

**Woman's
Weekly**
FICTION SERIES

7 Page Touching
Frontier Tale

March 2017



Your
No.1
Short Story
Magazine!

Fiction

Relaxing Reading!

20 Fabulous
Stories

To Keep You
Entertained!

'I Love A Puzzle!'

Says Bestselling Novelist
Sarah
Pinborough

Packed With
✓ Romance
✓ Mystery
✓ Comedy

PLUS

COFFEE
BREAK
PUZZLES

'In The Wings'
9-Page Story
Set In
London's
Music Halls



Great gift for crafters!

KITAZINE

Sew your own Bo Bunny

The
craft
NETWORK
KITAZINE



ISSUE 02 09.09
ON SALE 16.03.09

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO SEW THIS FABRIC TOY & HER OUTFITS

Inside...

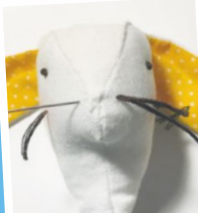
Contains all the fabric you need to stitch Bo and her wardrobe of pretty clothes

**ONLY
£9.99**



Make...
BO BUNNY,
A SKIRT, JACKET,
TOP, DRESS &
TROUSERS

Plus... STEP-BY-STEP GUIDES



**ON SALE AT WHSMITH AND ALL GOOD RETAILERS
OR VISIT THEKNITTINGNETWORK.CO.UK**

Contents

EDITOR:

Gaynor Davies

ART EDITOR:

Jane Stone

DEPUTY EDITOR:

Clare Cooper

SUB-EDITOR:

Sarah Giles

FICTION

ASSISTANT:

Maureen Street

HEAD OF

MARKETING:

Mary Bird

WOMAN'S WEEKLY,
161 Marsh Wall
London E14 9AP
Telephone 020 3148 5000.
Back issues: tel 01733 688964

Unless otherwise stated, all competitions, free samplings, discounts and offers are only available to readers in the United Kingdom, Channel Islands, Isle of Man and the Republic of Ireland. Prepress by Rhapsody. Cover and text printed by Wyndeham Bicester. ISSN 1465-0673.

WOMAN'S WEEKLY FICTION SPECIAL is a registered trademark of Time Inc. (UK) Ltd and is sold subject to the following conditions, namely that it shall not, without the written consent of the publishers first given, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise disposed of by way of trade at more than the recommended selling price shown on the cover, and that it shall not be lent, resold or hired or otherwise disposed of in a mutilated condition or in any unauthorised cover by way of trade or affixed to or as part of any publication or advertising, literary or pictorial matter whatsoever. © Time Inc. (UK) Ltd, 2017



Welcome

I've just heard a true story about a knitter so addicted to buying wool that she had to hide it from her partner. She even removed the bath panel in order to store her yarns. Fortunately, *Fiction Special* creates no such storage problems — although reading our yarns in the bath is highly recommended!

Gaynor Davies, Editor

PS Our next issue is on sale 7th March 2017

Photo: Claudine Hartzel



Fiction

4 Sacrifice by Kathleen Conlon

10 Suspicious Minds by Gabrielle Mullarkey

12 The Old Yew Tree by Linda Lewis

16 To And From by Gabrielle Mullarkey

18 Sea Anemones, Pavarotti and Mousstaka by Rachel Lovell

21 Birds Of A Feather by Jo Styles

22 Heat by Celia Bryce

29 Only A Hair's Breadth Apart by Brenda Joy

30 Happy To Share by Linda Lewis

32 Love When You Least Expect It by H. Johnson-Mack

36 In The Wings by Alison Carter

46 The Ex Factor by Jo Styles

50 Daffodils by Teresa Ashby

54 The Other Woman by Linda Mitchelmore

57 Chemistry by Fran Tracey

58 Amateur Night by Jo Styles

60 The Powder Room Pilferer by Pam Weaver

69 Strawberries On The Lawn by Vivien Hampshire

72 Second Chances by Linda Mitchelmore

75 Fly Me To The Moon by Irene Yates

Regulars

45 Just Jane

53 The Robin Family

71 Try our puzzles

75 'I love a puzzle,' says Sarah Pinborough

SUBSCRIBE TO WOMAN'S WEEKLY FICTION SPECIAL MAGAZINE FROM ONLY £9.49*

Save Up To 19%



Subscribe online at magazinesdirect.com/ficsub2017
Call 0330 333 1113 quote code 11XH

* Every 6 months by UK Direct Debit. Offer open to new subscribers only. Final closing date for all orders is 31 October 2017. For full terms and conditions, please visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries from the UK, please call 0330 333 4333, for overseas, please call +44 330 333 4333 (lines are open Monday-Friday, 8.30am-5.30pm UK time (exc bank holidays) or e-mail help@magazinesdirect.com

Subscription rates: One year, 12 issues (including p&p): UK £23.40; EUR €89.99; North America \$58.99; Rest of world £68.99. For enquiries from the UK, please call +44 330 333 4333 (lines open Mon-Fri GMT, 8.30am-5.30pm exc bank holidays) or e-mail help@magazinesdirect.com

We work hard to achieve the highest standards of editorial content, and we are committed to complying with the Editors' Code of Practice (<https://www.ipso.co.uk/IPSO/cop.html>) as enforced by IPSO. If you have a complaint about our editorial content, you can email us at complaints@timeinc.com or write to Complaints Manager, Time Inc. (UK) Ltd, Legal Department, 161 Marsh Wall, London E14 9AP. Please provide details of the material you are complaining about and explain your complaint by reference to the Editors' Code. We will endeavour to acknowledge your complaint within 5 working days and we aim to correct substantial errors as soon as possible.

Sacrifice

We've lived at the farm ever since the menfolk were sent overseas and we moved out of this city, and we have become unused to noise and crowds. But how would we fare in New Zealand?

We were a close family and, in the main, we were happy. And then the Great War came, followed by the Spanish flu, and everything changed.

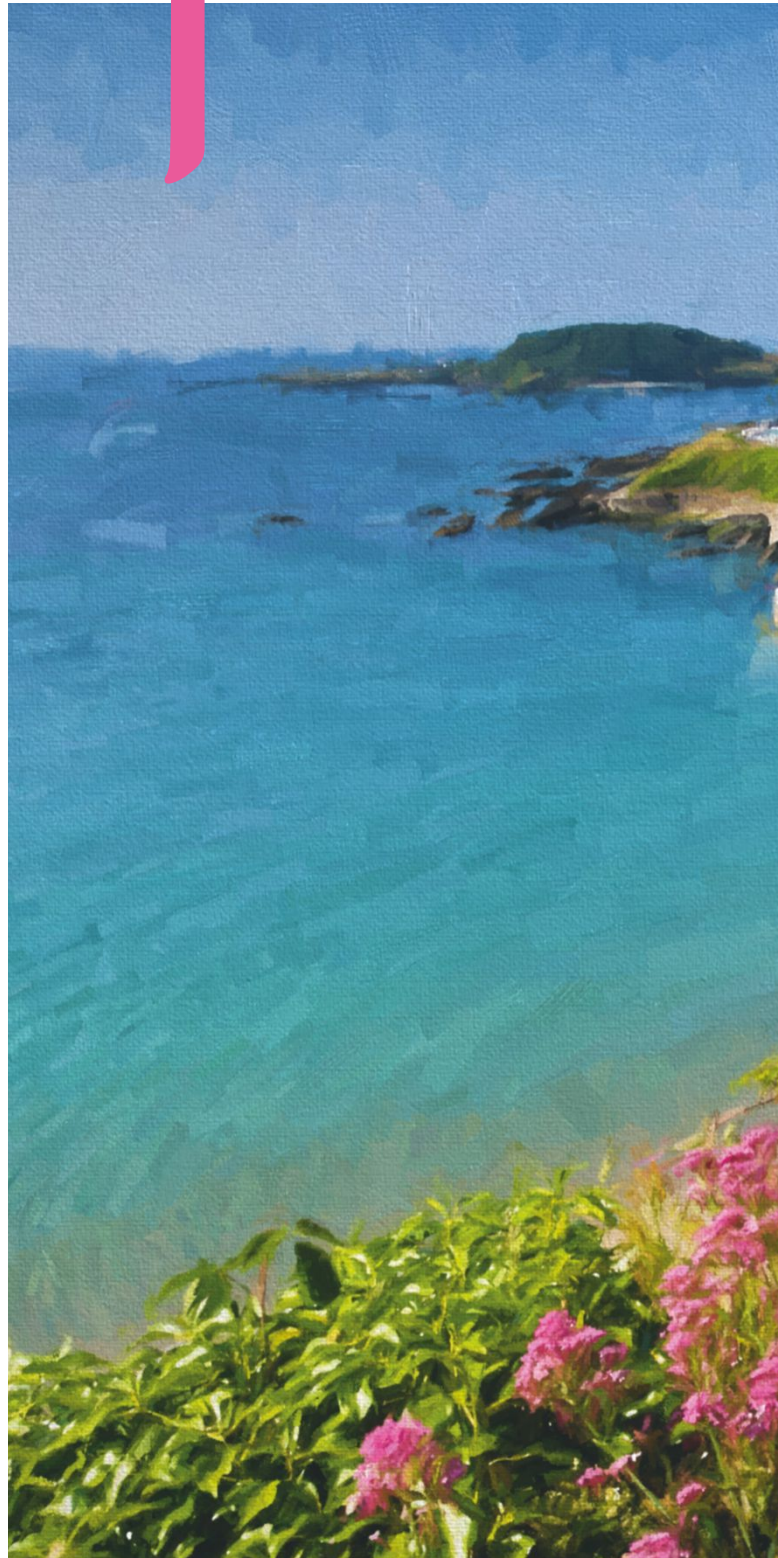


Eric, my nephew, is so excited at the prospect of our impending journey that he's awake before dawn. The night before, he'd insisted on helping me to pack our bags and I'd had to gently deter him from including a variety of his toys, reminding him that we are only spending one night away from home.

Ben, the farmer's eldest son, takes us to the railway station in the pony and trap. As he lifts Eric down, he says, "Now, young fellow, you look after your Auntie Lily," and then he takes

*Eric, my nephew, is so excited
at the prospect*

Illustration: istock



my hand to help me to the ground. His hand is as rough as you'd expect of someone whose livelihood is earned by working the land and tending the beasts. But its clasp is firm and comforting. He looks at me. "Have a safe journey," he says. He's blushing and, aware of this, turns away abruptly.

At this hour of the morning, pearly mist is rising from the fields and there's a chill in the air, so we sit huddled by the fire in

the waiting-room but, every so often, I allow Eric to go out on to the platform and check the position of the signal. After a while, I hear him calling urgently, "It's dropped, it's dropped!" so I gather my bags and get to my feet. It's hurting this morning, my foot, my hateful foot. I have one leg shorter than the other and am obliged to wear a built-up shoe, a great, clumping thing. "Auntie Lily's big boot," Eric calls it, amazed that a person should

possess a pair of shoes, one of them differing in size so noticeably from the other.

As we board the train, he bombards me with questions: "Auntie Lily, will this train go faster than the horse?"; "Auntie Lily, how many miles is it to the place?"; "Auntie Lily, will we see the sea?"

Then he folds his arms and presses his face against the carriage window and watches as the fields and the farmsteads

and the villages roll by. Occasionally, when approaching a crossing, the train slows and he will amuse himself by spelling out the name on the side of a public house or a shop front. And, of course, he continually repeats the question which all children ask, "Are we nearly there?"

"Yes," I say, "nearly there." And eventually we enter a long tunnel which leads into the city station: a soot-blackened canyon filled with roaring and clanging, smoke and steam. Guards shout, whistles shrill, doors slam, crowds surge, pushing and rushing, as though their lives depend on securing a seat. It is quite overwhelming and I feel Eric's grip on my hand tightening and notice that his lip is beginning to quiver.

We've lived at the farm ever since the menfolk were sent overseas and we moved out of this city, and we have become unused to noise and crowds.

To soothe him while we wait for our connection, I unpack my basket and we consume the lunch that I prepared: sandwiches of ham and cheese (and we were personally acquainted with the pig and the cows that provided those fillings), two slices of cut-and-come-again cake and a bottle of ginger beer.

"Are we eating Percy?" Eric asks, pausing respectfully before taking a bite. He has learned already that the piglets and the calves, those winsome pets, are mostly destined to be the providers of food. "Poor Percy," he sighs, but this knowledge doesn't appear to diminish his appetite.

Apart from the pangs at parting with small animals of which one has grown fond, I love life in the country. Whether I shall like it as well in another country remains to be seen. My brother, Eddie, awaiting demobilisation, plans to emigrate to New Zealand, sending for us when he's settled. England, he says, will be no place for heroes, whatever Mr Lloyd George cares to promise.

I've allowed Eric to bring along his diablo on the condition that it mustn't be allowed to disturb other passengers. He plays contentedly, spinning the spool



Sacrifice

on a string stretched between two handles, and I watch him and think he seems carefree. I often wonder what effect his mother's death might have had upon him, whether indeed he actually remembers her: he was only two and a half when they found out that she had consumption. She went into the sanatorium and was dead within the year. I talk about her, tell him how much she loved him but he doesn't show much interest. It would appear that Auntie Lily is all the mother that he is aware of ever having known.

"Will we see the sea?" he asks again.

He's never seen the sea, and I've seen it only once, before the War, when the family took a day trip to Bridlington. My brother Eddie tried to teach me to swim and when Pa fell asleep, my sister wandered off with Will Redshaw, who'd encountered us on the promenade. Purely by chance, she said, though I could see that her fingers were crossed behind her back when she said it.

Pa, who lied about his age, was among the first to enlist when Lord Kitchener called for volunteers, and died of a wound at Serre. I don't think my mother ever got over it. She was already at a low ebb when the first wave of the Spanish flu hit us.

So many deaths in such a short space of time. But I know that I must count my blessings and focus on the future. Eddie came through the conflict unscathed. He'll be back soon. And, best and most important of all, I have Eric.



He was up so very early this morning and now he sleeps, his thumb in his mouth, as the train rattles through the tunnels that men with picks and shovels cut through the great Pennine hills. As we pass through the last of these, which separates Yorkshire from Lancashire, he wakes, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"Are we there yet?" he asks.

"Soon," I say, and point out features in the landscape to distract him from boredom.

"Look at those tall chimneys," I say. "They are the cotton mills, and, look, a canal where the barges take coal to the furnaces."

Of course the trains now take the coal. Things change. It's inevitable. And, as if he's read my mind, he says, "Will there be trains in New Zealand?"

"I expect so," I say, though I really don't know. I feel alternately excited and alarmed at the prospect of that unknown country.

Gradually, the landscape changes. We leave the hills and the steep cluster of greystone towns behind. We speed past cornfields, market gardens and meadows, hurtling towards the coast. And now I can assure Eric that, yes, we are nearly there.

He winds up his diablo and I comb his curls flat and tell him to spit on my handkerchief so that I can remove the smuts from his face; it's essential that people should see that although I am not officially his mother, the care he receives is every bit as good as a mother would provide.

The cabbie gives me a calculating look when I state my destination, which doesn't help as I am already nervous, envisaging some great, grim pile, studded iron gates, massive locks and jangling keys. So it comes as a pleasant surprise to discover that our route takes us through tree-lined streets of



suburban villas until we approach the shore where the roads widen and the dwellings, set in landscaped gardens, become larger and more imposing, complete with conservatories and coach-houses and ornamental cascades, and then we turn a corner and come to a huge red-brick mansion which could well have been some rich merchant's residence, except that a sign in the grounds announces it to be the Sunnyside Convalescent Hospital.

"This is it," says the cabbie, and his glance now is purely sympathetic. "I wish you luck, missis," he says.

Slowly, I make my way along the curving driveway, not knowing what to expect. Eric has no such qualms, practically dances along, beaming broadly.

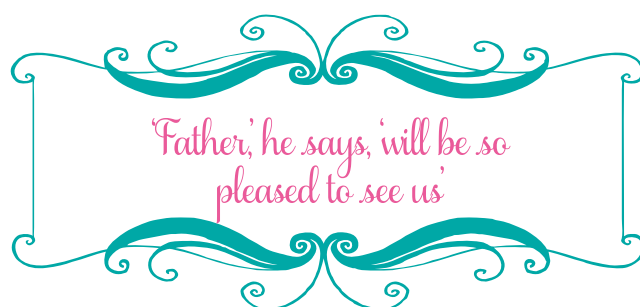
"Father," he says, "will be so pleased to see us."



My sister married Will Redshaw soon after that, supposedly chance, meeting in Bridlington. When war was declared, he volunteered, and we prayed — as we did with all the men — that it would be over before ever he needed to set foot on foreign soil, but eventually he joined the regiment as it ploughed its way through the engulfing mud of Flanders towards the carnage of Ypres.

My sister was a nervous wreck. Although we'd left the city — where the telegram boy was known to visit almost every house in certain streets — to rent a cottage at the edge of Tyler's Farm, there were plenty of black armbands to be seen in the neighbouring village. And just as our mother's grief made her prey to the influenza, so I believe that the strain experienced by my sister contributed to the speed at which the consumption destroyed her lungs, too.

They'd allowed Will home on compassionate leave, but he arrived at the sanatorium a day too late. I thought then that he seemed odd, but attributed it to



the effects of bereavement: the long silences interspersed with a hailstorm of stuttering, the vacant gaze, the constant fidgeting and twitching. My mother was perhaps more perspicacious and sent for a bottle of Dr Muller's Nerve Nutrient (guaranteed not German) which she'd seen advertised in John Bull as a remedy for nervous exhaustion, and he swallowed it obediently, though it became apparent that whatever was wrong was too serious to be cured by patent medicine.

"What's it for, Lily, this war?" He'd ask me that, over and over again. "What's it for? Young lads, scarcely taken razors to their chins, dying, crying for their mothers. We bury them, all the time. Some chaps would be better off dead."

I couldn't provide him with an answer. I knew only what I read in the papers: gallant little Belgium, Huns with hideous faces committing atrocities. And the need for all that to be stopped, however great the sacrifice.

"I don't think I can take much more of it," he said.

Nevertheless, they sent him back, back to the cold and the filth and the constant bombardments, until the day when he cracked completely, refused point blank to drag his weary limbs over another duckboard towards the next offensive.

At first, the Army had suspected him of faking. But no amount of sedation could cure his trembling or alleviate his strange, staggering gait, so they sent him home, first of all to the asylum in Wakefield, where my mother visited him and came back to report that he'd failed to recognise her, just stared straight ahead of him, lying on an iron bedstead clamped to the floor, among other men who rocked back and forth or wept unrestrainedly.

Then, mercifully, after some months, he was transferred to this specialist hospital for the shell-shocked, but it is only now that we've been informed that he's fit enough for a visit.



There are men in uniform walking about the well-tended grounds of the hospital. To my infinite relief, they look perfectly

normal. One of them pats Eric on the shoulder and asks him how old he is.

"Six," says Eric.

"Well done," says the soldier and rewards him with a threepenny bit.

I am ushered in to see Will's doctor while a nurse takes Eric by the hand and leads him kitchenwards with the promise of ice-cream.

The doctor's office is blue with smoke and the pipe, clamped between his teeth, is only removed when he needs to make a gesture to emphasise his point. But despite the fug and the forbidding eyebrows, he seems like a kindly man. Will, he explains, has been suffering from neurasthenia but has every prospect of making a full recovery. Rest and proper nourishment and the invigorating sea air can work wonders. "And he has a boy, I believe?" the doctor says.

"That sometimes gives our poor

Country. My second is that, though he seems calmer than he did when he returned for my sister's funeral, there's still evidence of nervousness: the restless hands, the foot tapping out a staccato rhythm on the hearth.

Eric looks up at me and says, "Is that gentleman my father?" I nod and push him forward. He approaches gingerly and then looks up at Will and says, "Hello, Father, are you well?"

Will stubs out his cigarette and opens his arms and, when Eric tentatively draws nearer, says, "I am all the better for seeing you," and sweeps up his son in a close embrace.

Eric wriggles a bit. After all, this person is a virtual stranger. And then Nurse Stephens steps forward and says, "Eric was telling me that he'd like to see the sea. We've still got an hour or so's sunshine. I'm off duty now. And," and she addresses Eric, who has now been returned to

child. I say instead, "How are you, Will?"

"I'm a lot better," he says with a sigh. "Compared to how things were."

We talk for a while about life on the farm, how the farmer's sons, exempt from conscription, have enabled me to manage on my own. Will says, "Ben, is it, the older one? Wasn't he sweet on you?"

He's very good to me, is Ben, chops my firewood, helps with the heavy lifting, is always there if something needs mending. Occasionally, I get the impression that he's about to make some sort of declaration, but he's a shy young man and anyway, in my case, it's very difficult to distinguish between pity and fondness.

Fortunately, Eric runs up, requesting pennies for the arcade, before I need to reply.

Will lights another cigarette and we look out to sea and glimpse the outline of a ship moving slowly on the horizon, and I think of the ship that will take us: Eddie and Will and Eric and me towards a new life.

The machines in the arcade have swallowed every last penny. Eric races back. "Miss Stephens and I are going on the sands. Are you coming?"

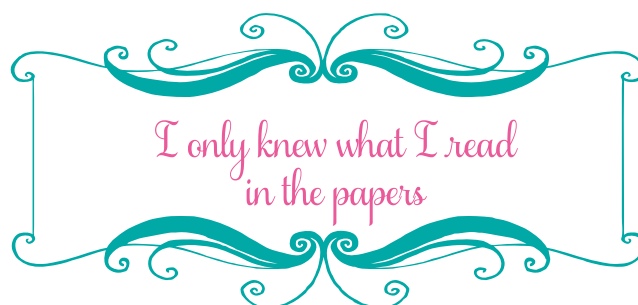
My foot is hurting, so I decline. "We'll watch you from here," I tell him. Miss Stephens comes up behind him. The wind has whipped tendrils of her hair out of its severe professional confinement. Her cheeks are rosy and her eyes sparkle. She's a very pretty girl, younger than she looked when in uniform.

"Race you!" she says to Eric and they clatter down the iron steps to the beach, where she deftly returns his clumsily thrown balls and has him running into the sandhills to retrieve them.

"She's good with him," Will says as, above the screaming of the seagulls, we hear Eric shout, "You're out!" when his companion takes a swipe at the ball with her bat and misses. "Mind you," Will continues, "it's not surprising. Vi has a tribe of younger brothers and sisters."

Vi! I suppose I hadn't realised that relations between the hospital staff and the patients would be so informal.

"He'll sleep tonight," I say. We are booked into a boarding house a little way along the



fellows an incentive to get better."

He stands up. "Nurse Stephens will direct you to the lounge," he says. "I'm sure he'll be delighted to see you."

The same nurse who'd supplied Eric with ice-cream — and I can see the evidence of its consumption around his mouth — is waiting in the hall, holding his hand. "Come on, Curlytop," she says, ruffling his hair, "let's go and find your daddy."

We proceed along several long corridors and then she ushers us into what seems to be a rather grand drawing-room, thickly carpeted, its long windows draped with brocade curtains, furnished with armchairs and card tables, and there, standing beside the fireplace and smoking a cigarette, is my brother-in-law.

My first impression is how thin he looks, a shadow of the robust man who left us in the spring of 1915 to fight for King and

terra firma, "I've brought my little brother's bat and ball. What do you say?"

He says, 'Yes,' of course. She says, "I'll just go and change then," and I'm surprised that she's to be of our party when we really need some privacy to discuss our family affairs.

Although, as we walk along the front towards the pier, I can see that, by distracting Eric's attention, it allows us — Will and myself — to talk without interruption.

He offers me his arm, looks down and says, "I don't suppose I'll ever be able to thank you enough, Lily. You've been a mother to him. Otherwise, I don't know how I'd have coped."

I resist the impulse to say, "Perhaps it will always be my function: the daughter whose prospects of marriage are slim, acting as nursemaid to other people's children." Though that isn't true any more since, to all intents and purposes, Eric is my

NEVER MISS AN ISSUE

*Ask your newsagent to save
your copy every month*



MARCH ISSUE
on sale **31 January**

AUGUST ISSUE
on sale **4 July**

APRIL ISSUE
on sale **7 March**

SEPTEMBER ISSUE
on sale **1 August**

MAY ISSUE
on sale **4 April**

OCTOBER ISSUE
on sale **5 September**

JUNE ISSUE
on sale **2 May**

NOVEMBER ISSUE
on sale **3 October**

JULY ISSUE
on sale **6 June**

DECEMBER ISSUE
on sale **7 November**

Fiction

FEBRUARY ISSUE
on sale **30 December**



AUGUST ISSUE
on sale **6 July**

SEPTEMBER ISSUE
on sale **3 August**

OCTOBER ISSUE
on sale **7 September**

NOVEMBER ISSUE
on sale **5 October**

DECEMBER ISSUE
on sale **2 November**

Knitting & Crochet

from Woman's Weekly

FEBRUARY ISSUE
on sale **30 December**

MARCH ISSUE
on sale **2 February**

APRIL ISSUE
on sale **2 March**

MAY ISSUE
on sale **6 April**

JUNE ISSUE
on sale **4 May**

JULY ISSUE
on sale **1 June**



GARDENING
March issue on sale
23 February

GARDENING
August issue on sale
13 July

HEALTHY LIVING
April issue on sale
23 March

HEALTHY LIVING
September issue on
sale **10 August**

GARDENING
May issue on sale
20 April

GARDENING
October issue on sale
7 September

HEALTHY LIVING
January issue on sale
29 December

HEALTHY LIVING
February issue on sale
26 January

GARDENING
June issue on sale
18 May

HEALTHY LIVING
July issue on sale
15 June

HEALTHY LIVING
November issue on
sale **5 October**

CHRISTMAS SPECIAL
December issue on
sale **2 November**

The Living Series

Sacrifice



promenade, and the landlady has agreed to provide us with an evening meal.

Will calls, shouting through cupped hands down to the beach, and they come running up the steps, Eric and Miss Stephens who is, apparently, to be addressed as Vi. They are windblown, their shoes full of sand, but quite exhilarated. "I think we make a very good team, don't we, Eric?" she says and he says emphatically, "Oh, yes!"

"You'll have worked up an appetite then?" Will says as we walk back along the pier. We can see the sign of the boarding house, *Balmoral*, in the distance.

Eric trots beside him, holding his hand. "Is Miss Vi coming, too?" he asks.

Will turns to look at her. "Well?" he says. She meets his gaze. And I know in an instant — that look says it all — that there is more to their relationship than simply that of nurse and patient.

She hesitates for a moment and then she says, "I won't, thank you all the same. You'll have a lot to talk about." She extends a hand. "Nice to meet you, Miss Pritchard. Perhaps we'll see each other again."

I have no doubt of it. I trudge along the promenade and I don't know which aches worse: my foot or my heart.



Eric falls asleep over his supper. Will carries him up to bed and

then joins me in the parlour, where the landlady has set a fire. I can't shake off my foreboding feeling and I know that some straight-talking is required.

"Have you heard from Eddie?" I ask.

He nods.

"He's told you about his intentions?"

He clicks his cigarette lighter over and over again. The fire crackles. The gasolier hisses. At length, he says, "You mean New Zealand?"

"Of course."

He shifts in his seat. "They say it's a land of opportunity. I'm sure Eddie will make a go of it."

I take a deep breath.

"And you?"

There's another pause and then he says, "I'm not really sure of my plans yet. There's a chap, he was in my platoon. He's become a good friend. You get very close in those circumstances, you know, when you have to rely on each other completely. Well, his people have an engineering works in Huddersfield and we talked sometimes about an opportunity there."

Will's an engineer — or he

was, before the War.

"And will you take it?"

My voice is trembling because I think I can already predict his reply.

"It's worth considering. When I'm myself again."

It's her, I know it. He won't want to leave her.

"Miss Stephens," I say. I'm stuttering almost as badly as he

used to do. "Would she have something to do with any decision that you make?"

"Did you like her?" he says, staring into the fire.

"I thought she was very pleasant."

He nods enthusiastically. "I'm pleased about that, because we've grown very close."

I, too, stare into the fire.

"And Eric seems to have taken to her."

"Indeed."

"One day," Will says encouragingly, "you'll have a family of your own."

We're speaking different languages and they're untranslatable. I see no point in prolonging the conversation, so when he gets up to leave, I don't attempt to detain him.

"It won't be long now," he says, "til I can be a proper father to Eric. I'm getting better all the time."

I've left the light on in our room and I can see that Eric is smiling in his sleep. I sit beside the bed watching him for a long time, trying to remind myself that keeping that smile on his face must be my first priority, that he has the right to a proper family life, should that be possible. Real love, they are always telling us in church, is unselfish, which seems right and proper but, oh, I just can't face the prospect of letting him go.



Sam, the youngest of the Tyler brothers, is waiting for us at South Milford with the pony and trap. He lifts Eric to sit beside him and says, "Ben would have come but he's

seeing to one of the beasts."

Ben seems to have a tremendous empathy with the animals. It is Ben they call upon when one of them is ill, he who breaks the horses they buy wild from the gypsies, stays up all night when a cow is calving and brings the beestings for Eric to drink.

"Good trip?" Sam asks,

whipping up the pony to a trot.

"I went on the sands!" Eric exclaims. And Sam says, "Well, good for you, young 'un. Oh, by the way, Flossie foaled yesterday."

The sands are forgotten.

"Can I go and see?" Eric entreats.

"Yes, but don't get too close just yet."

We reach the field nearest the cottage and Eric rushes off to peer over the gate at the grazing donkey and her spindly-legged offspring. Sam hands down my bags and then pauses. "He's too shy to ask you himself," he says, "so I'm doing it for him. He wants to know if you'll go to the picture palace with him this Saturday."

"Who?" I ask, though I know the answer before he says, "Our Ben, of course."

We look at each other. "You must know," Sam says, "that he thinks the world of you."

I used to cherish romantic notions that, one day, some man would come along and sweep me off my feet, without caring about my shoe, just the way it happened in the love stories that I read. I never, ever, imagined that Ben might fill that role. For one thing, he's five years younger than me. On the other hand, he's a kind man and a gentle man and has always managed to help me, without making me feel as though disability is my most defining characteristic.

I was doing a lot of thinking during the journey home while Eric lolled, sleeping, against my shoulder. The thought of handing him over to another woman tears at me, but if Ben and I were to get together, I was thinking, it would mean that I could stay here rather than board ship for New Zealand. And Huddersfield is only a train ride away.

All this, however, is in the future and the future, as we have recently discovered, is something that no one can predict. Meanwhile, here is Eric running back asking for carrots to feed to Flossie as a reward for her labours.

Sam waits patiently. "What shall I tell him?" he says at length.

Love, they say, can sometimes develop from liking. Maybe it's true.

"Yes," I say. "Tell him, 'Yes.'"

THE END

© Kathleen Conlon, 2017

Suspicious Minds

We get our kicks from old-fashioned whodunits. But our latest plot was proving rather hard to come by

"Strychnine," said Ted Allchurch. "Taken in small quantities, via food, it can mask an existing health condition. Foolproof."

"What about arsenic?" suggested Rosie Henshall timidly. "You can't beat that added to soup, for example."

"Haven't we done poison to death?" demanded Phil Clark. "If you'll pardon the pun. I mean, for goodness' sake, after *The Lure Of The Sinister Salad*, we did *A Symphony In Cyanide*, *Dial D For Digitalis*... Where's the originality?"

He looked around questioning at the rest of us in the Murder Mystery Suspense Players. We're an acting troupe with a difference — we also write the play we'll perform, taking our cue from the greats (Christie, Conan Doyle and so on), but adding our own twist. Some years, it's a case of too many cooks.

Now, June Gillmot put down her knitting and said to Phil, "I don't see you coming up with ideas this time around."

"That's because you all threw out my best ones," he protested.

As official note-taker for the Players, I glanced down at these ideas. Last week, Phil had suggested: *A hairdresser, after*

getting her elderly client to change her will, persuades her to try a new hair-dye without doing a patch test first in... The Curling Tongs Of Terror!

We'd vetoed it because it wasn't sufficiently dramatic and no curling tongs were involved.

With Phil still looking mutinous, I flicked through other ideas:

Ted: *A lethal dose of something or other is infiltrated into the tobacco of a millionaire pipe-smoker by his jealous business partner.*

Rosie: *A wife plots to kill her cheating husband by telling him it's OK to sit on a park bench, when it's actually quite a damp bench and he develops a chill that becomes fatal.*

Rosie was fond of this "stealth" despatch mode for cheating

falling on Sarah or inserting heart-shaped leaves into her salad from the poisonous wallflower bush (*A Waltz With Death In A Waldorf*, circa 2002).

That's the thing about the Players: we're upright citizens who get our kicks from old-fashioned whodunits, are compassionate in real life (not sure about Phil) and ask our audience to take imaginative satisfaction in guessing culprit and motive.

After kicking around a few more ideas in desultory fashion, I walked home with Ted, through the park. He lives not far from me. He lit his pipe and said, "What do you think of that Phil? Sociopath, you reckon?"

"No, he's just competitive. I mean..." I blew out my cheeks. "He strong-armed us into *The*

"I've heard things." He knocked his pipe against a tree. "She could be one of them black widows, going through husbands like a dose of salts, collecting the insurance each time."

I stared at him. "You've been too long with the Players, Ted!"

"Heard it on the grapevine."

"That ever-reliable source."

He meant that he'd heard rumours down at the Legion, where the regulars gossiped richly. "Didn't you hear all sorts about Rosie after her husband died, all of it nonsense?"

He frowned. "Disgraceful, that was! I soon nipped it in the bud. Difference is, I know Rosie."

Despite her propensity for plotlines about cheating hubbies, Rosie had been happily married to Derek

I'd fantasised about an anvil falling on Sarah

husbands — she'd get them to go out without a scarf on cold days, despite the fact they had a dicky chest, that sort of thing — making Phil's death by hair-dye look dramatically explosive in comparison.

Still, it wasn't like I'd come up with anything. I'd felt all tapped out for a while now... ever since my divorce, I suppose. Not that I'd fantasised about an anvil

Lure Of The Sinister Salad last year. Who on earth is 'lured' by salad? And sprinkling strontium over coleslaw — I never found that plausible."

"Changing the subject," said Ted, "you noticed that new woman who's moved in near you? Tall. Red hair."

I was glad it was dark, so he couldn't see my blushes. "Can't say I have," I lied.

before he'd died in his sleep several years ago (he'd been considerably older than her). I'd always thought she had a "thing" for Ted, but I'd never been able to tell if Ted (taciturn bachelor of the parish) had noticed, let alone reciprocated, and since I wasn't giving Sherlock Holmes any competition in the deductive reasoning stakes recently...

"We should probably extend the same benefit of the doubt to a stranger," I pointed out.

"I wonder how she did it, if she is a black widow," Ted mused. "Your new neighbour, I mean. Let's see. Husband number one could have drowned on honeymoon. Number two was a car crash — she cut the brakes — and number three, a hot-air ballooning incident."

"Wouldn't the police find out if the brakes were cut? And how did she drown him?"

"She persuaded him to go for a swim after a big lunch. He got cramp and got into difficulties."

"That's the Rosie stealth method. And it still leaves the brakes. And did she push him out of the balloon?"

"Now you're asking," muttered Ted, and when he sat on a park bench to consider, I dropped beside him. We both felt the beginnings of an idea, but it needed teasing out. Also, if we could find a method that satisfied means, motive and opportunity, as well as sounded plausible when revealed, which one of us could claim the credit?

"Say now't to the others," advised Ted when we parted. "Not 'til we've sorted the finer points."

We'd both agreed that the swimming thing might work, but only if she could, say, goad him into swimming out to where it wasn't safe, then claim afterwards that it had been his own idea and she'd tried in vain to dissuade him.

Lost in this idea, I got a shock a day later when my doorbell rang. A tall woman with red hair introduced herself on my doorstep as Maisie Hughes, my new neighbour. "Sorry to disturb you, but my cat is missing, so I'm asking all the neighbours to check their garages."

I led the way to mine while she told me that Hercule was portly, with a white bib and superior attitude. He wasn't in my garage, but I promised to keep an eye out. "Besides, with a name like that, I'm sure *eez leetle* grey cells will lead him back home."

She looked at me blankly.

"Hercule Poirot?"

"Oh — he's actually named after Hercules Tarragon, a character in *Tintin*. Do you like *Tintin*?"

I had to admit I'd never read any of the books, and she'd never read Agatha Christie.

"That's all poison and lead piping in the library, isn't it?" She smiled.

"Something like that." I was going to tell her about the Players, but then I wondered if she'd think I was morbid, so I left it there and asked her to keep me in the loop, re Hercules. Then I had another thought. "How long since you moved here? Only, I heard you're supposed to keep a cat indoors at your new home for a couple of weeks in case it tries to return to the old one."

"I was keeping him in, but he got crafty and slipped out —"

"After picking the lock! So, he does have *leetle* grey cells, after all!"

"You're strange," she said, but her smile was still just about in place, so I took that to mean "strange" as in "not uninteresting."

She returned — unexpectedly — that evening with a covered dish and an update. "I found him! He was ingratiating himself

it was too late? Call the police and have forensics on standby? I still had the dish downstairs..."

In the end, I called Ted. To his credit, he didn't turn a hair at being pestered in the small hours by a feverish, and possibly delirious, conspiracy theorist.

"You hang on there, I've got a mate, a doctor who owes me a favour. I'll get him to make a house call in the morning."

"That might be too late!"

I said, panic rising.

Ted said lots of soothing things then, partially backtracking on the black-widow theory:

"You know what they're like down the Legion. If I'm honest, I laid it on a bit thick on our walk so we'd get our thinking caps on. I'm sure it's a coincidence you're a tad unwell after availing yourself of her vittles."

Noticing his new talent for understatement, I tried to get some sleep.

Next thing I knew, I seemed to be surrounded by people, all pushing their way into my bedroom with hot drinks and

"She did say you were a strange one. But she seemed to find that interesting, mind, especially when I told her about the Players. 'That'll be where he gets his ideas from,' she said. She's popping by later."

I raised a hand to my stubbly cheek. I was still achey and my legs felt like rubber, so it wasn't a foregone conclusion that I'd be looking my best.

"I feel terrible," I croaked.

"In general, and for thinking Maisie might be a killer. She doesn't know your black widow theory, I hope?"

"No, rest easy. Point of fact, she's divorced. The one hubby she did have is very much alive.

Which I swear to you, I didn't know on our walk. I thought she had at least one skeleton bricked up behind the wall.

Now, what do you think to Murder By Muscarine?"

Muscarine, Ted explained, is a poison found in the red and white spotty mushroom that fairies are reputed to alight on. "Beauty of it is, before it kills you, you suddenly

Shivering, I wracked my brain for what to do next

a street away with a lady who's partial to a pilchard. Anyway..." She took a deep breath, holding up the dish. "I've made too much of this, so if you're hungry..."

I drew off the foil cover.

"Smells delicious."

"Mushroom stroganoff."

"My favourite," I lied, taking the dish (creating the opportunity to return it. As a plotting specialist, I have to think one step ahead).

That night, though, I started to feel ill, shivering and sweating, my thoughts drifting back to Ted's "black widow" gossip — and to where she might have picked or found those mushrooms...

Sociopaths didn't always need a valid reason to bump off their targets, did they? Like, say, a life insurance policy. Maybe she was just doing it "because she could" (what we call in the trade "the Everest motive") or to keep her skills honed before moving on to husband number four...

Shivering, I wracked my brain for what to do next: take an emetic? (too late, if it was mushroom poisoning); write a letter exposing the killer before

flannels and whispers...

"No, visiting hours have been strictly staggered," Ted said later from the chair by the window. "Lucky I found your spare key under that there flowerpot. You've been out of it a while, so you've probably lost all sense of time. Doc said it was a particularly nasty bout of flu."

"Flu?"

Ted indicated a bile-green scarf looped over the end of my bed. "June Gillimot brought that over when she heard. Doc said you probably got it from walking about in this weather unmuffled — not to mention sitting on chilly park benches of an evening."

I stared at him from my wan, unshaven face. "So, the mushrooms —?"

"We put the screws on the Hughes woman," Ted revealed in a very bad, American gum-shoe accent. "In the end, she admitted everything — that she got a stroganoff ready-meal from the supermarket and implied she'd made it herself."

"Oh, no! That means she knows I accused her of trying to poison me."

and briefly feel better. Now that's ingenious, that is."

"I'd rather steer clear of mushroom-themed murder." I sniffed.

"Rosie said you'd say that." Ted rose creakingly from the chair. "She said that sometimes you weren't a fun guy."

I still don't know if Rosie really made that joke or not.

However, since my recovery, she and Ted have definitely gone beyond lingering looks on one side (apparently unnoticed on the other) to sharing ideas, and even a Thermos, on a day trip to 221B Baker Street.

Meanwhile, Maisie has proved an enthusiastic recruit to the Players, even using June's knitting needles as inspiration for our latest performance — *A Yarn To Die For*.

I suppose Phil's nose will be out of joint for some time on that score.

Not that I care about that — or much else, to be honest — when I'm holding hands with Maisie to keep warm on our walk home after rehearsals.

THE END

© Gabrielle Mullarkey, 2017

The Old Yew



Illustration: istock

Tree

It was all right for Rachel. She just saw a pretty tree — but I saw it as an accident waiting to happen

It's funny how an old tree can stir people up.

The meeting was well attended, the church hall almost full. I listened to the other side's argument, but I'd heard it all before. To me, the tree had outlived its usefulness and was both a danger and an eyesore.

The yew's reddish brown trunk had been split, by a lightning strike, in 1546 and had been propped up by a large oak beam ever since. Now, it needed more work to make it safe. The sensible thing would be to chop it down; the tree would collapse eventually. When that happened, who knew what damage it might do? It was over 40 feet high.

I moved back to the village a year ago, and remembered the tree from my childhood. The damage to the trunk made climbing easy. Even I, with no head for heights, could clamber onto its lowest branches with ease. My brothers thought nothing of climbing right to the top.

When it was my turn to speak, I could see I was gaining support by the way people's heads were nodding. At least, I hoped that was the reason; it WAS rather stuffy in the hall.

After my five minutes, I sat down and the Chair, Rachel Stevens, took the stand. "We've heard both sides. Now we need to know what you think."

I don't know what she expected — maybe a cry of, "Save our tree", but whatever she hoped for, she didn't get it. A few people stood up and waffled, saying they didn't know what was best. Either way, it would be costly.

Eventually, it was decided to leave the decision to the committee. "If everyone agrees, we can vote at the next meeting," suggested Rachel.

I wasn't having that. We weren't due to meet for another six weeks. I stood up. "Madam Chair, as all the committee are here this evening, I propose we hold the vote now."

So that's what we did. The six of us went into another room and held a vote. The result came back three for, and three against — giving the Chair, otherwise known as Rachel, the deciding vote.

"The tree stays," she said. And that was that.

I left in a huff. I'm a bad loser, always have been. It's not a trait I'm proud of. I tend to get cross and rant at the world for maybe an hour, then the volcano subsides and I'm fine. Only, this time, I stayed angry.

It was all right for Rachel. She saw how pretty the tree was with its red bark and berries, and wanted it to stay. I saw an accident waiting to happen.

After the last storm, the

I was still feeling grumpy the following day when Pickles, my rescue terrier, nudged me with his nose. I patted the sofa and he jumped up beside me for a cuddle. I told him about the meeting and he listened, as though he understood my every word. When I'd finished venting my spleen, he trotted down and went into the hallway to fetch his lead.

I laughed. "Good idea," I said. "A brisk walk will soon restore my mood."

It did, too. It was one of those crisp, fine days when you can feel the seasons starting to change as winter loses its grip and spring begins to push her way forward. I walked without caring where I was going, letting Pickles lead the way.

Of course, he headed for the churchyard in search of squirrels. Squirrels are his favourite things in all the world and they were starting to be more active again

her hand stroking the rough bark as if it were a pet. She carried on talking, but it was as though she was talking to the tree. It felt uncomfortable, like eavesdropping on a private conversation, but there wasn't a lot I could do. I could hardly walk away.

"This is where we first met. I was sitting up here, reading my book, when this young lad came strolling by, hands in his pockets, whistling. When he saw me, he stopped and smiled up at me. 'I bet I can climb higher than you,'" he said.

"Without waiting for my answer, he clambered up the trunk like a monkey until he was almost at the very top. I didn't even try to follow him. I wanted to so much, but I didn't dare. My mother would have tanned my hide if I'd gone home with a torn skirt. When he figured out I wasn't going to follow, he climbed back down until he was sitting just above my head. 'There's a good film on at the Odeon,' he said. 'Let's go see it.' And that's what we did."

"You're talking about Tom, aren't you?"

She blinked as if she'd forgotten I was even there. "Yes. We always thought of this as our tree. It's where we fell in love."

She climbed down and showed me where the initials, T and A, were engraved in a heart near the base of the main trunk. "He carved that heart the day he asked me to marry him."

I knew the story. Everyone did. Tom had always loved danger; the bigger the risk, the more he loved it. Climbing trees, exploring tunnels. Nothing scared him.

Less than a month after they married, he was killed in a motorcycle accident after taking a bend too fast. Rachel became a widow at the age of 22. Overnight, she changed from a happy, carefree newly-wed, in

I'm a bad loser, always have been. It's not a trait I'm proud of

lowest branch had started to bend. Given another year or so, it would be within reach of any passing child or pet. Something needed to be done, and soon.

Yews are poisonous. I know that to my cost, because on my seventh birthday, a branch broke off in a gale and I ate some berries. I took a handful home to show my mother and she immediately called an ambulance.

I was lucky. I hadn't chewed the berries so there was no lasting damage, but it did mean I missed my birthday party.

after their winter rest. In all his seven years, he's never come close to catching one. I don't think he really wants to. It's the chase he enjoys.

As we rounded the path, I saw the old yew, its outline stark and heavy against the sky, and there, perched on a low hanging branch, was Rachel.

"Congratulations," I told her. "You got your reprieve."

I thought she'd be happy. Instead, she looked sad. As I drew closer, I could tell that she'd been crying.

"I don't know what I'd do if they chopped it down," she said,

The **knitting** NETWORK

The **NEW** website for **Woman's Weekly** patterns

Comfy Cushions to Make



Floral Cushion Crochet Pattern
£1.99 Code **WHD049**
Measurements: 40 x 40cm / 16 x 16in



Woodland Animal Cushion Crochet Patterns £3.99 Code **WHD192**
Measurements: Approximately 35cm / 13 3/4in in diameter

For 100s of quality knitting and crochet patterns visit **theknittingnetwork.co.uk**



Heart Shaped Textured Cushion
Crochet Pattern £1.99 Code **WHD042**
Measurements: Width across 32cm / 12 1/2in and 34cm / 13 1/2in high



Mixed Cushion Cover Set Knitting
Patterns £2.99 Code **WHD081**
Measurements: Each cushion measures
41 x 30cm / 16 x 12in



Cushion Cover With African Flowers
Crochet Pattern £1.99
Code **WHD177**
Measurements: 45 x 45cm



Anchor Cushion Cover Knitting
Pattern £1.99 Code **WHD089**
Measurements: Approximately 35 x 35cm /
13 3/4 x 13 3/4in

Register on **theknittingnetwork.co.uk** for our newsletter full of news, offers and tips

How to Order

The
knitting
NETWORK

DOWNLOAD YOUR DIGITAL PATTERNS NOW

Visit our website
theknittingnetwork.co.uk

You can buy, download and print a digital PDF version of any pattern on **The Knitting Network** website, instantly.

GET YOUR PATTERNS DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR

Call 0800 024 1212* quote **FC03**
or fill in the coupon below

Each pattern will be printed on A4 card and posted to you at an additional cost of £1.99.

Terms and conditions: The yarn(s) and the shade(s) quoted in these patterns were available when the designs were created. As we are unable to guarantee the availability of the yarn, where possible we have specified standard weights. However, if an alternative yarn is used, the yarn amounts may differ. For a perfect result, we recommend to always check your tension.

This offer closes on 7 March 2017 and is subject to availability to readers in the UK, offers cannot be used in conjunction with other promotions, prices are correct at the time of printing. If you do not have the facility at home to print our downloadable knitting patterns you can call or fill in the coupon attached and pay an additional £1.99 for printing and delivery. Charge only applies to patterns delivered by post. Items will be despatched within 2-5 days once payment has cleared. You'll be notified if a longer delay is expected.

All correspondence concerning this offer should be sent to **The Knitting Network Pattern Offer FC03 Customer Care, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU**. Or call 0800 024 1212*.

* Telephone lines are open Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm, but closed on bank holidays. Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones.

PLEASE FILL IN THE COUPON - Payment must be made by cheque, sent with the coupon to the address provided

**To: The Knitting Network Pattern Offer FC03 Customer Care,
5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU**

Pattern Code	Product Name	Price	Qty	Total
WHD049	Floral Cushion Crochet Pattern	£1.99		
WHD192	Woodland Animal Cushion Crochet Patterns	£3.99		
WHD042	Heart Shaped Textured Cushion Crochet Pattern	£1.99		
WHD081	Mixed Cushion Cover Set Knitting Patterns	£2.99		
WHD177	Cushion Cover With African Flowers Crochet Pattern	£1.99		
WHD089	Anchor Cushion Cover Knitting Pattern	£1.99		

By providing your details, you agree to be contacted by Time Inc. (UK) Ltd and its group companies, home of **The Knitting Network**, **Woman's Weekly** and other iconic brands. We'll only contact you about things we think you'll be interested in, like special offers and the latest updates. Please tick here if you DO NOT wish to receive these messages by email ☐ by post and/or telephone ☐.

Postage **£1.99**

TOTAL £

I enclose a cheque (no cash, please) made payable to **'The Knitting Network'** for the sum of

£ (please write your name and address clearly on the back of your cheque)

Mrs / Miss / Ms / Mr (delete as appropriate) _____

First Name _____

Last Name _____

Address _____

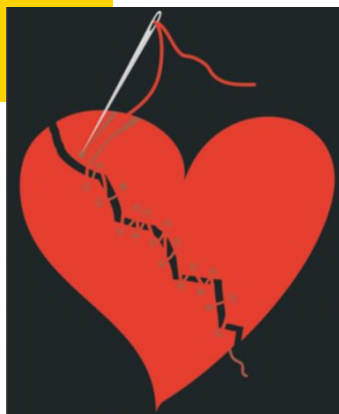
Postcode _____

Daytime tel no (incl code) _____

Email address _____



The Old Yew Tree



love with life, into a quiet, serious woman who spent most of her life on committees.

I thought she was going to cry again, so I put my hand over hers. "In that case, I'm glad the tree's had a reprieve," I told her. "You'll hear no more about it from me." I patted the trunk, which felt surprisingly warm under my skin. I didn't like to say that it would have to come down one day. Soon, too, unless I was very much mistaken. The split trunk already needed to be supported by a hefty plank. "Some more propping up might come in useful." I looked at Rachel for approval and she nodded.

"We could all use a bit of support," she said as she turned and walked away. She looked so forlorn and so alone, my heart ached for her.

The storm came two days later.

I've always loved stormy weather, so when the thunder started moving closer, I took Pickles for a walk up the hill, to get the best view.

Most dogs hate thunderstorms, but not Pickles. He loves them almost as much as I do. The moment he sees the first flash, he tears about, snapping his mouth and barking as though trying to catch the lightning.

That night, the storm was magical, like watching one of those early, stop-start animations. One second, the world was dark. The next, it was flooded with light. I wasn't the least bit scared, it was too beautiful to be frightening. To my ears, the storm sounded like a crazed orchestra, with each

section battling against the others — the thundering drums, the ever-changing music of the rain taking the part of the strings, and the wind playing rich oboe and deep bassoon notes as it swirled about, toppling leaves and branches in its wake.

Then a bolt of lightning struck the yew tree.

I watched in horror as the broken trunk exploded into matchwood. Seconds later, the whole tree was ablaze. I called the fire brigade but I knew that, this time, the old yew would be beyond saving.

I had to tell Rachel. I couldn't let her see it on the news, it would be too big a shock, so I dropped Pickles home, then headed to her house.

When I got there, the storm was still raging. I didn't think she was going to answer the doorbell. I wouldn't have blamed her. It was getting late and I must have looked like a madman, thanks to the effects of the rain and the wind, but I had to speak to her.

I knocked again, and again, until at last she answered.

walked so fast, it was difficult to keep up.

When we reached the top of the lane, she stopped. From there, we could see the tree, or rather what was left of it. The fire was out, but it was obvious that the tree hadn't survived the strike.

I expected Rachel to turn around and go back home. Instead, she set off again, so fast she was almost running. When she reached the tree, I thought she was going to fling her arms round it and hug it, so I called out a warning. "Be careful! It might still be smouldering."

She took no notice and began frantically sorting through the debris.

I knew what she was searching for — the initials Tom had carved all those years before. When she found them, she collapsed into a heap and started to cry.

I didn't know what to do, so I knelt down beside her and put my arm around her shoulders. It was as if I'd pressed a switch. She let out a groan, grabbed hold of me and began to sob.

"Let it all out," I whispered

I didn't think she was going to answer the doorbell. I wouldn't have blamed her

"What are you doing here at this hour?" she asked.

"You're soaked through."

"It's about the tree," I said softly.

As I explained what had happened, I saw the pain on her face, but she didn't cry.

"I want to see it," she said. "Now."

I could tell by her voice that there was no point arguing with her, so I waited in the hallway while she put on her shoes and coat and a pair of thick gloves. By that time, the storm was moving away, but it was still raining and very windy. Rachel hardly seemed to notice. She

and she did.

I have no idea how long we stayed there, but by the time she let me go, the storm was just a distant rumble. The rain and wind had died down, leaving a bright, moonlit sky.

"You've got your wish," she said. "They'll dig out the stump and the tree will be gone forever." Then she stood up, dusted herself down and turned away. "Please don't follow me," she said. "I need to be alone."

All I could do was stand there and watch her walk away, back straight, head held high. As she quickened her pace I realised the old saying was wrong. Lightning

CAN strike twice, but it wasn't just the tree I was thinking of. It was me. As I watched her walk away, I knew that I'd been hit by the thunderbolt of love and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

A team of workmen came to dig out the remains a few days later. Luckily, I knew the foreman and managed to have a word with him before they started. I'd wondered whether Rachel would be there, but she stayed away. In the end, I couldn't blame her. I could feel the sadness as the tree's ancient roots were wrenched from the earth.

I went to see her the following week.

"I have a gift for you." I handed her a piece of tissue paper. Inside was a plaque which I'd had made from the trunk of the old yew tree; the piece where Tom had carved those initials, years before. "Now you can keep it with you for always," I explained. Rachel hugged the plaque to her heart, then closed the front door in my face. She hadn't said a single word. I had no idea what to do. Should I knock or simply go back home? I didn't want to leave, but at the same time, I could hardly break down her door. I was still trying to decide, when the door opened again.

"I'm sorry, Martin. That was very rude of me," she said. "I didn't know what to say. 'Thank you' isn't enough for such a wonderful, thoughtful gift."

"It's OK," I said. "It wasn't just an old tree, not to you." It wasn't just an old tree to me either, not any more. It was the place where I fell in love for only the second time in my life, but I could hardly say that to Rachel. She'd been on her own for 15 years. She might never be ready to start a new relationship. All I could do was hope that, one day, the lightning bolt of love would strike her the way it had struck me. If it did, I knew that I'd be there, waiting. I was about to go when she said the words that gave me hope.

"Would you like to come round for dinner one evening? My way of saying, 'Thank you'," she added quickly.

"I'd love that," I said.

THE END

© Linda Lewis, 2017

Something has changed with Mr P, though I'm not sure what. He has even started to ask me questions about my life

From And To

Mr Pendennis is my half-three to four-thirty. *Arthur*, it says on my notes. I wonder if he ever had a Guinevere. It says *Single* next to *Status*, rather than *Widowed*, so I'm thinking not. In my one hour, I have to: do ironing, load washing-machine (if needed), change his dressing, wash up, do a light house clean, prepare his lunch, "encourage" him to eat, and prepare a supper for him to eat later. I have found the timescale difficult, so I choose my battles (making sure he gets a proper meal), though he always ticks the form to say I did everything — maybe he can't be fussed with getting a replacement.

I feel guilty at not disinfecting the worktops on every visit, for example, but I think he sees me trying to do it all and makes allowances. At least his next-door neighbour, Mrs Clements, comes in as soon as the machine beeps, unloads his washing and hangs it out. I collect it back the following day, to start ironing.

That's the regular routine. Oh — apart from his rudeness. He's not the rudest person I've met in this job, I should say straight off, so I make him some allowance, too. Also, it's no fun when arthritis has clamped its teeth around your wrists and ankles and kneecaps and made a mockery of all those photos of you walking uphill in your youth. "It's not 'walking uphill'," he corrected me crossly once. "It's called fell-walking."

He has trophies on the mantel that I'm not allowed to dust in case I drop and dent them, seeing as I'm that "ruddy clumsy woman from Sierry Leony". The photos also show these fells. Steep, they look, very steep, but not as mountainous as home. I once told him that Sierra Leone means "lion mountains" in Italian. Fifteen years I've been away and I'm looking at 30 now. That's half a lifetime.

"So you lot are Italian, Aminata?"
"No," I replied, sprinkling soap

flakes over his combinations (hand-wash only for those). "I'm descended from Jamaican Maroons who were transported there by Britain after fighting for their freedom from slavery."

"Still sounds like a lounge singer to me — 'Sierry Leony sings Sinatra! One night only!'" That's Mr Pendennis for you. Always keen to insult, then wants to know why I must depart on the dot.

"You know why, Mr P. If I'm late to my next client, I'm docked money. If your needs have changed significantly, I have a form you can fill in for social services..."

"Oh, there's always a form." He's got that right. Does he realise that I fill in just as many? And some of the questions... I wouldn't dare ask Mr P the one about regular habits.

But then, quite unexpectedly, a few weeks ago he said he was "risking" a trip to the day-care centre — he made it sound as if he was braving a malarial swamp in search of Doctor Livingston. "So you won't need to come until Thursday, Aminata, 'cos they'll be doing me a hot lunch at the centre. Have a day off."

I laughed at that, "like a drain",

He made it sound as if he was braving a malarial swamp

according to him.

"Drains gurgle," I retorted, "hyenas laugh."

"Well, you'd know," he said. "Must be plenty where you're from."

He has very strange ideas. I saw no need to tell him that I've never seen a hyena in my life. I live with my elderly aunt on the other side of town — she sponsored me when I first got

my papers to come over — and when I'm not looking after my clients, I take care of her. My life is very uneventful. So I merely said to him, "Mrs Clements mentioned you need new shirts, as the ones she hangs out have more holes than fabric. She will take you shopping at a time of your convenience."

"Ruddy women," was all he replied.



Knew straight off that coming to the day centre was a mistake. They lured me here under false pretences (homemade Yorkshires, my eye), then unleashed local schoolkids as part of some harebrained "adopt an old person" scheme.

I mean, without even asking! All right, I suppose the article who approached me did say I had the right to decline to participate, but by then he'd parked himself and asked me if I came here often. When I said, "No, not if I can help it," he told me his name was Kai, he was 10 and going to "big school" next year, and my walking stick was really "cool".

I told him I kept it to push inquisitive kids to their proper distance, but he just laughed and asked me what it was made of and, before I knew it, I was telling him about all my other sticks — the ones I had for proper walking — made of stout hazel or blackthorn. Now, though, they're called trekking poles (I ask you!), and they're made of aluminium and fold up.

In fact, I was just getting going properly when this Kai article says his time's up and we can talk again next week. I was very annoyed, I can tell you, to be wound up like an under-used clock and then left to tick in an empty room. I didn't tell him, though. Might tell Aminata, although that woman never listens properly.

Also, haven't decided if I'll come back next week or not, as I don't care to be jollied into activities — though it's a toss-up between that and sitting alone after Aminata's been, with

nothing to do but ponder my reflection in a non-slip beaker.



Something has changed with Mr P, though I'm not sure what or that I want to ask.

He asked me to look out some of his old photos to take along to the day centre one week — "there's someone pops in as might be interested" — and then he asked me about my grandparents.

"I have little knowledge of them," I confessed. "They died before I was born."

"And your parents?"

A difficult subject. I gave evasive answers until he realised he was trespassing on hallowed ground. It took some time, however, as Mr P is not one for picking up a dropped hint. Maybe there will come a time when I can open up about losing both my parents. But not yet, and not to him.

He's asked me other questions about myself, too, bordering on the inquisitive but, strangest of all, he's left off making the rude remarks. Is he sickening for something? I did feel his forehead, but he said, "Unhand me, woman, and keep your thermometer where I can see it."

I reminded him that I don't have a thermometer, as I'm not a nurse, and he asked, "Do you want to be?"

I said I'd thought about it, on and off, but it takes time and money to train and I had commitments (here hinting at my aunt).

"Fiddlesticks!" he said. "That's only excuses. Know why I took up fell-walking? Had polio as a kid. Doc said I'd be too weak to climb the stairs after it. Well, I showed everyone! I bet there are schemes, student loans, what have you. I could do the research. I've got the time."

So now he's taken to looking things up at the day centre's computer suite, on my behalf. He has all but filled in an application form. "You don't want to let the grass grow. No spring chicken, are you? Now, you have to pick a specialism when you do your

training. So what are you interested in?"

Intensive-care nursing, I told him. I think I might have an aptitude, and I'd like the challenge. Maybe later, lecturing in nursing. "I'll think about the form."

"Well, don't think too long."

In the meantime, he 'invites' me to an event he's attending

In the meantime, he "invites" me to an event he's attending, as his plus-one. It's being held at a local primary school. When I say "invites", what he actually said was, "Look, there's this thing this kid's asked me to at his school, I can't get out of it, wish I could, so you might as well come along and suffer it, too."

I checked with my supervisor that it would be appropriate and then I agreed to go with him, mostly out of curiosity, saying, "I didn't know you knew anyone with their own teeth, Mr P." Or had friends of any age that I'd met or heard about, truth be told.

"Ha di ha, Aminata. I know someone who still has a few milk teeth! So there."

He confided then all about his afternoons talking to a boy called Kai and telling him about his life. "Some sort of 'adopt an old person' scheme, if you please. Still, passed the time and gave him something to chew on, I hope."

So now, here we are at the primary school, for an activity related to what the children have learnt from their older and "wiser" mentors.

Mr P doesn't bother introducing me over the squash and crisps in the school hall, so I do it myself. "I'm Aminata, originally from Sierra Leone. I'm

hoping to train as a nurse."

Several people look at me and say "Ah" in a very mysterious way.

I find out why when we sit down for the "do".

What I'm expecting is that the children will each read a piece about the life of the elderly person they've met. But it's something different: seems the elderly people have nominated a person they're interested in, for the child to go off and research or imagine.

Mr P has chosen me — or a version of me that he's imagined — and then Kai, a small boy with an overbite, has further imagined or added things.

The result is a little strange — this small boy standing up, wearing what certainly looked like a traditional garas pattern, and telling people the name of "his" village, the history of the Maroons and other groups who make up the country, the food, the landscape...

"Did you know," he says, "that in Sierra Leone, we have the third largest natural harbour in the world? And some of the biggest diamonds in the world were found in our mines..."

I find myself nodding along. I'm proud of who I am and where I come from, but presenting it all like this, in a potted history, is not something you do when you meet people; you let who you are emerge through contact — through getting to know each other.

"Really?" says Mr P. "Well, you've never shown any interest in my origins."

"Oh, but that's not true. I've just been afraid to ask, as the 'ruddy woman' not trusted to dust your trophies."

"It's not you," he says abruptly. "It's just — seeing you over at the mantel, it brings home that all my glories are past ones. I might put the bloomin' things in a box. That'd solve the dusting problem."

I hope not, but decide to say nothing — for now.

After all the children have performed their pieces, we go and find Kai.

"Kusheo!" I greet him, smiling. "That means 'hello' in Krio, our national tongue," I tell Mr P.

I congratulate Kai on his research. He says shyly, "I was well nervous when Mr P said you'd be watching. Next time, I'm doing my mum. Her granddad was a miner in Wales. He knew Nylon Bevin."

"He's a very enterprising pikin," I tell Mr P later. "That means 'child'."

"Oh gawd," he says. "I knew you'd go all ethnic on me, given half a chance."

I drop Mr P back home. "Don't forget to send in that form," he says, hobbling off without a backward glance.

I didn't forget — and I've just got onto the nursing course.

We compromised with his trophies by placing them around the house — that way, they're still in evidence but he doesn't have to see them all in one place.

Then I bought him a pair of walking sticks called trekking poles, both as a "thank you for pushing me" and because he said his hips were feeling much better and he might take up some light walking again. They fold up and are just the thing for walking uphill, the salesman assured me.

Mr P didn't talk to me for a week when he saw them — a situation we both made the best of.

THE END

© Gabrielle Mullarkey, 2017



**NEW
ON
SALE
NOW**

Sea Anemones *Pavarotti* & Mousstaka

It's an awful thing to admit, but I don't want my sister and her family to stay here this year...

I have a little house on the outskirts of a village that sits on a wide shingle beach on the East Coast. It is just a two-up, two down terraced cottage, but the plot is long and it's just a short walk from here, down the lane past the shops and the fancy hotels, to the sea. There's a tiny room in the loft which I use as a studio and a lean-to at the back, where I can grow a few herbs. For me the house represented a fresh start after Alan left. And it's all me, from the gingham-curtained window frames, holding my collections of shells and driftwood, to the carefully painted wooden furniture. It's my sanctuary.

Which is why, this year, I am thinking of staying put during the holidays. Normally, I go on one of those arranged coach trips to the Highlands, the Lake District or to interesting towns like York or Bath. I enjoy sitting in state in my seat and being transported, without any effort on my part, around the delights of the UK. And I've made friends on these jaunts, too, people I keep in touch with and visit occasionally, even now.

No, the trips themselves are fabulous. The problem, though, is that while I'm away, my sister and her family come to stay. And though it's an awful thing to admit, this year I'd just rather they didn't.

"No, Bridget," Mrs Battersby, my elderly neighbour says, "it's not awful to admit, at all. Goodness, when I think of the mess they left you in last year!" She shakes her head. "The garden took all winter to straighten out. And the carpets!" Mrs Battersby is a small person, bird-like almost, but quick and efficient and there are not many people who would care to cross her. "Your problem, Bridget, as I've said before," she tells me, making her point with an accusing finger, "is you are too kind. Always

more for the magazine than the price on the front cover. And I have told him that if ever he needs it, there is shelter at my place for the night. And very rarely, when the temperatures drop below freezing or it is raining particularly hard, he has appeared at my door.

She waves a hand. "Ted. Fred. You need to look after yourself, Bridget. I bother about you."

"Hmm," I say.

She says, "Just ring your sister and say you're not going away this year. They'll have to find somewhere else to stay." She snorts. "And it's not like they can't afford it."

I nod slowly. "Yes," I say. "You're right. That's exactly what I'll do."

They have a dog that destroys my lawn and flowerbeds

thinking of others. Feeding me, for example!" (I'm often running next door with a shepherd's pie or a slice of Victoria sponge, as I know Mrs B hates to cook.) "Or worrying about that drop-out who sells the *Big Issue*. What's his name? Fred?"

"Ted," I say. I always stop and chat with Ted and give him a bit

My sister, Josie, lives in London. She and her husband have good jobs and they always have a holiday abroad. But during the summer holidays, she and the children like to come here, too. "For the fresh air," Josie says.

"For the free bed and board, more like," Mrs Battersby says.



Josie is chronically slovenly. Her own kitchen and bathroom are thick with grime, so it's unsurprising she doesn't think to give my worktops a lick with the dish-cloth. They have a dog that destroys my lawn and flowerbeds. And the children, whom I love, of course (in small doses!) tear

around the place, bouncing on the backs of sofas, dropping crockery and leaving smears on every wall. "Oh, lighten up, Bridget." I can hear Josie laugh. "It's only stuff!"

Mrs Battersby says, "It might be only stuff. But if you can't afford to buy more stuff when



the original stuff gets wrecked, it's not so funny."

I decide to make the call. I feel my heart begin to beat a little faster even as I pick up the phone. "Hi Josie," I say. "About the summer..."

There is water running in the background. Something crashes. She shouts at the dog. "Yes, we thought we'd arrive on the first Saturday in August, like we normally do," she says over the muddle.

I say, "Well, actually, Josie, I'm not going away after all this summer. I'm going to stay put..." Someone starts talking to her. "Hold on, Bridget," she says. Eventually she says, "So the first Saturday in August then?"

There is a sharp wind that flips up the grey waves

"But I'll be here," I say. "And in any case, I'll be working."

"That's fine," she says. "It won't bother us."



Josie and her tribe explode from their four-by-four and, within minutes, the house is a whirl of noise and activity. The dog, with a stick wedged between its teeth, races around from room to room, bashing the door jambs and scraping the legs of furniture. The children have water-pistols today. (Only small ones. "It's only water, Bridget.") Meanwhile, Josie dumps half a dozen heaving shopping bags on the table.

"I was wondering whether you'd mind if I invited Nell and Keith over one evening? I've not seen them in ages. You remember them, don't you?"

I remember that I don't particularly like them. Nell is a big drinker and Keith is a big-shot. "Yes," I say. "No, I'm sure that'll be fine."

I work as a freelance illustrator for a couple of book companies, and I have two big deadlines looming over the next few weeks. I'm just not sure now how I'll be able to focus amidst all this mayhem, and a dull ache spreads behind my eyes.

Nell and Keith arrive the following afternoon, bringing their own children with them. The baby cries, the toddler knocks the older children's Lego over and someone starts a fight. I decide to go for a walk.

I leave the house via the kitchen door and take the little path that runs along the back of the cottages, past Mrs Battersby's and the shed where the bins are kept. Mrs Battersby raps with one of her bony knuckles on her window as I pass. I stop and she opens it. "That mousstaka was nice you brought round the other day, Bridget. Mousstaka? Did I say it right? Anyway, it was lovely."

"Oh, good," I say. "I'm pleased."

She frowns. "Are you all right, dear? You look tired. Is it the visitors?"

I nod and a silly wave of tears rises up the back of my nose. I force them down with a smile. "I'm fine," I chirp. "After all, it's only a week!"

"Hmm," she says, closing the window and throwing me a dubious look.

I head for the sea then, down past the broken groynes and the tarred ropes left by ancient fishing vessels. There is a sharp wind that flips up the grey waves and makes them froth and foam. On the tide line, I find the shell of a sea anemone, round and spotted pale green. I think it might do for my window-sill but as I turn it over, I see there is a jagged hole underneath. I throw it into the boiling water and watch as it is sucked back into the sea.

Josie is younger than me, and she was always my mother's baby, the product of

a far happier marriage.

When Josie was a little girl, she invariably got her own way. "Let Josie play with the bricks, Bridget." I can hear my mother's voice even now. "You don't mind her having a few of your chocolates, surely?" "She won't hurt your doll."

And even when we were older, the pattern never changed. Because Josie hated fish, we never ate it. Because Josie didn't like sleeping in strange beds, we never went on holiday. Because Josie chose a fancy, oversized double wardrobe to house all her clothes, she and I had to swap rooms in order to fit the ridiculous item in.

Sea Anemones Pavarotti & Mousstaka



The funny thing is, I never questioned Josie's right to play with my bricks, eat my chocolates or move into my bedroom. I accepted, as my mother did, that my own preferences came a distant second. And even now, despite the fact that my parents are long gone, I realise that the habit of pleasing Josie is ingrained. And I know suddenly that Mrs Battersby is right: I have been too kind.

The problem is, I'm not sure I know how to be any different.



It is growing dusk by the time I leave the beach. I must have walked for miles. It is raining now, heavy drops that leave large dark splodges on my jacket. I hadn't noticed the clouds building behind me, but now I see that we will have a storm.

I am still a good distance from the house, only halfway up our little lane, but I can hear music. Mrs Battersby adores opera, I know that. And sometimes I can hear a concert playing faintly through our adjoining wall. But now, even above noise of the sea and the wind and the rain, I can hear Pavarotti roaring his way through *La Donna E Mobile*.

Inside the house, the crockery on my shelves rattles. Nell has a hand over one ear. With the other, she clutches her wine glass as if it might save her somehow. The baby on Keith's knee is still crying.

Josie has her hands on her hips. "And just how am I expected to get the kids to sleep with this racket going on?" she says to me. "Some people are so inconsiderate! It's nine o'clock!"

I say, "Mrs Battersby has got quite deaf recently..."

She shakes her head. "Well, it's not on. I can't think why you think it's acceptable, Bridget." She throws the tea-towel she's holding down onto the worktop. "I'm going to go round," she says, "and tell her to turn it down."

"Ask her," I say.

"I'll tell her," she snaps.

Josie steps outside with a cagoule draped over her head. The rain hammers into the dark yard. She bangs on Mrs Battersby's door. Her leather pumps are sodden in seconds and the wind slaps a strand of hair across her cheek.

But Mrs Battersby does not answer. The door remains firmly closed and Pavarotti's voice resounds off the walls, off the cobbles and out into the swirling sky.

We have another hour of it until the CD comes to an end. "Finally!" Josie sighs and then ushers the children back to bed.

I am keeping a low profile in the sitting room while Josie sautés and garnishes, while Nell nods into her glass and while Keith begins another lecture about his management skills. Then the doorbell goes and I wonder if it might be Mrs Battersby asking why we were knocking earlier, but it is Ted. He is huddled under the tiny porch, water dripping off the rim of his beanie and down his nose. He extends a hand, the one that reads *HATE* across the knuckles. "I wondered if you'd mind if I borrowed your couch for the night. It's a bit damp out here."

And then I realise that Josie has appeared behind me because he says, "Oh, you've got company. Not to worry."

I say, "Of course you can, Ted."

Josie has placed herself just behind the door now. "No," she is mouthing at me, shaking her head. "No. No." But it's too late because Ted is already inside.

Ted's mongrel is a placid old thing who will not move a hand's breadth away from Ted's knee, but Josie's dog begins to bark, racing madly around the table.

I take Ted to the sitting room and ask if he wants a hot drink. "Proper tea'd be nice," he says. "With three sugars and a tot of brandy, if you've got it, missus."

In the kitchen, Josie hisses at me, "He can't stay here."

"Why not?" I say.

Her face is flushed. She rolls her eyes. She says, "Really, Bridget? Do I actually have to answer that? Have you seen his tattoos?" She shudders. Pointless to tell her that Ted had his tattoos done a lifetime ago and now he wishes he'd had *LOVE LIFE* inscribed across his fingers instead.

"Anyway," she says, "we can't have someone like that in the house when there are children here." I see the disgusted shape she makes with her mouth when she says, "like that".

"Like what?" I say. I feel anger begin to grow and blacken inside me, like the storm clouds earlier.

She nods towards the sitting-room door.

Ted has not been the luckiest of men. Fate, it seems, has always conspired against him, but he is utterly good. There is nothing shady about Ted. I tell her, "Ted is staying. At least until the rain stops."

The following morning, Josie begins to pack the four-by-four. Nell and Keith have already gone. They set off in the wee small hours as Keith had a critically important meeting to attend today. I can't imagine he has many meetings that aren't critically important.

Josie is squeezing plastic bags of trainers and wellies into the boot. I say, "I'm sorry you feel you have to leave, Josie." And I am sorry. I feel dreadful. But equally, I don't want her to stay. Not for another minute.

She shrugs, lobbing one of the trainers that has fallen out of the car randomly into the back seat.

Fate, it seems, has always conspired against him

"Actually, I've found a place on the Internet, a holiday cottage," she says. "I think we might be better off there."

I don't contradict her. I say, "I hope there are no hard feelings, though?"

She says, "No. No hard feelings, Bridget. I'd just not quite realised what a strange bunch of acquaintances you have up here!" She gives me a forced smile.

I wave as the car takes off. Mud and pebbles fly up from the wheels and Josie parps the horn a few times as they trundle along the track. And then, as the car finally moves out of view, I see her arm waving from the open window.

Everywhere I look, there are damp towels and bed-sheets. Soft toys and torn paper litter the landing. The pans that didn't quite fit in the dishwasher last night still stand in red-smeared piles by the hob.

Only the sitting room is tidy. Ted's bedding is folded neatly. He has cleared away the Lego that had strewn the floor yesterday, and the books that someone had wrenched off the shelves are all now neatly stored away.

He says, as I put the kettle on for us both, "Can I help with the washing-up? As payment for the hospitality, like?"

I say, "You don't have to pay, Ted. But..." Just looking at the mess around me makes me feel weary. "I must say, a bit of help would be very welcome."

We spend the best part of the morning getting the place ship-shape again. Then I give him a sandwich for lunch and he's ready to head on out. I say, "Where will you go?"

He grins and scratches his head through his hat. "Here and there." It's what he always says.

I've said goodbye to him and am putting on my boots by the back door ready for a quiet hike along the shore when Mrs Battersby opens her window. "I see the troops have moved out," she says.

I say, "They have. I don't think they particularly enjoyed the concert last night!"

She says, "I hope you didn't mind. But I thought they deserved it." She takes a deep breath. "I've said it before, and I'll say it again: you're too kind, Bridget. And it doesn't do."

I laugh. "Mrs B, I think you're right," I say.

But as I reach the shingle and meander through the broad green heads of the seakale and the sunny faces of the yellow-horned poppy, I think of Mrs B and of Ted and of other friends and acquaintances who give back as much as they take, and I think that actually she's wrong. It's good to be kind. You just have to be careful who to!

I walk along the tide line, eyes down, hunting for a new treasure for my sill. The sun is high in the sky now. The sea flashes with light and out near the horizon, a tanker crawls slowly by.

THE END

© Rachel Lovell, 2017

Birds Of A Feather

Whenever Grandma Mary came to see us, I'd run off. Now, I have to go to her house every day

It was all Mum and Dad's fault. They decided Mum ought to get a job, so now, after school, I have to go home with Grandma Mary. I've never really liked her, only I'm not supposed to say so.

My other grandma's really nice. I'd rather be with her. Even Grandma Mary's telly isn't the same as everybody else's. It's like a caravan made of wood.

Not that she bothers with it much.

She's older than my other grandma, too. She has wrinkles and her hair is grey and she doesn't even drive a car! I have to walk all the way home with her every single day. She takes her through the cemetery so we can visit Grandad. She stands by his grave and tries to show me the birds.

She was at it again today. "There's a goldfinch! There's a hedge sparrow! Look up there, Zoe! It's a green woodpecker. It's not often you see one of those in here."

"I can't see anything," I said. "It's just a blur up a tree." "Who cares?" That's what I thought. I just wished I was back at home. I have a flat-screen TV in my bedroom and I have a tablet computer. I kicked at the grass. "Can we go now?" I spun in a circle to get her attention.

"What do you want for your dinner?" That's all we talk about. Salads and pork chops. I have to eat at her house because Mum and Dad take forever to get home now. I have to do my homework at her dining table. It's so much like school, I might as well stay there.

"Try to get to know her better," my mum told me. I hadn't seen much of Grandma Mary before this. If she came round to our house, I'd run off and play in my room.

"Race you to the gates!" I said now, before I ran off.

"Zoe!" she called after me.

"Don't go near the road!"

I'm eight, not three. I know what traffic is.

She caught up. She took my hand as we crossed the road.

"Fish fingers for dinner, please," I said, halfway across.

"Actually, I think I'd prefer a nice lamb chop."

It's always the same. She's nothing like me.

Back at her house, I turned on the TV and tried to avoid her. I didn't have any homework; no reading or stories to write for my teacher, Mrs Clark (she's ace), so I watched telly as Grandma clanked about in the kitchen.

I heard the back door shut then. She wanders off every day. Usually I don't take any notice but the telly was boring so, for once, I watched her out of the

window. She was standing at the bottom of her garden with one hand held out. She stayed really still until a robin flew out of a tree and landed on her palm.

I wanted to think, 'Boring, Grandma. Who cares?' Only I'd never seen anyone feed a bird like that before. Ever!

I went out the back door and down the garden, not too fast, in case I scared the bird away. It didn't fly off; it just pecked up seed from her hand as I got closer and closer.

"Walk to me slowly, Zoe," she said when she saw me creeping up.

I could see the breeze ruffling the robin's feathers. I lifted my

hand, thinking I could stroke it, but it darted off into the hedge.

"Oh, that's not fair," I said.

"Why didn't you tell me you can train robins?"

"You didn't seem to like birds much, Zoe."

"Only because they're usually so far away."

"Here, try to tempt him over with some seed then." She poured some from her palm into mine. "Stand still with your hand out. When he sees you, he'll come. You'll see."

I stood like a statue. I didn't move my feet or my hand. I barely dared to even breathe.

Grandma smiled at me.

"That's it. Patience. That's all you need." Her brows wrinkled up. "Funny, really, I suppose that's easy to forget, isn't it? You do have to wait for some things to come to you. Wait and wait." She sighed.

That's just what I did. I waited and waited. I could hear the leaves moving and Grandma puffing air in and out. I didn't give up or get impatient. I didn't stomp my feet and yell. Then, at long last, his wings fluttering, the little bird actually did land on my hand. He bobbed his head as he pecked at the seed. He was amazing!

"Can my friends come round and do this?" I whispered to my nan. "Lucy really likes animals, and Sophie. There's Jamilla and Fran too, and Harry and Nathan."

"You can invite anybody round you like." Grandma smiled. "I'd love to see them all." She nodded at me and the robin. "That's the way," she whispered. "Get her interested and she'll be eating out of your hand in no time."

I frowned. "I thought you said the bird was a he, Grandma?"

"Oh, I'm not talking about the bird, Zoe," she replied, looking smug.

I knew who she meant then. She meant me, but I didn't mind. Everybody else's gran might have a flat-screen TV and a car to drive, but only mine can tame wild birds.

I decided, as Mr Robin ate his tea, that there was something to like about my grandma Mary.

I hope she still thinks there's something to like about me.

THE END

© Jo Styles, 2017

Woman's Weekly Fiction 21

I'd never
seen
anyone
feed a bird
like that
before

Heat

Within 24 hours of the arrival of Mary Lambert, Elvira had been told an awful lot about her. Too much, perhaps...

Frontier Fort, Arizona, 1878

Elvira Duncan knew nothing about the newcomer. She only saw her entering the fort on a two-wheeled cart, pulled by a couple of mules. The girl was sitting among a pile of belongings, which included a rocking chair tied precariously to the back. She guided in the animals at a slow trot. Behind her came a string of settlers' children, a raggle-taggle guard of giggling boys and girls. Following on came a small group of grinning adults. She rode in like the Queen Of Sheba, much to the delight of the soldiers. It was a pleasant, happy distraction after the recent unpleasantness up at the Reservation. As for Elvira,

standing at her window and still feeling drained from a severe chill, it was a welcome sight. She recognised that same determination she'd had, as a young bride, recognised a wife coming to join her husband, no matter the difficulties or dangers. She was also reminded of Catherine, her daughter, and that same vitality of character shining through. That similarity weighed down on her heart. It made the heat even more oppressive, the dryness. It made a sob rise uncontrollably from her chest.

How could she ever bear it? How could Rose, after all that had happened?

"Now, missus, you'd not be wanting people to see you upset, a general's wife and all." Rose, who seemed able to keep her broken heart in check at all

times, guided her gently away from the window. If only Elvira could have such strength.

"Don't worry," she said, dotting a handkerchief at her eyes. "I'm all right and nobody's going to be looking at me."

She allowed herself to be guided back to her chair, allowed a shawl to be rearranged around her shoulders, allowed herself to be fussed over. Oh, how she loved Rose, the sense of her, the kindness.

"It's just the commotion," Elvira said. "I wanted to see what it was all about. Do you know who the girl is?"

"I don't... but sure, won't we all know soon enough?" Rose poured a glass of water and held it out to her. "Drink this, missus. The doctor says you've not to go thirsty. If only

How could
she ever
bear it?
How could
Rose?



there was ice to be had."

Elvira had to smile at that. There'd been stories for decades of ice being shipped as far away as Europe and India. Yet still they hadn't managed to send any to Arizona, for the lack of a railroad.

"And you'll need to eat something, get your strength up, because you'll be getting a visitation, doubtless."

Elvira looked up and saw by her expression of distaste that Rose meant The Sisters. The thought made her feel weak all over again. "Oh, no. No, I won't have it."

"I'll not be able to hold them off, missus, not with someone new in the place to gossip about."

"Say whatever you wish, Rose. Lie to them, if you have to. But I will not be terrorised by those two." Elvira smoothed her dress,

stabbing her hands at it in agitated movements, unable to stop herself, while inside she felt herself crumbling. "Not until tomorrow, at least. Tomorrow, I'll talk with them."

Elvira tried to calm herself. She wasn't like this, normally. She'd willed herself to be strong, as an army wife should, to be able to put up with the most difficult circumstances. It was the aftermath of the chill, that's what it was.

And seeing that girl arrive. Being reminded of Catherine.



The Sisters. Mrs Foster and Mrs Bennet. Identical twins at birth and, half a century later, almost still identical. It was a curious and unsettling thing to see them together. Tall, imperious, resolute. If only they weren't so good, so well-meaning, they

**If only
they
weren't
so good**

would be easier to deal with.

When Elvira first met them, she was so stunned by their appearance that it was difficult to concentrate on what they were saying. They wore exactly the same clothes, had exactly the same mannerisms and exactly the same gait.

Were it not for the way each spoke, it would be impossible to tell them apart. Two months

later, Elvira knew that Mrs Bennet rushed her words in a soft, rather high-pitched way, while Mrs Foster husked out her words, slowly, sonorously.

The Sisters had welcomed her when she first arrived at the fort, accosting her with smiles and cheery words as she climbed down from the wagon that brought her. Within about five minutes, or so it seemed, they'd made it quite clear that they were the ones who were in charge of the domestic side of fort life. From managing the social lives of the families living there, to overseeing the laundresses. From helping out in the hospital to organising running the school house. It was an inventory of their duties and they wanted her to know every item on it.

"Ladies, you must never

Heat



sleep..." was all Elvira could manage when there was a space for her to speak.

"You and the general —" They carried on as if she hadn't spoken at all — "have far more important things to think about..."

What those things were, Elvira struggled to imagine, when everything seemed to be accounted for.

"And we know everyone..."

"Been here since the fort was built..."

"And nothing escapes our notice..."

Only they seemed not to notice how exhausted she was, how dusty she felt, how utterly sad. Nor did they appreciate that there was an awful lot to do in her new home before she could even sit down, try to recuperate from her long journey. They didn't seem to notice that she was on the verge of tears, was struggling to control them.

It was Rose who came to the rescue, ordering two soldiers to remove the chest of bedlinen from the wagon and take it up the stairs. "And mind you don't damage anything or I'll roast the pair of you."

The Sisters seemed to come to a silent agreement that Rose, with her fiery red hair and the severe tone she could adopt when she had a mind to it, would have the soldiers remove them, too.

"We mustn't keep you, Mrs Duncan," they said with a nod and a curtsy, arm-in-arm as if they would never be parted. "We'll be sure to visit again to see how you're settling in."

It felt as if they'd just passed

sentence and given her a jail term.



Within 24 hours of the arrival of Mary Lambert, Elvira had been told an awful lot about her. The scandal. The attempted elopement, foiled at the last minute by the enraged parents of Mary, only just 16, and the equally put-out parents of the handsome Second Lieutenant who'd dazzled her. The Sisters, standing in front of Elvira's front porch where she was sitting, imparted their news as if they'd discovered the greatest secret in the world.

"Made to marry," Mrs Foster proclaimed.

"Everything put right in the end, a proper wedding, with guests." That was Mrs Bennett, shelling out words like peas from a pod. "You look quite pale, Mrs Duncan, dear. Still not recovered fully, are you? We'll make you a cup of tea."

Elvira was so surprised, she could only follow them into her home quite helplessly.

"It's me who'll be making the tea," Rose said, coming in from the direction of the kitchen which, to her unwavering disgust, was set apart from the house because of the fire risk. She stepped in behind them, her face pink, clearly affronted by what she'd heard. Offering to make tea, indeed.

The Sisters bustled with excitement, full of the importance of their quest, while their eager eyes darted glances at the furnishings, as if to check off items on a list they had stored in their heads from their previous visits.

Elvira had only been at the

fort for a short time and was still unsure about whether she should remain. It wouldn't be so very long before her husband retired and they'd endured separations before. When Catherine was young and needed decent schooling, Elvira saw her husband only once, maybe twice, a year. It could be managed.

Joining him at this last posting had been his idea; a distraction, he told her. Somewhere different, something to take her mind off Catherine and their grandchild. It would be companionship for him, too. It was his loss as well, he'd told her.

**'It's me
who'll be
making
the tea,'
Rose said**

They could share their grief. She wasn't alone in it. Yet his life was so busy at the fort that Elvira often felt quite alone. Were it not for Rose, she would have packed up and gone weeks ago.

The Sisters pulled off their bonnets. She needed to know about the Lamberts, is what they said, and as unstoppable as a waterfall, they regaled her with even more gossip.

"The parents managed the

situation, you know," Mrs Bennett said, "before too much damage was done... Only there's always damage done," she said with a knowing look.

"But something suitable was put in the society columns," Mrs Foster added, "everything quietly tidied away..."

Rose bundled in with tea served in a fine, blue-patterned pot, with fine, blue-patterned cups and saucers on a tray complete with a lace-edged cloth. There was also cake from which she cut hefty slices, lying them on the delicate plates as if to make a point, as if to draw attention to the incongruity of The Sisters sitting down with her employer.

The point was lost.

Though Elvira had to admit that knowing something about Mary Lambert would be useful, did it all have to sound like tittle-tattle? She was relieved that they didn't know all there was to know about her. She'd not wanted Catherine talked about. She made her husband promise not to mention it. She couldn't have borne the sympathy.

Elvira tried not to think about that, tried to pay attention to her guests, who'd made themselves comfortable as if they were going to stay for some time.

Mary Lambert, they told her, between sips of tea, had been beguiled, bewitched by the world of soldiers, the uniforms, the marching. The gallantry had enchanted her, they said.

"Bedazzled, she was." Mrs Foster leaned in, all secrets. "You'll be dropping by to see her, so it's best you know the situation..."



A few days later, Elvira noticed The Sisters taking a stroll in the cooler morning air. She was sitting at her open window with her patchwork, feeling much better, and couldn't help but overhear their chit-chat.

"Oh, she's quite the madam, that one," Mrs Foster said. "Doesn't know the first thing about being a soldier's wife."

The two women paused and she looked up at them. They bobbed enough to make their bonnets quiver. "Good morning to you, Mrs Duncan. My, you're looking so much better today."

Elvira dipped her head. "Thank you, ladies, I'm very much improved."

The Sisters moved off. "And she's carrying a baby." Mrs Foster's scratchy voice rang through the air.

Elvira folded away her work. It was time to pay the poor girl a visit.



Mary Lambert opened the door as if expecting something terrible to happen. There was less determination in her stance, less vivacity. In fact, she looked almost defeated. And well she might. Just two days after she arrived, her husband was sent away on duty to settle some dispute up at the Indian Reservation. Nobody knew how long it would take to resolve the problem. Elvira was used to this sort of uncertainty, Mary Lambert patently wasn't.

"I would have called sooner, Mrs Lambert," Elvira said, stepping in, "but..."

"Oh, please — not Mrs Lambert. Call me Mary." It was almost feverish the way she cut in. "I'd make you a cup of tea, but I have none."

Her words sounded brittle. Elvira looked at her but said nothing.

"We lost some of our belongings, you see. Leastways, the wagon carrying them fell into a ravine and..."

"Your tea went down with it?"

"Most of my clothes, too. Had to buy some new. All of my wedding china's lost..."

Mary flushed slightly and glanced in her direction, her voice dipped. "S'pect you've heard all about that..."

Elvira smiled. "A fort is much the same as a town, you know. I'm afraid people get to know at

least some of everybody else's affairs."

"I wish they didn't. And I wish I had some tea. Coffee's so bitter."

"They have some in the stores..."

Mary shook her head. "My husband says I mustn't be a nuisance and bother people about such silly things."

"Which means that he prefers coffee," Elvira said. There was a sigh in response. She went on. "My husband does too, but I never let that worry me."

Elvira noticed a huge pan sitting near the stove, one that could feed a company of soldiers if it was full of stew. "What in Heaven's name is that?"

Mary looked flustered. "I went to get our allotment of tin ware, some pans and such, a kettle, and this was all they had." She hesitated and gazed down at her fingers. "My husband says we can't really afford to buy anything new, and we wouldn't be able to take it all with us in any case, when we move. He says there's a weight allowance..."

Elvira shook her head. "Everyone needs decent pans to cook in."

Mary's face fell. She looked about the room as if she couldn't bear her own disloyalty.

"Now, you listen to me, my dear..."

Mary burst into tears. Out came a litany of complaints and miseries, from the tiny, two-roomed living quarters to the unrelenting, broiling heat. From this frightening part of America, with those terrible prickling cactus plants, to there being so little water. From deadly snakes and scorpions to desert lands as far as the eye could see. And the Indians.

How was it that her husband hadn't written to tell her of those things? Mary wanted to know. And how lonely it was without her mother and her sisters, without her husband.

Gone was the wilful determination of that first day.

"And those two women," she wailed. "They fuss and fuss but all the time they're prying, I know it..." Mary stopped as if she'd said something sacrilegious

Elvira patted her hand. She

agreed whole-heartedly but saw no value in admitting it.

"I'm quite new here myself," she said, instead, "and I'm sure we can be friends, you and I. We can learn to grow accustomed to the place. Mrs Foster and Mrs Bennett are just as curious to know my situation as yours. They mean well."

"I won't tell them a thing, you'll see," Mary said, sweeping a stray lock of hair from her cheek. But she told Elvira everything.

It transpired that her home



had lush green gardens and was near the sea. She was from a well-to-do family with servants, cooks and nursery maids. She was accomplished in many ways but declared that she didn't even know how to boil an egg.

"Not in that monstrous pan they've given you, anyway," Elvira said. She looked at Mary, whose middle was quite pronounced. It couldn't be so very many weeks before she'd be confined. Elvira's heart flickered an unwelcome hurt, an unwelcome memory. She tried not to dwell on it, tried to lock it all away in a far distant part of her head and concentrate on Mary's dilemma.

"I think we can find you some kitchenware to be getting on with and a soldier who can cook." She noticed Mary's surprise. "Oh, you'll find there are lots who aren't able to do active soldiering but can make a very fine stew. I had soldiers cooking for me, many a year."

"My husband says we won't be here for too long. Do you think that's so?"

Elvira wondered why men needed to come out with such platitudes to their wives. The

usual posting was for two years but could easily be longer.

"However much time you're here, it will feel like an age," Elvira said, "if you don't make friends."

There was a long silence when she knew that Mary was thinking about that. There was very little choice. There weren't so many women at the fort but she would need companionship.

"Have they told you that I'm to have a child? I expect they have."

"It's quite evident, Mary. I didn't need to be told."

Elvira found herself wanting to lay her hand on Mary's abdomen, to feel the baby kicking there, as she'd longed to do with each letter her daughter sent, with news on her progress, the growing child in her womb. She clenched her fists so that her nails dug in and the sensation went away. Not without leaving a scalding pain and a bottomless hurt in her heart.

"I don't want those ladies anywhere near me. Really, I don't. When it's my time..." There was fire in Mary's eyes as she said this.

Elvira decided not to say anything, but as she gazed at the girl, so like her daughter, she felt a forlornness that hung around her for the rest of the day.

As the weeks went by and Mary Lambert's confinement drew closer, Elvira met with her often, deflecting visits from The Sisters and helping to make the Lamberts' home more comfortable. It wasn't really kitted out for a family. It was, in fact, only half a house. The other side of it, a mirror image of theirs, was occupied by another Second Lieutenant, a single man who didn't mind the deprivation. It was log-built, as were the rest, but shabby inside, and small. If Mary's belongings hadn't fallen down a ravine, most of it would have had to remain in its boxes under the bed, there was so little space.

After a while, Elvira gently suggested that The Sisters would be best at helping the doctor with the birth of her baby. They had experience. She had none.

Reluctantly, Mary agreed.



Heat



Elvira invited her over for tea one day. She was nearing her confinement and her husband had once more been sent away, this time to try and capture the Indian who everyone called Geronimo. Mr Lambert had charged out on his horse with about 50 others to round up the Apache and his followers once and for all. The Settlers outside the fort were becoming more and more anxious about the way these rogue Indians were behaving, they worried for their wives and children, for their homesteads. They'd heard of murder and scalping. They'd heard of worse.

Mary was unhappy, uncomfortable in the soaring temperatures and scared. She wanted her husband with her.

"You have such a lovely house," she said, rather forlornly. "All of those rooms... I'm quite envious."

"I lived in quarters just like yours for many years. And some much worse." Elvira smiled, remembering, glad that those days were over. "It's the way of things in the army. When your husband is promoted, you'll be given a bigger place."

Mary sighed. "Promotion? That seems as far away as the stars. I can't see us ever getting anything bigger. And to have a child in such a place..."

Elvira didn't wish to hear so many complaints. After all, Mary was the wife of a cavalry man, not a businessman or rich landowner, like her father. Her husband was risking his life to keep others safe. Could she not remember that?

Immediately, she was sorry for such thoughts. Mary was

worried, that was all. It was only natural. She was so very young. And yet....

"My daughter was born in such a place," she said, wanting Mary to know that she wasn't the only one.

"But you had that lovely Irish lady to help," Mary said. "You had Rose."

"Nonsense." Elvira laughed. "There was an old soldier who fetched and carried for me, there was no doctor and I had to make do with almost nothing."

Mary gaped.

'All of these rooms... I'm quite envious'

"Oh dear," Elvira said. "I sound as if I'm boasting about how hard it all was; how I coped beautifully and you're in luxury by comparison."

"Didn't you cope?"

"Not beautifully. But there were some lovely moments after my daughter was born. I remember the day when some of the native women came in from the Reservation. They brought a papoose with them. Oh, it was something."

"A papoose?"

"They don't have cradles, you see. They carry the babies on their backs in these papooses. Such colourful things. I remember they strapped her into it and cooed and giggled as if they couldn't believe a white woman wouldn't have her own."

"You weren't scared?"

"Of the women? Never.

And mostly, the natives just want to live in peace. They're peaceful people."

Mary didn't look convinced. "They say Geronimo's like a spectre. They can't catch him." Her eyes clouded. "He's a monster."

Elvira paused. "We have moved his people away from land they've lived on for centuries. I can understand his anger." She shook her head at the thought of it. "Though I don't hold with savagery."

She'd witnessed some terrible scenes during her time as an army wife on the frontier, seen the results of it. Sometimes, it was difficult to fathom, sometimes it was difficult to know who was the more savage, the red man or the white. Sometimes, it was difficult to know where her sympathies lay.



When Mary's pains started, it was The Sisters who informed Elvira, calling by in a flurry of excitement. Could she possibly help?

"Everything's prepared for the doctor, only there's so much to do in the infirmary, he might not be able... But we'll be back..."

And they informed her, in hushed tones, that Mr Lambert

had been brought in, badly injured. There were lots of casualties coming back from the battles with Geronimo.

Elvira had her own battle to fight. She stood still as a hunted deer. The Sisters had no idea what they were asking of her, yet how could she refuse? "I'd be glad to help, only..."

They weren't listening.

"Any problems, just holler." Mrs Foster hurried away with Mrs Bennett. "Someone will find us. Or send Rose to look for us."

Any problems. Elvira closed her eyes, squeezing them so tightly shut that they hurt, but it didn't stop her fear.

"Missus? What is it?" Rose, drying her hands on her apron, stood in the doorway.

"Mary's baby. It's going to come soon and there's no one to... The hospital's so very busy and..."

"Oh, missus."

"I can't, Rose." She was trembling. "I can't do it."

Not after her daughter. Not after her grandson.

Rose's warm, strong hand took hers. "I'll help, missus. I'll fetch and I'll carry. I'll not leave you alone."

"You should go to the hospital, another pair of hands would be far better there, for a while, at least."

Rose shook her head.

Elvira insisted. "There'll be bandages to roll, sheets to be laundered, Rose."

"How could I go and leave you, missus?" There was a pain that Elvira had never seen on Rose's face.

"There might be hours and hours. I'll send someone over for you, when it's time."

Rose, you must go. Mary and I, we'll muddle on together for now."



Muddling on. Sitting in Mary Lambert's little house, hoping, praying, that nothing would go wrong, that The Sisters would find they could come, after all, that Rose could, too.

Mary was sleeping fitfully, Elvira dozed now and then, trying not to think about how it was with her poor daughter, her poor grandson.

When the dog began to bark, she instinctively glanced towards the window, though she could only see the sun, fierce against the sky. The barking gave way to a low growl, as if the dog had seen something it didn't like. After a few seconds, it began to bark once more.

Someone yelled out for it to stop but that made no difference. More dogs started, and from somewhere far distant there was a howl, as if the wolves had been alerted. The noise rang around the empty parade ground. There was probably a snake out there, somewhere in the shadows, or a scorpion. The dogs were hot, irritable and wary. Horses shuffled in their stables, giving an occasional stamp, an occasional whinny.

"Why are they making such a noise?" Mary woke, looking troubled. She began to rub her lower back. She struggled to sit up. "Will it be those Apaches?"

"They're all impatient for some rain, dear. Like us. A breath of air. It's nothing else. Don't worry yourself. The lookouts are there, keeping us safe."

Elvira pressed a cool cloth against the girl's cheeks, against her neck. The heat seemed more intense than before, or perhaps it was Mary's discomfort making it feel so. Oh, this weather. If only everything wasn't so very dry. If only a breeze would come.

Mary's slight fingers began to tighten around Elvira's. They were like iron bands as her pains started to build once more. Likely there'd be hours yet and nothing to think about except Mary's condition and her own in these temperatures. And the memory of her

daughter, her grandson.

"When will it be over?" Mary sounded like a child.

Elvira gazed down at this remarkable beauty and her heart squeezed. How like her daughter. Those same black curls, the same fresh face, the green eyes. Taking a deep breath, Elvira forced away a sting of anger.

How could the Almighty have snatched away her only child, her only grandson?

She calmed herself, as she'd had to do so many times before. It did no good, it would never do any good to be so angry, it wouldn't bring them back.

"We must be patient, dear. Let nature do its work."

If only she'd been there to hold her daughter's hand, just as she was with Mary. If only she could have kept her safe, if only she could have taken the newborn child and held him close, breathed in his sweetness, breathed life into him. But there was nothing to be done. Not even an eminent doctor could save either of them.

She thought of poor Rose, who was her daughter's maid, who'd been there at the birth and the death. It was Rose who met Elvira when she arrived to be with Catherine. The letter hadn't come in time to warn her, she hadn't known about the situation, the tragedy. It was Rose who took her to the cemetery where Catherine and her baby were laid to rest and where they'd stood arm-in-arm in a fog of grief.



Mary's pains were now strengthening, lengthening.

"Please, talk to me. About anything, anyone, else I won't be able to bear it." Her voice

If only
everything
wasn't
so very
dry

was tight. "Tell me about you," she begged.

And Elvira told everything to Mary, more than she'd ever told anyone, even Rose. It felt natural and light, oddly, a release from her worries, even her grief. She told of her childhood, parents brothers and sisters, her life with a soldier.

'Why
didn't
you marry
him?'

"I sometimes wonder why I ever married into the army," she said. "There was a very respectable banker who came courting, when I was your age and my waist was no bigger than a sparrow's."

"Why didn't you marry him?"

Elvira patted Mary's hand almost without thinking. "He was handsome enough and I nearly did marry him. My mother and father, they surely liked the fellow. But along came a dark-haired soldier, and I was lost."

"My husband has dark hair. Black as anything." Mary began to moan again, her fingers gripped. "Oh, I wish I could know that he's safe."

It was as if she knew, sensed, that all was not well.

If only Elvira could find out too, be able to reassure her with sound, not false, hope.

"Your parents allowed it?" Mary said, in the peace between pains.

"For us to marry?" Elvira smiled. "I was a determined young lady. Much like you, I suppose. I've never regretted it. Not once."

Right now, Mary looked as if she was regretting ever setting eyes on the dashing Mr Lambert but she seemed too tired to say so.

Elvira loosened the collar of her dress and sighed. "Though

sometimes, on hot days in this fort, I might be accused of a few regrets, I suppose."

"Mrs Foster and Mrs Bennet, they make me rue the day I ever set foot here." Mary sounded like a petulant child. "Don't mind me saying so. It's true. I won't lie."



"Any problems," The Sisters had said. How would she even recognise a problem? In all her time living and moving between forts, Elvira had coped with all sorts of things, from feuding laundresses to new, young soldiers needing a mother's ear, from welcoming new families, dusty and tired from weeks of travelling, to helping them cope with the rigours of living in an army fort.

But this.

She stood to relieve the ache in her own back and to change the water in the bowl. She looked around at the changes that she and Mary had made in the little house. Those curtains at the window looked pretty and homely, there were more pots and pans, plates and cups. A small sampler in a rough frame hung above the bed, with blue flowers stitched by a neat hand.

"Where's James? Where is he?" Mary's voice rang out, trembling, frightened. "Oh, why doesn't he come to me?"

Elvira shushed her gently. "Save your strength, dear, for the baby..."

If only there was some comforting news.



Whatever it was that upset the dogs earlier had gone, though the heat hadn't abated. Elvira dipped the cloth, squeezed it out and waited for Mary's pains to return. She allowed herself a small smile as she gazed down at her, so peaceful at present. Perhaps she hadn't heard of frontier forts when she fell in love, or that she might end up living, having her baby, in the wildest part of America.

Mary let out a long wail. "Oh, it's coming back."

"There now, child. They're quicker. That means something. You're nearer now."

Elvira tried to wipe her face, but Mary immediately

Heat



swiped away her hand.

"Is it going to come soon? Please let it come soon."

Elvira felt her heart twist.

Mary's eyes were staring up at hers. They looked too young, too frightened. "Oh, I wish my husband was here. Why isn't he here?" There was anger now. "He should be here."

Elvira turned up the lamps to be ready for whatever happened next. Her hands were beginning to shake. There was water simmering on the stove. That big old pan had turned out to be useful, after all. There were towels. Some spare sheeting. The Sisters had prepared well.

If only she didn't feel so useless.



When the knock came, Elvira flew to the door, hoping that it was the doctor at last. Only it was Mrs Foster with Mrs Bennett. They had a basket each, covered with a cloth. They looked determined.

Rose followed behind. She looked pink-cheeked. "I'm sorry, missus, I couldn't let you stay all alone. But I had to tell the ladies what happened with —" She dropped her voice — "poor Catherine, so I could come away. I know it's not mine to share..."

"But we're glad she did, Mrs Duncan. If we'd known, we would never have imposed upon you. Now, if you'd rather be in your own home..."

She could escape, she could wait at home with Rose and not be here, not witness anything. She could be safe from it all. But no. From somewhere deep

inside, a strength she hadn't felt in a very long time seemed to flow back into her.

"I'll stay," she said. "I'd like to stay."

She turned to Rose.

"But you...?" She'd been there and watched Catherine die, watched as her baby came, stillborn.

Rose shook her head. "My place is here, missus."



Frederick Michael Lambert came into the world screaming lustily. Mary Lambert screamed just as much up to that point, but when it was all over and she lay half asleep with the baby pressed to her breast, she smiled contentedly and sipped at a cup of tea.

Mrs Foster laid out bread and preserves direct from her basket onto the little table.

Mrs Bennet drew up the extra chairs brought to them by Sergeant Foster. The little house was full and warm, but something of a breeze came through the part-open door. It was enough.

"Never had a baby born in this fort," Mrs Foster's scratchy voice said. "An excuse for a party, I'd say."

Elvira stared. "Did you hear, Mary?" she said, but the young mother was fast asleep. "I didn't know that. It never occurred to me."

"Word will get out. The Settlers are bound to come calling."

"Might get a few of the native women," Mrs Bennet said.

"Not like that Geronimo feller, are they?" Rose looked alarmed.

A shake of two identical heads. "No, the women

just want peace, that's all."

The Sisters fell quiet now, as if worn out themselves by the challenges of the day. Rose seemed unusually content to sit in their company.

Elvira closed her eyes. She could hear the snuffles of the now-sleeping baby. She'd wrapped him up in a warm towel as soon as he was born. She felt the weight of him, the solidity, the comforting strength of him, felt the tiny heartbeat, the

Her hands were beginning to shake

fluttering little breaths.

It made her feel a lightness, a peace she'd not known since losing her daughter, her grandson. The pain was still there, yet seeing the contentment on Mary Lambert's face, seeing the obvious health of her baby, one of the many cracks in her heart began to heal at last.

"You'll want to know," Mrs Foster's husky voice roused her, "that the lieutenant is going to be all right. He'll have a limp, might find it hard to ride

for a while, but he'll do."

"We thought you'd like to tell Mary," Mrs Bennet said, standing up to gather plates and the remaining food. "We'll be going back to the hospital to see if there's anything else to do tonight."

"I'll stay here, missus," Rose said, closing the door behind them. "'Til morning, if you can spare me. I'll look after Mary while you have your rest."

Elvira looked at Rose and knew how important it was for her to stay. That everything was well with Mary and her baby had somehow healed a broken part of Rose, too, and she wanted to ensure that everything would remain well.

"And in the morning, I'll come back and you should sleep," Elvira said. "No arguments." She looked once more at the mother and child. "Oh, Rose, look."

The baby wasn't asleep but lying there, eyes wide open, as if listening to every word. Elvira kissed the tips of her fingers and pressed them gently onto his soft, plump cheek.

Two large eyes seemed to stare straight into hers, holding them, transfixing them and then, as if sure of her, they closed.



Outside a full moon was pressed like a ball of ice into the blackness. The air was sweet and cool. In the distance, darker shadows were streaked across the sky. Clouds.

Elvira pulled her shawl about her. Perhaps tomorrow there'd be rain.

THE END

© Celia Bryce, 2017

Only A Hair's Breadth Apart

My aunt's words have haunted me for years, because she was right. I was cruel back then

Of all the wards in the hospitals, you had to come into mine. Unbelievable! Ramona Woods, have you any idea what you did to my family when you took our dad away from us? I was 13 at the time, the eldest of three siblings, and nothing was ever the same again.

As for my poor mother — she wasn't in very good health anyway, so when Dad left, it just finished her off. Dad died three years later, so you didn't have him for long, did you, Ramona? But then, neither did we. We had to go and live with our aunt and uncle because we were orphans. You made us into orphans.

If I'd been a nurse back then and you'd come into my ward! It didn't bear thinking about...

And now, here she was, over 20 years later, and she was actually waving to me!

"Nurse, could you pass me my glasses, please?" she called. "I can't reach."

"What did your last servant die of?" I felt like saying as I gave her the glasses. Though, to be fair, the bedside cabinet was quite a way from the bed.

Well, she had certainly changed since the last time I saw her, at the funeral. Where was all the lustrous black hair? Where was that creamy complexion? Now it was all grey hair and wrinkles — what a come-down!

But eyes don't change. I'd have known those smiley blue eyes anywhere. Though there

were no smiles today. What I saw in them now was recognition. But I didn't hang around. The last thing I wanted was a catch-up with my would-be stepmother.

It must have been around 20 minutes later when I heard shouting at the far end of the ward.

"Nurse, nurse, come quick! The lady in the next bed..."

As I watched them trying to save her, my mind was in turmoil. She was in cardiac arrest — Ramona, my nemesis, the woman I'd hated for most of my life. She could die here, right in front of me.



When my dad left, I'd actually prayed for this to happen. I'd prayed that Ramona would die, so Dad would come back to us. But now I wanted her to live. I really wanted her to live.

You could say that I felt this way because I was now a nurse, with all these kind and caring qualities. But I knew better than that. I was so awful to my dad after he left us. I would only agree to see him when it suited me, and thought nothing of cancelling on a whim, just to punish him.

What had sickened me most of all was seeing how happy Dad was with Ramona. He seemed younger and more carefree, and he had a smile on his face that I'd never seen before. But, of course, his happiness was overshadowed by his guilt. I made sure of that. I even banned Ramona from coming to Dad's funeral, though she came anyway, sitting at the back of the church with the neighbours and Dad's work colleagues.

I was furious with her for ignoring my wishes and was going to have her thrown out of the church. But my Auntie Liz stopped me. "You can be very

cruel, Gemma," she said. "Your dad loved her. Just let her be."

My aunt's words have haunted me ever since, because she was right. I was cruel. And my biggest regret? The last time I saw my dad, I told him that I hated him, and that I wouldn't be seeing him ever again. And I didn't, because two weeks later he had a massive heart attack and died.

I was suddenly jolted back to the present by the sound of beeping — the sound of life.

When everyone had gone,

I stood by the bed, watching her closely. She looked so fragile, this once bold and beautiful woman, her breathing, her heart, her life, all monitored by machines.

Yes, her hair was completely grey now, but she actually suited the short, spiky style, and her skin wasn't very lined. That was just me being spiteful. 'If only I could go back,' I thought. 'I'd do it all so differently.'

When she opened her eyes, I could barely look at her. "I'm so sorry, Ramona," I said. "For everything..."

"Oh, Gemma, you were only a child," she said, pulling the oxygen mask away from her face. "But your dad never... completely... mine..." She stopped for a few seconds to take some deep breaths. "Your dad loved me, but he wouldn't marry me," she whispered. "He was afraid. He'd already... hurt you... so much..." And then her eyes closed and she drifted off to sleep.

After all these hate-filled years, it was so strange to be feeling such emotion for this woman, and dare I say, even empathy. So much so that it seemed quite natural to reach out and take her hand.

You see, I too have found that "once in a lifetime" sort of love. And like my dad and Ramona, my road to happiness wasn't an easy one. Because my lovely husband, the father of my children, who I loved with such a passion, was my second husband.

So, Ramona and I had more in common than she would ever know. We had both destroyed people's lives when we found that special love.

Over time, I've come to realise that, if you've been betrayed by someone you love deeply, your response is never going to be mild. With feelings so strong, there's only one way they can go, and that's right to the opposite end of the spectrum. Love and hate, two emotions so extreme, yet only a hair's breadth apart. I just hoped that my dad understood this. Then.

Blinking away my tears of shame, I moved the bedside cabinet closer to the bed, before walking away.

THE END

© Brenda Joy, 2017

Happy To Share

Should I get a dog? The obvious answer was, 'No', but the thought refused to get out of my head

I came back with my coffee to see Angela Parsons putting her jacket over a chair on my table.

"It's taken," I told her. "Sorry."

"Oh," she said. "I saw the sign and thought it was OK."

She pointed to the postcard size notice, propped up on the table. *Happy to share*, it read in bold, bright blue letters.

I wondered why I hadn't noticed it. In principle, I approved of sharing table schemes. If people wanted company, they chose a table with the card showing. If they didn't want to talk, they could turn the card over. I knew the scheme operated in Devon, but hadn't noticed it in Exeter before.

Angela was still hovering, one hand on the back of the chair. I could have told her to find somewhere else, there was plenty of space at other tables, but I didn't want to appear churlish.

"It's OK," I said. "Help yourself."

She thanked me and hurried to the counter to place her order. When she came back, she'd bought two large portions of carrot cake, one of which she passed across the table to me. "For letting me share your table."

I felt so guilty. I mean, I hadn't done anything. I don't usually bother with cake. A coffee, that's all I have, sometimes two, while I browse the local paper, but it did look rather good.


I thanked her, picked up the fork and tried a small mouthful. The cake was homemade, and melt-in-the mouth delicious.

I've known Angela for a long time. Word is that she moved to Devon after a painful divorce. She's hard to miss, thanks to her

dress sense. To call it mildly eccentric goes nowhere near it. Nothing she wears ever quite matches, and she always wears a brightly coloured scarf—summer, winter, rain or shine, it makes no difference. All of them feature different kinds of dog—poodles, Yorkies, spaniels, bloodhounds, the list is endless. She must have had dozens of them. That day, the scarf was day-glo orange and featured Dalmatians.

I try to avoid her as much as I can. She works part-time at an estate agent's and is apparently rather good at her job, but that's not why I avoid her. She's one of those annoying do-gooders, constantly rattling tins. Anything to do with charity, especially if it involved dogs, and Angela will be there—selling tickets at tombolas, handing out leaflets. Rattling those tins.

I expected her to start rabbiting away, which was the last thing I wanted, but instead she sat there, delicately eating her cake, saying not a word. It didn't seem right, not when she'd purposely chosen a "happy to share" table.



I try
to avoid
her as
much as
I can

In the end, I felt so uncomfortable, I started talking instead. "I know you like dogs. Do you have any yourself?"

She shook her head. "I did when I was married, but not now. I volunteer at a dog charity instead. I spend all my free time there, doing whatever I can. Walking the dogs, a bit of admin. My strength is fund-raising. There's never enough money."

My wife and I always kept dogs. We lost the last one a month before my wife died. I didn't even think about replacing him; it was so painful. "It's very noble of you, giving up so much of your time," I said to Angela.

She laughed. "Me? Noble? I do it for entirely selfish reasons. I get to spend time with lots of lovely people, not to mention the dogs, and it's a lot better than being at home on my own."

I knew what she meant. It's been three years since I lost my wife, but there are still times when the house feels too quiet. I said as much to Angela.

"You should get a dog. Two dogs, even." She lowered her voice. "Last month, the manager of the rescue centre asked me out on a date. Can you believe that?"

She laughed as though it was the funniest thing in the world. I didn't understand why. Her dress sense was a bit out of kilter, but there was nothing wrong in the looks department. I pushed the thought away. I didn't want a dog and I definitely didn't want a romance.

I was about to ask what her reply was when she finished her tea and stood up to leave. "I've had a lovely time talking to you," she said. "Enjoy the rest of your day." And with a flash of that bright orange scarf, she'd gone.

Having another coffee didn't appeal, so I went home. As I walked, I couldn't stop thinking about what Angela had said. Should I get a dog? Obviously the answer was, 'No', but the thought refused to get out of my head. When I got home, I sat down and wrote a list of pros and cons.

Unsurprisingly, there were far more cons than pros — dogs are a tie, they're expensive (food, vet's bills, treats, kennels) and it

doesn't matter how often you vacuum, dogs' hairs still get everywhere...), but I had to admit that the pros were biggies. I'd get a warm welcome every time I came home from work. I'd have company and a reason to go on plenty of good, long walks, whatever the weather. Since I turned 55, I've only worked part-time. My hours are flexible, too, so that wasn't an issue, either.

On Sunday morning, I set off to the rescue centre to see what dogs they had up for adoption. My plan was to take things slowly, have a good, long look first. I fancied a Retriever or a Labrador, a dog with a few years on the clock. Instead, I fell instantly in love with a pair of three-year-old mongrels — Connie with big, floppy ears that ended in raggedy fringes and a coat the colour of caramel, and Booth with small ears that stood permanently at attention and whose fur was a muddy shade of brown.

"They're brother and sister," the man told me, "though you'd never know it to look at them. As you probably guessed, their owner was a fan of *Fawlty Towers*." When I didn't get it, he explained. "Connie Booth, she played Polly in the show." He looked at the two dogs, a sad smile on his face. "It would be a shame if we had to part them." Without asking, he opened their door.

Connie raced over, like a greyhound out of the traps, and did her best to climb my leg while Booth lagged behind, gazing up at me with his sad brown eyes. My heart went out to him. I knew what it was like to have a pushy sister. I called his name, and he half-heartedly wagged his tail and slowly came closer.

When I knelt down so as not to frighten him, Connie jumped on to my lap. I hadn't been expecting that and lost my balance, so we all ended up on the floor. While I tried to get up, Connie kept trying to lick my face and Booth ran around and around, barking as if he thought it was some kind of crazy human game. At least he looked happier.

Eventually, I managed to stand up. When I did, both dogs rolled over on to their backs, asking for tummy rubs.

"They like you," the man said, his face one big grin.

"And I like them, too," I admitted, aware that I was also grinning. "I'd like to take both of them, if I can."

I had to wait several days before I could adopt them. It felt like forever. I took a week off work to make sure they settled in OK. My boss pointed out that it was the first time I'd taken any leave since my wife died. All in all, it was a fortnight before I went back to the café. It would have been sooner, but they don't allow dogs.

"You're looking well," said Patrick, as he served my coffee.

"Thanks. I'm feeling great." I pointed to the cake display.



"I'll take a piece of carrot cake while you're at it."

He chuckled. "Your appetite's better, too, I see."

"Yes. It's all thanks to Angela."

"Angela? You mean the dog lady?" He placed a large piece of cake onto a plate and passed it to me.

I nodded. "After talking to her, I went to the dog charity and adopted these two." I showed him just a few of the dozens of photos I had on my mobile. "Thanks to them, I'm getting lots of fresh air and exercise."

"They're adorable," he said as he handed back my phone. "How did you end up with those two? I thought you liked Labradors."

"I went there intending to get a big dog, but when I saw these..." I told him their story. "I'm so glad you joined the share-a-table scheme, or I might never have spoken to Angela."

"Sorry? What's that?"

I assumed he was teasing.

"The cards on the tables. If you want company, you leave them face up. If you don't, you turn them over."

Patrick still looked blank, so I went to a table to fetch a card but there wasn't one. I checked the other tables, too, and came back empty-handed. "I don't understand. It was definitely there. If it hadn't been, I would never have shared my table with her." I handed him a £10 note.

"I think I know what you mean now," said Patrick as he gave me my change. "They have that scheme down at the Copper Kettle. Maybe Angela picked up one of their cards and brought it with her. She could have put it on your table while you were ordering your drink."

"Why would she do that?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe she fancies you."

I spluttered. The idea was crazy. "The scheming, devious..." but as I carried my tray back to my table, I saw the funny side and started laughing. It explained why she'd also mentioned being asked out on a date. It was her less-than-subtle way of telling me she was available.

That afternoon, I took the dogs for a long walk, ending at the rescue centre. When the receptionist saw me, her smile turned into a frown. "You're not returning them, are you?"

"Goodness me, no. I was hoping to see Angela."

"She's not here today. She's down at St. Luke's. We're having a table-top sale there tomorrow morning, and she's helping to set it all up."

I could have called back the next day, but the church wasn't far and the dogs definitely wouldn't mind an extra-long walk.

As we stepped into the hall, Angela's face broke into a smile — a smile I realised I wanted to see a lot more of.

I straightened my collar, told the dogs to be on their best behaviour and walked over to her. It was time to ask if she'd like to share a table again, but not at the café — a table for two at her favourite restaurant.

THE END

© Linda Lewis, 2017

Love *When You Least* Expect It

He wanted more than mere looks in the woman he married.
He wanted something ridiculously sentimental...

Julian Trowbridge had two good reasons for not wanting to attend a balloon ascension in Green Park. The first was that the day was veiled in a layer of mist, and though his cousin Freddie assured him that it would have dispersed in time for the ascent, Julian had neither his optimism, nor a fiancée desperate to see the spectacle. The second reason was seated opposite Freddie and his fiancée Cressida, and right beside him, in Freddie's barouche. Of all the unattached females in town this season, Miss Sapphira Stanway was probably one of the worst. As well as being the daughter of an Evangelical member of parliament bent on social reform, she was extremely proper and correct, with all the personality of a painted doll. But she was Cressida's friend, Freddie was his favourite family member, and Cressida made Freddie so happy. The couple had met when Freddie had reluctantly gone in

Julian's place to a matchmaking party of Cressy's step-mama, falling helplessly in love, as he said to his cousin afterward, when he'd least expected it. Julian felt he owed Cressy for that, as well as liking her for herself.

He smiled at her as the carriage made its way through the tight London streets toward the park. "So, you're trusting Freddie's weather predictions, then?"

Cressida's eyes shone as they rested on her betrothed. "But, of course. The sun simply has to come out for us; we're so excited to see a fire-balloon ride! Don't you agree, Sapphira?"

There was a slight movement on the seat beside Julian as Miss Stanway dutifully murmured her assent. Julian only just stopped himself from rolling his eyes. Cressida shot him a frowning glance, reminding him of his earlier promise to exert some of

that famous Trowbridge charm on her friend.

"I'm sure there's plenty of places you'd rather be," she'd said when he complained about her choice of companion. "But you did agree to escort us, and if you would only drop that infernal guard of yours for a while, you might find that not all women are out to entrap you into marriage."

"I don't think that," Julian had argued, stung. "I like female company, as it happens. It's just tiresome to be pursued for your title all the time, and some of these unmarried misses are more mercenary than their mamas, if they're not obsessed with naught more than the latest fashions, that is. Is that not so, Freddie?"

But Freddie wasn't a lord, and he was in love. So, of course, he agreed with Cressida. "Miss Stanway hides more of herself than she shows, you know,

cousin. And she is very pretty."

She was certainly handsome, Julian agreed now as, with a covert wink at Cressida, he set himself the task of trying to entertain her reticent friend. But he wanted more than mere looks in the woman he married. He was seeking something that a lot of his fellow men would refer to as ridiculously sentimental. His eyes softened as they flicked across to Freddie and his fiancée, barely touching as they sat together in public view and yet bound by an unbreakable thread. He wanted something like that.

The barouche hit a bump, and he instinctively steadied both himself and his fellow passenger.

A warm hand gently but firmly removed his arm. "Do not fear, my lord," Miss Stanway said. "I am not about to throw myself into your lap."

Before those long lashes were

'Do not fear, my lord,' Miss Stanway said



The **knitting** NETWORK

The **NEW** website for *Woman's Weekly* patterns

Crochet — just for you!

For 100s of quality knitting and crochet patterns visit **theknittingnetwork.co.uk**



Fit And Flare Womens Jacket Crochet Pattern £3.99 **Code WLD086**
To fit bust sizes 86 (91) (97) (102) cm / 34 (36) (38) (40) in



Ladies Jacket Tunisian Crochet Pattern £2.99 **Code WLD167**
To fit bust sizes 81-86 (86-91) (97) (102) cm / 34 (36) (38) (40) in



Ladies Waistcoat Crochet Pattern £2.99 **Code WLD092**
To fit bust sizes 86 (91) (97) (102) (107) cm / 34 (36) (38) (40) (42) in



Lace Top Ladies Crochet Pattern £4.99 **Code WLD047**
To fit sizes 81-86 (91) (97-102) cm / 32-34 (36) (38-40) in



Vintage Ladies Cardigan Crochet Pattern £3.99 **Code WLD044**
To fit sizes 81 (86) (91-97) (102) cm / 32 (34) (36-38) (40) in



Womens Shell Pattern Jacket and Clutch Bag Crochet Pattern £3.99 **Code WLD030**
Jacket: to fit bust sizes 81 (86-91) (97-102) cm / 32 (34-36) (38-40) in
Clutch Bag: approximately 23cm / 9in wide and 15cm / 6in high

Register on **theknittingnetwork.co.uk** for our newsletter full of news, offers and tips

How to Order

The **knitting** NETWORK

DOWNLOAD YOUR DIGITAL PATTERNS NOW

Visit our website
theknittingnetwork.co.uk

You can buy, download and print a digital PDF version of any pattern on **The Knitting Network** website, instantly.

GET YOUR PATTERNS DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR

Call 0800 024 1212* quote FC03
or fill in the coupon below

Each pattern will be printed on A4 card and posted to you at an additional cost of £1.99.

Terms and conditions: The yarn(s) and the shade(s) quoted in these patterns were available when the designs were created. As we are unable to guarantee the availability of the yarn, where possible we have specified standard weights. However, if an alternative yarn is used, the yarn amounts may differ. For a perfect result, we recommend to always check your tension.

This offer closes on 7 March 2017 and is subject to availability to readers in the UK, offers cannot be used in conjunction with other promotions, prices are correct at the time of printing. If you do not have the facility at home to print our downloadable knitting patterns you can call or fill in the coupon attached and pay an additional £1.99 for printing and delivery. Charge only applies to patterns delivered by post. Items will be despatched within 2-5 days once payment has cleared. You'll be notified if a longer delay is expected.

All correspondence concerning this offer should be sent to **The Knitting Network Pattern Offer FC03 Customer Care, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU**. Or call 0800 024 1212*.

* Telephone lines are open Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm, but closed on bank holidays. Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones.

PLEASE FILL IN THE COUPON - Payment must be made by cheque, sent with the coupon to the address provided

To: The Knitting Network Pattern Offer FC03 Customer Care, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU

Pattern Code	Product Name	Price	Qty	Total
WLD086	Fit And Flare Womens Jacket Crochet Pattern	£3.99		
WLD167	Ladies Jacket Tunisian Crochet Pattern	£2.99		
WLD092	Ladies Waistcoat Crochet Pattern	£2.99		
WLD047	Lace Top Ladies Crochet Pattern	£4.99		
WLD044	Vintage Ladies Cardigan Crochet Pattern	£3.99		
WLD030	Womens Shell Pattern Jacket and Clutch Bag Crochet Pattern	£3.99		

By providing your details, you agree to be contacted by Time Inc. (UK) Ltd and its group companies, home of **The Knitting Network**, *Women's Weekly* and other iconic brands. We'll only contact you about things we think you'll be interested in, like special offers and the latest updates. Please tick here if you DO NOT wish to receive these messages by email ☐ by post and/or telephone ☐.

Postage **£1.99**

TOTAL £

I enclose a cheque (no cash, please) made payable to **'The Knitting Network'** for the sum of

£ (please write your name and address clearly on the back of your cheque)

Mrs / Miss / Ms / Mr (delete as appropriate)

First Name

Last Name

Address

Postcode

Daytime tel no (incl code)

Email address



Love When You Least Expect It

once more lowered, Julian was intrigued to glimpse discontent in her eyes. So, he was not the only one who'd been less than keen to come here today.

The park was busier than usual, with most of the wheeled and walking traffic converging round the intrepid balloonists and their Heaven-defying air contraption.

"Freddie was right," Cressida cried, clapping her hands as the carriage drew to a halt. "The mist has completely cleared. And there's the balloon! Let's go and get a closer look."

She all but dragged Freddie from the carriage and toward the assembled crowd.

Julian descended more sedately, helping Miss Sapphira to alight, then offering her his arm.

She smiled but did not take it, meeting his questioning look with a frank one of her own. "Come, sir," she said. "It's just you and I now. There's no need for you to continue being polite."

"I'm not sure what you mean," he replied.

The amused look she flashed at him almost took his breath.

"What, do you mean to say that Cressida saved all her matchmaking efforts just for me? I don't believe it. People in love are never content until all those around them are infected with it, too."

Julian arched a brow. "How perceptive of you, Miss Stanway. So you do possess some intellect, after all."

"Well, I see you've taken my invitation literally, sir!" She shot back, marching off to catch up with the others. "Not that I'm surprised; I was convinced you didn't like me. And the feeling is mutual, by the way, though at least now I can admire your honesty."

"Forgive me if I sounded impolite," Julian said hastily, her response stirring something in him. "I'm just curious as to why anyone would go out of their way to pretend to be someone they're not."

Her eyes widened. "Really? But do you not do the very same thing



yourself? Or do you genuinely find the pursuit of science and human flight so deadly dull?"

Julian was surprised into laughter. "Certain company, actually, though I'm beginning to realise I could have been wrong in this instance."

He would have said more, but by then they'd reached the others and were swallowed up by Cressida's enthusiasm for the spectacle on show.

The balloon was definitely impressive as it neared the required size, its huge, silken stomach only prevented from flying Heavenward by a series of ropes tethered from basket to grass. The noise, heat and excitement built to fever-pitch, then the balloonists were finally ready to step into the craft and commence their flight.

It was at this moment that Julian felt a tug at his side and turned to see a flash of tiny fingers by his coat-flap, then

a grubby little urchin darting away into the crowd. He patted his pocket but he already knew it would be empty. With a cry of, "Stop, thief!", he took off after the lad.

Determinedly pushing his way through the spectators, he wasn't that surprised to see Miss Sapphira in hot pursuit beside him, putting her parasol to good use to clear their path. They quickened their pace in an attempt to catch the thief before he could reach the busy thoroughfare beyond the park's boundaries. They had gained on him and Julian was

within lunging distance when Sapphira threw herself forward from the side, attempting to hook the boy's arm with her parasol. In her moment of triumph, she suddenly tripped and fell with a cry onto the gravelled walk.

Julian's hands immediately changed direction to pull her out of the path of park traffic. "I'm afraid your dress is torn," he said lamely a few seconds later, belatedly realising that he'd had his hands all over her when checking for damage.

He needn't have worried. Miss Sapphira wasn't paying the slightest attention to his hands. She was staring after the boy, a strange little smile on her face.

❖❖❖
"Honestly, Julian!" Freddie turned from contemplation of the street outside his drawing-room window to give his cousin one of his rare frowns. "I know you aren't keen on the girl, but did you really have to send her home with a sprained ankle?"

"I didn't send her, I escorted her," Julian corrected, "and she pursued that little wretch entirely of her own accord. I had nothing to do with it."

Freddie sighed. "Cressy's ever so disappointed. She had high hopes for you and Miss Stanway, you know, and now she's declaring she's given you up as a lost cause. She really must be vexed if she's saying that!"

Julian grinned and reached for his hat. "Tell Cressy she's getting as bad as her mother," he said, then, laughing, took his leave.

❖❖❖
She was gazing at a classical

Do you know what the authorities would do to him if they caught him with a gentleman's purse?"

"It was a pocket watch, actually."

"Oh, dear. Was it precious to you?"

"Not especially. I have another."

She nodded as though she'd expected that answer. "Just a shiny trinket to us, but the difference between starvation and survival for a boy like him. What else could I do but let him get away?"

"Spoken like the daughter of a social reformer," Julian observed, a smile curving his lips.

Sapphira frowned. "You say that like it's something rotten."

"On the contrary. I find I'd like to learn more about such things, and the young woman who would set aside all thoughts of fashion and appearance for such a cause, not to mention one who can keep up with me in a chase in skirts, no less!" His smile now was more to himself. "Freddie was right. Love happens when you least expect it."

Unable to resist any longer, he reached for her hand, moving with her as she took a cautious step backward.

"My companion, sir..."

"... is deep in contemplation of an Etruscan vase. Now tell me, Miss Stanway, that you'll let me escort you to the park again, or anywhere, in fact, that you want to go."

Sapphira blinked. "What's this?" she mocked, though her voice held an unmistakable tremor. "The commitment-shy Lord Trowbridge actively seeking an unmarried lady's company?"

Julian grinned. "Yes, indeed.

Julian was surprised into laughter

sculpture in the British Museum's gallery when he finally caught up with her. Julian stood in silence for a moment, supposedly studying the piece also, though all the while aware of her every movement.

"How's your ankle, Miss Stanway?" he said at last.

She straightened. "Perfectly fine, thank you, sir."

"You sacrificed a very pretty muslin so that little ruffian could escape."

She kept her eyes on the statue, but there was a flash of vexation in them as she replied, "He was just a boy, in rags and bare feet.

Perhaps I've been struck by Cressy Melville's cupid arrows, after all."

Sapphira's warm laugh sent a shiver of delicious anticipation down Julian's spine.

"On our last outing, you were odiously polite and bored with me, helped me wrench my ankle and ruin my dress, then got me into trouble with my dearest friend!"

This time, Julian did reach for her hand, regardless of her chaperone. "We'll do much better next time," he promised.

THE END

© H. Johnson-Mack, 2017

RUBY HAD WORKED HARDER THAN SHE EVER HAD IN HER LIFE. BUT HALF AN HOUR BEHIND THE SCENES OF A THEATRE MADE HER FEEL THAT WAS WHERE SHE WANTED TO BE

Ruby Marchant shook out the last of the acrobat costumes, and a fine shower of dust rose into the air, pale in the afternoon light. She hooked one frilled shoulder strap and then the next over a coat-hanger. These things the lady acrobats wore became skimpier with every passing year!

"I swear these look just like underthings!" she called to Mrs O'Rourke over her shoulder. "If they didn't wear those little leather shoes with 'em, they'd look like they were in a boudoir!"

Ruby didn't really mind the risqué nature of the costumes — this was theatre, and the point was to make people gasp — but it was fun to gossip about the talent.

"I grant you, they're tiny creatures," she went on, "those Hungarian girls, but even so. D'you think we ought to launder them after the last show on Saturday? Mrs O'Rourke?" Ruby turned around, looking for the familiar broad back of the senior wardrobe mistress. "Mrs —?"

But Mrs O'Rourke must have slipped out. Instead, there was a man standing in the doorway, a fair-haired man of perhaps five and 20, with a fine pair of shoulders and a bemused expression. Ruby wondered for a moment if he was a new acrobat, with his musculature, but he wore a suit and tie.

"I thought that corridor would take me back stage," he said, frowning. "But apparently not."

"Oh, our theatre's got a funny geography," Ruby said. She was pleased to be an "insider", even after nearly 10 years at The Exeter Street Theatre And Music Hall. It gave her a fillip to show her knowledge. "What are you wanting back stage for, anyway?" Her eyes narrowed. Sometimes,



members of the audience tried to get in and take a look. They were usually hoping for a glimpse of Hortense's lovely legs, or to ask one of the other dancers to meet them after a show. Most of their audience consisted of young men, and they were best kept out firmly "front of house".

"There's work going on up there,

sir, and the stage hands don't like visitors meddling. Who let you in, may I ask?"

He was looking straight at her, and Ruby felt a flicker of discomfort. She lowered the costume on its hanger in front of her body, in an instinctive movement she sometimes used, hiding (with her sewing or a list

In the Win



Illustration: Getty

of the night's acts) her narrow waist in the grey dress, the curve of her bosom, the small patch of pale skin below her throat. Then she realised that it must look comical with a saucy slip of a costume clamped against her, and she flung the costume on a bench. Ruby was awkward with men, which was no surprise

to her because, mostly, she avoided them, having no great interest. They sometimes told her that she was pretty, and wanted to know why, at 26, she acted 50 and didn't go out and have a good time.

"It's 1907," they said. "A girl can enjoy herself in London."

But Ruby loved her work and had little desire to hitch herself to a man and then lumber herself with kids.

The fair-haired young man was still looking at her. "I'm the new engineer," he said.

"Oh, yes, of course you are."

Ruby had forgotten for a moment that the owner, Mr Cohen, had recently appointed a man to do work on the theatre during the quieter season. She wasn't sure it was wise to make

major changes and spend more money when there was unrest amongst the staff of all the London music halls — wanting better pay and all that. But Mr Cohen wanted to keep The Exeter "in the first vanguard", as he said, and that was up to him.

Ruby folded her arms. "Well then, I think you ought to report your arrival to Mr Cohen. He's generally in, this time of day. His office is —"

"But I'd give a lot just to take a look before that," the man said. "They told me the Exeter has an actual telephone system, and I'm anxious to see that as soon as —"

"Mr Cohen will want to see you," Ruby said firmly.



Ruby had worked at The Exeter Street Theatre And Music Hall

since she was 16. It was one of the smaller establishments around the Drury Lane area, very much overshadowed by The Royal and the others. But she liked it. Ruby had left her parents' house at the age of 14 — "Least said about them the better," she would say with a wry smile, if anyone enquired about her early exit from the family home, and not to a marriage. That usually shut them up, but if more explanation was required, she often said cheerfully, "What youngster really likes being under the feet of her ma and pa when there's a world out there?"

She had worked in a laundry first, her hands and face bright red from seven to four. Then she had attended her first music-hall



In the Wings

performance. It had included Marie Lloyd, queen of the music hall, very much the star turn by then, but for Ruby it had been glimpses into the wings that had absorbed her attention. From the cheapest seat in the house, her feet crunching among yesterday's nutshells, she had been able just to see two or three women in dark clothes, scuttling around. She had guessed from the rise and fall of their arms in the darkness, their hovering and hurrying, that they were helping with costume changes. Now she knew that those two or three had been more likely one, two at most, dashing from stage right to stage left, keeping the show on the stage.

Ruby had visited nearly a dozen theatres asking for a job, any job, and eventually a harassed Mrs O'Rourke had taken her on, just to do some sewing back at her lodgings for a few shillings. Mrs O'Rourke had been frustrated that day by the non-appearance of a comic duo from Yorkshire, and was battling to cobble together second costumes for the existing sketch-performing troupe, so they could fill the gap without it looking obvious.

"Variety!" Mrs O'Rourke had exclaimed as she loaded Ruby with bolts of fabric. Ruby wondered how she'd get it home on the omnibus. "It's the number of acts that makes it impossible to manage. Escapologists, magic acts, dancers — ballet's the worst with all the frills — and the singers get dandier every month, I promise you. They claim they do their own clothes, but they've all got used to women like me at their beck and call."

Ruby had worked harder than she ever had in her life. A brief half hour behind the scenes of a theatre made her feel that it was where she wanted to be. It felt safe, controlled, hidden, thrilling in a special way. Mrs O'Rourke, satisfied with her work and overloaded, had persuaded Mr Cohen to hire an assistant wardrobe mistress. The pay was

terrible, but enough for rent and food — and Ruby had settled in immediately. She loved being part of the show, but not exposed. She took time every afternoon and every night to take a look at the rows of eager, perspiring men in the stalls, all leaning forward, a flood of masculinity kept at bay behind the lime lights.

The engineer nodded. "You're right, of course," he said, and smiled, a smile that changed his face, the bones of the cheeks sharpening and fine lines appearing around his eyes. "Do I turn right in the passageway?"

She noticed that he was shuffling on the boards of the floor, and that his fingers moved about most of the time, describing patterns in the air. He was one of those people with too many thoughts in him for his body to keep them inside. She smiled.

A moment later, Ruby heard

had made a waterfall, cascading down into a tank, and planned to have a pretty woman swim in it! Ruby had seen a proper photograph of that one. Mr Cohen was musing away, Jack said (he was one of the stage hands) on something of his own.

"He wants to be able to take the roof off, next high season," said Jack, proud and strutting to be able to make the report to Ruby. "Well, part of the roof. It's dreadful old, anyway. We're to make a roof that slides back in fine weather!"

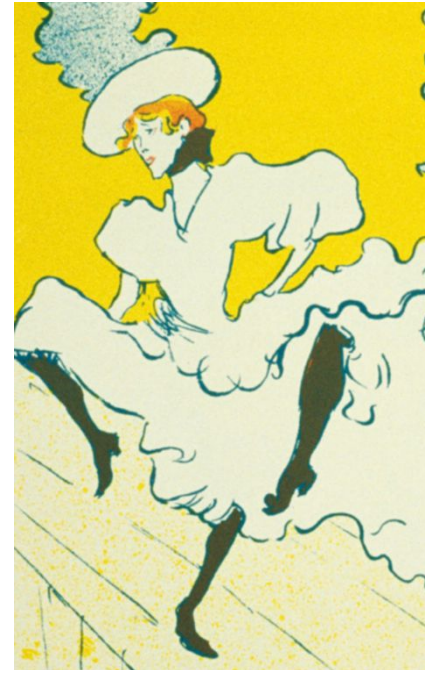
Ruby thought about the lofty ceilings of the auditorium. Did this blond boy, with his smooth chin and mobile body, have the necessary experience and skill? But then she recalled his eyes, keen, dark blue, and decided that maybe Mr Cohen knew what he was doing.

There were three hours to go before the matinée, and Ruby settled happily to her tasks.

It made Ruby smile as she thought of the boys in the audience

the young man's feet striding along the corridor outside, and breathed a small sigh of relief. There was work to do; she had no time to talk. He had been young, she thought, for an engineer, but Ruby knew Mr Cohen had bold plans for the Exeter. A theatre in Glasgow, Mrs O'Rourke had said, was actually bringing elephants out onto the stage with girls on their backs! Mr Cohen wanted his theatre to offer that level of attraction. These days, it wasn't good enough to offer great songs, big dresses and a performing spaniel. Later, Ruby heard that it wasn't only elephants, Lord help us: one of the bigger music halls

The Exeter Street Music Hall employed a core repertory company of players, plus a shifting band of "extras" — including a star or two, if Mr Cohen could secure them. Many of the visiting artistes knew Ruby well and appreciated her efforts with their clothes. Mam'selle Fennici was one such, and in the corner of the room lay a small trunk, dropped off the evening before by the singer herself and containing her dresses and shoes. Ruby opened the trunk and lifted out an ivory-coloured frock, heavy with hundreds of yards of ivory lace. She smiled to herself. In any other context, the dress would be vulgar, a parody of a



wedding dress on a woman singing about sex — but in the Halls, it was ideal. Mam'selle would sing her signature song in it that night, probably, a ditty laden with *double entendre*. But the sex stayed on the stage — it made Ruby smile as she thought of the boys in the audience, believing Mam'selle was singing just to them. She examined the underarms for the perspiration stains Mam'selle disliked so much, and the tune came unbidden into her head.

"What can I offer you?" she murmured, "*this starlit night?*"

"What can I offer you?" It was by way of being Mam'selle's catchphrase, delivered sometimes in the innocent voice of a waitress or a shopkeeper, more often in the throaty tones and guttural French accent Mam'selle Fennici had made her own.

Mam'selle's fastidiousness about her underarms was genuine enough, but her French accent and Italian surname less so. Clara Fennici was plain Clara Furness, a corporal's daughter from Colchester. But she had a fine voice, and who cared if she was from Umbria, Toulouse or Essex, if she could entertain? She would lean her voluptuous body out over the line of lights and sing to the lads she called "*mes petits*", making each and every one of them into lapdogs.

"What is your fancy, now the moon is bright?" Ruby sang in a small voice, into the velvet and glass diamonds of the next dress. She tried out her own French



accent, and then laughed at herself. Ruby had no intention of being heard, though over the years she had — always alone in Wardrobe when she was certain of not being disturbed — improved the way she made her breath last, and the high notes she could hit singing, *“Oh, for the wings of a dove.”*

Mamselle’s tune took her under its spell, and soon she was circling the room, her small feet tapping first on the boards and then the worn rug.

Her private singing sessions were the only thing about Ruby, she often said to herself, that was a secret. She prided herself on being an open book.

“What you see here,” she would say, spreading her slender arms out from the neat bodice of her usual grey dress with its narrow skirt, “is exactly and precisely what you get.”

Once, Mrs O’Rourke had come in when she was singing, and Ruby had turned to see her there, smiling widely.

“Lovely, Ruby,” Mrs O’Rourke had said. “You have hidden depths.”

Ruby had blushed furiously.

“You could start an act,” Mrs O’Rourke had said.

“No, I most certainly could not!” Ruby had said, grabbing a box of buttons and beginning furiously to sort through them. “I’m not the type. I can’t act. I’ve nothing here beyond what you —”

“What you see. I know, Ruby,” Mrs O’Rourke had interrupted, but gently, looking at her in silence for a moment.

Ruby began the chorus of the song again, testing out the warble required for its climax. *“And I think that I’ve got exactly what you neeeeed.”*

She felt the draught before she turned and saw the open door, and Clara standing in it, a foot taller than Ruby, curvaceous and scarlett-lipped.

“Now, there you go again,” Clara said, hand on hip, “showing me up.” She dropped a carpet bag on the rug and adjusted her low-cut bodice. A tall clutch of feathers in her hat quivered.

“Showing you up?”

“With that voice of yours, like a blackbird on a clear mornin’.” Her accent was pure Essex.

“There you go again, Mam’selle,” Ruby said, “talking nonsense.” Ruby was on familiar terms with many of the talent, Clara among them. “Here, I thought you brought all your frocks along yesterday?”

Clara slumped down onto a stool. “Didn’t I say? I got a new dressmaker in Bow. For the first time, a woman what understands my needs. I have to look a certain way, see — but you know that. She’s cheap as

you like, too, and today I am trying out a little red item on the boys and girls in the front row.” She gave a low laugh. “Chiefly the boys, of course.”

Ruby took the bag and peered inside. Red satin, waves and dips of it, edged with lines of black ribbon. She lifted it out and it shone.

“Won’t they love it?” Clara said, head on one side.

Ruby gazed at its nipped-in waist, the deep swoop of the neckline. A good deal of Clara Furness would be on show that night, quivering like those feathers. All around her, Ruby thought, was show and sparkle, most of it tinged with sex, or love, or both, or the promise of one or the other. Love songs, stories of broken hearts, a dance of passion, a comic routine about being found with somebody’s wife. The Halls played on sex; they lived on tales of men and women, women with men, men against women, sometimes men with men and women with women (though that was veiled in layers of language). To Ruby, all of it, the stage version and the other kind, too, seemed fraught. People lapped it up, and came back for more night after night, while to Ruby it all seemed laden with effort, liable to go awry. Men and women rarely got along as well as the songs suggested. Sometimes, they destroyed each other.

Clara was scratching her neck, and Ruby made a mental note to check Wardrobe again for fleas.

“You never had a singing lesson, Rube?” Clara asked.

“Never did, never will. Nobody gets me in red satin, and anyway, I earn a good living as I am.”

“Speaking of livings,” Clara said, “did you hear about the coming strike?”

Ruby had heard, just mutterings. Theatre employees were badly paid, and things had been getting worse. London wasn’t cheap to live in, though Ruby had always got along — her needs were not great. There were stage-hands and ushers, carpenters and cleaners talking more loudly about their dissatisfaction with the employers, who made an ever-growing fortune.

“I know there’s some people wanting to stop work,” Ruby said. “I don’t know how they’d afford it if they did, not getting paid.”

“Marie Lloyd’s a good girl, showing an interest. She’s got plenty of money but she’s got eyes in her head. She’s come right out this week and said she supports a strike. You know there are girls in a chorus in one of the theatres on Shaftesbury Avenue told to work a sixth day for no extra wage. And one of the owners took the perks away from the fellas who paint the scenery somewhere else, so my friend says. They used to get something to eat between the shows and now they’ve to bring in a bit of dinner themselves! The worst of them — Moss, who owns so many places — he just keeps shoving in more matinee performances.” Clara sat back, hitching her skirt up to cool her ankles. “They demand more and more for their penny, Ruby. People has to go home sometimes to their wives and kiddies, their husbands and mistresses!” She laughed, and then caught sight of the clock on the wall. “Lord above!” She jumped up. “I’m going to be late!”

“Got a singing lesson?”

Clara’s laugh filled the room now. “A singing lesson, me? Bless your stockings, Ruby, no. I’m off to a boxing match.”

*‘Now, there you go again,’ said Clara,
hand on hip, ‘showing me up’*

In the Wings

Ruby had seen a notice posted in a lamp-post out on Drury Lane. "Is it this new young fella they fancy?"

Clara winked, luxuriant black eyelashes brushing her cheek. "A chap came to the stage door — lovely-looking chap with shoulders on him like a god. Said he'd take me to a —" Clara leaned forward, and Ruby smelled lavender and rose — "a bit of an old-fashioned bout."

Ruby frowned. "Not bare-knuckle?"

Bare-knuckle boxing was illegal, one of the most dangerous sports cities had known. Ruby frowned in disapproval, but Clara didn't see the frown; she was occupied by the sudden spilling of flesh from her bodice as she laughed, and was rearranging herself. When she straightened up, she said, "Ruby, why don't you come? This fella — I think he's George, or perhaps Gerald — he's bound to have a friend for you to go on the arm of." She giggled. "I'm making it sound like tea at The Savoy." She reached across and touched Ruby's small chin. "Pretty girl like you, you're far too often on your own-eo."

"I won't come, thank you," said Ruby. She was thinking of the ring, what it might look like, a figure hurled against the side, and blood on a face.

"It will be fun," Clara said. "Promise. Bit of fun."

"I've no interest in boxing," Ruby said more loudly.

The sharpness of her reply took Clara by surprise. "All right, lovey," she said quietly. "Each to her own. See you for the eight o'clock — my engagement with Gerry will be done by seven. Am I closing the first half?"

"Yes, Mam'selle." Ruby was smiling, anxious to atone for her outburst. "You'll be wonderful. Shall I hang out the new red satin for that number?"

"I think so," said Clara, and left, closing the door behind her.

Ruby sat down and picked up a wooden needle case. She had to let out a shirt for the mime artist. She hadn't wished to be rude, but a person didn't have to like a sport, and knuckle fights were said to be brutal. Ruby disliked violence, and felt that nobody could oblige her to watch it, not any more. She felt discomfort in her palm and, looking down, unfurled her fist. There was a long red, raw mark where the needle case had been held tightly.

"Work to do," she said.



It became apparent that the engineer fella had not seemed as green to Mr Cohen as he had to Ruby. She did not see him for a few days, and then when she arrived early one morning to

sunshine when the roof's open, up and down like a salmon heading upstream." He noticed Ruby in the wings. "You could make her a costume, yes? Tight, pink like the salmon, with... what are the little shiny things?"

Ruby stepped forward. "Sequins?" she said quickly. "They're too heavy — a good pound of metal if you covered a bodice, say."

He smiled his attractive smile, his feet shifting in the chalk dust on the stage. "Why don't I be the judge of whether something's too heavy?" he said. "I happen to know that weight is crucial in the execution of the trampolinist's art."

"If you like," Ruby nodded curtly. She didn't want to talk to him too much, just obey orders.

Clara winked, luxuriant black eyelashes brushing her cheek

give the racks in the wings a good clean, there he was, right in the middle of the stage, ordering about the two scrawny lads who did the menial stage work. So, he must have the job.

"There's plenty of space for a trampoline," he was insisting, moving around the stage restlessly just as he had in the costume room. "But it'll have to look slick."

"Where d'you get 'em?" Jack replied from his position sitting sprawled on the mime artist's white chair. "Trampolines?"

"I seen a trampoline in a warehouse once," the other lad, Tommy, called from the other side. "Six feet long, it was!"

"Six feet!" In the engineer's voice was scorn. "Gentlemen, we want 15 feet, at a bare minimum! We want the artist to shine in the

He was a smooth one, with his smile and the way he kept looking at her. He took a step towards her and she took a step back.

"I'm Jonathan Angel, by the way," he said, and Ruby's hand went to her mouth, suppressing astonishment. He looked like an angel!

He grinned. "I know — no need to say it," he said, and pushed back from his brow a thick lock of golden hair. "It's the hair. People tell me I look like my name, but it's just the hair."

Ruby felt suddenly that she didn't want to know all this, details about a man. He had taken another step towards her, and she glanced out at the stalls, where men were usually restrained in the crimson velvet seats.

"Well, I can make your trampolinist's outfit," she said quickly. "That's my job. Just get a sketch to Mrs O'Rourke, and measurements when you have them."

"Excellent," he said, his voice softer now. She saw that he was about to come even closer, and turned to leave.

"And your name?" he said, to her back.

"She's Ruby Marchant," called out Jack. "Don't bother trying, there. No point."

Ruby flung herself around and glared at Jack. He was so vulgar.

Angel was still standing there, smiling. He appeared not to have heard Jack. "It's trampolinist," he said.

"Oh," Ruby said. She was hot, and angry.

"Do you feel all right?" he said.

"Perfectly."

"You seem upset."

Tommy was strolling over to where they stood.

"I am quite well, Mr Angel," she said.

"You have to believe our Ruby," Tommy said, smirking. "She says she never pretends, and that she ain't got no hidden depths. You could say it's her catchphrase."

Ruby's face burned.

"Well," Angel said, "that's a change, in a theatre, where most people never stop performing."

Ruby began to feel calmer. His voice was low and rich. It had different notes, Ruby thought, like a French horn and an oboe, perhaps, playing together.

"I've got work to do, unlike some," she said, and slipped away into the darkness.



Weeks passed. The "Music Hall War", as people had begun to call it, slowly ratcheted up, with two theatres suffering walkouts by workers. Meanwhile, Jonathan Angel was making The Exeter Street Theatre and Music Hall dance to subtly different music. He was, Ruby had to admit, sort of golden. Mrs O'Rourke already doted on him,

*She regretted immediately that she
had said so much*

and everyone from joiners to the girls who sold the barley sugar seemed enthused by his plans.

Clara, constantly thinking about boys and love affairs, once nudged Ruby and said, "He's a pretty piece of flesh, Rube — strong as an ox from all that climbing the proscenium arch, I'd guess. You could do a lot worse than nab such a chap, up and coming as he is."

"You do talk nonsense," Ruby said.

"Oh, let yourself go, Ruby!" Clara insisted, not unkindly. "You could do with a chap to look after you. It's a hard world."

"My world's not hard," Ruby said.

There was a very short pause before Clara said, "Not now, no, but I suppose we've all had our knocks. Mrs O'Rourke says she feels —"

"I don't hold with gossip," Ruby interrupted.

"Well, you can't avoid people knowing you in a place like this, Ruby. If you don't want your secrets passed about, join a convent where there's no talking. We all care about each other here, lovey."

"If I had secrets, I'd be quite happy for Tom, Dick and Harry to talk about them all night in the pub!" Ruby said. "But I don't."

But when Jonathan Angel said he was going to hear a band in St. James' Park, and asked if she would care to accompany him, Ruby said she would.

"I walk that way anyway," she said tartly, "if ever I want a little exercise before getting on an omnibus home, which is very often. So I'll stop and hear a tune, if it's on offer."

"You're too kind," he said with a hint of irony or sarcasm. But when she spun around and walked down the corridor, she sensed and heard that he had not moved away yet. Just before she turned to open a door, she found herself glancing to look back at him. He looked different, less sure of himself somehow.

St. James' Park was bathed in sunshine when they walked south towards the bandstand. People were strolling along the paths, their faces tilted up to the sun, many arm in arm. Ruby kept a generous two feet between herself and the young engineer, and walked briskly along. The band had not begun when they arrived, and Angel found a space on a bench, and settled her beside him.

"It's a military band," he said. "I didn't know. Let's see if they're too noisy, and if we don't like the music, we can go and walk by the lake."

He seemed to Ruby to be assuming a lot, but she said nothing — it wasn't polite. A few feet away on the long, iron bench sat a little family. There was a rosy-cheeked wife and a tall, handsome husband, smiling as he watched the tubas and trombones being unpacked. Between them was a small boy, a merry, chattering little thing who sometimes squirmed on the bench, and a girl of perhaps 15, too thin and fiddling with her hat-pins.

"What say we have a picnic on Saturday?" said the father, smiling down at his son. The

boy clapped in delight and slid from the bench, turning to stand before his mother and hopping about.

"Shall we have cake?" he said.

"Shall we take a boat out?"

"Take your seat, Stan," the father said. "The band will be starting and you'll want to listen. Be a good boy."

"Shall we take Grandma?" the boy asked, and Ruby saw the sister glance at their father, who was becoming irritated, and then take the boy gently but firmly by a plump arm and try and make him sit beside her. He resisted, and after a moment the father said, much more loudly, "Stanley! Sit!"

But the boy still stood there, smiling and hopping. The father tugged the child out of his sister's grasp, picked him up under the arms and almost dropped him back onto the bench.

"Now, Terence," the woman said, "he means no harm."

Ruby watched the man with her eyes narrowed to a slit. "He looked like a kind man," she said in a murmur, and Angel turned quickly to look at her.

"The father?" he asked quietly.

"He'll bruise the child," Ruby whispered, mostly to herself. She

felt colour rise in her cheeks.

Angel's gaze had not moved from her face, and she regretted immediately that she had said so much. He made her say things.

"But the little lad's quite happy now," he said.

He was right. The boy was sitting up again, and his father was rubbing his red hair affectionately. The sister had settled back against the bench. Ruby looked at the mother for a long moment, satisfying herself that she was really smiling.

"Fathers should be kind,"

Angel said. "My father never raised a hand to me."

"Nor mine to me," Ruby said quickly. "Never."

He nodded. "That's good."

Ruby closed her eyes for a moment. Mr Angel, thank goodness, was watching the conductor now — a man with a luxuriant beard — raise the baton.

"But to someone else?" she heard him say softly.

At that very moment, the band struck up, a deafening march. Ruby sat, her skin burning, forcing memories from her thoughts, wishing she had never come. How dare he push at parts



In the Wings

of her that there was no need — none whatever — to uncover? She wanted to go home.

The march seemed to go on forever, but at last the final bugle note died away.

"I don't like the style," she said. She wanted to go back alone to her rooms, but knew that her route through the park was the same as his, until the exit gates, and so to diverge from him now would be rude. So they walked together.

"I'm partial to a duck," he said, stopping on the bridge that crossed the narrowest stretch of the lake.

"A l'orange?" Ruby said without thinking, and he laughed.

"I like to watch them going about their business, heads in and out of the water like corks bobbing. What do they seek to find down there?"

"Something to eat," Ruby said. She looked down at the birds, their dark, webbed feet trailing behind them in the water.

"Can't you call me Jonathan?"

Ruby didn't think she could. "I'd better get home," she said.

He appeared not to have heard. "The surface is calm today," he said, "but it does mean that one can see the weed below more easily — look, it all wafts one way, rippling a little, just under the first few inches. All one has to do is look."

Ruby knew what he was implying — that she had things she never spoke of, a layer below her surface. He had no business looking, and it angered her that he tried.

Angel seemed to sense the tension in her, and her irritation. Suddenly, he pushed his muscled arms away from the railing, rocking back on his heels. "So, will you join the picket?" he asked.

For a moment, Ruby had no idea what he was talking about. Then she realised. "I do think some of the staff have cause for complaint," she said, relieved to have changed the topic. "I'm not

one of these 'reforming' women, not at all. I —"

"You like things as they are," he interrupted.

Ruby shook her head quickly. "It's not that. I just don't trouble myself all the time about the vote, or emancipation. I'm not a downtrodden wife or a girl in service wanting more rights, Mr Angel."

"Jonathan is my name." He smiled. "Marie Lloyd sung on a picket line last night — did you know?"

"Outside on a picket line?"

"The very same. That woman has no shame, and I admire it in her. She's supporting the demands for fair pay and fair working hours in the best way she can."

"I'd like to see her do that."

"Well, she may again. Let's keep our noses to the ground. Meanwhile, the plan at The Exeter is for a walkout next Friday, at the supposed start of

thundering. Ruby stepped back, and the birds thudded onto the grass, shook themselves and waddled off fatly. Ruby came to and realised that his hand was in the small of her back. She must have lost her footing and nearly fallen back. He was bent over her, blocking out the sun. The very edge of his crown of hair glittered gold, every strand lit by the bright light, and she could not tell the scent of the grass from his scent.

"I'm quite all right," she said, though he had not enquired.



A few days later, a day before the planned walkout at The Exeter, Jonathan Angel met Ruby in front of The Exeter's stage door. She was leaving for Poland Street to buy notions just as he was coming up the alley, hauling some kind of pulley mechanism, or part of one — a great iron cog — along the ground.

*To diverge from him now would be rude.
So they walked together*

the evening performance, for maximum effect. Cohen will have to sit up then — he really needs to take note. I imagine the Exeter picket will be peaceful — we're a small outfit and mostly we're just adding our voice to the general shout."

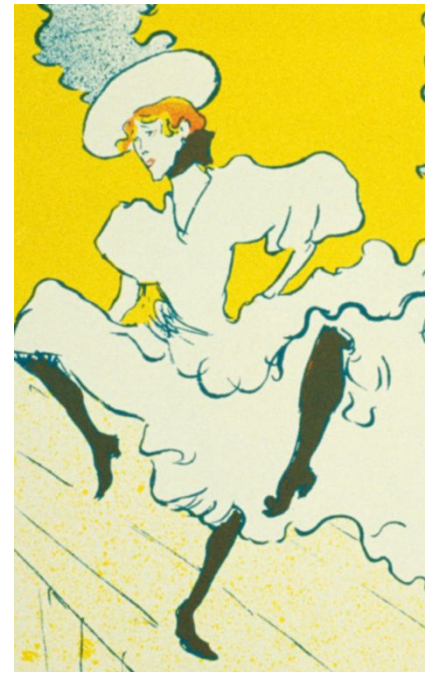
Ruby could hear that the band had begun again in the distance, a far gentler tune, some kind of German hymn melody, and both of them were silent, listening. The park seemed quieter, as though everyone wanted to hear the music wafting over them. Then, suddenly, a pair of pigeons crashed past them in the air, inches away, locked in some kind of dispute, their wings

"Ruby, I wondered if I can interest you in coming to the Soho Empire with me this afternoon?" he said.

For a moment, Ruby stared at him, horrified that he seemed to be asking her actually to walk out with him. Even though he was bent awkwardly over his burden, his face twisted up to look at her, his presence made her feel breathless, alone as they were in the narrow confines of the alley.

"I don't think I..." She didn't know what to say. "I am busy with..."

He looked suddenly shy, blushed, and heaved the cog against the wall, where it made



a huge clanging sound. "I mean, so we can take a look at a picket line," he said, straightening his back.

Ruby burst into a peal of nervous laughter. Of course, she thought, a theatre person almost never asks another theatre person to go to the theatre! It was absurd that she should have mistaken his suggestion. "Oh," she said weakly.

"The impresario there owns a string of establishments and has a bad record of employment."

"Oh, yes, the strike."

"Rumour has it that they'll walk out today, and they've a matinée where we haven't, so..."

"Yes, all right, I'll come."

It felt perfectly fine, Ruby thought, making the trip to the Empire. It was a professional outing — that was the way she'd chose to regard it. And they talked about the Music Hall Wars, and how effective the two of them judged the strike might be. He didn't try to pry, or to touch her. It was fine.

They rounded the corner of the street where the Empire was situated, just off Piccadilly, and Ruby saw a thoroughfare thronged with people. The sound of them had obviously been shielded rather by the buildings, and she was surprised by the numbers and the level of noise.

"No matinée without pay!" It was written on banners and was being yelled by men and women, young and old.

"Well, I never," Angel said, and they exchanged a glance of



excitement and pleasure. Ruby felt good. She was willing to join these people, and make her views felt. They were her people — she saw Jack, the Exeter stage-hand, high on the theatre's stone steps, laughing with a pretty girl in yellow, trying to help her with her banner. Jack waved at her.

"Let's go closer," Angel said, and took her hand before she could prevent it. They walked, and the crowd parted a little, by chance, until Ruby found herself only feet from where a speaker, a ruddy-faced man in a bowler, was haranguing the crowd.

"He looks like a porter," Ruby said. "Why are they always fat?"

Angel laughed and Ruby felt a glow of camaraderie.

"I want all the music halls supporting us on this," the fat man was calling out. "I've got Vesta Tilley making me a promise to perform on these very steps," he yelled, flinging an arm back towards the building whose steps he stood on. His arm thumped into a banner held by a tiny woman nearby, a Chinese acrobat by the look of her, and when she laughed, so did the crowd. "So, let's make our stand here, and then listen out for every picket across the capital, come out, and —"

"That's enough!" A strident male voice rose from a group near where Ruby stood, and a tall, moustached man in the uniform of a senior policeman shoved his way forward. "You've no permission to incite action beyond your workplace, Philips,

so confine yourself to this that you're doing here." He surveyed the crowd with an expression of barely concealed contempt.

There was a jostling beside him, and a slender young woman came up to the policeman, snaking round until she faced him, her hands raised in front of his face. Ruby saw that she held a pamphlet.

"Here, Officer," she said in a voice that was both sweet and strong. Ruby guessed immediately that she was a singer. "Take a bill. I'm on at the Holborn Empire tonight."

The policeman, taken off guard, read the bill for a second. Ruby, only feet away, could see that it was not an advertisement for a performance, but a pamphlet drumming up support. *Music Hall Wars*, she read, *the greatest show on earth*.

The officer, looking furious, swept a thick arm out in front of him, catching the girl on her chest and sending her flying. A shout went up from everyone nearby, and Ruby tugged hard at Jonathan's sleeve. "Time to go," she said. "We have to go."

He looked down at her, and Ruby knew that he saw the unease in her eyes, the fear, even. He looked about them, but they were hemmed in as some of the crowd began to move, closing in on the policeman. Ruby kept an eye fixed on his arm for as long as she could. An arm like that could fly up at any time, at a front door over a meal that wasn't right...

Suddenly, she heard a voice coming from her left, and looked up to see Clara, a head and a half above the men and women standing with Jack. She must, Ruby thought, be on a soapbox. Had Jack brought it?

"All down Piccadilly Dilly," sang Clara, "round by the park, you'll see the ladies running after little Willy, till it gets dark."

Her voice was as impressive as ever, and the crowd turned like a mass of lemmings, delighted. Ruby, though, looked back to the officer, and saw the stick drawn out of this pocket. Clara was goading him. Any decent music-hall singer could get a double meaning from a song.

"That's enough," he shouted, and pushed through the crowd. Now, behind him came the friends of the girl whom he'd cast aside, and in front were Clara and her supporters.

"I'm just shilly shally, shilly shilly; I'm fancy free," she sang, laughing between the lines of Dan Rolyat's song. "So though they try to win and woo me, though in thousands they pursue me, they can't catch me."

Clara was looking down at the policeman, her chin held high.

Jack, who might have protected her if the huge uniformed man got to her, was wrapping his foolish arm around the girl with the banner, and then the banner fell onto the policeman. It would barely have scratched the thick hide of his forehead, but he picked it off and hurled it down to the ground.

Ruby saw Clara, and the truncheon, and the officer shoving through the people again, and she felt as though Clara's red satin was being wound around her heart, pulled tight, and that her fury, and her panic, would overwhelm her.

"Clara!" she called.

"Ruby Marchant," trilled back Clara, seeing her. She had just finished a verse of the song. "Ruby Muby, friend of my heart, out walking at last with that pretty golden fellow of yours!"

Clara did not seem frightened, though a man with violence in his mind and hatred in his heart was heading for her.

Ruby looked at Clara's face and saw its creamy skin streaked with blood. She saw that the police officer was drunk, and impatient for his supper, and that it was all going to happen again, and soon the woman would be in a corner of the dark little room, crouched in a ball with her apron over her face, and Ruby, helpless, would be crying, and the man would be shouting into Ruby's face and telling her she was worthless, a daughter in nothing but name. The woman's hand would be raised in the air, as though begging him to stop, but being bloodied, and one finger broken again, it was no use to either of them...

Ruby knew nothing more until she came to, blinking hard into bright sunlight. She knew that she could not be in her father's house, because of the sunshine in her eyes, nor in the street where the theatre was. Above her loomed a great black shape with wings outstretched, casting a shadow on the stone steps she sat on. She looked around. The

Above her loomed a great black shape
with wings outstretched

In the Wings



sounds of carriages and motor cars, a great thunder of traffic, filtered into her brain as she saw them pass in front of her. Then she saw Clara's auburn hair, terribly disordered, and Jonathan Angel's golden hair, both of them leaning towards her.

"Is this... Eros?" she said faintly.

Clara burst out laughing. "Now, there's a relief. She lives. The Lord be praised!" She bent and pushed Ruby's brown hair from her damp forehead. "Yes, lovey, you're out on the Circus, for the air. Too many people back there, so after a bit we dragged you here. You're feather weight, though your hero here took most of the burden." Clara looked up. "Yes, the god of love," she said. "Take a little nap here, girl. Listen to what the god has to say. Talking of which, I'm to meet George on the hour. He was a George, Ruby, and a lovely man, though I didn't like the bare-knuckle fight too much. I can't really abide violence."

Clara, satisfied that Ruby was healthy, went on her way, and Jonathan sat with Ruby and described to her the events outside the Soho Empire. It appeared that only 15 minutes had passed between her fainting, and her coming to under the statue.

"Nobody was hurt, Ruby," he said. "That policeman wasn't best pleased, and the porter is not allowed to incite other strike action while on a picket line — that's the rule. But the

officer was sorry to have pushed the girl aside, and said so. She said she didn't mind, as long as they were allowed to protest, and she did a dance. I think Cohen should engage her for one of those French high-stepping numbers. She's good."

"I thought that Clara was going to be —"

"We knew what you thought, Ruby," he said. "I knew. Whatever you say, there are things bubbling under your surface, things you hide from. If you'll tell me, I'd be willing to sit here and listen until tonight's show." He pointed over the flow of traffic. "There's the Café Royal, and I'd willingly fetch you anything you like."

"No, nothing, Jonathan," Ruby said.

"Well, we'll sit then."

By the time Ruby had told her story, there was just enough time to get back to The Exeter for the half-past seven performance.

"But Mrs O'Rourke," Ruby said, "will be having to manage the costumes alone until curtain-up."

"She's good," Jonathan said.

Ruby told him about the violence of her childhood, the

escalation of her father's drunkenness and anger, her mother's injuries, the daily anxiety and dread.

"She went away," Ruby whispered. Jonathan was pressed close to her, listening hard over the noise of the traffic. "It was shameful, they said, but I felt as though a weight had lifted. I know she misses me, but she had to run. Then I saw something in his eyes, and that was when I had to go, too."

"Which was when you left home and lived on your own wits?"

"Oh, I'd been doing that since... since before I could remember." Ruby put a hand to her forehead. "I can't abide violence. Clara wanted me to go to a boxing match, but —"

"It's not just violence you avoid, though," he said. She felt the warmth of his body on hers, and did not move away.

"I don't know what you mean," Ruby said. But she did. Here, sitting beside a man, looking (as they must do to every passer-by) just like lovers, she knew that she had been running away, running all the time, from love and marriage, men and woman. These were dangerous ideas, bringing suffering and dread, bringing brutality.

"Look around," Jonathan said, his arm stealing around her shoulder. Ruby looked. It was nearly seven o'clock by the great clock on the east side of the Circus, and courting couples were strolling towards theatres and concert halls and away from tea houses and

parks, leaning toward one another, chatting. "All these people loving each other and never a cross word." He smiled out at the streets. "Well, not often."

"Thank you," Ruby said, and he didn't ask for what, but lifted her hand with his, and pressed his lips to it, very gently but for several seconds. She sensed that tingle from her neck down that she had felt with him once before, and at that moment she knew that, if he had turned to her, and she could turn to him, she would have allowed him to kiss her. No, she would have been the one to kiss him.

The Music Hall Wars were resolved to everyone's satisfaction, in the end. The Halls became busier and busier, but workers were paid for the extra shows and longer hours. Under the skilled, if sometimes over-enthusiastic, direction of Mr Jonathan Angel, The Exeter got its sliding roof, a major attraction which delighted Mr Cohen.

One summer Sunday evening, the week before its official unveiling, Ruby climbed up onto the stage. She had already commanded Jonathan to sit himself high up in the cheap seats, at the top of the empty auditorium. Ruby, in her usual grey dress with the narrow skirt, walked into the centre of the stage.

"*The boy I love is up in the gallery,*" she sang, sending her voice right to the back. "*The boy I love is looking now at me. There he is, can't you see, waving his handkerchief, as merry as a robin that sings on a tree.*"

She turned swiftly so that her back was to him, looked over her shoulder, and gave that flick of the leg backwards, that lift of the skirt, that look of sauciness and allure, that every music-hall artist knew like the back of her hand.

High in the upper circle, he cheered.

THE END

© Alison Carter, 2017

These were dangerous ideas, bringing suffering and dread

Jane reveals a hidden talent — the ability to find anything from lost keys to abandoned tea mugs

Although I say it myself, I am a dab hand at finding things. I'm also quite good at losing them. Reading glasses are a particular favourite, along with sunglasses, pens, and last-chance letters that I must action before something dastardly occurs. When my son was small, it was his job to locate my mobile phone. I would call it from the landline in the hall and he would scurry up and down stairs and in and out of the airing cupboard (where it turned up with unfailing regularity), until he had traced the source of the muffled ringing from beneath a cushion, under a chair or resting on a pile of newly folded towels. Or, on one memorable occasion, inside the washing-machine, where it was clonking around in circles, in the last seconds before it drowned. But top of my missing items list on an average day at home comes a cup of green tea with lemon. Misplaced mugs sometime take a surprisingly long time to track down — if my attention deficit has been especially active — but I don't rest until I do. The trick, since you ask, when an object has been lost, is to retrace one's footsteps. By focussing on exactly what you have been doing and re-enacting it pace by pace, you will soon find said cup of tea on top of the kitchen



number of minutes one has spent stomping and swearing and shouting, "This is ridiculous" — in that particular case, it was running into three figures.

I therefore feel a small thrill of anticipation when my son takes a call from his older brother to say that my step-daughter-in-law (modern families are complex things) cannot find her

point," he says gloomily.

"When did you last have them?" I enquire, as screams sound in the background, and I ferret for my own keys so I can storm to the rescue. Apparently, Lynda had the keys the night before when she reversed the car into the drive, and has turned every room upside down looking for them since. She can't

corner. I jump out of the car, preparing for the serene and composed manner in which I will insist Lynda walks through the route she took and my scrutiny of each surface on her way, and imagine the pride I will feel, and the gratitude and admiration in their eyes, when my method comes up trumps.

We arrive to find the hall full of cases and two figures running in small circles. I glance at the car in the driveway and spot a pink woolly hat lying on the bonnet with a set of car keys on top. I wave them through the open door. "Here they are!" I cry, feeling strangely cheated. Both look at me stunned. My son shakes his head.

"I'm good at finding things," I say.

'When did you last have them?'

dresser, where you perched it when you stood on a chair to change a light bulb. Or, most recently, on the bottom shelf of the fridge, where it had been abandoned in the search for whatever malodorous item was very clearly past its sell-by date at the back. The glow of satisfaction in the discovery is directly proportionate to the

car keys and they should have left for the airport half an hour ago. Paul is wondering if Tom will drive them to Gatwick, but I am keen to demonstrate my prowess.

"I will find those keys!" I declare, snatching the phone. "She needs to stay very calm," I tell my stepson.

"We are way past that

find the spare set, either.

"We will treat it like a crime reconstruction," I tell my son, who is coming to watch.

"You'd better do it quickly or they'll miss their plane," he says, as I screech around the final

100 Ways To Fight The Flab And Still Have Wine And Chocolate by Jane Wenham-Jones is published by Accent Press. Out in paperback and e formats.



The Ex Factor

He winced when he got out of the car, then rubbed at the small of his back and flinched again. What was wrong with him?

'You can't ignore what he is,' she told herself

"You're an addict." That's what Ashley told Matt as she started to pack up the few clothes she kept at his house.

"You're not serious?" He stood sweaty-faced and trembling a little. "I'm fine. Look at me."

He spread his hands wide.

A handsome, charming 30-year-old, he worked as a plumber during the day.

"I've done all of this before with Rory," she said. "I'm not silly enough to do it again."

"This is nothing like Rory. Nothing at all."

Rory, her ex, had always denied being an alcoholic. He drank to remember. He drank to forget. He drank for drinking's sake. She shook her head at Matt. "You must know you have a problem. You can't be in denial forever."

His dazed expression suggested otherwise.

"Fine." She zipped up her little case. She'd planned to stay for the weekend. She'd intended to help him decide which wallpaper would be best for the lounge and hall as he continued

In the restaurant, he sipped wine at their corner table. Wound about his wrist was a white crepe bandage. "I had an accident at work," he excused. "I had to wedge myself under this old lady's sink and my wrench slipped."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, it's just a bit of a sprain.

I took a couple of painkillers." He quaffed from his glass again. She had no reason to think he'd tripped headlong down a kerb in an alcoholic fog and ended up on his knees in the gutter. Rory, her ex, had done that once. He'd fallen in the kitchen, too, landed badly and broken his thumb. No. Matt looked so tanned, fit and healthy. Chomping through a pile of salad, nobody would guess he had a problem.

"I work at the office supplies place in town," she said as their chat moved on. "I cycle into work."

"You look in very good shape." He almost winked, then seemed to think better of it. He drank more wine instead.

She mirrored him for the sake of calming her nerves.

"I'd love to see you again," he said, even though they were still on their first course and barely knew each other at all. "Let's do something at the weekend. How about a walk? I love the outdoors."

"Me, too." She smiled, though her insides quailed. 'He's rushing me at bit, isn't he?' "That... that sounds like fun."

"Good. I'll pick you up around 11 in the morning. It's a date."

Date two then was set, barely

half an hour into their first.

The very next day, as promised, Matt picked her up in his car.

When he reached the open countryside and the stile that would begin their hike across open fields, he climbed out of his seat and winced. Then he rubbed at the small of his back as he opened the rear door so he could pull out his rucksack. He'd filled it with food and wine, he'd said. They'd picnic later, out in the middle of nowhere.

"Are you all right?" she asked when he flinched again, setting the heavy pack down on the grass of the verge.

"It's just a twinge." He played it down. "Don't worry, I'll tough it out." He fiddled inside the bag and pulled out a pack of painkillers. After that, he slid out a bottle of water and washed the tablets down. "It's work again. I was lifting this old-fashioned enamel bath and pulled a few muscles. I need to be more careful."

Rory had said something similar when he stumbled down the stairs, redecorating her paintwork as he went with a splatter of beer. "You shouldn't be out here walking if you're in pain," she said to Matt.

"It'll wear off. Besides, I've packed food and the best little Chablis I could find." He wrapped his arm about her shoulder and gave her a friendly hug.

She peered up at him and took a deep in-breath. His scent of manly cologne offered no clues. 'He keeps fit; he eats all

the redecoration of his home.

'You can't ignore what he is,' she told herself. 'He hid it well but the clues were always there.'

He'd eaten like a horse on their first date.

the right things; stop worrying,' she told herself. 'He isn't Rory.' Only... at first sight, Rory had seemed perfectly normal, too.

Matt shouldered the rucksack and took her hand. "Come on, I want to show you this fabulous view." He tugged her into a walk. Did he feel her reluctance just a little? Did those creases on his brow mark his unease? "So, here's a funny question," he asked as he climbed the stile. "You mentioned in passing you were engaged once. What did your fiancé do?"

"Oh, market research." That was what he meant, wasn't it? "He was called Rory. But don't they say it's a bad idea, talking about your exes?"

"Well, we all come from somewhere, don't we?" Matt replied, as she joined him on the far side of the stile.

As they crossed the first field, his wincing fell away. He didn't look like a man in pain at all. "I'd love you to see my house," he said. "I need some help with it. It's stuck in a 1980s time-warped."

"Yes, I will... one day. Soon," she said. "There's no rush, is there?"

"How about tomorrow? We'll have dinner there. I'll cook for you."

"How about the cinema, instead? Then... then I'll have to get back home. I'll need an early start for work." She'd fallen for Rory far too quickly, so quickly she'd missed all the warning signs. This time, she refused to be hurried. She planned dates three, four and five as they wandered along. She spoke of all the things she'd like to do later, laying out hints over their picnic as they sat before the glorious view he'd found. She warned herself to avoid his house — and his bed — for as long as possible.

She clung to her vow for another month, but how many avoidance tactics could a girl use? Eventually, she did give in. Besides, a part of her really wanted to.

Matt's house stood at the end of a gravel driveway.

Inside, she found two-toned wallpaper split by a flowery border almost everywhere.

"It needs redecoration and a new fitted kitchen, and goodness knows what else," Matt said, showing

her into the dated lounge.

They'd just been out for dinner. She'd drunk more than usual, knowing her nerves might need a little help that night. "I could do with a little restoration myself," she said.

He laughed. "What rubbish. You're perfect."

She blushed. "I am not."

He leaned down and kissed her. She kissed him back, then leaned in to him, feeling a little wobbly on her feet. "Shall we retire to the bedroom?" he whispered in her ear.

She laughed. "You sound like an old-fashioned butler." Butterflies spun in her stomach. "I'm nervous," she confessed.

"Don't be." He smiled. "I'll look after you. I have so far, haven't I?"

She had to admit he had. Once he'd realised her reticence to speed their relationship from

She leaned into the door frame, her knees watery beneath her. 'You see, it's fine. He's just doing his morning workout.' "Do you want some breakfast? I could make us some scrambled eggs."

"Great," he panted. "I'll be with you in —" he checked the display on the machine — "half a mile."

She stood admiring his lean body as he ran, turning pink-cheeked when she remembered the night before.

"I love you," he called, as if it came as naturally as asking for sugar in his tea.

She gulped. "I'll... I'll make those eggs." She darted away, her heart the weight of an anvil in her chest. 'Drift into his house. Let him buy you a toothbrush,' she told herself. 'Move in a few clothes, your own dressing-gown, some underwear. Be very,

lean and fit. "Right." He nodded. "I see. I do understand but... I'm not an addict, Ashley, and even if I was, being addicted to exercise isn't in the same league as being an alcoholic, is it? Still, fine if you're worried, I'll prove I'm perfectly OK. I'll go cold turkey — but if I do that for you, you'll have to do the same for me."

"What are you talking about?" She frowned.

"Well, I'm not the first man you've been close to since breaking up with your fiancé, am I? What was wrong with the others? Were they addicted to daytime TV or addicted to watching football? Did they smoke or gamble just a little? I'm sure you found an excuse to leave. You're an addict, too, Ashley. You're addicted to Rory and everything he did to you. If something's taking over your life and ruining it; if it's all you can think about, no matter what you're doing or who you're with, I'd call you an addict, wouldn't you?"

She narrowed her eyes and shook her head. "What do you know? You've never loved someone with your whole heart, watched them self-destruct, then been forced to leave to save yourself, have you?" She swallowed dryly. She fingered the zip of her case. 'Am I addicted to the past?' she wondered. 'Does it colour everything I do? Do I crave to leave Matthew six months after meeting him?'

Across the room, he wore a pensive expression. "My name's Matt, I'm addicted to Ashley," he said, as if introducing himself in an AA meeting. "I don't want to live without her. Not now."

She knew what she needed to do to break free. She knew how hard it would be. "My name's Ashley. I'm addicted to... to the past." She bit her lip. "Will you help me?"

He nodded so solemnly. "That's what I'm here for."

'The first step to getting better is admitting what you are,' Ashley thought, as she hurried into Matt's arms. The second step, she realised as she rested there, is finding the perfect person to help you.

THE END

© Jo Styles, 2017

*Glancing to his pillow,
she realised Matt had
disappeared*

A to Z, he hadn't pressured her. Later, upstairs, he carried on treating her with the greatest care.

The next morning, she woke up feeling glorious.

Only, glancing to his pillow, she realised Matt had disappeared.

"Matt?" she called, looking towards the door. He'd gone to freshen up, she surmised. She ought to do the same. She grabbed for his dressing-gown and wrapped the oversized folds of it about her. It dragged as she padded down the landing towards the bathroom over naked floorboards. "Hello?" She peered inside the room, but found it empty. "Oh."

She took to the stairs. Once down, she checked the kitchen and the lounge. Where on earth was he? Rory had a habit of disappearing, too. She'd found him in a cupboard under the stairs once — with a whisky bottle, after vowing on his mother's life he'd stay sober.

In the hall, she tried another doorway and found — Matt. "Hi!" He waved from his treadmill. "I always jog in the morning."

very careful. He still might be another Rory.'

In bullet points, that was how she thought of it.

Now, in his bedroom after another three months of being with him, she'd at last found him out. "You are an addict," she accused again as she packed up her things.

"You're being ridiculous."

"No, I'm not. It took me all this time to put it all together. When I came round today, what was wrong with you this time? Oh, yes... you'd hurt your knee."

"I hit it on the side of my van. It was an accident."

"It really doesn't matter, does it? You still got up this morning at six and went for a run on your silly machine. No sane person does that. You're addicted to exercise, Matt. How many gym visits was it last week? Then, you did more exercise at home. You crave endorphin rushes. You exercise even when you're hurt; that's how much you love it. I can't live with an addict. I know how it takes over your life."

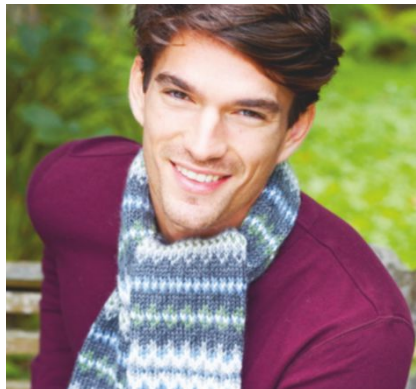
He took a moment, as if asking himself some searching questions as he stood there in his gym-gear, looking muscular,

Fantastic Fair Isle

For 100s of quality knitting & crochet patterns visit
theknittingnetwork.co.uk



Fair Isle Girls Cardigan Knitting Pattern £3.99
Code WCD039
Measurements: To fit ages 2-3 (3-4) (4-5) years



Fair Isle Mens Scarf Knitting Pattern £2.99
Code WAD064
Measurements: approx. 12.5cm/5in x 162cm/63¾in, incl. edgings



Floral Fair Isle And Intarsia Bag Knitting Pattern
£2.99 **Code WAD099**
Measurements: 36cm / 14in wide and 27cm / 10½in high



Vintage Mens Slipover Knitting Pattern
£3.99 **Code WMD009**
Measurements: to fit sizes 91 (97) (102) (107-112) (117) cm /
36 (38) (40) (42-44) (46) in



Dog Coat Knitting Pattern £1.99
Code WPD001
Measurements: to fit small (medium) sized dog



Kids Fair Isle Winter Hat Knitting Pattern
£2.99 **Code WAD040**
Measurements: to fit an average child's head



Womens Lace Trim Fair Isle Cardigan Knitting
Pattern £2.99 **Code WLD071**
Measurements: to fit bust sizes 91-97 (102-107) (112-117) cm /
36-38 (40-42) (44-46) in

How to Order

The
knitting
NETWORK

DOWNLOAD YOUR DIGITAL PATTERNS NOW

Visit our website
theknittingnetwork.co.uk

You can buy, download and print a digital PDF version of
any pattern on **The Knitting Network** website, instantly.

GET YOUR PATTERNS **DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR**

Call 0800 024 1212* quote FC03
or fill in the coupon opposite

Each pattern will be printed on A4 card and posted to
you at an additional cost of £1.99.

The **knitting** NETWORK

The **NEW** website for
Woman's Weekly patterns



Fair Isle Teddy Bear Toy Knitting Pattern
£2.99 **Code WTD024**



Fair Isle Hot Water Bottle Cover Knitting
Pattern £2.99 **Code WAD053**



Kids Fair Isle Hat, Mittens And Scarf Knitting
Patterns £4.99 **Code WCD020**
Hat and mittens: to fit ages 2-3 (4-5) years
Scarf: approximately 18 x 131cm / 7 x 51½ in

Womens Tweed Fair
Isle Cardigan Knitting
Pattern £2.99
Code WLD156
Measurements: to fit bust
sizes 81-86 (91) (97-102)
(107- 112) (117-122) cm /
32-34 (36) (38-40) (42-44)
(46-48) in

Terms and conditions The yarn(s) and the shade(s) quoted in these patterns were available when the designs were created. As we are unable to guarantee the availability of the yarn, where possible we have specified standard weights. However, if an alternative yarn is used, the yarn amounts may differ. For a perfect result, we recommend to always check your tension.

This offer closes on 7 March 2017 and is subject to availability to readers in the UK, offers cannot be used in conjunction with other promotions, prices are correct at the time of printing. If you do not have the facility at home to print our downloadable knitting patterns you can call or fill in the coupon attached and pay an additional £1.99 for printing and delivery. Charge only applies to patterns delivered by post. Items will be despatched within 2-5 days once payment has cleared. You'll be notified if a longer delay is expected

All correspondence concerning this offer should be sent to **The Knitting Network Pattern Offer FC03 Customer Care, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU.** Or call 0800 024 1212*.

*Telephone lines are open Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm, but closed on bank holidays. Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones.

Fantastic Fair Isle

PLEASE FILL IN THIS COUPON – Payment must be made by cheque, sent with the coupon to the address provided below.

To: **The Knitting Network Pattern Offer FC03 Customer Care**, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU

Pattern Code	Product Name	Price	Qty	Total
WCD039	Fair Isle Girls Cardigan Knitting Pattern	£3.99		
WAD064	Fair Isle Mens Scarf Knitting Pattern	£2.99		
WPD001	Dog Coat Knitting Pattern	£1.99		
WTD024	Fair Isle Teddy Bear Toy Knitting Pattern	£2.99		
WAD099	Floral Fair Isle And Intarsia Bag Knitting Pattern	£2.99		
WAD040	Kids Fair Isle Winter Hat Knitting Pattern	£2.99		
WAD053	Fair Isle Hot Water Bottle Cover Knitting Pattern	£2.99		
WMD009	Vintage Mens Slipover Knitting Pattern	£3.99		
WLD071	Womens Lace Trim Fair Isle Cardigan Knitting Pattern	£2.99		
WLD156	Womens Tweed Fair Isle Cardigan Knitting Pattern	£2.99		
WCD020	Kids Fair Isle Hat, Mittens And Scarf Knitting Patterns	£4.99		

By providing your details, you agree to be contacted by Time Inc. (UK) Ltd and its group companies, home of *The Knitting Network*, *Women's Weekly* and other iconic brands. We'll only contact you about things we think you'll be interested in, like special offers and the latest updates. Please tick here if you DO NOT wish to receive these messages by email ☐ by post and/or telephone ☐.

Postage £1.99

TOTAL £

I enclose a cheque (no cash, please) made payable to **'The Knitting Network'**

for the sum of £ (please write your name and address clearly on the back of your cheque)

Mrs / Miss / Ms / Mr (delete as appropriate)

First Name

Last Name

Address

Postcode

Daytime tel no (incl code)

Email address

REGISTER FOR **OUR NEWSLETTER** AT
theknittingnetwork.co.uk
full of news, offers and tips



Daffodils



It's four years ago now, and I no longer care what Joey did or what he said back then. But I will never, as long as I live, forget my baby

"For me? Really?" Lukasz looks at the blue envelope, but doesn't take it. "What is?"

His hand trembles as he places his hard-hat on my desk and I realise, too late, that his surprise isn't a happy thing.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no! Happy birthday," I say quickly. "It's just a card. I, um, got you a little something, too."

I reach into a drawer and take out a bottle of wine wrapped in red tissue paper.

"It's not much," I say. "It was on special."

He holds the bottle in his grimy hands as if it is the most delicate thing in the world and carefully strips the tissue paper away. His hands are still shaking.

I wait for a moment. This is the perfect opportunity for him to ask me to share it with him.

"Is perfect, thank you," he says, then he opens the card and thanks me again. "Very special. Is kind of you, Emmie. Thank you for thinking of me."

"No, I meant it was on offer, I mean, I wouldn't say it was special." I roll my eyes with embarrassment and he looks confused.

"Maybe beer would have been better?" I mumble. I'm not very good at this; in fact, I'm terrible at it. I wish I hadn't done it.

I don't normally get the guys at work anything for their birthdays. I couldn't afford to, but Lukasz is different. The others head to the pub at lunchtime or after work and they're always arranging to meet up at weekends, but Lukasz

is always in a hurry to get home.

"Wine is good," he says with a grin. "Can I leave it here until tonight?"

"Yes, of course. I'll put it in my desk."

"I will collect before I go home," he says. "Again, thank you."

I like him. A lot. It seems to me he has a good heart and that counts for everything in my book.

He brings a packed lunch to work, a sandwich with uneven slices of bread slapped around fat chunks of cheese, as if it's been made in a hurry.

The other day, I noticed a black button had been sewn untidily to his jacket with white thread and I itched to get it off him and sew it on properly.

He picks up his hat and leaves the office with a smile on his face, stepping to one side as our boss, Mr Cooper, comes in.

Mr Cooper is all tight suit and bluster.

"Hat on, Jankowski," he snaps. "At all times."

Mr Cooper drums his finger on his own hard-hat. "No exceptions."

"Yes, sir," Lukasz obeys and hurries back to work.

"What was he doing in here?" Mr Cooper wants to know.

"Shirking? And what's that?"

He snatches up the birthday card and scoffs as he chucks it back down.

"I hope you're not thinking of getting involved with him, Ellie, especially after what happened with Joey," he says and I flinch at the mention of my ex-husband's name.

Joey was a world apart from Lukasz. He was brash and charming and he'd come into the office and lean on my desk and gaze into my eyes as if the rest of the world had ceased to exist.

It's the same old story. He was doing the same thing at all the building firms he visited, selling his wares and selling himself — and he carried on doing it after we were married.

I don't want to think about how it all ended but, thanks to Mr Cooper, it's risen like a gigantic wave and I know it's going to break over my head and swamp me, same as it always does.

"Are you all right, Emmie?"

I push my chair back, grab my bag and stumble outside, but I can't escape the memories as easily as I can the office.

It was the only time my boss showed his human side, when it all blew up with Joey. He was good to me back then, although I didn't realise it at the time. He even bought me flowers.

I run blindly through the building site and out through the hoarding, and by the time I've crossed the road to the municipal gardens, it's washed over me and now I feel a fool.

It was four years ago. I no longer care what Joey did or what he said, but I will never, ever, as long as I live, forget my baby.

There's a low wall around one of the flower-beds and I sink down on it and feel the cold of the stone seeping through my clothes. The bulbs are coming up through the frosty grass and it won't be long before the park is yellow and gold with daffodils.

"Emmie." I look up and see Lukasz standing over me.

"Something is wrong? Was it my fault? I am sorry about the wine. It is great, really. I am very pleased."

"It wasn't you, Lukasz. Something Mr Cooper said..."

I watch as his large hands bunch into fists and he looks over his shoulder towards the hoarding.

"He upset you? Because of me?"

"No, no, he didn't. Not deliberately. And I'm fine now. I just needed some air."

I smile at him, to show I'm speaking the truth.

Mr Cooper watches us as we head back to the site.

"All right?" he asks gruffly.

"I'm fine."

I wait for him to tell Lukasz off for leaving the site, but he simply nods at him as if in acknowledgement of a job well done. He never praises, but those nods of his are like gold dust.

Back in the office, I make phone calls, chase up suppliers and pay invoices and when I've done, everyone else has gone.

"Time you weren't here, Emmie," Mr Cooper says.

I pack up, retrieve my bag from the deep desk drawer and see the bottle of wine and birthday card still there. My shoulders slump.

"He left in a hurry," Mr Cooper says in his gravelly voice.

"Probably forgot it."

"Maybe I could drop it in to him," I say, weighing up the bottle and the possibility in my hand.

Mr Cooper says nothing.

"It has nothing to do with you," I tell him.

Still he says nothing.

"You can't run my life for me."

He opens his mouth as if to speak, then changes his mind and shrugs.

"It's your life, Emmie."

"Right, it is. And I'll thank you to stay out of it."

No one speaks to Mr Cooper like that, but I just did. He just looks at me, so I gather up my stuff and leave, wondering if I've gone too far and whether he'll want me back tomorrow.

I know where Lukasz lives, of course I do. I work in the office. It's my job to know.

His motorcycle is parked outside a small terraced house. The curtains are closed, but I can see lights on through a gap. No one knows anything about Lukasz, about his life and circumstances, I mean. All anyone knows is that he is a good and reliable worker.

As I get out of the car and lean in for the bottle, a woman appears at the end of the road, hurrying along with a young girl. The child runs ahead and the door of the house opens. Lukasz hugs her, then woman and child go inside and the door closes behind them.

So there is a Mrs Jankowski and a daughter, too.

Because I let the thoughts in earlier, Joey and his betrayal creep back in.

His infidelity I could have lived with. The knowledge of it, I mean. I wouldn't have stayed with him. I do have some pride left.

It was the way he dismissed our child as something of no importance.

He was with someone else when Mr Cooper drove me to the hospital, in pain and bleeding.

It's going to break over my head

Daffodils

He'd wrapped me in the blanket he keeps in the boot of his car "for emergencies" and he held me up as we walked into the accident and emergency department.

He sat with me until a nurse called my name. "Your dad can come with you," she said when Mr Cooper stood up.

"He's not my dad," I said.

"I'll wait here," he said, sitting back down. "I won't go anywhere."

They did a scan and sent for someone from obs and gynae, but it was too late. My baby was a little girl, far too tiny to survive. I didn't see Mr Cooper again until I was admitted to a ward.

It was this time of year, dark and cold, with stars twinkling in the black sky and a sliver of moon like the tip of a fingernail. Mr Cooper brought me some flowers from the hospital shop, daffodils with tightly closed buds which looked like green spears.

"There are no words," he said and it was obvious it took an immense effort for him to say them, even though there were none. Then he did what people who can't find words often do and gathered me up in his arms.

It's what my husband should have been doing and he was the only person I wanted to see, but he was out of reach somewhere, his phone turned off.

"I'll find him," Mr Cooper said.

When he came back, Joey's jacket was all scuffed up to one side as if Mr Cooper had dragged him to the hospital. His face was red on one side and I thought he'd been crying.

"Where were you?" I asked and Joey looked at Mr Cooper.

He came over to the bed and Mr Cooper stood at the door, arms folded, suit straining, face wreathed in fury and sadness and a hundred other emotions I'd never thought my boss capable of.

"Tell her," he growled.

"Not now," Joey said.

"Yes, now," Mr Cooper said.

"She's already broken. Do you think you can break her more? At least have the courage to do it now."

Maybe Mr Cooper was wrong. At the time, I felt as if I was being

kicked when I was down, but he was right in that I couldn't hurt more.

"I was with someone else," Joey muttered. "But she doesn't mean anything. As for the baby, well it's not as if I missed a proper birth. You can have another one."

Mr Cooper barged forward and smacked Joey behind the ear. That's when I realised why his face was red and his eyes watering. He must have done it before, perhaps when he dragged him from his girlfriend's bed.

It wasn't a hard slap, but Joey howled like an injured dog.

"Not proper?" Mr Cooper said, outraged. "She was your baby, man!"

I was angry with Mr Cooper at first. After Joey stormed out, I threw a glass of water at my boss, glass and all, and he left. A short while later, Mrs Cooper arrived, wrapped me in her arms and said she knew what I was going through as she'd been through it herself.

She took the flowers away as the hospital didn't allow them on the wards.

When I was discharged, she took me back to her house, told Mr Cooper to keep away from me and looked after me until I was ready to face the world again.

She'd put the daffodils in my bedroom and they were already opening up in the warmth.

"I think they symbolise hope," she told me and I shrugged and told her I would never, ever love anyone again.

"Understandable," she said.

When I said I never wanted to be a mother, to risk all that pain again, she sighed.

"You don't have to make decisions about the future now," she said. But I did. I had to know I was going to protect myself.

Mrs Cooper even went to the office and did my job for me for the rest of the week. Eventually, I rented one of Mr Cooper's flats and I'm still there.

I'd been cool with Mr Cooper ever since. I suppose I blamed the messenger and, looking back, he could have handled things better, but he'd only acted the way he did because he cared and because he was angry and upset.

It's taken me all these years to realise that. And he warned me away from Lukasz for the same reason, because he cared, perhaps not about me, but for Mrs Jankowski and their daughter.

I daresay my behaviour over the past few years would put anyone off caring about me.

I am about to drive off when the door opens again and Lukasz looks right at me. Oh, why did I have to park right under a street light? He would probably have recognised my daft little car anyway, daft because the former owner decorated it with pink flowers which I can't get off without damaging the paintwork.

He probably thinks I'm some sort of mad stalker.

My car doesn't want to start and the more frantically I try, the worse it sounds.

Lukasz is leaning on the roof now, looking in at me.

"Stop," he says. "The engine is... overwhelmed."

I do like him, I really do, but I won't be the other woman, not for anything.

"I brought your bottle," I say, feeling stupid. "I'm sorry. I didn't realise. Your wife..."

He frowns. "My wife?"

"I saw her, with your little girl."



His face breaks into a smile, "My Milena," he says. "My daughter. Yes. Come in, please. Meet her."

I can see his wife watching from the open doorway. The only way to escape this with any face is to brazen it out, pretend I do this for every birthday at the site, that Lukasz is just one of the boys.

So I follow him to his house and the woman greets me with warm smiles.

"You must be Emmie," she says. "Lukasz has told us of your kindness."

Kindness? Have I been kind to him? So much so that he's noticed?

"Come in, have some birthday cake." She lowers her voice and whispers, "Milena made it today, so you might like to ask for a very small piece.

Bless her, she tries hard."

She is still wearing her coat.

"Anyway, I must be off. Have a lovely birthday evening, Lukasz. See you tomorrow."

She hugs Milena, then she's gone.

"My child-minder," Lukasz says. "Her name is Lizzie. I would not manage without her. And this is Milena, my daughter."

Milena wraps her arms round my waist and hugs me. I hug her back. She has the same dark, wavy hair as her father.

"My daddy talks about you," she says and she has no hint of her father's accent. Her smile grows even bigger and she adds, "All the time."

"Join us for dinner?" Lukasz asks. "We can share the wine. I will get you a taxi home after, then tomorrow I will look at your car."

Milena, eight years old, is the one who sews on his buttons. She makes his packed lunch, too, not because she has to, but because she wants to. Her mother died when she was two, just after they moved to this country, and Lukasz says she's taken it upon herself to look after him.

"Mr Cooper has been very kind. He rents this house to us."

"So he knows your situation?"

He nods. "His wife has been very kind also," he says.

"They are good people," I say and that's something of an understatement.

I know that Mrs Cooper understood when I said I would never love anyone again, just as I know she will have told her husband, who would not have understood quite so well. He's a very literal man is Mr Cooper.

The following morning, I go to work on the bus. My car is fine and I am going to collect it tonight.

I stop to pick up a bunch of early daffodils, their buds tightly closed, and when Mr Cooper comes in, I've arranged them in an empty coffee jar on his desk.

"Daffs," he growls.

"For you," I say. "Did you know they were a symbol of hope?"

"I just know they're bonny," he says and I get a rare smile. "Nice thought, Emmie. Thank you."

"Thank you, Mr Cooper," I say and he gives one of his nods. I think maybe we're starting to understand each other at last.

THE END

© Teresa Ashby, 2017

The Robin family



Illustration: Martina Farrow/New Division

First Aid Needed

There was still plenty of snow in The Woodlands, but most of it had become far too grey and slushy to play in. Luckily, though, Roley Robin had discovered a patch of snow that was still white and crisp. So, in no time at all, the little Woodlanders were hauling their toboggans across the meadow.

"But make sure you mind what you be at!" Wilberforce Weasel warned them when he saw them preparing for the first race. "That snow might not be quite as crisp as it looks!"

"Oh, we'll be all right," Morris Mouse and Sam Sparrow assured him. Minutes later, they were whizzing down the slope, neck-and-neck with Rosemary Robin and Carolyn Chaffinch, and all the other toboggans close behind. It was all enormous fun and, for the next quarter of an hour, everyone enjoyed themselves

immensely. But then disaster struck, tumbling Roley and his cousin Richard into the snow.

"Oh, my goodness!" gasped Rosemary and, with the help of all her friends and Wilberforce, rushed to rescue them.

Luckily, Roley and Richard were not hurt, though they were covered in snow from head to foot. But their toboggan was not so lucky, for it had hit a stone that had been hidden under the snow and poor Roley was most upset, quite convinced that it had been ruined.

"Oh, I don't think so," announced Wilberforce, after he had carefully examined the toboggan.

"There is a bit of first aid needed, but that can be easily done. Then, with a lick of paint, it'll be as good as new. But I think this ought to be the last toboggan session of the season, don't you?"

And the little Woodlanders agreed.

Indoors Is Best!

"Just listen to that rain!" said Mrs Rebecca Robin, as she and Mr Robin sat in the parlour of Tree Stump House.

Mr Robin went to look out of the window. "Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "I can hardly see across the garden. It's pouring. Well, at least it will get rid of the snow!"

"Just as long as it doesn't cause flooding in its place," Mrs Rebecca said, a little anxiously.

"It can't keep raining like this for long," replied Mr Robin.

But he was wrong. When they looked out of their windows in the morning, there was water everywhere! However, to their relief, the Frog Boatmen, in their bright yellow waterproofs and sou'westers, were already about and ready to ferry any Woodlander who needed to go out safely through the water.

Roley and Rosemary and their friends hoped they'd have the excitement of being ferried to the Woodland School but, to their disappointment, Mr Rook, after discussions with Miss Owl and Miss Thrush, was soon flying around to say that there would be no school until the flood had subsided.

"But that doesn't mean no lessons," Mr Robin told the two little Robins, "because Mr Rook has also been leaving some homework for everyone!"

"I have to write a short essay about my favourite sport!" Roley announced — and

How Dull Everything Looks

"Thank goodness the floods have gone," said Mrs Shrew-Mouse, as she and Mrs Wood-Mouse walked home from The Woodlands shops. "But," she added gloomily as she looked around, "how dull everything looks after all that wet!"

"At least no one was flooded this time," Mrs Wood-Mouse told her encouragingly.

But it seemed Mrs Shrew-Mouse was determined to stay gloomy. Mrs Wood-Mouse simply smiled and decided to invite her old friend in for a cup of tea before she went home. 'It might help to cheer her up a little,' she thought to herself.

Mrs Shrew-Mouse enjoyed her unexpected cup of tea, but, as she was putting her coat on, Mrs Wood-Mouse surprised her by saying, "Oh, before you go, come into the garden for a moment. There's something I'd like to show you."

Mrs Wood-Mouse had a pretty little garden and at the top, beside the fence, was a neat holly bush, with lots of

scarlet berries that glowed like tiny lamps in among the shiny, dark green leaves.

"Now, there's nothing in the least dull and grey there, is there?" Mrs Wood-Mouse said with a smile, as she pointed at it. "But have you seen something else that isn't dull and grey either?"

Mrs Shrew-Mouse hadn't and when she did, she gave a squeak of pleasure — for there, not far from the holly bush, was a little carpet of dainty white snowdrops.

"February Fair Maids — a sign that it won't be too long before spring is here once again," said Mrs Wood-Mouse as she bent down to pick some for her old friend to take home with her.

But she wasn't the only Woodlander who had some snowdrops. Mrs Rosabelle, Robin and Rowena each had a bunch bought from Anthea Rabbit's Flower Shop.

"Snap!" they called, laughing, when they saw Mrs Shrew-Mouse, and Mrs Shrew-Mouse, her gloominess quite forgotten, laughed as she called, "Snap" back to them.

laughed when his father said that there would be no prizes for guessing what that was — cricket!

"I wonder what Richard's homework is?" said Rosemary.

"Ring up and find out," suggested Mrs Rebecca, and

when her daughter did, she discovered Miss Thrush wanted her pupils to produce a little fairy story, and that Richard was already busy writing about a fairy who built herself a boat that would fly through the air as well as sail on the water...

The Other Woman

I heard him say her name quite clearly, and then he laughed. I can tell you, I've never felt less like laughing myself

They say it's always the wife who's the last to know, don't they? I wonder who else already knows, but I'm afraid to ask. You see, my husband, Pete, has another woman. At his age! I'm shocked, to be honest. I don't think he's had her long and I intend that he doesn't have her for very much longer. We have too many wedding anniversaries under our belts for me to let Pete get away now. I'm going to fight for my man. Pete's the wrong side of 60 and has a bit of a paunch. I love that paunch. At night, we spoon to go to sleep and I rest my hand on his little paunch. It's comforting — and it also takes the ache away that I get in my shoulder these days, not that I'll tell Pete that.

I know Pete's other woman's name. Joanna. I don't think Pete's got any idea that I know. So, how do I know? Well, Pete talks in his sleep, that's how.

In the early hours of Monday morning this week, Pete got a bit restless and all his twitching

and snuffly snores woke me up.

"Would you like to go the Bat And Hen, Joanna?" he asked. I heard him quite clearly. I almost stopped breathing when he said, "Jen's never been to the Bat And Hen." And then he laughed. I'm Jen and I can tell you I have never felt less like laughing.

Not only have I never been to the Bat And Hen, I've never been to Batleigh, where that particular pub is. And without me sitting beside him, Pete's never going to get there either, because he has absolutely no sense of direction.

So, at breakfast, I said cheerily (or as cheerily as an anxious woman can between gritted teeth), "It's a glorious morning, Pete. How do you fancy a drive out into the country? I've seen good reviews of the Bat And Hen in Batleigh in the county newspaper."

I haven't. I made that up. But as Pete only ever reads anything to do with Formula 1 in the papers, I'm sure he won't tell me he hasn't.

"The Bat And Hen?" he spluttered, with a mouth full of Cornflakes.

"I'll get the map out," I said.

So, that's where we went and very nice it was, too. I did look around to see if there were any lone females who might have been Joanna, hopeful of Pete turning up on his own, but

everyone was in couples or in big groups.

"I wish I could read a map like you do, Jen," Pete said on the way home. "But if there's a map-reading version of dyslexia — maplexia, perhaps — then I reckon I've got it."

We had a lovely day that day and in bed that night we did a bit more than spoon to get to sleep. Joanna forgotten — for the moment.

And then Pete started meeting a mate for a drink down the Fisherman's Rest. Two nights in a row. He hadn't been there for years. Not since his days of following Damon Hill around the Grand Prix circuits of Europe, and that's a long time ago now. Andy. That's Pete's mate's name. Back in the day, they used to meet up at the Fisherman's Rest and plan their route to Monza, or Le Mans, or Monaco or wherever. Andy always drove, said he was vaccinated with a compass needle. He barely had to even glance at a map, did Andy, to know where he was going. I used to like having the house to myself for a long weekend, back then. Now, I think it would just be lonely without Pete.

I was emptying the dishwasher after tea when the phone rang. Pete rushed into the hall to answer it. 'He can move fast for a big man, when

*I don't think Pete's got any idea
that I know*

he wants to,' I thought to myself.

"Who was that, then?" I said, all cheery and bright, when he came back. "You could have given that Mo Farah a run for his money, going to answer it."

Pete's eyebrows knitted together, and his lips went all thin and taut. Hmm, he didn't appreciate my little joke, then?

"Andy. I said he was going to call. I'm just popping out for an hour. The Fisherman's Rest." He jangled the car keys in his pocket.

That was the third time this week.

"You're not driving, I hope." Pete had walked the other two times and Andy had given him a lift home. Well, to the end of the road. So Pete said.

"I am. I'll have orange and soda or something. Andy's got something he wants to run past me."

Then he went upstairs and came back down wearing his best jeans, a multi-coloured striped shirt, and the new slip-on loafers I bought him and which he said he didn't like and has only worn once. Until now.

Now, I was tempted here to voice my concerns. But after a long marriage, a girl knows when to hold back.

"Give my regards to Andy," I said. "You could invite him and Laura around for supper one night. It'd be good to catch up."

"Er, no. Not Laura. They divorced a couple of years ago. Footloose and fancy-free is our Andy now."

Oh, my God. Did Pete wish he was footloose and fancy-free? Were the two of them double-dating or something? I seem to remember Laura being Andy's second wife. A cold shiver of something deeply unpleasant — fear — rippled up my spine and spread out over my shoulders like a wet blanket.

On Sunday morning, Pete disappeared into the garage. He said he was going to check the oil in the car, and the tyre pressures.

"Thinking of another drive out and a pub lunch?" I asked.

Pete gave me a funny look. And well he might. In the early hours of this morning, I distinctly heard him say, "Jo, you've got to help me out with this."

Pete grunted some sort of

reply I didn't quite catch. Then he swiped his mobile off the table and disappeared.

He was in there for ages. I peered out the kitchen window and could just see him, sitting in the driving seat. His lips were moving like he was talking to someone. So, I made coffee, cut him a double-sized slice of my coffee and walnut cake — I'm willing to bet this Joanna couldn't make a coffee and walnut cake like I do — and tiptoed out.

But it wasn't Pete's voice I heard. It must have been Joanna's — all breathy and sexy, as it happens — because Pete had a silly grin on his face, and his eyes were closed.

"Move forward when you are ready," the sexy, breathy Joanna said.

"The Cock And Feathers," Pete said.

'Over my dead body!' I thought. I banged on the

"I don't know how to get to Dartfield," Pete said.

"Ah, well, that's where you're in luck. Because I do," I said, in my best sexy, breathy voice. I found my glasses and put them on. Oh, dear. I think I might need a new prescription. That, or the writing on the map got smaller since last week. Eventually, I found Dartfield. I poked a finger on the map. "Turn left out of Acacia Avenue," I said.

OK, so we live in Acacia Avenue, but I've known Pete get lost on the way to the local supermarket. How he thinks he's going to impress sexy, breathy Joanna, I have no idea.

"Why are you talking all funny?" Pete asked. Worried now, I have to tell you.

"Perhaps I've got a cold coming," I said. "Put some music on, will you? I need to concentrate on this map."

So, Pete fiddled with some dials and I plotted the route from

husband sees me at all sometimes, except when he can't find the sugar in the cupboard or whatever.

"I have."

"None of us is getting any younger, Pete," I said. I liked to think he might realise that was a nod to the fact that Joanna had entered his life, and he'd better give it some long and hard thought, pretty damn quick. I mean, I know he's still competent in the bedroom department, but I doubt Joanna would be expecting him to wear boxers with the waistbands almost falling off just because they've got Damon Hill's Formula 1 Williams car all over them. I mean, would she?

"We're not," Pete said. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Jen, and that's the truth." And then he got the fleece we always keep on the back seat for emergencies and tucked it around me in the passenger seat. I felt cared for and loved and cherished in that moment. "Joanna will get us home."

"Joanna!" I yelled — or tried to, but my throat was sore now. "Joanna who?"

"Lumley. You know. The actress. She's voiced the sat nav." And then he poked a finger at a box on the dashboard I hadn't noticed before. "Like I said, I've noticed you have a bit of bother with small print these days, so I got this. Andy's been giving me a few lessons on how to use it. I think I've got the hang of it now. Just tapping in our postcode, then Joanna will get us home."

And she did. But if Pete thinks I'm going anywhere with Joanna Lumley's sexy, breathy voice taunting me — lovely as she may be in real life — he's got another think coming. I got the young lad next door — Alex — to look up sat navs on the Internet. He's ordered one for me. And it's going to be here next week — I should be better by then and I have a fancy for another pub lunch. The Swan And Feathers at Shawbridge.

Yes, Joanna is history. But it seems that that hunk of the bare-chest-and-the-grass-scything in *Poldark* — Aidan Turner — also does a voice-over for sat navs...

THE END

© Linda Mitchelmore, 2017



bonnet of the car. That woke Pete from his reverie. And it also almost was over my dead body, because the car rolled forward.

"Pete!" I yelled.

"Jen?" he said, blushing and yanking on the handbrake.

"I was, er, just testing the handbrake," Pete said when he recovered. "You gave me a fright."

"Good!" I said. "Oh, and I enjoyed our day out on Monday so I've rung and booked a table for two for lunch at the Cock And Feathers. It's in Dartfield."

I hadn't. But I was going to.

"Be ready in an hour and a half," I told him.

I didn't give Pete time to reply and marched into the house to make the reservation.

Now, I don't know the first workings of a car, or what all the dials and switches and buttons and the like are for on the dashboard. But I can read a map. It was open on my lap.

the map to my head. Easy peasy. My O-Level in geography was not going to waste.

Well, wouldn't you know it? Fact can be stranger than fiction sometimes. My talking funny had nothing to do with me coming down with a fictional cold, but all to do with the onset of what was promising to be flu. After lunch, I came over all hot and shivery and a bit faint, to be honest. My eyes were red and sore, and watering for England.

"I'm not going to be able to read the map to get us home, Pete," I said, all tearful and sorry for myself. Maybe the thought of Pete having this Joanna in his life was all too much for me.

"Don't worry, love," Pete said. "I've noticed you have a bit of bother seeing small print these days, even with your glasses. I didn't like to mention it, so..."

"Have you?" I said, more than a bit surprised. Like most wives of long-standing, I wonder if my

Subscribe to Woman's Weekly Fiction From £9.49*

**SUBSCRIBE
TODAY AND
NEVER MISS
AN ISSUE**

**SAVE
UP TO
15%**



**Monthly extras.
Exclusive for
subscribers.**

Rewards

Subscribe today and join Rewards for free to get even more from your magazine. Hand-picked offers, unique giveaways and unmissable prizes – exclusive for subscribers.

Join Rewards at mymagazinerewards.co.uk/fiction

Subscribe online at magazinesdirect.com/ficsub2017 0330 333 1113 Quote code: 11XH
Lines open 7 days a week, from 8am-9pm (UK time)

Complete this coupon and send to: FREEPOST Time Inc. (NO STAMP NEEDED - UK ONLY)

YES! I would like to subscribe to

Woman's Weekly Fiction

Please tick your preferred payment method

**TOP
OFFER**

- ☐ Pay only £9.49 every 6 months by Direct Debit, saving 15% on the full price of £11.70
- ☐ 1 year Cheque/Cash/Credit or Debit Card (12 issues), pay only £20.99, saving 10% (full price £23.40)

Your details

Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss: Forename:

Surname:

If you would like to receive emails from Woman's Weekly Fiction and Time Inc. (UK) Ltd containing news, special offers, product and service information and, occasionally, take part in our magazine research via email, please include your email below.

Email:

Address:

Postcode:

Home Tel No: (inc. area code)

If you would like to receive messages from Woman's Weekly Fiction and Time Inc. (UK) Ltd containing news, special offers, product and service information and, occasionally, take part in our magazine research via your mobile, please include your mobile phone number below.

Mobile No:

Date of Birth: DD MM YYYY

I would like to send a gift to:

Please also fill out 'Your Details' on the left. To give more than one subscription, please supply address details on a separate sheet.

Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss: Forename:

Surname:

Address:

Postcode:

1. I enclose a cheque/postal order made payable to Time Inc. (UK) Ltd, for £

2. Please debit £ from my:

☐ Visa ☐ Visa Debit ☐ MasterCard ☐ Amex

Card No:

Expiry Date:

Signature:

(I am over 18)

Date:

3. Pay only £9.49 every 6 months by Direct Debit (UK only)

Instruction to your Bank or Building Society to pay by Direct Debit
For office use only. Originator's reference - 764 221



Name of Bank:

Address:

Postcode:

Account Name:

Sort Code:

Account No:

Please pay Time Inc. (UK) Ltd. Direct Debits from the account detailed on this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Time Inc. (UK) Ltd. and if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank or Building Society.

Signature:

(I am over 18)

Date:

QWF CODE: 11XH

THE DIRECT DEBIT GUARANTEE This Guarantee is offered by all banks and building societies that accept instructions to pay Direct Debits. If there are any changes to the amount, date or frequency of your Direct Debit Time Inc. (UK) Ltd will notify you 10 working days in advance of your account being debited or as otherwise agreed. If you request Time Inc. (UK) Ltd to collect a payment, confirmation of the amount and date will be given to you at the time of the request. If an error is made in the payment of your Direct Debit by Time Inc. (UK) Ltd or your bank or building society, you are entitled to a full and immediate refund of the amount paid from your bank or building society. If you receive a refund you are not entitled to, you must pay it back when Time Inc. (UK) Ltd asks you to. You can cancel a Direct Debit at any time by simply contacting your bank or building society. Written confirmation may be required. Please also notify us.

*Every 6 months by Direct Debit. Offer open to new subscribers only. Direct Debit offer is available to UK subscribers only. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). The full subscription rate is for 1 year (insert number of issues for 1 year) and includes postage and packaging. If the magazine ordered changes frequency per annum, we will honour the number of issues paid for, not the term of the subscription. Offer closes 30 September 2017. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries from the UK, please call: 0330 333 4333. (Lines are open Monday to Friday UK time, 8.30am-5.30pm ex Bank Holidays) or email: help@magazinesdirect.com. Woman's Weekly Fiction, published by Time Inc. (UK) Ltd, will collect your personal information to process your order. Woman's Weekly Fiction, and Time Inc. (UK) Ltd would like to contact you by post or telephone to promote and ask your opinion on our magazines and services. Please tick here if you prefer not to hear from Time Inc. (UK) Ltd. Time Inc. (UK) Ltd may occasionally pass your details to carefully selected organisations so that they can contact you by telephone or post with regards to promoting and researching their products and services. Please tick here if you prefer not to be contacted. Time Inc. (UK) Ltd who publish Woman's Weekly Fiction, would like to send messages to your mobile with offers from carefully selected organisations and brands, promoting and researching their products and services. If you want to receive messages please tick here. Time Inc. (UK) Ltd would like to email you with offers from carefully selected organisations and brands, promoting and researching their products and services. If you want to receive these messages please tick here.

Chemistry

I'm quite new to relationships. I guess I've always been married to my work — until now

How does it happen? How does your relationship go from being as explosive as mixing potassium with water, to being like the slow creep of rust on an old banger?

And how has it happened without me barely noticing? Me, a chemistry teacher, a scientist, used to observation?

Mike and I teach in the same school — he teaches a woolly subject in comparison to mine — English — although don't say I said so. It's so much more subjective, no right and wrong answers, just opinion, in my opinion. Mike would argue otherwise, I'm sure.

We met over the kettle in the staff room. He was quite new. It had just boiled. We both glanced at the clock, as the switch clicked: 10 minutes until the end of break.

"Like Wordsworth's cloud," he said.

"It's water vapour," I replied. "Same as a cloud, only hotter. Clouds evaporate, eventually."

"My water," he said, grabbing the kettle. "Watch it evaporate into my mug."

I gave him a hard stare, about to claim that wasn't evaporation, but he filled my mug first, then his, almost having to squeeze out the drops to make a decent-looking cup of coffee. As revenge, he made sure he took the last chocolate biscuit before sitting at the table and doing his marking, glancing over and smiling at me. There was most definitely a spark.

Maybe it was because neither of us were expecting, or looking, for love, but once we were together, it felt like that first fizz of sherbet on your tongue. You close your eyes, hoping the fizz will go on forever because it tastes so good.

We had busy lives; it seemed easier if I moved myself, and my marking, into Mike's flat. It was fabulous for the first few months; the sheets would sizzle with friction every night.

I'm quite new to relationships. I guess I've always been married to my work, until now. Mike's a bit more practised. I can imagine him at uni, the soul-searching poet, drawing girls towards him while playing Bob Dylan on his guitar.

One thing is, though, I've never felt shy with Mike. We've always brought out the naughty side in one another.

Until recently, that is. It was becoming tricky, keeping our relationship alight.

"Not tonight, Cerys, I've got marking to do," Mike said a week or so ago when I kissed him on the cheek. He looked gorgeous, his hair flopping over his brow, his top button undone, sleeves rolled up, the perfect specimen. Casual and

The problem with not being very experienced at relationships is that I was at a loss to know what to do. It's not like in a chemistry lesson; you can't really keep repeating the experiment until it works, can you? Not with the same man.

A possible explanation for Mike's behaviour became apparent a few days later. I had an unexpected free period because a student teacher was to be left in charge of my sixth-form chemistry class. I knew Mike was generally free first thing on a Tuesday, so why not join him in the staff room? I might even make him a cup of coffee and, if he was lucky, he could have the last chocolate biscuit.

But it seemed that someone else had already offered him the last biscuit on the plate. You couldn't have failed to notice the new history teacher, Miss Barber: all high heels, pencil skirt and floppy hair. She was sitting next

it happening. Something had to be done. I had to stop the catalyst in her tracks.

Something, or someone, had to change.

Mike and I took it in turns to drive to work, and today was my turn. I was already in the car at the end of the school day, engine running, when he found me.

"Sorry I'm late," he mumbled, kissing me on the cheek.

"Detention duty."

I started to drive.

"Our flat is that way. Where are we going? The woods?" he asked, sounding puzzled.

Nice that he said "our flat"; that gave me a crumb of comfort.

Once out of the car, he followed me until we reached a clearing.

"And why are you still in your lab coat?"

I can see now how you become complacent in a relationship. We've not been undertaking enough practicals of late; there's

I've never felt shy with Mike

alluring. Our love-making had drifted a bit over the last month or so. I guess that happens, but it saddened me. I still fancied him like crazy, but we rarely even flirted with one another these days.

He'd patted the pile of schoolbooks on the dining-room table. "Twenty-two essays on Free Will in *Paradise Lost* for tomorrow. It has to be done. You know, like you had all those Periodic Table tests to mark last week."

Tired, I gave up and went to bed, alone, my plans for fireworks soon fizzling out. I was asleep before he came to bed, but awake in the middle of the night wondering if (and why) it was all going wrong with Mike and me.

to Mike in the comfy chairs, no marking in sight, giggling and flirting. And he was giggling back.

I realised right then that Mike was the man I loved.

I ran my hands over my sensible ponytail, brushed iron filings from my lab coat, then left the staff room before either of them saw me.

What to do? Either abandon the experiment and move back into my flat, or...?

Now, the thing about catalysts is that they have the effect they have on the other components, but they never change. That was Miss Barber. She'd eat Mike alive, spit him out and move on, leaving the ruins of our relationship behind. I could see

not been enough explosions; too much textbook work.

The thing about a lab coat is that it looks as dull as anything from the outside, but can hide a multitude of sins.

The next half hour or so was filled with sparklers, and then we lay back on my lab coat and watched the clouds drift by.

"You say, 'Cloud'; I say, 'Water vapour';" I told Mike. "But we both say, 'Love'."

It was another half hour before we were ready to go home. There'd be no marking tonight.

And Miss Barber? Mike was one battle she wasn't going to win.

Let's just say she's history.

THE END

© Fran Tracey, 2017

Amateur Night

Maybe we ought to take our daughter to a proper audition — show her how the adult world really works

I set my daughter up to fail. I thought it might do her good. My husband, Rob, and I sat in our local theatre on the day of her audition. The local theatre group intended to put on a pantomime this year — *Hansel And Gretel*. Sophie had leapt at the idea of acting when she'd seen the ad in the local paper. We'd thought, 'Fine, OK, we'll take her. She stands zero chance, but it'll be good for her to realise that you can't be good at everything.'

At school, she'd started coasting along. She was good at English, maths, geography, physics — you name it, she excelled. Unfortunately, due to her success, she'd also started receiving A plus-es in her new favourite subject — Ego.

As the kids around us chatted in the theatre, I realised from their talk that most had some experience; school plays and dance classes, mostly. My daughter had come fresh from riding a big, fat pony called Sidney at the local riding school. She still wore her jodhpurs.

When they called her onto the stage, she peered out into the crowd, unfazed. Setting the auditions in the theatre had to be a test.

"What do you want to sing?" the director, a stout woman in tweed, asked. She likely expected *Happy Birthday* again. That's what the other kids had sung. The woman had made it clear earlier she just wanted to make sure they could carry a tune.

Only, my daughter sang *Over The Rainbow* like a West End veteran instead. Then she acted out an improvised scene with the actress playing the old woman from the gingerbread house. "I'm not afraid of you!" Sophie put her entire soul into every word. "I want my brother back. I'm going to take him before he ends up in your oven!"

I shared a wide-eyed look with Rob. So, this might not be the day she'd fail and rediscover some humility, then?

The stout woman took her name and phone number.

Three days later, we got a call. Sophie would be Gretel. She'd share the role with two other girls. They'd work the performance rota out later.

At her first rehearsal at the church hall, she still shone far brighter than her peers. I felt proud and, in turns, worried her head might swell to the size of a hot-air balloon. She'd even invited her best friend, Olivia,

over to watch her — so she could show off, I suspected. Afterwards, the girl came home for dinner with us. She did that a lot.

"Are you going to a proper theatre school now you want to become an actress?" Olivia asked, chomping down on a mouthful of carrots at the dinner table that evening.

Sophie waved the remark aside with her fork. "I won't have to. I'm a natural; even Mrs Kenton, our director, is envious."

In his seat, Rob took a very long glug of wine. "Everybody has to learn from experts, Soph. It's just like school."

"But school's boring now," she replied. "It's all so obvious. Besides, I've seen lots of acting on TV. I know exactly how it's done."

"Well, I've read a lot of books but that doesn't mean I can write one," I said.

"You could if you had some talent, Mum."

Rob's brows hitched up. He stared across at me. I shrugged. What do I know about teenagers? I work in a pet shop. Ask me how to keep a tortoise happy, for goodness' sake. Our 13-year-old is beyond me.

After our meal, we cleared the table. In the kitchen, I washed; Rob dried.

Only, he kept sneaking off to the lounge door to listen to Sophie and her playmate. "She's just told Olivia she won't need as many rehearsals as all of the others." He grimaced when he returned to me with a report. "I never thought she'd be like this."

"Me neither," I agreed. When he crept off again, I attacked a saucepan with my sponge. Maybe we ought to take her to a proper audition, I thought. Some big try-out for a film or a play, not a tiny local production. Then we could show her how



In his seat, Rob took a very long glug of wine

the adult world really works. You can only get so far on talent, sprinkled liberally with a bad attitude.

Rob returned yet again. "Olivia's agreeing with her now. She will be a great actress one day. She'll win an Oscar."

I did fret a lot about rearing a monster. You know, that girl who peers down at her classmates and sneers; that girl who turns into a bit of a bully.

The following day, at her next rehearsal, Sophie continued to blaze like the sun.

I watched from a seat at the side of the hall while Mrs Kenton kept telling everybody to, "Look what's Sophie's doing. She'll fill the stage. You need to be as confident. You need to make sure everybody can hear you at the back."

That really wasn't helping to shrink my daughter's head down to a normal size. Still, unlike the others, she knew her lines. In fact, she could recite everybody else's as well.

Later, when she stood by watching another Gretel's performance, she crossed her arms and wore a disgusted expression. She grimaced all the more when Tamara, who could sing like a dream, stumbled over her lines, then couldn't remember if she needed to exit left or right. "This is what rehearsals are for," Tamara said, glaring at Sophie when my daughter gave a huff.

When the rehearsal finished, I raced like a whippet across the floor. I made a bee-line for Tamara. "Hi, Tamara! You don't want to come over to ours for some more rehearsal and a bit of dinner, do you?" I aimed most of that at the girl's mum standing by her side.

"No, Mum, she can't!" Sophie interrupted in a lofty tone. "I was going to ask Olivia round again."

"You can see her tomorrow." I smiled at Tamara's mother.

"I thought it might help them learn their parts if they spend a bit of time together."

"Yes, Tam's always up for that." She nudged her daughter's shoulder. "It does take a while for everybody to get their lines straight."

Sophie looked at me as if I had just invited a lame duck back to our house.

"It'll be nice having a new friend, won't it?" I said.

She grimaced. I had discovered she was becoming very bad at some things — like being nice, for example.

The drive home proved a little frosty. Back at our house, I ushered the pair into the lounge while I hurried back into the kitchen, where Rob stood peeling veg.

"Who was that again?" he asked. "Where's Olivia? Isn't she a part of the furniture now?"

It did seem so, sometimes.

"She's Tamara. I think she might be Sophie's arch-rival." After saying that, I decided it might be best to listen in, Rob-style.

In the lounge, as they rehearsed, Tamara fluffed a line.

"You can't remember anything," Sophie said in a haughty voice. "You're going to be useless on the night."

"I know you think you're better than everybody else," Tamara replied very calmly. "But rehearsals are just that. You can be brilliant all through them and still be awful on the night."

"I won't be awful," Sophie replied. "I know what I'm doing. I'm going to be on TV and in films one day."

"You need to go to theatre school for that."

"No, I don't. I'm a natural."

"Really? OK, answer this then: in TV and film acting, what do you have to do to make sure the camera is always on you? Go on, tell me. Tell me the best way to look at somebody when you're acting in a movie so your eyes don't waggle from side to side and you look like a maniac... or somebody about to have a fit?"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Ha! You see? You don't know anything at all."

I sensed my daughter might retreat at this point. I just managed to get back to the kitchen before she barged in. "Mum, why did you invite her here?" she demanded. "She's horrible!"

"Sophie, don't be so rude," Rob said from the sink.

I wondered if she'd take any notice of him. These days, we were like school to her: a tiny bit beneath her, a tiny bit too... easy. "What's the matter, Soph?"

I asked. "Does she know a bit more than you do?"

This might be a good time to confess. Yesterday, flummoxed by my own lack of expertise in this situation, I'd called in an expert. "M-u-u-m!" I'd wailed over my mobile before I explained to her my daughter's rapidly expanding ego. "I don't know what to do with her. She won't listen to me or her dad. Is it because she's an only child?"

"I don't think so," my mum replied. "You went through a bad phase too, at her age, and you



had two brothers, although saying that, they were out a lot. Anyway, you never came home on time and you started answering back. You had the attitude of a prison inmate. I didn't know what to do. Then, that nice girl, Sara, moved in next door. You made friends and suddenly you weren't such a pain any more."

I'd thought of Olivia then: Sophie's acolyte and "yes" girl. She was nice, but she'd never once challenged my daughter or her attitude. In fact, Sophie avoided friends like that. She always wanted to be the smartest person in the room.

"She knows about acting, doesn't she?" I now said in the kitchen to Sophie. "I found out she was in a London West End play a few months ago. She goes to the Daltons Theatre School. It has an excellent reputation. She goes on big auditions, too, all the time. Proper ones. She's a proper actress. She's actually earned some money. You'd hardly guess it though, would you? It's not

gone to her head at all. It was nice of her to agree to help you out tonight. You... the amateur."

I think Sophie did hear all that. I just wasn't certain what she made of it. Still, I'd played my part. Now I had to return to the audience. "Do you want a drink?" I asked.

She stood wavering. "I... I suppose. Thanks."

I filled two glasses full of fruit juice and handed them over. Off she went... to do what, I wasn't sure.

I returned to the lounge door and listened in.

"Go on then, tell me what you need to do to stop your eyes... wagging about," she asked.

Tamara heaved a sigh. "There's so much more to learn than that. I mean, if you're serious about acting. But the trick is, on camera don't look into both eyes of the person you're talking to. Only look at one of them. That keeps your gaze steady. Look out for it when you next watch a film. You can tell the actors who never learned that trick — their eyes are wagging all over the place."

"Really? Wow!" My daughter actually sounded impressed. She does like all those little details.

I did remember Sara, the girl next door to me from years ago, and how she'd chipped away at my bad attitude. I'd never have listened to my parents. Oh, no, what I'd needed was an industrial-sized dollop of peer-pressure: the positive kind.

"Will you tell me some more?" Sophie now said in the lounge. Her voice sounded different. Not so lofty or superior.

Was this actually going to work? Not that I intended to pick her friends for her. Maybe instead, I needed to find new places to take her where she'd meet more kids she could look up to. Ones who'd keep her size three feet on the ground. Ones who'd be there for her the day she did actually fail.

I never thought I'd have to do anything like that when I became a mum — but is anybody a natural when it comes to parenting?

It's like any skill, I suppose. You do have to learn.

THE END

© Jo Styles, 2017

The Powder Room Pilferer



IN HER HEART OF HEARTS, AMY KNEW AN ARREST WAS UNLIKELY. SHE HAD A STRONG FEELING SERGEANT GOBLE WOULDN'T TAKE IT SERIOUSLY, AND SHE WAS RIGHT

As she waited for the kettle to boil, Police Woman Amy Hobbs stifled a yawn. It had been a tiring day and she was looking forward to a relaxing evening with a good book. Amy wasn't normally as tired as this after work, but a late night last night and getting up for a seven am start didn't help. They were just getting ready for bed when her landlady, Martha Smith, had had a visitor. The two women were a little nervous about opening the door after 10.30pm, but it turned out to be Martha's late husband's old friend, bearing gifts. Martha's daughter, Elsie, crept downstairs when she heard her mother's excited cries.

"Uncle Jack!" Elsie cried as he swept her up in his arms.

"Being shipped out tomorrow," he told them. "Can't say where, but it may be sometime before —" and here he burst into song — "*we'll meet again.*"

"Jack is with ENSA," Martha told Amy in awed tones.

"What's ENSA?" Elsie wanted to know.

"Uncle Jack entertains the troops in battle."

"Every Night Something Awful." Jack chuckled.

Martha leaned towards Amy. "He's very brave."

"Now, come along, old thing," said Jack, imitating Noel Coward's cut-glass accent. "Just doing one's duty and all that."

Elsie's face shone. "Have you ever met somebody famous?"

"I'll have you know, young lady, I've just toured the Welsh villages with Sybil Thorndyke and Lewis Casson," he said proudly. "They were doing Shakespeare and Greek tragedy. And here's the real tragedy... it was all Greek to me."

"Oh, Jack, you are a case," said Martha wiping away the tears of laughter.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I met Tommy Trinder?" Jack asked. Even if he had already told them the story, Martha wasn't about to stop him and they ended up listening to Jack's hilarious tales until the small hours.

Jack slept on the sofa and, first thing in the morning, said his goodbyes. Outside in the street, there were few people about. Mrs Drake two doors down was putting her empty milk bottles onto the doorstep. Just as well. Doris Harker, who had taken over the milk round when her husband was called up, turned into the street and Dobbin's slow clip-clopping filled the morning air. On the corner, near the bus-stop, Mrs Armitage who ran the newspaper shop was putting out the billboards. *British And Canadian Troops Capture Caen.*

Seconded from the Met, she had left most of the dull and boring office work behind in London. The Sussex town was so short of police officers that, more often than not, she had had the opportunity to attend a crime scene. Since being at Thurloe House, the local police station, she had found enough evidence to arrest several murderers, solve some burglaries, find a missing child and even put everyone at ease when a circus lion was supposed to have escaped in the town. Of course, her immediate boss, Sergeant Goble, didn't see it like that. He was under the impression that he was the world's greatest detective and, for now, that suited Amy.

As soon as she'd made the tea, Amy walked into the office with two cups.

"You run a tight ship,"

Amy glanced up at the wall clock. "In about 20 minutes, sir." "Good," said the Inspector. "Find me some biscuits and don't hang around on your way home. There's a German prisoner of war on the loose."

"We don't know he's actually in Worthing sir," Sergeant Goble interrupted. "All we know is that he left the farm where he was working soon after D-Day."

"Quite," said Inspector Fry. "You mark my words, Gobble, he's trying to get across the Channel. Mounting a rear-guard, that's what he's up to." The inspector looked to Amy. "Biscuits," he said irritably.

It was still sunny when Amy left Thurloe House. After all the bad weather at the beginning of June, it was a welcome sight. Back then, you couldn't move for army vehicles and soldiers in uniforms of every colour and country. All along the south coast, British, Canadian, Free French and the Yanks had gathered in their thousands to begin the final push, but by the morning of June 6th, the streets were deserted. D-Day had begun, but if the soldiers who landed on the beaches of Normandy thought it was all over bar the shouting, they were in for a bitter disappointment. Fighting was fierce and casualties mounted. It quickly became apparent that the Germans were determined to fight to the last man, so having an escaped POW in their vicinity made everyone in town nervous. The local newspapers churned out extra copies with headlines such as *Dangerous POW On The Run and Army Issues Warning*. In fact, recapturing the prisoner had been left to the police. The army had bigger fish to fry. But how on earth Inspector Fry thought one unarmed German could mount a rear-guard against the whole of the Allied armies' beggared belief.



Amy allowed herself a small smile. Good news at last.

Suddenly, Jack, ever the clown, swept Martha into his arms and pretended to kiss her. As she pulled herself back upright, Martha slapped his arm. "Go on with you, Jack. You'll ruin my reputation."

"I thought your reputation was ruined ages ago," he said, laughing.

"Oh, you naughty man," cried Martha, as she glanced anxiously at the twitching curtains in the street. Then, with a blast from his car horn, he was gone.

Amy Hobbs had been in Worthing for 10 months and she absolutely loved the place.

Inspector Fry was saying to Sergeant Goble. "I'm delighted with our plummeting crime statistics."

Amy placed the cups onto the desk between the two men.

"You would do well to take note of this man, Police Woman Hobbs," said the Inspector. "I wish all of my officers were as diligent as him."

Sergeant Goble shifted uncomfortably in his chair and began fiddling with some papers.

"Oh, I know, sir," Amy said sweetly. "I consider it a privilege to be here." She turned to go.

"When are you off duty?" Inspector Fry said.

The Powder Room Pilferer

While she was working in the office, Amy had studied the papers relating to the case. Bertolt Möller had been working on a farm about three miles from town. He had a reputation for being polite, quiet and hardworking. Amy shook her head. Hardly the ruthless Nazi Inspector Fry imagined.

Amy ran all the way to her lodgings, not because she feared the German but because she and her friend Liz, who worked as Police Matron in the cells, were going to the pictures tonight. *Arsenic And Old Lace* was showing at the Plaza and everybody said it was very funny. The cinema was at the other end of town, so the pair would be hard pushed to make it before the programme started.

As she arrived at Wenban Road, Amy could see her landlady banging on her neighbour's door.

"I can smell gas," said Martha as Amy hurried up. "I've been hammering on the door but I can't get Dolly Taylor to answer."

Sure enough, there was a smell of gas, not pungent, but enough to cause concern. "Has anyone telephoned for help?" said Amy, turning down the side of the house.

"I sent Elsie to the police box by the railway station," said Martha.

As luck would have it, the dining-room window was slightly ajar. It didn't take Amy long to prise it open and climb inside. The smell of gas was coming from the kitchen, where she found two gas taps on the cooker were partially on but not lit. Amy turned them off and threw open the back door.

Martha hurried in. "Where's Dolly? Has she tried to kill herself?"

As soon as Martha blurted it out, she regretted it. It was better not to voice too many questions, or Amy would be duty-bound to arrest Dolly. Attempted suicide was a criminal offence.

"Well, she's not here is she?" Amy pointed out.

The two women gave each other a cautious glance before making their way further into the house, calling as they went. They found Dolly sitting on the floor upstairs in the bathroom. She'd been frightfully sick.

"Silly girl," Martha scolded as they helped her to her feet. "When you'd finished cooking, you forgot to turn the gas taps off."



Amy yawned and allowed herself the luxury of a small stretch. She was busy typing up some letters, but the words kept merging into one another. She and Liz never did get to see *Arsenic And Old Lace* at the Plaza. By the time Liz had checked Dolly over and put her to bed, the police, summoned by Elsie's call at the police box, had arrived in the form of PC Waller. With Martha's help, Dolly explained that she'd been about to start cooking when she'd come over all queer. She'd run upstairs to be sick and must have left the taps on. Amy confirmed that the gas taps were not fully on and that Dolly was indeed upstairs. There was no note, so Dolly's story was accepted at face value and once he'd had a cup of tea, PC Waller went on his way.

Without verbalising it, Amy, Martha and Liz knew different. It was perfectly clear that Dolly had tried to take her life but had changed her mind at the last minute. If PC Waller had concentrated more on the evidence than the tea-pot, he would have seen the obvious. Where was the meal she was preparing? Every surface in the



kitchen shone like a shiny new pin. The saucepans were stacked on the warmer over the top of the cooker and the vegetables were still in the vegetable rack.

Back at Martha's place, Amy said, "Is Dolly upset about something?"

Martha shrugged. "Her husband is in the forces. She worries, the same as we all do." "Children?"

Martha shook her head. "She works in the WVS canteen. Everybody loves her. She'd do anything for anybody."

"Keep an eye on her," Liz had cautioned. "If she's tried this once, she may try again."

Bent over the office typewriter, Amy squeezed her tired eyes shut and stifled another yawn.

"Not keeping you up, are we?" said Sergeant Goble, entering the room. "I've got a job for you, 'obbs. Get over to 'ubbard's department store. They've got a distressed customer in the ladies powder room."

Amy stood up wearily and reached for her hat. "Do we know why she's distressed, Sarge?"

"Probably needs 'elp with pulling up her drawers," he chortled.



Mrs Pomphrey was indeed very distressed. The cloakroom assistant, Ivy Watkins, was holding a damp flannel to her forehead as she sat in front of the mirrors. Amy could see Mrs Pomphrey's face from several different angles and none of them was flattering. Years of extravagant living had taken its toll. Mrs Pomphrey was the wrong side of 50, trying to look 30. Someone from the restaurant had brought her a cup of tea. She sipped the last of it and put the cup down onto a saucer covered in biscuit crumbs.

Amy opened her police notebook. "Do you feel able to tell me what happened, madam?" Ivy Watkins left them to it.

Mrs Pomphrey whimpered and sighed. "I can't believe this has happened and in Hubbard's of all places." She dabbed the end of her nose with a lace handkerchief. "I shall have to see the doctor. This is quite the worst thing that has ever happened to me. I'm in complete shock."

It was obvious that Mrs Pomphrey was going to milk this for all it was worth. "The sooner you tell me everything you know," Amy said gently, "the sooner we can catch whoever is responsible."

Amy confirmed that the gas taps were not fully on

With a great deal of drama, Mrs Pomphrey explained that when she had entered the ladies there had been a bit of a queue and she was desperate. As soon as Ivy had wiped the toilet seat with her duster and the door was locked, Mrs Pomphrey had put her bags down on the floor. As she perched on the toilet, a hand came from under the wall of the next cubicle and snatched her handbag. By the time Mrs Pomphrey had rearranged her clothing and come out to raise the alarm, the thief was long gone.

Amy took down all the details, then interviewed Ivy Watkins. Unfortunately, she'd barely noticed her clients. "We were very busy," she said. "A lot of ladies had been in the restaurant for the fashion show."

Every now and then, Hubbard's put on a special event in the restaurant. Models walked around the tables holding a number. If a customer liked the outfit the model was wearing, she only had to remember the number and go to the fashion department. The customer would also be encouraged to sign up for beauty treatments as well. It was very popular. Friends would meet up and the conversation flowed and, of course, after drinking several cups of tea or coffee, the ladies powder room became very busy.

By the time Amy got downstairs, the manager of Hubbard's was giving Mrs Pomphrey a bouquet of flowers. "I hope I can rely on Worthing police to find the culprit," he said sourly when his distraught customer had gone home in a taxi. "This is very bad for business."

In her heart of hearts, Amy knew an arrest was unlikely. She had a strong feeling that Sergeant Goble wouldn't take it seriously, and she was right. When she gave him her report back at the station, he bent double with laughter.

"I'm putting you in charge of this one 'obbs," he said wiping the tears from his eyes. "I'm sure you'll soon get to the bottom of the matter."

That set him off again and Amy bristled with indignation.



Martha Smith knocked on her neighbour's kitchen window. "Yoohoo, Dolly."

Dolly Taylor, who was sitting at her kitchen table reading a letter, looked up sharply. As Martha came through the kitchen door, she pushed the letter into its pink envelope and stuffed it into

afraid, but why? Could she have had bad news about her husband? Surely if she had, she would have said something. Could she be worried about bumping into that German POW? No, that seemed a little far-fetched, but it could have something to do with that letter she'd squirreled away in her apron pocket.



Shortly after Sergeant Goble left the room, PC Philips came into the office. He'd just come back from a spot of leave and this was the first time she'd seen him since

loos and Amy was immediately dispatched to Hubbard's.

"Just take down the evidence," said Sergeant Goble, grinning from ear to ear at the obvious innuendo.

Tight-lipped and annoyed, Amy looked away. Just because the victims were targeted in the toilets, did he have to treat the whole thing as a joke?

"Off you go then 'obbs," he said. "I've got more important things to do."

"May I ask if you caught the German POW who was stealing the chickens?"

"No, you may not," the sergeant snapped, "but you mark my words, 'obbs. I've marked that little runt's card. He won't get across the Channel, not if I can help it."

Out on the street, PC Philips fell in step beside her and Amy suddenly felt very self-conscious. Strange, but she'd never felt like this before.

"Where are you off to?" said Amy.

"My beat starts at the bottom of the Brighton Road," he said. "How was *Arsenic And Old Lace*?"

"I still haven't seen it," said Amy. "We were delayed by the unexploded bomb on the Richmond Road."

"How about coming tomorrow night with me?" He grinned.

"All right," said Amy, her heart giving her a surprising little flutter. They walked in silence for a second or two and then Amy said, "What do you think about the POW?"

"I can't see how he could kill and eat a chicken out in the open without someone finding out," said Philips.

"Did you tell the Sarge?"

Philips scoffed. "You know Goble. Once he's got a bee in his bonnet, he can't think of anything else."

Amy nodded sagely and after a few 100 yards, PC Philips turned the corner to begin his beat. "Good luck with the handbag thief."

*Tight-lipped and annoyed,
Amy looked away*

her apron pocket. Martha put a shepherd's pie onto the table. "You shouldn't have gone to all that trouble."

"No trouble, at all," said Martha. "I was making a big one for everyone else so I thought I'd do a small one for you."

"You're very kind," Dolly said dully.

Martha gave her an anxious look. "Look, dear, if something is bothering you..."

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Dolly interrupted.

"That would be nice," said Martha, lowering herself into a chair, even though she didn't really have the time to stay. Dolly made the tea and they made small talk. Time slipped away. "You know I'm not one to gossip," Martha said eventually, "and I can keep a confidence."

"Please don't worry," said Dolly, giving her a wobbly smile. "The whole thing was a misunderstanding."

But as Martha walked back home, she had to admit she was worried. Dolly seemed nervous,

he'd returned. While he was away, she'd surprised herself. She'd missed him. She'd been out with him a few times, but only to the pictures or the occasional dance. He was very nice and he'd once asked her if she would be his girl, but she felt that she wasn't ready to settle down yet.

"Hello, Amy, how's it going?"

"Fine," she said, trying not to look up in case he saw her blushing, "but I really can't stop. Sergeant Goble is way behind with his paperwork."

"I wondered if you'd like to come to the pictures tonight. *Arsenic And Old Lace* is on at the Plaza."

Amy looked up. "Oh, sorry, but I've already said I'd go with Liz."

The door behind him banged against the wall and they both jumped. "Ah, there you are Philips," said Sergeant Goble. "Get your helmet on.

Somebody's been nicking Sam Halliday's chickens. I bet you a shilling it was that bloody POW."

On Thursday, there was another incident in the ladies

The Powder Room Pilferer

The new victim was a robust woman in her 40s with a rather formidable manner, but Amy soon put her at her ease. The *modus operandi* was the same as before. There had been a long queue waiting to go in and when she finally got into a cubicle, somebody in the one next to hers snatched her handbag from under the wall. By the time she'd come out again, the thief was nowhere to be seen. What made this theft different was that when she got home, the victim had had a telephone call from the store.

"The manager told me to come back," she told Amy. "He said they'd found my handbag. I got on the bus immediately."

"But, madam," said the manager of the store, "as I have already explained, no one from Hubbard's has any knowledge of a telephone call."

"Well, someone rang me," retorted the woman.

Alarm bells began ringing inside Amy's head. "What did you have in your handbag?"

"My purse, my ration book, my handkerchief..."

"Your house keys perhaps?" Amy suggested.

"Yes," said the woman, "but I don't live in Worthing. I'm staying with my brother and sister-in-law. I had to go to their next-door neighbour for the spare key."

"Do the keys in your handbag have any identifying marks on them?"

"No."

"Could you have been followed?"

"I don't think so."

"Was there perhaps a letter with your brother's address on it in your bag?"

"Absolutely not," said the woman.

"What about your own address?" said Amy. "Where do you live?"

"Amersham," said the woman.

"You said your ration book with your home address was inside your bag?"

The woman gave Amy a startled look.

"We'd better ring the Amersham police," said Amy calmly. "They may need to keep an eye on your place, just in case someone goes there."

The woman put her hand to her throat. "Goodness, I never thought of that."

"And you will have to report your ration book stolen," said Amy.

"Yes, yes, of course," said the woman.

"It's a good job you had no other means of identifying your brother's address," said Amy. "Where does he live?"

"Clifton Road," said the woman. She suddenly gasped.

"I've just realised. My sister-in-law gave me some money and asked me to settle her coal bill. The address was on the invoice."

"Hilda Goble," she said.

"You may know my brother. He's a police officer, too."

❖ ❖ ❖

Martha waited until Amy had gone to work and Elsie was in school before she drew the pink envelope out of her apron pocket. It looked very like the one Dolly Taylor had received. She re-read the message on the scrap of paper inside. She had no idea what Dolly's said but if the tone was anything like hers, it was no wonder her neighbour had been so upset. Well, there was only one way to find out. Snatching off her apron, Martha put the letter into her coat pocket and went next door.

❖ ❖ ❖

"Didn't you question that toilet attendant?" Sergeant Goble said as Amy gave him her report when she got back to Thurloe

"It must be the same person," he mumbled angrily. "How come the attendant remembers her hair-style but not her face? You women are completely useless."

"I expect everybody had other things on their minds, sir," said Amy helplessly.

"Like what?" he retorted.

Amy chewed her bottom lip. "Going to the toilet?"

"This is no joke 'obbs," he roared.

Amy thought that was rich coming from him. "Did she steal much from your place?"

"My best cuff-links, Mrs Goble's ring, my sister's watch and some silver frames."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Amy.

"So you should be, 'obbs," he said. "I hold you personally responsible for it. Still, what can you expect? Women in the police force are only good for one thing. Go and get me a cup of tea."

Feeling utterly miserable, Amy went to the kitchen. While she waited for the kettle to boil, she looked over her notes again. There were three victims altogether. The first had had her bag snatched a week ago, but at the time nobody reported it. Each woman had used the same cubicle, number five out of six. The thief had been in number six but how did she know when to strike? Was it luck that the victim put her bags onto the floor? A thought that needed checking crossed her mind.

The first victim lost a fair amount of money, but she'd kept her house keys in her pocket and she had nothing in her bag to identify where she lived. The second victim, Mrs Pomphrey, lost her purse and a ring which belonged to her late mother but although she'd had a hoax telephone call, as far as Amy knew, she hadn't been burgled. Her address was in her bag but she also had two very large dogs at home. If someone had attempted to get in, most likely the sound of their deep and ferocious barking



*Feeling utterly miserable,
Amy went to the kitchen*

And with the name and address, it would be easy to look in the telephone book for the number, thought Amy.

"I think we'd better go there immediately," Amy said.

"Oh, my lor!" cried the woman. "They'll be in there stealing everything. My brother will never forgive me."

"Let's not jump to conclusions," Amy cautioned. "I may be completely wrong."

"I'll get my car," said the manager, hurrying away. "It's the least I can do. I'll meet you both outside the entrance."

A few moments later, they were all heading for Clifton Road in the manager's car. "I forgot to ask you your name," said Amy as the woman dabbed her eyes and blew her nose noisily.

House. The sergeant had still treated the incident in Hubbard's as a joke until he'd realised that his own sister was the latest victim.

"The attendant thought she had a high pompadour," said Amy, "but couldn't remember her face." She opened her police notebook. "Another witness described the suspect as blonde with blue eyes, aged about 24 or 25 and wearing a siren suit."

"Good," said Goble.

"On the other hand," Amy went on, "someone else said she was thin and muscular and wearing a tennis outfit."

"A tennis outfit?" Sergeant Goble spluttered.

"There are several other descriptions. Would you like to hear them?"

would have deterred any would-be thief. Sergeant Goble hadn't fared so well.

When she went back to Hubbard's, Amy had decided that she would watch the people who used the powder room. She had planned to hide herself in the attendant's rest room and was surprised to see members of staff using the same toilets.

"Don't you have your own toilets?" she'd asked Ivy Watkins during a lull.

"Normally they aren't allowed in here," said Ivy, "but the staff toilets are being painted. They were slightly damaged when that bomb fell in Lyndhurst Road."

Now she'd had time to think about it, things were starting to fall into place.



The kettle boiled and Liz put her head around the door. "*Arsenic And Old Lace* tonight?"

"Oh, crumbs," said Amy.

"I thought you were working."

"I swapped with Mrs George," said Liz. "She wanted Saturday off to go to a wedding."

"In that case, do you mind if PC Philips tags along as well?"

Liz looked slightly taken aback. "Are you sure he doesn't want you all to himself?"

"Don't be daft," Amy chuckled. "It's nothing like that."

Liz smoothed down her apron and checked herself in the cracked mirror on the wall. "All right. You're on."

And somewhere in Amy's head, the final penny dropped.

When Amy got home, Dolly Taylor was waiting for her in Martha's kitchen. Amy wanted to say that she couldn't stop. She was on her way to meet PC Philips and Liz and the cinema was easily a 15-minute walk from Wenban Road. With high-heeled shoes, she would be hard pushed to make it before the film started. It was a good job she had arranged to meet them both outside, because one look at Dolly's tearful face and Martha's concerned expression

told her *Arsenic And Old Lace* would have to wait.

"Shall you start or shall I?" asked Martha.

"You go first," said Dolly.

Martha laid a pink envelope on the table and pushed it towards Amy. The postmark was Worthing, six pm the day before. There was a single sheet of paper inside and the message had been painstakingly cut out of newspaper and stuck on with glue. *Shame on you, you brazen hussy, kissing men in the street.*

Amy glanced up at Martha. "Jack?"

Martha nodded and Amy let a little air escape from her lips. How could anyone think that kiss was anything more than a bit of fun? Jack had been acting the clown the whole time. Not only that, but it had been done in broad daylight with Martha's daughter looking on. Good heavens, she'd even been there herself, in her uniform and on her way to work!

Dolly produced an identical envelope. The note inside was constructed in exactly the same painstaking way. *I saw you. Tom Marks is a married man.*

Dolly gave Amy a helpless look. "His wife is dying," she said. "I know I shouldn't have, but I put my arms around him and he cried on my shoulder."

Amy bristled with indignation but forced herself to remain professional. Being in uniform, she dare not get emotionally involved, but her heart went out to these two. Martha was the salt of the earth and Dolly was clearly a woman of deep compassion. How dare someone who obviously had nothing better to do pass judgement?



"Have you any idea who might have sent these?"

Both shook their heads. "I only realised Dolly had one because I saw the envelope," said Martha.

"It has to be someone who lives around here," said Amy. "Jack went first thing in the morning when hardly anybody was about." She looked at Dolly. "Where were you when you hugged Tom Marks?"

"By the bus-stop on the corner," said Dolly. "I'd just come from the WVS canteen and he was on his way to the hospital."

"That narrows it down even more," said Amy. "Has anyone else had one?"

Both women shrugged. The telephone rang and Martha hurried to answer it. Amy reached across the table and touched Dolly's hand. "Don't worry about this, Mrs Taylor," she said. "Who ever sent it has a warped and dirty mind. No one will believe you did anything wrong. Not in a million years."

Dolly nodded. "I feel better now I know I'm not the only one."

"It's for you," said Martha coming back into the kitchen. "It's Sergeant Goble."

"Oh, no!" Amy groaned. "What now?"

Just over an hour later, Amy was in a meadow in the area of High Salvington. A plane had come down and the authorities were anxious that the local lads didn't loot it for souvenirs. The pilot and navigator had survived and been taken to hospital, but it seemed that the plane, a Spitfire, was carrying some top-secret equipment. A police presence was required until the RAF arrived. Sergeant Goble told Amy to, "get up there on yer bike and look sharp about it!"

When she protested that she was off duty, he used the old cliché that got everybody doing things they didn't want to: "Don't you know there's a war on?"

"What about PC Philips?" she'd suggested.

"I've tried ringing his lodgings but he's out," said Goble.

Of course he is, Amy thought acidly. He's gone to the pictures with Liz.

"I'm not arguing about it 'obbs," the sergeant went on. "You have your orders."

There was no getting out of it.

"Surely he's not expecting a girl all alone in the dark to fend off souvenir hunters?" Martha gasped when Amy told her. "What if that escaped POW is up there?"

*Somewhere in Amy's head,
the final penny dropped*

The Powder Room Pilferer



"I won't be all on my own," said Amy. "Apparently, a couple of locals are standing by. It's the uniform they want to see. And as for the POW, I should think he's long gone."

"But you haven't even had your tea," Martha wailed.

"Can't stop for it now," Amy said with a chuckle. "Don't you know there's a war on?"

As soon as she'd arrived, the two local men who had been guarding the wreck began to pack up their things.

"Where are you going?" Amy cried. "Sergeant Goble said you would be staying with me."

"We told Gobble we couldn't stay," said one. "There's a couple of torches over there."

Amy must have looked crest-fallen because the other man said, "You'll be as safe as houses up here, lass. Nobody comes up the hill except for courting couples."

"You might even learn a thing or two," said the first man, laughing out loud.

Amy's heart sank. It was a bright, moonlit night but she didn't fancy being out in the open on her own. She started when she heard a vixen calling her mate and a bird flew out of the trees below. 'Don't think about it,' she told herself crossly. 'You'll get all spooked up.' She kept alert by walking around the site and when her own torch batteries gave out, she was glad the two men had left her another torch. How much longer did she have to wait?

Her thoughts drifted to *Arsenic And Old Lace* and she wondered if it was as funny as everyone said. Cary Grant was so dishy, too. If only she hadn't taken that call from Sergeant Goble, she could have been in the warm watching it with PC Philips one side of her and Liz the other. She imagined what it would be like if he held her hand. He wouldn't kiss her, of course, not with Liz there, but her pulses raced as she imagined what it would feel like with his arm pressing against hers in the dark. Something ran across the grass in front of her; a rabbit perhaps, and it made her jump. It was going to be a long night.

When the RAF boys turned up at six am, they found

a totally exhausted police woman guarding the plane.

"Good Heavens!" exclaimed the master mechanic. "Have you been on your own all night?"

Amy nodded. "Yes, sir, and no one has touched anything."

Already his men were climbing into the cockpit.

"Look," he said scribbling onto a piece of paper, "I'm sending you down to the café on the main road. This will treat you to a slap-up breakfast."

Amy looked for her bicycle but someone loaded it onto the back of one of their lorries. He drove her there. The transport café was full, but they all stepped aside for her. Before long, Amy was enjoying the kind of meal she hadn't had in a very long time; two eggs (such luxury), two rashers of bacon, with doorstep sized slice of fried bread and a huge mug of hot tea.

The proprietor's wife came to join her. "I can't believe they left you up there all alone all night," she whispered. "Anything might have happened."

Amy smiled. "I might have been taken hostage by that escaped POW," she joked.

"What, Bertie?" she said. "Good Heavens, no. He's soft as butter."

"I thought his name was..."

Amy searched her memory but couldn't quite recall the German's name.

"It's Bertolt," said the woman,

"but we all call him Bertie."

"You know him quite well then?" said Amy.

"Oh, yes, he's always on the fiddle."

"Is he now?" said Amy, giving her a knowing look. "What sort of fiddle is he up to?"

"No, no," said the woman. "He plays the fiddle when we have dances in the village hall. Lovely man. I reckon once all this is over, he'll settle down here."

Amy frowned. This didn't sound like the murderous escapee Sergeant Goble said was on the loose. "But he's on the run, isn't he?" she said.

The proprietor's wife laughed and leaned forward conspiratorially. "I don't think it'll do any harm to tell you," she said. "They'll be on their way back by now."

"Sorry?" said Amy, confused.

"Bertie got his girl into trouble," said the proprietor's wife, "so they went off to Gretna Green to get married."

Before she could go home for some well-earned sleep, Amy had to give in her report.

"When you come in tomorrow, 'obbs, come in civvies," said Sergeant Goble. "We're going under cover."

Her heart leapt with excitement but she kept her cool. "Yes, sir."

As Amy left the building, she saw PC Philips in the distance. Giving her the thumbs-up, he called, "You little rascal. Thanks for last night."

She stared after him. Little rascal? What on earth did that mean?

When Amy arrived the next day, the station was buzzing.

"Why the civvies?" Philips asked when he saw her.

"Sergeant Goble has something up his sleeve." She shrugged. "How was the film?"

The expression on his face changed. "We couldn't believe what you did," he said, "but thank you. We had a wonderful time."

"What did I do?" she said.

Philips laughed. "Don't come the innocent with me," he said planting a kiss on her forehead. "You're an absolute darling."

Amy opened her mouth to say something, but then she heard Sergeant Goble roaring her name. When she got to his office,

She imagined what it would be like if he held her hand

a rather large woman was standing in front of the mirror patting the back of her head.

"Oh, excuse me, madam," said Amy. "I was looking for Sergeant Goble."

The woman turned around and Amy was struck speechless. It was Sergeant Goble, wearing a brown felt hat over a curly wig. His dress was of a shapeless floral design with pleated skirt. He had stockings over his muscular legs and wore peep-toe shoes. As he put an obviously completely empty handbag over his arm, he said, "Morning 'obbs," in a high, squeaky voice. "You're coming with me to 'ubbard's," and reverting back to his normal voice, he added, "We're going to get that powder room pilferer, if it's the last thing I do."

Amy swallowed hard.

"Good disguise, eh?" he said as a hairpin fell from the wig and clattered to the floor. "Certainly fooled you."

"Yes, sir," she said faintly.

"It's better we pretend we don't know each other," he said, striding manfully to his desk. "Off you go now and I'll meet you there."

"Actually, sir," Amy began, "the thief will be looking for a certain type of woman and..."

"Precisely," he said, pulling on a pair of white cotton gloves, "and here I am. Now, you run along. It's going to take me a while to get there in these blinkin' shoes. How you women wear them is beyond me."

Amy turned to leave. Thank goodness he hadn't asked her to walk the streets with him. How embarrassing! On her way out, she was surprised to bump into Liz on her way into the station. "What are you doing here at this time of day?"

"Just visiting," she said mysteriously. She looked different. Starry-eyed. Happy.

"Are you all right?" Amy asked.

"Never felt better," said Liz suddenly grasping Amy's hands. "Thanks for fixing me and Roland up like that. We got on so

well. It's like we've known each other the whole of our lives. Oh, Amy, I'm so happy."

Amy's mouth dropped open.

"You still here, 'obbs," said Sergeant Goble as he lurched into the corridor.

"Did you enjoy the film?"

Amy called over her shoulder as she hurried off.

"Film?" Liz grinned.

"What film?"

Quarter of an hour later, Amy sauntered into Hubbard's restaurant. The department store had put on a special event which had been opened by the

Sergeant Goble raised an eyebrow.

"Witnesses said she was either in a white dress or a white all-in-one," said Amy. "Hubbard's beauticians are dressed in white."

"I'm glad you noticed that, 'obbs," said the sergeant. "We'll make a detective of you yet."

Amy lowered her head, but only to hide a smile.

"So," he went on, "have you worked out how she does it?"

"I think so, Sarge. She waits for the powder room to get busy, then her accomplice



popular rising star, Deborah Kerr, fresh from her role in the film *The Life And Death Of Colonel Blimp*. While models from the fashion department wandered around the tables, Deborah signed autograph books and posed for publicity shots. The waitresses rushed to serve their customers, so Amy found a single seat close to the kitchen door.

Shortly after her arrival, Sergeant Goble tottered in. Amy did her best to hide her embarrassment as this "lady" with a five-o'clock shadow crashed into the chair next to her but fortunately everyone's attention was on the manager, who was presenting Miss Kerr with a bouquet of flowers.

"My feet are killing me," said Sergeant Goble. "Seen anything suspicious?"

She shook her head. "But I don't think it will be long before the culprit strikes again."

"Oooh, Miss Clever Clogs," said Sergeant Goble. "What makes you think that?"

"Because the thief works in the beauty parlour."

makes sure she goes into the last cubicle."

"Exactly!" cried Goble. "And that's when we'll nab her."

There was a round of applause. Deborah Kerr was leaving. The models returned to the fashion department and half the customers headed for the toilets. Sergeant Goble leapt to his feet. At the same time, Amy saw a woman in white dart to the front of the queue. It was now or never. Amy made her way quickly to the loos.

"Just a minute, young lady," a woman behind Amy snapped. "Get in the queue."

"What a cheek!" said her friend, elbowing Amy back. "You were behind me."

A couple of seconds later, there was a loud scream from inside the powder room followed by someone shouting, "There's a man in here!"

The women still waiting outside exchanged anxious looks. "What did she say?"

"There's a man in the ladies' toilets."

"Men and women in the same toilet? Whatever next? The world's gone mad."

After a short kerfuffle behind the door, Sergeant Goble was propelled back into the restaurant. His wig hung precariously over one ear but the dead give-away was his rolled up trouser leg descending down his leg.

"Out!" Ivy Watkins shouted after him. "I'm calling the police."

"I'll have you know, madam," the sergeant retorted, "I am the pol..."

He was silenced by several women who rounded on him with their handbags. As the *maitre d'* hurried to calm the situation, Amy's attention was on the door of the powder room. Sure enough, a few seconds later, a woman in white carrying a large handbag came out. As she rushed past, Amy stuck out her foot and she went flying, her handbag and its contents spilling all over the floor.

"Are you all right, love?" said a big woman, helping her to her feet while other customers rushed to pick up her things. The woman thanked them profusely when one of the ladies handed her the bag back, but as she turned to go, Amy barred the way.

"I am a police woman," she said, "and I have reason to believe that handbag is not yours."

At the very same moment, another woman burst from the toilets wailing, "Stop thief! She's pinched my bag!"



Sergeant Goble rubbed his bruised shin and winced in pain. He was sitting in his office, his feet soaking in a mustard bath. He still had his lipstick on, but the rest of his disguise had been discarded. Despite three arrests, he was not in a good mood.

Amy put a cup of tea onto the desk beside him. "There you are, Sarge," she said cheerfully. "I put an extra spoon in. They say sugar is good for you when you've had a shock."

The Powder Room Pilferer

"My feet will never be the same again," he moaned. "That's what you get for dedication to duty."

"Very commendable," said Inspector Fry, coming into the room. Sergeant Goble jumped to his feet. "No, no, don't get up, Gamble. I just came to say that the manager is delighted that you've got rid of that little gang. What put you on to them?"

Sergeant Goble glanced helplessly at Amy.

"We knew every time the thefts occurred, a woman wearing white was in the toilets," said Amy. "All Hubbard's beauticians wear white."

"So how come she never got caught?" Inspector Fry wanted to know.

Sergeant Goble pulled his trouser leg up out of the water. "You tell him, 'obbs."

"Her accomplice was Ivy Watkins, the cloakroom attendant," said Amy. "She made sure her friend was in the end cubicle. It's easier to pull the bag under the wall there."

"And so the thief got away," said Inspector Fry, "but the attendant saw nothing."

"Sergeant Goble was right."

"I was?" said Goble faintly.

"You said Ivy was observant about some things but not others, didn't you, sir?"

Sergeant Goble cleared his throat noisily. "Er... I suppose I did."

"PC Waller tells me you made three arrests," said Inspector Fry.

"Ivy Watkins' brother," said Amy. "He made the hoax call and broke into Sergeant Goble's house."

"Rum do, that," observed Inspector Fry.

"Oh, we've got most of the stuff back," said Sergeant Goble, brightening up. "Everything except my cuff-links. They were a present from my mother-in-law. Never did like them." He lifted his bruised foot from the water. "Never liked the mother-in-law, either."

Inspector Fry roared with laughter. "Pity the thief didn't take her, too."

As she walked home, Amy spotted PC Philips and Liz hand-in-hand and heading towards the pier. Despite herself, she felt a slight twinge of regret. Jealously? Envy? No, she decided, it was none of those things. She liked Philips, but she realised now that she had talked herself into thinking of him as more than just a friend. She couldn't imagine why she hadn't thought of putting him and Liz together before. She smiled. They were well suited.

Outside the newsagent's window, Amy hesitated. When she pushed the shop door open, Mrs Armitage looked up. She was a rather severe-looking woman who seemed to disapprove of just about everything in life. Amy turned the sign on the door and slid the bolt across.

"What do you think you're doing?" Mrs Armitage said indignantly.

"I notice you've got some writing pads and envelopes in the window," said Amy, walking towards the counter. "I wonder if you've got any pink envelopes like this?"

She laid Martha's poison-pen letter down in front of her.

Mrs Armitage paled.

"You do realise that writing poison-pen letters is a very serious offence."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," Mrs Armitage protested.

"Oh, I think you do," said Amy. "And I'm sure you'll have



a bit of a problem explaining all those bits of cut up newspaper in your dustbin."

Amy was taking a bit of a gamble. She had no idea what was in Mrs Armitage's dustbin, but her assertion had the desired effect. Two large tears rolled down the woman's cheeks. "I'm sorry," she squeaked.

"How many have you written?" Amy asked sternly.

"Only three."

"Three?"

"Dolly Taylor, Martha Smith and Miss Dixon."

Amy made a mental note to pop in to see Miss Dixon when she left the newsagent's. "You tried to ruin these ladies' reputations," she went on. "You're lucky nobody did anything drastic."

Mrs Armitage's eyes grew wide. "I'm sorry," she repeated.

Amy kept her stern expression. There was no way she could prove who wrote the letters and unless Mrs Armitage confessed, no court of law would convict her. Besides, what good would it do to bring her down? She had suffered more than most around here. Deserted by her husband for another woman, her only son had been killed in 1942. It didn't excuse what she had done, but it went a long way to explaining why she'd been jealous of a hug and a kiss.

"I should report this to my superiors," said Amy. She heard Mrs Armitage take in her breath. "But if you promise me it ends here..."

"Oh, I do, I do," cried the woman.

"Then we'll say no more about it," said Amy as she turned to go.

It was while she was on her way to see Miss Dixon that Amy realised how much she loved this job. The powder room thief was behind bars, the German and his bride were back on the farm and the poison-pen letters would cease.

Life had its drawbacks, of course. Sergeant Goble took all the credit and she still had to put up with menial jobs, but she had a deep-seated feeling that, by being here, she could make a difference. No, she wasn't ready to settle down yet. There were still criminals to catch and people to help. As she pushed open the gate leading to Miss Dixon's little flat, Amy decided that she was glad to be a police woman in wartime Worthing.

THE END

© Pam Weaver, 2017

*Two large tears rolled down
the woman's cheeks*

Strawberries

On The Lawn

It was a lovely way to spend an afternoon, and after a thrilling match, Mum's up-and-coming star was victorious

As we took our seats, there was a feeling of great excitement in the air. Mum had always been a tennis fan, and there was something extra special about a Wimbledon match, especially on the opening day of the tournament. The sun shining, the mumbling and fidgeting of the crowd in the moments before the umpire called for silence, the players warming up down at the side of the court...

"You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble, Barbara," she said, adjusting her skirt as she made herself comfortable. "It must have cost you a fortune. And booking a taxi, too!"

"You're worth it, Mum. And you're only 80 once, you know."

"Don't remind me!" Her knees were starting to stiffen up, and getting out and about wasn't as easy as it used to be. We lived a couple of hours' train ride away from Wimbledon, and she'd never been, so this was a very special birthday treat for her.

"Just look at how green that grass is," she said, gazing at it in awe. "And I swear I can see every individual blade. None of that mossy mess I have to contend with. Someone must be kept busy looking after that. I wonder what sort of seed they use?"

"I don't know, but they have to keep it cut to exactly eight millimetres, so I read somewhere."

"What's that in real measurements, love? In inches, I mean."

I laughed. "Short, Mum. Very short. A bit like Dad's hair used to be."

"He didn't really have any."

"Exactly! Oh, I think they're about to start. Who do you want to win?"

"I don't mind at all, Barbara, love. I don't know much about either of these girls, so just watching and enjoying it all is enough for me. Such an atmosphere! And I must say I'm looking forward to the strawberries and cream you promised me when the match is over!"

We sat side by side and "oohed" and "aahed" along with everyone else, our heads turning from side to side as we followed the ball being smashed from one side of the net to the other. I felt Mum grab for my hand once, when one of the players skidded across the court and almost fell in her attempt to reach a particularly good serve, a little trail of dusty earth rising up, clear as day, from behind her heels. The rest of the time, Mum just sat spellbound, obviously loving every minute.

The match was over in just an hour and a half, a straight two-sets win to the Russian girl.

"Phew! It's warm today," Mum said, as we finally got up and went outside. Leaving her sitting at a bench in a shady place out on the lawn, I went off to find the promised strawberries.

"Here we are," I said, returning with two bowls piled high with big, juicy fruit and a mound of cream. "And then we'll have

a cup of tea before we go back, OK?"

"That will be nice," Mum sighed, gazing up at the clear blue, cloudless sky and wiggling her toes in the grass. "I'd best visit the loo first, though. Don't want to have to walk out in the middle of a game!"

Soon we were back in our seats, all set for the start of another match, a men's singles this time.

"Are you sure you wouldn't rather see a doubles match, Mum? It's easy enough to..."



"No, no. I'm perfectly happy watching this one. There's a young man playing who's tipped to be a future champion, you know. I read all about him in the papers. Now, shush, here comes the umpire..."

It was a lovely way to spend the afternoon. We munched through a pack of sandwiches each, trying not to rustle the packaging, and sipped at bottles of fizzy mineral water,

so we wouldn't have to leave our seats in search of more tea and, after a thrilling three and a quarter hours, the match was over, Mum's up-and-coming star was victorious, and we both clapped until our hands hurt.

I stood up and stretched, rolling my shoulders around to ease the tension from sitting in one position for just a little too long.

"Well, I can honestly say that was just as good as actually being there, love," Mum said, reaching for the unfamiliar remote control and trying to work out how to switch off her new 60-inch hi-definition TV. "And without all the hassle of travelling. I do believe it's the best birthday present I've ever had. And fancy you bringing it here in a cab!"

"Well, I could hardly carry it on the bus, Mum. Just look at the size of the box!"

She laughed. "Pass me the TV guide, love, and we'll see what matches are on tomorrow, shall we? With all these extra red button things to work out, I'll be spoilt for choice!"

"I'm glad you like it, Mum."

"Like it? I love it! And having a lovely new set like this certainly gives a whole new meaning to the phrase 'game, set and match', doesn't it? Now, are there any more of those delicious strawberries left in the fridge? There should just be time to go outside and eat in the garden again, before they show the highlights on BBC2..."

THE END

© Vivien Hampshire, 2017

Subscribe to Woman's Weekly Magazine From £10.99*

**SUBSCRIBE
TODAY AND
NEVER MISS
AN ISSUE**

**SAVE
UP TO
26%**



Be Inspired Every Day!

Woman's Weekly

10 January 2017

9 Great Reasons To Visit New Zealand

6 Money Resolutions To Make You Richer

They're Easy To Keep!

JANE DANSON & GEORGIA TAYLOR
The Battersby Sisters Are Back!

Give Yourself A Winter Boost

With Our Extra Healthy Recipes

NATURAL Cleaning Remedies To Make At Home

Why You Should Question Your Health Treatments

Classic Cables A Knit From Our Archives

Rewards

**Monthly extras.
Exclusive for
subscribers.**

Subscribe today and join Rewards for free to get even more from your magazine. Hand-picked offers, unique giveaways and unmissable prizes - exclusive for subscribers.

Join Rewards at womensweekly.com/rewards

Subscribe online at magazinesdirect.com/wwwsub2017 0330 333 1113 Quote code: 11XD
Lines open 7 days a week, from 8am-9pm (UK time)

Complete this coupon and send to: FREEPOST TIME INC. (NO STAMP NEEDED - UK ONLY)

YES! I would like to subscribe to
Woman's Weekly

Please tick your preferred payment method

- ☐ Pay only £10.99 per quarter by Direct Debit, saving 26% on the full price of £14.79
- ☐ 1 year Cheque/Cash/Credit or Debit Card (50 issues), pay only £46.99, saving 21% (full price £59.16)

Your details

Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss: Forename:

Surname:

If you would like to receive messages from Woman's Weekly and Time Inc. (UK) Ltd containing news, special offers, product and service information and, occasionally, take part in our magazine research via email, please include your email below.

Email:

Address:

Postcode:

Home Tel No: (inc. area code)

If you would like to receive messages from Woman's Weekly and Time Inc. (UK) Ltd containing news, special offers, product and service information and, occasionally, take part in our magazine research via your mobile, please include your mobile phone number below.

Mobile No:

Date of Birth: DD MM YYYY

I would like to send a gift to:

Please also fill out 'Your Details' on the left. To give more than one subscription, please supply address details on a separate sheet.

Mr/Mrs/Ms/Miss: Forename:

Surname:

Address:

Postcode:

1. I enclose a cheque/postal order made payable to Time Inc. (UK) Ltd, for £

2. Please debit £ from my:

☐ Visa ☐ Visa Debit ☐ MasterCard ☐ Amex

Card No:

Expiry Date:

MM YY

Signature:

(I am over 18)

Date:

3. Pay only £10.99 every 3 months by Direct Debit (UK only)

Instruction to your Bank or Building Society to pay by Direct Debit
For office use only. Originator's reference - 764 221



Name of Bank:

Address:

Postcode:

Account Name:

Sort Code:

Account No:

Please pay Time Inc. (UK) Ltd. Direct Debits from the account detailed on this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Time Inc. (UK) Ltd. and if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank or Building Society.

Please pay Time Inc. (UK) Ltd. Direct Debits from the account detailed on this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit Guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Time Inc. (UK) Ltd. and if so, details will be passed electronically to my Bank or Building Society.

Signature:

(I am over 18)

Date:

XWK CODE: 11XD

THE DIRECT DEBIT GUARANTEE This Guarantee is offered by all banks and building societies that accept instructions to pay Direct Debits. If there are any changes to the amount, date or frequency of your Direct Debit, Time Inc. (UK) Ltd will notify you 10 working days in advance of your account being debited or as otherwise agreed. If you request Time Inc. (UK) Ltd to collect a payment, confirmation of the amount and date will be given to you at the time of the request. If an error is made in the payment of your Direct Debit by Time Inc. (UK) Ltd or your bank or building society, you are entitled to a full and immediate refund of the amount paid from your bank or building society. If you receive a refund you are not entitled to, you must pay it back when Time Inc. (UK) Ltd asks you to. You can cancel a Direct Debit at any time by simply contacting your bank or building society. Written confirmation may be required. Please also notify us.

* Per quarter by Direct Debit. Offer open to new subscribers only. Direct Debit offer is available to UK subscribers only. Please allow up to six weeks for delivery of your first subscription issue (up to eight weeks overseas). The full subscription rate is for 1 year, 50 issues and includes postage and packaging. If the magazine ordered changes frequency per annum, we will honour the number of issues paid for, not the term of the subscription. Offer closes 30 September 2017. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms, for enquiries from the UK, please call: 0330 333 4333. (Lines are open Monday to Friday UK time, 8.30am-5.30pm ex bank holidays) or email: help@magazinesdirect.com. Woman's Weekly, published by Time Inc. (UK) Ltd, will collect your personal information to process your order. Woman's Weekly and Time Inc. (UK) Ltd would like to contact you by post or telephone to promote and ask your opinion on our magazines and services. Please tick here if you prefer not to hear from Time Inc. (UK) Ltd. Time Inc. (UK) Ltd may occasionally pass your details to carefully selected organisations so that they can contact you by telephone or post with regards to promoting and researching their products and services. Please tick here if you prefer not to be contacted by Time Inc. (UK) Ltd, who publish Woman's Weekly, would like to send messages to your mobile with offers from carefully selected organisations and brands, promoting and researching their products and services. If you want to receive these messages please tick here ☐ Time Inc. (UK) Ltd would like to email you with offers from carefully selected organisations and brands, promoting and researching their products and services. If you want to receive these messages please tick here ☐

Puzzles

Just for fun, make yourself a coffee and try our two brain-teasers!

Rearrange the letters in the highlighted squares to spell out the name of a domesticated bird that is good to eat (7)

Arrowword

Bomb's trigger		Absorbent cloth		Odds and ends for sale (4-1-4)		George Gershwin's brother	Tough-minded (4-5)		Inland waterway vessel (5,4)		One circuit of a track	Meant, had in mind
				Lovely ____, Beatles song					__ Baba, pantomime character			
Central male character		River dam						__ Keating, Irish pop singer				
				Stiff paper					Fitting, suitable			
Jab with a finger		Pasture-land				Skin irritation	No score				Egg on	
			Benicio ____, actor	Ballpoint pen					Rounded mass of hair			
Shopping carrier		Small arrow thrown at a board					Long sharp weapon					
				Teenage pimples					Time of life			
Part of a skeleton		Scottish word for 'lake'					Went out with					

Kriss Kross

Fit the words listed below into the grid, then rearrange the letters in the shaded squares to spell out the name of Napoleon's final battle (8)

4 letters

GUAM
GULF
MONS
TROY

5 letters

ALAMO
PUNIC
SOMME

6 letters

ARNHEM
NASEBY

7 letters

CRIMEAN
JUTLAND
OKINAWA

8 letters

EDGEHILL

MAFEKING

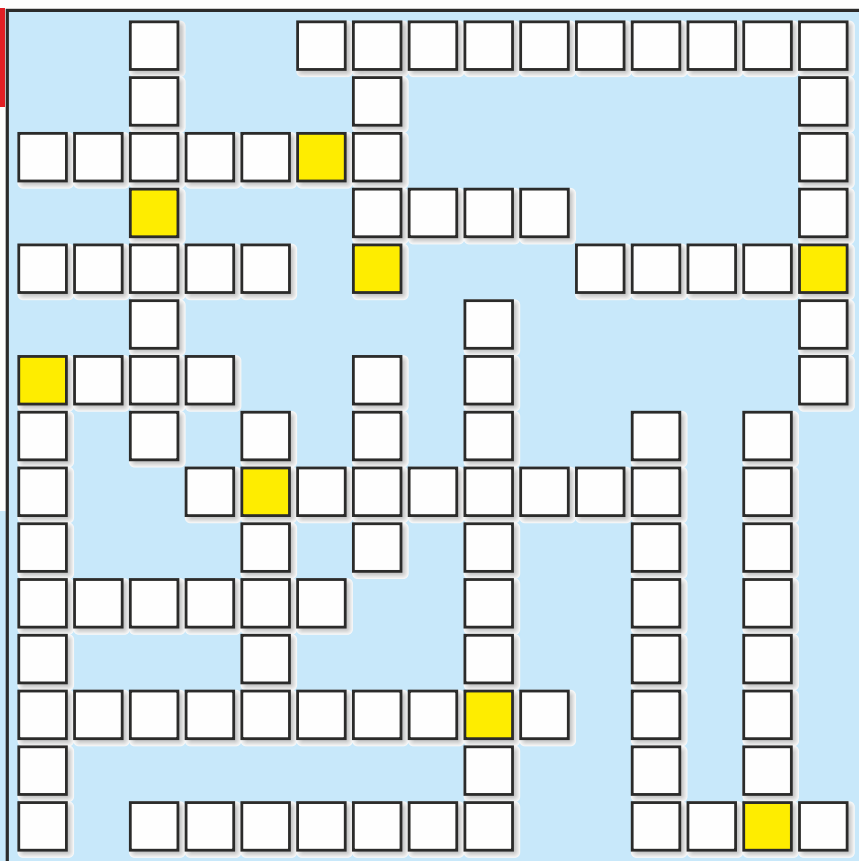
SPION KOP

9 letters

BALACLAVA
TRAFALGAR

10 letters

GETTYSBURG
NAPOLEONIC
STALINGRAD



ANSWERS

SOLUTION: CHICKEN

D T B H C
 H E R O R I T A A L I
 P O K E C A R D A P T
 B A G L E A N I L E
 T D A R T S W O R D
 B O N E A C N E A G E
 R R L O C H D A T E D

SOLUTION: WATERLOO

G U L F
 L I H E G D E
 N I K E F A V A
 J U T L A N D
 A R N H E M
 S P I O N K O P
 B A L A C L A V A
 T R A F A L G A R
 G E T T Y S B U R G
 N A P O L E O N I C
 S T A L I N G R A D

Second Chances

There were so many hurdles to jump over on his route to Jane's heart — but her lovely smile made it all worthwhile

Ed didn't need a map. He had one in his head. How to get to Jane's house in Kingswood Avenue, on the south side of the town, from his in Willow Drive, which was on the north side. In his head, he'd made the journey many times but now, he was going for real — now, Jane had invited him to lunch. Ed hoped with all his heart that lunch might be a game-changer because he couldn't imagine not having Jane in his life.

They'd met before, of course. In a very safe place, the first time — the café in the supermarket in Parkside. Ed had said he would be easy to recognise because he had auburn hair — well, fading ginger, if he was honest — and was six feet, three inches tall. He liked to think Prince Harry would look like him when he was older. He'd made that remark to the first date he'd had through Second Chances, a local dating agency, and there'd been a heavy, awkward silence after that, and there had been no second date. He still thought it, but he'd have to be careful who he shared those thoughts with, wouldn't he?

And then, on his second date with Jane — after Jane had said she'd love to see Ed again and he'd nearly fainted with shock because no one else he'd met had said that — they went somewhere less busy and noisy... a bench in the park by the duck pond during their lunch-hours, and they'd both been rather nervous. Ed had offered Jane one of his beef and mustard sandwiches. He'd agonised long and hard over what bread to use — white, wholemeal, or granary. In the end, he'd gone for granary, in case Jane was into healthy eating. He didn't think he'd ever forget the look of horror on her face as he sat there, the open packet of sandwiches resting on his palms.

"They look absolutely

He had been rewarded with a wonderful smile as Jane took the proffered egg and mayo alternative. She'd always looked so serious, so sad somehow, before, and Ed was glad he'd done something to make her smile. Jane's smile seemed to take years off her 52-year-old face, although he hadn't been stupid enough to tell her that.

They arranged to meet the following Saturday for coffee at Bella Italia. Jane's choice of venue. Ed made a note that Jane liked to dip a biscotti in strong, black coffee.

"Shall we do this again?" she asked, and Ed's heart flipped over with a ripple of happiness. "Same time? Same place?"

The following Saturday, Ed stopped off at Louise's, the

saw them. "They are absolutely beautiful." And then the pleasure dropped from her face and the serious look was back. "But I'm allergic to flowers. It says so, quite clearly, on my Second Chances profile."

For a moment, Ed wondered if he had read the profile of some other Jane because he couldn't remember reading anything about flowers. Or, to be honest, about her being vegetarian.

She reached out a hand to touch his arm and said, "Shall we give them to that lady sitting on her own at that table over there? She looks so sad."

So that's what they did. The conversation flowed easily and happily after that and Ed was pleased to discover they both

They exchanged brief life histories

delicious. But I'm a vegetarian, Ed," she said. "It says that, quite clearly, in my profile on Second Chances."

"Ah," Ed said. "I'd quite forgotten. So sorry. Perhaps you could give me a 'second chance'?" he quipped. "I've got some lovely egg and mayo sandwiches as well."

florist's shop on the corner of Eugene Road, and bought a bunch of deep magenta gerberas wrapped in crackly, silver cellophane. He had never walked along a street carrying flowers before, but it seemed to be the right thing to be doing for Jane.

"Oh, Ed," Jane said, when she

liked walking along the coast and old 1930s' black-and-white movies. They exchanged brief life histories — how Ed had been widowed at 46, 10 years ago now, and how Jane had been left at the altar and had been wary of relationships ever since. They even laughed at how long it had taken both of them to

allow themselves, perhaps, a second chance.

Things were going better than he could ever have hoped for, so Ed bit the bullet and invited Jane for lunch somewhere posher than a seat in the park, a supermarket café, or coffee at Bella Italia — lunch at The Palace Hotel.

He got there first. He chose a table for two on the terrace and ordered a bottle of Chardonnay — chilled and in a fancy bucket — to be brought to the table when his companion arrived.

When Jane got there, he stood up to welcome her and offered a hand to shake. Jane took it, briefly, then leaned in and kissed his right cheek — just a whisper of a butterfly kiss. On cue, a waitress arrived with the chilling Chardonnay.

"Oh," Jane said. "What a wonderful gesture. But I don't drink alcohol. It says that, quite clearly, on my Second Chances profile."

So many hurdles to jump over on his route to Jane's heart, it seemed. If Ed felt a little deflated, he did his best not to show it.

"Ah. Other drinks are available," he said, trying to make Jane feel less awkward, even though his heart was sinking a little. He'd already had visions of sitting comfortably on a couch — his place or hers — sharing a bottle of good Rioja, perhaps. "Could you possibly offer me another 'second chance' to get things right?" Ed asked hopefully.

"Pineapple juice with soda water will be lovely. Thank you." And again that smile that warmed Ed's heart.

As a chocolate lover himself, Ed was glad to see Jane choose a melting-middle chocolate fondant pudding for dessert. With Devonshire clotted cream. At least, he thought, they had that in common.

Lunch stretched to mid-afternoon and a pot of tea for two at three o'clock. And then Jane issued her invitation to cook lunch the following Saturday, and Ed thought he might die of happiness. She had given him so many second chances to get things right after he'd so very obviously not studied her profile carefully enough.

So, here he was on his way, the map in his head taking him first

to the local deli in Hyde Road, where he bought a selection of olives and a packet of biscotti.

Next stop was the health food shop in Victoria Street, where he bought a bottle of pineapple juice with agave. In the craft shop, Fleuri, in Gerston Place, Ed found some silk roses in the most delicate shade of pink — a shade he had noted Jane was fond of wearing. And chocolates. He mustn't forget chocolates. Casa Cocoa, a new speciality chocolate shop that had opened in Palace Place, seemed like a gift from the gods for Ed. As though it had opened just for him to guide him in his romancing of the lovely Jane. So many to choose from. He stood, deep in thought, in front of the display — not large, but obviously very well thought through. Cocoa Kisses. Champagne Delight. *Oooh Là Là Orange*. Amorous Almond. Café Cocoa. Rococo Choco. Ed made his selection — a mixed dozen, beautifully

Jane's cheeks, that she was feeling exactly the same.

Ed offered up all his gifts and Jane rewarded him with the most stunning of smiles that made his heart flip.

"Follow me," she said, leading him along the passageway and into a delightful room at the back, overlooking a garden that was very Japanese in style, with acers and firs and carved stone Buddhas and raked gravel — very calming. Ed felt his shoulders drop from somewhere around his ears. Jane had set a table with sparkingly white linen, shining cutlery and candles. There was the sweet scent of orange blossom in the air. Things were going well, weren't they?

"I'm so glad we met," Jane said.

"Me, too."

"Has anyone ever told you, Ed, that you look like I imagine Prince Harry might look when he is older?"

Ed thought she sounded rather nervous saying it... a touch

"A point," Ed said.

"I can manage that. I looked up how to cook steak on the Internet. I don't mind cooking meat, it's simply that I don't want to eat it myself."

Ed gulped. How thoughtful she was. How special she was making him feel.

"And I've made a sauce to go with the steak... cream and black pepper. I found the recipe on the Internet, too. You do like freshly ground black pepper?"

"Yes," Ed said with a broad smile. "I love it."

Jane had obviously been much more diligent at reading his profile — where he'd stated that he could eat steak at every meal — than he had been at reading hers.

"Good." Jane beamed.

"The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, so they say, don't they?"

"They certainly do and..." Ed — not normally lost for something to say — seemed to

She sounded rather nervous

boxed. He made a mental note not to accept a single chocolate, should Jane offer him one. He knew his weaknesses... one would not be enough.

It was a good two miles from Ed's end of town to Jane's. The walk would do him good, settle his nerves. He hadn't lived in the town long, but he was getting to know the place well and was glad the engineering company he worked for had relocated, now that he had met Jane.

Another 15 minutes and he was at her terraced house in Kingswood Avenue, opening the gate, shutting it firmly behind him. He was feeling a little anxious as he rang the bell.

It was as if Jane had been standing on the other side of the door, waiting for his ring, because she opened it immediately. "You found me!" she said, obviously delighted that he was there. Ed hoped there was nothing else he hadn't read on Jane's profile that might take that delight from her lovely face. He was falling in love and he knew it. And he had a feeling, by the flush that pinked

giggly, anxious to please, perhaps, and afraid she might not be achieving that aim. But, goodness, had she really said that? They thought the same thoughts, didn't they, he and Jane?

"It's the hair," Ed replied.

"Although Prince Harry still has more of his than I have. And the height, perhaps. And I was in the Army for a while, as was Harry."

"Really?" Jane said.

"How exciting."

They laughed together easily enough and chatted for a few minutes about royalty — both staunch Royalists, to Ed's relief.

"Well, this won't get lunch on the table, as lovely as it is just chatting to you," Jane said.

"Wine? I've got some Chardonnay chilling. Just because I don't drink alcohol, it doesn't mean you can't."

"Lovely," Ed said.

"And I'm cooking you a steak. The butcher recommended rib-eye, so that's what I bought. Organic." Again that rush of words coming out, anxious to please. "How do you like it cooked?"

have clammed up completely now. He wanted to say, "And you've captivated my heart already", but the words just wouldn't come out.

He'd been agonising for weeks about the etiquette of this second-time-around dating.

What were the dating rules for a man and woman of their age? How soon was too soon to hold her hand when out walking? How soon was too soon for that first kiss?

Maybe there were no rules and he'd tried, perhaps a bit too hard, with the wine, the assumption Jane would eat meat, the flowers. But now he decided he would just act on his feelings.

"And you have found the route to my heart, Jane," he managed to say at last. "Dare I hope you feel the same?" He held his arms wide and Jane walked into them, tilting up her face to his.

And then, dear reader, Jane's actions told Ed everything he needed to know as she stood on tiptoe and kissed him...

THE END

© Linda Mitchelmore, 2017

'I Love A Puzzle'

Thriller writer Sarah Pinborough reveals the secrets of her success to Sue Cooke

What do you like about writing thrillers?

I love a puzzle, and thrillers are also escapism. Most of us lead very regimented, normal, ordinary lives. It's emotional escapism as well as intellectual escapism. I like getting into people's heads and exploring their secrets. I think all my stories are dark, but even my horror novels weren't all-out horror. I'm much more psychological — I don't like to see flayed bodies.

Where do you get your ideas for plots?

Often it'll be newspaper articles. With my last book, *13 Minutes*, a teen thriller, I'd watched a documentary about an American girl who'd been murdered by her two best friends. They never got to the bottom of why they did it. So I started researching the psychology of teenage girls — their world is so intense, everything is very heightened when you're a teenage girl. I wanted to write something based on that, although my story is entirely different.

Where do you get your ideas?

Characters, for me, tend to come out of the situation. With my latest book, *Behind Her Eyes*, I wanted to write about an affair. Usually, in an affair it's the wife who's feeling a bit tired and fed up and has put on a few pounds,

and then it is the mistress who is beautiful. I wanted to flip that. What

interests me about affairs is how fascinated women are with each other. I think the man becomes irrelevant, so I didn't want him to play too big a part. We only see him through the perspective of these two women. It's a love affair between these two women, in some ways.

Which is your favourite character?

I love Mr Bright in *The Dog-Faced Gods* trilogy. He was enigmatic and powerful, and also very wry and funny, and controlled the world from a massive penthouse.

Which of your characters would you most like to be?

I've written a trio of fairytales, re-telling *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, called *Poison*, *Charm* and *Beauty*. They're fun stories. I'd be happy to be any of the women from those three books as they have the least angst of all my characters. For instance, there's the grandmother, who first appears in *Poison*. She's the old woman who lives in the cottage and eats Hansel and Gretel. In my books, she's wise and old, she's had lots of adventures, she's funny and she's got an answer for everything. She's past caring about the handsome man and the castles. I want to grow up to be her — without eating any children!

Which book have you most enjoyed writing?

The Double-Edged Sword, the first book in a trilogy I wrote for

children called *The Nowhere Chronicles*. It was the first book I'd written in a long time that wasn't under contract. I absolutely loved writing it. I would get up at five in the morning and write for an hour or so before going to teach. It's a fantastical adventure set in London, the kind of book I would have read when

I was 13. It was the first book I'd written that I could be funny in, too. There were some dark bits, but there was quite a lot of humour and light-heartedness. It was really nice to write something fun and magical.

Which book has been hardest to write?

The Death House, a young adult novel, is a love story but it's quite sad. It's basically about a bunch of kids who have been sent away to die. They're healthy, but they have a gene which predisposes them to turn into something horrible. That in itself was miserable, and I had to watch a lot of comedy while I was writing it. But also, it was very much a character novel rather than a plotty novel. I had a lot of events that I wanted to go in, but there was no defined structure, so that was hard, too.

Which fictional character do you wish you'd created?

Hannibal Lecter from *The Silence Of The Lambs*, only because he's so terrifying and yet also almost

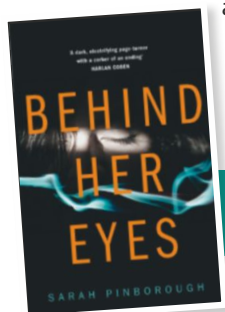
like a pantomime villain in places. The books are probably the darkest kind of thriller you can get. To be rooting for a character who's that awful, I think there's magic in that.

Which author has most inspired you?

I devoured Stephen King's books when I was a teenager and I've been reading his thriller *Mr Mercedes*, which I thought was a bit of a change of direction. He writes a really good thriller and his characterisation's amazing. He read *The Death House* and talked about it in the *New York Times*, which was one of the best days of my life. It was amazing that my hero had read my book and loved it.

What is your all-time favourite book?

The Portrait Of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde, simply because I love the secret lives people lead and the duality of human nature — we're all trying to be good and yet we do terrible things. So much of the human condition is wrapped up in that very small book.



BEHIND HER EYES BY SARAH PINBOROUGH (HARPER COLLINS, £14.99) IS OUT NOW.

Fly Me To The Moon



Most of the time, I feel like a single mum.
In lots of ways, I might as well be

There's a song buzzing around in my head that just won't leave me alone. It's been there ever since it was on the car radio when I dropped the boys off at school this morning. Even while I'm clearing up the breakfast chaos, getting ready to rush off to work, it won't go away.

Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars...

Fat chance of that!

Joe's the one who gets to fly to the moon — well, not exactly the moon, but he's always gallivanting off somewhere or other.

And Joe's the one who always gets to play. Fair enough, he calls it work — but how is being a tour bus driver harder than other jobs, anyway? It definitely comes with a few perks.

I reckon I could hack it, if I really had to.

I'm not sure Joe could hack my job, though. Filling in the gaps between work and home all the time. Juggling all the balls. Being the one responsible for everything, nearly every day, week, month. You name it.

Back from the school run, an hour to go before I need to race into the office, I make myself a coffee and try to get rid of some of the struggle, the loneliness, the sheer disappointment of life. It isn't what we'd ever planned. Not really.

... Let me know what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars...

What I would give for that time we used to have when we never

had a clue how lucky we were to be able to act spontaneously — dress up — go out — dance the night away together? And now...

I have to give myself a shake, a bit of a talking-to. Oh, come on, Karen. It's not Joe's fault that his job takes him away all the time. You were perfectly happy with all this at the start. It's not Joe's fault that kids get sick, houses have things go wrong with them, ageing parents need all sorts of help, at all sorts of odd times.

It's not Joe's fault that...

But it's not my fault, either!

It's not my fault that most of the time I feel like a single mum. In lots of ways, I might as well be. And — what's the point, really?

The point at the moment is — Joe will be back tonight. The boys are so excited. They haven't seen their dad for a month, except on the Internet. They can't wait. The boys and Joe will be rolling around like three untamed puppies. Which is lovely, of course, in one way, but — d'you know what? I won't get a look in. And the irony of it! Valentine's night!

Joe will be so tired, he'll be spaced out. I know it.

Admittedly, he's not always away for so long, but for the last four weeks he's been just about everywhere with a coach full of Japanese tourists. Scotland. Wales. Cornwall. Yorkshire. The Lake District. The Midlands. Lancashire. Kent. All in no apparent logical order. I know he'll be exhausted. I know he'll just be glad to chill out.

But what about me? All that time he's been gadding about, I've had two children with viruses. I've had my mum, so worried to death about my dad, that we've had to race over there nearly every afternoon after school to make sure he's in one piece.

I've had half the guttering fall off the roof in a high wind. And in the middle of that escapade, the clothes-line broke. All the washing puddled to the ground, wouldn't you just know it? And next door's cat, stealing his way along the top of the fence, was so shocked he fell, screeching and squealing, padded my washing and knocked a plant pot full of compost all over it.

Robbie, the handyman fixing the guttering, took pity on me. He gathered up the washing, pulled all the old, broken line through the rotary post, sat me in the kitchen, shoved the washing back into the machine, made a cup of tea, and talked me into seeing the funny side of it all. We ended up having a good laugh together.

Then the next morning, between the school run and me setting off for work, Robbie turned up with a new line to thread through the whirligig, promising he'd be back early evening to do it.

And — I really couldn't help myself — I said, "Well, come and eat with us, if you like." To kind of pay him back.

And so, while I cooked spaghetti bolognese, Robbie played football on the grass

with the boys and romped around with them and let them "help" to fix the line. And I couldn't help thinking that this is how it always should be, really. And I wanted to cry.

... You are all I long for, all I worship and adore...

But, oh, Joe, I just don't feel sure, any more.

And I've been to work, and I've collected the boys from school, and we've called in at Mum's and I'm still fighting with myself and with my feelings... even as Joe comes into the house.

The boys pounce upon him and our eyes just about manage to meet before the chaos erupts.

And so it goes on. Play-time. Tea-time. Bath-time. Dad-put-us-to-bed-time. Read-us-a-story-time. Dad-stay-here-'til-we're-asleep-time. Dad-will-you-still-be-here-tomorrow?

But, at last, he's down the stairs. And I'm looking at the man I love. Feasting my eyes. Watching him as, smiling, arms open wide, he comes towards me.

"Got no flowers, Karen," Joe says, his voice low and husky. "Got no card. Got no chocolates. Got nothing. But happy Valentine's..."

The struggle, the loneliness, the disappointment, all evaporate as his arms enfold me and I melt right into him.

... In other words, hold my hand; in other words, darling, kiss me...

"Fly me to the moon," I whisper. And he does.

THE END

© Irene Yates, 2017