



MaD Scribblings

Every month each member of the MaD Creative Writing Group produces a piece of writing based on a specific theme.

This little collection brings together a few of the stories, poems and reminiscences created by the group. We hope you enjoy them.

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CHARACTER TOMBOLA

090145. Character - Hardworking carrying: 1 pack of Tarot Cards , A 1970's diary which seems to be written in code.....

As the hearse drew close to the house Julia shuddered and squeezed her husband's hand. Auntie Em had meant so much to her in her childhood. It was Auntie Em who collected her from boarding school, when her mum and dad had been posted abroad to Saudi for daddy's work. Daddy was in the construction business and worked long hours for the family. He had followed the fortunes of many in his firm, who worked out there earning huge amounts of money, so that in returning home a nice little nest egg was accumulated. My boarding school fees were easily covered with generous concessions made by the firm and I wanted for nothing really. Except that very special human touch from someone who really loves you, and has known you from birth. I can feel it now, being so desperate for a special daddy hug. Everyone agreed he gave the very best of cuddly bear hugs. Being over 6ft tall he easily disguised the 15 stone he carried and was, as they say, 'well cushioned'.

Auntie Em had been his only sister, the youngest sibling, and she was extremely close to her brother. Sometimes I almost sensed the envy in my mother. Sometimes a cool atmosphere could develop between them but, nevertheless, Aunt Em and I seemed to gel. I assumed she had been unable to have children of her own.

In the early days when my parents were still working in London and my brother away in boarding school I often felt alone, in a sense. My parents loved me dearly but they both led such busy lives. Aunt Em had lived much of her life here in London, working mainly as a professional nanny to the great and good. As such, she actually was not at liberty to share details with us but her work did not prevent her visits to us at all, and to me they were very special. Being so used to children, she had so many new and exciting ideas of what to 'play', often to the disdain of my parents as she would whisk me away on her free days for 'adventures'. I absolutely loved her visits, as did my older brother when he was around. But, as I'm sure I was probably an unplanned birth, he was ten years older so not so interested in me at that age.

Auntie Em was a bit of a mystery in some ways who, despite living amid the secret lives of her employers, had the capacity for living her own life with zestful energy always left for family and especially for me. She was full of love and laughter, with a fantastic sense of humour. Daddy used to lovingly refer to her as 'Mary Poppins'. The only person he knew with the ability to charm his children into absolutely anything!

Inevitably, as the funeral service took the usual course, my parents stood silently together at the grave side with myself, my husband Tom, my brother Jeremy and his wife and a few cherished close friends: the stark empty hole of a grave at our feet. Although a fairly warm spring day there was a chill about this whole experience. My beloved Auntie Em, too young to die, once so full of life, things would never be quite the same. But a friendly gathering at the wake supported us all as we shared our memories, old photos being exchanged with some amusement.

Mum and dad, although living and working part time in London, still had little time or the energy, so I had stepped in to clear Auntie's house. It was something I really wanted to do as a kind of remembrance to her, and I was on a generous leave of absence from work. The decision to deal with Aunt Ems effects had nothing at all to do with the unexpected outcome of the Will reading. Apart from a generous bequest to my brother, the remainder of the estate was astoundingly left to me.

As I drove up to the small terraced suburban house, I noted its lovely setting opposite a small park with children's adventure playground, where I'd spent many happy hours. The tiny front garden had become a little unloved since her illness. I turned the key in the door and took a deep breath. All the memories came flooding back and the tears welled. The rooms were just as before and I realised I'd not been to her house at all since I'd married Tom and moved to live in Scotland. Poor Aunt Em had worked hard all her life and had now been denied a well earned retirement, where I had planned for her to come up and stay with us. The cruel ravages of cancer had determined that. More tears fell but as I entered her bedroom, typically kept neat and tidy but with a peaceful relaxing feel, my mood lifted. The soft shades of colour were tasteful and relaxing, the scent of aromatic candles, such a favourite of hers. I kicked off my shoes and lay on the bed in some kind of reverie.

Woken with a jolt, I had not dozed for long, only 20 minutes: oh gosh I really should make a start. So with plastic bags at the ready I started to go through the wardrobe of well chosen clothes but felt unable to clear them. Sitting at her dressing table I looked into the small drawers of costume jewellery, beads and brooches. In the lower drawers were 'undies' which could obviously be put into a bag, and then at the bottom of the drawer a rather pretty box. I carefully spilled out the contents. A pack of tarot cards, a tiny silver bracelet, two plastic hospital bracelets, one with her name and the other, Baby Cameron, which was of course her name and my family name.

Lying underneath was a small diary year 1970 and pair of booties knitted in pink...gosh! Had Auntie Em had a baby after all? I delved into the diary to look for some clues it was totally unintelligible apart from a few identifiable dates, ringed birthdays etc. And the only text written in some kind of code. I went down to the kitchen to get a drink, maybe a glass of wine if any around. Then, wine in glass, I sat in the rocking chair, the one I'd always referred to in childhood as the wishing chair, from Enid Blyton's books, to look again at this curious diary. At that moment the door burst open and Tom's voice saying, 'hello, darling it's only me ...are you ok?' He enveloped me in his arms and we clung together for a moment.

"Well Julia, you had been a while and no message so I thought maybe you'd need a hand and certainly some nourishment. I've brought a takeaway supper and a bottle of wine. Not sure what provisions would be here so I've catered for a couple of days for us. What a delightful house! Julia what's up my darling you look stunned." I showed him the diary "found this in her drawer". Handing him the diary "Upstairs with some other things ... you must come up and see" "Ok ok calm down my love" replied Tom. "Now let's look at this diary first. You always said she was a bit of a mystery woman". He picked up the tiny book"it's not code Julia, in that sense, it's Pitman's shorthand!!" It had looked like code to me, but Tom being a journalist had needed to use shorthand in his study and practice. Some journalists still do use it apparently.

Tom translated the diary as far as October revealing that, yes Auntie Em had given birth to a baby girl in 1970, the father of whom she referred to in the diary as being the love of her life. And, that due to whatever circumstances they could never be together, not being married and pregnant in those days, it being frowned upon. She had entrusted her daughter to my parents, and thinking I may have a cousin somewhere, questions began to rise in my mind. As we went over the items of evidence Tom and I reached the same conclusion almost instantly. Could this child actually be me? It would explain the disparity between Jeremy and I in her will. And my heart felt broken in two in equal measure, of loss and gain. No wonder I had felt this complete bond with her. Auntie Em was in fact my birth mother. It explained the occasional attitude of my mother towards Em too maybe. But It was somehow unbelievable. A truth hidden from me for 28 years. From the diary, it appeared that it was daddy who had insisted in taking me, and later adopting me so that Em could rebuild her life and continue her career. My mother was quite willing to have a child at that time, the bonus being a girl, having suffered severe endometriosis. I wonder if they were ever going to tell me? Wasn't there a law about this sort of thing in adoption? Feeling such anger about this, plus the bereavement of Em, now my birth mother, just left me in a state of hopelessness and loss.

"Julia, darling" said Tom as he stroked my hair, kissing me softly as the tears ran onto his broad shoulder. "We'll get through this, we really will, let's have another drink and get into bed. You're in shock, exhausted and must rest, we will really make better sense of all this in the morning." He led me gently, quietly, to bed and I fell asleep still wrapped in his dressing gown, his arm over me, until, sensing the morning sunshine, I stirred, listening to birdsong in a blissful daze. Had all of this been some kind of nightmare? Realisation crept over me inevitably, as Tom stirred and asked how I felt.

After breakfast there were still so many unanswered questions and the final three months of the year to transcribe. Tom was unwilling to delve further, feeling we had enough to cope with but I was so desperate to find out if there was a clue to my father's identity. The initials MB had occurred regularly at the beginning of the diary but never appeared again. Maybe my parents would know more. I felt so desperate for knowledge now, they just had to be prepared to reveal. This could have been so painful all round but after speaking at length on the phone, we drove round to their apartment with our discovery, sanely had a meal and talked. Yes there were tears, anger, regrets, a million and one emotions released over such a concealment. They were really sorry and had wanted to share as much as they knew and bless them, they had been so convincing and loving as my parents, I could not be angry for long.

Em, apparently had been so intent on secrecy. It was built into a way of life for so long. I was always their beloved Julia in their hearts, of that I had no doubt. Yes, they did have a birth certificate, but father sadly 'unknown' so no help there. Em had gone to her grave keeping that secret and I had to reluctantly accept the fact. My parents understood that the father was one of her employers and that was all, but they were also convinced he had not survived some kind of mission he was involved in at that time. Dear Em had faithfully carried on in her post as nanny to support his widow and family, to fulfill both needs and then was promoted to work for a branch of the royal family. A prestigious appointment, no doubt, where she remained until her diagnosis of cancer. According to the diary, it was during this time she had turned to spiritualism, and tried to use the tarot cards to try to determine the course of her treatment. Poor love, it must have been such an awful time for her. She became ill soon after my marriage, and I began to regret having been so far away from London.

We called to pick up her ashes today and decided some must be scattered in this pretty garden of her much loved house. Daddy had a letter giving her last wishes to take the ashes to be with other family in the local cemetery, as in life family had always meant so much. There had been a lovely tribute from a certain Lady Sarah's private secretary, read out at the funeral.

I kept this and the mementos, found in her dressing table, in the same pretty box knowing that maybe one day, I may give birth to a girl, and I know I would use Emma as one of the names. Certainly the essence of Auntie Em will live on; the mystery of my fatherhood remains until M15 next release papers

Susan White



GRANDAD FRANK

My mother's family come from the village of Honley in West Yorkshire. I have heard it described as quite a large, irregular clothing village seated on a hill overlooking the picturesque valley of the River Holme. Most of it was built to service the local woollen mills and associated businesses as well as providing just about everything needed by the people who worked in them. There are lots of Yorkshire stone cottages, shops and numerous churches to suit all denominations. The pubs are still well frequented today and have managed to retain their outstanding character with no inkling of shabby chic, it's just shabby but still alluring to the good old-fashioned drinker. Some of these watering holes still benefit from an old piano in the corner that allow local pianists to earn a free pint or two in exchange for a few jolly tunes. The village has grown, mostly since the 1990's, with lots of modern stone housing at the lower levels.

My grandfather Frank was born in 1897 and raised in the village with his brother Harold. He would have left school aged about 14 to work in a local mill. In time, he became a long-distance lorry driver which meant he made trips to far flung places such as Leeds, Bradford, Halifax and Wakefield. Back in his day, most people didn't venture further than Holmfirth and an eight mile journey to Huddersfield was considered to be a day trip.

Frank was a tall, broad, strong man with fair hair and bright blue eyes. He was kind and generous to everyone he met. He knew that he was lucky to be paid more than other drivers because he was capable of carrying the burden of extra responsibility by driving over the Pennines and across the moors in all weathers to ensure the safe transportation of his loads from factory to dye works and to the various clothing manufacturers across the West Riding.

Harold and Frank were brought up to be extremely strict Methodists. They carried their faith throughout their lives and both became Methodist lay preachers. Frank refused to carry a weapon when he volunteered for the Army Service Corps. He happily drove an ambulance during the Great War and went wherever he was needed on the front line to help the injured and pray with the dying. He was quite prepared to be killed but would not hurt another living soul.

Frank married my grandmother Annie-Gertrude after a courtship of around eight years during which they both worked and saved every farthing they could to buy their own home. Home ownership by a blue collar worker such as Frank was almost unheard of in its day but he was determined not to be beholden to a landlord and wanted to be sure that his family would have running water from their own tap, an inside toilet and electricity. Gertie, as she was known, was the one who looked after the money. Again, unusual in their time, they saved with the Yorkshire Penny Bank and were eventually able to pay £600 cash for their brand new two bedroom bungalow and then a very large garden for an additional £60.

Frank and Gertie had two daughters. My mother Joyce was born in 1926 and four years later Doreen arrived. The sisters were not alike in their looks, abilities or interests except for their total dedication to the church. As a child, Joyce was very pretty, fair haired with green eyes, tall and slim; she loved tennis and running; was a brilliant scholar and went to a grammar school where she became Head Girl and learned that life was for living to the full. Doreen was equally tall but was never very pretty in her youth. She hated all sports and struggled at school.

The little bungalow was soon bursting at the seams as Frank's mother and then Gertie's mother came to live with them until their dying days. Frank broke into the roof and created enough space for a double bed and a chest of drawers and that was the marital room for many years.

The garden, of course, was crucial to their survival. Frank grew every vegetable and fruit they ever ate. He was a marvellous gardener and Gertie would never waste as much as one redcurrant. Frank would pack up bags of apples, beans, potatoes and whatever else was over abundant and take them out with him to work so that if he saw a poor unfortunate person on the roadside he could give them something. He never did the long distance journeys on a Friday and would therefore come home for lunch. Friday was pay day and Gertie would be leaning on the gate waiting anxiously for him to arrive, hoping and praying that his morning had been spent in the mill yard and not on the road so that he would bring the pay packet home unopened. Frank could not see a human being go without when he had plenty and it was an all too regular occurrence for him to give it all away before he got home.

Drama came when my mother announced that she wanted to go to University. No girl from Honley village or the grammar school had been to university and it was necessary for people at the church to take the momentous decision to allow Joyce to go to Manchester University. Frank and Gertie could not possibly decide this alone. Most people could not see the point as she would get married and have children and it would be a total waste of money. She did go and that's where she met my father who was a complete alien to the people of Honley and the Methodist church.

Frank was teetotal. He would say "I've never had a drop of alcohol in my life". Unfortunately, this was not quite true but he had never knowingly had it. As children, my brother and I used to make alcoholic ginger beer and hide it in an outhouse. Grandad found it and asked if he could have some and so we obliged. He also had sherry in my mother's trifles and used to say that it didn't taste quite right.

I always find it hard to understand how a man who was so forward thinking in his younger days became unable to embrace change. He was not keen on the idea of Doreen getting married and leaving home and I suspect he feared she might move away as Joyce had done. She had an excellent job at David Brown Gears in Huddersfield and had progressed in a way that was not expected for any woman. However, she realised that her father would probably win this battle and he did. Doreen was a good earner and decided she wanted to pay for a telephone in the house, primarily so that she could speak with her sister instead of writing letters but also so that friends could contact her easily. Frank could not see the value and insisted that if she needed to speak with someone then she should go to their house or use the postal service. He also rejected the idea of a television for many years but Doreen eventually got her way and Frank enjoyed cricket and wrestling as well as the national news that gave better coverage on world issues than the Huddersfield Examiner. Having gas in the house and central heating was another war of words that Doreen could argue to a sensible conclusion. Of course, they loved the cleanliness and convenience as old age and discomforts were creeping in with massive speed.

As a grandfather, Frank was wonderful. He was probably stricter than most but with very loving, caring and carefully chosen words and we knew where we stood. We never lived near enough to visit much but he used to write to us most weeks. Holidays were always spent at our house and he would be busy from the moment he arrived. The first thing he would do was empty the shoe cupboard and polish them all despite us having done them the day before. The sheds would be emptied, cleaned and painted; the garden tidied; bicycles cleaned and serviced and all manner of mending and painting jobs would be saved up for Grandad's theoretical holiday.

Retirement was not something that Frank wanted to do so he stopped driving and worked part time at the mill until he was 75 and ill health took over. It was incredibly painful to watch Parkinson's Disease attack such a big, strong, active and very proud man. He died aged 78 after several small strokes thankfully ended the misery he had endured.

I am very fortunate to have had two glorious grandfathers. They were chalk and cheese and both taught me very important lessons in life and I trusted them both without question.

Carolyn Luckhurst



GRANDAD'S EARLY LIFE

This piece was written at the request of my grand-daughter.

I was born in March 1935 in Newport, Monmouthshire. My young married parents both worked in London because of the World Financial Depression and lived off the Fulham Road near Chelsea Football Ground. When I was expected Doris, my mother, wanted to go home. So, they went back to Newport where her father, Charlie Pritchard, rented a house to them - this was 17 Hopefield. But there were still no jobs in South Wales so my father, Bert, was now unemployed. He was dynamic in temperament and leapt over the counter at the Labour Exchange and demanded a job - any job! He was sent to the Brecon Beacons and helped to build Talybont Reservoir, living in the worker's huts from Monday to Friday.

I spent a lot of my time as a child at 71 Malpas Road with my mother's parents Gert and Charlie Pritchard. I was the first grandchild and was doted on by my Nana and my mother's three younger sisters Flo, Rene and Muriel. So I was spoiled by women 'from the word go'.

With the start of the war in 1939, unemployment became a memory with Bert now working down the docks and acting as a fire watcher at night. In March 1940 I started school at Crindau Infants. My Nana used to take me and she had to stop me picking up bits of metallic shrapnel in the road. "The Germans put poison on their bombs" she said! I can also remember sitting on my Grandad's knee at night in their air-raid shelter; he had the door open so that we could watch the searchlights and hear the anti-aircraft guns and the 'broom broom' of the German bomber engines. Some people were killed in Newport and even more in Bristol, just visible across the Severn estuary.

We were all issued with gas masks in case the Germans dropped gas bombs - though, fortunately, they never did. Hitler had been gassed in the First World War so perhaps that's why they didn't. My little brother Lyndon had a Mickey Mouse gas mask while my baby sister Barbara had to be placed in a large zip-up bag with a transparent cellophane window. I can remember her screaming out of her confinement which, of course, she hated. My youngest brother Robert was born after D-Day so was free of all that.

The rationing of food, clothing and other items started. Bread became less white because of the additives, and we were rationed to one egg each per week. I was eleven years old before I tasted a banana or had an ice cream! Sugar and all sweets were rationed but the Government provided free orange juice and cod liver oil with malt for young children - which I loved, and still eat it! Apart from Army lorries the streets were empty of traffic because petrol was severely rationed, and I loved playing marbles in the gutters on my way to school. Every night there had to be 'blackout' so we played in the dark, often under beautiful starry skies. Some boys had torches which were great for Hide and Seek.

The Council ploughed up all the city's parks for allotments to grow food, leaving just the children's playground with swings and slides. So, our main playing area, apart from the canal, was 'The Twmps' - a very hilly and overgrown quarry. An enterprising Colonel from the local Barracks had turned it into an Army Training Group with steep climbs, tank traps, machine gun posts, tunnels and stuffed dummy soldiers for bayonet practice. The area was bordered with rolls of barbed wire to keep civilians out. But naughty little boys were in there in two ticks! What fun, crawling through the barbed wire, wriggling through the tunnels and trenches, climbing the assault cliff and setting fire to the soldier dummies. Did the atmosphere of the War make us exceptionally wild and destructive at that early age?

In 1942 American soldiers arrived. I remember 'The Yanks' carrying kit bags and marching, in a rather unmilitary way, from Newport docks up to their newly built camp at Malpas Court. They were young men with - to our British eyes - plenty of money, and were very popular with the girls. My auntie Muriel said they were great fun. "Any gum, chum?" was a common begging cry from us children.

Once as they marched past our house which, like all the houses, had been denuded of its metal gate and fencing to be melted down 'for the war effort', I fell off our front wall and hurt my knee. A soldier broke ranks and picked me up. "Take this home to your Ma, son" he said and from his kit bag gave me a large but unlabelled silver can as he marched off to Malpas. But big boys of 9 and 10 took it off me and said "Let's go to the canal and open it up!" This they did by hurling it against the canal bridge until it burst - and out came pineapple juice and fruit which we ate with our sticky fingers. Foolishly I told my Mam the story and got a clip across the ear!

When I was nine, in 1944, a Spitfire screamed just over the top of our school and crashed into a hill above the canal. We were wildly excited - being too young to feel sorry for the pilot - all we wanted were souvenirs, especially RAF roundels. As soon as school finished we rushed up to the canal - but the police had cordoned off the area leaving a large smouldering patch in the middle of the field. The following year that patch became an island of nettles. I figured the plane had carried nettle seeds with it!

So while to our adults the world was violent and mad, to boys like me who knew nothing else it was exciting and apparently normal.

David Millinship



MISSING – Present Location Uncertain

The letter everyone dreaded was enclosed in a brown envelope. And, sadly, this was the experience of my grandmother Edna. She never actually knew where my grandfather lay in some far off field in France. My destiny was clear, that for her sake I must research how and where he died. I had her letters, beautifully kept. And of course there were war records of his regiment available now so it was possible ... I would like to share her experience as researched by me, put together using family stories from my grandmother Edna's point of view.

"It was a strange feeling saying goodbye and farewells to the lads, seemingly jammed onto the train but they were exhilarated and motivated to serve their country. We exchanged last hugs and kisses not knowing when we'd meet again. Alfie was only just twenty years old and we were only recently married. As I left the station, I tried to think of our wedding day, a lovely affair and a wonderfully sunny day. I was soon home as I mused away the time on the bus with my memories. I would have my job at the store to keep me occupied and work friends there, many in the same boat as me. My Mum and Dad lived close by and Alfie's folks close by. The street where we lived in our little rented place was a nice neighbourhood. All of them had been the world to us, setting up as newly marrieds.

As the long evening came to an end after listening to the wireless, I prepared for bed. We had never had a night apart and when we were courting, we met every day after work. This empty quiet house, the empty bed, the sight of his clothes, hanging around as though he might be home soon after work and maybe a pint with the lads. It was unbearable. The tears came full and fast as I pulled the bed clothes around me ... oh how in heaven's name was I going to survive? But, then I pulled myself up by the bootstraps and thought, oh God, how was HE going to survive?

The weeks and months went relentlessly on as the war progressed with very spasmodic but loving newsy letters passing and the odd parcel was allowed to be sent; little useful comforts between us. He even asked for me to make something to protect the tea and sugar in the trenches. He was quite light hearted at times, calling the Germans 'old Fritz' when things were quiet. That was September 1917 but things must have changed.

I had been feeling a little strange and the monthlies had stopped, oddly. Surely, I couldn't be pregnant ... oh heavens no, ridiculous. We had only spent such a short while together. I put my feelings down to nerves and got on with living until I gained some weight and it became very clear and my mum said I should see the doctor. To my horror, the pregnancy was confirmed and instead of the usual happiness under normal circumstances, I just felt so desolate and alone with no Alfie to support me. I'd have to give up work, how would I manage? It was amazing though to think that we had made a baby and that here inside me a little new life was growing. The very thought of it was also frightening. I knew I must be careful on writing my next letter to Alfie. I had to be so careful to concentrate on his joy at fathering this baby and not upset him as Alfie's job in the war was important. He'd told me but never allowed to explain what he really did.

His first letter in reply was so tender 'my dear, you have made me so happy, my dearest', and brought the usual tears.

The lads around him had given him a cheer and bulled him up. I just longed for the warmth of his body, the smell of him and prayed for his safety and peace of mind as we would have to face the birth so many miles apart. I knew about the pain that women giving birth suffered and the thought made me shudder. But, then I love Alfie so much, nothing was too much to give him and I really wanted to be brave for him. I knew I could rely on my Mum to help me through it. We women were used to that. I began to realise I could cope and started with preparing for our baby, spending my evenings doing a bit of knitting or sewing. Folk would give me some wool they had left over or we'd take down one of our own jumpers and use that. I cut up some nice soft flannelette sheets to make cot sheets.

My time approached and I had no word from Alfie for a while. Life went on here with difficulty and reports of the war on the radio sounded encouraging sometimes but who could trust that?

My Dad would sit by the wireless and shout with frustration. He was not allowed to fight this time because of an injury in the factory where he worked. So few men were left here to work now and Dad had all these women to organise on the factory floor. He just had to accept the fact that women were capable of working to help the war effort, even doing a man's work. Also, we women needed the money to feed our families. Day to day living was hard as food was scarce but as we had a wider family of friends and neighbours, we just mucked in together and managed. We had a bit of a back yard garden and the allotments at least to grow a bit of veg if we could. We shared our food around and looked after each other. There were not too many treats about though.

Our family and neighbours were my midwife, nurse and general support when eventually my waters broke and I was definitely in labour. No going back now; it had to be faced. So, after what seemed ages of pain and pushing, our son was born. An emotional moment, happy and sad at the same time, exhausted with no Alfie to walk in to the bedroom afterwards to hold his baby or hold me. Somehow, I did imagine I'd hear Alfie's voice though as I read through his letters.

I named the boy Sam after the song Sam, Sam, pick up tha' musket!! His strong and gusty lungs filled the house as regular as clockwork when feeds were due and thank God I had enough milk to satisfy him. The days and nights disappeared in a blur of tiredness, of endless laundry and trying to get things dry in the awful winter. I tried to write as often as I could but was very dispirited as no word was coming back. Mum spent as much time as she could spare with me and helped me through the worst times. Thank God, I had my family; quite a big one now with the in-laws, my sisters and a brother and thank God he was much too young for the war. I hoped he'd never be old enough.

I began to live in fear of the postman's arrival, feeling that no news was better than bad news. Little Sam was toddling by now and I desperately wanted his father to see this lovely little chap and to hold him. After all, a child, especially a boy, needs a father so much! I tried to 'keep my pecker up' as Alfie had said, when we shared that last precious night together and as he always said in his letters ... Oh God, how I missed him, longed for him, willed and prayed for him to be safe. Everyone had begun to realise that this war was producing more casualties than first thought as our boys were sent home with horrific injuries.

I often reached for his letters, saved in a special box with one of his handkerchiefs. Wrapped in his old jumper that I had knitted for him when we first met, I would climb into bed after Sam had settled and read them yet again, savouring every word, crying myself to sleep. If only I could hear something good for a change! I just kept feeling his spirit was still alive out there somewhere, but where was he? In some lonely French village, cold, wet and maybe injured.

And then, on a day when I was really feeling good for a change and Sam was being good and a joy to play with, the long-dreaded letter arrived. The brown envelope ... I trembled and ran with it round to Mum's house. I daren't be alone to open it. Mum and I sat with a cup of tea and opened the letter. When I first read it eagerly and not really seeing the words, 'Present location uncertain', I was hopeful. But then, as we read it and read it again, the words sunk into our souls. If they didn't know where he was, would anybody find him and was there any hope at all? We just clung together and cried.

The misery continued. The heard rending feeling when peace was declared and so many still missing and now presumed dead, left on some foreign field ... oh God, my Alfie, no proper farewell, no one to visit a grave and still no answers.

Life had to go on with little Sam and all was for him. I was now able to work a little again, thanks to Mum doing babysitting. My heart was hardly in it or in anything until I could at least have some idea of where Alfie was. This had been such a tragic war for everyone. We were so relieved that peace had returned but what a cost, even though we won; a generation of young lives lost. So many women with no man to support a family; so many women who may never marry.

And my Alfie, bless him, never returned but had died on a foreign field somewhere, along with so many others from the regiment. His medals were sent in the post to me: was that meant to make me feel better? Never in this world ... my anguish goes on because in my heart he's still missing ... I don't have any grave to visit. Will either of our souls rest again until I can see the place where he died? No, no, he is still MISSING."

Susan White

THE PHOTOGRAPH

As a young boy growing up in London just after the war so many of the everyday luxuries that we regard as perfectly normal today were simply un-dreamed of. Our 'everyday stuff' amounted to a cold, damp and draughty basement that we huddled together in, something we took to be a simple fact of life so we imagined nothing better. We didn't exactly like it, of course, but somehow we ceased to notice the mice and the smelly black mould, the lack of running hot water, and the cold because these were things we just took for granted. Our only heating was a paraffin stove, which we referred to as the 'glug-glug' on account of the noise it made, and a meagre coal fire in the sitting room which was only lit on the coldest of nights. Chill blains, something we never hear of these days, were just normal, something you just got. Such basic conditions, along with all the frugality and the rationing of the times, meant that ill-health was an almost constant feature of our lives.

Beyond the front door, the poor air quality was certainly a contributing factor to our health problems and, at its worst, London's famous yellow and sulphurous 'pea-souper' smogs must have been for some like a flashback to the terror of the trenches as they descended upon us, euthanizing the most vulnerable without distinction or mercy. In my case, being officially 'delicate' and suffering from chronic bronchopneumonia, I was especially at risk. So it was with some irony that the peculiarly British enthusiasm for the 'fresh air cure' was administered to me with such ill-considered exuberance.

First there were the windswept convalescent homes, far away by the sea, and then the open-air special school by banks of the River Thames where the estuarine fog conceded only to the bitter east wind as it whistled up from the North Sea like a banshee, hitting us full in the face and threatening to do for us all. Yet still, somehow, and miraculously, I survived all this and plenty more.

It was fortunate, then, that meeting one's end by getting run over was much less of a danger for us then than now. In those days to see a car at all in our street was almost a rarity, while essentials such as milk, sacks of coal, kegs of beer and such like were delivered more sedately by means of horse and cart. The clip-clopping of hooves, the snorting, the horse-shit and the smells are all sensory delights that will remain with me forever. And, as regular as the deliveries, came the limbless war veterans who daily picked their way past our house with their tied up empty sleeves and trouser legs, still wearing their berets and medals proudly. Others, mustering what dignity they could, begged with set faces on the corners along the North End Road, each one of them fanning the flames of my young imagination, each one to this day an unopened story book.

And of course we played the long day as children do. There were a couple of playgrounds for young children within easy reach but mostly the car-less street was our theatre of choice. Here our play was entirely spontaneous, serendipitous and free of all adult contrivance, oozing out of our fertile imaginations like a fountain of dreams suddenly made real. Assorted pre-fabricated goodies and baddies such as cowboys and Indians, English and Germans, Cops and robbers guided the meandering paths of our plots and our wild-water narratives, while heroes such as Tarzan, Roy Rogers and Superman were prime roles to be fought over at start of play.

Then, as we got a little older and more adventurous, there were the numerous bomb-sites, still un-cleared and just longing to be played on and explored. These became our instant cowboy 'Badlands' or perilous mountain ranges and during the summer we would catch various coloured butterflies and moths with our swishing fishing nets as they lingered over the thick clumps of bright yellow, wet-the-bed weeds. And as we reassembled the rubble into our various encampments and secret dens, there was always the lingering thrill of things to be found. Treasures such as mangled fork or a crushed tin pot might eventually find its way to the rag and bone man, and might even help to earn us a dejected-looking goldfish in a polythene bag.

But among all our finds, the one that stands out, head and shoulders above all the rest, was that black and white photograph. Uncovered by Robert, one of the slightly bigger boys, he gasped and hooted, clutching it as close as he could to his chest and then holding it up and gawking at it over and over again and wailing with mixed disbelief and delight while the rest of us crowded in, desperately straining our necks and pleading for a closer look at his mysterious find. Once we realised what it was there would be no more play that day for there was simply no more useful imagination to be had. Scurrying back to the security of the street we packed around him excitedly all the way while he clung to his prize like a drowning man to a twig, the King of the Boys.

Much of the rest of the day was punctuated with outbreaks of hushed and excited conversation in small, spontaneous huddles, well away from parents and younger siblings who would surely blow the lid off the whole thing.

Then at school the next day the photograph surfaced again and as soon as the playtime bell went we were upon Robert like wasps, pleading once more and arguing about what should be done with the prize - for this was an object as much of fear and of dread as of mystery and forbidden delight - surely, we reasoned, too much responsibility for one boy on his own.

In a quieter corner of the playground, where we would not arouse too much unwelcome attention, we all at last got a good look at the woman in the photograph. In black and white and subtler shades of yellowish grey, and naked from head to toe, she stood upright, looking back at us full on and blankly like any undressed shop-window dummy might. Her dark hair assembled into neat ringlets and curls, cascaded around her ears, framing an expressionless face that eschewed any possible hint of engagement of any kind while the actual physical details of our clandestine boyhood imaginings became fully de-mythed and revealed to us. From her slender neck to her neat round shoulders; to her bun-like, milk-white breasts with their large dark round nipples that seemed to glare accusingly straight back at us; to the strange curve of her hips and the shady well of her navel and, finally, the mysterious and darkly shocking, yet featureless expanse of her wide black pubic triangle, all left us gasping and our heads reeling.

A while later, having dispensed with the uninspiring realities of school dinner, we began to discuss what ought to be done with the prize. All enthusiastically agreed, apart from the finder of course, that such an image was far too precious and far too risky a thing to be retained by just one person. So after much arguing and re-shuffling of rank it was decided to dismember it and share out the details as carefully as possible so that we could all keep hold of some tiny part at least of its forbidden delights.

Painstakingly our friend began to tear the photograph, slowly and surgically, into neat monochrome rectangles and squares so that each boy would get his piece according to his status in the group. There were protests of course, amid some spirited argument and flexing of muscle. The smaller boy who was persuaded grudgingly to accept the head and face lived, he protested, in a houseful of framed photographs of women's heads and faces, so where was the thrill in that! To me, and surprisingly early in the pecking order, came a shoulder, her left one. Round and neat it had a kind of haunting perfection about it and I clutched it to my chest like a found banknote.

While the various parts of the photograph were distributed, piece by piece, among our individual members, we became magically transformed into Our Gang in the most esoteric sense of that term. Now we were special indeed. We had our very own sacred tokens of membership, easily worthy of any spy story, which could be matched up against each other and even reassembled, providing scope for further examination, as well as a deep sense of our closed and binding solidarity with one another, a sacred testimony of our hallowed belonging to what had suddenly become our very own, very secret society.

All the way home from school that afternoon my solitary piece of the photograph burned like a cinder in my pocket. I hurried back as fast as I could, convinced that people were looking at me and would just know my secret somehow, like adults always did; 'That boy's got a naked woman in his pocket!'... 'Dirty little child!'... 'Wait till I tell his mother!', so that by the time I arrived home I was almost in tears from the sheer effort of trying to maintain a straight and guilt-free expression. At home I headed immediately for my bedroom where I secreted it at the bottom of a cardboard box, full of other valuable boyhood collectibles, which I then pushed far under my bed and where it remained hidden in the dark and the dust, as big as the bogey man himself, waiting for a quiet moment when I might just feel safe enough to feast my guilty eyes upon it once more. And there it remained, out of sight but seldom out of mind.

At first the dread of being caught with it grew by the day while the actual image of the naked woman slowly faded from my mind's eye. Nobody ever discovered my secret and nobody read the story in my face.

In truth, of course, it could have been any old fragment of any old photograph, a knee perhaps, or even a large goitre for all the detail it provided, and no-one could have been any the wiser to my dark secret from this alone. Yet still, for a long time afterwards, weeks perhaps, the gremlin in my head haunted me, taunted me, tantalised me and tortured me in ways far worse than even the Brothers Grimm could ever have imagined, and I simply dared not venture back into the box again.

But time moves on quickly for young children and sometime later, when playing quietly in my bedroom, I did eventually retrieve my fragment of photograph for another look but it had mysteriously changed. Half-disappointed and half-relieved, I was surprised to find that I no longer recognised it for what it had once been. The object of all that dark fascination and excitement, along with its crippling payload of worry, all the shame and all the guilt, had simply faded back down to what it always had been, nothing more than a tiny snippet of insignificant grey paper set alight by the ever-hungry flame of a young boy's imagination.

Vic Blake



THE GATES

At the main entrance to Papplewick Pumping Station, there are four stone pillars supporting an awesome set of four ornate cast iron gates. A large central pair stand over the cobble stone driveway with pedestrian gates over modern tarmac on each side. This entrance leads to the large house that is now a Visitor Centre, detailing the history of how Nottingham and surrounding areas were able to have a good clean water supply in Victorian times.

The whole of the perimeter of the property is bordered with a wall made up of red bricks sandwiched between a grey coving topping and a grey brick bottom. About half a mile along Rigg Lane, which is the exterior roadway, there is another entrance to the grounds with an identical pair of stone pillars, however they sit on either side of some rather ordinary and out of place wrought iron gates.

Most people won't notice that the gates at the second entrance are no longer cast iron but for me, visits to Papplewick Pumping Station are tinged with a slight note of shame and a little embarrassment that is thankfully decreasing with my advancing years. Such a beautiful building surrounded by glorious gardens with the extraordinary lake, let alone the incredible feat of engineering housed further into the grounds. It's the ideal place to take little and big people for a lovely bank holiday Sunday outing to marvel at the monstrous pumps in action and admire their strength and sturdiness, their beauty and cleanliness and nobody can fail to notice how unbelievably quiet they are.

My tale of woe goes back to one sunny Sunday afternoon in 1970. My father had decided that it was far better that he taught me to drive a car than to have lessons. His unreasonable reasoning was that he didn't like the idea of me spending two hours with a total stranger but maybe he thought that the cost of driving lessons could become a burden as I was the second of five offspring and we lived in a small village with poor transport links to anywhere at all and desperate to become independent.

The designated time was 3.00 pm on Sundays so that we could borrow a rather natty little Mini belonging to his firm that was in the possession of a female member of staff, called Jean, who lived in Papplewick. The car was less than a year old and her pride and joy.

Jean, usually a very calm lady, looked slightly agitated as I cautiously proceeded to move her car off the drive and follow my father's vague instructions to go left where the cat often sits on the wall and right towards the east side of the next cornfield and carry on past the farm that used to sell milk at the gate. Needless to say, I dithered far too often and caused others to honk their horns and wave their fists at me. Dad would wave back at them, yell at me for my stupidity, grab the steering wheel far too often and put the fear of all things godly into me.

Instead of the joy of the challenge and the prospect of my freedom being realised fairly soon, we had experienced three Sunday afternoon outings that had proved to be nerve wracking for me, never mind the other road users and poor Jean. I had returned home a jabbering idiot, dreading the next weekend and pleading with my mother to make him change his mind about paying for lessons.

Sunday lunch accompanied by a large share of a good bottle of something red and heavy did not give me one iota of confidence that his potentially well-intentioned plans were going to work, bearing in mind that he would otherwise be snoring loudly in a chair with the Sunday newspaper draped across his face. The journey from home to Papplewick was not without fear as my father blearily drove his own car to Jean's house.

And so it came to pass on that Sunday afternoon that we travelled around the perimeter of the Papplewick Pumping Station. Dad announced that this was the perfect spot to practice reversing into a gateway. The enormous and impressive pair of cast iron gates attached to the tall stone pillars were closed to traffic.

The road was quiet and it should have been easy. Dad was telling me exactly where to position the car, grabbing the wheel as he thought fit and I was absolutely certain that he had not allowed enough room to enable me to straighten the car. In his usual bullish manner, he insisted that he was right and that I was on track for the perfect manoeuvre. "Keep going back" he repeated as I fearfully replied "I'm going to hit the gate, I know I am". Inch by little inch I carefully played the clutch and the hand brake until the inevitable happened. The rear corner of the car lightly touched the gate and within seconds there followed an almighty crash as one gate crumbled onto the roof of the pretty little Mini car. Out I jumped in absolute horror to find one cracked rear light and then see large parts of the ancient gate spread out in chunks on the dented roof.

My father emerged from the car as a flabbergasted man came out of the house just inside the gates. With his usual grin, my father said "She barely touched the gate. See, the rear light is only cracked and not even broken". The man had to agree that I hadn't ram raided the gate and the damage looked worse than it should do under the circumstances. They exchanged details and my father promised to deal with it the following morning.

My recollection is that the insurers pronounced the gates as 'an accident waiting to happen' and refused to pay for their repair or replacement. The current wrought iron gates were eventually made and that particular entrance to the Papplewick Pumping Station will never be the same again.

Carolyn Luckhurst



THE STORM

My father, Paul Franklin Bowen, was born on 15 February 1915 at the home of his grandparents in Tonkawa, Oklahoma, in the mid-west of America. No hospitals existed in Tonkawa at that time, or for several years thereafter, and most babies were introduced to the world at their parents' or their grandparents' home. Paul was the second child of the family, following his brother Albert Clair born in 1912 and ahead of his sister Mary Lavelle who arrived in 1917.

Yes, my uncle was called Clair, which was a fairly standard name for a boy in the midwest of America in the early 20th century.

My grandfather was a tenant farmer raising mostly wheat until oil was discovered 3 miles south of Tonkawa and, despite having been educated only to the 5th grade, he decided he was as good and as able as many men in the oil business and he set himself up as an oil and lease broker. He did well until the depression hit, when almost everyone suffered.

The first day of September 1918 was a real scorcher, but nothing more than a usual summer day to the Bowen boys who were playing in the dirt with two flat-bottomed pans tied to a string and filled with earth to give them weight so that when pulled through the soft dirt they created nice, smooth trails which they called roads.

They hadn't been playing long when my grandmother appeared with a new-looking pan which, of course, both boys wanted to play with and which my father succeeded in gaining by using his superior argumentative style and a few tears, but they didn't get to play for much longer. Clouds began to form and they received call from their Mama to stop what they were doing and go into the house quickly, as there was a storm approaching. Clair and my father both delivered verbal protests at this 'order of the day' but my grandmother soothed their feelings by fixing each a glass of milk and some bread, which tasted good.

Storms in the mid-west of America can be extremely violent affairs, so as the clouds gathered and boiled with increasing intensity everyone moved to the comparative safety of the bedroom and huddled together to wait it out. It looked as if it would be some time before the storm would be over and the monotony of waiting needed something to liven things up. The boys soon began looking for something to do.

Clair was, as usual, the first to think of something and took it upon himself to raid the cracker box which was located on top of a free-standing cabinet in the kitchen. Next to the cabinet was a cooking stove on one side and an iron cot on the other. To get to the Saltine crackers Clair had to climb onto the cot then onto the cabinet. From that point he could easily reach the cracker box and get a handful of his tasty targets. My father watched him closely then made the same trip with the same intent and success.

The boys were soon chomping on their booty and Mary then put up a fuss for her share of the salty tidbits. My grandparents were both nervous and looking for ways to keep the children occupied. My grandfather asked that the boys share their crackers with Mary,. As neither of them accepted the invitation he sent Clair back to the 'Saltine mine' for a handful for our baby sister.

Hardly had Clair disappeared when there came a tremendous bolt of lightning and an ear-splitting clash of thunder which sounded as if it had blown the house apart. It did blow a hole in the roof and tore apart the stovepipe down which it had travelled on its demonic mission. The lightning had struck the chimney then flashed down it to the stove, then to the cot and to Clair, who was found lying on his back on the steel cot.

My father watched my grandfather as he gathered Clair into his strong arms and held him lovingly while he bathed his face and chest with a wash rag and cool water. Clair never moved again, and the only thing different about him were red streaks on the skin of his chest.

The next day would have been Clair's first day at school.

Years afterwards my father was discussing this tragic event with my grandfather who said that when he picked Clair up his heart was still beating but he wasn't breathing, and when asked if he had tried artificial respiration my grandfather said he had never heard of it at that time.

From then onwards, whenever a storm approached my grandmother would take her remaining children into the bedroom, put them on the floor and cover them with her own body, all underneath a mattress.

My father lived to be 86, but the memory of his brother's dreadful and sudden death remained clear and painful for the rest of his life.

Sue Cullen



WOODTHORPE GRANGE PARK (1967- present)

Done in response to the proposed planning application threatening to sell the land for housing.

Oh the struggle to get babes ready, lead on dog, walk up to the park,
More difficult in winter when winds blew hard, and skies so dull and dark,
But the basic sense of achievement to arrive inside the gates,
The trees and luscious greenness, of open space awaits,
For children the fun of swinging gently as parents idly push
Or endlessly climbing steps so high, to slide down with a whoosh!!
Oh how we mums loved this park, just right for family fun
We'd call in Birds in Sherwood for drinks and still be home by 1pm

As we mums grew older, children now at school,
Busy times, but dogs need walk, an important daily rule
This park became a sanctuary, wrapt in nature, soul revived,
A favourite for all dog walkers and folk with busy lives,
The pitch and put a favourite game, for all, both rich or poor,
Just come enjoy the game and don't cheat on the score!
The gardens each with different theme, had a hidden charm,
Ideas to copy and use at home, if you've strength of arm

Now in the present, all of this remains, in fact so much more,
With greenhouse, shop with beautiful plants to buy and explore,
Community functions abound encouraging all to join in the fun
It's our park, our open space, our breathing space, and we must shun
The developer, the agent, who make offers to own the land
We must protect this historic place, as our heritage, originally planned.

Susan White



OUTSIDE THE WINDOW #1

Outside the window the rain is falling. A steady downpour that drenches the land around. The grass on the lawn lies under a shallow pond. The girl in the window seat rubs a hopeless arm against the steaming pane of watery glass. There is nothing to see in the darkness outside bedroom window.

"I can't see anything" she complains in a whispery voice. "I can't see if daddy is coming."

She is young maybe five years old. A waif dressed in an overlarge brown dressing gown, with pale skin and stick like arms and legs enveloped in the voluminous gown. She is pretty in her fragile way, with huge pale blue eyes and tangled white blonde hair.

"How do you know if he is even coming tonight?" asks the other girl from the bed where she is wrapped warmly in her duvet. The house is cold, the unreliable boiler has broken down again.

This girl is as unlike the girl in the window seat as possible. She is eight years old with warm brown skin and sparkling brown eyes. Her hair is tamed into a fat black braid hanging down her back.

The girl in the window seat turns and says sharply,

"He could come tonight! You don't know that he won't!"

"I know" The other girl agrees. She has learnt not to argue with Jenny. If she presses her on this subject, she will no doubt cry bitterly, then probably leave abruptly. Then Maryam will feel guilty. It has happened before, more than once.

In the nights since Maryam moved to this new huge, draughty house she has learned Jenny's story. In her whispery voice, becoming stronger and warmer with memory, Jenny has told her about her daddy. He is the gardener here, and he grows all the vegetables and fruit for the household. Though Maryam privately thinks he isn't doing such a good job right now. The garden looks wild and overgrown to her.

"Daddy showed me how to dig the potatoes, and how to prune the roses" Jenny muses. "He is going to let me have a plot of my own."

Jenny's daddy has had to go away. Maryam is not sure where, Jenny is not exactly sure where either. Gone off to the War which could be in the next town or the next country for all Jenny knows. He has taken Chestnut, the farm horse with him. He was allowed to borrow him, for the War. Maryam is sad about this, she likes horses.

"He promised he would be back soon, before Christmas, he said." Jenny has repeated this promise like a prayer, over and over, "He is bringing Chestnut back too."

"Look dad is calling me for tea, I'll be back in a while." Maryam can hear her father at the bottom of the big staircase calling her.

Dr Hussein ladles the shepherd's pie into two big bowls. The peas and carrots go in the middle of the huge kitchen table to be put on the pie individually. The table came with the house, too big to get out of the kitchen without sawing it up. Besides, he and his wife like it. It is part of the history of the house. Tonight, there is just him and Maryam, Alisha, his wife is doing a night shift. An inevitable routine for two doctors. Dr Hussein and Maryam crowd down one end of the table, they have not actually used the large, dusty dining room yet. Maryam pokes around at her food, distracted.

"Maryam, are you going to eat that or what?" says Dr Hussein somewhat crossly. He is tired and probably wouldn't even have gone to the effort of defrosting this meal if it hadn't been for Maryam.

"Dad where is the War?" she asks suddenly

"There are wars everywhere Maryam." He replied

“No, the War” she repeats. “The one that is here, in this country.”

“There isn’t one right now.” Dr Hussein tells her. “Luckily not here, not for a long time. Since 1945.”

“And why did the horses have to go?” Maryam asks.

“Horses? No. There were horses in the first World War though.” He says. “That was even longer ago. It finished in 1918.”

“Oh.” Maryam considers this. “That was more than a hundred years ago.”

“Uh huh.” Dr Hussein mumbles, his mouth full of shepherd’s pie. He swallows. “Why? Are you studying it at school now?”

Maryam says nothing, and bends her head industriously over her dinner.

Upstairs in Maryam’s bedroom, a hundred years ago. A dead girl waits for her father and a horse to come home from the Great War.

Jane Nandi



OUTSIDE THE WINDOW #2

Harold Elliott was totally and hopelessly in love. He knew it was ridiculous but there it was, he was in love and there was nothing he could do about it. And, to make matters worse, the object of his affections was unaware of his feelings; in fact, she was largely unaware of him.

Harold had spent the majority of his 73 years being sensible. He'd secured a place in a well-respected local accountancy firm where he met Stella, an attractive girl whom he'd asked out in a rare moment of recklessness and been astonished when she'd accepted. After a couple of years it seemed only right to ask Stella to marry him, and they'd had a happy and contented life together for 41 years, producing two children. Since Stella's death Harold had lived a rather solitary life, seeing the children and grandkids a couple of times a month but not doing much else other than his regular walks through the park, visits to the library and occasionally to the theatre or a night out for a drink with his old pal Bernie (when Bernie's wife would allow him a night out!)

Harold had been quite contented with his life until he saw HER.

It started on a glorious spring morning. Harold was at his window watering his spider plants when his eye was drawn to a woman walking down the street. Except she wasn't walking, she was – well, Harold didn't know how to describe her movement. She seemed to be barely making contact with the pavement as she travelled with a bouncy, delicate motion that seemed to echo the joy of the spring day. Harold was fascinated. As he watched her draw level with his window he realised she was wearing earphones and must have been moving to the unheard music. As she shimmied away Harold chuckled to himself, pleased to have witnessed this little episode then, feeling lighthearted, addressed himself again to his plants.

The next sighting of 'her' came two days later, at much the same time of day, as Harold was doing his weekly house clean. There she was: no shimmy in her step this time just a purposeful walk, carrying a bunch of flowers. Harold looked at her with more interest, taking in the mass of blonde hair, her trim figure and shapely legs (or what seemed to be shapely under her tight jeans) and finally noticing her face. Harold's sensible and steady heart flipped and started to beat more quickly as he gazed at her open and attractive features, her generous mouth which seemed about to break into a smile, and her laughing eyes. And then she was gone, leaving him a little breathless and wondering what had just happened.

After that Harold found himself stationed at his window at the same time each day, hoping she would appear – which she did about four times a week.

He watched for her through spring and into summer and become more and more enchanted. One lovely morning at the appropriate time he had gone outside on the pretext of cleaning his windows. His hand trembled a little as he spotted her and, timing it to perfection, he turned casually as she drew close and, effecting surprise at seeing her, offered her 'Good morning – isn't it a lovely day?' To his delight she slowed her step, smiled at him and returned his greeting in a warm and friendly voice, before continuing on her way. Harold was enchanted, and smitten.

The summer had been a glorious one and he had charted her progress down his street many, many times, noticing little changes in her from week to week. Sometimes she would hurry and at others would walk by a little more slowly, occasionally seeming to glance at his window and the giddy thought entered his head that she might be hoping to see him. One week she was moving quite awkwardly and seemed to be in pain from her back. He judged her to be a little younger than himself and, like him, prey to the aches and pains of an ageing body (although in her case a body in seemingly excellent shape). Oh, how Harold wished he could massage that pain away.

And so it went on. His windows had never been so clean, he'd repainted the front of the house, his small front garden was immaculate and on his 'outside' days, which he tried to keep below a loitering level, he had usually been rewarded with a brief exchange as she passed. And, on one wonderful occasion they had chatted for almost 2 minutes before she gaily sailed on her way. Harold had reviewed this exchange in his mind many times, adding bits here and there as he thought of clever and fascinating things he wished he had said.

She now occupied his thoughts for much of the time and his previously unimaginative mind had started creating little scenarios between them: coffee, a meal, a walk in the park, a visit to the theatre and, late at night when he was snuggled in his bed, he imagined encounters that were more daring, but very appealing.

Summer turned to autumn. Harold woke one morning with the realisation that he was hopelessly in love with someone he knew nothing about. He gave himself a good talking to, knowing he had to do something to change things. Being a realist, he knew he mustn't continue to put his life on hold in the hope of a morning's 'hello' but he didn't know what he should do to get back to his pre-window life. Firstly he tried to stop looking for her: in this he succeeded for less than a week, then he was back at his post each morning.

The woman he had built in his imagination and who had become so familiar to him was not real, so he had to get to know the real person. But how? He wasn't good at small talk with strangers, and although he had spent so much time with her in his imagination she really was a stranger.

He formulated all sorts of plans and dismissed them as being ridiculous. He had considered waiting for her by his front gate, but dismissed that idea also knowing he risked her thinking him to be very lonely, which he wasn't, or crazy, which also he wasn't. Although he had to admit to himself that he did feel a little crazy these days.

He was becoming desperate - would he ever find a way to get to know this wonderful woman? She wasn't appearing as frequently now that the weather had deteriorated and Harold felt unspeakably miserable when he thought of the empty winter ahead. Today, for example, the weather was awful. It was pouring and the howling wind was hurling the few remaining autumn leaves at his window which ran with rivers of rain, distorting his vision and echoing his sombre mood and heavy heart. No chance of seeing her today he thought, but suddenly there she was, by his gate, battling a large rainbow inside-out umbrella. As he watched her a car sped by sending up a plume of water and drenching her, and he heard her cry of distress.

Suddenly, steady and sensible were gone; this was his chance. Without thinking twice or stopping to put on his shoes and coat, Harold rushed to his front door, yanked it open and, heart pounding like the drumming rain, reached for the hand of his lady outside the window.

Sue Cullen



THE RUNAWAY #1

Giselle was kneeling on her hands and knees scrubbing the kitchen floor and the water spilled a little from the bucket soaking her skirt. She was so tired that her eyes kept closing, and she felt light 'headed' and there was still much to be done.

Giselle awoke to a loud noise and realised she must have dozed. Her stepfather Rupert Rheingold had banged the table with his whip and his face was contorted with anger. "You lazy slut" he bellowed "why I have to keep you in food and shelter when your mother and father are dead I do not know. For your idleness you will have no more food today and may only drink water. I hate seeing your face. Keep away from me".

Giselle's mother was Rheingold's first wife and had died having what would have been her brother. Rheingold was distraught at losing his son and re-married a woman called Amelia Lane soon afterwards. This woman treated Giselle as a servant who had to do many chores and often had to look after the woman's own daughter too.

She lay on her mattress shivering with cold and exhaustion and a rage gripped her: these people treated her so cruelly and unfairly. She could no longer stay here. It was time she made her escape. Unexpectedly, she heard the family below in the hall and it appeared they were all going out for drinks with the Martin-Hughes who lived in the big house nearby. She waited for the door to close with its usual scraping noise.

Hurriedly she packed some bread and cheese, an apple and some water but the most important item she took was a necklace shaped like a star that had belonged to her mother.

The darkness enveloped her like a cloak and she walked quickly towards the river. She leaned a moment on the stone wall and a wave of desolation swept over her. Sensing something nearby her eyes scanned the darkness and then she saw something white with light emanating from it and realised she was looking at a magnificent white horse who was whinnying gently. It moved towards her and then spoke in a soft, deep voice "do not be afraid, I come to help you. The Forces of Good have noticed how you suffer and have sent me to take you on a journey of enlightenment so climb onto my back". Naturally Giselle was apprehensive but she felt a feeling of calmness descend over her.

She found that the horse's back was warm and strangely comfortable and he moved with an almost supernatural floating movement towards the very steep mountain called the Goats' Column. The horse turned his head "My name is White Knight but I am usually known as Jack and we are going to climb that mountain". Giselle replied "it looks extremely steep and why do we need to do so?" Jack snorted "it leads the way to the Valley of Lost Dreams".

Before she could say any more Jack started trotting up the path at the base of the mountain which was green and foliated with small trees and bushes.

The path began to get steeper and the green vegetation changed to stony ground and the in the distance Giselle could see steps cut into the rock face. "Now you will have to hold tightly to my mane as we climb those steps, and don't be afraid" said Jack. There was a darkening in the sky as they started climbing the steps and the air seemed colder. Jack's hooves sometimes struggled to keep to the steps and as they climbed higher the mountain took the shape of a cone. The steps became smaller and more difficult to climb. Suddenly, there was a loud booming roar and Jack's hooves slipped and stones could be heard crashing down the mountainside. Giselle was terrified and clung to the horse. There were footsteps that made the mountain shudder and then an enormous head appeared around the corner of the mountain. The creature had large yellow eyes that moved all the time and a huge mouth containing many spike like teeth. "Good afternoon" the voice hissed "how kind of you to come. I was just wondering what I could have for a snack".

"We are stringy and tough" said Jack "and we need to be on our way".

“Nothing ever passes me as I am the Guardian of Goats’ Column” the creature said with soft menace. Jack started to climb the steps quickly and the monster roared and Giselle could smell its rancid breath. Smoke was billowing towards them from that huge mouth and flames were starting to appear too.

“Hold on” the horse instructed as tiny lights seemed to appear all around them and they were lifted into the air, higher and higher they rose until they were clear of the angry fire breathing animal. They found themselves floating sideways and then saw they had reached the top to the mountain and were carefully lowered down onto soft grass.

There was a small but lovely garden on the top of Goats’ Column and Giselle sat down on a seat to rest. She felt sleepy and drifted away to a peaceful place where she could hear birds singing and water gurgling nearby. The atmosphere was misty and mystical and through the mist a figure appeared of a woman who had a tiny fawn accompanying her. She knelt down in front of Giselle and asked her “what is it you are looking for in this life?” Giselle considered and then replied “kindness, respect and peace”.

“This will be shown to you and all you have to do is look into this mirror”. The mirror started to cloud over and then the shape of a woman emerged wearing a red velvet dress and Giselle recognised her mother and gave a gasp of disbelief. Her mother was entering what looked like office premises and a sign confirmed it was a lawyer’s office. She was signing a document and heard her mothers’ voice saying “ I am glad to get this Will sorted out as it leaves my fortune to my only child Giselle and she will never be poor or hungry”.

The mirror grew dark and then Rheingold appeared to be laughing holding up the Will and saying “she will never have it, she is nothing to me” and hid the Will high up in the chimney breast in the kitchen.

A firm pressure was felt on Giselle’s hand as she became aware of the beautiful face of the old woman who exuded wisdom, knowledge and understanding. “My name is Cora” she said “I am one of the Ancients who try to help others. Have you decided what you might do with this knowledge?” Without hesitation she answered “find the Will that was meant for me and live my life as my mother intended”. Cora smiled and took her hand and speaking quietly said, “When you awake you will be where you need to be”.

Giselle rubbed her eyes and realised she was back at the house and in the kitchen. The house was very silent as it was early morning. Checking carefully, she went to the large fireplace and had to climb onto a stool to find the envelope with its precious contents. Her hand was sooty and black but she just crept out of the house as fast as possible.

Giselle’s life has changed so much for the good now and she often thinks of White Knight and Cora.

Tricia Blanco-White



THE RUNAWAY #2

There was a time when my Golden Retriever Merlin, was not the stubborn old thing he is now. He was a stubborn young thing, with the strength of an ox and the brain of an ant. That is still pretty much the case in all honesty. We love Merlin, our second dog was a collie....

I was also much younger, and fitter. We liked to go walking as a family. We liked walking so much that we joined a walking group. Once a month we would pile into the car, the kids bitching and moaning that we had dragged them away from various Gameboys and videos, and we would drive out into the countryside. Usually the peak district or somewhere proper countryside. With wildlife and farms and things.

Then we would meet up with a bunch of hardened walkers, all day packs, North Face jackets, walking boots, and flasks of coffee, and we would head off through mud and fields. Sometimes the kids remind us of what happy times we had.

“Do you remember that time we got lost in the fog?” “Remember that time we were chased by cows?”

We look back and laugh. My eldest says; “Well that was another five years on the couch.”

There was one particular day when we walked across farmland in some Derbyshire wilds. I don't remember where and even if I did, I would never tell, not under torture. What I do remember very clearly is that we had just climbed a style into a field of sheep.

When I say climbed, I mean I climbed, my partner climbed, and somehow, we managed to heave Merlin over. He is the size of a small pony and the least agile dog ever bred. The kids had to fend for themselves.

As Merlin lumbered down into the field, he somehow jerked his lead from my hand, I bent to pick it up at the exact same moment as he saw a sheep. Now Merlin was not bred for speed, he was bred for his Brad Pitt looks, but he didn't let that hold him back. With a joyful grin he took off like a rocket after the sheep. He only wanted to play, the sheep didn't know that. The sheep took off like a rocket across the field with a bunch of other sheep.

I was appalled. I know how terrible this thing he had done. We were law abiding walkers, always closed gates, always kept our dog on a lead....

“Merlin!” I shrieked as I tried to sprint from a standstill wearing wellies and a back pack.

“Merlin! Merlin!” Of course, he totally ignored me. He was having fun. Off went the sheep, off went Merlin. He even looked like a sheep. All fluffy and almost white.

I gave chase desperately, because of course I was going to catch him, even though the slowest dog could give Usain Bolt some competition.

My back pack was chucked to the ground to give me more speed. I yelled at my eldest to; A. grab the back pack. B. Grab her sister and look after her. Then I was off, stumbling along woefully slow. Out of breath from yelling;

“Merlin! Merlin!” at top volume. For variety I also began to yell out Merlin's favourite foods; So “HAM! HAM! CHEESE! CHEESE!” “I don't know why I thought this would work. It didn't.

Now my partner had not seen this occur. The first she knew about it was several of the walkers tutting to each other and saying;

“Look at that, someone has let a dog chase the sheep.”

With a sinking heart she realised that this could be only one dog. Sure enough there he was, galloping across the fields, and there was me still in hot pursuit. So dutifully, she gave chase as well.

Anyone North of fifty will recognise the reference to a scene from Benny Hill. For anyone South of fifty; What followed was a comic chase scene full of slapstick humour. The sheep had far outpaced

Merlin and were now grazing in a corner of a distant field. Merlin was beginning to tire. So were we.

My legs felt like lead and I felt a bit dizzy. But miraculously Merlin had slowed to stop and sniff a badger set. My partner was still miles behind, it was all on me. With a truly heroic effort I found a burst of speed from somewhere and managed to leap on to Merlin's trailing lead.

Caught the bugger!

But the worst bit was to come. Trailing shame-faced back to the walking group A whole audience of righteous indignation. Merlin out of breath but happy. Us out of breath and mortified.

"You shouldn't let him chase sheep" we were admonished by several of the group.

Did it look like we let him chase sheep? Was it not abundantly clear that we very much did not want him to chase the sheep?

The kids pretended that they didn't know us for a bit, and we had to endure the silent, reproachful looks of the walking group for the rest of the day.

Merlin was oblivious. He always is, like the time he gave me concussion by knocking me over on a beach when we were on holiday. Or like the time he broke my mum's finger on another holiday. I think there is a book title there; Emergency Departments by the Sea. Best and Worst.

But of the many terrible things this dog has done, the Runaway episode was by far the most humiliating. It still haunts me to this day, and probably always will.

Jane Nandi



THE WAITING ROOM

Edith Glover eased her aching body into her favourite waiting room chair thankful that it was vacant. She had arrived very early for her appointment in the hopes that her chair would be available. She had also begun to find it extremely difficult to get an appointment with this doctor - who seemed to be increasingly reluctant to see her more than once a week – and did not want to run any risk of missing this appointment.

Her chair was located in the far corner of the waiting room and afforded her a panoramic view of the room and its occupants. She was a self-confessed cantankerous 86-year old for whom 'people watching' was one of her limited number of pleasures in life. Of her few acquaintances, however, most would call her a nosy old cow.

She had developed and honed what she liked to consider her observational skills over the nearly ten years since she had lost her dear departed husband (miserable old git). Arthur was a bus driver and had, she was forced to admit, provided well for them both. Sadly, however, he was so boring – his sole interests being his allotment and his shed full of tools.

Whilst she had a clear view of the door she was not concerned about missing newcomers as the hinges on the old door squealed in protest with every movement – it had been that way ever since Edith could remember.

The first squeak preceded the 'grand' entrance of the snooty receptionist for whom Edith harboured a deep-rooted hatred. Tall and imperious Miss Palmer clickety-clicked her way across the room to her desk. "Good morning Mrs Glover" she deigned to offer half way to her desk. "Good morning Miss Palmer – I have an appointment" Edith ventured.

"I am well aware of that Mrs Glover" the disdain almost dripped from her words. If hackles exist and they do rise this was certainly the effect this exchange had on Edith. She sat and quietly fumed.

The door announced a new entrant and Edith, glad of the diversion, concentrated on the door. However, she didn't need sight of the new arrival because she had heard the inane chatter progressing down the corridor so it was no surprise to see the somewhat overweight teenager enter with her mobile phone stuck to her ear.

With Edith's begrudging approval Miss Palmer dealt with Stacey in summary fashion, ordering her to switch off her phone, put it away and sit and await her turn.

Over the next 20-30 minutes the waiting room began to fill and people were being sent through to their appointments. "Mr Gardener your appointment please" Miss Imperious's voice would cut across the subdued conversations.

Edith was enjoying this visit – mainly because she realised she knew something about nearly everyone in the room. She knew, for example, that Mrs Williams, the local estate agent's wife (who was, Edith pondered, probably here for a pregnancy test), was having a not too discreet affair with the pharmacist Mr Lycroft.

She also knew that old Bertram Engles, who Edith cruelly referred to as 'Shakey' (the poor fellow suffered from Parkinsons), was planning to move from the village to go and live with his daughter in Gloucestershire.

"Mrs Harmon your appointment please" (this time in a somewhat obsequious tone) triggered Edith's reflections on the pompous Mrs Harmon, who considered herself to be a cut above the general populous. She and her husband, who owned and ran the printing ink company on the small industrial estate, lived in the large, 5-bedroom Edwardian property on Green Street.

Over time Edith's prying had accrued an impressive knowledge about the Harmons and she knew fine well why someone who could, ostensibly, afford the best of private health care was here using state taxes. She knew that the printing ink business was in deep trouble and was facing possible administration and that the Green Street property was mortgaged to the hilt.

Whilst enjoying her vicarious reflections she gradually began to become aware that people whose appointments she was sure were later than hers were being called ahead of her. Now focusing on this she felt anger and irritation building up inside her.

Having seen three more people go through she had decided it was time to remonstrate with Miss Snooty. She was about to leave her seat when Miss Palmer called “Mrs Glover your appointment please”.

Edith rose, marched to the reception desk, stared straight at the receptionist’s face and said, loudly, “You can stick your appointment where the sun don’t shine” and then delighted in the stunned silence that followed her on her way from the waiting room. As she grasped the door handle, however, she froze. She felt as though someone had wielded a sledgehammer to her chest. Every ounce of breath left her body, the pain around her chest and down her arms was unbelievably excruciating and she sank like a rag doll to the floor.

As her weight pushed the door open it gave out its usual squeal and her last thought this side of the great divide was: “The doc will certainly see me now”

Bryan Ruskin



ALFIE

The temperature was down to minus thirty-five degrees C. At speeds in excess of forty-five miles per hour the biting winds swept across the endless white plain whipping up surface snow into huge balls of impenetrable fog. Alfie stood rigidly to attention unfazed by the near storm conditions, awaiting his instincts to determine the direction he should go to seek his prize. His prize is to be another rare stone to finish off his intended mate's nest.

Alfie is – he would consider – a fine specimen of an Adelie penguin considered by themselves to be one of the finest of the nineteen species of penguin that inhabit the Antarctic.

His current target is to complete the nest, which requires only that final rare stone, to secure the approval of his intended mate and, as a result, her acceptance of him as her life-long partner. Kitty was the object of his desire and, at the moment, she was busy tidying her nest – far too busy to pay attention to Alfie who knew what he had to do – find that final stone.

For reasons that he would be unable to explain – even if he could talk! – he set off in a north-westerly direction – inland. After approximately half an hour he was feeling the effects of the increasing winds and he stopped to dip into his preen gland to spread more protective oil over his compacted feathers.

Looking back he could still discern the dark mass of his colony and he knew the risk he was running – should another male deliver an acceptable stone to Kitty's nest whilst he was away from the colony Kitty would accept that male and Alfie would have to start over in his search for a mate.

The area he was now heading for was a rocky plateau that he could see was being constantly swept by the winds leaving its surface scattered with loose rocks amongst which, he was confident, he would find that precious stone – the key to Kitty's heart!

When he arrived within sight of the plateau he saw that he could only reach it by swimming across a 'river' that had been created by a substantial crack in the ice. Propelling himself forward and flopping on his belly he shot into the water like a missile, his superb aerodynamic shape providing the least possible resistance to his forward movement. Accordingly he reached the far side of the 'river' without a single movement of his wings or flipper feet and landed safely on his belly.

It did not take him long to locate an ideal stone. Approximately 12cm in diameter it had an almost iridescent purple haze to its surface. It was somewhat larger than Alfie was considering but it was such a beautiful stone he was confident that it would definitely secure his place as Kitty's mate.

First he had to get the stone to the other side of the 'river'. To do this he secured his prize by moving it to the top of his left flipper and holding it there with his right flipper. He was then able to launch himself on to his belly and thus, bullet like, into the water scooting safely up on to the home shore still safely clutching his prize between his two flippers. Repositioning the stone on his left flipper – a move he hoped to be repeating with eggs in the not too distant future – he set off homeward bound.

With the stone carefully balanced on his flipper it was a relatively slow journey back to the colony and Alfie couldn't wait to present this glorious stone to Kitty.

As he weaved his way through the hundreds of nests and small waddles his excitement was building to an almost painful level. Imagine, therefore, how utterly devastated he was when he finally located Kitty's nest only to have his worst fears confirmed. Facing him was the spectacle of Kitty sitting on her nest involved in a mutual preening exercising with another male.

There was nothing Alfie could do and he wandered off, heartbroken, to seek pastures new. He did not even bother to pick up the stone which was later grabbed by the usurper and used to reinforce his position with Kitty.

Bryan Ruskin

THE CHOICE

Ntombi – Tom to his Oxford uni friends – was ‘haunched’ down at the edge of a small copse high enough to afford him a magnificent view across the Serengeti plain. It was mid October and with the temperature in the mid 30s the heat haze shimmered for as far as he could see. He was grateful for the gentle breeze that cooled his handsome brow – this latter, however, was currently furrowed.

As a Maasai prince surveying his beautiful homeland he should have been at peace with the world. He was, however, a very troubled young man.

His father Azizi, tribal chieftain, was seriously ill and was not expected to live more than a few days. In line with tribal tradition Ntombi, together with his two younger brothers, was called back to be with his father in his dying days and to administer The Father’s Chest – the Naasai tradition of distributing the father’s assets to the family.

Before his father died Ntombi would have to give him his sworn commitment to taking over as chieftain and maintaining, for the rest of his own life, the standards and traditions of the tribe and of which all of them were so fiercely proud.

As a prince of the 3,000 year old Maasai tribe Ntombi was incredibly proud of its standing in the African continent and of its traditions. However his father, Azizi, had been sufficiently successful with his farming business to enable him to send his first born to be educated in England, and Ntombi was half way through a 4 year engineering science course at Oxford Brookes University.

To his great surprise Ntombi had slipped, seamlessly, into the western life-style and was being successful both academically and socially. He discovered that he was a very creditable cricketer and was currently opening batsman for the university’s second eleven.

He had accrued a significant network of friends with as mixed a range of ethnicity, political leanings and cultural preferences than could be imagined.

And then there was Helen.

Having been bowled out for 65 at an inter-uni match 18 months ago Ntombi entered the pavilion seeking refreshments only to be totally stunned by the beauty of the young lady pouring the drinks – he and Helen fell immediately and uncontrollably in love and have remained so ever since.

Helen was a very candid and straight-forward person and advised Ntombi, very early on in their relationship, that she was ashamed to say her parents would present a problem for them due to their somewhat narrow views. Although her parents were aware that Helen had a boyfriend at this time they are not aware that he was a black African. The young couple were determined they would find a solution to this problem and vowed that, however it was resolved, nothing would part them.

As he sat, gazing toward the Mara river beyond which lay the Maasai Mara game reserve Ntombi pondered all these factors and realised he was going to be forced to make the most important choice of his life. There was no way he could be an effective chieftain for half his time and travel backward and forward to England to live the other half.

He decided to start walking and try and clear his mind. He stood and wrapped his shuka around him and set off from the copse toward the river. As he strode he found himself thinking about the magnitude of the traditions he had inherited as a proud Maasai warrior. He was slightly shocked to find that the thin veneer of Western influence he had acquired was making him focus, somewhat critically, on some of those traditions. With the prospect of the imminent loss of his father he thought about what will follow.

The Maasai tradition is not to bury their dead but to cover the body with animal fat and blood and deposit it in the undergrowth and leave it for predators to clean up. Although he felt the Maasai belief that this was a more natural solution to the problem of dealing with the departed he wondered if he would be able to describe this process to his friends in Oxford.

Eventually Ntombi entered a forest area and became fully occupied with trying to make progress through the undergrowth. He paused and sniffed the air and the hairs on the back of his neck bristled – he sniffed the air again and froze. Born and bred a Maasai warrior he could not escape the scent of lion.

He stood stock still trying to ascertain the direction of the source of the scent and how far away it was. He knew the one thing he must not do was to run as that would only ensure that the lion would run him down. He was at the edge of a small clearing and was trying to calculate whether, if the lion emerged within the next few seconds, he could make it to the large acacia tree at the far edge of the clearing.

He heard a sound emanating from down the track to his left and, as he focused on the spot he thought the sound was coming from, a magnificent lioness appeared on the track. At first she was looking down the track in the opposite direction from where Ntombi was standing and fighting to control his fear. For a brief moment it looked as though she was going to carry on down the track away from Ntombi, but a pair of warblers choose that moment to start a scrap up in the canopy and noise resulted in a sharp u-turn by the lioness. As she turned she saw Ntombi and started to run towards him. Ntombi used the only remaining ploy he could remember being taught by his uncle: he stood to his fullest height, raised his hands way above his head and started yelling at the top of his voice whilst wildly waving flailing his arms.

The effect of this on the lioness was to make her momentarily pause in her stride but, clearly having immediately decided that this demented human was no real threat to her, she resumed her rapid progress to this unexpected supper for herself and her cubs.

She emitted one last terrifying roar before leaping at Ntombi's throat.

THE CHOICE IS MADE!!.

Bryan Ruskin



NEGLECT

The road is still familiar, though it's been so very long
Since I visited my childhood home, but everything is wrong.
I pause, dismayed and shattered as my eyes take in the scene
Rot and devastation where my fondest dreams had been.

The gate is warped and broken and its paint is peeled away
The path is overgrown with weeds; the air smells of decay.
The swing I'd swung on happily has fallen from the trees
And I hear a broken shutter creaking softly in the breeze.

Thick arms of clinging ivy hold the cottage like a lover
And my heart contracts inside me as I think of my lost mother.
Her gentle hands, her smiling face, a kiss to calm my fears
This was our home, so full of love, for many, many years.

The garden was her sanctuary, her solace and her joy
I see her now in my mind's eye teaching her little boy
To name the plants, to set the bulbs, to harvest fruit and flowers
From this now abandoned garden where she spent so many hours.
Hands stained with earth she worked the soil in sunshine and in rain
What I would give for one more time to hold those hands again.

I venture up the garden path, the pond is overgrown
It's water green and filthy but - one lily blooms alone.
That little drop of sunlight serves to ease my aching mind
And I take this picture with me as I leave my dreams behind.
One small bright yellow flower standing lonely and erect
One drop of joy for my sore heart amidst this sad neglect.

Sue Cullen



GRANNIE'S GOT DEMENTIA

There's her specs in the freezer and peas in the jam
She's put wine in the kettle and gin on the ham
She must've gone out but I don't know where
Here's one slipper, one shoe but there isn't a pair

I'll call to the neighbour to see what she knows
Which way, what for and wearing what clothes
I said I was coming – she must have forgotten
I hope she's not ill and feeling quite rotten

I've been to the doctor's to pick up her script
And then to the chemist who thinks she has flipped
He's told me to talk to the doctor or nurse
And told me to label her coat and her purse

She's coming back now down the path with a bag
She's got cat food and litter but I see one big snag
The cat disappeared some ten years ago
She said at the time it was such a big blow

"Hey Grannie, this food for a cat is no use
Now that Flossie prefers to live out on the loose"
"Oh no" she replies with eyes open wide
"I saw her this morning when I was inside"

Her hair is all knotted and needs a good wash
Her clothes are no better, she doesn't look posh
Not any longer a Grannie that's chic
No longer bright, she's gone past her peak

It's time to think hard and to work out what's best
To ensure she is safe, well-loved and no pest
Not walking the streets, odd shoes on her feet
Looking ridiculous to the people she'll meet

Grannie has got dementia – Oh dear!!

Carolyn Luckhurst



IL ITALIANO

He, a handsome Italian,
She, a housewife from Wapping.
Her name, Margaret O'Malley
And she'd popped in for a coffee while shopping.

She noticed him as he pulled up a chair
Almost opposite her at the table
And she tried so very hard not to stare,
Tried, but was hardly able.

And in that moment she lost her heart,
Her eyes out of her head were popping,
He, an Italian, handsome and smart,
She, a housewife from Wapping.

He sipped at his coffee and very soon
He noticed her eyes gazing wide.
Buongiorno, he smiled as he put down his spoon,
Hello, she meekly replied.
My name is Dario, he told her,
Margaret, she said with a splutter.
Oh how she wished he would hold her
For her heart was now melting like butter.

And as she gazed she quietly fell apart,
Kicking over her bag of shopping.
He an Italian with a smile like the sun,
She, a housewife from Wapping.

When he came to her side to assist her,
His face came so close to hers,
She almost begged him to kiss her,
Her insides now all in a whirr.
And she thought as they talked about this and that,
His voice so soft, so lyrical,
That if he got out of here with his trousers intact
It would be little short of a miracle.

She knew now she wanted him, right there and then,
That soon there would be no stopping,
He, an Italian, a god among men,
She a housewife from Wapping.

Across the table they fell in love
While they talked of their dreams and of life
Then like a thunderbolt from up above
He asked her to be his wife.
You come with me to Italy, he said,
We live and make love in Milano.
You teach me to make your toad in the hole,
I teach you Italiano.

Oh how she wanted to fall into his arms,
Though the scales from her eyes were now dropping.
He an Italian, single and free,
She, a housewife from Wapping.

What of my husband, she thought to herself,
I can't just go off and leave him.
And what of the children?
Though I love this man,
I'm not sure if I can believe him.

And before she left she made him a promise
To love him for a year and a day
And, if after that time, they still both felt the same,
Then she'd follow her heart and away.

Oh how she wanted it all to come true.
Oh how her heart was hopping.
He, an Italian, loves dream come true,
She, a housewife from Wapping.

Vic Blake



MaD LIMERICKS

There was a young poet called Pound
Whose hair reached right down to the ground;
It was sold for a fiver
To Lady Godiva -
Covered her, her horse and her hound!

David Millinship

There once was a woman called Myrtle
Who entered a race with a turtle.
She thought he'd be slow
But he couldn't half go
As off like a rocket he hurtled

Vic Blake

There's a lot about ageing that's good
There's more about ageing that's bad
As long as my sage
Can grow wiser with age
There's hope that I'll never go mad

Carolyn Luckhurst

A lady called Jacqueline Whiting
Said "Life now is very exciting"
When asked why that was
She said "It's because
I've signed up for creative writing"

Sue Cullen

There is an old fella from Mapperley
Who was usually dressed quite natilly
But when at the swim pool
You'd think him a fool
'Cos he'd wear a Mankini quite happily

Bryan Ruskin

There was an old Welshman from Dee
His name he'd forgotten you see.
He tore up a bill
'Cos it made him feel ill -
"I'm not Jones, I'm not Evans, I'm ME!"

David Millinship

I've made a New Year's resolution
To work on my poor constitution
I'll sweat and I'll strain
And I'll sharpen my brain
To stay out of an aged institution

Sue Cullen



We hope you have enjoyed these little scribblings.

If you have, we'd love to hear from you.

If you haven't, then we're sorry -
but thank you for reading

"How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live"

Henry David Thoreau