



TAW U3A CREATIVE WRITING GROUP

EASTER 2023 BOOKLET

PREAMBLE

(with the emphasis on “amble”)

Here we are again, fans; back by popular demand (well, we enjoyed our previous efforts and thought we would have another go).

This new selection of writings by members of the Creative Writing Group will, we hope, enthrall, entertain, amuse and, in a pleasant way, mystify you all. There are several pieces by each of our members and the variation in subject matter and styles is immense. We try to achieve a high standard of writing in each piece; sometimes we succeed, sometimes we fall short, but the main purpose of our writing is to enjoy ourselves – and writing gives us an excellent excuse for meeting-up, which we also enjoy.

Some of you will have read our previous booklets; unfortunately, those booklets departed to Literature Heaven when the website suffered its malfunction but, if anyone would like a copy of any of our previous publications, they have only to contact our editor at kane@hadleyville.co.uk and ask for a copy when one will be supplied with alacrity – or, at least, when I get round to it!

Now, I know you will be itching to get to grips with our stories but before doing so, there follows a few words from our chairman, Sue Boyd.

Sue Boyd

As some of you will remember we started producing these Booklets at the beginning of the Covid Pandemic as obviously we couldn't meet up in each other's houses. It was Bob's suggestion that we still carry on writing a story every month and he would make them into a book and send them out to us. It wasn't as good as having actual meetings, but it was a way of keeping in touch through those first dark months and having a positive project to complete each month. I don't remember how many we did in total, but they were eagerly awaited by many of you.

I'm very grateful to Bob for all the work he puts in to publishing our literary scribbles and hope that they will give you in hour or two of the same pleasure we get in writing them.

Jonathan Cox has joined us in the last few months, and he has been a very welcome addition to our Group. I have got a waiting list with one name on it, but of course as we meet in each other's houses we are limited to the numbers we can accept. However, if anyone has a story to be told or is a budding Pam Ayres like our Wendy Pentling give me a ring and I'll add your name to the Witing List.

TRAVELLING HOME

**By
Sylvia Wiseman**

The man wiped the damp carriage window with his sleeve and watched as the rain ran in rivulets down the outside of the glass whilst the train sped through familiar countryside which hadn't changed since the last time he travelled this route almost 20 years before as a young student on his way to Oxford.

He had been lucky to gain a scholarship and to be accepted into this privileged seat of learning and his parents had stood proudly on the platform waving enthusiastically as the train pulled away carrying their only son to an academic life they could only imagine.

The man lay back in his seat again, legs stretched before him pondering what his life might now be, there would be opportunities but how would he feel either behind a desk or in front of one? It had been a long time since he had been in a position where he would be restricted in his words and actions.

The train would soon be pulling into the station he remembered as a youngster. The parents would be waiting, Father leaning on his stick having suffered a mild stroke recently and Mother eagerly scanning each coach as it passed. As it screeched to a halt, steam hissing between the carriages Mother hurried along the platform longing to hold her boy to her bosom again, Father limped behind her his stick tap, tapping. He waited his turn for the embrace he knew would surely come when his wife finally released her son. Happy smiles, hands firmly clasped, the elder gently pushing the son away from him to study the tall handsome figure before him.

"Welcome home, my boy," the Father stifled a catch in his throat "It's good to have you back".
"It's good to be back" the young man replied putting his arm around his mother who was holding a tissue to her eye. "Let's go home".

So much had happened since they were last together. He had spent 5 years at Oxford gaining his Masters (Sci) and going on to gain a Doctorate before accepting the post of Head of Science and Technology at the University of South Africa in Pretoria where he had become actively involved in the political scene of the country at a very difficult time. Racist and violence were the order of the day and he had become embroiled in the aspects where race and colour clashed at every corner and he found himself at the wrong end of the law on several occasions and spent some time in the legendary KOKSTAD Super Max. Jail in Ebongweni where he suffered all sorts of inhumanities and still had the scars to prove it, never being sure which side the police were on.

But he was home now, and it was a good feeling to have the love and support of his parents again. He breathed in the good clean air of the English countryside and sighed contentedly as he settled into the front seat of his father's old car.

"Yes, let's go home" he murmured.

A DARK GIRL DRESSED IN BLUE

Two Seconds Later

By Robert Beattie

Two seconds later and so much would have been different; not better but different. Yes, certainly different. Because in those two seconds but I'm getting ahead of myself.

It all started the day before. I was idling as usual; nothing much on – not that I was almost naked, I mean, but I hadn't much to do. I'd just finished a job and was looking for something else to do, somewhere else to go, you know how it is. Then I saw her, a dark girl dressed in blue. "Come back Stanley Holloway," I thought. "All is forgiven." Silly comment, that. I hadn't anything to forgive him for, apart from Albert, and he was long gone. She was gliding along the other side of the road when I saw her first, all sinuous movement and elegance. I crossed the road and followed her. She hadn't seen me and I was able to follow her for some distance. I didn't know, quite, why I was following her but I was drawn to her and that movement in that dress; I love blue; it's my favourite colour, particularly on her.

She disappeared around a corner, and I followed her, of course. The next thing I knew I was on my back on the pavement with her kneeling on both my arms and with a knife at my throat.

"Hello, sunshine," she said. "You following me?"

"No, no," I said. "We just happen to be going in the same direction."

"Where you off to, then?" she asked.

That stumped me. I stuttered, "Nowhere in particular. I've just finished a job and I just had nothing to do I was following my nose."

"My ass more like," she said. She withdrew the knife but still trapped my arms. "Anyway, I know you don't I? Jerry Sykes, isn't it? You don't remember me, but you know my brother Jim McConnon."

And then it came to me; I remembered the walk and the sinuous movement. "Sally?" I said. "That's me," and she got up. "You're after a job, are you? Well, I've got something for you. Meet me at the Jolly in half an hour and I'll fill you in." She left and I didn't follow.

The "Jolly" is the "Jolly Roger", a pub we all used to meet at years ago. Not Sally, though; she was too young for that at the time.

I got there within the half-hour, and she was already there. We got drinks and sat in a corner. "This job," I said. "What is it?" "Some silver," she said. "There's a bloke who's been chatting me up, not without my help, if you know what I mean, and in his place, he has some special silver stuff; worth loads. You're the best in the business. Can move over gravelled drive without a sound which is just as well 'cause his drive's gravel. But you've never been caught so nobody outside the trade knows you. If I give you the details will you do it?"

Who is he?" I asked.

"Bloke called Jaimie Morgan," she said. "You might know of him."

"Yes, I do," I said. "Biggish chappy; bit of a thug in his way."

“Does that put you off?” she asked.

“Not at all. What’s the job?”

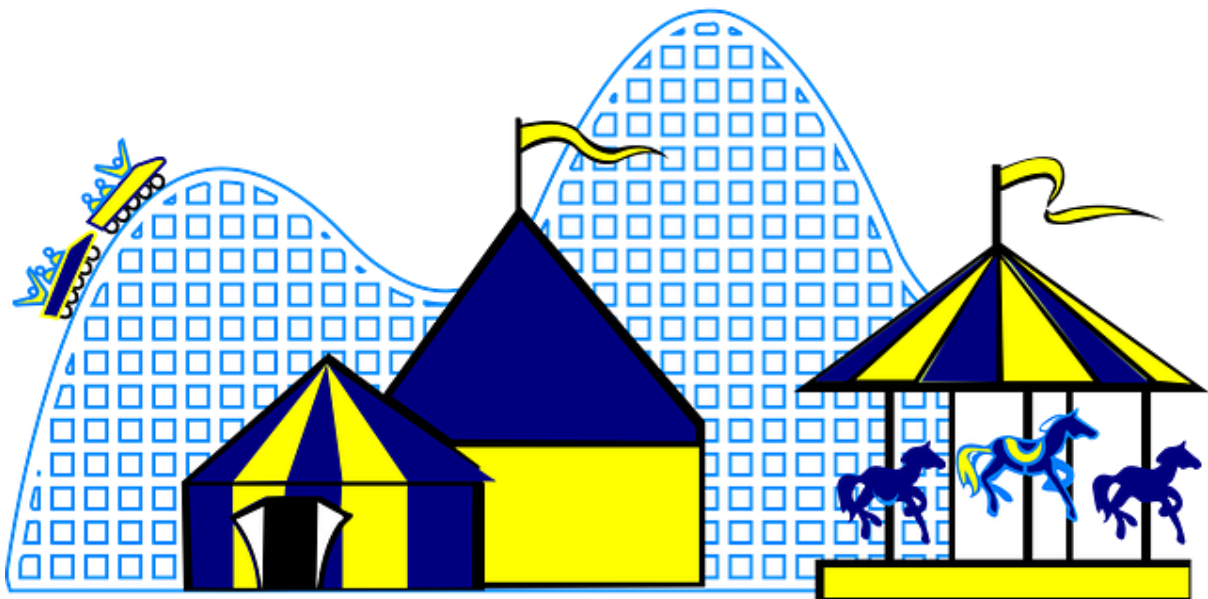
She explained the job and the lay-out of the place. I negotiated my cut and we arranged that as soon as I left the house she’d take the stuff from me, fence it and let me have my share. I said I wanted 50% up front and she agreed at once.

So, next day there I was, cash in hand, smoothing up the drive at two a.m., she, waiting in a car just down the road. Now, one of the secrets of my success is that I don’t reckon to be in a place more than 30 seconds, in and out. Any longer and the risk escalates like mad.

The door to the French widows was unlocked just as she said it would be. There was no alarm. Just inside the room I could see the silver, gleaming in the moonlight. I opened the door and then came the two seconds. In the silver I saw a reflection which was gone in a flash but not before I’d registered it. It was her! She had a gun in her hand. I thought, “I’m out of here,” and turned tail and skedaddled down that drive as fast and as silently as I could. There was no sound behind me.

I reached the road. There was the car and her in it. “What’s on?” I thought.

FAIR DAY BY SUE BOYD



It was a beautiful day with the sun shining through the windows of the bus as it trundled along country lanes on the way to Branston and Hannah thought that she would burst with happiness. It was Fair Day in the town, and this was the first time that her parents had allowed her to go without them and meet her school friends. It had taken weeks of pleading and doing so many extra chores around the farm, on top of her usual job of looking after the chickens (all 200 of them), that she could hardly believe her ears when her mother

finally said, "All right, you can go, after all you'll be sixteen in a few weeks' time and your father has persuaded me to cut you a bit of slack. But you must promise to get on the last bus home which leaves the station at seven o'clock otherwise that will be the last time, my girl."

"Thank you so much Mum. I'll be on that bus," and she rushed off to phone her best friend Liv and tell her the good news. Liv was delighted and promised to meet Hannah at the Bus Station.

Liv was waiting as the bus drew in and soon, they hooked up with a large group of their friends, plus several boys from the Grammar school who Hannah had seen before hanging around the school gates most days when they came out of school. One of them seemed a lot older than the rest and obviously had quite a high opinion of himself, mouthing off about how tame the fair was compared to Disney World. Hannah wondered why he was there in the first place, but it appeared he was staying with one of the boys for the weekend and had no choice in the matter.

The afternoon passed in a blur of laughter, hot dogs, candyfloss, goes on the various stalls trying to win that elusive £50. note in a jar or a large teddy bear and ending up with a chocolate bar or a free go. However, it was the rides on the bumper cars, big dipper, the Haunted House and the Wall of Death that were the stars of the show and Hannah loved every minute of it even if her heart was in her mouth. She spent most of the time with Liv and a couple of other girls, but every now and then they would bump into rest of their crowd and there he was, a good head and shoulders above the rest, with his arm around one of the girls, but Hannah could feel his eyes on her and a shiver ran down her spine.

All too soon it was time to catch the bus home, Liv was chatting to one of the boys so Hannah decided to walk to the bus station on her own, after all it wasn't that far. Suddenly she heard footsteps behind her and quickened her pace, her heart started hammering in her chest and her breath came out in painful gasps as she started to run down an alleyway by the side of a park. She thought of all those girls who had been attacked, raped and killed even in broad daylight like now, her name was called out and as a hand closed around her arm she screamed loudly and started shaking all over.

"I'm sorry Hannah I didn't mean to scare you" it was Loud Mouth, "Liv saw you leave and asked me if I would see you safely on the bus. My name is Liam by the way. Come on we'd better hurry up otherwise you'll miss it."

Fifteen minutes later as she sat on the bus, Hannah smiled to herself, half from relief and half because she had a date with Liam when he came to visit his cousin again. Perhaps you can't always tell a book from its cover.

‘Travelling Home’

BY

Jonathan Cox

Phillip heard the distant rumble of the underground train and hurried down the stairs. It was late and there were very few people waiting on the platform and he saw the train emerge from the tunnel, the metallic screech of steel on steel as the brakes brought the train to a halt assaulting his ears.

The doors slid open, and Phillip boarded the carriage and flopped down in a seat. He had been working late at the office in Holborn and was now physically and mentally drained. He lived in Essex and knew that the journey home on the Central Line would take about fifty minutes, so he wedged his briefcase between his body and the side of the carriage and as the doors slammed shut and the train jolted forward, he laid his head against the window and closed his eyes.

When he awoke, the train was motionless in a station and the carriage was in darkness. The light from the platform was sufficient for him to see that he was alone in the carriage. He looked out the window and was amazed to see how many people were congregated on the platform. Many of them were lying down with blankets over them and Phillip assumed that they were homeless people who made their way down to the station to shelter for the night.

He got up and walked to the doors and pushed the button to open them, but they remained closed. After several more frantic attempts to get the doors to open with no success he tried the door through to the next carriage – also in darkness – but this also would not open.

Now, a little anxious, he made his way back to the sliding doors and knocked on the window to hopefully get the attention of somebody on the platform. Many of them were conversing with each other but seemed oblivious to his knocking.

Phillip walked to the far end of the carriage. As he looked out onto the crowded platform, he noticed the name of the station for the first time. He knocked frantically on the window but there was still no response from anybody, and he finally gave up and returned to his seat and after what seemed an eternity eventually fell asleep. When he woke again, the train was once again in motion and five minutes later it pulled into Theydon Bois station where he alighted and headed home.

The following day he set off for work later than usual as he wanted to speak to one of the station staff about his experience the previous night. He approached a station guard.

“I was stuck at a station last night for what seemed hours – where exactly is Tanners Lane station?”

The Guard shook his head “Never heard of it Guvnor – guess you dreamt that one”

The train headed into town pulled in the station and Phillip was unable to conclude his conversation with the guard.

As the silver train pulled out the guard approached his colleague.

‘Tanners Lane – wasn’t that the station hit by a Jerry rocket at the end of the war’ – he asked.

“Yep, they estimate more than 500 people were down there sheltering from the bombing when a doodlebug hit a gasometer above the station – one almighty explosion apparently. There was already a service tunnel bypassing the station, so they just rerouted the line through that and never

attempted to retrieve the bodies for a proper burial; locals still believe their ghosts haunt Tanners Lane''

THE WINDOW
BY
WENDY PENTLING

MY PAL AND I WENT SHOPPING
A DRESS TO HELP ME CHOOSE
WAS FOR MY GRANDSON'S WEDDING
I ALSO NEEDED SHOES

FIRST TO PURCHASE UNDERWEAR
TO HELP APPEAR MORE SLIM
REGRETTABLY MY BITS STICK OUT
WHERE THEY SHOULD GO IN

THAT CORSET WOULD BE PERFECT
THE ASSISTANT CAME TO SERVE
IT WILL SMOOTH AWAY YOUR BULGES
AND LEAVE A SENSUAL CURVE

WITH SAID GARMENT IN THE CUBICLE
I SQUEEZED MYSELF INSIDE
WHEN GLANCING AT MY IMAGE
I WAS DEEPLY MORTIFIED

MY FACE BEGAN TO REDDEN
I STRIVED TO TAKE A BREATH
MY MATE HELPED ME EXTRACT MYSELF
VOICED AN EXCUSE AND LEFT

NEXT, TO A LOCAL CHAIN STORE
THE ATTENDANT THERE WAS NICE
I TRIED ON SEVERAL DRESSES
MY FRIEND GAVE HER ADVICE

I SETTLED ON A FLOWING STYLE
HIDES MANY IMPERFECTIONS
THE FLORAL PATTERN ALSO HELPED
I STUDIED MY REFLECTION

WE REACHED THE VENUE EARLY
THROUGH A WINDOW, PEEPED INSIDE
WEARING THE SAME APPAREL
WAS THE MOTHER OF THE BRIDE.

A DARK GIRL DRESSED IN BLUE

MOVING HOUSE

BY

ROBERT BEATTIE

"Did the earth move for you," I asked.

"No, but the house did," the dark girl next to me replied.

We were lying in bed. Normally, the dark girl, Sally, would be dressed in blue and, no doubt, would be again, soon, but as she got out of bed her pale body shone like silver in the early morning light which came through the gap in the curtains.

She started to dress; I was right; all in blue.

"So, today's the day," I said. "You're collecting the cash."

"Yes. He said he would have it ready at 10.00 and I'll meet you at Jolly's at 11.00."

"Ok, I said," and she left.

I quickly dressed and followed her. I knew where the fence hung out so didn't need to follow too closely. I saw her just as she was going into the shop. I waited. She came out about 15 minutes later looking shaken. She stood for a while outside the shop clearly trying to recover. She took her mobile from her pocket and clicked on a number. The mobile in my pocket vibrated but didn't ring; I didn't answer. She let it ring for a while and then moved off.

At 11.00 I was at the "Jollys". She was already there looking agitated.

"What are you drinking," I asked.

"Nothing for the moment. Look, the fence says the tray isn't silver. It's not worth £20,000 as we thought but £250. It's a fake. Where's the original?"

"How do I know?" I said.

"I thought you were an expert," she said.

"Not in Georgian silver," I said. "That's a bit obscure for the likes of me."

"What are we to do?" she asked.

"Well, I'll go and see the fence if you like and make sure he's kosher; he might be trying to scam you as you're a girl."

"But I've known him for ages but then, I've not done a deal like this with him before. Yes, go and see him."

So, I went back to the shop. Bill, the fence, was waiting.

"How did she take it?" he asked.

"As you might expect I said. Have you got my cut?" He handed me £30,000 in cash and I left by the back door.

Now, you may think I'm a shit but let me tell you the full story. You'll remember I hadn't broken into the house because I thought she was in the house waiting for me with a gun for some reason. I tackled her about this when I got back to the car. She was startled but told me that the house was owned by her former fiancé and that she wanted the silver to compensate her for his kicking her out. What I had seen reflected in the silver was a photo of her on the mantelpiece, taken with a gun whilst they were out shooting. So, I agreed to go back in there and then. I was in the house, as usual, for no more than 60 seconds. I took the silver but then stopped in the garden to examine it. Despite what I told her later I am an expert in Georgian silver and have written several well received books on the subject, not under my true name of course. I valued the object at around £80,000 not the £20000 she told me it was worth. So, she'd tried to scam me and I wasn't having that. After she'd taken the silver to Charlie, the fence, who I knew very well, I had met up with him and agreed a price of £30000 for it and settled the details of the story Charlie would tell her. So, in all I had the £5000 she had paid me up front and the £30000 Charlie had paid me and now I had to lose her.

I had already booked my passage on the ferry to France and went at once to Dover. The ferry was on time. As we left the quayside, I was looking over the stern towards the quay, saying au revoir to England as I always like to do. I noticed someone moving on the quay. It was a dark girl dressed in blue.

AFTER ALL, TOMORROW IS ANOTHER DAY

BY

JUNE LIDDY

Flashbacks of the argument darted through my brain as I fell in slow motion bouncing off opposite walls before landing with a painful twist to my ankle. Stunned I closed my eyes hoping when I opened them again, I would still be walking the sea cliffs. What on earth had just happened? Gradually the realisation of me falling down a mining shaft 20 feet deep terrified me. It was dark and damp, but above bright sunlight poured down. I touched the walls. Wet, loose with shale. I stood up and attempted to climb stretching my legs to position either side of the shaft, digging in my fingernails but my feet just slipped dislodging the soil and shale and I fell back to the floor.

I began to rebuke myself. Why had I left my phone at home on charge? Why had I gone out in a temper not looking where I was going? Why hadn't I kept to the footpath? How the hell was I going to get out of here? As the thoughts came, I became angrier and angrier. Why did I argue with my husband? Why couldn't I have accepted that he was going to change his job? I sat down and wept.

It was fear that I couldn't accept he was changing his job. He had been out of work for two years before his current employment and I thought he was settled. Anyway, that fear was nothing like the fear I felt now. No-one knew where I was, I couldn't climb out. I was looking towards a slow agonising death.

I lost all sense of time, but the sun had disappeared and the temperature had dropped. I wrapped my jacket tighter. Would Dan try to find me or think I would come back when I had cooled down? That is ironic, I thought, as a shiver passed through my body. I began shouting for help although it was useless because not many people would veer off the footpath. I shouted until I was hoarse and was glad I had peppermints in my pocket to ease my throat.

I dozed off and on and a plan began to formulate in my more lucid moments. What if I dug out soil

around the perimeter of the shaft and compacted it in the centre gradually building up the floor. I had no tools but there was so much shale in the soil that I could use one of the rocks to dig. The fear was that the whole wall would collapse and give me a burial alive! I began to feel around the walls in the dark and found a large flat rock which I prised out. I thought I would start immediately as I was chilly, and the digging would warm me up. It took many hours to complete a first circuit around the shaft and compact the soil under my feet. I could feel my feet caked in mud seeping through my trainers. My hands likewise were caked and sore. I kept dropping the rock tool and feeling blindly for it. I continued until I was drained of all energy. At least I was warm. I sat down resting my back against the shaft wall and decided that I would try to get some sleep and continue in the morning. After all, tomorrow is another day!!

VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE

BY

JANET WINCHESTER

"It's disgusting - shouldn't be allowed," grumbled Nancy over her cup of tea, "and, besides, she looks very cold out there, with no clothes on."

"She's fine," Barbara remarked, "she's standing up there, and doesn't look as if she's cold or anything."

"Well, I think it's an absolute disgrace," Nancy muttered, staring out of the café window. "We can't have naked women like that in this town - it'll make us a laughingstock. And why, for goodness' sake, does she have to be waving a stick around like that?"

"It's not a stick – it's a sword!" smiled Barbara, "She holds up the sword as a sign of freedom and liberty."

"Hm," Nancy slammed down her cup, "And she's pregnant! I think pregnant women should keep themselves covered up, and not show all they've got to the general public, like that."

"But don't you understand, lots of visitors come to see her, and bring trade to the town," Barbara smiled at her friend again, "it's just what we need after all that trouble we had in years gone by when they changed all the nice hotels into bedsits - that really wasn't good for the town."

"And why does she have to hide those scales behind her back like that? It seems a bit sneaky to me." Nancy wasn't giving up. She folded her arms across her chest resolutely.

Barbara laughed, "The scales are a sign of justice! And I'm sure the tourists just love her! They come from miles away just to see her – and they always stop in the town for a coffee or something while they're here."

"Well," Nancy was determined to keep up her grumbling, "I heard that Mr. What-ever-he's-called only gave her to the town so that he'd get into the council's good books, and then they would allow him to build that massive housing estate on his land."

“Oh Nancy! - that’s ridiculous!” Barbara began to feel a little cross with her friend, “You can’t go about saying things like that! And, besides, he didn’t give her to the town – he only lent her.”

“Well,” Nancy stared at Barbara, “that’s true – but I’m sure it was only so that he got his planning permission.....”

“And”, reasoned Barbara, “the town is so much better for it.”

“But, naked? Pregnant?” Nancy persisted “It somehow doesn’t seem right... She just looks so cold and vulnerable!”

“Well,” Barbara tried to pacify her friend, “I know that last winter someone knitted her a pair of leg warmers – they gave them to her on New Year’s Eve, so she must have been really grateful.”

At last Nancy smiled, “Yes, I suppose you’re right” she said, “perhaps I’m just being an old-fashioned fusspot and she is good for the town.”

“Oh, yes” Barbara agreed, “she’s going to be on a par with the Kelpies, and the Angel of the North, and you know what they say:

‘Verity is the Spice of Life’!”

MOVING HOME

BY

SHIRLEY THORNHILL

Hello there, my name is Herman on account of my mother being an avid fan of his group in the Sixties. Compared to my many siblings, I came off relatively unscathed in the 'name game' As in many large families, practicalities dictate we all leave as soon as we are able to survive on our own.

My first home was small, rather 'grey and uninteresting' I didn't exactly choose it, it was close-by, available as the last tenant had already left and it suited my immediate needs. I felt safe, but after a while it began to feel cramped – a bit like the horrors of a student flat.

Time to look for somewhere else and this time I was more selective, still amongst friends, but with a less claustrophobic feel. Ah, that looks nice, interesting, tasteful colours, but on closer inspection, a little on the snug side, so time to look elsewhere.

I viewed several possibilities before eventually discovering a home where I could feel comfortable, this being most important, and I quickly settled in. The design was similar to the previous place, rejected on the grounds of size, and I was happy. Already I knew most of the neighbours and with friends and family surrounding me, it was ideal. A very pleasant time in my life and I was happy to live there for ever.

However, life moves on and I needed more space yet again. This time I spotted a well-designed home, its white exterior seemed to shimmer when the light caught it. I was, definitely, going 'up-market'. Plenty of room, very comfortable with an elegant yet useless minaret marking my home out as, really, rather special. I was so proud when friends, family and neighbours, you are right I never moved out of familiar surroundings, gave admiring glances and comments. Unfortunately to quote Shakespeare, 'All that glistens is not gold', The eye catching exterior disguised a design fault so, reluctantly, time to move on yet again.

My next home was a panic move as I needed somewhere to live urgently. To be without a place to live is to be in the worst possible position, but I was fortunate to have somewhere secure in the same area, amongst friends and I stayed longer than I had anticipated owing to the emotional shock of losing the home of my dreams so suddenly and unexpectedly.

After about eighteen months, I was on the move again. I was generally on the move every year to eighteen months and my skill in selecting the right place grew with experience. However, I was still smarting at the loss of my 'dream home' and the last place didn't 'do it for me', space was once again an issue, and I was on the move again.

Same district, same people, I spotted a capacious residence, not with the same kerb appeal, but homely, inviting me in and for the next year I was happy. Friends aware of the shock I had suffered, rallied round to make sure I felt at home, keeping the noise down and allowing me to rest.

Surprisingly, although I felt weary, I felt safe, at peace and there was room to live comfortably, but I knew there was something wrong. I was in my prime, but felt lethargic, eating less and then I felt a soreness on my stomach. It developed rapidly. Friends and family began to worry.

Then I noticed they were keeping their distance. Was it contagious? Their eyes showed love and concern, but fear was in their gut.

Thankfully I didn't suffer long, passing away in my prime years. Maybe it was the trauma of so dramatically losing my lovely sparkling white home? Who knows? I had skin cancer on my soft underbelly. For a Hermit Crab this is a very vulnerable part of the body.

My family and lifelong friends, when they felt it was safe to do so, inscribed the shell that had been last home, my only real home, with the words: -

“HERMAN
the
HANDSOMEST OF HERMIT CRABS
lived here.

R.I.P.”



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Travelling home

By

June Liddy

I awoke to find myself in the back of a travelling van. The driver was erratic, and I veered from side to side getting more nervous as time went on. There were no windows, so I had no idea where I was going. The van was full of tools and smelt pretty awful.

After what seemed like an eternity the van came to a stop, and I heard the driver disembark. Footsteps sounded by the side of the van towards the back door and, as the door handle was turned and the door opened, I leapt from the van banging into a man and ran as fast as I could into some nearby trees and just kept running and running.

I must have covered about a mile before I stopped and looked back. Thank goodness no-one was following me. I needed to get home, but which way was home? There was just wall to wall trees and nothing else.

I found a track and decided to follow it. Eventually I saw a house up ahead and decided to try my luck as I was hungry and thirsty. I was about one hundred yards from the farm door when a chorus of dogs began barking. Being terrified of dogs I decided to make a dash up the nearest tree. I had just got my legs off the ground when a dog snapped towards them. I sat there trembling for half an hour before the dogs became bored and returned to the farm. I descended the tree and re-joined the track which led me to a main road. The cars were going at about 100 mph past me. There was no way they were going to stop.

I followed the edge until I came to a roundabout. I didn't recognise any of the words on the direction signs and all I could do was hold my head up high and take a deep breath which I hoped would give me some inspiration.

It did and guided me across country avoiding the road and the danger. After several hours I came to a lake and sat mesmerised watching the ducks to-ing and fro-ing on the water. Someone had discarded a bag of crisps on the bench, and I ravenously tucked into them. I drank from the stream feeding the lake. Darkness began to fall, and I realised I would have to spend the night there before continuing my journey. I found shelter in a wooden fisherman's hut and lay down exhausted.

At first light I was woken by voices and dog noises. I made a hasty retreat and continued across country following my nose. Then the heavens opened, and torrential rain poured down on me. I shook the most of it off but felt pretty miserable. I think the birds felt the same because the birdsong had stopped, and I do like to hear birdsong.

After several hours my nose told me that I was near home. I had left the country and was now walking down a familiar road. Several roads later I turned the corner and was relieved to see my familiar front door. I tapped on the window and the door immediately opened - my whole family greeting me and cuddling me. 'Oh Tabby, where have you been we have been so worried when you didn't come back last night?' The tasty Catkins breakfast and lots of strokes made me vow never to enter a strange van again.

CROSSING THE BRIDGE

BY

SUE BOYD

The day of the Move arrived, and Lesley was filled with both excitement and trepidation. She'd lived with her Mother for the last ten years since her Father died. Mildred was that breed of woman who had entirely relied on her husband to take care of the money side of things, had never worked except, of course, as a housewife and mother, putting 'her Frank' first and having no life outside the home. When he suddenly died of a heart attack, she was not only heartbroken, but completely unable to cope with the household accounts, had never written a cheque, paid a bill or organised anything but the weekly food shopping. On top of this she couldn't drive and had never been on a bus –

"How common dear" she said to Lesley when she suggested a trip into town to get her hair permed. "I'll have to sit next to those people from the Council Estate".

Her two brothers were both married with children and as Lesley was a spinster of the parish, she was the obvious choice. Consequently, except for going to work in the local bank, Lesley had no social life and her boyfriend at the time, soon lost interest when he realised that 'Mother came too'.

Now ten years later and in her mid-40's, Lesley found herself on her own after Mildred died very suddenly from pancreatic cancer. As Lesley was the main beneficiary under Mildred's Will, she quickly put the bungalow up for sale. It had been snapped up and now she was moving into a cottage in a village just a few miles out of town. She'd changed the dated Ford Fiesta for a nippy bright pink Mini and today felt as if she was crossing a bridge from one life to a newer, brighter one, hopefully.

Lesley had fallen in love with Honeysuckle Cottage from the minute she arrived to meet the estate agent. She hadn't even stepped over the threshold when she decided that this was IT. It had a real cottage garden wrapped around the house, honeysuckle (obviously) growing over the porch and a stream at the bottom of the garden with a bridge leading into a wood. It reminded her of The Enchanted Wood by Enid Blyton which had been one of her favourite books as a child. There was the sound of water gurgling over stones on the riverbed, the birds were singing in the trees and Lesley was almost sure that she saw a couple of squirrels playing chase up a tree trunk.

"Is the bridge part of my property?" Lesley asked the estate agent.

"I think someone lives over the other side in the wood and it's shared between the two properties," he replied, but quickly moved onto another part of the garden and Lesley thought nothing more about it.

The removal men had driven off with all her furniture etc the day before and Lesley set off bright and early the next morning having spent the night with one of her brothers. When she'd seen Honeysuckle Cottage, the sun was shining and everything in the garden was beautiful. Today, however, the sky was heavy with rain and the garden looked wet and bedraggled. The grass was knee high, the rose bushes were overgrown, needed de-heading and there were no birds singing in the trees or squirrels playing tag.

The cottage smelt distinctly damp, there was no wood in the basket beside the fireplace, Lesley hadn't got any matches anyway and when she flicked the switch on the Combi boiler – nothing happened. The removal men had put the beds up for her, but she couldn't find the box with the bedding in that she'd so carefully labelled and didn't have the energy to try and locate it. Consequently, after eating the now curled up sandwiches she bought with her and having a drink of milk out the bottle, as she couldn't find the kitchen boxes either, she wrapped herself in an old blanket she kept in the car and fell into a fitful sleep on the sofa.

Tomorrow she'd go over the bridge and find out if someone did live on the other side, but at the moment the last thought in her mind was "I do wish I hadn't been so rash without finding out more about this cold, damp, uninviting house" and a tear slid down her cheek.



I REALLY WISH I HADN'T

BY

SUE BOYD

The next morning Lesley woke up freezing cold and aching all over. She was starving hungry and with nothing in the house but a bottle of half-drunk milk, she decided that first on her list was a visit to the local shop she'd passed as she drove through the village the day before.

The shop was crowded with people chattering away to each other, but they all turned to stare at her and stopped talking as if someone had turned down the sound on the television. Lesley could feel her cheeks burning so ducking her head down, she grabbed a wire basket and scurried down the nearest aisle. However, by the time she'd grabbed a few essentials and made her way to the till, they had all vanished except, of course, for the lady behind the counter, who must have been left with the task of finding out all about the new owner of Honeysuckle Cottage. Questions came out of her mouth like bullets out of a gun,

"Where do you come from dear?"

"On your own, are you?"

"Are you a gardener? Because if not our Fred will come and give you a hand. It's a lot of work for someone of your age."

Lesley mumbled a few answers, but then became irritated by the woman and said

"I'll be fine, thank you very much. Could I just pay for these please?"

The smile disappeared from shopkeeper's face, and she snapped back,

"Suit yourself, but just one piece of advice, don't go over the bridge. Mr Jenkins isn't exactly the sociable type. That's why the last owner of Honeysuckle Cottage left."

As she drove off, Lesley suddenly had an uneasy feeling about what lay over the other side of that bridge. Surely if there was friction with her nearest neighbour, this should have been mentioned when she purchased her cottage. However, nothing had been said either by the estate agent or her solicitor, so perhaps it was just local gossip. Now even more than ever she wished she 'really hadn't' purchased the damn cottage.

When she got back to Honeysuckle Cottage, she unpacked her shopping, found the boxes containing her kitchen utensils etc, put them away in the appropriate drawers and cupboards and then found her bed linen and made up her bed ready for that night. Grabbing herself a sandwich, she flung on an old fleece and wandered down the garden towards the bridge. When she viewed the property there were leaves on the trees and that was all Lesley could see over that bridge. Now, however, the branches were bare and she could see quite clearly what looked like a cross with a stone slab in front of it. Was that a grave? With her heart pounding in her ears, Lesley put one foot on the bridge, but it was slimy with leaf mould. Her feet skidded on the wet surface and the next moment she found herself sitting in freezing cold water.

“Goodness gracious, my dear woman, we must get you out of there quickly” roared a voice and looking up startled Lesley could see a gentleman in plus fours and wellington boots with a couple of golden retrievers, standing on the bank looking very worried.

“Have you broken anything?” Lesley blushed scarlet, more embarrassed than hurt and shook her head.

“No, I’m fine, thank you” and she tried to scramble to her feet, but her right ankle gave way and she ended back on her bottom.

“Don’t move” he shouted and scrambled down the bank closely followed by the dogs who thought it was some sort of game and splashed around in the water, making Lesley wetter than ever.

“Stop it Beano and Dandy” he shouted and unceremoniously hauled Lesley to her feet, putting her arm around his neck and supported her injured ankle as he helped her up the bank. He deposited her on a nearby tree trunk saying,

“Won’t be a minute we’ll soon get you out of those wet clothes” and he disappeared between trees, reappearing pushing a wheelbarrow. Lesley burst out laughing and felt like a child again as the mysterious man wheeled her back to his house nestling in among the trees of The Enchanted Wood.

His name was Edward, the grave belonged to his favourite dog called Bouncer, his wife had died from cancer a few years ago and evidently the old woman who’d lived in Honeysuckle Cottage before Lesley, had been a right ‘harridan’ and caused him nothing but trouble. Lesley learnt all this in the space of about half an hour while he helped her into bathroom, gave her warm towels, bought her a dressing gown that had belonged to his wife and made her a cup of hot, sweet tea.

It was several hours later that Edward drove her home to Honeysuckle Cottage, having washed and tumble dried her clothes. They had chatted away like old friends and as Lesley waved goodbye to him from her doorstep, she thought to herself.

“I’m really glad I did buy Honeysuckle Cottage”.

Houses

By

Jonathan Cox

Inspired by John Masefield’s Cargos’

Rose covered cottage in a distant hamlet,
Walls of mud and straw and roof of thatch,
With low hung oak beams,
Lead glass windows,
And a door that creaks when you raise the latch.

Post War ‘semi’ on the edge of town,
Built like many others from red brick and tile,

With a loft extension,
And a high privet hedge,
We are all well acquainted with its construction and style.

A converted barn on the edge of the moors,
Reached by a lane, barely wide as a car,
With underfloor heating,
And an induction hob,
But the distance to the shops is unfortunately too far.

New Build houses from Persimmon or Barrett,
All the mod cons, you can hear the agent bragging,
With a quartz topped island,
And a 'postage stamp' sized lawn,
Built in just weeks but requiring months of snagging.

A DARK GIRL DRESSED IN BLUE

AND THEN THERE WERE NONE

BY

ROBERT BEATTIE

I bought my place in Brittany some years ago as a sort of bolthole in between jobs. I always think it's a good idea to leave the country after crime. I've never been caught but there's always a first time and being out the country makes "first time" more unlikely.

The bolthole is an old farmhouse, well, more a chateau although I say it myself. It's quite big and there are lots of places for me to hide all sorts of things and people, including me.

Anyway, I was sitting reading in my study late one afternoon when the doorbell rang. It's a big old bell and makes a hell of a racket through most of the ground floor. I couldn't see the front door from my chair, but I have a cctv system and checked it. The screen showed a dark girl dressed in blue standing there.

I went to the door and opened it. "Hello, Sally," I said. "What..." but I couldn't finish the sentence because she stormed past me.

"What the hell did you think you were doing, running off like that and leaving me high and dry?" She cried. "And your good fence Charlie's been arrested because his boyfriend dobbed him in when Charlie gave him the heave-ho. So, Charlie dobbed you in to save his own skin and the police are on the way here to arrest you. See what a friend I am despite the way you treat me? Where's the extra money you took? Let's get out of here sharpish."

"Hold on, hold on", I said. "Where did you get all this stuff from?"

"From a mate I have in the cops. She told me and it's kosher, and we should scarper if we want to stay free."

I thought for a second or two.

"Ok," I said. "You stay here, and I'll be back in a second."

"Oh no," she said. "That's what you said last time; I'm not letting you out of my sight."

So, off we went together but, as we left the room, the doorbell chimed again. I glanced at the screen; There were two blokes at the door, and I just caught a glimpse of another disappearing round the corner of the house.

"Too late," I said. "They're here."

"What do we do now," she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "I'll go and see what they want. You stay here. It wouldn't be good for them to know you're here already."

I answered the door even though it hadn't asked me a question. "Good afternoon, sir," said one of the chaps standing there. "I wonder if...."

"Look," I interrupted him. "I know why you're here and I'll come quietly. Let's go now shall we."

"But..." he started.

"No, it's Ok. I'll tell you everything when we get there."

"If you think that's best, sir, that's up to you. The car's over here," and we walked over to it. The third man came round from the back of the house, and we drove off.

I got back about 4 hours later. Sally was still there.

"Wow, you're back! What happened," she asked.

"I told them a story and they accepted it. I didn't mention you and they didn't seem to know anything about you, anyway. They seem to have got the wrong end of the stick as they seem to think that the silver was mine not that I took it so I'm in the clear. But the real point is, what are we to do now? Why do you think I've got extra money?"

"You shot off without so much as a "by your leave" so I thought you must have a reason and that reason must be money."

"You silly girl," I said. "I left without telling you because I didn't want to compromise you. I haven't ever been caught but I've had, shall we say, some interesting interviews with the police in England – and elsewhere, for that matter- over the years and I thought they were bound to try to tie me into this caper, so I left. That, at least, kept you in the clear."

She smiled, came up to me and put her arms around me. "OK, buster," she said. "What you gonna do about it now?"

Next morning, I was awake early; Sally was still asleep. I lay on my back staring at the ceiling. What to do? The chaps who had called around yesterday weren't police but some architects who I had asked to call around to give me some advice about changing things in the chateau. It was a coincidence that they had turned up when they did but I knew the police had no reason to call. Charlie, the fence, wasn't a woofter. I knew him, his wife and three kids well, and had introduced him to his current girlfriend, Helen. So, Sally was, as usual, lying but then, I knew that. I knew where I was with her. I, actually, wanted to be with her, at least for the moment, perhaps longer? But I had

reservations. I turned over and looked down at her, lying on her back with her mouth wide open, a picture of innocence which didn't exist. But my reservations? And then there were none.

Silence

By

Janet Winchester

It's quiet at 5.30 on a frosty, early spring morning; no birds singing yet, and no traffic to speak of. Yet we have to get up. We fill the flasks and grab the hats and gloves and are on our way as soon as possible. We shiver as the car slowly heats up, but soon we are quite warm as we drive through dark lanes, catching glimpses of the frost covered hedges as we head towards our 9 o'clock rendezvous.

High on the Exmoor hills the others are waiting. After greetings, and a quick mouthful of coffee, we collect ourselves together and set off. Now there is a faint pink hue in the eastern sky, which lightens up the heather with a mystic glow. The lichen on windswept hawthorn trees shimmers with frosted particles, and the bracken shows off its dead, but beautiful fronds, highlighted by the wintry covering. Our breath turns to mist as we trudge along and the once-muddy track crunches as icy puddles shatter under our feet, but we are warm in our layers of walking gear, and the eastern light is brighter now.

The eight of us, pleased to be together again, chat away happily.

Suddenly, Tony, our leader, at the front, turns quietly and puts his finger to his lips. "Shush!" He whispers as he creeps forward. Silently, we stop. There, up-wind of us, quite close, is a huge red deer stag, pawing the frozen heather with his foreleg, and snorting at the the heath. His wide antlers stand out and the country folk would say he had, "all his rights and six on top".

We quietly watch him for a few moments then we catch sight of a small herd of hinds just a little way beyond him. Our cameras work silently, but he senses our presence and turns and trots off to join the females. Alarmed now, he gathers them together and, in a few seconds, he is off and away, leading his ladies to a safer place. We stand, checking our photos, and Tony give us a firm lecture about keeping quiet if we want to see wildlife. A case in point, surely.

Walking again, this time in complete silence and then watch as a kestrel hovers - motionless in the dawn sky above. All of a sudden it drops like a stone then immediately rises again, its talons clutching some hapless little creature.

Soon we approach a small, wooded area and know that it's not us that are the noisy ones – the trees are absolutely full of birdsong – the dawn chorus has started. The sun has just risen, and as we quietly sit on some old tree stumps, we listen to the magical sound of seemingly millions of little birds chirruping away as they each claim their own territory, oblivious to our presence. We linger a while, marvelling at the wonder of it all, then set off again, leaving the little songsters to their cacophony.

After about five miles it's time for "ten-sies" and we settle down inside a pine wood and take out our hot coffee - and, for some, a round of sandwiches. Hungrily refuelling, we sit on soft cushions of pine needles, admiring the wonderful views over the Bristol Channel to the Welsh seaports and, further over, the snow-capped mountains, shining brightly as they are caught in the early sun.

"What was that?" someone suddenly whispers as something dives from tree to tree across our line of vision. We stare silently, then it returns, leaping from branch to branch and we notice that it's a squirrel, this time being chased by another. We wonder if this some kind of courting ritual, or maybe a couple of young ones just having a bit of fun. Together they dash up and down the tree trunks, taking kamikaze leaps through the branches while we sit there, motionless, trying to stifle laughter at their crazy antics.

All too soon, it's "flasks away" and time to press on. We stand and check for any left litter or walking poles, then set off, glad to be moving and warming up again after the break.

As we leave the wood, we see that the sun is shining, and the sky is a cloudless clear blue. Although the frost is lingering in shady places, the warmth of the sun on our faces creates a feeling of optimism – perhaps summer isn't too far ahead.

We come across a small herd of Exmoor ponies, their rich brown coats camouflaging them amongst the dead heather and insulating them against the bitter weather. They lift their heads to stare at us then carry on munching at whatever they can find amid the undergrowth.

A cheeky robin chirps loudly and follows us along, and we listen as a stonechat mimics the knocking of stones.

Someone asks Tony if we might hear the cuckoo, but he shakes his head and says, no, and then quietly recites the song, "in April he opens his bill, in May he sings night and day, in June he changes his tune, and in July away he'll fly."

As we reflect that it's not April yet, Tony hushes us again and we listen. High, high up in the cloudless blue sky a lark is singing – singing for all its worth – sounding so full of the glorious day.

Somehow, the little skylark has lifted our spirits and we smile quietly as we step on our way.

At last, we reach the old country pub, where we have booked lunch. Piling a couple more logs onto the wood-burning stove, the landlord greets us warmly then shows us to our table.

Our food is hungrily devoured, and we chatter away, and then, after a rather raucous game of skittles, it's time to be off again.

We leave the cosy pub and realise that the sun is starting to descend behind the western hills, and the air is chillier now. Silently we trudge along the riverbank starting the last five miles back to the cars. Then – this time one of us points – "look!" he whispers, and there, quite close to the riverbank, is a heron. Standing on one leg, the other tucked up underneath, he stares at us, then sedately lifts his wings, and flies off to the safety of a high tree.

"We've seen so much today," Tony says as we climb up away from the river, "and," he smiles when we reach the crest of the hill, "Look there!" We follow his pointing finger, and see, across the valley, - our cars!

"Now," Tony says, "one last time - keep really quiet and listen – what can you hear?" We all cock our heads and concentrate – nothing! We can hear absolutely nothing!

"That's it!" Tony says, "The sound of silence."

ROSE COTTAGE

BY

SHIRLEY THORNHILL

Amelia lay lazily in a hammock slung between two very old apple trees, in the beautiful dry wall enclosed garden. The warmth of the sun relaxed her completely, mind and body, disturbed only by the cat jumping up to enjoy the experience.

As she stroked her cat, known as Mr. Pudding due to his portly appearance, memories of her life flowed through her subconscious mind. The many years spent with her husband of nearly forty years. Hardships endured as they struggled to build their business, followed by fun and laughter as they enjoyed travelling the world. Retirement, however, was short-lived when her dearest love, on whom she had relied, died of cancer, having barely made his sixtieth birthday.

As the years passed Amelia travelled less. She, and her lady friends, having had a good life, were content just to be. The world had become a dangerous place for everyone, let alone ladies of a certain age.

Amelia drew her hand across her forehead, it was wet. Upon closer inspection, she realised it was blood and that Mr. Pudding lay lifeless on her stomach. She was unable to move. The walls surrounding Rose Cottage were crumbling and the cottage itself was a ruin, smoke emanating from the pile of rubble that had been her home. She sank back into unconsciousness, a blessing.

Amelia and Mr. Pudding passed away without realising Rose Cottage, the village and a large part of the country no longer existed. Putin, paranoid and suffering from terminal cancer, had pushed the button. The lucky ones were those who didn't have to live through the aftermath.

BEHIND THE DOOR

BY

JUNE LIDDY

We had intended to remove the Welsh dresser. It was old and dusty and on moving in we realised what space we could gain without it. So here we were on a sunny afternoon pushing and shoving, moving it inch by inch, by rocking it back and forth and sideways. Solid oak and an uneven flagstone floor wasn't helping our efforts. We stopped for a cup of tea. We also were distracted by the postman delivering our mail but returned every time dedicated to our challenge. Eventually after half an hour we had moved it about a yard from the wall.

'Crikey, what is that?', Fred pointed to the wall.

My eyes followed his finger and there hidden behind the dresser was a narrow brown painted door. It had two keyholes but no latch. Towards the top of the door was a beautiful multi-coloured stained-glass panel with an elaborate pattern centred around a heart in the middle.

'Ugh', I shrieked, nodding towards the floor, 'look!' An uneven pool of dark red, sticky liquid, emanating from under the door, coated the slabs. A shudder coursed through my body, and I came

out in a cold sweat. We looked at each other and I could see the colour drain from Fred's face. We remembered reading the history of our new place before we bought it and how a young lady had gone missing from the family many years ago.

'Shall we call the police?' I shakily suggested.

'No, there's bound to be some explanation', Fred reassured me. 'We don't want to call the police for nothing and look stupid!'.

'Well, I am not going to look inside', I replied. 'I don't want nightmares for the rest of my life!'

However, my morbid curiosity was stronger than my fear so after Fred returned with his tools I sat down and watched while he fiddled with the keyholes and chipped away inside the door frame. My imagination ran riot and I pictured the body of an imprisoned young girl slumped behind the door and pictured her last terrifying moments bleeding profusely from a wound.

After another half an hour the door was so much looser that Fred said, 'Right! Are you ready?'.

Queasy and ready to run, I nodded in agreement.

On the sound of splitting wood and laboured breathing from Fred, gradually little by little, the door eased open. First the bottom half then with a crack the top half. 'Bring the torch, June', Fred said. I ran over to the drawer, pulling out the torch and joined Fred at the open door. Both of us apprehensive, Fred shone the torch into the dark space.

We froze. Then we looked at each other. Then walked into the space. Then - we burst into hysterical laughter! 'I don't think the police would have been interested in this, hey?' Fred laughed.

Inside the cupboard-sized space were two rows of shelves. On the bottom shelf were several demi-johns of wine. Just about readable was a label stating, 'Beetroot wine'. One demi-john had exploded with the wine trickling onto the floor and under the door. So, what we thought might have been blood was beetroot wine. Oh well, it will certainly be a good conversation piece to recite to our visiting friends!!

SECOND TIME AROUND

BY

WENDY PENTLING

Arriving home, shattered after a week of night shifts Jane stepped on something hard on the hall floor. Glancing down she spotted a set of keys, filled with a sense of foreboding she, nervously, walked around the house; nothing seemed to be out of place, but entering the bedroom she started to feel apprehensive. She opened the wardrobe door: empty. She, then, searched the bedside cabinet. No passport or driving license; grabbing the phone in a blind panic she dialled her neighbour. "It's me Jane! he's gone he's left." She began to cry uncontrollably.

After hurrying round Mary led her into the kitchen; "We need a drink ". She put the kettle on then decided a brandy would be much better for this situation. Mary knew about Stephen's affairs and could see how depressed Jane was getting; he didn't care about her but used her when the other women dumped him; they never stayed round long. She was always there for Jane, who was like Jekyll and Hyde, depending on whether he was fooling around or not.

"He's actually gone", Jane cried. "He said he would never leave; what am I going to do? How can I manage on my own?" She was getting hysterical, and Mary thought it best not to give her opinion while she was in such a state.

A few days later she went with her to the bank, the bank manager was sympathetic, but the mortgage and loan had to be paid.

"What loan? "Mary asked Jane as they walked back to her car.
"Stephen asked me to get a loan to buy the Porsche as his credit score was too low".
"And he has been driving round in that to impress the girls and his mates". Mary was furious.

A few months later with so much more confidence, and a promotion at work Jane found herself in control of her life. She had arranged to meet Mary in the local wine bar. As she pulled the front door shut, she heard a voice whispering her name.

"Who's there? "

"It's me Stephen; I'm coming home".

After Jane had explained, Mary tried to convince her it was a bad idea to let him back in
"You are doing so well your confidence has returned you laugh and seem so much happier".

"I feel I should give him another chance; I'm so confused I don't know what do".

"Do what's best for you but take your time don't rush. " Mary was sure Stephen would convince Jane to let him return and she was right.

It wasn't long before Jane realised he was back to his old tricks. She decided to finish it for good. When he finally came home in the early hours one morning Jane informed him, she was going to stay with her parents for the rest of the week.

"I want you gone when I come back otherwise, I will leave, it's over" she shouted at him "I should never have taken you back, you're pathetic and weak,"

To her dismay there were signs he was still in the house when she returned, Jane discovered him sitting at the kitchen table with towels wrapped around his wrist grabbing his arm she removed

the cloth revealing a few deep scratches. She recalled the long piece of piping she had found in the garage. deliberately left there to scare her, Incensed with his threats, and regretting she had ignored Mary's advice she flung the razor at him.

"Don't try to blackmail me Stephen you're too much of a coward to kill yourself".
She returned to her parents his pleading for them to stay together falling on deaf ears.

As Jane entered the house the following week, the first thing she observed was a thick rope suspended from the banister.

"Jane are you back let's talk please I need you "

She could hear him begging and snivelling from the landing.

"Too late Stephen, I don't need you".

she noticed he was standing on the kitchen steps and had placed his head in the noose.

"I will Jane, I will do it".

She took a deep breath and climbed the stairs.

"I knew you would see sense I..."

The rest of the sentence was never finished as Jane kicked the steps away and calmly walked out of the house.

THE GIRL IN THE WINDOW

BY

JONATHAN COX

The proprietor of the tea shop navigated a tortuous route between the tables, chairs, and large potted ferns towards the table where Luke and his wife Jenny were sitting.

"And what can I get you both?" he enquired.

"Just two flat whites please and do you still do those lovely, toasted tea cakes", Luke replied.

"Indeed, we do. I'll be back in just a moment with your order", and he headed off back towards counter.

Luke and Jenny were staying over in Barchester for a murder/mystery weekend and were killing time before they could check into the hotel. Luke had lived in the town for two years as a boy and did not have the best memories of the place and when Jenny had arranged for them to come here for the weekend, he had tried to get her to cancel, but to no avail.

Luke's mind began to drift back twenty-three years to his school days in Barchester. His father's job had brought them to this small town in Hampshire, He was just a shy twelve-year-old and struggled to make friends with the boys in his class and was constantly bullied. His route to school each day took him along the perimeter of the park and past a number of expensive houses facing out onto the park. On one particular morning two boys in his class caught up with him and started to call him names and push him about. The approach of an adult walking in the opposite direction was sufficient to stop things getting any worse, but before they ran off, they grabbed his satchel and threw it over the wall of the nearest house. Luke had ventured up the drive to the house and saw his bag lying at the foot of a horse chestnut tree. He had ambled over slowly to pick up his satchel and then paused to get his breath back. Luke had briefly looked at the beautiful façade of the Georgian house covered

in Wisteria blossom, but his eyes were quickly drawn to an open upstairs window through which a girl could clearly be seen. Her long golden curls fell across part of her face, but he could see that she was smiling. He had awkwardly pointed to the satchel to explain why he was in the garden, but she just smiled and waved and so he waved back.

He had stopped by the garden in front of the house every school day after that and would look up to the upstairs window and wave to the beautiful young girl, who he guessed was the same age as him. She would always smile and wave back as if she was pleased to see him and Luke had wished that he could summon up the courage to speak to her, for he knew that he was hopelessly in love with her.

"Come on Luke your coffee is getting cold", squawked Jenny, bringing Luke back to the present day with a jolt.

Luke emptied the coffee cup with one large gulp and devoured the rest of the tea cake and then looked at his watch. "Say, Jenny, we can't get checked into the hotel till three, it's quite pleasant outside. Do you fancy a gentle stroll up to see my old school". Jenny nodded and Luke went up to the counter to pay.

"Are those grand houses on Park Avenue still there?" he asked the tea shop owner.

"Barely", the proprietor replied "they are in the process of pulling them all down, a local builder plans to put forty houses there in their place. Flippin shame I say".

It took just ten minutes for Luke and Jenny to get to the park and Luke was despondent to see the skips full of brick, wood beams and masonry. Most of the trees and shrubs had been cleared but he recognized the house he most wanted to see as the horse chestnut tree was still standing.

Luke walked up the drive with Jenny reluctantly following him and he looked forlornly at the house, most of it torn down with just the right-hand corner still standing. Luke's eyes scanned across to the open upstairs window.

"Come on Luke; it's getting cold" squawked Jenny as she walked back to the road "who were you waving to?"

Luke turned briefly to Jenny, frowned, and then quickly looked back again towards the house.

Through the open window, Luke could clearly see the girl, her long golden locks tumbling over her shoulders and that wonderful smile. He waved again and the twelve-year-old waved back.

ONLY TWO CAN PLAY
BY
WENDY PENTLING

THE DOCTOR TOLD MY HUSBAND
GET AN INTEREST FOR YOURSELF
THIS DEPRESSION YOU ARE SUFFERING
AFFECTS YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

I SUGGESTED HE WENT BOWLING
A SPORT HE'D PLAYED BEFORE
IT'S DIFFERENT IN A WHEELCHAIR
SAID YOU'LL SOON ADAPT I'M SURE

WE TURNED UP FOR TUITION
THE LADY COACH WAS NICE
I LEFT HIM THERE TO CARRY ON
WOULDN'T VALUE MY ADVICE

A NICE YOUNG MAN APPROACHED ME
ASKED IF I'D LIKE TO TRY
I MIGHT AS WELL AS I AM HERE
HE WAS A HANDSOME GUY

WITH ALL THE GEAR BUT NO IDEA
I FOUND I HAD THE FLAIR
CAST A GLIMPSE ACROSS THE RINK
STAN'S BOWLS WHERE EVERY WHERE

IT WASN'T LOOKING GOOD FOR HIM
SAT LOOKING MOST CONFUSED
HIS MENTOR LOOKED DISBELIEVING
NO WAY WAS SHE AMUSED

AT HOME HE SAID HE'D HAD ENOUGH
IT'S NOT HIS CUP OF TEA
THE WOMAN COACH WAS USELESS
DID NOTHING TO HELP ME

I TOLD HIM I WOULD CARRY ON
MY COACH HAD SAID I'M GOOD
WELL STEAM CAME OUT HIS NOSTRILS
GAVE ME A MURDEROUS LOOK

LETS PRACTICE IN THE GARDEN
WE CAN BOWL ALONG THE LAWN
HIS WOOD ROLLED IN THE FLOWER BED
I FELT HIS LOOK OF SCORN

IN A FIT OF RAGE, I GRABBED MY WOOD

AND HURLED IT DOWN THE YARD
IT BOUNCED AGAINST THE GARDEN SHED
IT STRUCK HIM VERY HARD

SO NOW I AM A WIDOW
AND I'M IN THE LADIES TEAM
MY COACH AND I PLAY DOUBLES
THAT'S ON AND OFF THE GREEN

END-PIECE

And that, Ladies, Gentlemen and Others, is all for now.

We hope that you have enjoyed our efforts and we would welcome your comments; if you wish to do so, please send your comments to the Editor.

Bye for now and until the next time.

