

Brixworth and District u3a - Writing for Fun Group

A New Year's Resolution

Sandra was feeling very down and weepy, mind you, she always did at this time of year. Christmas was over and now it was Twelfth Night and she'd taken down and packed away all her Christmas decorations until next year. She looked around the room and sighed a big, tearful sigh. Everything looked dull and miserable which was exactly how Sandra felt.

She was just sifting through all the Christmas Cards she'd received and reading the little messages written from old friends and acquaintances. She realised they were the same every year - "Hope you are well". "All fine here". "Don't know where this year has gone"!! "We must make the effort to get together in the New Year". "I'll write, I promise". She also realised that she wrote exactly the same messages in her cards but never did get around to writing or phoning as promised.

Some of the cards were from people she hadn't seen in years. It would be interesting to catch up with them again. Or would it???. Would they still have anything in common? Most of them were married and had families, although she supposed that the children were probably in their early teens now and she'd probably only met them once and wouldn't know them if she passed them on the street.

Some cards had new email addresses written in them with a plea for her to get in touch. It would be a very easy thing to do so why didn't she sign on to her laptop and drop them a few lines? Sitting there pondering the idea, Sandra decided she just couldn't be bothered, and besides, she didn't really have anything to say. Nothing positive or of any interest anyway.

"Oh dear Sandra, you really are feeling sorry for yourself, come on now, give yourself a little shake. Remember your New Year's Resolution. Shape up, lose weight and try something completely different".

"Hang on a minute, who said that?" Sandra looked at the card she was holding and saw a really cheerful looking Snowman peering up at her. She shook her head and thought she must be going mad. She'd obviously spent too much time on her own over the Christmas and New Year period and now she was believing that a Snowman on a Christmas Card was talking to her.

She gave herself a little shake, looked through the rest of the cards, made notes in her address book of any new contact details and then separated the picture half of the card from the greeting side. She would give the pictures to her next door neighbour who was a preschool teacher and liked to take the cards to school for the young ones to practise their cutting out skills. It was a good way of recycling the cards.

That job done, Sandra wondered what she could do for the rest of the evening. She'd seen her neighbours set off for their nightly jog so she couldn't drop in on them for a chat. No, there was nothing else for it, she'd have to put the kettle on and make a brew and perhaps have a biscuit or cake or two! As she got up from her chair, something slipped off her lap and landed on the floor. It was the card with the cheeky Snowman on and it had landed right next to the Adult Learning brochure that had arrived through her letterbox a couple of days earlier.

She was appalled with herself at how difficult she found it to just bend down to retrieve the card which had slipped halfway into the brochure that in turn had worked itself under the coffee table. At last Sandra managed to crawl under the coffee table and grab the brochure. Emerging from the other side of the table having bumped her head in the process, she managed to get to her feet and stand upright, huffing and puffing like the Big Bad Wolf. "Oh my goodness, I'm so unfit" she gasped. Falling back into her chair she rested her head back and closed her eyes for a while. On opening them, she found the brochure lying open across her knees on the page advertising various Art and Design courses. "It must be a sign" she thought and started reading about all the possibilities open to her. The course that caught her eye was due to start the following Saturday and was described as an 'Art/Paper Crafts for Easter' 'Fun for everyone and designed to unlock one's inner quirkiness'.

Without wasting another second, Sandra grabbed her laptop, signed on to the Adult Learning site and managed to book the course of her choice. She sat feeling elated with a Cheshire Cat sized smile on her face. "There, that shows you Snowman" she said, looking around for the christmas card but it was nowhere to be seen, how very odd!! "Oh well, I expect it'll turn up again at some point".

The day of the course arrived and Sandra had a leisurely walk to the college that was about 2 miles away. She arrived with plenty of time to spare and enjoyed talking with all her fellow students and the Tutor who was a bright and breezy, friendly young lady.

Over the coming weeks leading up to Easter, most of the students designed their Easter Cards depicting little fluffy yellow chicks, daffodils, brightly decorated eggs, sunny skies and Easter bunnies. However, Sandra showed her true quirkiness by featuring a very cheeky looking Snowman holding a basket full of Easter Eggs. It

was still wearing a nice warm scarf and had a carrot for its nose and two eyes of coal but on its head she'd painted the most beautiful Easter Bonnet.

The tutor loved Sandra's idea. She thought an Easter Snowman design was amazingly quirky but quite feasible as it was more than possible to get snowy weather in March or April. And who said Snowmen were just for Christmas??

Sandra was very pleased with her Easter Cards and really enjoyed sending them to her friends with little notes saying they were of her own design. She'd actually received several replies and was looking forward to meeting up with three old school friends over at Dunstable Downs for a nice walk and picnic when the weather was warmer. She was confident that she'd have lots to talk about and would easily be able to keep up a good strolling pace now that she'd shed a few pounds and toned up.

She still hadn't been able to put her hands on the Snowman Christmas Card, that was a real mystery, but she would be forever grateful to her cheeky little muse, for encouraging her and making her stick to her 2023 New Years Resolution.

Eileen Truby - January 2023.

The Interloper

She is at a friend's house for dinner when suddenly a man walks in unexpectedly. Everyone looks up and the man smiles and nods to each of them.

"Hello and thank you for inviting me Charles" he says to my host's husband. "I hope I am not late but I walked here and it took a little longer than expected" He handed Charles a bottle of wine and to Charles wife Jenny a small bouquet of flowers.

Charles looked at Jenny who slightly frowned at her husband who also looked a little bewildered but said to the man "No of course Martin let me introduce you to everyone else."

It was clear that Martin vaguely knew some of the guests, when he got to me Charles introduced me as Jenny's friend Maria. Martin looked at Maria and asked her if they had met before and that she looked vaguely familiar. Maria had never seen the man before but being put on the spot she replied "Maybe; I am involved in a number of groups in my spare time so we may have come across each other on a previous occasion" However Maria was certain that she didn't know this man and had never seen him before.

One of the other guests another woman from Charles office looked at Maria and to break the awkward silence said "Well that nice it evens up the numbers."

Maria thought to herself that she didn't really need or want the numbers 'evening up' she was quite happy being the singleton and had really only come to support Jenny who had thought it would be boring listening to everyone talking shop.

All the guests started to relax as Charles handed round more drinks and Jenny excused herself to finish off the meal. As she left the room Maria stood up and said that she would help her. Once in the Kitchen Maria asked Jenny about Martin. Jenny shook her head "Charles never mentioned him to me and seemed as surprised as I was to see him just walk into the sitting room. He has never been here before so a bit presumptuous of him. I don't think Charles would have intentionally invited him without telling me. Anyway I have laid another place at the table and there's plenty of food to go around."

Jenny called everyone through to the dining room and as they all found their seats Martin moved towards Maria. "I have put you here Martin next to Charles and Yvonne as you know them both from the office" Jenny said.

"Oh no" he replied smiling "I intend to spend the evening getting to know this lovely young woman" and sat himself next to Maria in Jenny's seat. Maria and Jenny exchanged looks but rather than upset anyone Maria smiled a little stiffly and Jenny moved to the place she had set for Martin.

Immediately he sat down Martin started to talk to Maria telling her about his job. He then asked Maria what she did for a living. Maria wasn't comfortable with Martin and didn't want to give away too much information so she mentioned the well-known local company where she was a PA saying that she was busy but what she enjoyed most was the work she did with the youth group where she volunteered. She then turned her attention to her neighbour to start another conversation. However Martin interrupted and tapping her arm regained her attention and continued to ask her questions. Some seemed a bit too personal to Maria especially when he asked if she had a partner or did she live alone. Maria was very uncomfortable as Martin continued to monopolise her time. She needed to put some space between herself and this man so she stood at the end of the first course to help Jenny. Once again Martin took her arm and gently but firmly stopped her getting up from the

table. Not wanting to cause a scene Maria sat down again but gave Jenny the look that said "I need some help here". Jenny shrugged not knowing quite what to do and asked Charles her husband to help her with the main course. When they were in the kitchen Jenny asked Charles for an explanation.

"I don't really know him" Charles responded "He works in another department on a different floor and hasn't been with the company long, just a few months. I certainly don't recall inviting him here we barely pass the time of day. I was as surprised as you to see him just walk into the sitting room Damned rude of him but I didn't feel that could throw him out."

"Perhaps he thought if he rang the doorbell you would have made an excuse to get rid of him. Maybe he's a bit lonely heard about the dinner party and decided to invite himself along. Funny how he's taken to Maria though."

"Well he's here now so we will have to make the best of it" Charles replied and Gave Jenny a squeeze as he picked up the tray of vegetables to take to the table.

By 10.30 Maria had really had enough of being monopolised by Martin and excusing herself she stood and told the group that she had an early start in the morning so needed to leave early. She thanked Jenny and Charles and said her goodbyes as Jenny fetched Maria's coat. At this point Martin stood and told Maria he would walk her home to make sure she was safe. She told him that she was fine and didn't need an escort as she only lived a couple of streets away but he insisted and collected his own coat.

As they left Jenny told Maria she would give her a call later or maybe the following day. As the door closed on Martin and Maria the rest of the party started to chat one of them said to Charles that they didn't know that he was friends with Martin. Charles paused for a moment and then told them that he wasn't really a friend in fact he barely knew him and couldn't remember inviting him to the dinner party. They all looked at each other and one of them pointed out that they thought he was a good friend as he had just walked into the room without knocking the door.

"What he lacks in manners he makes up for in his choice of wine" Charles said and briskly changed the subject.

On the walk home Maria became more uncomfortable with Martin and did an involuntary shiver and started to walk a little faster. She just wanted to get home and away from this man as something didn't feel quite right.

Martin put his arm round her shoulders and pulled her closer to him saying "Your cold, I can keep you warm. Don't walk so fast it's a lovely evening let's enjoy it". Maria said very firmly that she wasn't cold and didn't want his advances.

Martin then said to her "I have seen you at the office a couple of times with Jenny when she was picking Charles up." "I just want to get to know you better" and he held her a little tighter.

It was late when all the guests finally left the dinner party. Jenny told Charles she was going to phone Maria to say goodnight but Charles thought it was much too late so Jenny decided to call her in the morning.

The next day Jenny was still uneasy about Maria being walked home by Martin who was essentially a stranger as it seemed no one really knew much about him. She called Maria at 9.30 on Saturday morning but there was no reply so she tried a couple more times during the morning. Eventually she told Charles that she was worried about Maria but he just said

"look it's Saturday, you know she didn't really have to get up early perhaps she got on well with Martin and well...you know maybe they made a night of it"

Jenny wasn't convinced but left it another couple of hours and tried again. Still no reply and she was getting worried now so she decided to walk round to Maria's to see if she was ok.

When she arrived there was no answer, the house seemed empty. Perhaps she had gone back to Martin's home with him, but it was very unlike Maria to do that and she always messaged Jenny on her mobile even if she didn't speak to her.

Jenny tried to contact Maria all weekend but to no avail. On Monday morning she rang her at her work but again there was no reply. By lunch time Jenny was really worried and phoned

Maria's manager asking if he could put her through to Maria as she wasn't answering her phone. "I am afraid I can't as she hasn't come into work today." He told Jenny.

"Oh has she phoned in sick?" Jenny's replied.

"No its unusual Maria always phones in and never lets us down. I was going to give her a call myself later to check she's ok. "

"I will call round on my way home" Jenny said. She was really worried now this just wasn't like Maria.

By 7.00pm that evening despite Charles saying she was worrying too much Jenny called the police and reported Maria as a missing person.

At first they didn't really seem interested but Jenny persevered and eventually they said they would send an officer round to take a statement. As Jenny was telling Charles her phone rang, "Oh at last she thought I hope this is Maria. It wasn't, a male voice introduced himself Detective Inspector Jones. He said he needed a few more details about the missing person report.

"We are taking this more seriously as it is very similar to a missing person report a few weeks ago in Leeds, the woman is still missing. Could you just go over the circumstances again please I need a few more details about the man she left your party with on Friday night."

Jenny told the inspector that she really didn't know the man but described him and told him where he worked. The inspector said that he would call round later for a photograph of Maria and would be contacting this Martins place of work.

An hour later there was a knock on the door "oh please let this be Maria" Jenny said to Charles but when she answered the door it was the Inspector and a uniformed police officer.

"Can we come in" the Inspector asked.

Jenny moved away from the door to let them in. The uniformed office handed a bag to the Inspector. He held it up and inside was Maria's mobile phone, coat and jumper.

"Do you recognise these? They were found behind the bins not far from Marias house"

Jenny gasped and looked at Charles who said "Yes that was what Maria was wearing when she left here on Friday, Inspector"

Jenny's eyes filled with tears as the Inspector told Charles and Jenny that they were very concerned for her safety and would now start a full scale search for Maria.

THE PATIENT

By Christine Rowe

Doctor Samantha Mackenzie was a surgeon at her local hospital, specialising in thyroid problems when a goitre occurs in the thyroid **gland** and all usual remedies have failed to work and the decision to **operate** to remove the goitre is the only option left.

Jillian Smith was one such patient. Her family doctor had written out a prescription for tablets to help reduce her hyperthyroidism in his usual **scrawl** but despite Jill religiously taking the tablets every day for over a year, the goitre in her neck was getting larger and the doctor eventually decided that it was **crucial** for Jill to have an operation as the goitre was beginning to affect her breathing.

When Jillian met Doctor Samantha she was rather taken aback to meet what at first sight appeared to be a **full-blooded** male doctor in his early 50s. She wondered if she was in the correct room. The doctor was dressed in the usual hospital scrubs uniform so it was difficult to establish whether she was meeting a male or female doctor – not that it particularly worried her one way or another. She wasn't really bothered about all the media **propaganda** in the newspapers about cross-dressers or gender reassignment. As long as the doctor could cure her thyroid problem, she would be happy.

Sitting down opposite Doctor Sam (as Jill now thought of her surgeon) she tried to **convey** the problems she was having breathing – although it wouldn't take even a non-medical person long to realise that her harsh voice was caused by the now very large goitre sticking out of her neck, rather than a lifetime of cigarette smoking. A few months ago her voice had got so bad that she lost her voice completely and had to use sign language to **semaphore** her needs to her long-suffering husband, William. The operation went well and the next day she was able to at least sip some of the hospital soup for lunch – although the main **ingredient** was a total mystery. After her unsatisfactory lunch Jill decided to write a poem for her local U3A poetry group – maybe in the form of an **ode** to the NHS? Not mentioning any names, of course, but praising the surgeon and all support staff.

THE WAITING ROOM

Clouds of smoke and steam drifted across the concourse at Euston station from the locomotives lined up at the various platforms, ready to take their passengers to all parts of the country. Porters with their trolleys piled high with luggage hurried from platform to platform, with worried travellers rushing to keep up, one eye on the station clock and one eye on their porter to make sure he got to the correct platform. Not that luggage very often went astray or missed the train, but you couldn't be too sure.

Emily sat impatiently in the waiting room, drumming her fingers on her hatbox, feet tapping on the hard wooden floor. She'd been waiting for over an hour and the train was due to depart in 15 minutes. Where on earth was he? He assured her he would be at the station in

plenty of time to buy their tickets and find their seats on the train to Scotland. She was so nervous about it all. What had she got herself into? And what would her parents say when they found out that she and Jeremy were off to Gretna Green to get married.

There was no way that her parents would approve – she knew that for certain. They had always stressed the importance of marrying for money and status rather than love. And Jeremy had neither money nor status – but she did love him passionately and couldn't wait to be his wife. Although there was a slight niggle in the back of her mind that while she knew she would make the perfect wife – her parents had taught her well, she wasn't totally convinced that Jeremy was perfect husband material.

Jeremy was a builder. Quite a successful builder, but having started his own company up only 2 years ago, commissions were still only slowly coming in, so money was tight and without the right backers, his building company wasn't going to be building mansions in the heart of London any time soon. Maybe the odd bungalow extension in the suburbs, but that wouldn't keep her in the style to which she was accustomed.

Emily was not a builder's wife – she had been groomed to grace the salons of the wealthy and aristocratic friends of her parents. Admittedly the family enjoyed “new money” – her father, Dudley, was a banker and had made his own way in life – having not inherited when his parents died – what money and property there had been in the family had passed to his two older brothers. But he had done well and married well and had provided a good background for Emily. Sadly, Dudley and Muriel were unable to have more than one child, so Emily was their only child. As Dudley had no sons to pass his property and investment portfolio on to, he wanted Emily to marry well and for her husband to take over the management of their not inconsiderable estate.

But Jeremy was not Dudley's idea of the perfect son-in-law. A builder!!!! But Emily loved him, having met him when playing tennis with friends at the local club. Jeremy had just finished work on the club-house extension and had been invited to play a few games to make up for the rather pitiful fees they had paid him. As a tennis player, he was rather inexperienced but very athletic – and looked good in his borrowed whites. He had picked up the rules quickly and as Emily was not a bad player herself, the two played mixed doubles on that first afternoon to great success.

So successful that Jeremy had been invited to become an associate member of the club so he and Emily played several mixed double matches against other pairs. Over teas in the club-house they gradually became very fond of each other, despite her parents' obvious disapproval. Dudley and Muriel played tennis regularly and were on the committee. Dudley had tried to persuade his fellow committee members that Jeremy was not member material, but had been over-ruled. Jeremy had become a competent player and would be useful in tournaments against teams from other clubs. Especially when he was partnered by Emily in the mixed doubles.

Under the watchful eyes of her parents, their friendship developed rapidly over that summer of garden and tennis parties. Muriel thought Jeremy was quite dashing in his tennis whites, but Dudley couldn't see past the fact that the young man was a builder, even if he did have his own company. Jeremy just wouldn't do for his precious daughter and tried to persuade Emily into the arms of the son of one of his banking friends, who had “prospects” in his father's bank. Emily couldn't stand the young man, Stanley, thought he was a chinless wonder who couldn't play tennis, only golf. Which she wasn't the slightest bit interested in. Emily and Jeremy were inseparable on and off the tennis court. He called for her and took her for “spins” out in the country in his new Austin motorcar, despite dark looks from Dudley. He was always a proper gentleman, never took advantage of Emily and always delivered her

back home on time to dress for dinner with her parents and their guests. Jeremy would go back to his rented accommodation above his builder's yard offices and dream of what their future could be.

At a new year's dinner, held at the tennis clubhouse, Jeremy kissed Emily for the first time at the stroke of midnight and whispered to her that maybe by the next new year their relationship would be different. Emily wondered if Jeremy was actually proposing to her, but modesty forbade her from inquiring directly.

It wasn't until Easter that Jeremy took Emily to one side in her parent's garden, during a party for Emily's 21st birthday, knelt on the lawn in front of her and proposed, holding out a beautiful blue leather box holding the most exquisite sapphire and diamond ring (mainly sapphires admittedly). Emily accepted the proposal and rushed indoors to break the news to her parents. Needless to say, they were horrified, however much they liked Jeremy as a person, he was most definitely not going to be their son-in-law. But now that Emily was 21 they couldn't actually ban her from seeing Jeremy, let alone forbid her from marrying him, but went out of their way to dissuade her from making any hasty arrangements.

But Emily loved Jeremy and it was her idea to run away to Gretna Green and marry in secret. He wasn't so sure. He really wanted Emily to have the wedding she deserved, not a hasty ceremony in front of a blacksmith's anvil.

And now Emily was sitting waiting for her fiancé to arrive at the station – and he was dreadfully late. They wouldn't catch the train now and she fought back tears. How could he let her down like this? She surreptitiously dabbed at her eyes, willing the tears she could feel not to embarrass her by brimming over in front of all the other passengers. But one lady had spotted Emily's distress and came over and sat next to her and asked what was wrong – and could she help in any way?

Rather hesitantly, because she didn't know this lady at all, Emily explained her predicament and how worried she was that Jeremy hadn't arrived – and there was now only 5 minutes before the train was due to depart. What had happened, where was he – had he had an accident? What on earth was she going to do?

Emily glanced up as a man walked towards her, hoping that at last it would be her beloved. But oh no, it was her father!! What was he doing here – and where was Jeremy? Dudley stood in front of Emily and addressed her rather loudly so everyone could hear. "Time to go home, Emily, he's not coming on this madcap scheme of yours".

"But, father, why, where is he?"

"He's seen sense. I guessed something was up when I saw you leave the house this morning with your hatbox and portmanteau, and went round immediately to those lodgings he has." Dudley shuddered with distaste recalling the builder's yard and the dismal rooms above the offices.

"There is no way I'm going to let my daughter live in those conditions, with a common builder," Dudley went on, "I made him an offer that I would invest substantially in his so-called building business and he decided that the money now was preferable to waiting until you inherited it. Sorry, my dear, but Jeremy was nothing but a gold-seeking good-for-nothing. You will do much better next time with someone like Stanley who can look after you properly".

Emily was horrified. How could Jeremy let her down like this? They loved each other, didn't they? They wanted to get married and Jeremy would build them a little house of their own, wouldn't he? She was so confused – what was her father telling her? Why hadn't Jeremy contacted her? Did she trust her father to be telling the truth – that Jeremy preferred to have

an investment in his business rather than a loving wife? And would her father keep his side of the so-called bargain to invest in the building business? What on earth was she to think? The other passengers in the waiting room were trying to show they weren't interested in the scene being played out in front of them. Many were studiously scanning their books or newspapers – others were in conversation with their companions, although glancing over to Emily surreptitiously, wondering what she would do. The lady who had comforted Emily, moved back to her own seat and picked up the book she had put down, obviously hoping Emily's father wouldn't think she had been involved in any way.

Emily looked up at her father – this strong-willed successful man who had sheltered her all her life. Oh, but where was Jeremy?

Emily sighed as her father bent to hold her arm. "Come on, Emily, let's get you back home. Your mother has invited Stanley and his parents over for lunch – that will cheer you up, won't it?"

Emily knew she was beaten and picked up her hatbox as her father picked up her portmanteau. Emily glanced around at the other passengers – some of the ladies gave her sympathetic looks, while the men seemed to be more interested in how Dudley had dealt with the situation, smiling at her father.

Her life would now no longer be as she had hoped, Emily knew that. She did consider for one fraction of a moment that throwing herself under the locomotive that was just backing out of the platform opposite might be an option. but as an obedient daughter she sighed again and followed her father out of the waiting room,

Hitch-hiker

'Your character picks up a hitch-hiker who tries to persuade the driver to leave everything and drive them across the country...'

The travelling sales business ain't what it used to be. One time I could make 500 dollars a week in commission and scoop a hefty bonus at Christmastime. That'd pay the medical bills for my wife Sandy who'd taken ill just after we got married three years ago. Now Sandy's gone and the business is moving out of Chicago. June 24th 1977, I've just finished my very last day with the company and I'm on my way to drop off the company car and pick up my new ride – a seven year old red Chevrolet Corvette Convertible.

As I pull into the forecourt of the dealership in this dirty brown Oldsmobile I can see the a young boy giving the Corvette a last minute polish. It's a fine car and I can't wait to feel the freedom of the open road. Not that I have anywheres to go. The house feels so empty now without Sandy. Maybe I'll get me a dog and we'll go fishin' up at Little Grassy Lake.

"Afternoon Frank," hollers the car dealer as he waves from the other side of the forecourt and comes wandering over. "Paperwork's all done and she's all ready for ya. She's a fine lookin' gal ain't she?" "Sure is," I replied and caught the set of keys that had been tossed over to me by the boy. I climbed in, fired up the engine and took off down the highway, aiming to take the car for a bit of a run before heading home.

It had been a fine day, the skies were clear and blue and I was heading south on the Stevenson Highway, feeling the breeze gently sweep over my face. The radio felt my mood and embraced it by playing *Easy* by *The Commodores*. In the distance I could see a small figure running by the side of the road. As I got closer I could see it, (I say "it" because I couldn't make out if it was male or female 'cause it was wearing an oversized shirt and pants and a baseball cap pulled low over its face.) I slowed right down till I was matching the kid for speed and yelled "can I get you a lift someplace?"

The kid looked around furtively, nodded in the affirmative and hopped into the passenger seat. I could see the kid was slightly built with pale skin and looked about fifteen as far as I could tell. "Where you heading?" I asked as we sped away. "I need to get to Los Angeles." replied the kid. "Whoaa, that's one helluva distance. I guess I could take you as far as Springfield. Why Los Angeles?"

"I need to find my family."

Kid didn't seem to be too talkative but I did manage to find out that he or she'd run away from somewhere cos of being mistreated. The family had arranged for them to all meet in Los Angeles and they would be leaving on a ship from there.

I still had no idea as to the kid's gender so I asked, "What's your name kid?" Kid said "Bes." Dang! That didn't give me any clues. We drove in silence till we got to Springfield then I suggested we stop off at a diner and get some food before we went on our separate ways. I parked in the empty lot and we ambled into the diner and found a bench near the window. We were greeted by a waitress in a pink dress with a white apron and a white cap covering dark brown wavy curls. Her name badge revealed that she was called Maisie. We ordered a coupl'a cheeseburgers with fries and coke. The food was real good and by the time we'd eaten it was starting to get dark.

I was just about to get the check when a cop car pulled up, lights flashing and lighting up the parking lot. Bes was startled, jumped off the bench and sprinted towards the washrooms like a kid whose pants were on fire. Maisie collected up the empty plates and cups and gave me a look of bewilderment before returning to her station to draw up the check.

Two cops entered the diner, one a short, balding guy with a uniform that might have fit better when it was new and the other a taller, slimmer and younger looking fella with a dark moustache and an arrogant look about him.

“Evening Maisie”, remarked the short guy. “Well hello Officer Jackson, Officer Rodriguez and how are you both this fine evening?” she answered. “All good Maisie. We’re on the lookout for a young runaway, may’ve headed in this direction. You seen anyone round here, early teens wearing a check shirt and pants that look too big for ‘em and a black baseball cap?” I looked earnestly at Maisie and put my finger to my lips. Maisie caught my drift and replied, “No, sirs, not seen anyone matching that description. Now gentlemen I’d offer you some coffee but I’m just about to shut up shop here,” she replied, carrying the check over to me.

The younger policemen turned to me. “Haven’t seen you around here before.” I said, “No I’m from Chicago, just picked up my new car and thought I’d take it for a drive. It’s the red Chevy. I’ll be heading back home soon as I’ve paid for my meal.” “Nice one. Did you see a kid, ran away from home earlier today. His parents are desperate to get him back, think he may have been picked up along the road.” I said, “Nope, can’t help ya.”

The two cops shrugged as though they weren’t expecting to have succeeded in their task, wandered back over to their car and drove off towards the center of the town.

I handed Maisie a twenty and told her to keep the change then went into the washrooms but the kid had gone, climbed outa the window. I ran out back and found Bes huddled on the ground, not daring to move. I told him (I was fairly sure it was a him at this point) that the cops had gone and that he’d be OK but he still looked terrified and I had to pull him to his feet to get him to move. With big, imploring eyes he begged me to take him to LA. His hands were cold and clammy and I decided then and there I couldn’t leave him to his fate whatever that might be. I led him to the car just as Maisie turned out the neon signs above the diner. I said to Bes, “Hey, d’ya know what? I’ve always wanted to drive Route 66. Let’s **do** it!”

So we did. We drove in the direction of St Louis, found a Motel for the night. Bes didn’t want to be alone so he took the bed and I slept on the couch. The next morning I got up early, picked up some fresh clothes and a music cassette from a nearby discount store and some breakfast and took them back to the Motel. I woke Bes, then we ate, showered, changed and took off with the top down and the music high.

That day we drove to Joplin then on to Clinton, Albuquerque, Winslow, Needles and on the seventh day we finally made it to Los Angeles. OK so we didn’t have time to see all the sights along the way but I figured I’d make sure Bes found his family, stay

a few days in LA then take some time to head back and visit all the places we'd missed on the way.

Bes said he'd arranged to meet his folks in Hilltop Park. I stopped off and got a map of the area but by the time we arrived it was already dark. I pulled into the parking lot and Bes said he would go alone. I argued that it wasn't safe for him to do that but he insisted so we got out of the car and we said goodbye and he thanked me for everything I had done for him. I waited and started to follow him as he ran up the hill so's I could make sure he was OK.

After a coup'la minutes I saw a bright light coming from the hilltop and I could see Bes's silhouette climbing up some steps into a huge dish-shaped thing that seemed to be hovering above me. As Bes disappeared inside the thing, there was a loud whooshing sound and the dish vanished as fast as it had appeared. Dang, this was the ship Bes talked about. A freakin' **space** ship.

My mind was racing, I'd just driven an alien across the USA. It occurred to me that he might've escaped from the Center for UFO studies in Chicago but I guess I'll never know. I made my mind up to carry on with my plan to see LA, meander back along Route 66 then get me that dog and take him on a nice relaxin' fishin' trip.

The Policeman and the Billionaire by Jackie Bird

It was a lovely sunny day and a walk by the river would fill in a good bit of the lengthy day ahead. Charlie found the days long and tedious since finishing work and he seemed to get under his wife's feet not that she said a lot but her expressions said it all. He was a retired policeman and he missed walking the streets, chatting to the residents of the small town which had been his beat for the best part of 25 years. He had never been ambitious, just a happy PC plod. They didn't have all the specialist squads that they have now when he had joined up years ago, you were either patrolling the streets in uniform or a plain clothed detective in those days but Charlie loved walking the streets he had got to know several generations of families dealing with the parents, their children and grandchildren, the good and the bad although as he thought back there was only a few families that had really been trouble makers and the Smiths were by far the worst.

Three generations lived in that small scruffy terraced house on Park Street. In fact some of them were still there although he had heard the grandparents had since passed away. He had decided long ago that there was far too many of them in that cramped house, not enough money to feed them all with no one working, all relying on benefits and too much time on their hands. He thought back to all the times he had knocked on the front door to see the perpetrators of the latest crimes disappearing through the broken door at the back of the house running across the park towards the river. Charlie had been a fit young man then chasing them countless times and catching them a fair number at that.

Mostly the lads were caught shop lifting, or joy riding. Of course it was their father and grandfather who Charlie blamed. Both heavy drinkers, smokers and they liked a bet on the

horses and the dogs. The boys were often caught stealing bottles of vodka and cigarettes ostensibly for themselves but Charlie knew it was for old man Smith and his son. He had heard recently that the father had died, it was surprising he had lived as long he had considering the amount he drank. The boys had all known if they didn't do as they were told they were in for a hammering from their dad or grandad or both. Charlie recognised the boys occasionally took food for themselves and their mother who was a quiet little woman who wouldn't say 'boo to a goose'. Charlie had always felt sorry for the lads, he had treated them as kindly as he could turning a blind eye to some of their antics. The older lad would be in his early 30's by now but he had taken the worse of the beatings being the eldest. Charlie looked out of the window at the sun breaking through the clouds, yes he thought time for a walk. As he put his boots on he tried to remember the eldest boys name but just couldn't get it. That's old age for you he thought as he shouted goodbye to his wife and started his walk to the river still thinking about the Smiths. It was strange about the eldest lad he left school suddenly and completely disappeared. There was some rumours about a girl, others said he had joined the army, Charlie had always wondered if he had one too many thumps from the old men and was under the patio.

By the time Charlie reached the river he felt like a sit down and a think about the good old days. He bought himself a coffee and a bun from the van chatting to the owner Arthur who he had known since he was just a babe then walked across the park to the bench overlooking the river. He wasn't as fit as he used to be he thought looking down at his stomach no longer flat and he definitely didn't have a six pack any more. That's retirement for you he thought as he sat down to enjoy his creamy coffee and cake and too many of these, best not mention it to the wife.

As he sat enjoying the peace and quiet a young man walked past smiled at Charlie as if he recognised him and asked him if he minded if he sat down on the bench. Charlie smiled back and told him to take a seat.

"I could do with one of those" he said looking at Charlie's coffee. Charlie pointed over to the trailer. "Do you think they would take a card i don't have any cash on me. I just parked my car and came for a walk and to think before I ..." he left the rest of the sentence in the air. Charlie put his hand in his pocket and pulled out some loose change, here he said just in case Arthur is cash only although knowing Arthur as I do he will take any type of payment, go and get yourself a coffee and one of these buns they are really good.

"thank you" the young man responded taking the money. "you always were very kind to me". Charlie still couldn't put a name to this smart young man.

As he walked away Charlie was trying desperately to recall the young man in the obviously expensive and probably designer suit, not that Charlie had any idea about designer clothes. He watched him as he walked back to the bench and suddenly recognised him. "Are you one of the Smiths" he asked him with surprise. "Yes" he replied I'm Eddy well I was I call myself Edward or Ned now.

"Well, I always wondered what happened to you" Charlie told him.

"I recognised you straight away" Eddy replied smiling, "you haven't changed much at all". Charlie chuckled not what he had been thinking a few minutes ago "What are you doing back here anyway and what have you been doing with yourself all this time. It must 15 years since you left town and completely disappeared."

"17 to be precise" Eddy told Charlie. "It's a bit of a story"

"I have plenty of time and I'd very much like to hear it. I was just thinking about you and your family, a fine runaround you and your brothers gave me.

Eddy smiled at him "I ran away when I was 15 went to the city. I'd had enough of the battering's at home and bullying at school. I hated being known as one of the 'Smelly Smiths'. Any way after a particularly nasty beating from my father for stealing the wrong cigarettes I just took the rest of the beer money which only amounted to a few pounds probably left from grandads pension and I walked out of the door. No one said anything but then there was always one or more of us coming and going. I hitched a lift with a lorry driver and ended up in Birmingham. Needless to say I got into the wrong crowd initially, then I joined the army, I wanted to see the world but it was too disciplined for me and after a couple of years I left. Soon after I was in a pub whiling away a few hours and thinking about earning some money when I heard some chaps talking about how much they had made in a few months working overseas. Of course this interested me and i started talking to them bought them both a pint with the last of my money. Turned out they were mercenaries. I listened to their stories, they had been all over the world. I asked them how to get into it and told them I had been in the Army, exaggerating my experience and they introduced me to another chap. Anyway to cut a long story short after a bit of training and a lot of lies, let's face it I was used to the deceit it ran in the family, I blagged myself into the biggest private army in the world G4S. They work in 120 countries they are 4 times bigger than the British Army and pay a lot more. So a year later I was a Mercenary earning \$1000 a week. The top guys can earn double that but I had never seen so much money in my life. I made some good friend along the way. In those conditions you have to trust your comrades. Any way a mate put in me in touch with a finance chap who helped me invest my earnings. We couldn't spend a lot living under battle conditions. After about 5 years I had more money than I had ever seen before. I kept going for a couple more years then decided to stop before my luck ran out, but I was a different person by then. I moved to London and bought and sold some properties and have a portfolio now which includes night clubs, bars and a casino. He looked at Charlie " All legal and above board, no dodgy deals for me these days, I am a respected businessman." He said smiling at Charlie.

" A very wealthy businessman by the sound of it" Charlie commented. " Yes" very wealthy not quite a billionaire yet but getting there" he said laughingly.

Eddy took a deep breath " you know I have never told anyone that story" he said " I'm not proud of some of the things I have done. But I am here for my dad's funeral although my family don't and won't know the extent of my wealth". I have sent money to my mum you know in the past but I know my father always found out about it and drank it away." He stood up " Thanks for listening" he said to Charlie " and the coffee and cake of course". I couldn't make up my mind about going to my father's funeral, seeing my family again which is how I ended up walking by the river trying to decide what was best. Talking to you as helped me make the decision, I will attend it. I do want to see my mum and perhaps I can make her life a bit easier now".

Charlie smiled at Eddy, stood up and shook his hand. He looked at him and said "it's been a pleasure and thank you for sharing your story with me." Charlie looked at his watch as Eddy walked off in the direction of his car. "Better be getting back for dinner" he said as he passed Arthur in his van, well that's another mystery solved Charlie thought as he made his way home.

Unexpected Guests by Colin Rowe

Fiona & Sophie had looked forward to their spring party which took place every year. They held it at Sophie`s homestead where she lived with her husband Desmond at Hinton Alberta. Fiona was a loner, unmarried, not even in a relationship with a male or female. Fiona and Sophie who had been friends from their school days where they grew up in Edmonton, where Sophie still lived. The homestead was a large wooden ranch with wood burning stoves in each room. They owned a 4000-acre cattle farm near Hinton on the banks of the Athabasca River, in Alberta just east of the Rockies. This year was different. It had been an unusually hard winter with deep snowfalls and high winds with drifting due to the snow bomb which occurred in the previous December. After the bomb the snow drifts had reached the top of the telephone poles.

Normally on the date of their spring party most of the snow would be gone from the lower levels even though they were still at 1000 metres above sea level. Not so this year, the snow remained piled high. The high winds had brought down the fences and electric wires supplying their power. Desmond was busy from dawn until dusk repairing fences and other wind damaged structures.

In their large ranch style residence, there were plenty of rooms for guests to sleep in with windows facing the magnificent snow-capped peaks of the Rocky Mountains, the highest being Mt Robson. Desmond or Des as he preferred to be called was away on the land when their guests began to arrive.

Friends were coming from as far away as Winnipeg - a treacherous journey by road so they had decided to travel by the Westbound Canadian the world famous silver and blue train which makes the transcontinental journey from Toronto to Vancouver twice weekly, a journey taking 5 days. Don & Freda from Winnipeg would cover the 1000 mile journey to Hinton with one night on board the sleeper train, in about 30 hours.

The party usually lasted about 3 days with outdoor activities and walks. This would be more difficult this year. Never mind Sophie and Fiona, who had driven from Edmonton a couple of days early to help with the preparations for the dinner on the first night, had been busy in the kitchen so the smell of baking, pizza and freshly baked bread was coursing through the warm ranch. They were both looking forward to meeting Justin, Julie`s new partner. They would be driving from Jasper in the early hours of Friday morning and had arranged to meet the train, the West bound Canadian from Winnipeg at Hinton station at around 3.00am to pick up Don & Freda.

There would be 13 of them for dinner on Friday night. At dusk the only one missing was Desmond who had left early in the morning to travel to the far side of their land to repair a damaged fence. Fiona and Desmond communicated by walkie talkie and usually the signal was good but now Fiona couldn't raise Desmond which was a little worrying. The dinner table was laid and the buffalo meat and venison was almost roasted, it would be a fine spread. All thirteen of them were having pre-prandial drinks in the lounge, where it was warm and cosy, with a roaring fire.

At last they all heard the clatter of the sneck on the heavy back door of the ranch. "Ah at last," exclaimed Fiona "the wanderer returns!" She didn't leap up to greet her husband as she knew he would be going straight to the shower room to get cleaned up as after working on the land for several hours she imagined he would be quite dirty.

More drinks and reminiscing about the old days at school and lost friendships – these gatherings always sparked off memories and the latest news of past attendees at the St. Boniface convent school in Edmonton.

They all moved from the lounge and seated themselves around the large dining table in a typical farmhouse kitchen with range and the smell of delicious food which they were about to devour. Sophie removed the large roasted Buffalo joint from the oven and placed it with all the trimmings in the centre of the large oval table.

Fiona started to carve the meat including a side of venison also dragged from the oven.

Sophie disappeared for a while then returned in a panic saying that Desmond had not arrived after all. The side door of the ranch out to the farmyard was wide open but there was no sign of Desmond. She tried his walkie talkie and above the loud crackling heard his distressed voice saying he had got stuck in a snow drift. So who was it that had entered the farmhouse earlier? An unwelcome guest?

"I will get some wine up from the cellar", shouted Fiona as she put on her outdoor clothes ready to drive the tractor out to where Desmond was stuck.

She headed for the back of the ranch to where the cellar door was and became spooked because it was already open! She started to go down the steep wooden staircase. It was dark at first before she reached the light switch. She stepped on to the cellar floor and immediately saw the contents of the large chest freezer scattered over the floor and there in the corner was a female black bear standing on its hind legs consuming the contents of a beer can held between its two front paws. In the other corner of the cellar sitting down attempting to eat a frozen buffalo steak was a very young bear cub making a whimpering noise.

Fiona froze to the spot remembering the rules - don't get between mother and cub and be prepared to stand your ground. She was aware that this mother bear had probably just come out of hibernation as it was now March, where during this time the cub would have been born probably at the end of January so very young and very appealing to the human eye, even though it as yet didn't have much fur. With the deep snow still covering the land they would struggle to find food. When hungry bears will eat anything and break in anywhere. What they heard thinking it was Desmond returning was the bear operating the door latch to gain entry. Fiona screamed, ran up the stairs and shut the cellar door behind her.

Hearing the screams two of her friends appeared . They moved a large heavy chest across the front of the cellar door to prevent the bears entering the living area.

What should they do? First they must go and rescue Desmond so the rest of the friends tucked into the dinner while Fiona and Don, Freda's husband, jumped in the Chevrolet 4x4 ranch wagon and headed out to find Desmond.

They found Desmond, he was very cold, his tractor having overturned in a snow drift. Fiona told Desmond that they had extra guests for dinner. How are we going to get them to leave? Desmond said there was probably only one way, but Fiona would not hear of it. They wondered how far they had walked from their den and whether there were any other cubs in the litter?

Finally they were all seated around the table enjoying the food that Fiona and Sophie had prepared, but instead of the usual conversations discussing old friends and their own adventures of the past year their conversations were completely consumed by the extra guests banged up in the cellar beneath them. For their own safety Desmond wanted to get his rifle from the gun safe and shoot at least the mother which was the only real threat to their safety. The others voted against this and eventually they all agreed that in the morning they would call the Jasper National Park rangers office in Jasper who would come out and remove the bear after sedating it. An uneasy sleepless night was spent by all.

I gave the taxi (driver) my address. So, why had he taken me here? A stranger opened the door then and said, "Good! You're here. Let me show you around."

The public Inquiry had been fraught with a great deal of shouting from the audience about the compulsory purchase of their land and property. It took over an hour to deliver my reasoning however even with generous compensation offers there were a lot of unhappy people. I was due to return to London by train after the hearing so I slipped away through the back entrance and hailed a taxi to Piccadilly station where I would board the 16:50 intercity

express to Euston. A glass of wine and a packet of crisps off the trolley service and probably nod off, I was tired.

It had been a busy day with a long meeting in Manchester where I had been a negotiator with the Land Assembly Commission discussing the proposed Compulsory Purchase Orders through Staffordshire for a new railway line between Birmingham and Manchester. This project represents a major investment for the country and many compulsory purchases of properties are needed along the route.

I would go straight to the taxi rank at Euston to reach my flat in Maida Vale. It was dusk and a mild spring evening, with rain in the air. A car drew up on the rank and without checking that it was a licenced cab, I got in I was in a hurry to get home. A couple of miles up Edgeware road the taxi driver turned off and headed for Swiss Cottage. I didn't query the diversion as I thought maybe he knew of a road blockage or something else to warrant a diversion, after all you do trust a black cab driver, don't you?

The taxi drew to a halt outside an office block near St John's Wood tube station. A suited and booted gentleman opened the door of the taxi and said,
"Good! You're here. Let me show you around."

At this point I was just looking forward to getting home, having another glass of wine and a takeaway for supper - I protested -

"There must be some mistake!, can you please explain what is going on?"

"You will see", said the man and led me into the building through two large wooden doors which opened inwards. This can't be the resurrection of the TV programme "This is your life" surely not, Eamon Andrews has been dead for years, there's no red book and I am certainly not a celebrity?

The doors clanged shut behind me just ahead there was a group of men standing talking, they turned towards me and beckoned me to join them.

As I approached an outstretched hand and a greeting,

"Good evening Ms Flowerdew I'm Giles, these are my colleagues from STOP HS2, you will no doubt have heard of us?"

I was led along a long dark passage and began to get anxious as I was wondering what was going to happen? I protested vehemently,

"what is going on?"

Suddenly I was in the open air sensing the drizzle and a cool breeze on my face. I was in amongst a number of railway carriages and the sound of an engine running nearby. It was dark now with the area floodlit by large overhead search lights.

"What's this all about?"

I enquired of Giles whose 3 accomplices remained silent. We suddenly stopped in front of a railway carriage which was moving slowly along the rusty lines. The carriage and its propelling engine came to a sudden stop with a squeal of brakes and a skidding of wheels on the rusty rails. There was a loud hiss as the air brakes were applied. One of Giles accomplices was carrying a long rope coiled up and slung over his shoulder. One of the other men went into a trackside hut and came out with a large plastic sheet and laid it down in front of the carriage across the lines in between the wheels.

Giles then ordered me to lay between the rails. I was tied to the rails following a struggle which was pointless against these strong men. I've been kidnapped I went for my mobile phone to call the police alas my briefcase had been taken away from me.

The engine driver was ordered to drive the carriage away from where I was lying. As I screamed I could see the red light on the back of the carriage disappearing in the distance.

One of Giles' accomplices placed a series of detonators which are explosive caps set off by the wheels of a train passing over them, along the rails next to where I was lying.

I was suddenly aware of a Tannoy delivering the words I had spoken earlier in the day, a recording of my actual speech, at the Manchester Public Inquiry where I was describing the importance of HS2 to the economy and

“yes it was unfortunate for some people that they would be losing their homes and livelihoods but the compensation would soften the blow and in any case there were always winners and losers in these situations which are vital projects to the growth of our economy”.

I couldn't believe I was hearing this.

My head was spinning now as I shouted out to Giles to untie me. I could only look up as I was tied flat on my back with a noose around my neck as I struggled the noose tightened. Suddenly I felt the ground beneath me vibrating it was the railway carriage returning at speed which would pass right over me. There was nothing I could do! As I lay there I could feel something crawling up my leg, eventually it came in to view an enormous rat which stared into my face. The carriage approached at speed as it passed over me at probably 50 miles an hour I was showered in some evil smelling liquid, probably the contents of the carriage toilet. By now I was screaming for mercy, as the detonators exploded close to my head.

As I opened my eyes looking down at me there was a man with a stethoscope slung round his neck and a lady dressed in a blue uniform.

“What's happening where am I, are you Giles?” I asked,

“No my name is Dr Mathewson”.

“Ms Flowerdew we found your name on documents in your briefcase, you are in hospital in Manchester. You had an accident”.

“My briefcase, where is it contained the secret report! I need the police”.

Sitting on chairs opposite the end of the bed were two bearded police officers sharing a bag of Haribos Starmix sweets, one of them said,

“we are the police”.

Was I dreaming I wondered, just like a scene from a TV advert!

As soon as I was fully conscious, noting pipes and drips and instruments connected to me, I started asking questions. Believing that I had been run over by a train, well I had hadn't I? I explained to the police how the train went over me very fast while I was tied to the track and how I was sprayed by an evil smelling liquid and attacked by a large rat.

“Ms Flowerdew”,

said one of the officers,

“you weren't run over by a train, you fell off the edge of the station platform into the path of the Euston train arriving at Piccadilly railway station. Witnesses have told us that you struggled with a man trying to steal your briefcase while you waited for your train. The man was wearing a placard on his back with letters “STOP HS2” printed on it”. “

“You owe your life to the train driver who was able to stop his train by making an emergency brake application before he ran over you. In the fall you were knocked unconscious by hitting your head on the train line and have remained so until now. This happened two days ago, you were brought here in an ambulance, two men are helping our detectives with their inquiries”

Colin Rowe

Finding Mrs Claus

Santa was having an amazing day in Milton Keynes. One of the elves had made mince pies with extra brandy and everyone in the grotto had said they were the best they'd ever tasted. The queue of children to see him had been busy all day and oh how they'd loved to sit on his knee and tell him how good they'd been all year and what they wanted for Christmas. The grotto was alive with twinkling lights and jingle jangly music and the looks of wonder and excitement on the Childrens' faces as they marvelled at the sparkly trees and glittery snow filled Santa with joy.

The queue started to shorten as it came up to five o'clock and Santa's heart skipped a beat as he spied a beautiful lady with long blonde hair and the biggest blue eyes, carrying a large bag filled with Christmas decorations and holding on tightly to a little boy who was obviously very eager to see him.

As it came to the little boy's turn, his mother smiled at him and her face lit up the already bright room. It was like an arrow had been shot through his heart. He immediately fell in love and welcomed her little boy into his grotto. Seated on his knee Santa asked him what he wanted for Christmas. The boy replied, "I want a police car with a siren and flashing lights because I want to be a **policeman** when I grow up. Making a mental note, Santa then proceeded to ask him other important questions such as did he have a chimney or should he use his magic key? Had he been a good boy? Were his parents still together and was his mum seeing anyone? When his time was up, Santa gave the boy a gift from his sack. He was desperate to speak to the boy's mother but he still had children waiting for him and couldn't possibly disappoint them.

Santa was distraught, "I'll never see her again," he thought, dejectedly. When the last child had gone, Santa noticed an unusual silver and turquoise **bauble** lying on the ground. He recognised it as one of the decorations that his new-found love had been carrying. It must have fallen out of her carrier bag as they left the grotto. He carefully picked up the bauble and exclaimed to the elves, "whomsoever has a Christmas tree with decorations like this I shall marry."

"Who even uses the word "whomsoever" any more," said the elves, that's a bit random." "Oh no it isn't," replied Santa and hurried off to Goldsmiths on Midsummer Boulevard to look for an engagement ring.

Back at the North Pole, Santa checked that his Stardust Antimatter Propulsion Engine was working on his sleigh and that the reindeer were all fit, healthy and ready for the night ahead. With everything in good order, on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, they loaded up the sleigh and started off towards the South Pacific. His mind wasn't really on the job and some children in Australia opened sledges or bobble hat and mittens sets instead of surfboards and boomerangs that year. Young children received boxes of Werther's Originals or bottles of whisky, grown-ups received childrens' bikes or Lego sets and elderly people got skateboards or trampolines.

Did you get something really unexpected one year? Now you know why.

Finally, the reindeer arrived in the UK and, on Santa's instructions, headed directly towards Milton Keynes, completely bypassing the rest of England. Within seconds they had visited 75,267 homes. Lo and behold the 75,268th house was displaying the very baubles Santa had been looking for. He was beside himself with joy and left the gifts - something called a rabbit in a brown package and a stocking full of dog treats - underneath the tree. No sooner had he wolfed down the mince pie and brandy left on the hearth and made his exit into the hallway than he was met with the loud barking of a scruffy brown and white Shih Tsu who had awakened the lady of the house.

Holly Cavanaugh was a striking brunette with a cappuccino complexion, big brown eyes and slight figure. In fact, she was a bit of a cracker. She came down the stairs wearing cerise silk pyjamas and furry Ugg slippers. She clearly was not the girl he had seen in his grotto. However, Santa feasted on the vision and immediately fell in love all over again. And actually, he thought to himself, she doesn't have the same amount of baggage as the other woman.

Rubbing her eyes, Holly realised who her visitor was and blushed the same colour as her pyjamas. They introduced themselves and Santa confirmed to himself that with a name like Holly she would make a perfect wife. Being an old-fashioned **romantic**, he got down on one knee, opened the jewellery box, illuminating the most enormous diamond Holly had ever seen and asked her to be his wife.

Now, Holly was a **headstrong** young lady, so, despite the enormous rays of light emanating from the diamond, she wasn't going to be bamboozled and said, "I'm going to need some time to think about this. Meet me at the Concrete Cows at North Loughton Valley **Park** at 10." To which Santa replied, "I have a few more presents to distribute so I'll come back in the morning." And off he went back to his sleigh, petted the reindeer affectionately on their heads and flew away towards Iceland. He managed to complete the rest of the night without too many further incidents. He did notice a few flimsy Summer mini dresses being left to teenagers in London but assumed they were intentional.

Snow fell lightly in Milton Keynes that Christmas Eve night and Holly woke to find a carpet of the white stuff all around her red brick estate. Wondering if she had dreamt Santa's proposal, she gorged a sumptuous breakfast of smashed avo on toast, then donned her jacket and wellies to take Cookie for her morning walk in the park. Walking across the grass at 9.55 she spotted the sleigh and a flustered Santa trying to stop the reindeer from either attacking or fornicating with the cows, she couldn't quite tell.

Dark clouds were beginning to gather and the air was turning warmer as Santa eventually managed to move the sleigh to a more suitable position. He said, "It looks like it's going to **rain**, dear. Let me take you somewhere a little more romantic." He lifted Holly and the dog onto the sleigh and off they flew towards the North Pole.

They arrived on the rooftop at Claus HQ and alighted from the sleigh. Although it was morning it was still quite dark at the North Pole. Holly marvelled at the twinkling stars and glistening snow all round. Santa got down on one knee and proffered the ring. "Holly Cavanaugh, I fell in love with you as soon as I saw you. Would you honour me by becoming

Mrs Claus.” “Oh yes I will,” she answered and hugged him tightly because it was bloody freezing up there. Feeling her icy fingers on his neck he led her downstairs to the workshop to find an abundance of drunken elves lounging around, smoking weed and drinking whatever liquids they could find in bottle-shaped gift bags. “They’re winding down,” explained Santa as he quickly shut the door and headed to his living quarters.

They chatted for hours and made wedding plans. Two weeks later they were married in St Nicholas’s Church and, because of the magic of Christmas, they lived happily forever after.

Diane Fenton
December 2023