

Breakfast

D L Nightingale

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slavik.nachtigall@googlemail.com

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Coming soon from the same author, Lunch and Dinner.

Tragic

Notes for the reader: Please excuse me if some of this chapter is not as coherent as it might be, for it seemed at the time the worst period of my life. Writing about it brings strong emotions, which distract me from the story I determined to record.

It's Friday evening Jason has just put the key in the door, I can hear the lock turning. The door opens, bang it slams, the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs grow louder. We live in a cramped flat above a shop in the high street. There is a small door next to the main display window, it's rather a bland affair, slightly recessed so as to be unobtrusive. I'm busy cooking when Jason's head pokes through the archway at the top of the stairs.

Here I stand stirring the stew in an old sauce pan on the two ring mini oven. The kitchen is part of the lounge. His voice booms in the tiny cavity we call home. He wants me to stop cooking and go to bed now.

"But I'm not tired!" I say in Jest.

This makes him angry, I've never seen him like this. He is trying to pull me through the lounge across the mottled carpet. The bedroom and bathroom are side by side, we are heading for the bedroom. I shout at him that I want to eat, he shouts back saying he wants a shag. I suggest he goes to the coast. The joke is lost on him, he is so serious. I ask him why he is being like this, he just throws me on the bed, I bounce on the soft mattress. As he tries to jump on top I roll to one side. He's now swearing like a trouper, worse, he's like a different man.

I run back through the door into the lounge, tripping on a flex we have trailing across to the television from the one rather overloaded socket. It's like some mad breeding bacteria sprouting adapters, extensions and plugs. I go flying down onto the rug which hides some disgusting stains in the old carpet. In front of me as I lay bruised on the floor is an old settee which sits in front of the corner that passes for a kitchen. Looking ahead I see the carpet disappear under it, like a forest hiding weeds and scrub. This big old sofa is concealing crumbs, crisps and detritus of which I know not.

I turn my head, he just stamps his feet heavily, grabbing his big coat. Calls me a bitch and some other words which a lady would rather not hear. Then leaves, the sound of his feet echo back up the steep narrow stairway. The wooden panels, covered by layers of paint where they have never been stripped and done properly, are now peeling like a well baked suntan. When he slams the door it feels like the whole flat is about to collapse in some dreadful earthquake. I pick myself up off the floor, shaking my head silenced by his strange mood. The stew is sending olfactory signals, it needs attention, so like a slave to the wooden spoon I give it a stir, a very vigorous stir. My mind is unsettled, this is not my Jason, not my happy go lucky, life is one big laugh, let me tell you another joke Jason. When his mates ring "I ask who is it?" Roger from his work always replies, "It's batman and I am after the Joker." The works day out just a month ago was such fun, they were all so silly, we went down on the beach. The older crew went round the town, this lot went around in circles, the sand was a complete mess. But that was then, why did he suddenly want to have sex for dinner, why was he in such a foul mood?

What does a girl do in such circumstances? I phone mother, we talk for ages, she is as perplexed as I am. She suggests I phone one of his mates from work. "Perhaps they're moving the factory to China," she says.

I try ringing Roger, no answer from his home number or the mobile. I try ringing old Stan the foreman. It's ringing and ringing, Stan answers and I ask him about the factory first. He tells me business is booming and as far as he knows there is nothing to worry about. He then asks me why? I explain about Jason, Stan pauses, then he tells me that Jason had been his normal jolly self and he could think of no time during the day when his mood changed. I thank Stan and ring off. Sitting, waiting, waiting, the wall clock in the kitchen creeps around in slow motion. I put the television on, but I can't concentrate, I keep looking at the clock. The sofa and television combined are usually great for insomnia but not tonight. All I can do is sit here worrying, where can he be? Why did he storm out? Why the strange mood? Eventually at about midnight, I turn the television off and go into the bedroom. It's small and dingy, the purple and black paint, spattered with holes and stains from an array of posters that were stuck in here by the previous resident. We painted the lounge,

which was grotesque, whirling stripes of red, purple, black and orange, enough to make you sick.

It was the previous resident who had wrecked the carpet, but the owner of the flat was rather miserly and preferred to take less off us if we would do the redecorating. The bedroom was mostly in darkness so it has been left till last. Now its spooky stripes send a chill down my spine. I should change into my nightie, but I'm like a zombie, I can't do a thing until I know Jason is ok. I lay on top of the duvet, skirt all roughed up, blouse dishevelled, hair like a mass of baby snakes leaving their nest, basking on the white pillow. It's four in the morning I'm unable to sleep, the alarm clock ticks loud in the silence. Its rhythm occasionally augmented by a passing car. I decide to get up and phone the Police, he should have been back hours ago.

I'm told they will make a note of it but there's nothing they can do for now. The officer was polite and nice enough about things, but no help. Distressed, tired and worried all I can do is stay here until he returns. I'm thinking about my poor father, he was a kind happy man. Always eager to help people, always lending tools and never getting them back. One time a little old lady who he used to do private hire work for suggest I go with them. She was such a sweet old lady, suffered from kyphosis, but she never complained. It was a lovely trip, he took her to Bath to see one of her friends. Dad took me to see the Roman Baths, which makes our iron bath with its chipped enamel seem quite primitive. All that hot water, all from under the ground, and the big bath like a swimming pool. A beautiful place, as is the town, with its Georgian splendour, ideal for a dreamer like me. No nice dreams now, just nightmares and a splitting headache. My head feels dizzy, my eyes sting, their lids heavy, I sit slouched on the sofa next to the phone on the small coffee table.

Morning comes and goes, I should have gone to work but I just sit transfixed waiting for the door to open or the phone to ring. It does ring at about twelve o'clock, the voice is familiar, sleep deprived I mumble and mutter to the shop owner, explaining the situation. From the tone of his voice he does not understand my concern, suggesting I come by lunch time or I may need to start looking for work elsewhere.

The clock is ticking louder, my glazed eyes try focusing on the hands, it's

two thirty in the afternoon. My head turns back, following my right hand which is attempting to grasp the phone. This time I ring the Police, they have no news, and suggest I come down to the station if he is still missing tomorrow. I continue curled up on the sofa dozing off, then a few hours, sometimes minutes later I come too. Instinctively checking one four seven one to see if anyone has called, and look at the clock. Half asleep just after six in the evening, I am woken by the phone. It's mother checking, she talks for nearly an hour on the cheap after six, one hour for a few pence call. She rings off.

I phase in and out of sleep over the whole night. My eyes tired, my head buzzing, brain whirring trying to focus on what to do next. It's ten the next morning, I've been wearing the same black skirt and white blouse for the last two days. Both are crumpled and grubby, but I don't care. Like a zombie I pick up the door keys, put on my shoes and head down the stairs. My hands gripping the hand rails on the steep descent to street level. The daylight is dazzling, as I pass through the crowds people stare at me, my hair is a complete mess, I weave along carelessly bumping into peoples' shoulders. My skirt catches on someone's shopping bag, the old lady holding it stares defiantly at the impertinent woman who just continues past her. It seems an awful long way, but I reach the small brick house with the blue light hanging over the entrance. It's only a small station, the duty officer looks surprised, not expecting to have to fill in any forms.

He's watching me, he asks if I'm ok, I reply that I have not slept with worry. I explain, he takes some notes, tells me to go home and get some rest. Offers me a cup of tea, I shake my head and wander off.

It's now several days later, I have done nothing apart from eat snacks phone the police and phone mum. She came around the other evening, but is busy planting the west field with cabbages at our farm, the north field has been ploughed and that will soon have a crop of potatoes. I sit curled up on the sofa, wishing father was around, he worked so hard. After grandfather died he tried to do his private hire work and help out on the farm, it was all to much. One day he took the old lady to visit her friends in London, he parked in Hyde Park and went for a walk. Next thing we knew my mother was in tears, she had received a phone call. They had taken him to hospital, but it was too late, poor old dad died of a

heart attack. Dad was friends with everyone, quite a contrast to grandfather who after returning from his stint late in the war withdrew from people. The kindest person to help us was one of dad's colleagues, an old fellow with a dog called Monty. Dad had told us this chap batted with the other side, but it did not bother him or us. He took us all the way to the hospital in London with no charge, then came around and visited us afterwards. He would sit with us for hours helping us get through those dreadful days. He's gone now, they say only the good die young, poor old dad went at fifty two, and poor old Ron died just into his sixties, which is not that old these days. I remember sitting in the hospital, mum talking to the nurses, I just looked on, I could not believe my father was gone, how can it be possible.

Grandfather had seen some bad things, he was only just old enough to join up after the Normandy landings. He would never really speak about the details just that he could not understand how people could do such things to other human beings. When he came back to the farm he took over from his father. A man who unlike grandfather had married late in life to a much younger woman, when she died not long after giving birth to grandfather he went down hill quickly. Great grandfather and his wife were like swans, so strongly bonded, the death of one devastated the other. It was great grandfather who bought the farm, he had come over from Holland during the thirties disturbed at things he heard from the big neighbour to the east. Grandma is still keeping in touch with our relatives out there which is nice.

My meandering thoughts are interrupted by loud knocking on the door. I shout that I'm coming and hurry down the steep stairs. As I open the door I see two police officers, a man and a woman, they ask if they can come in. We trundle back up the stairs and stand in the tiny lounge. The lady officer suggests I sit down, so again I perch on the sofa.

"We have found a body, from the contents of the man's pockets we believe it to be Mr J Brendan. It would be helpful if you feel up to it, to identify the body miss?" the lady officer pauses, she continues to say that they just need to ask a few routine questions. My eyes are like a burst dam, my nose all snively. I sob that I've been here all the time apart from going to the station to report him missing. They ask if I have any witnesses to prove it? I shake my head. With their notes taken, they help me down stairs to the car, it's horrible, I feel guilty the way people

are staring at me. The male officer opens a rear passenger door and the lady helps me in. Then they get in the front, the doors thud closed, through a blur of tears I see an old woman staring in at me from the pavement. Others turn their heads to see what she is looking at, I feel like the whole world is collapsing in on me. I can understand what it must be like as a caged animal in a zoo, you just want to get out, panic rushes through my head. I don't have an alibi, my breathing quickens, the lady officer looks around at me, this makes me feel even worse. My palms are sweating, I'm sobbing, my body shivers, my cheeks burning, as though the microbes that have not been washed off for days are having a barbecue.

The car stops in front of the police station, they help me out, but I'm a nervous wreck. We go down through the side entrance to a small building out the back. Inside I see a stainless steel table, a white sheet over it, as though keeping the flies off a sumptuous banquet. The lady officer is now supporting me, she asks if I will do it, I nod. A man in a white coat pulls back the cloth, as I see the head, I collapse. The lady officer tries to hold me but I'm heavy, she lets me down gently. I lay sobbing on the floor, the other officer asks if he should call a doctor, I hear him concerned at my distress. I don't remember what happened after that, perhaps I was just too tired. When you are over tired you become uninhibited, you have no control over your emotions. Your fears are magnified, anxieties become giants stalking your every thought. I could now understand why grandfather became reclusive, coping with the real world was just too scary. In a sleepy state the line between reality and nightmare is blurred making everything worse. The wiring that leads to the part of the brain where the coping mechanisms lay is cut off. It's like being a stranded whale, you can do nothing, you flounder on the sand, your skin dries, your breathing laboured. You just have to wait for fate to weave its path, and hope to be rescued.

I have no idea how long it's been, or where I've been, but now I'm sitting in a room, across the table are two officers. Apparently they want to ask me some questions, reading me some caution, and am I hearing things? I am considered as suspect and this interview is to see if they can eliminate me from their enquiries. It brought back memories of when I worked in another town before I met Jason. There had been a series of things going missing at a company where I worked. That made me

nervous, when the boss man said, "If you're not guilty then you have nothing to worry about." It did not stop my anxiety. Perhaps for you reading this it is an emotion you may be unfamiliar with. I don't know but I shall explain, you see I was bullied badly at school. The comprehensive to be precise, where I was under the delusion that it was a place to study and learn. There were a group of girls who always seemed to forget to do their homework and me being soft let them copy mine. Eventually when they got better marks for their work than I, and the teacher intimated that I might be copying the work of others. I was you see a simple country girl from a farm. This annoyed me and I withdrew access to my homework. Which made them mad, really mad, they were so sly and cunning, the way they got at me when the teachers weren't looking. One time I was held against a radiator, I had a big thick coat on, one held the toilet door closed the other three goading me, wanting me to strike at them, calling me names. That time I was saved by the bell. In a science class one of them kept poking me in the back. When I turned and with my pen tapped her head, the teacher picked on me and had me standing in the corner, meanwhile those who did not want to learn sat smirking. I hated sports, and the showering afterwards, it was like hell. On the way home was the worst though, sometimes they would follow me, I had to go down a footpath. They would run, I had no chance, just getting beaten up, but not so you would notice. They would hold me and punch me where it would not show. Then leave me laying on the gravel, crying my eyes out. How many poor black people have been wrongly arrested and gone to their end on death row in America. Being a good person, being innocent, is no guarantee that you will not suffer, my mind was programmed for many years, hard wired to know this, and now I sit here answering truthfully that I have no alibi, other than speaking at certain times to them, mother, Stan and Roger over the phone. I knew they were noting that the suspect seemed nervous and edgy.

I sat in a cell for several days, eventually they let me go, the reason, they had checked the telephone records, electricity meter and neighbours in the flats opposite and were reasonably happy that I could go home. They did take away my passport and give me a few words of caution.

I'm back home clearing my things, mum will arrive this evening with the Land Rover. I have no Jason, no job and no money to pay for the flat. Filling up my cases and various old bags seems to take forever. The

door bell rings, I go and let mother in, the first thing I do is give her a big hug and burst into tears. The two of us just standing, we are at the bottom of the stairs for a long while. Mother trying to comfort her baby, speaking softly, telling me it's going to be ok. That they will find out who killed Jason, that I should not worry, that we should get my things. We gather up my belongings and head back to the vehicle.

It's so nice just sitting in the battered old Land Rover, I could have hugged it to. Like a grumpy old pal it grumbles as mother turns the ignition key. My bags are now piled in the back strapped down under a piece of tarpaulin. The old diesel engine grunts into life as the sun sets ahead of us. Mother takes a slow drive through the town, negotiating its chaotic one way system. We are soon on the open road, the green fields different shades of grey as the light fades. Big old trees stand like dark shadows on the horizon, the indicator is ticking as mother pulls up on the main road. A car, one of those expensive ones with special dispensation, speeds towards us. While mother waits for another car before turning right, my eyes begin to water upon seeing the lane, our lane. After another car whizzes past in the opposite direction mother begins to turn across the road. Easing the Land Rover over a dip off the main road and down into the lane. We are bumping around, our bodies like floppy dolls jiggling about, bouncing in our seats. The lane winds and twists, the surface rolls and rocks the vehicle, sometimes leaning one way sometimes the other. We round the final bend, on either side our apple trees or what passes for an orchard, ahead the big wooden gates. The lights beaming against them, the arch above shadowy and imposing. Like magic they open, it's no electric trickery, something much much better, it's grandma, she must have been keeping watch. Her bedroom looks out from the east wing down the lane, our lights would have been easy to spot, like crazy searchlights flying around as the car went up and down over the bumps and craters.

Mother parks the car outside of the front door, telling me not to bother about my things, just go in with grandma. I get out shut the door and fall into grandma's arms, hugging her and crying. She's kind, and helps me in, there is a nice hot meal waiting in the kitchen, which I eat with relish. Then I'm told to go to bed and get some rest, which I do. Here in the old farm house I feel safe, with my family to support me, for the first time in weeks I sleep well.

Hard Times

Notes for the reader: I hope you will understand from this chapter, the ways in which we struggle to keep the farm going.

Farmers have to be like fortune tellers when they plant crops. What will be most in demand months ahead at harvest time? Higher demand usually equates to higher prices, and a chance of profit. With a small farm the variety and size of crop is limited so you are more vulnerable to the market. The bigger farms can at least rely on a large regular contract to a retailer. We have to find our own markets and sometimes we are told by our potential customer that they have found a cheaper supplier. Either we lower our prices or try elsewhere, you can end up selling at a loss just to recoup part of the costs. After father died we could not manage long without extra help. At first grandma stepped in, but of late she has been suffering. Her joints worn with age restricting how much she can do around the farm. One of dad's old friends was looking for part time work, he was getting near retirement. In a bid to cut costs the company Bill Turner worked for offered him voluntary redundancy. He decided to take it, his wife keen to see more of him. Unfortunately his daughter has caused them a lot of grief, she always has no money. Mother told me how, when she was hard up she still bought ice. At which grandma and myself, shook our heads in disbelief. Alright if you were having a large party and needed lots it would be understandable, but when you are a single parent with a child to feed? So poor old Bill receives regular visits, mother even thinks he has borrowed money to give her. He tried to get other better paid work but at his age found doors either closed or the hours too unsociable, so has been working part time to help mother. Bill is quite a character, very quiet spoken, and a timid nature. He does however have considerable brute force, mother avoids asking him for help with more delicate tasks. His big hands are like clam jaws, when he shakes your hand you can feel the bones crumbling. If I end up with an arthritic hand I shall know who to blame.

Mother decided at the start of the year to rent out half of our fields to the neighbouring farmer. This suited him as it effectively gives him economy of scale and helped us reducing our need for extra help and providing a small yearly income. With my arrival back home, Bill after a respectable

period allowing me to grieve, suggested he might reduce his hours a bit. Mother with both me to feed and my help did not take any persuading. Bill is a smoker, that should be was, but mother thinks he still does it on the sly. Farm work can be exhausting and Bill had become rather short of breath lately. He would regularly stop, not to take a cigarette, but to take gulps of air.

Earlier in an attempt to increase our income I suggested to mother that I get a job. Mother had foresight and said no. With both grandma and Bill less able to help I now understand why.

With the fields ploughed and the seeds sown, Bill asked mother if she would mind if he did not come any more. She asked him why? Yet I knew she knew the reason, and the reason he gave was not it.

Farmers Market

Notes for the reader: The farmers market was a brilliant idea, whoever thought of them deserves a medal, they certainly help us.

Mother and I are busy in the small orchard, the trees are old and quite tall. We have a pair of steps which mother holds while I climb into the branches. It takes a while as this is the first of the crop, we want to get in early because the price will be good. The later crops we tend to wrap in newspaper and store for use through winter. There are a mix of Bramley's for cooking, and Cox's for eating. Mother makes a very delicious apple crumble, putting ground almond in the topping with almond slices as the piece de resistance.

When the buckets are full we take them through to grandma. Mother and I smile at each other as we walk towards her. The little old lady before us, her head down and arms in motion like some automaton. Grandma sits on a chair in the main courtyard, surrounded by a sea of old wooden boxes. It was like an apple armada, stacked by her were empty boats ready for their crew. In numerous buckets and other receptacles were hundreds of raw recruits. Grandma had a cloth on her lap, she would pick up an apple wipe it, take a quick look and assign it to its quarters aboard the next box. Those which had a blemish, hole or some other detrimental feature were piled into an old cardboard box on her left. It

was a laborious job, but necessary as our customers expected good quality produce. Mother had done a rather good job of marketing on a couple of small fruit and veg shops who still clung on in the face of stiff competition from the larger retailers. One is in the small town nearby, and another further afield. We also have a customer in the big town, "you". We were selling direct to the public tomorrow in a farmers market.

It is a very productive if tiring day and this evening we are all ready for an early night, which is just as well. Tomorrow we have to take the apples to each of the shops then go on to the big town and must be up with the dawn chorus.

This evening as I remove my bra I look down at my breasts hanging low on my chest. Each sloping out to either side like two nets of fish dangling over the side of a trawler. It makes me think of one of fathers sayings, "They can't fall there's nothing to stop them," he was referring to mother worrying about things in her shelves being to near the edge. I slip my nightie on and take the bra down to mother to put into soak, she would do the washing tomorrow evening.

It is still dark outside when I get up in the early morning, racing around the room trying to be quick yet seeming to take longer.

"Are you ready dear?" shouts mother up the stairs.

"Just looking for a clean bra?" I shout back, as I rummaged in a draw. Without wearing one my breasts were dragging over the contents, like trawling for fish!

"Come on or we'll be late," she shouts again. I always hated this, as often you would not catch every word and have to go running to find out the full detail. Leaving the draw open I go across the room and open the door to my room. Walking out onto the landing, I lean over the bannisters, the top of my breasts press against the rail, squeezing them between it and my ribs.

"Mother I need my bra."

"Darling don't worry, we have the deliveries and we need to get the stall set up."

"But..," I start to say as she cuts me short.

"Look it's going to be a hot day, now just put a tee shirt on and hurry up." Mother can get very anxious.

I have one tee shirt which is a very tight fit, I put this on hoping it may

give a little support.

My breasts in case you have not already guessed fail the pencil test, in fact they would probably fail the whole stationary cupboard, which you could hide under them and no item would go crashing to the floor. I am not keen on going out just in a tee shirt, being rather self conscious. Rushing down stairs, my breasts jump around, the tee shirt between the twin peaks strained.

Mother is busy taking the boxes from the hall and putting them in the back of the Land Rover. I automatically assist, grandma is standing with our sandwiches in two plastic lunch boxes and a couple of flasks full of liquid refreshment.

Mother straps the boxes down well, careful not to bruise the apples and intent on preventing them escaping as they are jolted around down the lane, she packs the tops of the boxes with bits of foam and newspaper. The tarpaulin over the top, and we are ready to go. Grandma passes the sustenance to me, as mother hurries to the drivers seat. The first part of the journey down the lane is painfully slow even with Bill's help and some rubble kindly donated by the local builder it was still far from smooth. On the main roads we were not much quicker, a combination of mothers ridged adherence to speed limits and the limitations of the old Land Rover meant we were slightly late arriving at the first shop.

The old gentleman that runs it is very understanding, my mother blaming me and my bra, his eyes alight on my chest. Then he makes a very frivolous remark as I help mother unload his boxes. We are soon off to the next shop, mother making up a bit of time on a resurfaced road with a long gradual descending incline. What we gain on the dual carriage way we loose on the multitude of traffic lights in the town.

With the second delivery done we are heading out of town on another dual carriageway to the bigger town some miles to the east. Mother hates it, not only because of the road system, but because of all the buildings. She gets quite claustrophobic, the town centre has a large number of office blocks and one of those massive shopping malls. We are outside down a large open street that used to be the old market. For years Market Street was devoid of any market activity. The days of bringing sheep and cattle to town were long gone. The old market had

been moved to a specially constructed area on what had been a small car park. With much protestation by market traders at the bad location, it was finally moved back to Market Street. The move had not come a moment too soon, the local traders running small independent shops found it a welcome boost. People coming on market day visit both the market and their outlets. With the favourable response from everyone including the public, a local councillor had proposed a farmers market.

So once a month we and other farmers have the street. It's not just fresh produce, one farmer's wife keeps bees and sells the most delicious honey. A dairy farmer has branched out into making cheese. We have not tried it as mother suffers from migraines and this is one of the triggers, but it does smell nice. There is a wide range of vegetables, meat, eggs and game. One busy lady is doing a roaring trade with her cake stall, by lunch time she has none left.

We are doing a reasonable trade, our collection of assorted carrier bags, voraciously collected by mother for a multitude of purposes is showing signs of depletion. An awkward looking fellow with glasses has just wandered up, I'm not sure if he is looking at the apples or my tee shirt.

"My mother, needs some apples to make a pie?" he says looking at me. I look for my mother, she is busy chattering away to one of our regulars. "We have these Bramleys." I look back at him, trying to make eye contact.

He pauses, I'm not sure if he is nervous or just a bit unsure.

"Yes, please then," he says almost stuttering.

"How many?" I ask, wanting to grin, wondering if the poor fellow was a bit lost without his mother. I suspect she normally did this for him.

"Yes, she did tell me, but.," he tails off, his stance unsure.

"Is she ill?"

"Yes, yes, she's in bed today."

"Oh, you don't normally do this shopping do you?"

"No, no." He gives me a sort of smile, an almost helpless expression. I want to ask mother how many they would need for a pie, but she had gone off with the old regular, a little lady, who now has her standing over at another stall. I take a guess based on the number mother used in a crumble, and put an extra one in for luck.

"I think this should be plenty," I say handing him a carrier bag of apples.

“Thank you.” He pays and then scurries off, perhaps keen to be back on familiar territory.

Income

Notes for the reader: When you've had a long period of everything going badly it is nice when things look up.

“I have had a thought, my room is the biggest and has en-suite so what if I move in with grandma and use the spare bed. We could let my room to a lodger. What do you think?” mother asks me looking for consensus.

“What does grandma say?”

“She thinks it's a good idea,” says mother smiling.

“Who were you thinking of as a lodger?” I say wondering what we were letting ourselves in for.

“We will just have to see who comes and make a decision,” she says very matter of fact.

The first respondent to mothers advert has arrived. Mother is talking to her in the hall and shouts to me to come and meet her. As I descend the stairs my eyes are filled with foreboding. A rather stern and severe lady dressed in black stands before me. She looks to be in her early fifties, a slight hint of grey in her black hair. Bulging eyes, with a cold stare send shivers down my spine. When she speaks, it is loud and commanding, her hand taking mine in a very limp hold.

“So what brings you to us?” asks mother in a friendly manner.

“I need a room and I believe you have one?” says the woman in a curt response.

“I meant what do you do for a living?” says mother trying to break the ice.

“Then you should be more precise my dear,” comes a cutting reply.

“Yes,” says mother feigning a polite smile.

“Now may I see the room?” commands the lady.

“Of course,” says mother gesturing to her to follow.

Mother escorts her up the stairs, I watch the expressions on each face as the woman looks over mothers old room. We had done an amazing job of tidying it, cleaning everything, but you could not hide the fact that its contents were old. She makes a few comments, asks how much and

says she has to check a few other places. Then promptly leaves.

A week goes by and we have more interest in the room. A bicycle is coming down the lane, mother and I are picking up windfalls in the orchard just outside the courtyard main gate. The man riding it gets off, he has glasses and an awkward stance as he walks towards us.

"Hello I'm Jack Smith, you had an advert for a lodger?" he says nervously.

"Yes," says mother.

"How is your mother?" I ask.

"Oh, she, she, haa haa had to go into a home," he stutters.

"Oh no why?" I ask sympathetically.

"She's a lot worse now, he says almost stuttering on the word lot. "She had to sell her house to pay for care, so now I have to find a pp ppp place to live."

Mother looked at me, "You know this chap?"

"Yes he bought some cooking apples at the last market, when you went off with old Mrs Smythers."

Mother invites him to come and take a look, the three of us wander into the house. Jack peers into the room, my mother encourages him to go in and take a look around. He turns and asks. "How, how, how much fff ff for the room?"

Mother tells him. He stands his eyes dropping to the floor, as though the carpet has the answer to his thoughts. "Yes, yes, that, hmm, yes that, that's ok. Ccould I, could I start today?"

Mother looks at me, I shrug my shoulders and and lean my head to the right, with a bit of a grin. Like signalling hey mum, why not. She turns back to him, "Ok Jack, the rooms yours."

He smiled at her and rushed down to his bicycle, we stood waiting, then he came back up with a pile of bags that had been strapped to the back. "Wow my room," he says disappearing inside, mother and I leave him to it.

Quietly mother took me to one side when we were out working in the old barn. "I think he may be a bit, well."

"Simple?"

"Yes," she said with a smile, nodding her head, "Still he seems a pleasant chap, probably totally lost without his mother. Reminds me a bit of your Auntie Edward's lad, except his stutter was far worse. It took him

so long to say even the simplest things.”

“I wonder what Jack does for work?” I say curious about the fellow.

“It had crossed my mind, I hope he can pay.” Mother's face is serious at this remark.

Later that evening mother invited Jack to dinner and we all started eating and talking.

“So Jack what do you do?” she asks, giving him a very motherly look.

“Oh, I, I mmm, I work at the nursery, help with the plants,” he says very hesitant.

“Do you enjoy that Jack,” asks grandma, taking an interest.

“Yes, yes it's very nice, the people are very kind to me,” he says nodding with a smile.

“That's good,” says grandma, her hand touching his arm.

“It's a very nice meal, thank you,” says Jack, in between mouthfuls.

Mother looks pleased, she likes politeness. “Thank you Jack.”

It's early morning, last night after dinner we had a call from Bill's wife. She had more news on dad's old friend. Mother and I have are getting ready to go on the long journey to see him in the main county hospital. Our old vehicle does its usual grunt, and grumble at being started up. Soon we are beyond our usual realm and into unfamiliar territory. Living as we do on minimal income and being very preoccupied with the daily tasks it is rare to go anywhere out of the ordinary. I have a map in front of me, navigating mother who is at this moment cautiously negotiating a rather large roundabout. Cars seem to be coming at us from all directions, one sports car zooms by blasting his horn. We are relieved to exit onto the outer ring road, following reassuring signs to the county hospital. Looming ahead is yet another roundabout, except an exit off this one leads directly into the hospital. Mother is prematurely relieved at leaving the hustle and bustle of the crazy drivers.

Signs everywhere, arrows to different blocks, and units, various arrows indicating car park A, car park B, short stay, long stay, red lines yellow lines, white lines, arrows, worn road markings, it was enough to need a psychiatric care unit just for bewildered visitors. The worst shock is to come. Mother finally decides to park in the car park we find first. We will walk from here she announces. “Go and pay at the meter dear.” I wander across, check the vast notice board full of charges and return

ticket less. You see we are used to paying a few tens of pence in the short stay at the local town. Mother and I have no idea that you need to win the lottery before trying to park in a hospital. Along with that psychiatric care unit, they should have one for visitors in shock. When I tell mother how much it is per hour she suffers Post Traumatic Parking Syndrome.

With our change cleaned out and a parking ticket so valuable that mother felt in need of an armed guard to watch over it. We set off, wandering from building to building, confused at directions, and asking many staff members. All the time mother was fretting about the minutes on the car park wasted. Standing in a lift, mother grasps my hand, she is not at all comfortable, had we not lost so much time she would have used the stairs. There is a ting, the bell rings as it reaches the second floor. We walk down a hard floored corridor, echoing footsteps from all those who tread on it. The sparse walls, interspersed with doors leading to wards and other rooms. At the far end is where we want, perhaps that is the wrong word as we would rather visit dad's friend in a nice place.

It's sad in the ward, poor old Bill laying in the bed, his wife by his side. Mother and I felt awkward but, were told by his wife to stay. She went off for a while, no doubt glad of a rest. His face was drawn, gaunt and grey, his breath laboured, by the side of bed was a big oxygen cylinder. His hand clasped a clear plastic mask just below his chin, deep blue veins crossing like mountain ridges below a thin crumpled skin. He has a flemmy cough, his other hand bringing a bowl to his face, his mouth spewing spit into it. He puts the bowl back out of sight under a bedside table. Behind his head and shoulders a pile of pillows, almost like white ghosts of death ready to take him. They are thwarted, an angel, well a nurse who is probably even more deserving of adoration comes with some pills. He struggles to take them, supping water from a plastic cup. The nurse is very sweet to him, her words and a kind smile, brighten his face just a little. She turns and wanders off down the ward passing the regiment of beds. A few are empty, Bill tells us they were occupied last night. This was a very depressing place, when we came in I noticed other faces, all tired, exhausted, like warriors surrounded and running short of ammunition.

Bill's lungs were badly damaged from years of abuse, his body short of

oxygen was slowly giving up. From somewhere mother was finding positive things to say to him, they somehow got into a conversation away from his illness. I could see his mood lifted, she was a great motivator my mother, strong and determined. They talk for ages until finally the nurse returns, tactfully suggesting that he should rest for a while. Mother and I each give him a kiss on the cheek, and leave with a smile and wave. It's not how we are feeling though, outside we meet his wife. She is tired, drained, her morale is low, her expectations for her dear husband even worse. Mother and I sit with her, mainly listening, mother puts an arm around her, comforting her. This poor lady is desperate for company, for a warm kind person to give her hope. Both I and mother are holding back the tears, we know from recent experience what she must be going through. When you are so close to someone the thought of losing that person is heart wrenching.

Eventually mother and I leave, we don't want to, but his wife understands, "You have a farm to run," she says tears streaming down her cheeks. Mother gives her a hug and we head off down the corridor to the lift. Mothers claustrophobia has temporarily been overcome, she and I are both relieved to be in this tiny metal box. The numbers go down, zero the doors open and we walk briskly across the reception area, through the double doors and out into the open air.

Mother can hold back no longer she takes me in her arms, I knew she was remembering those times when the four of them would go off together, happy days. Mother sobbed on my shoulder.

"Poor old Bill."

"I know."

I cried, remembering such a short time ago his strong grip. This time his hand felt so weak that mine would crush it.

We walk solemnly back to the car, lucky that no one had noticed our expired ticket. Mother sits for a while longer, she can not drive, tears fill her eyes as she stares out across the bleak car park and the monster buildings that had Bill deep within their bowels. Rain was coming down in sheets, gloomy dark clouds turning day almost to night. Mother pulls a hanky from her coat pocket, wipes her eyes, blows her nose, puts it back, finds the key and starts our good old trusty Land Rover. She pats it and thanks it for being a good friend. At that moment our inanimate car, is not just a hunk of metal.

I think of how father loved his car, how it shined. He would wash and polish it by hand, the paintwork gleamed, even inside the doors, and engine compartment. Dad liked taking different people, he was a great one for conversation. He said you can learn a lot listening to others, everyone liked dad. Well except someone jealous of his new car. He had parked up in the village, went into the grocers to get some shopping for mum, came out and there it was, a nasty scratch right along the passenger door. You can imagine some ignoramus thinking, "He must be doing alright, new car, must have loads of money." Father had to buy the car, it was necessary for his work. A colleague of his did weddings and dad helped out, so he could hardly turn up in some beat up second hand vehicle. Besides when dad worked the council were very tough on inspecting licensed vehicles, especially licensed hackney carriages. Bill would help dad out doing maintenance on the car, this helped save money which was always in short supply.

Grandma's Holiday

Notes for the reader: Sometimes you can't have what you want or need, you have to make sacrifices for others.

In town mother has finished the main shopping and is on a mission for me. She goes into the lingerie shop, and asks the lady assistant. "I wonder do you have a 34H bra it's for my daughter?"

The lady says she thinks they have and brings back one, unfortunately when mother asks the price, she says she will have to think about it.

When mum gets back I rush to greet her. "Did you get me one?" "Sorry dear, they did have one but the price." Her face was sad, she was between a rock and a hard place. With the grandma's holiday coming up, money was even tighter than before, mother was worried about going abroad without enough funds. She did not want to visit the relatives without being able to offer to pay for things such as meals out in restaurants and any visits they may go on.

"Can you manage without until we get back darling?"

"Well?" I say pausing, not wanting to make her short on the trip.

"We can't really go all that way without enough money."

"Sure, I'll be fine." I hope so anyway. If you are wondering why I don't borrow one of mothers or even grandma's. The genes for my breasts did not come from them, neither being particularly endowed. My fathers mother on the other hand is abundantly endowed if she did not live so far away I would have gladly borrowed one of her bra's. It would need some padding as her's are even bigger than mine.

I remember when we went to visit one time, mother and father left for some reason. I think they went into town, so I helped granny, as I called dads mum. She was gathering in her washing, the line was full of cloths. These days you don't see so many washing lines, I suppose with those washer dryers it's easier than taking it to a line. Well, she unpegged each item, handing it to me to fold and put in the basket. The phone was ringing and she walked back into the house, leaving me holding a big white thing with straps and two massive bags. It was her bra, and I remember reading the label, at that time reading was a big thing for me and any words warranted attention. There was a number and a letter, what did it mean 34J. Was it her house number, my little mind wondered about this for a long while, I proceeded to put this strange looking thing into the basket.

When she came back I started to ask "Granny..," but she cut me off, "Mummy and Daddy are on they're way back so you be a good girl and put your shoes and coat on." They had been shopping before we returned home, and it was much easier for them without a menace running around under their feet.

This evening at dinner, we get a surprise.

"Oh Jack that's nice for you," says mother listening to his news.

"Yes," he nods frantically, at the joy of going on holiday to Australia. Yet just lately he has seemed a little shy, and although he appears keen, his face is, well. It's hard to say but he does not have a big happy smile, it's almost an air of relief. Still he seems a bit of a quirky fellow, perhaps he is not keen on flying, that must be it.

"Scarred of flying all that way Jack."

"A bit."

"You'll be fine," says mother her voice full of encouragement. He was going to go to the airport by train and had it all worked out. Mother

suggests rather than leave his bicycle locked up for months outside the station, that she should give him a lift first thing in the morning. He is very happy with this suggestion.

It's the following morning after seeing Jack off on the train, mother notices a national paper on sale at the station kiosk. She buys it and returns home. I am surprised not to see a happy smile. Mother tells me the terrible news, old Mr Green who used to go around doing peoples gardens has been found dead. He was hit in the head with the edge of his spade, the skull fracture indicates he was hit from behind. There is no doubt this is murder, you can imagine how I feel, not long over my Jason's murder. Mother is now worried about leaving, especially as our lodger has gone off to Australia, and I shall be alone. "We'll have to cancel."

"If you don't take grandma now she may not be up to the trip, who knows how long it will take to catch whoever it is doing these murders." Mother is taking the Land Rover because no taxi will venture down our lane, it also saves some money and she can leave it at Granny's, near Heathrow. So she insists on getting enough shopping in, so I will not have to venture into town. Travel from our farm without a car is not much fun. It involves standing around on a lonely road waiting for the infrequent bus. You then have to hang around the town for four hours until the return bus arrives, if it does not run or you miss it then there is another three hour wait for the next. Either that or go by bicycle, which when you need to get a lot of shopping and negotiate mad drivers and pot holes is also less than appealing. The weather always seems to rain when I get my bum on the saddle. Cycling into driving rain up hill with a loaded bicycle, cars splashing you and the wind making every push of the pedal a real effort. Yes I am glad of a thoughtful mother.

Walled Garden

Notes for the reader: I'm sure many men might like to skip this chapter where I describe the walled garden but women will understand we ladies like our beds.

Saturday I was rather lazy, and had mother been around she would no doubts have chased me from my slumber. In my defence it had been a rather restless night, the weather was very hot, necessitating additional

dozing. The birds sang outside, they were singing louder than ever. This instigated my arising, that and the rumblings of a stomach complaining about my lackadaisicalness. I lay on my back arms stretched up as if to reach for some mystical creature to pull me up, instead my hands stung from the pain. Hitting out at a wooden headboard is not recommended, especially one made of solid oak. The old bed was a strange mixture of mend and make do. The metal frame, creaked and groaned at the slightest movement. Had the bed head been away from the wall I'm sure my feet would have become quite elevated. The headboard was so massive and heavy, grandfather had taken it from another old bed, after he and father had moved my bed into the room in which I reside. My previous bed had been a rather precarious wooden affair, which thankfully did not collapse when I used to play under it as a child. Perhaps though I might be to blame for its deterioration on account of not having a trampoline. Yes you are right it's my parents fault for depriving me, that's why I had to improvise, thank you.

When my arms were fully extended above my head again, this time avoiding the lump of oak, I give a rather cavernous yawn. It is most unlady like, no dainty affair, but what do I care, there is no one in the house. As push up on the mattress my head takes a most unnatural position, the blood rushing to my feet, I passed out for another five or ten minutes. Can you imagine such a thing, well we ladies do have such moments. Unfortunately the stomach is now grumbling with audible commotion, so again I pull myself up, the single sheet sliding over my chest, its smooth clean feel is wonderful. My breasts rubbing gently against it as they slide slowly from the spill that had lain either side of my ribs.

I swing my feet around and down into the waiting slippers, bleary eyed I decided to wander over to the window. Perhaps a bit of sunlight and the gentle breeze that blew in from the half open orifice would help. Here way out in the sticks, we had never bothered with net curtains, we all so loved the surrounding nature, there was a certain pleasure in a clear view. I stretched out my arms rising above my head, another yawn released from the cavern, my back arched. There was a certain sensation as the underside of my breasts pulled up against the skin, and they moved slightly to the sides. As I ease my arms down, a little robin comes and sits on the bird table below, it was almost empty and he to

prepares a complaint, joining forces with the songs from my abdominal cavity. The garden out the back is mostly grass, enclosed by a crescent of a hedge. Mother has a vegetable patch near the kitchen adjacent to the southern wall of our walled garden. Behind the hedge is a rather large expanse of woodland which grandfather had planted behind the south-eastern aspect of the house, this had been expanded by grandma upon his death. It was a beautiful memorial to his character, he would wander along the shaded path, he and grandma, taking me in the middle. They would pull me up by the arms, when we crossed the little stream, shouting wee. Then we would sit, on a log seat that his father had carved out of a massive log, the birds would sing, the stream burbling across the stones. Some evenings the whole family would gather in a clearing and we would play games, silly nonsense but it made us all laugh, and grandfather could be quite a tease.

Grumble guts is stimulating me from my reminiscences, mother would have had a fit, had she seen me wander from my room naked, but she is not around so hey. The bathroom is not far, just across the landing. With a splash on my face, I make haste down the stairs, heading directly for the kettle. As it hisses and bubbles, I grabbed a couple of slices of mothers home baked bread and put them in the toaster. Clunk, the old museum piece eats them in it's warm recesses. The kettle now furiously calling for attention, as it creates a cloud of steam. This old thing has no shut off and the handle is on the top, well what passes for one, it had been mended with a wooden splint and liberal helpings of black tape. The tape could get quite sticky and has to be replaced or you would be able to do a spider man impression without the aid of special effects. I opened the old wooden cupboard door above the sink, where a motley array of china representing most periods sitting higgledy piggledy.

With a willow pattern cup on an plain black saucer I am ready to commence the relief of the kettle. Its contents flowing onto an old teabag which we usually made do twice, putting the first users on a plate in the fridge. Milk, I walk over to the old museum piece, it is a monster, and certainly not energy efficient. Though it did have one of the few solid handles in our house, this was a quality built German model, which we think grandfather got in a kind of barter deal. You see in my sleepy head I had forgotten to get the cow juice when retrieving the teabag. With the hot weather it is better for the milk, which when I pour it onto the watery

tea swirls down under the clinking of a battered old spoon, extracted from a fragile draw. This draw every so often would refuse, most objectionably to returning to its home. Mother and grandma used to call father, but with his passing they just got more and more frustrated, until my younger mind and lighter touch was called upon to coax the cantankerous beast back into its lair.

With the tea ready the toaster, started emitting that warning smell. It was no automated micro chipped marvel, this one craved attention, and had a sneaky nature. This time I was lucky, pulling the hot bread out onto a waiting plate. The thick toasted bread made a thud down onto the cracked surface. Grandma was a whiz at making marmalade and I would be chastised for heaping jar fulls onto the slices, but not today. It is yummy as my teeth crunch through the crisp toast, the tang of the oranges bites into the tongue, hmm. Crumbs fall like hail onto the plate and over the table, there was the Robin again, his calls for my more attentive mother to see to his needs. As I got up from the table the old wooden chair scapped across the stone floor, its slabs worn where people had stood over hundreds of years. My hands reach down for the plate, cup and saucer, which found its way to the sink, but no further. You understand I have to get the food for the birds, this was contained in a special cupboard reserved for them. Even our wall cupboards had character, they were an odd assortment added over the years to this unfitted kitchen.

The kitchen has two external doors, one small one into the walled garden to the west, and the other into the hedged garden. Now I have to find my sandals in amongst an array of old shoes. With success I slip them on, and unlock the back door into the hedged garden where the little birds are waiting for their morning, now nearly afternoon, snack. It is a nice feel, a cool breeze against my bare skin, but not the sun. I have fair skin so burn very easily, once the avian friends are replenished it is time to retreat to the shade of the house. With such a nice day, and so hot I do not want to dress, neither do I want to sit and burn. But of course, come with me, I will take you around the walled garden, it's quite beautiful at this time of year. Opening the kitchen door a waft of fragrances tickled my nostrils, playing a tune of scents. To the left of the door inside the southern wall are the herbs, basil, chives, rosemary, mint, thyme, parsley, sage, and lavender it is exquisite. Turning to my right I walk

along the path by the eastern wall which abuts the end of the house, filled with roses. There a magnificent red rose, I lean to touch its bloom and my breasts hang low, touching the leaves, luckily not the thorns. I move along just a few paces and there is Grandma's joy, it was her and grandfather's favourite, the most gorgeous yellow rose, still lovingly tended by her. As I lean to hold a flower to my nose with my right hand I use my left forearm and hand to hold my breasts against my chest. This bush has been growing many years and has some formidable barbs on the solid stems. The smell is fantastic, a light aroma, gentle, subtle, strong and wild.

Before I go to my destination there is another smell, I walk along the path to a point where it follows the northern wall, along which is the overpowering smell of sweetpeas. Mother would have the whole garden full of them if grandma did not hold back her passion. I step one foot onto the soil, my nose wandering from bloom to bloom, my breasts lightly tickled by the foliage. I feel the strength of the sun on my back and step onto the path, continuing around to the western wall, most of the bed is full of various heathers, mauves and purples, mixed with the dark foliage, bees, busy collecting the nectar. Now I turn in towards the middle, on my right the pond. Fish rising to the surface and sucking air as the hot weather reduces the oxygen in the water. A dragon fly, its brilliant colours dazzling in the sun, blazes by. Damsel flies sit coupled on the stem of a flag iris, it's brilliant yellow hue competing with the radiance from the waters surface. The ripples shine and sparkle like a thousand diamonds moved by the breeze.

I can sit and watch it all from the shade, behind me is a summer house, partly made from trees trained up around it. It's cool inside, the leaves of the plants absorbing the suns energy and the shade they afford make it most pleasant. I walk in through the only entrance, it's just right. I turn lowering my posterior onto the polished beech seat, a single board supported on two old logs. The whole thing is so rustic and very heath Robinson, there is no danger of splinters, years of use have rendered its surface marble smooth. I lay back against an old cushion rescued from some abandoned settee, one of many fly tippings down one of our lanes. This slouch now turns to a laying down, my head obviously needs the blood again. As I lay back on the bench my back feels the woods caress, my left breast sliding down my side resting between it and the cushion,

my right breast falling over the edge, touching the side of the wooden plank. Its rough edge not so smooth, but I have no intention of moving. The seat was not designed for sleep and I remember my grandparents sitting in here, bolt upright. Posture, they were always going on about keeping the correct poise, working hard on the farm their backs took some pounding.

I lay for a while, then I turn on my side, pulling my right breast across the rough edge up onto the bench where it is more comfortable. As I roll to this position, my left breast, slowly flops over on top of the right, sandwiching it against the board below. The left meets the right with a faint plop as both are quite fluid and wobbly. If I put on weight most of it seems to go onto my ample bosoms, which are soft to touch. To put it into perspective I hope when mother gets back there is enough money to buy me a bra, the current requirement is 34H. Still I'm boring you, a little hover fly has just flown in doing its static, erratic dance in the air and then it's gone. They look like wasps, but so far as I know quite harmless, to the side nearest my feet is a Buddleia, full of small tortoise shell butterflies and a few red admirals, fluttering around. So delicate, so slow, walking across the massive head of tiny flowers, probing with their unrolled proboscises. It is amazing to think that the red admirals migrate to and from north Africa, how something so small and fragile can cover such distance when for most humans it's a struggle to walk a few hundred yards to the local newsagent.

With my head propped against the cushion I lay here quite contented, dozing off with short cat naps. Every so often my eyes flutter open and take a look around, through the open entrance the pond is in full view. The plants around it wave back, pushed by the air, a small beetle its wing case open makes a loud ungainly flypast. There is the loud song from a wren, sat on the far wall over near the herbs. I'm honoured, our robin is sitting on the wooden window ledge to the right side of the door. He is trying to tell me it's lunch time, perhaps he and mother have an agreement. This little fellow is determined to make sure we both eat properly while she is away. Mother never stops worrying about one thing or another. Even if she won the lottery and had not a care in the world I do believe she would find some reason to be all of a flutter. Still it is a great blessing to have a mother who cares about you, for all her faults she is the best in the world and I love her dearly.

Hot summer

Notes for the reader: In this chapter I describe the second day of my freedom from parental power, and describe women's things so you male readers may want to skip to the next one. We ladies like our little details.

Sunday morning and my brain is now concious, but I have a headache. At first I can't think why, I roll on my right side not wanting to get up. My right breast presses against the mattress feeling the left breast sprawling over it. Both are weighed down by the arm laying over them, the left breast pushed over so it crosses and to lies on the mattress. My mind like my bosoms wandering, pressed down by the weight of what needs doing, where had I left my collection of mother's lists. My right arm is under my head and soon gets pins and needles, my eyes look down, staring at the left breast inches away from my chin.

Sitting up in bed I put my hands up to my neck with my elbows almost touching, the back of my arms resting on the top of my breasts. Twirling my head around, the window had been open too wide and now I have a stiff neck from the draft. As I grasp my neck harder, trying to massage it, my arms push down, spreading and squashing my big bags of fat with the nipples several inches below the elbows. My eyes settle on the window, it had been so hot last night I had left the big and small windows open, the air must have streamed into the old house, helped by an evening breeze.

So I have a wash, take breakfast then track down the dreaded list. Mother did not particularly like housework so it was delegated to my good self. I to have an allergy to such excitement, but being the lowest on the pecking order it always seems to fall to me. The house did need a thorough vacuum, mother was right, and it was one of those jobs that kept getting put off. I wandered around to the cupboard under the stairs, extracting the rather old upright vacuum. This beast was difficult to get spares for, we would re-use the bags. The worst feature was the noise, it was no wonder grandma had a hearing problem, I used a couple of ear plugs, which I keep in a little cupboard in my room. The hall was always the dirtiest because of our constant traipsing through. Over in one corner I plug in, the round plugs had never been replaced. The frayed cord, like

a crazy tail led me to the roaring machine, which began growling the moment I flicked the wall switch. There was an on off switch on the appliance but this had long since ceased to function. I believe under the cover there is a bit of wire that performs the same function.

Taking a firm grip of the handle I begin the backward and forward motion, trundling it across the big old square carpet that covers most of the stone floor. As I bend low, to slide the end under the big oak table that resides along one wall my breasts swing forward towards my head, as I pull back they swing back to my chest, like two swings in a park. The right one, helped by my right handed action, and its extra weigh going further and higher at both ends of the swing. It's a strange feeling, I look down at my breasts, it is no good trying to vacuum like this.

While my mind whirs for a solution my feet take me to the wall socket, where I bend down and turn off the infernal din. The grey cells take me into the kitchen, mother has a draw with all sorts of bits and bobs. There is a lot of assorted string, not much good as it would cut into the skin. When you live with a family of improvisers it becomes instinctive. At the back of the draw I have found a string bag. I put my arms through the handles letting the bag hang over the top of my breasts. To keep the handles from doing what the straps on slips do, I use a piece of string between them below my neck. Now I tug the left breast up over and down into the bag, which it does a good job of filling. Will the right breast fit? Well here goes, I lift it up and push it down into the remaining space. Both breasts are now squeezed in pressing against the net, rubbing my hands over them I can feel the multitude of bumps as the skin protrudes through the each square of net. This seems ok for supporting them underneath but when I lean forward as you do when vacuuming they swing about so it is not complete.

I now wander from the kitchen through the hall across the yard and into the big barn. My eyes adjust to the gloom inside the big building, scanning around, searching. We have all sorts of bits around the farm, hooks on walls, boxes in corners, old cabinets. The junk shed is an Aladdin's cave, and is my next port of call. There is a piece of chord, just the job, I pull up a strand of the net down near my nipple and thread the chord through then across and through near the nipple of the left breast, so that at either side there is a long end. I wrap one end behind my back

catching it with the other hand and do the same on the other side. Now the ends are both at the front where I thread these ends through the net above each areola then pull the chord tight so it pulls down firm. Tie a reef knot and do the shake test, wiggle my torso around, all seems to be restrained. So it's back to the boring chore, and it's no good suggesting one of those music players. We don't have such luxuries and with the noisy machine going you would deafen yourself at anything approaching an audible volume.

As I was about to leave the junk shed I heard a noise, not a natural noise, maybe it was the wind on the old tin roof. But it made me think, the door into the junk shed is near the gate and fence into the northern field. The fence is just wire and the gate a rather broken five bar affair. There is a hedge around the field but from the lane it would be possible to see across from the fields other entrance. This spooked me for a moment, if someone had come down the lane they might have seen me wandering around in the nude. Now I'm being silly who would come over a mile up a bumpy rutted lane to our farm. I walk out of the shed into the outer courtyard, closed the junk shed door and stand silent listening. Nothing, I walk over to the old milking shed. Following along the wall to the fence where I peek around like a naughty child. My eyes stare across the northern field to its other gate, there is no one there, no one in the lane.

When you are alone, isolated as I am especially being a woman you can feel quite vulnerable. I must admit this is the first time apart from when Jason disappeared that I felt this paranoid. Perhaps more so now, because then I had the support of my family. With mother and grandma away and no car, you can feel very cut off. I'm sure if a man reads this he will come up with some statistics showing that anything with the word road in it is a thousand or even million times more dangerous. That's great, but even if I were clothed in a suit of armour I would still have this uneasy feeling. I'm sure some man will also be doing a statistical analysis of the number of times I have recently mentioned my breasts. Sorry if it is boring you men but they are a big part of me and have caused a lot of anxiety over the years. So now I am able to experience new feelings, these are important to me. When my family get back I won't be able to go around naked, so you will just have to bare with me. There is another reason I am describing them in detail, so you will have

to keep reading to realise why.

Still staring my little head off across at the gate, I snapped back. I walked back along by the old milking shed, its painted walls flaking. The doors tatty, one hanging on the skew, then around the corner through into the secluded main courtyard. I stopped after closing the gate, should I bolt it? No I would not bother, I was being rather neurotic. It took all morning to do the downstairs, upstairs would have to wait, I shall not bore you with the detail. Or the excitement of my snack lunch, mother would have told me off for not making a proper meal. I do hope however that in this and the previous chapter you are getting a more detailed picture of our farm, so I shall continue.

My breasts had been squashed together in the string bag and pulled hard against my chest by the tight chord all morning. Now they were beginning to feel in need of liberation, the reef knot is quite tight and is taking a bit of fiddling to get undone. No it is not a granny knot and my nails are so short they are not assisting. Apart from a gentleman farmer's wife I doubt any farming women have need of a manicure. That's better, my hands are now pulling the chord out of the net bag and put it on the kitchen table. A bit more fumbling with the string between the bag handles, there done. Now I try slipping the handles down and off my arms which is a bit awkward, but success. Though the tenacious bag has a good hold, I had not accounted for the shape of the bag which is smaller at the top, with a firm braided band around it on which the handles are fixed. I try to pull the smaller left breast but it's no good. There is one of those finger things like a tunnel that each finger goes in and the harder you pull the more it grips. My breasts are now firmly wedged into something like that.

Scissors, I rummage in the cutlery draw, ah great. I've just remembered, this is grandma's bag, damn. My next idea is simple, I wander through the house and main courtyard, into the outer courtyard and walk to the junk shed. Here in the top draw of an old chest of draws I find just what I need. Clutching two hooks, like those they hang meat on in the butchers I go over to the five bar gate leading to the north field. I place the two hooks over the top bar and their other ends through each handle on the bag. As I walk backwards the chord handles take the tension, the old gate groans and my breasts are pulled outward. If you could see it, I'm

starting to giggle, two massive bosoms pulled out in front of me. Pulling harder my giggles turn to tears as it is getting painful and that bloody bag won't let go. The top of my breasts are strained and stretched, ah, shit, it is all I can do to stop myself falling backwards onto the concrete. My breasts crash back against my chest and all I have done is to demolish the top rail of the five bar gate, now four bar. A rusty portion had broken away and the hooks slid off, making a clatter as they hit the dusty concrete.

The damn bag is still tight around my bosoms, I am sorely tempted to go and use the scissors, but being a silly stubborn bitch I feel that would be giving in too easily. Where is there a strong gate, down the lane the one into the north east field. It's Sunday and the other fields are empty, so I will go. I pick up the two hooks, wander back through the courtyards and down the lane. Mother would have a blue fit if she saw her daughter clothed only in sandals and a string bag walking down the lane. But she isn't around and the hedges are high and the lane has more twists and turns in it than a couple of mating snakes.

Here on this gate I stand a chance, so hooks in position. I pull backwards, again my breasts are pulled forward and the skin stretched taught. It was no good, I look down at the bloody bag, it just seems to cling on for dear life. Then I notice after all my wrenching, that the handles pull through the top braiding. Daft, I pulled hard on the braiding, the chord to the handles slowly shortened and the top opened up. The top had just bunched up and become almost jammed, so that is why I thought it solid. Now putting my hands down into the bag I pull and tug at the left breast. As it pops out, the bag falls loose on the right breast and comes off with a light pull. I stand for a moment, string bag screwed up in one hand, hooks in the other. A few steps to the gate, I lifted each breast and flopped them over the top bar of the gate giving them a modicum of support. I rest my arms on the bar, staring up the field towards the coppice. This will teach me to think before improvising.

As I pull back from the gate to turn right and go back up the lane, my breasts drag across the top of the gate. The right bosom is the first to wobble over the top and slap down on my chest, then the left slides over the smooth warm metal. Each takes its natural position, hanging low over the top of my stomach and slightly to each side of my chest. As I

trudge back to the house along the rough lane my breasts settle into a slow rhythm, swaying inward and wobbling outwards. I can feel them touching my arms and the soft tissue sliding away again across my ribs. Then they come again the skin folding against my arms, looking down I see ripples as these big soft bags of fat oscillates with each step I take. The sun is quite strong so I quicken my step, I have been in it for a while and burn easily. The faster pace accentuates my bouncing bosoms, as they jiggle to the new tempo.

On reaching the hall I can check the list which I left on the oak table. Having spent all morning vacuuming I guess I should tackle another of mothers tasks. She is quite a one for her documentation and saves huge quantities of card on which she meticulously records all the chores and shopping lists. Each day handing a new card to me, as though it is some collectors item to be treasured. "Don't lose it," she urges, proceeding to read aloud all the things on it as though I'm some illiterate child. The next item is to clear up the path through the woods. The path follows a rough loop, the track winding between tree roots and except near the door to the walled garden, is mostly unsurfaced. A few weeks back we had a very strong wind and it took down quite a few branches from some of the older trees. Each year we collect these and add them to the wood pile for the winter.

Refreshed from the meal I first had to collect the wheel barrow from its hiding place, out of sight behind the garden hedge and southern wall of the walled garden. The old hulk rattles a lot, it has seen better days, how it has lasted so long is a miracle. As it bounces over each bump, tree root, or hole some flake of rusty metal falls off, like an autumn leaf. Well I have reached a good place near the old trees. These once stood on their own in the middle of the south east field, most of which apart from the kitchen garden and a swath near the outer courtyard became grandfathers woods. It was a large area, extending far beyond the confines of the path. It rolled gently up to a tree lined ridge, this also limited the extent of the south an north east fields. Through the west field accessible from the outer courtyard there is a track, it follows up through the south field hugging the edge grandma's tree plantings in what was left of the south east field which grandfather had left as a small paddock. Shaped like a crooked bottle, the spout emptied into the walled garden, the base at the top of the ridge to the south. The track then turns east

following between grandfathers wood and the trees of the ridge, it emerges into the troublesome north east field. The northern corner of which is a coppice planted to try and stabilise the soil. Beyond the ridge, is an escarpment, partly natural and completed by some aggressive quarrying. Our boundary is quite spectacular, perhaps tomorrow I will go up on the ridge and explain some more, but now I must work.

As I bend down to start picking up the bits of wood and twigs, my breasts sway around, sometimes like windscreen wipers in the same direction sometimes competing for the same space. They are quite sloppy and it feels strange doing this work naked, but in another way quite liberating. I perhaps should explain my breasts have gone from large and firm to huge and floppy. As each year passes the fat in my breasts has increased a little, it's the area I put on most weight. For some women this would be a dream as it makes them bigger, but mine were already big so the extra just makes them softer, heavier and more gross. It has been quite a while now without a bra and at the top of each there are the beginnings of stretch marks in the skin, no doubt the side effect of gravity unhindered by a brassier. One of them slides across my knee as I kneel to pick up a bigger branch. The old branch falls apart as I pick it up, I throw the piece in my hands into the wheelbarrow, then I bend down again and pick up the rest. It is quite a laborious task, but the path is special to all our family.

Some time later I stand, my back is hurting from the constant stooping. In the distance, a rat tat tat, then a pause then another series of blows. It is a woodpecker, but from where I am I can't see what species. My arms folded under my ample bosoms, they flow over like escaping otters, any anthropologist might consider my stance defensive. My body language is misleading, they are folded as support. Whenever I exert myself they do feel the strain and sometimes a bit of pain, being well endowed I would not recommend running, especially without good support. With each footfall they tug downwards and swing around like two mad monkeys, pulling and wrenching at the bodies supporting sinews. The wheelbarrow is looking back at me, it's full and wants emptying.

I lower my arms, my breasts flopping down against my chest, swaying gently as I walk over and take up the handles. It is quite heavy and hard going pushing it along the bumpy path. The wood bouncing upon the

rusting metal sides, like crazy drummers. My pendulous breasts are now bouncing together and brushing against the insides of my arms, adding to the senses. The next piece of path is alongside the walled garden outside its western edge. There are numerous chips in the bricks where, we have all at sometime crashed the wheelbarrow into it. The flakes trodden into a mix of dirt and gravel that leads to a small wooden gate. Through the gate is the outer courtyard, to the south is the wood through which I have just walked, Grandma's wood. To the north a gate, fence and field where we used to keep cattle, now it is rotated between pasture for sheep and potatoes or cabbages. To the east the old milking shed and big gate into the main courtyard, over to the west is the cattle shed and at the far end the old junk shed, its corrugated iron roof sagging and rusted. Behind these is another field with a gate behind the cattle shed at the southern corner, in a triangle of mud. Yes there is a lot of mud, muck and slurry around, the concrete surface of this outer yard is worse, because it is used to access all except the northern fields. So for grey concrete first find an archaeologist to dig through the brown layer over which I now tread. Luckily in this dry weather the worst that is happening to my sandals is a smothering of dust, from the caked mud. I head through the big gate into the main courtyard, crossing diagonally over to the big old barn. It is a massive stone building, quite imposing and possibly bigger than our house. There is a huge tall double door, open at the moment and through which I now walk, slightly hunched under the weight of the load. Just around inside the door I am relieved of my load, heaving hard, the logs rather untidily add to the base of our stack. These will need cutting up before I can put them as neat as mother has her previous efforts.

I'll do that in a moment, but first I must put the wheelbarrow back outside the walled gardens entrance to the woods. The barrow is placed up against the wall, mother insists it goes there as it is both sheltered and easily accessible when she needs it for either the garden or logs, without cluttering up the paths. That done I stroll back to the barn, the sun still hot in the late afternoon. Apart from the one tractor and a few tools the barn is almost empty, when father died we sold quite a bit either to other farmers or scrap. It was the only way to pay for the funeral, so now it is quite cool and airy.

Near the woodpile is a sawing horse, like one of those boxes you vault

over but with a vee of wood at each end to help grip the log. Hanging on the wall I reach up and grab an old bow saw, lift up one of the logs, placing it on the horse. Holding the log in place with my left hand and start sawing with my right. As my arm and body rocks back and forth it sets up another motion, my boobs swing out from my body then slap back against my ribs. On the floor below a shower of wood dust. Rays of light stream against it from one of the barn windows high up in the wall. The scattering of logs is now becoming a heap at the end of the sawing horse.

There I have finished, I place the saw back on the hook and move the horse back against the wall. The last job to stack these logs on the pile. As I lean forward to put them up high, the skin on my chest presses against the ends of the logs, leaving red marks by the time all are in place. Satisfied with a good afternoons work the dinner table beckons, so I leave the barn, closing the big doors and head directly opposite for the main entrance to the house. It's quite old, mostly stone, but at some stage a previous owner extended it by adding a wing on the north eastern corner, so it is L shaped. The wing projects into the courtyard so the outer wall follows the line of the old wall now much shorter with the main gate to the lane taking up a good portion. The other side is a short wall which joins with the old barn.

I go through a small stone porch, it looks big but the walls are thick stone so the door seems to be shrunken. Just in case you are wondering where about my bare person is the key? The door is not locked, silly I know but being so far from civilization we tend to leave everything open. Yes mother did tell me to keep the house locked while she and grandma are away. Turning around I walk over to the main, gate, it is a big wooden structure, closing under an imposing stone arch that joins each side of the wall. The gate is firmly bolted, I walk to the gate into the outer courtyard, which yes I have left open, this is also wooden and fills the gap in the stone wall. Now I don't need to worry about going around tonight, all that's left is to bolt the front door. Cluck, its hefty iron bolts slide across into the fixings buried in the stone surround.

The entrance hall leads off to the right into the dinning room, it also contains the main stairs, under these is the kitchen entrance. Now I'm in the kitchen, first things first I walk briskly down the long room to each of

the garden doors and secure them. Ok now you, mother and grandma can all stop worrying. I must tell you how mother gets annoyed with all the doors in the kitchen, she says it reminds her of one of those stage farces. You never know who will come through which door next. It was worse when we were a bigger family, there are four doors, the fourth through into the dining room. She also complains about the light, although the kitchen faces south east, the house is at an angle, it does not receive a great deal of light. The windows are small and high up, as are those in the even duller north eastern wall of the extension. The larger windows open on the courtyard, where there is least light! My mother complains bitterly about the men who designed this house, cursing them for her eye strain.

After a raid on the kitchen I am now heading back into the entrance hall, on the other side there is a downstairs toilet near the entrance and a corridor. Down this dingy passage are four doors, leading to a small office first on the right. Then a store room again on the right, on the left a door to the library and round the corner several yards further where I am now, in the rather large lounge. You would probably laugh at the furniture, it looks like one of those reproductions they do in museums and history centres. This is how people used to live in Victorian times and we still do. At the far end is a massive stone fire place, one you can almost stand up in, it's vast. To fuel this takes considerable amounts of timber, so my grandfather and grandma's concept of planting lots of trees has other benefits. There is one wood further from the house that mother and I coppice each year. The tractor pulls a heavy load across the north east field, we have to wait for dry weather. One year the ground was wet and the poor old trailer had to be abandoned before the tractor joined it as mother furiously tried to pull it out, succeeding only in digging herself and the Massey deeper into the mire. We returned to it several weeks later, digging it from rock hard dry mud was no fun. The field in summer is bone dry, yet in winter the water runs down of the surrounding slopes and turns it to mush. The extra trees around the top ridge helped, but it's still best left for summer grazing.

Where was I, oh yes the carpet, or rather a mixture of carpets, rugs and anything else that helps to keep your feet off the cold stone slabbed floor which is rather worn and threadbare. Mother was rather naughty, she cadged some samples from a local carpet salesman. These now fill

various gaps along by the big windows. I felt sorry for the poor fellow the day he came, his poor car. Only a Land Rover, tractor or keen hiker would make it to the farm, even the post office refused to take their vans down our lane. It's over a mile long and has more pot holes than the peak district. When he arrived, his face you could see the worry as he looked back at the car, covered in dust, and no doubt his concern was for the exhaust pipe, which did clatter a bit when he left. Then he had to face mother, first he gave her samples to flip through, measuring up the lounge. His eyes looking at a much younger me, before I had gone to live with Jason. Then he would glance at my mother flipping through the sample books, he would stop and scribble on his clipboard. You could see the morale ebbing away as he looked at the room, it was little better than it is now.

We had recently lost father and I feel mother was looking to fill the void, carpets were though a pipe dream. Our finances were non-existent, this unfortunate salesman was an incomer. He had purchased a franchise for the area, his wife working in their new shop, they had from what he was telling mother put everything into it. This made it worse, mother felt terribly guilty, she had assumed it was some big national company which charge a small fortune and would not be put out by her indulgent daydreams. Mother determined to right her wrong, has ever since collected business cards from them and handed them out with glowing recommendation. Apparently when the chap got back he had to have a new exhaust, the car sounded like an old man with uncontrollable wind. Luckily when mother explained to his wife, that she had been foolish, after fathers passing the lady was very understanding. They are such a nice couple, and from all accounts they did do an excellent job fitting some Axminster, in one of mums WI friends home.

The walls, yes, well one good thing is that they are rather thick. They also are thankfully free of damp, but the wallpaper, lets say it's past its best. In the lounge there were curtains until they disintegrated when mum and grandma tried to get them down for a wash. You should have seen it, hilarious, oh there were bits everywhere, grandma claimed it was mother's new carpet. There are still threads of it out of reach at the ends of the rail, still clinging on, all that remained of once elegant red velvet. In its time this room must have been very special and the owners at that time obviously doing well. Now a variety of chairs are scattered around

the room, most patched or reupholstered. I have plonked myself down on the big old sofa, which almost engulfs you. The cushions have lost that effect and the springs are a bit wonky, but we like it. Pulled close up to the fire in winter it is magnificently cosy, the three of us squashed together, grandma recounting tales of her youth. Giggles and don't they both go on about, Mrs Thingy you know used to live next to so and so, oh what in the, yes married old what's his name, the one with the big, oh wasn't it huge, giggle giggle.

The light is fading now, I can see the sun going down over the roof of the old milking shed. It has been a long time since that was used, mother and father gave up after grandfather died. With our small herd and the price we were getting, it ran at a loss. It does get used to put the sheep in occasionally.

I wakeup in the pitch black, all the work had tired me, and no I was not watching television. Mother thought it was not worth the licence fee, all those reality shows. Grandma loved them so there were endless arguments, these stopped abruptly. One stormy night the nature took a hand in the decision making, siding with mother. So with an aerial laying in courtyard and no money to pay for it to be replaced we took to playing cards for matchsticks and board games. The society for the prevention of cheating would have had a field day. Grandma is terrible, mother accuses me and I'm the only one who thinks winning by skill is the honourable way. Yes, mother was at it too, Grandma egging her on saying if her granddaughter can cheat so can we all. Me, the effrontery of these old folks and they have the temerity to go around complaining about the youth of today.

Beauty sleep, off to bed, I am groping my way in the dark towards the door into the passage, my left hand outstretched to my side contacting with the wall. I follow it bumping into a chair before colliding with the door, one advantage of having massive mammaries is that they do provide a soft buffer. I must have looked funny, my nose touching a panel and my breasts squashed against another lower down, their mass splayed out to each side, partly rolled around my torso. My right hand found the door handle, I do not bother putting the lounge light on because I am soon in the passage, which I illuminate upon entry. Wandering down around the corner and further along to the entrance

hall, where it was on with landing light and off with the hall one.

My old slippers slapped down on the bare boards, we had long since taken the stair carpet to cover the weeds. Some of the stair rods had come loose and the carpet was worn and dangerous so it had to go. Nearly to bed now, just a quick nip to the bathroom, with all the working I feel a bit dusty and a tad sweaty. So it's nice to ease down into a hot bath, so soothing. I like the water deep, breasts being full of fat are rather buoyant and the support of the water is quite welcome. The water getting deeper as it cools and I add a bit more. But eventually I must give in, wash and go to bed. I'm now kneeling in the bath rubbing soap over my body, lifting up each of my bosoms in turn to wash first underneath and then on top, with soapy hands they are very adept at escaping ones grasp. The right one is escaping my left hand now as I try to wash it with my right had. My right breast is slightly larger than the left and in the less dexterous care of the left hand is more able to slide out of it unless I keep a firm grip, which is not so easy with soapy skin. My flannel at hand I splash around, mother always frets that I make the wooden floor slippery, but I must remove the lather first. Pulling the plug it gurgles and sucks as the water chugs down the old pipes. Stepping out of the bath onto the bath mat I sit on the side of the old cast iron bath, which as I lean down to dry my feet, I can see right underneath. My breasts are warm and pressing down on the tops of my legs as I dry their lower halves. It's a pleasant feeling, clean smooth skin of my legs against the soft cushion of my bosoms. There I'm dry, happy and surprisingly no phone call from mother. Well never mind, I'll hang up the towel and wipe the bath around.

All done, so it's to bed now and I am ready for a good sleep. I try sitting up and reading for a while, but it's no good. The lead eyelids take over, so I lay back my head on the pillow, a thin sheet over me. My mind drifts as do my breasts, laying on my back with arms down each side, as I breathed deep and my chest rises they come wandering like a slow tide towards the beach. In this case heading towards my neck and face, so I moved my arms away and they slide down my ribcage resting gently on the sheet below. As I lay in bed I considered it unusually that my worrying mother had not phoned but perhaps it was a longer journey and they are in Holland, also there is the time difference.

Spinster

Notes for the reader: I have noticed many people rushing around in their cars, if they forget something they just hop back in and get it.

It is a typical Monday morning the weather is cool and overcast, lots of white fluffy clouds but these could turn to black thunderclouds with the hot weather. I have had breakfast and realised that on Saturday I did not collect the post. We always try to combine activities, checking the fences around the top of the ridge was necessary but arduous because it was a long walk.

Wearing a pair of trainers instead of my favourite sandals, which are ok, but get a stone under your foot, ouch. I first go around the courtyard and check that the gates are bolted, then lock the front door, and leave through the kitchen door into the walled garden locking it behind me. I thought it best, and today I am wearing a bum bag, yes I also have a blouse on and a long flowery summer skirt. My arms are covered with sunblock just in case as is my face, and I have a beautiful wide brimmed straw hat, quite the country lady. So through the track down by the walled garden, turn left, past the end of the cattle shed, picking up the track in the west field. Its start is almost flat, a gentle incline becomes steeper up near the top of the south field. On my left over the fence are grandma's trees, a wind is blowing them around, planted close their top branches clatter together, it is like some frenzied meeting where everyone must shake the hands of all the delegates.

I turn at the top to walk though the trees along the ridge above the south field, no longer on the main track, checking the field fence. On the way back to the track I check the fence between the trees and the precipitous drop. This is my main task and I follow parallel to the track which follows an arc anticlockwise to the north. We have to make sure that it is secure because sometimes a sheep will escape, one year grandfather lost a few that had fallen into the old quarry. The obvious gap in the fence where a post had rotted away, triggered the routine I now follow as the fourth generation to work the farm. The trail along by the fence is well worn, and shaded by the trees has remained passable. At the start of the trees I look down to my right over a natural limestone cliff, leading out to other fields below. Further along now the fields rise almost merging to the level of the trees where I stand, yet they are just a few metres lower, then the

fields descend to the west as I round the curve. It is fairly rough land, only suitable for grazing, grandfather said a lot of the soil got washed away when they cleared the trees from the top of the hill. The track and trees now head roughly north, so to my right is the east and the fields, to my left, west is grandfathers woods in the south east field, which follows the track almost straight until it turns north west. About half way along the north facing part of the track the escarpment really starts. There is an abrupt end to the fields, as a great hole in the landscape opens ahead to the north east. This is the remains of an old quarry, here the the drop is scary, descending onto rough rocks below. The undulating surface covered in scrub and weeds is slowly being reclaimed by nature. A track on the near side leads down to an even deeper hole, once dug to follow the geological seam it is full of water. Over the far side is a track leading up to a bumpy lane that used to connect to the main road. It's all now overgrown and according to father, who clambered down from the end near the coppice quite impenetrable where the ramp was destroyed.

That was one of the last mad things he did, mother was furious, she had seen the big fence and warning signs. You know, keep out danger, no access and blew her top, poor old dad, it isn't that bad, grandfather took me down our precarious trail when I was little. An adventure to remember, all the way down I was told of the big machines, that would eat me if I did not do as he said, "Be careful or your mother will have my guts." I had no idea what this meant but I understood dear old grandfathers emphasis and intonation on the word "Mother". When his father originally bought the farm the quarry had been in use and was extremely active during the the second world war. I can recall him standing me on a big lump of rock down in the quarry. His had pointing around the void, "Do you see all that."

"All what grandfather?"

"That space was filled with limestone."

"But where is it now?"

"It is now in houses, steelworks, glass making, you have been to the village church."

"Is that made of limestone?"

"Yes it is?" I remember his big smile, as he revelled in my understanding. Grandfather was a very clever man, he did a lot of reading and had been to a lot of places. He was the best teacher and if ever I was stuck on a problem all the family would tell me to ask grandfather. He was our

oracle and now it brings a tear to my eye that I can no longer ask him, why? or how? All those adult annoying little words that like a pin after a wrinkle can bring some bigger ones dangling on the end.

I stand and stare down, what a barren hole, all those millions of years in the making, now gone. The animals that made up the rock once living like I do now, all gone. Strange creatures swam in the sea, hunters and hunted, moments in time, no longer important, other than they now hold up the spire of a church or concrete of a bridge. Many of man's marvellous constructions would not be possible without these animals having lived before us. I must move on, round the curve following the final part of the track to the north west.

I have followed along to the start of the coppice which is just below the end of the tree lined ridge. We put a fence across and included those in the coppice area so my job is now complete. The clouds above are still blocking the sun, I open the gate into the north east field and follow along by the coppice picking up the field hedge half way down. The ground is rock hard and the grass is struggling. Ahead I see the gate into the lane, it might seem strange being so far from the farm. The reason the gates are located at this end is because in winter it is relatively speaking the drier end of the field.

Ironic, that I now am going through the best gate, in the worst field. Looking down the lane, on both sides I see the first two fields have been ploughed. Arthur Williams had a good crop of sweetcorn off these. He likes it this far up the lane, less chance of people helping themselves. I remember speaking with him in the spring, there is one of his fields right by a big lay-by, he made the mistake of planting the corn in that field one year. Pick your own, or should I say nick your own and the crap that was dumped. People have no idea what some farmers have to put up with. The hedges are getting fairly frisky down along the next fields all of which belong to us. We rent them out to Arthur, we don't have the capacity and he can get economies of scale with our land. The lower field to the left going down the lane, has the stream that starts from a spring up in the woods bordering its hedge. The blackberries are quite vigorous and it looks like we will have a bumper crop this year.

The old lane is very dusty, holes filled with rubble, these are Arthur's

work. Further up at our end it's more like the grand canyon, deep furrows. No white lines down the middle, just a long narrow strip of grass. As I round a bend our post box is in sight, the main road is another couple of hundred yards further on around another curve. The old box, is sat almost hidden in the hedge on top of a substantial square post, one father put in and he always did a thorough job. I fumble for the key, slide it in, the metal front creaks down, crying oil oil oil. Inside we have a good bundle. I should have come down on Saturday, the local paper is in the box, buried underneath a layer of envelopes. We have them post it because the nearest newsagent does not deliver this far out. It's posted on Thursday the day of issue, but often does not reach us until Saturday. Mother collected the post on Friday before she left, so this must have come late. Post and paper in hand I look up, yes I thought so, clouds are clearing, I have that warm feeling on my face.

Wandering back a rabbit sitting in one of the fields sees me, runs a few paces, watches then dives into the hedge for cover. Mother catches them, skins them and we have rabbit stew, this is not a job I participate in. Mum thinks I've gone soft since living in the town, but they are so cute, I just can't bear to watch. It's one time I go and hunt the vacuum cleaner. A robin is standing on a gate post, singing his heart out, then he flies along to the branch of a field maple. I wander on my way back to the house, my attention is now attracted by the distress call of a blackbird, it's shrill shriek, no doubt because of my presence. Nearly back to the problem field, poking out of one hedge is a big old dead tree. The lower trunk and limbs covered in green ivy. The way its branches point, it looks like a green uniformed, anaemic policeman directing traffic. Up on a top branch with its back to me is a buzzard, very regal, dark brown feathers it sits like a clay sculpture, such fine lines.

With the sun getting hotter, I am spurred to walk faster. I can feel my breasts wobbling around, restricted by the blouse. It's a pretty red, with black lace around the vee of the neck and the sleeves and hemline. There is a distinct difference as I walk through the stone porch through the front door. The house downstairs is cool, the stone floors and thick stone walls help to keep it that way. In the kitchen I chuck the letters and paper onto the table, where they race to slide off the other end. The telephone bill almost makes it, like car straddled on the cliff edge. My hand instinctively reaches to catch it, my body moving automatically to

assist. Leaning forward my right breast catches on the top of the paper, as the bosom moves across it, the paper moves pushing other letters some of which fall onto the floor. The bill safe in my hand I place it in the centre, then leaning down to pick up the fallen few, from the corner of my right eye comes a signal stopping me in my tracks, it is the headline on the paper. The headline is simple, with two words it chills my spine, I try to concentrate on the text. My mind though is sending other instructions, frantically rushing around on autopilot, I check every window and lock every door. Only when I have finished this, does my brain allow me to return to the paper.

The old wooden chair scrapes across the floor as I pull it out to sit on. My butt plonks down on the seat making it groan as always. Leaning forward I have a couple of sensations, my breasts are resting gently on my upper legs, my head is dizzy with foreboding.

Another Murder?

Miss Simmons of Bracken Cottage was found dead on Wednesday just days after the murder of Mr Green the gardener. Police have said it's too early to say if the deaths are related. They are treating the old Spinsters demise with suspicion. The chief constable has requested that anyone with any information should contact them. He also warned all households to check their security and if you see anything suspicious to report it immediately. This is the third murder this year, since the murder of Mr J Brendan in the spring. The public are advised to be on their guard. Miss Simmons was a reclusive lady, little is known other than she had Mr Green to maintain her garden. The Police have not confirmed she was murdered but it looks likely. In none of the cases were any valuables taken, and no forensic evidence found of a third party. In a statement, the Police said that they believe there is a highly dangerous individual or maybe group of people, who are very sophisticated at evading normal detection methods. Miss Simmons, according to the few people that met her was a kind, quite spoken lady. Because of continuing investigations we are complying with requests to limit the content of the articles, however hope to bring you further updates in next weeks issue....

Reading this makes me sad, scared and angry that who ever it is has not been caught. As I stare out of the window deep in thought I am startled

by a noise. My head spins, my body rises, the chair scraping backwards, its feet grinding on the floor. My breasts again feel heavy, as does my mind, the noise comes again. I turn, it's just the phone, I walk into the hall and lift up the hand piece.

"Are you ok?" says mother disturbed by my silence. "Where were you yesterday evening I tried to call you but there was no answer."

"Yes sorry mother, yes fine." My voice is not convincing, mother knows me too well. "I was working all day and fell asleep in the lounge."

"Somethings wrong, what is it?"

"There's been another murder, last Wednesday they found Miss Simmons."

"We'll come back."

"You will not, you are safer there and I'm locked in her so. Don't worry." This was a worthless comment as mother will always worry.

"We will come back a bit early at least."

"Mother." I was getting impatient with her, "I have grandfathers rifle so there really is no need." My words reassured her a little, but I could tell mother was very anxious about the situation. As we continue talking I find that grandma has been having a lovely time. The family over there have been exceptionally kind to her, she is rather a sweetie and they have been doting on her hand and foot. Mother has been taken around the local sites on mini tours by some of the more energetic ladies and until my news was feeling quite refreshed. Mother rings off not wanting to run up their phone bill.

I walk back from the hall, get some bread and make a sandwich, nothing exciting, just pickles and some left over bits and pieces of veg. This does not take long to eat, now I'm wandering around like a lost sheep wondering what to do. My rational mind kicks in, the murder if it was a murder probably happened at least a week ago. The last couple of days unaware of this fact I had been outside oblivious to any danger. Both murders were in the small village three miles away.

I wander around in the big barn doing a lot of nothing, just moving junk around to see if there is anything of use. Putting down an old tool box I hear a loud banging, this scares me, has something fallen or is it someone?

The banging starts again and it's from the main gate. I wander over to

investigate.

"Who is it?" I say nervous that it might be someone bad.

"Police," says a man's voice. But is it?

"Can you show some ID, pass it through the gates," I ask, there being several holes where the wood has split and gone a bit rotten. He passes through, his ID, I look through the a gap, there is a female officer with him and a Police Range Rover parked up on the verge.

"Hello miss we would like a word with you," he continues, while I inspect the credentials.

I ease the gate open and they walk in. We go into the house, and sit in the kitchen.

The male officer is first to speak. "We understand you were well known for fighting with other pupils at school."

"I was defending myself."

"That's your interpretation miss," he continues, "You know how to kill an animal?"

"Yes."

"And you worked at a butchers?," his stare is unbearable.

"Yes."

"Must get very boring stuck out here," he says trying to get under my skin.

"No, I like it."

"But you would like a little excitement now an again?," his question was very suggestive, I wondered if someone had seen me wandering around naked.

"What?"

"Why did you move to town?" he questions like a dog getting deeper into a fox hole.

"Because of my boyfriend."

"So he excited you then?" he said, trying to corner his quarry.

"What is this all about?"

The female officer now takes over.

"It would be better for you if you confess," she says with a soft voice.

"To what?"

Now the male officer starts digging again.

"Where were you on the Friday before last during the daytime?"

"At the farmers market."

The female asks "All day?"

"Yes"

He puts the next notion to me.

“But you could have slipped away? Anyone witness you there?”

“My mother.”

The woman speaks, “May we ask her?”

“No, she's in the Netherlands with Grandma.”

“You have a phone number, we can call her on?”

“Yes,” I hand the woman one of mothers card lists with the holiday details on it. She gets out her pad and writes the number down. Then hands the card back to me, her eyes stare almost menacing into mine. I feel intimidated, scared.

The male officer stops by the front door, the female officer turns to look back.

“If your lying we will be back, good day miss.”

The woman comes back towards me.

“Are you sure there is nothing you wish to tell us before we leave?” The question felt worse with the sun bearing down on my face. It is like some horrible questioning technique.

“No.”

“You knew Miss Simmons?” she continues, with that penetrating glare.

“Yes, my father had a Private Hire business, he did work for her.”

“You knew Mr Green?” This next question came like a sharp knife, stinging as it sliced into my fragile mind.

“Yes, he used to do her garden.”

“How do you know that?” she was hooked on a new line of information and I can not cut the line. I can not say “Not today thank you and slam the door.”

“Because once during the school holidays she went to Bath and asked my father to bring me, to see the town while she visited her friends.” How I wish I was there looking at that big steaming lead lined bath right now. How I wish father was here to give me the support I missed so much. Don't misunderstand me mother is lovely, but she worries so and frets about the least little thing. Father was a lets have ago person and he did not worry about failure, he always said, “Just do your best, and don't worry.” I remember once studying hard for an exam, he came to my room where my nose was buried in a book. Announced, “You've done enough young lady, come on.” We all went in the Land Rover off to a nice picnic spot along a quite stretch of river.

The male officer is making copious notes as I stand nervously by the

door hoping that they will leave.

The woman notes this and then with her colleague departs. I follow and close the gates, leaving the mess in the barn, I go into the house. Bolt all the doors, rush up the stairs and fall into my bed, tears streaming.

Hours later, having done absolutely nothing I hear the phone ringing. Pulling myself together I wander down to the hall and lift the receiver. Mother can tell she asks what is wrong, has there been another murder? I explain about my friends in blue doing a social call. I could sense Mother was distraught with worry, I know it is concern over the police visit. She tells me not to worry to stay inside, forget the lists of work, reminding me that they will be back at the end of the week. She calls off, without telling me about their day.

I go back upstairs and lay on my bed. I dream of taking the farm and putting it on an island. Perhaps I'm tired, I do certainly drop off and wake in the small hours of the morning feeling hungry. I had had no dinner last night, my stomach was now making the rules, it had sent a strongly worded petition to the government sat in the lofty heights of Grey Matter city. With a bit of collective bargaining the nerves and muscles fired up and sent a semi somnambulating woman down on a trail to the food cupboards. It's rather odd having breakfast at half three in the morning.

I get myself washed, clean my teeth then wander around watering the pot plants. It's only just gone five, so I get carried away with the duster. Each room getting a thorough wipe around. Vast piles of grey fluff collect on the yellow cloth, I open the window shake it, not knowing what waving a yellow flag means, white is surrender. If a naval vessel were to stray up our stream the captain would wonder why I signalled Q. During the war grandfather had met many different service men, one had told him about the signal flags, each representing a letter or number. They were used extensively during Nelson's time and beyond, so he said, to communicate between ships.

I was heading for the vacuum cleaner when the phone rings just after nine am. It's mother, her tone sad, she is telling me what a lovely day grandma had yesterday. How sad she was today when grandma did not get up and she found her dead in bed. I ask her to say that again, my brain can not take on board the information. "Grandma, we went to see

why she had not come down for breakfast. There she lay, white as a sheet, I touched her hand it was stone cold, yet the room was warm." Mother sobbed as she spoke, I still don't want to believe what she is telling me. My silence speaks louder than words. Mother continues, "I'll be a bit delayed getting back. Will you be ok?" "Yes," I whisper. She says she will call me this evening and puts the phone down.

All I can do is sit in the hall staring up at the clock. I do this for several hours, my mind wandering through memories of grandma.

Mother's End

Notes for the reader: They say life is stranger than fiction.

When mother returns it is a very sad reunion, she has to spend a lot of time arranging things for grandma's funeral. It is some while before we can sit as we always did for a chat in the kitchen.

I think mother must have said something to the people out there, because she hands me a present. A ratty wrapped box. The paper was beautiful almost too good to tear open, with a pretty yellow bow. While I open the box mother explains how she told them about my sagging breasts and her worry at not buying me the bra. Well apparently one of the women had the same problem after breastfeeding, suggested the pills. I'm now looking at these as mother continues to tell how she explained that my breasts were very large. So before she left they gave her the box with a full course enough for me to take the maximum amount, she says it's what was recommended. Of course mother explains it may make them a cup size bigger but, they are already large so what's a cup size.

I look at mother, "This must have cost a fortune."

She nodded back at me, as I pull out more pill bottle cartons from the box, like a little army sat on the kitchen table. I notice under a layer of tissue paper more boxes, these contained bras, as I pull them out mother says there are some for later. Two contained my size 34H the other two contained 34HH, then she says I think there are another two just in case. In the bottom she was right, I pull out a 34J.

"Those are the same size as granny." I nodded understanding.

"Wasn't that nice of them?" she looks at me awaiting and answer.

"Yes, yes, lovely," I say, amazed.

"You will have to write a nice thank you letter," she say wandering off, my guess is right a few minutes later she returns with a writing pad. "Here," she says handing it to me.

Then after a brief pause, "Oh and I think seeing how they have spent so much money you should write and let them know how the pills are working."

What can I reply except. "Yes." She puts the pills in one of the cupboards and reminds me where they are and how many I should take. It's just like being a child again with mother insisting you take your medicine, "It's for your own good you know," she says, making me promise to take them all. This is rather a trait of our family, we don't like to see things going to waste.

Later I am just off to bed, when mother asks, "Have you taken your pills." I reassure her that I have. Then to drum it in she reminds me of my promise. I understand she feels guilty and wants me looking nice, what mother does not.

Grandma's funeral is very sad, without father around and Granny house bound there are only a few people attending the church service in our nearest village. Arthur Williams has come with his wife, Bill's wife sends her condolences she is preoccupied with her husband in hospital. A couple of old ladies who mum knew and had known grandma are here. Our family in the Netherlands have sent flowers and cards. Most people of grandma's generation had already passed on some time ago, only one lady, a dear woman who went to school with her has come. The service is rather dull, the vicar does his best, but he did not know grandma, even though he tries to sound like the whole world would miss her. Mother and I hold hands and are only able to cry and mumble the prayers and hymns, there are no words from our mouths. The loudest voice is the vicar, the poor man is almost doing a solo, a quiet chorus from the elderly ladies backing him. I don't think Arthur or his wife are much into ecclesiastical vocalisation. It does not matter, grandma would not care, them being here is more than enough.

We follow the coffin to the waiting hearse and get into the two cars waiting behind. The slow cortège travels the short distance to the

graveyard. Grandfather's grave is open, we walk over to it, the vicar standing in attendance as they lower her to join him. He says his piece, mother throws in grandma's hair brush, it was the thing she never travelled without. This makes me burst into tears again.

At the wake, only Arthur and his wife attend, they were the only ones with suitable transport. Mother has done far too many sandwiches, I see Arthur's wife give him a nudge to have another. It's not long before they leave us, we wave them off as they trundle away in his Land Rover, much bigger and newer than our old thing.

"Do you think they had a good chat?" asks mother.

"Arthur and.," I begin.

"No the Land Rovers," she says clearly upset, but I could see she meant it. With her mother gone, the Land Rover which she drove so much was a strange kind of comfort to her. She goes out to it and sits in the driver's seat. I sense she needs some space, so I go up to my room, sitting looking down at the garden. It brings back memories, I can see grandma doing her weeding, planting bedding plants. Those boxes of begonias that she carefully took in doors each autumn and planted again in the spring.

It's the day after the funeral, mother is not happy, neither am I. We are like two lost sheep wandering around the house. "I better go and get some shopping."

"Do you need a hand?" I ask.

"Could you move the sheep from the north east field it's getting rather boggy up there with all the recent rain."

"Sure," I say not feeling much like traipsing around for groceries.

We hear footsteps, it's Jack. "Just off the the nursery, sorry to hear about grandma," he says, just like yesterday when he left before we went to the funeral. Then he scurries off out, over to the barn, gets his bicycle and rides off down the lane. We watch him from the hall window. Mother goes into the kitchen and a few minutes later has shopping bags and her purse. She passes, me reminding me of the sheep, kisses me on the cheek and hops into the Land Rover, her friend seems less grumpy today. Perhaps he senses her pain, the old vehicle, good as gold taking her down the lane.

I sit on the hall chair and pull on my wellies. Then wander across to the

barn, opening its big doors, the old tractor before me. My first task is to put a short length of electric fence along the lane to stop them getting into the orchard on either side. Pushing in the plastic posts, using my foot to drive them home. I string the thin wires between each and hook up the power units to their batteries. Once in place I hop back on the tractor, start the engine, backing it out into the yard. Leaving the engine turning over I shut the barn doors, you will understand why later. With them closed I drive down the lane leaving the tractor blocking it just after the entrance into the north east field. I swing open the five bar gate and tie it to the back of the tractor. Dumping an old pallet in the gap between it and the fence of the north field. The sheep have seen me, they know what I'm up to. Will they play ball? This is one situation where I wish we had a dog, but we could hardly afford to feed ourselves let alone a dog. It amazed mum when she saw people she knew were living on the state and they had a dog with them. It could get to her at times. Why were we working our socks off, why not give up and let everyone else keep us, like they do. Then I would ask if she would be happy living in a town in a flat like I had with Jason. You can guess the answer.

In each hand I have a long cane, spares from the garden. If I'm lucky I might get them all into the lane, if not they will split up and it'll be the devils own job. Most were doing well I had gone up to the far corner and was sweeping back down the hill, diagonally across to the open gate. They were moving forward, a few would stop and check my position. A few were getting bold and edging out from the flock. I moved over to their side covering a potential breakout. Now others on the other side, looked at the grassless lane, and back into the field. You could tell they were not so daft as people assume. As we get closer to the gate posts they are getting more edgy. I have to keep my cool, if a few escape back into the field I shall get them later. Three led by one bold lady try on my left along the fence, but with a wave of my stick they hesitate, others have moved into the lane. With a steady flow out of the field they change their minds and follow. All I have to do now is move them along the lane.

It takes a while, they amble along eyeing the lush grass under the apple trees. Their hopes dashed as they see the fences. "Not today ladies," I say urging them through the yard gates, shutting these behind me. With a bare muddy concrete yard ahead they are not keen on stopping and are soon in the outer yard. I close its gates and walk through to the gate

into the west field at the back of the cattle shed, opening it. They don't need a lot of coaxing into the lush grass ahead. With the sheep safe and the field secure, I walk back down the lane. Close the gate, put the pallet back against the fence, hop back on the tractor. Start the engine and back it up along the lane to a patch of land just before the orchard. It's big enough to turn the tractor, taking it back into the barn. I go and take the electric fence down and put it back in the barn. I hurry to get all this done before mother arrives back.

Sitting eating a snack I am worried looking at the time and knowing how mother hates to spend time or money in the shops, I wondered why she had now been over four hours. I ring Arthur Williams perhaps she has stopped by his farm. He says not, perhaps she has gone to the graveyard, I ring the vicar. No he has not seen her, but he assures me he will check and call if he has any news. I know the carpet people, mother often visits them. I look up their shop number and call. The wife has not seen mother, but she says she will keep a look out. Where else would she be? I call each of the old ladies that attended the funeral, each drawing a blank. The nursery where Jack works, we got the flowers from there, maybe she has popped to thank them, they were very nice. Yes she may be looking around the garden centre. I call them, the lady on the phone, asks me to hold. Some minutes later, she comes back and says, no she checked the car park no sign of our Land Rover.

I decide to call the police, my call is noted, they ask if she might have gone to a relative. "Of course, granny," I say, putting the phone down. It then hits me, mother would not want me worrying she would have phoned. I call granny, she has not seen or heard from mother since yesterday when mum rang after the funeral.

I'm now pacing up and down the hall, my mind frantically trying to think of who else to call. I call the police again, telling them she is not with granny, they note it and tell me they have no news. I call all those whom I spoke with earlier, no joy. Half an hour passes, my heart is lifted a familiar sound comes is getting louder. I rush out through the courtyard into the lane. It is a Land Rover, Arthur's and he is driving. He stops as I rush up to greet him, shaking his head. "Sally thought you might want to go and look for your mum."

"Thank you Arthur, thank you," I said trembling "I'll just lock up."

“Hop in, I'll turn in your yard, while you do the doors.”

I run in while he turns, as I rushed back through the hall, I stop. One of mothers lists is on the hall table. I grab a pen, and write a message on the back, leaving it very prominent. Then lock the front door, climb in his vehicle and we are off.

We drive into town. “Aren't you going a bit fast?” I say knowing mums strict rules.

“Yeah, they will bloody catch me doing five miles over the limit.” He shakes his head. “Don't catch whoever murdered your Jason though.” The town was straight ahead, Arthur goes down every side road, just in case mother has parked for free! We check each car park, nothing, we drive around the one way system several times. Nothing, now Arthur decides we should check the grocers mum supplies.

The frivolous, man has not seen her, we go to the other shop, they have not seen her either. “Sod this,” he says and drives back to town. Parking in the entrance to the police station, “You can't leave it here.”

“Bloody can, ought to get the buggers attention, don't know why we pay taxes.” Arthur was getting a bit frustrated, while we were driving around town he told me of another farmer who had had thousands of pounds worth of equipment disappear! “Did they do anything? Took a few notes and said they would let him know,” says Arthur. Now we were marching into the building, Arthur is a big fellow, not the sort you would argue with. He bangs on the unattended desk, “Oy” he shouts.

An officer strolls slowly to the desk, this is like a red rag to a bull.

“Don't rush mate, you might catch something,” shouts the farmer.

“Can we help you sir?”

“Yes you can help us look for this young lady's mother.”

“Let me make some notes.”

“Notes, notes, is that all you lot do, make bloody notes, she's already rung I don't know how many times.”

“Calm down sir.”

“Calm down, her mothers missing, she's just lost her grandma and you lot still haven't caught the bugger who killed her boyfriend.”

At that moment another officer came through the front door. “Excuse me sir is that your vehicle blocking the entrance?”

“Ey and until you lot get off your arses and help us look for her mother it's going to stay there.”

“Sir please, move it or we will have too.”

“I'll put the bloody combine there and block the whole bloody road.” he was getting extremely worked up. I had tears streaming down my face.

“Sir.”

“Sir, look at this poor girl,” he shouts “Take a bloody good look.”

The officer was now joined by his colleague from the car now stuck out in the road.

“What's going on?” he asks, looking at the red faced bull of a farmer, me crying and the other two officers.

The duty officer at the desk starts to speak, but is interrupted.

“I'll tell you what's going on, this woman's mother's missing and you lot are going to pack up your bloody speed traps and start catching real criminals. First you are going to find her mother then your going to find the bastard who killed her boyfriend, and the others.”

I recognised this man he was the one who had come accusing me with the other female officer.

“If you don't move your vehicle we will have to arrest you?”

“Oh fucking brilliant, arrest the innocent and let the criminals roam free.”

I tugged Arthur's arm, “Best do it, they would just love to add you to their statistics you know how they love their pens.”

“We are wasting our bloody time with these lazy buggers,” he says and we storm out. He backs his Land Rover out narrowly missing the police car parked in the road. As we tear off down the road out of town, Arthur continues. “Makes me mad. We aren't allowed to take the law into our own hands, oh no, leave it to the police.” He shakes his head, “What do they do? Harass the innocent, and write bloody notes, it's no wonder the country is in a mess. Don't worry love we'll find your mum.” He pulls a mobile from his pocket, “Bloody arrest me for this to.” He dials, “Hello mate, just been at the Giddings farm, daughters mother's gone missing, we're looking for her. Bloody plod wanted to arrest me for blocking their entrance. Could you put the word out to keep an eye open for the old Land Rover, he pauses, “Yea that's the one, must be the only one for miles. Cheers mate.”

Arthur turns to me, “Don't worry love we'll find your mum.” We drive miles around all the lanes mum might have used, everywhere I can think.

Places she enjoyed with father, view points, lanes, nice villages and river bridges. Mother loves to listen to the water bubbling over the stones in the river bed.

“Come on lets go and get a bite to eat, then we'll continue this evening.” he says, with a reassuring smile.

“Thank you,” I say, he can see I'm upset.

He punches another number into the phone, “Hello love, no, no luck we're coming back for a bite to eat ok dear.” Slipping the phone into its pocket, he turns and says, “Don't worry love.”

We pull into his farm, his wife is standing at the door waiting for us. He pulls the big vehicle up near the front of the house. She comes over and greets me, I fall into her arms, crying my eyes out.

“Come on love, don't cry Arthur and the lads will find your mum.” She tugged at my arm reassuring, “Come on I've made nice meal. Arthur's just going to give your home another call just to see if she's back.”

We sit at their kitchen table, she has done a lovely stew. “Go on love you tuck in don't wait.”

“Thank you, thank you,” I try to smile, and eat, but I'm not feeling happy or hungry.

We have not been sitting down more than twenty minutes when the phone goes. “I'll get it love you've been doing all that driving,” says Sally. When she returns to the kitchen she is a bit subdued. “It was Graham over at White Hole. He and his lad were out looking and found the old Land Rover hidden down in a gully.”

“Come on lass,” said Arthur, taking my hand.

In moments, Arthur is breaking every speed limit in the district, while punching in a number on his phone. “Hi Graham, have you called the plod? Ok I'll do that, you call the other lads get them searching.” He then punches in a number I know.

“Hello, right we have done half your job, found her mother's Land Rover over at White Hole, so shift your arses.” He ends the call.

This is the nearest to a white knuckle ride, I have ever experienced, Arthur knew his vehicle. I doubt a speed camera could get his number with all the dust flying from behind as he charges along.

We ground to a halt in a dusty clearing near the edge of a road, next to it is a gully in a rough bit of land overgrown with trees and brambles. I could see the tail of the Land Rover, Graham came to meet us, “Thought we best leave it there for plod to make a few more notes.” It was him who had had the disappearing machinery. Another Land Rover turns up and several men decant.

"Cheers," lads says Arthur. Then he looks at me, "Sorry to have to say this love but you better be prepared for the worse, this don't look good, can't think why your mum would be right out here, can you?"

"No," I say crying, he gives me a hug, "You stick with me, we'll find her." "If you do find anything as Graham says we best leave it for plod to make their notes."

"Sure mate," says one of the new arrivals. They go over to where Graham's son is looking helped by the farm collie.

"Anyone checked that ditch?" he asks, Graham shakes his head.

"Come on." He takes my hand, collects a torch and stick from the Land Rover and we go over to the old drainage ditch. Pulling back the weeds with his stick giving it a though search. He stops, "Have you seen something?"

"Nop, but we've been hear nearly an hour." His mobile in hand he dials again, "Hello, yes I would like to make a report. We have found the missing Land Rover and have been searching for over an hour, so where are you lot?" he pauses, "Yes it is about her mother and we are over at White Hole." There is another pause as he patiently listens. "Yes" then he snaps, "Look mate with all the murders around these parts, do you really think her mother is going to go to some isolated spot, drive the Land Rover down into an overgrown gully and do her bloody knitting." He terminated the call, shaking his head.

"If old Ned was still doing the rounds he'd have been down here on his bicycle." I could see Arthur getting wound up again. I can't say I was any different.

We turned at the bark of the collie. He was barking loud repetitive calls, we and the men went running. Deep down an overgrown trail, the dog had found his way through a small gap between two trees. "Good lad," said Graham stroking the dog, as we approached, he turned first to me. "Sorry love, it's your mum, some bastards cracked her skull from behind." I burst into tears, Arthur tries to comfort me with his strong arms. "Best take her home," says Graham.

"Cheers lads," says Arthur "Thanks Graham."

"We'll ask around someone must have seen something. We'll get them, love," assures Graham.

"Thank you," I sobbed, hardly getting the words out. Arthur puts his arm around me and walks me back to the Land Rover.

"You stop with us tonight, Sal will fix you up in the spare room. Ok?"

All I can do is nod, as he starts the vehicle on a more subdued drive back to their farm.

There is a knock at the door, Sally goes to answer it. "Who is it?" she asks as Arthur is out in the fields. Everyone is now paranoid, four murders in the space of six months have that effect.

"Police."

She opens the door on the chain, assured that they are she lets them in. "We understand from Mr Smith up at the Giddings farm that you have the daughter of the murdered woman here?"

The man looks at me with compassion.

"We have checked the vehicle miss. Seems like your mother ran out of fuel. We think maybe she had gone to get some and was surprised by her attacker."

"But why was she out at White Hole, it's miles away, not even on her route home?"

"Perhaps she was driving around, people do just go for a drive," he suggests.

"Why?"

"She had just lost her mother miss," he reasons.

"I know."

"Sorry miss, we will return the vehicle to your farm. We'll keep you informed of any progress, good day miss."

The next day we are informed that we can make arrangements for mothers funeral. I can do nothing, I'm just in a state of shock. We are all sitting at breakfast when the call comes through.

"Don't worry love, we'll sort something," says Sally, "You have your breakfast."

She looks over to Arthur. "Take her to collect some cloths."

Arthur takes me back home, when we arrive we see the police have brought the Land Rover back. Jacks bicycle is over next to the barn, no doubt ready for his daily routine ride to the nursery.

In my room I pick up a selection of cloths, some appropriate for the funeral that I know must come soon. In mother's room I look for a small item, one that I know she loved.

I have no idea what happened between then and now, but this morning Sally lets me know that mum is going to be buried today, in the grave with father. She helps me dress for the occasion. Then we go downstairs, she puts an arm around me and guides me to the front door. Outside was Arthur's big red tractor, "Go on love you site up their with Arthur." Sally walks over to their Land Rover and climbs aboard bringing up the rear. On a trailer behind the tractor is mum's coffin. Arthur, gives me a hug, "We'll give her a damn good send off."

The tractors engine starts up, its chunky sound reassuring. As we move through the gate into the road, there are people waiting with flowers. Arthur slows almost to a halt to let them put a mass of floral tributes around the coffin, on the flat bed of the trailer. Some of them then get in the Land Rover, others follow on a tractor and trailer. We reach a road junction, I look to the left and see a massive combine harvester sat waiting to follow us, behind it another tractor. We turn right and our convoy, moves on through a village where from another couple of side roads we see more tractors waiting to follow the cue, some with trailers also filled with people. We headed along the rural B road, to our destination the next village, another combine harvester joined. Several cars are headed towards us, Arthur slows, they must be as surprised as I am. All realise, turning around is the best option.

Up ahead a police car, pokes out of a junction. A officer gets out and walks towards us the other drives the car across the road ahead.

"Where are you going with that lot mate?" he says to Arthur.

"Straight over that car of yours if you don't move the bugger."

"You are causing an obstruction, you have to get authorisation to hold a parade."

"This is a bloody funeral."

"Don't worry Arthur, we'll take care of that obstruction." It's Graham, a rather annoyed farmer and about twenty other farmers. They march past the officer, brush his colleague aside, pick up the car walking it across the road. Leaving it in a rather difficult position, put it this way a crane might come in handy. Then with beaming smiles on their faces they come marching back and we are off again, leaving two rather bemused policemen.

In the village more tractors are blocking all the other roads, nothing was

moving except us. As we approached the church, the Vicar had an expression I shall never forget. His jaw dropped, there must have been every farmer for miles around and they were still arriving, all proud to be on the end of our queue. It was the most magnificent cortège we could have ever hoped for. As we stopped and Arthur helped me down, I could see a vast sea of farm vehicles stretching back up the hill. Sally came over and helped me, while Arthur joined Graham and many others who had helped in the search that dreadful evening. They lift the coffin on their shoulders and walked in. A slow sombre, march we followed behind, I am so glad of Sally, I can hardly see my eyes are full of tears.

Behind us a great crowd, all smartly turned out. Through the old stone church doorway, we all file. I sit on the front pew, flanked by Arthur and his wife, looking around behind, the church is packed, every seat taken, the isles full of people standing. The church is cold, sun lights the stained glass window above the alter. The vicar begins his speech, welcoming everyone to this sad occasion.

With a few hymns and couple of short prayers, he concludes the ceremony. Well he would have, but, now an old farmer I recognise walks to the front. "Excuse me Vicar, just like to say a few words." The old fellow makes a lovely tributes to mother, he had worked with grandfather and knew her well. Then another farmer walks to the front, he tells us how he knew mother at school. A woman comes to the fore and when he finishes she tells us how mother helped her. For over an hour a steady stream of people eager to pay a last farewell make their contributions. It is immensely moving, then Sally, asks if I want to say something. I nod not sure what or if I can even find my voice.

Slowly I move to the front and stand by the coffin. I look around at all those people, what shall I say. "Thank you, all so much," I pause, "I'm overwhelmed by your kindness, this is the finest tribute to her." I can't find the right words, I want to tell them, mother would be pleased but, then she's not pleased to be dead. I just collapse in tears, rescued by Sally and the Vicar. Arthur and Graham with the others take up the coffin and we begin the slow walk to the graveyard adjacent to the church.

As they coffin disappears down into the open grave, my legs feel like lead, Sally and another lady help steady me. The vicar says a few words,

and a short prayer, then I reach into my pocket and throw a tiny wooden bear in, it used to be on a keyring that father bought her. One day the keyring broke but she always kept that little fellow by her bed. So she can have him in her long sleep now.

We all move away from the hole and the farmers, their wives and families stand either side of the path as we walk slowly down the slope through into the street. The sky is cloudy but the sun shines from time to time. Ahead the street is full of tables covered with food and drink. The farmers have put tables, many I recognise from the farmers market, all along in front of the tractors. A wake in the open air, mother never did like confined spaces, I'm sure her spirit would love this.

From a few villagers we did get strange looks, I think they may be a bit miffed that we have invaded their space. The roads are completely blocked, you might think that irresponsible, suppose a fire engine or ambulance is needed. Believe me, I know these farmers would have a passage through the roads in no time.

So many kind people come to me and pay their respects, the farm vehicles slowly dispersing, over the course of several hours farmers drift away. Eventually almost the last to leave we climb aboard the tractor. Sally bringing up the rear as before. I can't help smiling when we pass the patrol car still stranded. Arthur notices, "That's the spirit girl." He holds my hand, giving it a firm squeeze. There is another car next to it with two more officers one has his hat in one hand, the other scratching his head. We get a rather cold stare, "Make some more bloody notes," laughs Arthur.

"I hope they don't arrest you all," I say worried about the consequences. "There'd be big trouble if they did, trust me." He is very confident and having seen what he organised in a few days for mother, I have no doubt he was right.

"Thank you, for all you've done," I say, still moved by the event.

"When I suggested it to the others, there was no stopping them," he pauses as we turn down a narrow road. "Everyone liked your mum, just look at all those who attended from the farmers market. It was an honour, wouldn't have be right any other way."

Very soon we are in parked in his yard and decanting into the house.

Sally busies herself in the kitchen preparing an evening meal. I sit quietly, just watching her. Arthur is off doing a few essential tasks around the farm. He has a dairy herd and the animals have to be milked come what may.

It is nearly a week later when I feel the need to return home. I put this to Arthur and Sally at breakfast.

"You can stay here as long as you want. There's no need to rush off." says Sally.

"I know thank you, you've been so kind, but I just feel a bit homesick."

"You sure, our note taking friends have still not found Graham's equipment, let alone caught the bastard who killed your mum, or Jason," says Arthur his concern genuine.

"I'll keep grandfathers rifle handy and lock the doors, besides Jack is there during the evenings."

"No disrespect to the lad, but I can't see him doing much," says Arthur, recalling meeting the lodger, when he and Sally came around one evening for dinner.

"You'd probably be the one protecting him," laughs Sally.

"If it's what you want lass," he smiles, "You go pack your things after breakfast and I'll run you back."

I thank him and in a short while am sitting in our lounge, alone. The house seems strange without all those nice voices.

I get grandfathers rifle, which is kept locked in a cabinet in the small room we use as an office. Opening it I load a couple of cartridges and snap it shut, with a weapon over my shoulder I wander around to the west field. The sheep are gone! I look to my left and see them in the South field, Arthur must have moved them, good old Arthur. They looked down at me from their position near the top ridge.

Several uneventful days pass during which I catch up on work around the farm and in the house. I have hardly seen Jack, he is almost like a ghost, wafting in silently at night to his room and he leaves without taking breakfast early in the morning. Then around midday just after lunch I am startled by a knock at the front door. I must have left the front gates open when I trimmed the hedge this morning. From the kitchen I move quietly into the dinning room, from where I can see a police Ranger Rover. I go through into the hall and open the door.

There is an older officer and a young fellow.

"We have to ask you to come with us for some routine questioning," says the senior officer. "I have a farm to run, perhaps you could ask me here?" I say, some of Arthur's temperament must have rubbed off on me.

"It's just routine," he continues.

"Then ask me here."

"Very well, may we come in?"

"No," I say, thinking of Jason and Mother.

"With your grandmother dead, your mother was the only thing between you and your inheritance," he says and now I recognise him, he was the one who last time came with the female officer, after Miss Simmons died.

"I have inherited debt."

"But you could sell the farm, so you do have a motive?"

"How dare you, if you had a mother who loved you like mine you would not ask such a...damn fool question." I was going from scared and nervous to defensive and angry. This was one accusation an officious officer was not going to get away with.

"She does have a point sir," said the younger man, he gave me hope that there are good caring people in blue.

He got a condescending stare, then I got the eyes boring into my skull.

"Have you something to hide?"

"No."

"Then why can't we come in?" he persists.

"Because I want you out there catching whoever killed my mother and my boyfriend, not in here wasting my time."

The younger man raised his eyebrows, yes he was the one scratching his head by the car after the funeral procession.

"You seem to have an attitude problem."

"I've just lost all my relatives in a few months."

"She's bound to be upset sir," says the young officer.

"PC Jones, we are here to ascertain facts."

"The mother was murdered seven miles away sir. We already know the young lady made numerous calls to us and others, we checked her phone records remember."

"PC Jones, who is the senior officer?" said the officious man.

"The chief of police?" says the young man, with a smirk.

"Remember I have to report on your progress."

"And we have to report to the public on our progress, there have been

four murders sir and all we are doing is upsetting this lady.”

As I listened to my champion in blue, I was whispering 'thank you' in my thoughts.

“Are you Ned's son?” I have no idea why this comes from my lips, just thinking back to what Arthur said, and this lads attitude.

“Yes, dad retired a few months ago. You knew him?”

“Some friends of mine were singing his praises, they liked the fact he cycled around. Apparently he had a knack of catching people up to no good.”

“He never did like it when they made us drive around in cars,” replies the young officer with a laugh.

“When you two have quite finished.”

“It's called community policing sir, building relationships with the people we protect.”

“Thank you PC Jones. I will speak to you later.” The other officer is clearly frustrated both by me and his friend.

“I am very pleased to met you PC Jones you are a credit to the force and your father.”

“Thank you miss.”

The other officer is going red with rage, his authority and position clearly being ignored.

“Perhaps I may suggest we leave sir.”

“Just because you are Ned's son does not make you special,” said the other officer in a loud voice.

“He does seem rather clued up on the job concept.”

“Thank you miss, now if I may continue.”

“Yes why don't you continue down that lane and do your job,” I say feeling buoyed by my ally.

“Sir, come on, what are you trying to prove?” Ned's son was like a little dog facing a big brute, he was not giving ground and clearly frustrated by the situation.

“We have to follow all lines of enquiry.”

“Yes and we know she was here or with Arthur Williams at the time the coroner placed the murder. Sir,” he emphasised the last word with hard intonation.

The senior officer, looked at me, then at this upstart, “Jones, I hope you are right. Come on.” Ned's son gives me a smile and the two of them climb into their vehicle and head off down the lane.

I close the door and can't resist ringing Arthur, telling him that there is hope.

"I thought I recognised that lad," he says, "If he's half as good as his father we're in with a chance." I think this call helped everyone, Ned had been very well respected, he had always shunned promotion which would have taken him away from the community he loved. His in depth local knowledge built up over many years gave him a nose for spotting unexpected changes. He understood farming and had caught a fair few miscreants intent on taking advantage of overstretched farmers too busy keeping their heads above water to secure every item of value. Villagers loved being able to chat with him, recalling odd items that gave him vital clues, avoiding a deluge of calls, notes and emails that could clog the modern system. He never had problems chasing escaping vehicles, he would just phone a few farmers, a tractor down a narrow lane is very effective. The farmers would often sit in the pub recalling when he toddled up behind on his bicycle. The hilarious accounts of fugitives trying to climb up over tall hawthorn hedges.

I decide to take a walk armed and dangerous up the lane, there must be a mountain of post waiting. A stroll calms me and entices appetite for dinner, I hope it will also help me sleep. Getting a good nights slumber has been very hard, I just can't get used to mum not being there. Grandma was quite old so it was easier to accept, we knew she was getting weaker, but mother and so brutal. The thoughts give me nightmares, I try and focus on the hedges, a little Robin sings, trying to cheer me. They look so sweet, yet are quite aggressive, not to grandfather. He had a regular friend in the garden, the little bird would fly to his hand and follow him as he turned the soil, removing copious numbers of worms.

The old post box is crammed full, not just the regular mail, there are a huge number of white envelopes. Luckily I came prepared, the old shopping bag was heavy with the weight of paper. Part way back down the lane, I stopped to give my arms a rest, I wished I had taken the tractor. Some time ago before father put this big box up, we had a much smaller affair. It was quite adequate in the days before junk mail, father decided that to avoid us having to empty it daily he would put up a more substantial receptacle. Rested I heave the bag off the ground, and continue a rather with lopsided gait. The gun in my other hand is hardly a

counterbalance.

In the kitchen I resist the temptation to pour the bag contents onto the table top. Visions of an avalanche and paper tiled floor fill my imagination. It's no fun kneeling on cold stone slabs, they're only real advantage comes when cleaning. The grey stone shows up much less dirt than linoleum. I sit the bag on one side, a cardboard box for the paper recycling on the other. Junk goes straight in we never bother opening it, then I pull the envelopes off real mail and they join the junk. Piles are neatly forming on the table top, like soldiers forming up on a parade ground. This analogy is one I get from dear grandfather, he told me about his training days, before going to Europe. It was the one part of his experience he had fond memories of. There was a good camaraderie, even if he and his mates did hate the drill sergeant.

Like the officer I now inspected the line up, quickly glancing over the bills. A few letters from our relatives in the Netherlands for mum. I'm overwhelmed by the condolence cards for mothers death. Not just the sheer number, but they have put such lovely words in them, some have little letters. Reading them makes me cry, I pause to look at the one that appeared different, it sits in its own pile. I take it, poor Bill has passed away, his wife has tried calling and sent this note. It's recent only yesterday and addressed to mother.

I wander into the hall, picking up the phone and dial their number. She is shocked to here the news about mother and moved as I am when explaining the tribute. I learn Bill's funeral is in the town, a few days from now. The conversation is shorter than I expect, I think she is so stunned, her and mother had gotten on so well.

After speaking to her, I decide to start writing letters to the people who have sent cards. I begin with a letter to the Williams, they did so much, a letter seems insufficient. My second letter is to Graham and the other farmers who helped in the search. Mothers writing desk in the office is full of writing paper and envelopes, enough to stock a shop. It is a nice comfortable bureaux, probably antique, the front pulls down, on either side are draws, each an Aladdin's cave of bits and pieces. Pens, paper-clips, notelets, staples, scissors, you name it. I remember her sitting in here for hours doing fathers books. She kept meticulous

accounts for the farm. In the big side draws below the main desk are folders carefully labelled, each contains paperwork, or blank forms growing with the mountain of paperwork and regulations.

I hear the cluck of the sturdy front door closing. "Is that you Jack?" I shout, although it is hardly necessary. The office is so close to the hall, just off the corridor to the lounge.

"Yyy yes" he stutters.

I get up and look into the hall, he is already disappearing up the stairs, I can just see his legs through the bannisters. I retire back to my task, the time is getting on, it's nearly eight in the evening, no wonder my stomach is rumbling. I pack up the bureaux, probably just as well as my hand is starting to ache. As I walk across the hall to the kitchen I notice a small black plastic cap on the mat. I bend to pick it up, it's the cap off a bicycle valve, much trimmer than the ones on my old upright, this belongs to a Presta valve. It's new, Jack must have bought it for his racing bike. We were surprised he did not have a mountain bike and even more surprised by his skill at negotiating the lane on his narrow tyres. Mother did see him get off and walk along one of our worst patches.

I popped it my apron pocket, it would remind me to give it to him tomorrow. my mind was now on rustling up a quick meal, then off to bed. It's not long before I'm washed and in my room getting undressed. I remove my bra, now one of the bigger 34HH, the pills had taken effect, after mothers demise I did consider giving up. Mother meant well, as did our relatives, I doubt they realised how big my H cup breasts were, or mother the effect of even one cup size bigger. I did not want to continue but I remembered my promise to her. I told her I would take them all and I shall, I don't care much about anything anymore. It maybe hard for you to understand, but my world has collapsed and I feel empty. This must sound stupid but in a kind of way it's the last thing I can do for her, a kind of memorial. Each time I take a pill, I hear her voice in my head, pleased with her daughter, doing as mummy says.

I slip the nightie over my head, the thin material glides over my skin, it's a very sensuous feeling. Then I get into bed, my ears still alert, listening, for what, I don't know. Jacks turned in for the night, perhaps an owl in the trees behind the house. Restless I turn my head to look at the clock, the luminous hands indicate only couple of hours have passed. Strange

it feels like I have been laying awake for just minutes. My eyes move fast to the door, I remain very still, my heart beat sounds loud. In the crack below the door, is a narrow strip of light, the landing light is on. I start to reason, Jack would not need the bathroom, he has his own, has he gone to the kitchen for food? Yes that must be it, my ears pick up the creak of floorboards. 'I did lock the doors didn't I?' my mind reasons it must be Jack. The rifle? damn it locked downstairs, I make a mental note to put it in my room tomorrow just in case. I hear footsteps, the old stairs creak and groan, when you have lived most of your life in a house you know its character. Someone was descending, it must be Jack. The light below the door goes off, but now there is a faint glow. Gently I move to the end of my bed, avoiding my creaky boards, sliding off the end, almost by the door. I strain to hear, there is no sound from the kitchen. Surely he's not still in the hall? I open my door just a crack, bathroom door is near to it on the right. The boards along the opposite wall are fairly solid, so I edge out, at first I wonder why, then I think I don't want him to know. A little further and I can just see a small patch of floor in the hall. The stairs come up over the kitchen door and then up a few steps along the back wall, then turn again up to the landing. I can see two feet, not standing, but sticking out behind, he is on the hall floor, is he ok? Yes his feet move, toes are downwards, it's like he is crawling. I move back along the edge of the wall and into my room taking great care to close my door quietly. I now stand scared to move lest I put a foot on a creaky board, my room is in darkness.

Come on Jack go to bed, my patience standing here is running thin. The light goes on under the door, my feet, what if he notices them behind the door. As he creaks up the stairs I slide sideways away from the door by the wall at the foot of my bed. His sounds masking any I make. The light goes out, there is a faint click, I recognise the sound of mothers door closing. I would often listen to my parents going to bed, except unlike Jack they would look in, of course I was "Asleep" I was really. Now I pull myself up onto the end of the bed and move like some graceful feline across the bedclothes and wrap myself back under the warm duvet.

I can't sleep so contemplate his actions, he must have realised he dropped the new valve cap when I called out to him. Why did he not put it on his bicycle? Why bring it in? Why the concern to find it. Oh well he is a funny one, my eyes heavy, my brain finally shuts down for the night.

The dawn chorus wakes me, rather than do my usual stint in the bathroom then go into the kitchen for breakfast, I decided to go and do a bit of "Early Work," in the barn. Dressing quickly, I descend the stairs unlock the front door and scoot across to the big doors. I doubt he would see me as all the windows in mothers room overlook the back garden and there is no window directly opposite the room door.

I close the barn door behind me and head across to the racer. Both wheels have their valve caps, so why did he need another? I will puzzle this later, for now I pick up a bucket, leave and go over to the orchard picking up a few remaining rotten apples that litter the grass, they are a horrid brown, all mushy with spots of fungi over the once shiny skin. I don't have to wait long, before the lodger makes his early exit. As he comes through the main gate I startle him, he skids and almost falls off.

"Morning Jack."

"Yyy yyes, mmmorning," he says looking very nervous.

"Your off early."

"Lots to do."

"Do they let you in this early?" I ask knowing that it is just gone six and the nursery is only forty five minutes by bicycle, so he will arrive even with a slow pace before seven.

"Yyess, must go, work." With these final words he puts on a spurt and wobbles around avoiding the worst of the holes.

Breakfast calls, sitting here at the table eating some hot porridge I consider my next tasks. How I wish mother was still making her lists, my mind drifting to the Land Rover and Bill's funeral. They live in town so I will need it tomorrow. There I've finished, my eyes feel sticky, I did not wash, better do that.

In the bathroom, drying my face I realise the old Land Rover needs some TLC. That becomes my next task. Back downstairs in the kitchen I assemble buckets of water, a sponge, an old broom, duster, and dustpan and brush. This collection is then reassembled near the vehicle. I grab the old broom and go first to the back of the vehicle, our friend is a series 2A 88 pick-up version. Dropping the tailgate my eye catches something falling, scanning the concrete there is a small black thing now a metre away to the right. I walk over and pick it up, seeing immediately what it is

I rush into the house and on though to the kitchen. My other hand automatically reaches into the apron pocket. It's another Presta valve cap, so why was one of his valve caps in the back of our vehicle? After a brief pause for thought I realise a plausible explanation. Of course, he must have had a puncture, if mother drove past him she would have stopped and given him a lift, placing the bicycle in the back. The cap must have been a spare, he is a funny lad, maybe he gets worried if he does not have one.

Satisfied with my reasoning I go back and finish the cleaning job. Several hours have passed, I stand back and look at the shiny paintwork. I can hear dad's voice, saying, "That's my girl." He used to like me helping him clean his taxi, praising me for my work, and pointing out were I missed a bit. He had a keen eye for a smear of polish, or a dull patch hidden by a curve.

The rest of the day is spent doing mundane chores. The following day, is rather foreboding. I wake early, there are two things bothering me, going to the funeral because of the memories it evokes, but even worse the journey. Mother used to do most of the driving. Very often on longer trips we went as a team, one driving the other looking out for road signs and checking the map. Today I will be alone and going to an unfamiliar town, I want to stay here in bed, but I must go. Bill had been father's best mate and the best man at his wedding, I have to go.

With a big yawn and stretch, I pull myself up and sit, the top of my back leaning against the headboard, the pillows scrunched up lower down. It feels funny, my breasts sitting on my stomach, the ends resting on my thighs. It won't do, I slide my legs around, my feet finding the slippers. A few steps across to the door, I reach up and unhook the dressing gown, wrapping it around me. A few more steps and I'm in the bathroom, the old taps rattle as I turn them, spurting water loudly into the white enamel bath. I sit on the linen box, occasionally dipping my hand in to check the temperature. It's not long before the water is just right, I undo my gown and hang it on a hook on the back of the door. With both hands I grasp the bottom of my nightie and pull it up over my head, open the linen box and place it in, dropping the seat lid back in place. I put one toe in first, it's fine, stepping into the warm water I kneel to wash myself, then sitting I wash each leg. I reach over to the hot tap and top up, it's lovely, I lay

back in the warm water, steam rising about me. Relaxed, I listen to the birds singing in the garden below, my attention is distracted by the familiar sound of feet on floorboards, they get quieter, the front door closes. Jacks off and I have the house to myself. It's no good I can't stay in the bath all day, so get out dry myself, then pull the plug out. The water drains with a strange squelchy sound, eerie noises emanate from the old pipes as it rattles them. I pick up the bath sponge and give it a wipe around, one hand holding the side of the bath to steady myself, the other in a swirling motion wiping the surface clean. My breasts dangling from my chest, pulling down heavily, they wobble around and depending where I am, collide with the sides of the bath. As I pull back from the far side, they catch on the nearside rim sliding over and flopping down against the outside. With the bath done, I open the door and walk across the landing, not bothering with my gown. Opposite the bathroom door is one of the landing windows and I am rather relieved that Jack has his head down, the lad is looking around the yard.

I quickly go into my room, keeping away from my yard side window near the door. My room has three windows in total, of the other two one overlooks the hedge garden, the other next to my bed, looks upon the walled garden. It may be the smallest bedroom but it more than compensates with the best views. The room is rectangular, my bed is near the door on the north side, its head against the west side. Below the walled garden window is my dressing table, next to it in the corner just fits a chest of draws, facing it in the opposite corner is a large old wardrobe. My first port of call is the chest, seeking support, The HH bra was uncomfortable, much too full. I rummage around and pull out one of the unopened J cup bra boxes. Pulling it out of the packaging I try it, I should have done this earlier, with the last pill gone I'm now on a rather full J cup. Looking at them they remind me of mum and for that reason I'm pleased they are so huge just like her love. I suppose one has to be pragmatic, everything changes, life goes on.

With a further rummage through the wardrobe I'm dressed for the occasion, black shoes, stockings, a long out of fashion pencil skirt and a jacket that does not do up at the front, with a plain blue and rather strained blouse below it. I look at the buttons, trying to maintain a hold of the button holes, I really must go and get some bigger blouses, for now there is no time. I rush downstairs, grab a piece of toast and then head

for the front door. Walking across the hall, I realise how I am so unused to dressing like this. The elegant long tight black skirt restricting my hast to a more dignified stride. It does nothing to help me climb into the cab of the Land Rover. Sitting in the seat for a moment, I feel awkward, thinking of mother sitting in here, wondering what happened to her. Then I look at my watch, I must go. The first part of the journey goes well, only upon reaching the outskirts of the town do I start to panic. They have put a new housing estate in what used to be fields and altered the road system. I have to negotiate lots of mini-roundabouts, then follow signs to the crematorium that suddenly run out and you have no idea if you should continue ahead or turn off some place. I try to look for the landmarks which Bill's wife told me about. Her directions are good, there it is, the big old oak tree stuck in the middle of a roundabout, left past the red post box on the corner, right there it is, turning into the car park, I find a suitable slot. No time to sit relieved that I was here.

His wife and sister are waiting to go in, with them a few elderly folks. She is pleased to see me, the service at the moment is running over time. They were tactfully informed a few minutes before my arrival that a rather dodderly old clergyman is rambling on a bit with his eulogy. Unlike most other things, going in and interrupting a funeral to hurry them up is rather frowned upon. So all we can do is be patient.

A man comes over to us, he is very smart in a black suit, apparently we can now go in. Bill's wife and sister go on ahead, I'm behind them with a rather kind old fellow who has a very bushy white beard. He was with Bill during his national service in the air force. Before we went in I had asked him why so few people, he explained how as time goes by many people have either gone abroad to warmer climates or preceded Bill on the final journey. There are two other couples behind us as we file in and sit on the pews.

The young vicar, new to the town, seems to have some of Jack's genes, almost stuttering when he starts Bill's eulogy. The poor fellow has gone red in the face, his eyes drop as though looking down to read his lines. The words are a little muddled, I don't think Bill's wife or sister are too impressed, I see their heads turn to each other just slightly and catch a glance of the eyes as he stumbles over Bill's hobbies. He says "Bill liked hobbies, flying kites was a favourite." The old chap next to me grinned at

this, whispering in my ear, "Watching Kites and Hobbies flying." I nodded, knowing he was a keen ornithologist.

There is relief all round when we get onto the hymns and prayers. Then watch the coffin disappear, that is very sad and I start crying. Partly because of Bill but I think more because of the fresh memories which it evokes. The old fellow takes my hand, quite the gentleman. It's not long before it's all over and we are outside in the garden of remembrance, sheltered under a roof there is a vast marble wall full of names, it's raining. Light drizzle, we are all huddled waiting for the ashes. Bill's wife, Anne looks tired, she was with him to the end, keeping constant vigil in the hospital. One of the old couples comes over to speak, the wife has problems with her legs, so they bid farewell and leave. The other couple soon do likewise, the man is rather overweight, making his thin wife appear tiny. I'm standing talking with the old gentleman, when Anne taps me on the shoulder, "You go dear, you've a long way back."
"It's ok I'll wait," I say, not having any great reason to rush home. The old gentleman, pipes up, "You run along, the weather looks like it's getting worse and it's no fun if you've a long drive ahead. I'll look after these ladies."

"Please dear," says his sister, "It was nice of you to come, thank you."
"Hugh is right," says Anne, insisting I make for home while it's only light rain.

"Alright, I'll give you a call tomorrow," I say and kiss each of them goodbye, then venture into the downpour. My jacket looks like it has an infection as little spots appear. As I walk slowly across the car park, it's not only the skirt restricting my pace. I'm not used to the dainty shoes with their heels wobbling a little with each stride. They are not at all like my Wellington boots.

Pulling back onto the main road I see signs for 'New Homes' and so rather than use my brain I follow them. The roads don't look like those I used on the way in and when I reach the construction site I realise why. This is another new development, in a side road I make a three... and a few extra points turn. When you do something like this suddenly half the country wants to use this piece of tarmac. On both sides traffic is building up, looking at a woman driver, smartly dressed in a beat up old farm Land Rover. I can see one man, fuming with frustration, his head no doubt full of witty comments and choice expletives. "Yes almost done," I

mouth back, watching his lips move. Pointing back in the right direction I give him a wave and smile, which does nothing for his sad gloomy look. You'd think it was him just come from the funeral.

I make a painfully slow drive retracing my steps, infuriating one car, which at the first opportunity blasts his horn and overtakes, I see a hand at the window signalling some new manoeuvre. At the sign of an erect digit, I can't help mouthing back, "I'm busy do it yourself." It makes me feel better, a thought crosses my mind, the council might hire me as a roaming traffic calming scheme. Ahead is the big oak, and with a bit of brain power I am able to retrace the correct route.

Reaching the dual carriageway the clouds let rip, it's coming down so hard the wipers are struggling. I pull over into the next lay-by, joining a large number of other people who have parked. I'm not worried about me driving in these conditions, it's the other silly sods who are still whizzing by as though they are on a dry road during a sunny summers day. Several had raced up behind me, jamming their brakes on when confronted by a slow moving vehicle. It's a tribute to the design skills of the tyre manufactures that they weren't aquaplaning.

I sit for about ten minutes before it has eased sufficiently. Venturing back on the road only to come to a complete standstill a few miles further on. A Mexican wave of brake lights ripples through the queue. It's not long before I hear sirens and looking in the mirror see blue lights. I pull over, the car in the fast lane does the same and gradually a channel precipitates down the middle. The traffic cops are the first down, then an ambulance follows minutes later. I can't see what has happened but it's not difficult to guess.

All I can do is sit and wait. Thinking of father who was a professional driver and who had also driven lorries. With thousands of miles of driving he had seen plenty and it annoyed him that people went along oblivious to the road condition. "Why don't they read the road." He would shout when some idiot raced past, only having to brake a few yards ahead. He hated it when a maniac got right in your boot, and used to say "People put stickers in their rear window to distract you from their bad driving." Rather a sweeping generalisation, but we did see evidence of his theory on more than one occasion. Oh, now a fire engine is coming down the

gap. Looking across the other carriageway has slowed to a crawl. The rain is back to torrential, the sky dark. A person in the space wagon ahead of me, has just slid a side door open, now a youth is running up the bank into the gorse and saplings. Oh for the joys of in car entertainment, around the farm it is superfluous, journeys further afield mother and I generally went together. We would chatter all the way to and from the farmers market. Sitting here I feel so lonely, nothing to do, not even a magazine, so thorough was my clean up.

Nearly an hour has passed, I have seen one ambulance go back the wrong way down through the gap, an air ambulance flew in just after that. Now there are another couple of ambulances coming through. Looking across they have cleared all the traffic on the opposite carriageway. I have not seen a car go down for a long while, and the reason why becomes obvious. A large crane too big to get through the gap on this side is coming the wrong way up the incline, past us on the other side. A motorway maintenance lorry goes past.

Half an hour more has passed and I do believe we are moving. A few cars are also heading down the opposite carriageway. There is a slow trickle forward, it takes nearly another half hour before we begin to funnel towards the central reservation, merged into a single lane by a wall of cones. The services have removed a barrier allowing us to go back on the other side, a policeman beckons us through, his hands whirling as the cars ahead slow. I can understand the meaning of rubber necks, and feel like using the Land Rover to give these people a nudge. The old vehicle takes the bumpy crossing in its stride and I make a slow but steady drive back towards town.

There is an exit so I pull off, not wanting to go too far back and unsure of an alternative route. The road passes though a small village and confronts me with a roundabout, right goes back to town, ahead goes to a strange named place, left. I take the left it being sort of parallel to the dual carriageway. I keep following signs for towns I know are broadly in the right direction. This proves quite effective, when I near one, I avoid it taking the signs to the next one that I know is nearer to my destination. With the dark sky, driving rain and inconsiderate drivers it is harder than I make it sound.

It's great to finally be bumping along down the lane, which is now more like the great lakes. Each pot hole is a deep puddle, the ruts like a river and adjacent canal. I drive through the open gates, in my haste I had not closed them. Driving it under the shelter of the old cattle shed. Lock my friend and wander rather wobbly through into the main courtyard closing the gate behind me. The rain is still tipping it down, I move as quick as my skirt and shoes will allow pushing the main gates closed. As I hurry back to the house I feel the damp skirt rubbing against my legs as it goes taught back and front with each stride. My poor jacket, my only jacket, is soaked. The wind is blowing the rain into my face, the front of my blouse dripping as the fabric becomes saturated. The air is cold, I shiver, the porch is very welcoming. I fumble in my bag for the key, looking down I notice one of my shoes, this morning clean and shiny, now covered in mud. My stockings are a mess, as are my feet where the sides are exposed in the fashionable gaps around my arches.

A cold wet clammy hand grasps the key, there is a grating sound as the metal slides into the hole. A few twists, push and I'm in, I close the door firmly behind me and turn to see a drowned rat in the mirror. My hair flattened and dripping, I shiver again, brushing my feet on the door mat, before stepping onto the carpet. I walk over to the mirror, next to it is a hat and coat stand. I remove my jacket and hang it up. Checking the clock, I doubt Jack will be back for at least another couple of hours. I unbutton my cold damp blouse and fling it on another hook, my wet hands fumble for the hook and zip at the back of the skirt. I can hear grandma telling me to get out of those wet cloths before you catch a death young lady. The skirt drops to the floor, I step out of it and kick the shoes off. My legs feel horrid, the mud in the yard has stuck like a wattle and daub construction. Quickly I unclip each stocking which almost falls down under the weight of slop attached to it. The front of my bra is soaked so my hands fiddle with the many clips, releasing it. Then picking this lot up I drop it in a messy pile on the stone floor under the old table, unhooking the suspender belt which relieved of its job has ends which just flop against my skin.

I wander upstairs to the airing cupboard, switching on the immersion. Into the bathroom next, removing my knickers I grab a big towel and rub myself dry. That feels better, now I just want to sit in front of a warm fire while the water hots. I trundle back down to the hall, slip my feet into

those comfy sandals, retrieve the mess of cloths and do the step aerobics back upstairs making deposits in the washing basket and hanging the jacket and skirt to dry of their own accord.

The fireplace in the lounge beckons, I place some small logs on, then a layer of twigs swept up from the woods, then apply a fire-lighter. Mum always said I was cheating, she and grandma had a knack of doing it without. In minutes it is roaring, the logs take and I sit on the carpet samples, feeling the warmth on my skin. I look out into the main yard, the rain is still tipping down. If this keeps up Jack will be soaked, rain and cycling are not a good combination, with the addition of a strong wind it's miserable. I put another log on and move back a bit, the blaze is going well. The sofa, soft with many a broken spring calls me. It holds me between its solid arms, the centre sags from years of overuse. My legs folded, I lounge chez long style, my head resting on a small cushion over the arm nearest the big window, laying on my side, my breasts hang down resting on the seat cushion below. This is so comfy, my eyes look back to the fire. The flames play like erratic dancers, a pop the wood spits, a little burst of sound and it goes back to a faint crackle.

I check the time, I've been on the sofa just over an hour. If it took me half an hour to get in and light the fire. I realise that Jack might come back soon, it's getting dark out, the rain is still coming down at a steady rate. I can hear it pattering against the windows, driven by the gusts that push at the house. Across the yard I notice the barn door is just slightly ajar. It must be the wind, pushing it, go back through the corridor into the hall. Should I go and pull it to, I'm going to have my bath, so what does it matter if I get wet. I slip on my wellies, unlock the door and make a quick march to have a look.

It suddenly strikes me that Jack may be back early, I hesitate just outside the barn door, the rain streaming down my skin. I listen, there is no sound, I carefully ease the door open, poking my head inside. His bicycle is not there, I close the door and make for the house. Locking the door, swapping wellies for sandals I head up the stairs to the bathroom. Turning the taps on the room is soon full of steam, the water level rising. I step in and begin washing, my face, my arms, scrubbing my back with the loofah. I rub my soapy hands over my breasts. Then I lift the right breast up, washing beneath it with my left hand. Its massive size makes

it difficult to hold in my small hand, like trying to pick up a giant jelly it slides around trying to roll off in all directions. I do the left breast which is no easier, as it flops over my hand.

Clean I lay in the bath thinking, why was the barn door open? Jack was not back and I could think of no reason Arthur would have to go into our barn. My ears are alert for any sound, my mind filled with paranoid thoughts. What if it was the murderer? Then I wondered if he had slipped in while I locked the barn door. I jolted at the sound of the front door, there was a long silence then footsteps getting louder moved up the stairs, slow steps. Not Jacks, rapid scurry in to avoid me, steps. My chest heaved pulling on my breasts as my breathing deepened. The sound of my heart pounding like a drum, I am nervous as hell.

Then I heard a familiar sound, I gave a sigh of relief, it was mothers door opening and a few moments later closing. Jack must have been drenched, that's why he was slow going up the stairs. I shook my head, I'm being so silly, yet the rational part of my brain reminded me four people were dead. With this thought I get out of the bath and let the water go. Wiping my self dry I leave the bath cleaning, pop on the dressing gown still hanging in the bathroom and head the few steps to my room. Here I check the wardrobe and under the bed, just in case, of course there is no one hiding. The rain is still falling, it's very dark, I put the light on, and the outside almost disappears from view through the black windows.

I dress in an old baggy jumper and some rough looking trousers, not very elegant, but functional. In the kitchen I make a nice hot meal, after which I go back to the lounge and resuscitate the fire which lacking fuel is almost out. Curling up on the sofa, my mind churns things over. The first headache is how to keep the farm going, not just for my family's sake. It is such a lovely place and the only place I truly feel at peace.

Farm

Notes for the reader: All your friends were once strangers.

The next day I'm standing in the lane wondering who the old man is walking towards me. He looks like a walker, his socks up over the bottom

of his trouser legs. Good sturdy ankle boots and a walkers pole in each hand. The camera round his neck is expensive and his karki top looks almost new. Fear starts running through my mind, Jack the lodger is out at work, I'm on my own, suppose this chap is the murderer. Should I run, he's getting quite close now.

"Hello, sorry miss," he shouts. "I was looking for the footpath that goes across this lane and up on that ridge," he says, pointing up to the north near the end of the trees that screen the old quarry below. For a moment my mind is blank, we rarely get time to use any of the footpaths and this one is up at the main road end, where we no longer farm.

"It's right up the other end near the main road, tucked in the corner of a bend, coming this way you could easily miss it."

"Oh, I'm dreadfully sorry. Thank you." He turns and wanders off back down the lane. I stand watching him, he has a steady walk, good stride and regular pace. He is almost around the corner, when he stops and looks back, a hand waves in the air. Now he is coming back towards me. Why? What does he want?

As he approaches, he begins to speak, his voice has discernible tremble to it. "Since my wife died, hmm well, I do a bit of photography. Nature, views, lovely around here." He pauses, putting both sticks in the left hand, his right picks the camera up away from his chest. "Can't take it with you, and we have no children."

"Yes, it's a nice camera, you should enjoy life while you can." I am thinking about how young father was, all the things he and mother had planned to do when they retired.

"My name is Cuthbert Wesley, my friends call me Bert."

"Hi Bert," I am hesitating, should I tell him my name?

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry, of course a woman on her own. I must be making you nervous. Sorry I was going to ask a rather silly question but I had better not," he pauses, "I had these printed for an exhibition of my work, the local photographic club have a thing once a year." He hands me a card with his name, the word photographer and contact details. "I'll be off, sorry to have disturbed you."

The rest of the day I immerse myself in essential jobs around the farm. It's not until the evening that I get to relax, my mind now unoccupied drifting. Sometimes when someone does not finish a story it can play on your mind. Here I am sitting in the lounge, wondering what he was going to ask. Why did he give me his card? It is bugging me, why did he come

up the lane, would it not be obvious from the map where the path started it was just after the first bend down the lane.

"Hello Bert?"

"Yes."

"You might remember me.."

"The young lady down the lane."

"Yes, can I ask you a few questions."

"Of course go ahead dear."

"Well how come you did not see from the map where the footpath was?"

"When you get to my age you become quite forgetful, I had a map but without my glasses following all those tiny lines was rather difficult."

"Why did you give me your card?"

"Well because I wanted you to know who I was, there have been some terrible things happening around these parts over the last year. With my details at least you could check to see that I was who I said."

"Oh, yes, thank you."

"Might I, oh no perhaps I should not."

"What, you were going to ask me a question in the lane, is it the same one?"

"Yes but you will think me, well, I expect you will ring off and I have few people to talk to. Without my wife I have bored all my friends with endless slide shows. Thousands of pictures, with a running commentary, add to that a lot of my old buddies reaching the end of their lives and I have very few people to chat with."

"What is your question?" I press him for an answer.

"I think it better we forget it, only an old man dreaming."

"Please, look I understand you want to have someone to talk to and if I promise to let you call me if you feel like a chat, will you tell me?" His elusiveness like a fish you know is there but it won't take the bait was getting to me. So I dangle some bigger bait, which worries me suppose this is all a way of getting to me next. Suppose this meek man with his new cloths is actually the murderer?"

"Oh very well," he pauses, "I have always dreamed of being able to afford a model, until recently we never had much money so it was just a dream. I had given up, thought myself to old. Besides a lot of those models seem so false, then I saw you, your natural radiance, I'm sorry. You probably think I am just a dirty old man."

I pause for a long while, thinking about what he was saying. "So, I don't mean to sound mercenary, but our family has had a hard time lately and

financially we are struggling.” By we I meant I but did not want to let on to the fact that except when Jack was in, I was alone.

“Off course I would pay, as I said I can't take it with me.”

“What will you do with them?”

“The pictures?”

“Yes.”

“Add them to my collection.”

“Yes but will you show them.”

“I understand your concern, how about if we agree that should I want to put one in a competition or show then I have to have your written permission.”

“You could do it anyway.”

“Unfortunately you do not know me like my wife did, you would not need to ask such a question.”

I understand the intimation, “I hope you don't mind me asking but what did she die of?”

“Of course not, she had a heart attack, she always was rather partial to her food, that and the stress of her mother.”

“What did her mother do?”

“Oh she was constantly in quotes ill, drove us potty, always being carted off to hospital, nothing wrong with her, outlived her daughter. Only went last year at one hundred and two.”

My mind is getting a picture of this lonely old gentleman. The more we talk, and we do for several hours the more comfortable I feel about him. I suggest he comes to the farm, on foot the following day.

When I put the phone down I wonder if I have just been really stupid. Here I am on my own, Jack is more like a ghost, and I'm inviting a stranger to my home. After a little longer in the lounge I go to bed. I'm restless, my mind worrying, or is it mother putting thoughts into my head. The thought that I'm becoming like her, makes me smile. The following morning I'm up a bit late so rush around, getting very little done as I race downstairs only to realise I have left my mug upstairs. Then on my way back up I realise the pile of washing sitting on the kitchen table that I should have carried up. So I go back down to the kitchen. With the washing in the airing cupboard and my mug in hand I rush back down for a bite to eat.

It's five to eleven, and the gate bell rings, the old fellow is punctual. I'm

out in the yard, doing a bit of sweeping. I walk over and open the gate, before me stands a very smart gentleman. Decked out in his hiking gear, loaded with a large rucksack, and under one arm a sturdy looking tripod.

“Hi, Bert, how are you?”

“Fine, I see what you mean about not driving up.”

“Rather cavernous surface isn't it.”

“Rather indeed.” His face is kind, his thin lips radiate a warm smile. We enter the house and I take him through to the lounge. “Sorry it's all rather, well rather ancient.”

“As my wife used to say, we did not come to see the house we came to see the people.”

I smile. “Shall we sit?”

After chatting for a while I suggest we go into the garden.

“Sorry this is not much, but I don't have many cloths.”

“Budget restrictions?” he says, making me laugh.

“How did you know that?”

“You seem a little tight about your chest.”

I blush, the old blouse I have on fitted nicely once but with my breasts being bigger there was a noticeable stretching. The cloth, dipped in ridges between the bulging breasts.

He wanders around me, I stand like a statue being admired and photographed at some stately home. He asks me to change my pose, my expression, to sit next to the garden table, to stand near the apple tree. To walk towards him, his shutter clicking, then away, then to move around the garden. It's strange that it feels like minutes have passed, I was sure I would get bored. Yet several hours later and a few changes of wardrobe, it was him suggesting we call it a day.

He has finished packing up his camera and fishes down into a side pocket. “Here. Thank you very much. You were wonderful and the lovely chat was a bonus.” Heading in my direction is a big handful of notes. I look down at them, then at him, I felt bad, it looked a lot and he was a pensioner. “Thank you but, but that's rather a lot...” I pause he finishes my thoughts. “Look, I have more money than I can spend, I would have to pay a lot more for a professional model and I doubt she would want to sit and talk to a silly old codger. Think of the house and your wardrobe.” His face says more than words can, he is determined I should take the money.

My hand tentatively takes hold of the notes. He thanks me and asks if he may call again next week and perhaps phone now and again for a chat. I agree to this, he was interesting to listen to, reminding me of grandfather. One of those people with a fountain of knowledge and a pleasant way of imparting it without seeming pretentious.

He's gone and I sit in my room, not wanting anyone to see what I have. So silly who is going to be watching? We are miles from anywhere, but there are no curtains or nets on the windows so, perhaps it's an instinctive reaction. Like a big cat with a kill, taking it up the tree to stop the hyenas wresting it. I'm almost in shock, there is two hundred pounds in tens and twenties. Wondering if the ink is dry, I hold each up to the light, they seem real. All I did was stand in front of his camera, it was hardly work. My mind is trying to calculate the number of apples we would have had to sell at the market to get such a sum. It was a great buzz at first, my mind listing all the things I could buy. Then I remember down in the kitchen is the council tax bill, propped up against the biscuit tin.

The following day I'm in town. It's fun looking in the charity shop because I know that even with my small nibble of the money I can at least buy something. I feel I have too, we had been through two blouses, three skirts and dress which was almost my entire wardrobe, apart from one other dress and a few tatty farm work cloths.

That evening is spent thinking. Sitting in the lounge with no television, watching the fire, the only sound comes from the wood crackling as it burns. Without mother and grandma to talk with my mind drifts. According to his friends at work Jason was fine all day. So why was he so wound up when he got home. Mother and the gardener both received blows to the head from behind. Then there is Jacks behaving even stranger than usual. Mind Jack was so used to being with his mother, and my mother, he might just be insecure with women his own age. Then again why was he so obsessed with that valve cap. The barn door open, had someone been in or was it just the stormy weather? I feel silly even attempting think who it might be. Though it does keep going around in my head, the possibilities, funny thing is whoever is doing these dreadful deeds, is not in it for the valuables. Why? That is one tiny word

to which I have no answer. It's no wonder there are so many unsolved cases.

A fairly uneventful week passes, the newspaper is full of mundane local stories. Most people groan at these, but I think now they are a relief to read. There is a small advert from the local electrical shop in town, who are selling personal alarms at cost. Another bit about the council looking into increased street lighting. I wonder about these two items, what can have triggered them? Yes I'm being sarcastic, I suppose people need to feel like they are making a difference. For a while these events will focus minds, but people move onto other things, complacency sets in after the initial knee jerk reactions.

The bell goes and realise I could set my watch by my visitor. I greet him, feeling a bit guilty considering all the money he paid me. The session goes well, this time he has me posing around the farm, near the end of the shot I put on my drab old farm cloths. It does not seem to bother him that I'm less than glamorous. He suggests I go and change again, some shots on the tractor perhaps. I look a bit sheepish.

"I'm sorry Bert, I got some more cloths on Saturday but we've exhausted my tiny wardrobe collection."

He stands thinking for a moment. "I hope you won't think my suggestion improper. Would it be possible perhaps to do some lingerie shots on the next session?"

This makes me think for a moment, would I mind him seeing me in my nightie? Then I think of the difference his money will make. To make ends meet mother had re-mortgaged the farm, it was only a small monthly payment, but the debt I had inherited was a lot when you are on a low income. I do not want to leave this farm and that decides my answer.

"Yes, that will be fine Bert. Thank you."

His reaction is one of relief, the tension of waiting for my answer which may have been less favourable had caused his brow to furrow. It returned to a lighter ploughed field, aged and weathered. Bert was in his seventies, during his working life he had struggled to keep to engineering as manufacturing jobs leached to the far east. In our morning pre-photo session chat he explained how he started as an electronics design engineer. It was something his father suggested was the in thing. He laughed, it was until he chose it as a career, then he had to move over

into computing. When machines became so cheap no one wanted to pay to have them fixed he moved into web design. When that was dominated by the big boys and those nice people in India, he had to change again. He started selling renewable energy products, nothing large scale, but in his final years in business it made him his fortune, which he is now splashing out on my modelling.

As the week goes by I look forward to Bert's visit. When you are doing basic chores alone, the mind can settle on depressing subjects. As the days go by I yearn for a bit of company, to interact. I used to love being able to wander on my own, or sit silent reading. Farming you get used to solitude, out all day ploughing fields, sowing seeds, with only the chugging of the engine and the squawk of the rooks and crows for company. I have to laugh when I hear youths complaining about being bored, there's nothing to do they say. I'm sure I will be ok alone, but not while I still miss mother so, and worse while there is some killer on the loose. So it is with some relief when the morning comes around and my photographer arrives.

Bert is in fine form, cheerful and keen, quite the contrast to me. I am feeling more concerned about Jack, since mother's death he seems to avoid me. There was something about his manner that worried me, this makes me feel more comfortable about Bert's visits.

As I leave the kitchen to take off my skirt and blouse ready for the first photos, Bert asks where I'm going. When I explain I feel really silly, why am I going to remove them in private when he is about to photograph me in my bra, panties and stockings. The stockings by the way are not for effect, with such large breasts it is easier to pull down the panties when going to the toilet than to struggled pulling tights back on. He asks if he can take some shots while I remove the outer garments. Why not, I let him, his poor camera must wish it was on one of his walks. He did tell me earlier how he can get hundreds of pictures on each memory card. He was so much more inhibited by the cost of film in his more youthful past.

He has me walking around the kitchen, sat at the table, opening a cupboard and now acting the part of pouring tea. He gets me to put some tea things on a tray, as though taking it to a guest. I am enjoying it,

seriously it is quite fun being paid to do virtually nothing. Which would you rather do, back breaking farm work or stand in front of a camera posing?

In the week that follows, I hear the police are having a meeting at the village hall. Part of some awareness campaign.

It's my fourth session with Bert, who arriving with his usual punctuality accompanies me into the kitchen. We sit on the old wooden chairs around the kitchen table, chattering away. After catching up on each others events, we finally get onto the reason he is here.

I am blushing at Bert's suggestion.

"Sorry, my wife used to say I had the sensitivity of a hammer."

He has obviously noticed my embarrassment.

"Perhaps some more lingerie shots around the house?" He is trying to be helpful, with that suggestion. So I agree.

We do some photos in my bedroom, sitting brushing my hair, wearing my underwear and a delicate dressing gown. He is taking pictures with it done up and suggests I loosen the ribbon belt.

He is snapping away again. My mind thinks of ideas for shots, "Would you like me to wear the gown without the bra and do the same shots again?"

Bert, thinks a moment and decides my suggestion is a good one.

I untie the silk belt, letting the sleeves slip down my arms and the sides glide off my shoulders, forming ripples of fine cloth on the stool where I sit. Bert asks if he can take a few as I am now, to which I agree

I then remove my bra, flinging it sideways onto the bed. Sitting in front of the dressing table my reflection in the mirror, I pull the gown back on and tie the silk belt tight. He begins snapping again. He comments that he likes the way the silk drapes over my unsupported breasts. Like the roof of an outhouse, sloping out from a house wall, so my breasts begin a gradual slope outwards from part way down my chest. Soon he asks me to loosen the belt as we did before. I see him like a shadow in the mirror gliding around the floor like a dancer on ice. Moving gracefully into position, stopping then off again. With the belt loose my breasts are pulling the front of the gown open. So now in the mirror on a similar speed and scale the two tectonic silk plates are moving at millimetre pace over my globes of flesh. Like a valley exposed by retreating ice

sheets, driven back to the peaks by the hot sun. Each breath I take precipitates a further shift as the avalanche of silk retreats down the opposite faces of my mountains. Each breast is now half showing, Bert is still snapping away.

No he has stopped, "Sorry you are coming adrift down the middle." This thoughtful gesture touched me, he could of just kept going.

"Thank you, I appreciate what you just said." I sit for a moment, he stands waiting patiently, expecting me to cover the chasm. "I'd like you to continue, if I feel uncomfortable I'll let you know." I say feeling happy to let him continue.

"If you are sure? Maybe next week, give you time to think about it?"

"Please," I say, my hands reaching up and pushing the gown off my shoulders, the shimmering silk makes a delicate decent like the parachutes that once used such material. He now moves around again, his tripod like one of HG Wells's Martian craft, observing this human.

I stand up and hold the pose, he again moves around like a surveyor mapping every angle. Slowly I move and stand to one side of my bedroom window, looking out over the garden towards the woods. He comments on the light being excellent in my current position. Then just as sudden stops.

"Something wrong?" I turn towards him.

"Filled up the last memory card. I bought some more, but you are so photogenic I seem to have run out."

"Have you got some nice photos?" I ask. He picks up on my interest.

"Yes, I shall put these and all the others on a CD so you can look at them."

"What would I need?" I ask, being unfamiliar with such technology.

"Just put them in your computer." He saw my vacant expression. "Ah you don't have a computer!" There is no need for words the slight shaking of my head confirmed his statement.

I move back over to the bed, picking up my bra, putting it back on, "Does this get an Oscar for best supporting roll?"

He laughs, "It should get an award, engineering one, as a major load bearing structure."

I smile at him, seeing the funny side, taken in the good humour that it was said. I don't mind people looking or even commenting, as long as they are not rude or obscene, or down right smutty.

"I'll see myself out, you get dressed," he says with a pleasant smile, and disappears, onto the landing.

"You don't have to rush away," I call, moving over to the doorway.

"I have to go to the opticians this afternoon," he replies standing ready to descend the stairs.

"After today you will need stronger lenses."

He grins, waves and wanders off. I hear him packing up his tripod downstairs, there is a click as each telescopic leg collapses, then a clunk as he puts the locking clamp on. A few moments more and he is shouting goodbye, and I hear the door pulled to behind him.

It's the evening of the following day, and I get a phone call from Bert.

"I have a couple of things to say."

"Go on then." My tone is a bit cheeky.

"I have the pictures on CD and I have a computer for you to look at them on."

"Thank you."

"It's one of those notebooks so you can keep it in your room."

"Notebook? Sorry Bert but I thought they were made of paper." Had he been talking tractors and farm equipment, but this was all new.

"They are portable computer, used to be called laptops."

"Oh," I say "My room? It's for me to keep?" I was taken aback by his generous gesture.

"Yes, thought it would be best, you did mention the lodger, might not do for him to go looking, might give him ideas."

"Oh, yes, that's very kind and thoughtful of you." Then I realise that such a machine must be expensive. "Are you sure, about the machine?"

"Yes of course," says Bert, followed by a brief silence. "He's not listening, I mean in the room."

"No, no he's gone out for a meal. Mother used to cook for him, but now he goes and gets a takeaway, usually including chips." I had found various discarded pieces of packaging, from which you could deduce his menu.

"The other thing was a silly suggestion, regarding your finances," he says in a more subdued tone.

"Please tell me more," I reply eager for any ideas.

"Well, I would not suggest anything other than the kind of pictures that we have been doing, but you could have your own website."

"Is that, the Internet?" I say showing my ignorance. I have seen people

using computers in the town library but that's as near as I have ever gotten.

"Think it like having a book that members of a library can access, except it's electronic and your members would subscribe to an expanding volume."

"Right." This is all I can think to say, as the brain grappled with the idea.

"Think it over, I used to do that sort of thing, that's all just a stupid notion. It might give you a regular subscription income, from the members."

"Yes, I'll think it over, thank you."

He continued onto one of our more usual chats, where we put the world to rights. Solve some major problem and come up with various alternative theories, very frivolous but it makes us both laugh.

Over the weekend I had called Granny, today I was going to visit her. I had considered driving, but it is such a long journey and without mother I did not fancy the long trip on my own. Just outside the town is a railway station, my first destination. I have a big coat on, not that it is particularly cold, mainly to hide my breasts. Driving down the station car park I find a nice big slot at the far end. The tarmac is rough, the area behind old wire fence is full of wild shrubs, an old trees stands on its own, ivy creeping up its trunk.

I lock the Land Rover, as I leave it looking back, I turn and just go to the door again to make sure. Yes I have locked it, seeing the time, I move quickly, the old brick station building showing its age. Wooden panels below the roof are slightly broken. Inside the walls have lots of leaflet holders, some empty. Luckily there are only a few people in the queue, my eyes look up at the clock. The woman at the ticket office window is asking all sorts of questions, about travelling next weekend. It's so painful, a man ahead of me is fidgeting, the minutes are counting down to my train. I can see quite a lot of travellers waiting on the platform. Finally the woman leaves, without buying a ticket. The man is very quick, I'm next with minutes to go. The tannoy announces the train is arriving, I have my purse in one hand, ticket in the other and a small rucksack half hanging off one shoulder.

As the platform attendant blows his whistle I climb aboard. Most of the seats are taken, I stand and put my ticket in my purse, then the purse into a small pocket on the rucksack. The bag swings down off my

shoulder. "Sorry," I say as a passenger avoids my clumsiness. Carrying the bag by the top handle, I walk down the corridor, negotiating the doors. I keep going, becoming slightly embarrassed when I try to get through the last door in the end carriage. I look around, there is an empty seat, cramped by the seats in front I slide in, and sit watching the scenery go by.

The train is warm, I consider taking my coat off, but decide not, feeling rather self conscious. It's a relief when several hours later I can get off and walk the rest of the journey to granny's. Passing a bus stop I consider taking one, but I know how they go around the houses, and who knows if I would get lost in the unfamiliar territory. The breeze is very welcome during my stroll. The roads are alive with massive numbers of vehicles, people rushing past, headed for a train, on the opposite pavement a child falls and starts screaming, its fraught mother shouting at it. On either side houses, looking like they were all from the same mould, like cakes in a bakers window. I pass a parade of shops, some youths loitering outside on bicycles stare at me, I maintain a stare ahead ignoring them. One shouts something, I feel nervous. My foot takes a wobble, my eyes fixed on a van parked in front of a house. Workmen have scaffolding at its façade, a cement mixer churns its mix emanating a gravelly rattle. One of the men catches sight of me as I pass, like a programmed moron he whistles. This is a signal to his mates, one of whom shouts "Nice tits love." I feel like shouting something back, slowing my pace, preparing to turn. They are not worth it, I continue a few streets along into the side road where granny lives. It is with some relief I pass through the garden gate of granny's bungalow. The small front garden behind a low brick wall is covered in concrete slabs. I press the door bell and wait, granny is rather slow getting around. She uses a frame to help her walk, which she finds most frustrating. When the door opens I see a radiant smile, she never complains and always has a cheery countenance.

"It's a long time since I've seen you. You've filled out a bit," she says taking a good look at me. "Come on in." She moves around, manoeuvring the frame back into her lounge. I remove my coat and hang it in the hall, following in her wake.

"Yes I'm a J cup." I know this sounds silly but I am rather proud that my breasts are like hers, I suppose it is a very odd kind of link with the past.

“You take after your old granny, she says with a sweet smile. Us J's must stick together.

“You do look lovely. How are you feeling now?” Granny has now rested herself back into a comfortable seat.

“Struggling,” I pause thinking about how to explain to gran about my modelling and Berts suggestion.

“Granny can I ask your advice?”

“Yes of course dear.”

“Well this photographer wanted to take pictures of me. He's a retired gentleman, very nice, kind and intelligent, reminds me of grandfather. Well he has been paying me for a bit of modelling, the money has been a lifeline. Thing is I explained to him my situation, he suggested I could have a website,” he thought. I pause again. “Men would appreciate my breasts.”

“I remember having you here that very hot year for a holiday do, you remember?”

“After they started picking on me because of my breasts.”

“Those silly jealous girls, they are probably padding theirs now, false as they ever were and you don't have to. It's only pictures dear, besides if men are stupid enough to pay, then you exploit them,” she pauses, “You be careful though, just let him take nice pictures nothing else.”

“Thanks granny.”

“You think how hard your family has worked and what do they have to show for it. Look at your poor father, dead at fifty two. I don't want to outlive my granddaughter.” As she speaks a tear rolls down her cheek. She takes a hanky and blows her nose, like a trumpet with a sponge stuck up its tubes.

I brought some fresh veg with me and make a nice lunch, for us both. Granny has carers that visit morning and evening, usually she just has a sandwich at midday, so this makes a nice change for her. We talked for an hour or so after lunch, with much reminiscing until she points out that I would soon have to go for my train. Not that she wants me to leave, but she is keen that I get a train before either the commuter crush or the earlier brat pack. Being squashed in a carriage or surrounded by screaming horrors was not appealing, I'm sure you can understand why. After saying goodbye I make hast to the station, the builders are sitting in their van eating. As I walk past one pokes his head out and calls to me, “Want a lift darling?” I continue at a fast pace, thinking perhaps I should

have taken up his offer. My watch has stopped and I have no idea what the time is.

I walk as fast as I dare without running, there is a rough monotonous sound looming behind, I turn to realise it is the hard wheels of a skateboard, ridden by a scruffy teenager. He stops abruptly ahead of me, and stares back. Then I hear the clatter of a rough engine, "Did you want that lift?" shouts an unshaven fat faced man from the builders van, as he pulls up alongside. I hesitate, he is alone in the van, I look back at the youth and several others coming to join him. They decide for me, I walk around the front of the van and get in.

"Alright love," says the man, his stomach bulging over a belt, escaping the cover of a scraggy tee shirt. "Where you off to then?"

"The station." I look at him, the expression on my face no doubt showing my concern.

"No worries, love, I'm going there," he says, "Bloke trying to save money bought all his own materials, scared we'd rip him off. Daft sod, ain't enough wood, there's a builders merchant down by the station yard."

"I see, thank you."

He's waiting to pull out, indicator going, eyes checking his mirrors. "Best off in here, the neighbourhoods gone right down hill lately. Them buggers," he says, looking towards the youths who are now loitering on a corner. "Only tried to nick our planks."

The old van rattles, the gears crunch as he noses out into road.

"You've got a nice pair of knockers, darlin'."

"Thanks," I say taking this remark as a crude compliment.

"They real?" he says, blasting his horn at a motorist in front, "Bloody idiot, fucking road hog."

"That car you mean?"

"Your boobs darlin'."

"Yes, they are. Thank you."

"That coat does nufin for your figure."

"Exactly."

"Oh, don't want us lot getin an eyeful a!" he says with a wily grin, turning his head like one of those nodding dogs in the back a car. Ahead another car driver is making a parking manoeuvre into a gap which looks far to small, in the opposite lane there is a steady stream of traffic and I wonder if walking might have been the faster option.

"Come on you cunt, you won't get that heap of shit in there," he shouts

out of the window. He turns and looks at me, "It's fucking mad up here," pauses and asks, "So where you from?"

I explain as best I can, not being a seasoned traveller.

"Fuck that's bloody miles from here. What you doin up ear then?"

"Visiting my Gran," I say, looking down at the car still faffing about, considering joining my fat friend with my own set of expletives.

"See, what did I say, now the silly bastards realised," he says, putting both hands in the air, as we watch the driver pull back out of the gap and head off down the road. "Took you long enough."

The old van lurches forward as he revs the engine, my father would have had a fit. He hated that, said it was the best way to ruin one. I hear the regular click of the indicator and can see the entrance to the station, much to my delight. The van judders to a halt near the station entrance. My driver turns and looks at me.

"I'm Richard, they call me Hansom Dick," he says laughing and offering me his hand.

I rather cautiously take it and he gives me a good firm shake. "Thank you," I say forcing a smile.

"No problem, any time," he hands me a card, You need anything you give me a call.

"Ok," I say.

"Promise?" He stares at me, "Promise."

"Ok, I promise."

"Streets ain't safe any more, you're a nice lady," he pauses, "Don't suppose you'd open that coat let me have a quick shuffy?" His face is like a giant red pepper, his eyes twinkle. "Got you ear safe a."

"I'll miss my train," I say my hand reaching for the door lever.

"When is it?" he persists.

"Thirteen fifty eight," I reply looking back at him.

He looks at his watch, "It's only thirteen forty, go on."

"Oh alright," I say, undoing the buttons with some haste. I sit facing him, and pull the coat open, below I have a thin white blouse, you can see the lace on the bra through the translucent material.

"Fucking hell, they're bloody massive." His jaw drops almost as low as his stare. "Jesus darlin you are bloody beautiful." He manages to look me in the eye, "Cheers, love you've made my day."

"I best go," I say buttoning up the coat. "Thanks again for the lift."

"Thank you darlin," he says with a genuine smile. "Most women would have slapped me round the gob."

"I wondered how you got like that," I say giving him some back. This remark made him laugh like the proverbial drain.

"Remember you need anything, call Hansom Dick, even if it's down in the sticks. I owe you one."

I look at him puzzled, "Owe me one?"

"A favour darlin." He looks surprised that I have not understood.

"Why?"

"You made my day. Go on, or you'll miss it." He gestures to the station entrance. I get out, and give him a wave, then make my way through to the down line platform.

I am in good time and the carriage I get in has plenty of free seats. More people get off than on at the next station, the cool air that wafts in when the doors open is very welcome. The air-conditioning is to much for my liking. I decide to undo my coat, there being nobody sitting nearby. The journey back is very pleasant, passing through some beautiful countryside. Fields blur into the occasional conurbation, then merge into woodland, a road occasionally sweeps in to follow the line, then veers away. Countless rivers wind their way seeking the sea, gulls have joined rooks in a ploughed fields. I can hear the gentle hum of the diesel electric, as we speed along.

Equal to four?

Notes for the reader: You often think you know the answer.

The day after visiting granny I'm down the shops. It's Tuesday, I like it because the town is quiet, Monday people restock after the weekend. Today the town is populated mostly by a few pensioners doing their daily morning shop. At the moment I'm looking for some tinned sliced mushrooms. They keep well and make a nice addition to stews and curries.

From behind I hear a familiar voice, a voice I will never forget. I turned by my shopping basket which was on the floor weighed down by the weeks groceries. It is the carpet shop man.

"That bit in the paper, said your mum ran out of fuel. My Darren works part time down the petrol station. I thought it a bit strange, my lad said she filled up that morning, only just twigged he doesn't take much notice of news like. Called the police but they seemed very dismissive, some

whipper-snapper on the other end said he made a note. Probably did a doodle," he paused then whispered in my ear. "Thought you ought to know, especially with those rumours flying around."

I whisper back, "What rumours?"

"Well some down in that village near you, gossips, have an idea you are some how involved."

"Me?"

"Idiots the lot of them, it's that kind of talk got people burnt at the stake. If anyone comes into our shop and spouts off. We tell them we are family friends and there is no way. Stupid buggers make me bloody mad."

"Thank you." As I speak I'm having trouble holding back the tears.

"If anyone bothers you, you give me or Angie a ring at the shop." He hands me their card. He takes it back, gets a pen from his pocket, scribbles on the back then gives it back to me. "That's my mobile and our home number, you ring, ok. Doesn't matter when."

"Thank you," I cannot help bursting into tears.

"Come on, lets get your shopping paid for and I'll run you home in the van. Put that old bicycle of yours in the back."

Some people can be so kind, and he was true to his word. He gingerly drove the van down the lane.

"It's ok," I insist, "I can manage the rest. Last time you had to have a new exhaust."

"Angie would never forgive me if I didn't see you safely home. Do you know she thought the world of your mum. After I got over that day with my car so did I." His mind focused on getting through a particularly rough bit ahead. The tractor could make some deep ruts, especially with some of the loads it has hauled.

"Do you know whenever you had some veg in season she would bring us great bag fulls. Must have more than paid for the exhaust, very very nice lady your mum."

"Yes," I sob.

"Hey, sorry, you must miss her every day," he says sensitive to my situation.

The van was outside the gates. "I'll open them easier for you to turn in the yard." A tear rolls down my right cheek, as I climb down.

With the gates wide open he eases through under the arch, keeping to the centre. Turns the big long van on a sixpence and pulls up ready to leave.

“Nearly went off with your shopping and bicycle, that won't do will it.” He jumps from the cab and carefully takes the bicycle and puts it up against the wall of the house. Then returns and pulls out my bags of shopping.

“Thank you.” I hold out my hands to take them from him.

“Don't worry, these are heavy, come on.”

I open the door and he carries them into the kitchen placing them down on the table.

“Thank you. Your samples are still doing well,” I smile.

“Mind if I take a reminiscent look?”

“Off course not, come on.”

I lead him down the dark passage into the lounge.

“Like I was here yesterday,” he says shaking his head. “That bit over there looks a bit worse for wear though.” Along by the fire and around the sofa, years of use had made it rather more thread than carpet.

“Sometimes we get people who change their carpet because it does not match the new three piece suite. Even their old stuff would be like new compared with what you have. Can't promise mind but if I get something of the right size how about I come along with Angie and Darren and we put it in for you.”

“But, but,” I stuttered, “That's very kind, but I can't even afford second hand right now. I'm trying to keep up the mortgage payments.”

“Don't be silly we won't charge you.” He pauses, then asks. “Tell me I would have thought this place was paid for long ago.”

“Yes it was, but mother couldn't make ends meet.”

“Could you not have sold some land?”

“It's farm land, low price, at least renting it we get a regular income.”

Reg suggests he better head back, carpets to fit. We wander back through the house out to his van.

After Reg heads off I put the shopping away and get myself some lunch. The next few days are very mundane, my mind in a muddle and upset at the rumours. Thursday I set off down the lane as usual to collect the post. Near the post box I hear the sound of a tractor getting louder. Looking across to my left I see Arthur ploughing one of our rented fields. To one side, the ground is row upon row of furrows, the other is rough stubble from the wheat crop he grew this year. It is our largest field and being down near the main road the ground away from the hills is fairly level. He slows near the point he would normally turn, giving me a wave. The revs from the tractors engine fade, the cab door opens. His machine

is much more modern, the enclosed cab must be cosy in bad weather. Sitting on ours you just get soaked in the rain and burnt in the sun. Arthur climbs out and wanders across the rough ground to the gate, I go to greet him.

"How you doing love?"

"Managing," what else can I say, "Still wondering why anyone would kill mother."

"Me and Sal often wonder that, Sal said maybe she were in the wrong place at the wrong time, saw something somebody did not want her to see."

"I suppose, but what about Miss Simmons she hardly ever went anywhere, except if someone took her by car."

"It is a puzzle," says Arthur shaking his head, "And a worry, never know if the bastards going to do it again and to who."

"I know."

"You see anyone suspicious, get inside and give us a ring."

"Thanks."

"That's alright, I bet I'd get there before the note takers!"

I smile back.

"I best get this lot ploughed."

"It might rain later," I say, looking up at the gathering clouds.

He gives me a wave as he turns and heads back to the cab. The engine bursts into life, the big machine eases forward, turns and heads back to the far side.

I take a slow walk back to the house, looking forward to tomorrow. The following day Bert is here again for his usual session. We are sitting in the kitchen having our conversation which becomes longer each week.

"I still don't understand mother being over at white hole. It's not a place I associate with any fond memories."

"It is rather desolate," he says.

"And why would someone kill so many people?" I ask, unable to understand why anyone would do such a thing.

"Perhaps it's more than one person."

"What makes you say that?"

"Somebody could be using one or more of the murders to cover their own, using it as an opportunity."

"Mother and Mr Green were hit from behind," I say, putting things together.

“And the others?”

“I have no idea and I doubt the police would tell us.”

Bert shakes his head, I can see he is thinking, my grandfather had that look when trying to solve a problem.

“I read in the paper that they had found no forensic evidence, you would have thought they might have found the odd hair.”

“Who knows, I don't see how that helps,” I say not seeing the relevance.

“The person or persons must be very meticulous, scrupulously clean. Most of us would leave flakes of skin or a few hairs, maybe fibres from our garments,” he says contemplating the details.

“So we have a bald, nudist, who baths every hour?” I say joking.

He pulls back and feigns fear, “Maybe it is you, women are known for their cleanliness and I've seen you nude.”

“Bert, I'm not bald.” I express surprise.

“But you could wear one of those swimming hats,” he says with keen speculation.

“You are not serious?” I say worried that he might not be speaking in jest.

“No, of course not.”

“I should hope not,” I pause, a neuron fires in my grey matter. “You do have a good point though.”

“About?”

“Well it could be a woman.”

“Or Jack?” he proffers. He and I both look up at the clock, thinking the same thing no doubt. “We will probably never know, shall we go take some photos?”

“Sure,” I say, pleased to take my mind off things.

“Well what shall we take today?” asks Bert.

“You could take some statue like nude shots in the walled garden. If you like.”

“Are you sure?” he asks looking surprised.

“Yes,” I feel very at ease with Bert, who has a calm good natured demeanour. He starts unpacking his camera stuff on the kitchen table, while I start to undress. Unbuttoning my blouse, I ease it off and hang it on the back of the wooden chair on which I had sat. My hands reach around to unfasten the skirt, first the hook, then sliding the fine zipper down at the back. It falls to the floor billowing out, like a collapsed balloon. I step to one side, bending down to pick it up, my breasts rolling forward toward the top of my bra, and back as I straighten up. I slide my

panties down then again sit on the chair, now adorned with garments. I carefully undo each of the fasteners on the stockings, then run my hands down each smooth leg. A small crumpled mass of nylon accumulating on each foot. I shake each and hang the long wispy sheer black stockings over the pantie blouse skirt sandwich. The suspender belt is quick to remove, fastened only with a couple of clips. Bert is ready waiting by the door as I reach behind my back to undo the bra. Being of industrial strength it has a few more fasteners than a more regular model, and so is a bit fiddly. Unclipped the weight of my breasts pulls down on the big cups, their decent hastening the final part of the removal.

Bert seeing I'm now ready goes through into the walled garden, I follow him, my feet at first cold on the stone floor, become warmer as they touch the paving slabs of the garden path. These have been warmed by the sun, which at the moment is hidden by clouds.

“Could you go and bend over smelling those lovely roses?”

I oblige, recalling my first ever nude venture into this garden. My breasts now dangle low, wobbling as I move from flower to flower like a giant bee, my massive pollen sacks drooping under their own weight. He asks me to repeat the process, which I do. By the pond he has me standing like a statue various different poses. I lean to the left, or the right, each time my breasts taking up a different sculpture.

In the tree covered summer house the foliage is dying back with the approach of autumn, behind one part is a trellis. The leaves are beautiful hues of golds, reds, browns, yellows and oranges. I see Bert eyeing up the riot of colours, his mind visualising a scene.

“Could we perhaps do a fruit of the trellis shot?”

It takes me only a few seconds to guess what he wants. I walk in the gap behind it, the side of the summer house to my rear, the path on the other side of the wooden structure. Looking for a horizontal slat at the right height I lift my left breast through to one side of a vertical slat. Like putting a round peg in a square hole I squash it through, the skin brushing rough wood. Then I take the right breast and push it through the adjacent square, it flops through. Bert tells me a trellis suits me, it's all the rage in Paris this year. This starts me giggling. “Are you ok?” he says, always checking, asking if I mind, concerned for my comfort, making sure I'm happy to do the poses he asks for.

“Very happy thank you Bert.” And I am at this moment, it does not last

long, but these sessions are an escape from the depressing world I find myself in.

He comes over, "Great, to finish off could I do a mini movie of you perhaps walking down the path, stopping to smell flowers then turn around at the end and just walk straight back."

"Wow, me a movie star!"

"I doubt this will ever make Hollywood," he says, giving me a big smile.

"We can dream," I say, with a cheeky grin. I put my hands through squares in the trellis and push each breast up, drawing back, they flop against my ribs. I walk over to the path, ready for my starring role.

Following his direction, on the up line I'm a local train stopping at all stations, as I lean to smell a flower my bosoms dangle forward, reminding me of those old slam door trains, when the train stops and they all fly open. At the end of the line I turn and face the camera.

Looking straight at Bert I walk forward, my pace quite brisk, each bosom following the flow of motion transmitted up from the hips. Reaching the camera, Bert looks up. "Perfect."

"Thank you Bert I have enjoyed today, it's been fun. I think it has been the best so far."

He smiles back, "You've been through a lot lately, I'm glad to be the one bringing a little happiness back into your life."

We go back into the kitchen where like rewinding a film, he packs his stuff and I get dressed. Just before he leaves I thank him again for the computer and the CDs from the other four sessions.

"Ah yes," he says, "I think perhaps I should give you a quick lesson."

I am pleased with this suggestion, repaying the kindness with a lunch.

Bert rings as usual just after six the next evening, for a chat.

"Do you know of all my friends, I hope I'm not being presumptuous in that statement."

"No, no, you are a good friend."

He continues. "You are the only person with whom I can have an intelligent silly conversation."

I giggle at this remark. If only you could hear what we say, it is so spontaneous and each mini epic in our alternative world view deletes after a few hours. Bert thinks this is because we are right, and our brains

do this in order that malevolent powers are unable to get hold of our superior knowledge.

"Bert on a serious note."

"Yes, is something bothering you?" he asks sensing my seriousness.

"Hmm, the last murder, my lodger he seemed extremely nervous when he came into the kitchen, I had the paper open. I've hardly seen him the last few weeks. I just wondered if, well you were an engineer, could, or is there any way that we could monitor his movements, just in the house? I can't afford to satellite track him."

"I suppose so but I don't see that it would tell you anything." Bert pauses,

"You don't think he did it do you? Shouldn't you tell the police?"

"They think I'm the one doing the murders?"

"Why?"

"Because I knew all the people and some were very close to me. Every time one's committed I am on my own with at best a flimsy alibi."

"Oh."

"Bert, it's not me," which I say in a scared shrill pleading tone. Bert is the best friend I have, he is the only person I feel I can trust, well him, Arthur and Sally and the carpet family. Without him, I'd be totally lost, and a lot poorer.

"I know, it's ok, don't worry, I am not going to go into hiding," he continues, "Why don't you just tell him to sling his hook?"

"I need the money Bert, but maybe if I did a website like you said I might be able to survive without him."

"We'll talk about that when I come round next Friday."

There will no doubt be those who think what I'm consider doing to be wrong. Just as they think it's wrong when farmers don't get a fair price for their produce. Until it affects their pockets, I heard a woman the other day down in the village store. She turned to her daughter and whispered, "I'm not paying that for potatoes."

The weekend passes by without incident, Monday is mundane, Tuesday evening my mind is back contemplating again. In the gloom of the lounge, doubts creep in. Jack is off tomorrow on a long weekend up in Scotland, I think that's what his scribbled note said. Am I being stupid, then there is the money, any extra will be handy. I wondered who had started the rumours in the village that it could be me. If I began asking they might find a way of silencing me. That was scary, perhaps I should

have a visit to Reg and Angie. Reg had told me about the rumours in the first place, he might have some ideas. I call them, and without even hinting, I'm invited over the following day.

That evening I am very pleased to see Reg standing in the door of their house, as I manoeuvre the Land Rover into their drive. I lock the vehicle and wander over.

"How are you getting on?" asks Reg, "Angie's busy in the kitchen, let me take your coat."

"Thanks, I'm, still shopping in the village, feel I have to," I say standing in the hall undoing the buttons.

"Or the silly sods will think you have a reason not to," he says, taking the coat from my hands.

"Exactly, who would start such an absurd notion?" I say, being ushered into the lounge. The carpet is beautiful, a warm red, the matching curtains and suite make it very inviting. On the pastel orange wall hang pictures of beautiful views. My head swings back towards Reg, as he continues the conversation.

"There are a lot of people who take one look at you and think they know your life history. A Angie?" shouts Reg to his wife.

"God, yes, we've met plenty of those, look at the price of our carpets and think we are millionaires," she replies.

"Don't those factories give it to you for free then?" I ask, looking at the collection of bunnies in a glass cabinet. They both laugh.

"Could be someone who does not like you. Plenty of jealous types," says Angie, popping her head into the lounge.

"We had one of those down our street, when we lived in London, a love." says Reg.

"Be nice to know," says Angie.

"Took us a while, to find out who was scratching the van," says Reg with a frown.

"My father had that happen with his taxi, five minutes in the village and five hours down the garage getting a respray."

"Who did that?" asks Reg.

"Don't know? We never did find out, why?"

"Could it be someone in that village?"

"Don't ask."

"We're on good terms with the landlord of the Angry Bear, he hears plenty. We fitted his carpets in."

"I mean don't ask anyone, don't want them having a go at you."
"She's right Reg you keep your mouth shut." Angie walks in placing some dishes on the table. "He's a proper one for sticking his nose in, I keep telling him. Dinner won't be long."
She disappears back in the kitchen.
"So how is Darren?"
"He's started at Uni," says Reg with a glow.
"What's he studying?"
"Psychology," says a proud dad.
"We can get him to do a study of the village," I joke.
Reg laughs.
It's a wonderful evening, and a delicious meal.

In the morning on my way to the village I see another friend.
"Hi Arthur," I say, as he walks over to the Land Rover.
"See the funny fellow went off early this morning in a taxi, parked at the end of the lane. Had to get him to move, couldn't get the tractor past."
"Who Jack?"
"Yep, his bicycle broken?"
"No, he's gone to Scotland."
"Sometimes I wonders if it isn't better to be daft, Sal says we're the daft uns, what with all the help they gets."

After doing a bit of shopping in town, on the way back I pull up by the post box. Opening the box I put the contents on the passenger seat. Just about ready to drive off, my eyes catch the paper I look with shock at the headline, another murder. The police are only saying we should take all precautions and be alert. Report anything suspicious, so they can make more notes no doubt. They are not even saying who it is, but I bet there are a few rumours already flying around the village.

Back at the house that evening I get a call from Angie.
"Hello love, we didn't know if you've seen the paper."
"Yes, terrible isn't it."
"Frightening," she takes a breath, "Reg, has heard a rumour that it was old Mr Bartrum."
"Doesn't he run the little cycle spares shop from one of the concessions at the nursery."

“That’s him, lovely old fellow, very reasonable prices. Our Darren could not believe it, he thought the world of Barty as the kids called him.” We have a long chat, discussing the ins and outs of the recent events.

Later in the week, with yet another murder I was glad to see Bert again. We were sitting both rather gloomy, on what would usually be a fun Friday.

“I know you said the police have their eyes on you,” says Bert, with obvious concern.

“Yes.”

“Well I was thinking, I did not like to say this over the phone, just in case, he pauses.

“In case?”

“They might have tapped your phone.”

“Oh,” I say wondering if he is over reacting.

“Do you have an alibi for that day?”

“No, no, it was the day Jack left a note that he was going to Scotland.”

“We could say I came around, you invited me to lunch.”

“That’s kind of you Bert, but it would be a lie.” Apart from it being wrong, I also do not want him dragged into this. It is a strain for me let alone an older person. I have visions of him succumbing to some stress related event such as cardiac arrest.

“Look you told me what it was like when you were questioned.”

“Bert, when you come you leave your car in the lay-by up on the main road, where was your car that day?” My mind is working through the flaws in his idea.

“In my drive, but I do a lot of walking. I could have walked, the weather wasn’t that good, doubt may others would have been around,” he pauses, then continues, “Don’t worry we best not mention the photography though, you know what they’d think of that.”

“Get all the wrong ideas you mean.”

Much as I hated the idea, I do have a long conversation synchronising our stories. I just can’t face further interrogations, with the loss of mother and her support I feel mentally weak and vulnerable. You hear about people under pressure admitting to things when they are innocent.

Not long after Bert leaves I get yet another, less welcome set of visitors. “Hello miss, may we ask a few questions?” asks my officious friend, this time without Ned’s son. The lady officer is back with him, so I expect a

macho show.

"I don't believe this," I say staring at him, as though he was a fox come into a hen coup.

"It won't take long miss," his tone is calm and almost sympathetic.

I invite them into the hall, the weather is tipping it down.

The officious officer starts by grilling me on my whereabouts on the day of the murder.

"Here," I reply, hoping not to have to go into details.

"And your lodger?"

"As far as I know at work," I say wondering where this is going.

"Your lodger, what's he like?" asks the woman officer.

I pause to think, should I tell them he is a very odd, strange fellow, just because someone is not normal, whatever that means, does not make him guilty. "He's quiet, keeps himself to himself, no bother."

"Is he here?" she continues, her eyes penetrating, hard and cold.

"No, he's gone to Scotland."

"Has he?" Comes a very snide remark from the officious male.

I go into the kitchen and return handing the man, Jacks scribbled note.

"He left this."

"Hand writings a bit shaky," he says handing the paper to his colleague.

"He always writes like that."

"You didn't write it, did you?" asks the woman.

"Excuse me, no I did not," I say rather indignant at the accusation.

"Anyone see him leave?" asks the man.

"Yes, my neighbour, Arthur Williams."

"Where in Scotland did you say he went?" asks the female, sharp as a knife.

"I only have that note," I say shaking my head, "Why don't you ask his mother."

This got her curious and after explaining that his mother was in a home, and maybe he tells her things, they seem satisfied. After they leave I go and slump in the lounge, it's no wonder some people seek solace in drink.

I'm just getting comfy in front of a warm fire when the phone goes. We only have one, it's a battered old thing that sits in the hall. It's my friend and he asks me a worrying question.

"Will you be alright for a few months?"

"Why?" I ask concerned, "You're not ill are you?"

“No, no, just some friends who moved to Spain invited me over. They enticed me with the word warm.”

“It has been rather damp and cold, I know Grandma used to hate this time of year. She always said the damp got into her bones.”

“I just, well I feel a bit bad, what with the latest murder. If you'd rather I didn't go.”

“No, look Bert you go I'll be fine, I'm sure Jack will be back soon.”

“Is that good or bad?”

I shake my head, and shrug my shoulders, silly as he can't see. From my silence he continues the conversation.

“Do you know when he's due back?”

“I have no idea, it's been nearly a week, and he had over a month in Australia, so I guess he will have used all his holiday entitlement.”

Although I was pleased for Bert, it concerned me on two fronts. I would not have my friend for a while and my income would drop.

There was a surprise in the post, after last night's chat with my friend he had obviously dropped by and put a parcel in the box. There was no stamp, when I opened it there was a note from him and a book on web design. The message was short.

Off to airport, will help when get back. Thought you might like to read book. Best wishes Bert.

I wondered about looking in Jack's room. I usually just went in once a week to change the bed linen, empty the bin and run the vacuum over the carpet. Then again if I go prying around and the police come checking they would find me everywhere. I decide against such an action, besides it does not seem right, I know I would not like it. I can hear people saying if you've nothing to hide you've nothing to fear. That maybe so, it's more the feeling that someone has touched your personal things. It's the principle of it, I just can't, it goes against my upbringing. Somehow I just don't see Jack having any reason to kill.

Then again he did go away around the time Miss Simmons and Mr Green were murdered and this last one. Bert has also just gone away, and offered an me an alibi, but suppose the alibi was actually for him? Now I'm being paranoid, I stare out into the garden, this won't do there are things that need doing.

Alone

Notes for the reader: Fear is a strange emotion and anxiety causes people to avoid many things, often blocking a person's full potential.

A day later I get a call from the nursery, the boss is asking after Jack. I explain all I know that he's gone to Scotland.

"Scotland!" expresses the boss with some surprise.

"He left a note, saying it was where he was going," I reply, "Why where did you think he'd gone?" I say, my curiosity aroused.

"Jack asked for a few days off, said his mother was ill," said the boss, sounding rather upset. I wonder why Jack would be deceitful, perhaps Bert was right.

Later the same day the Police arrive, requesting to search his room. This time it's Ned's son and the female officer. I watch them from the bedroom door, meticulously checking every draw, under the bed, all the cupboards even around the carpet edges, lifting mats. It is an extremely thorough search, "So why the interest in Jack?" I ask in a casual manner, my question directed more at PC Jones than the cold woman officer. Yet it is she who replies, "The nursery reported that he had not been into work, suspicious you see."

"Why?"

"The last victim worked at the nursery, if you would not mind, we do need to concentrate."

I understand her intonation and leave them to it. It is some time before I hear my name called and I venture into the hall. They explain that they have finish and insist if he turns up I let them know, and try to keep him here until they arrive.

This is quite some day, they say things come in threes, I hope they are wrong as I sit relaxing in my warm bath. It's around nine in the evening, when my bed exerts a stronger pull than the cooling bath. Running a farm there is a tendency to get up early so I need my beauty sleep. Dry and wrapped in my favourite silk dressing gown, I walk across the landing to my room. Startled by the sound of the main gate bell, who can it be at this time of night. Changing direction I go down to the hall and pop my wellies on, walking across the yard my breasts wobble around

frantically under the flimsy silk. I pull the gown together and hold one arm over my bust.

"Who is it?"

"Jj JJ Jjack," he says with the most recognisable stutter.

I shine the torch through the gap and see a rather grubby man, it's him alright.

"Jack," I say astonished at his state, which becomes fully apparent when I open the gate.

By the time I have closed the gate, he is already in the porch. I follow him in, shouting, "Wait."

He turns and looks startled, "Wait in the hall Jack you are filthy," I say approaching him.

Jack begins to go up the stairs and stops in his tracks when I slam the door and shout, "Jack."

He is shaky, nervous as he comes back like a scalded puppy.

"It wasn't mmmmee," he says shaking his head frantically. "I I ddd ddidn't kki kkill B B Barty."

"How did you know he was dead?" I ask unaware that it's been all over the evening news.

"I saw it, pictures on a television, in in a shop ww wwindow."

"Did you go to Scotland?"

He nods his head.

"The nursery rang, wondered why you weren't at work."

"Oh," he said with a gaping wide mouth.

"I dd ddidnt have anymore hol holiday left." His face is contorted with fear, "You won't let them take me away. Mmm mother needs me, ppp pp please h h help me," he pleads In the mess he is, it's difficult not to feel sorry for the poor wretch.

"How did you get so dirty?"

"I came across the fields, fell over lots in the dark," he says, now a little calmer.

"Take your boots trousers and coat off then go up and get yourself a bath," I say, expressing a rather motherly order. "I'll fetch a basket, you can put them on that, not on the carpet." I stroll into the kitchen grabbing an old plastic washing basket from under the big porcelain sink.

Returning with it I plonk it down on a part of the floor not covered by the mat. He looks sheepishly, at me standing in a tee shirt and pants. "Pick them up and put them in the basket, please." Having just had a bath I had no desire to get dirty, "Thank you. Go on." He nods and disappears

like a squirrel up a tree, meanwhile I take the smelly cloths and dump the basket under the stairs, not wishing to foul the kitchen. He must have come across some of Arthur's fields as there was a distinct whiff of cow dung.

With the mess stashed I'm faced with a dilemma, do I call the police. If I don't then I could be aiding and abetting, but then suppose he's innocent. A man like Jack under pressure could easily succumb, and if the murderer had no more plans then you can guess where all the fingers will point.

Waiting until he finishes his bath, which is easy to tell when you have lived with our plumbing for a while, I knock on his door. "Jack." There is no answer. "Jack can I come in?" This louder call gets his attention.

"W w why?"

"I need to talk to you Jack." With that the door eases open, Jack is standing in some rather worn pyjamas and a scraggy old red towel dressing gown, that looks like it has not been washed for years. I sit down on the end of the bed, "Sit down Jack." Again he looks nervous, "H h have you be been looking, I I looking i in m mm my room?"

"No Jack that was the Police."

"P pp police!" he pauses, looking a bit angry. "Y y y y you I I let them, i i in mm m my rroom?"

"I had no choice, Jack." Now it was me feeling nervous, suppose he is psychotic. "You must realise, that," I say, appealing to him in a conciliatory tone.

"Y yes," he replies sitting beside me.

"Look Jack they said if you came back I was to tell them or I would be in big trouble."

"Oh," he says, "Why w why wo would you be."

"Because I think they want to ask you a few questions," I say trying not to alarm him. "You know that day of the very bad storm a few weeks back?"

"Yes."

"Did you come back earlier, it's just that the barn door was open."

"No, no."

"Look Jack I don't think it's you, but if you hide away and don't talk to the Police everyone will say it is."

"I know," he says his eyes sad.

"It's horrible being questioned, but you have to be strong, for your mothers sake."

"I know," he utters again, trying to hold back the tears.

"If you want to cry it's ok Jack." He nods and bursts into a flood of tears. I put an arm around him and hold him to me. His body is trembling, his head bowed, I feel one of his hands touch my hand that is still across my bust holding the silk gown in place. "It's ok Jack," I say, swaying a little, in a gentle rocking motion.

"They all t th think I'm I'm .," he can't find the words.

"A little different?" I suggest.

"Yes," he agrees.

"People, can be very cruel to people who they think are a bit different, is that why you are always so frightened?"

"Yes," he replies, I believe he understands.

"I used to get teased a lot, and people are still rude to me."

"W why?" comes a child like question.

"Because of my large chest."

"Oh," he says, perhaps a little embarrassed.

"If I call the Police and ask to speak PC Jones, he's the son of a very good ex-Police officer." This was the best idea I could think of, hoping that Ned's son may be a bit more understanding.

"You'd better."

"Ok," I say and leave him sitting on the bed, while I phone the Police from the hall.

"I want to speak with PC Jones."

"Who is this?" asks the officer.

"It is urgent I speak with PC Jones." Stressing my insistence, I wait.

"Madam," he tries to continue, but I snap cutting him short.

"Please," I bark at him.

"I'll see if he is available."

There is a long delay, then to my relief I hear a familiar voice. Explaining to him Jacks state and that they need to treat him with care, it is agreed that he and another officer will make a visit this evening. I was very lucky, after PC Jones had stuck up for me the officious officer had put him and another less compliant officer on the late shift. It did not take them long to arrive, during which time I had slipped some cloths back on.

Jack was still sitting where I'd left him, when we went into his room.

Upon seeing the officers, he gives them a sad stare, shaking his head. "I

I I dd didn't kill anyone.”

PC Jones tried to reassure him, explaining that people were worried by him leaving so sudden. “It does not look good you see Jack,” he says, “We have to talk to you so we can tell those people that you did not kill anyone. So will you help us?”

The poor lad nods his head. I say lad but physically he is nearly thirty although mentally he is much less mature.

“You will take care of him won't you,” I say pressing the point. PC Jones and the other officer both assure me they will. Though this is more for my benefit, in our hearts we all know there is a limit to what these two junior officers can do. I'm sad when they finally take him away, the car leaves and I close the gates. I head back into the house and lock up, now I really am scared. At the back of my mind is the nagging question, why was the barn door open that evening? It's late, the police did not leave until nearly midnight, tired I lay awake, my ears listening for the slightest sound.

The way the murders had been done seemed cold and calculated, that did not fit with my impression of Jack. I get up and look down at the barn doors, bathed in moonlight, without curtains on the window I wonder had someone been watching me? Who? Jack? I doubt, Bert? why? he gets to see me every week. Feeling really sleepy I slid back into bed, half concious. Startled I try to awaken myself, in slow motion with lead limbs I try to sit up. My eyes, half open, my ears straining, there was a sound, I know it. I shake my head and slide back out, my feet finding the sandals. In the moonlit room scabbling around on the floor, feeling for the old rifle, my hand with some relief grasps the cold metal of the barrel. I tentatively pull it out from its hiding place and stand in my nightie. I shiver the air is cold, the silence broken by another sound, but it is only the hoot of an owl.

Nothing, no more noises. With great caution I open my bedroom door, wandering across to the bathroom. Opening the door I look in, it's empty, I go to Jacks room, checking it, empty, I wander around to Grandma's room it to is empty. Heading quickly back to the top of the stairs I stand silent, listening. Everything is quiet, as stealthily as the old floor boards and steps allow I make my way down into the gloom of the hall. My heart is pounding, my breathing deep, I shiver again. The hall is empty, I go into the kitchen checking the doors and windows, they are all locked.

Carefully I open the door into the dining room, expecting some miscreant to pounce, nothing it's empty, all the windows shut. I walk back into the hall, and check the front door, it's firmly closed, the small downstairs loo is empty. I check the office and spare room, nothing. The library is just full of its usual compliment of musty old books. Wandering along the corridor is eerie, almost pitch black, the last room is the lounge. I hesitate outside the door, if there is anyone then this is where they are. My mouth goes dry, I hold the gun firmly, turning the door handle I put my fingers back on the trigger and kick the door open. In the gloom my eyes adjust straining to find anything unusual. I make a slow patrol around the furniture, nothing, feeling relieved I lower the gun. The house seems secure, my pounding heart slows. You are no doubt curious as to why I did not switch the lights on, the noise may have emanated from outside, with the lights on I would not even glimpse a shadow, and would alert an intruder who may then wait until I was back asleep.

From the big lounge window I can just see across to the gate into the outer yard. It looks closed, I make tracks back to the hall, and upstairs to grandma's room. Looking down from the window at the end of the room I can see the main gate is also closed. Across the yard the barn doors are still shut, the moonlight has moved around a bit but it still glows off the gloss paint that father put on them. As I move away from the window, I hear another sound, looking from grandma's window over the orchard I see something move, then it stops hidden behind a tree, is it a deer? I had heard a metallic bang, there was an old galvanised metal bucket out there, I had left it when going to the phone and had not yet bothered to collect it. I stared straining my eyes for the slightest hint of movement, nothing, I went over to grandmas dressing table and borrowed the stool. Placing it at the window I sat watching the spot near the bucket, which I could just see laying on its side. It is a good fifteen minutes before I catch a glimpse of something moving again, but with the darkness and a raft of branches, sporting a thin canopy of leaves that had not yet succumbed to the autumn fall, I could not make out what it was. It could have been the back of a deer, it was heading from the orchard up into the woods.

I was scared, hardly sleeping all night. In the morning I'm up late and in zombie mode, frequently taking cat naps. In the afternoon, I decide to

drive down the lane to the post box. Not wishing to be out longer than necessary I go to the end of the lane, turn and quickly head back. With a bit of manoeuvring I get the Land Rover in the barn along with the tractor. This it seems is a more secure location than out in the other yard where the obstacles are rusty five bar gates. I only examine the haul once I have secured the main gate and have my self locked inside the house.

Sitting at the kitchen table I spread the mixture of envelopes, scanning for things of interest. The first thing that catches my bleary eyes is a card from Bert, wishing I was there. Ah and a letter from him, posted a few days later, they had arrived together. The letter, contains his address in Spain and a phone number. He is concerned that I'm ok and says he will call me on Sunday. I giggle at a rather cryptic suggestion about the scenery needing a couple more hills, with a pun about me baring it out there. The newspaper is depressing, there is a big article about the murders and a picture of the chief constable, with copious references to the fact that they are getting close to solving the crimes and a man is helping them with their enquiries. I wonder who?

I spend the rest of the afternoon laying on my bed and most of the night on sentry duty. Cheered a bit the following day when I get a call from Angie inviting me to lunch. Lunch I think, what about their shop? but of course it's Sunday.

It's nice to visit them again and we spend a lot of time chatting, the conversation soon swinging around to the current events.

"See that lodger of yours has been charged with murder," says Angie.

"I thought you said he liked your mum," asks Reg, looking a bit perplexed

"He did, that's why it makes no sense," I reply.

"Wasn't he a bit odd though?" asks Angie.

"Only in being a bit simple, and suffering from anxiety."

"Must be hard for you now?" says Reg, "You're mother told me how glad she was of his rent."

"Yes, very?" I say wondering exactly how I would manage.

"You could do a bit at the shop if you want, couldn't she," says Angie.

"Yea there you go, how about it?"

"It's very kind of you but I already have so much to do just keeping the farm going, I'll give it some thought though. Thank you."

It is a nice interlude, they tell me all about Darren, and how well he is doing on his course. Late in the afternoon, wanting to get back before dark I thank them and take my leave of their hospitality.

When I arrive back I park the Land Rover and go over to close the gates, during the day our family tended to leave them open, going in and out all day with the tractor or Land Rover it made sense. Besides you could only lock them from inside, both gates were secured with large wooden bars, locked in place with padlocks which joined brackets on the gate to what was basically a bit of four by four, with an associated securing bracket. The wood slides in between what look like iron rectangular lifting handles. As I try to push one of them closed it almost falls on me, crashing to the ground, sending up a cloud of dirt. The bottom hinge twisted still gripping the base of the gate, the top has tears where the screws have parted with the wood.

I look in despair, the gate is very heavy, father helped grandfather replace them years ago, the two men had struggled then to get these massive pieces in place. An increased sense of vulnerability fills me with dread. The ground floor windows on the outside of the house are all small and high up, but the courtyard side is a different matter. Here the windows are large and not having double glazing would no doubt be easy to access. I debate whether to call the Police, I decide I should, they will probably ignore it, now they have their man.

Upon making a phone call explaining the main gate, the barn doors open and the other nights potential intruder seems to evoke no response. The officer after asking a series of questions puts it all down to natural causes. I got the distinct impression that they were suffering from paranoid caller fatigue. It's likely they had a lot of hysterical women calling over the past months and the officer I spoke with seemed very indifferent to my concerns.

I'm sitting by the phone, with virtually no money wondering what to do, I can't pay for a new gate and the money from the sale of our crops is all set aside to pay the bills. In farming you have to do a lot of planning ahead, it's not like a nine to five where each week or month you get a regular pay packet.

The following morning I'm pacing up and down the hall, my mind obsessively focused on the gates. I consider calling Reg, but thinking about the scale of the job and that they would be busy with their business I decided to call Arthur. Speaking to Sally his wife, I don't think she appreciated my concern and labours the point when listing all the things Arthur has on his plate. In a way I could understand, my mother had hired help so I expect she thinks I might be taking advantage of their kindness.

Beer Belly Knight

Notes for the reader: Help often comes from unexpected quarters, people can be too hasty to judge the people they meet.

Sitting pondering I have an idea, this necessitates going out to the junk shed. Within minutes I'm dressed for the weather and marching through the yards. It's cold and I put my hands in the coat pockets, one rests upon a piece of card. Grasping it I pull it out wondering what it is. Hansom Dick's card of course, but then I think of the distance he would have to come and I can't pay him. Still it makes sense to keep the card handy so I go back indoors and place it in a draw in my room. I did not want to lose it while rummaging around in the shed. In there finding it again would be worse than the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Back in the jumble I found a piece of wire, and a couple of staples. Pleased with my find I wander around to the barn for some pliers and a hammer. I walk to the gate tools in hand, scanning around over into the field and to each side in the orchard. Assuring myself that no one is watching I staple the wire on the inside of the gate posts a few inches off the ground. The fence wire is grey and in the darkness I hope it will not be seen or expected.

My mission complete I go indoors and take a long afternoon nap, in preparation for my nocturnal existence. From my vantage point in grandma's room I keep watch over the yard entrance. Even with copious naps during the day, I still find myself nodding off from time to time. The night goes without any sign of an intruder much to my relief.

In the morning before going out to check the gate I take a wander around

the upstairs windows, looking out to check for signs of anyone. Satisfied, I go and inspect the gate, it's ok the wire is still in place. No! it's no longer taut, the wire is hanging loosely almost touching the ground, my eyes scan the concrete, alighting on a red mark. Blood, there is blood about two metres from the wire directly ahead. The height of a man? Although if you trip you might fall forward a foot or two, so it could be a woman. I must have been dozing, when it happened. I wish I had Bert's camera, if it rained the evidence may soon disappear, black clouds were looming on the horizon.

I rush back to the house locking the front door, and phone the police who seem very indifferent. I ask for PC Jones, but am told he's been transferred. Slamming the phone down close to tears, "Shit," I say, wondering perhaps if mother had a camera. I went back upstairs to grandma's room and checked everywhere, nothing, except grandfathers old box brownie, for which I had no film. Even if I can buy some it would mean driving though the evidence which if it rains may well be gone when I get back.

I slumped down on grandma's springy bed, "Did someone kill the old cycle repair man to implicate Jack, thus leaving me on my own?" My eyes fixed on the family photo on the dressing table. The murders were certainly not done for money. "Then without Jack I'm even more short of money and people know we are having a hard time, mother used to tell everyone," I say out loud, "I'm going mad talking to myself."

My mind continues to think. If they want Jack out of the way maybe it was the same reason for killing mother. Why Miss Simmons? She did know father, she thought the world of him. This is a silly thought but suppose Mr Green was at hers to witness a change of will? Then why kill my darling Jason? It's almost like someone is trying to isolate me and make it difficult to keep the farm going? Why? Who? Bert's in Spain, I had a phone call from him the other night and the letter and card and I rang him back using the dialling code for Spain, besides he's been providing me with money.

The time is ticking by and again I'm worrying about that broken gate. It's nearly midday when I decide to give Hansom Dick a call, it worries me though involving him. Suppose someone has a go at him, they are

obviously ruthless.

"Hello, you probably won't remember me."

"I remember you darlin, you're the one with the big tits."

"Yes," I say, "Look, there's been a lot of murders down our way, including my mother so you don't have to come. It's just I think someone's trying to scare me, the main gate is broken. I put a trip wire in place and found blood on the concrete the following morning."

"Fuck, some bastards killed your old ma?"

"Yes, and I think you'd say, stitched up my lodger to take the wrap."

"Shit, there are some fucking cunts around," he says in his rather colloquial manner.

"Thing is without my lodger I can't afford to pay someone to fix the gate, an without it I can't sleep."

"Don't worry love, Hansom Dicks on his way, you measure up your gates give us a call. Me and the lads will fix something up tomorrow. Bit busy today, finishing some bastards extension."

"Thank you, thank you."

I lose no time in getting him the dimensions, he asks about any other entrances, so I ring him a second time with details of the gate into the outer yard. Dropping in a tactful mention about the state of the lane, at which he says he can fix that to. I insist he does not as in the rough state it may put off whoever it is from bringing a vehicle down.

Early the next morning I get a call, they are on their way. I tell you I have never been so pleased to see a white van, people may curse them. You may not like these fellows swearing and I can't say I was keen on their methods of complementing me, but they were at least coming to help a damsel in distress. Rough they maybe but they're hearts are in the right place.

The scruffy old van, covered in dust and muck lumbers into the yard, I had pulled the other gate open in preparation. It was with a big smile that I greeted the fat unshaven man who stepped out, followed by his two mates.

"Allo darlin, don't you worry me and the lads will have you nice and safe."

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Core yea, two sugars," says one of his pals. Having Dick and the third fellows requests I nip back in doing my bit. In the evening unable to rest I had baked a rather large fruit cake, which during the morning

disappeared at a rapid rate. I am cooking a big lunch for them when, Hansom bowls in, "Come an take a butchers darlin."

I follow him and to my amazement see new gates, not old wooden ones, these are big steel gates each side are some new concrete buttresses.

"Wow."

"Take a gander behind you."

I turn, to see some equally secure gates at the other entrance. "Thank you. Thank you." In the centre ground behind each they have put some metal pipes, held in the ground by a massive amount of concrete, "Just drop the bolts in there, see darlin," says Hansom demonstrating on the main gates.

Wow, thanks, lunch is nearly ready.

"We'll be in shortly, just got to put some of this around the tops, on the wall to," he says, pointing to rolls of razor wire. "We have to stop bastards nicking stuff from our yard, this fucks the buggers."

"Great. I'll go and see to the food."

"Cheers darlin, could do with a bit of grub."

"Yea, cheers," say the other two.

When I go back to tell them it's ready, they already have most of the wire in place, which is very pleasing. They all traipse into the hall, remove their boots and follow me into the kitchen, where like exocets they have no trouble finding the target.

"Fuckin tasty," says Hansom Dick.

"Yea, not arf," says Scruffy, or two sugars.

"Wish my old lady could cook like this," says the quite one.

"Sid's, missus only does burnt or burnt. Don't she Sid?" says Scruffy.

"What's out the fucking back, bloody forest?"

"It's a wood, my grandfather and grandma planted over the years."

"Fucking bastards could creep up git over the fucking hedge," says Dick.

"We got a bit to bloody finish round that side wall, that some garden in there?"

"Yes it's a walled garden."

"We do that lads then we only got the fucking outside of the bloody house. Can't have the buggers gettin in the back. Some shit could smash the fucking kitchen windows, or get through that door. Ideas lads?"

"I could do with some more cake please miss," says Sid, his mates seconding that.

"There's not much left, I'll bake another," I say, feeling guilty that I had not made more.

“You got any old bottles?” asks Scruffy, “See they might pull the wire off so we could cement some broken glass in the top of the walls.”

“Fuck yea, like we did at that rich bastards.”

Sid had wandered over to the kitchen door and was giving it a good look over.

“What you bloody reckon Sid? says Dick.

“Could take a bit of doing, I'd need some bits.”

“Any fucking builders merchants, nearby?” asks Dick, looking at me.

“I think there is one just the other side of town.”

“You get baking the fucking cakes, we'll find it,” says Dick with a big grin,

“Come on lads.” He looks at me, “You lock those fucking gates when we leave.”

“Sure.” I smile back.

With that they set off, leaving the gates closed behind them, I lock up and go back to the kitchen, which is becoming quite hot. Lost in my cooking, the time flies and it does not seem like five minutes when I hear the gate bell ringing. I turn the oven down and go out to open the gates, it's them back. After I open the gates the old van lumbers in, as I close up the lads, jump out and begin unloading.

“Dick, this must have cost a fortune I say observing a vast hoard of building materials spreading out over the yard.”

“Don't you worry your pretty head. We've got a fucking rich bastard, drives a fifty grand car and the tight bastard is always complaining about not having much money.”

“I don't understand,” I say naively.

“We'll stick a bit on his bill, sundries.” At this comment the others laugh.

“Some cunt down the builders merchants asked what we was doin in these parts. I told him working. Nosey bastard.”

I laughed, as did his mates.

“Well what the fucks it to him,” says Hansom Dick, his chins wobbling.

“I best attend to the cakes.”

“Cheers darlin,” says Sid, as I head back.

It's not long before they are all working away in the kitchen, Sid and Scruffy have the old door off, and a new very solid door, armoured with sheet metal in place. Dick bolts some sturdy bars behind the kitchen windows and adds locks to the openers. They he wanders off outside, surveying the outward facing walls.

Sid and Scruffy again disappear and return with another door, this time replacing the door into the walled garden. With both doors in place they

then go back outside, it's only when I try the door to the walled garden that I see two heads above the parapet so to speak. "Alright love?" says Sid.

"Great," I reply, watching them work as a team, one dobbing cement on the wall the other poking bits of broken glass in. "We'll put razor wire on after says Sid.

"Thank you. The doors are great," I say admiring them.

They nod back with beaming smiles.

Dick is back in the kitchen scratching his stubble. "The other fucking windows are quite narrow, high up, that's good."

"Yes, grandfather's idea, grandma insisted the kitchen windows were more conventional."

"Why d do that then?"

"He saw things at the end of the war, never talked about them, but it made him scared of what humans do to each other."

"I know ow e feels, fucking cunts attacked my mate who runs the newsagent. Fucking nice bloke, Indian e is, salt of the fucking earth. Fucking racist bastards. I told him, you see the little shits to let me an the lads know. Fucking youths it were. Police weren't no fucking use."

"That's terrible."

"Could be some little bastard doing this to you."

"I don't think so Dick, the more I think about it the more calculated it seems." I sit and tell him my reasoning so far.

"So maybe some mother fuckers after this farm?" says Dick, "If you get short of a bob or to you let me know. No shits gona mess with a nice lady like you," he says with a resolute posture.

"You're being so kind to me, thank you."

"Look darlin, I know I'm an ugly looking bastard, and I ain't no angel," he pauses, scratching his stubble, "But that day you got in me van, you trusted old Hansom and you let me, a strange bloke ogle your tits. Every other bitch, even the ugly uns, tells me to fuck off."

"Wait a moment," I say, wandering off up to my room. When I return Dick has demolished half a cake, still steaming on the wire cooling frame.

"This is fucking lovely grub."

"Thank you. A photographer persuaded me to let him take this," I say handing Dick a rather revealing artistic print that Bert had given me. "You keep it."

"Fucking hell, Jesus shit, wow, they are some huge jugs, cheers darlin. That is a well tasty pose." Hansom's eyes were out on stalks and he had

the widest grin I had seen in a long while. "The wood in your gate, the broken fucker, it weren't rotten, some bugger had been at it. Like you thought."

"Thanks for the info."

"Ain't no comfort, but best you know some cunts out there for real."

We sit and chat a bit longer, Scruffy and Sid eventually return from their labours.

"All done lads?"

They reply a resounding, "Yep."

"Well we best be off, it's a fair old journey."

"Let me pack some food for you."

"Cheers love."

I wrap loads of cake and make some super size sandwiches. All of which is snatched up eagerly, giving each a peck on the cheek. They leave with beaming smiles, heading back up to the big city. I took a quick look around at the outside of the house, by the orchard first where I noticed Dick had stuck some nasty pieces of broken glass around the edges of the windows. Wandering back in I locked the gates, and inspected the garden side, he had done the same, good old Hansom.

With all the doors locked I retire to the lounge, letting the sofa engulf me, a fire crackling away. I feel warm cosy and a good deal more secure. My thoughts now drifting, first wondering about Jack, it got me thinking about the people we meet. Circumstances, if I had not been scared of the youths when I left granny I would not have become acquainted with Hansom Dick. If Jack's mother had not had to sell up to pay for her care, Jack would not have ended up here and be in the dire state he is now. I know I owe it to him to try and find out who the real villain is. The thing that still puzzles me is how Jason's murder fits into the equation. Unless of course there is more than one person out there up to no good.

My mind is speculating about Mr Green and Miss Simmons, if she was going to leave us some money who would know. A solicitor but I can't see them gossiping about a clients business. Miss Simmons may have told a relative, but then Jason had already been murdered so I doubt it would be them. Mr Green did do a lot of gardens, suppose he changed his routine. His usual customer on that day may have asked:

"You're going to be late in Mr Green, unlike you?"

"Oh, it's Miss Simmons, needs me to witness a change of will."

“Who's the lucky one?”

“Oh those folks over at the Giddings Farm.”

It might not have been that person, they may have just spread the gossip. It's all conjecture, but then what if the same person knew Jason. The factory were pleased with his work. Was he in line for a better paid position? One thing I can be sure of they will be upset with Hansom's work.

This night I sleep well and the next morning refreshed I head for the barn, where a pile of logs are waiting. I'm distracted from my wood chopping, the phone which has an outside bell, is ringing. Rushing back into the house I pick it up to hear a rather excited voice.

“When the buggers said it were gona be dry the rest a the week, made me fucking appy. When it's wet I leave me size twelves all over the fucking place, which got me finkin. That bastard who's been round yours musta left some fucking foot prints yea. So I speaks wiv my mate down the newsagent, his cousin runs a shoe shop, well he reckons if we make some plaster casts of any sods we find, he can find what they is. Gives you a bit more to go on like, yea.”

“Dick that's brilliant.”

“So dan to yours for lunch Sunday, don't want you lookin on ya own, right. You take care, we'll ave the bastard.”

The call set me thinking, who would know the people Mr Green worked for, or more to the point who could I ask without them gossiping or arousing attention. Someone in the village, but who? An old friend of mothers? Of course Bill's wife Anne, they had not lived in the village for a while. With Bills condition and Anne not driving, they had moved to town, however she might have an idea. I pick up the phone and am in luck, upon asking if I can have a chat about something, she invites me over for lunch. Leaving the logs, I quickly change and head off in the Land Rover.

It's a couple of days later I'm busy hanging out the washing in the garden when I hear the main gate bell. Wandering back into the kitchen, through the hall, I could hear the sound of a tractor engine. I trot upstairs and check from grandma's room from where I can see it is Arthur. I give him a wave and shout. When I greet him he seems quite surprised.

“What the bloody hell is this lot, haven't you heard it was that lodger of

yours.”

“Some friends of mine, did it.”

“Well you best let me have a key.”

“They have the spare.”

“Oh, well it's probably for the best. Sal had a bit of a go at me, don't want me ending up like your dad. She says I've got enough on me plate.”

“It's ok Arthur.”

“Well I feel a bit bad, Sal don't mean no disrespect but she thinks you shouldn't be running this place on yer own. Says you should face facts, sell up and buy yourself a place in the village.”

“Oh.”

“I says to her, it's been in your family four generations, don't seem right.”

“No.”

“Well I best turn around and get on with me work. You take care now.”

“Thanks Arthur,” I say as he climbs into the cab. The engine roars, and the tractor moves forward into the yard, turns and he's off back down the lane.

Sunday I'm so pleased to see the battered white van approaching, Hansom Dick is swaying, as the van lurches around. Grandma's room must have the least dust of any, while waiting I had been giving the room a thorough clean.

Dick is super keen to go tracking, he is babbling away about some program he saw on the tele. He exudes enthusiasm and a few gaseous emissions, from both orifices. Making me laugh when he looks startled his head jerking from side to side, “What the fuck was that?” he says, in an uncharacteristic seriousness. We go out to the orchard and carefully look over the area. His keen eyes spot some foot prints.

“These ain't non of yours?”

I move to where he is standing, look down, “No.”

“I best pour this shit in the fuckers, then, a?” he says, peeling the lid of a tin of filler. Taking a filling knife from his back pocket he flings it down spattering it in a light rain.

“Build it up slow so we don't mess the fuckers up.”

The next morning I'm tidying up in the walled garden when I hear the phone, like Pavlov's dog I respond to the bell, the connection is bad, it's Dick on his mobile. “Green wellies, my mates cousin, says it's bloody

green wellis." After this call, I sit in the hall, wondering what Ivan would make of our phone culture. The way the phone overrides all other activities, we stop, even when talking to others to respond to that ringing.

Sunday seems to come around fast, I'm shutting the gates after letting Hansom Dick into the yard. I greet him with a beaming smile as he wobbles across from the van, greeting each other. Then the big man wanders in behind me and we take up sitting at the kitchen table.

"Green wellies, size tens, just like these fuckers," he says, pulling a pair of brand new wellies from a carrier bag and thumping them down on the table.

"Wow."

"Narrows it dan a bit," he says, with a gleeful grin.

"I have a list of people Mr Green did gardening for."

"Mr Green, who the fucks he?"

"He was murdered, an old fellow, gardener. I have a hunch he is linked to the murder of an old lady around the same time."

"Gotcha, and e might have worked for the piece of shit who's bumpin people off. Right."

"Right," I say nodding, with a grin, Hansom is a real character.

"Evidence: we ave your broken gate up against the wall out there, and a plaster cast of the print, Right." Hansom sits scratching his double chins.

"Yes," I say, smiling, pleased that we have made a bit of progress. "Now all we need is a wellie chucking competition."

"See who brings what, a love?"

"Either that or I go around with a foot fetish."

This remark has him looking at me with a frown. "Hope you don't mind, I meant to say last week, bloody forgot," he pauses, scratching his chins.

"I a, I a showed the lads that photo you gave me. They went fucking crazy over your knockers. Scruffy said you'd make a fortune if you ad one a them fucking websites. Well what wiv you bein short of a bob or two."

"Thanks for the suggestion." I wonder whether to mention that Bert had already proposed such an idea. I was pleased for the extra votes.

"You got any more of them photos, been wankin me self silly over that one."

"I think that's a little to much information," I say blushing.

"Sorry love, don't bloody know when to shut me gob," he says looking equally embarrassed.

Dick had helped me focus my mind and after he leaves I ring Spain, and am pleased when my friend answers.

"Hi Bert, I have a silly idea."

"Go on."

"Well a friend of mine said mother filled up with fuel, yet the police said she had run out."

"Right," says Bert, I visualise him sitting like grandfather pondering.

"Suppose mother saw someone she knew."

"And they appeared to have run out of fuel," he adds, running along the same lines.

"Carrying a can and syphon."

"Your mother would have stopped to help."

"Yes, and what if they had carefully planned it, then told her that their vehicle was over at White Hole."

"With all the murders I doubt she would have picked up anyone who she did not already know well."

"Exactly," I pause, "I don't think for one moment it would be my farming friends, but Arthur's wife did think that I shouldn't be running the farm on my own. The killer might think I won't cope and will want to sell."

"Keeping everything above board and with Jack fingered for the murders no one will be suspicious."

"Yes, yes that's what I thought." I was pleased that Bert considered it a plausible explanation.

"I'll give it some thought, which reminds me, without Jacks rent, would you like me to get a website sorted for you? I can do it from here on my friends computer."

"Yes please, I've been reading that book but I'm making slow progress," I say, worried at my situation. Bert is very considerate, keeping the call fairly short, as it is expensive for me. Bert has been most helpful, concentrating my mind and reducing my financial worries. I now have in my mind, a local person who knew mother and had Mr Green do their garden, this person also drives a diesel vehicle and wears a particular style of green wellies. I also have a possible motive, that for some reason they want this farm, so if they plan buy it legally they must have money, this would be confirmed by them paying Mr Green to do their gardening. Of course this is all based on circumstantial inference.

Later that week I get another call from Bert. He tells me the details of the

site he has setup. He says he will ring back and tells me to have my machine set up in the hall. His plan to talk me through connecting it to the Internet. With my machine on the hall table I await his return call. After a second much longer conversation which must have been frustrating for him, we finally have it set up. He has to ring off so I can test it, mentioning that when he comes back to England he'll get me on broadband.

Suspect

Notes for the reader: It's interesting solving puzzles the hard part is understanding the clues.

I was sad to hear that Hansom would not be down for a few weeks. He had a big job on for an architect friend, and the client was, to use his phrase, "Playing silly buggers with the design." Anne had made me an excellent list. Bill and her had been keen members of the village gardening club. With her friends still keeping her informed she knows exactly who used Mr Green's services. She also gave a star rating to those who knew mother, the more stars indicating the level of familiarity.

After several visits to the village shop in the hope of eye balling suspects I was poorer and non the wiser. Most of the villagers seemed to be quite euphoric and surprisingly cordial. Their comments were so predictable, inside I was fuming and it took a great deal of self control to keep calm and smile in an agreeing manner.

"Fancy you living with that evil man."

"Bet your glad he's locked away."

"I always knew it was him."

"My Derek said it was a weirdo."

"They shouldn't let those mental people loose in the community, it's not right."

You can imagine this barrage of unproductive tittle tattle has made me think about my approach. I have to agree with anyone who blames Jack, just in case they are or know the murderer. I also have a story to tell, Sal informed by Arthur has spread the word about my friends handy work.

"Well I only wanted my gate fixed, they just got carried away, men," I say shrugging my shoulders. Hoping that the grapevine would feed this back to the villain. "Sounds just like my Harry," says the chief gossip, "Asked

him for some more shelves in the kitchen, he rips the whole lot out, months later I have a set of new units.”

“You poor girl,” chips in a deputy gossip, “Must make you feel awful, seeing all that barbed wire, can't you take it down?”

“Don't be silly Madge, she would upset her friends. Must have taken them hours.”

“Oh days.”

“You see, they would be offended.”

“They would, very sensitive people,” I say, conjuring up an image of Hansom Dick. “I best be off nice talking to you.”

“You take care dear.”

Standing at the checkout I hear the conversation continuing.

“Well fancy that, some people are just so over the top.”

“Poor girl, what with loosing her mother and all.”

“I know, I wouldn't like to have to run a farm on my own.”

“Must be a lot of work for her.”

“Yes.....” the conversation fades as I walk out of the shop, taking a deep breath, and marching swiftly back to my four wheeled friend.

As we chug down the lane, I get a surprise, “Bert.”

“Sorry, tried to ring flew back this morning,” he says strolling over as I approach the gates. “Very impressive, who did this.”

“Oh, some sensitive friends of mine,” I say with a giggle.

“Sensitive?”

“I'll tell you inside.”

“Mums the word,” he says, touching his nose.

After parking and locking up, I open the front door and we go in. “Come through Bert we'll sit in the lounge for a change.”

We wander down the corridor, I go for the sofa and point at the recliner. Bert immediately exercises its full features. “Dad bought that for grandma.”

“This is very nice,” he says, with the back down and the foot rest in place, “They should have these in Economy.”

“You were squashed in then?”

He nods, “Sorry, came back in a hurry, my neighbour was looking in and spotted what she thought was a damp patch.”

“You've a leak?”

“No, no, that's what she thought, I should have warned her, it's just a dark patch of paint in the ceiling, I filled a crack covered it with a bit of

odd paint and never finished the job. Standing with my head leaning back on a ladder made me dizzy.”

“Why don't you get a decorator in?”

“For such a tiny job?”

“Sure. So are you going back?”

“Yes, it's warm during the day. Bit cold at night, some lovely scenery, not as lovely as you though.”

This makes me smile, “Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Look I'm not going back for a week and a bit, so why don't we get you setup on broadband.”

“Can I have that here?”

“We'll check and see.”

“What about the cost?”

“My treat, go and get your computer.”

“What, Bert?” I say not wishing to over indulge his altruism.

“I'll let you give me a few extra sessions how about that.”

“Ok,” I say, “Meet you in the hall, it's the only phone socket.”

In the hall I watch as he expertly goes onto his favourite Internet service providers site. Navigating around like a pro, checks, first if I can get broadband.

“They say you can,” he says, pointing to the result, “Probably only be 512k.”

“Right, whatever that means,” I say, puzzled by his statement.

“It's the slowest speed, still fast enough for most purposes.”

“Have you a credit card? Or is that a silly question.”

I shake my head.

“I'll give them a call see if I can sign it up on mine, we can change it next year at renewal.”

I nod again, as he dials and speaks a load of babble to some guru on the other end.

“Debit card?”

I shake my head, then he asks some more questions, telling them it's a birthday present. There is a delay, then he starts speaking again,

“Excellent you're a star. Thank you, you've made an old man very happy.”

He puts the phone down, fills in a bit more on the form and then announces it will be about a week and he will return with some kit in a few days so I can use it wireless in the lounge or my room, or if it has the range in most rooms.

“Wireless?”

“There is a thing like a radio that will go in your computer. Then there is a thing that connects to the telephone line. Joining them together is a transmitter, like the radio station, sends your radio the news.”

I nod, “Yes I think I understand. The phone sockets the news room, their output goes to the big transmitter on a hill and I have a radio in a little house.”

“Yep except you can send stuff back to the news room.”

“Ok.” I nod.

With the technical stuff all sorted we retire to the lounge where I explain my sensitive friends remark. This has him roaring with laughter, “Don't those silly gossips drive you barmy.”

He tells me how he feeds them all sorts of silly stuff, taking great care to be credible. We continue for some while before he checks his watch and suggests making a move.

“I can run you back down the lane.”

“No my dear, if there is some villain watching we don't want him seeing me with you.”

“You're right,” I say, thinking of all the places down the lane where someone could lay in wait. “Stay alert, with Jack taking the wrap I doubt they would try any more murders, but they might try an 'accident'.”

“Yes you have a point. Perhaps when I come next I'll chance the car.”

I nod and smile, “Good idea. Just take it very slow down this end.”

With Bert gone, I sit again pondering who it could be. I'm really stuck on finding who has the the right size feet, then a bright idea hits. I've lost touch with my best friend from school, but mothers copious address book has her parents number. It's worth a try, I call several times during the day, finally getting an answer in the evening.

“Hi I just wondered if you have a number for Gail?,” I ask speaking to her father.

“Why don't you speak to her now,” he says. “Gail,” he shouts.

I hear, “Who is it?”

He shouts, “Your best friend from school.” In truth I was her only friend from school and she mine.

“Hi Gail, how are you?” I say pleased to hear a friendly voice.

“Great, sorry to hear all your bad, news, father told me.”

“I was wondering if we could have a chat, just need a bit of help with something.”

“You need my brain power?” she giggles.

“Yes, please.”

“I'm sorry we are just off out, I could pop over and see you tomorrow.”

“Great, I'll keep an eye out for you. How will you be coming?”

“Bicycle of course, is there any other way?”

“Be carefully the lane is terrible.”

“Don't worry see you, bye.”

“Bye.”

When I put the phone down I do worry, I worry about getting my best friend involved. I have a sleepless night, tossing and turning. In the morning I'm glad to get up and after doing all the necessities I sit on watch waiting for sight of her from my lookout position up in grandma's room.

In the distance I spot a head moving along between the hedge rows and make my way down to the main gates. By the time I'm standing with one open, I see a gangly woman, on a sturdy mountain bike, racing along at a cracking pace. She hits the brakes and comes to a halt inches from me, dust flying up behind, as the wheels slide on the gravel. Her wire rimmed spectacles, giving a fitting intellectual appearance, quite out of sync with her sporty lycra.

“Look at us, me cycling and you doing all that farm work, bet we are the only ones keeping fit.”

“Don't be unkind, I'm sure all the sporty ones are racing to the biscuit tin, and lifting those plastic cards.” I've started her off in fits of giggles.

“Come on I'll lock the gates and you can put that mean machine in the barn.”

“What's with Fort Knox?”

“Oh the Americans were running out of space.”

“You're surrounded by hills, just the place for insurgents. Don't tell me this is a secret military base right?”

I nod, and gesture her in. Once her bike is parked, we park ourselves in the lounge.

“So what's this all about?” asks Gail.

“Look I can trust you can't I?” I say feeling the need for reassurance.

“That's a silly question, of course you can.”

“You won't tell anyone what I'm going to say?”

"Mums the word," she pauses, frowning, "Sorry."

"It's ok," I say continuing, "I don't think Jack did it."

"Neither do I or my dad, he used to help Jacks mum. Says the lad is even more hopeless than me when it comes to doing anything practical. Not that it would do any good to say that."

"They'd do you for conspiracy."

"Oh god don't remind me. Do you remember when you stuck up for me after those bullies stitched me up."

"If my dad hadn't have intervened."

"I know, he was brilliant, bet you miss him." Her comment makes me feel very melancholy.

"Bet you miss your mum," I say remembering her loss.

"I do, very much."

"So why are you back home?"

"Came back after dad's accident."

"Accident?"

"He worked at the same factory as your Jason."

"Did he?"

"Yes, well this machine was not properly secured, fell on him."

"Ouch."

"Not nice, he limps a lot and his left arms not very good, does a bit of caddying over the golf club. The factory boss set him up with the position."

"They change their shoes for golfing don't they?"

"Yes, there's a cloak room, amazing all the kit they have to chase a little ball across a lawn."

"How do you know?"

"I help dad now and again, why?"

"We found a foot print."

"We?"

"This friend of mine, one of the ones who put up the gates."

"Oh, ok."

"Well we made, or rather he made a cast of a foot print. It was after someone was creeping around."

"Scary."

"Yes, well we know it is a particular size ten green wellie, hold on," I say going from the lounge, collecting them from the small room next to the office. I open the carrier, for her to peak in.

"Can I see?"

"I'll show you later in the corridor, just in case someone is watching."

"Watching?"

"Some one has killed five people, if you don't want to get involved I'd understand."

"Ok, she says staring at the wall, So you were wondering if we could find who wears a size ten at the golf club."

"Or nine, they might have worn a two pairs of socks."

"Easy."

"Really," I say, hoping to be convinced.

"Yep, most of them are so lazy they have dad running around like a mad waiter, often send him to get their shoes from the lockers."

"Really." My face is full of glee, there are only a few people I reckon it could be.

"You've narrowed down the suspects, brilliant. Who and how?" Gail, who at school was know and Geeky Gail, one of the more appropriate and less derogatory nick names, she loved brain puzzles. Now she seemed to have her teeth into this one.

"Well I think they probably have all been to the farm, so have to have known mother or father."

"Cool, and?"

"They had Mr Green as their gardener."

"Figures, he was murdered, go on."

"I think from their tactics they want me to sell."

"So it's all legal, squeaky clean."

"Exactly, so they must have enough money."

"Rich bastards."

"But I don't know their shoe size. By cross referencing the list narrows it down to, a gentleman farmer who used to visit, mainly to buy sheep. There is a politician who father chauffeured and would come over for a chat and a rich business man who moved in about a decade ago and also had father to drive him mostly to the airport."

"Wow, can I see."

I hand Gail the list, she looks studiously. Not sure about your farmer but the other two definitely play. She stares at the wall again, thinking.

"Surely they would get someone else to do their dirty work."

"I don't think so."

"Why?"

"I get the feeling they would not want it to leak out."

"They could be blackmailed."

“Yes, possibly.”

“I'm helping dad this weekend.”

“You will be careful.”

“Of course, if I get to carry shoes I'll note who and the size, simple.”

“But if they see you looking, or taking notes.”

“This is Gail you are talking to.”

“Memory like an elephant.”

“Body like a stick insect, I know," she smiles.

“Yes but whoever it is, they are ruthless, I don't want you having an 'Accident'," I say making the quotes gesture with my fingers. I'm worried they might see you come here and make the connection.

“You're getting as bad as your mum, she was a worrier. You visit us then, come over for lunch on Monday, should have the info by then.”

“What about your dad?”

“What about him?” she says looking bemused.

“He might hear our conversation.”

“So?”

“Well, I know he could be trusted but if he knows.”

“You think his attitude to the suspects would change and they being nasty characters might pick up on this putting him in danger.”

“Did you get your degree in mind reading?”

“Psychology, hey nearly the same," she smiles, “You have a point.” Her mind whirs for a moment, “He hates my music, we can go upstairs to listen, and I'll annotate your list.”

“Great.” So it is, I am pleased to make a bit of progress. It is also nice to spend some time catching up with Gail. Time that flies all too quickly and she has to get off to do her afternoon shift.

The next day is just as busy, I hope my intruder only works at night. It seems just as well that Bert has come in his car, as he relays his usual camera equipment and lots of colourful boxes, bags of wires and his portable computer into the hall. He puts a funny looking box in the hall, with two pointy aerials, powers it up and proceeds to wander around the house. “Excellent," he says, “Just need to put this box down the end of the corridor.” He explains that we can either run a cable to it or put a third box in. With plenty of places to hide the cable we go for that option. I get some steps and a hammer, and we work as a team.

“Well apart from connecting it to the phone line, it's all ready to go, now I'll show you how to connect it so if I have to go back before it's ready

you will be able to start surfing," says Bert, looking up at a rather blank faced woman. He very patiently shows me all the connections, and how to surf, which we do on the slow modem connection. This man is a very good teacher, and I feel that I'm getting a good grip on the technology.

Bert suggests a break from all the technical stuff, "Perhaps a secretarial themed shoot?"

"Sounds fun," I say, and so we proceed. While I sit waiting for him to set up his tripod in the small office, my eyes drift down. I'm relieved to find that Bert has small feet.

Cold Data

Notes for the reader: You don't have to go far to make discoveries. Why do snails gather together in the same place every winter?

Upon Hansom Dicks next visit he suggests a stroll around, check for any more clues. He says it will give us an appetite for lunch, if you could see him, I don't think it's quite what he needs. As we wander along the track at the top of the ridge he stops and stares.

"What the fucks down their," says Hansom Dick looking into the massive hole the other side of the trees.

"An old quarry,"

"Can you still get down there?"

"No, youths kept getting in and they had several accidents so the road in was blocked and filled, the ramp down destroyed. They fenced it off for good measure and there is that jungle of scrub over what used to be the gully in. I say pointing to the far corner. You'd have to abseil down, from one of the surrounding fields, if you can get through the gorse." These bushes edge the site like lace around a doily.

"What's that then?" he says pointing to a precarious trail down one side.

"My father and grandfather went down it, it's now the only way in on foot."

"What if some bastard has stashed something down there?"

"Where?" I say pointing to the open barren rocky landscape.

"In that fucking lake." He turns and stares at me, "Any fuckers know about that track?"

"I doubt you'd see it from most angles." There is a delay as I stare back into his eyes, "Dick you are a genius."

"I am?"

"Suppose one of my family brought someone up here, suppose that person had long ago hidden something, which now they wanted to get their hands on."

"The little shit would know they could get down from you farm."

"But if it was to get some ill gotten gains."

"The buggers would want to keep it secret." He scratches his chins,

"What the fuck are we sodin standin ear for? Lets go dan and take a look, a."

After much protestation about the danger, more concerned for my big friend than myself I finally concede, and we start off down the narrow track that hugs the rocky cliff face. With both hands I grab any hold I can find. My foot slips on a piece of scree sending it over the edge spinning as it falls down the almost sheer drop, we stop and watch it tumble, bounce and finally smash on a big boulder. This is the worst section, very narrow and quite a steep incline, I look back and Dick seems rather petrified. "Are you ok?" I say.

Just catchin me," his deep breathing interrupts his speech, "Fucking breath." We edge our way slowly down, Dick at times trailing some distance behind me, his big belly pressed hard against the rock, strong hands clinging like a leach to the jagged outcrops above. Standing at the bottom I wait for him, as he eases his way down the last few metres.

"Don't shout Dick it will echo around," I whisper.

"Can't fucking shout love," he whispers, "Shit, there must be an easier way out of here."

I shake my head, the expression on his face is one of dread. "You mean I got ta go back up that fucker."

I nod.

"Fucking holey shit, fuck," he says dropping his head, bending with his hands on his knees.

"Are you ok Dick?"

"Yea, yea," he says, "Ain't usually scared of heights, but then scaffoldings a bit different than that fucker." He blows hard several times, his lips pursed. "That makes you respect the bloody safety rules, fuck." He continues to take more deep breaths, almost whistling as he exhales. Gesturing towards the lake we walk over to the water filled hole. Its shape is almost a regular rectangle and over to one side is the top end of a track that was once the access road into the giant chasm. The water is surprisingly clear, and we can see the decent of the slope below its

surface. Nearer the deeper water the light and shadows play tricks with our eyes, hard as we try staring below we mostly see our own reflections.

“How deep is this fucker?”

“I have no idea, I've only ever seen it like this.”

“Shit, where do you think the bastard would have dumped the stash?”

“Hard to say,” I reply looking around the edge, two sides of the rectangle are hard up against the sheer rock faces, “Guess it must be nearer one of these two sides,” I say, pointing to those accessible.

“Always knew I should have fucking learnt to swim.”

“Why didn't you?”

“Fucking shits teased me somethin rotten,” he says looking sad, “Mother ended up givin me a note.”

“I know what that's like,” I say, “I wish I had a bathing costume.”

“You can swim?”

“Yes.”

“If you think I'm fucking runin back to the ouse.” He looks at me with a cheeky grin, “Sod it who knows, could be old cars, all sorts of dangerous fucking crap down there, best not go poking around, a.”

He looks at me, I'm unzipping my old work coat, throwing it on top of a boulder. I undo the belt on my trousers, and let them fall to the ground.

“You ain't fucking going in, it'll be fucking freezing.” I nod and undo my blouse, putting it over the coat. I slide my knickers off, and sit on a small rock, pulling each sock off. I glance at my friend, Hansom Dicks eyes are more frantic than a bar code scanner at a checkout. When I finish removing my bra, his eyes are more than out on stalks, “Fuck,” is the only word he can utter. I walk over to the slope, my breasts wobbling as I tread gingerly over the rough surface. My body shivering in the cold air. As my toe makes contact with the water, I realise that Dick is right to use expletives when describing the temperature. I gradually wade deeper into the water, in a few metres it's up to my waist, a bit further and my breasts are receiving liquid support.

I start swimming, slowly and carefully keeping my eyes peeled. With a gentle breast stroke I circumnavigate around the rim like some insect around the edge of a water filled lunch box. As I reach the far corner below the sheer cliffs above, the water seems much colder and is certainly very deep. I roll over on my back, my breasts flopping around, my eyes stare up at the sky, and the magnificent vertical strata of grey

rocks. Remembering my mission I roll back onto my front and continue further round. As I swim my breasts splay out to either side of my chest, they slow me like the air brakes that deploy beneath an aircraft wing when it lands. For all my staring down below, I've only seen one old car, the rest of the time, just rock and shadows. I'm approaching the last corner, before the shorter side and the exit ramp. I turn and continue, looking forward to getting out, as I approach a few metres from the rock slope now visible below the water I veer out slightly from the bank to swim over it. As I do, I turn my head back to the corner made by the descending track perpendicular to the short side, a shaft of sunlight breaks through the cloud above and something glints below the surface. I change direction swimming slowly and duck my head below the surface. Holding my breath, my head moves around, cheeks bulging as I search. As my lungs are about to explode and I tilt my head up, I catch sight of a metal cylinder stuck a few metres below the surface hidden in a crevice in the rock face. I come to the surface for air, treading water I take deep gulps and descend once again. I'm very buoyant, so it is taking a lot of effort to stay below, approaching the object I can see more clearly, it is very large, but well hidden in this hole. There are a few rocks in front of it as though, placed to disguise its presence, the cap at one end is about a third of a metre in diameter, and the cylinder looks to be at least half a metre long. I put my hands out to touch it, grasping the top, I pull, but it is wedged in there solid. I break for the surface again, gulping deep breaths. Unable to do more I swim away from the edge over to the sloping track, gently lowering my feet, where they find the rough, rock strewn bottom. With a firm footing, I lift my body from the water. Icy rivers of liquid run down me, the cold air hitting my skin, I shiver, covered in goose bumps. As I walk onto the dry land, Dick is holding out his arms with his fleece, which he puts around me. "Thanks, it's bloody cold," I say shivering. I don't usually swear, but with Dick it does not matter, although I hope I don't get quite like him. Frantically I put my cloths on, not worrying that I'm still damp. "Well?" he says, "Any fucking joy." "Yes, yes," I say, nodding pleased with my find. "Where you went under right," he says with exuberant enthusiasm. "Yes there is a metal cylinder about two metres below the surface, wedged into a crevice. I could not move it, it's about half a metre long." "So it would take some getin out right?" "Yes"

Dick stands scratching his stubble, "Take some time right?"

"Yes"

"So the fuckers would need to have some kit and some time and that way dan."

"Yes" The cold is now getting to me, and I suggest we head back, this evokes a gloomy response from Hansom. "You sure there is no other way?"

"Why do you think they want our farm?"

"Fuck, never argue with a woman," he smiles, "Come on then."

Going up is not quite so scary, possibly because of the way you look and also I guess if we fall forward going up it is less likely to result in disaster.

When we reach the top I can see relief in Dick's face as he catches his breath, standing well away from the edge. Slowly we head back down the track to the house, Hansom is expressing a desire to eat. In the kitchen he devours all I put before him, in full trough mode. It's not until we go into the lounge that he becomes his vocal self.

"So how long has that fucking entrance been blocked off?" he says, finishing with a burp.

"It was blocked when I was little, I thought back all those years, I'm sure mother and I stood and watched the machines from the ridge."

"So fifteen, twenty years?"

"About that."

"What if some Mr big bastard did a heist, stashed the haul in that cylinder. His gofas who did the blag are out and putting the squeeze on him for the dosh."

"Why don't they come and try to get it?"

"The old bill might be watching them, besides they probably don't know where it's hid."

"Mr big will want to stay respectable."

"Exactly he won't want plod and a load of fucking villains clogging up his drive."

"News papers." Comes an inspiration.

"What?"

"If I go to the local library, to 'Research' my family," I say, making the quote signs with my fingers.

"Right, take a sly shuffy through the local rags."

I nod with a smile.

"Mind you, might not be a fucking local job," he says, scratching his bum.

"This could be big."

"Right."

"Should we tell the police?"

"You gotta be joking, they'd take the fucking glory for recovering whatever the fucks in that can," he replies, resolute in his answer.

"You don't think they'd link it to the murders?" I say rhetorically.

His response to this is an adamant one. "Fuck no, why would they, they ave a poor bastard banged up for that shit."

"Hey, you said you needed another picture. Come with me." With this comment his eyes light up, and he gets a massive grin. We wander though into the office where my computer is still set up from Bert's photo session. I sit at the desk and after a long wait for the machine to start up, my next utterance is, "I'll print you one out." This has him transfixed, pointing to the thumbnails on the screen. "This one ok?"

"Love that shot with one tit on the office desk and the other hanging dan. Think that should bloody help me nerves recover."

As the printer chunters slowly, he continues. "He's a good bloody friend too, this old bloke, if he gave you that fucking lot."

"Yes, next time he comes back from Spain, maybe you can meet him."

"Spain, fuck."

"What's the matter?" I say curious at this remark.

"Used to get a lot of dodgy fuckers goin to Spain."

"He's got small feet."

"That makes him a decent bugger," he grins, "You should tell the police that. Save them a fucking lot of time."

"What eliminating people by their shoe size."

"Yep, any fucker with small feet is innocent."

"Can you imagine, they'd all be going private to have foot reductions."

Hansom Dick's stubbly chins wobble as he rocks with laughter. "And the fucking police would have to recruit on height of arch, not height of head! No flat foots, no big foots."

"There," I say, interrupting his merriment, handing him the print.

His whole being is now focused on the piece of paper. The only thing that interrupts his gaze is a rather loud fart, to which he utters a very subdued. "Ops, sorry." His, head remaining frozen, his rough hairy hands locked like vices around the edges of the media.

"Fuck, fuck, you are so fucking tasty. Shit this, wow, this is fucking nice."

He says with a slight nodding of the head, having difficulty accessing his vocabulary.

While Dick is ogling the image, I check my emails. "Oh no!"

"What's up darlin?"

"Look," I say, pointing to the message on the screen.

"Fuck, the pervert only wants to harness you to a fucking carriage, like a bloody horse." He goes quiet, as he reads on. His head turns from the screen, "This mothers a fucking weirdo, the fucking detail he fucking goes into it's fucking unreal. Like you ain't got enough to worry about without this shit."

I shrug my shoulders, "There's always one, besides he's probably harmless."

"Tell him to fuck off."

"He has my email."

"Cut im the fuck off."

"I don't know how."

"Have to wait for the old fucker to come back?"

"Yes, and I have just heard he's going to stay out there until the spring, better for his bones or something."

We continue to chat for a while longer, but as the day runs out, Hansom must run to, he has work the following day and an early start. For all his uncouthness, I was sad to see Hansom leave, little did I know Monday had worse in store. Arthur came along and rang the bell. When I greeted him, I could see he looked rather uncomfortable.

"Look love, I won't beat about the bush. Sorry to have to do this, but our lads are at university and we are struggling."

"What is it Arthur?"

"Well, we had this offer of renting two big fields, almost the same acreage as your four small uns. Thing is they are right next to some of ours, won't have to cross that bloody main road."

"Right, so you don't want to rent mine?"

He shakes his head, "It would be too much love, besides the squire has offered us a five year deal, price is half what you're charging."

"I see."

"Sorry love, I was a bit reluctant to do it," he sighs, "but as Sal says we're not a charity."

"I understand."

“Sorry, I feel bad about this.”

“It's ok Arthur,” I say, trying to put on a brave face, “You've got your family to think of.”

“Oh don't say it like that.” The big bull of a man is now going all mushy,

“What with you not havin yer family. Makes me feel awful.”

“Arthur, sorry, honestly don't worry I'll be fine, really.”

“You sure, I could ave another think about this.”

“Please Arthur, don't worry.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, yes, thank you.”

“Best be off then,” he says, making a hasty retreat to his Land Rover.

Under normal circumstances this new development would just be put down to the business environment. I expect whoever is up to no good is now trying a more subtle tack, possibly hoping I will put the gate down to natural forces. My visit to Gail now takes on a new urgency and I count every minute till I leave for town.

I park down the road a bit and slip down the close where my best friend lives. It's a small house in a road with a jumble of different houses. Many have been added where people have filled in the gaps, or one big house was replaced with several small ones. When I arrive at their door, I'm whisked inside and with my coat off, ushered into their tiny lounge. Her father limps over to greet me.

“I was sorry to hear about your mother,” he says with great sympathy.

We sit down and chat for a long while. Gail busies herself in the kitchen making lunch, she works shifts at the local hospital and so has a very variable schedule. Today she is on lates, hence why we are able to fit a weekday visit in. She and I both thought avoiding me going home in the dark was advisable. Also she reasoned coming during the day when most people were at work also cuts down the likelihood of being connected.

With the meal finished, and the dishes washed Gail and I are both eager to chatter and retire to her room. With some amazing music booming in the background I press her for the results.

“The business man, he's a size nine, very lazy had me and dad running around getting everything for him,” she pauses, and sees me sitting on the edge of my seat, “The politician, he is a size ten, he played a round

with the business fellow, dad carried his shoes to him when they started.”

“So what, you asked your father?” my voice conveys anxiety.

“No silly, before we left the lockers, father put them down on the bench,” she continues, rather excited, “The other fellow your gentleman farmer he does not play.”

“How do you know? “

“I asked father what the Squires handicap was,” says Gail, “Apparently he hates golf, thinks it's a waste of good grass.” I laugh at this statement, and that makes me think of another farmer.

“That reminds me,” I say, “Arthur the farmer who rents some of our fields came around earlier in the day.”

“Oh?”

“He is no longer going to rent them,” I say looking grim.

“Why?” Asks Gail leaning forward, with concern.

“The squire has offered him a better deal,” I shrug.

“That's not good for your income is it?” She says her brain whirring.

“Makes for an easier purchase as well,” I add.

“Keeps him out of the picture,” she says, “And out of the way.”

“Right, he lives the other side of the main road, down in the dip.”

“So any nefarious characters would come and go unobserved.”

“Yes Gail, now why would the squire do that?”

“Maybe just a coincidence, you did say of the three most likely he is the least probable.”

“He is the only one we don't know the foot size of, just does not seem the type to organise some big heist,” I say going over my reasoning.

“If that's what it was?” There is a short delay, I can tell Gail is about to continue. “So what are you going to do for money?”

“Ah.”

“Ah?”

“Well you probably won't approve.”

“Won't I? Why?”

“Well a friend of mine, came up with an idea, and well,” I blush.

“Well, what is it, you seem embarrassed, go on tell me.”

I am embarrassed, and rather than go into some long diatribe, get Gail to start up her PC. We wait quietly for the machine to boot up, she is lively with excitement, once connected up, she hands the mouse and keyboard to me. I browse to the site, and point.

“Oh, my god,” she reacts with a shriek.

“Your shocked aren't you? You think I'm terrible.”

“I'm surprised, but hey why not, you've got it flaunt it. I wouldn't be any good, might get a few insects excited but I do that already,” she giggles, “So what are you going to do now, apart from measuring the squires feet?”

“We only know him here.”

“Sorry?” says Gail, puzzled by my statement.

“I mean a lot of gentlemen farmers have other interests.”

“In the city?” Gail eyes light up. “Yes, yes, he may well know some unsavoury types.”

“We see a respectable older man, but fifteen or twenty years ago.”

“Yes, I see, but how do you work that time-scale out?” queries Gail.

I substantiate my supposition, “It was when they closed off the quarry. I keep meaning to go and check the newspaper archives to see what happened around that time.”

“Are you sure you need my grey matter, yours is doing pretty well.” From Gail this was a compliment. The time is getting on, she sees me looking at the clock.

“You want to get back before the first wave of traffic.”

“You are a mind reader.” This sets off her giggles.

“Your dad used to call them incubator wagons,” she burbles.

“He had some classics,” I smile, thinking about dad's expression for the mothers driving their space wagons. We finish up and I slope off back to the old vehicle which sticks out like a sore thumb. The town is full of four by fours, but they are all big bright and shiny. The old Land Rover has myriad scratches and dents, not to mention various dull patches where the paint has been worn by excessive use.

Read All About It

Notes for the reader: Words are amazing treasures, time machines for the thoughts of others.

The following day I'm off early to the big town, our local library is small and after a phone call they suggest that the county library is a better bet. In some ways I'm glad because there is less likelihood of bumping into anyone who knows me. My only dread is the journey, remembering the last time on the dual carriageway and the jungle of roads in town.

I feel like one of those jets being held in a holding pattern, circling the

runway waiting for a slot to land. Eventually we, me and the vehicle, find the secret entrance into the multi story car park, which is visible from everywhere, yet seemed totally inaccessible. The entrance was hidden round a maze of side streets, and some of those now you see me now you don't sign systems. You know, they say down here, then run out at the next junction leaving you puzzled and guessing because this is the only location where your target is obscured by a block of flats.

I'm also glad of the cold weather, otherwise I feel quite conspicuous, either wearing my big coat, or displaying my charms. Wandering down the main high street for what seems like miles I eventually find the library with a car park almost opposite. My time is constrained by the exorbitant parking costs, so I decide to ask making up a silly story that I'm helping a friend with a history project. I hand a very helpful lady some scribbly notes which she has no trouble deciphering, and shows me how to operate the system containing the archives. She also kindly selects the most appropriate ones for me, thus narrowing my search.

I scan as fast as I can through the mountains of text, having to look away now and again when my eyes become fatigued with staring, and my brain numb with information overload. The pressure of the clock adds to my strain, but I must keep going. The more I look the more incidents I find, after reading them I find most are merely distractions. Based on the time-scale and Hansom Dicks suggestion that shooters may be involved, so far I only have one possible, looking up at the clock I'm close to giving up when my eye catches another. Making some very hurried notes, I tidy up, thank the lady and rush back to the Land Rover.

Worry sets in because, as I approach the car park entrance I realise I'm ten minutes after the ticket expires. My pace quickens, my bra is strained as I trot up the stairs to the floor on which the vehicle is waiting. The building does allegedly have a lift, but I had not found it. I am in luck, no ticket, I open up throw my bag on the passenger seat, and climb in. We set off for home, just getting back before the evening rush hour.

After having some dinner I retire to the lounge, to digest both my food and my information. The sofa is very conducive to thinking, especially when there is a nice log fire crackling away in the grate.

I had found the date they closed off the quarry, this first piece of data had enabled me to reduce the possibilities. Of the two items that warranted attention one seemed unlikely as it was the most ancient. Eighteen years ago, a big bank had been emptied, the target seemed to be the deposit boxes in which there were large quantities of peoples valuables, unlike money which undergoes changes, this would hold its own. Thankfully no one was hurt, but it did take the police several years to crack the case. It was by all accounts meticulously planned and apart from one mistake had left no clues to go on.

The other just over fifteen years ago, only months before they blocked the quarry entrance, was a hold up of a security van transferring bullion. The report seemed quite terrifying, the villains were well armed, the driver was killed and the guard badly injured. The accompanying police vehicles were rammed off the road, seriously injuring their occupants. Initially this was hailed as a perfect crime that had the police baffled. One of the officers, before receiving a thwack to the head, had recognised a voice. The blow to his head had given him amnesia, hence the initial dead end. In neither case did they get the mastermind.

I am now shaking with fear, just thinking about the second, ruthless gang, even Hansom Dick's security features would not stop people like that. Of course they would be a lot older now, and maybe even more determined. Then I pinch myself, I could be barking up the wrong tree, it could just be a series of coincidences and a psychotic nutter. All I have is a footprint, canister and hypothesis to go on. It would be helpful to know what is in that canister, but that would mean disturbing possible evidence and there's no way I'd get Dick back down that trail. If it was bullion then it would be very heavy, the reason I could not budge it? If water got in then it would cause no damage to such a haul. They would need a bit of time to get it out, and undisturbed access. I can face the thoughts no longer tonight, I shall have trouble sleeping as it is.

First thing this morning I was feeling at my wits end and if someone had come along then I would have sold. The thought of my mother and all the family stirred my spirits, I determined I will not be driven off.

Immersing myself in work helps, in the lane I'm cutting a overhanging branches off a tree. The sawing horse is coming in handy to cut the wood into more manageable pieces. There is the sound of an engine,

not one I know. It gets louder and as the vehicle comes around a corner, the occupant becomes apparent. The squire approaches, I'm carrying an arm full of logs. He stops his car, a rather posh four by four and comes over to greet me. As he draws near I stumble and drop a log, it rolls over to his feet, he bends down to pick it up, and my eyes look down, but not at the log.

"Hello my dear, long time no see, how are you?" He says, giving me the log.

"So so, I say do you mind following, I need to get these cleared from the lane."

"Of course dear."

As we approach the entrance to the yard, he sounds surprised.

"What's all that about," he says, pointing to the gates and wire, "Looks like a fort."

"In that bad weather, the wind blew a gate off, I think the wood was rotten. Friend of mine got a bit carried away. You know what these townie people are like."

"Oh, he's a townie." The squire has a very know what you mean expression.

"It's really over the top, all I wanted was my gate fixed," I say now inside the yard dumping the wood in a pile.

"Of course you did my dear, what a silly bugger."

"I know, I feel so stupid when people come."

"I expect you do dear, totally ott, silly sod."

"You look tired my dear."

"Running a farm on your own is not easy," I reply, sighing.

"Finding it hard are you?" He says sympathetically.

"Just a bit," I say with a frown.

"I was speaking to Arthur and he seemed a bit upset. When I asked him why, he mentioned the fields you see. Course I knew your mother, your a nice family, and well I thought perhaps I'd see if there's something I can do for you. Farm this size, a lot for one woman, don't suppose you want to sell. It's been in the family quite a while, but well if you do, you let me know. See you get a good price, keep it in a farming family, it's the least I could do. You've got my number, give us a call."

"Thank you."

"You still running around in that old thing?" He says, pointing to the Land Rover.

"Yes," I smile.

“My dear if you did sell this place you could buy yourself a nice new car and some pretty dresses.”

“That would be nice,” I say trying to give him a beaming smile, and seem dreamy.

“Well best be off, got a pheasant shot to run, have to do me bit.”

“Best of luck,” I smile, “Thank you for coming, and thanks for thinking of me.”

“Not at all dear, my pleasure.” He wanders back to his vehicle drives up, turns around and is soon disappearing down the lane.

I'm now even more scared and call Hansom.

“Thanks for the new members.”

“How'd the fuck you know?”

“Well my membership went up after giving you that picture.”

“Yea well told the lads.”

I explain to Dick my concerns over the newspaper articles, and the squires recent offer.

“Darlin, you don't want to mess with fuckers like that,” he pauses for thought, “You don't want to fucking sell right?”

“No.”

“So, your mate, the one what's fucked off to Spain, if you stayed with im, put it about that you were avin a few monfs away.”

“They could come get their ill gotten gains.”

“And you keep your bloody farm and stay amongst the living.”

“So they get away with it, Jack suffers and five people are dead.”

“I ain't got a soddin private army, n they is fucking nasty shits. You either do what I said or take the fucking evidence to the police.”

“Can't you come down for a few days?” I plead.

“Sorry love I'm up to me eyeballs, I was gona give you a fucking call. See this business bloke, he's got this gaff up north. Wants us to go an sort it out, pays loads a money, we do a load of is fucking work around town see. Very lucrative, didn't like to say no, means I won't be around for a month or so.”

“A month?” I say in panic, “Who is he?”

“Business man, you wouldn't know him,” There is a shout in the background, “Hold on a fucking minute, sorry love got to go, Scruffy, up the scaffolding, needs some fucking help. Call you later.”

I am wandering around town, Gail had told me about this new shop that sold things cheap. Although I'm not sure her directions were that good, either that or my navigation, as I have ended up down a little side road. There is a chap doing his garden.

"Excuse me," I say proceeding to ask him directions.

"No, you want to go down the other way." He stares at me, and then realising who's daughter I am, gets quite chatty. "My oldest son was telling me about you."

"Your son?"

"I'm Ned."

"Oh PC Jones," I say as the penny drops.

"Yea that's right," he looks at his house, "Bet you'll be glad to see the back of that place, wouldn't you love? All those bad memories. I know I would."

"Hmm," I say, assuming he's referring to the farm.

"Place like this would suit you, wouldn't it love?"

"Yes it would, it would be very nice actually," I say with enthusiastic nodding and a smile.

We talk for a while and the conversation drifts onto his lovingly tended garden. As he moves around pointing to the various plants and beds, explaining the plan for next year, I notice something. With his back to me I glance down at the damp soil, then at his footwear. "Sorry Ned, I best be off," I say making my excuses, and heading to the shop.

Just as I'm leaving the shop I get another surprise. A bicycle nearly runs me over, it's Gail.

"Don't call me on the ordinary phone call me on this," she says thrusting and old mobile into my hands, "It's pay as you go, you have to top it up, the shop in town. Must go, late for work." With that she speeds off narrowly missing a car, and tearing down the road like a maniac.

In the evening I have various puzzles, one is deciphering the operating manual that Gail gave me for the phone. The other is a foot problem, the Squires feet are much too small, and Ned's are the right size, he also has the right Wellington boots.

I'm startled by a strange noise, it sounds like music, as I run from the lounge it gets quieter. I turn and look back at the mess on the sofa, the mobile's screen is lit up. Rushing to it, I press the green button, it's Gail,

and she lets rip before I get chance to speak.

“Look while I was studying psychology my room mate at uni was studying criminology. I called her, she says that most of the villains on the second heist got away.”

After Gail's outburst, it makes me think, studious people write thesis's on their subject. Mother would have written lists with all the details, so I evacuate the lounge and go to the office, writing down all the information I have so far, putting the paper into a blank envelope and hiding it amongst a load of other envelopes.

Nearly a month goes by, each day I live on my nerves, a letter from Gail is no help. I had tried to call her over the last few weeks, frightened something may have happened. This letter confirmed it had. She apologises for not being in touch, they had had a surprise. A distant relative on her mother's side had left them a recently renovated and refurbished house up north, they had sold their house for a lot of money so her father could retire early on the proceeds.

This is shortly followed by another visit by the Squire. I'm mending a fence when he arrives, almost unnoticed, I'm over the far side of a field hidden behind the tractor.

“Hello dear, sorry to bother you. How are you?”

“Ok, thanks.”

“Look, this is a bit awkward, I know I said I would help you, give you a good price for the farm. He looks a bit upset, Well had this other business offer come up, good investment you see. Shame to miss it, but my word is my word. So if you say you want to sell I shall honour my promise.”

The Trap

Notes for the reader: Have you ever watched insects, really watched them close, observed their world.

I'm sitting in the office, the sound of the computer fan whirring in the background, when the door swings open.

“Dick wow you came, this is a wonderful surprise,” I'm beaming, “How did you get in?”

“Spare keys darlin.”

“Oh yes,” I say as another familiar face appears, “wow you brought Sid,” then I see Scuffy, “you brought the lads,” I smile with joy looking at Dick. We are all smiling, I greet them and give Dick a hug. “Thank you.”

“Ned?” I say puzzled, looking first at him then at Dick, then my eye catches the Squire bowling in. “Have you all come to help me?”

“No, love we’ve come to help our fucking selves.”

“What?” I’m now perplexed by the whole situation.

“Scruffy tie her up.”

“Lets have a bit of fun with her first Hansom,” says Sid leering at me.

“Look lads, this ain’t fucking going to plan at all. If you want to make some more cock-ups, don’t do what I say. The only reason you lot got fingered in the first place was because he,” Dick points at one of them, “Scruffy opened his bloody trap. Right. So you do what I say, OK.”

“How did you know about my visit to granny?” I say becoming nervous.

“The squire knows about your family, talked to your bloody parents a lot in the soddin past. Knows where your old gran was, we had somebody watching.”

“Those kids?”

“Yea that’s right, good lads. Lucky when you came we had a job down the road to the station,” he says, sniffing and wiping his nose on the back of his hand.

“Why didn’t you go to the police asks the Squire?”

“She had fuck all on us, foot print and the canister, nothing linking us, a bitch?” says Dick in a very scary voice.

I nod in agreement.

“Gag her and lets get the fuck down that hole,” he says very in command.

“Jason, why Jason? “

“That little fuck. Is old man confessed to him on his death bed, what he’d done. The shit only thought he was due his fathers share. We’ll he weren’t see. Thought he’d give you something better, cos you was living in that fucking shit hole of a flat. Wanted to help you with the money, well fuck him. I ain’t got time to stand here talking.”

The gang leave following Dick, Ugly Dick, I could think of some words for him. The hours tick by tediously slowly, I try to undo the ropes which bind me but to no avail. It’s well past lunchtime when they arrive back. With their stash retrieved, they sit tired, then startled by the gate bell.

“Fuck, be quiet and move the fuck out of this bloody kitchen, and bring the shit and bitch with you.”

"Where to?" whimpers Scruffy.

"Shut the fuck up and follow me," growls Dick.

Scruffy has me in a vice like grip, and we all bundle into the library which is the most secluded room in the whole house, having only windows on the courtyard side of the house. The bell goes again, I hear a faint sound of a booming voice, it's Arthur.

Dick whispers, "Are all the fucking lights out?" it was late in the afternoon and the sky was dark with black clouds.

"I could check," says Sid, "And turn them off boss."

"Fucking stupid, then that bastard would know someone's home," he says, clipping Sid over the head with his hand.

"It's Arthur, local farmer," pipes the Squire, "Tomorrow I'll tell him I heard a rumour from one of the village gossips."

"The bitch is in Spain."

"Yes, that's it old chap."

"See lads, the Squire is a fucking smart bloke, you could learn from him," he gestures to Sid, "Give me that fucking bag, we may as well prepare her."

"Core a bit of fun," says Scruffy eagerly.

"Fuck you, we ain't got time, with that nosey shit outside we'd best get our haul moved to some place else." He pauses pulling stuff from the bag. "Don't worry lads we got fucking money, we can ave any fucking woman we want."

"I thought you were going to make it look like an accident Dick?" says the squire eyeing up the plethora of strange articles.

"She as been getin weird emails from a fucking perv."

"Oh, I get it, damn clever. Bit of bondage, take a few pictures."

"She," Dick laughs, "emails him to come over."

"If they find her, they are just looking for some sick pervert. Tidies up the whole mess," says the Squire, he continues, "We want decent people in these parts not his sort or disgusting bitches like her."

"Takes the pervert a while to get here, he won't find anything, if he does she's dead," says Dick, working through their sordid plan.

Dick grabs my head, "Don't want you singing, a pretty bird." He forces straps over my head and binds them tight at the back of my skull. In front, a bit is pushed into my mouth, Scruffy assists holding my nose so I have to open wide. Two metal rings hold either side to the bridal. "Strip her," says Dick. "May I have the pleasure," says a more refined voice.

"Certainly Squire," says Dick as the Squire, rips off my blouse and skirt, and with no delicacy pulls off my knickers and suspenders. As he pulls my bra off, "Well gentlemen look at these." Dropping the bra on the floor, he fondles them. "Lovely my dear, most lovely," he says as they all revel in their act.

"Come on," says Dick chivvying them along.

Scruffy holds my hands while Sid forces them into fists and puts a bag over each, strapping the top around my wrists so tight I can hardly feel them. Between them they push my arms up behind my back and strap them tight together in some kind of harness. Dick grabs a big heavy wide belt, straps it tight around my waist, metal rings hang from either side.

"Ned, check that dickhead farmer ain't around."

"Sure," he says, coming back a while later, "Stupid shit stood around for a bit, then hopped on his tractor and is motoring back down the lane."

"Get her into the courtyard, stupid bitch thought she was doing me a favour with two fucking pictures." They pull me to my feet and pushed me roughly, down the corridor into the hall. "Scruffy catch," says Dick, two boots go flying through the air.

"Sid," says Scruffy. Sid lifts one of my feet behind me as though shoeing a horse, and puts a boot on. Repeating the process for the other foot.

Dick turns to his old police chum, "Ned how do we get your mates down here at the right time without raising suspicion?"

"Doesn't have to be immediate, there'll be enough evidence on the computer. Someone will find her, as long as he is here at the right time, within the window of demise. We don't really want him to find her."

"Right lets get her into the courtyard," says Dick gleefully rubbing his hands together, then squeezing my breasts. "Hitch the bitch, Sid." Sid obeys, pulling up the small buggy behind me, and attaching the bars to the rings. "Reigns," says Sid, Scruffy hands them to him and attaches it to each side ring, "Ready boss."

"Perverts pictures first lads, while we still got some good fucking light." The others stood well clear as Dick wandered around taking lots of shots. He comes over to me. "When I put my hand up you walk towards me," he whispers in my ear.

He steps back to the far side of the yard, puts his hand up, I remain still. He nods and makes a sign, Scruffy comes over with a whip, "You do as he says." With that he whacks it across my breasts, and walks clear, my

chest in pain. Again Dick signals, this time I move, what's the use of being obstinate. He signals to Ned, "Take this in, then follow us up," he says handing him the camera.

Dick walks behind me, sits in the buggy, takes up the reins and utters giddy up. What choice do I have, he's heavy as I try to pull forward, Scruffy comes behind me and whips my arse. "Nicely done my son." compliments Dick. I pull him through the outer courtyard, and start to struggle up the slope, it's getting harder and harder. Scruffy is again on the whip, and Sid comes with each hand grabbing me by my nipples. My pain is excruciating, I try with all my might to keep pulling and am relieved to reach the reasonably level track along the top.

"That's far enough lads."

"But why don't we go up further says Scruffy," salivating, with the whip in his hand.

"Cos Scruffy we have got the woods on one side and a line of trees on the other, so until we throw her over no bugga ain't goin to see us."

"Yea, alright, smart gov, I get yea," says Scruffy snivelling.

"Throw her over nice bit of strawberry jam," says a very sadistic Sid.

Below this bit is the corner of the quarry with the water filled pit, I don't think they have realised, all of them are high on their pleasure. Scruffy and Sid, beg to get to throw me over. Dick allows this, scruffy takes me under my shoulders and Sid holds my legs. Ned starts to speak, "Ready lads, on the count of three she's worm food, One," they swing me forward and then back, "Two," their swing increases, as they show how macho they are, "Three," has me spinning and tumbling through the air, well clear of the sheer rock face.

The cold air freezes my body as I fall, my breasts are loose and flapping around. As I look up I see faces peering over the edge. My back stings the skin hurts like hell, pain shoots through my arms so restrained, the water grips and tugs my breasts, pain sears through them as I fall below the surface. The backs of my legs, feel numb, and my neck feels like it's being wrenched off as my head hits the surface and sinks below. I'm struggling with the bit in my mouth to hold my breath. I almost black out as I float back up, assisted by my two buoyancy aids. I keep telling myself over and over, stay alive get those bastards. I can see them above on the ridge, their heads shaking.

"Shit, I forgot that fucking lake was below this shit," says an angry Dick. "She's still alive, floating face upwards, shall I go and finish her?" says Sid.

"How the fuck would you get to the middle of the lake," says Scruffy.

"Fucking bullet, that's how."

"She won't last long the waters fucking freezing, it was ice cold a month ago," says Dick, "Besides a bullet would complicate the evidence."

"Bloody cold, she won't see the night out, nobodies going to go looking this late in the evening," says the Squire.

"She'll be rotting on the bottom," says Ned, snarling.

"Ditch the buggy in those woods, hide it well," says Dick.

"No mistakes lads, they use DNA these days," says Ned.

"What about that back at the house?" asks Dick.

"Dick, you and your lads are her builder friends, the Squire is an old family friend, and I was a concerned ex-cop who knew her and paid a visit,"

"Smart so the pervert gets it," says Dick.

The heads go, I'm floating on my back, the only thing I can move is my legs. I keep looking up wondering if they will come down, and move my legs very slowly, partly to avoid any noise or be seen swimming and partly because I hurt all over and am bloody cold. I'm relieved that after some time, they have not returned and I've almost reached the slope that descends into the water logged pit. When my back hits the gravel below, it hurts, the stones cut into my skin. I try and stand, helped by the water, I can hardly concentrate, my head hurts, thumping. I wobble up out of the water, and try to head for cover but fall on the ground. The cold has got to me, my body struggling to keep going, I keep trying to think, to keep awake.

A man is coming towards me, I can see his shadow in the moonlight. All I can do is shiver, curled up tight like a frightened hedge hog.

"Shit, I better call for an ambulance and get you to hospital, says the man." Undoing the straps that bind me, as he removes the bit from my mouth I cry.

"No, no, please," and when he releases my arms and hands I try to reach out to him.

"Why not, you must have hypothermia," he says, pulling off his coat, then his jumper, now his shirt.

"What are you doing?" This is a silly question, as he wraps me in his

cloths, he pulls his trousers off and puts them on me, then he takes his shoes and socks off and puts them on my feet.

"Cold feet, nothing worse, now why should I not call the emergency services?"

"Be, be because," I have trouble speaking, "They would get me, overdose hospital."

"Who?"

"The bastards who," I shiver, unable to speak more, even though I try.

"The bastards who did this to you?"

I try to shake my head in agreement. I reach for the discarded articles.

"You don't want them?" he questions, seeming taken aback by my demand.

I nod, and he puts them in his rucksack.

"Come on, lets get you up to the house," he says helping me to my feet, though I can hardly stand, he pulls me to him, "Just trying to warm you up," he says holding me close.

It is a long struggle, and very frightening, but we both know I can't stay in the open. At the bottom of the path, he halts and fishes in his rucksack, taking out two head torches. Very gently he places one on my head, then takes it off again. Fishing down he pulls out a warm hat, puts it on me, then puts the lamp back in place. He puts his baseball cap back to front and puts his torch on and we set off up the precarious path. I don't know if he is scared, his hold on me is firm in a reassuring way, and he continues to talk to me. His words are kind and encouraging. When I stumble he steadies me, and we move one small step at a time, up the slope.

Once on the ridge track he tries to pick me up, but I'm too heavy. I do appreciate this gesture, and wonder about his poor feet on the rough ground. He does not complain or even seem to wince walking over the gravel. The back gate to the main courtyard is open, but the front gate looks firmly closed, I nod to him to close the gate behind us. The front door is open unlocked.

"How, how did you..?"

"How did I get in?"

I nod.

"When I found the front gate locked I went looking around the back assumed you must have left the back gate open for me, this door was open and the house empty. So using a bit of initiative I followed the trail,

for all I knew you had some secluded building for your photo sessions.”

“L Lock,” I say my jaw still frozen with cold.”

“Where's the warmest room?”

“Kk.”

“The kitchen, Ok, he carefully takes me in and sits me in a chair by the boiler. I see two sets of spare keys left lying around, they don't intend coming back that's reassuring. “These the keys?” He says pointing to one of the spare sets.

I nod.

In a short while he returns, “All locked.”

I look at his feet, he notices, “Sorry borrowed these, my feet were hurting. He's wearing a pair of my shoes from the collection in the hall.”

I wanted to laugh, to tell him they looked lovely on him, as a joke. All I could do is stare, he came back over, “I'll make you a nice hot drink.”

He did, trying it first to make sure it was not too hot, and after the banging of a lot of cupboard doors, found grandma's stash of drinking straws. Very gently he offered the straw to my lips, holding the cup until I had finished. Then he disappears again, returning several minutes later with a bundle of blankets and proceeds to wrap me in them. I tilt my head to look at him.

“What do you think? My style?” he says standing back and parading by the table.

I nod, he's wearing my old coat, I half expect him to get on the table, for his floor show.

“Shit, my car, won't be a moment, best bring it in don't want it drawing attention.”

I nod, at this good idea, though I start to worry because he seems gone a long time.

“Sorry took a while, drove it in in the dark, somebody might see the lights, just in case those bastards are still nearby.”

I nod, and try to smile.

“You look tired, shall I take you up to bed?”

Again I nod. When we reach the top of the landing I indicate Jacks room, the windows all face towards the ridge, it's the most secluded. Very gently he helps me into the big double bed, then rushes off back downstairs, returning a while later with a couple of hot water bottles. One was grandma's the other mother's, they had remained in a draw in the kitchen since the last time they were used.

“These don't leak do they?” he says, concerned for my safety.

I shake my head. He smiles, and pulls up the comfy chair, takes one of my hands and sits down beside me. "You need anything, anything at all, you wake me ok."

With my other hand I try and pull back the bed cloths, "You want to go to the loo?"

I nod.

"You want me to help you?" he says and for the first time seems unsure of himself.

I nod again, and he very carefully helps me into the bathroom with just the moonlight, cautious that we attract no attention. Relieved we go back to the bed, he helps me in, and goes to sit down, I pull his hand.

He looks apprehensive, "You want me, to.."

"Y y." Is as much as I can utter.

"Shared bodily warmth, ok," he says, sliding in next to me. He is warm, nice and warm, and I'm soon off, my body has no more strength to stay awake. He stays with me all night.

In the morning I'm warmer I'm able to speak.

"How did you see me down there?"

He runs off and comes back with a telescope that looks like one a sea captain might have used, it is telescopic in four sections. A lovely looking brass affair, an item which I now think of as very special.

"This is all my fault," he says, looking rather dejected.

"What?"

"You being down there, if I hadn't sent that stupid email with one of my daft bloody fantasies."

"They would have devised a more deadly accident believe me. They enjoyed setting Jack up. The temptation to set you up as well was irresistible for them."

"Jack?" he asks.

"I'll explain more later, but basically he took the wrap for the murders, yet he is innocent."

"Bastards, he says angry, Don't worry we'll get them."

"What? You really haven't got a clue of what your up against have you. They've killed five people, they nearly killed me. These are ruthless people."

"If we don't get them, they will certainly have another go at you, then they will have a go at me as well. So I don't think we've got a lot of choice, one way or tuther we'll sort the bastards."

Later on he asks, "What are you doing?"

"Checking my machine," I say wandering to the office. My new friend follows like a puppy.

"That's running Linux," he says staring at the screen.

"Is it?" I say non the wiser. "All I know is my friend gave it to me, and when those bastards came I was playing with the voice recording feature on the second desktop."

"Why?"

"My friend who gave me this said I might do a sexy voice bit for the website, add another dimension."

"So why are you interested in that now, surely we have more important things."

"When they arrived I had flipped to the other desktop to see what emails had come in, looking for inspiration."

"And the recorder was still running?"

"Yes," I say now with the machine running and the program open.

"They had no idea, but why didn't they take the computer?"

"It was important someone discover your weird email, when they are trying to find me, then they find the buggo, then me."

"Then I get the same treatment as Jack."

"Yes."

"Best make copies of that audio, I'll post one off to a mate of mine, get him to say he found it when he gives it to plod."

"We will have to act fast," I say anxious that they will be dispersing their ill gotten gains. "God I never imagined it would end like this."

"You thought you'd gather all the evidence, outwit the criminals. Invite them here, they confess, the local constabulary are in the room next door. As the bad guys make their move the boys in blue slap the bracelets on."

"Something like that, or maybe the local farmer would have called the police".

"Why would he?" my friend inquires.

"He came knocking the night they threw me in the lake."

"So his suspicions aroused he comes with the seventh constabulary charging up the hill. The damsel is rescued and the baddies rounded up."

"If only," I say, feeling rather dejected.

"If this were a novel, everything would fall neatly into place, you would be making your fortune on knitted woollies, wine and wheat."

“Not on naughty world wide websites!” I chuckle, getting his point all too clearly.

“Perhaps we should go to the police?” I say, “I can tell them what happened.”

“Your word against, a well respected Squire and ex-police man,” he remarks.

“And the recording?” I say, wondering how this might be explained away.

“You're hard up for cash, they might say we made it up.”

“Blackmail,” I suggest, as a reason.

“These are devious people we are dealing with, and they will have the best lawyers.”

“And the jury would probably favour them.”

“Yes, they'll twist the tale so it comes back and bites you. Besides it's the builder doing most of the talking.”

“Maybe I should call Bert,” I'm thinking he might have some idea.

“Bert?”

“The photographer guy who helped me set up the website,” I reply.

“How do you know he's not part of this?” he asks, making a good point.

“He, helped me, gave me money,” I reply, defensive of my old pal.

“Cash or cheque?” responds his cynical mind.

“Cash,” I say, pondering the question, my face deadly serious. “The website, tame as it is would make me look like the unsavoury character.”

“It's just us then?”

I then had some odd thoughts, people had won my confidence before then turned nasty. “Those weird things you wanted me to do. Do you want to hurt me?”

“No way,” his response was very vociferous. “I don't eat meat because I can't bear the idea of an animal being factory farmed and ending up in slaughter house. The pain those animals must endure.”

“Are you one of those animal liberation lot then?”

“No, who am I to tell other people how to live, and I think a few animals used to help medical research is far better than slaughtering millions to feed a bunch of over feed under exercised lazy bastards.”

It's a couple of days later when my new friend rushes into the kitchen with bad news.

“Just had a call back from my pal. They've told him it's a very clever computer complied hoax.”

“No,” I just can't believe what I've been told.

“I'll ring him you can ask him yourself.”

I shake my head, “We're never going to win. Are we?” I say looking into the man's eyes, mine filling rapidly with tears.

“Come on,” he says hugging me, “There must be a way, just like in the movies.”

“Fantasy land,” I cry, I want to tell him to get real to face reality, but why dash his optimism, or maybe it's stupidity, at least he's positive.

Deep Bait

Notes for the reader: What are plans? but fiction until you try them.

We are both sitting in the lounge, looking into an empty fire place, I was just going to put some logs on when he suggested waiting until it was dark, smoke signals might not be ideal.

“Hey I have a silly idea.”

“I'm all ears,” he says listening attentively.

“Suppose someone had been watching their whole operation.”

“An ornithologist looking for the rare yellow quarry bird!” he jests.

“Good, choice he would have a long lens.”

“Very,” another quip.

“So he knows the Squire and wants the gang to bring him a share.”

“Or he sends the pictures to the cops.” Catching on fast.

“Yep, and he wants them all down in the quarry.”

“Why all of them?” my friend says, checking my logic.

“He wants to be sure where they are.”

“No tricks, he can see them all,” he stares at me, “Why would he do that, five to one they'd kill him, he must know that.”

“What's his security?” I cogitate on this point, my friend continues, “He'd have to be very naïve to think he could get away with that, and if he's too stupid they will smell a set-up.” This shrewd reasoning is followed by more, “And just how do we keep them down there until the cavalry arrive and we make our point. This might not even be admissible, isn't it called entrapment?”

“Yes, but we do have the audio, and the bondage gear.”

“Faked, and set-up,” he says dismissively.

“You are very negative.”

“If you don't plan for worst case and then in a high wind the bridge will collapse.”

“You build bridges?” I say curious, I haven't even asked what he does or even his name. “I have just realised I don't know your name, unless it's that crazy email one?”

“Geek, and my name's Dave.”

“That figures, via keyboard you seem to live in an alternative universe.” I consider him further, “You are not the scary, oddball I imagined.”

“It's the ones who hide their fantasies you want to worry about,” he says, proffering a very philosophical statement.

“So getting back to our problem you think getting them down the quarry is a bad idea?”

“Not if we can solve two problems.”

“And they are?” I enquire.

“How we stop them getting back up, and hard evidence that they are each connected in some way to each other and that heist.”

“Any ideas, Brains?” this remark makes him laugh.

“My hero.” He looks at me like I should know something. “A puppet character, always coming up with cool solutions, engineer scientist fellow.”

“Ah,” I say nodding my head non the wiser.

“Dynamite would do to make a hole in the path.”

“Easy, we've got loads.” I'm getting as flippant as him.

“Gets rid of moles I hear.” His grin is sweet. I nod smiling. “What about you fans?”

“Some of the bastards are signed up, any activity.”

“We'd alert them.” He understands.

“Yep,” I confirm.

“Can you get at their details?” His mind in data mining mode.

“No,” I shake my head, “Payments go through some third party system.”

“We could trawl the Internet, but we'd have to be carefully,” he suggests.

“Why?”

“You have an IP Address, even dynamically assigned ones can be tracked.”

“IP Address?” I'm getting lost in jargon.

“If you ring and ask for a catalogue the postman needs to know your house number and post code to get it back to you. If you go to a website it sends the data back to your IP address.”

"And they log this, like a catalogue company would know who it sends to," I say, getting the gist.

"Exactly, and for our plan to work you're dead remember?"

"Is there a way around this?"

"If you were in the middle of town we might find an unsecured wireless network and use that. Unfortunately we don't, there are other methods, but I've never used them."

"Could we try?"

"First we'd have to look up how to, then we would have to dabble. The security services are most likely watching such activity to spot terrorists. If they found this farm was the source, isolated as it is," raised eyebrows complete his thoughts.

"This is hopeless." My emotions are welling up inside.

"People give up too easily, there are a lot of complex problems, you just have to apply copious brain power, and plenty of lateral thinking. Most humans want black and white answers, they want certainty. Life ain't that simple."

"Could we get up to the ridge without being seen?" he asks.

"Yes, why?" I say, wondering about what he is thinking.

"Have a hot idea as to how we might block the path."

After a brief explanation and some questions with regard to available resources, I warm to his concept. So if it works we just need to get some good evidence.

"Yep," he says giving the thumbs up, and a cocky grin.

We are up early, Dave and I sneak through the woods via the walled garden. Upon reaching the track at the top we cross it into the narrow band of trees. Keeping very low, almost crawling we inch along to the top of the trail. I remain at the top, clicking the button on grandfathers old stop watch. I observe Dave descend the hazardous path, he stops and waves his hand. I note the position, he moves on eventually reaching the quarry floor where I stop the watch. I reset the watch, wave and he wanders a long way from the path towards a collection of rubble, in amongst which is a big boulder. He sits on this with his back to me, then turns and puts one arm up. I return his signal and put my right arm up, it's a good position, I note the time. We repeat the process in reverse, when Dave gets back up he is relieved. "God that's scary in daylight I never realised quite how precarious that narrow ledge is. Why is it

there?"

"We think that it was made by the workers, a lot of them came from the villages on our side of the hills."

Our next mission was to scurry further along, and see if we can get to a position above the path where Dave had stopped. The place was critical, to high up and they might climb the short distance to the top, to far down and we would not have good access to it.

"Is this it?"

"Yes looks alright," says Dave, "We can even hide the sacks round behind those gorse bushes." He was pointing to a very dense growth, which was far enough away from the point of decent. This would save us carrying them from the coppice.

We move along the trees still keeping very low until we reach those that join the small coppice, where we descend the hill slightly to a position behind some of the trees. The view is excellent. I start the watch again as we retrace our steps. I stop the watch, when we reach the gorse.

"Well what's the difference?"

"Allowing for the filth man to reach the bottom they should do that a couple of minutes longer than it will take us to get here."

"Great, great," he says looking pleased.

With our reconnaissance mission complete we make a swift stealthy return to the house.

For the rest of the day we must prepare the components for the trap. Our first task is finding the things on our list, the old junk shed being surprisingly fruitful. Because the shed is near to a five bar gate, visible from the lane we marshal the stuff inside, then do a very rapid relay race to get it inside the main courtyard.

We have fun making and painting a papier-mache yellow quarry bird with feathers from around the farm, it is in fact modelled on the yellow-headed blackbird. Dave made some most convincing binoculars from assorted toilet roll card inners. I made an very nice vacuum flask for the our ornithologist to keep his coffee warm, the inside was full of gravel, we did not want the wind blowing it over. For those producers of children's television programs which instruct on the use of cardboard, cartons, washing up liquid bottles and sticky backed plastic we are truly grateful. Our items had to be as good as possible, the nearer the villains get to our friend before realising, the more precious seconds we have to

close the door.

As a family we have squirrel genes, no we don't have bushy tails. But like that animal we collect and bury things for later, a massive roll of chicken wire made our eyes light up. Over many hours a very wise man appears, cutting a very fine figure, if a little underweight. We put cloths on him and he becomes most convincing in his sitting pose, add the binoculars and he looks just the part.

The rest of the chicken wire we turn into wire cages, using some strong wire to make a roundish access in the top. It's late afternoon and before we can proceed further we must go back to our point above the trail down into the quarry. I stand almost hidden in the trees by the track watching from a vantage point as Dave lowers a chain with an empty basket attached. When it reaches the level of the path I signal, and he makes a mark. With the chain length sorted we return to the house and fix up several other chains and baskets. As the evening light fades we relay bags, and hide them in the gorse along with several cans of oil. The wire baskets and chains, now with coloured ribbons are placed in the coppice along with an old pair of leather gardening gloves and some of my fire lighters.

It's very early the dawn chorus has just started, we take our wireman, a bundle of cloths, lots of safety pins and his accoutrements up to the ridge. Dave again braves the journey down while I lower the man on a rope to the quarry floor, where eventually Dave releases him. The wiry ornithologist is taken to his position, by which time the cloths and bits have descended ready for collection. I wait and watch while the naked frame is clothed, safety pins are used to stop items flapping in the breeze. He is feed intrastomachly with plenty of roughage, stones clank and rattle down into his hollow legs, the poor fellow puts on a lot of weight. His flask by his side and binoculars up to his eyes, the quarry bird in all its fine plumage is tenderly placed so as to be just visible in a small ledge. I had pointed out that the Squire may well know about birds, he shots enough of them. We had based our model on a plausible migrant from one of mothers books. Dave waves, I give him the thumbs up, and he returns to the top.

Later back in the house, we are sitting chatting and preparing.

"Ok so we have a trap but no hard evidence?" I say pointing out the obvious flaw.

"We can record the ornithologists conversation, if they turn up then that will confirm what they did," he says.

"It's a bit thin." Now it's me being pessimistic.

"If we wait too long they will have dumped the stash." He points out. This was a very valid point.

"Use this," I say handing Dave my mobile.

"Won't they know it's your number? I could use mine," he offers.

"They might know your number it was on the emails remember. I've never called them with that phone."

He calls. "Hello is that the Squire," he says, his voice different, he is taking off an older man with an odd accent.

"Yes."

"You don't know me, but I know you."

"What do you want?"

"I should have gone to the police."

"Are you alright man?" says the Squire, sounding a bit ruffled.

"Bbut my wife is very ill, I'd do anything to save her, I wouldn't normally countenance what I'm about to ask," he says, sound a little nervous.

"Get on with it man." The Squire is becoming impatient.

"To get my wife treated privately they say we'd need fifty thousand pounds."

"Look old fellow I'm not a bloody charity." The Squire was getting rather agitated.

"I saw you and the others."

"Others?" barks the Squire.

"I'm rather a rather keen ornithologist, friend of mine had sighted Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus. I was looking in the quarry you see, saw you and the others."

"You must be mistaken old fellow I was no where near the quarry on that day."

"I have some interesting pictures, nice," he pauses, "c canister."

The other end goes silent.

"What do you want?" says the Squire, we had his attention.

"Enough for my dear wife's operation," says an almost pleading ornithologist.

It went silent again.

"We will meet you down in the quarry in one hour," comes the reply.

"Oh, oh, thank you very much you are most kind, most kind." our ornithologist is so polite.

"No trouble old fellow, but no tricks there are five of us, understand."

"My wife, I can help her," he says excited, "Of course no tricks thank you thank you."

We heard a faint laugh in the background.

"Have you told anyone?" questions the Squire.

"Oh no, perish the thought, wouldn't want anyone being incriminated."

"One hour," says the Squire in a harsh whisper.

"Pardon?" says the ornithologist, "Sorry, my hearing's not to good."

"One bloody hour," shouts the Squire terminating the call.

From the relative safety of the coppice in the corner of the north east field we watch as the old builders van lumbers along the lane. There might not be any leaves left on the trees, but there are thick stands of young shoots. Like cartoon figures they move between each vertical viewing slot, it is like looking through a zoetrope.

Dick is the first out, wandering to the main gates, he thumps his fists, turning to the others who are now decanting from both the front and rear. Ned is carrying a big bag, the Squire a small bag which looks contorted, as though hiding something long and thin. Sid also appears to be carrying a large bag. We hear Dicks voice boom out. "He doesn't have the keys," I whisper to Dave.

Dick points to the field, the Squire shakes his head and points back down the lane. The five of them march down to the gate in the north east field. Crossing it they disappear from sight, obscured by the barn. It's some while before they reach the exposed part of the ridge, emerging from the cover afforded by the woods. We both keep very low and very quiet. They all look edgy, scanning the area, they go over through the thin line of trees, we can just make them out pointing.

Dick shouts, he's spotted the dummy.

It was a good job we told them of the hearing problem. Dave had come up with a brilliant notion that our character was hearing impaired. I can imagine, Dick saying to the others, "Deaf bastard."

One by one they disappeared below the ridge, now our timing would be critical. Move to soon and they'd hear us. Move to late and they would realise their mistake and rush back up. When the last head bobs below

the horizon I start grandfathers stop watch. Then we make our move to the stash in the gorse bushes above the trail down into the quarry.

With logs and old rags in the first cage, we set it alight, Dave holding the cage while I get the fire lighter going. As the blaze takes hold he lowers it over the side. I quickly move back along the track to my position in the ridge trees near the top of the woods. From here I can see how the fuel is burning and signal to Dave. This is where the ribbons come in handy as he knows the order in which the cages are lowered, so he knows which to bring up when its fuel is expended. With some urgency my fingers dial the police, "Hello there are five armed and dangerous men in the quarry," I say describing the location in detail. There is a pause and I hear an new voice, they have transferred me.

"Giddings Farm?"

"Yes."

The officer shouts something to another, "It's that paranoid woman."

"The barbed wire princess?" the man in the background says, sniggering.

"Yep, says she's got armed men out the back in the quarry."

"Pest control people", says the faint voice.

"I am not paranoid and it's not pest control," I shout, no doubt sounding hysterical.

"Yes love we will make a note and send someone over, you run along and get back to your house ok," he says, his attitude condescending.

The phone goes silent, down in the quarry the five characters move towards the ornithologist. They are ambling very slowly, Dick is now behind the man, pats him on the back, shouting. Our friend is very deaf, and Dick is very loud and animated, picking up the fake flask hurling it at the quarry bird. It misses, crumpled, falls to the ground. Dick swings round enraged, pointing back at the path, the others turn and see the blaze blocking their retreat. The first cage is running low on fuel, Dave is lowering the second, when I look in horror at the Squire drawing a rifle from his oddly skewed bag. I wave at Dave, he's seen the Squire and is still lowering the vital cage. A shot rings out, Dave slumps back falling to the ground, my heart is pounding, nervous ripples shiver through my body. He's put his arm up he's ok. Another shot ricochets off the rock face as the Squire takes pot shots at the chains. He then starts shooting at the fence post we are using to secure them. A great chunk of wood

splinters off the top as a bullet finds its mark.

We had worked out a series of semaphore signals, Dave understood my next one. He was on his own, descending as fast as I can through the woods, tripping on a tree root I go flying. I slide and roll on the dirt track, thudding into a tree, grazed and bruised with no time to loose, I get up and make for the house. Like some scatty woman in a complete panic, frantically trying to look for a card. I'm almost laughing with relief when I located the officious officers card. Keen to crack the case he had told me to ring even if he was off duty, his mobile number was on the back. Taking deep breaths, calmed, I call, explaining the situation.

"I'm off duty love, call the station."

"I have." I pause as a loud shot rings out, echoing from the rock faces.

"Did you hear that."

"I'm on my way." With that he rang off.

Think think, I say to myself, Wood. I go to the barn and collect another bag full, taking it to Dave's position, relieved to see him still holding out. I dump the bag and run along the track to my vantage point.

Dick, Scruffy and Sid are ripping the ornithologist to pieces. They look very annoyed taking out their aggression on the wireman. No, no, they are taking the old cloths and dipping them in the water of the lake. Carrying the soaked cloth they are heading towards the trail. As they ascend, the Squire takes aim, shoots shaving another chunk from the top of the post. I signal to Dave, but he does not understand, his head is low to avoid the shots so he can't see what's going on. I head back over, Dave they have soaked the ornithologists cloths in water and are heading up the trail.

"Shit, shit. Why didn't I think of that. Do you have bottles?" he says as I nod and turn to leave, "And petrol, more rags." I wave my hand, and run like hell to the house.

On the ridge track Dave gathers gravel in a bag, picks it up and running low heads back. He pauses takes a quick look over the side, another shot sends him diving for the ground. Crawling over the rough ground through the narrow tree line he continues past the fence post and huddles round behind a bush. He hurls a big lump into the air, another shot rings out hitting the rockface just below him, shards of limestone fly up showering him in dust and fragments. He hurls several more large lumps down over the precipice, "Bastard," shouts Dick, as a lump

bounces off his shoulder.

"Thank you," says Dave continuing the barrage. There are a few shouts and all goes quiet, Dave stops, listening for the sounds of the men below. I've just arrived in the house, grabbing a shopping bag I fill it with bottles and rag, leaving it by the kitchen door. In the barn we don't have any petrol all the vehicles run on diesel, but there are several five litre cans of wood preserver, highly flammable, that will do. Dave has moved back to the track and is checking, from the cover of a tree. The three men have moved back down the trail, the fire in the cage is running low. He rushes back, lights another bundle and rolls it over the edge, the heavy chain with its load tugs on the old fence post as it goes taught at the end of the drop. I struggle back slowly with the bag on my shoulder and a can in each hand. Spotting me as I appear from the woods, Dave sprints along the track, takes a can, "The bottles quick." I remove the bag from my shoulder, his hand like lightning with the zip. Pulls out a bottle and fills it half full, grabs a rag, stuffs it in sloshes the bottle. "More," he says, moving to trees, I start filling. The men are now closing back on the burning cages, one is almost empty. Dave lights the cloth and throws the bottle at them, it smashes just in front of Dick, spewing flames in his path. The Squire quick with his gun fires, but Dave's on the move, running back to the chains. He pulls up the almost empty cage, rapidly refills it ready for another go, then runs back to the inflammable bar.

"Another cocktail sir?"

He smiles, "Thank you." Rushes to the trees, looks down, Dick has doused the flames of his first effort with the ornithologists coat. Dave hurls him another bottle, this time two shots ring out, Sid has a pistol, a very powerful pistol, he misses Dave but hits the tree splitting off shards some of which pierce my friends right arm.

He stumbles back grimacing, "Take this out, please."

There is a big splinter hanging from his flesh. The shirt sleeve torn and bloodied, as I pull he winces, grabs another bottle and is off, hurling it this time at Sid. Dick is very close to the cage and has the big coat ahead of him. Dave grabs two more cocktails and runs off to the fence post, crawls to the edge, ignites, moves his arm over the edge and lets go. "Fuck you, you piece of shit," shouts Dick as the contents flare up covering the coat. The men back off, down in the quarry they stand huddled in a circle.

I get a call, it's the officious officer he's down at the house, I signal to Dave who gives me the thumbs up. I race down through the woods then blaze along the path in the walled garden, almost crashing into the kitchen door. I'm scurrying like a rabbit in a warren, then out of the front door to the main gate. All I can do is heavy breathing, as I almost collide with him.

"Steady on love, what's this all about."

I indicate to him, he follows me to the computer in the small office. After it finally decides to wake up, I play the audio. He stares at me in amazement, "Some of your colleagues have decided this is a fake. They say Jack did it."

"Miss, Ned's son found the evidence that sealed the conviction." He listens carefully. "That's enough, I'm convinced." The officious officer calls the local station on his mobile.

"Ops sorry wrong number," his finger presses the red button. I stare at him, "Wrong number?" I'm worried that he might also not be on our side. "Ned's son, if I told him he'd probably come over and help his father," he says in his brisk manner.

"I'm worried my friend won't be able to hold them much longer, we need to take more logs."

"Logs?"

"Please," I say racing out to the barn, the officer following my tail. I grab a bag full and give it to him, he grabs another and between us we take three up to Dave. It's getting desperate, the last wire cage is loosing its flames, and the men below have started to come up the path again. The officer is quick to cotton on to our system, filling a cage and swinging it down to meet the other. The intensity of the fire refuelled increases and the villains are halted.

"You two look knackered," he says looking at both of us, "What's happened to your arm?"

"Shard of wood from a tree, bullet took a lump out."

"You need more logs to hold these bastards, and we need some serious help." He runs off back to the house.

"Can we trust him?"

"I don't know," I say, "I better keep watch."

He nods, and starts filling the third basket. Meanwhile I'm back in my position, scanning the scene below, and something's not right. I hurtle back towards Dave, almost collapsing in front of him "There's only four

down there," I say struggling for breath.

"One on the trail?"

"I shake my head."

"Shit, who?"

"Ned, I can't see him."

"Your blind spot, on the cliff below you."

Dave runs around behind the bush from where he can just see down the cliff face by leaning out. His glance is fleeting, Sid and the Squire soon have their target, shots ring out again. Dave almost falls backwards, dives, rolls and crawls, he grabs a can of oil, "Wait here." Like a man possessed he sprints along the track, and dives in behind the narrow line of trees. Undoes the lid, slides the can near the edge and holding its base moves it along, pouring oil over the rocks until the can is empty. Ned is trying to climb up, we did not know it but he is a keen rock climber.

When my friend gets back he takes a second look, from a slightly different place. Before those below can target him he is back with me.

"The bastard's edging over to avoid the oil."

"Whereabouts?"

"He's got the lake below him."

"I best check the cage."

"Shit." Dave realises we have ignored the fire, it's not long before my frantic waving indicates we need to act fast. The Squire is in sniper mode, the rest are having another go at the fading flames with more wet clothing. A cage swings down, like a pendulum, giving the approaching men a real scare. Dave then runs over and collects the remaining bottles in preparation for more hand signals. I spin around at a sound on the gravel track behind me.

"Ned's just below here trying to climb up, we've got our hands full with the men on the trail."

"Leave him to me miss," says the officious officer.

"Be careful the Squire is a good shot."

"So am I says the officer unzipping a big black holdall bag." He tugs on a flak jacket and pulls out one heck of a rifle, with what looked like the Hubble telescope bolted on the top. Clicking in a ammo clip he moves further up along the line of trees.

"Armed police, drop your weapons," he shouts. The Squire dives behind a lump of rock, the men on the trail scabble back down and join him.

Sid, a man with few scruples attempts to fire first, but the officer is sharp, and lets off several rounds. As the bullets skim the tops of the boulders their heads drop behind the safety of the stone.

Dave is taking a look for Ned, with the man sighted, he moves back to drop another cage, pulling the depleted one back up, smoking embers glow red in the bottom. Dave is waving at me frantically, I look around to see where he's pointing. Ned is clambering up from the cliff top into the trees behind me. Our officer turns, but from a corner of the bolder Sid is watching, firing a shot he gets our man in the unprotected arm sending him and his gun sideways. I try to run but Ned is very fit, I feel a hand grab my coat. In a moment it goes loose a man running faster than a bullet brushes past me slamming into the man behind. Ned is a big fellow and although he initially falls back my Geeky friend is no match. The officer is still unconscious, blood running from the wound and a gash on his forehead where he hit the ground. Below the others have started back up the trail.

Brain Power

Notes for the reader: Is life like a game of chess or is chess like a game of life?

Dave again runs at Ned who is getting back on his feet, the big man swipes at him, knocking him sideways he crashes down through the trees falling backwards onto the track where he lies. I go for the officers gun, picking it up and point it at the big ex-policeman now walking towards me.

"Don't be silly love, put the gun down," he says smiling, "You're a bit confused, aren't you?" He moves slowly forward, holding a hand out. "Stay where you are." I shout my voice trembles with fear.

The big man, drops to his knees, his body falls forward and crashes down like an old tree being felled.

"Tut tut, you are so careless dropping logs," says Dave with a grin. "I knew I was one short."

He looks in the bag and pulls out some cuffs, putting Ned's arms behind his back, there are two clicks as they are clasped together. Dave ties the man's feet, then starts of back to the cages.

"So you are a bondage freak," I say with a giggle. Dave points at the others, his face now very serious. With my sights lined up I take a shot, it

snatches at the wet coat that Dick is trying to put over the burning cage. I slump to the ground, Sid has pulled his pistol out and is returning fire. Hidden by a tree and long grass I lay with the gun and take another shot, while another cages swings down, it's the last, containing the remaining logs, rags and sacks soaked in oil. Red flames and black acrid smoke blaze across the trail, the men back off, returning to the safety of the boulders. These lumps of rock are left over from the blast when the ramp up to the exit gully was blown, leaving a rough cliff face. Five metres above, the remains of the exit ramp huge concrete blocks and a fence. The four remaining men were eyeing it up, we could see them pointing.

Our officer had come to. "Here you best take this," I say offering him the gun. He shakes his head. "Not with this arm," he grimaces with pain. "I'll get some first aid," I say, seeing the extent of his wound. "Not yet," he says pointing at the men now trying to escape. "Get those bastards first." "Are we expecting help?" I ask concerned that we won't hold much longer.

He nods and continues pointing, I turn and look again. Sid is standing on Dicks shoulders, reaching up he is within half a metre of the end of what remains of the quarry road. I fire a shot that shatters rock above his fingers, shards showering the men below. They cower, Sid's head drops and the two men appear very wobbly. Still watching the men I'm wondering when the officers reinforcements will arrive. "When is your backup arriving?" my tone ringing with alarm.

"Soon."

"Who have you called?" I say curious. Sid has jumped back down and is talking to Dick.

"Some colleagues of mine, we've been investigating the local force here for some time."

"Bad apples?"

"A few."

"So you are from another force?"

"Yes." As he replies we hear the distinctive sound of helicopter flying low, looking back over the farm, there it is coming up the valley. The officer waves his good arm, the machine drops down in the bottom of the north east field decanting four men then it takes off again. The men race up through the boggy ground to our position. They are all armed and in black, adorned with utility belts and flak jackets. The helicopter swoops over the heads of the four villains, a loud hailer warning them to give up.

Sid and the Squire both shooting back at the aircraft, which hastily withdraws.

The men have reached us, one tends to his colleagues wound. Another calling for medical assistance. The two remaining come over to me, targeting Sid and the Squire they return fire. Both men drop to the ground, cries of pain echoing around the rocks. Dick and Scruffy look at each other then dive down behind the boulders.

"Who's this?" asks the officer who had radioed for the medics.

"Ex-police, Ned, one of them," I say. The man nods, looks over to Dave "And him?"

"He's my friend," I say with pride, waving him over. As he approaches, "Dave when that chaps finished let him see your wound," I say concerned about his arm.

"Sure," he says, "So you guys are the cavalry, nice flying horse." This gets a chuckle from the men, one of whom asks. "How many weapons do they have?"

"Just the rifle and pistol as far as I know," I say.

"That quarry, how many exits and where?"

I point out to the man our trail and explain the demise of the official entrance.

"Are we expecting more of you?" I say, eager to wrap this whole sordid affair up and get back to a normal life, whatever that is.

"We're it lady."

"Why?"

"Each force has a limited number of fire armed trained officers. We also have a limited number who can be trusted to deal with this lot."

"I don't understand?"

"They've done a lot of jobs, paid off a lot of people and have infiltrated deep," he pauses, I can see he's thinking. "Could we get down that trail?"

"They did, but wouldn't you be sitting ducks?" Even with covering fire they would be totally exposed. "Can't you wait them out?"

"It's not just them miss," says our officer. "They were only expecting your naïve blackmailing ornithologist. By now I bet they've called for assistance." The police helicopter flies back and lands in the field, as the rotors slow the crew get out. The pilot and co pilot come to our position. "Hello," I say recognising the woman, she smiles and goes to her colleague, the officious officer. Another helicopter arrives, and lands nearby the first one, two paramedics jump out as it lands and come

running up to the ridge. They whisk the officious officer off, his wound is quite serious. The woman takes command, gathering information from each of us, she is extremely efficient.

She dismisses the option of going down the trail, and is now discussing taking the helicopter in. As the sound of the helicopter fades, I hear another sound, looking down the lane I see several four by fours charging along at quite a pace.

"Is your house secure?" asks the woman officer.

"The gates are open, why?" I ask.

The woman officer looks at the pilot. "Get the chopper up, you go with him," she says to one of the officers. "You three stay here, watch the quarry and the lane."

She turns and looks at me and Dave, "You two come with me, your farm, quickest route."

We hurtle along the track, down the shortcut through the woods, and into the house. "Gates first, she says, running up the stairs with her rifle. As I finish locking the front gate and Dave the rear, the four by fours grind to a halt a way up the lane, the occupants fanning out over the fields. We check the walled garden door to the woods and then secure the kitchen doors.

There are shots ringing out. Dave suggests blocking the hall door with the big table, which we do with some considerable effort. He then follows me upstairs as I dive into my room, the landing window shattering as a bullet carers though it.

"Bloody hell," says Dave laying on the landing carpet, shards of glass covering his back like confetti.

"Go and ask the police officer what she wants us to do?"

Dave turns and runs almost on all fours, in a few moments he comes haring back.

"Shot any bastards that shot at us. She says shot to kill."

I poke the bedside lampshade up above the window sill, in a moment the window shatters and it goes spinning out of my hand.

"Shit, they've got automatic weapons," says Dave as the other windows shatter under a hail of bullets.

"Hhow many were there?" I ask Dave, as we huddle together against the big solid stone wall.

"Two vehicles, maybe six or seven, did not see them all get out."

The officer comes into the room. "The bastards are keeping low out of

sight, I've taken one down but the rest are working their way round the back." She tries to get a shot from my window that looks out over the hedged garden. Her lightning reflexes roll her body away, back in the corner, she sinks down to the floor. She looks at us, "Diversion, now." I put a blouse on a pillow and hold it up, the villains friends let loose, our police friend moves to the middle window that looks out over the walled garden and lets of a shot, then moves back into cover. "Two bastards down."

"Do you have a small mirror?" asks Dave, "and a wire coat hanger?"

"Yes," I say scurrying around, trying to avoid the glass fragments.

"Good lad," says the woman officer.

I hand the items to Dave who deforms the coat hanger and mounts the mirror in it at an angle. He pulls the dressing table away from the window, and sits back to the wall. Raising the mirror, he can see the men moving around, Two heading east through the outer yard, heading to gate, and track. No others in sight.

The woman quickly moves into position downing one, and missing the second, a bullet sends up a cloud of dust as it hits the gravel track. Shit he's gone behind the trees. Check the back. Dave moves over to that window, "One disappearing into the woods."

She beckons to us and we move into grandma's room. Dave checks with the mirror. "Two pinned down in the field below the ridge. These are in the north east field, its top faces that direction. The officer calls on the radio, "Two coming up through the woods, we'll get the two in the field."

"You take the nearest one, she says to me. From our position overlooking the orchard we have clear shots unlike those on the ridge.

The man furthestest jerks, and rolls, my rifle shot hits the second man, making him clutch his side. The helicopter is loud over head, hovering in support of the men on the ridge. We hear bursts of gunfire, the men in the field are trying to crawl back down to the vehicles. Then there is a burst of sound on the officers radio, it's from the helicopter. "Two in woods, retreating back towards house."

She clicks her radio "Men in quarry?"

The reply, "Mike has them pinned down."

"Casualties?" she asks.

"Ed has taken a hit in the leg," says one of the officers on the ridge.

"Status?"

"Not serious we can hold here," he concludes.

"Charlie, track two in woods, if you get opportunity take them out," she orders.

The helicopter replies, "Will do."

"Watch the two in the field," she says looking at us both, her hand pulling a mobile from one of her pockets. We hear her explaining the situation to what we presume is her boss.

When she finishes, she speaks again to the men on the ridge. "Military support on the way, fifteen minutes max." She clicks the radio off, "Roger that," comes the reply. The woman now moves over to us. "What are they up to?"

"Crawling slowly." I look her in the eyes, "Military?"

"It wasn't just bullion in that van."

"Oh," Dave and I say in unison, our eyes meeting, like wow this is heavy stuff. Her eyes always on the lookout spot the two other men trying to use the orchard on the other side of the road for cover the helicopter is hovering and shots ring out. The men return fire with machine guns, the helicopters nose lifts and it swerves left, pulling away from the storm of bullets. Our lady officer, takes a shot at the visible leg of one man hidden from view behind a tree. He collapses, his colleague sprays the farm house, and she spins back from the window falling onto grandma's bed, blood soaking into the quilted bedspread.

"Dave, kitchen, pale blue cupboard next to sink, first aid." He sprints off like a gazelle, living on a farm accidents do happen, there is a lot of dangerous machinery, and on some farms dangerous animals too. Being deep in the countryside you need first aid skills, as it can take a while for an ambulance to wind down the maze of narrow lanes. I help the woman down onto the floor, she is bleeding badly, a bullet has caught her under the armpit. I grab her radio, "Charlie, your lady has been hit badly." I click the radio off, awaiting reply. "Understood, medics on way."

As Dave runs back into the room clutching mothers first aid kit we hear, a very heavy droning rhythm. "Three bloody great Chinnocks, coming up the valley," he says with a grin. As they drew closer the house vibrates. While I attend to the officer, he checks with the mirror. "Two landing either side of lane, men streaming out. Third sounds like it's on top of the house." It is flying over and comes down in the west field.

Round up

Notes for the reader: Smart people know when brains are better than numbers.

The military forces, sweep across the fields, the remaining man tries to run, but does not get far. He is totally out numbered and out gunned. The other men are picked up by the troops and taken to the helicopters. With the area secure, another helicopter lands in the north east field this time medics with a stretcher, trudge across the muddy field towards the house. Dave has gone down and is opening the main gates to let them in.

The helicopter in the west field takes off again, flying around the quarry dropping men all around the perimeter. It's not long before the four men concede defeat. Dave returns with the medics and several troops in tow. One of the men has a beret, "There was a canister. Do either of you know what happened to it?" he asks looking at us. We shake our heads.

It's a very strange evening, Dave and I sit in the lounge, this time with the lights on and no fire. We had emptied the barn, all we could do was look at the empty grate and imagine. We are both coming to terms with the days events. The sofa is so cosy and the lounge warmer than either grandma's or my bedrooms both with their broken windows. Neither of us could face Jacks room, so we are huddled together, my head on his shoulder.

In the morning there is plenty to do and my friends brain is very active. "We better get your windows fixed," says Dave. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Money problems," I say, "We can board them up for now."

"We'll use my credit card," he smiles.

"No, no, it's ok."

"I wouldn't usually argue with a woman, what with your genetically sharpened elbows, but on this occasion." He pulls out his mobile, and arranges for a local double glazing firm to come and fix them.

"Double glazing."

"Save you energy. Might as well get the job done properly."

"Thanks. But..."

"But nothing," he gives me a big smile.

We spend rather a lot of time getting all the glass up, it's a nightmare

even several vacuumings later we still find the odd shard. Our efforts are halted by the arrival of the military commander and one of the armed officers. When I see the officer I ask how woman officer and officious officer are doing.

The first thing the military man utters is. "If you find the canister it must not be opened."

"What's in it?" I ask, my curiosity aroused.

"I can't tell you that," he says with a stern expression.

This makes me ask in my mind, why won't he say?

"Why was it in bullion wagon?" asks Dave.

"It was no ordinary bullion wagon that was just for the press, it was in fact a military bullion wagon with police escort. In those days pay was transported to bases in it, also they used to move the top brass's valuables, the money and this were the original target. That day, unknown to the villains, it had an extra load for the destination base.

"Why don't you ask them where it is?" I ask, thinking surely they must be able to extract such information.

"We did, ugly brute goes by the name of Dick, said they did not get chance to ask the man tasked with the job of hiding it. Psychotic chap answering to the name of Sid, he died from his wounds on the way to hospital."

"Why is it so important?"

"We would like you both to sign the official secrets act."

"Sure," says Dave, I look at him then back at the men and agree. With the paperwork satisfied the military man continues.

"We have to keep this very low key, yesterday will be down to a military exercise, your valley ideal for simulation purposes. If the public were to get wind of the contents there would be panic."

"Shit," says Dave, expressing what I'm thinking.

"We have recovered most of the valuables, they no doubt stashed them at the time, the items being far to hot to handle. The cash on the wagon is long gone, but that canister, we must recover at all costs.

"Perhaps they dumped it?"

"No, we checked, the villains knew it must be important as they failed to open it."

"Can't you search the area?" asks Dave.

"We could but it would take vast amounts of manpower, which we don't have and if we did would attract far to much attention."

"Couldn't you say it was a search for a missing person?" I say lateral

thinking.

“Yes but we'd get every Tom, Dick and Harry looking and we can't chance them finding it.”

“Why?” I ask, puzzled if this thing is so important.

“The risk is too high. It's better hidden than some idiot putting a garden fork through it.”

“How do you know it's still in the area?”

“Because those were Dicks orders to his psychotic friend.”

“Surely you should tell the farmers, suppose he hid it in a ditch and some farmer runs his tractor over the top?” questions Dave, making a good point.

The military man shakes his head, “Look with your local knowledge we would like you two to work with our police friends on this one. Strictly low key. If the locals see you two wandering about they will think nothing of it.”

“I do have that thing called work to attend to,” says Dave, somewhat sarcastically.

“We'll sort out a sick note for your boss,” says the officer.

“I am my boss. If I don't work then I don't get paid.”

“Ah!” says the military man, “I'm sure we could arrange some consultancy cover story, pay you for your time, ok?”

“Ok, great,” says Dave. Little did I know that he had recently moved and was in need of new customers and money. Had I, his smile would have made more sense.

“If we could ask you to first check every inch of your farm, and if you would not mind taking a look around the quarry just in case. Then contact my police colleague,” says the military man, “Oh miss, we will also pay you for your time.” Just before they leave the military man turns to us. “If you find it, a word of caution, don't touch it, call my friend here immediately,” he says with a glance at the policeman.

With that the two of them draw the meeting to a close and head off, leaving us with a task and not much the wiser.

“I still don't get why they want us to do the looking?” says Dave with a puzzled expression.

“He said it needed to be kept under wraps.”

“I guess those were real Chinnocks,” he replies musing facts, “So we need to get inside Sid's brain and work out where he would hide a cylinder.”

"I'd rather not!" I say with a grin.

He laughs, "Might be scary, very dark grey matter."

Our thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the glazier. He looks around my room eyeing up the broken windows, fragments of glass still hanging in the putty.

"What happened here?" he says very curious. I am stumped for an answer, how do three windows in one room and two in another become shattered, not to mention the one on the landing? He also notices chunks of plaster missing in the walls where the bullets have smashed into them.

"Glass worms and plaster beetles," says Dave in a very serious tone, I am unsure how he keeps a straight face, I have to step outside the room.

"Is that so?" says the glazier expressing disbelief.

"Oh yes, check out Plaster Beetles - Cryptophagus and Latridius, then there is Thiobacillus concretivorous, concrete eating sulphur rod, turns pipes into soft paste it's the acid you see."

"Right and glass worms?"

"All to do with humidity you see, not actually nematodes, all to do with ion exchange at the glass surface."

"You're a scientist?"

"Studied biotech."

I poke, my head back through the door and watch the man doing his measuring. We take him to the other room where he repeats the process. He leaves saying he will get us a quote but it will be a few weeks at best before the windows will be ready. With some plastic sheet and a few nails we cover the holes.

Over the next few days we scurry around looking in drainage pipes, ditches, check the quarry, gaps in hedges, behind trees, in old hollows you name it we look, even scouring the earth for signs of digging nothing. After calling our police contact we are sent very detailed local maps and asked to check the area, marking where we have searched. Dave a man of many guises becomes an amateur archaeologist. With most of the cattle inside for the winter, crops harvested and my farming contacts we are able to scour the surrounding countryside, field by field.

"The places we have looked are all easy to access, even without permission," I say to Dave, who at the end of another fruitless day is

looking rather pessimistic.

"It would have to be somewhere out of bounds but where nobody goes, somewhere like the quarry," he replies. "Somewhere that nobody would want to go."

His point is a good one, but sitting for hours and hours, pouring over maps and searching the web we are no nearer to an idea.

"Near water?"

"No." He shakes his head, "fishermen, floods, walkers, conservation projects all sorts of activities.

"Railway?"

"Nop, maintenance crews, track replacement etc."

"Dangerous cliffs."

"Might collapse and you'd loose it."

"Up a tree?"

"It would have to be big, an old oak." He looks around the room, "If you did not know the area to well?"

"There are some big trees down White Hole and if he murdered mother he would know that place. Few go there it's quite dangerous."

"Why?"

"There are some deep fissures, it's like a big gully, my geography teacher reckoned it could be a collapsed cave system."

"Better get a few ropes then."

I look at him, "More bondage gear?"

He grins and heads off back home in his car.

With some preparation we set off the following day.

"You ok?" he asks, seeing tears welling in my eyes as we draw up in the parking place. "Mother?"

I acknowledge this with a simple movement of my eyes.

We leave his car and wander down the track, Dave has a rope between us for safety, one part of the path is a narrow ridge deep in the hole, on either side there is a steep drop. Most people don't venture across this, Dave ties a rope to a tree on both sides so I have something to hang onto. We keep going deeper in, until we reach a strange wood, the trees are old and very odd shapes. Hunting around, Dave climbing up them, we find nothing. Going deeper down into the gully the sides tower above us, with a dark sky and some deep crevices it is very frightening. The vegetation is sparse, receiving no direct sunlight at this level. Our trail is almost invisible, few are brave or foolish enough come here. Ahead is a

wall of rock, imagine a giant putting his foot down in some mud, his heel resting on a stone, leaving a wedge shaped hollow. Dave looks around, at the far end are a jumble of rocks. "Perhaps this was a giant cavern?" he says expressing wonder at the view. He ties one end of a rope around a giant boulder, then begins to clamber around.

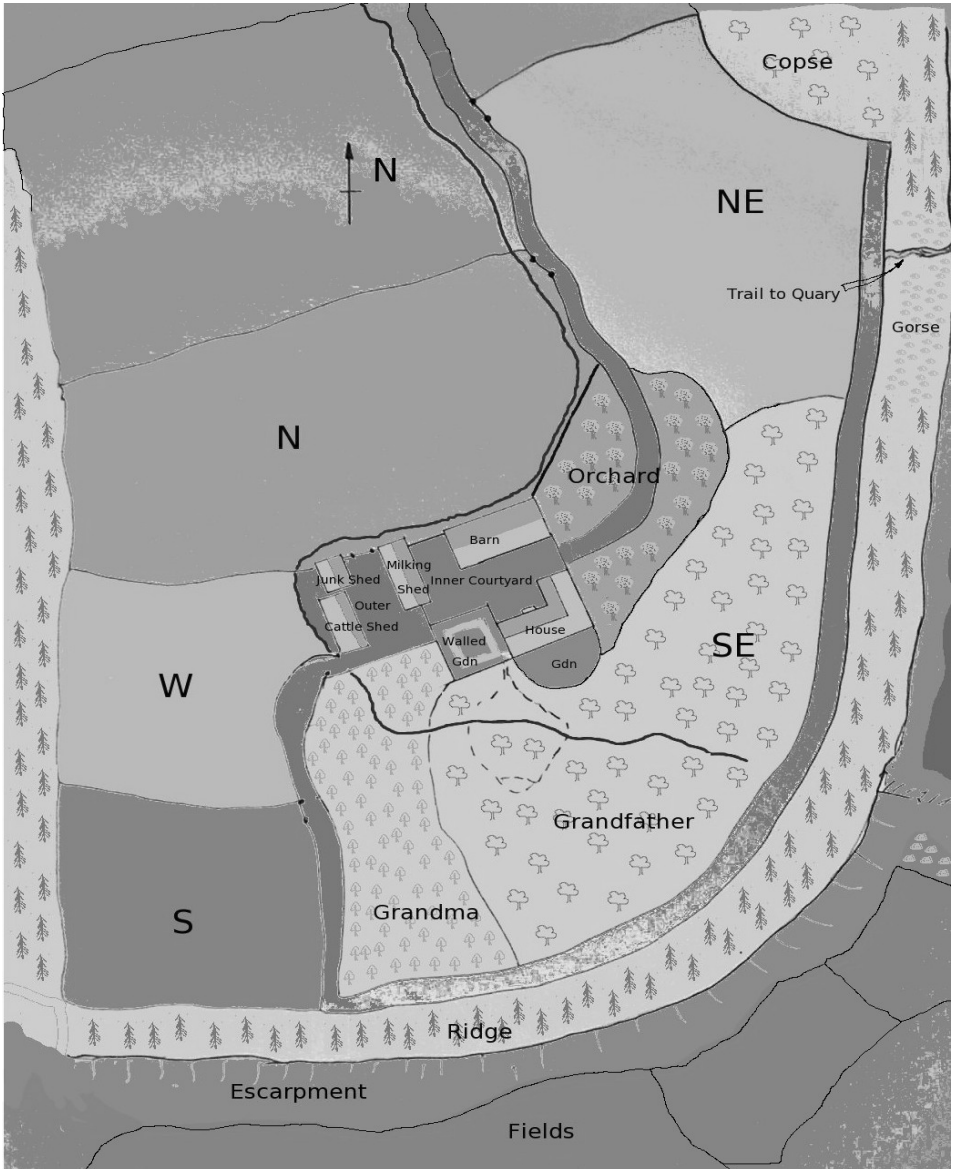
Struggling back he looks disappointed, his gaze is suddenly distracted, I watch his eyes. He then moves over to a crack on the way back, well away from the track, coming down you would not notice it, even going back it was almost invisible. When his thumb goes up, I can't help but smile, he comes back over to my position.

"Best call our friend."

I dial the number but down in White Hole there is no signal so we try again at the top. We are told to clear the area and that is the last we know of the canister. Months later we both receive cheques, and my windows are looking very posh.

Jack is released, he is awarded substantial compensation, enough to get his own place. With help from both Dave and Bert my website is now bringing in more than I could have hoped. I know it won't last forever, so it is being invested wisely. I guess that is about it, life goes back to normal, well not quite, with Dave around!

Map of Giddings Farm



Titles by the author:

<i>Title</i>	<i>ISBN</i>
ICE	978-1-84728-845-5
Breakfast	978-1-84728-724-3
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