

Wales Short Story Competition 2021

Winning Stories

1st 'Out Of The Frying Pan' by Laura Bailey, Porthmadog u3a

2nd 'Breaking the Chain', by Tina Lukey, Flintshire u3a

3rd 'Freedom Trip' by Lynda Okeefe, Gilwern u3a

Runners up

'Ariadne's Question' by Alan Hawley, Welshpool u3a

'Four Diamond Rings' by Margaret Preston, Prestatyn Rhyl and District u3a

'The Forager's Child' by Joanna Shone, Flintshire u3a

'The Glass Bottle and the Clay Pot', by Allan Williams, Porthcawl u3a

'The Red Kite' by Janet Willson, Welshpool u3a

'To Go Or Not To Go' by Kay Blackwell, Gilwern u3a

'Waterloo Sunset' by Ray Ede, Ruthin and District u3a

Out of 'The Frying Pan'...

Pest stared, at the gates towering above him. He strained his neck upwards, standing on the very tips of his cloven hooves, but the gates just seemed to stretch on and on above him.

A harmonious medley of voices could be heard, coming from somewhere beyond the gates. They were not quite in tune.

“...Put your right leg in, your right leg out...”

“...In, out, in, out, shake it all about. You do the Hokey-Cokey and you turn around. That's what it's all about...hey, watch it! You're stepping on my foot!”

“Oh, Sorry man!”

In all his years as an under-demon in Hell, Pest had never heard anything like it. It was certainly very different from the “music” he had been forced to listen to before: heavy metal and punk with a bit of opera thrown in!

Out of 'The Frying Pan'

Nearby, a large desk stood. There was a bulky blue book on top of it.

This was your life' was inscribed in gold writing on the cover.

A blue striped cup with feathery white wings hovered above a saucer. Upon the saucer was a chocolate digestive with a bite taken out of it.

A comfortable looking armchair was behind the desk. Closer inspection of this revealed a small cocker spaniel with a patch over one eye, apparently asleep.



Out of 'The Frying Pan'

It took a few minutes for Pest to take it all in. It certainly wasn't what he had expected.

"Well", he thought, "Now all I have to do is figure out a way to get in there"

It wasn't going to be easy!

He wondered if this had been such a good idea after all. What chance did a demon have of getting into heaven?

But he couldn't face another day in Hell!

The Head Demon, Cassius, had said he was too soft. "The Boss" had said worse!

Pest sighed, remembering.

They were probably right.

If truth be told, the three Ts: Torture, Trouble and Torment, just didn't appeal to him.

He had longed to be free.

Freedom from being ordered about by the big demons!

Freedom from being told he was too small to do anything useful!

Freedom from the fear of upsetting "The Boss"!

Suddenly, there emerged a tall figure.

He had long blue hair and wore bright, rainbow coloured robes, adorned with pin badges: "Ban the Bomb!" and "Give peace a chance!"

There were a pair of fluffy white wings upon his back.

Out of 'The Frying Pan'



The angel smiled, adjusted his halo, and strolled over to the gates.

He took a gold key from his pocket and unlocked them. Stepped through, he closed the gates behind him and placed the key back inside his pocket.

The angel strolled over to the desk.

Pest watched him without saying a word.

“Angelica baby!” The angel stood by the chair and prodded the sleeping form fondly. The dog opened one sleepy eye and gazed up at him.

Out of 'The Frying Pan'

"How many times I gott'a tell you honey? You got' a stay awake when I'm off duty. This young gent's been kept waitin' whilst you've been snoozin'.

The spaniel stared at Pest. For a moment he felt that she could see right into his mind and knew what he was thinking: how surprised and puzzled he was, and afraid of being turned away.

Then, with a yawn, a yap and a wag of her tail, she hopped off the armchair and disappeared through a cat-flap sized door at the bottom of one of the gates.

The angel lowered himself into the chair, brushing aside a few dog hairs.



Out of 'The Frying Pan'

"So sorry to keep you waitin' Mr...?"

Pest looked up at the angel, hopeful but nervous. He felt very small and insignificant.

"Please Sir, m.. my names P..P..Pest Sir, short for Pestilence, Sir. I..I wondered if I could enter Heaven Sir? Only, I'm having a rather bad time of it in Hell and I feel I'd be much happier here Sir, if it's convenient that is"

The angel smiled down at him.

"The name's Gabriel little dude. Call me Gabe, all my friends do. As for you wantin' to get in here, well, it might be a bit tricky. See, we don't usually asked to admit many demons here"

Pest was distraught.

"Oh no" he cried helplessly, "There must be something I can do to earn a place here. I just can't face another day...down there"

Gabe placed one hand thoughtfully on his chin.

Then he rose to the desk and began to flip open the blue book.

He turned to a blank page and showed it to Pest.

Pest had to stand on the tips of his hooves to see over the top of the desk.

Out of 'The Frying Pan'

"There is one thing" Gabe looked kindly at the small being in front of him and lowered his voice to a quiet whisper.

"It's not usually allowed, but as Angelica didn't bite you on the leg the moment she woke up, I guess I can trust you.

"You see, it's not your fault you're a demon. Hell may have given you horns and hooves and that pointy tail, but it's YOU alone that makes you who you are inside" Pest stared up at Gabe, suddenly exited.

"So you're saying there might be a chance?" he asked earnestly.

"What I'm sayin' kid, is that there ain't no harm in tryin' "

Gabe picked up a quill from the desk and began to write on the blank page.

When he had finished he turned back to Pest, a serious look on his face.

"All you got' a do is answer this question. If you get it right, we're allowed to let you in. If not, it's down to 'you know where' for another eternity I'm afraid. Good luck!" and he handed the quill to Pest.

Written on the page was the question...

What do you see in the flames of Hell?

Out of 'The Frying Pan'

Pest was dumbstruck. His mind raced with possibilities.

No! He had to concentrate. His entire future depended on it. If only he could think clearly. He saw Gabriel looking at him. The angel was drumming the gnawed fingernails of one hand on the desk impatiently. With the other he gave Pest the thumbs up.

'Oh well' thought Pest 'here goes'. He began to write.

I see warm faces smiling at me. I love how the flames leap and jump.
The bright glow gives me hope in the darkness.

He watched with amazement as he saw his answer vanish from the page.

Almost immediately a reply appeared.....



Out of 'The Frying Pan'

As the message appeared Gabriel, who had been watching over Pests shoulder, gave a whoop of joy.

"You did it man! Hey, great minds think alike. I wrote a very similar thing for a competition I won back on earth. The prize was a year's supply of chocolate biscuits! You got' a take something like that with y'a when you find yourself in Heaven"

He rose from his chair, took the hand of the surprised demon and shook it vigorously.

"Congrats kid, you sure know your stuff when it comes to fire. All the other demons we've had answer that question rave on about inflicting pain and the smell of burnt skin, but clearly you ain't no regular demon. You can see the best in everything, even fire, and that's a highly commendable gift up here"

Until now, Pest had thought his "gift" nothing but a nuisance that got him into trouble.

"I thought it was a fault, a freak of nature?"

"Not at all" Gabriel laughed "You spoke from your heart when you answered that question and that can be very hard for some, but clearly not for you and if that's good enough for good enough for me."

Pest was overwhelmed with gratitude. Tears began to stream down his face as he hugged the angel round the knees.

Out of 'The Frying Pan'

"Easy on the waterworks little dude, I'm just doing my job"

Gabriel bent down and returned the hug.

"Come on kid, I'll give you a guided tour. How would 'ya like that?"

"Erm, yes please sir but, well, I don't want to be an inconvenience"

Gabe laughed, smiling warmly

"Inconvenience? Kid, in this place there's no such word. Angelica 'll look after reception till I get back, don't worry"

Gabriel gave a low whistle, intended to summon the small dog back to the desk.

Nothing happened. Pest stifled a giggle.

The angel blushed slightly. "Yes, well she's probably fallen asleep again somewhere. We better go look for her."

He patted the grateful demon on the shoulder and ushered him towards the gates.

Pest felt a new, pleasant sensation sweep around him. It was like being engulfed in warm caramel and it was the most wonderful feeling he had ever experienced. A dreamy smile spread across his face. Now he could enter paradise. He was finally out of 'The Frying Pan' of Hell, and he would never have to risk the fire again.

He had found his true freedom.

He was going home.

Breaking the Chain

They were not deliberately ignoring her, Erin understood, but it didn't help. All she saw was Becky's blazer-clad shoulder block off the sight and most of the excited chat of the girls perched along the picnic table in the schoolyard. Erin gazed up at the over-hanging branch, as the plans for Louisa's party were discussed in minute detail yet again. She wasn't going; Erin never went to parties.

Determined to hide her feeling of exclusion, Erin focused on the ancient oak, its leaves losing their bright hue for drab dun. As she watched an amber leaf detached itself, floating slowly to the damp grass below - time was passing.

Ten years previously an excited little girl had made her first visit to the local leisure centre and gymnastics class. A step up from Gymnis that she'd loved, Erin felt a real big girl, absorbing everything the instructor taught the group with the eagerness of a disciple.

Erin's wide-eyed enthusiasm was matched by her talent, clear from the start. From the age of six she was encouraged to take part in local competitions, pony tail bobbing, strutting proudly with her sleek leotard in club colours. She beamed with pride when her name was announced as winner of her class. That first medallion still graced her bedroom wall.

This glow of success persisted through Erin's junior school days. Almost all her games would involve tumbles, hand-stands and flips as part of some imaginary scenario and she would even demonstrate the correct method for her school class on occasion.

It was just after her eighth birthday when Erin remembered the instructor asking her mother to stay behind after class. Erin stood, gnawing at a cuticle as she waited, but she needn't have worried, she was not in trouble. Miss Evans smiled as Erin's mum approached.

"You know," she said, " Mrs Davies, I don't think I can teach Erin any more. I'd like to send her for trials with the county team. How would you feel about that?"

After confirming class location and times, Sue Davies readily agreed, as she too could see Erin's talent and that she loved the sport with its competitiveness and camaraderie.

Whilst 'classes' soon became 'training', Erin continued to blossom. Focus on the competitive side grew as the team competed against other counties, often involving long trips with very early morning starts.

By the time she was fourteen Erin had visited every county in Wales, as well as a number across the border in England. Sadly the only knowledge she had of these places melded into memories of echoing shed-like leisure centres, filled with scents of sweat, talc and rubber gym mats on the outskirts of anonymous towns,

It was a drab drizzling day when Colin arrived to pick Erin up from training. He smiled as she bounded across the carpark, grinning from ear to ear.

“Things go well today, then, love, eh,” he asked.

“Hmmm, you could say so,’ she answered, still beaming widely.

“Well - ?”

“Guess who has been selected for Welsh Squad training, then?”

Colin laughed, “Oh, it must be Nicola, eh?”

Erin replied with a playful punch to Colin’s arm, “No, father dear. ME!”

A sense of awe struck Erin as she walked into the Sports Wales Athletics Centre just outside Cardiff. However, she was greeted warmly and made to feel at ease as were Colin and Sue. Mum gave her a hug and whispered “Just do your best, fach.” before Erin headed into the changing rooms.

Three serious faces watched Erin as she approached the mats after a brief warm-up. She was given a nod to start. Once into her floor routine Erin forgot everything but the music and her rhythm. In seconds it seemed, she was holding an elegant final pose. Confidence growing, the barre routine gave no problem at all and she finished with a smile.

“Thank you, Erin”, said one of the serious faces. “Would you like to shower and change before we chat?”

And so it began. Unbeknownst to her, the manacle of success was closing around Erin’s ankle.

At school, Erin’s friends and her teachers were both proud and delighted for her. Thankfully, as an able and conscientious pupil, Erin could cope with missing almost every Friday afternoon of

school. There were some jibes which hurt, though Erin remembered one afternoon when her discrete departure from English was disturbed by a yell from Mark Williams.

“Hey, where’s she off to, Miss?”

“Training, mun,” Steffan Lewis answered. “Phew, I’d like to see ‘er in ‘er leotard!”

“Leotard? Nah - she’s got no tits, mate!” was the response, raising guffaws from the other lads.

Before Mrs Bell could chastise the boys, a scarlet-faced Erin was through the door. As she sped down the corridor, female voices could be heard calling the boys ‘pigs’ and ‘disgusting’.

As the months went by it seemed that all roads led to Cardiff and the family in perpetual motion. Mostly Colin would drive Erin, while Sue stayed home with Matthew. Other times, the whole family went, visiting Cardiff, St Fagan's and, in the summer, the beaches. Travelling, a novelty at first was not easy; summer months meant roads crammed with tourist traffic and caravans, while Welsh roads in winter frost, fog or snow needed care.

Furthermore, there was a financial cost. Erin had overheard her parents discussing potential problems with their ageing Astra, the mileage on which was zooming up. Neither could Colin work any overtime. Family holidays were impossible, both financially and because of Erin’s commitment to training camps. Still Colin and Sue felt the sacrifices were worth it for their talented daughter.

Although unable to articulate them even to herself, it was Erin who felt the first doubts; the insidious tightening of that manacle of success, like chains around her ankle and her life.

She loved school, did well in most subjects, was liked by staff and had good group of friends. The problem was that these friends could rarely be seen outside school, neither could Erin afford the time to join school visits, whether to Stratford upon Avon to see their set play, Merchant of Venice, let alone longer trips to France.

Erin would smile, ask how the trip to Stratford had gone, how a trip to town had gone, what they’d bought, where they’d eaten. She ask about those ‘amazing’ parties that she hadn’t attended and all those events where she remained on the fringe. But it hurt.

She loved gymnastics - or did she? Now that she was in the National Squad aiming for the Commonwealth Games, Erin wasn’t so sure. It has somehow become that she *lived* gymnastics. There was little room for anything else in her life.

Erin desperately wanted the freedom to go to parties, to be included, not on the fringe. She wanted to meet up in town, buy gaudy earrings from Claire's Accessories and eat a burger at McDonalds, eat any forbidden food.

Acutely aware of the the sacrifices her parents had made over the years, Erin had no choice; the journeys and training continued, intensifying even as the Games came nearer. Many a Sunday, Colin drove home with a sleepy girl stretched out on the back seat. Regretfully, she began to fall behind on GCSE coursework.

It was with very mixed feelings that Erin nodded agreement when the coach announced
"You'll all be here for the whole week during your half terms. It'll be a chance for some individual work."

Knowing it was essential to manage some school work too, Erin ensured that English set texts, geography notes, biology notes as well as the dreaded maths past papers joined training gear in her bulging bags.

In typically foul February weather they set off earlier than usual. Colin drove carefully and they reached Cardiff's outskirts in excellent time.

"How about a hot chocolate before I drop you off?" suggested Colin. "We won't see you for a week."

'Oh, yes, great!' was Erin's eager response.

Colin pulled into the cafe's carpark, switching off the engine.

"Watch out, it's not been gritted well."

As he spoke those words, Erin opened the door and swung out her legs. Very briefly it seemed she stood while one leg went under her and the other in a different direction. Colin heard a snap followed by a cry.

* * * * *

Erin's smart Team Wales track suit was never worn. Her parents, her school - basking in her reflected glory - were sad. Erin, though unable to admit it, was only momentarily sad. That manacle around her ankle had broken. She could be an ordinary teen - she was free.

Freedom Trip

Next door was off again. That was the trouble with warm summer nights, leaving the windows open to get some cool air had disadvantages, and unfortunately what wafted in on this particular breeze was the residue of the neighbours' argument. She was screaming at him; he was bellowing loudly at her.

"She's brave," I mused, as I longed for sleep. "I wouldn't have the guts to answer him back."

He had been a rugby player in his youth, and was still a brute of a man, even if time and take-aways had been less than kind to him.

Will had a short fuse, so it didn't take much to get him started, and today it had been the trees. This was a well-worn bone of contention and had begun earlier that day in the garden. I had invested in a garden recliner about five years ago, just before Will and Jen moved in, but it had had very little use because garden relaxation didn't go hand in hand with argumentative neighbours.

Who would have thought that six hours later, they would still be at each other's throats, at full volume, for all and sundry to hear?

Omitting the foul language, the gist of the argument was that he had again refused his wife's suggestion to cut some height off the Leylandii hedge which acted as a barrier between us. All credit to Jen for bringing up the subject, she must have known that it would result in, at the very least, an argument, and at worst the force of Will's fist.

There was no reasoning with him – there hadn't been for the entire time that they had lived next door. I'd soon given up trying to approach him rationally, explaining that the height of the hedge was blocking my sunlight, and if they could just trim the tops..... but all efforts

had been in vain. Out of a sense of embarrassment, Jen felt obliged to keep trying, in what had become an annual ritual, meanwhile, the trees kept on growing until they were now well over the permitted two metres in height.

The noise stopped suddenly, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I lay on my back contemplating the ceiling in the bedroom. Silence descended and I slowly drifted off.

Next morning, Jen nodded sheepishly as I went past in the car, was that a black eye she was sporting? It wasn't the first, she seemed to be resigned, probably after years of abuse, to accept things as they were.

Will was a consummate bully, not just towards his wife, but towards everyone else who came into contact with him. I had found this out to my cost just after they moved in when I had trimmed the branches overhanging my side of the hedge as far as I could reach, which I was perfectly entitled to do. Thinking it was neighbourly to offer him the trimmings before I disposed of them, I was aghast at his response. In no uncertain terms he had told me to "shove them where the sun don't shine," and, "never touch my trees again."

I was forced to go to the Citizens advice and had completed a "high hedge" council complaint form, but their advice was to try to reach an amicable agreement first, suggesting I write a letter to Will if he was being difficult to deal with. That went down like a lead balloon, and resulted in a diatribe of abuse, and Will becoming so obsessed with the trees that he installed a CCTV camera to intimidate anyone even thinking of going near.

I had become used to a wall of darkness where there used to be light. Who was it that said, "One man's freedom is another man's prison?" Whoever it was, "they were right about that!" I thought.

I contemplated moving, there was nothing wrong with the house, and I should get a good price for it. The estate agent's jaw dropped when he saw the height of the "hedge" and had suggested I get it trimmed before any viewings. I laughed in his face and decided against continuing down that route. I was trapped by the Leylandii.

On the morning of the 23rd August, I did a double take as I drove past next door's front garden. My heart lifted as I saw the wonderful sight that was "Foy and Simms" local estate agents "For Sale" sign appear to wink at me as the sun caught it. I looked up fleetingly to the sky and thanked the Lord that my prayers seem to have been answered.

My immediate thought was, "how long does it take to sell a house these days? Followed by, "I would miss Jen;" I had no reason to dislike her, at least she had a sense of humour and would quite often take the micky out of herself – a defence mechanism I suppose for someone who lacked confidence in themselves. I expect any spirit she might have had had been eroded over the years.

Week after week went by, but there was no sign of next door moving. I put it down to Will being so difficult to deal with. I could just imagine strangers picking holes in their décor and the response they would get. To say the least, Will had an over inflated opinion of his communication skills.

Just by chance, I had a brief chat through the hedge with Jen while Will was out. She told me, in confidence, that they had had an unexpected win on the Post Code Lottery - £50,000. Jen hadn't wanted to move but was afraid to say. Will reckoned she was no good at making "big decisions", and he wanted to buy a place with a bit of land so that he could keep alpacas.

Freedom Trip

“My idea of hell,” she had said.

“Mine too” I thought.

In the village one day, I bumped into Jen,

“Any luck with the move?” I asked, reining myself in so as not to sound too enthusiastic.

“Not really,” came her reply, “we’ve been advised to do some jobs around the place - Will wants to get top price.”

A week later a van pulled up on next doors’ driveway, I did a double take as I read the name on the van, “Terry’s Tree Topping Services.” My pulse quickened. Once again, the benefits of open windows allowed me to overhear the conversation going on in next doors’ garden, Jen was telling Terry,

“Estate agent reckons no-one will buy the place with the hedge so far grown.”

Halfway through the tree trimming, Will could be heard bellowing in his usual fashion. He was not happy about the fact Terry had upped the price as the job was a lot bigger than Will had described on the phone. Terry had the impression that it was going to be a quick trim. Things got nastier and Will started to throw his weight around. Not the sort of thing any normal person would do with someone with an electric hedge trimmer on the ground and a telescopic branch lopper in one hand. Will didn’t know what hit him, but at least it was quick. The lopper had lived up to its name as a fatally injured Will clutched his neck and fell to the ground in a pool of blood, a stomach churning “Argh” accompanying his last breath. The inquest was brief. “Accidental death” the judge had decided. It was difficult to argue with the CCTV that had captured every move. “Terry’s Tree Topping Services” was exonerated of any blame, as the coverage showed quite clearly that Will had lunged at

Terry, tripping over the blade of the hedge trimmer straight on to the lopper, impaling himself on the blades. Terry had been traumatised by the whole thing, he had never considered himself to be armed and dangerous and had gone off sick for a few weeks. His deputy, Ian, had to finish the job, and Jen gave him a bonus to remove the trees completely. Ian had offered to put in a new fence for Jen and she jumped at his offer. She insisted on paying the bill for the best quality panels she could buy, ensuring they were of the correct height to lean on when chatting across them.

The new fence was installed just in time for us to have a celebratory gossip over it after Will's funeral. Jen seemed to have reinvented herself, I had never, before, seen her with makeup on and her usual lacklustre hair was lifted by blonde highlights.

"To Will," I toasted as we clinked our champagne glasses.

"He'd turn in his grave if he could see us now," she chuckled, "to freedom."

Ariadne's Question

Ariadne's mother told her not to go through the woods, especially after dark, because if she did the ground would swallow her up. Ariadne did not like doing as she was told at the best of times, and especially not when going *around* the woods took twice as long as going *through* them, so she decided to get a second opinion and that evening she asked her grandmother.

'Granny, what happens to little girls who go through the woods? Does the ground swallow them up?'

'Not as such,' said her Grandmother, who mistook the question for one about fairy stories. 'What happens is that you meet white rabbits in waistcoats and follow them into their burrows, where you have adventures which are strange and exciting but which do not make you any less smug.'

The following Tuesday, coming home through the woods, the ground swallowed Ariadne up. She found herself not in a burrow but in a tunnel which led windingly downwards around stalactites and stalagmites. It seemed to have been made by water trying to find its way to the roots of mountains.

Her part of the tunnel was lit by a faint flickering light, while in front and behind it was completely dark: the light moved with her, as if she held a candle. In fact it moved anyway, whether she walked or not: when she stopped the light carried on without her, at the same walking speed.

She caught up with the light and walked on down the tunnel in the middle of it. The more she thought of it as candle-light the more she decided that she could see a candle just in front of her, and the more she looked at the candle the more it seemed to be on the top of the head of a little man. She tried to make him into a dwarf in a leather jerkin, but she couldn't do it. He was quite obviously not a dwarf but a garden gnome, painted in bright, primary colours. Without really intending to, she found herself asking the gnome a question.

'What happens when the candle burns down to your head?'

The gnome quivered with what might have been rage, and then spoke.

'It goes out. And the tunnel gets very dark.'

There was more muttering, in which she thought she heard the word "genius", and then the gnome added, 'I can snuff myself out and show you, if you like.'

A bright pink finger and thumb appeared on either side of the candle flame.

'Please don't', she said quickly. 'I was only asking. Where are we going?'

The gnome did not answer, but after a while he said,

'I hope you don't think I'm doing this because I want to.'

After what seemed a long time, and in fact was, she saw ahead of them another light. This one was green rather than yellow and stationary rather than moving, and she soon saw that it was a lamp on a huge desk, behind which sat a man with a pointed hat and a quill pen. He looked up when they got to the desk, and said to the gnome,

'Thank you Nigel. That will be all.'

The gnome slouched away muttering and Ariadne thought she caught the words, 'Three Bags Full', but she had no time to worry about the gnome because the man behind the desk stood up and looked at her with a serious expression. He was very old and tall and thin and was dressed in dark robes decorated with silver moons and stars. Silver moons and stars also decorated his tall pointed conical hat. She was on the point of saying something like, 'Ah, a wizard', when she remembered the gnome's muttered reference to "geniuses", and decided that obvious remarks were frowned upon. That left her with the job of thinking of something un-obvious to say. She considered 'Good evening' but wasn't sure if it really *was* still evening, and the man spoke first.

'Name?'

'Ariadne Pankhurst Jones. Why am I here, please?'

He wrote her name in a huge ledger and then looked up.

'I will answer that question if you promise not to follow it with others about the meaning of life, the nature of reality and the purpose of custard.'

'I promise. Why am I here?'

'No idea', said the wizard. 'But for that matter I don't always remember why I'm here either.' The wizard thought for a bit and then added, 'Well, I suppose I do know why you're here, in a general sort of way, and I do know vaguely why I'm here too, but you may not find the reasons particularly satisfying. People usually don't.'

He paused as if waiting to be encouraged to go on, so she thought she had better encourage him because otherwise nothing looked likely to happen.

'Is it because I've been pushing my luck and because you are Merlin?'

There seemed to be a clearing of the air and Merlin smiled.

'Yes. Quite right on both counts. Thank you. That saves me droning on about a past, very distant to you, in which lances were the last word in weaponry and minstrels sang ballads about courtly love. Ballads which, incidentally, I'm not sorry to have seen the back of, but which I'm supposed to mention, along with other stuff which I find it difficult to get through without my visitors or me nodding off. And talking of nodding off, perhaps you also know who snoozes behind this door?'

He gestured to his right. Beside the desk and set in the curved stone wall of the tunnel there was an enormous oak, iron-bound door.

'King Arthur,' she said, and then, realising immediately that it was a mistake, she added, 'But he's a myth. He never really existed, did he?'

An ominous looking little wand appeared in Merlin's hand. He pointed it past her shoulder at a stalagmite further down the tunnel. A bolt of lightning blinded her for a moment and when the smoke cleared she saw that the stalagmite had been replaced by a smouldering stump and a sulphurous smell.

'That', he said, 'is the sort of thing which happens when "nature of reality" questions get asked. Which you promised you wouldn't. *Custard* questions get the *big* wand. Do you want power or soul?'

'What?'

'Quite right. I'm getting ahead of myself. We have to deal with the myth business first, since you raised it. But where to begin?' Merlin stroked his chin theatrically, daring her to answer. When, equally theatrically, she didn't, he went on. 'Well, let's start with what it *means* to be a myth. Most scholars reckon I'm at least as mythical as Arthur. Does that mean I'm sort of ... unreal? We could start by asking that stalagmite if myths are real or not. I wonder why it doesn't answer. And while we're about it, how do you know you're not a myth yourself?'

'Sorry I spoke.'

Ariadne remembered that a little while ago Merlin had asked her a strange question, but couldn't remember what it was. She filled the silence by asking one of her own.

'I thought Arthur slept under the mountain until the country needed saving. It needs saving *now*, doesn't it?'

'It certainly does', said Merlin, 'but *from* people like him rather than *by* people like him.' He produced a huge iron key. 'I can let the pompous old fool out if you really want, but I don't recommend it. It was your ancestors who locked him up in the first place, and quite right too. My job is to make sure he stays locked up. *Part* of my job. The other part is to deal with people like you. Once again, do you want power or soul? You can't have both.'

'Is that a trick question?'

'Yes. But that doesn't mean it's going to go away.'

Ariadne thought for a bit: 'If I say "power" I guess I end up with Arthur, behind that door. But I'm not sure I like the sound of "soul" either. It sounds a bit like the people my mother calls "precious": if I say "soul" I probably end up behind the door anyway, trying to cure the incurably power-crazed.' Finally she said, 'Do I have to say one or the other? Can't I say "neither", and just be myself?'

Merlin said nothing, but looked at her with one raised eyebrow. So she had another try.

'Can I say "neither", and be *a better behaved version* of myself?'

'Yes! There are no correct answers, but there are good ones and bad ones, and yours ... spares you Arthur's company. Well done! Nigel will show you out. He will take you the short way, providing you make him a promise, and it has to be one which he finds plausible, about not going through night-time woods again. Enjoy your freedom. I hope we do not meet again: the questions get harder.'

Four Diamond Rings

It was summertime 2017 when I visited Tommy Riddell. He was propped up in front of a pile of pillows. His blue cotton pyjamas clung to his bony frame but his lifelong cheeky grin still stretched from ear to ear.

“Stop talking in riddles, Tommy,” I said. “Tell me where they are.”

He laughed and shook his head. I knew he was enjoying teasing me but a fit of coughing overtook him and he buried his head in the pillows. I waited until he stopped. I’d known Tommy Riddell a long time. I knew it was no use trying to coax him. So I gently squeezed his hand then started to walk the length of the hospital ward.

“Don’t forget, Danny,” he called. “Look for the snapper.”

I carried on walking. I could hear him laughing until another bout of uncontrollable coughing over whelmed him.

When I’d reached the hospital car park I sat in my car. Oh Tommy, I thought. The snapper? What do you mean? How was his riddle going to help me find those diamond rings? Exasperated by his teasing, I sank into the seat of my car and reflected on the first time we’d met.

It was on a building site in Swansea during 1997. I’d just arrived from Ireland, chasing work. I was on my own aged twenty two, no family, a fostered upbringing, a

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bit of a loner. Tommy, five years older and his attractive wife Glenda took a liking to me. They were kind to me, looked after me and helped me settle in to my new surroundings.

The black haired handsome Tommy was slim in those days too. He was full of energy and like me, a qualified brick layer. We made a good team. With directions from the foreman and back up from the apprentices, we were able to build the shell of a house in no time. But Tommy loved to tease. He'd send the young lads to the shops for elbow grease and he'd make them search the site for his glass hammer. His hoaxes made us laugh. But now, twenty years on and four missing diamond rings later, having just been told he was about to die, I was not impressed by his teasing ways.

I decided to talk to Glenda and as I drove towards the Riddell's home, I thought about those diamond rings. Some of the stones were enormous. They were worth a fortune. I had to find them. My guilty conscience was weighing me down.

On reaching the Riddell's house I knocked on the door. "It's me, Glenda," I said. I could hear the last cords of Pobol y Cwm.

"Come in," she shouted. "Did he tell you?"

"No," I said wearily.

Glenda didn't stir from her chair. Now in her forties, her faded black trousers and loose stripy top covered her ample figure, her long black hair was tied in a pony tail and I could smell vinegar, the lingering odour of her fish and chip tea. Even so, Glenda still held a touch of glamour.

"Maybe he's sold them," she said, examining her painted finger nails.

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“No way,” I answered “and you’ve got to help, Glenda. We’re talking thousands of pounds. If he dies they’ll be lost for ever.”

Glenda sighed. “I don’t know where he’s put them. You’ll never get a straight answer from Tommy Riddell, you know that...and our lolo’s going just like him...like father, like son.”

I paused at the thought of the lanky teenage offspring, their only child, my God Son. A nice boy well brought up but not the brightest of lads when it came to thinking. Anyway, trying to detect the ring’s whereabouts, I surveyed the clean but cluttered living room for inspiration.

“He told me to look for the snapper,” I offered.

“The snapper?” repeated Glenda.

“Does he play card games with lolo...Snap or the like?”

“No.”

“What does he do besides watch the tele?”

“He looks at his photos,” she pondered.

“What Photos?”

“Photos he’s taken of you and the lads.”

“Photos,” I said. “Snapshots. .Is that what he means? Where does he keep them?”

“In here,” she said, leaving her chair.

I watched as she moved to a cupboard and when she opened the doors I could see shelves holding stacks of ‘Racing Pigeon’ magazines. I waited while she lifted the folded clothes that filled the other shelves until she found a dark blue photograph album. She handed it to me. I sat on an arm chair and having opened the album, I

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said, "I didn't know about these." Glenda shrugged her shoulders and perched beside me.

The first photograph showed Glenda and Iolo playing Swing Ball in the garden. Surprised, Glenda smiled. Next came a group of men, including me, sat on a pile of house bricks, a half built house, complete with scaffolding, in the background.

"This was a job we did...twelve years ago. Davy Probert was the Builder. See that little lad there," I pointed. "Tommy teased him something rotten."

I grinned. "And this is the garage we built for Mrs Morgan. God Bless her. Tommy had her looking for holy water. He told her he couldn't finish the job if we hadn't baptized the place."

Glenda laughed, shook her head and I continued to turn the pages. But when I reached the last entry, "This is it," I said. "This is the wall we built at Davy Probert's place. This is where we found the diamond rings."

"What...Mrs Probert's rings?" gasped Glenda.

"She left them on the rockery. Took them off to do some gardening. You know what she's like...easy come, easy go. 'Finder's Keepers?' Tommy said."

"Oh Dear God, Danny. I didn't know they were hers. When was this?"

"A couple of weeks ago, day before Tommy was taken ill."

"You can't keep them, Danny Nolan," tutted Glenda. "If you do find them, you'll have to give them back. Think of all the work Probert's given you and Tommy over the years...you owe him."

"I know," I said humbly, "I know." But then, as if from nowhere, remembering Tommy's words 'Finder's Keepers?' I said, "If we do find them and sell them Glenda,

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you could buy yourself some new clothes. Or would you like to go on a holiday?"

I could see I'd touched a nerve and I could see that the idea of a holiday was certainly appealing. "I'll have another look," she said sheepishly. "And lolo can check the pigeon loft."

I didn't sleep much that night. Temptation it's a terrible thing. I could envisage those four huge clustered diamond rings. I could see wads of money in my hands, feel it, smell it. I could buy that car on Jonesey's forecourt. Maybe a new suit. I could imagine Glenda soaking up a Mediterranean sun. However, when dawn broke and temptation left me, pangs of guilt and a vision of Davy Probert's trusting caring face returned with vengeance.

So, longing for freedom, I visited Tommy again. Poor Soul. He'd hardly the energy to speak and I didn't need a doctor to tell me his prognosis.

"Did you find the snapper, Danny?" he wheezed.

I muttered I hadn't.

He raised a finger, I bent my head towards him.

"Give 'em back, Danny," he whispered in my ear.

I could barely hear him.

"Give Probert the rings. Free your conscience," he whispered before painfully coughing then closing his eyes.

"Where've you put them, Tommy?" I said.

He didn't answer.

Damn you, Tommy, I thought. Tell me. He could be the most irritating frustrating little man but then it struck me, how much I'd miss him and how unimportant that

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careless woman's rings were now that Tommy was sinking. He died the next day.

Glenda and lolo came to tell me.

Following our consoling and weeping, "Well, Glenda," I said. "His suffering 's over but he's passed the burden of the rings on to me. What do I tell Probert?"

"I don't know," said Glenda. "I've searched that house from top to bottom. There's no sign of them."

"Never mind," I said. "They might turn up. I'll speak to Probert and I'll pay for a holiday...when you're ready."

lolo who'd quietly occupied himself with my mail order catalogue suddenly said, "Are we going on holiday, Mam? Can I take me camera?"

"What camera?" said Glenda.

"Me dad's snapper," he said, pulling Tommy's little camera from out of his pocket. "He gave it me when you phoned the ambulance but I think it's broke. You can hear something rattling when you shake it up and down."

I could picture Tommy's grinning face. I could hear his last words, "Free your conscience." I could feel the burden lifting and with relief I smiled, "Give the snapper to me, lolo. I'll buy you a new one."

THE FORAGER'S CHILD

Crouching, she moved closer. Through the trees she could just make out what might be a vehicle.

Yes, it was definitely the black 4X4 she had heard, then watched patrolling the highway two days ago. It was obviously searching for someone or something, but now it was parked on the track near the clearing where she regularly foraged for mushrooms.

How did they find her? Rose hadn't seen a soul in weeks. It had been more than two weeks since she had heard that farm truck clattering and rattling in out of earshot.

For 31 days she and Clemmie had survived on berries, mushrooms and re-hydrated dried sachet soup which they ate cold stirred into a gruel with stream water. Her little girl who had just turned four had adapted amazingly well into her new life as a fugitive.

When instructed she would hunker down under tangled undergrowth with Teddy Puffball for company while her mother scouted for the next safe sleep site. She had learned like a new-born fawn to remain silent and, as near possible, motionless when alone.

Her mother would return before the sun started going down. She knew they would eat, drink and pick insects, leaves and twigs from each other's hair. She would watch her a makeshift den, or better still find a rocky overhang to sleep under for the night. She knew before they settled down her mother would lead her away into the trees so that they could relieve themselves and clean up as best they could with water from one of two plastic bottles that were remnants of a lost life.

The red-capped bottle was used for washing, the other with the blue cap for drinking. When alone she was always left with an almost full blue bottle and an empty red bottle. They never strayed too far from fresh water and when it rained they took off their clothes and skipped together like woodland nymphs. Such precious carefree moments.

Her mother had a rucksack that she carried everywhere. Inside was \$400, her stock of dried soup sachets, which she had slid into every available space. There were two spoons, a kitchen knife, two small plastic bowls, a tin opener, a torch with spare batteries, two changes of clothing for both she and Clemmie, a fluffy throw, two toothbrushes, toothpaste, a bar of soap and a small trowel. At night they used the rucksack as a pillow, laid foliage on the ground before wrapping themselves together in the throw.

There were also four full boxes of matches in the rucksack , but Rose had been so fearful that drifting smoke might be spotted that she had not even tried to light a fire. When winter came she would have to take that risk if they were to survive, but she would not worry about that now. Just planning for another tomorrow was a big enough challenge.

As they lay huddled together in the dark Rose would whisper stories to Clemmie and sometimes she would sing softly until the child's breathing evened out into slumber. How had they come to this?

The onset of a virus like no other had coincided with a meteorite explosion in the upper atmosphere over USA's Mojave desert. Experts estimated it could have been as much as fifty times greater than the one over Chelyabinsk, Russia in February 2013. The effect had been cataclysmic. Thousands had died instantly and people more than 100 miles away had been blinded by the fireball. The explosion had scorched the earth and destroyed all vegetation and animal life across a swathe of Nevada, Arizona and Southern California, but it was Las Vegas that took the full destructive might of the devastating shock wave. When the dust finally settled there was nothing left of the fun capital of the world, except heaps of strangely pitiful glittery rubble.

Bible-thumping evangelists said it was the hand of God taking revenge on a modern day Sodom and Gomorrah, while others feared an Alien apocalypse. Whatever people

believed they were not prepared for what happened next.

In a matter of days people under the 200-mile wide dust cloud were dying in huge numbers. All were adults. Babies and children seemed immune, but one day they would be adults too. It was a terrifying prospect. In no time at all the death toll was inconceivable, and it was clear that those worst hit were parents, teachers and anyone in direct contact with children.

Death was swift and certain. Unlike the Corona Virus in 2020 there were no survivors. This plague from the planets that seemed to evolve through interaction with human hormones was out of control and hospitals couldn't cope. The US Government insisted on immediate lock-down, but very quickly there were thousands of orphans to care for, and it became clear the only way to stop the spread of the disease and to give scientists the time to develop a cure or a vaccine was to isolate all children.

Crisis legislation was passed that ordered the removal of four to 16-year-olds from their homes. They were taken away to live in special facilities originally built for the military. There they were overseen by a CCTV Big Brother form of parenting. Adults in full protective gear monitored from behind screens and only intervened when absolutely necessary.

Infants and toddlers under the age of four were allowed to stay in their homes with one parent, usually the mother, but not allowed outside. Those with learning and extreme physical disabilities were not to be taken into care at all, but had to remain in strict isolation to protect the wider community. The bread-winner parent would have to live separately, many forced into hostel accommodation so that they could continue to work to provide for the upkeep of their families.

It was draconian and, without doubt, flouted all levels of human rights, but the authorities

insisted it was the only solution. It was the only option that would give time to at least try to control the disease.

Medical experts had irrefutable proof that although prepubescent children seemed immune from the disease they were at the same time the sole carriers. There was no evidence of adult to adult transmission. None. So if human life was to continue in this Land of the Free the only option was to take away the freedom of a whole generation.

The disease had quickly spread into Colorado, Utah, Idaho and Wyoming but had not so far reached into Canada or Mexico so all travel was banned in or out of the United States. Whatever it was and wherever it had come from it had to be contained for the future of mankind.

Rose couldn't bear the thought of giving up Clemmie. She couldn't bear the thought of her little girl growing up without her, possibly forgetting what it felt like to be cuddled by Mommie. She had said nothing to her husband about her plans as Clemmie's fourth birthday drew nearer, but if it meant going into hiding until her daughter was 16 that's what she'd do.

She knew the impounded children would be fed, kept warm and sheltered even educated , but with their only regular human interaction with each other, or on very rare occasions with fully-gowned and masked grown-ups. What would that do to their souls and their mental well-being?

It was all too much for Rose. Three days before Clemmie's fourth birthday she had dressed her daughter in her warmest clothes, given her Teddy Puffball to cuddle, and crept out into the darkness. She made a hide 'n' seek game of persuading the child to lie down on the car floor behind the driver's seat under a fluffy throw and had driven to the hills.

She knew the authorities would be out looking for them, so she waited until the car was

almost out of gas and then, as the sun was just rising, pushed it into a steep gully full of water before taking off into the wilderness carrying a sleepy-eyed Clemmie.

At first they had eaten and drank what little perishable supplies and tinned food she had been able to carry on her back, and in the weeks since then they had foraged, ate dried soup, and slept rough.

Rose discovered that freedom smelt of wild briar bushes. Freedom had the earthy taste of raw mushrooms. Freedom sounded like the wind in the trees. Most of all freedom felt fragile and fleeting especially now the hunters were here.

They had come with dogs and drones, and Rose could feel the net closing in. She turned to Clemmie with her index finger to her lips, and got a nod in reply, but as the mother and child began crawling silently away through the undergrowth a dandelion seed-puff drifted under the little girl's nose and she sneezed.

The glass bottle and clay pot

The central Anatolian village of Gokbel was quiet that hazy summer afternoon. Jannan yawned and stretched, as her bent back, arched and aching from constant harrowing of the parched red field, gave her a final wicked twinge. The work monotony frequently meant her mind was far away from her small body. It was now a year since she had picked up in a roadside ditch several discarded Cosmopolitan magazines thrown from a passing car. These pages were where her thoughts now lay. Shouldering the adze, she waved to Ahmet, a shy old school friend, who was digging in the next field and made her way back to the small stone house where she lived with her parents. She daydreamed again of Gianna Azzacas, the international Italian super-model whose features graced the front pages of the Cosmopolitan. The comparisons were massive.

She entered, greeted her mother who squatted cross-legged by the open fire rolling dough on a large circular board. *Pide*, perhaps with some goat cheese was a staple village diet, perhaps with multi scented honey, washed down with copious drafts of tea. She washed and helped prepare the evening meal. Her father eventually came home after his long arduous toil in the fields and they ate the meal in silence, before he uttered just one sentence, '*Bu gece siseyi disari koydum*' ('*Tonight I put the bottle out.*')

Jannan blanched. Village custom decreed that when a girl reached 15, it was time for marriage and a bottle was placed on the house rooftop. Village boys could throw up to three stones, or could use slings for a better aim in order to break it. Whoever succeeded had the offer of the girl in marriage. Hormones were burning through her blood and feelings of repressed sexual awakenings, freedom, caroused through her body, but her face was emotionless and expressionless when she bade her parents' goodnight and moved to her simple alcove bed. Her face might have seemed expressionless, but she

The glass bottle and clay pot

desperately wanted release from her feelings and she found them in her dreams, as always of Gianna Azzacas. Dreams are usually hazy recollections of fuzzy, unrelated details, but hers were surreal, vivid with high definition crystal clarity

Gianna Azzacas slept fitfully, even though the Roma hotel had a five star rating. Her headache was no doubt due to the multiple glasses of champagne consumed the previous night. A sideway glance revealed the comatose form of Atila Asur, a tall, rich Turk, who had wined and dined her for the past two nights and eventually bedded her. She groaned inwardly at her apparent inability to say 'No' to virtually any man. She crept out of bed and made her way to the bathroom, longing for a long warm bath. Shutting the door, she filled the large tub, poured in salts and gratefully sank into the scented water. She seductively rubbed over her body almond soap from the 800 year old Santa Maria Novella Pharmacy in Florence, her fingers gently caressing firm toned skin. Last night the Turk had done this. but had been rough, hard and demanding. Luxuriating in the steamy atmosphere, her day dream thoughts drifted off and off and off...

She had come a long way since graduating from Rome University with a degree in water quality. She smiled as she compared her current earnings with what she would have earned in academia. The one huge scar in her life though had been a car accident death of Vitt Alebar who was undoubtedly the love of her life. Vitt. short for Vittorio, born in Sienna and named after one of the cities patron saints had an apartment overlooking the Campo and each August they watched *Il Palio* – the famous horse race. She cherished the small rhinoceros brooch he had given her, a symbol representing his birth district. After his death she had returned just once, staying at the Minerva hotel with

The glass bottle and clay pot

Col. George Fusoan, the British Military attaché based in Madrid and that had been a tearful experience.

Her thoughts drifted on and lovers became entangled with cities. Paris, was the dashing unbelievably handsome Irishman, Mic Antony, who, after she had ended the affair joined the French Foreign Legion; at Sophia, it had had been a hedonistic three day session with John Davidson who was in the city discussing international security matters with his Bulgarian counterpart; Lisbon had resulted in many torrid sessions with Loscar Vasil a Portuguese diplomat; Zini Pranzeno had been her lover in Florence, Sonel Gelran, a Nobel Laureate in Stockholm, whilst Ankara had seen Daler Hanoz – a cavalier mercenary soldier en route to Syria.

The thought of Turkey invariably brought back the central Anatolian region and her then escort. It was funny but she could not recall his full name. Perhaps Tonan, a small, squat, bulbously fat Maltese of Arab descent, with plenty of money, all no doubt obtained from very dubious sources All she cared about was that he was extremely rich. She recalled that he had a gecko tattoo on his thigh and spoke fractured, atrocious English. The trip had resulted in a present of a superb diamond bracelet, to which she was very much taken.

Initially it had been extremely pleasant with the Cappadocia ‘Club Med’ being the highlight. Magnificent food, classical music by the poolside every evening, rooms hollowed out from a limestone cliff face and hot air balloon flights over a fantastic landscape, all had made her mellow to Tonan’s advances. She had taken several copies of her latest Cosmopolitan cover shoot with her because she liked to scatter a few in various

The glass bottle and clay pot

hotel lobbies. It did her ego good. She often wondered how much longer she had as a top model, for the younger versions, such as, Lela Lasba, were now making their mark.

She well remembered that last argument with the Maltese. They had been driving through a small Anatolian village when he decided that he wanted the bracelet back, stating that he had only loaned it her; she had disagreed. A flaming row had erupted in which he had reached into the glove compartment, seized and thrown onto the road all her remaining magazine copies, called her a tramp and driven to the nearest airfield. Luggage was unloaded and she had to pay for her own flight back. No word was spoken between them and that was the last she had seen of him. However, she still had the bracelet.

As Jannan rose from her bed, a rock flung through the window knocked her unconscious. On awakening, her head ached and all she could remember was that dream. She had loved every minute of it because in that dream she was Gianna. The dream sequences were lovely.

Her father approached the alcove. Quietly spoken, he remarked, '*Arsez Bose burada*' ('*Arsez Bose is here*') and motioned with his hand. She gasped as, short, fat, bald man entered. His distinguishing feature was a lopsided grinning mouth that exposed broken and rotten teeth. '*Testiyi o kirdi*' ('*He threw two stones and broke the bottle,*') was her father's laconic comment, '*ve erkeğın o olacak*' ('*and will be your man.*') Bose smiled, further exposed more rotting teeth. He was well known in the valley, as a person of limited intelligence, but tilled a very large plot of land. As he backed away and left, his nodding and grinning exposed what few teeth remained, '*Gelecek ay herkes düğününüzde*

The glass bottle and clay pot

oynayacak ('everyone will enjoy your wedding next month,') were the words then spoken by her father.

Jannan picked up the rock that had hit her head. It had been the first thrown by Bose and had missed the bottle but found the open window. Blood could still be seen on it. She felt absolutely empty, rose, washed, dressed and left the house. Walking to a small hill crowned by an olive tree grove, tears burst from her eyes as she sobbed out, 'Bose, Bose, No No.' Her clenched fists repeatedly hammered the earth. She laid there, her face pressed to the dank, rich, hot, red, lateritic earth for some time. A shadow caused her to stir and she saw Ahmet, her quiet school friend. He put down his adze and placed his arms around her. Sobbing, she explained what had happened and he comforted her.

The wedding was one month later and the wedding night was celebrated according to local custom, by Bose placing a large clay pot outside his doorway. Throughout that torrid and tortuous first night, Jannan kept thinking of her Cosmopolitan magazines and became Gianna and not Jannan. In the early pre dawn light, Bose left the marriage bed and walking outside picked up a stone and hurling it, deliberately missed the pot. He retreated indoors. As custom demanded, the few neighbours waiting outside gasped, as *not* breaking the pot meant the bride was *not* a virgin and therefore an automatic divorce. Ahmet had comforted her too well, but now she was free.

NB: The custom still exists in rural areas.

The Red Kite

It really wasn't fair being left to do everything. No wonder she couldn't ever finish her homework on time! Eleri had made hardly any friends since she moved up to secondary school and resented having to go at all.

Cramming some toast remains in her mouth, she slammed the front door behind her. She had left the congealed pan and leftovers in the sink after hastily preparing brother Rhys some beans on toast and shouting at him for leaving half of it. Too much of the sunny evening had already been spent stuck in detention. Mum had already withdrawn to her bedroom with a second bottle of wine, she needed it nowadays to help her sleep.

Eleri hastened past the small front yards, thick with weeds, cars and abandoned furniture, out of the modern housing estate and towards the traditional old village. She would look for Willow, who was missing again. An excuse, but she wanted to get outside. Time to calm down, to pretend to herself everything was back to normal. The dog kept wandering off, usually to return forlornly days later, without the master he had been searching for. Mum didn't seem that bothered about Willow being missing, or indeed anything.

Distractedly calling for Willow, every now and again but not expecting to find him. Lost in thought about the injustice of the day, before realising it, she was on the outskirts, approaching the spinney. Despite the warmth, she shivered involuntarily. Evening sunlight now caught the sculptural grey trees, still bare of leaves. A froth of blackthorn blossom was starting to lace the hedgerow. Hesitating, and calling out again, Eleri peered into tangled undergrowth, where the dog could be lying. Injured perhaps? She hadn't been here for a while and had to steel herself to enter the path. Birds were loudly proclaiming their territory. Rich smells of wild garlic, leaf mould and sap rose to meet her, the first few spring primroses peaked out of a sunny bank. Unreasonably, she resented the bucolic scene. How dare it look so beautiful and innocent now?

She had avoided this place. Dad always walked here with Willow, so it would be cowardly not to look. She wasn't planning on going all the way to the clearing, but would turn around at the second gate. Nearing the gate she heard an unfamiliar, pitiful, mewling sound. Not Willow, but maybe an injured rabbit or cat? Kind hearted, she couldn't bear for an animal to suffer. Tentatively she lifted the latch and made her way swiftly to the clearing, before she lost the sound, or could change her mind. Eleri was aware this was the very spot where they had left flowers and tied ribbons to the sycamore tree six months ago. Some of the tattered, faded ribbons still hung dejectedly from the branches.

Above, swooping low and soaring in wide circles, was a red kite. Eleri recognised it's graceful shape from when Mum and Dad had taken them to Rhayader to the Red Kite Centre at Gigrin Farm. That had been a joyous day for them all.

He was calling persistently as he circled the sycamore. Craning her neck, fascinated, she saw the light catch the red on his plumage and the shape of his forked tail as he swept lower and nearer. The sight enchanted her and lifted her up to the endless sky with him in flight. Transcending worldly concerns, he glided effortlessly. The stress and the responsibility dropped away from her for a moment.

The Red Kite

Gran had told her that when people died their spirits were freed as birds. Watching the agile creature and feeling his freedom, part of it seeped into her soul and made her feel somehow lighter.

Suddenly, Eleri jumped in alarm, something moist touched her hand and she felt a spasm of fear. She hadn't noticed the dog, who nearly knocked her over in his ecstatic greeting. Relief flooded through her as she flung her arms around Willow and untangled some brambles from his long coat.

Companionably they stood together watching, as the sky took on a rosy hue. The kite finally landed, in Dad's tree. So Willow had come too, to this place where Dad had chosen to die. Dad was of this place, he knew it intimately, instilling in her his love of wildlife. She still couldn't understand how he could leave them. It still hurt her badly. Now she wanted to remember happier times and forgive him. She couldn't carry on holding everything together on her own.

Gran would be glad to hear that her lost son's spirit was now released as the red kite. Perhaps she could visit her, it wasn't far. Gran was still angry with Mum, but was speaking to her grandchildren. Maybe she would ask if Rees and her could come over, like they used to before. Gran was strange and old fashioned, but she seemed to have an answer to most things, and they would get a nice tea.

Eleri felt less weight on her shoulders making her way back out of the spinney. As they left she made a promise to Dad that she would come back here again, soon.

TO GO, OR NOT TO GO?

I've been staring at that small piece of blue sky for what seems forever. Okay, sometimes it's grey clouds that are going past, but at least it's out there, while I'm stuck in here. I've seen stars in the night sky, again, only just a small section, but it looks so good from in here.

I suppose I shouldn't really complain: I'm relatively warm, and I get fed regularly, but I'm not free, I haven't got my freedom. I've been lying here plotting how I might escape, but every idea at the moment seems doomed.

But I am keeping myself as fit as I can, in this confined space, because I realise that any weakness and my escape plan will fail. I've been doing stretches and bending and then just tensing muscles and relaxing them again. Will it work? Who knows. If I am to escape, then I have to be able to pull myself up to the height of that aperture, and be able to lever myself over the edge.

But then what? I don't know exactly what's on the outside, so I'll just have to take a chance. What if it's a huge drop? I might tumble down and down into oblivion. What if there's another wall, stopping me from going further? How can I get over it? All these questions keep plaguing me as I gaze at the slit of sky above me.

TO GO, OR NOT TO GO?

I can't stay here much longer, I just can't. It's too claustrophobic, so I'll just have to give it another few days and see what happens. Oh, great, here's the food, so I'll just play dumb and take it and eat it. And that's the other thing, of course, personal hygiene. Although they take all my waste away, it's still getting very smelly in here and I really feel very stale, needing some form of a shower to freshen me up. But that won't happen any time soon, so I'll just have to put it on the top of my list when I get my freedom.

I think I'll try and see just how near to that opening I can get - here goes. Oh, that was hard, but I nearly managed to see over the edge, so that's better than last week. My exercises must be working because I sensed that I was much stronger this time. But to escape I've got to get right up onto the ledge and jump from there, and that's going to be very tricky. If I land badly, I might break a leg and that would be both painful and deadly for me. No, I've got to be sure before I jump.

Now I've rested a bit and got my nerve back, I'll try again. Right, if I can get a grip on the ledge, I might just be able to pull myself onto the edge. I have to be cautious, I don't want to make any noise and warn them of what I'm trying to do.

One, two, three – yes! I'm on the edge but very unstable. I think I'll wait a bit longer and try again. But if I wait too long, the weather may change and it might be pouring or windy and not sunny like today.

TO GO, OR NOT TO GO?

If I'm to escape, it's got to be now or never. So here goes. One big jump and a scabble and I'm on the edge again, but feeling much safer this time. I can see nearby trees and fields and, thank goodness, there's no wall to stop me.

I'm past the point of no return, because I can't go back inside from here, so there's only one thing for it, I have to jump. One, two, three – oh no, I can't do it. Yes, you can, you silly creature, just jump! Here goes, then.

I close my eyes and leap outwards, flapping like mad. But amazingly, I don't fall, I actually go upwards and away from my 'prison'. I'm flying! Yes, my wings have enough strength to take me over to the nearest trees and beyond, if I wanted to. I rest for a moment on a branch and then jump off using my new-found skills to soar away and up into the blue skies. If I drop my right wing, I go round in that direction, and if I drop my left wing, I go round the other way – fabulous.

This is freedom. This is what I've been waiting for. Yes, I'm as free as a bird.

Waterloo Sunset

For the third time that Friday evening, the stylus of Terry's Dansette settled into the groove of his new Kinks single. A twangy guitar riff... Ray Davies's breathy tremolo... *Dirty old river*...

Singing along, Terry glimpsed himself in the chipped mirror of the dressing table Sid Bilson had got him. His new maroon trousers – the shop-assistant had called them 'claret hipsters' – looked great, low slung and tight. The purple shirt – 'mulberry' the assistant said – was pretty groovy too, floppy at the waist and a bit tight on the chest. He hadn't meant to spend another ten and six on the wide black belt but the assistant knocked ten bob off the shirt and assured Terry it really completed the outfit.

The Ray and Terry duo sang on – about Friday night, Terry and Julie. But he was meeting Alison.

Terry wondered how many shirt buttons to leave undone. Two? Three would be a bit daft as apart from a bit of downy fluff he'd no chest hair to show off. He didn't know what Alison thought about chest hair. A whiff of aftershave nearly made him sneeze.

It had been Alison's idea to meet on Waterloo Bridge. When she'd brought the post down, he'd shown her his new record.

'That the one about Terry and Julie?' she said.

'Except this Terry's meeting Alison.'

'Yes. Shall we meet on the bridge? Make sure Julie's not there?'

'OK.' Terry thought Alison was unlike any girl he'd ever met before.

'Seven o'clock?'

'OK,' he said again, then as she walked away, 'Hang on.' He touched her upper arm and brushed her lips with his.

That had been their second ever kiss, a couple of hours ago.

The record had finished: *I am in paradise*... From downstairs came sounds of Mum in the kitchen. Water running. The clang of the chip pan on the stove.

He'd go now, while Mum was busy. He'd said that morning he was going out and he wanted to be gone before Sid Bilson appeared. Once downstairs, he opened the front door, flooding the narrow hall with sunlight. 'Bye, Mum,' he called.

'You're not going out dressed like that.' She stood in the kitchen doorway, arms folded across her apron.

Terry turned, his hand on the front door-latch. 'Don't be daft, Mum, course I am.'

'Daft? You calling *me* daft?' The smell of chips frying seeped around her. 'Just look at those trousers. They're a disgrace. Where on earth did you get them?'

'Shop near Covent Garden.' He wanted to face her but found himself looking at the patterns the sun was making on the lino, highlighting the scuffs and scratches.

'Oh, very posh. And how much did you pay for them?'

'Seven pounds ten.' It was true but it was the wrong answer.

'*How* much? Seven pound –'

'That's what I said.' He let the door swing shut.

'Don't get lippy with me, boy. Well, they certainly saw *you* coming. If your father was alive –'

'Just as well he isn't now Sid Bilson's on the scene.' He regretted saying it as soon as it was out but deep down he meant it. His stomach clenched and his hands were balled into fists.

She took a step towards him. 'How dare you.' Her lips had tightened, her eyes scolded. Mixed with the cooking smells was the rosy feminine muskiness he'd loved as a child. Now it made him feel insignificant, a little boy.

'How *dare* you!' she repeated. 'Mr Bilson's been very kind since your father died.'

'Not to me he hasn't. Unless taking three quid off me for that dressing table –'

'You want to show some respect. Sidney Bilson could certainly tell you a thing or two about dress sense.'

This was just so plain silly that Terry laughed. 'Don't be daft, Mum, Sid Bilson wears clothes from twenty years ago. This is 1967 –'

'Don't you *dare* call *me* daft. You're the daftie. Spending over a week's wages on rubbish. And just where are you off to? Out with some little tart from that place you call work? Or worse, got up and stinking like some pansy.'

'Alison's not a tart. She's – ' Words wouldn't come. He pulled open the door and stomped into the sunshine. The door banged shut behind him.

In the street, a breeze brought eddies of dust and cigarette ends. Terry hurried towards the High Road. A dog trotted past, ears pricked, sniffed at the base of a tree, then cocked its leg before continuing on its mission. *Dead End Street*, thought Terry, the Kinks' previous hit.

The dust tickled his nose and he sneezed. Mid-May, the first sign of this year's hay fever. He felt in his pocket for his handkerchief. Not there. Damn! He could picture it on the dressing table, beside his money, watch and door key. He was locked out, with no money, and couldn't even wipe his nose.

Terry stood for a moment, stroking a sideburn. He'd have to go back. He looked at his watch, feeling guilty about what he'd said to Mum. She'd given him the watch when he passed his CSEs last year. Top grades in English and Maths got him the job at Giffords Publishing so he didn't have to take the one at Sid's mate's scrap yard.

He'd better go back, say sorry to Mum and get his things. He turned – damn again! There was Sid getting out of his ancient Ford Popular, flicking ash from the sleeve of his check sports jacket. Sid took a last drag of his cigarette, cupping it in his hand like a spiv, dropped it in the gutter and strolled to Mum's front door, full of himself. Terry checked his watch again. He couldn't go back now. But he had to, he had no money.

Hang on, though. If he'd put his watch on...

He felt in his back pocket. The money and key were there! His relief was joyous. No hanky, though. He'd just have to sniff.

A bus was waiting on the High Road. Terry ran for it and jumped on. Two women watched him as he sat down. 'Cor lumme, duck,' said one, 'you are in a 'urry. I 'ope she's worth it.' She nudged her friend with a bony elbow.

Terry snuffled, blushed, and felt another sneeze coming. He pressed the bridge of his nose and sniffed.

'Ain't you got a 'anky, dear? Dearie me.' The woman rummaged in her handbag. "Ere..." She handed him a couple of tissues.

'Ta.' Terry spluttered and blew his nose.

'Fancy,' she said to her companion. 'Goin' to see 'is girl without a clean 'anky...'

'I 'ope 'e's got clean pants on.' They screeched with laughter.

Terry looked away, his face burning, but he was smiling. He was thinking about the first kiss with Alison. Last Friday, there'd been a birthday pub do for Julie, one of the other typists. She'd expected a birthday kiss from all the men, and then all the typists wanted kisses from Terry and the other post-room boys. He knew Alison was different the moment he touched her lips with his. For one thing, she didn't taste of cigarettes. She tasted of freedom. Her lips were soft, yielding slightly. He pressed more firmly, his hands together in the small of her back. He felt a finger on his neck. Suddenly, Alison's tongue flickered like a warm dart against his lips. Something fizzed through him to the tips of his fingers and toes. He let his tongue gently touch hers. 'Mmm,' she said.

'War-loo Bridge!' shouted the conductor.

The women looked up as Terry went to get off.

'You 'ave a lovely time, duck.'

'And make sure *she* 'as a good time.'

'And if yer can't be good be careful.'

He gave them a grin and a wave as the bus took them across the bridge.

Alison was already there, early, waiting, looking over the parapet down to the swirling dark water.

'Dirty old river...' said Terry.

She looked up at him, the sun behind her, shining gold around her hair. 'Oh Terry, you smell like the ground floor of Selfridges.'

He blinked into the sunlight, saddened. What had Mum said he smelt like?

'Don't be daft, silly. I'm only joking.' She moved closer. 'It's nice. Are you going to kiss me properly now?'

He lowered his head, put his arms around her, brought his lips to hers. Softness, pressure, flicker of tongues. Exchange of scent and taste. Like last week a sudden fizz went through him. Except this time it went to every tingling nerve-ending. Even there. *Even there*. How could a flick of the tongue do that?

The fingers of his left hand enlaced with those of Alison's right. Beyond her, the sun sank lower over Westminster sending shadows of grand buildings across the ebbing Thames. Another two shadows merged into a single fading shimmer that followed Alison and Terry across the river.