JENNY GREEN TEETH
and other
Short Stories

Joel Hayward

Jenny Green Teeth and other Short Stories

National Library of New Zealand
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data:

Hayward, Joel S. A.
Jenny green teeth : and other short stories / Joel Hayward.
ISBN 0-9582446-3-4
I. Title.
NZ823.3—dc 21

TOTEM PRESS

Publishers of
Creative Excellence

P.O. Box 8065
Hokowhitu
Palmerston North
New Zealand.

Email: TotemPress@hotmail.com

Web: http://totempress.tripod.com

For my “girls”

Kathy, Shoshana, Rachel and Michaela

With all my love and gratitude

About the Author

Dr. Joel Hayward is a former Senior Lecturer who abandoned the political correctness and creative constraints of academia to pursue his goal of living a rewarding, creative and less stressful life. Author of several successful, internationally praised works of biography, history and analysis, and scores of specialist journal articles, Joel now concentrates on poetry and fiction. His efforts in these genres have, along with some of his non-fiction, been translated into many languages including German, Russian, Spanish and Serbian.

Joel lives in Palmerston North with his wife Kathy and their daughters.

His other books include:

Stopped at Stalingrad: the Luftwaffe's Defeat in the East 1942-1943

A Joint Future? The Move to Jointness and its Implications for the New Zealand Defence Force (editor)

For God and Glory: Lord Nelson and His Way of War

Born to Lead: Portraits of New Zealand Commanders (with Dr. Glyn Harper)

Lifeblood: A Book of Poems

Tears in the Mind's Eye (forthcoming)

JENNY GREEN TEETH
and other
Short Stories

CONTENTS

Author's Foreword

The Creator kindly gave me two gifts: a desire to tell stories—some true, others fictional—and enough talent to do so, both orally and in writing. I'm profoundly grateful.

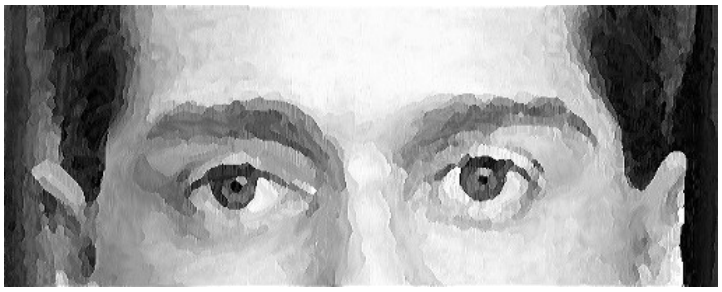
Despite success with published works of history, biography and analysis, I much prefer to write poetry and especially fiction. The pleasure of using words to construct paths through my invented landscapes, along which my readers will "journey," hopefully with enjoyment, is hard to equal.

All these stories originated in my imagination or in my own life experience. I've used allegory to transform certain wonderful, frightening and painful events in my life into stories that no longer resemble reality but which convey those events' lessons or truths with, I hope, verve and pathos matching the original.

I dedicate this small book of stories to my wife and daughters, and also to my father, John. He fed my voracious boyhood hunger for knowledge and encouraged me to live life to the fullest in *two* separate realms: the three-bedroom house in which he and Mum raised me and my brother and sister, and the vast, luxurious mansion of my imagination.

My House Guest

I see it, again; in the flannel-wiped mirror, above my foamy white cheeks, in my eyes. There; deep inside my pupils. I stare intently into their blackness and see, I think, *something looking back*. Not my eyes, with their age-fading blue irises still resembling my children's. *In* my eyes. In the blackness of my pupils. There.



I inch to the mirror but my breath fogs the glass and without thought I smear it again with that darned flannel. I'd used protex soap to wash and now its film covered the mirror. Good soap for your skin; not for the mirror. Towel-waisted and wet-haired, I walked with goose bumps and frozen feet through to my bedroom and looked into the duchess mirror. The room's sixty-watt bulb provided pitiful light, even after I stretched the curtains as far back as they'd go. I cursed the overcast sky.

My son's room? Ah, his teenage vanity ensured a powerful bulb and I saw, up close, the darkness within my eyes' darkness. It moved, stared, leered.

"Oh God, help me!" I prayed, seeing the eyes of my demon. "Who are you?"

"I am you," he answered—in my voice, in my head, I think, although I knew it wasn't me saying it.

"You are not me, and cannot be here. I belong to God. Go. Go."

"You are mistaken. I am you. I belong in this body, and you have forsaken your master, have you not?"

I had not. I had *not*. But this vile thing was there, in my eyes, where God should be.

"What do you want? My soul?" I asked, maybe out loud, maybe not.

"I have everything I want," he said in my voice, and with my sarcasm; the sarcasm my sons copied and my friends hated. "I have you," he added with a sulky exaggerated sigh, "and I must tell you that I'm not exactly over the moon with delight. A year ago you were someone. I was almost proud to be here. But now? Well, I'm not so sure."

That stung. "Life's hard, damn it!" I fumed.

"I wouldn't know. I've never lived."

I had no come-back for that.

I prayed harder than ever, off and on all day, and it felt good; well, better. I sensed contact with my beloved Creator, who was listening to my pleas. But I knew that I still had an unwelcome house guest. Gotta do something. Gotta do something. What?

Aha. My old car—without a Warrant of Fitness (God, I *have* been sinning!)—carried me from the city. I found solitude down some once-gravelled farm road leading to any family's farm. I sat with the noisy heater on, blasting my feet but making my eyes dry and itchy. It was cold, after all. But I turned the inside mirror upwards so I

couldn't catch my reflection. Not that there was much chance. It was dark. Very dark. But I didn't like the idea of seeing those eyes: my eyes. I'd averted them all day.

"Okay," I groaned, terrified to do something but more so to do nothing. "Satan, what hold have you got over me? Why? Why? And for how long?"

"No, no! *I'm* not Satan," he hissed back. "Don't be so arrogant. Do you think he is involved with you and your problems? Get real. He's far too busy, and you're far too unimportant. As I said, I am you!"

"Who?"

"*You*, man, you!"

"Why do you use my voice?"

"I cannot use another. I can only use mine."

"No, it's mine."

"Same thing, friend."

"We are not friends. I hate you. I despise you. I want you out. I can't bear it. You have to go. I cast you out in the name of Jesus!"

I said that last bit so forcefully I had to wipe droplets of spit from where I imagined they fell on the steering wheel. I felt embarrassed for my shouted religiousness, for a moment, but remembered my isolation. I was outside anyone's hearing.

The silence was overwhelming. He hadn't answered. Hah. Have you gone? I thought. Silence. *Have you gone?* I thought more aggressively.

"No, I'm still here," my voice said somewhere.

"How the hell did you do that? So you can read my mind too?"

"Nothing to do with hell, at least not directly, and it's my mind, remember," he said. "And you sure got me for a

minute. The name of Jesus. Phew! That was very good. It would work, too, if someone else said it. You know: a true believer."

"I am."

"Can't be. It didn't work, did it?"

"No. I guess not."

I wept again. Bitter tears. "So how do I get rid of you? Do we make a deal, is that it? Or do I get a priest or a pastor to cast you out?"

"Do you know one without sin?" he asked, making me detest my voice.

"No."

He had me. I couldn't beat this damned demon with my goodness (and I guess he truly was damned; or I was). Apparently I had no goodness, or not enough.

But maybe I could outsmart him. After all, I am very smart. I've always been smart. Even at primary school I felt different—a bit at first, more as I grew older—from the other kids, even the bright and artistic ones I hung around with. I've always felt pride in my intelligence. Maybe it's only because I don't score the very highest marks in looks. I remember describing myself once in a self-reflective poem: "I look … as kind as a golden retriever, sharp as a scalpel, intense as a southern preacher, and deep as the mid-Atlantic. … I'm most proud of the latter."

I had to ditch the poem, as you can imagine. What narcissism; pride. Good God, what pride. Aha! That's it.

"You! Demon. Appear!" I demanded.

"I'm not a genie, fella!" he snapped.

"Want to make a deal? Do you? How about this? If I win, you must go and never return. If you win, I give up and accept you as part of me."

"I'm listening."

"You always are."

"Well, not always. I switched off when you recalled your poem. What boring, vain rubbish!"

"I know. I binned it," I said, secretly encouraged by his revelation that he wasn't always listening. I tried to scramble my thoughts as I wove my trap. And that's no easy task: scrambling your thoughts while you try to think. "Anyway," I added, "Here are the terms. And I want your word—your oath—that you accept them. Do you remember Rumpelstiltskin?"

"No," he said, and I knew from the tone in his voice—my voice—that he didn't.

"Forget it then. It was a Grimm's folk tale from the early 1800s. Here's the deal, okay? If I name you within three guesses, you go and never come back. If I can't name you, you stay here. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes, yes, *yes*. … Hah, I love you suckers who think you can outsmart us. I'll do it. But on one condition: you cannot say your own name, because I've already told you that I'm you."

"Deal?"

"Deal."

I wasn't going to do what Rumpelstiltskin's princess had done; pretend not to know his name just to add a dramatic effect. I wanted this son of darkness gone from inside me.

"Pride!" I shouted. "Your name is pride!"

"Arrrgghh! *How?* How did you know?" he hissed.

"Because you are me," I howled with excitement. He fled.

I cannot remember walking home, but I must have.

The police turned up early in the morning to inform me that my car had been found, burned out, down a seldom-used country road.

"Burned out? Like, how do you mean? Totalled?"

"Are you kidding?" the cop said. "Your car was shredded. I haven't seen anything like it, except for when the fire brigade's Jaws of Life are used. Yeah, that's how it looked: like it had been cut up by the Jaws of Life."

We talked about my "whereabouts" and I didn't tell the cops I'd been down that empty road in my car. When they learned that the car had no warrant and wasn't insured (this caused a few tut-tuts and head shakes), they reached the logical conclusion that I hadn't trashed my own car for financial gain. So they promised they'd keep investigating and let me know what emerged.

Nothing emerged; about my car, *or* within my eyes. It—he—was gone. He clearly didn't like leaving me, if the wreckage of my car was any indication of his passion. He must have been mighty angry when he went. I saw the twisted mess of metal, still sitting, corroding, where it had died. The police were right. It was a dismembered corpse. But I had triumphed.

I thanked God each day and let life return to normal.

It did, until last year. I got a stye on my right eyelid, like a little pimple. I'd had one or two before and they responded well to antibiotics. I peered into the mirror to dab it with cream. Something moved; within my pupils. I knew that hideous darkness. My head dropped to my chest. I wept.

"Why are you here? You promised to go."

"We are liars," he said.

"But didn't I guess your name?"

"Of course. But I lied when I said I'd leave. And did you really think I don't know all your thoughts, and can be

tricked by someone like you? Or that I didn't know the Rumpelstiltskin story. Get real. I've been here all along. Just waiting."

"Waiting! Waiting! For what?" I wailed between chest-heaving gulps of crying.

"For you to want me. To need me."

"I don't need you. I don't need you."

"You don't? But I'm your motivation. Why do you think you are writing this book of short stories? Because you think you've got something to say, right? And that it's worth other people reading, right? Isn't that pretty arrogant? Wouldn't you call that pride?"

"No. It's self-confidence."

"Not pride? You're not proud of your poems, your articles, your books?"

"I … I like them."

"Not proud of them?"

"No."

"Truly now? Swear on it!"

"No need," I sighed, surrendering. "I'm proud of them."

He had me, that cruel muse. He sure did. I told Pride to shut up and let me write. He did.

High Tide

"You say, Madam, that this morning you watched Harry King go out on the mudflats with his, ah, sledge as he always did, and that everything seemed alright with him this time too?"

"Aye, Constable," said the stooped woman with grey hair pulled back in a Victorian-style bun. "Harry waved hello like he has most mornings for nigh on sixty years, and then he pushed his sled out as usual. But he failed to come back before the high tide. It's normal, see, for him to bring me a few cockles for my Brian. He's a kindly fella, our Harry. We went to school together, back, oh, when Queen Victoria was still alive, would you believe? Today the tide came in, but old Harry, he didn't come back; at least not that we saw. That's why we called for the Police to come."

"Mrs Secombe," said the young policeman, whose ruddy cheeks showed that they hadn't yet got used to the area's sandy and salty winds, "I'm very new to these parts, as you can probably tell, and I don't understand this business with the sledge. Why did he not merely walk out in Wellington boots to collect his cockles?"

"You seem a nice boy, Constable, so I won't laugh at your ignorance. The mudflats around the Welsh coast, and especially here in Cumbria, with the Solway Firth, are mighty perilous. Quicksand, see. You think the mud's firm, but then it turns to jelly and you begin to sink. It won't swallow you, mind; just hold you stuck up to your knees, or if you thrash about, to your waist, and then the tide comes in and drowns you."

"So our cockle fishermen," she continued, "ride out on what look like flimsy sleds. Not sled*ges*, mind; sleds. They're not for snow. But they're tough old things, our sleds. The men-folk have always done it like this, since before Roman times, I suspect. You see, son, if you don't spread your weight out, the mud will take you. It holds you tighter than a witch's grip. So any local fisherman will follow the tide out across the wet mud using his sled. He rests his top half across the sled's upright frame, which is about the same height as a kitchen table. He then propels himself, and mighty quick too if it takes his fancy, with his feet. His body weight is spread out over the sled, see. He won't get stuck."

"And he collects his cockles with a rake, and puts them into his flax basket," added Brian, Libby Secombe's husband, who joined them on the doorstep with slippered feet and pipe smoke. The pungent smell of both Brian and his smoke climbed up Constable Filbee's nostrils despite subtle attempts to exhale it.

"Okay, I think I understand, sir. Um, Mr Secombe, is it likely that the tide came in extra suddenly, or at least in some unusual way, and caught Mr King by surprise out there? You know, so he couldn't get in from the mud before the tide rose."

"Young fella. I know you don't mean to be rude, but what you suggest is so bloomin' ridiculous that I can only explain it by saying you're not a coastal fella. No, a local fisherman like our Harry King knows the tides like you surely know your wife's moods, if ye be married, mind."

"I am, sir, and I take your point. I didn't mean to disrespect your friend. Truly. I'm just trying to understand it all."

"You're a good lad, I can see. But there's only one person who would understand if—I say *if*—our Harry got caught by the tide, and that's our Harry. We only saw him go out. But the edge of the mud, where it meets the first

waves, is too far away for our tired eyes to see. Son, I reckon you better go talk to old Joe Llewellyn. He's been Harry's fishing mate for more years that I can remember, and he's a good man. Lives over yonder, across the bay, in the second small stone cottage past the post office."

Constable Filbee agreed to talk with Mr Llewellyn when he could. He thanked the Secombes, shook the old man's twisted hand, gently, not wishing to cause pain to arthritic joints, and walked from their postcard-perfect white cottage. Nice people, he thought; local treasures.

Filbee bicycled around to Llewellyn's house, a journey of ten minutes; two by car, "if we had one. It's 1950, after all," Filbee thought. He didn't really mind. His adopted village was peaceful and beautiful and, despite his upbringing in distant Northampton, he really did love the smells and sounds of the sea.

Joe Llewellyn turned out to be the living embodiment of those smells and sounds. His hair and facial stubble seemed a marine bluish-grey and his dry skin was as scaly as any fish. He smelt like salt and mud and had a voice as deep as the Bristol Sea. And, like Brian Secombe, he wore a mist of pipe smoke that seemed to cling to his cardigan and heavy canvas trousers without noticeably dissipating into the air.

"Come in, young fella," Llewellyn said after Constable Filbee introduced himself as the village's new bobby. His liver-spotted hand gave a firmer shake than Filbee could have imagined from a seventy-something-year-old. "You'll be wanting to speak to me about Harry, I'm guessing. Am I right?"

"Yes sir, I understand you are close to Mr King."

"My boy, we've fished together through both world wars and all those years in between. Yes, you could say that me and Harry have enjoyed a lot of good times together."

"Mr Llewellyn, I need to know when you last saw Mr King. He seems to have disappeared. He's not home, and Mr and Mrs Secombe can't remember him returning from his fishing today. Normally he brings them cockles, but today he didn't and they didn't see him return with his sled. They're really quite worried that's he's been drowned by an incoming tide."

"Ah, bless our Brian and Libby. They're dear friends too, you know. Always looking out for us when we follow the tides. But I have to correct you, Constable: Harry King *is* home, that I do know. He is home now, even while we speak in this here kitchen."

Filbee felt relieved. Okay, Harry King wasn't home when he checked earlier, but he's back now and all is well. "Oh good, thanks Mr Llewellyn. I'll call in and see him on my way back to the station. My sergeant will be pleased. He doesn't seem to like fusses. He gathers cockles too, I believe."

"He does, lad; he does at that. And your sergeant's an asset to the village; him and his quiet ways. Fits in real well, as you will too, I'm sure." Filbee enjoyed the flattery, but not the weather-beaten fisherman's next comments. "But you cannot call in to see old Harry. When I said he were home now, I'd didn't mean in his house. I meant his *real* home." Filbee didn't understand, and said so. "Okay son. Have a seat here and a cup of tea and I'll explain myself in better words. You be patient, mind. It's a bit of a story."

"Now, as I was saying, me and Harry go a long way back. We were mates at school, back before this here century began. And even then we fished, in streams and off rocks, but mostly out on the mudflats. My dear old dad, see, liked the cockles too. So even as lads we'd go out on sleds we made and we'd comb the mud till the incoming tides forced us in. Harry liked to talk, mostly about coopering, which he wanted to do when he left school.

Coopering? You don't know? Well, I guess it is a disappearing trade. Coopering is making barrels and smaller casks, like the kilderkin and firkin. Then there's the big'un, son: the 108 gallon Butt. There's not a man round here can make one now, at least not the proper way."

Filbee sipped poisonous-tasting tea while Joe Llewellyn gulped it down, cup after cup, while talking just as quickly. The policeman learned a lot about crafts that had disappeared, especially coopering, which Harry King had done splendidly, and wheelwrighting, the complicated hand manufacture of wooden spoked wheels. This was the trade Llewellyn had himself chosen.

But Filbee learned most about gathering cockles, which the friends had done throughout their long lifetimes for both pleasure and profit. "Not so much to be made from it now, mind," Llewellyn sighed.

The way the story-teller said it, Filbee thought, those two old gents had spent more time on mud than on solid ground. He smiled into his tea cup, which seemed pitifully small and fragile in a kitchen full of large wooden, tin and iron utensils, when Llewellyn said much the same about the mudflats: "We sure love it out there, on the mud. We're nearer to God out there, son, than back here in the crowded village."

Crowded? Filbee raised an eyebrow, unnoticed. The village had fewer than two hundred families.

After his restraint and amusement finally withered, Constable Filbee gently broke into Llewellyn's endless reminiscences about brick and pot making, pug mills, and charcoal burning. What did he mean when he said Harry King was at home, but not at home? Could he please explain?

Llewellyn seemed to regret having to abandon his memories for the time being, but wasn't irritated. "Aye,

lad. I'll tell you about our Harry. It goes like this. Harry learned a few weeks back that he had gone and got liver cancer. He'd been off-colour for a few months and we all—his friends, that is—sent him away to see the doctors at Carlisle. And they sent him off for tests at Newcastle upon Tyne. That's when we knew something was amiss. The doctors in Carlisle wouldn't have sent him to Newcastle if it were something they could fix. But they had reasons, it seems. And Harry comes home to the village with a bleedin' death sentence. His liver would last weeks or months but no longer."

"I'm very sorry, Mr Llewellyn, but you seem to be telling me that Mr King has gone home to die. Is that it? He's died at home?"

"Well, in a sense you are right, Constable, but only in a sense. As I said, Harry's not in his house."

"Not? You don't mean he's here, do you?" Filbee felt horrified at the thought of the dead old fisherman lying somewhere nearby, maybe only a few feet away.

"Son, this is what I mean. Early this morning Harry went out with his sled. I seen him from here with my binoculars, but he had no rake and no basket, so I knew he weren't going after cockles. He rode across the mud real slow, like. And I watched him go out and keep going. So I knew what was up with my oldest mate. I hadn't time to haul my sled down, so I grabbed me a pair of plashers—What? Plashers? Oh, I beg your pardon. They're like small skis; made of old barrel staves which we lace to our Wellingtons—and off I head. See, with plashers you can walk across even soft and dangerous mud without sinking."

"So you caught up with Harry, I mean Mr King?"

"I did, lad. Way out where the mud's turning to sea and the water's around your shins already. And Harry asks me why I'm there. Can you believe that? I've known

him all my life, nearly eighty years, and he asks me why. I told him. 'Goodbye Harry,' I said. 'I just came to tell you goodbye.'"

"And he shakes my hand and tells me he's going home. And he just steps off his sled into the water and sinks to his knees and tells me to go before I get stuck. I shake his hand again, wish him God Speed and leave him there, next to the sled he's used for thirty or forty years. He wanted to go, son; home I mean. And so he did. So he did."

Constable Filbee's lips moved without any regular muscular control. His shock twisted his voice to a strange and remote pitch. "You left him there?"

"He went home, son. And before long, if I'm as brave as my old friend, I'll go too. Now don't you be worrying, or upsetting your sergeant. By tomorrow you'll have Harry to bury, just as surely as if that cancer had killed him in bed."

The young policeman swirled the dregs of tea in his cup, politely asked for more, and waited for control of his thoughts to return before he could ask something about coopering that a few minutes earlier had caught his interest.

Meetings at Borders

Alec knelt to pull a book from the bottom row of the Poetry rack at Borders, the multi-story bookstore near the top end of Queen Street in Auckland. The blue and white spine called out “Sylvia Plath: Collected poems”. Well, only he heard it, inside his head. He’d been searching for ages for that book and had tried every second-hand bookshop in the downtown area. He’d even tried the two excellent shops in Devonport. Eureka, he now thought, sharing Archimedes’ delight. I’ve found it. I’ve found it.

Just then someone else found it, although maybe not with Archimedes’ excitement. Another hand pulled at the book. Alec’s hand touched the soft skin of a woman’s hand and he smelt sweet air around him.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said. “Here, you look at it first.”

Self-conscious blue eyes looked into his, their long-lashed lids opening wide then narrowing to disguise any awkwardness. What gorgeous eyes, he thought faster than light, before looking away.

“No, I actually want to buy it,” she said in a voice that, Alec thought, didn’t match her eyes. Her voice had frostiness not evident in her radiant summer eyes.

“Um, okay. But we have a wee problem. I really, really want this book. I’ve found it here only after a long, difficult hunt that makes Indiana Jones look lazy.” She smiled at his silly joke, and released the book. He passed it back to her. “No, you have it. But let’s see if the staff have any more copies out the back or at least on order.”

It was the store's only copy, it transpired, but another could be ordered and acquired within a week. Alec agreed to place an order for it and give up the existing copy to the woman with the blue eyes and golden-blonde curly hair. She thanked him, bought the book and watched him shrug his shoulders pleasantly and walk away.

"Hey wait," she called, surprising herself, him, and the fascinated cashier. "If you're a fan of Sylvia Plath you can't be too bad. Can I buy you a coffee?"

God yes! he thought. "Um … okay. Sure. Why not?" he said.

They paid for their own coffees at the café in the Borders complex and sat uncomfortably until Michaela, as she named herself, got the introductions out of the way. "Is that Alec, as in Alec Guinness, or Alex, as in Alex P. Keaton?" she asked.

That broke the ice. "You're not old enough to remember *Family Ties*," Alec said.

She nodded. "Yep, I am, and I adored Michael J. Fox's character, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I think the whole world did back in the eighties. So how old are you, Michaela, if you don't mind me asking? After all, you brought up the eighties."

"I'm thirty-three. And you? Forty-four's my guess."

"Hah-hah! Very funny. I'm thirty-four."

"Are you a university student?" she asked.

"No, why? Are you?"

"No, I'm a part-time teacher. It's just that I don't imagine many men would read Sylvia Plath's poetry unless they had an assignment to do on it or something."

"Really? You think that?" Alec asked. "I love all twentieth century poetry, and you can't go past Plath. She's a legend. To be honest, though, I'm really a fan of

Robert Graves, although for some reason he's fallen out of fashion."

"Graves. Yeah, you're right. Do you write poems yourself, Alec," she asked. Her posture revealed that all awkwardness had left. She had both elbows on the table, her chin cupped in her hands. She wore rings, he noticed, although not a wedding band.

"Yeah, I try. I've actually written several hundred poems and I've got a complete manuscript of seventy-three with a publisher at the moment. Keep your fingers crossed for me, please. … Um, I've actually written other books, including non-fiction, and I write short-stories too. I guess I've just got that darned writing bug."

"Me too," she sighed, "But it tends to make me very anti-social. Do you find that?"

Alec sensed she was fishing for information on his private life, to see if he was single, lived alone, and so on.

"Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. My friends think I'm obsessed with writing. But it hasn't ever stopped me pursuing whatever else I want at any time. Not that I have much happening in my life at the moment."

Would she pick up on his equally unsubtle hint?

She did. "God, Alec, I've never done this before. I can't even believe I'm here with you now. Um, do you think you'd like to meet me again for coffee or a movie? Please say no if you want to. It won't hurt my feelings."

"Michaela, I'd love to. Truly. How about tonight?"

They both laughed at their school-kid behaviour and nervous mutual attraction. She nodded and wrote her address and phone number on a napkin. He did the same. After agreeing that he'd pick her up at 7.15, they said a happy "see you later" and went their separate ways.

Michaela squealed with delight, inwardly of course,

but her smile beamed like fluorescence as she drove home. Yesss! She trumpeted her triumph to herself. Later, stretched on her bed, she read and re-read the napkin he'd given her. "Alec Stretten, 54 Mahars Rd, 09 417456".

That name rings a bell, she thought, but couldn't make any further association. Then she realised she owned one of his books. She flicked her eyes along her shelf of spine-cracked paperbacks until the name "Alec Stretten" shone white on a green spine. Man, he's flippin' famous, she thought. She pulled the book down, jiggling with happiness, and read the tiny blurb on the back cover: "Alec Stretten is a graduate of Waikato and Otago Universities. He has travelled widely, lives in Auckland and enjoys sailing his tiny yacht." Wow, how did I manage this? Michaela thought.

Her excitement cracked apart and disintegrated when she flipped the book open and read the acknowledgments page: "To my wife Miriam, who inspired every good word in this book. May my eternal gratitude prove a suitable reward."

Michaela gritted her teeth, re-read that dreadful expression of love, and then threw the book with angry strength against the door. I should have known better, she violently thought. A married man. A liar. A filthy darned liar. Well, you wait, Mr. Hotshot writer. I'll show you than I can't be conned. I'll go out with you tonight and tell you what I think of your antics.

She did precisely that.

Alec picked her up at 7.30—he's a man, after all—and drove to a lovely, softly atmospheric café he knew. She answered questions but seemed flat. Nerves, he thought. They gained a slightly wobbly table against a side wall, beneath a beautiful framed Japanese woodcut, and ordered cappuccinos and cheesecake.

Michaela tried to bide her time as he made small talk.

He cracked a few jokes that were actually rather funny, yet they produced a smile on her lips and no laughter. What a fake, she thought, even though she had to admire his cheek. After twenty minutes of saying in her head what she planned to say aloud, the words began tumbling out. “Alec, I have to know: why are you really out with me tonight?”

“Well, um, I guess I thought we have a lot in common and might make good friends. … You don’t look convinced. What’s up? Do you regret coming? Have I said something dumb?”

“No, that’s just it. You seem perfect. *But*—and it’s a pretty big ‘but’—I need you to tell me about Miriam. The truth, please. Why didn’t you tell me you have a wife? What do you take me for?”

“Ah, I see. You must have seen her name in a book I wrote.” Alec fell speechless, and looked deeply sorry.

“Well, spit it out. What’s going on? Why are we going out if you’re already married?”

“Michaela, listen, I …”

“No, you listen,” Michaela burst in, preventing him explaining his obviously unfaithful intentions. “I met a man today who looked great, shared my interest in literature, seemed genuine, seemed kind of shy actually, obviously liked me, and maybe even fancied me. But he turns out to be a married man with a bunch of lies.”

“Michaela, listen. I haven’t told you a single lie. Please believe me. Yes, I had a wife I loved dearly. I married her and thought I was the luckiest man on earth. I loved her more than life itself, until, Michaela—*listen*—her life disappeared. Four years ago she … oh shit, just like Sylvia Plath, she … Miriam, um … committed suicide. She was schizophrenic, and eventually, despite her medication, just couldn’t cope anymore. I wanted to die with her. I tried to, but couldn’t even do that properly. I’ve

had no-one in my life since Miriam died. And, if I'm being really open here, this is—or was—the first date I've had in four years."

Half-empty cappuccinos grew cold. Marshmallows on the sides of the cups lay uneaten. Syrup on the cheesecake dripped onto the plates. Tears from Michaela's eyes dripped onto the table. Through red eyes, lots of squinting and several shaking breaths she apologised—profusely and repeatedly.

Alec's eyes brimmed but didn't overflow. He kept his voice steady, assuring her that it was okay, that she couldn't have known and that no harm had been done. "But I do think we should leave now," he said abruptly. And they did.

The drive back to Michaela's house felt tortuous for the plain but pretty blonde who clutched her seatbelt for comfort. Alec had little to say as he concentrated on the traffic and on stemming the flood of memories that threatened to rip his mind apart. He pulled the car up outside her house and watched her unbuckle her seatbelt and slide a leg across towards the grass. "Wait on, Michaela," he said. "Did you really mean it when you said I, um, looked okay?"

Michaela turned and saw a smile wider than the Harbour Bridge. "Just asking. Typical male vanity, I'm afraid," he added.

"Yes, you're very nice looking actually. And please, please accept my apologies. I'm so ashamed of myself."

"Please don't be," he said. "See you later."

Yeah right, she thought. I'll never see you again. Oh what have I done?

"Tomorrow?" he asked.

"What?"

"I'll meet you back at the poetry stand at Borders at

one o'clock. Is that good?"

"Good?" she said, sighing massively. "It's really, really good, Alec. See you at one."

Michaela couldn't sleep. She curled into a ball and hid beneath her blankets, all thoughts dominated by regret and an overwhelming sense of Alec's goodness. She woke late, showered, "made herself beautiful"—inadequately, she thought—and drove to town. She parked in the dimness of the Borders car-park, paid her fee, and walked up to the literature floor. He wasn't there. She shuffled in front of the poetry shelves and noticed that a volume of Robert Graves hadn't been put away. She did so.

A warm hand slipped inside hers, squeezing gently.

"Hi," he said. "I guess I should have put that back myself." Michaela felt an overwhelming urge to cry, but didn't. She also wanted to kiss him, and did. His lips felt beautiful. "By the way, you were right about one thing last night," he said softly, and with clear embarrassment, as they drew apart. "I do fancy you."

"Alec," she mumbled awkwardly but knew she had to get it out. "You've got to know something right from the get-go. I'm … Argh, how do I say this after what you've been through? I'm … God, Alec, I'm schizophrenic too."

Victims

Theodor Berchem sat nervously across the table from the American army officer, who pulled his lips curiously into a puckered tightness as he inhaled his cigarette smoke. The officer asked in fluent German, “You want one?” Theodor was asthmatic and had never smoked, so he declined with exaggerated thanks so as not to cause offence to what seemed like a decent enemy officer.

Not that Theodor actually considered this man, or any American, an enemy. The Russians? Maybe. Yet that was not because of any racial or ethnic preconceptions or experiences. Theodor hated no-one, but he did grieve for his sisters, both violated by Stalin’s troops when they entered Cottbus, Theodor’s hometown, after crossing the great Neisse and smaller Spree Rivers.

“Father Berchem, I know this is hard to discuss,” Captain Arthur Solomon said in his pronounced American accent. “But I need you to tell me about your experience at Dresden during and after our bombing attack. Where do you want to start?”

“I don’t want to remember those days at all, sir, as you must understand. I will never forget them, but they are not easy memories to carry around.”

Theodor’s brown eyes stared from dark circles that made him look far older than his thirty years. Captain Solomon’s eyes, also brown, looked no happier. This war had clearly done both of them much psychological harm. Theodor played gently but uncomfortably with his small black felt hat. With his long black cassock, this revealed

his vocation as a Catholic parish priest.

"You must understand, Captain Solomon, that what I saw in Dresden was shocking beyond description. It is no cliché to describe it as Dante's inferno. I saw death, death and more death. Even as a priest, I could not cope with such bloodshed."

"Father Berchem, my government isn't delighted by the deaths at Dresden, and I can tell you that I am personally mortified by what we did. I can understand your distress."

"Mortified?" the German priest repeated, arching an eyebrow. "That is a perversely appropriate word, Captain. You know it means to put someone to death?"

"Oh … ah yeah, I know. I was merely trying to assure you that I was horrified to learn of Dresden's fate; as we all were. But I must say, even now—over four months later—that it was a necessary evil."

"I am a priest, sir. I cannot agree that *any* evil is necessary. Is not evil the Devil's work?"

Captain Solomon didn't like the semantics, but understood why Berchem felt so strongly about Dresden. Solomon didn't chide him.

The American's superiors had assigned him, a junior intelligence officer with the Army Air Forces, the task of probing into the psychological effects of the Allied bombing of Dresden. The attack had taken place on 13 and 14 February 1945. Solomon simply had a job to do.

"Father, maybe it would help if I told you about something I recently experienced, and the feelings that arose within me, as a way of easing you into an explanation of what you saw and felt at Dresden."

"Ja, okay, Captain." Theodor Berchem saw kindness in Solomon's prematurely worn face. He liked him, despite the awkwardness of their interview.

"On 29 April I accompanied," Solomon said, "as a volunteer, merely along for the ride—a unit of the U.S. Seventh Army's 42nd Division as it entered a small town near Munich that I had never heard of. It was picturesque, with cobble-stoned streets and medieval houses and relaxing-looking inns that before the war, I'm sure, I would love to have stayed in. The whole town was beautiful, and the people came out to greet us with enthusiasm."

Solomon paused to swallow hard. He continued: "But outside this small town, down a road lined with tall poplars, across from endless fields of corn stumps, lay a devilish place that equalled your description of Dresden. Father, I would say that *this* place was Dante's inferno."

"Ah, I see. … You mean this Dachau place, do you not?"

"Yes, Father. Dachau. The horrors I saw were beyond possibilities for comparisons. Father, I saw piles of bodies, emaciated and skeletal, stacked like kindling wood or lying in random groups, or by themselves. They were everywhere. And I wept, not only because many were Jews like me, but because all were humans, men, like me; like *us*."

Solomon's eyes brimmed, and Berchem instinctively reached across the table and rubbed the American's shoulder. Tears filled his eyes too. Solomon continued: "I had already seen war's privations in France, when I was attached to General Weyland's XIX U.S. Tactical Air Command. We caught some retreating German field units in the open and shredded them from the air with rockets and anti-personnel bombs. These were dreadful things to see. Dead soldiers everywhere. But Father, these scenes were nothing, absolutely nothing like the horrors of Dachau. I tell you: piles of matchstick-thin bodies, naked with their privates exposed, their eyes bulging, their mouths open as if they had died wailing. Can you understand my grief?"

The German clergyman could, and wept openly, gravely ashamed of what his people had done under the beasts who had ruled them for twelve years.

After a minute to gain composure, the priest spoke. “My American friend, I can honestly say that I knew nothing of Dachau or any such place of murder until I had to confront these sites after our defeat six weeks ago. I am ashamed and will never, ever be able to convey my sorrow that the German nation stooped to this; one of history’s greatest atrocities. I am sorry, too, Captain Solomon, that you saw your Jewish brethren in such villainous conditions. I have prayed for weeks for those who perished, and for those who survived.”

Solomon saw the sincerity in Berchem’s face, and knew that he was about to hear a similar story from the priest’s perspective.

“I am a parish priest in Cottbus, Captain, where I grew up. Cottbus? Oh, it’s near the Polish border. I served my little flock of parishioners through the years of Hitler’s violence against the world, and undertook no military service. My brother was also a priest, but he … he died of frostbite, not of wounds, in the Ukraine near Odessa. I am not tolerant of war, and requested to stay and serve my parish. The bishop agreed, and so did our region’s political authorities.”

“In February this year I travelled to Saxony, to many villages and to Dresden itself, to help comfort the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing from the east. Dresden was, you know, swollen to overflowing when you bombed.” Captain Solomon did know, but revealed no sign. The German priest continued: “I intended to stay two or three weeks, and could not stay longer. I had to return to my own flock. But in those weeks I saw the skies open and a rain of exploding steel fall upon Dresden like a biblical curse.”

“The firestorm from the bombs showering on

Dresden—too many of them incendiaries, I must strenuously complain—was visible for twenty miles or more in all directions. I was in an outer suburb when the city began burning and I led a column of terrified residents into the fields nearby. We watched German spotlights criss-cross the skies, but not for long. Very quickly the only light visible were flames from shattered buildings. The intensity was soon horrendous. It was like looking at the sun. It hurt our eyes. But Captain, we had to move further and further from the city. We had to flee far and very fast. Do you know why?"

Solomon didn't.

"We could not stay in the city's immediate outskirts because huge winds began to blow. No, I take that back. They began to *suck*. The vast fire of the burning city was consuming the very air itself and was sucking oxygen inwards from miles around. Leaves, tree limbs, and even some whole trees; I saw them sucked into that maelstrom. We could not stand, but we crawled and crawled until we could eventually stand again. Then we ran and walked until we were safe."

Solomon's astonishment could not be hidden. "You say that winds were pulling tree branches and even some trees into the air and sucking them towards the inner city? How, then, did those inside the city survive? Was all their air not consumed?"

"Captain, in some suburbs you are right. I cannot speak of the whole city. But in the suburbs that I saw, not one person who survived the blasts and the fire survived the … ah, the suffocation."

"Father Berchem, I can only say that war is hell. This was a bombing raid, *not* the deliberate extermination of civilians."

"Ja, well, I can see you sincerely believe that," the priest said, shrugging his shoulders, but not with

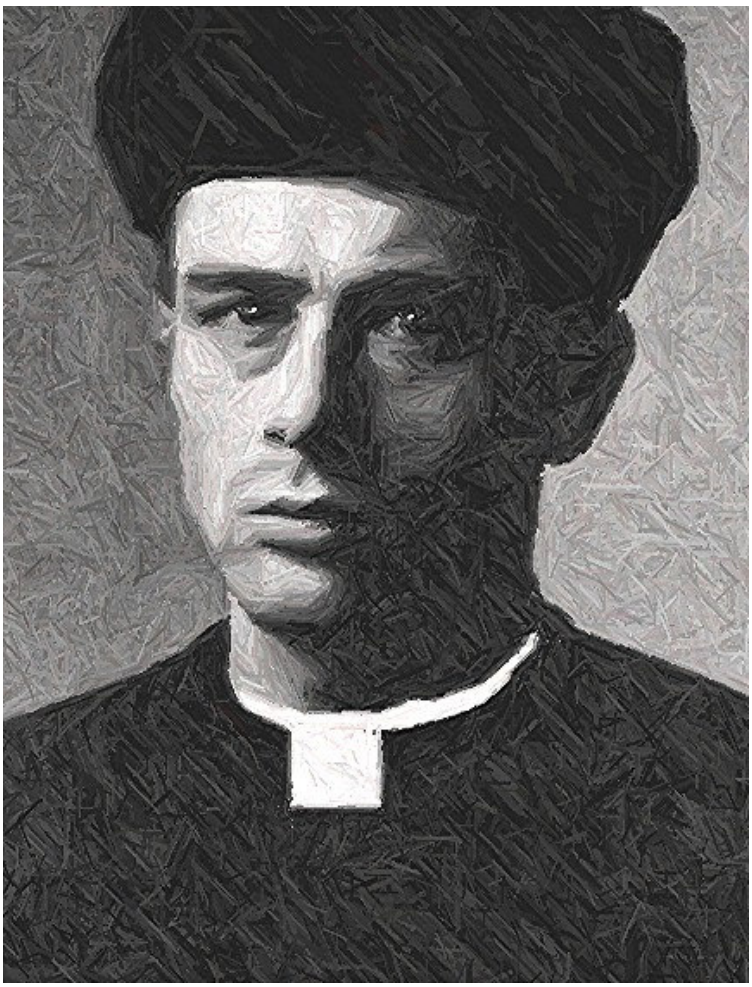
indifference. “Yet the horror you described at Dachau is the very same one I saw at Dresden. Did you know that, after the fires were finally extinguished, the police, the army, the fire brigade, and any surviving citizens and refugees collected all the bodies that had not been totally consumed? They—we—gathered up the suffocated, shattered and burned bodies and created large pyres. Stacks? You described the bodies at Dachau looking like stacks of kindling wood. Captain Solomon, in Dresden they looked the same. Everywhere: bodies stacked up for burning. Oh dear God, I cannot erase the horror of the image.”

“Nor I,” said Solomon unhappily, thinking again of Dachau. “Nor I, Father.” After an uncomfortable pause the American continued: “I’m sorry, but I need you to tell me about the fires caused by the bombs. It’s for my report. I have seen the photographs, of course, but I need to know which buildings upset people most when hit. And why? Churches? Cathedrals? Homes? Can you tell me about the, um, the relative impact on morale?”

It was a reasonable question from a military point of view, but Berchem was a priest, not a soldier. “Relative impact? Captain, I cannot answer your question. We huddled in bomb-shelters, under bridges, in the subways, in bunkers, in the fields. We feared death. And we died, thinking not of buildings, but of loved ones.”

Berchem became more agitated: “Can you tell me what the victims of Dachau thought of as they faced their impending deaths? Of their synagogues, their houses, their businesses? No, they thought of God and of their mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and children. Oh dear Lord, the children. I lament for those Jewish children, Captain Solomon. Truly. And, you know, I lament equally for Dresden’s children. I found them scattered around the streets like small charred dolls. I picked some up and placed them, unknown, on funeral pyres. Some

mothers—fortunate or unfortunate, I don't know—cradled their dead, charcoaled children. I saw this several times. It broke my heart."



Solomon was not enjoying this interview. He had seen no dead children at Dachau but he knew only too well that

the Nazis had murdered innumerable children throughout Europe with no regard for their innocence and helplessness; and not only Jewish children. Gypsy, Serbian, Russian and other children had died at the hands of uncaring adults with guns and poisons. Solomon thought of Evelyn, his wife back in Long Beach, California, and of Evan, their son. Not yet three, Evan walked and talked—baby gibberish mostly—in total safety. Europe's children faced hardships unimagined in American homes.

"I have a son, Father," he finally confided. "His name is Evan. I miss him more than you can believe. And I can't wait to get home to him and my sweetheart, the boy's mom."

He pulled out a small, slightly crinkled photograph of mother and child, and passed it to Theodor. The priest handled it carefully, knowing he held the American's treasure. A sweet-faced mother, full in figure, dressed for winter, held a warmly wrapped baby in a woollen hat.

The priest felt an uncomfortable familiarity with their pose. Oh dear God, he thought. They look like the Mother of God and my very saviour. Tears welled, trickled, and then flowed as he looked at Arthur Solomon's beloved wife and child. He passed the photograph back and watched the exhausted young American, whose own eyes glistened, place it carefully back inside the pages of a small notebook he kept in his front pocket—"above his heart" he said.

"Listen, Father … Theodor … We never killed your children on purpose. We never hated them. They died as a desperately tragic circumstance of a war we finished but did not start. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The priest agreed, but only to a point. "War should never involve the innocent, neither by intention nor by accident. How could your armed forces burn a city to the ground, knowing it was full of refugees, and then say that children died accidentally?"

"I did not say they died by accident, Father. That they died at all is terrible. Ghastly. What I mean is that we could not achieve our military goals without a great number of deeply lamentable civilian deaths. But that is *not* the same as lining civilians up in front of graves they had dug and then shooting them down into them; or forcing them to work as slaves until they died of exhaustion; or incarcerating them in camps where they worked without sustenance until they dropped dead from exhaustion; or, worst of all, sending them to the death camps in Poland."

Berchem frowned. "But Dresden, Captain Solomon; why Dresden? Were the deaths there really so different from those you mention? Dear God, the city had no military garrison, it had no military industry, it had no important railways or bridges; but it did have Germany's finest Baroque and Rococo architecture—Florence on the Elbe, people called it—and it had a huge, frightened civilian population of young and old men and women, and children who should be going to school and church, all cowering in fear. And there were another one hundred thousand or more already terrorised refugees. They had come to Dresden in search of safety. Why, Captain, is this not a war crime like those you mention?"

"Maybe one day people will say it is," the American glumly replied. "I dearly hope not. I see no crime, only a dreadful military necessity. We had to aid the Russians as they pushed into Germany from Poland. And, yes, there is a *vast* difference between Dachau and Dresden. As I see it, and I'm sure you will agree, the Creator made all people, and all races, equal. Their souls are all precious in His sight, are they not? Thus, when we bomb Dresden for war aims and kill your old folk, women, refugees and children, and you do the same to those in Warsaw, Rotterdam, Brighton, London, Coventry and Belgrade, there is no difference. These are all dreadful, rotten circumstances of war. We did not plan their deaths."

"But Father," he tersely continued, "there has been an evil at work throughout Europe during these past few years, and it was not only an unwanted circumstance of war. Your leader and his party, thugs most of them, and Godless all of them, maintained that people and races are not all equal. Those who died in Dachau or Buchenwald or Belsen or Auschwitz did not die in their homes, or even in their home cities. They had been taken from their homes in twenty countries throughout Europe and concentrated in places of inevitable death. Who else has ever done that? Not even the cruellest Caesars, Attila the Hun, or Genghis Khan combed whole lands for their enemies so they could separate them and murder them. We Allies did not, after all, gather up German innocents in one place and then send in the RAF or the US Army Air Forces to exterminate them. No-one has done such evil. *You did*."

Solomon wished he had not added those last two words, but he had dropped the reins on his emotions. They were galloping freely. He looked at Father Berchem, who stared back without the slightest movement, as if caught in a spell. Tears alone moved.

The priest finally spoke: "Not I, Captain Solomon. Not I. But your words are true. You gave us a Dresden, and a Hamburg, and others besides. But we gave the world a new disease; a new insanity. I am deeply ashamed."

He stood up, nodded respectfully, extended his hand in a farewell shake, and then, with a barely audible "God bless you and your wife and child, Captain," left Solomon alone with an unfinished interview.

That Day in 1801

Jack Mackinnon lay in despair and frightful pain, unable to rest the throbbing stump of his right arm, amputated just above the elbow, on his hard hospital cot. The slightest bump of that stump, or even the light weight of a blanket, sent a ripple of agony through his neck and across his shoulder-blade. Jack longed for sleep but the gods of war punished the wounded seaman by denying him anything more than an occasional dream-tormented nap.

"What are you thinking about, friend?" said the man in the bed next to him—if you could call their canvas stretchers "beds". Both men would indeed have called them that. After years aboard men-of-war, hanging bent like bananas in stinking hammocks, these stretchers would ordinarily have seemed luxurious. Only their wounds now prevented them feeling any comfort.

Jack noticed that his neighbour had his left eye padded in gauze with bandages holding it tightly in place. A musket ball had doubtless taken sight from that eye. This momentarily eased Jack's self-pity.

"I'm thinking about home, mate; home. I want to go home as soon as this here arm has healed, if that ever happens. Doctor says it's not healing so good, though, but if I keep it clean and don't get no disease or gangrene I might—I say might—just live to go home. It sure does hurt. Like the devil, you know. Oh I'm sorry, mate, course you know. How's your eye? Musket ball?"

"Yeah, I was in the rigging of the *Ardent,* trying to work the mainsail, when I got this here wound. I tell you

what, though, I didn't fall, but managed to climb like a man back down the ratlines. It were a horrible sight, though. On the *Ardent* we had twenty-nine seamen and marines killed, and me and sixty-three others wounded. But we did our bit for King George and Lord Nelson, eh! By the way, my name's Adam Rose, like the flower. So where's home then, mate?"

"Jack's my name, and I'm pleased to meet you, though neither of us is much to look at right now. Home, Adam? Oh dear Lord, home. I'm from West Harris. A paradise. The most beautiful spot on God's earth, tho' some folk think it's not much of a place. We have precious few trees and nothing to warm us in winter but peat, peat and more peat. Everywhere are peat bogs. Them and winds and wild grasses and rabbits. Do you know where Harris is?"

"No, but I can tell you're a Scotsman. I'm from here, you know, Yarmouth. So I'm already home, only I ain't got no family to go home to. My ma and pa died about five years back, of consumption. But where the bleedin 'eck is West Harris, then? Sounds a treat!"

"Way up north, off the west coast of Scotland, but further north even than Tiree and Skye. It's a bit cold there for an Englishman like yourself, but I come from Taobh Tuath—you'd be calling this town Northton—which gets a fair breeze most of the year. It's from the gulf-stream, you see. East Harris is colder. Mighty desolate I'd call it. There's nothing but miles and miles of windswept rocks and waterlogged holes. Ain't even no grazing animals."

"Ain't never been that far," said Adam. "I've sailed to India and the Caribbean but around my own coastline I ain't actually been past the Isle of Man, but I mean to, one day. So why, friend, are you fighting in an English fleet if you be a Scotsman?"

"Just like the Irish, mate, we highlanders and

islanders don't care much for things English, but we have to eat. Life's tough right now in Harris. The English have been settling Scots families on our island, so they can have their lands I guess, but Harris is struggling to support everyone. It's very hard to make a living. And I was, in any case, born with salt air in me lungs. I love the sea. She's a bonny mistress."

"And to me too, Jack. She's a sweet lady alright. D'ya think you'll ever be able to go back to sea?" the one-eyed sailor asked.

The reality of the situation brought tears to Jack's eyes, quietly and unexpectedly. "No, friend Adam, I'm finished. I won't even be any use in a little fishing boat back home, so there's no chance the King's navy will find me a hammock aboard a fighting ship or even as a guard on a prison hulk. I wish I were dead. Sorry to tell you, but I do."

Jack turned away from his companion and, with wet eyes clamped shut, tried to pray for a release; from pain, from life.

Sometime later—hours? days? Jack didn't know—a murmur spread throughout the Yarmouth Naval Hospital that Lord Nelson had just arrived back from his great victory at Copenhagen and wanted to see his wounded sailors before he departed for London. The excitement reached fever pitch. Oh Lord Nelson: England's greatest and favourite champion; Admiral Jervis's saviour at the Battle of St. Vincent in 1797; the man who had destroyed Napoleon's fleet and ambitions at the Nile in 1798; and who had, three years on, recently wrecked the Danish fleet at Copenhagen and gained an armistice between Denmark and England. The whole hospital rejoiced at the news that the greatest living Englishman had come to pay tribute to those wounded at Copenhagen.

Jack had always admired Nelson, from afar. He'd never sailed under him before the Battle of Copenhagen

and never actually saw the admiral, who commanded the attack from the *Elephant,* during that close match. He was as sure that Nelson was a naval genius as he was that Napoleon, that vile French brute, was a military one. Nelson will finish him soon, he thought.

Yet he still lamented that England's battles, which Nelson won splendidly, no doubt, had cost him his arm and any chance of a career at sea, even as a fisherman home in poor Northton. He wouldn't even be able to pull a net in, let alone row or work sails.

Excited hospital staff helped everyone put on their best shirts and neck-scarves, awaiting the arrival of their lord. They nonetheless looked and smelled dreadful, as did the entire decaying hospital, which had flaking paint, dusty window sills and dirty floors. Musket wounds, many of them sceptic, and amputated limbs created a scene of utter misery.

Into this squalor the great man strode, as if nothing was askance. Of course, as most sailors knew, Nelson was used to suffering, and had seen and experienced more than his fair share since he'd gone to sea at the age of twelve.

Nelson passed up and down the rows of cots, bending to say a kind word to anyone who seemed particularly distressed and nodding with sincere appreciation every time hearty cheers rose.

Jack's pain prevented him rolling onto his other side so he could see Lord Nelson's approach, but the growing excitement in his hall indicated that Nelson was near. Suddenly, to Jack's surprise, a short, slender man in a rich blue and gold vice-admiral's uniform, glittering with medals and awards, knelt beside him and whispered, "Lad, I share your pain and I salute your courage. What ship were you on?"

Jack stuttered the answer. He stared into Nelson's

face from a distance so close that he could feel his warm breath. He gulped in shock. A life of pain and suffering had prematurely turned the admiral's hair grey, almost white, and a deep, twisting purple scar across his forehead removed any good looks the hero might once have had. Jack knew that scar, or the story of how Nelson received it at the Nile. Most of England knew it, and of Nelson's blinded eye, damaged by an explosion in Corsica. It was still blue, Jack noticed, but entirely dull and lifeless, unlike his sparkling, empathetic other eye.

Oh God, he thought as he reached up with his good hand to touch Nelson, what right have I got to wallow in pity? Here is our greatest man, and there's only half of him left. Yet he's smiling, and winning the king's battles.

"Where do you hail from originally, lad? I take you for a Scotsman," Nelson asked in a soft East Anglian accent, his teary eyes and genuine look of concern testifying to his birth as the son of a devout clergyman and his reputation as King George's kindest admiral.

"Lord, I was a fisherman from Northton."

"Ah, from Harris, eh! How fine to meet a true man of the sea."

Jack beamed with pride that Horatio Lord Nelson, the Hero of the Nile, had heard of his tiny town in the Hebrides and obviously valued their sea-faring qualities.

"But I'm afraid, lad—Jack, is that your name? I'm sorry—that you will now be no more useful as a fisherman that I would be." Nelson wagged the stump of his own right arm, which had also been amputated above the elbow. "I see, young Jack, that we have both been beautified in the same manner. How lucky we are. You know that ladies will admire your wound. Maybe they'll even say you look like that strange little admiral Nelson." The admiral bellowed with laughter. "And maybe they'll tell me that I look like that naval hero Jack from Northton

on Harris! Now wouldn't that be something!"

Lord Nelson turned to look at Jack's one-eyed companion, and smiled again. "Ah, another 'Nelsonian,' I see. Another one-eyed sea-dog. How did it happen? A musket ball? A powder burn?"

"A musket ball, m … my Lord," Adam Rose said.

"Well then, I salute your courage as well, son, and I can tell from your accent that you hail from these parts. Am I right?"

"Yes, Lord, I live here in Yarmouth and will sail with another of your ships as soon as I'm able. If my admiral can defeat the French with one seeing eye, I can at least serve under him in that same state."

Nelson roared again in happy laughter. "Bless my soul," he said. "What a fire-brand. It would be a mighty honour to have you back in one of my ships".

The smiling Nelson nodded at both men in a gesture of affection and respect and then led his entourage further along the row of cots so that he could talk with other wounded and gravely sick seamen.

Adam Rose's expectation, and Nelson's apparent acceptance, that Adam could re-enter naval service tore at Jack's heart. He knew full well that the only reason why Nelson himself continued to serve was because he lost his arm after he had already become a rear-admiral and a national hero. Ordinary seamen couldn't stay in service with severe disabilities. He rolled over, as carefully as his horrific amputation wound allowed, and tried to blot out all thoughts.

Talk of Nelson's visit hung in the air for weeks, with every patient, except those who had died or gone home, eulogising him with every breath, even while eating. Jack Mackinnon tried to breath in the joyous air, but the pain in his stump drove him mad. Opium sedation sometimes

proved necessary, but it was costly and the hospital existed on extremely meagre funds. Most days Jack could feel pain in an arm and hand that no longer existed. Even worse, that ghost arm sometimes itched.

Jack soon realised that, pain or no pain, he would survive and would have to vacate his bed in the hospital. The war against Napoleon created a heavy demand for beds. He would return to West Harris, he concluded, even though his travel home would consume the pittance the Navy would give him by way of a pension. He would seek the help and love of kinfolk and do whatever a one-armed man could in a labouring community. This, he knew, was virtually nothing. He would be a drain; a liability. The guilt and shame of his uselessness was a bitter pill to swallow.

Adam proved a good friend, and their constant efforts to raise each other's spirits created a bond, they both felt, that would last forever. Adam knew, of course, that he got the better deal. The loss of one eye in a world of manual labour wasn't a terrible blow; the loss of an arm was.

The eventual separation of these sailors proved hard, with each promising to stay in contact despite their realisation that, in practice, they never could. They embraced, and prepared to part at the main hospital's entrance, when a doctor, a kind fellow with a positive bedside manner, called Jack aside. Adam Rose waved his farewell and disappeared from Jack's life, although he stayed forever in his memory.

"Ah Jack," said Doctor Bryant, "Here, let me start by telling you a little story. You wouldn't know this, but I have been a friend of Lord Nelson for a very long time; since his dreadful illness in Nicaragua, in fact. Anyway, he and I stay in regular contact and, as you know, he makes a point of visiting the patients here whenever he's in Yarmouth. Fine fellow, His Lordship."

"Anyway, Jack," he added gleefully, "His Lordship recently sent me a letter and a small packet. I haven't

opened it—oh, he'd be furious if he found out I did such a thing. He wanted me to give it to you if and when you recovered enough health to leave here. It seems, my boy, that Lord Nelson saw in you the same despair he felt after losing his own arm. He took a liking to you, and, being aware that you'll never serve at sea again, has been worried about your future. 'Harris is not a likely spot for a one-armed seaman to make a living,' he said. So here, take whatever it is that he has sent you. Take great care of your wound, Jack lad. Goodbye and good luck."

Jack stood alone and shocked with a carefully wrapped little box in his hand. Its elegant packaging made him suspect that the infamous Emma Hamilton may well have wrapped it herself. No seaman would take such care with outside trappings. Jack strode into the sunlight and, with no-one close, sat upon a park bench and carefully opened the small parcel.

It contained a note in spidery writing: "Dear Jack, you will, no doubt, be able to use my small gift when you return to Harris. Independence means a lot, doesn't it? Take care of yourself, and please tell no-one of this. Nelson & Brontë."

The unique signature, Nelson's title since he received a Sicilian estate called Brontë from King Ferdinand of Naples, made Jack smile. Oh, how wonderful, he thought: a personal note from our greatest man.

Jack's smile and eyes widened in astonishment a moment later when he unfolded a relatively heavy bundle of tightly wrapped tissue paper and saw what it contained: twenty gleaming gold coins—worth more than he could ever have made in his lifetime as a fisherman or naval seaman.

O Lord above, he thought, I am alive again! And I'll be a man, not a burden!

Jenny Green Teeth

In the year of Our Lord 1562, Tom Applewood took his young son, also Tom, to walk through the nearby forest. Away from the village's confines and the fields' demands he felt free, and the four-mile walk to the forest passed quickly. The boy's seven-year-old eyes remained wide, like his smiles, as the father pointed out particular trees, fungi and birds while they walked, talked and sung their way ever deeper into the world of shadows, gold shafts of light, and catching and scratching undergrowth.

The ugliest of the giant oaks scared the boy, who had never seen anything so menacing outside his nightmares. Massive in girth ("thirty feet or more," the sun-baked Yorkshire farmer said), oaks ruled all trees "as lions do the animals." Higher than the steeple of their church, with branches stretching everywhere like human arms, complete with grasping fingers, the oaks were certainly magnificent.

"Son," the man said, "great oaks like these deserve our respect. They grow from single acorns to become the largest of the Lord's living things. And they can live longer than old Methusela, who was 969 before the Lord took him."

"Are *all* trees older than Me-what's his name, Father?"

"No. Only some are. See that oak there. He's the biggest round here. He might be as old as Methusela already, and he may well live another few hundred years before he's gone."

That tree stood separate, as if others were afraid to

grow close. The boy noticed strips of faded cloth tied around one branch, which stretched from the twisting, wrinkled trunk a few feet above the ground for twenty yards.

“What are those tied-up rag things, Father?”

“They’re our prayers to God, the earth and the spirits of life. I tied them there, but not all. Someone’s been adding others over the last few years. I don’t know who.”

“What do they do? Are they bandages for the tree?”

The father smiled at the innocence. “They remind the Almighty of our needs, son. I began to tie them there after your mother died. And here, look.” They peered into a rip in the trunk that the boy called a cave. Small wooden carved figures and a few coins, valueless, lay where hands had carefully placed them.

“These are offerings. This little carved man is you. I made it when you fell ill two winters ago. And the Lord saw it, and healed you.” The farmer touched his creation gently, propped it up and then kissed his fingers.

“So can we take the doll home now? And can we spend that money?”

“No, no,” the farmer laughed. “We leave this here forever, and the Lord, we ask, will keep you safe and healthy forever. The money, boy, also belongs to the earth, God and the tree. I didn’t leave it there. I don’t know who did, but I’ll certainly not take it. No-one will. Who would dare?”

After praying together, with the boy peeping now and then so that he could copy his father’s reverent posture and gestures, they left their tree and headed for a drink from a stream that flowed from a well. The cold water helped ease down a brief meal of bread and cheese.

The food appeared magically, young Tom thought, from his father’s leather hip bag. He threw small torn

pieces to sparrows and thrushes that watched the humans rise and walk to the source of the stream: the Well of Saint Helen. The birds followed only until they realised that their supply of tasty nibbles had ended. The father said as they walked that the well would never run dry. It flowed from deep within Mother Earth, who provided for all living creatures.

Saint Helen's Well was indeed remarkable; not the lifeless and often unpleasant water pulled from the bottom of a deep hole, like the well in the village, but a pool of sparkling, gently bubbling water that rose from an unseen spring. Half of the surface, the boy saw, wore a green blanket of what his father called "duckweed". It did not grow where the pool spilled over a semi-circular sill of laid stones to begin flowing away as the stream from which they had drunk.

"What are the rocks for, Father?" he asked, "and those?" He pointed to stone carved heads that lay, facing the sky, beneath the shallows near the stones.

"I cannot say who placed the stones across the neck of the stream. They've been there since I was your age; maybe longer. The stone faces beneath the water represent the spirits who guard and care for the spring. They are also very, very old."

The boy looked confused. "Who are they guarding against?"

"They hold back Jenny Green Teeth from this end of the pool, so people can come and make offerings without danger. Here, hold out your hand."

He gave his son a single coin, and asked him to copy his actions. Kneeling near the stone sill, he prayed aloud, "Lord of all, and you, guardians of this well, we thank you for life and ask for blessings." He then gently threw his own coin into the water. It sank and disappeared. His son muddled the words but solemnly threw his coin into the

same place. The father beamed and ruffled his sandy hair. “There must be a fortune under there, son. I’m sure of that. But it’s a trifle compared to the gifts we receive in return.”

“Jenny Green Teeth! Oh, oh, she’s the one who kills those who try to steal the water’s money, isn’t she?”

Old Tom nodded, adding that the water spirit would murder anyone who ventured into the water itself. You can drink from the stream, he explained, but you must *never* try to bathe in the pool, no matter how safe or nice it looks. Jenny Green Teeth, that hideous old spirit, will wrap weeds around any fool’s ankles and drag him to a horrible drowning. She is evil. That’s why they must keep clear of areas covered by the duckweed. It reveals Jenny’s presence.

The youngster stepped back from the water’s edge and vowed, in frightened sincerity, that he would never go near Jenny Green Teeth, “that old hag.” Pleased that he had conveyed his valuable lesson, the father took his son’s hand so they could begin the pleasant walk home.

Just then a strange noise, or a ripple in the air, or something he’d never be able to describe, made the farmer turn. It was beneath his hearing and above his imagination, but it came from a willow’s shadow that hung darkly over one part of the well’s edge.

In the shadow, in a blink, he saw her; then he didn’t. She was gone, as was the sound. Yet the image hung in his mind: of a beautiful young woman with long hair bathing waist deep, pouring water from cupped hands over her face. Oh Lord, he thought, I’ve had far too much sun, or far too little food. He said nothing for a while to his small companion, who had obviously heard and seen nothing, judging by his happy chatter. The boy wanted to show what he had learned earlier, and pointed and named plants and trees, often correctly.

For several weeks the farmer's daily toil exhausted both mind and body, and he seldom thought of the shadow woman beneath the willow. She was probably a woman from one of the villages on the other side of the forest. He'd never visited those villages, or ventured that far from home in any direction, so he allowed himself nothing more than occasional curiosity about the woman's identity.

On the fourth Sabbath, however, he found himself alone in his hut. His son was away for the day with his cousins. Loneliness, sadness at his inability to remember his dead wife's face, and the morning's stifling sermon worked as a team to deny him relaxation.

But he would find peace, and his wife's face, in the forest. He made his usual preparations, both for him and the divine, and then headed away from the noise of dogs and children towards that of jays and chiffchaffs.

His great tree wore many more knotted strips of cloth, and for only the second time in as many years he was not alone as he tied a new piece with a silent prayer. Yet small-talk with his cousin and other relatives wasn't what he sought that day, so he wished them well and wandered deeper into the forest.

Soon finding solitude in an oak grove, he sat in cool shadows and smiled. His beloved oaks looked decidedly tatty, he thought, with most of their spring leaves now shredded and holed by moth caterpillars, chafers and weevils. Only the new, lighter green leaves of mid-summer remained untouched. "Ah, you hardy lammas leaves," Tom called out to those above him, happy that they signalled Lammastide, the traditional feast of late summer's first fruits. He dozed a while, thinking of his dead wife.

She whispered his name, outside both dreams and nightmares, pulling him back from sleep. He lay there, unsure whether winds in treetops had mimicked her voice.

She whispered again. He heard, and followed the voice that came from outside the grove but not from the winds or trees. It was a voice, sounding like his wife's.

By the time he reached Saint Helen's Well he felt hoarse from shouted replies. He sank to his knees to scoop water from the slow flow where pool formed stream, and felt eyes upon him. He turned and looked instinctively at the shade beneath the willow and saw her.

She was not his dark-haired, dark-eyed wife, whose pretty smile had captured him before they were teenagers. Tanned, physical, and strong, she'd been an "outside" girl—and wife—with little interest in the traditional tasks of her sex. This other woman, again bathing in the shallows away from the pondweed, looked as though sunrays had never touched her skin. When she waded from the shadows, Tom saw the whiteness of her throat, shoulders and arms. She reflected light.

She paid him no attention and bathed silently, her face hidden until he shattered the air by nervously calling hello. Looking up from the water's secrets she met his stare with long-lashed eyes of sapphire perfection that strongly dominated a face framed by a long mass of gold. It seemed to Tom that her hair of fine-spun gold thread trapped the sunlight, but maybe this was an effect caused by her pale shining skin.

"I did not mean to frighten you," Tom said, not sure that he had.

"You look far more frightened than I feel, sir." She smiled, and waded closer, until they stood only a few yards apart. He noticed the shape of her breasts and hips beneath her wet green dress. He looked down, afraid of her eyes and of his attraction to a stranger from another village. At nineteen or twenty, he guessed, she had doubtless been someone's wife for several years.

"I've brought sugar for the well," he said, opening his pouch to show her the gift he intended to place in the water. "It's to reward the earth and appease Jenny Green Teeth."

This caused a gentle giggle. "I have never heard of Jenny Green Teeth," she said, and asked who it was.

"What? She's the crone that haunts pools round here; an old hag who drowns the unwary. Surely you must have

heard of her. I've known her name all my life, and my son now knows it. I've never seen her, mind you, but plenty of folk have."

"Ah, your son. I presume he was the cute little boy with you here a month ago." Her smile was unforced and reassuring. "Is he not with you today?"

"No, my lady, I am here by myself."

"As am I," she replied.

This news caused Tom Applewood some concern. It was unlawful to be alone, anywhere, with another man's wife who wasn't close kin. He placed the sugar in the water, watched it dissolve, said a prayer in his mind, and prepared to leave.

"I'm sorry. I must go."

"Already, Tom? You've only been here a minute?" Her use of his name struck him. Had he told her? He couldn't remember. "Might we not talk on a while? I am almost alone in this world, and I so enjoy talking."

Tom nodded and sat, his unease still present. "In any event, these mighty ones will keep us safe from the water spirit," he said, pointing to the fierce carving beneath the water. "They are very old, but full of power, I'm quite sure."

"These? Yes, I imagine they are," the woman said, bending to see them better and stretching a golden-freckled alabaster arm down so she could feel one. Her fingers touched a mighty stone mouth, wide open as if it were shouting curses at its intended opponent. Tom had never seen such casual treatment of divine objects, and marvelled at her courage to touch something so sacred. "You know the pool is rich in gold and silver," she added. "I am surprised that no-one has come to steal the water's treasure."

Tom smiled, aware that she was teasing him. Even

the vilest wretch would not commit such a crime against the divine order.

An hour of relaxed conversation passed, and Tom and Dana, who offered her name without hesitation, discussed their common love of yews, elms, birches and oaks. Dana talked proudly about the willows near her home, and Tom about his sacred oak. They shared stories about the birds they knew: the jays with their raucous calls, the fat thrushes, the little warblers and the abundant chaffinches. Tom was reluctant to draw the conversation onto human topics, afraid that Dana would mention a husband. She didn't, but also kept the topics nature-focused. Tom did mention his wife's death following his son's birth, but retreated quickly when a lump in his throat threatened to shift their gentle dialogue to painful memories. He wiped his brow to disguise any visible emotion.

"If you're hot, Tom, you could bathe your feet in the pool. The water's cool."

She already sat like that; on the bank with her white calves and feet in the water. He pulled off his shoes and sat likewise. A look of inevitable connection passed between them. She tenderly touched his arm, and then reached for his hand. Her touch startled him, but not because of the boldness of the act; her fingers felt like ice, and like claws.

Her grip was inescapable and her strength horrendous. She swung herself back into the pool and dragged a terrified, bewitched Tom with her. By the time they reached the edge of the weed carpet, they were already chest deep. He couldn't swim and pulled to free himself. His feet slipped and he disappeared beneath the surface. Gasping, he surfaced momentarily, or tried to. Weed covered him, preventing his lungs from grabbing air. She pulled him deeper until he struggled somewhere between bottom and surface. His air gave way to water;

his life thoughts to death visions. Eyes bulging and seeing little, the farmer's last murky sight was a hideous face. Jenny embraced him, kissed him, loved him and drowned him.

My Own Grave

A few metres beyond the green iron gates I stood before a new signboard—with only a few rust spots to speak of winter's violence—which proudly proclaimed that the Terrace End Cemetery held 100,000 bodies and was part of Palmerston North's Heritage Trail. A map outlined a walk that should take between one hour and one-and-a-half. I shook my head, and blew air between my lips in disgust. That the graveyard had more residents than the entire living city would ordinarily have made me think "hah, interesting!", but the inclusion of this vast resting place as a stop on a tourist trek repelled me. Maybe the council didn't intend anything tasteless, but in my view the result was the same: clomping walkers out for exercise through a sanctified city of souls.

Supposedly typical of Geminis, I've always had an interest in death and graveyards; not a morbid fascination, but a modest and respectful interest in the ways lives are celebrated and deaths mourned and memorialised.

I roamed in search of inspiration. As a poet, I looked for any visual images that my mind, or muse, could transform into words rich in symbolism or music that I could shape into a poem. After ten minutes strolling in gentle rain that left my glasses looking like the outside of a beer bottle in a supermarket cooler, I found a sight of dazzling magic: a beautiful statue of Mary, Mother of God, lying broken in three pieces.

I pushed the red record button on my tiny dictaphone and spoke:

"Mary's discretely covered legs

stand next to her separated torso, of marble,
and a pretty, sympathetic head
that rolled a pace away.
Baby Christ never woke within her cradling arms.
He smiles asleep.
O Mother, blessed be, you kept him safe."

I don't always retain my words as I originally dictate them, but tend to play around with them once I place them on my computer screen. Somehow they look different when typed.

Pleased and moved by this tragic sight—I didn't dare try to reassemble the Mother of God—I continued my quiet, reverent search for some kind of truth that I could put in words. Occasional soldiers' graves made me stop and read the inscriptions, as did those of children, which grieved me even though the names were unknown. I approached a newly laid concrete grave with a bone-white headstone and fresh yellow roses in a clean jar, and wondered who had recently died. Only those who owned plots could be buried here; no "new" deaths could be accommodated in this decaying graveyard. Maybe, I thought, a husband or wife has been buried alongside a long-dead spouse.

The name on the gravestone, with black paint shining in the carved letters, caused a flood of blood to my cheeks and a spasm of blinking. It was *my* name; including my middle name, all spelled the same. Even more distressingly, this person's year of birth matched mine: 1967.

Thank God, I thought, at least the date of death proved the grave was someone else's; he died a full month ago and I was still very much alive.

I walked back to the car as quickly as I could, crunching over cracked concrete and weedy shingle paths, so that I could take my camera from the glove-box and photograph this freaky grave. No-one would believe

me otherwise. *I* wouldn't believe it, if a friend told me this story.

My car should have sat where I'd left it: on Napier Road near the cemetery's gates.

It wasn't there. Neither was a dry patch on the rain-wet road to indicate that a car had recently parked there. Man, this was all too much. I pulled out my cellphone and dialled my home number.

Ah, thank God. My wife Brenny answered. "Hey, hun, you'll never guess what's happened. Someone's bloody nicked my car."

"Hello … Hello?" Brenny couldn't hear me. I spoke louder, and then much louder, but all I got before the phone clicked off was another "Hello?"

With my mind struggling against dizzying chaos I began walking the half mile to the nearest taxi stand. For some reason my head ached frightfully behind my left ear. A bruise too sensitive to touch swelled and throbbed. Maybe I had noticed it earlier, maybe not. Was it there when I looked at Mary's shattered life? I couldn't remember, but couldn't rule it in or out. All I knew what that my head hurt; badly.

It soon dawned on me that I wasn't able to walk far. I sat with my feet in the gutter and my back against a lamppost, puffing and wincing. The pain was growing steadily worse and sapped all strength and eroded the coherence of my thought. All I could think of—and even that hurt—was calling Brenny again. She'd come and get me. I searched for my cellphone, my heart racing after my frantic search failed to find it. Argh. It must be back by the graveyard gates, where I'd last tried to use it.

I stumbled like a drunk back along Napier Road, scouring the grass and footpath for a denim blue cellphone. It wasn't anywhere along the road or near the gates. I searched, although the mounting pain in my head

and now in my jaw prevented me stooping. Exhausted, I sat on a red tubular park bench with a green seat. Gosh, a brand new bench, I thought. I sat dazed, unsure what to do next or where to go.

Did I drift off for a while? I couldn't tell. Nor could I stretch my hand to feel my head. Any exertion sent waves of agony through my body.

I slumped and slipped away into a desert world of infinite sand-dunes, all rippled with small endless waves blown by a wind I couldn't feel. The temperature was suffocating. Breathing the air of fifty-degree heat felt like staring from an inch into the mouth of a hairdryer on full. Then Lawrence of Arabia peered down at me and smiled. No, it was Peter O'Toole, the actor who played him. Peter O'Toole speaking to me?

What was he saying? What was I saying to him?

I think I told him I worked for Telecom, or the Egyptian Department of Antiquities, or a dog shelter, or something. Where did I live? I asked him. He shrugged, wrapped his headdress around his face to protect himself from the approaching sandstorm, and departed.

Thank goodness Charlton Heston stayed. Or was it Long John Silver, or Michael J. Fox?

"Mike, is that you?" I whispered.

He grinned that adorable smile and told me to relax. I tried to reach for him, maybe to touch his boyish cheek, but instead I felt the tears flowing from my mother's old but still blue eyes.

"Mum, what are you doing in Palmerston North?"

She didn't answer but hushed me and wiped my head with a cool wet flannel. She pulled the blankets up around me to keep me warm.

Blankets? What blankets? I was in a cemetery, for goodness sake, with Lawrence of Arabia and the youthful

Deputy Mayor of New York. I wasn't at home. I closed my eyes and moaned with the realisation that something very wrong and weird was happening.

Darkness engulfed me, but not an empty darkness. Whispers and laughter and tears kept me from sleep. They swirled too fast and sometimes too loud, sometimes too quiet, for me to gain comprehension. Then, suddenly, a new darkness fell like a stage curtain, but it brought a sweet silence that stole my consciousness.

"Aaaarrrgghh!" An agony under my thumbnail—the tip of a pen, I later learned—snapped me back to consciousness. I lay in an awkward posture, with one arm bending the way it shouldn't, next to the three pieces of beautiful Mary.

I tried to ask the old man who leaned over me what had happened to Lawrence of Arabia, but he seemed too intent on pushing his jacket under my head to go looking for a mad Englishman dressed like a Bedouin.

"It's okay, son," the old man soothed, "the ambulance is on its way. I saw you fall from my kitchen window. I was doing the dishes when you slipped and hit your head."

This made no sense. How could I have fallen out of his kitchen window? I didn't know who he was or where he lived. Then I understood: he meant that, from his window, he watched me trip over in the cemetery. Had I whacked my head? It sure did hurt, like mad!

"My cellphone, I can't find my cellphone." I mumbled through my agonising jaw that I had tried to ring my wife Brenny from near the gates to get her to pick me up. Could he have a look for it, please?

The old man shook his head softly and quietly told me that I had not moved since I'd fallen. I certainly hadn't wandered down the road as I claimed.

But what about my car, I asked.

He pointed. “Is it a red Honda or something like that parked near the gates?” When I affirmed the car’s identity he told me that it sat there safe-and-sound.

I didn’t bother asking if he would look at the gravestone with my name. Obviously it wasn’t there.

Jack, as the old man introduced himself as, waited with his wife until the ambulance arrived. The driver and attendant had to park it near the gate and carry a stretcher and medical kit to where I still lay near Mary’s smiling head. The ambulance couldn’t fit between the narrow rows of green lichen-covered concrete graves.

I held out an appreciative hand to Jack and thanked him. He smiled with yellow teeth the most perfect smile I’d ever seen. Then I rode away on a stretcher like a wounded soldier from the trenches.

The strangest thing is that, as we wove our way along the shingle paths past rows of graves I swore I caught a glimpse of an elegant white headstone, shaped like one of Moses’ tablets, half-obscured by a bunch of fresh yellow roses. Hadn’t I seen that grave before?

The Black Danube

Marica Beljak read to her parents an article from *Vjesnik*, Croatia's daily newspaper. "Damn it," she said angrily, her blue eyes filling with tears. "It is exactly as Pavle warned. Even now, three years after the NATO alliance attacked Serbia, the Danube is still polluted with oil and chemicals. They knew that would happen, Dad, when they hit those refineries. They knew they would damned well destroy that river, even though it flows past Serbia and through several other countries. They're all suffering. Their main waterway is poisoned, its fish are dead, its birds are dead. And those that aren't are full of toxic chemicals."

What could the two older Croatians say? Their daughter was right. The Americans and their allies had severely polluted the majestic Danube. It was no longer blue, as it was in Strauss's wondrous waltz, but black with oil. The Milosevic regime deserved rough treatment by NATO, they agreed, but the Danube wasn't Serbia's river. It was all Europe's.

Marica wept; not for the river, but for her fiancé, Pavle Zorich. The newspaper story brought back the horror of that day—three years earlier, in June 1999—when her heartache began.

On that accursed morning she had been pegging her father's shirts on the line when a car pulled up beside the house. Red crosses painted on the car doors revealed the identity of the two men who walked up the path, but not their purpose.

Red Cross workers were a daily sight around Sisak,

Marica's hometown in Croatia, and had been since war in the former Yugoslavia erupted at the beginning of the decade. Yet Marica's racing thoughts were full of dread: had these men come to tell her about Pavle?

"Are you Mrs Beljak?" one of the Dutchmen asked in heavily accented, adequate Serbo-Croatian. Marica's mother nodded. She engaged them in a quiet conversation, signed a form on a clipboard, and took a small package they had brought.

As they walked away to their car, the thin, apron-girthed mother beckoned Marica, who hadn't moved from the clothsline. Her daughter, with wide eyes staring and a hand over her mouth, did not come. She could not. Through tears their eyes met, followed a few seconds later by hugging arms after Mrs Beljak rushed to hold her only surviving child.

"No, mum," Marica sobbed quietly, "It can't be. Tell me Pavle's alive."

"Be strong, sweetheart. I don't know. Neither do the Red Cross. They found letters addressed to you in the pocket of a body at the Novi Sad oil refinery where Pavle worked. American missiles blew it up and killed many workers. Not all bodies could be identified, and on one of them—they think it was Pavle—they found these." She gave her daughter four tatty envelopes. Marica recognised the handwriting on those grim treasures: her own and Pavle's. "The Red Cross didn't open them, but brought them here because they have your name on them."

"Oh Mother of God." Marica, a devout Catholic, crossed herself. "Mum, I can't open them. I can't. What if he is dead? I can't live without him. You know I can't." They wept together, rocking each other in a tight, teary cheek to cheek embrace.

Alone in her bedroom, surrounded by photographs of

Pavle, her parents, and her dead brother (slain in a battle against Bosnian Muslim militias early in the war), Marica opened the first envelope after a dinner she didn't eat. Pavle's voice spoke the words in her mind, breaking her heart:

"My dearest love," his soft, resonant voice began at the top of a three-month old, unsent letter, dated 18 March 1999, "We are still working and the refinery is running at full capacity. But I'm really worried by the American Secretary of State's threats to Milosevic. You know as well as I do that her threats won't work on that bastard. In fact, he'll probably be delighted with the situation, especially as any foreign attack will distract attention away from our dreadful domestic problems."

Marica cringed at Milosevic's name, hating him, as did all Croats and most of Milosevic's own Serbian people, including Pavle. She forced her eyes to continue, anticipating what Pavle would write next.

"You know what'll happen if Milosevic is stubborn and won't seek some kind of compromise. Madelaine Albright will convince Clinton that a short, sharp bombing raid will force him to accept her demands. War will start, but it won't be short. Marica, I hate Milosevic and his Dedinje mafia, and I hate what they have done to our nation, but I can't see him giving up quickly. He's a tyrant and a bully, but not a coward."

Pavle's letter continued: "Why can't NATO see that its demands are grossly unfair and won't be satisfied? No Serb, even that creep Milosevic, will allow Kosovo-Metohija to go to the Albanians. Kosovo's our Jerusalem, as you know, and our cultural treasure. So war will start when we don't surrender the province, and the Americans and their cronies will bomb us. And that means that they'll bomb Novi Sad, especially my refinery, and probably the refinery at Pancevo. Darling, they'll bomb my workplace. I'll be okay, don't worry, but I can't tell you what will

happen here. I have no money, I am forbidden from leaving my job (even if I wanted to) and I have no good work prospects elsewhere. The other night while walking home I even heard an owl screech three times. We used to laugh when mum talked of such omens of death, but now I'm really scared. What if they destroy my refinery?"

Pavle's concerns weren't only for himself. He added—prophetically, Marica thought—that the destruction of the Novi Sad refinery would undoubtedly spill millions of litres of oil and petroleum, as well as thousands of litres of mercury and other poisonous chemicals, into the Danube River. It would be a greater environmental crime than Saddam Hussein's ignition of Kuwaiti oil wells. "We have no way of stopping it, if they do bomb," Pavle wrote, "and I'm terrified. But know this, Marica; I'll do my best to keep safe so we can see each other soon in Hungary. I love you passionately, and always have. Pavle."

The mentions of love and Hungary momentarily eased Marica's distress. During her eight-year separation from Pavle, following his expulsion from the Sisak refinery in 1991, along with all other Serb workers, they had met just across the Hungarian border once or twice each year for a day together.

Oh God, she thought, they're my happiest memories: walking with Pavle in the gold grasses of the Hungarian countryside, planning our wedding and our eventual emigration to Australia or New Zealand. Were all those plans now dead? Was Pavle dead? If he was, she thought, it would kill her. Too much had happened, and too much time, effort and intense love was involved, for their plans to come to nothing.

With trembling hands she opened her own two letters to Pavle, one dated four months earlier and the other three years earlier. She read the old one first and remembered writing and sending it as if only three weeks had passed, not three years. She had sent scores of

letters to Pavle during the years of their separation. Yet the survival of any was the best evidence, she concluded, that their unidentified carrier, killed in the explosions, was indeed her beloved Pavle. Who else would have them? Who else would keep them in his jacket pocket?

She read her own words, which brought floods of memories and fresh trickles of tears. She thought of the first time she and Pavle met, introduced by mutual friends who worked with him in the Sisak refinery, back in November 1989. Storm clouds were already black on the political horizon, but Marica and Pavle gave them little thought. They met under lime trees. Sitting outside a tree-shadowed café in central Sisak they spoke and immediately hit it off.

They even looked similar, friends said, both having deep blue eyes, light brown hair and small statures. He was mature for 25, but then he'd already been working at the Sisak refinery for a year since completing his engineering degree in Zagreb. He was also handsome, she remembered, although her mother never thought so.

Her parents had liked him, despite the fact that he belonged to Croatia's Serb minority and was Eastern Orthodox, not Roman Catholic like them and most other Croats. Her parents' attitude towards Pavle had always surprised her, but then Pavle's attitude towards her—and all Croats, for that matter—surprised them. Several of Pavle's great-uncles and aunties had died at the hands of the Croatian Nazi-supported Ustashe in a horrific massacre in nearby Glina during World War II. That was the worst period for Serbs, whose fears and anger still ran deep. Yet Pavle showed no bitterness, and his love for Marica, which blossomed in the months following their happy café meeting, had won him the respect of her parents. His own parents weren't as tolerant, but he learned to block out the complaints that occurred too often in their letters from Belgrade. They had suffered expulsion

too, so he at least understood their pain. Love, however, was more important than ethnic differences or historical hatreds.

That's precisely the notion that had motivated Marica's father to smuggle Pavle across the Sava River to the self-proclaimed independent Serbian Krajina region, and to pay for his secret transportation across Bosnia to safety in Serbia, four months after war broke out in June 1991. Pavle's safety had cost Mr Beljak three thousand Deutschmarks, a great deal back in those awful, violent days, but he had never once regretted spending the money. He loved his daughter and, wanting her to be happy, worried about his future son-in-law, Orthodox Serb though he was.

Marica turned her attention to the newer letter, wiping away tears and reflecting on one comment she'd written to Pavle: "Mum and Dad send their love and best wishes, and can't wait any longer for the wedding. Dad says the neighbours will find out about our engagement, so he wants us to hurry up. I agree. Save harder, will you!"

How cheeky she had been. Even as a qualified engineer, Pavle made a pittance, and almost all of it went each week on his rent, cigarettes and meals in the refinery cafeteria. She never liked him smoking, but he couldn't stop. He did try, several times, but stress and good-natured teasing by friends always seemed to conquer his resolve.

She placed the letter against her nose and breathed in the faint smell of his cigarettes, remembering how it clung to his clothes and how she always carried chewing gum to disguise his smoky taste.

She carefully opened the last letter, one that Pavle had apparently written on 2 May 1999, five weeks into NATO's air war. She shrieked, and her parents ran to see what had happened. They found her sitting on the floor with her knees pulled up to her chest and her head

sunken upon them. “Read it, Dad. I can’t. Oh Mother of God.”

Her distraught mother hugged her as the retired dentist picked it up and read the sentence that had caused such anguish: “Dearest Marica, if you read this letter you will know with certainty that I am dead.”

The father choked, crossed himself, but continued: “The Americans have been bombing Novi Sad city again and have destroyed our water supplies and cut off our electricity. They even wrecked the Danube bridges. There was no reason for doing that. Now those destroyed bridges lie across the river like dreadful steel skeletons, cutting off all nations’ river transport for years to come, because of pure evil. They have also bombed my refinery on several occasions, but so far they have done less damage than we expected. We are working on makeshift repairs, and hope we will be able to prevent major spillages.”

Pavle's letter became more personal: "I know the Americans will return to finish off what they have started. I am terrified, but I must remain here in case a major raid occurs and we lose oil and chemicals. We must save the river, and the country, from an environmental catastrophe. So I have made this choice, Marica: to stay and see what I can do. Many others are staying, but, despite the laws, some of the workers in my section have left for the safety of the countryside. I am giving this letter to my flatmate, Jovan Brankovic (you have photos of Jovan, remember), who will only work today and tomorrow and then leave for Belgrade. I have asked Jovan to post it to you, and a few others I have written lately but not been able to send, if something should happen to me (God forbid). Jovan will be at his brother's house and I'll phone him every day. If he does not hear from me for four days straight he is to post the letters to you. If there's still no postal service he is to give the letters to the Red Cross. In any event, sweetheart, if you ever get this letter you'll know I'm dead. You'll also know that I chose to stay, aware of the risks, and that I love you more than life itself. You mean the world to me; this world, and the next. I'll see you there one day. Your loving Pavle."

Marica looked broken and dumbfounded. She was. So were her mother and father, who re-read Pavle's words. Pavle was going to give this letter to Jovan Brankovic, his flatmate. Had he actually done so? Could the body that carried it be the flatmate's, and not Pavle's? Could Pavle still be alive? Could he be hurt or displaced and not able to make contact? Possibilities whirled in their minds with confusing, chaotic speed.

No answers came during the three years since that day on which the Red Cross delivered the letters. Time passed with painful slowness. Every day dragged. Marica died again and again as she re-read the letters, devoured the newspapers, scoured Red Cross displaced persons lists, and prayed for Pavle to come to her. He did, in

dreams and nightmares, but not with arms that could hold her and lips that could kiss. Marica promised, nonetheless, that she would never abandon hope that her fiancé might still be alive.

She kept her promise—until the awful evening when she noticed that the Danube River article that she'd read to her parents only hours earlier was written by Jovan Brankovic.

A Death in the Family

Daniel Hodgson's sledgehammer sprayed brick and mortar fragments as he pounded that mighty weapon into the wall he was viciously demolishing. With four more great thumps a half hour's work ended; a head-sized hole in the wall stared back at him, blackness hiding whatever lay behind. Hodgson pulled a small plastic torch from his dust covered tool box and switched it on. It produced a second of faint yellow light that disappeared into nothing. "Damn," he said aloud, annoyed at his failure to check the batteries.

He had intended to cease work for the day once he had knocked a hole in the wall and peered in to see why the owners of this decaying two-story farm homestead near Wanganui had once bricked off the end of the gigantic master bedroom.

That someone had done so was obvious; at least to a builder like Hodgson. The rest of the house, including this junk-filled bedroom, had outer walls of small red bricks, made, like most bricks of the 1890s used throughout the area, at the local brickworks. This one wall, however, was not original. Bigger and coarser bricks formed a wall that, Hodgson calculated after making rough measurements of all the house's dimensions, hid a space at least ten feet deep.

With no torchlight available, he now had the choice of bashing a bigger hole, one that would allow more light to penetrate the musty blackness, or coming back in the morning with new batteries in his torch. Impatient, he chose to break a larger hole that day.

Ten minutes later Hodgson put down his crowbar, with which he'd broken jagged mortar from the edge of the enlarged hole. He leaned in. The hole now let in more light, but still not enough for the panting builder—who had been contracted to restore the old house to its former glory—to see the back wall or far to the left and right. All he saw were floorboards covered in broken bricks fading into the blackness.

Frustrated, he squeezed in through the hole, slipped on the brick rubble, and sprawled on his stomach in the darkness which swamped him. Clambering to his feet he walked forward, hands outstretched, feeling for the back wall. Within three or four steps he felt its cold bricks. Well, he thought, at least the space is empty. He turned, looked through the smashed hole into the light of the empty bedroom, then turned back into the darkness and walked towards the side wall he anticipated feeling any second.

Edging forward one step at a time, his left steel-cap boot kicked something solid. He stopped and groped blindly to touch whatever blocked his way. It couldn't be the wall, which would still be another eight or nine feet ahead. He ran his hands up and down the wardrobe, as he concluded it was, and fumbled for a door. It swung open in the inkiness of the walled-off space, and he felt inside. It contained nothing but a layer of dust or cobwebs that felt dry and old on his fingers. He walked around the wardrobe, and past a chair he almost tripped over, before reaching the wall.

Ah-ha, he thought, this side's empty; now for the other side. He fumbled back past the furniture and the illumination cast through the hole by the bedroom light, and inched toward the other wall, expecting by now to find more furniture but no explanation as to why someone had bricked off the end of the master bedroom, creating a smaller room with no door or window. He found something else.

Hodgson's reaching fingertips momentarily touched something smooth in the pitch blackness. He recoiled and shuddered, sucking air through his nostrils in uncontrolled spasms. Someone's soft chin and warm closed lips had set off the spontaneous horror, which consumed him within the space of a panicked heartbeat. He turned to escape towards the light cascading through the hole he'd made, but slipped on the wooden floor's dust blanket and ended up face downwards.

Crawling forward like an infant, he almost reached the mists of light when a woman's hushed voice spoke his name in the darkness.

"Daniel," she said, "Wait. Don't be scared. I didn't mean to frighten you. Here." A hand on his shoulder and another on his elbow helped him to rise. He stood there, in a space as black as the sea's great depths, apparently face to face with a softly breathing person who should not, could not, be there.

"Who … who the hell are you?" he asked in a gulping voice. He actually still felt like fleeing and was inching, hopefully undetected, back towards the refuge of the two-foot-round hole in the wall.

"Here, I'll turn on the light," his unknown companion said in voice of reassurance. A faint radiance appeared from nowhere in particular. He hadn't heard a switch, and couldn't see a torch or light bulb, so he couldn't identify the source of dim light that rose to no more than a strange and diffuse illumination of the entire walled-off space. But he could see her.

Around her long black hair shone a luminescence like a renaissance painted halo, reaching out for about a foot in a golden blue arc. It looked like a candle flame, although only one tenth its strength. Her eyes flickered in this unique atmosphere, her shining irises as black as her bottomless pupils. Black and deep, these eyes looked at him kindly from beneath equally dark, gently arching

brows. She was beautiful, and looked exactly as his memory had seen her throughout the twenty years since her death.

“Mum,” he said. “My God, Mum. … How?”

“Son, it’s your turn. I’ve come to take you with me. Please don’t be scared. I was just as scared when it happened to me. But look, I’m happy and young again, and the cancer that ravaged my body and took a breast has been destroyed. I’m perfectly well. Perfect, in fact.”

The words “your turn” sent a wave of terror through Hodgson’s mind. He knew what they meant.

“So I’m dead? Is that it, mum? Don’t tell me I’m dead and you’ve come to take me to heaven or something.”

“It’s okay, Daniel. Here, take my hand.” Her voice echoed through his mind with strangely comfortable familiarity, even though he hadn’t heard it since he last saw her a month before his ninth birthday, but talk of his death was too much. He stepped back again. Seeing this, his mother walked forward, not disturbing any of the dust that covered the floor.

“Mum, this is too much; way too much. This is like a horror movie.”

“But it’s me, son, and you know I’m not going to hurt you. And you can see I’m well again. Come, don’t be scared. Take my hand.”

Daniel Hodgson’s crowding memories shattered any attempt at clear thought. He couldn’t think straight, and struggled to do so. He loved his mother, and her memory. She had been wonderfully kind and cuddly, he remembered, until death in the form of that spreading, wasting disease destroyed her body and all their lives. It moved quickly, killing her within six months of diagnosis, and did so with a remorseless cruelty that had haunted him for two decades. On her deathbed she looked as if

she'd already left her body for the afterlife. What lay there, emaciated, was no longer her, but an empty shell. How, then, could this spectre, or spirit, now be so whole and healthy? Was it her, a trick, a curse?

His mother walked into his arms and embraced him so gently and naturally that his fears dissolved like an aspirin in warm water. "Oh God, mum, how did I die? When? Where are we going?"

"Hey, hey, one question at a time. Come. See there." She led him by the hand back to the hole in the bricks. There, to Hodgson's surprise, lay his body. With hair and overalls covered in dust it stretched face down, crumpled as if it—he—had been hit in the gut by a warrior's punch. His sledgehammer lay nearby.

A heart attack, he thought. Oh man! All those years of gym workouts, pushing weights while I told myself "no pain, no gain," and then I go and drop dead of a heart attack while bashing down a brick wall.

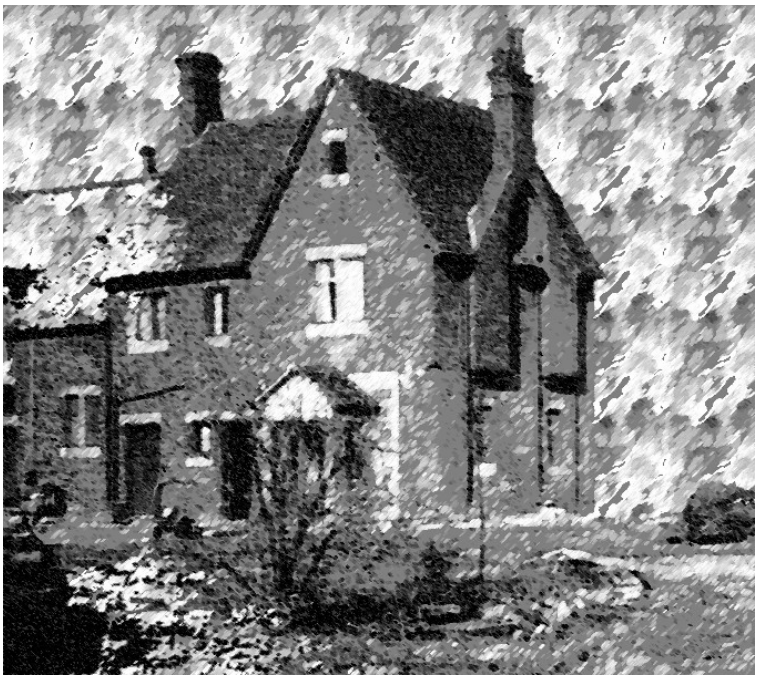
The wall! The wall! He removed his eyes from his body. "Mum, why did they make this space here? What's hidden here? Money? A body? I have to know."

"Nothing's hidden here, son. You really have to forget all that horror movie stuff. A long time ago the owner of the house simply wanted to reduce the master bedroom's size so he could heat it far more easily during winter. So he had a third of the huge room's size bricked off. I believe he was ill for many years and seldom moved about the house. So he wanted at least this room warm."

"Couldn't he have used one of the smaller rooms? That would have made more sense."

"I guess so," his mother said. "But the children or relatives, or maybe even some of the farm workers, probably used all the other rooms and he or they didn't want to swap. I just don't know. Anyway, don't worry about this old house. Your work here is done, and it's time

to go."



Daniel Hodgson looked back at his curled up body, then walked away from the light that now hurt his eyes, back into the darkness of that small bricked-up space. "Okay," he said. I'm ready, mum." He held out a hand, into which she placed her own. He wrapped his fingers around hers and squeezed them with a contented sigh. "Let's go."

"Haaaaaahhhhh!" a hideous deep and clearly male voice snarled. The voice struck Hodgson from behind, snaking all over him like chilling tentacles. It came from the darkness into which he'd first walked, from the wardrobe or nearby.

Hodgson jumped towards his mother, but empty

space and a rushing swirl of whispers greeted him. She was gone. He felt for her, fingers clutching into the blackness, calling her. She gave no answer. He stumbled towards the light, but slipped again and stepped past it. Oh God, damn this darkness, his mind cried out. His lips said nothing.

Hodgson was alone with someone, but not his mother. The voice that laughed and hissed his name with frightening closeness was no less familiar.

"Dad," he said. "I know it's you. What do you want? And where's mum?" His voice had no warmth, only a cold distress at his father's presence.

"She's taken off, boy, like she always did." Hodgson's father revealed himself with radiance like his mother's, only not a gentle flame of blue. William radiated a dull greenish light that matched his bulging, greedy eyes. "Come, boy! Now!" he barked liked a sergeant-major. "We have a journey to make."

Daniel Hodgson backed away from his shadowy father, who slid closer with no footsteps across dust which fled before him as if blown by an evil wind. His father's dirty, gnarled hands clutched his overalls and tugged. There could be no struggle now. There had never been a struggle when Daniel's father lived—and beat him in violent drunken bursts of anger brought on by feelings of ferocious failure. He had been dead for twelve years, killed, in one of life's perverse ironies, by a drunk driver.

Suddenly the darkness split asunder with a loud rip like a skirt's hem caught on a rosebush. Daniel and William Hodgson stood in the brilliant light that flooded the enclosed room from every direction, leaving no shadow alive. Before them, they realised when their burning eyes gradually adjusted, stood Daniel's mother and her own father, the boy's grandfather. This clean-shaven giant of a man, who had died at about the same time as cancer took Mrs Hodgson, stepped forwards towards the cringing

shape of his son-in-law. “You’ll not take my grandson, you monster. Your abuse of the lad ended with your death. He’ll suffer no more. Go from here. Now! Go!”

“I have a claim on the boy. He’s my flesh and blood. I demand to take him. He’s mine.”

The grandfather laughed, although not with amusement. “Flesh and blood? Even if this could have once formed the basis of any claim, it cannot now. Neither you nor Daniel is flesh and blood. I am losing patience. You will go back to your accursed dwelling. With the authority of the Most High, I order you to go. Go back to the dark recesses of the earth and come here no more. Go!” And with this last command the grandfather threw out an angry gesture of dismissal.

It worked. Daniel’s father seemed to shrink and the light he wore faded almost to invisibility. It hung faintly about him for a few seconds, and then disappeared altogether. The beastly figure crawled, like a frog it seemed, away towards the wardrobe. He never made it. The floor swallowed him whole, and then closed with a snap like an orca’s jaws around a tuna.

“I could not let him take you, sweetheart,” his mother said, soothing Daniel with a gentle rub of a hand on his back. “So I rushed to fetch Granddad, who always regretted not knowing what that snake had done to you. If he had known he would have stopped it. Well, now he has.”

Daniel wept and embraced his mother and grandfather, and prepared to depart. “Before we go, mum,” he said, “I have to know about this house. What’s the mystery of this room, really?”

“There’s no mystery,” the old man softly interrupted. “It is as your mother explained. The wall was built to reduce the difficulty and cost of heating.”

“So why did all this happen here, then?”

“No reason. It would have happened wherever you died.”

Ah yes, Death, Daniel remembered, looking back at his body on the floor. A heart attack at 28; who would have thought?

They held hands and left the house.

Blood in the Water

Leaning back on some towels and wet-weather gear, I sat in the Parkercraft which gently rose and flattened as peaceful swells stretching for ever passed beneath. Only twelve feet long with a seaboard maybe a foot above the water, this aluminium dinghy should have given me the creeps. I couldn't swim the width of my school pool, and Shark's Tooth, that white triangle of soft rock jutting up at the very southeast tip of the Kaikoura Peninsula, looked awfully tiny. It was half a mile away, maybe more. Yet I wasn't really scared. The sun heated me and no breeze cooled me. The ocean seemed content to lie quietly and sooth me with gentle motion and slurping laps at the boat. And I wore a life-jacket. Bulky, red and strapped tight, it made me feel secure.

Dad and my brother were beneath me somewhere, diving with scuba tanks in search of fish to spear and crayfish to grab. I never joined them in the ocean's murk. Just the idea of being underneath the surface of water (with no smooth concrete sides or a ladder in the deep end) made me shudder. No, diving was certainly not for me. Good on them, though. I admired their courage from the safety of the dinghy that kept me dry and safe. Even when I analysed the situation—after all, a half-inch of shining aluminium was not a rock-solid platform—I didn't get overly scared.

I read a book and day-dreamed of the Vikings that filled the pages. Henry Treece was my favourite author, and I'd been reading and re-reading his books since I was nine or ten. Now, three years on, I had become extremely familiar with the characters and their journeys. That didn't

ruin my pleasure. It added to it. I felt like I had a second family; cousins who didn't go to school or work, but roamed the British Isles in search of riches and glory. Harald Sigurdson was my favourite, and boy did I want to have his adventures. I even pulled on my sister's long sheepskin Ugg Boots and tied my hockey boot laces around them in a criss-cross fashion so I looked like Harald the young Viking. I don't think my sister ever knew; at least she never mentioned it.

Anyway, Harald Sigurdson wasn't afraid of the sea, and, even though his longship with its dragon-prow was far more seaworthy than our tiny aluminium dinghy, I wouldn't be frightened either. Vikings don't fear the sea. They embrace its danger. So there I sat, a lousy swimmer day-dreaming in a bobbing dinghy half a mile from shore.

I moved to the back of the boat next to the little motor, an old-fashioned thing called a Seagull, so that I could slouch back further and feel the water run across my hand and wrist, cold and untamed as it moved past me in gentle rolls to the shore. I pulled my sunglasses over my eyes to block the scorching sun and rubbed sunscreen on my nose. I picked up my book again with my dry hand. Ah, reading *Viking's Dawn* during a hot morning on a glimmering sea was paradise.

Paradise seemed endless as Harald Sigurdson and I won sword-fights and stole treasure. Then, sometime during a frenetic bareback horse-ride across England, paradise vanished with a dull but definite bump beneath my boat, followed by a savage tug on my wrist I was still dragging in the ocean. It didn't hurt, just pulled me with an almighty yank that almost spilled me overboard. I threw myself down in the dead-centre of our tiny craft, as far from the sides as its dimensions allowed.

I was wet; fish blood covered the bottom, bright and sticky like sauce. But I hadn't yet caught any fish. I hadn't even baited a line. My missing hand continued to pulse

the blood and I realised with body-shaking fright that the blood was mine and that it spewed from a cleanly sawn wrist. I squeezed it tight with my other wrist and felt the warmth of my life-force and the rigid stem of a bone.

Oh God, I thought with shuddering panic, I've lost my hand. I looked overboard, but couldn't see it—or anything. Neither a hand, nor any blood, nor my brother or father floated nearby.

My brother and father. Urggh. They were out there, down there, somewhere; with a shark or killer whale? I tried to call, but had no strength and no voice. Must tie up this wrist. Must tie up this wrist. No other thought spoke in my mind. I hunted for a rope, knowing we had no first-aid kit. We had sticking-plasters in the tackle box, but they'd be no use. Some thick green string on a roll—gardening twine—would have to do. Dad used it to make temporary repairs to cray-pots. It was hairy and difficult to wind with one hand, but I overcame the awkwardness of using my right hand (I'm left-handed) to tie a tourniquet three inches up from the stump. I wrapped the messy end in my cotton shirt and somehow, by good fortune, I slowed the blood to a trickle.

I still felt little pain, at least in my arm. My heart cried out in a spasm of agony for the fate of my brother and father. My voice eventually copied it, weakly at first then with more gusto. "Dwayne! … Dad! … Dwayne! … Dad!" The vast sea gently swallowed my plaintive cries without any sympathy for our plight. What could I do? I didn't know where they were, or how deep they were. I didn't know when they'd surface next. I didn't know if they were already torn apart by the creature's sharp razors that had severed my wrist as cleanly as a surgeon's scalpel.

Then an idea burst into my mind. The Seagull motor. If I could start that pathetic outboard the noise would shatter any undersea peace and bring my brother and father to the surface to see what was happening.

The pain of starting that darned engine was horrific, and caused me to swoon two or three times. It had a pull-cord like a lawnmower, but one much harder to pull, especially for a boy trying to do so with his weakest hand. After four great tugs, the motor finally spluttered and, with my thumb anxiously depressing the choke that looked like a gear-lever on an old man's bicycle, it beat a steady cadence beneath the surface.

Dripping only a small amount of blood, and making sure none spilled overboard, I scanned the sea in every direction for my family. I prayed as hard as I could, even though I knew no proper prayers. I remembered bits of The Lord's Payer, and repeated them for a lifetime: "Our Father, hallowed be Thy name, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven … Our Father, hallowed be Thy name, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." I even cried out promises I knew I couldn't keep despite any best efforts: "Oh dear God, if you save them I'll never ever sin again; *ever!* I promise."

God must have a kind heart, or a sense of humour, or a purpose for me, or something. I heard a faint splash and saw my brother's mask-encased face staring my way. He waved. I waved back, my stump hurting when held aloft. He can't have noticed, because he showed no distress. He put his head down and slowly kicked his way over to the boat. Even before he reached halfway I heard a similar noise and saw Dad's bobbing head. He also held up a hand, and then began to swim over.

Then I saw it, circling behind them, its great grey fin cutting through the water with no splash and its tail leaving no wake. I cried out for Dwayne and Dad to swim faster. Swim! Swim! The word "Shark!" reached my brother's hearing when he was about ten feet from our tiny boat. He stopped! I couldn't believe it; he stopped! He looked everywhere for the predator but saw nothing. He swam again, reaching the boat after a few frantic

seconds. He pulled himself up with adrenalin-charged arms.

"Where's the shark? Where is it?" Dwayne asked with gushing emotion between exhausted puffs. I pointed madly.

"It was behind Dad, Dwayne. Oh God, where is Dad?" Thankfully, our father's silver aqualung was making steady progress towards us, with Dad kicking furiously to escape the danger he perceived from our angst. He reached the boat just as that shark glided in for its ravenous delight. But he made it, hauling himself up onto the boat in a series of great exertions, aided by Dwayne.

My joy was indescribable and masked most of the pain in my wrist that now began to stab at me. They were safe—alive—and I could now trust them to get me back to shore and the Kaikoura hospital. I collapsed, and lay panting and weeping, salty tears flowing without any attempt to stop them. The tears plinked in the bloody water in the boat bottom. I watched them mix with the blood. Yet the blood was intensifying, not diluting. How could this be?

I struggled to sit up and check my wrist. The shirt bound around the stump was thick with black drying blood, and the tourniquet still squeezed the flesh with a grip that caused slight pain. No blood flowed from the wound. So where was the blood coming from? I sped my eyes over my brother, who was pulling off his wetsuit and showed no wounds, and then over my father's rubber-encased legs. He was pulling off a flipper and had already stripped his wetsuit top from his body.

But his other leg had no flipper. It had already been removed—apparently in a great bite, along with his foot and lower shin. His leg stopped at the calf. Below that was a horrific emptiness. Blood poured from the wound like a faucet, gushing into the bottom of the aluminium dinghy with heart-beating pulses.

"Dad, Dad, it got you! Look! Your foot's gone. The blood, all that blood. Dad, we have to bind it and get you to shore. Now. We have to go. Come on."

Strangely, Dad seemed not to hear me, or not to notice his grave wound. He's in shock. That's it; he's in shock. "Dwayne, look at Dad's leg! What'll we do?"

I don't think I could have anticipated my brother's reaction. He sidled up to me in the rear of our small boat and placed his palm across my forehead. It hurt frightfully. His hand was icy cold, doubtless from his exploration of the deep's mysteries. Even in mid-summer the Kaikoura water is cold.

I began to panic. Was I delirious from my wound? Had I lost too much blood? Couldn't they hear me? Couldn't they see my missing hand and Dad's severed leg? "I think he's got too much sun, Dad," I heard Dwayne say, deeply concerned about something I couldn't grasp. What did he mean?

"Yeah, you're right. Looks like he's got a bad case of sunstroke and maybe dehydration. Poor kid. I told him to wear his hat and to drink plenty. C'mon, let's get him back to shore."

"But look at my hand, guys, look!" I protested. They reached and grabbed both my hands, squeezing each in turn. Dad asked if I felt their squeezes. I did, in both my hands, and wept. "But what about all the blood in the bottom?" I cried, pointing to where blood, salt water and drops of fuel mingled to form entrancing kaleidoscopic patterns. "Look at the blood."

"The blood's from these," Dwayne explained, holding up the line that connected his spear to its spear-gun. Five fish, Moki and butterfish I think, hung on the line, pierced through the body or through the gill area. They dripped blood.

Dad weighed anchor, turned the boat towards the

South Bay slipway and headed us home. I said nothing else during that gentle journey up and down the swells that helped pull us to shore.

I said little during my night and day in Kaikoura Hospital, where nurses warned me with annoying repetition about the dangers of sunstroke.

Not my Hair!

"So, Mademoiselle Odile Lamarque, tell us, do you know why you are here?" The doctor's voice was cold and accusatory, like his eyes, and he stared with obvious disgust. "Do you know why we must waste our time dealing with you when our town is half destroyed and needs rebuilding?"

At this time, 29 April 1945, Doctor François Lespinasse, a podiatrist, was the only known surviving member of the French town of Colmar's council. The townsfolk thus expected him to fulfil a range of unpleasant duties, including those of magistrate. He knew plenty about ankles and bunions, but nothing about the law, and treated everyone brought before him in the same rough-and-ready fashion. They would get at least a quick hearing before he declared their guilt; otherwise someone might accuse him of partiality.

"Monsieur, I am here only because I fell in love. And the boy I love is not popular with my parents or my neighbours." Odile's voice shook as she spoke. Even at eighteen, she knew full well that she was in deep trouble. Frail with deep-set green eyes shadowed beneath by dark signs of stress, she found it hard to meet the eyes of her accuser. Once very pretty, Odile now looked and felt worn out and beaten down by worry.

"No, girl!" Lespinasse sneered. "You are here because you fraternised and committed sin with an enemy soldier. Do you deny this?"

"Yes, Monsieur, I deny your charge. I did indeed spend time with a German boy, and yes, he was a soldier,

but you are wrong, I must say with respect, when you claimed we sinned. We fell in love and promised to marry, but we did nothing that the Church would frown upon. We never made love. And of course I did absolutely nothing to betray my people. If I am guilty, it is only of falling in love. Please believe me, there's nothing more."

François Lespinasse hissed at her like a serpent, accusing her of being a whore, a traitor and a liar.

Odile looked into the faces of the twenty or so townsfolk who had gathered in the wood-panelled hall to watch Lespinasse dispense justice. She noticed softness, even sympathy, in the eyes of the women and one or two men. All other eyes looked like Lespinasse's.

His voice continued to spread its poison, and Odile found herself drowning him out with a mind full of beautiful thoughts that his anger could not touch.

His voice faded altogether as she remembered the day she and Carl de Cotte first kissed, two years ago in front of 400-year-old Pfister House in the heart of Colmar.

Carl was passionate about the town's rich history, and they had been bicycling around the town's best preserved sites—the Place de l'Ancienne Douane with its Koïfus, or old customs house, built in 1480; the exquisite half-timbered houses of the Rue des Marchands; the Bartholdi Museum; the magnificent Gothic Church of St. Martin, started in 1240; and the wondrous crooked Medieval houses of the Rue du Chasseur.

Odile was listening to the slender, fair haired boy as he explained that the painted icons on the walls of Pfister House contained many biblical themes as well as depictions of the emperors Maximilian, Charles and Ferdinand. Carl spoke in perfect French, though at home he usually addressed his parents in German. This region had a bi-lingual mixed population, after all.

Something made Carl stop talking. He stared with an

odd look in his eyes at his school-friend, and then reached across, leaning his bike towards her, and tenderly kissed her lips. She closed her eyes, and kissed him back with equal softness. It was a beautiful moment, the beginning of a love between two ideally suited teenagers.

"You are not listening, Mademoiselle Lamarque!" the podiatrist barked, pulling her consciousness back to her predicament. "You must explain to me why you chose to join with an enemy."

Odile thought for a moment, and then softly said: "Monsieur Lespinasse, you must excuse me, but Carl de Cotte was neither my enemy nor your enemy. He never fired a shot in anger, and he never maltreated even a single citizen of France. And please don't forget that this boy you call an enemy grew up right here in Colmar and went to school with me and even your own children."

"You wicked young woman. My children never collaborated with the enemy, and never liked that damned German."

"Monsieur, I respectfully remind you that de Cotte is a French name, and that Carl's family have been in Colmar for many generations, and that you, our podiatrist, even treated the feet of the de Cottes, including Carl's father."

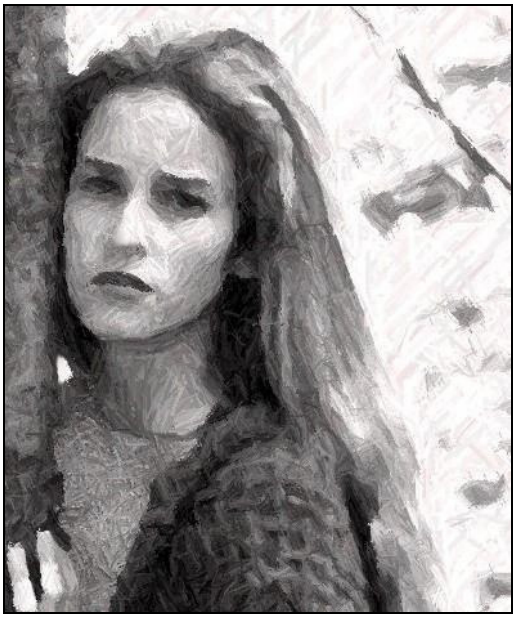
This was too much for Lespinasse. Shouting over her protestations of Carl's innocence, he told her to shut up at once, that Carl de Cotte had donned a German military uniform and served in the small German occupation force in Colmar. He was an enemy, and Odile was therefore a traitor. "There can only be one response to fraternisation with the Germans. Take her out and let the town see her shame."

Two burly artisans, probably boot-makers, Odile thought, grabbed her arms and marched her outside into the leaf-filled courtyard. Both whispered apologies and

weren't rough. One walked away and came back a minute later with a pair of hand shears. He couldn't look her in the face.

"Please, not my hair. Anything, but not my hair."

Odile's despair brought a flood of silent tears. Her dead father had always loved her long golden-brown hair, especially when she joined him to celebrate Alsace's religious and community events. He'd dress in a spotless white shirt and a flat-brimmed black hat. His bright red waistcoat matched her long flowing skirt. She looked fantastic in her traditional skirt and white lace blouse, but it was her long braided hair, tied in an enormous black silk bow, wider than her head in the region's unique manner, that made her father beam with pride. "You are truly beautiful, sweetheart," he'd say. Young Carl's admiration of her silky tresses also made the thought of their loss unbearable.



"Please don't," she whimpered.

The shears chomped through her hair with painful tugs and within two or three minutes Odile carried the mark of a fraterniser: a clumpy, poorly-cut, close-cropped head. The cardboard sign slung around her neck, "I no longer deserve France. I slept with a German!" weighed her down like a bar of lead. Despite the agony of humiliation, she felt no shame. What sin could God see? None. She had fallen in love with an "ethnic German" French boy who shared her passions for history, literature and music.

It was not her fault, nor his fault, that in August 1944 the German occupation authorities in Alsace-Lorraine drafted all young ethnic Germans over the age of sixteen into the armed forces of Hitler's failing war machine. The seventeen-year-old Carl had barely started shaving, had never made a Hitler salute and hated the violence and chaos of war. All he wanted was a reversion to peaceful relations between Colmar's ethnic French and ethnic German citizens. "For goodness sake," he used to say to Odile, "Colmar, this sleepy Rhine town on the French-German border, has no real importance to the world. It has changed hands so many times during the last 150 years that it doesn't matter who rules us. All that matters is that we find a way to live in peace."

Carl hadn't gone willingly into the German military, and had to be forced by threats of hard prison labour if he refused. He had detested his brief basic training in Freiburg im Breisgau, and he felt ashamed of the duties he finally received: patrolling the very Colmar streets on which he'd played as a boy, with orders to keep the French subdued and to prevent any anti-German activities. In pairs, Colmar's ethnic German citizens (and other young soldiers not medically tough or healthy enough for regular front-line combat) patrolled Colmar's

pavestone streets, walking nervously in oversized uniforms and carrying rifles that dated from the Great War.

Odile's handsome young man soon developed obvious signs of stress and depression. These eased a little after he sneaked into the Colmar council house one day to assure the deputy-major and the town clerk, who both expressed sympathy, that he meant no harm and was only doing the minimum. But he never adjusted to life in the Third Reich's vile forces, and several times thought of running away.

Of course, he couldn't do so; no French family (except maybe Odile's) would hide him, and any German family would hand him to the military police as a deserter. So each day he trudged unhappily up and down Colmar's streets, praying that no Allied or German bombs would destroy the wonderful buildings that were older than Goethe and Shakespeare.

The young couple secretly pledged their love shortly before American troops liberated Alsace-Lorraine. They would marry, they agreed, as soon as the approaching Americans freed Colmar from its four years of craziness. Carl even surrendered without a fight to an American vanguard unit, which lined him up with some of his "colleagues" so they could shoot them; not with guns, but with cameras.

The tough old Americans, actually only a few years older than Carl, simply could not believe that Hitler had thrust schoolboys and youths into uniform and expected them to fight. Very few did fight, at least in Colmar. Most of these frightened boys staggered with their hands up towards Americans, even unarmed support troops like cooks and logisticians, who initially suspected some ploy. The wide-open eyes and sunken cheeks of these German "soldiers" soon convinced them that these boys were no threat. Those seventeen years and under weren't even

incarcerated as Prisoners of War.

"Go home, boys, and look after your mothers," one American captain called out to an assembled group that included Carl. "But don't do anything dumb, okay."

Carl heard the translator's words with immense relief. Thank God, he thought, he could go home.

Carl walked through the streets that increasingly filled with Colmar's long-frightened residents. Their joy at being liberated was obvious. He smiled and sung along with their songs, but received several suspicious stares in return. Ah, it's this darned uniform, he thought. I still look like a German soldier.

He pulled off the grey tunic and cast it down, then stamped and spat on it. He pulled off the necktie and sat on the cobblestones to pull off the boots that he particularly hated. Hob-nailed, they had clacked as he patrolled Colmar's quiet streets. He couldn't wait to get his feet free.

As he bent to pull off his left boot, a bullet shattered his temple and killed him instantly. Clearly not all French were ready to sing.

Odile Lamarque never learned of Carl's fate. He just disappeared and, as far as she knew, he had become one of several million refugees scattered throughout Europe. He would come back to her, she knew. One day he would return. She hid her short clumpy hair beneath a scarf and prayed fervently, in church and at home, for the day Carl and her hair would be back.

Wages of Sin

If "the wages of sin is death," as the Bible says, I certainly don't deserve to live. I should have died ten thousand times or more, because I've sinned at least that many times. Take last night, for example. I earned my own destruction by 8.30 p.m. and almost received it ten minutes later. I say *almost,* because it seems my Creator gave me a sharp warning and a second chance. Hence I'm able to record my most recent experience with the Divine's darned good system of justice.

I'm not a normal Christian. I'm not even sure I am a Christian, or anything else that is easily defined by a single-word label. I believe in a Creator who is greater than all other deities, but also that Earth's great natural ecosystems, and the Earth itself, are living deities. Forest spirits, for instance, protect the forests and administer the complex, meticulous food-chains that exist within. Likewise, the Earth's great rivers—the Danube, the Rhine, the Volga, the Nile, the Congo, the Euphrates, the Indus, the Ganges, the Huang, the Mississippi, the Amazon and so forth—are Earth Mother's primal arteries, pumping life in all its rich and abundant forms into most regions.

But, like many people who believe in what Westerners like terming "a supreme being" (so that it doesn't offend any religions), I believe in my Creator's omnipotence and I fear getting rapped over the knuckles, so to speak, when I screw up.

Last night I did. I wish I hadn't, especially now that I've suffered the consequences, but I couldn't seem to help myself. I'm a man, with all the impulses and "drives"

we're infamous for—you know what I mean—and I'm also romantic, in a corny, old-fashioned sort of way. I like gentle caresses, soft kisses, and things like that; stuff that we're not normally associated with (at least by women, who supposedly like that stuff more than men). So when I knew I had an ardent admirer, and a very pretty and articulate one at that, I ignored my conscience and my wedding vows to follow the prompting of my heart (or that part further south). I agreed to meet her in the evening for an hour or two alone.

I knew this would happen. Connie and I had actually only met a few times, at the squash club we belonged to. We'd made small talk and, on one occasion, had an awesome discussion about the paths our lives had taken and where we saw them going in the future. We "clicked," to used a cliché, and found ourselves staring with a curious mutual attraction into each other's eyes. These were mirror-images: we both have hazel irises and long dark lashes.

The next day she rang me at work (I'm a factory foreman) to see if I wanted to meet her for lunch or coffee. I did, and enjoyed sipping lattes and eating bagels with her in a too-busy but otherwise ideal café in town. We talked about our marriages, our children and our unsatisfied romantic natures. These were also mirror-images; we hungered for the same things. We met for coffee at her place a few days later, and during an enjoyable ninety minutes agreed, at least in vague terms, that we both felt somehow "connected" and ought to make time in our weeks for each other. That is, we'd start an affair.

Planning that first evening meeting wasn't easy. I grew nervous, and tried to back out, unsuccessfully. I'd meet her in the car-park of Nelson's Arms, an English-style pub about halfway between our houses. I always thought this was the wackiest name for a pub. Horatio

Lord Nelson only had one arm, after all, thanks to a near-fatal war wounding. He did not have “arms”.

Anyway, at 7.30 last night I turned up as promised, expecting to wait a few minutes until Connie arrived. Instead, as I walked up to the tavern door she sort of skipped up to me out of the shadows and, with a big “hiya Colin,” asked for a hug. I was slightly taken aback by her sudden burst of self-confidence, but she put it down to freedom’s elation so I thought I might as well enjoy it. I hugged her, and then gave her a soft kiss on the lips. It lasted the merest second, yet I noticed her eyes close. A good sign, I thought.

Connie wanted to talk, and drive. She loved driving, she said, and proved it by driving way too fast for my liking. I said nothing, but gripped the seat belt and waited impatiently until we reached the destination she chose: Cobham Hill. Its large car-park overlooking the lights of Ballarat provided young lovers with an excellent location for back-seat love-making. It certainly had a romantic atmosphere, if you could block out the burn-outs done by “boy-racers”—the young guys who hottened up their cars and lowered their seats to look cool as they drove around at (sometimes literally) breakneck speed—and if you could ignore the stares of those in cars parked on each side of you.

We didn’t engage in any back-seat antics. We got out and stood together, leaning back against the bonnet and looking at the orange city lights which, by contrast, made the stars seem almost pathetic. We talked and she edged closer so I gently reached for her hand and felt the softness of her skin and the smoothness of her fingertips. I touched her equally soft neck and kissed her again, with a gentle but lingering connection of warm lips on warm lips. When I stroked her blonde, curly hair, she rolled her neck with pleasure, like a cat. I ran my fingers over her neck, and lower, pausing on her breasts. This was a nice

situation, I thought.

I had to leave sooner than we would have liked, because I had a friend, Calvin, coming around to use my welding equipment for a while at 8.30 p.m. or so. I had arranged for Calvin to come around long before I had agreed to meet Connie, and I like to keep my word, especially when friends are involved. So I told Connie that we'd better get moving. "Yeah, okay," she said, annoyed that our increasing physical intimacy would end so soon. I also wished it could continue, and told her that. We left Cobham Hill the same way that we'd arrived: at about 25 kilometres-per-hour too fast.

Driving home alone from the Nelson's Arms car-park I felt quiet and reflective, my conscience questioning my actions. What was I doing out alone with a woman while my wife sat home in front of the television with our boys? Why was I doing this? Male pride? Loneliness? A desire for forbidden fruit? "Good" old fashioned lust? Did this count as anyone's betrayal? As sin? I never had time to reach any conclusions, even the most tentative.

A faint "boing" or "ping" below the front left corner of my car reached my ears a fraction of a second before my car lurched left, uncontrollably, and smashed into the rear of a parked car with an ear-splitting crunch of metal on metal. The weight and energy of my Nissan Pulsar, not great by any standards, was sufficient to shunt the parked car ten metres up onto a lawn and hard up against a fence.

"You alright, mate?" called the driver of a car on the other side of the road. "What happened? You swerve to miss a dog or cat or something?"

Shocked and shaking, I forced my door open; not an easy task now that the entire front of my car was crumpled inwards and the door frames were bent out of alignment. "Yeah, a dog," I stammered because of proud embarrassment, assuring the guy that no-one was hurt

and that I'd go and sort out whose car it was. He looked a bit worried, but I assured him that I felt perfectly fine aside, for some reason, from a sore right thumb.

"Well, okay mate," he said, "you take it easy. You might even want to get a check-up."

By this time a young man in a yellow shirt had come out from the house with the fence I'd shunted the parked car into. Before seeing if I was hurt, he checked his fence. Pleased to see nothing worse than one tiny split in a plank and a bit of red paint, he turned and asked: "What happened? You swerve around a cat or something?"

Stressed, I didn't feel like lying again. "Ah, no," I said. "I can't explain what happened. I was just driving along, and I haven't been drinking and I wasn't speeding, when my car just threw itself sideways into your car. I honestly can't explain it, but I think maybe the steering gave out."

"Nah," he said. "It's not my car. I think it belongs to someone next door. I'll go check, but first let's push your car off the road a bit. We don't want your wreckage to cause another accident, so put on its warning lights."

I did, and we pushed my car further up against the curb. The guy in the yellow shirt went next door to see if the car I'd hit—an old red Ford Capri, it turned out—belonged to anyone there. "Students, I think," he said as he walked up their driveway.

The two guys and one young woman who walked back with him were amazed at the damage my car had taken. But one of them, a young blond guy even taller than me (I'm six-foot-one), seemed distressed about the red Capri. He walked around it several times, looking intensely and touching this and that. It was clearly his car.

"Man, I'm really sorry about your car," I told him, upset by his distress. "I haven't even been drinking. Something went ping in my steering and my car just slammed to the left into the back of yours."

"Well, at least you're not hurt. And no-one else is either," said the pretty girl with long dark hair. "I've rung the cops but they might take a while to get here. Friday night's their busy night."

Oh man, I thought, she's gone and rung the cops about an accident in which no-one was hurt. What was she thinking? That I was going to drive away in my totally un-drivable car so as not to take responsibility for what I'd done to her mate's car.

"Damn," I said, "I wish you hadn't rung them. They only turn every little fender-bender into a major incident. We could just as easily sort out things without them here."

"I can see why you're saying that, buddy," a young man in a green army jacket said. He pointed to the front windscreen of my wrecked car. "No Warrant of Fitness and no car registration, eh! There's about five-hundred bucks in fines right there. And you'll probably get done for reckless driving."

"Gee, thanks for pointing that out," my sarcasm replied.

I swapped names, addresses and telephone numbers with Brian, the guy who owned the Capri, and watched in hidden amazement as he struggled to write his address. Dyslexic or only barely literate, I thought. Poor guy. Still he seemed like a decent enough fella, and was upset, but not at all angry, at the state of his Capri. He explained that he'd been restoring the Capri and had just had the electrics and some panel work done. "I'm really sorry, mate," I repeated, and he said again, "Na, shit happens."

An uncomfortable ten minutes passed, by which time Calvin, the friend I'd rung from my cellphone, had arrived to give me a ride home. No-one could leave until the Police had arrived, however, which stressed me considerably. Getting an ear-full and hundreds of dollars in fines from the cops wasn't going to be pleasant, or

helpful to anyone. Then a great idea hit me.

"By the way, how much is your Capri worth?" I asked the young owner.

"Not much now," Brian smiled back.

"No, before I whacked into it." I liked his good-natured way of dealing with the situation.

"Maybe nine hundred bucks."

"What? Your Capri's worth nine hundred dollars?" I said, amazed at the low value.

He didn't understand my surprise and thought I was mocking him. "Hey, I just spent $240 on the electronics, and I just had this whole side straightened."

"No, I'm not questioning your judgement or suggesting you're trying to inflate the price," I clarified as soothingly as I could. "I'll gladly take your word that the Capri's worth that much. I wasn't trying to be offensive. I'm just amazed that a classic old Capri is only worth $900."

"Yeah, I know, but it still needs a lot of work. It's a bit rough inside."

"Okay," I said, and then hit him with my proposition. "Why don't we ring the cops and tell them to forget about coming out. We can honestly say that there was no injury and the two parties have agreed on a solution. See, if we do this, and I don't get a whole bunch of fines from the cops, I'm free immediately to sort out an arrangement with you for the damage to your car."

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I'll buy your car off you, right now, for a thousand bucks cash. I can go get it from a money machine, and give it to you in five minutes. Then the whole matter's fixed, right? I'll own your car, with all the damage I did to it. Then fixing it, or whatever, will be my problem and my

responsibility. You'll get more than you say your car's worth, and won't have to wait to get it panel-beaten and so forth. And we don't have to involve the cops or insurance companies, which would only cause delays and complications. What do you think? One thousand dollars cash, right now?"

"Yeah? … Ah, great!" he said, looking as relieved as I did. "That's cool."

One of his friends, the guy in the army jacket, clearly didn't like the deal, although I couldn't understand why. A few minutes of whispering occurred, with suspicious eyes occasionally glancing at me and the damaged cars before he felt brave enough to speak his mind. "We should wait for the cops," he said, apparently scared that I'd take off and not pay his friend, or that I had some other hidden reason.

"Look," I explained, "If the cops come and I get slapped with a whole pile of fines or maybe even have to go to court, you simply won't get any money straight away. I don't have enough savings to pay for everything. Money only goes so far. But if we forget the cops and fix the problem right now with a fair financial deal, we're both happy. I don't get in trouble for having no registration and warrant, or for reckless driving or causing an accident by driving an unsafe car. And you don't have to wait to get paid."

Even the guy in the green jacket grudgingly accepted the logic, and the Capri's owner needed no persuasion. "Deal, mate. A thousand bucks is very fair."

I asked the young woman to call back the cops and tell them there was no need for their intervention, and then heard her tell a policeman on her cellphone that she knew they'd be busy, given that it was Friday night, and they would doubtless be needed elsewhere, where something important was happening. This was just a tiny fender-bender, she said, and the cars' owners had

already sorted out the repairs. Clever woman, I thought.

I got my friend Calvin to take us to the cash machine at the back of the nearby mall, and Brian the Capri owner came along, at my invitation, to ensure we weren't going to do a disappearing act. I actually felt bad for Brian, who wasn't the brightest guy in the world but seemed decent and very proud of all the work he'd done on the Capri. So I withdrew an extra hundred dollars. "Listen, mate," I told him when I got back into Calvin's car, "I feel bad that you're parting with a car you've been doing up. So I'm gonna make it $1,100. Is that good?"

"Yeah, that's *more* than fair. You didn't have to do that but it's a cool gesture. Thanks."

When we got back to the site of the car crash, we went inside and Brian wrote me out a receipt for the $1,100. Actually, because Brian asked us to help spell nearly every word I politely took over the receipt writing. I felt sorry for him, but pleased that, even though he clearly had some type of learning disability, he was a happy and apparently successful guy. He lived with his parents, he'd said earlier—he was only visiting friends in the house outside of which he'd parked—and held down a good job at a pub. We agreed that the next morning, Saturday, I'd come out to his place with the formal change of ownership forms. He was visibly happy with the whole arrangement, as I was.

I felt very lucky, strange as that might sound. I could have swerved to the *right,* into the on-coming traffic. Head-to-head prangs are often fatal and always serious. Or I could have swerved left, as I did, but hit a parked new Mercedes instead of an old, inexpensive Capri. Things had worked out well.

Yet one thought lingered in my mind, and had done so from the very moment my car veered left and struck Brian's. It more than lingered. It troubled me. It still does. Was the accident a warning that my behaviour that

evening was wrong? Had those who watch over us—the Universe's guardian and the other life spirits (call them God and the angels, if that's easier; although it's not exactly what I mean)—sent me a warning that I must go no further in my fledgling relationship with Connie?

While driving home with Calvin, who seemed amazed and impressed by my calmness and clever handling of the situation, I came to the realisation that my soul-searching questions could only be answered in the affirmative. *Yes,* the evening's events were indeed a warning that, as the language of the King James Bible puts it, "the wages of sin is death". This time I'd been let off with a warning, and a small, $1,100 wound to my bank balance.

Now what happens? Will my rational mind find another explanation? Will I hold fast to the conviction that I mustn't get involved with Connie? Will I ignore my conscience, and my divine warning, and pursue what I shouldn't? Weak and indecisive human that I am, I can't yet say.

Trading Places

2 June 1800

My dearest wife,

I am relieved finally to be at sea. The last few weeks in Liverpool were very tiring and for some time I felt fearful of not obtaining a strong crew and sufficient stocks for their needs. But I managed through perseverance to find, and at good cost, a healthy crew of thirty-one men. The youngest (Pembroke) is twelve and will serve my cabin, and the oldest is, at thirty-seven, not much too old.

I obtained chain and shackles at a splendid price and had our carpenters transform our small 220-ton Swiftsure into a fine transportation vessel. It will carry our merchandise safely. Along with all trade goods we bought salted meats and dry biscuit, and even obtained more onions and lemons than we had hoped.

It is my fervent prayer that the Good Lord will give us a safe and quick voyage of ten or eleven weeks.

May you and Gilbert enjoy good health in Ipswich and remain in the Almighty's attention.

Yours in loving thought,

Cuthbert Drinkwater

14 June 1800

My dearest Alice,

I am as happy with my crew as any captain can be. I am altogether delighted by their energy and obedience and have not yet had to chastise any for offences greater than occasional drunkenness. The ship also sails as though Noah's own hands created her. I am thankful.

I am entrusting this letter to a mail ship we should encounter within hours. That sloop sails from the Canary Islands (so we have learned from local fishermen), and should cross our path shortly. I remain pleased that the Spanish are allowing safe passage to mail vessels.

My toothache is again a nuisance and I may have to have our good man Sykes pull it from my jaw. But we shall see. I suck clove buds and the pain decreases for a time.

I look forward to teaching the ways of God's great

oceans to our dear son Gilbert. At ten he is yet too tender, but two more years should see him sufficiently mature. I think his overall disposition will improve greatly with salt air in his lungs.

I trust your wellbeing to the Almighty's affectionate gaze, matched only by the good wishes of your loving husband,

Cuthbert

8 July 1800

My dear wife and son,

Oh, how hot and uncomfortable the weather has become! I am a man who prefers the cold. The change from temperate climates to tropical weather has been hard on most of my seamen, and several are very poorly. As I mentioned in my letter of 3 July—which you should receive by the time we reach the town of Bonny, along the Niger River, within a few more weeks—I have now sadly committed two fine fellows to the depths and the Almighty's eternal care. Influenza be cursed!

Mister Brissol and I went ashore in Spain and beheld

their great spectacle: a bull fight. Despite my experience of battle in Lord Hood's fleet I am unused to such needless bloodshed. How the spectators roar with each stab of sword or lance! Don Martinez considered us weak-livered but I think him wrong to claim that we would grow to enjoy such cruel sport.

News reaches us that markets in West Africa reach their most agreeable stage in three weeks or so. I have taken aboard a Portuguese merchant, Rodrigo de Pinto, and commissioned him as my negotiator and translator when we reach Angola. I would rather trust my own man than a local middle-man who may well have other loyalties.

It is my hope that I will receive news from home sometime soon, but in the meantime I remain, as ever, your adoring husband,

Cuthbert Drinkwater

12 July 1800

My dearest wife and son,

I am taken ill with a tropical malaise that I pray

will not become feverish. My stomach has ached for two days and robbed me of sleep. I can not regret making this voyage, however. The Good Lord who watches our hearts and endeavours knows that my decision to sail to Africa was based only on a good heart's desire to provide adequately for his family after receiving no further occupation in His Majesty's Navy. Although my crew becomes ever interested I have yet to feel excitement at the purchase and transportation of our merchandise. A merchant I am *not* by inclination. It would give me greater joy to serve in His Majesty's fleet again.

Winds, or their lack, have slowed our progress and I am not convinced we will reach our destination, Bonny, during the weeks of best prices. But De Pinto and Spencer are both reassuring and I pray their counsel is trustworthy.

My love and prayers extend to you, dear wife and Gilbert, and I remains yours ever,

Cuthbert

23 July 1800

My dear,

I have recovered with God's grace from the malaise that beset me. Although I have lost weight and strength I am most grateful for the health I will need for good trading.

We have made several landfalls along the African coast. We have stopped at Spanish, Portuguese and our own trading stations. I am proud of the nation of our origin and notice that we live in a more orderly manner than our neighbours. Frenchmen make poor traders although we have experienced no hostility.

My hope is that we now make good speed and arrive at the great Niger River within five days. Our progress has been delayed but, with all good graces, we will still purchase a well-priced cargo.

The sun burns the timbers of my ship and the skin of my seamen. I have seldom experienced such a fiery climate. God has taken three more of my fine lads and I have committed their mortal remains to the depths. I wept, but not in front of the crew.

Gilbert, you'll like the gift I have bought you at a Spanish trade post: a telescope of such craftsmanship as we English cannot yet attain.

With love to you, my dears,

Cuthbert Drinkwater

1 August 1800

My dearest wife,

Our ship needs repairs but we have at last sailed the Gulf of Guinea and reached the Niger. I have seen few sights to rival this mighty river. The Niger is said to have its origin in some black jungle in deepest Africa. Its source is as far away in miles as we have sailed these two months from Liverpool to its delta.

This river is full of traffic. Ships from all Europe compete for currents, and black men in Piroque (dugout canoes) bring simple provisions. I marvel they do not sink but the native sailors, who are excellently proportioned and strong, are adept beyond description.

Tomorrow we trade!

With greatest love and the Lord's blessings,

Cuthbert

3 August 1800

It was a strange day, my darling Alice.

De Pinto, Spencer, Brown and I purchased our cargo, which we obtained for a fair sum. They were kept in enclosed areas called, I think, "Baracoons". They—the goods—came from many inland tribes, from the spirited Hausas, the gentle Mandingos, the creative Yorubas, from the Ibos, Efiks and Krus, from the proud Fantins, the warlike Ashantis, the shrewd Dahomeans, the Binis and Sengalese. I bought 408 black men, women and children, and will take them aboard the day after tomorrow.

I confess, dearest, that I was at first appalled to see humans imprisoned, especially children, and to see them chained by ankle or neck when taken from the Baracoons. But my weak thoughts ignore the scriptural basis of human existence, which has always placed some men in the service of others. And I will treat all within my care with the greatest humanity and will pray for their souls and that their American and Caribbean servitude will be with Godly masters.

Europeans, it is clear, cannot become accustomed to life in some climates, so our need for workers with god-given hardy constitutions is not in the least unreasonable. And these fine but godless people can only benefit from their placement in the stewardship of

Christians who can teach them the Lord's requirements and who will pray for their souls. Yet still, alas, I find discomfort in my heart and concern in my mind.

I have found gifts for you, Alice, that will make your sisters envious. And I have special surprises for you, my son. Bless you.

Ever with love,

Cuthbert

15 August 1800

To my dear wife and son,

We are now five days sailing into God's great Atlantic, and I look forward to reaching the Caribbean in seven weeks. We were blessed with fortunate circumstances in Bonny. There we obtained a full cargo. A second and third day at the market gained us an addition 48 black men, none older than twenty. So we did not, as many vessels have to, sail along the African trade stations in search of more merchandise.

We did good trade, De Pinto said, and I am indeed content. For each adult male I paid 96 yards of cloth, 50

handkerchiefs, 25 kegs of gunpowder, 100 flints, 2 bags of shot, 20 knives, 4 iron pots, 8 hats and caps, 4 cutlasses, 6 strings of beads and 14 gallons of brandy. Women and children were less costly.

I have to confess my stomach was made ill by the smell of sad humanity when first I beheld my cargo chained in our vessel. I think I will never undertake such voyages in future. Other captains and crews may be better suited.

I worry about the psychology of those we transport. Their large black eyes stare blankly out from the cots upon which they lie, and when we have them on deck for their daily vigour they must be watched carefully so they do not spring overboard into the sea. I am told they think we are devils taking them to hell. Oh, if they could only know that we are Christians and will deliver them to Godly masters!

I look forward to the completion of an unpleasant task and the return to more English and manly trade, and remain your dear husband,

Cuthbert

20 August 1800

Dearest wife Alice and Gilbert,

This voyage is an unhappy experience and I long for its conclusion. I hear songs rising from the hold and they anguish me greatly, so mournful is their sound. Although I try to keep their conditions as dry and agreeable as the ship's constraints permit, and have hatches ever open to increase the circulation of fresh air, the smell is overwhelming.

I have the African children on deck often and watch how they sing and dance—along with mate Firth's fiddle—more readily than those with greater years. I have them all daily in the open air in shifts of one hundred, so that the crew can scrub their cots with vinegar to clean them of their waste and vomit. It is an inadequate method, but the best available.

My conscience now pricks me, dearest, but perhaps it is merely that my nature is too soft. I do not think it wrong to place humans in servitude, and can read this permitted by scripture, but I do not like having ownership myself, even if only for the duration of this voyage and the subsequent sale. I feel unable to provide them with adequate food, water, medicines and Christian charity.

Four died yesterday and I upset my crew by having

a prayer read and a hymn sung before their bodies were entrusted to the sea. I told the crew that these "chattels" are also His creations and cannot pass from this world without our prayers for forgiveness for their unredeemed souls.

Yours with the most delicate love,

Cuthbert

9 September 1800

Dearest Alice,

I cannot guarantee your receipt of this letter in a timely fashion. We are becalmed! We have no breeze to fill our sails and no current to pull us nearer our destination. We sit motionless in still seas beneath a sun that seems devilishly cruel to the timbers of my ship, to my crew, and to those hundreds of Africans who lie in darkness in the sweltering heat of their deck. We have not enough fresh water for all. Nine great kegs were found yesterday to be rancid and the water therein can only be used for cleaning and swabbing.

Maladies are spreading, and Africans are dying at a

distressing rate. Spencer earned my rebuke this morning by cursing the loss of profit these deaths are causing. That's no talk for an Englishman, I conveyed in no uncertain terms. These Africans may not yet know the grace of God, but they were created in His image.

I am unsure how to stop scurvy and fevers below decks, or how to keep the crew immune. The crew are also suffering, and four young fellows passed into God's kingdom these last three days. One was a most grievous loss: Pembroke, our youngest, who served my cabin. I lament my inability to preserve his life after fever gripped him. He was a good lad and a credit to his parents. I shall write to them and tell them he served me faithfully and never complained.

I have been reflecting on my familial responsibilities. It may be that our Gilbert, whose embrace I miss almost as much as your own, will prefer a career on land. A clerk at the Admiralty or in a customs-house perhaps. I hope so.

My abiding love to you both,

Cuthbert

13 September 1800

Oh wife of my own heart,

I yearn for you and your gentle caress. How miserable has my life become! I had nineteen Africans perish yesterday and fifteen today. Their needs for water and nutrition cannot be satisfied, and the maladies that have swept unchecked through their decks include fevers, pox and dysentery. My crew is also reducing. I presently have seven gravely ill seamen and two have died of dysentery in these last few days.

My ship has <u>no wind!</u> We remain motionless halfway between Africa and the Caribbean. The sun is distorting timbers and we have serious leakage. The African are frightened and groan, sing or hum what sound to me like death songs. They are chained, of course, but were they at the same liberty as the crew their lot would be no better. Where could they go, except over the sides?

I have headaches and such fatigue that I feel I am asleep while awake. Yet my mind is ever on the issues of my heart: the cargo of Africans that sadly suffer only ten feet beneath my own hammock. I have a father's responsibility for them, but I am proving a miserably unsuccessful father. Their deaths grieve me as though they were redeemed Christian souls.

And what kind of Christian am I? Will God forgive me putting financial gain ahead of human life?

May this letter one day find its way to you.

Yours with devotion,

Cuthbert

15 September 1800

Dearest Alice,

<u>We are still becalmed!</u> My heart is sorely burdened. I have lost two more Englishmen (actually one a Scotsman) and eleven Africans. What differences have white Englishmen and black Africans? All need food. There is very little. All need healthy water. There is even less. All succumb to their lack. All suffer the same symptoms. All have expressions of hopelessness. All need courage to pass from this world.

Glyn Brown is dead.

I feel my bodily ailments are quickly worsening. I am eating what vegetables I kept in my sea-chest and I still have a little drinkable water. But I fear for my

mortality, and assure you that should I slip away I shall await you and Gilbert in God's mansion.

Has God deserted me? My crew? Oh, forgive me my doubt! I face a clear realisation that I have acted outside His wishes for man. I have participated in the un-Christian act of holding brethren into servitude.

With passion for thy love and God's grace,

I remain, your

Cuthbert

16 September 1800

Dearest Alice,

My strength is fast failing and my heart is breaking. I slept little but, while awake or asleep I cannot say, I dreamed of my Lord. He came in bare feet, wearing the thorny crown pressed deep by those who took his life. He was accompanied by black Africans. They were singing songs of joy with wondrous rejoicing faces. I hid my face in shame but heard His voice. Only it was familiar. It was young dead Pembroke's voice, and he invoked my attention by calling me to kneel and meet

his eyes. When I did, he, the Lord, was gone. But my cabin was not empty. It retained for some minutes traces of his spark, his presence.

I wandered down to the slave deck. There I saw or felt His divine presence, as I had minutes earlier in my cabin.

My wrongdoing is grievous, darling Alice, and I pray that I find forgiveness in that realm I will seemingly enter shortly. I have sought the Almighty's redemptive grace. I have also prayed in earnest for my crew and for the souls of those stolen humans below. My sin against them has been great. I am very tired, love.

O, May this letter bring you and dearest Gilbert my assurance of love beyond measure,

Yours ever,

Cuthbert

19 October 1800

To Alice Drinkwater, widow of Captain Cuthbert Drinkwater of Swiftsure,

I am not a man skilled with letters, so I beg pardon for my uncouth expressions. I am a man of the sea, and it was as such that I served under your husband on Swiftsure.

I enclose four letters found in his cabin. He died a month past, on 17 September, his strength taken by a sickness that swept the vessel he commanded so ably.

We lay becalmed for nine more days. Then the fifteen surviving Englishmen and ninety alive Africans caught a wind that took us some way towards our goal. We were come upon by a French frigate who observed our state of abject calamity. The Frenchmen took our Africans as their prize and released us ashore at Port-au-Prince.

I have the honour to convey my satisfaction at serving under a good and just captain, and I trust your boy and you find some measure of comfort in his devotion to all aboard Swiftsure, black Africans included. Your good husband's care of the Africans went beyond what his obligation demanded and was often a puzzle to us. We thought them not worthy humans but your husband did and, from his example, I have learned much that is charitable about <u>all</u> my brethren.

He died well, and his remains were committed to the sea he loved near as much as he loved his wife and child.

I am your servant, Madam,

Harvey Dean

Without a Trace

Doctor Lombard's concern was obvious on his face and in his voice, but his answer was not the one Graeme Howarth sought. "I'm really not sure that I can help you, Graeme," he said almost timidly. "I've been treating your brother for over three years, and I do worry about him. He's been very unwell. But you know as well as I do that I can't betray patient confidentiality. I can't discuss his condition or medication any further. I may already have said too much."

Howarth asked the doctor to spare him another five minutes, a request he made so pleadingly that it earned him a sighed, "Okay, just five minutes. But give me something concrete, not just your gut feelings or general concerns."

"Here, Doctor. Read this. It came by email an hour ago."

"You read it, Graeme. It looks long. Can you just select the important parts?"

"No, I really do think you should hear it all. Please, bear with me. I think this email clearly reveals Steve's state of mind. You need to hear it all."

"Yeah, okay. Go ahead." So Graeme began to read his brother's email. His shaking voice revealed his inexperience at reading aloud, not unusual for a dairy farmer, but he gave it his best effort:

"Graeme, I rang but you didn't answer," he read out, in a diction that Dr Lombard guessed was Graeme's subconscious impersonation of Steven. "Please take this

seriously. I am typing this with the utmost urgency and emailing it to you in case I disappear. Forgive any errors and typos. I am very, very scared and in a great hurry. But, whether you believe this or not, immediately (waste no time!) go the Police and do not even think for a moment of entering my house without them. Please, do not do so. Now, let me explain the reason."

Graeme stopped for a few seconds, clearing his throat as he freed another button on his shirt, even though his open collar was by no means tight. He apologised, and continued reading his brother's words:

"I bought the rug at a garage sale, early, about eight o'clock, on the Saturday morning that changed our lives. That was three weeks ago to the very day. I liked the rug, mainly because its colours would suit our lounge, and its size—I don't know for sure, but maybe two metres by two metres—would cover the worst of those Fanta stains that the kids made last year. Anyway, I can't even tell you the address of the garage sale, but I do remember that it was down the north end of Albert Street. The rug was rolled up, but I asked to see it and, when I unrolled it on the lawn near the garage, I liked it at once. The elderly man who sold it wanted fifty dollars, but I got it for forty, and I was so pleased I also bought a pile of old National Geographics for the other ten bucks, just to, well, help him out I guess. He was a very nice man, as far as I can remember. Sorry, I don't know his name."

"When I got the rug home and spread it out in the middle of the lounge floor it looked awesome, with all its colours blending well with our walls and curtains. It even contained green flecks the same colour as the curtains. Kate and the girls were just as pleased as I was and Susie—typical eleven-year-old—even rolled herself up in it. You know, she started at one end by holding the edge then rolling over and over across the floor until she lay like a sausage in a rolled-up carpet. When I think back now,

with all I know, I can't believe it, but when she did it we all laughed—a lot. Mary also liked it, but, along with her mum, only commented on the colours."

Allan Lombard was clearly growing impatient and asked Graeme to hurry up. What was all this stuff about a rug anyway?

It would become clear in a second, the emailer's brother answered. Could he keep reading?

The doctor looked at his watch, rolled his head to loosen his neck, and said okay.

Graeme kept reading his brother's strange email:

"Nothing unusual happened for a week or two, at least not that we can attribute to the same cause. Then, one night, about two a.m., Kate heard a crash from the lounge. She went to investigate. I didn't. Well, I couldn't. I was still asleep. You know me, Graeme; sleep through an explosion probably. All she found was that one of the two paintings on the lounge wall behind the couch had fallen. The glass didn't break, so the next day I tied new string across the back—the old string had given way, apparently—and re-hung it. Now, you may think that this is not such a big deal, but let me add that the very next night that darned picture fell down again, and this time the glass shattered in a dangerous pile of shards behind the couch. The string had broken again, which had me stumped. I'd hung the picture on very strong nylon cord, with knots that simply could not come undone by themselves. That picture would survive on the wall during the worst imaginable earthquake, I'd thought. Oh, I forgot to mention that the picture was one you used to comment on; you liked it. It was the old antique print of Napoleon Bonaparte standing on the deck of The Bellerophon, the British warship that took him into exile in 1815."

Graeme looked up from the email he clutched and noticed that the doctor was running his fingers through his

dark hair and stretching his neck up and down. Oh God, he thought, Lombard's not listening properly.

Lombard was, and asked him to continue reading Steven's email. With occasional coughs and tripped-over words, he did so:

"Someone, or something, apparently didn't share my enthusiasm for the French emperor," the email said. "Within a week all my Napoleonic stuff had fallen, although the only thing to suffer permanent damage was that first engraved print. No, my precious pewter mug also fell from the mantelpiece and dented its lip, and cracked a tile in front of the fireplace, one day when Kate was vacuuming. She said she hadn't nudged it, and by the end of that week I was more than ready to believe her."

"Now, this is the thing. Whoever, *whatever*, was playing games with Napoleon began to play games with us. We noticed it the very same day the pewter mug fell. Our friend, Pete Reece, you remember, the retired general with the grey flat-top, came around for coffee. He was fine when he arrived, but he left in an awful hurry with severe abdominal pains—a ruptured spleen, would you believe?—within half an hour. Now, we had no reason to connect his sudden bad health with the 'attacks,' or whatever you want to call them, on my Napoleonic collection, but looking back we remembered that he'd stood talking, with his coffee cup in hand, on our new rug."

Doctor Lombard was clearly becoming intrigued. "Forget all that carpet stuff," he said, "and tell me more about the medical problems."

Graeme couldn't, adding that Steve said nothing else about Reece's illness. Should he continue reading the email? Lombard plonked himself down in his black leather chair, put his feet on the desk and a pen between his lips and grunted "ah-ha".

Graeme kept reading, his voice getting thinner as it grew tired. “That damned rug,” he read, “even seemed to move, not far, but sometimes in the morning it seemed—and of course we still thought back then that we were imagining it—to have crept about a foot or more towards the couch. And that’s not all. You know how much I like the Discovery Channel and CNN on Sky TV. Well, we began having problems with the reception, but, and notice this, only when any stories about Africa and the Middle East came on. That’s quite often, of course, given America’s war on Afghanistan, the Israel-Palestine thing and President Mugabe’s nonsense with the white settlers in Zimbabwe. Everything would be fine until someone in power, like a president, or a military leader, was shown or interviewed. The TV reception then deteriorated within seconds, and sometimes the picture completely frosted over with grey dots.”

“Then the second ‘attack’ on a person happened. A pleasant, sympathetic bailiff from the District Court came round to see us about our children’s outstanding school fees. Apparently we had to attend a hearing so the Court, which had upheld the School Board’s demand for the arrears, could work out a payment plan. The bailiff was on the doorstep, and he was nice enough, I must say, so I invited him into the lounge so we could talk in warmth. He walked to our mantelpiece to admire my small whale’s-tooth scrimshaw—it’s from 1805, the year of Trafalgar—and crossed the carpet to do so. He immediately grabbed his chest and lurched forward in a spasm of great pain. He soon came right, thank God, but promptly left to see his doctor without bothering to arrange the payment hearing.”

Doctor Lombard again twitched at the mention of illness and asked for more details. Graeme had nothing else to tell him about this man either. “Okay, go on,” Lombard said.

The farmer asked for and gulped down some water, and then continued reading his brother's email:

"This event again suggested to us that the rug itself was creepy and threatening. But I must say, Graeme, that it hadn't been so to us in the family; even once! You'll note above that on the day we got it my youngest daughter even rolled herself up in it like something from the Arabian Nights. Both she and Mary often used to lie on that rug to watch television, or sit on it to eat a snack or even sometimes their dinner. And nothing bad had ever happened. In fact, the kids liked the rug. It was warm and kind of cosy, they said. And apart from the weird stuff that might have been associated with it—and right up until the end Kate and I thought we were being silly to even waste time on such stupid notions—we liked it too."

The sharp-featured doctor had begun to scribble a few notes on a desk-pad that carried the fat logo of a pharmaceutical company.

Good, Graeme thought, he's listening. He knew he had to convince Lombard that Steve might be in trouble, so he kept reading, swiftly, barely pausing for breaths and never slowing to stress any words. Lombard's a smart guy; he'll know what's important. He ploughed on with his reading:

"Then it happened. We were watching television. Sorry, I'm talking about *today* now; Saturday, at about 1.35 p.m. We were all watching television, and Susie was lying next to the rug on the carpet, playing with her felt-tip pens and colouring a page in a schoolbook. Without thought I told her not to get any ink on the carpet, and without thought she slid across, with her felt-tip pens, onto the rug. I asked her to come sit on the couch, so she could do her schoolwork on the glass-topped coffee table, and just as she got up to come *she began changing colour*. Please, Graeme, please believe what I write here. I'm not nuts, and I'm not kidding. I wouldn't believe this,

but I pray to God you will. Susie started changing colours; her clothes I mean. She wore jeans and a rainbow-coloured sweatshirt. As she stood up her jeans began to change from blue to, well, all the colours in the rug. In other words her jeans began to *blend* with the rug. Even the same pattern. This blending spread upwards, like a rising tide, only it all happened within seconds. And there she stood, not in blue denim and yellow and blue and green but in clothes of Persian carpet. She hadn't even noticed."

Graeme Howarth looked straight into Allan Lombard's frowning brown eyes, and saw serious contemplation occurring behind them. Lombard was worried now, it seemed. Graeme felt relieved, and kept reading, unwilling to let the doctor's concern slacken:

"Mary noticed, and grabbed her hand to pull Susie off the rug, and I jumped up from my chair. But before anything could be done I had two children, holding hands, wearing clothes of Persian carpet. Both were now very frightened, as we all were. Then dear Susie sank, as if in quicksand, *into* the carpet! I called out to Mary, 'Pull! Pull!' She did, but to no avail. In fact, I could see that she was herself slipping into that wretched rug! Within a few seconds they were both up to their chest, then their necks, and then they disappeared, without a trace, into the rug. Aside from my shouts there had been no other noises; no creaks, cries, nothing."

"Kate hysterically jumped forward, before I could stop her, like any mother would," Graeme quoted, looking up at Lombard as often as he could.

Lombard had his eyes down, as if he were staring at a beetle or a spider on the carpet. He wasn't, as Graeme knew. Lombard was lost in concentration. Steven's words, from Graeme's mouth, were all that mattered.

Graeme kept reading: "But by God, my dear brother, I wish Kate hadn't jumped forward. She landed ankle deep

in the rug, then waded (I know this sounds crazy) another step until she was waist deep. Then she did what shook me to my bones. She held her breath and plunged her head under the surface! Now let me add that the surface was not water; *it was our cheap Persian carpet!* After twenty or thirty seconds—I don't know; it may have been longer—she threw herself up with a great gasp and wiped her hair from her wet face. It didn't look wet to me, but it must have felt wet. 'I see them, Steve. I see them!' she shouted. 'They're standing in a field, and still holding hands. They're okay, but I couldn't reach them. They're looking around for us. I'll go in again. I'll get them.' I called out for Kate to wait for me, but it was too late. Seeing her kids in there—where, I don't darned well know—was too much for her. She took another great breath and plunged her head back in. This time she disappeared underneath and didn't re-surface."

This all sounded so bizarre that the doctor politely asked Graeme to re-read the last five or six lines. He thanked him for doing so, and asked him to read on. Graeme's dry voice continued the unusual, uncomfortable recital of his brother's email:

"I was scared, mighty scared. I still am. I tried to grab her before she went back under but felt her slip through my fingertips. All I had left were wet fingers, and not wet with water, just with wetness, if that makes sense. It probably doesn't but I can't explain it differently right now. No time. I have a wife and two children *inside my rug!* So I tried to hook them out. If this sounds pathetic, I agree it was, but I couldn't think of anything else to do. I tried lowering the broom into the rug, but given that I couldn't see down into it—it still looked just like any lounge carpet—I really had no idea if the broom was getting through to where they were. It was going somewhere, I can tell you that. I'd push the broom in and it'd disappear right up to where I gripped it. I had to be careful myself, not to put my feet accidentally on the rug, or let my hands

touch the surface. Anyway, nothing worked. I couldn't 'hook' anything or anyone with the brush end of the broom."

"Then I decided to send a message through. I ran to the kitchen and got the coffee jar, emptied it and wiped it as clean as I could, and stuffed a note into it. Then I rushed back and sent it through the rug. Yeah, Graeme, I should tell you that my note promised to rescue them. I'd get the police, I said, and then I'd come myself. Then I put the coffee jar on the rug. At first it wouldn't sink. It just sort of floated, like you'd imagine it would on a lake. It was floating half in and half out of the rug, not heavy enough to sink. So I pushed it under with the broom, and it did sink, with a slurp. So at least Kate and the kids know we're coming for them."

Graeme anxiously probed the doctor for his thoughts so far, but the young South African brushed aside his question with a dismissive wave of the hand and shake of the head. Finish reading the email, he gently instructed. Graeme did, pleased he was almost at its end.

"Okay, here you have to take special note of what I'm writing. I rang the local cops, three times, and they would not come. They thought I was drunk. True, I was hysterical, and I'm sure I sounded it, but I was not drunk. So now you know that you're my only hope; my life-line. Please go to the Police and bring them here. You may find us all here, back again and safe. I'm praying you will. Or you may find us all gone. The point I'm trying to make is that I'm about to go into the rug too. I have to. You'll agree. I know you'd do the same. I can't leave Kate and the kids in there. God only knows what's happening to them even as I type this email. Please, Graeme, please take my email very seriously. I'm signing off now. Goodbye. I dearly hope to see you soon. —Steve."

The general practitioner's office seemed far smaller than it had ten minutes earlier. He and Graeme Howarth

searched each other's face with eyebrows raised and lips pursed. "Now, let's be clear here, Graeme. Did Steven ring the police as he claimed?" Lombard asked.

"I'm afraid he did. I checked, and the Police confirmed that my brother, who's well known to them, unfortunately, had rung them several times. He sounded distraught, but that wasn't unusual for Steve, so they did nothing about it. Steve was right: the cops thought he was drunk or had gone off his medication again."

"And *has* he been taking his medication, Graeme? Do you know? It's a serious business, this."

"I don't know, I'm afraid. And given that Steve lives alone in that damp, pokey flat, I don't really know what he gets up to."

Lombard pulled on his jacket as Graeme talked. He grabbed his leather case, placed a blood pressure reader, numerous pill bottles and several syringes in it, and fished around on his desk for his car keys.

"Right," he sighed, looking worried and uptight, "let's go see Steve. Will you drive?"

Confounded

I am not yet sure how to explain the extraordinary events of 3 August 2002, but I do believe they need recording in some form, given the huge impact they have had on several lives, including mine. Everything seemed entirely normal as I drove to The Warehouse with my wife Francis and my daughters Sherryl and Angie. The girls love The Warehouse. Well, who doesn't? It sells nearly everything and its prices are good. It's also so big you can explore its aisles for hours without getting bored. Given that I'm an "impulse shopper," I seldom leave without buying something: a cheap CD, light-bulbs, scissors, vitamins, liquorice.

It was no different this time; after about an hour we headed for the checkout counters, laden with stuff we liked but probably didn't need. As always, I had light-bulbs; two of 40 watts and two of 75. Sherryl had a cheap 1980s compilation CD, featuring Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet, Culture Club and so forth. Angie had a cheap imported fairy statuette, which looked far better than its $9.50 price, and Francis had some extra tea-spoons. We're always buying and losing tea-spoons.

The young girl at the cash-desk looked at our collected pile, forced a feeble smile and, without interest, asked how we were. Francis said fine and I pulled my EFTPOS card from my wallet.

"Would you like to withdraw any cash with that, sir?" the girl politely asked—a question she had doubtless been taught to ask every customer.

"No thanks," I said; at least that's what I *tried* to say.

My mouth contorted the two easy English words into a stream of gibberish as my mind struggled to understand what had seized power inside my head and forced my facial muscles into rebellion.

"No thanks," I tried to say again as my face flushed with embarrassed blood and my voice uttered more nonsensical sounds.

The checkout girl's face showed a flash of panic before her training took over. "I'm sorry, sir," she then said with impressive deliberation, "I can't understand what language you're speaking. Can—you—speak—English?"

Her question was loud and slow, as if I were retarded or deaf. I tried to tell her that I was neither retarded nor deaf, but another stream of meaningless sounds flowed fluently.

Francis started to tell me to stop fooling around but stopped mid-sentence when she saw the confusion and fear in my eyes. "What's wrong, hun? What's happened? Say something!"

She demanded the impossible, as I discovered when I tried to tell her I wasn't able to speak. I couldn't tell her anything, of course, as she discovered when she received a string of sounds that sounded like a Beatles song played backwards.

My heart raced and I thrust my chest out and mouth open in a convulsive gasp as if I were trying to swallow the English language. I tasted nothing except frightened disappointment and stood there shaking and breathing in and out with exaggerated heaves as if I'd just finished a 100-metre sprint. A stroke, I tried to say. I've had a stroke. I can't speak. My brain and mouth won't work together.

Francis stared with terror as Angie burst into tears and Sherryl bashed my back as if I had something stuck in my throat. Oh no, she'll try the Heimlich Manoeuvre next, I thought as I tried to assure her with nods and

deliberately slower, calmer breaths that I wasn't dying.

"What's wrong? What's wrong? Tell me," Francis kept saying as I slumped forward onto the counter, knocking tea-spoons in all directions.

I didn't feel ill, only frightened. I couldn't tell if I had a headache, or if I had any other symptoms of what I thought to be a stroke, but I knew I couldn't make words anymore. My eyes felt wider than they'd ever been. My lids were so far apart I thought, ludicrously, that my eyeballs might drop onto the counter. I tried to blink and found I could. I also learned that if I forced my eyes to relax they obeyed, at least partially.

The poor young assistant watched our spectacle with shock. No staff training course had prepared her for a babbling madman, or a stroke victim, or whatever I was. She stood motionless, mouth open, holding Angie's fairy statuette and running it through the bar-code scanner, time and beeping time again. I watched in stupefied silence as Francis finally took the fairy from the girl's hands and asked her, firmly but with a clear tremor in her voice, to ring for an ambulance.

"I'll call for the manager," the assistant said in an emotionless voice. And she did. She pushed the button next to the microphone on her counter and asked, over the huge store's public address system, for the manager to come to her counter. Before he or she could arrive, however, the two women from the Help Desk came and, with polished professionalism, helped.

"What seems to be the problem, Ma'am," one asked Francis.

"My husband can't speak. I think he's had a stroke. Will you please get him an ambulance! Please!"

"Of course I will. Sandra, ring for an ambulance as quickly as you can. Tell them it's a suspected stroke and the gentleman's not well and can't speak. Go. Hurry. Get

going."

Sandra scuttled off while the older and more dominant of the Help Desk women strode across to a wall of soft-drink and tore a small bottle of lemonade from a plastic-wrapped cardboard crate. "Here, sir. Have a drink. It might just help a bit."

I gulped down several mouthfuls and tried to clear my throat for speech but gave up when the same strange sounds flowed forth.

"Damn," I said, which came out entirely differently. I sank into the chair the woman had thoughtfully pushed behind me, and rocked back and forth in a state of intense distress, gasping every minute or so as waves of panic swept over me. I even breathed into the brown paper bag this wonderfully efficient woman had given me. It helped, a bit.

The ambulance arrived after an eternity of waiting, curled up on a Warehouse chair that still had an old price-tag on a leg, while the crowd of concerned or nosy customers and staff stood on tip-toes to get a better look at me. Francis hugged me tightly and soothed me with strokes of my hair. My God, I thought, I'm a baby again—and even talk like one. Yet I hugged her back, also tightly, and felt the kids also pat and prod me reassuringly.

"Sir, can you understand me? Can you tell what I'm saying?" an ambulance officer asked in a strong European accent. I nodded, not wanting to attempt speech while my audience listened with such riveted attention. "Do you hurt?" he asked as he gently stretched my arms up and out, one at a time. I shook my head, and then let him rock it up and down ever so gently while he felt the back of my neck. His companion helped me slide onto the stretcher, to which they secured me with Velcro straps. Were they worried I'd run away, or fall off? Thank God, I thought, I'm going to hospital. I'm going to survive.

I stared up at the Warehouse's mile-high ceiling as they wheeled me out to the ambulance. Huh, I thought, this really is just a big warehouse. I could see the inner roof's silver building paper, held tight by wire netting. I felt Francis's hand holding mine as we left that vast red and white shopper's paradise.

Francis and the girls joined me in the ambulance, and helped the attendant with the European accent to keep me calm as we headed to the hospital. He was an attentive, terribly courteous man, who apologised every time he had to poke and prod me as he checked my blood pressure and performed several other tests.

"It's okay," I told him, my garbled words causing him to stop and stare at me with owl's eyes.

"What did you say? Please, say it again," he asked with a quivering voice. I craned my neck to get a better look at the man who had pulled away from me in fright. He had backed away and now squatted, staring madly. We all stared back, shocked by his reaction to my incomprehensible sounds.

"What's wrong?" Francis demanded, terrified that the attendant had spotted some dreadful symptom. "Why did you pull away like that? You're frightening us. Say something." The girls were scared, and clutched their mother's hands and buried their heads into her chest.

The ambulance attendant's eyes still bulged with fright, and for several second he said nothing.

Francis prodded him for an answer, and he finally exclaimed "He spoke to me!"

"I know," said Francis. "and I realise that he's not making much sense. That's why we're taking him to hospital, right? But I don't understand what's wrong with you."

The attendant no longer stared. He squeezed his

eyes tight and muttered what looked, from his hand gestures, like a prayer of some sort.

"Hey you. Stop it. You're scaring us," Francis snapped.

"What's he doing?" I said aloud in my own garbled language, not expecting an answer to what I knew wasn't coming out as meaningful English. But I had to say something. "Please mister," I tried to say to the ambulance attendant. "Tell us what the matter is. Are you in pain? God, it's nothing from me, is it?"

This attempt at speech elicited an immediate response: a shriek and a cry of "Forgive me, forgive me!" from the petrified man who cringed near me in the back of that ambulance.

"What's he saying?" Francis howled. "He's making the same garbled sounds as you. What's happening? Now he's not making sense either."

"What are you talking about? Who can't speak either? This guy just pleaded with me to forgive him. I heard him, perfectly clearly. Hey fella. This is getting weird. Speak to my wife, will you. She's scared that you're flipping out."

Of course I knew that the sounds coming out of my mouth were impossible to understand. I could feel my tongue and lips twisting in ways I hadn't intended, and I could hear the cacophonous jumble of sounds I made. I felt embarrassed uttering anything, but the situation was developing a madness that was frightening to everyone inside that travelling metal cell.

The attendant wailed at the sound of my voice, crying, almost hysterically, "God be praised. God be praised. Your servant begs forgiveness. Oh God be praised."

"He's doing it again," Francis hissed with accusatory venom, as if the attendant was threatening to murder us or commit some other foul deed. "He's talking gibberish

as well. Make him stop."

I sat bolt upright on my locked-down stretcher. I reached both hands out and clasped the shoulders of the medic, who continued fervently praying. Only now tears streamed down his cheeks onto his tanned neck. He was clearly distraught.

"Can you understand me, Francis?" I asked, looking directly into her eyes. She clearly knew I was addressing her but had no idea what I was saying.

"What? Try slowing down, one word at a time," she said.

"Can *you* understand me?" I asked the attendant, who met my eyes with a look of pathetic torment as he nodded, although not convincingly. "I don't understand any of this. I know I've had a stroke, and can't speak. That's clear. No-one understands a word I say, yet every time I mumble my blather in your direction you have a kind of wailing fit. Tell me, *can* you understand my words?"

I didn't get an answer immediately. The ambulance had obviously reached the hospital. I felt it slow, manoeuvre and stop. The attendant remained frozen, and didn't move even when his colleague, the driver, opened the rear door and demanded to know why I wasn't lying down and why his mate looked so upset.

"You won't understand," the attendant told the driver, "but don't move this man just yet. I need to speak with him."

The driver tried to push past him, but was stopped by a bold "No! I must speak with him. Two minutes, please Barrie." The driver looked at Francis, who shook her head in dismay and said something I couldn't hear. She took the driver by the arm and moved away from the ambulance so that they could speak in confidential whispers. Whatever they were saying was fiery, but Barrie

returned and said to the medic, “Antanas, two minutes. Then we get him inside, with no excuses.”

Antanas—the guy with the accent—knelt beside me as I sat on my stretcher in the ambulance, completely unsure of what was happening. Only Antanas seemed to know. He whispered to himself, and then to me. His words burned my brain.

“Sir,” he said in a meek fashion, “I cannot understand how it is that you, a New Zealander, have come to know my language. I have never met a New Zealander who has even visited Lithuania, let alone taken time to learn my language. And yet you speak with my exact dialect, as I learned it in my home city of Klaipeda. Tell me how you came to speak my language, and then tell me how you know about my life.”

“I can’t speak Lithuanian. That’s *nuts*. Tell him Francis! He thinks I can speak Lithuanian.”

Again, only an idiotic steam of nonsensical sounds came out of my mouth.

“I can’t understand you, sweetheart,” Francis wailed. “You know I can’t. Please don’t worry. If it’s a stroke they can do wonders. And your speech may return. Don’t worry. …It’ll be okay. Sshh!”

“See, my friend, it’s not nuts. You speak perfect Lithuanian,” Antanas insisted. “Even if your wife cannot understand that you are speaking any language at all. She thinks you’ve had a stroke.”

“You understood me when I said ‘nuts’? You can understand me now?”

“Yes, yes, yes. I understand you. It is a miracle from God. Do you not know what you said to me five minutes ago, on the way here?”

“I think I only asked you to chill out and stop scaring my family. I asked what was wrong, didn’t I?”

"My friend. You did not. Your words to me will remain in my mind forever. You told me in perfect Lithuanian—and in my own dialect—that it was time to forgive myself and to let go of the pain that was eating me. You told me that God had chosen to speak through you. You told me that the Lord God wanted me to return to my family."

"Wait," I said. "This can't be true. I can't be speaking to you. You cannot be understanding me. This is madness."

New tears brimmed in Antanas's eyes. He wiped them away and said, "Thank you Lord. Thank you. Yes, I will return to my parents."

Hadn't he understood this time, I asked? Could he repeat back to me what I had just said?

"Yes, you just added a word from the Lord. My parents had forgiven me and wanted me to return."

"No. I did not say that."

"Before Christmas? Yes, I am grateful, Lord."

"Wait, you're not responding to what I'm saying. This is crazy. Am I hallucinating?" I felt panic mounting inside and called for my wife. "Francis, come here!"

"I heard you. I heard you! You can speak again. It's a miracle. Say something," she called as she rushed over.

"*Something!* Hah. I said it. There. Yes, yes, yes, I can speak"

"It is indeed a miracle," Antanas stammered, equally shocked that English was cascading off my tongue while Francis hugged me and wept.

"Look, I'm kind of spooked here, gentlemen," Barrie the driver said. "But I want you taken inside and examined. Even if it was just a small stroke, it was a stroke, or something, nonetheless. You're going to be seen by the doctors if I have to piggy-back you inside

myself."

"No, I can walk—and talk!"

As it happened, the doctors kept me in the hospital for two days and submitted me to a frightful barrage of tests. No-one, including the neurologists, could find any evidence that I'd suffered even a slight stroke. I seemed perfectly functional and "eminently healthy," they said. They put my Warehouse incident down to an unusually severe panic attack, and blamed my hectic work schedule for piling stress upon me. They prescribed Aropax, a daily anti-depressant, and Clonazepam, for any occasional panic attacks, and discharged me with dire warnings about the potential costs of my workaholic nature. I nodded politely and agreed to take their prescribed drugs, but knew inside that I hadn't had a panic attack at The Warehouse. I'd had an encounter with a Lithuanian paramedic's god.

I remain uncertain why Antanas Linkevcius's god chose me as his mouth-piece—I'm not even a Christian—but that he did so I have no doubt. Antanas told me his story as I lay in hospital that first evening. He'd been a medical student in Klaipeda, on the Baltic coast of Lithuania. One spring day about seven years ago he had taken his young sister out on his little yacht with him. Caught by an unexpectedly savage gust his yacht flipped and the young girl drowned. Antanas blamed himself, as his parents unkindly did initially, and he felt so heartbroken, and such a failure as a son, that he had abandoned his studies and fled to Australia. After a short time there, unhappily, he crossed the Tasman and settled in Palmerston North. He ached with guilt and shame and felt abandoned even by the god he'd worshipped all his life.

That is, until the day he picked me up, purportedly a stroke victim in the local Warehouse. In the Lithuanian language that I'd never learned *I spoke to him*, or rather

his god did through me—to my total ignorance—and forgave him.

Yes, Antanas's god forgave him, conveyed his everlasting love, and told him to return home. And he has. He is intensely happy, he tells us in regular letters, and is a comfort to his parents. He may even resume his medical studies. He can afford to. He'd hardly spent a cent of his wages here.

It's Hard being Eighty

It's hard being eighty, and even harder being the grandmother of the saddest girl I've met in my long life. I've been living with her—Sally—and her mother and father, Alistair and Louise, on a sheep station that stretches from the shore of Lake Pukaki up to the peaks of the Ben Ohau range. Those great rocky brutes stand grey in summer and white in winter and rob our house of sunlight an hour early each day. That's how much extra day we'd have if we lived in Twizel, the dying little town that lies on a wild-grass plain, gasping final breaths, fifteen minutes drive away.

I came here five years ago, unable to live alone in Wanaka after cancer took my dear husband of fifty-three years (and fiancé, before that, of another seven). I miss him, terribly, and await God's call to join him without any trepidation. I only fear a painful escape, caused, say, by cancer or some other devilish disease.

But I worry, I do admit, that I'll die regretting the failure of my efforts for my darling grand-daughter Sally. My only excuse, the one I'll give God when he asks, is that it's hard being eighty and powerless.

When I first moved here—during a spring of tiny long-tailed lambs skipping on clumsy legs and of warm breezes that thawed snows high above—my grand-daughter had not yet fallen victim to black depression. The curse of puberty first fell upon her as an evil shadow about two years later, when she was twelve. Now, that may sound like an awfully dramatic statement, but in truth Sally's developing body ruined her life. Maybe, if I'm bold

enough, and can do it without disrespect, I'll ask God why he gave breasts to a twelve-year-old girl.

Sally had always been a gentle, quiet and introverted child, with a love of walking alone during her free time, and reading for hours in bed before switching off her light. Even when she came to stay with us in Wanaka during occasional holidays she said little, at least to us. She talked to the sparrows she fed with seed and toast, and even befriended a magpie. Clive and I would watch her from the kitchen window as we did the dishes. Sally would be crouching or sitting on our shingle path chatting happily to the birds that hopped on spindly legs as they pecked at the food she offered. The magpie's head jerked side to side as it watched her with one eye at a time. It'd eat from Sally's fingers and she'd whisper to it. Only she and the birds know what they discussed. If we tried to join her, even quietly, the birds would resent the intrusion and scatter. Sally would merely smile and say, "Oh Grandma, you frightened them."

I never saw anger in the eyes of this sweetheart, my favourite grandchild, who clearly loved us; bless her. She'd sit with Clive as he hunted through Stanley Gibbons catalogues to learn the rarity and value of postage stamps. He had a vast collection, started before the Great War. And Sally would help me bake or shop at our little store, holding my hand whenever she could. Oh, how we loved her too.

When Clive died and I moved to live at my son's house on the shore of Lake Pukaki near Mount Cook, Sally would lie with me, silent but truly sympathetic, reading on my bed. Sometimes she'd cuddle in to feel my warmth or impart her own.

"Don't worry, Grandma," I remember her saying, revealing a sensitivity of spirit unmatched by any child I'd ever met. "Until we die and go to Granddad I'll look after you. You can talk to me about the things you used to

share with him."

I believed her. Who could doubt her sincerity?

Sally's two sisters had already left home by that time. They'd met young farmers at dances or pubs in Twizel and had married them in what even I considered a hurry. They called in occasionally and talked endlessly, but without much engagement, about the farms and stations they worked or lived on. I love them of course, but not as I love my Sally.

They paid her scant attention when they visited, which annoyed me, but apparently not her. I said nothing, although Sally one day whispered: "Its okay, Gran. I'd rather talk with you anyway. They're a bit superficial, aren't they?" Where had she even learned such an adult word? I remember bursting with laughter and having to say "oh, nothing" when everyone wanted to know the joke.

Sally wandered for ages every day in the great expanses of rough and sheep-chewed grass, and would return with her hands full of wool she'd picked off the barbed wire fences that stretched forever up through the hills behind the house to the shadow-casting peaks. When she returned she'd bring me the long, crimpy wool (especially from late autumn and early winter coats) and together we'd pick out the brambles, insects and other things that were "snagged," as Sally put it, in the tufts ("staples," I called them, remembering from my earlier years that wool clumps were called that). Sometimes she'd quietly tell me about the things she saw: rabbits and hares, hawks and all the sheep she seemed to know by name. But mostly she'd just sit silently and we'd clean the wool together before she took it to her bedroom. I wasn't sure what she did with it, but she once told me, exaggerating I thought, that she had "a whole roomful".

When I noticed Sally wearing her padded nylon jacket inside the house, and seldom removing it, except when

wearing her favourite loose jersey, I suspected the reason was the same as the one that, nearly seven decades earlier, had caused me equal distress and confusion: she was developing breasts too large for a twelve-year-old. She was small for twelve and very young in her facial features, so her bust seemed grossly out of place. Poor sweet kid, I thought, but said nothing so that I wouldn't embarrass her further.

Now I wish, dearly so, that I had discussed it with her, or that her mother had. But Louise hadn't even seemed to notice. She was a busy woman, I admit, and had, especially in shearing season, to cook for what seemed an army of sweating young men in singlets. Yet her daughter should have been more important. Oh, maybe that's just what all grandmothers think, with the blessing of hindsight and the passing of decades since they've abandoned the responsibilities of parenthood.

Sally began to change. She became more reclusive and sometimes even a bit argumentative with her mother. I never saw her argue with Alistair, her dad, or even talk to him for that matter, aside from small-talk at dinner. And she spent far more time outside, wandering alone along the fence lines and gathering wool from the savage barbs. We'd still sit together after dark, normally in my room, picking clean the wool or discussing stories from my childhood or later life. Sally liked my stories, yet seldom said much about her own experiences. School was simply "fine, Gran".

She would talk about the hills, though, and especially about a hawk that she called Silver. "Named after Long John Silver," she said. "Well, he's only got one leg," she patiently replied to my fascinated prodding for an explanation. "I think he must have stepped in a possum trap and had one leg taken off. But you can barely tell when he's flying. Oh, he's awesome, Grandma. He flies with barely any movement of his wings, except when he's

taking off, of course. He only has trouble when he eats. Then he has to balance on one leg."

When I asked what Long John Silver ate –"no, he's just 'Silver,' Gran; a bird can't have a long name"—she explained that he ate mice, small rabbits and "road kill". Eeww! I said, screwing up my face and making Sally smile and squeeze my arm. "No, Gran, he's got to eat. He even comes to me, you know. He doesn't come down onto my arm yet, but I'm training him. He'll swoop down onto a branch near me."

Although amazed that anyone could "train" a wild hawk, I didn't doubt her for a minute. If anyone could convince an animal that she wouldn't hurt it, Sally could. I only wished I could climb up the hills to watch, as Sally repeatedly asked me to, but my old legs and tired heart ruled out anything more strenuous than a five-minute walk on flat ground. So I had to make do with her vivid descriptions of sheep and birds, and the lovely dreams they gave me.

Every now and then, however, my dreams of Sally weren't full of blue skies and smiles and God's best hawk-trainer. Sometimes I'd jar awake with wet cheeks after dark skies, howling winds, aggressive male voices and whimpering voices pleading "no, no" shredded my sleep like Silver's lone claw did to its prey.

Sometimes the dreams seemed so vivid I'd swear they were real and my awakening was the dream. Then I'd open the curtain to see a peaceful sky and I'd realise that my dreams needed to be denied space in my thoughts. I drove them out, and paid them no heed during the day.

Sally's descent into moodiness continued, with her mother putting it down to "teenage hormones" and her father remaining oblivious to her discontent. She never directed any unhappiness my way, but I saw it in her eyes: a sadness that sometimes caused me to cry in

private.

We remained best friends, with my sweetheart helping me with all those things that became more laborious to my tired old arms. And she still sat with me or lay on my bed most evenings, apparently preferring that to watching television with her parents and the farmhands that often joined them. We continued scouring her gathered wool, talking of birds and wildlife, and reading.

Oh how she could read. By the time of her thirteenth birthday she'd read the works of the Brontë sisters and had repeatedly read George Eliot's *Silas Marner* and *The Mill on the Floss*. I'd giggle to her about any description of love than ventured on the raunchy, not that there were many or that they were at all graphic. Of course they weren't. And I'd complain with her about life's injustices when love remained unfulfilled. In *The Mill on the Floss,* for example, which I'd bought Sally after having adored the story myself as a young woman, Maggie Tulliver breaks off her romance with the man she loves after his father ruined her family's small mill business. Confused, she runs off with her cousin's fiancé, reconsiders, repents, and returns. But it is too late. The book ends with her death in a flood. It also *caused* a flood: of tears, as Sally and I read the ending together.

Yet Sally said nothing of her own worries, even though her thinning cheeks and dark bags under her eyes revealed how difficult the change to adolescence had become. I tried to winkle it out of her, but she wouldn't share what was on her mind.

"I'm okay, Gran. I'm more worried about you than about me," was all she'd say. Of course, hearing this melted my heart and made me increasingly anxious for her, but she'd become tight-lipped or change the subject. "I know you are, Grandma," she's say, stroking me affectionately (yes, like a dog or cat) when I insisted, often, that I was always there for her.

Her parents were a dead loss. Louise would say, “Well, if she won’t talk you can’t force her to. Just leave her and she’ll be fine. It’s normal behaviour for a teenager.” Alistair would say, “Mum, talk to Louise about it. I don’t understand kids. But I’m sure things are fine.”

The day I knew things were *not* fine, and learned the reason why they weren’t, came shortly after Sally’s fifteenth birthday. It was almost dinner time and Sally was up in the hills, still trying to convince Silver that he should fly down and perch on her arm. I was sitting in the lounge, dozing in front of the television, when I felt so cold around my legs that I decided to get a blanket. Propped up against my bedroom door was a gorgeous paper-wrapped parcel, complete with a tied ribbon.

“To dear Grandma,” said a label written in red felt-tip pen. I smiled and took the parcel into the bedroom. What has that girl gone and bought me now? I thought with joy. Sally had often bought me small gifts or books after school in Twizel. This time, though, the gift wasn’t from a shop. It was from the natural world that she and I both loved. It was a cardigan: a beautiful white cardigan with brown flecks, knitted from loosely spun wool. ‘Oh, that girl!’ I thought, truly delighted.

“Dear Grandma,” her simple handwriting stated atop the letter included in the package, “You know how we cleaned and every now and then carded the types and aligned the fibres of all the wool I gathered along the fences. Well, dearest Grandma, I made this cardigan for you from that wool. I had Mrs Burton in Twizel spin it and then I knitted the cardigan myself.” I felt amazed by her industry and imagination, and wept a little thinking of the love that shone from the slightly waxy wool. “You are my best friend and I love you dearly,” her note continued. “Please listen to the cassette, and don’t blame yourself.”

Inside the cardigan I found a black audio cassette, a music tape she’d obviously recorded over, judging by the

stickers she'd placed over the original labels. I felt confused and a little concerned but walked back into the lounge to find a cassette recorder.

That was the worst day of my life. I think about it often and, yes, I do blame myself for not doing more. I'm pleased Alistair is locked up in Christchurch's Addington Prison, although I'm still disgusted by the lightness of his sentence. Five years! With the usual reductions for "good behaviour"—what a perverse word to use for this man—he'll get out in two-and-a-half. That's not right; *it's just not.* Two-and-a-half years for sexually violating my sweetheart, his own daughter, for three years? That's not justice.

The audio tape convicted him, of that I'm sure. It devastated me, as it did Louise when she heard it after finding me shocked and speechless in the lounge. But the jury's verdict doubtless sprang—and it came fast, after only a thirty-minute deliberation—from the horror story of the search for Sally in the foothills of the Ben Ohau Range. Her body wasn't located for three days. Police finally found it, and Alistair's rifle, which she'd taken from his wardrobe, next to a tiny stream in a cleft in some rocks.

I cannot believe this evil happened. I visit Sally's grave, and always wear my cardigan. I have asked to be buried in it. I love her and miss her, yet somehow I reluctantly survive the acute feeling of loss and longing that will haunt me until I see her with my Clive. Until then I continually dream of her, and a one-legged hawk.