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A Ghost Story

It starts with just a grizzle, quite a small, complaining grizzle but just enough to break her sleep and cause a sinking feeling that has become so familiar over the last four months.

She drags herself up, makes her way across the landing, leans over the cot and the complaints cease as the baby begins to feed. She is relieved that her sleeping husband, with a stressful day ahead, does not appear to have been disturbed.

All is silent in the house. She resists switching on the light, relying on the faint street light in the room to direct her movements, not willing to be reminded of the time, trying to retain an element of sleep in the darkness. She keeps her eyes shut and tries to shut down her thoughts, longing for the feed to end.

So she sits, her thoughts a mixture of dreams and half reality, patiently waiting for the baby to finish.

Through this semi-conscious state a slight sound suddenly arouses her. It is not a familiar sound and, what is more disturbing, it is a continuous sound. At first it is faint, more of a creak, with a definite rhythm to it, but as her awareness sharpens, the sound grows stronger.

This disturbance to the silence is not in her room. It is coming from the darkened landing which she has a view of through the open door.

She stiffens her back, opens her weary eyes wide and stares in the direction of the sound. In all the times that she has sat there

since the baby was born she has not heard anything like it before. Has she really drifted off to sleep? Maybe she has and this is but a dream. She is not prone to dreams. Her constant exhaustion ensures that when she has the chance to sleep she sleeps heavily and in the distant past her only dreams were of trying vainly to catch a bus or of making a fool of herself at some gathering or other! But this is different, a definite sound in her own home surrounded as she is by all that is familiar.

How can this be? After all, it is not a big house with hidden rooms or a history of unusual sightings. It is an ordinary town house with neighbours in the street and with shops nearby, not a house to excite the imagination.

Alarming thoughts begin to take over as she peers through the darkness. Did she lock the back door? What if there was a window left open? She is fully awake now, her heart pounding and her whole body in a state of weakness. As the ominous sound moves closer she clasps her baby and prepares to call out for help.

She sees the top of a head gradually appearing above the solid banister on the landing followed by a familiar, friendly face.

"Cup of tea, dear?"

By Anne Tester



Night Duty

Nineteen year old Gary Bishop had only been in the Police Force for six months, three of which had been spent at the Training College. He was full of enthusiasm and keen to do well in what he considered would be an exciting and worthwhile career. After weeks of going out on patrol in the company of an experienced officer he was now looking forward to his first solo tour of duty. Tonight his beat consisted of patrolling a large housing estate on the south side of the small market town where he was stationed and a long road which ran beside the canal to a rather dilapidated mill which had been unoccupied for a considerable time. An inquiry was being held to decide its fate and when Sergeant Evans was allocating the beats at the briefing at the start of the shift he had told Gary that there had been a report of youths hanging about in the area. "It's considered unsafe, so check carefully and if there's someone there, move them on. Any trouble, radio in for assistance." Gary hoped to cope on his own and make a good impression.

He had a leisurely stroll round the estate, trying to walk with measured tread in a dignified manner as befitted his smart new uniform. He had a word with a young lad riding his bike on the pavement who said he had been baby-sitting for his sister and was late going home. The lad was polite and was nearly home so he let him off with a warning. By the time he reached the old mill it was 12.30 am. It was a cold, windy night and the moon shone fitfully from gaps in the cloud and the building, standing as it did amongst tall trees, looked very eerie. He squared his shoulders, turned on his torch and started to pick his way round some scaffolding which was shoring up the walls.

Suddenly there was a scuffle over his head and a dark shape dropped to the ground with an angry yowl. Phew, only a cat! He hadn't realised how nervous he was; serve him right for watching that horror film

earlier on. He felt in his pocket; yes, his truncheon was handy and the radio bleeped comfortingly.

He carried on, flashing his torch through gaps in the fence. Then he saw a rough looking man, dressed in old cord trousers tied with string below the knee and a shabby jacket and old fashioned cap. The man looked straight at him then disappeared round the corner. "Hey, just a minute", Gary shouted and hurried after him. An extra strong gust of cold wind met him at the corner and the torch slipped from his fingers as he felt a sudden heavy blow on the head which rammed his helmet over his eyes. With trembling fingers he managed to push it up again and groped around for his torch. With a sigh of relief he found it but the light was dim; no doubt the fall hadn't done it any good.

There was no sign of his assailant and on closer examination it looked as if the wind had dislodged some of the scaffolding and it was this that had hit him on the head. The man had vanished and, as far as he could see, the passage to the living quarters of the mill was uninviting, but empty. With some trepidation he made his way slowly, his truncheon in one hand and the torch in the other. When he reached the other end, the place was deserted. He continued round the outside of the property, down to the tow path without seeing anyone, so returned to check the living quarters. The doors were locked, some of the windows were boarded up, but the ones with glass in were unbroken. Gary shone his torch through the largest window and saw what he thought was a heap of rags in the corner. Just then the moon came out from behind the clouds and he saw clearly that the rags were the body of a woman with an old fashioned knife sticking out from her chest. From her position it looked as if she was dead and had been for some time. In a panic he tried his radio but, perhaps due to the height of the building and the trees, he couldn't get it to work. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, he ran swiftly to the road. Still no joy with the

radio, so he carried on to the telephone box at the end of the road. The Sergeant was just about to have his meal break but said, "Stay there and I'll be with you as soon as I can."

Gary wished he had a cigarette as he waited for what seemed a very long while. When the Sergeant came he told him about the man he had seen as they walked back to the mill. At the window the Sergeant shone the beam from his powerful torch all around the room. It came to rest on a pile of rags in the far corner. "Is that your body, lad?" he asked. "No, Sarge. I definitely saw the body of a woman. She had a white high necked blouse, a long black skirt, red hair piled up on her head and a sheath knife in her chest." "Come on, then. We'll get in through this boarded up window. It looks loose, anyway. Pass me that bit of wood and I'll prise it off." They got inside and searched carefully but found nothing. "I can't understand it", Gary said. "I swear I saw the body." "Well, come on. We'll go back to the station. You look as if you could do with a cup of tea."

At the station Sergeant Evans asked "Have any of the lads been telling you stories about the old mill, lad?" "No, Sarge. Nobody's said anything. Why?" said Gary, looking puzzled. "Well, years ago, there was a murder there. A young woman was stabbed by a vagrant and it's said that they haunt the mill but I've never met anyone who has seen them. But your description of the woman is spot on. Are you sure you hadn't heard about it or read about it?"

"No, I haven't and it'll be a long time before I fancy going there again!"

By Dorothy Elgar



SCULPTURE

Seal-sleek, yet unyielding you stand,
Sentinel in shaded glade.
Spherical eye to wildness beyond,
Obscured in primeval setting of canopied floor,
In sunlight, dappled and enticing.
Bronze beguiler whose golden radials beckon
Reflecting otherness.

With deepest blue sheen,
Since when have you
On plinth immovable been posted thus?
Testament to Hepworth's legacy of immortality.

How I yearn to touch you.

*A response to a photograph
taken by Ian Paterson*

by Mikki Wilde



*Front page of the Blaby Daily News, Monday, 20th October 2008.
Byline : Glenise Lee*

CHARITY WORKERS MURDERED!

Police were called to a house in the south of Blaby yesterday when a nearby homeowner reported screams coming from the property. At 3 am, a man surrendered following a two-hour siege, during which armed officers surrounded the house. Handcuffed and blood-spattered, the man was driven away in a police car. Two bodies were stretchered from the scene soon after.

The victims were identified as widow Mrs Alice McGillicory (65) and Belle McGillicory (22). According to a neighbour, Mrs McGillicory, a local character, was renowned for her charity work. Members of this close-knit community knew her fondly as, 'Grandma'. Her granddaughter, Belle, was nicknamed 'Little Red Riding Hood', because of the hooded mackintosh she wore in all weathers. Mrs McGillicory was retired. Belle worked as a waitress at the Dozy Duck Café in the village centre.

Grief-stricken Derek McGillicory (44), whose mother and daughter were slain, said he could not understand why these lovely ladies met such a dreadful end.

Woodcutter, Andrew Frambly (28), has been charged with the murder of the two women. Sources close to the police say he dismembered them with an axe in a frantic attack that left the walls of Grandma's house dripping with gore.

Frambly lives alone on Acacia Avenue, where residents expressed surprise that a pleasant, mild-mannered man could have turned into a cold-blooded killer, though Mrs Agnes Vice (73), who lives next door said, “He did have a thing about transvestites.”

The two were butchered sometime around midnight on Saturday, after their return from the Village Hall where the Women’s Institute had staged the pantomime, Cinderella, for the charity Age Concern. Belle and Grandma had played the Ugly Sisters. The manager of the Bull’s Head public house claims to have spotted them passing by, still in costume, just before closing time.

“Couldn’t miss ‘em,” he said. “They was as ugly as sin.”

Frambly visited the Bull’s Head most nights. Other regulars report that on the night in question, he became very agitated when he saw Mrs McGillicory and her granddaughter passing the pub.

The police are unable to comment at this stage.



By Glenise Lee

HOLIDAY OF A LIFETIME

The great white ship glided through the calm, moonlit waters of the shark-ridden South Atlantic Ocean; land was far distant, no other vessel nearby. Outside on the Promenade Deck only the swish of the sea could be heard. Suddenly, emergency alarm bells screeched throughout the liner. Immediately the ship's crew could be seen, lifejackets already donned, hurrying to their emergency stations.

Robin and Sylvia Wilkins had joined the cruise in Capetown. They were celebrating their thirtieth wedding anniversary and this would be the holiday of a lifetime. The magical sight of floodlit Table Mountain, apparently floating in the coal-black star-studded sky, as they sailed away from South Africa would stay in their memories forever. They had just sat down in the theatre when the alarm sounded.

According to previously rehearsed procedures, all passengers were required to fetch their lifejackets from the cabin, then proceed to their allotted muster station in one of the lounges.

"It's probably a false alarm," Robin commented as they made their way. A few minutes after they were seated, the Captain's voice sounded clearly over the loudspeaker system. The ship had received what was strongly believed to be a hoax call from someone claiming to have placed a bomb on board. Normal security procedures made this almost impossible but, as a precaution, passengers were requested to search their cabin and report anything unusual. Any suspect object should on no account be touched. The response was dramatic. One woman started screaming hysterically. An elderly man collapsed. A woman fainted and children started crying. Medical assistance arrived promptly. The screaming woman was soon silenced with a hefty slap across the face. Robin and Sylvia returned to their cabin. All appeared to be normal until Sylvia pulled her suitcase from under the bed. She

froze. “There’s something here.” Her voice was faltering and hoarse. Robin knelt to look at a white parcel in the far, dark corner. “Come on. Let’s get out,” he urged.

They hurried to a ‘phone to report what had been found, then quickly made their way back to the muster lounge, not speaking to anyone. They sat, grim-faced and silent, hearing the lifeboats being lowered outside. Much later, as passengers slumped tiredly in their chairs, the Captain announced that a known hoaxer had been questioned in Capetown, admitting responsibility for the ‘phone call. Nothing suspicious had been found aboard and the emergency was over. Robin and Sylvia exchanged puzzled frowns. “That’s odd”, Sylvia remarked. Her husband didn’t answer. Arriving back in their cabin they were met by an officer. Behind him stood the Cabin Steward, with a sheepish look on his face. He was being reprimanded for bundling up the used bed linen in one of the sheets and pushing it under the bed. Greatly relieved, most passengers had retired to their beds feeling exhausted by the experience.

Three days later, the ship docked at the port of St Vincent in the Cape Verde Islands. Hardly anyone had taken advantage of an offer to abandon the cruise. The bomb exploded just after eleven o’clock in the morning blowing a massive hole in the side of the ship just below the water line.



By Sheila Knight

A Conversation

If I could,
What would
I change?

My friends?
Not _____ likely.

My opinions?
Possible,
But difficult.

The American President?
Not this one.
Hurrah for Obama!

You said –
Change my lifestyle?

Is it too late?
No, never.

My family?
Of course not.

Would I change
Man's inhumanity
To man?
To be sure
I'd try.

Discrimination?
Oh, yes!

Sexism?
Racism?
Ageism?
Of course.

What about
Distribution
Of wealth?
If only I could.

How about
My hair colour?
Perhaps I should.

Safety regulations?
Some –
Play conkers
Play street games

Can I change
Blame mentality?
Not alone

What would
You change
If you could?

By Betty Morley

THERE IS ALWAYS MAGIC

The elderly man sits in the armchair smiling to himself as he reads the paper. He is listening for footsteps running up the path. His grandson, David, will be coming soon. David is nine and the apple of his eye.

Running footsteps are heard, the door is flung open and a small boy rushes in and throws himself into his granddad's arms crying. "Now, what's up lad?" granddad asks holding him tight. Through his tears the little boy sobs, "Alan Ashcroft says there is no Father Christmas and that it's only your dad and I'm a baby because I still believe in him". "Ah! That's the way of it. Well, I'm going to tell you the truth."

"Over a thousand years ago, in the mountains of southern Turkey, lived a very rich man who was shy and kept himself to himself. One night in the middle of the coldest winter he looked out and saw that many of the cottages in the valley below had no smoke coming from their chimneys and he realised that the villagers had little money left for fuel or food.

"He decided to put money in little bags and at the dead of night he climbed onto the roofs of the cottages and dropped the moneybags down the chimneys. In one place a coin fell out of the bag and dropped into a sock that a little girl had hung up to dry. Next morning everyone in the village was very excited and mystified, especially the little girl, but no one knew who was responsible for this good fortune.

"The rich man was pleased to see everyone happy and loved hearing the little girl's laughter. He thought how nice it would be to make all

the children so happy and decided that throughout the year he would make toys for them. On the same night, the 24th of December of the next year, he again climbed the roofs and dropped down little bags of money and a small gift for each of the children. This went on for many years but no one knew who gave the gifts.

“As the rich man got older he found it hard to climb onto the roofs so after a year in which the task had become very difficult for him, he called together all the fathers and, swearing them to secrecy, told them that he was the person who had dropped money and gifts down their chimneys but now he needed help. During the year, all the fathers secretly made toys for their children ready to leave mysteriously on the 24th of December.

“These fathers whispered to other fathers in nearby villages telling them what they were doing and gradually word passed throughout the land, then via sailors and traders around the world, but still it was a big secret.

“So you can see, David, that although Father Christmas does not really exist, because of that original good man, St Nicholas, the first Father Christmas, the magic still remains. For over a thousand years, fathers throughout the world have provided gifts secretly for their children at Christmas bringing excitement and happiness to millions of children and if that’s not magic, I’d like to know what is.”



“What a big secret!” grinned David, “I wonder what I’ll get this year.”

By Dorothy Wells,

WRITE ABOUT THE FUTURE

The question came right out of the blue.
'I'm nearly four. Nanny, how old are you?'
I said 'sixty seven', hoping that it was true.
'When I'm that age, Nanny, I'll be Grown Up too!'

She had replied quite without hesitation,
But really what is her destination?
Will this rate of change stay on in our nation,
Solving life's problems with more medication?

When I was that small we were a country at war
But allowed to believe that would happen no more.
Here we are still fighting, making nations poor,
Perhaps leaders will one day stop fighting, by law.

To us, as children, a blackberry grew on a hedge.
Now it's a gadget, kept with others on the ledge.
It's the latest of tools - really 'cutting edge' -
Owning one, using it, seen as a privilege.

Maybe the new world will turn out to be Green.
Farmers' markets, veg boxes everywhere to be seen!
Will future generations make sure they are lean
And the air that they breathe, will it really be clean?

We only can hope, advise them, then trust
And point out that sometimes it is 'improve things or bust'.
Our generation hasn't done things. This next one must
Or before she's sixty seven Lindsey's world will be dust.

By Patsy Paterson

THE PORTRAIT

“You’re fine as you are”, he’d told me when he started the painting. I was rather flattered to think I rated as an artist’s model, especially at my age. I thought they had to have flawless skin, perfect figures and glorious long locks of gold, midnight or titian – like that Irish so-called ‘model’ of his.

I wish he’d get rid of her; she’s no better than she ought to be. He needs to marry a nice suitable girl and settle down before it’s too late.

I should have insisted on changing into my best frock. This old black one’s way past its best. Really, there was plenty of time *and* I could have worn my new earrings.

It’s a good job I’m sitting down. Staying still is more tiring than you’d think. I wonder how much longer? My neck’s getting quite stiff and someone’s got to start supper soon – and that would be me as usual.

“Don’t smile,” he’d said. “Look natural.” Well, I’m pretty sure I’m just looking a bit fed up by now. You’d think he’d have noticed. It won’t look a bit like me – everyone knows I like a good laugh as much, if not more than the next person.

It’s getting really boring just looking at the wall. If only I could look up a bit, out of the window.

Whoops! “Sorry!” - didn’t mean to move! He *is* grumpy. He never had much patience even as a small child.

Those panes need washing. They never stay clean long. That’s what you get for living in London.

They say Hastings is nice.

Apologies, apologies! “Sorry!” - can’t help moving my feet, they’re barely touching the floor as it is.

My left foot’s gone dead now. I’ll have to tell him.

That’s better, now he’s stuck that stool there. He’s a good lad really.

Now I’m starting to get pins and needles in my fingers. How much longer? Dare I ask him? He needn’t think he can make me sit as long as he makes the others do. Everyone complains.

I hope he’s going to use a bit of colour. I’m sure he’s not added anything to all that black and white he’s put on that wooden board thing. What’s it called? Begins with a ‘p’. Oh, this is going to annoy me now.

Alright, I’ll stop frowning.

‘Palette’ – that was it.

Alright, I’ll stop grinning.

Anyway, looks like it's still all black and white on his 'palette'. He says it's 'elegant' and 'aesthetic'.

I like cheerful pictures. His friend, Theo – Mr Fantin-La . . . whatshisname – does lovely flowers, so real and all sorts of pretty colours.

“Sorry.” I know, don't smile, don't move; does he realise how hard this is. I'm not so young as I was. Has *he* tried to do it?

Good grief, no need to speak to me like that; it was only a sneeze. He might be 37 but I can still smack the back of his legs!

I wonder if he's got my best side? Personally, I think a portrait should be full face and close up. He's not even calling it a portrait, just 'An Arrangement in Grey and Black'. I mean, what's that all about? I know I'm no oil painting, but I *am* his mother.

That's it, I've had enough.

“Come on, James McNeill Whistler. Let's get those spuds on.”

By Patricia Brown

NOTE: *Arrangement in Grey and Black: The Artist's Mother*, famous under its colloquial name **Whistler's Mother**, is an 1871 oil-on-canvas painting by American-born painter James McNeill Whistler. Anna McNeill Whistler posed for the painting while living in London with her son.

SUNKEN DREAMS

Thoughts on Rutland Water by Margaret Woolley

Sun tipped ripples lap your shore.
Streets, lanes and fields make up your floor.
Are your waters the tears of the people that cried
For the homes they had cared for with such pride?

The school yard is silent, and the bell tower.
The trellis now supports no summer bower.
Cow byres, crew yards where animals trod,
Now drowned with the copses, the bridges, the sod.

It is said that at times you can hear the bell toll,
Or the cock crow, or the neighing of a foal.
Reality being horses trotting by,
And picnicking families on your banks lie.

People are sailing, surfing, fishing and such,
Cyclists, walkers, enjoying your space so much.
So surrender the ghosts and sounds from the past
To leisure and pleasure – have peace at last.



Lanis

Lanis woke slowly. He felt stiff. He had been sleeping, avoiding the heat of the day, secure in the protection of leafy shade, waiting for sundown and the safety of darkness. He hadn't eaten for two days. The weather had been dry and the previous night the temperature had hardly dropped. The moonlight had added to his difficulties, as he knew there was the possibility of being ambushed in open terrain. He was waiting for better conditions. This morning a good shower had moistened the area and would keep the dust down on his travail.

So tonight was a good night. Lanis took in the cool damp air and stirred himself. He left his hideout and began to make his way carefully towards a rocky outcrop. He went round the boulders, keeping close and listening. Pausing the other side of the stones he was sure he heard or maybe felt footsteps. This was dangerous and he shrank into himself breathing slowly and silently. There were wild animals in this country, many of them sharp of tooth and looking for an easy meal. He, too, was hungry. He knew he would feed well if he could reach his destination. The sounds faded into silence.

There was no moon, therefore no telltale shadow for his enemies to see and they would need exceptional night vision to spot him as he almost floated over the open to reach the next part of his route. He had travelled this way once or twice before and had always been rewarded. Food was often plentiful where he was going.

Lanis continued, moving ever forwards, now with a hard path underfoot. The next twenty minutes was easy going. He was thankful of this as he expected tougher times ahead.

He was right. Some excavating had taken place and he faced huge mounds and deep hollows of earth. The ground, though damp, was soft and slowed his progress. He was tiring now but finding a puddle of water lying in an indentation on a boulder, Lanus refreshed himself. The thought of food and the certainty of a good meal waiting, spurred him on. Why, he could almost smell it.

And indeed the end was in sight. His pace quickened. He had been travelling for nearly two hours on an empty stomach. He had arrived. Lanis gorged himself until just before the sky began to lighten in the east. Lanis, a replete and happy snail, in the newly planted petunia patch.

By Ruth Westley

HAIKU OF EGYPT

At the fringe of light
sage willow arcs, bonding sky
and still shadowed earth.

Ruffled Nile water
stills when reverential breeze
pays quiet homage.

Sacred ibis squawk,
flying, profiled, east to west;
souls of lost pharaohs?

By Glenise Lee



THE DOCTOR'S WAITING ROOM (1)

Time was
The doctor opened the surgery door,
Said 'good morning'
And smiled.

Time changes;
A digital display flashes,
A buzzer buzzes,
A green light winks.

Time now;
Digital displays don't open doors,
Buzzers don't say 'good morning',
Green lights don't smile.

By Shirley Wilding



THE DOCTOR'S WAITING ROOM (2)

"Next, please", said the doctor. "Next, please.
What can I do for you?"

"It's me knees again, doctor, me knees."

"Right - let's see what we can do."

"Next, please", said the doctor. "Next, please.
What can I do for you?"

"The kids have come home with the fleas."

"Right - let's see what we can do."

"Next, please", said the doctor. "Next, please.
What can I do for you?"

"Think I've caught some awful disease?"

"Right - let's see what we can do."

"Next, please", said the doctor. "Next, please.
What can I do for you?"

"Just hear me old chest whine and wheeze."

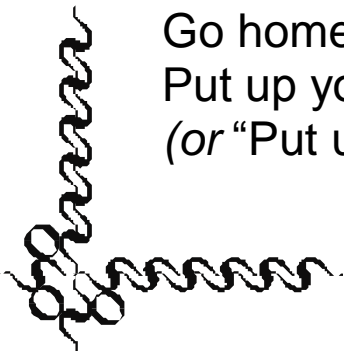
"Right - let's see what we can do."

"Next, please", said the doctor. "Next, please.
What can I do for me?"

Go home and relax - take your ease.

Put up your feet with a nice cup of tea!"

(or "Put up your feet with a nice G and T")



By Shirley Wilding

THE TIME OF HIS LIFE

He was in the sitting room breathing in interesting smells coming from his kitchen. His cooking was becoming quite excellent and he felt he had surpassed himself with his latest concoction, which was bubbling gently in the small oven.

Richard had been widowed four years ago. He felt he had been lucky in his marriage. It had had the usual ups and downs, often happy, been fruitful, two sons and a daughter, but had ended abruptly just after he retired, when his dear wife, Liz, was killed by a careless motorist outside Sainsbury's one Friday afternoon, leaving him alone in the family house with its four bedrooms up and two large rooms down. The garden had a vegetable plot, several flower beds and a grassy space for boisterous ball games. He realised that it was all too big. One son lived in Canada, the other travelled about with his job and the daughter was coping with twins and an academic husband who had no domestic bent in him. So all were busy.

At first Richard looked about. At sixty five years old he needed to downsize. Where to live? Just when he thought it would have to be a bungalow in his village or a flat in town, he spotted an advert for a compact small house in a retirement settlement a few miles away. He sold his house with just a brief pang of regret for his old life and moved in. He took some bits of furniture from home and had lots of new curtains, carpets and a two piece suite. He liked the well-equipped kitchen and two fitted bedrooms, one beautifully large with an en-suite bathroom.

Finding it necessary to learn how to cook, he joined a class called 'cooking for one'. Washing was no problem; you just read the instructions on the box and on the clothes. No, washing was a doddle. Cleaning took less than two hours a week. Gradually Richard became aware of other retired people on the site. There was a social side to this retirement village. Days could be filled with coffee mornings, tea dances, lunches three times a week in a splendid hall called 'The Birch Restaurant'. There were clubs galore, painting, line or country dancing, chess, scrabble, discussion, and a reading group. The nurse lived in the main house and the bus service went into town regularly. Richard began to settle down nicely. He could be a gregarious fellow and his popularity grew.

There were more couples than single residents and although nearly everyone spoke to nearly everyone and nearly everyone showed Richard a friendly face, he had more in common with single people than with the others. He began to people watch. In the mornings his neighbour put crumbs out for the birds and she hung peanuts up for the squirrels. His other neighbour banged doors at night so he always knew when she was going to bed. The pair in the next close had visitors most weekends. They took them for a walk on the lawns and woods whatever the weather. There was a man whose smalls could be seen draped out to dry over chairs in his sunny bedroom window. But best of all Richard noticed that there were more than a few well dressed, well spoken ladies on their own. Richard missed female company. He made many new friends and mostly they were on the distaff side; unsurprisingly as there were many more widows than widowers.

Needing to fill his days Richard went to the tea dances to keep himself fit. He joined the painting and reading groups, to keep his mind active, and his culinary skills improved beyond ‘cooking for one,’ and was entering the haute cuisine stage. What a shame that there was no one to appreciate his prowess.

He decided to invite a guest in for dinner one evening, just casually as a friendly gesture. So when Stella had helped him to clear up some spilt water at the end of a painting session, the opportunity arose. And when he accidentally trod on Enid’s toe during the dashing of the ‘Dashing White Sergeant’ he asked her round as an apology. He found it very easy. Ladies came for dinner with alacrity. One at a time of course.

If his children rang or sent emails, he told them about the social side of his life, his daily activities and the friendliness of his new environment. He didn’t bother to mention his cooking and his intimate suppers à deux.



But that is what kept him alert and eager, who to invite next and what to cook. ‘Better not give her that as I think I made it for her last time’. Richard started to keep a record of what he cooked for whom; also, which meals seemed to make his ladies more relaxed. Wine needed to be considered; too much and they

either became giggly or sleepy and neither state was conducive to a pleasant evening with a gentle goodnight peck on the cheek.

After four years, he began to judge it just right. He could manoeuvre his guests into entertaining him to exactly the degree he wished. With the right combination of food and wine, the lady could be guaranteed to go home replete at ten o'clock, or to stay talking and laughing into the small hours.

Yes, thought Richard, as he sat on his new, now familiar double settee. His latest dinner of kidney ragout with dauphine potatoes and grilled asparagus was nearly ready. He had made fresh summer puddings with Chantilly cream and spun sugar for afters. Two bottles of Australian wine were cooling in the little fridge. Yes, tonight should take his progress one step further. And if it worked with José, this carefully chosen lady, it should work with the next and the next. No need to limit himself. This was surely a time of golden opportunity such as he had never experienced before. There were a lot of lovely ladies in the neighbourhood and he liked them all with their delightfully intriguing, provocative ways.



By Ruth Westley

STRANDGADE 30



Sitting there in solitude
Deliberately posed,
With slanting rays of sunlight
Identity undisclosed.
Reading in absorption
Enigmatically composed,
So carefully constructed
A position that he chose.

Calming for the viewer,
The woman too at peace,
In soothing, muted colour
Emotions to release.
No sense of melancholy,
In silence we admire
The poetry of painting
Creativity to fire.

Your world just to enter
If only now we might.
Your existence so static,
Mysterious and white.
Within the walls contained,
Panelled door firmly closed,
Window draped and veiled
No outside force imposed.



A response to a painting by the Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershoi - Woman Reading in Sunlight, Strandgade 30. 1900 Exhibition at the Royal Academy, 16th July 2008.

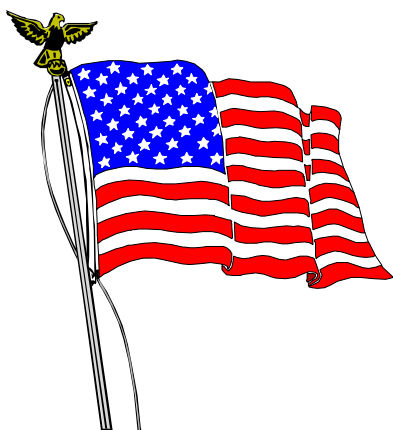
By Mikki Wilde

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

“It’s not going to happen, you know!” insisted the Little Voice.

“Rubbish!” I said, “Of course it is.” I carried on planning what to take to cope with the forecasted heavy snow and temperatures of -11°C , whilst remaining within the airline’s weight limit. There’s all the Christmas presents to get in as well, and I must take a book or two.

Great – it all went in, and under the limit, too. Passport – check; currency – check; medication – check. Plants watered, windows locked, rubbish out, cat arrangements in hand, alarm set. Goodnight!



Two in the morning – and the Little Voice is at it again. Funny – I don’t feel even remotely excited, and I should do as I am off to Oregon to see the son I’ve not seen since February, and his lovely girlfriend and their wonderful new home close to Mount Hood. I swing my feet out of bed and rapidly get ready, swallow a warming coffee, and am all ready and waiting for the taxi at 2.45 am.

No show! I ring both the taxi firm’s numbers – no reply. OK. Plan B it is then – I’ll drive to Birmingham, and put up with the extortionate parking charges. With suitcase and flight bag in the car boot, I set off. *“Remember what I said!”* “That’s what you think”, I replied more cheerfully than I actually felt.

“This car doesn’t feel right”, I thought after a few yards and, pulling in beneath a streetlight, I got out and saw that the front, nearside tyre was as flat as a pancake!

OK – Plan C. I drive the car gingerly round the block, back home and into the garage, and phone a friend. A good friend at that – one who didn’t object to turning out at 3.15 am to drive me to the airport! On the way there, I couldn’t help remarking that it did seem as if

something was telling me that it was not to be! But, speeding easily along the M6, I felt that things were now under control. We arrived at four o'clock and I joined the queue at check-in, and my friend bade me farewell and returned home to bed.

"It won't happen!" The Little Voice piped up again. "That's what you think – I made it to the airport in spite of everything, AND the flight is on time – so there!", I answered smugly. "Can I help you check in at the self-service machine?" said one of the airport staff. "It will speed things up, as you'll only have to drop your bag then." I accompanied her to the machine. Problem! She asked me to wait while she checked my journey details.

She returned saying apologetically, "I'm so sorry, but your connecting flight to Portland from Amsterdam is cancelled. You need to wait at that desk until it opens, and they'll sort things out from there." I was shocked, but well, there must be a Plan D – mustn't there?

To cut a long story short, there were no seats available on any routes until Christmas Day, arriving at midnight, which would have been absurd as I was due to fly home three days later. Also, the weather conditions in the US appeared to be worsening, and I could have been stranded half-way, or snowed in at Portland. Stunned, I turned away, and made my way to the taxi rank. *"I told you so!"* Forty minutes later and £80 poorer I arrived home, the Little Voice still giggling madly in my head.



I sighed as I unpacked the suitcase – home for Christmas. Not so bad after all, and anyway the cat was pleased to see me. I reckon these Little Voices know a thing or two!

A true tale by June Hawkins

THE GREAT WAR

*“If you get a choking feeling and a smell of musty hay,
You can bet your bottom dollar that PHOSGENES is on its way.
If the smell resembles pear-drops then you’d better not delay.
It’s not father sucking toffee; it’s that ruddy K.S.K.
If they’re using LEVISITE, it’s geraniums you’ll smell.
Then fold your hands and say your prayers, for it’s either heaven or hell.”*

*From an instructional poem,
Author unknown.
Date: The Great War*



Sent into war with a poem for a shield against gas attacks;
into the trenches armed with words.
(They’re mightier than the sword!).
Grandad wrote, in pencil, so he wouldn’t forget
the rhyme taught back home in Blighty.

Fear still vibrates through the page,
on paper, stained with sweat,
torn from a cheap writing pad;
folded, stored, till a new century,
read by a family he would never know.

Pain is etched in every line
but disciplined, he endured.
Endured the stupidity that sent boys
so poorly armed, to their deaths, folded and torn,
on the battlefields of Europe.

By Glenise Lee