem to know the meaning of a holiday. The planned early start was trashed as bags were piled into the boot. The children griped for their mid-morning snacks. The door slammed for the third time and Allan handed over the

map in disgust. Sue resisted the temptation of pointing out that map-reading took time, along with packing, loading up and organising the family.

Sue recalculated their arrival time. She hoped that late key collection would not be a problem. As they pulled into a motorway service area, Allan leapt out of the car and disappeared clutching his phone and muttering something about office papers. Sue tailed behind with the kids, downing her coffee hurriedly as Katie headed for the shop, whining about the latest Barbie outfit. Jonathan was hovering by the amusement arcade, when Allan finally strolled across the concourse, jotting a phone number in his filofax. He slammed the car door, muttering about phoning a client when he reached the holiday resort.

Three days later the family were driving to a famous tourist spot in Dorset. Sue was already biting her fingernails and the family was volatile. On Sunday Allan had stayed in to wade through the paperwork and Sue seriously contemplated hiding his briefcase. She decided it wouldn't be worth the hassle. On Monday they had wandered around Weymouth and Allan had called the office at 9.15am, at 11am and finally at 3.30pm. Sue would not have minded so much, except the second phone call occurred as they were wandering through the timewalk journey at the Brewers Quay. Cobblestone streets and the sound of a cellular phone destroyed the atmosphere. Sue tried to calm her embarrassment with coffee and ice creams,

while Allan appeared glowingly relaxed. There were difficulties in Allan's absence and he clutched his phone with pride. Peace didn't last long. It never did.

On Tuesday they climbed the hill to Corfe Castle. Sue batted replies to Jonathan's endless questions. Katie complained about the climb. Allan was visibly twitching, his features wrapped around an internal problem.

"Dad. Just look at that! Is it safe?" Jonathan stared in fascination at the gaping hole in the gateway.

"Of course it's safe. We'll sue if it's not." Allan glanced at the awkward angle of stones, as if wondering whether he could find a business solution.

"But Dad, how did they get like that?"

"It's a ruin, Jonathan. That's what happens."

"It says here that Cromwell did it, Jonathan." Sue enlightened him. "The Civil War. They were on the King's side."

"Wow, was there a battle then? Can I see the dungeons, Mother?"

"I don't think it's got dungeons," Sue pored over the visitor's guide. "But it's got a keep. Look, let's go and see the tower up there." Jonathan bounded along with his mother, while Sue pointed to the Outer and Inner Bailey, guiding Katie across the scaffolding skirting the hillside.

"Oh look at that. Mum, can we climb down." Jonathan was intrigued.

"Of course not, it's cordoned off, it's far too dangerous to climb." A shriek had them peering over the edge and they watched the steam rise from the station below.

“It’s a steam train. Oh Mum, I want a ride. Can we?” Sue gave a practised non-committal response as she guided him round to the Keep.

“Dad, look, it’s the tower. Is it very old?” Jonathan seemed determined to attract his Dad’s attention.

“Henry, it must have been Henry,” Allan muttered without conviction.

“Henry the Eighth. Oh Dad, did he live here?”

“I don’t know, but kings always stayed in the castles when they travelled.”

As he moved away, oblivious to the raw excitement of youth, Sue stepped up.

“It’s Henry the First, Jonathan, and Henry the Third. Oh and the guide says William the Conqueror built the hall.”

Sue busily perused the guide book as they settled down to a pub lunch. Allan’s shoulders relaxed a moment as he mouthed the word, “Telephone”. His dinner remained forlorn, like a beach at low tide.

“I’m sorry, Sue, it’s no good.” He hovered importantly. “They’ve lost a file. It’s crucial for the project. I could talk them through it over the phone, but, they really don’t have all the facts. I would only have to clear up the mess later.” Allan seemed oblivious as the edges of Sue’s mouth began to twitch. She was trying hard to express sympathy and surprise at his revelation. “Of course, Allan, I understand perfectly,” she nodded.

“Well, if you’ll just drop me off at Poole Station. I can make my own way up to the City, it really

doesn't take long to get to London. You can manage for a day or two, can't you?"

"Now don't worry, Allan. I can manage. There's lots of things I can be doing with the children. Now, your briefcase."

"Oh, could you just stop by to collect it. We've got time. And the paper shop, I really need the Financial Times. There should be just enough time on the train to catch up on the latest news."

Sue turned round quickly at the station. She had already spent ten minutes reassuring Allan that they could manage without him for a couple of days. As she climbed into the car Sue smiled. Allan had already lasted longer than on any previous break with the family. Sue did not expect him back before the end of the week. She glanced over her shoulder at the kids making faces in the back of the car. She was beginning to enjoy her holiday at last.

"Now then Jonathan, Katie. How would you like an afternoon ride on the steam train?"

THE END

THE ERODING DOOR

Francesca stared at the notice board, kicking her foot. She was restless to explore, but the surroundings were unfamiliar. She was irritated sightseeing alone, when there was so much to enjoy locally.

“Excuse me, I hope you don’t mind my saying, but the Centre won’t be open just yet.”

“Er, oh dear, I mean, thank you.” Francesca glanced at the older man. “It’s just that I thought I could get some local information, places to see, only I’m new to the area,” she tailed off leaving the rest unsaid.

“Oh, you’ve just arrived on holiday have you? On your own?”

“Well,” Francesca paused.

“Over here, dear,” the man gestured, as a neat plumpish woman arrived at his side, kitted out with walking boots and woolly hat.

Introductions were shared, and Francesca discovered that Thomas and Betty stayed at the same hotel every year, opposite the Heritage Centre. They were keen to take the path over to Durdle Door, a short distance from Lulworth Cove and a popular tourist attraction.

“Perhaps you would like to join us, dear? We don’t go too fast nowadays. But perhaps you have other plans?”

Francesca returned Betty’s smile, instantly warming to this friendly couple. “Oh, yes please,

everyone told me to visit Durdle Door when I mentioned my Dorset holiday. Only, I was expecting," she trailed off rather pathetically.

As they followed the gentle incline, Francesca kept pausing and turning round to look at the view below. She could see the Centre and the huddle of thatched houses marking the descent to the Cove. As they reached the brow of the hill they paused to catch breath and Francesca was amused at the neat rows of caravans edging the gentle sweep of hills rolling down to the sheer cliffs.

"Just getting my breath back," the old man explained. "It's the old ticker, you know."

"What, you mean your heart? But you're all right, aren't you?"

"Oh don't worry about him, dear," Betty joined in. "He's got a pacemaker. Just needs to be a bit cautious, that's all."

"But he's still climbing hills?" Francesca was incredulous.

"Oh, we've slowed down nowadays."

"I tell her not to worry whilst she can still feel it!" Thomas quipped. "It's quite reassuring, actually."

"But you say you've slowed down?"

"Oh yes," rejoined Betty. "We used to go skiing every year."

They smiled like collaborators and Francesca felt a sudden twinge. It was all Jack's fault.

"Oh, I've always wanted to try skiing. I wish," Francesca began. "But Jack wouldn't enjoy skiing."

"Jack?" Betty queried.

“My boyfriend. He’s meant to be on holiday with me. We’re staying at the youth hostel, but he’s gone off diving.” Francesca felt she could confide in Betty. Thomas was already strolling ahead of them.

“He always goes diving. I expect I’ll be alone all week, pretty much.”

“But have you given it a try, perhaps you would enjoy it?” Betty queried.

“Oh no, I tried it once. But I felt so claustrophobic. It’s odd breathing under water, I just kept holding my breath.”

“You don’t seem to have much in common?” Betty suggested.

“Well, we met in the pub, and Jack seemed so adventurous. I thought, well, maybe we would try other things too.” Francesca began to think about skiing. “But he’s not interested in anything else. I wouldn’t mind, only we don’t seem to spend any time together.”

“Well, you could try your own hobbies. Thomas and I met when we joined a skiing trip one year.”

“Oh, I don’t think I could go on my own, I’m not that brave.”

“Nothing to it, my dear. Now, perhaps you want to explore the beach. We’ll just wait up here, the steps are a bit steep for us.”

Francesca watched fascinated as water swirled around the Door, sparkling like diamonds in the brilliant sunshine. The strain of muscles slowed her climb up the cliff steps. She began to realise the pressure on her life, struggling against a tide eroding her own doorway to the future.

“Ooh, for a long soak in the bath,” Francesca grimaced as she reached the top.

“But you’ve got facilities at the hostel?” Betty enquired.

“Yes, of course. But you can’t relax the same. Actually, I would have much preferred to stay at the hotel with en-suite, but Jack doesn’t see the point.” Francesca waved her goodbyes to Thomas and Betty, promising to meet them the next day for afternoon tea in the village.

The following morning Francesca again found herself alone. She pottered around the village for the morning, then decided to take a picnic and explore Lulworth Cove. She peered uncertainly at the notice describing coastal erosion. Screwing up her face in concentration, the route along the cliffs made little sense to her. Armed with her camera and lunch she set off along the beach, crunching through shingle and white stones like birds’ eggs. The notice worried her, with its tidal warnings. A white post beckoned her ascent and she peered towards the red flag fluttering above her. Scrambling up eroded steps, she gasped for breath, aware of a thundering boom in the distance. She paused, but few clouds blotted the sunshine, reflecting dull splodges on the clear water below. Francesca stared fascinated as a large yacht slipped gently into the Cove, past jagged rocks submerged beyond the headlands. Francesca stuffed the camera back into her bag, watching the speck of a dinghy trailing towards the shore.

Aching from the steep climb, her hand caught on the barbed wire. Glimpsing the yellow arrows

marking her track, she was reassured. Francesca wandered along, finding a sheltered spot to eat her sandwiches. She mused on Jack's reaction, if she announced a solo skiing holiday. Her mind drifted, wondering what attracted him beneath the waters in such idyllic places. She doubted he saw much beyond the edge of his goggles. Yes, Jack was proving to be a problem. Oblivious to the world, Francesca was unaware of the tiny specks on the beach, spreading out around the Cove.

The chill wind awoke her. She jumped up suddenly and grabbed a bush as she stumbled. It was much later than she had expected and the sky was heavy with cloud, darkening the afternoon early. She realised and instantly regretted missing her tea with Thomas and Betty. She assumed they would simply enjoy their afternoon tea without her, before retiring to their hotel. She had to reach the hostel before the rain started. The thundering seemed disturbingly loud. Francesca headed across the cliffs towards the hostel. Uncertain, she shivered in her light clothing. Why wasn't he with her? But she hadn't realised before. Was it too late? Of course, Jack would be expecting sympathy over the joys and trials of diving. Well, not this evening. She had a few things to sort out first. Absorbed in her thoughts she climbed the stile, heading down the unfamiliar track.

"Hoy! Stop where you are. Freeze!"

Francesca drowned a scream and became rigidly still. She trembled in the lengthening shadow, seeing a man approaching her.

“What are you doing here? Didn’t you read the sign?” he barked.

“I came over the stile, I was just trying to reach the youth hostel,” Francesca stumbled over the words, close to tears.

The sentry lowered his gun slightly and his voice became less harsh. “Didn’t you realise this area was out of bounds? There are clear ‘No Entry’ signs.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t going to come along this path, but with the cliff erosion,” Francesca stammered. The tension of the holiday was suddenly released in streams down her face and she hung her head. She was too embarrassed to look at the soldier.

“This land is cordoned off for rifle practice and,” he paused. “You mean you didn’t even hear the loud bangs? You could have been killed.”

“Oh God, army practice? I thought it was thunder.”

“It’s clearly marked, you should have read the signs. Here, it’s probably easiest if you take that route to the village. You can find your way to the youth hostel from there, can’t you?” The soldier was being as helpful as protocol would allow.

Francesca stumbled off gratefully along the plateau and down to the village below.

“Hellooo! Francesca. Wherever have you been?” Betty was poised at the top of the village, looking worried.

“Oh, Betty, I’m sorry about afternoon tea. I climbed the cliff and the time just disappeared,

and then I got lost and then,” Francesca tumbled over the explanations.

“For goodness sake child, I’m not bothered about the tea. But we’ve had a search party out looking for you. We’ve had people combing the beach. It can be dangerous for newcomers, the tide’s quite high at the moment, you could have been cut off.”

“Oh dear, what a lot of trouble I’ve caused, I just thought I would climb to the clifftop for the view and then find my way back. But the soldier really scared me.”

“Good God, you haven’t been anywhere near the restricted zone, have you? When we got a message to the youth hostel, Jack said that you weren’t back.”

“Jack, Jack’s back already?” Francesca stared.

“But where is he then?”

“Jack’s sorting out his diving gear. He says he will see you when you get back to the hostel. Now why don’t you come back to the hotel with me and when Thomas returns we can have a nice hot supper.”

Much later at the hotel, Francesca felt the warm glow that finally reached to her core. Contented after a large meal, she was waiting in the lounge for Thomas and Betty.

“Hello again, my dear, good to see the colour back in your cheeks,” Betty fussed over her.

“Now what about that boyfriend of yours, won’t he be getting worried that you’re still out.”

“Oh, Jack, let him worry. I’ve just booked into the hotel for the rest of the week. They had a vacancy, since it’s out of season, and there’s even an en-suite,” Francesca stretched lazily.

“Perhaps I should explain something. I met Jack on the rebound, a few months ago. But this holiday has made me realise something. You don’t know what you’ve got until you lose it. Thank goodness Andrew didn’t walk away permanently from a closed door. Er, I mean me.” Francesca blushed through her fringe.

“Andrew, what do you mean my dear?” Betty raised her brows at Thomas.

“You’ll be able to meet him. He’s joining me tomorrow. We’re going to make a fresh start, and book into Relate when we get home. You see, Andrew’s my estranged husband.”

THE END.

THE MISSING WOMAN

TM pulled up his coat collar. He felt conspicuous in the grubby backstreets of South London. It was a pity that the data had not been more precise. He would have to search, ask questions. He would have preferred to pass unnoticed, a faceless sleuth searching for another missing person, with a faded image and a date of birth.

It could not be helped. He would track her down eventually, of that he was certain. She was causing him a great deal of trouble. This was already the third location that had to be searched. Thoroughly, this time. He had the faintest suspicion that details on her file were missing, incomplete. He did not like an inconclusive case. If he could pull this one off, he would gain promotion. He would be recognised for his precise techniques, even, his genius. He had no stomach for relegation. Somewhere in the back of his mind there was a niggling doubt. Something did not add up. He had drawn a blank since retrieving her maiden name. Paper records were messy, inconclusive, but it was the only way forward.

“Please excuse me,” he attempted a smile at the woman behind the enquiry desk. “I am trying to

trace this female. Catherine Anne Levisham. You keep the data stored here?"

"You will need to fill in a form. Do you have some ID please?"

"I do not know. I have the Certificate of Birth; she is registered with you. Her nationality is British."

"You're foreign, aren't you? Look, you need to complete the form with your details, your name and address. Then I will need some identification. Do you have a driving licence?"

"I am using the public transport system in this country. This has my photograph. I think this will identify me sufficiently."

"Oh that's fine. You work for this Company, do you?"

"Yes, my Company. The name is familiar to you?"

"Oh yes, of course. Now you need to fill in the client's details here. You said you had the Birth Certificate, did you? Wait a minute, there's something rather odd here."

"It is her Certificate of Birth. The year 1955, 13th May."

"Yes, that's fine. It's just that her place of birth reads the Queens Medical Centre in Nottingham. But it didn't exist then. It would have been one of the older hospitals. It's not important. It must be a later copy. I expect the records were transferred by temporary staff. If you would like to sit in the Waiting Area."

TM took the nearest seat and remained motionless. He did not remove his coat in the uncomfortably hot Waiting Area. He was evaluating the latest information. The Manual

Reprographics Centre had committed an error. Procedures would need to be tightened up in future. It was a difficulty, attempting to reproduce authentic records. His superior would be informed on his return. This could not be allowed to arouse suspicions.

“Mr Mann? Would you like to step over to the desk. I’m sorry it took a little longer than we thought. There you are, Catherine Anne Levisham, born 13th May 1955 in Nottingham. Married Frederick John Winter on 22nd July 1974. Marriage dissolved...”

“No, you must have the incorrect records. Catherine Levisham married Thomas Weldon in the year 1981.”

“Yes, the details are all here. Catherine Anne Winter (nee Levisham), divorcee, remarried Thomas Matthew Weldon, on 10th May 1981.”

“You are certain? These records are accurate?”

“I’m sorry, we can only give you the available records. Births, marriages, deaths. Perhaps you need to contact the Missing Persons Bureau? “

“Yes, you have given me unexpected data. A search will be undertaken. Goodbye.”

TM decided to retire from any further contact with the public for the moment. He stared at the dials on his clock face and twitched as he glanced at the digits. A new search would have to be commissioned. This was beyond his brief. No-one from Catherine Levisham’s past had mentioned Frederick John Winter. It seemed there was suspicious data to be retrieved, catalogued. No further action could be taken at

present. Not until they were certain. It was well-known that Catherine Anne Levisham had been married to Thomas Matthew Weldon and that there was no living issue. No descendants of Catherine Anne Weldon. But that year with Frederick Winter. Why was the marriage dissolved? He had to be certain. There was no room for error. TM switched off. He would continue to search and retrieve data tomorrow. He needed time to assimilate the new information. There could be no hidden facts before the disks were wiped clean. There would be no going back.

The possibility of a disaster had not occurred to him before. He had assumed this was a straightforward case. A childless couple. No messy list of descendants. Simply an open and shut case to file in the OD Section. The room hummed as TM awoke the next morning. He glanced dismissively at the clock face as the cogs of his brain began to re-evaluate the overnight data. There was someone he needed to interrogate.

“Nurse, where are you? Here you, young man. Come here.”

“Catherine? Catherine Weldon?”

“Come here. Stop talking in your boots, speak up. Oh, it’s you. Now fetch me my stick. It’s dropped over there. These nurses, they’re never around when you want them.”

“I need some information. My name is, er, Mr Mann, Terry Mann.”

“Oh, it’s young Terry, is it? I thought you were the older one, what’s his name? I never could

remember. Well, you don't look like your father, young man. Sit down. Why do young people always hover."

"There seems to be some misunderstanding? I wanted to talk to you about Frederick John Winter. You were married in 1974, I believe?"

"Freddie? What's it to do with you? Who are you anyway? Nurse."

"Catherine Levisham. You have proved difficult to trace. We have almost completed our enquiries. But we need your assistance. Tell me about Frederick Winter."

"Oh, I kept him quiet. No-one knew; not even Tom. We were married for 32 years, you know."

"Yes, we have that information. But no children, no descendants."

"What do you want to know about Freddie for, anyway? What did you say your name was?"

"TM. I think you recognised me earlier, Catherine Levisham."

"Recognised you? I've never seen you before in my life. But Freddie, it didn't work out, so we had the marriage dissolved. I didn't tell anyone. My parents didn't know. I was living in Leeds then. Oh no, one didn't talk about such things, not to my family anyway."

"There was no issue? You had no children with Frederick John Winter?"

"With Freddie. Oh no. But I remember you, TM. Terra Firma, something or other. What does it mean anyway? You're not Terry Mann."

"Merely my current identification, Catherine Levisham. I am Terra Firma Mark B2362. It has taken some time to download all relevant data on you."

“Data. Oh, computers don’t know everything. So you had trouble finding out about Freddie, did you? Well what does it matter now.”

“You have forgotten, Catherine Levisham. TM B2362 has been programmed to assimilate a natural error ratio. Your records are now completed at earth year 2028. All living data is currently being scrambled. You will cease to exist as Catherine Levisham beyond the age of 10 years 3 months and 2 days. You will be transmigrated shortly, to earth year 2357.”

“But Freddie, Freddie knows. What are you going to tell Freddie?”

“TM B2362 downloading all data. Please wait. Ready. File closed on Catherine Anne Levisham, born earth year 1955, 13th May. No living issue. All active data on earth destroyed. Catherine Anne Levisham transmigrated to earth year 2357. All terra firma records cease about the émigré from earth year 1965, 15th August. All files have been recorded in the Overwritten Data Section. Visual image retrogressed to earth pictures, aged 10 years. On line for further input.”

“You’ve cocked up, TM.” B2362 stood rigidly before his superior. “You didn’t check out the facts thoroughly enough.”

“But there was no issue. Catherine Levisham ceased to exist in earth year 1965.” TM hummed with the data.

“But Freddie knows everything. You should have spoken to Freddie.”

“Freddie? The marriage to Frederick John Winter lasted 15 months 22 days. It was

dissolved without issue. There are no living descendants.” TM blanked his monitor.

“Wrong. Freddie filed for divorce following discovery of Catherine’s pregnancy from a previous union. Catherine Winter delivered a son in earth year 1975, 25th January. She registered the birth under her maiden name after Freddie left. Father unknown. The child was adopted. You cannot get out of this one, TM. Catherine Levisham has living issue beyond earth year 1965 and we cannot trace the father.”

“Freddie, Freddie knows. Data understood and assimilated. Error. Error. TM prepared for relegation.”

“Oh no, TM, not this time. You’re model’s being scrapped, as of now. The natural error ratio is just too unreliable.”

THE END.

STITCHED UP

A cockerel crowing its head off is sometimes the most beautiful sound you will ever hear in your life. But for Sally, thirty-one - on her back and being told to push harder – there was nothing less likely to leave her in stitches.

Every love story has a beginning, but twenty-four hours of labour, although normal for a first-time mum, was most unlikely to produce the greatest love story of her life. But that last half hour was imprinted on her memory as one of the most embarrassing, not to be repeated, not to be remembered episodes - like the first time she was constipated before that all-important interview.

As she lay on her back, exhausted from pushing – with bare feet pointing at the ceiling – awaiting that last delicate stitch to tidy up her modesty, the door slammed open and a loud guffaw echoed around the delivery suite. It didn't help her embarrassment when the poor nurse slammed the door, hissing loud and extensive apologies to the male nurse- who paused mid-suture.

Sally would never forgive that disgusting battery hen of a receptionist, Dave, who welcomed his latest patient to the department with gut-tickling

humour at the crucial moment as the door flew open - everyone in reception looked straight up. No matter that when she arrived earlier she had, between gasps, decided that the guy was wasted on admin. He had smiled rather apologetically, she thought, and quipped that he wasn't yet up to speed in stork and butter land. She shouldn't have noticed him; every man could currently crawl under the nearest stone, but... "Agency," he had whispered and, for a moment, the relief between contractions had felt like a bonding.

Now she fumed. She would never forgive him. She would not look at him as she left maternity; and there was no damned way anyone would get her on her back ever again. That most beautiful sound - of her baby's first cries - were lost in Sally's embarrassment. Mother-love had not crash-landed for her; but then, some love is spread, like muck, long after it is dumped in a heap in the farmyard. Meanwhile, she could only replay endlessly the wide-open door, her legs in stirrups and Dave's loud guffaw.

It was just history that such an insipid weed of a man had got her into this mess in the first place. Her ex may have managed to get her on her back and up the aisle, but he had pushed off almost as soon as that fickle line turned blue. Constipation may have given her the edge in interview, keeping her replies as crisp and businesslike as the job demanded, but she had long been eyeing up the local paper for more challenging vacancies. Wringing out revengeful plans of maintenance - and contacting the Child

Support Agency – had kept Sally pushing in the labour ward and now assisted the hatching of a new plan.

Sally used the laid-back approach for her next interview. After a room full of strangers had seen her well and truly stitched up, nothing but cheek could daunt her confidence. So what if she had to juggle career, temperamental childminders, an occasional mum that flitted in when broody was just fashionable and flitted out when the cracks were too messy. Mother-love was as fickle as Cupid’s arrows and – absolutely – she could manage without egg on her face.

As for that battery-hen of a Dave, Sally began to giggle. The real idiot was her ex; every woman in the office who had faced the indignity of lying on her back for hours had vowed ‘Never again!’ Now she was brimming with supreme confidence – had even joked about landing herself on her back with her leg in plaster – until she had signed up for the sponsored parachute jump. No matter that her instructor was a dismally no-nonsense guy that could give the Brothers Grimm a bad name. She had registered, learnt to jump and roll and scream “CHECK CANOPY!” Nothing and no-one would prevent her advanced leap into the modern world.

Sally had remained philosophical while she faced the indignities of kitting out. There was no way she was going to tell her male colleagues where all the buckles were tightened – she was convinced that a strait-jacket would have given

her more room to manoeuvre. With a heavy parachute on her back, she bravely lifted her legs – like a turkey - to clamber into the cockpit for hook-up and take-off. Men had obviously designed parachutes, aeroplanes and – definitely – cockpits.

Now she wasn't so sure. The engine stalled as her fellow trainee had crawled forward, positioned and leapt backwards. He disappeared from view and Sally felt the plane lurch, before steadily climbing in a prolonged cough. The hint was too much for her, as Sally's stomach churned and she screamed silently that she had made a mistake. If only there had been too much cloud and the drop had to be delayed until another week, or year. Damn that sponsorship. She had to jump. There was no other way to guarantee nearly a month's salary for her local neonatal unit.

She dragged herself forward in the single-seater plane, to the gap where the door should have been. With every ounce of her first urge to push, she remembered to keep her thumbs pointing outwards to avoid premature ejaculation. She drilled the steps, fell backwards screaming, "One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, CHECK CANOPY."

She had launched a new career, a new image and now she was laughing aloud with exhilaration. She'd done it. Who would have believed that Sally – 'I cannot face bungee jumping and bouncing back up' – had jumped and would land within three minutes. She shivered at the

memory of how many seconds she had if the chute had failed to open. Stuck in a harness with just two toggles to pull, turning left or right, she felt like she was hardly moving at all. It was so quiet. She was in a world of her own, cocooned like a foetus. A deep flush spread over her cheeks and neck and chest and – a cheeky thought rose from the image of the pilot seated in his cockpit, while she had to crawl out of the plane.

The pull of her harness grounded her thoughts into a vivid notion that ‘pigs might fly’. She hadn’t launched a new image at all. She should have had the cheek to ask Dave for his phone number anyway. Since when was antenatal reception a good place for original chat-up lines? He had made her laugh. Any man who could make a woman laugh through a contraction must have something more than looks on his credit card. Here was a man that had seen her on her back and the only way was up.

Sally’s stomach lurched. The ground was rushing towards her unnaturally fast – she couldn’t see the view below properly – surely the airfield would look more like bare tarmac than this muck-raking impression of disaster. But the only way was down. Drilling back into the routine of the jump, she turned and forced a mock-restrained position with bent knees. She must give and roll and turn and...

“Heck!” Branches broke her ungainly fall. She had pulled the toggles too hard and spiralled down off the edge of the landing strip. Her

limbs spread in shock before the foetal instinct saved her from a broken arm.

She lay on her back like a newborn baby, listening to her own gulping breaths and with a dreamy impression of a chicken flapping and feathers flying.

“I’m alive. I’M ALIVE. I’m - alive.”

For the first time in her action-packed life, Sally Reardon (nee Higginbottom) had nearly backed – not a winner - but a cheerleader. She had a story to tell that would have the women in roars of laughter back in the office. As for the men, she was not interested in telling any of them how she crash-landed with her legs in the air for all to see. It was sad that she would never meet Dave again, because nothing could make her laugh like the memory of his raucous chicken-impression. After all, if he had seen her on her back, then shaky steps back up and into his arms would be ample for hands-on introductions. Cupid’s arrows had begun to sting deliciously, like a chicken pecking seed before a roast dinner of stuffed bird with all the trimmings.

After a moment she realised she ought to move; see if her legs would hold up her shaky entry into the modern world. For now she just lay there, delighting in the sound of a crowing cockerel - terrified at the sight of an ungainly pink elephant, crashing through a hawthorn bush into a farmyard, in the middle of nowhere.

But she would never meet him again. She had no more plans for maternity - her hands were

full with career, childminders, and occasional drinks out with the girls. Anyway, he was from an Agency; he could be anywhere. Except that Sally had a knack for chicken wire, since the day she emerged from that delivery suite to stitch some order back into her patched-up life. She considered Yellow Pages - phoning every local agency that employed admin staff - but it would be hopeless, like finding a chicken in a haystack – or even a hawthorn bush - when jumping above an airfield. There were more painful matters to consider first, like the tear to her hand, when her friends mopped up her shaken pride and delivered her to the city centre hospital.

It could have been worse. Dave guffawed so loudly when she arrived in OPD that everyone stared at her - sporting a deep gash to her right hand. With a basket full of imaginary chicken eggs – Sally would smash each one into a most delicious omelette for two – and a scribbled exchange of phone numbers, Cupid retired early before this love story hatched to the patter of chicken feet. Never mind, this was her second time in stitches and she laughed to hear that most beautiful sound she would ever hear in her life – again.

THE END

DAFFODILS FOR MOTHER

Daisy stood in the park, her yellow anorak complementing the Spring flowers. She was nodding absentmindedly, as daffodils were dancing in the breeze.

“Just as mother used to say,” Daisy sighed. Her mother was fine until that last visit.

“But I mustn’t think about that now,” Daisy muttered decidedly.

She frowned, watching her daughter on the climbing frame. Harriet was steady on her feet.

“She’s too daring...”

“Mummee, watch me!”

“Harriet, come down now.”

“I did it Mummy. I did it.” She skipped ahead.

Daisy pounced, quickly deposited the toddler in the pushchair, distracting her with sing-song games. Dizzy from entertaining her three-year old, she grimaced that her own mum had never told her how much energy she would need.

“You’ll find out,” her Mum had smiled sagely. Daisy’s mother was like that. She never gave away what she was truly thinking; except later, much later, her words bouncing back unexpectedly. So true, so grave.

“Well, she was right this time,” Daisy frowned. It was hard to admit.

Harriet nodded off to sleep as the pushchair rolled along. She was tired; it was hard to push the thoughts away.

Mum welcomed Harriet, a red-faced bundle with a shock of dark hair.

Not that she said much then, either. Daisy's mouth twitched. Mum walked into the hospital ward, held Harriet without comment – perhaps she held a new grandchild every day...

'Go on, Gran, give us some pearls of wisdom then!' Jim teased.

"You'll find out," she smiled knowingly.

That infuriated Daisy. Trust mother to say something uncontestable. Not now, though. If only thoughts could sort themselves out.

Daisy took Harriet to the park most days. Most days, mum came too.

Today, well, there was a problem to sort out.

'Sunshine after rain.' Whatever made her think of that. Daffodils, ah yes, the daffodils." There were daffodils everywhere. Why had she only just noticed them? Golden sunshine heralding Spring; smiles after rain.

'You always know it's Spring when the daffs appear,' Daisy said it aloud. "Just as mother used to say." She sighed.

Daisy dragged the pushchair through the front door, as Harriet stirred from her nap.

"Want a drink, Mummee."

Later, Daisy frowned at the clock. At least another hour before Jim's home.

Much later, Daisy collapsed on the sofa. Harriet was now tucked up in bed. Jim relaxed with a newspaper; the TV droned in the background.

“We must get some daffs for Mothers Day.”

“You want daffodils?”

“For mother. It’s Mothers Day on Sunday.”

“Of course, we’ll go in the afternoon.”

Mmm. Daisy was already considering last Mothers Day. A tinge coloured Mum’s face as she was presented with the jolly bouquet.

“Daffs, Mum, your favourite.”

“Ah, Spring.” Nothing more. Just the hum of the engine as they returned home.

‘Mum’s your best friend,’ rumbled through her head, mile after mile. Well, this year would be different.

Sunday came quickly. Daisy smiled proudly, receiving her Mothers Day posy. Harriet held Jim’s hand, walked to the front and, holding the daffodils aloft, she returned to Daisy, a serious expression on her face. They hurried through lunch, packed toys and drinks into the car. It looked like they were going away for a week. A bunch of daffodils was in the boot, for mum.

Jim took Harriet to play, burn energy. Daisy picked up the daffs.

“Here you are, Mum. Daffs for Mothers Day.” Her mother always liked daffodils best. Daisy smiled, arranging the bright gold heads in a vase.

“I’ve got some news for you, Mum,” Daisy patted her tummy, cleared her throat. **“You’re going to have another grandchild.”**

There was an air of calm, as if her mother had a grandchild every day. After all, this was Daisy's second child.

"Remember, you said 'After rain, the sun always comes out' and..."

Daisy tweaked the last daffodil, turned abruptly. Harriet was already in the car. Jim glanced over, as he turned the key in the ignition, but Daisy was looking back at the graveyard. A bunch of daffodils bobbed in the breeze, nodding sagely.

"You always know it's Spring when the daffs appear," they agreed, a jolly company. Just as mother used to say....

THE END.

CITY OF PEACE?

Jill browsed through the trinket stores, uncertain how to spend her shekels. There were so many goods hanging up tantalisingly, blocking her path as she squeezed along the narrow streets. She hated bartering. She had hoped Roger might come along with her, but he had a different schedule. Well, she would see him later on. Apparently he was a determined tourist, she knew that much already. But Jill preferred a less demanding schedule. She was on holiday, after all, burning her bridges of the past. The early coach had been rather stuffy, and she was now happy to stroll along the shaded Suqs, pausing to drink freshly-squeezed orange juice.

“You buy, yess? You Eenglish?” The Arabic trader caught Jill’s attention. She had dawdled a moment too long.

“Er, I don’t know. I, I was looking for a necklace,” Jill stammered.

“I gif you very good price. You haf cash, yes? Dollars?” the trader insisted.

“No, no I’ve got shekels. But I’m not really sure,” Jill brushed along the display of trinkets, indecisive without the reassuring price tags. Shopping was so different here. She had no idea what offer to make on the necklace. She hated having to calculate the currency value. She

began to step backwards and was again too slow with her apologies.

“This is a bargain, yess? You have this one. Very good discount. You buy one for your friend too, yess?”

“No. Er, I mean, just this one. How much do I owe you?”

Jill retreated like a frightened rabbit, hurriedly stuffing her purse into her handbag. She grasped the paper bag with her dubious prize, conscious that she had been overcharged. The trader ignored her. He was already stringing half-intelligible phrases together, attracting his next customer. Glancing at her watch, Jill realised her precious free time had evaporated. She pushed her way through the crowds, dodging the traders and avoiding their eyes. Nervously Jill quickened her pace. She had promised to meet Roger by the Jaffa Gate, ready for the return coach. She was ten minutes late and the crush of bodies impeded her feeble progress. She dreaded the coach leaving her behind. She had no idea of the hotel's location and she dreaded using the unfamiliar taxis or foreign telephones.

Breathlessly Jill paused, emerging from the narrow street. The Jaffa Gate lay ahead, a minaret rising loftily above her. The citadel stood impregnable at the entrance to the city. Jill scanned the scene quickly, hopeful that Roger might be sitting in the corner cafe. There was no sign of him, only strangers relaxing in the shade with iced coffee and falafels.

Suddenly the atmosphere was torn apart. She screamed, terrified. A ghastly silence followed. She could hear sobbing. Poised on the corner of the street, she froze. Her body felt assaulted, as if something had gone right through her. Nearer the gateway, men and women were grovelling in the dust. Muffled screams sounded beyond the city wall. The gate blocked a scene of certain devastation beyond her view. Jill shook uncontrollably. She could not think. She could not feel. Somewhere in the recesses of her mind she knew that a bomb had gone off. The sirens seemed to rise unmasked, wailing their route around the city wall. Jill heard sobs rising in her throat and she stumbled backwards. The crunch of glass dragged her gaze to her feet. Scattered shards lay in the dust around her. Glass trinkets beaded on her open toes.

Then something snapped inside her. "Must go.. I have to get away. Now." She turned and ran down the half-familiar street. "Back! Back!" A moment? An eternity? Jill ran for her life. Terrified of the bomb, terrified of imagined carnage, Jill pushed through stragglers, dodging down a side alley. Away from the shops, away from the crowds, away from the fragile map she had carried in her head. She did not stop until exhaustion forced her to pause in strangled gasps. The blood was beating in her brain, sweat pouring down her forehead and trickling down her back. In the recesses of her mind she was trying to remember something important, but her thoughts were in a fog of shock and fear. The few people she saw ignored her. The traders had shuttered their glittering caverns

against the violent world. She was just a tourist, assaulted by the midday sun. Her bright hat was rammed down on her damp head. She stumbled along, hopelessly lost.

Stifling a scream, she almost ran into an Israeli soldier. His machine gun was poised. Jill backed away, but he was not interested in her. She was just a foreigner in a city torn apart by conflict. The shock calmed her down. Now she realised where she was. Jill was very close to the Wailing Wall, the edge of the temple site and the notorious tunnel that had fuelled the latest conflict. As a tour party they had visited that scene earlier in the day and she now stepped through an archway into an expansive square. Military and religious festivals were held here. Jill watched entranced as men bobbed down in prayer, their shawls dazzling in the sunshine. Israeli soldiers were talking nervously in groups.

Jill stumbled across the open space, feeling vulnerable in a strange and hostile land. She remembered Roger and realised that she was supposed to be meeting him.

“But where? What shall I do now. Oh God,” Jill wiped a stray tear from her face. Finally she was calm. Her thoughts organised themselves unasked. Gradually it dawned on her why she had been so terrified. It was not just the bomb that had made her run blindly away. In the back of her mind, unadmitted, was the thought that Roger had been waiting for her. Perhaps he had been beyond the Jaffa Gate, watching the cars and buses go by on the busy road circling the Old

City. It was possible he had been watching for the coach before she arrived.

“What if...” but she shuddered and refused to think of the possibilities.

Jill was surprised how important Roger had suddenly become to her. It was only a matter of days since Jill had come on this trip of a lifetime, intent on reassessing her own life. She had not expected to meet anyone, travelling alone. But each day she joined the coach tour, Roger had been there, beckoning her to sit next to him. They had compared notes, taken the same photos at all the tourist sites. They had begun to laugh at their shared perspectives through a camera lens.

“But now, where is he? Where would he go?” Jill felt her intestines gripped in a terrible fear. She stumbled through the city gate. It had a strange name, like many of the routes from the Old City of Jerusalem. She knew she could rejoin the main road from here. But where was the hotel?

“Jill, Jill, over here.”

She stopped in her tracks and looked. Then she saw a ginger head bobbing towards her, through the crowds of tourists on the pavement. Her heart jumped with sudden recognition.

“Roger, Roger,” she stammered too quickly.

“We’ve been looking for you. We were getting really worried,” Roger began.

“The bomb, did you hear the bomb?” Jill felt the tears pricking the back of her eyes.

“We saw the police cars. But the Israeli soldiers moved us on some time ago. They wouldn’t let a

coach wait outside the Jaffa Gate for long.” Roger began to guide her along the busy street. “But the coach, why did they move the coach? They couldn’t have known about the bomb.” Jill spat out the words on a rising crescendo of fears.

“Oh, Jill, did you see what happened? We were worried sick. We didn’t know whether to wait, or to return to the hotel and phone the hospital.” Roger paused as Jill began to sob with relief. She was safe and the rest of the tour party were safe.

As Roger helped her up the steps of the coach, Jill smiled faintly at the other passengers. Tomorrow the tour would be taking them up to Galilee, away from the crowded streets of Jerusalem. Jill relaxed with a growing sense that Roger would be staying very close to her for the rest of the trip.

THE END.

PHOTO ON THE MANTELPIECE

Carole glanced at the wall clock above the fireplace. It was 4 O'clock and Jack should be home soon. He was always late, she expected it. She peered through the lace curtains, hardly aware of the peeling paint that decorated the frames. She had no time for such things.

"Not since Bob." She twitched at the unwelcome reminder. It had been some time since she had last consciously thought of him. Of course, he was always there just below the surface. But her mind had reorganised her thoughts, tidied up anything beyond the daily routine. She dusted her life, along with his photograph on the mantelpiece. It was 14 long years since he left, looking so smart in his forces uniform. She had received the formal notification, insulting in its brevity. After 17 years in the RAF, his life was summarily dismissed,

"Flight Lieutenant Robert James Phillips, confirmed dead on active service in the Falkland Islands."

It had taken her months to discover torn fragments of his last days. Bob had never been the sort to write letters. A curtain was drawn over most of his active service. But life at the base had kept her fully occupied. They had organised most of her social life, and she had been drawn onto the usual round of committees. Of course, her life had always revolved around the children, driving them between school and social activities with military precision. Carole

had been so pleased with their last posting near Edinburgh. The base had been closed down since then, due to Government cutbacks. But at least her family had managed to visit her, renewing contact with their grandchildren.

“Where has Jack got to?” she wondered, a frown deepening its familiar groove. “He should have arrived by now.”

Her son was a poor time-keeper, but he always phoned if he was delayed. The phone seemed to confirm her expectations.

“Jack! Where are you? I wasn’t really worried, but,”

“Mother,” Jack forced his way into the conversation. “Listen. This is important. It’s about Dad.”

“What are you talking about, Jack, are you on your way yet? I expected you over an hour ago. Susan’s coming to supper, and...” Carole continued to spill her jumbled thoughts of the previous hour.

“I will be late, much later. I don’t know whether, but we have to talk. I’ve found out something.” Jack seemed suddenly reluctant to say more.

“Jack, are you all right? You’ve not got yourself into some sort of trouble, have you?” Carole could not understand why there should be a delay.

A firm rap on the door distracted her.

“Wait a minute, Jack, there’s someone at the door.”

Carole’s heart jumped when she saw the two uniformed officers. She dredged the depths for her usual composure, but the reminder of

Robert and his best friend Tom had stirred the silt on 14 years of buried memories.

"Mrs Robert Phillips? Perhaps we might step inside, it would be a little more... private."

Carole's face was ashen as she led the men into her parlour.

"If you will excuse me, the phone," Carole left the room abruptly. She picked up the receiver, but the line was dead. It unnerved her and her mind grasped at straws, wondering what kind of trouble Jack could be in. He had always been such a good boy, reliable except for his time-keeping. She frowned as she rejoined the officers, annoyed that they were present, disturbing her thoughts.

"I'm sorry," she said half-heartedly. "But my son's coming round later. I really must get on with supper."

"We won't take up much of your time, Mrs Phillips," replied the older man who had addressed her earlier. His companion seemed to be the silent partner, merely there for observation, Carole realised.

"Anyone would think this was an interrogation," flashed through her mind, as formal introductions were made.

"We are sorry to call so late in the day, but this matter is pressing and requires urgent resolution. Your husband, Mrs Phillips, when did you last see him?"

Momentarily Carole's mind blanked out. "After all these years?" She surfaced, but could not understand the question.

“Mrs Phillips, perhaps you need to give it some thought, but it is imperative that we discover your husband’s last movements.”

“But he’s dead, it’s been so long. I don’t know,” Carole began. “Your office informed me of his death. I have the notification.”

“Your husband was on active service in the Falklands, Mrs Phillips. Did you have any further contact with him?”

“But how could I, he wasn’t there very long. Anyway he was hopeless at writing letters.” Carole was beginning to get annoyed.

“Perhaps you had a telephone call?” the man persisted.

“No, of course not. We never, we didn’t have that sort of relationship. I would have seen him when he next came home, only...” her voice trailed off.

“Perhaps you can give the matter your consideration. This is my phone number. I will be in touch in a few days. Your son, I will need to speak to him, of course. We will use the proper channels.”

“Yes, but he’s on leave at the moment, surely it can wait?” Carole had already opened the door to expel them. She knew that the meal would be late now. She dropped the card on the hall table in disgust.

“Men, they have no consideration.” Carole grabbed her apron and rushed to prepare the meal. “Well, Susan can help, even if she is still wearing her office suit.”

The doorbell stopped Carole in her tracks and she rushed to open the door, relieved to find Susan perfectly on time.

“Always punctual, just like her Dad,” Carole smiled as she ushered her daughter into the kitchen, motioning her to dump her case and jacket.

“Hi, Mum, you look rather flustered.”

“I’m behind, I’ve not long had the meat in. There, help me chop up some veg,” Carole bustled through the chores expertly, passing on her orders.

“Oh, Mum, I can’t stay late tonight. I’ve got a report to write.”

Carole ignored her daughter.

“Listen to me, Susan, there’s something the matter. Jack was on the phone.”

“Oh Jack, yes, shouldn’t he be here by now? I thought he was on leave.”

“He is, but he’s not arrived yet. He does talk to you, Susan. Has he told you anything lately?”

“No, but I’ve not seen him. I mean, I thought we could catch up a bit tonight,” Susan looked puzzled. “He’s not in any kind of trouble, is he Mum?”

“Trouble, what do you mean, trouble?”

“I don’t know, but why are you so worried about him? I mean, he’s always late isn’t he?”

The doorbell interrupted any further communication and Carole was almost jolly when she finally ushered her son into the dining room. Susan decided to leave the conversation to her mum, whilst she began to serve the meal.

“Jack, what’s happening. The line went dead, why didn’t you phone again?”

“Mother, those visitors you had, were they from the Air Force?”

“Well, yes, as a matter of fact they were. But how did you know? Jack, you’re not in some sort of trouble, are you?”

“Of course not. But I’ve found out something. I was looking through the records and, well, I just thought I would take a peek at Dad’s.”

“Oh Jack, surely that’s illegal? What did you want to do that for?”

“Well I just thought, maybe it would tell me a bit more. I mean, we never really knew what happened to Dad. They didn’t exactly explain, did they?”

“But Jack, the Force is always like that, surely? They just left me to clear out the quarters on my own. No assistance, with two young children, and then they had the nerve to charge me for Blu-Tack marks left on the walls.”

“Yes Mother, but that’s standard procedure. But, about Dad, I was surprised by the security classification. When I read ‘Missing, presumed dead’, well I thought we knew he had been shot down. I thought he was just not shipped home.”

“It was a war Jack, things were hurried, but I got the notification eventually.”

“Yes, that’s strange, you see I tried the computer later, when I had a chance, and security clearance had been withdrawn. Then I tried to check Tom’s records. You told me he escaped alive from the same plane, and they were meant to be good friends.”

“Tom, yes he escaped. But Jack, he never got in touch after that. I thought, perhaps, well maybe after a while...”

“Mother, his records said ‘Killed in active service’. But I checked his photo. It’s strange, but I could have sworn I saw him.”

“Seen Tom. Jack, what do you mean? We’ve never seen Tom, not since your father was killed.”

“Exactly. But remember when Princess Di visited Argentina last year? There was someone in the crowd, I don’t think he realised the camera was on him, but he was the spitting image of Tom.”

“Tom, Tom’s alive? I thought, when he didn’t show up...Oh God.”

Carole gradually realised her daughter was supporting her, calling her name. She sounded frightened.

“Mum, whatever’s the matter? What’s all this talk about Tom, anyway? It’s not as if Father’s still alive.”

Carole ignored the conversation around her and could hardly face the meal set before her. She was back in a world of 14 years ago and the long months of waiting, hoping to hear from Tom. It had always been Tom, since the first day he strolled into the house with Bob. She never thought that Bob had suspected, but then their relationship had never been particularly close. Of course, Tom had phoned her, and written. She still had the letters. But she had thought that after the war he would come back, especially since Bob had died. Why had he never answered her letters? The years had cast a thick film of dust on her disappointment. She never looked beyond her immediate duties after that, when Tom failed to come for her.

Carole stared into the fire. The papers curled at the edges, turning ashen in the dying embers.

Streaks of red ribbon remained in angry protest. Jack had found out what happened all those years ago. Tom had used the opportunity of an unidentified corpse, to escape his military tour of duty. Arrested following his recent sighting in Argentina, Tom had been relocated to Britain, where he faced a Court Martial. Carole's shoulders tensed back to attention, the aggrieved widow of Flight Lieutenant Robert Phillips. She would be visiting her husband's grave in the Falklands, laying to rest her ghosts of the past. After all, she had a son in the Forces now.

THE END.

TERROR OF THE FLAMES

“Oyez! Oyez! Leave your homes. By order.” The crier continued up the hill, tolling his bell. His voice resonated along the narrow street.

“Dad, come on. We have to leave. The pans, I must take the pans.”

“What’s the girl talking about?” the old man muttered. He opened his eyes for a moment, but already he was nodding back into kindly sleep. Banging aroused him.

“The fire. It’s coming nearer. Old John, are you there?”

“What’s the fuss? Can’t a man think in peace,” John murmured, pulling the blanket closer around him.

“Dad. Get up. We have to go.” A bowl smashed to the floor.

“Come on, Dad. We have to leave.”

The old man moved unsteadily through the door. “Doesn’t the girl know I can’t manage without my stick?” he mumbled. People darted past him into the maze of streets, dirt tracks wandered around jumbled shacks. The houses had grown up like weeds, and the Reaper was now hacking through them, burning corn and weeds together. Jogged along the ebbing tide, the old man reached out unsteadily, smashing his wrist against a door post.

“Where’s she gone? Why’s she hurrying so?” John stumbled, bobbed along on the fearful tide of humanity, smashed like flotsam onto the leeward shore.

“Don’t leave me,” he whimpered. “It’s not my fault, I don’t know what to do.” Shadows flitted past him, the red sky flickering unnaturally. John could smell smoke. He cried hopelessly, as a gull on a deserted beach, “Eliza!” Coughing, the wind brought wave on wave of blackened soot. John trotted forwards suddenly, lost in a long-forgotten memory. His little Eliza was lost. He had to find her among the bonfires of London. The Guy was to be burnt. The year was 1605.

“Harry was with her,” John wandered. “It’s not my fault.” His little Eliza was three years old last Holy Day. Surely his wife knew she was only playing on the streets. “I know where to find her,” he declared, his voice false with bravado.

John joined the milling crowds, dragging firewood towards the rising pyre. He hesitated in his tracks, a momentary panic as dusk settled in for the night and darkness dropped like a blanket. Firewood crackled and people cheered. Crowds jostled for position as sparks flew into the air. John shivered as warmth assaulted through his layers of clothes. He was very close to the fire now, too close.

“The Guy, the Guy,” chanted the crowds, dragging the effigy to the flames.

John was agitated. Where else could he look for the child? “She must have tagged along with Harry,” he muttered. “She likes to play at ‘bonfires’.” The warmth on his skin reminded him of the hot punch soon to slip down his

throat at home. He coughed, shuffling back with the others.

“Eliza! Eliza!” he screeched. Sick with terror, he heard only his own screams. His body strained as a man laid out on the rack.

“Let go of me! Let go of me!” John sobbed uncontrollably. Only he could see the bundle of rags. It could have been anything. But he had seen the discarded doll. Eliza’s doll. He was in the despair of eternal purgatory. Crowds parted in a silent wave of terror around John. Long, mangled sobs emitted from John’s throat, in the silent wake of the crowds. The bundle of rags had been found.

Old John stirred from his confusion. “I must hurry,” he muttered. His feeble strength was ebbing away, a remnant of the tide. The red glow seemed brighter now. Menace pervaded each house. Everything was red. The shadows seemed alive.

Dirty tears trickled down the old man’s cheeks. He tried to move, but he was caged in pain. His arm hung limply by his side. He coughed repeatedly. Soon, his young wife would come. He knew that. The bonfire, was it only yesterday? The fire that took his little girl Eliza.

“Oh God! Why did she wear the ribbons? The bonnet?” His young wife clutched the little bonnet. Red ribbons for his little girl with the pretty curls. His wife’s words floated through vacant air.

“Wrap the shawl around her, John. She will be so cold in her little grave.”

“Cold, so cold.” He shivered, but the muddled thoughts would no longer order themselves. Old John understood it all now. The sleep of the innocent, as smoke had lured his little girl irretrievably into death. He gave himself up to thoughts of his dead wife, and of his little girl. His second, much later daughter - she meant nothing to him.

But she was left to deal with old John’s body. In the tired dawn they found him, huddled up in a corner a few streets away. The last embers of the Great Fire of London were disclaiming their power, the morning seeming reluctant to declare itself. The fire had not touched old John. His heart gave out, even as the wind had swept the flames away from his empty shell.
THE END.

DANGEROUS RIVER

Ducks bobbed on the swelling tide. A Grebe pierced the waters and disappeared beneath the surface sheen, reappearing upriver with silver gleaming from its beak. The anglers on the further shore looked disgruntled; they could not land a fish so easily. The reeds were bending under the strain and volume of water. The relentless tide was forcing its will on any debris, buoying it along. The sky was ashen and worried looking. The waters reflected the uncertainty, refusing to admit anything within its depths.

“It could rain later,” Richard commented. Helen did not bother to dispute the point, she could see the way his eyes scanned across the horizon before he gave his sailor’s verdict.

“I’ll get the waterproofs out ready.” Helen had already jumped below deck and was rummaging in the locker. She glanced up nervously, trying to keep her invisible link with the cockpit.

“Henry!” she warned. The tone made the toddler pause as he was holding the grab rail. He was securely strapped into the cockpit, “But you cannot be too careful,” Helen murmured.

Richard suddenly jumped up. He seemed to be twitching and ready for action. Helen emerged hurriedly on deck and stood hesitantly, in case she was needed. They saw the large cruiser heading towards them, the reverse thrust of the engine protesting loudly. The boat steadied

itself, almost becalmed, and glided neatly parallel with the cruiser in front. The skipper stepped easily onto the other boat and rapidly tied the stern line. Another member of the crew was already passing him the bow line, and the vessel was neatly secured against the insistent tide.

“Boat!” pointed the toddler. Helen glanced at her husband, who seemed surplus to the proceedings. It was good to see that some people knew how to handle the larger craft. Too often they had watched the inexperienced clash with the tide.

“Well, they soon learn their lesson at Reedham,” Helen thought to herself. They had watched boat after boat take no account of the tide when they tried to moor. The engines had screamed with horror as they engaged reverse too late. The dents and scrapes on the hire craft told their tale. But Richard was understandably nervous for his own vessel.

“Goot day to you” the new skipper pronounced carefully. His strong gutturals jarred on Helen’s ears, but she smiled back politely. She was more than a little curious what brought this man to the Norfolk Broads. Now Helen and Richard were able to stare at the cruiser more obviously, as they chatted with the older couple. The boat was well-maintained, obviously seagoing, but its port of origin was Southampton. They had seen too many floating caravans on the Broads, that lurched unresponsively in their skippers’ hands. The hire cruisers acted like a hippopotamus in a mud bath; completely unsinkable but unwillingly turned.

“We haf met before, yes?” the skipper carried along the conversation with the same persuasion as the oncoming tide. “It was last year, perhaps. You held a baby.”

“Oh, Henry, well he’s rather bigger than that now,” Helen laughed.

“He was a tiny baby, yes. You carried him in front of you, with, what do you call it?”

“Oh, the baby sling. Well, that was the year before then, he was very tiny.” Helen mused fondly on the idea as she watched her tempestuous toddler who was trying yet again to climb overboard.

Something distracted the older man for a moment, and Helen half-consciously thought the conversation had reached a natural end. Richard was busily fussing with the sails, checking the rigging and preparing the boat. He was obviously keen to move off with the slackening tide. It would be easier to move down river then, Helen realised.

“Why are those people waving near the bridge?” Helen couldn’t understand it. The railway crossing was open, obviously no train was expected. The river seemed relatively calm. The hurrying boats were no longer queuing to moor, or tentatively pushing through the narrowing gap. A horn sounded from one of the boats.

“Surely that’s a distress signal?” she puzzled, straining to comprehend. Then her eyes were drawn to the sodden rags. The tide was bringing in strange unwieldy debris, but slowly, as if in slow motion. The relentless push of the waters had eased off, they seemed to have lost their earlier force. The wind was blowing more

persuasively, rippling the disgruntled water surface, which shivered across its width. The river was disclaiming its involvement in the incident.

Helen cried out as the realisation assaulted her. Those rags were not just debris.

“It’s a child. Oh, God, it’s a child.” She clutched Henry to her tightly. He whimpered, but she only enclosed him in an enduring embrace. She would not let him go, “No, never,” as she gulped for air. She was frozen into the unnatural scene unfolding before her eyes.

The splash shook her senses. A man was thrashing in the tide, his lifejacket glaring defiantly on the grey waters. He smashed into the waves in outrage, a smouldering ember on a lifeless hearth. He seemed to advance on the bedraggled bundle, snatching it from an early grave.

The shore became suddenly busy with people trying to help. Helen felt the lurch of the boat as she realised Richard was jumping ashore. He was running urgently, the flash of yellow suddenly hurled from his grasp. The buoyancy aid splashed obligingly near the man, tiring as his goal was almost achieved. Men from the boatyard completed the rescue and Helen stirred quickly as the disaster was averted. She hurried below deck, bundling her son with her. She was too terrified to let go of him for a moment, but she struggled to bring up a blanket to wrap around the sodden child.

BEST LAID PLANS

Later in the day, the rain had insistently dampened down the wind. On the darkened waters the drips persisted in ever expanding circles. Richard had packed away the sails in disgust and Helen was now looking forward to the local bar food that was already sending its tempting aromas in her direction. Henry was tucked up for the night early, coccooned in his berth and checked frequently by a suddenly protective Helen. The older man on the next cruiser had been taken to the hospital for observation, following his ordeal in the cold waters of the Broads. The child had been rushed to the nearest emergency unit, where her parents were soon to face the assault of the press. Helen wondered aloud at the determined foreigner, who was set to become a local folk hero.

“You just cannot tell about people, can you?” she murmured.

“What’s that, dear?” Richard’s head was raised above his newspaper, his mind already lost in the football results.

THE END

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Julie was nervously sipping from the cup. She glanced around the room, but no-one was interested in her. They all seemed rather tense as well, except the mother in hot pursuit of her toddler, racing along the corridor. She wished Fred had come with her. Whyever did he think his meeting was so important, more crucial than supporting her? She glared at the couple in the corner, annoyed at the way they were muttering and holding hands. Why wasn't Fred here, it was his responsibility. She took another sip from the cup, grimacing in disgust.

Of course, Fred had joined her for that first visit to the doctor's. He had been far more nervous than she was, as they were ushered into the consulting room. The doctor's warm smile relaxed them, while questions were asked and dates scrutinised.

"So that will be the 17th of July, Mrs Williamson," the doctor confirmed.

Julie grinned at Fred and Fred looked rather sheepish.

"Well, what should I do doctor. I mean, is there anything else?" Julie panicked for a moment.

"No, that's everything for now. Just see the receptionist to arrange another appointment in 3 weeks time. We can discuss everything then,"

the doctor reassured her. "By the way, congratulations."

Julie retreated from the surgery, grasping leaflets with painfully glossy titles. Fred was keen to return to his office. He said he had work to do, but she knew he wanted to brag to his mates. Julie was a little more cautious, wanting to hug her secret for a while longer.

"Mrs Williamson. Mrs Julie Williamson. This way, please."

Julie jumped as her name was called, she had been miles away. She dropped the cup hurriedly and rushed behind the nurse. If only Fred was here now. She was ushered into the room, whilst the nurse busied herself with the paperwork. Julie perched on the edge of the bed, feeling ridiculous in the formal surroundings. The nurse checked her dates, then bustled around her like a farmyard hen, nipping and prodding. The pressure tightened on her armband and Julie watched mesmerised as the gadget wheezed. Thankfully her blood pressure was normal and she began to relax as the nurse scribbled on her notes.

"You've brought a specimen? Good." The nurse swept it away from her and Julie wondered how many times she would have to provide a sample jar before she lost her embarrassment. Julie looked rather horrified when she stepped on the scales, but it was to be expected.

"You've been sent for blood tests?" Julie stammered the dates and was relieved to find the procedures so straightforward. She was beginning to get used to this. Well, what did it

matter if Fred wasn't with her, he was the one who would be missing out.

"If you would like to lie on the bed, the doctor will be with you shortly."

Julie stared at the ceiling, wondering what further indignities she would have to suffer, before she could scamper away from the hospital like a frightened rabbit. Not that Julie felt particularly like rushing anywhere, not any longer.

"Mrs Williamson. This won't take very long. We just need to establish the age of the foetus."

Julie pursed her lips. She knew perfectly well how pregnant she was. As if the doctor could tell her anything different. Her cycle was always regular.

"This will feel a bit cold," the doctor warned her a moment too late. Julie gasped as the gel was spread over her tummy and she felt the probe rolling around. She gritted her teeth, feeling like a waterlogged balloon, longing for the moment she could empty her overstretched bladder. She stared at the small monitor hopefully, uncertain of identifying anything at all on the scan. She wanted to see a baby waving back at her, or at least sucking its thumb. The doctor seemed to be concentrating particularly hard and Julie briefly caught a movement on the screen before the image disappeared in a mass of grey dots.

"If you would just like to wait there, Mrs Williamson, I will ask someone more senior to check you over."

Julie wondered where the doctor thought a marooned whale could hide, exposed with a sticky wet belly. Julie was plotting her

persuasion techniques on Fred for the next appointment, when the door opened.

"Hello, Mrs Williamson," the doctor's name disappeared in the general blur of medical personnel she had already greeted that morning. But she remembered the "Senior" in his title.

"You've seen the scan, Mrs Williamson," the doctor seemed to pause.

"Well, only briefly, I really couldn't make it out." Julie began to wonder what she was meant to see. The doctor swept the probe across her tummy again and she felt the same uncomfortable pressure.

"Is that the baby, doctor?"

"Yes, there's a foetus. You can see the heart beating."

"It's very small," Julie frowned.

"That's perfectly normal, Mrs Williamson." The image froze as the doctor played around with the image, seeming to draw dot-to-dot. He scribbled down the measurements while Julie contemplated the likely distance to the toilet.

"You will notice, Mrs Williamson," the doctor continued, sweeping the probe and severely worrying her bladder. The image appeared on the screen. Whyever was he measuring the baby again? A stray thought hovered on the edge of Julie's mind, as the doctor continued.

"We have another foetus here. You have twins," he concluded.

Julie gulped and her jaw froze half-open.

"Twins? You mean there are two babies. Are you sure?" The doctor obligingly swept from one image to the next and Julie didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

She left the hospital in a state of shock, clutching the notes that confirmed the hilarious nightmare she was facing.

“Two, there’s two of them. I’m having twins.”

Julie was still trying hard to assimilate the facts when she reached home. She phoned in sick at work, she could not face the quizzical expressions of her office mates.

The phone screamed for her attention.

“Julie. Why aren’t you in the office? They said you phoned in sick.” Fred sounded more than a little irritated by the disruption to normality.

“Fred, I’ve got some news,” Julie began.

“Julie, everything’s all right, isn’t it? I mean, the baby’s OK.”

“Oh yes, the babies are fine.”

“Julie? You sound strange. The doctor did say the baby’s OK, didn’t he?”

“The babies, Fred. The babies. We’re going to have twins.”

“Oh my God!” Jim could think of nothing further to say. When he came rolling home rather later that evening, Julie could see that he had been celebrating with his mates. He looked distinctly pleased with himself.

Over the next few months Julie and Fred planned the birth in meticulous detail. The doctor warned them that twins usually arrived early and they recalculated 3rd July, circling the date in bright red on their calendar. They even managed to persuade Julie’s parents to reschedule their holiday, to help with the new arrivals. Julie’s notes expanded with her girth, until her ‘shelf’ had room for not one but two coffee mugs. The slightest exertion left her

breathless and Fred was looking baggy under the eyes. The nursery was arranged with two cots and two of everything else. Julie was offered a 'trial of labour' and hoped desperately that a Caesarean would prove unnecessary. The detailed scan ended with Julie clutching a blurred photo of arms, legs and heads in a grey muddle. It had been difficult to work out, but Julie was pleased to inform the absentee Fred that one baby was definitely a boy. They began to buy some blue outfits and sailor suits and speculated on the sex of the second baby.

The birth was rather dramatic. Julie was rushed into the operating theatre for an emergency Caesarean when one baby showed signs of distress. Fred had been left pacing the corridor, unable to wait in the visitor's room. The entire medical staff of the hospital seemed to be coming and going. Fred described later seeing two incubators rushed into the operating theatre. He had watched one incubator whisked hurriedly past him and then another, then one rushed back again. He could not glimpse the babies swaddled in layers of cloths.

As Julie surfaced, still groggy from the anaesthetic, Fred was repeating something about the babies.

"But Fred, they're OK aren't they? Is the other one a boy or a girl?"

"Girls, Julie, they're all girls."

"But Fred, one was a boy, I saw the scan."

"Julie, they're all girls and they're fine. All three of them."

THE END.

BEST LAID PLANS

FURTHER INFO:

wmwordsworth1850-tips@yahoo.co.uk