



Aspects Of Life

(How to Fall in Love)

Susannah Jones

Love is..The Balance of your Nature.

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1. Art for Lark's Sake

Davina Jackson loved to paint. It gave her a sense of well being and relieved the stresses of her everyday life. She rarely had time now but when she could spare it she would eagerly indulge. She loved the colours and blended them together with such elegance that even Da Vinci would have been proud. She was self taught and this only added to her sense of achievement. She had been to college but quickly left it because it seemed to disagree with her artistic temperament. She decided that she would be better off on her own as the course only seemed to teach the basics. She longed to be held in the high esteem of the masters but as yet her work was only shown in the comfort of her own home. It attracted a lot of praise and attention from her visitors but Davina was never really sure if that was only out of good manners. One day though she knew that she would receive the recognition that was hers by merit.

She had hopes that today would be that day. As word of her artistic creativity got around it attracted the attention of one of the local businessmen. He expressed an interest in her work and an appointment to view was quickly in the making. He was due around at two o'clock and Davina eagerly awaited his appearance although a slight nervousness was still detectable. That was only natural she reasoned to herself as all artists were entitled to first night nerves. She looked at her watch and saw that it was only 1.30. That was the third time in as many minutes so she decided to make herself a cup of tea to try and calm herself and pass a little time. She was reluctant to make a mess though as she had spent most of the morning cleaning up the house and making sure that her work looked its best. She had sent her husband out with the children as she did not really want them hanging around and getting in the way. Her husband John was a bit of a Philistine when it came to her work. He was of the old school that believed that a woman's place was in the home and he had tried to dissuade her and hamper her at every opportunity. Yes it was definitely a good idea that John would not be there. He would probably only come out with some derogatory comment. He had never had her artistic flair and she thought that deep down he must be jealous of her. He would never come out and actually say it but Davina knew him better than he did himself.

She looked at the watch again and it said 1.35. She was starting to think that maybe the watch had stopped working as it seemed to be going that slow. She took a sip of tea and wondered what sort of man her visitor would be. She had heard of him. John Timms was well known in the town for his shrewd business sense. Like her, he was a self made man and so he might appreciate her worth. He had made his fortune in the service industry and had a string of hairdressing saloons across the county. He was well known for his interest in the arts and could tell a Constable from a Rembrandt without fear of contradiction. The phone rang. Maybe he was phoning to cancel Davina thought to herself; something else must have come up. Maybe he had found another artist? It was no good she thought, she would have to pick the phone up to find out one way or the other. Nervously she picked it up and said, "Hello."

"Is that you darling?" a voice said on the other end. It was Davina's mother, "I'm phoning just to see how you got on. Mind you it was a fore gone conclusion really. He was bound to appreciate your work."

"He's not due till around 2 O' Clock," Davina said with a sigh of relief. She could not be upset though as it was her good word that had pointed John Timms in her direction. She had encouraged her in her artistic pursuit with the vigour that only a mother could muster, "Look can I call you back when he has gone. He should not be too long now. I think I'm getting a little nervous though," her mother always seemed to bring out the child in her.

"You have nothing to worry about; he'll love your work. He's got taste Mr. Timms has. Sorry I thought that he was coming around at noon that's why I rang up. I thought that you would have rung me by now."

"He phoned to postpone," Davina said feeling slightly guilty because she realised that her mother must have been waiting with the same kind of anticipation that Davina herself was, "He apologised and said that he had been called to an important meeting and there would be a delay. I'm sorry I

should have rang you but to tell you the truth I've been that busy cleaning the place up and getting rid of John and the children.”

“I understand. Is he any better?” Somehow she could never seem to remember his name.

“Just the same mum,” Davina said with a smile. She had long since given up as peace maker. Her mother had a very selective memory when it came to John but it cut both ways so she just kept out of it, “Look I'm going to have to hang up now. I'll call you as soon as he has gone.” Davina put the phone down and looked at her watch again, it read 1.45. Not long now she thought and had a strange tingling feeling inside her. It was her big day. Her first major break and she intended to sell herself the best she could. She had decided on a mildly Bohemian look as she had decided that it best suited her work and from what she had heard of Mr. Timms he would appreciate her insight and who knows it all goes to help. She thought of the changes in life that it could bring and thought that it may be a good time to make a few personal changes of her own. She reasoned that she could not really appreciate John if he could not appreciate her work. Maybe when the money started to come in he would have to come to terms with her talent and see her for what she was. She smiled with satisfaction and wondered what to offer Mr. Timms when he came in. She decided on a cup of coffee as it had a certain flair. She had thought of red wine as it had a certain Parisian walkway thing about it but had decided that he would be driving and so he would not want alcohol. She went for the ground coffee as its earthly quality would go with her work. She knew that Mr. Timms would see the connection and know that he was dealing with somebody who knew her stuff. Yes she certainly had put a lot of thought into it but she knew that if it paid off it would be well worth it. The watch read 1.55 now and she knew that her wait would soon be over. She was tempted to sit down and relax but her nerves kept her on her feet. It would not be long now anyway. She suddenly remembered that she had left the empty mug by the phone so she quickly took it to the kitchen and washing it up put it away. What would he have thought if he had seen that?

She had one last look around the downstairs and especially in the living room because she felt that her best work was in there. Everyone who had entered it commented on the artistic work that was in it and her heart lifted with each and every word of praise. Yes she thought to herself, her work in the living room would definitely swing it. The door bell rang and she knew it must be him. It was with a heaving heart that she opened the door. Standing in front of her was a large balding man in his early fifties dressed in the manner of a Victorian gentleman. He wore a three piece suit with a gold watch chain hanging out of his waistcoat. He took the watch out and said, “2 O' Clock on the dot. Mr's Davina Jackson I do believe.”

“Yes that's right,” Davina said in surprise. She had not expected him to be like that. He did not look like the type of artistic person that her work would appeal to, “I'm sorry, where are my manners. Please come in.”

“Thank you. Your mother thinks a lot of your work and as you know she is a woman of taste so I thought that I would take a gander and who knows we might do business.”

Maybe Davina had misjudged him. She wished that she had not took the Bohemian approach in her dress sense though as he looked quite a conservative sort of man.

“Would you like a cup of coffee before we start?” Davina said trying not to sound nervous but not hiding it well.

“There's no need to be nervous young lady for from what I've heard from your mother your work sells itself. She certainly sold it to me,” and laughed a little laugh that Davina thought false before he said, “I don't suppose that you would happen to have a port by any chance?”

Davina had to think about that as she was not really a drinker, that was more John's department. She remembered that there might be a bottle lying around left over from Christmas so she said, “Actually I think that I might just have one,” and invited him into the kitchen. She found it and poured him out one. She poured herself one, more out of good manners than anything else as she hated the stuff. She took a sip and shuddered to try and get it down. Mr. Timms did not notice as he took a large gulp out of his. He seemed to enjoy it immensely and quickly emptied his glass. Davina

offered him a refill which he quickly accepted and then got down the business in hand, the business of selling her work. She had rehearsed it for hours and had stood in front of the mirror practicing ever since she had heard of his interest. This had brought howls of laughter from John but it seemed to be paying off now as he was listening with a keen and genuine interest. She was that good she thought that if her art as a painter failed she might try the stage as an alternative. He seemed intent on her each and every word and she played him with the grace that any angler would be proud of. By the time she had finished her act he was well and truly hooked and that was even before he had seen her artistic work. It was with hopeful anticipation that he waited to be invited into the living room to see the art that Davina had so eagerly extolled. She saw that he was ready and so she said, "But instead of staying here talking about it why don't I introduce you to it. I think that the living room should show you what I'm talking about. Would you like to follow me?" He eagerly followed her and as he saw it she knew that she had won. He wanted his living room and two bedrooms to begin with.

2. Beyond Redemption

John Reddin sat in front of the television and watched the mid morning programs. He was not really paying attention only wasting time until the pub opened at twelve. Ever since he got laid off from work he had a lot of time on his hands and did not really know how to spend it. He had given up on getting another job because at the age of 63 he thought it a pointless endeavour. He was still fit and healthy and with a young outlook on life but most Employers could not get past his aging shell. There was nothing of any real interest on the box and he started to drift off and be alone with his thoughts. He had never been a religious man as such although as he was getting on in years he liked to think that he would be going on to somewhere else. He had pondered on the point to life but did not seem to be getting anywhere with it. He liked to think that maybe there was re-incarnation and next time round he might even come back wealthy and actually have a lifestyle that he enjoyed. He did not follow the Christian teachings of Heaven and Hell because all the minor faction fighting had distracted him from its original message. In fact he blamed most of the wars and unrest in the world squarely on the different brands of the Christian Church. He could not see why they were arguing over such minor points that had no real relevance to the actual Word of Christ. He could never come to terms with that and his dislike of the self righteous had turned into pure hatred over the years.

A knock on the door brought him back to the physical. "Who could that be?" He said as he got up. He did not get many visitors but he did not mind that as he could take or leave company. He walked to the door and opened it. In front of him stood a large balding man that John estimated to be in his late forties. He was smartly dressed and had an air of control about him that John thought made him a Company Director or similar.

"Hello," The man said, "My name is Anthony Davies and I've just moved in next door. I thought that I had better come around and introduce myself."

"Oh so they finally sold the place. I was wondering how long that would take."

"Sorry? Has it been on the market a long time?"

"About three years. Mind you with the recession and that it was hardly surprising."

"Er. Yes," Anthony said not really knowing what else to say, "Anyway what I'm really here for is to invite you to a house warming party, to get to know the neighbours and all that."

John was a little reluctant for he liked to keep his own company but said, "When is it?"

"Tomorrow night. It starts at eight so I'll see you there then?"

"Fair enough, is it bring a bottle?"

"No, just bring yourself and a partner."

The man walked off and John shook his head and wondered what he had got himself into. He was not a party animal as such and ever since his wife had walked out on him he seemed to want to keep out of large gatherings preferring a quiet drink in his small local.

He went back to his living room and saw that the clock had turned twelve. He put on his coat and quickly made his way out of the house and walked the short distance to his favourite watering hole. The pub was very quiet as it had only just opened so John got himself a drink and waited for his old workmate to arrive. They were both of similar age and had been laid off at the same time. He had known Charlie Parker for years and they always met at the same time every day to have a couple of pints and put the world to rights. Charlie was late and this was not like him so John sipped his beer and waited patiently for him. After another five minutes Charlie came walking through the door.

"Sorry I'm late but I got held up by that freak who just moved in next door to you."

"Freak, what do you mean freak?"

"Oh he's some sort of religious nutter. You know he tried to invite me to a house warming party. Would you believe it?"

"Hang on, hang on, is there something I should know about?"

Charlie laughed and said, "Oh you must not have heard about him. I thought that you would know what with living next door and that."

“Know, know what?”

“He runs some sort of cult thing. Don't you remember all that fuss when they heard he was moving in? There was a petition and all that. Sheila Jacobs organised it.”

“Sheila Jacobs, no wonder. She has not spoken to me in years. Not since that incident with the dog.”

“Oh do you mean when you ran it over. I couldn't blame her for that,” and laughed loudly

“Look it was an accident. It could have happened to anyone. So what's it all about then?”

“Oh he's some sort of fundamentalist. I think that's what they call themselves anyway. They don't drink or smoke and believe in the fire and brimstone. I think it's more of an ego trip really.”

“And he wanted to invite you to a party, that's why you are so late.”

“Yes it took me ages to get rid of him. These people never seem to take no for an answer. I had to come up with a real good excuse in the end. I mean I don't want some God botherer at my heels all the time. You know what they say once they get in with you, you can never get rid of them.”

“Oh,” John said silently and Charlie noticed it, “I didn't know. I could kill that woman for this.”

“You haven't have you?” Charlie said and laughed loudly, “You've been invited as well. Good luck to you John I think that you are going to need it,” and started singing 'Oh come all ye faithful'.

“Alright, alright knock it off. I just won't turn up that's all. It's no skin of my nose one way or the other.”

“You don't quite understand these people. If you don't slam the door in their faces they'll be back again and again. They follow the maxim that if you are not concerted then you are converted guess that you have a friend for life now John,” and laughed loudly again, “Maybe you'll get a job bringing in the collection. You'd like that I'm sure. In fact I could do you a favour, that music shop on the High Street is having a sale. I could pick you up a tambourine on the cheap if you want. I've heard that they are very cheap.”

“No thanks I'm getting more than enough rattle from you as it is. I just won't turn up that's all and when he comes around again I'll just slam the door in his face, simple as that.”

“Have it your own way,” Charlie said still laughing, “But I think you'll find that it's not as easy as that.” The subject changed and the afternoon passed fairly quickly. When the pub called for last orders John said his good bye to Charlie and left. He had his usual mid afternoon nap and woke up in the early evening to watch a little television. It seemed to him that his days were starting to take on a familiar pattern and he was getting bored with it. He was thinking that it might be a good idea to go down to the Job Centre in the vain hope of getting a job but that thought soon disappeared as he remembered the countless rejections that he had had already. He found it hard to sleep that night as his thoughts went back to his new next door neighbour. How had he let himself be fooled into it? He could have cheerfully strangled Sheila Jacobs as he remembered how much of a vindictive harridan she had been over his accident with her dog. That was 10 years ago and still she had not forgotten. She might have at least warned him though; after all he was the one closest and more likely to be involved. He eventually drifted off to sleep and woke up later than usual the following morning. He looked at the time and found it was 11.30. He decided not to go to the pub that day but instead go for a walk as it was a nice day. Charlie would be a little disappointed but that could not be helped. He would have probably thought that John had converted and took the pledge. John laughed as he thought about it. He decided that he would go to the party but quickly make his excuses and leave as soon as he could. The afternoon wore on fairly fast and as it was a bright day John enjoyed his walk. He got back at around six and sat down and watched a little television while he waited for the appointed hour. There was not a lot on again and if anything John was actually starting to look forward to getting out of the house. The clock ticked closer and when his time came he got up and went next door. He could hear no sign of life and this put a dampener on it more than a little. He knocked loudly and a middle aged brunette answered it. “Hello,” she said with a smile, “You live next door. I've seen you around; come in the party's not properly started yet.”

John said hello and followed her through to the living room. The woman had been right there were only four people there. He recognised Anthony but did not know the others.

“Would you like a mineral water?” The woman said in a friendly manner.

“Er no thanks, have you got anything a little stronger?”

“No,” the woman said, her tongue taking a more self righteous edge, “We don't drink alcohol because we believe that it is the root of all the evil that is in the world today.”

“Probably,” John said smiling, “But it certainly makes for a good party.”

“Anyway,” the woman said ignoring John's flippant comment, “Have you met the other guests?” She introduced him to a small contented middle aged couple called Gilbert and Harriet Spiby. They seemed pleasant enough but John soon got bored with their company.

The door never knocked again and John found himself in the company of four fundamentalists whose conversation quickly turned to religion. John actually found himself agreeing with quite a lot of what they were saying but he did not agree with their self inflicted abstention from the pleasures of the flesh. He listened patiently as they picked apart the Bible to try and justify their point of view but as he looked at his watch he remembered that there was a good film on the television.

“Look,” he said as he got up to leave, “I'm afraid that I must get off now. I'm afraid that I don't believe in your methods although the dogma sounds good. You see I'm one of those strange people who believe that you can't get more fundamental than fun.”

He left the room to a quiet audience.

3. Seriously Funny

John Gardner held his abdomen in a feeble attempt to enclose the pain. His whole body shook and vibrated with the impact of the cough. His stomach seemed to want to escape from his body to avoid all the pain. His lungs shook and burned all around them. He leaned over the bed in a vain attempt to cough up what seemed so desperate to leave him. He held firmly to the side of the bed as if for strength and heaved like there was no tomorrow but nothing would come out. His eyes watered liberally as his head shook with great fervour. The irritation subsided for a while and John took a little time out to try and get his breath. His stomach rose and fell at speed still but now most of the pain had gone. He gasped and gasped for air as if he had just escaped from being strangled for in a sense he had done. The breath grew deeper and he calmed down to almost normal almost because he was never sure when the cough would come back to haunt him and this made him slightly on edge. He cursed the bane of his life, the object that had got him into this mess. It had half killed his health and now was closing in for the rest. When the doctor had told him he had lung cancer he just seemed to lose his mind. He had heard that there was a chance that it might be cured but he was too full of self pity to see past his plight. All he saw was that he was going to die and this unnerved him more than slightly. He could not come to terms with this and needed a little time away. He spurned any treatment as he could not see the point. He took to the roads in one last attempt to live a fulfilling life. He was always haunted by his own death and would constantly dream about it in his more panicking moments. His health deteriorated rapidly. It might have been accelerated by his new surroundings as the roads could sometimes be cold and unforgiving or him losing the will to live who knows but the cancer found it easier to spread. The first winter was the hardest. His money had long run down and he had found himself stuck in a small squat in the heart of a friendless city. He saw no one for days and his windows used to ice up with a regularity that defied logic. He took to thoughts of the here-after because he reasoned that that would be the next step in life. He hoped that there was one because as he got closer towards his God he just wanted to make sure that there was a God to go to. His mind was tormented by doubts, his head told him that when he was dead he was dead but he always had that doubt. A straw to clutch at people would say but to him it was his only hope and some times in the heat of the pain even that was diminished. And what pain he had suffered, in his most delirious moments he had seen the devil or at least sensed him as he was never quite sure when his madness finally did pass. He thought of taking his own life but he could never get the courage to take such a final step. He was still a coward at heart. Perhaps that was why he had just panicked and went out on the road in the first place, only he could know. Though whether he knew now after all that torment had twisted his mind would be a very debatable point. Besides he had read somewhere that if you took your own life you would never get to Heaven and that had a very poignant meaning to John at that precise moment. His weight dropped quite dramatically as his cholesterol fought tooth and nail with the outside cold to try and come to some happy medium on the heating arrangements. He hardly ate only soup and bread and lived a very insular type of life. It was just like he wanted to be alone with his pain. The first winter saw the first trace of the infliction that had become such a major part of his life.

It was late December when it made its debut to a snow filled ground that had appeared outside John's little piece of life. He woke early as the cold had worked its magic to a cough that he had never had before. It was a deep bronchial cough that shook him to the core. On and on it went and John thought that it would never end. He held himself tightly but it did nothing to suppress the anguish. His eyes were blinded by the tears that escaped from them and he felt his whole body shake like a skeleton on a cold dark night. He needed a cup of water when the cough finally subsided and so struggled to get to the mess that was once his kitchen. He held his chest to try and aid the relief of the pain and poured a long glass from the cold tap on the sink. He quickly swallowed and almost choked as the coldness hit the burn of his inside and had to gasp for breath. He never forgot the first time although it had been repeated many times afterwards. For to him the first time was the start. The start of his decline into whatever he was not sure but hoped it would be

something. Now he knew that the cancer was on the attack. It seemed to grow inside him at a rapid pace as if it went hell for leather knowing of his frailty. By the end of the first winter he coughed every day and not just in the morning. Sometimes it could last for twenty minutes at a stretch but to him it always seemed a lot longer. His mind seemed to tell him that he spent all his time coughing and that surely it must be close. His fear then always took over and sometimes he would just sit up and wail, "I don't want to die," but only to himself as there was no one else to listen. He could have gone back to his family who would have gladly helped him make the last few precious moments of his life happy. He could only think in moments though as he sometimes expected to die at any time and he could make no plans for any sort of future. He had shunned his family in his own self pity and would never grace that old life of his again. He saw the happiness and his heart could not accept losing all of that so he had decided to make his little time on Earth as close to Hell as he could possibly get. Maybe he thought that if he had Hell on Earth then anything in death would be heaven. His mind had long since lost the rational that would have invalidated that. No doubt he would have been committed in a more normal set of circumstances but he was out on his own and lived aloof from any help or hindrance.

The warming spring eased it slightly but it was still there to haunt him, it was just that it was not on so many occasions. He still had no yearning for life as he could not climb out of the quandary that had been caused by his self pity. He had seen more striking images now and as the disease worked its way around him the horrors were just starting. He saw past friends, long since dead who called to him and told him that they would take care of him. He saw scenes of fire and brimstone that put fear in a new wage bracket to him. In his most delirious moments he saw his mother calling him and telling him to go home but still he would not listen. He was too weak by then anyway, well too weak. The hot summer followed and with it brought him the heat. He felt nothing though only the cold that always seemed to be around him. He shivered violently as if he was being cut to ribbons whilst people on the streets below sweated profusely and topped up their tans. He saw little of the summer only the occasional trip to the shop for some cheap and nasty ingredients that could not by any stretch of the imagination be food. He had the occasional tot of rum but that was rare enough to be called a novelty. He had shunned help but little was offered because he was so reclusive not many people knew he was actually there. Some people had tried to get close but he sent them away by feigning madness and just being obnoxious. As autumn took its turn the cough came back with a harder feel to it. It was like every time it happened now it took a piece of his lung with it. His stomach felt like glass and would churn into itself with each and every convulsion of John's body. He found himself confined to his bed more and more and the cold cut deeper and deeper into his fast diminishing body. He had sensed his own death and knew it would not be that long in happening. He had not expected to see the autumn out but against all the odds he survived. The winter hit hard and John was virtually confined to bed. Still no help was offered although this time it would have been gladly taken. It was like everyone had forgotten about him. He heard life all around him. People climbing stairs and chatting loudly about the coldness of the day and how their Gas Bills would be on the roof but he was not a part of it. It was just him against his death. The cancer spread again and saw him coughing up blood and phlegm but still the coughing fits did not subside. He was close now, he must be he reasoned to himself. Would he last out to Christmas and did it matter anyway as he knew that his death would only be a matter of time. He was still having trouble coming to terms with it which was unusual really as it was so close. He coughed and coughed violently getting the last bit of air to extol and half choked and gasped for air to fill the empty void. He held on with white knuckles to the bed post and tried to breath but it was getting harder and harder with every attempt. It was as if the coughing had taken over and would not release him. He wretched his stomach as if to throw out his lungs but they did not want to come. His whole body seemed to want to be drawn out of itself to escape the fate that even he could not ignore. His body stank of sweat and that thick musty smell that comes straight from the bronchial tubes. It had a strange almost acidic taste that would burn through paint and still have the strength to

scorch your inside. He had noticed it more and more frequently and to him it was the final sign. He called for help but his voice was too dry and anyway he had scared off any chance with his outrageous displays of anti-socialness that had done their trick at the time but now how he regretted them. He longed to go home and finish his time out with his loving family but he knew that that was not to be. He lay back still shaking and through his semi blind vision scraped around the floor beside him. It seemed like an eternity before he had found it and he was even starting to panic. He picked it up and lit it and let the soothing flow of hot air cool his very being. Well after all I suppose it is good for your nerves.

4. An Altered Image

Davina Davidson looked around the back street occult shop in the semi derelict part of the city centre. She was not looking for anything in particular it was more of a day out than anything else. Her knowledge was rather limited as she had only just started to get into it. She had seen a lot about it on television but it was through mainly horror films although she did like the idea of the power that it seemed to dispel. Her eyes lit upon an old silver Chalice that was gathering dust by a pile of old books. "How much?" she said to the old man who was just leaning against the counter reading a book and leaving her to it. He looked up and saw her holding the chalice. "Twenty pounds luv," he said, "It's got a lot of history that has."

Davina resented being called love but said nothing about it. Instead she said, "Would you take 15 for it? It looks like you are having a job getting rid of it."

The man thought awhile before he said, "Alright but I had better tell you the history of it first because it might put you off and it is my duty to warn you about it as then there will be no comebacks on it."

Davina just thought that it would be a business ploy to enhance its appeal and the appeal of the shop but humoured him anyway. "Well if you must," she said with an air of indifference that was supposed to put the man in his place and show him that she was not some brainless bimbo.

"It belonged to an old church," the man went on unperturbed, "But they say that it has been cursed because it had been desecrated."

"Desecrated," Davina said pretending to be interested, "In what way?"

"It fell into the wrong hands and it was used for evil and not its original purpose of good. A Satanic Society had sprung up in the area and its members used to use the church in the dead of night to pursue their vile ends."

"Really," Davina said still not interested, "And what happened?"

"They were burned as witches by the local population."

"This must be very old then," Davina said thinking aloud, "I mean they haven't burned witches in hundreds of years."

"Not that long ago," The man said with an evil grin, "For my father used to tell me about it. It happened in his lifetime."

"Hang on a minute are you trying to spin me a line? They have not burned witches in hundreds of years."

"It was not done with authority but by a vigilante group at the turn of the century. They were never caught and the Chalice has remained here virtually ever since. You see some people think that it is cursed."

"Are you after more money for it because as far as I'm concerned the price has been struck and the deal has been dealt? No fake story of witchcraft is going to enhance its price."

"No," The man said putting his hand up, "As far as I'm concerned it's done I just felt it my duty to warn you. To tell you the truth I'm glad to get rid of it as it gives me the creeps."

"Well that's alright then. No need to wrap it up I'll take it as it is."

"Good luck," The man said as Davina departed. As she left the shop she thought that if she would have been a man he would not have said that.

She walked the short distance to her Sport's Car and got in. She hated parking it there as more often than not it had been damaged on her return. She was lucky today though as it had not been touched. She drove home and watched the dirty old terraced houses turn into a leafy suburb and knew that she was nearly there. The traffic was sparse and so her progress was fairly rapid. As she parked her car in the drive she got out and taking out her door key opened the front door. She looked on the floor to see if there was any post but was disappointed. She went into the living room, poured herself a drink and studied the Chalice. It was ornately decorated in the Celtic fashion and she felt that she had got herself a bargain and laughed at the old man's stupidity. He must have thought her foolish she thought but he was the fool as she had only paid £15 for it and it was worth quite a lot

more. She had decided that she would go and get it priced up the next day as she felt that its value must lie in the hundreds of maybe even thousands. She meant to keep it though as it would make a great conversation piece on her mantel piece. Her thoughts were disturbed by the voice of a stranger, "Now that you have me what are you going to do with me?" She looked up in shock to see a large well built man with a huge unkempt beard looking down at her. Her first reaction was one of fear but she said, "What are you doing in my house? How did you get in anyway?"

"You brought me in so don't waste my time with foolish questions. Now I will say it again. What are you going to do with me?"

"Get out, get out now or I'll call the Police." The man sensed her fear, not that it was hard and so he said, "I mean you no harm. In fact I mean you only good. Think of me as a Genie if it will help you to get over your fear of me. Maybe I might even grant you three wishes."

His humour was lost on Davina as she was still on her mild panic stage. "Look," she said eventually, "What's this all about? Are you some sort of burglar or something?"

The man laughed and said, "Do I look like a thief in the night. I'll have you know that when I lived I was held with honour and awe by all who knew me."

"When you lived," Davina said slowly as it was starting to sink in, "Do you mean to tell me that you are dead. I think I must be going mad."

"Well alright," the man said laughing, "Maybe you are but I will tell you one thing I'm more of a conversation piece than that Chalice you hold so dear to."

"No, no this is not happening to me. I'm dreaming, I must be dreaming. Look, tell me what the hell is going on?"

"I am the spirit of that Chalice that you hold in your hands," the man said getting serious, "My life was sacrificed to protect it and all who use it for its proper purpose."

"Well," Davina said remembering the story, "You did not do very well with the last lot did you. Weren't they burned for witchcraft?"

"As I said for its proper purpose I am not here to protect people who use it for their personal gain nor am I here to protect people who use it for the benefit of their esteem. That is not its purpose."

"So what exactly is its purpose?"

"Ah," The man said with a broad toothless grin, "Now that would be telling."

"What, are you playing games with me? Just tell me what it was meant for, what's the matter with you?"

"I'm afraid that I can't that must be your quest. When you have found out then I could be of great use to you."

Davina thought awhile and said, "I know, it's something to do with the Church isn't it?"

"That Chalice's essence pre dates Christianity by a long time, you are right in thinking that it is in the spiritual sense though. Its form has changed but that is all I can really tell you. In fact I may have told you too much already."

"So you must know all about it. Why not just tell me and save us both a lot of trouble?"

"Patience," the man said in a serious tone, "That knowledge cost me my life do you really think I will let it go so easily and cheaply?"

"You mentioned its essence," Davina said after a while, "Are you talking about the metal it was made from?"

"No that would be like saying your body was your essence wouldn't it."

"Are you trying to say that it has a Soul or something," Davina said getting even more confused,

"Wake me up I'm not hearing this."

"Not a Soul but a Spirit, a parallel existence perhaps?" and laughed loudly much to Davina's discomfort.

"But you are that spirit, at least that's what you told me anyway."

"That's right you're getting there. So when you find out my purpose then you will find out the

Chalice's it's as easy as that.”

“It doesn't sound that simple from where I'm standing,” and thought a while, “Surely its purpose is to drink from it? Your job must be to protect people from drinking from it.”

“Nearly, you are right about its purpose but you have not quite got mine. You are that close I may as well tell you though. My purpose is to protect you from being poisoned.”

“What.” Davina said with a look of disgust, “Are you trying to tell me that that is it? How did that cost you your life?”

“I was poisoned by drinking from it for I was after its essence just like you are.”

“Me, after its essence?”

“Well you want to know what it's all about don't you. You would not have bought it otherwise even though it was going very cheaply,” and chuckled at the last statement.

Davina was shocked and confused, she did not understand what he was on about. The man saw her predicament and so went on to elaborate. “Knowledge, that's what it's all about. The more you know the more you are it's as simple as that. You might not be burned as a witch nowadays but it is still a dangerous road to take. I was poisoned and cursed by the druids who thought that I was after their power. My punishment was to warn others not to follow that path.”

“The path?”

“Of hidden knowledge you want to get into the occult don't you?”

“You want power,” The man said as Davina remained silent, “Just as I did. Sure I tasted the never empty Chalice but look at me now.”

Davina was totally confused, she did not know what to think or say. “Well.” the man said, “Now that you know about me how can I help you?”

Davina looked at him in total confusion. He stood there and waited. She did not know what to say or do. She just looked at him and said, “Could you run that by me again?”

5. Bob's Full Grouse

The shafts of golden light shone through the doorway of Bob's bedroom awakening him from his gentle slumber. He stretched and took in its warmth. He liked the heat because it seemed to ignite the life in him. He looked around for something to eat as hunger had left its mark. He found nothing but knew the Anne would be along shortly and so was not unduly stressed. He liked Anne and looked forward to her daily visits. She was always talkative and had a happy smile that seemed to rub off on him. Sometimes he would just sit around and wait for her if he had nothing better to do. Other times he would just look out the window to make sure that his world was good.

Today though he decided to give the place a clean, if the truth be known he was a little lazy and would often just leave the job to Anne. In fact he used to put on her a lot but she did not seem to mind. Well she never told him that she did anyway. He moved bits around but after a few moments got bored and went back to the window. Spring had started to take its toll now and new life sprang up everywhere. He longed to get out and stretch his legs but he was getting on in life now so he just sat back on reflected on how his life had once been. He remembered the vigours of his youth and how he used to walk around with a permanent bounce in his step. He was a bit of a ladies' man in those days and was never short of female companionship. Spring had definitely been his season and it brought a tinge of sadness to him as he remembered how things had once been. He saw the neighbours cat walk across his garden and he stamped his foot but the cat never seemed to hear.

A butterfly fluttered gently around a group of flowers and Bob marveled at its grace. How he would have liked to be one so he could float around and see the world for what it really was. He seemed to be leading a very reclusive life now and if Anne had never took the time to see him then he would be on his own. He did not mind being alone though. He never thought of himself as being lonely as he was just happy enough to sit around and watch life go on all around him. He saw a bee hovering around collecting nectar and marveled at its industrious nature. He had never been one for work and had spent most of his time trying to avoid it. He admired the bee though but thought to himself each to his own and never took its example. A chirping bird distracted his gaze and he turned around to see a robin sitting on a fence and keeping a watchful eye on his neighbour's cat. He liked the birds for they always seemed to have a song in their hearts. They never seemed to hunger and spent most of their time just playing around. He longed to be like them but he never went out anymore. The cat tried to sneak up on the robin who was feigning ignorance of its presence. Bob tried to warn him but he could not be heard. He stamped his foot in anger and frustration but he was worrying over nothing. Just as the cat was about to pounce the robin flew off in a mocking nature leaving the cat diving into mid air. Bob could not understand why the cat did what it did. It never ate the things that it caught. It only used to play around with them before it killed them. He had heard that they only did it out of instinct but he thought that there was more to it than that. He had noticed that they were fairly rational creatures. They even seemed to know the time they would be fed. No Bob thought they did it out of spite and spite alone. As you might have gathered he did not like cats. Bob had always been a vegetarian and had shunned meat at every opportunity.

He did not dislike dogs though which was surprising really because he was quite nervous of them. He trusted them more than cats. His thoughts went back to when he was chased by a dog. He was only young then and he had run away as fast as he could. He had only escaped by the skin of his teeth and he smiled to himself remembering his escapade. Yes he had certainly led a very interesting life. Anne was always in too much of a hurry for real conversation but she could not understand him anyway. She was too young to understand the workings of an old ones mind. He was grateful that she had taken the time out to look after him though and he liked to have her around sometimes for her company. In his way he had come to depend on her even though she was barely a child. Her parents did not seem to mind the amount of time she was spending with him. Well they had not been around to complain about it anyway. He wished she would hurry up now though as he was getting even hungrier. He knew she would not be long now as she always came to

see him before she left for school. He looked around his garden again to see what was happening and to take his mind of the hunger. The cat had disappeared completely but Bob guessed it was only hiding somewhere.

The robin was high up in the tree well out of harm's way and singing the joys of spring. He had been joined by a chorus of other birds. He was usually up for the dawn chorus but today he had overslept. Maybe it was his age catching up with him or the cat fight keeping him awake half the night he was not sure. One thing he was sure of though and that was if Anne did not hurry she would be late for school. She liked school and would always come and tell him what she did that day when she came to see him afterwards. He would listen with interest and remember what it was like when he was younger. He had never been to school as he had always been on the move but he used to play about a lot. He could recognise the child in himself as he listened to Anne's tales of adventure. She had a vivid imagination and he remembered that he used to have one himself. A barking dog brought him back to the present. It was the neighbour's dog and it meant that the Postman was about. Bob had never received a letter in his life but as he did not read he did not see it as a problem. His learning in life came from nature and his instinct to survive and that was all that seemed to interest him. Some people would say that he had had a hard life but Bob never saw it as that. He saw it as a challenge and his very survival was an enhancement to him. It gave him a deep enjoyment of the little things that most of us would take for granted. He appreciated the song of the bird and the hum of the bee. He saw nature at its cruelest but he also saw it at its kindest. The fragrant aromas of the flora always lifted his spirits. The warming sun captured his senses and lifted his very essence. He loved life for what it was and not for what he could make from it. He did not take much out of life only enough to live on and he was happy just to be alive.

A hedgehog slowly made its way across Bob's lawn. He had seen it before on many occasions but not for a long time. The cat appeared and ran towards it but the hedgehog just rolled into a ball. The cat played around with it for a while but soon got bored and left it to go on its merry way. Bob liked the solitary life that the hedgehog lived and would have got on very well with it but he was trapped by the cage of life. He saw life go on all around him but he felt somewhat aloof from it all. It was like he was just a couch potato and the garden was his television. He longed for the time that he could be out and about enjoying life for all its worth. Now that winter was over though the warmer weather would be coming and so it would be less of an ordeal on his ancient bones. Yes he definitely liked spring for as life grew all around him it seemed to also grow inside him. He knew that he could never be what he once was but that did not stop him being what he was now. Sure he could not jump about and gambol like a child in the lush green grass but he could still take in the smells and the gentle warmth of the glowing sun and let them ignite the child inside him. One day soon he might even be out in the garden and see the hedgehog on its territorial travels. He did not mind it coming on his lawn as he knew that nature must always go on. The cat was a different animal though. He had stepped out of the balance of things. It killed for sport alone and had tried to make itself a god amongst the other animals. He would not let the cat on his lawn when he finally did manage to get out. He ought to tell Anne to chase it off but she would only see him as cruel. She liked the cat with its false purr and was easily taken in by its winning ways. Bob was different though, he saw it for the merciless killer that it was but how could you tell a child that? They could not come to terms with its true cruelty; the cat was much too clever for that.

The robin had flown off now and the garden was fairly empty. The hedgehog had long since gone and the cat seemed to have gone with it. Maybe it had gone to try and torment the hedgehog again but as it was out of Bob's range of vision he was not too interested. Yes Bob could be quite selfish at times but on the whole he had a good heart. He heard the back door open and knew that it must be Anne coming to say hello. She was very late today but then Bob remembered it was Saturday and she was not at school that day. He had seemed to lose all track of time lately. That was probably his age he reasoned. He looked with eager anticipation and saw that she had brought him some food with her. Yes she was definitely good to him and he would never forget her. He did not really know

why she had taken such a shine to him but he was glad that she did. He found that as he was getting older he was actually starting to rely on her and just having her around made him feel a lucky rabbit.

6. A Dog's for Life

The deadly silence seemed to rip into Brigid's heart and leave her cold inside. She was waiting for that noise again but it did not come back. She had noticed it two days ago and it had preyed on her mind ever since. It was a cross between a scratch and a shuffle and it appeared to happen at exactly the same time every night. On the first night that it happened she searched the house with a fine toothed comb but to no avail. She felt vulnerable, living on her own miles from anywhere and the noise only made it worse. She had shaken like a leaf as she opened every door in the house. She had a kitchen knife with her but she did not think that she could bring herself to use it no matter the circumstances. She had kept turning around thinking that someone was behind her but there never was. She cursed herself for her paranoia but kept turning just the same.

On the second night she did the same but did not find anything that night either. She knew that she was going to have to get up and check it again if only for her peace of mind. She got out of her bed and made her way downstairs once again. She looked in the kitchen first and saw that it was empty. She checked all the doors and windows downstairs and made sure that they were locked before she made her way back upstairs again. As she went into her bedroom she froze. She saw the figure of a large man standing with his back to her. How did he get in she wondered as all the doors and windows were locked. He looked a bit strange from the back. His clothes were not the ones of a burglar. They seemed to be of a different lifetime but Brigid did not know which. The figure turned around and saw her, "What are you doing in my house?" he bellowed much to her surprise and shock. She could not bring herself to speak she was shaking that much. "Well" he said again, "I asked you a question," and came menacingly towards her. He was a large well built man with long straggly hair and a matted beard. His face was heavily scarred and it looked like he had seen a few battles in his time. Brigid wanted to run but her feet could not move.

The man was almost upon her before she summoned up enough courage to speak. "This is my house," she said, "What are you doing here? I'll call the Police; they will be here in next to no time."

"What do you mean it's your house, and who are the Police anyway, who do they fight for?"

"I bought it last year," She said debating on what exactly the man was. Was he some sort of madman escaped from an asylum somewhere? Why was he in her house anyway and why should he think that it was his? The man looked at her in a funny manner and said, "What do you mean you bought it, from whom because it was not theirs to sell. This is my house. It was given to me by King Jamie himself for services rendered and I will spend the rest of my days here."

"King Jamie," Brigid said more than slightly confused, "James the First, but he died hundreds of years ago," she went cold as the realisation hit her, "You're dead. You're a ghost."

"What do you mean dead," the man bellowed angrily, "Do I look dead to you? I may be a ghost but I am not dead. I don't like that word. We say no longer in the physical." He thought for a while before he said, "So if you did not think that I was a ghost what exactly did you think I was?"

"Er a madman," She said sheepishly, "Well a burglar at first."

"A madman," the figure said and started to laugh heartily, "Well I've been called that before many times but I'm no thief of the night." He looked at her strangely and said, "Do you know if you had your hair a different style and colour you would look a lot like Mary."

"Mary who is that, you wife or something?"

"She was my wife and companion," he answered with a note of sadness in his voice.

"Where is she now then? I mean she must be no longer in the physical too."

"She's moved onto another place I suppose but I've earned this place and so I'll never leave it."

"You mean you really plan to stay here for good but where does that leave me?"

"Oh you can stay as long as you don't disturb me. I like a quiet life."

Brigid was a little uncomfortable about sharing her house with a ghost. 'Mind you' she thought 'he might be good company. Underneath that rough exterior he doesn't seem that bad. I bet he could tell some stories as well. It will be a good history lesson if nothing else.'

“So,” Brigid said, “Were you responsible for that noise earlier? I thought that you like a quiet life.”

“What noise?” he said with a bewildered expression, “I haven't heard anything.”

“It was a sort of scratching, it came from upstairs. I definitely know that but I don't know from where.”

He thought awhile before saying, “No, I'm none the wiser.”

“So if it wasn't you,” Brigid said aloud, pondering to herself, “Then I wonder who it could be.” She looked at the man and said, “Do you think that maybe there is another ghost haunting this place?”

“There had better not be,” He said angrily, “And besides what do you mean haunting. I won't disturb you if you don't disturb me. You want to count yourself lucky that I let you stay here.”

“Oh sorry,” she said on seeing his temper rise, “I didn't mean any offence.”

The man calmed down slightly and said, “I guess we'll just have to wait until you hear it again.”

“Well that won't be tonight. It only happens once a night at around 12.30.”

“Ah well,” he said slightly disappointed, “Never mind. So tell me Mary how do you like my house?”

“My name is Brigid. I'm not sure about the house I feel uncomfortable sometimes.”

“Uncomfortable? I didn't mean to frighten you. You caught me off guard that's all.”

“Oh no, not from you I live on my own miles from anywhere. I feel vulnerable sometimes.”

The man laughed and said, “Whilst Liam Mac Gonagle's about you have no fear of any man.”

Brigid thought about it and could see the irony in it. She was being protected by a ghost whom she should have more fear of. She quite liked the idea though and it did make her feel a lot safer it was just the noise that preyed on her mind.

“You don't know how safe that makes me feel. Once that noise is sorted I'll sleep well at night. Tell me about yourself I mean it's not often you get to talk to a ghost.”

Liam told her about his upbringing, his family, the constant wars and Brigid sat there listening enthralled at what she was hearing. He could definitely tell a story. The hours soon passed and before they knew it the dawn chorus had erupted. Liam made his excuses and left and Brigid went to work very tired that day. She dared not tell anyone about the ghost though as she knew that they would think that she had lost all reason.

Her day dragged slowly and she was even looking forward to seeing him again. He was a very interesting man of that she had no doubt. She could listen to him for hours. Most of the conversations she had that day were mundane by comparison just the general chit chat that was heard in most shops. She loved to hear of his adventures, his constant battles seemed to take up most of her thoughts and she would go into daydreams much to her customer's surprise. She was usually a level headed woman who kept her mind firmly on her job.

Eventually the day finished and she drove the long distance back to her house. She got back, made herself something to eat and waited eagerly for nightfall to appear. Time dragged slowly but it turned to dusk in the end. She looked for Liam but could not find him. She called his name but there was no answer. She looked in her bedroom, the first place she had seen him but he was not there. Time marched on and it was soon midnight. She was about to give up hope when she heard his voice. “Is that you Mary? Have you come to disturb my peace?”

She turned to see him standing there in battle dress brandishing a broad sword. He looked at her and said, “Let no man say that Liam MacGonagle never went into battle unprepared.”

She thought that he might be a little over the top but she never told him that. Instead she said, “Very fetching. A lot of women like a man in a uniform you know.”

“Oh I do that Mary,” He said with a smile, “I certainly do know that.”

For some reason Brigid did not mind being called Mary, in fact it was her second name so she got used to it quite quickly. She was getting quite taken with Liam especially seeing standing in all his regalia. She looked at her watch and saw that it was 12.15. “Not long now,” she said, “Only a quarter of an hour and you will hear it for yourself.”

Liam brandishing his sword in mock bravado said, “And then the other man will hear it. It's been a

long time since I've split another man's head and I'm looking forward to it.”

“Would you be able to do that to another ghost,” she said looking at him in a funny manner, “I mean he will already be de....I mean no longer in the physical.”

“I should think he would die of fright,” Liam said laughing, “It's just a scare tactic that's all.”

“Oh,” she said not realising he had such a sense of humour, “I didn't realise you were only joking.”

“I have my moments. Well known for my humour at one time. Many a man laughed his head off when he saw my sword,” and started laughing heartedly.

Brigid checked the watch again. Two minutes left she noticed. It was with a mixture of fear and excitement that saw her standing and waiting for the scratching to occur.

The seconds ticked away slowly and her heart pounded quickly. She looked at Liam but all she saw in his eyes was the look of anticipation. He was in his element now. He felt that he was doing something he was good at and Brigid saw that he liked it.

Then it came. It was the same sound as before and Liam's ears pricked up. His face changed from an aggressive manner into a smile. He looked at Brigid and said, “Tell me Mary, do you like dogs?” Brigid looked at Liam and shrugged her shoulders. Liam smiled and said, “You'll like this one.” He whistled and said, “Here boy, come on Taig.”

With that a huge Irish wolfhound bounded out from behind the wall that the noise had come from.

“There's a good boy,” Liam said patting it.

7. Love's Young Dream

Andy Love looked at the blank piece of paper and wondered what to put on it. How could he even dream about putting down all that he wanted to say? How his life had changed beyond all comprehension since he had met and fell in love with Jennifer. He knew that he did not have to write the note but something inside him had other ideas. He felt that he should bare his Soul and tell her how much of an effect she had had on his life. How he awoke every morning with a light heart and a spring in his step that told him that everything was alright and if it was not, well it did not matter anyway. About how the quality of his life revolved around her smile and without that smile his life was not complete. He had taken the 'I' out of living and replaced it with 'O' because nothing is everything when you are in love. He put the pen on the desk beside the paper and thought a while longer as he did not want to miss a thing, their first meeting on that bright sun-lit summer morning when her beauty had first encapsulated him. Her long slender brown hair stuck firmly in his mind as the gentle summer breeze flicked it about with an air of indifference. How could he put that all into words without using the word love because it seemed to cover everything? He remembered back to how life had been without her. Day to day living was mundane and without any real purpose. He was just drifting along and without a soul mate he was only half of himself. It was like he had no shadow, where ever he went he felt alone for he had no one to share his heart with. His self centred lifestyle had gladly fallen to a self less nature that gave him a more satisfying existence to say the least. He picked up the pen again and he rationalised that he would have to start with the word 'I'. He wrote it down and sat back to ponder a little more. He had not decided what he actually wanted to say. How could anyone write down what there was between them for how can you put such emotions into words? How could he even rationalise an emotion for a start? How could such intense electrical impulses like feelings be put down on an ordinary piece of paper when after all they can only be carved in the heart? How it felt like he had an inner body that lifted and shivered every time that he saw her. She radiated something inside him, a warming glow that lit up all his senses and told him that the world was good. All his doubts had been sated. His pride had turned to humility for humility is the luxury of the gods and that was how he felt at that moment. How his avarice had been quelled by the gold in her heart. About how he could not look at another again for his heart was always with her and everything else just faded in comparison. About how his mood was always one of joy for he had no place for anger in his heart. She had taken it from him and replaced it with her love. He rarely ate for his stomach always seemed too light. His only hunger was for her and how when they were not together he felt starved of such affection. He had once envied others of their self but now he only wished them well for how can you hold envy in your heart when Jennifer's love was a possession he held with such high esteem. His life had taken an upsurge and with it came such drive. He felt that he could do anything and to have such a belief made him feel immortal. His every waking moment was spent in a different reality than before. He was in a Fairy Tale living out the ending for and they all lived happily ever after was a self fulfilling dream to him. What could he put down that encapsulated such supernatural phenomena as that? It was well out of his limited vocabulary. He knew what he felt because that was always with him but to translate such understanding into such wisdom was beyond his intellectual mind. He was dealing with something he could not see although it held him captive to his happiness. It was the strongest emotion that he had ever felt and it took the 'ish' out of selfish for there was no doubt about the benefit it had brought to his life. He had found that oneness that most people only ever hope to achieve. The intensity of that emotion had picked him up and lifted him into the highest plane of existence. He was in the highest heavens, a state of mind that no possessions other than his partner's heart could take him to. He struggled again trying to think of what word he could put down that could start to get even close to such a colossal emotion. He could only think of love but he seemed reluctant to use it. Its meaning had been demeaned a lot in his mind with its constant use for some subjects so mundane. It was the deepest love that he had ever known. It seemed to him that he was the luckiest man on Earth as no one else was feeling as good as he was. How could they for they did not have

Jennifer's love. To him she was the gold at the end of the rainbow, the Golden Fleece of his searching. Surely no one else could feel as good as that? He had never told her that he loved her before and was reluctant to for some reason. That had been the only doubt in his pot. He guessed that she loved him but he could not be sure. The way she smiled at him lifted his spirits and told him that she cared but she had never told him that she did. The way her eyes seemed to connect with his in a moment of bonding that told him they would always be with each other. They could be on opposite sides of the room but he always seemed to sense where she was. He seemed to know her mind and at times know what she was thinking but still she had never told him. The little child inside him wanted her to say it first and it did not want to commit itself until it had that reassurance. It was his head and it held the last doubt in his mind. It was only of its making as his heart knew the answer for is not love blindingly obvious? He remembered how they looked at each other in the twilight of the evening. Her head tilted up and eyes hung low in adoration. His inner child was satisfied, how could she not love him it was written all over her face. Maybe it was blindingly obvious. He smiled and put the second word down. He had passed the first hurdle and that was admitting his feelings for her with that word that was so strong it smothered everything. But what could he say about her? Her beauty would never be justified by mere pen and paper. He could hold her with comparisons like the great poets of old but how could he when there was no comparison in grace to the features of Jennifer's angelic face. For beauty such as hers could only be found on such spiritual spheres. She was out on her own with nothing else close to her radiance for she seemed to have an aura to Andy. It was like she was covered in gold. Midas' daughter but with a spark of life that was so precious it could never even be hoped to be bottled. She could play his heart strings with her eyes and hold him in such captivation that surely he must be in Heaven. They say that Heaven is the place that you most want to be and it that was the case he had hit the bull's eye. He could never hope to put such elegance into words for it was impossible to imagine. He looked down at the floor and cursed his inadequacy. She meant more to him than anything and yet he could not even hope to come to terms on paper with such finesse. No one before could have got down to such depth and yet he had taken it upon himself to try. What foolishness had come over him to think that he could even scratch the surface of what he was feeling about Jennifer and that was only her shell? How could he narrate the quality of her Soul, the pureness of her being? He could not rationalise a Soul so what chance had he of capturing the purity of her essence and transcribing it onto paper. He was a fool to even consider it. He looked down at the two words and said aloud, "I love," he said it again but this time he was going to chance his arm. Should he talk about her radiant smile that held his love with such return? Should he talk about her warm comforting smile that told him that she would always be there for him? It lit up his life more than he felt he deserved. Should he talk about her playful smile that sent all her senses tingling? He could write a book about her smile but still never get it all down. And yet her smile had nothing on the depth of her eyes. Those eyes held love and they could never get deeper than that for love is all our essence. The once great Library of Alexandria could not contain such wisdom as the wisdom that radiated from those eyes. Yet the humility that encased them would put a Saint to shame. What could he put that would capture such a vision as she had left in his heart? And yet her inner beauty even out shone all that. It seemed to be a reflection of his for with her love inside him what else could it be? Her wisdom was his and he felt proud to be of service. What was hers was his and that included their Self. But what could he say? Where would he start? He loved everything about her and with equal affection. He saw the whole and knew that it was 'you'. He put it down and looked again at the paper. 'I love you'. Three little words but to Andy it said everything. He folded the paper neatly and decided that he would give it to her in English, if the teacher was not watching of course.

8. Chanced Upon a Guess

Flashing lights scrambled up the ladder accumulating wealth as they climbed. Spinning wheels bringing with them hope to arouse the inner greed.

Dave Latham was a gambling man, nothing too heavy though, the occasional flutter on the fruit machine to pass the boring hours in the pub. He knew the machines well and usually came off ahead. Today was different though, things were not going his way. He was losing heavily and just seemed to be throwing good money after bad. He was down £60 already and it was money he could not afford to lose. His job at the chicken factory was not well paid and he tried to work as much overtime as he could to compensate their measly wage rate. Still he found it a struggle to make ends meet and put a little away for a rainy day.

The reels seemed to be spinning quickly and Dave took it as a sure sign that it was about to pay out. It was only a £10 jackpot but it had been known to hold up to six times afterwards. He had hit the jackpot a couple of times earlier and though it did not repeat itself it had kept his spirits up. He was down to his last pound though and at 25p a go it had soon swallowed any winnings. He looked around the pub to see who was in. He was a little reluctant to leave the machine as he felt that it could pay out at any minute. He knew that he would have to go to the cash point but as that was only about 30 yards away that would not take too long.

The pub itself was empty apart from an old man who was sitting in the far corner reading a newspaper. He seemed to be in a world of his own and Dave thought he would stay there quite some time. Dave quickly nipped out and unhindered by a queue he was back at the bar asking for change before the spin of a wheel. He had taken twenty pounds which was half his rent money but he still had high hopes that he would win it back. Besides he reasoned even if he did lose it he could still give half and owe the rest until the next week.

The barman on the other side of the bar took the Ten Pound Note and Dave seeing that his glass was empty said, "Pint of lager mate and could I have five ones in the change?"

The barman poured Dave his drink and gave him his change. He was getting a little short of coinage and it was only late afternoon. He hated working Saturday afternoons as the place was always empty and this made the time drag heavily. The pub had only recently started opening all day Saturday in the vain hope of attracting the weekend shoppers and all day drinkers, looking around though it seemed to him that they had obviously failed. The old man had been there for at least three hours and in all of that time he had only been up to the bar twice. He seemed more concerned with his newspaper and had probably only come in to get out of the winter's day. The man on the fruit machine was just as bad. He must have spent £60 and only had two pints. He had been losing heavily and making constant journeys to the bar. It looked like it was money that he could not spare but that was not the barman's problem. His problem was the fast dwindling pound coin supply but looking at the size of the man he thought it was not one worth mentioning.

Dave went back to the machine now almost hypnotised by the flashing lights. He had won a pound but lost it after the first gamble. He was nearly out of change again as it just seemed to swallow it up. He had had a couple of small wins but lost them on the numbers gamble. It seemed that the machine had turned against him and was leading him a dance. He had number two on the screen and gambled higher but the outcome of that gamble was number one. He was starting to lose his faith and would be happy enough just to break evens. The reels turned again and brought with them more disappointment. Thoughts about his rent money came back to haunt him but the machine still had his imagination in its power and so they left little impression. Dave knew that he would have to go back to the bar for change and felt foolish for doing it. The barman must have known how much he had lost and Dave was getting a little self conscious. His last credit disappeared and he sheepishly went to the bar.

"Er can I have some change please mate," he said offering the £10 to the barman.

"Ten pound coins?"

"Er yes," Dave said and by way of conversation, "I see that the rain has stopped."

“Oh really,” the man said with an air of indifference that only added to Dave's self-consciousness and handed him the change.

Dave went back to the machine and put the first coin in. The four goes went quickly and Dave found his hand in his pocket once again taking out more money. The second and third coin went just as quick and Dave soon found himself down to his last fiver. He still felt that he could grab some money back if he hit the jackpot but by now he only hoped to get enough back to cover the rent and a few pounds besides. He was disappointed again and again but still he carried on. He had the occasional low denomination win but rarely collected it as he would try and gamble it up to the elusive ten pound jackpot. He came close a couple more times but it was like the machine was in control. It would let him win the occasional gamble to build up his confidence and then snatch it away at the last moment just as it was getting close. It was as if it was playing games with him but by this time he was too well hooked to notice. He knew that his money would soon run out and he would have to make another trip to the cash point to carry on. This put him in a bit of a predicament as he needed to give his landlord at least something to keep him happy. Deep down he still felt that the machine was going to pay out soon but he would be in terrible strife if he lost it. The overtime had dried up and he was getting late with his rent sometimes and this created more than a certain amount of ill feeling with the landlord.

He debated with himself for a while as he played his last pound. The machine seemed to have speeded up even more and the jackpot signs were getting closer with every spin. On his last go there were two on the win line and the other one was just underneath it. Something inside him told him he was very close to the big one. He was out of money now and so he looked around the bar to see if it was still quiet. Nobody else had come in and it was just Dave and the old man who was now at the bar ordering a pint of mild. Dave quickly left the bar and went to the cash-point machine. To his disappointment there was a queue of five people before him. An old woman was at the front and she seemed to be taking ages. Dave turned to look at the pub and see if anyone else had entered. He turned back to see that the old woman was still there. Dave's patience was wearing thin and he was surprised that nobody else in the queue felt the same.

After what seemed like five minutes she finished and left the point to the next in line. The next customers filtered through slowly much to Dave's chagrin and he waited until it was his turn. Meanwhile back in the pub the old man was getting his change. “Do you think that fellow's finished?” He said to the barman as he looked at the fifty pence coin that he had in his change.

“Sorry?”

“On the fruit machine. Do you think he has finished on the fruit machine?”

“Looks like it. He would have been back by now if he hadn't.”

“Oh,” the old man said and looked again at the coin that was still in his hand. He seemed a very cautious man but if came across to the barman as doddering. The old man's demeanour changed as he looked at the bar man and said, “Tell me something, have you ever chanced upon a guess?”

“What,” the bar man said as if he was talking to an imbecile, “What are you talking about?”

“Not having a good day are you. Are you a gambling man?”

“Now and again, why do you ask?”

“That machine is about to pay out big time I can feel it in my water.”

'Oh God' the barman thought to himself, 'Why is it always my shift that gets the nutters' “And what do you want me to do about it,” he said aloud afterwards.

I'm offering you the chance to make some money if you care to chance upon a guess that is.”

“Not me mate,” the barman said with a smile, “I haven't your faith and besides it's your water at the end of the day.”

The old man laughed and said, “Well don't say that I didn't offer but it's your choice.”

The bar man seemed a little surprised by the man's confidence but not enough to risk his hard earned money on it, “I'll live with it. Thanks for offering though.”

“It wasn't personal,” The man said with a glint in his eye, “I don't like profiting from others

misfortune that's all. That young man must have lost a lot of money and I would have felt bad if I had not offered you a share.”

“Well he's certainly filled it up,” the barman answered not really understanding what he was on about, “He must have put at least £70 in it to my knowledge.”

“I noticed,” the man said as he walked over to the flashing machine.

Meanwhile back at the cash point machine Dave was punching in his pin number. After what seemed like ages he received his last £20. This is it he thought to himself as he looked at it; it's all or nothing now. He shuddered as he pictured his landlord's irate face. He would have to cross that bridge when he came to it he thought as he quickly made his way back to the pub. He had taken some comfort from the fact that no one had entered the pub during the time he had queued for his money. The short distance to the pub was quickly covered but as he got to the door he was stopped in his tracks by the noise that came from behind it.

“Ah well,” he said in a philosophical manner and looked around for a cat to kick.

9. Enigmatic Christine

Christine Steel was a strange creature. She was one of those people that could see the good in everything and this seemed to make her unpopular with her friends for some strange reason. She lived her life with the maxim if you have nothing to worry about then why worry over nothing. Whilst her friends fretted about everything and anything she just smiled and got on with her life. To her life was a game while to others it was a struggle. People reading this might think that she had led a very sheltered life and was immune from the heart ache that life seemed to bring but they would be well off the mark. Christine had tragically lost both her parents in an armed robbery at her house when she was a child. What made the trauma even worse was that she was there when it happened. She moved in with her grandmother who was a loveless old woman who saw her as a burden that God had forced upon her. She thought Christine the devil's spawn in her perverted view of religion and made Christine well aware of it at every possible moment. The constant beatings that would have left an emotional scar on most people just seemed to be absorbed without thoughts of revenge and retribution. Yes you could certainly say that she had tasted the downside of life.

All that seemed far away now as she woke up to a bright new day. She was 26 now and happily married although her husband Arthur worked long hours and she rarely saw him. She had taken a job at the White Swan more out of boredom than financial necessity but today was her day off. She had planned to go for a long walk in the beautiful countryside that surrounded her little village in the garden county of England. She got dressed and made herself a light breakfast before venturing into the bright sunlit day. The green of the flora lifted her mood if that was possible and the aromas that they released sent her sense of smell into orbit. She loved to walk in the countryside so she could be alone with her thoughts. She walked deep into the forest that started two fields from where she lived and watched bright sunlight turn into shade. She always liked to walk deep into the forest for she felt that nobody had ever been there before. The faint traces of litter usually dispelled her feeling but today there seemed no trace of it at all. She walked about two miles until she came across a clearing that seemed out of place amongst the dense undergrowth of the woodland. She did not remember seeing this clearing before but paid no heed thinking that she must have taken a wrong turning somewhere. It was easy done for the forest at its thickest looked much the same where ever she went. She felt tired and decided to sit down a while and take a rest. The warming sun was absorbed by her skin and she felt it quite relaxing. She was about to doze off but a voice brought her back to reality.

"Daughter of Eve," it said, "What are you doing on my land?"

She looked up to see a strange looking creature standing over her. It was male and of a gruff looking appearance. It was only about three feet high but it had an air of defiance that was a lot bigger than its size. It stood there waiting for an answer but Christine was still trying to get used to the spectacle. "Well," it said, "Have you no answer for me?"

"I'm sorry," she said eventually, "But I did not realise that this was your land. What exactly are you anyway?"

"I am the Spirit of Nature and you have invaded my privacy. You must now pay the price of this incursion."

"Pay the price, whatever do you mean?"

"You have entered my realm and it is a realm in which you may never return." With that a large wall sprang up all along the edges of the clearing. Christine looked around and saw that she was trapped. For some reason she did not appear to be too frightened and this intrigued the little man more than slightly.

"Have you no fear?" it said, "You are to be a prisoner here for eternity and beyond. Don't you realise the seriousness of your predicament?"

"Well," Christine said with a smile that perplexed him, "There is nothing I can do about it so why worry; it's just a waste of time."

"You're a strange mortal. I have not come across you type before. Well no matter," and

disappeared.

Christine looked around the little clearing and relaxed on the warm grassy floor. She heard the birds singing all around her and was surprised to find out that she could actually understand what they were saying. She called to them and one came and landed about 8ft away from her.

“What sort of creature are you?” the little bird said unsure of itself.

“I’m a human, have you not seen one before?” The bird looked like it was ready to fly off but Christine stopped it, “Stay awhile, I mean you no harm.”

“I have heard of humans, they kill when they are not hungry and take more than they need at the expense of others.”

“We are not all the same,” She said by way of reassurance, “Stay for I mean you no harm. We can talk awhile and I can tell you all about my world and then maybe you could tell me about yours.”

“I know all about your world. It is common knowledge among all the other animals in the forest. They talk about how in the old days their homes stretched the length and breadth of the land and they all lived in harmony. No one took more than they needed and everybody was happy.”

“I too have heard that but don’t judge me by my kind judge me by my kindness. I mean you no harm as I have said. I just want some company.”

“You are not like the other animals have portrayed you. Why have you become a prisoner then?”

“I guess I was just at the wrong place at the wrong time,” She said shrugging her shoulder, “Must I stay here for all time?”

“I have no answer for you for you are not of our world and you do not follow our rules. The Spirit of Nature can be a cruel force. He believes in the survival of the fittest and many have fallen along the wayside. The only way he can be beaten is to find out his name for when you have found that out you have found him. I do not know his name so I am afraid that I am no use to you.”

Christine smiled and said, “Don’t feel bad. I like your company and you are a very clever animal who has helped me more than you realise.”

“How can you say that?” the bird said with a puzzled expression, well the nearest thing to a puzzled expression that a bird can do. “You are none the wiser from this talk. You still have to find out his name and even then it might not be any help to you as I said before you follow another set of rules than the rest of the animal kingdom.”

“Don’t belittle your help because before I met you I did not know anything but now I know that I must find out his name.”

“You are a strange sort of animal, not like how they portray you. The other animals say that Man takes and takes without replacing and renewing yet you seem different. You don’t seem to be after anything. Maybe the other animals are wrong and I ought to be a little less afraid of your kind than I am.”

“I would not judge my kind by me for you might be in for a rude awakening. You must keep that fear inside you and be very wary of my kind for a lot of them may be out to show you harm.”

The bird said goodbye and flew off to be with the rest of his kind leaving Christine alone with her thoughts. She did not seem too concerned about her predicament in fact it seemed that she was just relaxing and taking a little time out to be alone with her thoughts. Unbeknown to her she was being watched by the Spirit of Nature and as he scanned her she left him in a confused state. She was not like the other mortals that he had trapped and left as prisoners just to watch them go mad in their feeble efforts to escape. She intrigued him more than just a little but he had a lot of hatred for her kind and what they had done to his domain. He had watched his world decimated by their shallow attempts of self gratification in their pursuit of his land. Forest after forest had disappeared under their plough and axe. He had seen once fertile land turn into desert and this dismayed him more than just a little. But she was different. She seemed to be happy where she was and revel in the company of the bird that he had sent to check on her. She had not tried to harm him which was unusual for a start and she had took her punishment with an inner strength that he had found lacking in the other mortals he had captured. She did not seem to follow the other rules that her kind

pursued so maybe he thought she should be given the chance that all the other animals with the exception of Man had.

Christine was daydreaming when he appeared to her, "I have decided to give you a chance," It said in a tone of indifference, "You can count yourself lucky Daughter of Eve for not many of your kind have this chance."

"You mean you are letting me go," Christine said getting ready to get up.

"Not so fast. First you must tell me my name."

"You are the Spirit of Nature. Well that's what you told me when I first saw you."

"That is what my essence is but that is not my name. You must guess it before I can let you go. Do you feel up to it or are you going to be my prisoner for eternity?"

Christine thought hard and remembered what the bird had said about when you have found his name you have found him. She also remembered about taking more than you needed and this

seemed to give her another clue. She looked at the little man and said, "When I know you then I have found you. In that case your name must be Balance for is not that the true Spirit of Nature?"

The man looked at her and said, "This must be some sort of trick for you are the first mortal that has beaten me."

With that he disappeared leaving Christine alone in the clearing. The wall had gone and so she got up and made her way back to the forest with a spring in her step.

10. A Secret Liaison.

Penelope Farthing looked for romance with eager anticipation. It had been a long time since she had been out on a date as her business took out a large chunk of her time. She had been known to work for up to 16 hours a day to try and build it up but now things were starting to flow better she had more time on her hands. She had never really looked for a soul mate as the crushing effect of her previous marriage had taken its toll on her. One that she even found difficult to admit to herself for in truth she still loved him but he had left her for another. That had wretched her heart out and threw it on the bin of life. Her first break was the business and she got a lot of satisfaction as well as money from it. She felt more independent and beholden to nobody. She had rebuilt her life to a good extent but still she felt that she needed someone to share it with her. Besides she wanted to get rid of her stupid surname as it had made her the butt of endless jokes. She had tried the dating agencies in the hope of finding a man of similar quality (Well financial anyway for her self esteem would always be thinking that he was only after her for her money) but there was no one on the horizon. She had took to going out with her friends in the hope of meeting the right person at a bar or club but most of the people she was introduced to had no depth beyond a night of passion. No, Penelope wanted more out of life than that. She wanted someone who would understand her, someone to share her life with and fall in love with just like in the movies.

She had been an ardent movie goer in her time and loved the great old films that had been made in the thirties and forties. Her idea of a man would be a cross between Clark Gable and Humphrey Bogart but she knew that, that would never be possible. Until today that was.....

It had been a normal day when she had got up. The sun had been unusually bright but as it was the middle of summer that went unnoticed by her. She made herself a light meal and then went to her shop. It was a busy flower shop that had a prime place in the middle of the High Street and gave her a tidy return for her endeavours. It was around about 11 O' Clock when he made his appearance. He was tall, well over six feet and wore a two piece suit much akin to the zoot suits of old. On most people it would have looked out of place but the way he carried it, it was as if it was made for him. His short hair was slicked back in the style of the decade that the suit came from and he extolled an air of charisma that she had noticed straight away.

He walked up to the counter and said looking at Penelope with a stare that sent her knees trembling, "I was wondering if you could help me?"

The gentle melodic voice made her lips quiver. She had to pause to get her breath before she could speak, "Yes," she said and tried to raise a smile but he had stunned her senses and made her a little bashful.

"What's the best way to tell somebody that you love them, that you can't go through life without them? That you want to spend every waking hour just being with them and doing their bidding," He said and it just seemed to flow out of him in a natural way that told her that he meant every word of it. He was a romantic of that there was no doubt and the lady of his dreams would be a very lucky lady. Her heart told her that he had someone else and so she would be wasting her time so her head got down to the business of the day.

"That would have to be flowers," she said in a business manner, "Roses for romance they never fail."

"I'm not sure, they don't seem enough. It does not express what I need to tell her. You see ever since I saw her my life has become obsessional. I think about her all the time, she never leaves my mind. It's like I am not whole unless I am with her. I don't know how I could show her that, it's all too much for me."

Penelope looked at the man and wished that it was her he was talking about. The man looked like he was out to make his love's life heaven and it looked like he was very capable of doing it. She cursed her bad luck that it was not her and went back to the matter in hand. "Why don't you send a nice note to her it always goes down well?"

"That's a good idea," the man said, his face lighting up, "What about a poem. She might like that."

What do you think?"

"Well I don't really know the woman concerned," Penelope said thinking lucky bitch as she said it, "But I would say that you can't go too far wrong with a poem. Who did you have in mind, there a great many good poets to choose from?"

"That could never do her justice not unless I wrote it myself."

"Are you a poet then?" She said her heart lifting. The man was starting to become a mild obsession to her heart.

"I don't know yet," the man said with a smile, "I've never tried it before."

"Oh," Penelope said with a slight twinge of disappointment, "Well why not give it a go and if it's no good I've got a book of poetry that you could borrow from."

"Oh so you like poetry, you might be of help then." He took a pen and some paper and started to think a while. It was not for long and his pen was soon eagerly scratching on the paper. It did not take him too long to finish and so Penelope thought it would not be up to much but when she read it those thoughts fell by the wayside.

**"Step forward colleen how have you been tell me about your day
Ages have passed since I saw you last and I thought that you'd gone away
So give me a smile make it worth my while and perhaps even a kiss
For a life next to you that could never be blue for that's not the colour of bliss."**

She could not believe it and yet there was another verse to it. It seemed that the man had taken very little time to write it but its quality said otherwise.

**"Step forward colleen come out of that dream for you mean the world to me
Hold me tight for my heart feels so light and I hope that that doesn't sound twee
Let me feel your heat it can never be beat especially the warmth of that smile
For you give to me all that can be and do it with such great style."**

She looked at the man and he said with eager anticipation, "Is it alright, I mean will it do?" She did not know what to say. His tall athletic shell held a brilliant mind behind it. It went against all the stereotypes of men that she had been weaned on by the countless women's magazines that she had browsed through and yet he was humble in his attitude. She could tell that as she looked at him with his almost schoolboy manner. He was perfect. There was no doubt in her mind that he was the one but he had found another. Penelope had more than just a twinge of jealousy. In all her travels and constant searches for the right man she knew that she would never find the like of one such as this man. It seemed so unfair but she wished the woman well in a philosophical manner and said, "Oh yes she will definitely like this."

He seemed to let off a sigh relief when she said this and wrote it down again on the card that was to accompany the flowers. She looked at his hand writing and saw that it excelled in elegance more akin to a poet than anything else. He was just too good to be true.

"So," he said when he had finished, "Do you think roses will do then? I mean what would you as a woman prefer? To tell you the truth I'm not really used to this."

"Oh yes," she said almost gushing, "I love roses, most women do."

"Good," he said his excitement coming to the fore, "Then roses it shall be."

She sorted him out a dozen and wrapped them up in thin paper. He paid for them and then handed them over to her. To say she was shocked would be an understatement she did not know what to say or do when he said, "It could only be you." She nearly collapsed as her legs were nearly taken from underneath her.

"I don't know what to say," she said with a mixture of joy and confusion, "What have I done to deserve this?"

"Just by being you, would you give me the privilege of devoting the rest of my life to your Soul pleasure and making me the happiest and most fortunate man that ever walked the Earth?"

She was speechless; it was all too much for her. She felt faint and had to hold onto the counter for support." Please don't refuse me," the man said as he saw that she had not answered him, "For it would be more than my heart could take. For a life that would be without you would not be a life to me."

She could not answer him. Her mind was still on the fact that he had feelings for her and he wanted her to be that woman that she was so jealous of. Her senses were all over the place and it took her quite a while before she came back down to Earth. "I don't know what to say this it too much for me. I think I need a drink of water."

The man looked at her with a heavy air of disappointment. He had taken her silence and last words as some sort of refusal and turned to leave.

"Wait," Penelope said, "I would be more than delighted, it would make my life complete. I just need to get over the shock."

The man smiled and said, "I thought that I had lost you for a moment. I could never have come to terms with that."

He came closer as if to kiss her but alarm bells went off in Penelope's head. They just seemed to appear from nowhere. Maybe he was just after her money she thought as she found herself being sucked into a different reality. She wanted to go back but it was too late. It had been a dream and that was it. It was with more than just a hint of disappointment that she came to terms with it.

"Why do men only act on impulse in dreams?" she said as she got out of bed.

11. A Night to Remember

A cold sweat fell down Kim's back. She felt that she was being watched but knew there was nobody there. She had only been in the house a fortnight but it seemed a lot longer. She hated Steve working shifts as it meant she slept nights on her own one week in three. She looked around the room once more but there was nobody there. She huddled under the sheets and eventually fell asleep.

She found herself being woken up by a strange noise. It was a scratching noise that seemed to be coming from behind a wall to her left. She got out of bed and for some reason she was not afraid. She walked over to the wall and the scratching stopped.

"Whose there," she said, "What do you want from me?"

"Help me," a small voice said, it sounded like a child's, "Please help me."

"Who are you? How can I help you, what can I do?"

"I'm Angela, daddy trapped me and left me here as a punishment."

"What," Kim said in horror, "As a punishment, this isn't happening to me."

"He said it was the King's wish that all little girls must be punished. It's the way of the King but I want to come out now, I've been here too long." with that a little girl about 9 years old stepped out from behind the wall, "Will you be my mummy?"

Kim just seemed to take it in her stride. She had no fear as she looked at the strangely dressed child.

"What happened to your mummy?" She said as she studied the pretty child in front of her. She had short blond hair and the bluest eyes that Kim had ever seen. It was quite ironic really for Kim and Steve had been trying for a child for a long time but with no success.

"God came and took her away from me when I was six and then my daddy got me a new one but I did not like her so I had to be trapped because the King said so. Daddy said that so it must be true."

"Don't you want to be with God like your first mummy? She'll be waiting for you."

"I don't know," she said sadly, "I want a new mummy. Why don't you like me?"

Kim smiled and said, "I think that you are adorable but you already have a mummy."

Angela looked at Kim through tear stained eyes and said, "I don't know how to get to her. I want you to be my mummy anyway. We could play together," and she skipped and danced around the room much to Kim's amusement. She was very taken in with Angela and would have gladly been her mother but for one thing. She was a ghost but seeing her skip and hop Kim could have easily forgotten that fact. Kim laughed and started to skip around herself much to Angela's amusement. After a few minutes Kim had to sit down because the exercise had caught up with her. Angela stopped and said, "Don't you want to play with me anymore?"

"I'm tired, come and sit and talk with me a while."

Angela danced and said, "Mummy used to tell me a story every night will you tell me one? What about the story of the Princess and the Beggar?"

"The Princess and the Beggar," Kim said puzzled, "I'm afraid I don't know that one. Don't you want to hear about Goldilocks and the Three Bears instead?"

"No I don't like that one. I thought that everyone knew about the Princess and the Beggar, mummy told me that."

"Well why don't you tell it to me then how does that sound?"

"Once upon a time in a big palace in a country far away lived a Princess called Angela. She was a happy little girl who always played around until one day her mother went to heaven and that's all that I know."

"That's a sad story, why don't we change it a little," and thought a while, "How about this? Once upon a time there was a Princess called Angela. She was always playing around until one day she met a Beggar who was on his way to see the King," Angela sat quietly and listened attentively whilst Kim carried on with the tale. "The Beggar smiled and said hello little Princess is your daddy at home? The little Princess smiled and said that she would take him to see the King. The King was happy to see the Beggar and thanked Angela for bringing him" Kim looked around the bedroom and

saw the television in the corner. It gave her an idea. "And the Beggar gave Angela a magic box that she could travel the world in."

"A magic box," Angela said in disbelief, "There's no such thing as a magic box."

"Oh but there is, you see the little Princess left the magic box and I found it. Would you like to see it?" and went over and switched the television on.

Angela sat in awe and watched the picture appear. It was a Nature program and Angela laughed and screamed as a herd of wildebeest ran across the bush land. Kim switched the television off much to Angela's disappointment and said, "There you go I told you it was a magic box. Now that's a better story it was not so sad was it?"

"Yes," Angela said smiling, "I like it. Can you open the magic box again I want to see those funny animals? Were they from that country that was far, far away?"

"Yes they were from that country that was far away but I can't open the box again tonight as it can only be opened once a night. Now it's your turn to tell me a story."

"But I don't know any more, mummy used to tell me that one."

"Tell me about your daddy then. What sort of person could do that to you?"

"It was the King who told him to. My daddy wouldn't have done it otherwise. My new mummy had children of her own and they used to hurt me all the time because I was naughty. They didn't want me to play because it was a sin and God didn't like sinners and so he told the King that all little girls should be punished and that's why I'm here."

Kim could not come to terms with the fact that someone could harm such a sweet little child. A sudden thought came to her. Angela must be buried behind the wall. She went cold. The house was certainly old enough to have its secrets. It was a very old farm cottage that must have been built over 500 years ago. What was she to do? She had read somewhere that if the body was buried then maybe the child would be at peace. She looked at Angela who smiled back and said, "I like my new mummy, she has a magic box so she must be good."

Much to Kim's disgust half of her wanted to keep her for she was such an adorable child but deep down she knew that it was wrong. She had to move on to where ever ghosts go to in the end.

"I must help you to get to your mummy, she must be missing you."

"I want to be with you," Angela said and started to cry, "I'm not naughty no more why don't you want to be my mummy? I'm a good girl now; daddy said I was after he trapped me."

"I want you to be with me," Kim said honestly and close to tears on seeing Angela's distress, "But God wants you to be with Him. He knows that you are good and wants you to be with your real mummy. He told me so, that's why you must go."

"But he's a bad man. He told the King to tell daddy to trap me."

"No," Kim said trying to calm her down, "He would not do that. He likes children to play. When you are with Him and your mummy you can play for ever. Wouldn't you like that?"

"You don't like me," Angela said with a mixture of anger and self pity, "You're just like my new mummy she didn't like me either," and started to cry profusely.

"I like you a lot," Kim said with tear stained eyes, "But you must go to your real mummy she likes you more than anything. She must be missing you. Don't you miss her? She will be able to tell you stories every night and you could play with her every day."

Angela cheered up slightly and said, "Will she have a magic box like yours?"

Kim dried her eyes and said, "Yes she will. You would be able to watch it for as long as you like."

Angela disappeared and Kim woke up.

"It must have been a dream," she said to herself with a mixture of relief and pity. She looked at the wall where Angela had first appeared from. It was possible that there might be a small room behind it but Kim was reluctant to tell Steve about the incident. After all she reasoned he would think she was mad to knock a wall down because of a dream.

She thought a bit more about Angela and deep down she knew it was more than just a dream. She decided that she would try and find out a bit more about her. She reasoned that Angela must have

been born in Puritanical times. Although Oliver Cromwell was in charge in those days Angela was only a child and would think of him as a King. She decided that she would go down the local library later and see if she could find out anything about the house. Her thoughts were interrupted by Steve coming through the door.

“Hiya,” he said with a smile and kissed her, “You're up early its only seven.”

Something inside her told her to tell him about the dream and much to her surprise he listened intently and said, “Somebody at work said that the house was haunted last night. I didn't believe him at first. I thought it was only a wind up but now I'm not so sure. Let's have a look at that wall once more.”

They measured the distance between the window and wall and then went outside and Steve got on the ladder and did the same from the outside. There was a difference of four feet between them. Kim went cold again when she found out.

“Maybe she is buried there,” Steve said, “It's possible. Who would do something like that? What sort of father could do that to his child, they must have been funny times?”

It was decided that the wall must come down. Steve reasoned that even if there was no skeleton in there the bedroom could do with extending. He was quite a pragmatic sort of man. They contacted the police to be on the safe side and Steve and his brother Andy got to work on it at the weekend.

The wall soon came down and it was with a mixture of disgust and horror that Kim saw the skeleton of a young child. The skeleton was buried and Angela was finally at peace. Later on that year Kim conceived a daughter and they called her Angela.

12. How's That!

Phillip Stevenson shook his head in disbelief as he watched the news. It was not the topic that had made this event happen for the topic was not very outrageous. In fact it was that mundane it should never have been a news report at all. It was about some rich family who had no real relevance on his life whatsoever. Floods had decimated half of Asia and tornadoes ripped through Florida causing mass havoc in their wake. The global warming that scientists had been talking about with great dread had started to kick in. Icebergs the size of Wales were leaving their natural environment and going on a cruise to the Gulf Stream. He had noticed the upsurge of rain that was automatic to this as the ice melted in the warmer climate and it had scared him more than a little. It was like the world was coming to an end and he seemed to be the only one aware of it. He had even started to think of it in terms of a conspiracy theory and that the people in power were running around like headless chickens more concerned at what the great population would do to them when they finally realised what they had done to the world. He saw the countless factories pumping out their filth into the choke ridden skies and noticed the rise in asthma and other related diseases. It seemed so obvious to him but nobody seemed to care. He knew that the water levels would rise soon and millions would be left homeless and with it an upsurge of civil unrest would surely follow. To say that he held a fear for the future would be an accurate decision as he did not even see a future but nobody seemed to want to know. He had tried to organise committees to see what they could do but it was all too much for them. It seemed that the world was at an end but no one cared. What could they do anyway against such multi-national companies who made such a profit at the expense of the world's critical resources? He was a very little fish and knowing his luck he would be poisoned like most of the other fish in the once abundant oceans. He had stopped eating meat as he saw it as murder though it must be admitted that a freshly cooked bacon sandwich was a very real threat to his self induced abstention. He had the satisfaction of knowing that he was doing his bit how little that might be. He could hold his hand to his heart and say that he cared for the environment but that mattered little on such a global scale. Time was running out and in truth he was getting a little scared. He sometimes had nightmares that involved him fighting for his life in various situations. The most prevalent one was when he was on a raft drifting down what was once the High Street of the town where he lived. All around him was water and he saw no signs of life. He was alone and isolated and in his panic calling for help. Maybe it was the fear of being alone more than the actual fear of dying that haunted him. He was not sure because he always seemed to wake up before anything of any real interest occurred. His other dream was one of war and he was hiding from some kind of vigilante crowd out for vengeance and to satisfy their lust for blood. In his dream they were calling out his name and blaming him for their plight. It was a twisted sort of logic but Phillip could see its appeal. He had not warned them about it and so it was only natural that they should blame him for it all. He hid in some dark cellar that he had never seen before and waited with baited breath for them to appear. The noises always got louder as if they were getting closer and with it his fear grew. He heard the mass horde scrambling down the thin stone stairway and knew that there was no escape. "He's in here," a voice always used to say and he recognised it. It had been that of his ex wife and she had always been out to do him harm. He always woke up just in time but it still left him in a cold sweat and reluctant even to go to bed. He scanned the newspapers for news of such unusual phenomenons and was never disappointed, droughts in Africa and starvation all around him. Monsoons in India and with them all that water. The land was disappearing to roadways and soon he thought he would be living under a sea of concrete. That was of course if he was not just living under the sea as he had heard the sea levels would rise and everywhere would be threatened. The future definitely looked bleak to him and the helplessness of the situation only made it worse. People seemed blind to it though, he felt that the world had lost its reason. Except him of course and that only made it worse. Sometimes he held his tongue for fear of being laughed at. He had seen the plight of the eco-warriors and how they were treated with contempt by the press. They were made out to be odd-balls, spongers of society who had given up on civilised life and

took to burrowing like animals to halt the march of progress. He had a lot in common with their views but could not find it in himself to live in a hole as he liked his home comforts too much for that. He did feel an affinity with them though and could empathise with their predictions of doom and gloom and the fact that they were all going to die. His part in the war of the world had involved letter writing to the large companies but all he got in return were patronising letters that talked to him like he was a worried child that was if they ever wrote back at all. His group had soon disbursed as the power struggles began. They all saw themselves as leaders and had separate methods to achieve their goal. Some saw letter writing as middle class and inadequate and wanted to take a more harder and drastic line. He never saw it as that though that might have been something to do with the fact that he actually was middle class and frustrated from Surbiton was a very apt description of him.

He had been to a good school and went on to a university education. It was there that he first came across the environmental struggle. It was a throwback of the hippie infested sixties where love was all around although not in his direction. He could never see himself as a hippie as it was far too outrageous for his mundane and introverted life. He watched them with a mixture of envy and laughter as they spouted on about love and the state of the world but eventually things started to sink in. He started to look around the world and see that it was not quite the bed of roses he had been led to believe in by his privileged background. He saw the injustice to his fellow man but that paled into insignificance in comparison to the injustice that was being done to Mother Nature. Man seemed to be able to look after himself and even regenerate his species but once nature would be defeated then that would be it. The environmental issue was always around but did not really take off until he heard about the hole in the ozone layer and the dramatic effects of global warming. After that his world changed dramatically. He felt restless as if the event could happen at any moment and would constantly scan the newspapers for news of its progress. He found himself disappointed as the media did not seem to be giving it much coverage at all. The first few weeks of the discovery were well documented and a host of talk shows covered the topic. The newspapers and television news also covered it with great gusto but then it just stopped. It was like it was not newsworthy anymore. The world was going to come to an end but still it was not worth covering. He wanted to know how the great scientists were going to save the situation and looked to them to provide the answer. He scanned the papers and sat in front of the television for hours but still he heard no news. It was like they had admitted to themselves that they could not fix it and so had gone quiet. The effects of the warming seemed to him to be occurring almost immediately as his mind was apt to pick up on any information and turn it into a crisis. Flood and famine all seemed to take on new meaning as he put the blame squarely on the shoulders of the fallen world. Why could scientists not see this he thought to himself and sometimes in his most paranoid states he would think that they knew what he alone knew and were keeping it from the rest of the world? The first major assault on his ears was when he first heard about the melting ice caps. It had actually started to happen. A chunk the size of a small country had broken off and made its way past the Falklands and had started to melt as the rise in temperature had its effect. This had sent him into shock as he reasoned that it must be on the way now. The men in the so called know said it would not be in his life but that was proving to be a lie. He reasoned that if they were prepared to lie about this what else would they lie about? They seemed to be in an every thing's alright frame of mind and this unnerved him more than slightly. His mind seemed to prey on this more than was natural and he started to see subterfuge everywhere he looked. The quality of the news had fallen in his estimation as it seemed to be involved around things that were so trivial they could almost be called stocking fillers. The wedding of a pop star or the fact that someone had their hair cut seemed to make front page news with endless debates on the reasons for it. Everything was over analysed to waste what he saw as the precious time that should have been devoted to the important issue of what was to happen to mankind and what were the people in charge doing to try and divert this tragedy. His mind had made it out as a conspiracy and with that knowledge he saw things in their true light. The

News section had finished and it moved on to the Sport's section. He sat back and forgot all his thoughts as he saw that England had beaten Australia in the Ashes. He loved cricket and this was great news to his dwindling spirit. All thoughts of conspiracy theories had gone out the window as he saw the highlights of the game. But perhaps if like you he was really after a conspiracy theory he should have looked at the title.

13. A Bit of a Lad

Richard Henderson found himself in a bit of a dilemma. He had a job lot of stolen property and he did not quite know how to get rid of it. He had never tried fencing before but the price he got them for could just not be turned down. He looked at it piled around his small flat and wondered how he would actually go about getting rid of it. He knew a lot of people and was hoping to get it shifted that way. He would have to make it quick though as he seemed to be tripping over it. He did not like the idea of having it around the flat either as if he was caught with it he would be looking at quite a sharp sentence. First of all though he had decided to do an infantry of it all to find out what he actually had got hold of? He had his note book and had written it all down in a meticulous way. There were bottles of perfume that he had picked up at a fiver each and what looked like the proceeds of numerous burglaries. He had wrote everything down and put it all in some sort of order and now it was time to see about actually selling them. He had arranged to meet an old friend of his who had a little second hand shop on the corner of Main Street and who had expressed a keen interest in his wares. Richard checked the time just to make sure that he would not be late. The rendezvous was not far from the flat in the local park and Richard set off at a brisk pace to the appointed place. It was a warm spring morning and the birds were singing to each other. He soon arrived and saw his friend waiting impatiently. "What kept you?" He said in Richard's approach. "Nothing," Richard said and looking at his watch, "In fact I'm a little early." he had known the shopkeeper on and off for ten years and called him by the nickname Foxy. "Never mind I hear that you have come across some gear and you're looking for somewhere to shift it."

"That's right. If the price is right that is."

"Well that would depend on what it was and what sort of condition it was in."

Richard took out his note book and said, "Various electrical goods including D.V.D.'s and teles, some C.D. Players and electrical tools."

"I'm not sure. There's been a bit of a crack down on that sort of thing. Only yesterday I had a visit from our boys in blue."

"Oh," Richard said with an air of disappointment that did not go amiss on Foxy, "What about perfume I've got all sorts. They're worth about fifty quid in the shops but I'm knocking them out at £8 a piece."

"£8 sounds a bit steep to me. Wrong time of the year you see. Now if it was Christmas it might have been a different story, anything else?"

"I've got some dodgy M.O.T.'s" Richard said getting exasperated. He had thought that Foxy would have snapped them out of his hands, "And some blank tax discs but that's about it."

"I'm not sure. What sort of money are you looking for? For the job lot I mean because it would not be worth my while taking it in bits and bobs."

"I don't know," Richard said unsure of himself. He had expected a rather different reaction from Foxy and now was just debating getting rid of it all just to get his money back. "Well," he said eventually, "I paid two and a half grand on it so I would want to make on that."

"Two and a half," Foxy said ignoring Richard's last statement, "That's a lot of money. Look I tell you what, what about I have a look and see what we can come up with."

"Yes, you are probably right. I won't take less than I paid for it though it would make me a laughing stock."

They walked the short distance to the flat and Foxy had a good look around. He checked the electrical goods to make sure that they were in good working order and the perfume to make sure it was not snidey. After 10 minutes he said, "Look I know that you said you paid two and a half grand for it but I'm afraid if you did then you were conned."

Richard went quiet when he heard that. "What do you mean," he said eventually, "Are you trying to make me out a liar?"

"Look Rich," Foxy said calming him down, "Whether you did or not is not relevant to me. All I

know is that the stock is only worth five hundred to me it's as simple as that. I mean," and put on a false laugh, "Just because you got conned it doesn't mean that I should."

Richard was stumped; he did not know what to say. He was going to have a word with the man who sold him the gear and find out what his game was. "I won't take less than a grand," he said eventually and Foxy knew that he had him. "Maybe not," Foxy said, "But you won't be taking it from me. Five hundred quid, it's not open to bargaining that is the price I am offering. Take it or leave it," and made to walk out of the door.

"Hang on," Richard said in desperation, "Seven hundred and fifty, you'll easily get it back."

"No, there won't be a profit for me then." He turned around and walked out. Just as he got to the door Richard said, "Alright. I'll want cash though."

"That's how I deal. Cash on the nail."

"You'll have to load it up yourself for that price."

"I'll be back in around ten minutes with a couple of lads and a van," Foxy said as he walked through the door.

Richard sat down and looked around his Aladdin's cave. He could not believe that he had been conned. Why would Dave Green do it? He had been mates for a long time and expected more than that from him. His thoughts turned to anger and then vengeance. A knock on the door brought him around. He got up and answered it to find Foxy and a couple of young lads he recognised as local burglars. "Alright Richard," the lads said and nodded their heads and one said, "I hear you got conned," and they both started laughing.

Richard said nothing only plotted a suitable revenge for Dave Green. The flat was soon emptied and Richard paid in full. "It was a pleasure doing business with you Rich," Foxy said, "Give us a bell if you come up with anything else, I'll see you around," and left Richard alone with his thoughts and went on his merry way.

"Right," Richard thought to himself, "I think it's about time I paid Greeny a visit" and got up and left the flat. It was only a short walk to Dave's house and he quickly covered it. He knocked the door loudly and Dave answered it half asleep, "Alright Rich," he said yawning, "What can I do you for?"

Richard grabbed him by the throat and pushed him into the hall way. Dave gasped for breath as he said, "What's all this about?"

"Don't give me that," Richard said tightening the grip, "You conned me out of a lot of money and I want it back."

"What are you talking about I've never conned you in my life. I thought that we were mates."

"Mates don't charge two and a half grand for five hundred quids worth of gear. Well not on my book anyway."

"That's what I paid for it. Honest I didn't even take a cut of it."

"That's not what Foxy said it was worth. He's just priced it up at five hundred."

"That slime ball. It's him that's conned you Rich not me."

Richard released his grip and said, "I don't know what to think anymore."

"Think about it Rich the perfume alone was worth around four grand and that was if you only knocked it off at a tenner a throw."

Richard thought awhile before he said, "The bastard, the cunning bastard. He conned me good and proper. I've lost two grand and I can't afford to do that just to make him rich. I ought to go around and punch his lights out. How could I have been so easily fooled?"

"Calm down Rich, don't get mad get even."

"But how, the deeds been done. He's got the gear and I've been paid. He's stitched me up good and proper."

"There's more than one way to skin a cat," Dave said with a wicked grin that told Richard he had something in mind, "We'll check his shop and see what he's selling."

"I know that already," Richard said and took out his list, "I've got it all written down here, fool that

I am,” and gave the list to Dave who studied it and said, “I could easily find out where this lot came from it would just take a phone call. Won't be a moment.” He went into the living room and Richard heard him on the phone. He came back a few minutes later and said, “Well that's all sorted. Now we have to come up with a nice little plan. Any ideas?”

“Torch the place with him inside it that sounds good.”

“He's more than likely insured. He could make money on it knowing him but I do like the idea of setting it alight.”

“Do you reckon he'll sell the gear from there anyway? He told me he had had a visit from the police yesterday I can't see him risking it.”

“That's probably only spiel. Did he sound like he was doing you a favour by taking it off your hands?”

“Yes he did. He told me it was the wrong time for perfume and he could not sell the electrical gear in his shop.”

“He's clever I'll give him that. I bet he's been doing that sort of patter for years though. He must be well polished by now. Mind you he always was a devious man; I suppose that was how he made his money. His time is just about running out now though.”

“That sounds to me that you have something on your mind.”

“I won't be able to get you your money back but I could set him up big time. It will mean dealing with the Coppers though.”

“I'm not sure about that.”

“It will be worth it in the end; you'll feel a lot better afterwards.”

“Okay, what's the plan then?”

“Meet me at the phone box around the corner from the shop and bring some petrol with you. I'll get this list typed up by then and where it all came from.”

Richard went home and met Dave later at the appointed time. He looked in the shop window as he passed and was amazed to see that most of his gear was on display. Dave phoned the police anonymously as Richard poured the petrol through the letter box. The police arrived just in time to find the list in the phone box and the stolen gear through the scorched remains.

14 Septic Dave

Dave Campian picked at his sweat induced rash under his arm and looked around his new lodgings. Litter lay everywhere but that was to be expected as he was on a rubbish tip. The smell of ammonia was all around him and would have choked a lesser man than Dave but he was used to it. He had slept in council tips the length and breadth of England's green and not so pleasant land for he had seen a lot on his travels and not all of it good. Hunger drove him to get up and search around the vicinity for anything of either an edible or nourishable nature. He was in the wrong part of the tip for that though as most of the waste food had long since decayed. He looked around but it was in vain. Over in the distance he saw the rubbish collection vehicle emptying its load and rushed over with eager anticipation. He only got about ten feet away when he was seen by the man in charge of the vehicle.

"Oi," he shouted, "Get off out of here," and threw an empty can of baked beans at him. It hit Dave on the side of the chin and he licked the sauce that had marked his face. "Not bad," he said aloud and picked the can up from where it had landed. He started to lick the can with great relish much to the man's disgust. The man was having none of it. He picked up another can and threw it at Dave. The rest of the crew had been watching and followed suit. Soon Dave was being rained on by various cans and bottles and it was getting advisable to leave. He turned around and quickly, well as quickly as his aging body would allow made his escape. As he got to the outskirts he turned and said, "I've been threw out of better places than this," and raised his hands as if to curse them. He turned around and muttering to himself walked down the thin dirt path and back into town. People gave him a wide berth as he walked off in a world of his own, his thoughts going back to his previous life. It had not been a bad life and sometimes he yearned to have it back. He would often rant on about it to the fellow outcasts he met on his travels. They did not believe him of course as they reasoned that if things had been that good he would not be in the state he was in. He always protested that it was by choice but that only seemed to set them off in hysterics. He put his hand in his left side jacket pocket and fished out a bottle of clear liquid. The bottle itself was filthy and this would have put a lot of people off from drinking it but not Dave. He had a strong stomach and would often boast about how far he could throw it on a Saturday night. He wiped the top in some vain attempt at hygiene and saying, "First of the day," took a healthy swallow from it. The burning liquid caused him to nearly choke and it took some time to clear his throat afterwards much to the disgust of passersby that seemed to pass by a lot more quickly than normal. He was on his way to see an old friend of his called Nasty who lived on the other side of town. It was not a long walk but to Dave's aging legs it could have been the other side of the world. He turned the corner at the top of the road and made his way down the High Street. He ducked into an alleyway when he saw a policeman on his rounds and waited for him to pass. He had not done anything wrong, well not legally anyway as he was offensive to the senses but he had a deep mistrust about the police. After the policeman had passed Dave slunk out and carried on down the street. He looked out of place amongst the gathering hordes in clothes that did not know what dirt was, like a weed amongst a flower bed.

A large group of teenage lads were hanging around the amusement arcade and that always meant trouble for Dave. He crossed over and pretended not to see them but that did not work. "Look," the one that seemed to be giving the orders said, "Captain Bird's eye's back in town. Perhaps he did not get our last message."

Dave went cold when he heard this for he remembered their last message. In fact he could not sleep for a while afterwards as it was too painful to lie on his side. He walked faster and they crossed the road and made their way his direction. The people all around him must have known what was going on but none of them lifted a finger to help him. They circled and the one who had first seen him said, "Remember me?" and looked menacingly at Dave, "I'm your worst night mare."

People walked past leaving Dave to his peril, it was like he was not there. He looked around pleadingly for help but none of it seemed to be forthcoming until he heard an old and familiar voice

from behind him, "Now you look like you could do with a hand dad."

Dave turned to see his only son Stephen standing behind him. He had grown in the last ten years but he had been big even before Dave had begun his travels. He stood six foot three and weighed in at sixteen stone. The youth that had been giving Dave all the trouble disappeared and blended into the crowd leaving his friends standing around and bewildered.

"Stephen," Dave said forgetting about the situation he had been in, "How are you, I haven't seen you in years."

"That was your choice dad. Come on home now. You have proved your point. Look it's been ten years and I've searched everywhere for you. Mum misses you like crazy," he stopped at that point and looked at Dave in a strange way, "What has happened to you dad? Why are you putting yourself through all this crap? You don't need to, you know that."

"I don't know. To tell you the truth I've become a bit set in my ways. I like the lifestyle, generally that is," he said remembering the last two incidents of the day, "I don't get any hassle, well not much. I'm independent again. I felt trapped, it was just work and sleep and nothing else in between. I can't go back to all of that."

"It will be different now. We have all grown up for a start. Life's not a struggle anymore. Why not come home and see for yourself?"

"Could I invite a friend," Dave said remembering Nasty. Stephen was a bit reluctant as he could guess that the friend would be of a similar calling in life but agreed to it saying, "Well it's your place dad."

"He just lives on the other side of town. I'm on my way to see him now."

"Well why don't I give you a lift it will save a lot of time. We could go straight home afterwards," Dave noticed his haste in wanting to get back home but said nothing. He was just thinking that it would save him a long walk and prove a point to Nasty. Nasty had been one of his greatest skeptics and had made Dave the butt of his many jokes. Dave saw it as funny a lot of the time but sometimes he did want to be believed. This would prove him right once and for all. He was not sure if he would like to go back and live there yet but it might be nice to see his wife once more. He did not really like Margery but it had been a long time and things might have changed by now. She had been the main reason that he had chose to go on the road. It was to prove a point though to tell the truth Dave had only a vague recollection of what that point was. He had blocked a lot of his life out though he was sometimes known to recall it on the odd meths induced occasion. Dave followed Stephen to his dark blue Mercedes and gave him directions on how to get to where Nasty hung out. Stephen had to open the window to try and extinguish the nasty smell that had grown fond of Dave over the last few years. They talked little whilst they drove to Nasty's abode as Stephen did not really know what to say. Dave just sat there and looked at his surroundings as it had been a long time since he had been in a car. He used to hitch-hike when he first went on the road but as the weeks went by and the toll of living took itself out on Dave's clothes the lifts got less and less. He gave directions and pointed out other misfits that he had met on his path and who liked to congregate in the town centre. It seemed ages but they finally got to their destination. Dave got out the car quickly and called into an old derelict building that had not seen signs of life for quite a long time. Stephen heard a noise and saw a small crouched man run out to see them.

"Whose he?" Nasty said pointing an accusing finger at Stephen.

"He's my son," Dave said as if he had proved a point, "And he wants to take me home."

"That's what you say but how do I know he is your son he could be anyone."

"What," Stephen said not expecting such an answer but Dave was quick on the rebound, "I told you I was right," and they started bickering like little children.

'No,' Stephen thought to himself, 'He's lost his mind, what is mum going to do?' He backed off slightly and sneaked away. Dave was far too engrossed in argument with Nasty to notice.

Eventually he turned to see that Stephen had gone. He called after him but he was well away by then. Nasty commented that if he was his real son then he would not have left him but Dave did not

see it as that. He had decided that he would not be going back after all as he could not face living a life with Stephen's mother. One day he said to himself, when I have proved my point, whatever that may be.

The drive home for Stephen was a long guilt filled one. He could not have taken Dave home in that state it would have destroyed his mother and she was not in the best of health as it was. He would just have to tell her that it was not him, it had only been a rumour and as it was so far away she would not be any the wiser. By the time he had got back he had decided to keep an eye on Dave but not to tell his mother, what was the point?

15. The Letter

Karen Liversage woke up with eager anticipation. She was expecting a letter today and it meant a lot to her. She quickly got dressed and ran downstairs to see if the Postman had been. He had not arrived yet so she went into the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea and wait impatiently for him to come. She had put the kettle on and was waiting for it to boil when she heard the letterbox rattle. She quickly rushed to the front but to her disappointment it had not arrived. A gas bill and two letters promising to make her very rich, very quickly were the only things that graced her floor. She put the junk mail in the usual place and the gas bill on the table next to the phone and went into the living room in a slightly dejected state. She sat for a while just feeling sorry for herself really and then decided to go for a walk to clear her head. It was a sunny day and this seemed to have picked her up slightly. She liked to walk in the park not far from where she lived as she liked the smell of the fresh cut grass. She would often go there to be at peace from all the struggles of life and be alone with her thoughts.

She had a lot on her mind as she entered the park. The letter had been promised her by a clairvoyant that she had been to visit. Its arrival was to mark a turning point in her life and the woman had been most particular about its arrival date. She had never been to one before as she was very skeptical about that sort of thing. She had heard that they were all a con and it was only out of desperation that she ended up knocking on one's door. She had been at a very low ebb since her mother's tragic death and everything just seemed to come at once. She needed something but she did not know what, a ray of hope, a straw to clutch, some tangible reason for her very existence.

A friend had recommended Mrs. Gaynor to her saying that she was very good and that she had helped her come to terms with the death of her husband. Karen remembered the apprehension of her visit and it brought a sad smile to her face. Mrs. Gaynor was a strange looking woman, a sort of a cross between a traveling woman and a psychiatrist. She was barely five feet tall but radiated an aura much greater than her size. She was getting on in years but this only added to her appeal. She invited Karen in and Karen sat in awe as she read the tarot cards. She seemed to know everything about Karen, her mother's death, the financial struggle, her loneliness and dissatisfaction with life. One by one she went through them and Karen sat in disbelief at her accuracy. Mrs. Gaynor told Karen that her mother had not died but only cast off her physical body and was looking over her all the time.

Although Karen was a little skeptical about that it was a comforting thought and she took a little strength from it. She did not really believe in life after death but that was more to do with the fact that she had never thought about it than anything else. In fact it was only her mother's death that had brought the subject to her notice. Maybe that was the straw she had to clutch. Mrs. Gaynor had been right about most things about Karen and so in her mind that added strength to her case. She had known about the loneliness and dissatisfaction with life but Karen reasoned that maybe they were just natural reactions after you lost somebody so close. Her knowledge of other things took some explaining though. She knew her mother's name and quite a lot of personal things about Karen. She had held Karen's watch and seemed to have picked up a lot of knowledge from it. She knew about a holiday that Karen had had as a child in Scotland, when she had got lost in a crowded shopping centre. She knew about her pet dog called Laddie who died when she was only ten. She told Karen all sorts of things that were too personal to be guessed at.

She had left Karen with very mixed emotions. She wanted to believe in life after death but as there was no tangible evidence she would always have that doubt. Karen wanted something more but she did not quite know what. Mrs. Gaynor had said that her life would take an upturn with the arrival of a letter. Karen had wanted her to put a date on it but Mrs. Gaynor had declined at first. She said that there was no time in the spiritual world as time only existed in the world of matter. Karen persisted though. She said that it would be the ultimate proof to her and it would give her the peace of mind to carry on with her life. Karen could be quite melodramatic at times but it worked as Mrs. Gaynor relented though she told Karen not to build her hopes up.

Karen took a seat on the bench next to the small lake and watched the ducks at play. There was something peaceful about the way they seemed to just glide across the water. It had captured her imagination that much that she did not even see the tramp that had come and sat next to her. It was just a pity that it had not captured her sense of smell though as that brought her back to earth. She turned around to see a large thickset man with a full straggling beard and greasy hair that matched. He was wearing a suit that looked like it might have graced a scarecrow at one time until the farmer had had sense to get rid of it. His trousers were held up by a piece of dirty yellow string and carried enough holes in them to finance a golf course. He was just sitting there watching the ducks and not really taking much notice of Karen. Karen had thought about getting up to go at first because he was quite an intimidating looking man. She changed her mind though as she saw he was too engrossed to be interested in her. She settled back to watch the ducks. She had even got used to the smell and was just happy to be out in the sun on such a fine day.

After a while the tramp spoke to her in a very cultured accent, "A duck's a very good study in human nature you know."

Karen was surprised to hear him have such an accent but more than a little intrigued at what he said. Her first thought was just to ignore him but curiosity got the better of her. "How do you work that out?" She said looking at him in a strange and careful manner.

The man smiled and said, "You don't need to fear me I'm just a gentleman of the road. See that duck over there," and pointed one of to Karen, "See how he glides so graceful with an air of royalty that we all try to reach. You would not think that its little legs were going ten to the dozen underneath the surface."

Karen thought awhile about what the man had said but it did not make sense to her. She looked at him in a bemused way and said, "I'm sorry I don't understand that."

"No I didn't at first. Maybe that was why I first went on the road. I saw the cool and aloofness of my fellow man and I could never be like that. I suppose I was too emotional really. My legs were going ten to the dozen but I could not keep them below the surface. I could never wear that protective shell."

"I've never really thought about it in that way," She said looking at him in a new light, "Is that why you just gave up on life? You went on the road and left it behind you."

"I didn't give up on life," the man said with a laugh, "I suppose you could say that I moved on to a better one. The things in life that I once thought was important did not matter in my new life. I appreciated life for what it was and not for what I could get out of it. It's a level of understanding that has to be lived in order to truly know it."

The man's openness and honesty captivated Karen and she found herself genuinely interested in what he was saying. "It must have been difficult at first though," she said, "I mean by the sound of your accent you must have come from a well to do family. You must have taken a huge drop in your standard of living."

"It wasn't that difficult because it was my decision to change one standard for another. My family was well off though and I had everything I wanted on a plate but that was not my standard as I did not see it as living. As I said though it is a standard that has to be lived rather than talked about because you could not do it justice with words alone."

"I don't think it would appeal to me. The cold winters, the struggles just to eat. It must be a very hard life when all said and done."

"That's part of it," the man said with a grin, "You appreciate it more because you realise their true worth. Food tastes a lot better when you are truly hungry. It may be a simplistic life to most people but that's only by their shallow standards. As for the cold winters you soon get used to them."

"Well each to their own. Mind you, you are obviously happy which is more than I can say about myself. Do you believe in life after death?" The last question surprised the man slightly.

"Well yes," he said, "But I prefer to believe in life before death. Mind you, you could say that I was an example of life after death. My old life had to die before I could begin a fresh."

Karen smiled and said, "Maybe you are right. I was expecting a letter today, one that would change my life. A clairvoyant told me but I guess that they don't know everything after all."

"Who knows," the man said with a glint in his eyes, "It could be I," and laughed, "Most people called me Q for short. It was my old school nickname that stuck with me over the years. Speaking of letters any chance of a few coppers for a cup of tea."

Karen laughed at the man's cheek and said, "I tell you what I only live around the corner. I might even rustle up some food if I can find any that is."

The man gratefully accepted and they walked the short distance back to Karen's flat. As they walked and talked it was like a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Maybe that was what Mrs. Gaynor had meant. It was speculation of course but it helped Karen with her peace of mind and that was all that really mattered. As for the letter, maybe it was him or then again there was always the second post.

16. The Contract from Hell

The loud drone from the alarm clock awoke Steve Morrison from his deep restful sleep. He looked at the clock and saw that it was 5.20. In his semi-conscious state he scrambled out of bed and made an attempt to get dressed. The cold room made him in a hurry and he nearly fell forward putting his first sock on. He was as quiet as he could for he did not want to wake Angela who was still fast asleep in the warm cosy bed. It was Friday and he was very tired still. He had clocked up 60 hours already and he rued the day that he had ever joined the firm.

He had seen the job advertised in the local Job Centre and thought that it sounded just right for him. He knew that the hours were long but he did not mind that as soon the money would add up and he would be able to put a nice little deposit on a house as living in the flat he was in at present had soon lost its appeal. He shivered as he put his ice cold tee shirt on and went into the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea and a small bite to eat. He was working 30 miles from base and it took an hour to get there. He had to be at base for 6.30 but that was not much of a problem as he got a lift at the bottom of the street. He had hardly seen Angela all week as he usually got home at around 10 o'clock and was that tired he went straight to bed. The long hours were taking their toll and he had only been there a week.

He quickly drank his tea in the hope that it would warm him up and had some toast to try and satisfy his constant hunger. He sat down and lit himself a cigarette and watched the time go by. He left the flat at six and walked into the cold winter's morning. He shivered as the icy wind cut through him. The streets were nearly empty at that time and this made him think that he was the only fool up and about at such an early hour. He waited at the usual place for Jim to pick him up. Jim had been there a lot longer than Steve and knew the ropes a lot better. He was late turning up and Steve had to stand around in the cold dark air.

A light brown Astra pulled up and Steve recognised it as Jim in the driving seat. "Are you fit?" Jim said as Steve got it.

"Just about, I think these hours are catching up on me."

"You'll get used to it just pace yourself. Take my example and you won't go too far wrong."

"But you're a joiner. You hang doors occasionally. I seem to spend most of my time filling skips."

"Well," Jim said laughing, "Each to their own I suppose. Lucky De Ville won't be on site today. Why not try and disappear for a couple of hours and get your head down."

"That doesn't sound a bad idea. So where's the boss off today then? It's not like him not to be looking over my shoulder."

"He's gone to price a job up over in Sligo. Anyway you should think it an honour that he's taking an interest in your work. A lot of bosses wouldn't do it you know."

"I think it's a bit early in the morning for your humour. Does he get a lot of jobs abroad then?"

"They've got a job starting over in Sweden in a couple of months. How would you like that?"

"Sounds good I could do with a holiday."

"Now it's your turn for humour is it," Jim said giving Steve a strange look that surprised him.

"Well," he said by way of an explanation, "I've never been abroad before."

With that Jim laughed loudly, "Believe me it's no holiday. You'll be away for a fortnight at a time working on average 15 hours a day. You won't have any time for sight-seeing."

"Surely you must be able to get out occasionally. You can't be working all the time."

"Oh no they let you have a little time for sleep. Well unless you're on a ghoster of course."

"A ghoster?"

"You work right through the night. We did 38 hours solid once. It was over in France and we were well behind."

"You've worked in France, now that's a place I would like to go. I've read so much about the place."

"Well I actually did manage to go round Paris on that trip. It killed me the next morning though. I got back to base at 7.15 and set the alarm for 7.30. Fifteen minutes sleep, not bad eh."

"Jesus, what have I let myself in for?"

“You'll get used to it. Besides you get an extra pound an hour when you work abroad.”

“That reminds me I've got a wage review next week.”

“They tell you that did they?” Jim said laughing.

“Yes, they started me off at £4.50 an hour and said that they would see what I could do and get paid accordingly. Anything up to six quid in fact.”

“There should be a law against that,” Jim said shaking his head, “Don't hold your breath.”

“Well four fifty would do me anyway its good money.”(Quite an old story and the rate wasn't that good either)

“It sounds good until you look at it more closely.”

“How do you mean?” Steve said with more than a hint of confusion.

“Well you must have clocked up the same number of hours as me.”

“Well sixty so far. Not bad for four days.”

“You don't get overtime rates here,” Steve still looked confused so Jim carried on, “Most firms pay time and a half after forty hours and double time after sixty. It's all a flat rate here. After forty hours then your rate in real terms actually goes down to £3 and after sixty it's only worth £2.25.”

“Oh I've never thought about it before. He told me it was a flat rate at the interview but I did not really understand what he was on about.”

“I know. You were more concerned about getting a job than anything else. It happens to us all. Were you unemployed long?”

“About 8 months. I had big plans from this job.”

“Me and you both Stevie lad. Get a nice little deposit for a house, was that the plan?”

“You must be psychic, how did you know that?”

“Just an educated guess I've seen it all before. Many people have come to work here thinking the same as you. He's a very clever man De Ville is.”

“No I'm just a sucker. How did I let him fool me like that?”

“You were just that relieved that you had a job, like many before and many to come. Just get your head down for a couple of hours.”

“I've got a better idea. Why don't I just give in my notice and tell them to stick the job.”

“I'm sure the dole would like that. They go to all that trouble to set you up in a good job and you just walk out.”

“That's their problem. What are they going to do about it?”

“Refuse you dole for a start.”

“Well I'll just go out and get another job.”

“When do you get time to look you're either here or sleeping? Are you in at the weekend by the way?”

“Not if I can help it. I'm starting to forget what Angela looks like. How do you manage, you must never see your missus.”

“I'm divorced actually. Mind you I rarely get to see my kids that can be a bit hard sometimes.”

“How did you manage to get into this situation, I mean you're a joiner I've heard that firms are crying out for them. You could go to anyone of them.”

“I like it here. Alright the hours are long but I pace myself. You said it yourself I just hang the occasional door. He pays by the hour and not by the work rate and that suits me down to the ground.”

“You get on with De Ville then?” Steve said changing the subject.

“I tend to keep out of his way when I can he's a bit of a character. I think he's a bit paranoid myself.”

“Sorry, in what way?”

“Have you seen the security around the yard, he's got cameras everywhere. Heat detectors as you come through the main gates and he's also got microphones everywhere.”

“What. I hadn't noticed. I didn't think that there was anything of any real value in the yard.”

“Well only to Steptoe maybe,” and laughed loudly, “He sneaks up around the back and checks to make sure that you are working as well. I remember Dave saw him once hiding behind the door and looking through the crack. He can be a bit funny sometimes.”

“It sounds like it,” Steve said laughing, “Mind you all that money and he's still not happy that makes me feel a lot better.”

“You don't know the half of it. He went over to Ireland on the sly to check up on the lads. They did not even know he was there. He actually phoned Trev the plumber to ask him where he was even though he could see him. Mind you he loves that mobile phone it seems to be glued to his ear, he's never off it. He likes all the lads to have them so he can get in touch with them at anytime.”

“I suppose when you work all those hours it's a handy thing to have. I mean let's be honest when you are never home, what's the point of having a normal one?”

“So,” Jim said laughing, “I suppose you'll be getting one next?”

“Not me, he might wake me up when I am asleep somewhere.”

“Going to try and get a couple of hours in. I don't blame you. You look a bit tired now and we haven't started yet.”

“I know. It's starting to catch up on me a little now. I might try and get my head down on the way to the job as well.”

“Good thinking, most of the lads do the same. So how long do you think you'll last?”

“Well,” Steve said but without much conviction, “I'll try and stick it as long as I can. I mean the money does mount up but that's because I have no time to spend it.”

As they pulled up to the main gate Jim said “Well it won't be so bad today after all it's Poets day.”

“Poet's day, what's that?”

“Piss off early tomorrows Saturday,” Jim said laughing.

17 The Dream

Torrential rain whipped and bounced off Mary's car, she could barely see ten feet in front of her but she had to go on. She had an important meeting and she knew that she could not be late. She looked hard into the darkness to see if there were any obstacles in her way as the strong gale force winds had done a lot of damage. A small tree lay uprooted to the left of her but it had not fell across her path so she could carry on her way. The rain hit the car with such velocity that she half expected it to dent the thin metal shell that surrounded her. Her windscreen wipers could not hope to cope with such copious amounts of water thrust upon them and proved useless. Mary knew that she had to slow down but also knew that she did not have much time to spare so she put her faith in luck and carried on. The road split into a fork and she took the left hand side. She was on a fairly thin country road with high hedges either side that twisted sharply into a series of double bends. On a clear day it was heavy driving but with the rain it was almost impossible. She skirted the hedge to the left as she nearly lost control on a blind bend. Water covered the low lying road and splashed up the side of her car as she drove through it. The dirty mud ridden water covered her wind screen and she drove straight into a fallen tree that had blocked the road just past the blind bend. She had had no time to break as she had not seen the tree until she was upon it. She jerked forward on impact but her seat belt kept her from doing any real damage to herself. She cursed herself for her misfortune and tried to decide what to do next.

The rain had slowed down considerably by now but the damage had already been done. The front end had major problems and she knew that she was wasting her time even trying to drive it. She got out the car and took a closer look. The rain had completely stopped by now but she knew that she had no chance of getting to her appointment. She looked at her watch and then looked at her front axle and sighed in despair. She did not really know what to do next as there was not much chance of seeing a passing motorist and that was even on a clear day. Nobody in their right mind would be out on a day like this she thought to herself with a sardonic smile. The sound of horse's hooves made her change her mind.

She quickly turned and looked down the road which she had come down and could not believe what she saw. It was a man dressed as a knight trotting up to her on horseback. The horse was adorned in a decorated white sheet with the knight's logo embellishing the edges. The knight had his shield draped over his left arm and threw it onto the road as he approached. Mary could do nothing only stand in awe at the sight and as he got up to her he lifted her up with the ease of lifting a child and jumped over the tree that was blocking the road. She was that enthralled that she could not speak as they galloped off down the country lane. The hedges just seemed to zoom past as she held on tightly to the knight's strong arms. The knight spoke and said, "We can't have you being late Mary it's time to get up now."

It sounded like her mother's voice and Mary gradually awoke to find out it was just a dream. She looked at her mother half asleep but aware of her surroundings and said, "How's the car?" "What? It's still in the garage. Breakfast is ready Mary, get up now. You don't want to be late for the interview now do you?"

Mary stretched herself and yawned, "That was a strange dream, it seemed so real."

"Tell me about it over breakfast," her mother said with a smile, "You want to get there in plenty of time Mary."

Mary got up, had a wash and got dressed and joined her mother for breakfast. She was a little nervous about the job interview as she felt that it really was a job she wanted to do. All her life she had wanted to be a social worker as she felt that it would be doing something to help the community. It was her final interview today, the culmination of all her efforts and so she was drinking her coffee with very mixed emotions. Her mother saw this and tried to calm her down by saying, "You'll do fine Mary don't worry about it." She then asked her to tell her about the dream hoping that it would get her mind of the interview for a while. Mary went on to relate the tale and her mother listened patiently until she had finished. She thought for a while and then a smile came

across her face as it she understood it.

"It was just nerves," She said, "You think that something's going to go wrong that's all. Amazing things really aren't they dreams, "and she smiled to herself remembering one that used to haunt her at one time, "I used to have this one once you know. It was a really strange one. It worried me at the time."

"Did you," Mary said. She did not really talk to her mother on that level. It was like the mother daughter relationship had started to evolve into a friendship. Maybe her mother had realised that she had grew up now and was ready enough to take her place in the adult world, "What was it all about?"

"I was always being chased. I don't know who by though I just knew that somebody was after me. I would try and climb a flight of stairs to get out of the way but it seemed I was too weak. Every step became an ordeal. Yes it certainly was a strange dream."

Mary's interest had been aroused so she said, "What happened in the end, did you get away?"

"I used to wake up long before I ever found out. I suppose it became too frightening for me."

"Did you ever find out what it meant?" Mary asked. She had read that dreams sometimes had hidden messages but did not really know too much about it.

"Oh yes. In fact when I did find out what it meant it stopped."

"So what did it mean?"

"I guess it was just telling me to get out of the relationship with David. We were not going anywhere you see. Oh he was a good father to you but as a husband he had a lot to answer for."

"I thought that you left him because he had an affair?"

"That was just the icing on the cake; things had long lost their appeal well before I found out about the affair. Maybe the affair had been going on for a long time and he had just lost interest because of it. I did not feel too concerned to ask him. By the time I had found out the relationship had long since gone past the point of no return."

"But how did the dream fit in to that?"

"The unhappiness was what was chasing me I could not get away from it as it was sapping my strength. The stairs I suppose would be my relationship with David as he was making it hard work for me to be happy with his indifference towards me and that caused the unhappiness that was actually chasing me. You see there are a lot of things that go into a dream."

"You worked all that out just from a dream," Mary said looking at her mother in a new light,

"That's amazing and do you think my dream was just a little nervousness because of the interview?"

"Yes, you were thinking if it can go wrong it will. You expected the worse weather imaginable and the car to go wrong so you could not make the interview."

"What about the knight though, after all he did save me. We could have probably got to the interview in time if I had not woken up. What was that all about?"

Her mother thought for a while and said, "Now that's a tricky one. Some of the dreams symbols are only personal to you. Maybe you were looking for a knight in shining armour to come and save you. Maybe you are just a romantic at heart only you can answer that one."

Mary thought for a while before she said, "Well who knows. Mind you I'll set off ten minutes earlier just in case anything should go wrong. The car has been playing up a little lately."

"I thought that Steve had, had a look at it. He said that it was running alright. It might be a good idea to go early though as it makes a good impression."

Mary finished her breakfast and checked that she had everything that she thought she would need for the interview. Her mother wished her luck as she left the house and got the car out of the garage. The car had seen better days but it started first time much to Mary's surprise. She drove it out the garage and shutting the door behind her went on her way. There was not a cloud in the sky as she embarked on her ten mile journey and she started to think herself foolish at worrying over nothing. After around five minutes though she started to worry as the car seemed to be losing its power and with another quarter of a mile the battery was completely flat and she was left stranded in a small

village. A tall man in his mid twenties came over to see if he could be of any help and got Mary to open the bonnet.

"It's alright," he said, "It's a loose wire to the battery that's all. I'll tighten it up and get the jump leads from my car. It won't be too long."

"Thanks," Mary said relieved, "That must have been my brother Steve he was having a look at it yesterday."

"Easily done. You were lucky it happened here though and not on a country lane." He tightened the connection and put the jump leads on. Mary's car was brought back to life and she thanked him again. They talked awhile as Mary quite liked him and besides she had plenty of time to get to the interview now. He was an unassuming man and this appealed to Mary. They were soon talking together as old friends. It was with reluctance that she had to leave him but they arranged to meet later that day. As she left she asked him his name. "Andy," he said, "Andy Knight."

18. That Gentle Touch

Jeremy Thomas was proud of his prowess as a pickpocket. Looking at him you would not think that he had the gentle touch. An overweight balding middle aged man he would not have looked out of place sitting behind the desk of a bank. His normal haunts had been fairgrounds and shopping precincts in fact anywhere where large crowds were known to gather. He saw them as easy pickings and was in his element in all the hustle and bustle. Times were changing though as ready cash was being superseded by plastic and even he was starting to feel the strain. He was looking for new outlets to increase his dwindling income and he scanned the local newspaper in search of local car boot sales. There was nothing of any real interest in the What's On section but he found himself being drawn towards a strange title. It read 'How would you like to feel the gentle touch?' This intrigued him more than a little so he read on. 'Come and try healing Nature's way. Are you frustrated with our National Health Service? There is an alternative. Phone Andy's Healing Joint and watch Nature take its course. Our treatment starts at £20 a session.'

He thought about the advert although not in a professional manner. His knee had been playing him up recently and his G.P had not been very helpful. He had put it down to old age and Jeremy's weight. As Jeremy was only 55 he found it insulting to be called old and fat and told the doctor the same. He wrote the adverts phone number down with the intention of ringing it later that evening.

He scanned the newspaper again but nothing of any real interest took his fancy. He had always been an ideas man but just recently they seemed to be running out. After around half an hour he gave up and tossed the newspaper idly to the floor. He went into the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea and think some more about the advert. He reasoned that he had nothing to lose as it was only £20 so bringing the tea with him went back into the living room and dialed the number.

After five rings a man answered, "Hello Andy's Healing Joint, how may I help you?"

Jeremy was a little put off on hearing a man's voice but nevertheless went through with it, "Er I saw saw your advert in the paper and thought that I would give it a try. Could you tell me a little more about it?"

"That could be difficult you see we cover a lot of different aspects, reflexology, acupuncture and acupressure, Reiki natural healing. I would really need to know a little bit about your problem."

"Well it's my knee; it's been giving me a lot of grief recently. I've been to the doctors but he was no use. I thought that I might try an alternative way."

"Could you tell me a little more? What sort of pain for example, is it sharp or dull, that kind of thing."

"Well I would say that it was more of a dull pain really. It gets worse when I'm lying down. It is almost as if my legs were hollow."

The voice on the other end went quiet for a while as if the man was pondering on Jeremy's predicament then said, "It sounds like you have an energy blockage. How would you feel about acupuncture?"

"No," Jeremy said almost straight away, "I've heard about that it's sticking needles in isn't it? I'm not into needles they're painful, what else have you got?"

"Well I could try acupressure, that's a form of massage."

"I'm not sure about that," Jeremy said not really liking the idea of being massaged by a man,

"What's this reflexology, would that be any good for my knee?"

"Oh yes they all work well. Reflexology involved manipulating points of the feet to free the blocked meridians that cause the pain."

"Oh," Jeremy said not really understanding, "I'm not really sure about that one either my feet are very sensitive. What's that gentle touch thing you mentioned all about?"

"Oh Reiki, that's something that has to be experienced rather than talked about. It involves harnessing the Universal Energies and is a very powerful remedy."

"Er is it painful?"

"No but it might leave you a little shaken for a while."

“That sounds alright, when will you be able to fit me in?”

“Tomorrow afternoon at three but if that's not convenient the next free space is a week on Thursday at one.”

“Tomorrow sounds good to me. Where are you based at?”

“In the High Street number 22. What name is it?”

“Pringle,” Jeremy said out of force of habit, “David Pringle, so I'll see you tomorrow then.”

Jeremy took a drink and thought awhile about what the man had said. It all sounded far-fetched to him. Meridians and Universal Energies it all meant nothing to him. He had seen programs on T.V. about alternative medicine but they never seemed to go into too much depth. He thought a little more about his knee. Maybe it would work; he had nothing to lose just as long as it was not painful. Jeremy went to bed early but found it hard to sleep. As if on cue his leg was playing up with a vengeance. It felt like it was a dam and this led Jeremy to believe that perhaps it was blocked energies. He kicked his leg out to try and free the pain but it was no use. The pain went on unabated but eventually he did manage to succumb to sleep.

He woke up about 9.30 the next morning which was unusual for him as he normally got up before eight. He put it down to his sleepless night and quickly got dressed. He went downstairs and made himself a little breakfast and sat down in front of the T.V. He had nothing else planned that day as the slack period after Christmas meant he could take it easy until the January Sales. There was not much on the television so the time passed slowly but eventually he found himself walking the short distance to the High Street. The crowded streets would have made him a tidy sum but his mind was elsewhere. As he got to number 22 he knocked loudly on the front door. After a short time a small bespectacled man in his mid twenties opened it and said, “Mr. Pringle?” Jeremy nodded and the man invited him in. He followed him into a large plush office and sat down in a large leather chair. ‘He must be good’ he thought to himself as he looked around the certificates and the luxury of his surroundings.

“Well Mr. Pringle,” the man said as he shook his hand, “My name is Andy Talbot and you are here about your knee I believe.”

“Yes that's right. I thought that I would give it a try.”

“Reiki isn't it,” He said checking his notes, “That will be £20 for a half hour session.”

“Oh,” Jeremy said taken aback by the abruptness of Andy's business manner. He took out his wallet and gave him a £20. Jeremy's eyes lit up when he saw the size of Andy's wallet.

“So,” Andy said as he put the wallet away, “Do you know much about alternative medicine?”

“No not really, only what I've seen on T.V.”

“Well not to worry. Would you like to lie down on the bench and we can begin.”

“Oh, don't you want to know a little more about my knee?”

“No, think of Reiki as a full service if you like.”

Jeremy lay on the bench and Andy started the treatment. He put his hands on Jeremy's head with the fingers touching at the crown and palms facing outwards. Jeremy relaxed and felt a strange sensation. It was like he was a battery and being charged. He felt his stomach rise slightly and a very small feeling of sickness in his solar plexus. It was a good feeling and Jeremy was content to feel the new sensation. The hands gently glided down and stopped with the fingers resting over his eyes and palms resting on his cheekbones. The electricity that had left the palm started to bounce around Jeremy's head leaving a cooling influence in his path. He felt strangely elated by this; it was like he could just float off.

The fingers turned towards the back of his neck using the palms as a pivot and the palms went down until the fingers touched at the base of the neck. The electric energies seemed to massage his head and rolled around to his pleasure. The fingers moved again with the palms still as pivots and rested over Jeremy's throat. He felt more energies come in and a slight lump in his throat. The lump seemed to get smaller as the energies flowed around it and to every part of his body. He felt his knee throb and it was quite painful but he did not mind. The hands slid down and rested on Jeremy's

heart and this seemed to send a stronger more relaxing form of energy around his body. He felt even lighter when the hands moved down to his solar plexus. It felt to him like he was going to take off. The throbbing around his knees had disappeared and he felt a strange tingle of relief. The hands moved down to his abdomen area and the energy seemed to break off into pockets. It seemed to concentrate around the bottom of his spine where he had had trouble before and around his shoulder where he had once trapped a nerve. He had never felt such a strange sensation but he was that taken in by it that it just seemed natural. The hands moved down to his knees and he felt the energies lesson and fade away.

“How does that feel?” Andy said as Jeremy came back down to Earth.

“I don't know,” Jeremy answered sitting up and putting his legs on the floor, “Strange.”

“I told you that it had to be experienced rather than talked about.”

As Jeremy got up his legs felt funny and he stumbled forward into Andy. “Sorry,” he said, “I think I lost my legs for a moment.”

“That will soon pass,” Andy said catching him, “You've just stirred some energies that's all.”

Jeremy sat back on the bench and waited for his legs to settle. He felt a lot better and it seemed to be all over and not just his knee. “I don't know how to thank you,” He said getting up and shaking Andy's hand, “I think that I'll try that again sometime. My knee feels a lot better.” Jeremy said goodbye and walked back down the busy street. He had a broad smile on his face as he opened and emptied Andy's wallet.

19. The Lion's Pen.

John Sinclair thought of himself as the last great white hunter. He had been brought up on tales of heroism and adventure which usually ended up with the head of some poor unfortunate animal whose only crime was being in the wrong place and the wrong time. He was a man who had more money than sense and who could easily afford to pay someone to do his own hunting. John was not like that though, he was that arrogant that even others of his own kind noticed. He had got into big game hunting as he had thought it would be a good idea to adorn his large stately home with the heads of dead animals that he had shot in far off places and besides it made for some interesting conversation at his numerous dinner parties. His walls were adorned with tigers, antelopes bears and all sorts of large and exotic creatures. There was one thing that he longed to finish his ensemble with though and that was a lion. He felt that the king of the jungle would look good in his place as he felt himself king of all he surveyed. He used to travel to Africa frequently and was often found on safari.

Today was a special day though. He was hunting in Kenya and had heard rumours about a giant lion that was too clever to be caught and this had only made him want it even more. He felt that it was a challenge even though he had guns and a large party of bearers to carry his wares. The dense heat had started to take its toll on him and he had started to sweat profusely. They had not seen sight or sound of the lion although they had been trekking for a long time and had got deeper and deeper into the jungle. The flora was dense but the natives made short work of it with their machetes. He had seen countless other animals giraffes, elephants, rhinos but his mind was set on a lion and they were poor substitutes. The day was turning into night and the natives were getting restless. They saw the lion as some sort of god and it had cost him a lot of money just to get them to work for him. As the chorus of the day turned into the chorus of the night they seemed more on edge but John just put it down to barbaric superstition.

A large roar echoed in the distance and the murmuring of his staff turned into one of panic.

"It's no good, bad spirit sir. He is angry with us, we must go now."

"Don't be silly," John snapped angrily, "It's only a lion and I have guns."

"No good," the head man repeated, "For bullets cannot harm him. My people are scared and want to go now. They fear him for he is an evil spirit."

"You've been paid to do a job," John said angrily, "And by George you will do it." He pointed the gun at the head man who backed off. The roar came out again and then it started. The bearers at the edge of the group ran leaving their loads behind them. It set off a deluge and soon John found himself alone with nobody to carry his excess baggage. He looked around at where the natives had once been and cursed their superstitions. What was he going to do now? How would he get all his gear home for a start? The roar erupted again but this time it sounded a lot closer. All thoughts of baggage became minor as his one thought was the lion. He cocked his gun and went forward in the crouching position. It was dark and he could hardly see in front of him but that did not concern him. He was in his element now. It was him against the lion, there would only be one winner and he intended it to be him. He veered towards where he had last heard the noise but found it hard going now as the trail had not been cleared for him. Time after time he was hit in the face by stray branches but still he carried on into the dark in the hope of doing battle with the king of the jungle. He had heard that this lion was a lot bigger than most but he knew how the natives were liable to exaggerate if they thought there might be more money in it for them. The roar came back once again but this time it seemed to be coming from behind him. He was surprised and wondered how it could be. It was like the lion knew where he was and was playing with him. He turned around and made his way back to where he had come from. The chorus of noises around him seemed to be baiting him as if the whole jungle was against him but he carried on, his arrogance making him feel he was above it all. He got into a small clearing and then it happened. The ground just gave way underneath him and he found himself in a large pit that must have been dug by some other hunter in the pursuit of prey. The hole was at least twelve feet deep and had a sheer face that made it

impossible to climb. He was stuck miles from anywhere with not much possibility of being found as it was that far off the beaten track. The jungle seemed to get more sinister as he looked up from his open prison cell. He heard noises above but they were only small animals scampering about their nightly business blissfully unaware that he was beneath them. He wanted to call for help but he knew that it would be in vain and besides he might attract the attention of some beast that would see him as an easy meal. He had dropped his gun when he fell in and it lay somewhere on the ground above him and out of his reach.

The night wore on and after what seemed like hours but was probably only one he heard a loud roar. This frightened him now as he was alone and isolated and the roar had come from very close quarters. He looked up and his heckles rose. Cold sweat fell down his back. It was enormous, the biggest lion's head that he had ever seen and it was looking straight down at him. He backed into a corner and tried to look back as defiantly as he possibly could but his stiff upper lip had started to quiver. His knees shook wildly together and spread all the way up his back. The lion just looked down in what John guessed as a look of contempt and glee. John waited for it to pounce but it just waited looking down with disdain as if it had caught him with such ease that it had not been much sport. John knew that look. He had used it on many occasions because when the thrill of the hunt had gone the killing was a bit of a let-down. The lion held its ground and surveyed John's every move. It was like it could understand what he was thinking and could sense his fear. After ten minutes it turned and left John alone with his thoughts.

The night turned to day and it was the next orchestra's turn to play. The morning heat became intense and John felt sweat leave his body from every pore. He was soaked and getting a little dehydrated now. His hunger had come to the fore and his stomach rumbled loudly as he looked above him. All he could see was the sky but it was a better view than the earth that surrounded him. He listened out for noise but heard nothing. He had a feeling that the natives would be back to find out what happened to him and he waited patiently as they were his only hope. The morning turned to afternoon and the intense heat became a furnace in his prison pit. There had been no sign of life and John had nearly completely given up hope of being rescued. The afternoon turned to evening and John lay there with most of his life lost. The lion's head returned and looked down at him. He was not so afraid now. Perhaps it would be a blessing to be killed by the lion because it would be a lot faster than the process of death he was going through at the moment. He looked up at the lion and it seemed to be communicating with him. It was not verbal but more on a telepathic length. Maybe it was the lack of food or the intense heat but he felt that the lion was saying, "Why have you come into my domain to harm me? Why did you not listen to your fellow man?"

John had never thought of the natives as his fellow man only some sort of sub species that was meant to be used and abused for his personal gain. That did not make him a racist as he felt the same way about a lot of the white men that he met but he did not say that. "I have come to have a look at your world," He shouted, "I mean you no harm."

"If you mean me no harm," the lion seemed to be saying, "Why do you need to be carrying that fire stick? Your words are not the words of your actions."

John thought awhile. The lion seemed to have some sort of intelligence and it threw him for a while as he had not expected it. Eventually he said, "I carry this fire stick for my own protection because this jungle is a very dangerous place. I mean you no harm; I'm just having a look around your great domain."

"A very clever answer you must also be a king of your domain but I am wise to you for I can read your mind."

John went quiet for it was pointless to say anything else. He looked at the lion with an expression of surrender. The lion looked down at him but said nothing. After a while John said in a pleading voice, "Help me please I'm going to die."

"I'm afraid that, that is out of my hands for you have been trapped by your own kind a trap that was probably meant for me. Do you have irony by the way?"

“Finish me off then,” John pleaded, “I don't want to die this way it's too slow and painful. Put me out of my misery.”

“There is nothing I can do for if I come down how will I get back again? Your time has come so be patient and it will soon be over.” With that the lion's head disappeared from John's vision and he let out a pitiful wail that echoed all around the jungle. “I can't die like this,” he shouted, “I don't deserve it, it's not fair.”

He went quiet when he heard a rustle above him. It was like something was being pushed through the dense coarse grass. Then he saw it. It was the barrel of his gun and it made its way further and further over the edge. More and more it came until it fell forward and landed by John's feet.

“Thanks,” he said softly to himself as he picked it up.

20. Blind Faith

Stella looked around the crowded pub. She wished that she had not made the arrangements now. How would she find him in all this mass of people? She had wanted to meet him in a public place but had not realised how public the place was. She would never find him in all that crowd. She had only a vague description from him on the phone and knowing the people who wrote into the lonely hearts column it was probably exaggerated. He seemed sincere on the phone though otherwise she would not have arranged to meet him. He said he was a Steel Erector and worked away occasionally. His description to her was that he was five feet ten, well built with mousy brown hair and blue eyes. Her description to him was a little exaggerated although not enough that he would not know her. She looked around but there was no one that matched his description. She knew she was early but reasoned that it was only ten minutes so if he was not already in then he would not be too long.

She went over to the bar and ordered a drink. It was a Bacardi and coke. She did not really drink but she felt left out standing in the pub on her own and besides a little Dutch courage would not go a miss. She had never answered an advert before but realised that at 35 she was not getting any younger. She had been married before but it did not work out. They just seemed to drift apart for no apparent reason and went their own way. Her ex husband Dave left town and the last she heard about him he was up in Scotland working on the oil rigs. The further away the better she thought as she took a drink from her glass. She went over to the table by the door hoping that she would recognise him straight away. She looked at her watch and saw there was five minutes to go. How time seemed to drag as she waited eagerly for him to appear. The minutes dragged on and at the appointed time a man entered the bar. He looked at Stella and seemed to recognise her almost immediately. "Stella," He said not quite sure of himself, "I used to go to school with you, remember me?"

Stella looked at the man and there was some sort of recognition, "I know your face but I'm afraid your name escapes me."

The man smiled and said, "I'm Mike, Mike Davidson. I was in your class for English."

She looked at him once again and total recognition came back. He had changed quite a lot but it was nearly twenty years since she had seen him so she could expect that. She used to have a bit of a crush on him when she was younger although he did not know that.

"Er so how are you doing, what brings you here?" Stella said. She was not sure if he was the man on the phone but she did not want to ask him. If he was not it could be quite embarrassing to Stella, he might think she was desperate or something.

"Oh I come here regularly, when I'm not working away that it."

"Oh really," Stella said, "What do you do?"

"Civil engineering," Mike said but Stella was none the wiser so he carried on, "Steel structures. I go all around the country, not a bad life really, I like traveling."

"So you are a Steel Erector, sounds like a good job. I'm a Nurse now."

"You must do some hours then, I hear that it's a dedicated job."

"Yes, you don't get much time to yourself."

"Is that why you answered the ad. then?" Mike said getting straight to the point.

Stella blushed a little and said, "One of the reasons, mind you I did not expect it to be you. In fact I was still not sure when I met you."

"That was one of my reasons too. With all the working away you don't actually get much time to do anything else."

"I thought that you would be out every night enjoying yourself. I've heard stories about all you gangs of men working away from home."

"That must be a different job to the one I'm on then," Mike said laughing, "By the time you have finished you are too tired to go out. Besides most of the places I stay are miles from anywhere so even if I wasn't tired I could not go out anyway."

"That sounds a hard job; it doesn't give you much of a life does it?"

"Oh it's only for a bit. The money's good and I don't get out much to spend it. I'm building up quite a nest egg. I'll be able to get a house of my own soon."

"Oh, you must live at home still then?"

"No, I've got a flat but it's only rented. I want something of my own now. Oh sorry, where's my manners would you like a drink?"

"Er yes go on I'll have a Bacardi and coke please."

Mike went to the bar and bought Stella a drink and got himself a pint of lager. He returned with them and sat beside her, "So what have you been doing since school?" he asked and Stella brought him up to date. He had used to be a friend of Dave's but they lost contact not long after they left school and Mike joined the army.

"So tell me," Stella said later on, "Why did you never get married?"

Mike thought for a while before he said, "Two reasons really. The first I suppose was that I never found the right woman. I know it sounds like a cliché but I spent the first few years in the army and then went into civil engineering. I was never around long enough to develop a relationship maybe but I never found her just the same."

"Oh so what was the other reason then?"

"I never felt financially secure enough. I came from quite a big family without a lot to go around. I didn't want my kids to go through the same. I've nearly got enough for a nice little house. I've even got my eye on one at the moment."

"Well that's an unusual way to go about it but I see your logic. Well what sort of woman are you after when you've got this house?"

Mike went quiet for a while before he said, "Someone like you actually. Some one very much like you in fact. You see at school I was mad about you but I was too shy to do anything about it."

"I never thought of you as a shy one," Stella said in disbelief.

"I'm not the same person now, the army gave me that confidence but I used to think the world of you."

Stella went quiet for a while. For some reason she was reluctant to tell him that she used to like him. She did not know why though for he was still a handsome man. Maybe it was because they were at school together and she felt a bit odd answering his advert. Eventually she thought better off it and said, "I used to have a crush on you but you did not seem to notice me."

"Oh I did," Mike said with a wistful smile, "More than you could ever have known. I used to like English just because I wanted to be near you. The innocence of youth eh."

"I think I'll need a little time for this one. I wasn't really expecting it."

"You have all the time in the world. I'm just glad that I've seen you again."

"Look why don't I give you a call when I'm ready. That would be the best bet wouldn't it?"

Mike thought for a while before he said, "That sounds like a don't call us we'll call you sort of thing."

"Oh no, I just need a little time that's all. I will definitely call you one way or the other."

Mike gave her his home phone number and had a look of disappointment as she left the pub.

Stella did not know what was the matter with her she liked him and she knew that he liked her so what was stopping her from being happy. She walked along the street in a world of her own. Her thoughts went back to him at school and how he and Dave used to be good friends. Maybe that was it she thought to herself. Maybe she thought he was like Dave, after all they did grow up together. No she reasoned it was not like that. He was nothing like Dave in fact if anything they were like chalk and cheese. Realisation hit her, it was the fact that she had knew him before. If it had been a stranger it would not have mattered so much. She felt a little uncomfortable that was all. She cursed herself for being so silly and made her way back to the pub. Unfortunately Mike had already gone by the time she got back. She looked around the pub but could not find him anywhere so with a heavy heart she decided to go home. She had to be up early for work next morning so maybe it was

a mixed blessing.

She decided that she would phone him the next evening after she had come back from work. She just hoped that he had not been called away on work. He would have told her anyway she reasoned. Her mind seemed to be creating problems for her that did not exist.

She slept well that night and woke up bright and early for work next day. She liked her job even if the hours were too long but her mind kept drifting back to Mike. Yes she decided she would give him a ring as soon as she got back. The day wore on very slowly as she eagerly awaited for home-time. She wished that she had not been so odd with him and she had fears that he might reject her. Eventually she did finish and she quickly walked the short distance to her home. She had decided to give him a ring straight away but when she got home she changed her mind. She decided to leave it until around six in case he was still at work. As six came she thought that she would have something to eat first so she made herself a sandwich. Six thirty came and she finally decided to ring him. She was nervous as she walked to the phone. Just as she got to it, it started to ring. She nervously picked it up and said, "Hello."

A voice said on the other end, "Hello Stella it's your mam, I just rang up for a chat."

It was 20 minutes before she had finished but it seemed a lot longer to Stella. She had visions that Mike might have gone out and met someone else. Stella picked up the phone and dialed Mike's number. "Hello," a voice said on the other end but it was not Mike's, it was the voice of a woman.

21. Use nor Ornament

Harry Jones looked around the cross between a scrap yard and rubbish tip that had once been his builder's yard. Old filing cabinets lay strewn all around the place. It was like the burial ground of redundant furniture. He was reluctant to get rid of it reasoning to himself that one day it might come in handy but looking at some of the scrap it would have taken some reasoning huge dents lay in the various rust infested equipment. He could not use them again and the scrap value was at an all time low, not that he would ever think of scrapping it that was. They just seemed to take up space amongst what should have been valuable ground for his building equipment. Pallet after pallet of old air conditioning stacked up on top of each other and grew with every project he completed. His main work was office renovation and as you can imagine he would never throw anything away. He could always find a use for it or if he could not he guessed that one day he would. The place had got dangerous as time went by for the pallets were stacked on each other in some very precarious order. It looked like it could fall at any moment and heaven help anyone who was underneath. He was a fairly affluent person though he could never get rid of the term nouveau riche that had taken to finding him. All his wealth and yet he would still scurt around like an old hobo looking for anything of value.

It was a cold winter's day and he was out in his yard surveying all that he possessed. The smell of rat sewage captured his nose but he was used to it by then so it left no real effect. He had just nearly tripped up on an old urinal that he had taken off another job about two years ago. He cursed himself for not being more careful as he had long since realised that he had to use a certain amount of caution when he was in the yard, it had long been in a desperate state. He heard a noise to the left of him and turned to see a rat scuttling around a box of old curtains. The rat did not seem to have any fear of him and carried on without taking much notice. He watched the rat for a while and wondered what sort of life he led. It must have been one of dirt and slime he reasoned and felt in a superior manner until something strange happened. The rat turned to him and said, "I wish you would sort this yard out. How am I supposed to go about my business in all this crap?"

Harry went quiet for a few seconds. He could not believe that a rat was speaking to him. He knew that rats could not talk and so he started to think that maybe he had been working too hard.

"What do you mean?" the rat said and this put another dimension to Harry's question of his sanity. The rat must be telepathic. He looked at the rat as if he was not hearing anything and said, "You are not there."

"Have it your own way," the rat said and scuttled off whistling the theme music to Steptoe and Son. Harry had to sit down for a minute to try and actually come to terms with what had happened. He had met a talking rat and not just that it was telepathic to boot. That was not possible and his mind could not come to terms with it without thinking that it had lost all sense of reason. Had he actually seen one or was it just the fact that he had been overdoing it a little. He thought about that and quickly dismissed the over working as he had long since gave up his tools and took a more managerial role in his firm. As his firm had expanded he had even left that to others and so spent a lot of time walking around jobs and generally getting in everyone's way. Now all that was left was his sanity and he knew that that was sound as he still kept a good business mind.

The sanity question did not last long so he went on to the next logical step. It was a talking rat. He did not know how it came to be like that but he had got past the question of its existence and now his avarice came to the fore. He could not even imagine the money making potential of a talking rat. It must be worth millions and all he had to do was find it again. That was when the first problem came about. Just how would he go about finding a talking rat? The rat itself did not look unusual nor did it have any characteristics that would make it stand out from any other rat that inhabited his yard. How would he go about finding it and how would he go about trying to trap it? He could not see it being trapped as if it was telepathic it must have some high form of intelligence. It would never be so foolish to fall to such simple traps that were available for Harry's disposal. He could not risk trapping it anyway as there might be a chance that it could come to harm.

He thought awhile longer and decided that drastic steps must be taken. He could not tell anyone about what he had seen as they would not believe him. He could not take the chance of them believing him anyway as it might stir them on to looking for it themselves. It had to be done by him alone and without raising undue suspicion. He looked around the yard and saw that it was self contained. There was no way that a rat could escape from it as it had been too well secured for Harry was a little paranoid about his assets. He would have to strip the yard that was all. He looked around the debris and knew that it was going to be a job and a half. He did not even know where to begin. It was like a cross between a battle field and a bomb explosion. He had to do it in some sort of logical manner but it looked like it would be too much for him. He shut the main doors to the yard, phoned through to the rubbish collection place and ordered a skip. He reasoned that it would take quite a few days to get it done properly but as it was the weekend tomorrow he would be able to give it a good start. He knew it would be worth it in the end so he did not mind. His thoughts turned to the excess of waste metal that had found a home amongst the debris and litter. He phoned the scrap yard but they were a little reluctant to come out and work over the weekend until he said that it was all free. They promised to come as soon as they could and in the meantime he reacquainted himself with the fork lift and started moving the metal that was on the pallets outside. He could not risk them coming onto his yard as they might kill it thinking it was just vermin. He had moved quite a few pallets and when they made their appearance they could not believe their luck. The skip was soon filled and they promised to be back as soon as possible. Whilst all this was happening the builder's skip arrived and was deposited in the yard. Most of the metal had been moved by then so the yard was starting to look like it might actually be a builder's yard. He had checked the yard and cleared a space in the far corner and started moving the palletted bricks and slabs there. The day was getting dark by then and he had to finish. He could not risk working in the dark because he might actually run the rat over himself.

It was with a very tired heart that he went back to his house. His wife had his dinner already made and laid out on the table when he arrived so he sat and quietly ate it. They had been going through quite a bad time recently and were more likely not on speaking terms than were. He finished his meal and went straight to bed without so much of a word spoken between them.

Saturday morning seemed to come quickly around as his tiredness had meant that he fell straight to sleep. He woke up with a tired body but high hope that he might find the rat that day. All the rusty iron had gone and now it was just the debris. He would have to be very careful when he cleared this because it would more than likely be amongst it that he would find the rat. He got down to the clearance and to him in his weak body and pampered state it was very hard work. It took him hours to clear enough rubble to fill a skip and even then it did not make much of an impression on the other rubbish that lay around it. He managed to fill another one but now only the thought of finding the rat kept him going. His strength was waning and sweat poured from everywhere possible. The day dragged slowly and he finally filled another skip. He had to pay extra for the firm to bring him one the next day as they did not usually work on a Sunday. He fell straight to sleep and did not even have the strength to have a meal.

Sunday saw him up at first light and working through the cold windy day. He made slight progress as his hands were starting to acquire blisters and this made it even harder to carry the hard unforgiving rubble. He finished the first skip by about mid day and waited for the next one to arrive. He looked around the place but still he knew that he had a lot to do. He would not have time to completely finish it and would have to carry on Monday. It was a sad and tired Harry that went to bed that night with more than just a curse on his lips for the elusive rat.

Monday morning came around and two of his workers were looking around his yard. "I don't believe it," Dave Johns said, "It looks like I owe you a tenner," and put his hand in his pocket. "I told you that he was greedy," Steve Mellor said but it sounded like it came from behind Dave. Dave looked around quickly and then turned and said, "I wish you would not do that it gets me every time. How did you know what he was thinking anyway?"

“I'm telepathic, didn't you know?”

“Yes right,” Dave said unsure of himself.

“Have it your own way,” Steve said and walked off.

22. The Wronged Man

Peter Grimsby sat upon the thin sheeted bed and counted the bricks on the white washed brick wall in his prison cell. Boredom drove him to do this but what drove him to be in this predicament was another story. He had been out on the town earlier that day and had had rather too much to drink. He had met up with his friends John Tipper and Paul Smith in their local at mid day and started their celebration. The Three Horse Shoes was just another small pub that attracted their custom from the local area. It had been done out in the old style of wooden beams and a large open fireplace. Peter had been enjoying a quiet game of pool with Paul and waiting for John to arrive. He was always late but they did not mind as they were playing for a pound a pocket and their concentration was on the game. He arrived at one and bought the round in. "Alright," John said, "Sorry I'm late I had a bit of trouble with the old girl."

They knew that he was talking about his wife Sarah as he was always having a bit of trouble with the old girl. "What's up," Paul said, "Didn't she want you to come out again?"

"Every week it's the same I mean it's not as if I go out every night. One day a week is all I ask, can you believe it?"

As Peter and Paul were not married they thought it a bit of a joke. "Is that a thumb print on your head?" Peter said pretending to look at the top of John's head.

"Well I'm here aren't I? Let's get down to some serious drinking I feel like a few today."

He drank his pint very quickly and was soon at the bar waiting for the next round whilst the others were only half way down theirs. "Whose round is?" John said holding out his empty glass, "You could die of thirst in here."

"Take your time John," Paul said, "We've got all day you know."

"What's the matter Paul," John said in a mocking tone, "Can't you take the pace. I thought we were out for a good time today after all it is the weekend and I've put some hours in this week."

Paul finished his drink and got the next round in. John drank his next one slightly slower but still at a rapid rate. He seemed to be different than normal. It was as if he had something on his mind. The others said nothing though and as the drink flowed he mellowed out a bit. Peter was losing heavily at pool and was down about £20 by the time last orders were called at 3 o' clock.

"We going into town then?" Paul said as he finished his drink, "We could give the Royal Oak a try; I hear it's open all day."

"Sounds good to me," John said emptying the rest of his glass, "If we hurry we can catch the bus."

Peter finished the dregs of his pint and followed them both out into the warm summer's day. The bus was just pulling up to the stop as they got there and so they hopped on and went upstairs after paying their fares. John was unusually quiet but the others said nothing as they traveled the short distance into town. It was like he had a lot on his mind still and when he was not drinking it came back to haunt him. Paul was half drunk by now as he was not used to drinking so quickly and just looked out of the window and watched the world go by. It took about ten minutes to get into town and during all that time hardly a word was spoken between them. Peter had guessed that there was something wrong but said nothing. Maybe it was that he had an inkling that John and his wife had had a row again and he did not want to have to hear all the grizzly details. The bus pulled up at the stop outside the pub and they all got off. The Royal Oak was a bit of a dive that seemed to attract most of the drunks and derelicts of the town but as the beer was good Peter did not mind. He was looking forward to a good session and did not want to let any of John's marriage problems get in the way.

"Three pints of lager," Peter said to the pretty barmaid that smiled when they entered the place.

They were quickly served and the first pint went down just as quick. John got the next one and Peter went to the juke box to see what was on. He put some records on and went back to the pool table where Paul and John were now standing. They were waiting for two lads in their late teens to finish and John was getting impatient. Paul was staggering heavily by now and just going with the flow as John started to make offensive comments about their lack of pool playing ability. The youths

ignored him but the comments carried on and got more and more personal. In the end they just finished their game and walked out.

“What was all that about?” Peter said to John after they had left, “They weren't doing you any harm.”

“What's up with you,” John snapped, “I was only having a laugh, where's your sense of humour?” “Have it your own way but if you want to go out and cause trouble you're on your own. I'm just after a quiet day out.”

John said nothing as he was a bit of a coward when it came down to it. He was one of those people who would not say boo to a goose until he had, had a few drinks and then after that he could take on the world. John set the table up and Paul struggled to get off the chair that he had sat on to try and clear his head. He was well away by now and Peter thought it was going to be an interesting day to say the least.

“Pound a man Paul,” John said chalking the cue and Paul was well up for it. They took the break and John found himself on a winning streak. About halfway through the game Paul had to disappear to the toilet for a few minutes and when he came back the game was over. They set the table again and the outcome was much the same. Paul's winnings were quickly disappearing. He was far too drunk to play and John seemed to know this. He was egging him on for another game but this time Paul had lost enough to realise.

“Go on,” John said, “Have another game, what's the matter with you. Can't you handle your beer?” and laughed. He was playing Paul like a fish and it was starting to work. He got his money out and set the table once more.

“Let's make it interesting,” John said, “What about £20 a game. You'll be able to make up what you lost.”

Paul was not sure about this as he would be nearly out of money if he lost but John urged him on and so he agreed. The game was nearly over as soon as it began but John did not have it his own way. Paul just seemed to come into his own and wiped the floor with him. John had six balls left and a very puzzled expression on his face.

Peter could sense the agitation in John's voice as he said, “You were lucky that time, do you want to go again?”

Paul was a little reluctant as he was getting a little bored with pool and besides he had enough money to have a really good night out. “Not this time it seems like I've been on it all day.”

“Go on,” John said his voice getting more agitated, “Forty quid all or nothing, money on the table.”

“No, not me I can't afford to lose that sort of money.”

“What's the matter with you,” John said his temper was now starting to rise, “You've got to give me a chance to win it back.”

“I told you,” Paul said getting angry himself, “I can't afford to lose that sort of money.”

On seeing Paul's temper John's subsided slightly, “Well what about £20 then. You'll still have enough for a good night out if you lose and besides the way you beat me the last game it should not be much of a problem.”

Paul thought awhile about it. John had played on his greed and he fell into the trap, “Alright then, one last game and that's your lot.”

John set them up and Peter went back to the juke box to put some more records on. The pub was unusually empty with only a handful of people in there. He ordered another round of drinks at the bar and by the time he had done all that the game was well under way.

John was ahead but only slightly as he had three balls on the table and Paul had four. He took a long shot and put it into the bottom pocket, “That's how you do it,” He laughed and said in a semi mocking voice, “You may as well sit down now as I don't think you'll be getting another shot,” His arrogance was short lived as he missed the next shot by a mile. Paul got to the table and put two down before he missed and left the third one blocking the top right hand pocket.

“Got you this time,” John said as he lined up his first shot, “Just like candy from a baby.” He put the

first one into the middle bag and set himself up for the next one, a long shot to the left hand middle bag that only just went in. John was positively buzzing as he lined up his last colour, "Looks like it's all over bar the shouting," He said. His last ball went in but he found himself out of position on the black.

"Looks like you've got yourself a bit of a pressure shot there John," Paul said and picked his cue back up.

John took his shot and nearly cut the black in. He stamped his foot in anger at just how close it was,

"Never mind I'll get it with my next shot."

"What makes you think you'll be having one," Paul said as he put down the ball that was covering the right hand pocket. His last colour went down just as quick and Paul found himself on the black.

The black went easily in and Paul smiled and put his hand on the kerb of the table to pick up his newly won money. Out of the blue and without provocation John swung the cue down and it connected with Paul's wrist. The sound of bone on wood echoed and Paul was felled with another swing but this time to his head. Peter swung into action but it was too late. John fell to the floor as Peter's fist connected with his chin and landed on top of Paul. Within seconds the place was swarming with police and Peter found himself being dragged into the back of a white Maria and charged with affray. The perfect end to a perfect day.

23. The New Age Traveler

Brian Haynes came from devout parentage and had started reading from the Bible from a very early age. He did not follow his parents' orthodox views but one passage had a profound effect on him, one that would stay with him for the rest of his life. It was a passage that stated that St. Paul had preached in two different places at the same time although they were miles apart... He had often pondered on how an event like that could possibly be done. As time went by he took to reading material from other sources and came up with the phenomenon called astral traveling. He read heavily into it but could not get anywhere with it. His life moved on and he met his wife Mary at the place that he had chose to work. He never mentioned it to Mary as he felt foolish talking about such a supernatural event to someone as skeptical as her.

A cold morning saw Brian coming back from working the night shift and waking Mary up with a cup of tea. "Up and at em," He said as he kissed her on the cheek, "You don't want to be late for work."

Mary got up and yawned, "It's never been the same since they split us up," she said, "I never seem to see you anymore."

"I know, but it won't be for long. I'll be back on days in a fortnight and then things will be back to normal."

"I can't wait," Mary said smiling, "I miss snuggling up to you at night."

"Be patient. Do you still want me to pick you up after work?"

"If you don't mind. You must be very tired; you haven't had much sleep in the last two days."

"I'll be alright. One more night and I'll be finished for the week. Do you fancy doing anything at the weekend?"

"Just being with you, it will be a novelty. Are you going to get some sleep today?"

"Well I've got a few things to do but I should get a couple of hours in later. Anyway, what can I get you for breakfast?"

"Nothing too heavy, what about some boiled eggs on toast?"

"Sounds good to me I'll see you downstairs in a couple of minutes and hopefully it will be ready."

Brian went downstairs and put the water on the boil. He had a lot to do today and it seemed that he had not slept in two days. He was very tired but he knew that he would be able to catch up at the weekend. He put the eggs in when the water was boiling and put a couple of slices of bread in the toaster. By the time that the toast popped Mary was dressed and downstairs waiting.

He brought her breakfast in and she said, "Are you not having anything yourself?"

"No I'm not hungry at the moment. I'll get something a little later."

"I've noticed that you seem to be off your food lately," she said in a concerned tone, "Are you alright?"

"Oh yes don't worry about me as I usually get something when you are at work. My body clocks a bit funny since I started working nights."

"Oh that's alright then. I wouldn't like to think that you are not eating, it would worry me sick."

"No I'm alright. I tell you what, why don't we go out for a meal on Saturday night. I've heard that there is a good restaurant opened in the High Street."

"Yes why not it will make a change."

Mary quickly finished her breakfast and kissed Brian goodbye and left for work. He then went onto the business in hand. He was decorating the living room and that was the only time he could do it. The paper had already been stripped and he had painted the woodwork. He was halfway through the papering and expected to have it finished before he got a few hours sleep and picked Mary up. He had not eaten in two days because he had been that tired that he was not hungry though it was starting to tell with his body strength. He found it harder to lift weights that he once could pick up easily but he knew that a good sleep and the weekend would bring his appetite back.

He mixed the paste and quickly had the first sheet up. He looked at the time and saw that it was still, only seven. He reckoned to be finished by ten that would give him five hours before he had to

get up and fetch Mary from work. The Postman dropped two letters through the door at nine and Brian was nearly finished so he went to see what was in them. The first one was the Gas Bill so he put it on the mantle-piece as an accompaniment to the electric. The second one was about a holiday that could be won in Egypt but he just glanced at it awhile before throwing it in the bin. He decided to make himself a cup of tea before carrying on and finishing the job. He had only two more drops to do so the room looked well as he sat on the chair admiring it as he drank his tea. The last two drops were done and he decided to get some sleep on the sofa. Tiredness made him drop off fairly quickly but he did not fall into a dream. Instead he found himself hovering about three feet in the floor at work. He looked around and everything was in place. He was conscious enough to debate on whether he was having a dream but he was about to get a shock. Mary walked in and saw him. The shock of that encounter found him back on the sofa wondering what time it was. He was not certain if it was a dream or not but knew if he did not hurry he would be late. He quickly made his way to the car and drove to pick her up. Mary was unusually quiet when he got to her. Brian said little as he was not sure if it was just a dream and so the atmosphere was one of silence. As they got home Brian opened the door and took her into the living room to show her his handiwork. She just nodded and said that it was very nice.

She seemed aloof and Brian was confused. He did not know if she had seen him and if she had it would mean that it was not a dream. He did not quite know how to broach the subject and by the look of it neither did Mary. "Are you hungry," he said, "I'm afraid that I have not made any dinner. I thought that I would go down the chippie."

"It's alright Brian I'll make something. You want to get some sleep before you have to go to work tonight." Brian nodded and turned to walk off, as he got to the door Mary said, "What happened Brian?"

"Sorry?" he said as he was not expecting it.

"I saw you at work today. You were hovering above the ground like a ghost. Tell me I'm not going mad because that's the only explanation I can think of."

"No," Brian said by way of reassurance, "Mind you my explanation might have you thinking I've gone mad."

"I'll risk that it must be more logical than what I've come up with. I think I've been working too hard I need a holiday."

"I think we both do, things seem to be getting on top of us recently. Right about this afternoon, I don't really know how to say this so bear with me. Have you heard of astral traveling?"

"Isn't that something to do with the stars, isn't that what astral means?"

"Only one of the meanings, it also means spiritual but basically that was what I was doing this afternoon. It was not a conscious thing. I think it was because I haven't been eating much or lack of sleep."

"But why work. I would have thought that you would have had enough of that place by now."

"I don't really know. Maybe it was because that was the last thing on my mind when I fell asleep. I was remembering that I had to pick you up."

"So what does it actually involve? I don't know anything about it. I thought that you had died and I had seen a ghost."

"Oh is that's why you screamed?"

"Well I bet you would too. So what's it all about then?"

"I suppose you could say it's when you leave your body. Mind you a lot of people think that they are their body."

"Sorry, are you trying to confuse me?"

"No it's just that it's so hard to explain you get side tracked. What I'm trying to say is it's when your essence leaves your body. Some people call it your astral body but I can't tell you much as the more I say the more confusing it becomes."

Mary went quiet for awhile before she said, "It used to happen to me."

“What, you’ve never mentioned that to me before.”

“Well,” she said with a nervous smile, “It’s not something that you would bring up in normal conversation now is it.”

“I suppose not,” remembering how he had felt about telling her about it, “So what happened then?”

“It was when I was a child. It only happened a couple of times but I’ve never forgot it. I remember waking up and finding myself floating above my body. It was very strange, that’s why I could never say anything about it before now.”

“Before you saw me hovering around,” Brian said with a smile, “Well now we know, what’s the next step?”

“The next step,” Mary said slightly confused, “What next step?”

“Imagine if you could do it under control? Who knows you could have a holiday every night all you have to do is go to sleep.”

“What, do you think it’s as easy as that?”

“I don’t know but I guess it would be fun to have a try. We could go to Egypt if you like,” Brian said remembering the brochure that came earlier.

“Egypt why there and how anyway I don’t know anything about it?”

“All you have to do is think about it. That is why I ended up at work. A holiday brochure came today about Egypt that’s why I said it.”

“So all you have to do is think about it. Well it beats queuing up at airports.”

“So it looks like it’s out for a meal on Saturday and then off on holiday.” Brian laughed, “Don’t say that I never take you out girl.”

24. An Altered Ego

Their eyes met across the crowded vibrant dance floor. She had never seen such perfection, such grace. It blinded her senses and raised her heart almost to her mouth. The beauty nearly took her breath away and seemed to leave her enchanted, spell bound even. This form of perfection had never been seen by mortal eyes before. It was like an angel had come to Earth and its very presence lit up the room and seemed to reflect the rest of Creation in its image. She had lost control of reality as she took in the beauty that stood on the other side of the room. She saw nothing except the vision that was before her for to her that vision was everything. It seemed to take on all her dreams, her ambitions and all her charms and put them into a perspective that paled into nothingness compared to the wholeness of its being. Her heart told her that such perfection was hers by the virtue of the fact it seemed to reflect her image and her image alone. Her head told her that such beauty could not exist because by its value it must have come from the realms of fantasy. No presence could be so fine, as precious as this. Its flawless perfection was not from the world of Man for its kind had never graced a mortal realm. Her head told her that she was just dreaming and had entered into a Fairy Tale but her heart told her to get closer and then she would know for sure. She found herself being lifted up and drawn towards it with the pull of the strongest magnet. It was like she was just floating on air in a world of her own creation, a world that just involved her and the angel of perfection. It had captivated her and it was carrying her over on the strength of its charm. She drifted forward not seeing anyone or anything except the vision that was before her.

The crowd seemed to part like the Red Sea on Moses approach as she drifted amongst it. It was as if they knew she was about to embark on a match made in Heaven and waited eagerly with anticipation at the outcome of such a pairing. It was almost as if the world had stopped to take in the spectacle of wonderment but she did not seem to care. To her the world had no sight as fine as the purity that stood before her and there was no comparison of loveliness that could hold its head to this image of excellence. The tropical birds of South America with their vivid display of colour and charming airs bowed down before such grace. It turned them into painted sparrows with withered wings, insignificant dandelions to the cultured rose. If the world had stopped to take a break it would not even register with her for she was that enchanted by the dream of Creation. She was carried along on wings of desire, drawn forward with a pull so subtle and yet so forceful that nothing could stand in its way. It was a pull so strong that it could draw in the Universe and reverse the big bang that had caused its very being.

She studied the vision before her because her mind told her that nothing could be so pure, so fine, and so vibrant with life. There must be some flaw, something that marred this ideal because Nature could not be so blind as to let such perfection loose on this Earth. What chance had the rest of Creation against such splendour? It could upset the balance of the whole of Creation and Nature could never be that foolish. As she gazed at such finesse her head had to come to terms with what her heart knew all along, perfection, pure perfection. Before her stood the ultimate proof that Nature had evolved to its finest artistic form. She beheld in her eyes the love-light from Nature's most precious thing and it lifted past any perception that man could imagine Heaven to be. The total bliss that became hers transcended any pleasure that she had ever known and left her breathless with a desire so strong that it could lift her mortal being into total oneness with the Universe. Before her eyes was the cream of the cream of Creation and its magnificence was not surpassed by anything that had been brought into existence before it and whose like would never grace the Earth with its presence again. Its vibrant radiance played music on her heart strings in tones so mellow and so wholesome that the great Pan himself would bow down before its grace. Here stood before her was the Elixir of Life that had eluded the grasp of countless pursuants over time immortal and yet it graced her eyes with such radiance that she could barely look at it without being in awe of its splendour.

The deep blue eyes glistened and twinkled and from them seemed to come the essence of the Universe. It was as if the whole of Creation had centred around those eyes because inside them held

the most precious of all Nature, the creative force called love. They pulled her forward and held her in suspended animation. Her awareness was for those eyes and those eyes alone. Transfixed to such beauty her heart beat quickly and she could feel her breasts rising but it was like they did not belong to her. She felt aloof from her physical self and joined her Spirit in mutual understanding. The depth of those eyes went to the very Soul in search of the Ultimate truth. The knights of King Arthur in their quest for the grail could not find such depth of understanding as the wisdom that radiated from such eyes. King Arthur himself with the imagination of Excalibur could not even hope to cut so deep as to barely scratch the surface of such a treasured sight and yet before hers they did meet. Solomon's treasure turned to lead because it could never match the twinkle in those eyes. The hair was more golden than Jason's Fleece and if he had seen it he would have turned his head in shame at wasting time on such a quest so mundane. The golden wheat that swayed in the breeze would have bowed down before such elegance and purity. The flowing locks curled and twirled like acrobats across a face so fair. Cascades of water paled in their beauty to this display of charm and the gold spun by Rumpelstiltskin could never have been so fine. The finest silk worms with all their work could never hope to compete with such a sheen as the hair that graced her eyes. She had never seen the like of it from such an Earthly plane. It belonged to dreams and yet here it was a presence with true grace. She marveled at its loveliness for it was indeed a treasure to behold. The snow white skin covered its face without a blemish on its form. The finest table cloth that was laid so grand had not the smoothness of this complexion. No finer sight was beheld than the sight of silk against the proudness of its form. The blood red cheeks held her gaze and sent her senses into orbit. Those ivory teeth in all their glory would put the Pearly Gates to shame. What beauty, what balance, what more.

"Looking good," she said to herself and winked at the mirror.

25. Laura's First Day

The warming sun awoke Laura from her restful slumber. Her bedside clock read 8.30. It was her big day, her first day back at work and she was looking forward to it with eager anticipation. She quickly got dressed and breakfasted. It had been difficult for her since the road accident, the scars were not just physical, but slowly she had mourned the passing of Dave and tried to rebuild her life the best way that she could.

This was her first big break. She had got a job working in the personnel department of the local biscuit factory. The pay was nothing to boast about but it was the first step on the ladder. She felt that she was moving forward and putting the horrors of the past behind her, the constant nightmare that used to haunt her, the loneliness of an existence without Dave, the constant struggle to pay the bills. At one time it had been too much for her and she found it difficult just to have some semblance of life. She had been low but her inner strength and time had lifted her spirits enough to come to terms with each and every problem as it crossed her path. She was a different person now, more confident and stronger but she still had the memories of Dave to keep her happy.

It had been a horrific crash. She had been riding pillion on the back of Dave's motorbike down one of the country lanes near the village where they used to live. They had not been going fast as Dave was a safe rider. A brown Vauxhall Cavalier had pulled out in front of them and Dave had crashed into the back of it. The doctors had told her that he had died instantly and this gave Laura a certain amount of comfort. She was unconscious on arrival at hospital and she did not even know who had called the ambulance because the nearest home was miles away. Her recollection of the event was vague as she had been sitting behind Dave and her view was not too clear. The Police had told her that the driver of the car had left the scene and as there were no witnesses it was unlikely that he would ever be found.

After she left the hospital she went back to live with her mother until she found a nice flat in the nearby town. She had replayed the accident many times in her mind but still the event was too vague to be of any help to the Police. She had seen the car in her dreams but it looked different to the one in the crash. She had read the registration as B142DGH but that was hardly evidence she reasoned to herself although she remembered it just the same.

She put all that behind her as she stepped into the bright sunny street. She had a little bit of a walk to the bus stop but she liked walking so it was not an ordeal. She got on the crowded bus and it slowly made it's way to her destination. All the passengers knew each other as it was the works bus and Laura felt a bit left out as they talked loudly about work. She knew that in time she would be able to join in but as it was her first day she was a bit reluctant.

The bus pulled into the factory yard and the passengers quickly got off. Laura asked a tall, middle-aged woman directions to the personnel office and the woman took her there as it was on her way. Laura was greeted by a tall good looking man, "Hello," he said, "You must be Mrs. Davies, I'm Paul. I'm here to show you the ropes."

Laura smiled and said, "Thanks, I'm Laura by the way." Paul returned the smile and Laura noticed its warmth, it seemed to take all her nervousness away. The job itself was not too hard to learn because she had done it before albeit a long time ago. Paul was pleased with her progress and said, "You'll do well here you seem to pick things up quickly."

"I've done something similar, well a long time ago anyway. I used to work at Bridges on the other side of town." She went quiet as she remembered that it was there that she first met Dave. How handsome he looked as he worked on the line. The first time she saw him she felt a strong attraction and his smile told her it was not one way. She smiled to herself as she remembered his shyness; he was certainly a man in a million.

"Are you alright Laura?" Paul said bringing her back to reality.

"Oh sorry," she said with a sad smile, "I was miles away." She quite liked Paul, he was easy to get along with and very open.

"You must have liked it there; it's a friendly place here as well. Watch out for old Rogers though he

thinks he's a bit of a Casanova. You'll fit in here in next to no time though.”

“Thanks I'll keep that in mind. So tell me, have you worked here long?”

“Four years. Mind you some days it feels longer,” and started laughing.

He had quite an infectious laugh and Laura soon caught it. She felt a little guilty as she thought about Dave but deep down she knew he wanted her to be happy.

The morning went by quite quickly and ten minutes before dinner Paul said, “There's a few of us who go down to the pub, they do a good meal there. Why don't you join us?”

Laura was a little reluctant because of her financial situation but agreed because it might help her to get to know her workmates better. The pub itself was quite a bustling place at dinner time. It was a quaint country style pub with mock oak beams and a large fire place. Paul bought the round in which was quite expensive as there was five of them. Laura had a coke and was introduced to the others. She had met Mary before as she had been helpful when Laura got stuck on the photo copier. She did not know Anne or Margaret as they worked in a different office but they got on like a house on fire. The dinner time soon passed and they found themselves back at work. Laura settled back and quickly got into the swing of things. At around 2 o'clock Paul came up to her and said, “So how are you coping, any problems?”

“No everything's fine, well apart from the photocopier playing up earlier.”

“That goes with the territory I wouldn't worry about that too much it always plays up. I think they should have replaced it years ago.”

“Mary said the same. No I quite like it here, you're right the people are friendly.”

“Yes they're not bad are they? Do you live local?”

“Ash Street, it's not far. Mind you I get the bus in.”

“I live in Oak Street it's just around the corner. I'll give you a lift if you like it will save on the bus fare.”

“Yes thanks if you don't mind.”

“No it's on my way. Have you lived there long?”

“A couple of months I've got a flat over the hairdressers.”

“Oh you must know my mother then. Marie Jones, she works as a stylist.”

“Marie,” Laura said in surprise, “Yes I know her well. So she's your mother then. It's a small world isn't it? She was very good to me when I first moved in.”

Paul thought for a while before he said, “I think she has mentioned you before. Mind you it didn't click until she told me where you lived. I think that she was trying a bit of match making, well you know what mothers are like.”

“Well she has mentioned you before I must admit,” and smiled.

“Yes I'll bet. Don't mind her she means well. I'll have to tell her that you work here she will be pleased.”

“She's a genuine woman, she helped me settle in. She even told me there might be a job going here.”

“Did she?” Paul said with a knowing smile, “Did she happen to mention that I worked here?”

“No,” Laura said laughing, “She never told me that.”

Paul laughed his infectious laugh and said, “I'd better get back. I'll see you later then.”

Laura went back to typing the letter she had started before Paul had come over. Her thoughts went back to Dave once more. She remembered their first date and the first time she had got on the back of his motorbike. She was a little scared at first and she smiled to herself as she remembered her nervousness. She remembered their honeymoon in the South of France and the struggle to make ends meet. She knew that Dave would always be with her but she found a strange attraction to Paul forming. It was a different attraction to the one she had for Dave but it was an attraction just the same. Paul was sincere and so open that Laura thought she could tell him anything. His mother had told her a lot about him and it seemed to be all true so far. He was kind hearted and generous, good looking with a warm smile. She could easily fall in love with him.

She finished the letter and put it in the out tray. The workload was quite light and the time flew by surprisingly quickly. She was surprised at how easily she fell into the job and how good her work mates were. Her thoughts still drifted back to Dave on occasions but she knew that it was time to move on. She must accept that he was no longer with her and rebuild her life once more. She was not looking for a relationship but she was happy to be in Paul's company. She had a place of her own and a good job to match it. She was ready to take life by its horns once more and felt confident enough to actually enjoy the challenge. Her thoughts were interrupted by Paul's voice once again.

"That place must be good; you seem to spend a lot of time there."

"I'm sorry?" Laura said not understanding.

"Miles away," Paul said laughing, "So anyway how did you enjoy your first day?"

"Is it over already I've never known a day go so quickly."

"Well you must have enjoyed it then. Mind you though you don't want to stay here for too long they don't pay you for working extra time."

Laura packed her things away and followed Paul to the car park. It was on the other side of the factory so she had not noticed it when the bus had dropped her off.

"This is a short cut," Paul said, "Save you going all the way around."

They went down a fire escape and ended up on a huge car park. Laura thought that it was a lot bigger place than she had expected. She followed Paul through the mass of cars and he said, "Sorry about the walk the car park's always full. They work around the clock here. Ah here we are."

Laura saw a brown Cavalier with the registration number B141DGH

26. Wot You Looking At?

John Insley shuffled his feet and clapped his hands in an attempt to get warm. It was a bitter cold morning and he was fighting a losing battle. Winter had been unusually harsh that year and it was taking its toll on his health. He had lost a lot of his weight as he had burned off most of his fat in his bodies attempt at central heating. He hated standing around as he could never get warm yet that now seemed a major part of the job he was doing. A big strapping man in his late twenties he would have been better suited swinging the pick with the other members of the road gang but his foreman had other ideas. He had had it in for John from the start. It was not of John's making and it had even taken him several weeks before he found out. John was nobody's fool who relied on his prowess as a worker rather than pandering to the foreman's ego to get on in life. He was a well traveled man although still young who had had a noted career in the army and this seemed to ignite the nasty jealous streak in Andy Jones, the foreman of the outfit. A small man with a high pitched shriek that could never have got the job but for the fact that his father owned the company. He was a strange man who felt that everybody that he perceived as subordinate to him should treat him with the respect that he thought he merited. Most of his workforce upheld his principle, well to his face that was, and followed him in a sheep like manner. John was different though, he was wise to Andy's pathetic mind games and the threat of losing his job had no hold on him for John valued his worth as a worker and could do the work of two without raising a sweat.. He could easily have got a job elsewhere but something held him there. It was a pride inside him that not many understood. He could never walk out of the job because if he did he felt that he had lost the game. Andy Jones had misunderstood this; he thought that because John turned up every morning he was in fear of losing his job. That gave him a sense of superiority that was only quelled when he threatened John with the sack and he laughed in his face. The humiliation of the scene still haunted Andy and sent him very mixed signals about John for Andy was a pseudo intellectual who had had the best education that his father could buy. He believed in the divide and rule maxim and actively enforced it by playing mind games on his workers. He put everyone on different rates of pay and gave the best jobs to his favourites. Resentment built up but not by John, he just took it in his stride and found it amusing to watch the antics that surrounded him during his working hours. He stood aloof from it all and to his fellow workmates that made him seem strange to their already warped minds. Some of them even held him responsible for all the antagonism but John being an ex professional boxer saw none of this materialise on the physical level.

He looked at his watch and it read 9.30. Frost was still on the ground and the metal lollipop with stop on one side and go the other almost stuck to his fingers. He would rather be getting warm with a bit of pick work but he did not complain. Today was Friday and he was meeting an old army friend of his later that evening.

Dave Hill had known John for years and had a bond with him that could only be found in the armed forces or the tight knit motorcycle clubs. John had saved Dave's life on the battle field of Iraq and Dave had never forgotten that. John's mind drifted into thoughts of nostalgia and this seemed to keep the cold at bay. They were going to go out for a drink at the White Lion and John was meeting him at eight. To say that he was looking forward to it would be an understatement as he had not seen Dave in three years. The day passed quickly and by dinner the weather had warmed up dramatically. John took his break and sat on the verge eating his sandwiches. The sun was quite pleasant now and John relaxed in its gentle rays.

"You're back on the pick this after," a shrill voice said interrupting his thought chain, "Danno's on traffic control alright?"

John shrugged his shoulders in an air that was meant to offend and Andy stormed off under a cloud of his own making. John laughed quietly to himself as he saw this happen. Nothing was going to spoil his day. As his half hour finished he picked up his pick and got to work. The early frost had melted and left the ground softer and easier to break. John found it easy work and as he got into his rhythm the others found it difficult to keep up with him.

Mumbled grumbles came from all around him but John carried on regardless. He was on overdrive and the time flew past with such speed that his working day was soon over. He was slightly tired when he got back but nothing that a hot shower would not cure. As he opened the door of his house a letter fell to the floor. He looked at the envelope and saw that it was from work. He picked it up and went into the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee. As the kettle boiled he opened the letter and read it with mixed emotions.

"It is with regret that the Company no longer has need for your services and your employment is to cease on Friday 15th November. Your final pay will be paid as usual through the bank in the week following. We require you to return all Company clothing and any property belonging to us."

He did not mind losing the job but he did not like the underhand way in which it was done to him. He was a man of honour and foolishly expected it from others. He folded the letter and put it back in the envelope and on top the television. He looked at the time and saw that it was 7. All thoughts of work left him as he showered and got ready to go out. By the time he had finished he was running a little late so he rushed straight out but was still ten minutes overdue. The bar was fairly empty and Dave was easily found. He was propping up the bar and taking a large swallow from his drink. He stood six foot four and weighed in at around 240 pounds so even if the bar would have been full John would have found him just as easily.

"Pint of lager then," John said shaking Dave's hand, "How you been mate?"

"Sound John, you want a J.D. with that?"

"Yes go on then seeing as you're the one in the chair." The drinks were quickly served and John tipped the bourbon into the lager and took a large drink from it.

"Same old John I see," Dave said smiling, "So what are you doing with yourself nowadays?"

"In between jobs at the moment," John said with a grin, "Just finished today in fact. What about you, the last I heard you were in Croatia freelancing."

"Knocked it on the head, got my own security company now, nightclubs and that sort of thing. There's a lot of money to be made from it if you're interested."

John thought for a moment and said, "Yes that sounds great, beats directing traffic anyway."

"Directing traffic, were you a Traffic Warden?"

"No," John said laughing, "I was working with a road gang. Well until I found a letter when I got home that is. Mind you it was a bad job anyway, you would not believe it."

"Well," Dave said with an air of disgust, "It sounds like you are better off without it. You mean to tell me that they never had the bottle to sack you to your face?"

"That's nothing, you don't know the half of it," and laughed, "I had a bit of a personality clash with the foreman who just happened to be the Boss's son."

"Yes," Dave said with an air of understanding, "He would be wouldn't he it's always the same."

"Ah don't worry about it," John said in a philosophical manner, "What's done is done."

"I don't know how you can take it so calmly. I thought that you would have ripped his head off and spat down his throat."

"I would be on an assault charge before he hit the ground, you know the type."

"Yes I suppose. Mind you I bet you're not too happy about it."

"Well that would depend on how much you will be paying," John said laughing.

"£100 a night as many nights as you want just take your pick."

"Yes why not. I could start next week if you want."

"You can start tomorrow if you want. Saturday night is the main night."

"Sure," John said shrugging his shoulders, "Where and when?"

"Stocks in the High Street, do you know it," John nodded, "Turn up at 8 and ask for Rod he'll show you the ropes."

The night wore on and the drinks flowed freely. John enjoyed himself as he talked about the old times and made plans for the new. At around 10 though something happened to put a dampener on the evening. Andy Jones walked in the lounge with his girlfriend and John saw them from the bar.

“Would you credit it,” he said, “He knows it's my local he must be trying to provoke me.”

“What,” Dave said in surprise, “Something I should know about?”

“No, not really the fellow I was telling you about has just gone into the lounge.”

“And he knows that it's your local,” Dave said tutting, “Has he seen you yet?”

“No he's too full of himself to see anything. I wonder what his game is though.”

“Who knows what goes on in some people's minds? He's not that little fellow with the tarty blond on his arm is he?”

“Yes,” John said laughing, “Shows up like a sore thumb doesn't he.”

“Look I tell you what; you don't want to let that spoil the night. Why don't we move on to my club instead? Have a look around the place and see what you think.”

“Yes I suppose so. Do I get paid for the night by the way?”

“I can see why you got the sack,” Dave said laughing, “You might get free drinks if you're lucky. Mine's the grey Merc outside. I'll see you outside I've got to go to the toilet,” and went into the lounge.

As John opened the outside door he heard Dave's voice say, “Wot you looking at?” and the sound of a connecting punch.

“Ah well,” he said shutting the door behind him, “I suppose it must be true what they say what goes around comes around.”

27. A Comedy of Terrors

Robin Smith hated his new house and wished he had never moved there in the first place. He had got the house cheaply and now he knew why. He had an impression that it was haunted. He had not actually seen anything but he had sensed it. The house had a very uneasy feeling about it, he could not quite put his finger on it but he knew that it was there. Things had never been the same since he split up with his wife Joanna. He had been restless and looking for new direction in life. He had loved her dearly in fact he still did but she had not returned the favour her loved lay elsewhere, with his old business partner David Beale. He had never got over it and as you can imagine the business went downhill rather quickly. With the money left over after the divorce and the little return he got from his now bankrupt business he bought a nice little cottage in the countryside miles from anywhere in a setting so idyllic that it could have been out of a Fairy Tale. He just wanted time on his hands, time to re-evaluate his life and find out what his next step without Joanna would be. He had built his life around her and watched it crumble and this had a slight effect on his mind. Maybe it was a safety valve so he did not get hurt again but he had turned mildly paranoid. He did not think that everyone was out to do him harm though he was very wary of strangers and liked to be on his own more than in company.

He had moved in with great expectations but almost immediately things started to go wrong. He had noticed that the room would sometimes change quickly between hot and cold. It was a sudden temperature drop that would send shivers down his spine. It happened on the first day as he was moving in. He had left the move until quite late in the evening which was unusual but could not be helped as he had an appointment that could not be ignored. It was about eleven at night and he was bringing the last of his clothes upstairs and into the main bedroom. He had just got through the bedroom door when a shiver went down his spine. The first time he just put it down to a draught as he might have left the front door open. He was edgy on the first night and found it difficult to sleep. He felt like he was being watched but when he quickly looked up there was nobody there. He had put it down to first night nerves or maybe all the trouble that he had had with the solicitors was starting to show. He eventually got to sleep and woke up late the next morning. The house seemed draught free that day and he quickly got the place in the order that he wanted. It was only a small cottage and did not take much organising and so he was sitting in front of the television by around mid afternoon. Maybe it was his restless night but he found that he was very quickly asleep and in a strange dream.

He saw a long blond haired woman in her late twenties calling to him with outstretched arms. Her long hair flowed in the wind and she seemed to be actually hovering. He found himself being drawn to her but that was not an ordeal. In fact he was quite captivated with her and would have gone anywhere with her. She took him along a windswept beach with crashing waves and whistling rain. They walked hand in hand and he felt no wind or cold. He felt in paradise but a noise awoke him from his self induced heaven. He was alert quickly but still he saw nothing. He looked around the room thinking that maybe he had been sharing his house with some rat or mouse but there was no sign of life. He looked out of the window into the cold dark night but there was nothing out there. He felt alone and isolated but he shrugged it off quickly as he reasoned that it must have happened in the dream. He looked at the time and saw that it was 10 o' clock at night. He did not feel tired but as there was nothing on the television decided to go to bed. As he walked the stairs up to his room it happened again. It was another cold draught and it just seemed to brush past him about halfway up the stairs. It stopped him in his tracks as it was not just the draught but the fact that he smelt flowers. It was only a trace and it did not last long but he could definitely smell it. He had another restless night as he was not that tired and the slightest noise would have him on edge. It's surprising how noisy the silence of the countryside actually is. It did not have the same duration as the noise that he had been used to living beside a busy main road with Joanna but it was short and sharp like the occasional owl hoot, the wind whistling past his bins and far off noises seemed to sound as if they were only next door. He only just managed to cat nap before the next assault on his

ears. He knew that this would take some getting used to, especially the feeling of being watched when he slept. Maybe it was just the isolation playing on his paranoia but to him it was real. When he finally did get to sleep he found himself in a strange dream again. It was the same woman who had appeared before but this time she was calling his name. She was surrounded by darkness and this had a more sinister edge to it. There was a deathly chill all around her and Robin felt his stomach churn in the cold. She shivered in a mild wind that made her long white dress cascade like waves on the shore. It was bewitching and enchanting but it had a threatening tint to it as well and this made Robin very wary. He tried to hold back but he was being pulled. The figure smiled as if to reassure him but he saw it in a different light. To him it was an evil grin that said she meant to do him harm. He tried to pull back with more vigour but she held him firmly in her gaze. The closer he got the more he panicked. "No," he said softly. "No," he said again but more loudly. "No," he shouted this time and repeated it twice. He woke up with a cold sweat and looked around the room for reassurance. The dream had scared him more than just a little and would have to take some explaining in his mind because it posed a lot of questions for his paranoia. He looked at the time and saw that it was eleven in the morning so he got up and opened the window. The cold morning air rushed in and awakened his body. He thought a lot about the dream as he got dressed and went downstairs. He could not put it down to the fact that it was just a dream because it had occurred twice. He could not understand what it meant. Maybe it was something to do with the trauma he was going through at the moment? He tried to rationalise it in the hope that it would disappear. Maybe the first one was when they were happy and life was a beach but the second one was completely different. To him it was more evil. She was calling him and trying to drag him into something. He smiled with self satisfaction as it suddenly came to him. She was dragging him through the divorce and the hell that surrounded it. He was glad that he was into the meaning of dreams for he knew that once you knew your fears they would go away. His paranoia had been satisfied so he decided to go out for a walk. It was not really a pleasant day but that did not concern him as he liked walking in that type of climate. He opened the door and went into the wilderness that just seemed to start at the fresh hold. The twisted trees swayed in the cold wind depositing leaves of autumnal brown. He liked the wildness of it all for to him it was as far away from civilisation as he could possibly be. He still had other things to pester his mind. He knew he would have to try and start rebuilding his life soon but he did not quite know what direction to take it in. As he got past the first tree he turned around because he had the feeling that he was being watched again. He looked but there was nobody there. If the truth be known he was getting a little frightened about the house and reluctant to sit in it. He would have to move out just as soon as he could afford it but his finances were completely diminished. He had only been in there two days and was getting lonely he reasoned to himself but the uneasiness still remained. He walked for what seemed like miles before he had cleared his head and got the nerve to go back in. In fact he was feeling quite happy as he made his way back. He had built up quite a hunger and looked forward to a hot meal with eager anticipation. He was only starting to learn how to cook but he enjoyed it immensely. As it was Sunday he thought he would do the full spread of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding with accompanying vegetables. He could almost smell it as he got through the door. How he looked forward to preparing it himself and then eating it. He was stopped in his tracks by another draught but this time the smell was stronger and lingered even longer. He could not understand why there should be flowers in autumn. He had not seen any in his earlier travels and it did not feel right to him. He thought no more about it and got to the matter in hand. His taste buds seemed to have imagined it already as the smell of food came back to his mind. He walked through to the kitchen and the smell was very strong. He went cold as he opened the dining room door and saw the table in front of him had been fully laid. His best table cloth lay on it and a candle stick added to its atmosphere. His best China Plate sat on the table with his silver knife and fork beside it. On the plate was the meal he had been thinking about earlier. The smell that emanated from it told him it was real. He felt that he was being watched again and this made him feel even more uneasy.

Something inside him told him to run. It was advice he quickly took and soon the house was empty. Well except for the spectral figure that stood there wondering if the best way to a mortal man's heart could really be through his stomach.

28. Catch You on the Rebound

Sarah Nightingale looked upon the image of grief that was her reflection. The laughter lines had long since been replaced by tear stained crevices. She had never come to terms with the death of her beloved and could see no future for herself in this life. She was not an old woman although the daily stresses of living had taken their toll. Her once glistening soft brown hair now sported flecks of grey and the dullness of her eyes dimmed her once natural beauty. She had always been a loner, until she met Sam that was, to her he was everything. It was love at first sight but it went to a depth of understanding that was almost telepathic. She knew that there would never be any one else like him and that enhanced the tragedy if that was at all possible. And what a tragedy that was, he had been taken so young in a hit and run accident. How she hated the perpetrator of the deed that left her alone and isolated. In her bitterest moments she would wish a similar fate to befall whoever it had been but later chided herself for wishing anybody such peril. She knew the loss she had suffered and would not wish it on anyone else.

She sighed and looked at her threadbare spartan living room, she had lost interest in housework it just seemed mundane and pointless. The great abyss that had once been her heart had sucked in her Spirit and with it her will to live. She was barely in existence mode from day to day, no plans, no future. She had put her life on hold and just drifted aimlessly. Half empty tins lay strewn across the litter filled floor. She had not eaten in two days and could not bear the thought of food. She had lost weight and started to take on an emaciated appearance. She knew she could not go on like that forever but she could not bring herself to change.

She sat down on her moth eaten sofa and pondered on death. She seemed to have dwelt on the subject a lot since Sam had been taken away from her. She wanted to believe in life after death because she could not bring herself to think that she would never, ever see him again. Life without Sam was hard enough but an eternity without him was Soul destroying. She cried once more in a pitiful wail and called his name. She seemed to spend most of her time crying but that was only natural and to be expected. A slim shaft of sunlight came through her semi opened curtains and lit up a slender rectangle on the wall behind her. She had not opened her curtains that day in the vain attempt to shut summer out for the Sun meant life and it had no place in her heart at present. Her thoughts were on the dark side of her mind and her room reflected that. She could not see the point of life. It seemed like just being born and dying with a little bit in between. There seemed to be no reason to it only to sustain the species and that was no reason at all. She cried his name once more but he had left her, deserted her in her hour of need. Her bitterness took many shades but always in grey. A knock on her door brought her back to her senses. It was not just the shock of the noise that brought her to life in fact it was more the reason that anyone would be knocking at all. She wondered who it could be and got up with more than just a hint of trepidation. Since circumstances had made her reclusive and introverted in a big friendless city sometimes the door would not knock for three or four days.

She got to the door and looked through the peep hole. A large well built man in his late thirties was standing on the other side. She did not recognise him but he looked normal, quite handsome in fact. Maybe she thought he was a Policeman with news about Sam's accident. She slowly opened the door and looking at the man said, "Can I help you?"

"Are you Mrs. Nightingale?" the man said in a nervous manner, "Sarah Nightingale."

"That's right, can I help you?"

"I'm Dave er David Johnson," he said slightly restless, "And I don't really know how to say this but I was the driver of the car in the accident."

"What," Sarah said wondering how he dared show his face, "How dare you come around here," she yelled hysterically, "Get out of my doorway, leave me alone," and started crying loudly.

"I'm sorry," the man said in a sad and genuine tone, "It's hard to lose someone you love."

She looked at the man and despised his pity. Her anger came to the fore, "What would you know about it? What do you want from me anyway, forgiveness to ease your conscious perhaps, don't

waste my time.” Her venom knew no bounds. If she had had a knife she would have gladly plunged it into his heart. He stood there meekly before her like a child before the head master and took all of the tirade silently. “You're just a murderer to me. If I was a judge I would throw away the key. Your type don't deserve to live,” on and on the vicious tirade went, wave after wave of vicious insult but something strange was happening. Sarah was starting to feel lighter with every harsh and cruel word she said. She was like a boiling kettle. All the tension and stress built up inside her was escaping along with her hatred for the man. He did not look like a monster she reasoned although her mind had made him out as one. After her anger had worked its course she said to him, “Why, why did you take Sam away from me?”

He said nothing at first because there was nothing to say. After awhile with his head tilted slightly in shame he said, “I'm sorry but it was an accident. What more can I say?”

She looked at him and saw the anguish in his demeanour, he was genuinely sorry and this seemed to make Sarah slightly better, “What do you want anyway,” she said eventually, “It must have took some doing to come around here.”

“I just wanted to see if there was anything I could do and maybe try and explain my actions.

Normally I would never leave the scene of an accident, well I would like to think so anyway as it hasn't happened before,” Sarah remained silent so he carried on, “I just didn't see him it was too dark and he just came in front of the car. I could not stop in time. I would have stopped afterwards but I had too much on my mind. My mother had had a heart attack and I was on my way to the hospital before it was too late.”

Sarah went quiet when she heard this, after awhile she said, “How is she?”

“I'm afraid she passed on,” David said close to tears, “I did not get to her in time to say good bye even. Life can be so cruel at times,” and sadly shook his head.

“I'm very sorry and I appreciate you coming around to explain especially as you have been through such a loss yourself,” she hesitated a moment before she said, “Look would you like to come in for a cup of tea. I'm afraid you'll have to excuse the mess though.”

David went quiet for a while before he smiled and said, “Yes thank you that would be nice. To tell you the truth it's been a bit of an ordeal recently.”

Sarah knew what he meant and invited him in. He followed her into the living room and she opened the curtains to reveal the room in all its gory. She apologised once more about the room saying, “As you see I've er let it go to pot recently.” She cleared some papers away from the sofa and David took a seat. He looked around the place and said, “It looks just like my place. I know it might sound cheeky and I don't mean offence but if you like I could give you a hand to clean up.”

Sarah did not quite know how to take his last remark as her solitary life meant that she shunned help from anyone. She looked at David and saw in his eyes that he meant it in a genuine way and this quite endeared him to her so she said, “Yes why not, that's if you don't mind of course”

“No,” David said getting up, “In fact it might give me a bit of an incentive to do mine when I get back. It's probably in a worse condition than yours.”

“Do you live far,” Sarah said out of the blue and much to David's surprise.

“Er no, Workshop Street it's about three streets away.”

“Oh I know it. I could give you a hand afterwards if you like.”

David was a bit reluctant at first because he too was a bit of a loner but he followed the maxim one good turn deserves another and agreed. “Look,” Sarah said, “We'll have a cup of tea first, unless you're in a hurry that is.”

“No, not really,” David answered and sat down again. Sarah asked him if he took sugar but he said no so she went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. David looked around the room and saw Sam's picture hanging on the wall above the fireplace. Guilt came back to haunt him as he remembered the fatal night. His thoughts were interrupted by Sarah bringing back the tea. He thanked her when she gave it him and took a drink from it. They talked a little without saying anything and finished their tea. Sarah found him easy to talk to which was unusual for her as she was always nervous around

strangers. Maybe it was because she could see herself in him because after all they were two peas in a pod or maybe it was because they had both suffered tragedy and this bonded them together.

The house took about an hour to clean and in that time the conversation had got deeper. In fact it was like Sarah had known him all her life by the time the paper jungle had been cultivated. Sarah had never seen the place looking so good and told David the same. He smiled and said goodbye meaning to leave but Sarah offered to return the favour.

“Well,” David said, “If you're sure, it will save me a job. Surprising how quickly it gets messed.” Sarah followed David to the car and they drove the short distance to his house. As Sarah got out of the car and followed David to the door she noticed that the garden was not in too bad a condition and so maybe it would not be such a large job. David got to the door and as he opened it Sarah heard a scratching from behind it. The door opened and a large border collie ran out and playfully jumped on David. Sarah could not believe her eyes as it was the spitting image of her Sam.

29. Does Your Mother Know You're Out?

The loud screech of a braking car awoke Judy and Anthony from their peaceful slumber. "Oh no," Judy said, "Not again. Have they no respect for anyone?"

Anthony went over and looked out of the window, "They've gone now. What time is it?"

Judy looked at the clock and said, "It's one thirty in the morning. Haven't they got no homes to go to? Where are the parents anyway I mean they are just bits of kids."

"Who knows, I guess we can count ourselves lucky that Sean is not like that. We brought him up right. He's got respect for others."

"Ah well we'll try and get some sleep you're up at seven tomorrow."

Judy and Anthony eventually got to sleep until the alarm clock woke them up later that morning. Anthony was still quite tired when he awoke as the constant interruptions to his sleep were catching up on him. The estate had been plagued by joy-riders for months now. The police did not seem to be able to do anything about them because they never seemed to be around when it happened. If by some lucky coincidence they were the joy-riders seemed just to think of it as a game. The constant chases made even more noise and led to more sleepless nights. Anthony's temper was getting very frayed and his work was suffering because of this and the tiredness.

Reluctantly he got out of bed and dressed himself. He was starting to really hate his job at the plastic factory and it was becoming more of an ordeal with every day that passed. He went downstairs and helped Judy with the breakfast. He called Sean at 7.30 but there was no answer. "I bet he's tired poor lad," Judy said, "It must be no joke for him either what with his exams and everything he must need his sleep more than we do."

"He had been studying a lot recently I'll give him that. He's always over at Andy's house with his books. He'll go far that lad, I'll call him again."

Anthony went upstairs and knocked loudly on Sean's door, "Come on Sean, it's a big day at school. You've got your maths exam today."

A grunt came from behind the door and Anthony knew that Sean was awake so he went down for his breakfast. Around ten minutes later Sean came down looking pale and withdrawn.

"Sit down lad," Anthony said, "You look like death warmed up. You don't want to be overdoing all this studying if it's going to affect your health."

"He'll be alright," Judy said coming to his aid, "Besides the exams will be over soon and then he can relax a bit before going to university."

"All I'm saying is don't overdo it you want to get there in one piece."

Sean sat quietly eating his breakfast or the best of it he could because his appetite had gone.

"Not hungry Sean," Judy said, "You want to eat love. It will build your strength up. You're going through a very important stage of your life now."

"Ah he'll be alright he can get something later at school. He's just had a restless night that's all. You don't want to be picking on him."

"I'm not. I'm just saying that he wants a good breakfast inside him. It's the best way to start the day. You wouldn't go to work on an empty stomach so why do you expect that Sean would want to?"

"Have it your own way, I've got to get off to work now anyway," he kissed Judy on the cheek and wished Sean good luck as he left the house.

"You're very quiet," Judy said to Sean after he had left, "Are you nervous about the exam today. Don't worry with all that work you have done you should walk it. It'll soon be over and then we'll try and get a bit of money together and go on holiday."

Sean picked over his food and managed to eat a little. Judy had thought about moving out of the area but Anthony's job still held them there and he was a little reluctant to travel too far to work because of the early start. She just wanted to have a restful sleep at night and be able to leave the house during the day and come back to find that it hadn't been burgled. Her thoughts were interrupted by Sean saying, "I'm getting off now mum I'll see you later."

She noted with pride that he left for school early and reasoned that he must be happy there. He was

bearing up well she thought. He must be under a lot of stress especially with all the noise during the night. If it was not the joy-riders it was the gang of louts hanging around the street corners intimidating the residents. Whatever happened to the estate it used to be a good place where everyone looked out for each other? "Ah," Judy said aloud, "Times are changing but not for the better. It's just lucky that Sean's getting a good education, he won't have to work in a plastic factory he could do anything that he wanted to do." A knock on the door brought Judy back to her senses. She went to the door and opened it. Her next door neighbour Lynda was standing on the other side of it. Judy had forgotten that she had invited her over for coffee. "Come in Lynda I'll put the kettle on."

"Thanks Jude," Lynda said coming in and taking a seat in the kitchen, "Did you hear all that noise last night. I didn't get to sleep until around two."

"It's getting beyond a joke; I think that it's starting to take its toll on Anthony and Sean."

"I bet it would Steve's the same. Don't these people have to get up in the morning?"

"I bet most of them don't get up till twelve, work shy most of them."

"Most of them look too young to work, what about school? You would think that they would teach them to respect others. No discipline today that's the problem. Of course I blame the parents."

"Yes I know what you mean. What sort of mother would let her children out until all hours in the morning? I mean they mustn't keep much of an eye on them must they?"

"They are probably never there," Lynda said getting into her flow, "Half of them haven't got dads and the others, the dads are worse than their kids. I've lived here for thirty years and I've seen some changes."

"I've been here 16 myself and it's changed a hell of a lot in that time."

"You know old Mrs. Rogers got burgled again that's the third time this year. They didn't take anything as there was nothing to take but they smashed the place up and painted graffiti all over the wall. She daren't leave the house but she daren't stay in, in case they come back. What sort of life is that for a woman of 75?"

"And where were the Police when you needed them," Judy said as the conversation got a little bit more heated, "If you are speeding then they are right behind you but if you get burgled forget it. It's alright if you are insured but me and Anthony are struggling. How are we supposed to pay for it? The courts are too soft on them if they actually do get caught. They just get a little slap on their wrists whilst Mrs. Rogers lives in hell."

"No discipline again they've got no respect for others. They can't have, if you try and tell them off you get a mouthful of abuse. Complain to their parents and they give the same."

"That's where they get it from. The parents never taught them because they haven't got respect for anything either. Heaven knows what the next generation will be like."

"I'll be long gone before that. Me and Steve are putting the house up for sale and moving next year. Best thing we ever did buying the house. We got it that cheap from the Council you would not believe it. We thought we would get a house over in Oakley. Steve can still travel to work in fact its closer for him now."

"Oakley's a nice place I've been through it quite a few times myself. The houses look pretty expensive though. Steve must have a better paid job than Anthony."

"We're not paying anymore than the mortgage; you'll be surprised how much you make when you sell the house. It makes a nice little profit and cuts the rates down."

"That's not a bad idea," Judy thought to herself. She had already bought her house from the council but it was only two years ago. She could put up with another three years and save as much as they could for an even bigger deposit. She decided that she would talk to Anthony about it later.

Judy got up and said, "I bet the kettles boiled now amazing how time flies when you are talking."

Judy made the coffee and brought it back to Lynda who thanked her and they took it into the living room. "So how's Sean getting on with his exams?" Lynda said after she had sat down.

"He shall walk it; mind you it's catching up on him a little."

“He did look a little pale when I saw him the other day now you come to mention it. Mind you it will be worth it in the long run. You must be very proud of him.”

“Yes,” Judy said beaming, “He's a good lad. He'll go far in life. We've done the best we could.”

“And it looks like things are paying off. Does he still want to be a teacher?”

“Yes never stops talking about it. I wanted to be one once you know.”

They talked a lot longer and had another two cups of coffee. Lynda left at 12 and Judy decided to give the house a bit of a clean. She decided that she could go back to work now that Sean was older. It could all go to raising the deposit. They could get quite a bit of money raised in 3 years. The afternoon wore on and the housework and the dinner got done. Anthony came back at around 5.30. They talked a little about moving and much to Judy's surprise Anthony agreed with her. He had decided to get another job because the factory work was getting too much for him. He even liked the idea of Judy working although he was a little worried about leaving the house empty. Sean came back at 7 and went straight to bed. He told them that he had eaten at Andy's and he had better get some sleep for his exam the next day.

Around 11 the screeching returned as a yellow Sierra wheel span around the road outside. Anthony and Judy were just about to go to bed. “Right that's it this time,” Anthony said losing his temper and running out the door. He ran down the path and the Sierra took off in mild panic. It careered over the road and straight into a concrete lamppost. The lamppost broke and fell forward crushing the car below. Anthony stood there and watched it all in horror. Judy had come out just in time to see the collision. She screamed at first but soon came round.

“I knew it would happen one day,” Lynda said after she had come out, “I've called an ambulance not that it will do them any good.”

They slowly walked over to the car to have a closer look. They only saw one body. It looked like a young lad had been driving it. As they got even closer they could recognise the face under the slumped body. Judy screamed and staggered backwards. All Anthony could say was “Sean.”

30. The Deep Blue See

Father Jake O'Leary was having a crisis of conscience. He had woken up one morning and felt that God was no longer with him. He could not feel His presence and that unnerved him more than just a little. He did not know whether God had deserted him or whether it was the other way around but that did not matter as much as the fact He was no longer there. His life felt empty and all the good that he seemed to be doing amongst his dwindling congregation could not fill the void. He had prayed and prayed but it seemed in vain as he no longer had that peace that he used to feel when God was around him. He had spoken to the Bishop but he had not received much advice only pull yourself together man and say a prayer for me on the way out. His thoughts went to leaving the Church but to him that would be like leaving his home. If the truth be known it had become his home and he had become institutionalised in its vastness. He still saw the Church as a vocation and not a career and his crisis was not of a sexual nature either. No Jake's crisis lay in a different sort of love. It was a spiritual love that had enhanced his quality of life beyond reason but now it had gone. He lived in fear that he would never get it back and just drift through his job with half the message. His congregation had noticed the change; it was as if his heart was not in it anymore. They had commented to the Bishop about it but only because they were concerned for his health and not for reasons of a malicious nature. He had been summoned to see His Grace and tried to explain to him what was going on in his mind but the Bishop did not seem very approachable. He was of the old school that said it was a job for life and must have a formal face. Jake found no joy in fact it made him feel a lot worse because now he felt isolated. He felt that he had to face this problem alone as his boss was indifferent to his plight. This had been a bitter blow and did not help Jake one bit. He took to spending long times at prayer but he always felt alone when he spoke. He did not have God's strength to get through the pain and distress that was called life and found on every corner. Life to him had become a bind and he felt that there was nothing to share it with him. His depression grew worse as time went by and he had grave misgivings about the profession he was in and thinking about leaving and re evaluating his life and taking it in a different direction. He saw the death of his elderly population but he felt pity for them rather than the happiness he had previously felt that they were moving on to be with the Great Creator. He could not come to terms with the pain anymore as he could not advise them on what he no longer had to give them. His life had become mundane and at times verged on the profane as he called out for help to some uncommunicative being. He had chided himself for taking His name in vain afterwards but the frustration would always return and with it another tirade against his once previous soul-mate. He was having a particular bad time one day and sat in front of the altar with his hands around his head bewailing the predicament that he had not been able to cure. He was in a world of his own and unaware of his surroundings even. It was like he had slipped out of time and become immune from everyday life. The church was quite cold but he didn't feel it.

A voice interrupted his thoughts though and brought him back amongst the living. It was the voice of a small child, "Are you alright Father?"

He looked up and saw a girl who looked no more than 8 or 9. A pretty little thing though of unkempt appearance she seemed to have a concerned tone in her voice.

"Oh yes," Jake said with a smile, "I was just alone with God."

"Do you see Him too," The girl said with an incredulous look that made Jake look at her in a different light. It sounded to him like she had actually seen Him. He was intrigued to say the least so he said, "Where have you seen Him?"

"It was in a dream," she said and went on to elaborate in a very articulate manner. "I was in the water and saw fish all around me. I seemed so be sinking, there were bubbles all around me. It was frightening at first but I saw this light underneath me and it seemed to be pulling me towards it. It was cooling and I knew that when I got there my fear would be at an end. Very soon I was surrounded by light and everything was alright."

Jake looked at her in disbelief but it went unnoticed by her as she smiled with childish innocence.

He could put it down to the imagination of a child but something inside him told him it was real. His thoughts turned to self pity. How had she managed to see the divine when he had done all that work in His name had not? It did not seem fair to him but he kept that thought to himself as he questioned the child some more, "This light, how did you know it was God?"

"I had a feeling," the child said as if it was obvious, "It told me."

"But why the sea?" Jake said still confused. He still could not come to terms and maybe in his subconscious he was trying to persuade the child that she had not as it would ease his mind, "God does not come to the fish."

"God is everywhere," she said much to his surprise as she seemed to have a lot more depth than he in his arrogance had given her credit for, "And was not Jesus' sign Pisces the fish?"

She had cornered him and he did not like it. He was losing a theological debate to a child and it went against his esteem. She seemed unperturbed by his disbelief and her demeanour told him that she was going to be unshakable in her belief. In the end clutching at straws he said, "But it was just a dream you did not really see Him. People would think that you are a bad girl and didn't like God if they heard what you are saying." He was trying to play on her emotions, a low level line of debate that usually meant the intellectual side of the argument had fallen down.

"God appears in dreams," she said, "You only have to look in the Bible to see that. I did see Him," she repeated again to emphasize her belief.

Jake looked at the girl in a stern manner and said, "God does not waste time with little girls like you. He has a lot of things to do."

His manner did not appear to frighten her as she was still in a rational frame of mind, "What about St. Bernadette of Lourdes?" she said in a triumphant manner, "She saw Our Lady and she was just a child."

He had no answer except a threat of punishment for her trouble, "What would your mum and dad say if they knew you were being cheeky? I bet they would not be pleased."

"They are both dead," the child answered with a twinge of sadness that went unnoticed by Jake as he was still in temper mode, "Besides I am telling the truth that does not make me cheeky."

Jake still had no reasonable answer so he said, "But why would God waste His time on you. St. Bernadette was a Saint, a Holy woman and you are not."

"I have no answer for that, I can only tell you what I saw."

"What you think you saw," Jake said trying to throw a doubt in her mind, "Because after all it is only your word."

"I know I saw," the child said getting slightly vexed and then out of the blue there came an appeal to his heart, "Why won't you believe me, I'm not telling lies why would I do that, it does not make sense."

Jake thought awhile but still could not get over the hurdle that she had seen Him and he had not. It had blinded him to everything and only added to his crisis of conscience. He could not tell her that for he could not bring himself to talk from the heart. She was only a child after all, what would she care or understand even. Instead he went on, ignoring her plea and said, "God will send you to Hell if you upset Him and you would not like that."

The threat of brimstone and fire had no hold on her for she looked at him and said, "God told me that there was no Hell except in the heart of man. He would never harm me because it would be like harming Himself."

That was too much for Jake, to him her words had turned to blasphemy and his temper rose accordingly, "How dare you," He said, his whole body shaking, "You will be punished for that. You will burn in hell for eternity."

The child looked at him without a trace of fear and said "Perhaps I am just wasting my time," With that she disappeared leaving Jake in a state of shock and confusion. He had seen a ghost and his rational mind could not cope with it. In time he would come to terms with it and actually get strength from it for he might not have seen God but he had seen His messenger for surely that child

must have been an angel. He would have reasoned that she must have drowned and that was when she saw Him. He would also have worked out that the fact that she had appeared to him must be the ultimate proof of God's existence. Well without jumping into some lake and losing his life that is. But that would be quite a long time down the road as sometimes the mind takes a little too long to work out things that go against its limited capacity.

How to Fall in Love

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1. Intellectual Sleaze-Art for Lark's Sake

Art is ambiguous; well that's what the pretentious say
It shocks our sensitivity and what a price to pay,
But what is Art in essence? Is it not our creative source?
Our ability to express an image, it's just par for the course.

We might do this with Paint and Brush or even Pen and Paper
Music, Verse and Literature, some might even Caper,
So why all this ambiguity is it to keep it from the Masses?
The Great Unwashed, the Plebians, the dreaded lower classes

Do they not understand our Art, is it lack of education?
Instinctive types, mindless drifters without a real vocation,
Is it lateral thinking gone too far, concept over notion?
Imagery long since lost and it's clouded in emotion.

It's been rationalised out of reach by the inept and the shallow
For when it came to cultivation their field was always fallow,
As for shocking of the sensitive well I've never been that twee
I was once a necrophiliac till some c### split on me.

2. Equality-Beyond Redemption

I look around the world today and it grieves me to the core
Injustice and inequality abound and life for some is poor,
Disheartened by all this sleaze I set my Mind off on vacation
A temporary measure I'll admit but it gets rid of the frustration.

So what is inequality now if not the pursuit of the middle classes?
Who put life into little boxes with no concern for the Masses,
They mean well but without a clue run around like headless chickens
Causing more inequality as it just stagnates and thickens.

They see life like it was a Clam, they can't see past the Shell
Because in their shallow little lives the White Man's doing well,
Resentment grows accordingly and ignorance turns to hate
And Society implodes against itself we've lost the meaning great.

So nowadays inequality to me has long since lost its meaning
For the little boxes I must not trip on have sent my Mind off teeming,
I've lost the Big Picture now, it's been rationalised past sense
And the Family of Man nowadays is spoken in the past tense.

Well that's inequality done and dusted what about the other
For injustice rattles me as much, I must have got it from my Mother,
When People put life on levels injustice is close to home
So inequality was the cause, see that's not far to roam.

But how do you get equality without reference to the Lord
For Man's ignorance of His truth has given Avarice its sword,
Lack of imagination holds him back he disbelieves the Soul
Thus all he sees is a stereotype, inequality takes its toll.

True equality comes from within and has to be bore in Mind
And don't forget that God's inside so seek and you shall find.

3. The Ballad of Jack and Rory-Seriously Funny

I'll tell you the Story of Jack and Rory
Who spent their Days just looking for glory,
Renown was their aim for they craved the fame
And brutal adventure was part of their game.

Now Jack hit the Bottle along with his Wife
And come to the Law he was always in strife,
So he thought he'd abscond before the Judge had his say
As the road to Botany Bay was never Jack's way.

He took his own road and it was there he met Rory
A big Irishman who was good with the Story,
They traveled the Land just drinking and brawling
They got rather good it was almost a calling.

Many did try but each one did falter
And they quickly moved on thus avoiding the Halter
Reputation quick grew, they were recognised before hand
For the calling was heard and this heightened demand.

So they left Civilisation and took the King's Shilling
And when it came down to killing they were more than willing,
They had their vocation and it re-lit their fire
Killing to quench a great Empire's desire.

Culling the Native with rampant lead shot
Herding the ignorant for treasures ill got,
Killing for land for the Empire's glory
For Jack and for Rory nothing's too gory.

It was here they met Jamie and took him to wing
For death was their object and he was that thing,
They traveled across realms in search of adventure
They just killed for fun as they never feared censure.

Many did fall through War and through Famine
And Jamie mopped up with an outcome so damning
Bodies piled up and Llewellyn appeared
Diseased ridden Vermin his path quickly cleared.

The Empire grew strong on the backs of these men
And conquered the World with Sword and with Pen

4. Mother-An Altered Image

She bore me into a life that I could never hope to prosper
Though that suited me as that ideal was one I'd never foster,
The struggles of life took her health though it never took her faith
And now she's up in Heaven I know she's always safe.

Mum I dedicate myself to you for it was you that gave me life
You gave me too your inner strength so I could cope with strife,
You gave me love in your own way and took me to the Lord
Now with His love inside me I need never fear the Sword.

You gave me wisdom of the kind that can only be got through pain
You gave me truth and understanding in a World that is insane,
You gave me hope and a firm belief that I could hold my own
Responsibility for myself to reap what you have sown.

You gave me tears when you left and tore my World apart
But now I know you're always here because I keep you in my Heart

Amen

5. Celebrity Bears-Bob's Full Grouse

Winnie the Pooh, what a drip, he couldn't get wet in a shower
And as for that Paddington fellah his Station was never a Flower,
So what's it about, Celebrity Bears, what is the point we're defeating
for from this Grouse's point of view it all boils down to cheating.

What about Grouse, where do we stand, apart from over a Pot
And I'll tell you this it's close to boiling, my pecker's getting hot,
So why a Bear instead of a Grouse apart from the fact we taste better
Or perhaps it is a little more sinister, maybe you changed a letter.

For F makes fear, is that the case, instinctive regression perhaps
You fear the Bear for its sharp Claws but you need not fear our Flaps,
But a Cuddly Toy, don't be a fool get back in a certain reality
For if Food is love a Bear's inedible so come over and cuddle me.

So put down the Bear, give me a try, get me out of this Stew
Mummy's gone out there's no one about, it's really easy to do,
But the Child turned around and left me alone and boy was I getting hot
It did not hear, but who could really, a Bird hungover a pot.

6. The Wolf Hound-A Dog's for Life

He bounds across field without fear, without favour
With strong stamina that any athlete would savour,
He looks for his Master for his wont is to serve
Though first you control him and that takes some nerve.

For his strength is his being, his faith is his own
He has his own Spirit and that must be known,
So treat him with dignity and he'll be a good friend
And stay with you forever or until he meets his end.

7. Pandora's Pox-Love's Young Dream

Pandora left a little thing I guess you'd call it hope
Some took it up for inspiration whilst others used a Rope,
From hope came dreams and other things related in that sphere
And love though young and innocent made its home in here.

Now the Pox arrived to blight the Land, had hope turned to despair?
For the Rope that hung was Avarice, a Rope that did not care,
The Rope it changed into a Noose to hang its Victims high
But hope alone stood its ground for it could never die.

8. God-Chanced Upon a Guess.

Though I've never seen the Divine I've felt its healing Light
And this gives me a Gambler's instinct, I know about His might,
Some might say it's just a guess and life's a game of chance
And God a concept long since dead and a hindrance to advance.

To them maybe that is the case for God is out their reach
So let them live accordingly for I'm not one to preach,
No God to me is everything and I'll back Him to the hilt
For now my faith has got that strong it will never wilt.

9. The Collection Box-Enigmatic Christine

I see an Old Woman who walks around with a Pram
Inside is a Doll but to her she's the Mam,
She sees the Doll as a Child having lost hers to the Cot
And will rant and rage increasingly if you tell her that its not.

So what has this to do with Charity and where's the Collection Box?
Or maybe this enigmatic Christine is just a sly old Fox,
No Charity is more than Money it's to do with understanding
And an open Heart is worth more than Wealth or is that too demanding?

10. The Cream Cake-a Secret Liaison.

See the cream oozing out and let me taste its ware
I need it there to increase my girth I mean like I really care,
Come down at night and raid the Fridge, no one needs to know
For with me alive inside your Head you are going to have to grow

No one's there quick have a bite; you know you love the taste
Tuck in quick, eat up heartily it will only go to Waist,
Eat your fill, increase my need and let my Spirit grow
And very soon I'll take over and you won't even know.

See that Mirror, take a look and say 'I've got a butt on me'
Then you'll know me for who I am for my name is Gluttony

11. Disco Inferno-A Night To Remember

See that Girl with the silky Thighs wouldn't you like a taste
Those curvy Breasts, those firm Buttocks and what about that Waist,
I've seen her around, she is well known, I'm sure you'll get a lay
So go on over and have a go, you know you'll get your way.

The Disco Inferno is here at last so it's going to be your Night
Go on over, dance with her, you know you'll be alright,
So I went over and you were right she was a bit of class
Though I know I wasn't the only one as now I'm pissing Glass.

The Umbrella next did come and I had no chance to flee
So I just sat there through pain filled teeth and cursed that Lechery.

12. A Reason for Living-How's That.

See that big flash Car; you'll look good behind the Wheel
Alright you can't afford it but that adds to its appeal,
Imagine you inside it People would think that you're the man
And listen to your every word for they know you can.

For that Car says you're someone, not a Divvy on the Dole
But look at the Wimp that owns it, does he really fit the role,
You want a reason for living, then follow the Jones way
Materialism at all time, your mind won't fall into decay.

Believe that then you're foolish, just another man's prat
Because you've just met Envy, I've caught you out, how's that!

13. Control Freak-A Bit of a Lad

Look around this World today, doesn't it make you mad
People taking liberties it's lucky I'm a bit of a Lad,
I'll take control of your life, no one will mess around
Yes put your trust in me my Friend and I'm always found.

I'll shout and rant inarticulately, put fear in all who hear
With me in charge of your miserable life what need have you for fear,
Well alright you'll get a situation when you end up being hit
But what concern of that is mine I'd have long since flit.

You see in the world of Fireworks you'd class me as a banger
A loud noise but with little show, that really sums up Anger.

14. The Great Unwashed-Septic Dave

God its Monday Morning again do I have to leave this Bed
I think I've turned lethargic as all my drive is dead,
I won't bother with Work today, they won't miss me anyway
For the little bit I do, do is not that much to say.

I'll stick around a little longer; I'm in no hurry to get up
Just the same old situation, talk about a rut,
I really don't know why I bother; it's not really my scene
Besides all they ever talk about is my Personal Hygiene.

Maybe one Day I'll wise up and start to use my loaf
But until then I'll just hang around and tolerate this Sloth.

15. A Battle of Wills-The Letter

I had a Letter the other day and it came as quite a shock
My Uncle had a Heart Attack and left me quite a lot,
A large amount I must admit though it was not enough
So I searched through the Obituaries to see who else did snuff.

I was looking for Relations to keep Finances high
For the only way to get more Wealth was they would have to die,
A cruel idea you might think but I'm wont to disagree
Yes when it comes to comfort I've got to think of me.

So go ahead and lose your life my Heart it will not bleed
For relationship means nothing all I want is greed.

16. God Realisation -The Contract from Hell

See yourself for what you are a God without the power
That makes you a special man, well above this shower,
Sign this Contract that I have and have all you desire
Though time will come eventually that you have to taste Hell's fire.

But you can handle it anyway for now you have the notion
You're not just like them ignorant, controlled by their emotion,
To them you see you are a God and they believe in you
So believe in me and you will see just what I can do.

So now I have you in my grasp there is nowhere to hide
You might control the Ignorant but you're controlled by Pride.

17. Patience- The Dream

I had a Dream the other day that said I'd end up rich
I found it very comforting as life to me is a bitch.
Money problems all around, how was I supposed to live?
I needed something in my life, something had to give
So I found a little Patience, maybe that Dream would make it true
But it didn't really matter now as I was no longer blue.

18. Temperance-The Gentle Touch

Moderation is the game, a gentle sort of touch
Give yourself a balanced life, don't ever take too much,
I'm not talking abstinence as that does not fill the need
I'm talking moderation anything else is greed,
So go ahead in moderation, see the changes it will bring
And a touch is good though not too much as then it becomes a thing.

19. Fortitude-The Lion's Pen

Give me the strength of a Lion for I'm in need of his pride
All these little problems still hang around to chide,
I'll have to write them down otherwise I'll just forget
And then they'll keep on haunting me, much to my regret,
So with the Lion's strength within me I made that little List
And saw I had no worries, was there something I had missed?

20. Ode Ear-Blind Fate

“So gather around all that are here
And fair list a while for I have your Ear,
I've come to wax lyrical and beat on its drum
With a good slice of wisdom or maybe a Crumb.”

“So what reality am I from?” I hear someone ask
A Heckler no doubt so I took him to task,
“Reality to me is more balanced than yours
For if the effect is stupidity you are the cause.

So listen awhile and hear I talk sense
For a life without hearing is sad recompense,
Your memory it suffers with nothing to feed on
And ignorance abounds with plenty to seed on,
So keep your Ears open and you'll never have fear
Of being left in the dark whilst I say “Oh Dear.”

21. Rationalising Stereotypes-Use nor Ornament

Rationalising Stereotypes, what a silly Title

A little elaboration needed as your attention is now vital,

So what is a Stereotype anyway if not man's imagination?

Invented Characteristics that are supposed to mould a Nation.

They don't actually exist though you can pull one out the hat

Though on normal daily living he'd revert back to a prat,

So you're rationalising stupidity does that really make you sane

You'll end up like the subject and add to all our pain.

22. Humility-The Wronged Man

I have a little Seat that I reserve for the divine
So that he may sit with me and tell me all is fine,
Though I know I'll never see Him His Spirit's always there
And so that piece of Furniture was christened God's Chair,
Now anyone who sits there becomes God in my Mind's Eye
And I treat them all accordingly, call that humble? Fie.

23. Piston Broke-The New Age Traveler

Saturday Night and the Bike won't start again
God this is ridiculous do I really need the shame,
I'm going to have to bump it, what must People think
I need my head examined; I'm going to find a Shrink.

The Bike got home eventually and I sought that Mental Aid
And he cleared my Bike obsession though a high Price it was paid,
For the Bike was sold on quickly, much against my will
But I needed all the Money to pay this man the bill.

24. The Demon Within-An Altered Ego

There's a little Elf inside me that's out to do me harm
He wants to drive me mad so I might buy the farm,
He'll tell me things are bad even when I know them well
He'll tell me I am God and my Head will start to swell.

He'll tell me anything for he changes without reason
He'll leave me in the dark when madness is in season,
So what is this little elf if not my Imagination?
I created him myself when my Mind was on vacation.

25. Self Assurance-L'aura's First Day

Today is the first day of your life, none has gone before
All your mistakes are rectified; you are now without a flaw,
Feel assured that that's the case though you are yet a learner
So walk in Light, enjoy yourself you're on a little earner,
For God's Light's there for all to see you'll find it in your aura
And it attracts the Honey Bees for they love to taste that Flora.

26. Paranoia-Wot You Looking At?

I had some Ale the other day, I did not feel myself
It was like there was a competition to try and cull my health,
They were all out to do me harm though I knew not what I'd done
But if they craved the danger I was going to have some fun,
I hope it doesn't return though for I felt such a Prat
But why am I telling you this for and what you looking at?

27. How to Fall in Love-A Comedy of Terrors

The first time that I saw him he took my breath away
Turned out literal in the end as I did not get much say,
He rattled on about himself and I never got the chance
Because that silly love thing had led me on a dance.

What was this attraction; after all he was a bore
Though when I finally left him my Heart in two was tore,
So next time that I look for one I'll know just what to do
Find someone just like me; do you know a boy called Sue?

28. The Wild Geese-Catch You on the Rebound

With graceful elegance they traveled across the globe
Encased in serene charm, adorned with radiant Robe,
Was it Divine Inspiration as they know just where to go?
Yes when it came to Instinct they're the ones that know.

Their fame traveled with them as they made their presence felt
For to see one in its glory would make a cold Heart melt,
A Nature Lover maybe, don't think me that absurd
I was talking about the Flight of Earls not some dumb and gangly Bird

29. Day Dodgers-Does Your Mother Know You're Out?

Once there was a Lady whose Daughter copt a dose
She put herself about too much and ended up morose,
So Mummy dear the evil bitch went on a campaign of hate
With calls of cowardice all around the Southern Army she did slate.

She called them D day dodgers and wanted them all marked
So women would avoid them when they disembarked,
But these men were the heroes with Three landings to their belt
They were fighting over in Italy, I wondered how they felt.

Yes this pampered Lady Harridan's logic had really hit the dregs
It would have been much easier to tell her Daughter to shut her Legs.

30. Fishy Tales- The Deep Blue See

Once there was an Octopus that had Second Sight
He would look into the future if the Price was right,
“You'll meet a handsome stranger” as is usually the case
But this one was a Dolphin who had a nasty face.

Well the Fish that came to see him thought he couldn't be beat
As he told them what they wanted for he was a cheat,
They went off into the deep blue Sea, elated, unaware
Straight onto a waiting Dolphin, you see it was a Snare,

And Payment for the Service for the Fish that he had lost
The Dolphin made amends, Sick Squid was the cost.

Look out for the Book Formerly Known as Reality