

Short Stories

By Dante Harker

A New Dawn

Chapter one

A blue pill and shoes covered in blood

'Hold on a second, I can hear the lump heaving his fat load out of the car,' Dawn typed. She added 'BRB' to let her friend Laurie from the Psychotic Housewives forum know that she would only be away from the computer for a short while.

Before her husband made it into the house, Dawn rushed through to the kitchen, put on her apron and busied herself until Fred came in.

'Love, how far off's dinner?' Fred called through to the kitchen.

'Great,' Dawn whispered under her breath. Partly because he hadn't asked her how she was or for that matter even said 'hello' – instead he'd just plonked himself in front of the TV – but mostly because it was clear from the slur in his voice that he'd been drinking. It was not that this was unusual but, over this last year, Fred had gone from being

hammered only at the weekends to now pretty much every night. If he hadn't have been self-employed as a taxi driver, Dawn was sure her husband would have been fired years before for being drunk on the job.

'Did you hear me love? I'm hungry in here.' Fred called, his voice starting to tinge with anger.

'I'm just serving up now.' Dawn called back as she pulled a shepherd's pie out of the oven.

'Did you not hear me?' Fred asked, this time not from the living room but from the entrance to the kitchen. His hulking nineteen-stone frame filled the doorway. Most of the nineteen-stone bulk was formed by his ever-expanding beer-gut, which looked like an over-inflated beach ball forced under a grossly inadequate t-shirt. His gut, desperate for escape dripped like a lump of molten wax over the top of his jeans. His stretch marks, like train tracks, were highlighted by the lobster red he'd managed to colour himself by sitting, shirtless in the pub's beer garden for the best part of Saturday.

'It's all ready for you, I was just about to fetch it in.' Dawn scooped a large helping of the pie onto a plate and offered it to her husband.

‘What’s that muck?’ He asked, his growing temper flushed his face, forcing blood to make his split cobweb veins vibrate.

‘Shit, shit,’ Dawn thought, ‘this can’t happen now, I’m not ready, this isn’t the plan!’

‘It’s your favourite darling; I know how much you like shepherd’s pie.’ Dawn did her best to keep her voice calm, she could see Fred wobbling, he was more than a little drunk today and perhaps a soothing tone might placate him.

Fred wasn’t soothed. ‘It used to be my favourite, but when you serve it every fucking night what am I supposed to do?’

Dawn cringed at the ‘f’ word; she hated swearing, always had, and Fred generally respected that but, when he drank, he was a different person. He certainly wasn’t the person she’d married nearly thirty years ago. Back then, Fred had been sporty in a doing, not just watching, kind of way. He had been an apprentice mechanic, keen to have his own garage one day. But that ‘one day’ never came and, if it had, Fred would have been too drunk to see it.

Dawn watched her husband’s eyes, he was waiting for her to say something, but she had nothing left to say, at least not out loud. In her head her thoughts were popping, her mind

scrambled, torn between anger that this was happening today, when all her plans were in place for tomorrow and a desperate bid to find a way out.

The silence was gasoline for Fred's temper, he wacked the plate out of Dawn's hand and screamed, 'now look at the fucking mess you've made.' Dawn looked around, the pie had gone everywhere. She watched a blob of mashed potato drip off the Formica worktop and explode like a raindrop in slow motion as it struck the white, tiled floor.

Fred, clearly expecting his wife to cry and beg for him to stop, was thrown by her continued hush. With a need to fill the accusing silence, he grabbed Dawn's hair, pulled her face close to his and, before throwing her to the floor, screamed 'this place isn't going to clean it's shitting self. Get your scrawny body down there and sort it out. '

As he screamed a jet of tobacco and beer-smelling spit sprayed over Dawn's face but this was the least of her worries. The side of her head hit the cupboard as she was thrown to the floor. Dazed, Dawn managed to get to her knees and look up. Fred's fat was still vibrating; his face flushed darkest red – darker than Dawn had seen before.

Without any cloths and unwilling to reach up to the sink to get one, Dawn started to scoop the pie into a heap. When she looked back up at her husband his look had changed. A

leer had cracked over his face, making him look like a beetroot that had been left out in the sun to crisp and decay.

‘Some bloke gave me a blue pill to try down at the pub; he said it’d perk up our sex life.’ Fred said, spit again hitting Dawn’s face.

The statement made Dawn want to laugh, but she knew better. Apart from his ridiculous timing, Dawn knew it would take more than a magic blue pill to perk up their long-dead sex life.

‘Seems to be working’ Fred said looking down, not that he could actually see his penis over the swell of his belly, but then he didn’t need to see it, he’d placed his hand on it and was outlining it through his jeans for Dawn’s viewing pleasure.

Dawn felt sick. She couldn’t remember seeing Fred’s penis for well over a year, his fat acting as a perfect cover for something that had never been of note. And the idea that he could still get it erect brought vomit up into her throat. Again, Dawn wasn’t sure what to say, though as much as she’d promised herself that she wasn’t going to beg this time, the look on her husband’s face told her she might want to reconsider.

Fred pulled at the buttons on his jeans. He was desperate to free his manhood, though the first few buttons just released more fat. Eventually, and with a gasp of accomplishment, he managed to set his cock free. It stood proud, not proud of his gut or for that matter proud of his orange peel thighs, but it was at least erect. The blue pill had given Fred his first erection in months; his penis looked like a ghost-white pencil with a glistening purple grape for a rubber.

Fred took a step towards Dawn's face and said, 'while you're down there love.'

Dawn didn't move. Her eyes darted around looking for a solution, for a way out, again she cursed that Fred couldn't have lasted one more day without an outburst. 'I have plans,' Dawn thought and then her eyes fell on the broken plate.

Not letting his wife's unwillingness be an obstacle to emptying his load, Fred stepped forward until he'd pinned Dawn in a corner. 'Come on love, I know how much you like sucking it!' Fred said, the anger slipping back into his tone.

Dawn wanted to scream, 'that's a lie, I never wanted to suck it, it always smelled like gone off mushrooms, even the thought of it makes me want to gag.' And the thought of it did make her gag, this time the sick made it up into her mouth and Dawn had to swallow hard to stop her vomit covering

her husband's shoes.

Even when they had first got together Fred's dick had smelt, he used to say it was due to all the sports training he did but, when that stopped, the smell didn't. And the more he gained weight the worse it got, in fact the last few times Dawn could remember blowing her husband, she had convinced him that it would make his cock tingle if she sucked a mint first – if it did or not she didn't care, it just filled her nose with a scent more bearable.

Fred thrust his cock forward, but this did nothing to get it nearer Dawn's mouth, instead his stomach hit her in the head and forced the back of her head to hit the cupboard behind.

'Come on love, suck it, don't make me force you; it's a shame to let this go to waste.' Dawn looked at the tiny purple-ended cock being thrust towards her, a grape with an eye that was dripping ooze.

This had gone on too long, plans or not, this had to end now. With one hand Dawn took hold of a piece of broke plate; it was hand-sized, smooth on one side, razor shape on the other. With her other hand Dawn worked her way up her husband's inner thigh, parting his legs.

‘That’s it, love, you get in there,’ Fred took her actions as a way of getting into position. He obliged by spreading his legs and bending his knees slightly. Then, as he leant back, his cock was free to move into Dawn’s mouth. For a second, Dawn thought about giving it one last suck, as a sort of goodbye but, as the offending item dripped thick ooze onto her blouse, she lifted the makeshift knife into the new opening between Fred’s thighs and manoeuvred the cutting edge against the fat. Then after summoning up years of repressed anger, Dawn sliced deep into her husband’s thigh and, in one swift movement, she severed his femoral artery.

Bright red arterial blood, under pressure, jetted from the wound. It shot across the room, like water pumping from a hose. The blood soaked the refrigerator, covering the pictures pinned there. Dawn’s heart sank as she watched the fluid soak the most recent picture of her only daughter and the granddaughter she’d never seen – a daughter who’d had the good sense to emigrate to New Zealand as soon as she was old enough.

Fred’s legs gave way and he fell forward pinning Dawn against the kitchen units. With a huge effort she pushed him backwards and he dropped back onto his padded behind.

‘What have you done?’ he asked. The draining blood took Fred’s strength. He was in shock, his face pallid. Dawn didn’t answer; instead she struggled to her feet. In life she

had always been flighty, worried about everything and everyone. As her heart raced with worry so had her metabolism and, even as she'd watched her husband balloon, she had only gained the slightest amount of weight in their thirty years of marriage. As the sun set over the playing fields their house looked onto, the room filled with an amber glow. Shards of fading light brushed over Dawn and her husband. They held each other's gaze, neither believing what was happening. The blood jetted from Fred's body so quickly that shock took him before he had time to scream, before he even had time to reason what was going on – though the look on his face, in his eyes as he held Dawn's, left no doubt that he knew he was about to die.

The bloody sight and the coppery smell of freedom, left Dawn's mind momentarily empty and from her mouth, without any thought, drifted Frank Sinatra's famous ballad.

'Somewhere beyond the sea Somewhere waitin' for me My lover stands on golden sand....'

Chapter Two

You'll need salt to get that out!

'Are you there?' Dawn typed, even after scrubbing her hands her fingers still left faint red smudges as they hit the

keys.

‘Of course, you were gone a long time – what’s the matter, did the wide-load give you some abuse again?’ Laurie’s words appeared in the chat box with the deft speed of a touch-typist.

A tear rolled from Dawn’s eye, the last she would shed for her husband. This moment had been a long time coming and, though it was a day earlier than planned, it felt strangely good.

‘I’ve done it, Laurie – I’ve killed him!’ Dawn had been talking to Laurie for over a year. They had met on a chat forum designed for stressed- out housewives. The site’s aim was to enable women to swap recipes, share money-saving tips and gripe about their husbands. The name of the site Psychotic Housewives turned out to be apt. After declining an invitation to a ‘coffee morning’ on the grounds that her husband didn’t like her going anywhere without him other than her work, Laurie had sent Dawn her first private message.

It had turned out that Laurie too had a controlling husband; she was in an abusive relationship that she was desperate to escape. From that first message they had become firm friends; they chatted online most days and though their friendship had never left the online realm – both feeling that

they could share more if they knew they would never meet – the relationship blossomed.

Laurie's pause was almost too much for Dawn; she needed a reply, needed validation.

At the bottom of the little chat box a message read, 'Laurie is typing.' Dawn held her breath; this is what she had been planning for a year. Well, not exactly this, in her plans there had been less of a mess and Fred wasn't due to die until the end of tomorrow – there was so much else that needed doing first.

'Then it's all stations are go then – it's a shame that bastard couldn't have been your last victim, but still, he's dead now and that's all that matters. What have you done with the body?'

Dawn hesitated to write 'nothing' but, as that was the truth, she was left with no option. But so she didn't sound weak or ill-prepared she added after the nothing, 'I wanted to tell you what had happened first, as soon as we've done chatting I'll move him into the freezer like I planned and give the place a good going over.'

'Excellent. And tomorrow? Do you have everything you need prepared?' Dawn watched the letters appear on the screen,

the deep red text, smooth font and considered wording offered comfort and made her feel ready for what was to come.

‘I’m set, I have all the tools I need and I’ve even made a check list, so I can keep a tally.’ Dawn made a mental note to print off the check list before work tomorrow. Dawn was about to ask Laurie if she was set also, a quick question given that Laurie only had one person to despatch, when Laurie asked:

‘A check list how does that work then?’

‘Well first there’s ‘The Angel of Death’, Beverley Allitt – she’s my first check point at four killings.’

‘Ok, and then?’ Laurie typed.

‘I have to kill at least five to match Myra Hindley’

‘Though she did have help,’ Laurie offered.

‘That she did, and of course she killed children, I’m not going to harm any little ones. Plus I want to keep my tally to only those who deserve to die.’

‘That sounds fair. And after Myra Hindley?’

‘Rosemary West at ten, but again she had help; I don’t know what it is about female killers they always seem to need a man on hand.’ Dawn clicked around her computer screen until the melodic tones of her favourite singer – Mr Sinatra – flowed from her speakers and filled the room. The house had seemed quiet, creepily so, she was so used to having her computer time accompanied by Fred’s thunderous snoring – him having eaten then fallen asleep in front of the TV – that she found the silence unsettling.

‘Well that’s all about to change; tomorrow you’ll be the UK’s greatest female serial killer – no man needed. So, after Rosemary West who then?’ They had talked about female serial killers many times, done hours of research, subscribed to countless part-work magazines exposing the lives of the world’s worst killers. But somehow going over the old ground helped keep things clear in Dawn’s head.

‘Well then it gets a little tricky, there’s Amelia Dyer, a Victorian baby killer and then two working together – Amelia Sach and Annie Walters – again child killers. The problem is that no one knows how many they killed. One, two, five, fifteen? It’s all very unclear, so I’ve put Ameila Dyer at twelve and the other two as my fifteen marker.’ As she wrote Dawn broke occasionally into song, singing as if she was wearing ear phones and, though she didn’t want anyone to hear her sing, at times she couldn’t help but sing a few words – the song at the moment was ‘I’m a fool to want you.’

‘And I guess that brings us to the grandmother of Great British serial killers – Mary Ann Cotton – now there’s a lady who knows how to rid herself of a pesky husband.’ Laurie wrote, adding a smiley face to emphasise her amusement.

Dawn glared at Laurie’s message, miffed by her beating her to the climax of her list. Mary Ann Cotton was the woman Dawn had to beat if she was going to get the title of ‘Most Prolific British Female Serial Killer’. Beating this particular crazy Victorian meant that she would surely get a part-work dedicated to her and her alone.

Still, she let Laurie’s faux pas pass and wrote, ‘that’s her, the arsenic widow – shame that once again she couldn’t just kill people who deserved it, she had to kill babies, too. Some people are just sick! Still at twenty killings she’s at the top of my ‘to beat’ list. And here’s me, still stuck at number one – still, tomorrow will be here soon enough!’

Chapter Three

Thank goodness for flat shoes

Judging by the lack of traffic on the roads, most people were doing what they were supposed to do on a Sunday morning – taking a day of rest. Dawn was on her way to work; she had a part-time job as a travel agent and, one weekend out

of four, she worked on Sunday.

Dawn looked down at her hands and when she found them still free of blood she promised she wouldn't look again. She had already washed them five times that morning. Plunging them into scalding, bleach-filled water for as long as she could bear – which seemed just long enough to form red blisters on the back of her hands.

After saying goodbye to Laurie, Dawn had set to the task of cleaning. She had been stock piling cleaning products for the last few weeks – just in case – and running down the chest freezer to make sure there would be room. It had taken the aid of a sack barrow to get her husband's corpse moved out to the garage attached to the house. And then she had used the winch that Fred had set up years before, when he had enjoyed tinkering with old cars and needed a rig to help him remove the engines. Still, once he was in the freezer and covered with bags of frozen food you couldn't even tell he was there at first glance.

The kitchen had taken a lot more work than lugging Fred's bloated, reeking body. The blood had gone everywhere; the curtains were ruined, but soon replaced – when Dawn had got them in last winter's sales she'd had the presence of mind to buy two pairs. Not because she had worried that she might get her husband's blood all over them, more because they were nice and it saved wear and tear to swap them

from time-to-time.

The blood-soaked pair, along with a ruined towel and eventually the cleaning cloths were all bagged up and with the help of a good dose of petrol they were burnt along with some general household litter, in the back garden. Bonfires were a common practice in Dawn's little country town and it didn't draw any undue attention.

Dawn glanced over at the huge scarlet bag taking up the passenger seat and smiled. Its ribbed cord exterior housed three separate compartments crammed to the brim with supplies for the day. Its contents were meticulously planned and packed – eBay and Google made some things so easy. She only hoped that its size didn't draw any unwanted attention.

At the carpark in town where Dawn always left her car was only one solitary parked car that looked lost against the vast gray tarmac. Driving past the lone silver Ford near the entrance – with a carpark the size of a football pitch it seemed silly to park right next to the only other car – Dawn parked. Walking towards the exit, Dawn noticed the Ford wasn't empty. As always when walking in public Dawn had her umbrella up, a quirk that often got her looks, but she hated being watched from the skies by God – or from lampposts or telegraph poles for that matter.

When closer, Dawn saw a woman get out of the car, then lean back in through the window, give the balding man sat in the driver's seat a kiss, thank him and then head off towards the exit.

The driver seeing Dawn's judgemental expression started the engine and left; his tyres leaving the faint smell of rubber in his haste to leave.

'What you looking at?' the woman yelled. A slight breeze caught the front of Dawn's yellow, flowery dress and lifted it slightly. The same breeze caught the woman's dress, but hers was barely more than a denim belt and even a hurricane would have to offer a £20 to lift it!

Dawn didn't reply; instead she focused on her dress's little uprising and waited for the thirty-something year-old whore to walk on. She did and as she reached the exit of the carpark she hesitated for a second before making the decision to use the toilet that stood at the carpark's entrance.

'I can't believe we get people like that in our quaint little town', Dawn said, adding, 'the sign reads- "Historic Market Town" not "Historic Whoring Town"'. Dawn chuckled at her play-on-words and sighed that there was no one around to hear her.

Reaching into her bag Dawn pulled out her day planner. Inside she found a list entitled 'Acceptable Criteria' and, running her finger down it, she paused at 'a bad person' but that was just a little too ambiguous. With a mind for expedience, Dawn pushed on because though she knew that even a woman with makeup as thick as the whore's could be in the toilet an age – application taking time – She couldn't stay in there forever. Dawn moved her finger down the list until she found 'Low Moral Values'.

That was more than enough; Dawn closed the planner, put it back in the bag and marched towards the toilet block. The building was old, probably Victorian, its bricks were red and worn and the years of use had left a stench so strong that it forced Dawn to screw up her face as she entered.

In the doorway, Dawn reached into her bag and put her hand on her tool of choice.

'What the fuck do you want? You some fucking do-gooder here to save me?' The woman was stood at the wash basins fiddling with her beached-to-death hair. In the blue fluorescent light the woman looked worn out – years of use and abuse. Her arms were lined with tracks and her wrists bore the thick scars of failed suicide attempts.

Dawn had a pang of guilt, how could she kill someone who had so clearly been ravaged by the worst the world had to offer? The pang soon passed. 'Think of the list!' Dawn's compulsive thoughts reminded her. 'Does she fit the criteria?' Knowing that she did Dawn said:

'I'm just coming to use the loo – I'm not here to save you.'

Dawn expected a fight, or at least some more verbal abuse but the woman, obviously tired, just grunted and went back to preening in the mirror. After taking three steps towards the cubical behind the woman, Dawn swung around and as one hand reached up and took a hold of the back of the whore's hair, the other hand pulled out an eight-inch hunting knife. Then with all the energy her tiny frame could muster, she slammed the knife deep into her victim's lungs. And, just as the SAS manual had informed her, the punctured air sacks were unable to issue the air needed for the prostitute to scream. Still pulling hard on her victim's hair Dawn kicked her foot into the back of the dying woman's knees and used the momentum of her fall to throw her off balance and into the open cubical.

Dawn, glad she had taken 'women's self defence' classes in her dinner hour and studied up on using your victims body weight to your advantage – a must when you're as tiny and petite as she – completed the entire offensive without getting a drop of blood onto her pretty summer dress.

Falling backwards, the whore hit her head on the toilet bowl and then lay moments from death in the stench of the hundred-year old toilet. Unable to scream, blood dripping from the side of her mouth she used her eyes to beg for it to be over. But Dawn hadn't quite finished.

Laurie had said that there was no point Dawn just stabbing the odd person here and there, or taking a gun to a bunch of people. That wouldn't give people a reason to remember her after the initial headlines. She would be nothing better than one of those crazed students or postal workers who lose it, kill as many as they can before ending their pathetically small lives. No, that wasn't for Dawn, that wouldn't make her a serial killer – she had to do more.

Reaching into her bag Dawn pulled out the 'more' – a clear bottle, with a red skull and crossbones on the top, marked Sodium Hydroxide. Dawn had searched the internet for flesh burning acid and though she had managed to compile a comprehensive list, further research had led her to a base solution instead of acid as it turned out these are much better at dissolving organic materials.

The prostitute tried to kick out with her feet, tried to back further away, but she was moments from death, her wound bleeding out onto the cold, dank floor.

Taking the stopper out of the bottle Dawn tipped the clear liquid onto the dying woman's face. The internet was right, on contact the fluid bit into her skin, like wretched fingers with inch long nails the liquid tore at the victim's skin. A last attempt at a scream caused nothing more than bubbles of blood to form around her dissolving mouth. The once pleading eyes first lost their lids and then with a milky pop the eyes themselves burst, dripping ooze instead of tears down the crater-strewn face.

Dawn's heart raced, she felt like a bee who had just found a mother load of pollen. After the second eye hissed and burst, Dawn glanced at her watch and noted she was going to be late. After nipping back over to the sink to clean the knife, Dawn placed it and the bottle back in her back. She then pulled out a thick black bin-liner, placed it over the whore's head and thanking God she'd worn her flat shoes today she stamped until she felt skull crack under foot.

Then with the agility of a woman half her age, she locked and climbed out of the two cubicles at either side of the one housing the dead woman – the growing blood pool had already run into both adjoining cubicles and by locking the doors discovery of the body could be delayed. After going back into the bloody cubical and locking the door behind her, Dawn pulled a small brush, a carrier bag and a pair of pumps out of her bag. Placing the pumps on the toilet seat, she stepped out the old pair – whose bottoms were covered

in blood – and one foot at a time stepped up onto the toilet seat and into the new footwear. Reaching down Dawn brushed away any foot prints before placing the soiled items into the carrier bag, tying it off and placing it back in her bag.

Once up and over the loo door, Dawn checked to see that no blood was running out from the cubical and with number two ticked off her list, she breezed off to work humming all the while.

Chapter Four

That's really not how you should use a claw hammer!

'Wow, Dawn, that's a big bag; you carrying a body around?' Gail, the store manageress asked before Dawn had even had chance to close the door behind her. Gail was stood in her usual place, behind her desk, eating a bagel and pawing her fat sticky fingers over the shop's latest sales figures.

'I know, I just have to drop some clothes off at the charity shop later,' Dawn replied, her reason prepared in advance.

Having worked at the travel agents for the last five years, Dawn knew the ladies there well. The store had a standard compliment of seven gossiping fish-wives, plus Gail, Dawn and Katie, the nineteen-year old office junior. Their lives

revolved around whichever reality TV show *Heat* magazine had told them to watch. They longed to be size zeros, dieting sporadically in accordance with the latest trends. For the last week it had been the Cambridge diet, a diet that suggests you can eat almost anything as long as you don't eat more than a thousand calories a day. This almost laughably low figure had led to a tetchy few days. Plummeting blood sugar levels had left the ladies feeling tired, agitated and inclined to be mean.

Gail, the worst of the bunch for fad dieting – a woman who would never lose any weight until she gave up her bottle or two of wine each night – had exploded late on Friday afternoon. Though the explosion had not been literal, the women in the office had certainly felt the impact. The weekly sales figures had come back and were woefully inadequate, which had led to Gail keeping them all twenty minutes after closing time while she berated each of them in the name of staff development.

Dawn had been told that she needed to spend less time flitting around tidying up after everyone and more time answering the phones. It was a ridiculous charge as, one, Dawn never let her phone ring past the regulation four rings – never – and, two, if she didn't tidy up after the slovenly occupants of the office, no one else would.

‘Your makeup bill must cost you a fortune – walk into another door?’ Helen, a recent divorcée asked, her face contorted into a sneer that really said – ‘we’ve been telling you for years, Dawn, to leave that bastard of a husband of yours but, as you haven’t taken our advice, we’re just going to make fun of you for being weak.’

‘I’ll show you who’s weak, let’s hope you die first!’ Dawn thought and then just smiled, rather than answering and made her way up to the staffroom on the third floor. As she passed a stack of old boxes, Dawn’s mind flicked back to the criteria list in her diary. Thankfully Helen ticked most of the extensive list but, as with the now dead prostitute, the tick in bold would be at the side of ‘low moral values’ – for the last year, since her divorce Helen had regaled the office woman with tales of her conquests. Her husband of 25 years had been her first love and, until their divorce, the only man with whom she’d had sex – something two or three men a week had soon put right.

Every Monday morning or, that very day if she was unlucky enough to have shifts on the same weekend, Helen would captivate the girls with stories of her conquests. Dawn found the idea of a 46-year-old woman hanging around with her two daughters in bars and nightclubs repugnant – especially when the eldest daughter, at 22, already had three children of her own.

This was a view that only Dawn seemed to house; she had once asked why Helen couldn't just enjoy being a grandmother, rather than doing God-knows- what with men her daughter's age. It was a question that found only dissent from the other women. 'Why can't Helen enjoy herself? Why should only men be able to go out with younger partners? What's too old these days?'

Dawn had acquiesced. She just smiled politely and made more coffee. What she'd wanted to say was, 'of course Helen can have fun, but pouring her fat sagging body into one of her daughter's slutty outfits and having sex with teenage boys at the back of a nightclub, before eating then throwing up a kebab is not fun – it's sick and deserves to be punished!'

Dawn always made the coffee and this morning was no exception. She switched on the kettle and then took a box of homemade muffins out of her bag.

'What are they?' Katie asked as Dawn pulled out a small box of what looked like teabags.

'Oh, they're coffee bags,' Dawn said, trying to sound blasé, 'I've seen them a few times in the supermarket and thought I'd give them a try – let's not say anything to the others, I want to see if they notice.'

Katie smiled her agreement and went back to setting up the circle of chairs for the customary staff meeting – or at least the ten slurred minutes of Gail, usually hung-over from a little too much wine ('well if you have a second bottle it seems silly not to open it') giving a pep-talk about the need to boost sales.

With the kettle boiling, Dawn reached inside her bag, grabbed her mobile and without removing it speed-dialled her shop. As per routine when the shop wasn't yet open, all calls were diverted up to the training room at the side of the staffroom. The training room housed a cheap answering machine that only had two minutes of space. Gail didn't want the women spending all morning answering customer queries when they should be selling, which is why she'd never installed answering machines on the phones downstairs and wouldn't allow more than two minutes of storage space.

As always the space had been used up, either that or it had not been emptied from previous calls and it rang way past the answering machines answer point of five rings.

'I'll get it,' Dawn said to no one in particular. Though other members of staff had started to drift into the staff room, no one had any intention of answering a phone before the doors opened.

‘It was for you Katie, the hospital. It seems your mum’s been in some kind of accident, I wanted to come and get you but the doctor said it wasn’t that serious. Still, he said your mum was asking for you and can you get right over there?’ Dawn liked Katie; she was a pleasant girl and reminded Dawn of her own daughter. Panicked Katie found Gail for her approval and then rushed out the building.

While the rest of the office ladies made their way up the stairs, all chirping like a pack of demented crows as they tried to guess what was wrong with Katie’s mother, Dawn went back to making coffee.

The kettle boiled and she poured water into the eight mugs of coffee and then into her own green tea. After adding milk to each cup – except for Helen who was off dairy – she picked up a couple of cups and gave them a smell. There was no hint of the poisonous tobacco tar that she’d mixed in with the extra strong coffee when she had been making up the perforated bags.

In her earliest planning stages, Dawn had realised the potential of the internet. She had never been one for computers, putting them down as a something only young people played on. But after Gail had forced her on a ‘computers for the terrified’ course at the local college the indispensable resource had become evident. All the

information she needed was at her finger tips. The most useful had been murder, mystery, and horror writer's forums. Without having to ask a single question, the answers were there; details on all types of poisons, access and traceability. Dawn needed one she could put in her colleague's drinks and one to add to their muffins.

It had been challenging to set up a mailbox at the central post office where she could have things delivered. The challenge had been how to set it up in someone else's name; something sorted by a brief stint of volunteer work – befriending the elderly, then stealing a couple of their utility bills, which proved enough to set up a mailbox. The old people had again proven useful in providing Dawn with a means of payment. One particularly chatty but lonely diabetic, who was prone to nasty turns after she'd gleefully accept the sorbet lemons Dawn covertly offered, allowed Dawn access to a credit card. While in a near coma, Dawn rang the card company and asked if she could receive only online bills and, fortunately, the card had already been set up so that it was paid off by direct debit at the end of the month.

Now, rather than steal the card, which might have raised suspicions, through experimentation Dawn worked out that she could keep the old woman in a near comatose state for twenty minutes before she had to force another sweet into her mouth to revive her. Dawn always found it funny how it

took sweets to knock the old woman out and the same poison to bring her back – albeit drastically different quantities. Once out, Dawn could ring whomever she needed, order what she wanted and have them delivered to her mailbox – perfect.

The tobacco leaves had been easy to find. In retaliation to the ‘anti- smoking lobby’ countless websites have been set up in the United States promoting smoking. All a person’s tobacco needs were served. Tobacco seeds were the easiest to get hold off, with the aim of growing your own. Dawn toyed with the idea momentarily and then searched on until she found a supplier of freeze dried leaves. There had been some debate about their effectiveness in creating the end product, but that had meant in the creation of cigarettes. Dawn’s purpose was a simpler one. Boil the leaves down and make nicotine tar – apparently an extremely effective poison. It was a process that gave off a horrific scent; a smell that had secured her a beating from Fred when her ill conceived excuse for its presence was that she had burnt his dinner.

Dried and mixed with strong fresh coffee, even after several tries Dawn could smell nothing more than the expected aroma.

‘Are you coming Dawn?’ Gail called. For a moment Dawn was lost in her plan and hadn’t noticed that everyone was

assembled and waiting. Placing the drinks on a large tray, and quickly emptying the chocolate muffins onto a plate, Dawn made her way over to the circle and put down the tray on the small formica table at the centre of the room. As people reached forward and took their coffees, Dawn breezed over to the door, and making it look like she was shutting it so they wouldn't be disturbed, she clicked the Yale lock and then, pretending to wipe a scuffmark off her shoe, she dropped the security bolt on the bottom of the door.

No one was watching Dawn, they were all involved in their usual 'should I, shouldn't I', banter over the muffins – 'well I really shouldn't' Dawn heard one of the women say, though even without turning around, she knew that her colleague had picked up a cake anyway.

'And that's why you'll always be fat,' Dawn thought and then with the grace of a bee flying on the wind, she moved back over to the circle and took her seat.

'What's wrong with the coffee, it tastes funny.' Gail was the first to question the beverage; her tone laced with its usual animosity.

'It's a new brand, a bit stronger, thought it might be a nice pick-me-up for everyone in the morning – I'm sure if you try the cake, it'll take some of the taste away.'

Gail complied, but before she had chance to close her mouth around the cake she started to cough. She grabbed at the top of her blouse, the poison tar made its victim very hot, Dawn remembered as Gail clawed at the buttons of her top.

Helen stood to come to her aid, but she had bit and swallowed down most of her cake. She took a single step forward and coughed so hard that blood shot from her mouth and covered Gail's face. People screamed.

Helen reached into her mouth and pulled something out, a tiny metal hook shone in the bright sunlight that flooded the room.

Before she could work out what she was holding, Helen dropped to her knees then fell sideways holding her body in a tight foetal position – she shook violently for a second then lay still.

The second poison seemed to work much faster than the first. Dawn had prepared two; it was the only way she could be sure she'd get everyone. Her colleagues were such a fussy bunch that from one week to the next you couldn't tell what they would be excluding from their diet.

The second poison was Curare; one of the world's strongest, it included many elements but most notable were extractions from South American tree frogs and preparations made from the bark of trees in the Loganiaceae family. With the raise in homeopathy, the ingredients were easy enough to find, and orders to several different suppliers had ensured sufficient quantities.

Dawn took her bag and stepped towards the locked door, there she took out and put on a butchers apron before holding back to watch as the poisons went to work. The Curare didn't work by ingestion, it required direct blood entry, so rather than bake it into muffins Dawn had coated tiny fishing hooks in the fluid, allowed them to dry and then forced several into each cake.

After one or two initial screams the collected group had broken into coughing. Two women in their late fifties had dropped in seconds, the nicotine tar bringing on heart attacks.

The Curare had dropped Helen, who had stopped moving, though her eyes were still open. Dawn remembered that the horror of Curare poisoning was that the victim is very much aware of what's happening until they lose consciousness, which can take twenty minutes or more in a strong individual. Watching the terrified look in Helen's eyes, Dawn was sure she could feel every stab of the progressive

paralysis destroying her body.

Including Helen, five of the women looked, if not quite there yet, dead. Gail was on her knees coughing up blood and the last two women who had made it to the kitchen and were fighting over a carton of milk, hoping to soak up the poison. Neither had eaten cake and must have spat out the coffee when they realised what was happening.

Clare and Violet, usually the best of friends, were struggling to get the milk carton back to their lips. Both had taken a large gulp but clearly deemed it insufficient. Dawn's claw hammer caved in the back of Clare's skull, the force of her swing forced the larger of the two ladies forward. The hammer killed her instantly. Violet, now pinned to the floor by her long-time friend, fought to get free. Dawn spun the hammer around in her hand, which brought the large claw to the fore.

Violet didn't have the chance to finish screaming ,‘no!’ before Dawn brought the claw down, smashing its two heavy prongs through her forehead piercing her brain. Dawn waited for the body to stop jerking then, placing a knee on Clare's back, she used the leverage to free the tool. The prongs snapped away most of Violet's nose and part of her lips compelling Dawn to bash the hammer on the side of the sink. Violet's nose fell with a wet thud against the silver metal. Near perfect, it looked like a donor nose waiting to be

attached to a burns victim.

Realising that she had taken longer than expected, Dawn rushed from colleague to colleague giving one swift blow – two for Helen – on the heads of each. She then dragged them all to the middle of the room and from under the sink she brought out a container of petrol that she'd left there weeks earlier. She'd decanted the liquid into a bleach container knowing that as she was the only one whoever cleaned, it wouldn't be disturbed.

After coating the pile of dead bodies in the foul-smelling fluid, Dawn took off the blood splattered apron and threw it on the pyre – all set to be lit later when she was ready. Then locking the door behind her, she went down the two flights of stairs to the sales area. Smiling on the way down that theirs was the only shop in the row that used the third floor for anything more than storage and then after composing herself, she opened the travel agents for business.

Chapter Five

The only real use for six-inch heels

'How's it going?' Laurie asked the moment Dawn logged into Messenger. Dawn had long since stopped wondering what Laurie did with her time. She was always there waiting at the

other end of the chat program. If her online friend was to be believed, and Laurie had never given Dawn a reason not to believe her, then she was a receptionist for a quiet law practice. Just one elderly solicitor, who played golf more than he actually worked, but he didn't want to give up the office as that would mean he had to spend more time with his wife. This meant that during a typical 9-5 day, Laurie had the freedom to play online. At night, Laurie's time online was often sporadic. Her husband, another heavy drinker, needed her to be sat at his side if he was in the house and not at the pub. It seemed he couldn't even watch TV without her there for company – still, Laurie had her own supply of Curare and a lunchtime meeting with her husband.

'It seems to be going ok. I managed to take one out on the way to work – a dirty whore who was clearly asking for it.' Dawn sipped her green tea between typing and enjoyed the quiet of the office. She hadn't transferred the phones back downstairs so the place was blissfully silent.

'Just one so far?' A smiley accompanied her question, a face with a confused look and a question mark for a hat.

'Oh no, I've managed far more than one – I've taken out most of my office.' Dawn smiled as she thought about the pile of corpses lying upstairs, 'they all deserved it,' she said to the empty room.

‘Not Katie though?’ This time the smiley had a wide open mouth and little hands covering its eyes.

Dawn found smileys irritating.

‘No, I sent Katie off. It wasn’t nice of me to worry her about her mother but far better than her going like the others.’

‘Was there a lot of mess?’

‘Some, but I put on an apron, and managed to keep it off my shoes – I’ve already changed them once this morning, I don’t want to do it again so soon.’

‘Side note, did you get your copy of Serial Killer Weekly this morning? Mine didn’t arrive?’ For this message, Laurie included her favourite emoticon, a tiny figure wearing the ‘Scream’ costume holding an impossibly large knife.

‘I can’t help you there, I cancelled mine; Serial Killer, Mass Murder Profiles and CSI Weekly – I thought it best, don’t think I’ll be needing them.’ With much regret, Dawn had cleared the hiding place in the garage of back issues the week before – she’d burnt them like her dress last night, though unlike her dress, which had gone up in one session, she had so many back issues that it had taken four fires to get rid of them all. Of course, Dawn could have just had one

massive bonfire but she thought that might have attracted attention. The last thing she wanted was a nosy neighbour poking their head over the fence and catching her with her stash.

Dawn loved her magazines, they fed her compulsion for killing for years without her having to go out and actually kill anyone. However, like any good psychopath she had killed several pets over the years. She had never been entirely convinced of her reasons – was it something she enjoyed or just did because the literature told her she was meant to in order to belong to the club. From a very young age, Dawn had been obsessed by death, spending many hours in the library reading case studies on the world's most evil – though all the time hiding the books in brightly coloured children's fiction.

She'd read many times that serial killers will often start killing pets while they were still children. Dawn had never killed as a child – she'd read this fact early on in life and was determined to prove the psychiatrists wrong. On her 18th birthday, she gutted the Labrador that belonged to her first boyfriend; his cheating on her had felt like sufficient reason. She had taken the dog's heart and eyes. The heart she kept hidden at the bottom of the freezer until 'A' level graduation day, when she wrapped it up in bright gold wrapping paper and sent it to him as a gift. The greetings card with a picture of a lab on the front had felt like a nice touch. Even though

this had been in a time before CSI, Dawn had worn gloves and so given the police nothing to go on. And no one suspected a petite girl such as her.

The eyes, she had kept in a box in her room. She'd wanted them as a trophy, something else she'd read serial killers were prone to doing – she only kept them until they started to smell.

'So, what now?' Laurie asked bringing them back on topic.

'Well, I've passed the first two on my list – Beverley Allitt and Myra Hindley – and after finishing off the staff here that brings me up to ten, so I'm drawing with Rosemary West. Only ten more to go and it's not even ten in the morning. I'm sure I can manage another ten before seven tonight.'

'No worries there, is your booking still on for this afternoon?' Dawn was about to ask which booking she meant, when the smiley of a fit muscled teddy bear jogged her memory.

'Yes, he's all sorted.' Dawn smiled; she had flicked through page after page of handsome fit men looking for one who made her feel the most wanton. She had forgotten what sex felt like. On numerous occasions, Fred had rolled on top of her, thrust for a few seconds, not actually caring that he hadn't quite made it inside her, and then cum on her thigh.

Not that she would have noticed if he had made it inside her, apart from his lack of endowment Fred's immense bulk meant that once he was on top she often feared she would be suffocated. She had made sure the man she'd chosen for this afternoon was only large in the right area.

'Will he have to go, too?' Laurie asked.

'I think he will, it'll help build the number, plus it would seem a bit hypocritical of me if I didn't, given that I killed a female whore this morning. Right, I have to go, Laurie, customers, I'll check in later.'

Dawn logged off just as a smiling couple came through the door. Dawn wasn't entire sure why they were smiling. The woman, in her late twenties or early thirties – it was hard to tell under all the fake orange tan – was wearing a pair of pink Lycra sweat-pants. Dawn didn't believe in Lycra sweat-pants, in fact she didn't believe in Lycra anything. The only people Lycra suited was size zero actresses and only then when the Lycra had been made into a one piece outfit for a futuristic melodrama. The woman, who sat down and introduced herself as Shanty, certainly wasn't a size zero. Her husband, on the other hand did actually resemble a 0. He appeared to have no neck and his limbs looked stuck on like a child's play dough model of a man – Brian.

‘Brian and Shanty’, Dawn thought and just knew there was a Ford Escort somewhere with that plastered at the top of the windscreen.

This was the typical fare for the small travel agents. In Dawn’s mind the people who came in their shop were usually either too stupid to find a better deal on the internet or too intimidated to go into one of the large ‘Travel Supermarkets.’

‘We wanna go somewhere sunny, in winter like, saw that one you’ve got in the window – 200 quid, you still got that one?’ Dawn watched the words crawl from Shanty’s mouth. Each one begging that the wretched woman wouldn’t continue to mutilate their brothers and sisters.

In fear of coming across as a ‘Little Britain’ character, something Shanty and Brian, who was now digging for treasure inside his nose, would surely pick up on, Dawn hesitated and then said: ‘Sadly, all our winter sun holidays at that price have gone – the cheapest we have now are around the £400 mark.’ Shanty’s face dropped, her smile replaced by growling snarl that reminded Dawn of a dog when you’d try to take away its bone.

‘Why do you keep the sign in the window then? That makes no sense, just conning people – who do you think we are that we can afford £400 quid?’ Dawn wanted to say that she

thought the woman was a tramp and that she thought it amazing anyone could save even £200 pounds from their benefit cheques. She didn't, instead she smiled and said 'you're completely right...' Dawn struggled for a second with the name 'Shanty' she just couldn't understand why anyone would call a child such an odious name. '...it's our manager; she makes us leave the cards up in the windows long after the holiday has sold.'

Dawn then offered up her brightest smile, one that stretched her small thin face and for a second made her look completely insane and then said, 'but I'm the only one in today and you know what, you look like a nice couple – come with me, I'll do you a big favour.'

'And society along with it', Dawn added silently as she got up out of her chair, picked up her bag and walked through to the back of the building.

At the bottom of the first flight of stairs Dawn said, 'we have a staff room up here where we keep all the best offers. Our manager likes to give them out to her friends first, so they tend to stay on the board for at least a week before we put the price up and sell them.' Dawn was amazed at how easily the lies were flying from her mouth. She'd practiced how she'd get customers up to the store room many times, but she expected it to feel more stilted. It didn't, it felt exciting, somehow right.

Dawn bounded up the stairs, she was going to let the couple go first but they hesitated at the bottom of the rather steep steps, almost as if they needed to ready themselves before they braved the thirty-step climb.

Inside the room Dawn reached into her bag and took out her weapon of choice. Shanty entered the room first, with only a cursory glance at Dawn she headed for a table holding stacks of out-of-date travel brochures – not to read them, to lean on them as she got her breath back.

Brian followed seconds later, though the sound of his panting breath entered the room long before he did, in the same way as his white-vest covered belly, entered long before his face. At first sight of his gut, Dawn swung the axe from her bag and sunk the blade deep into his stomach. Raking the blade after entry to make sure she did enough damage to his stomach so that the acid there ran riot. Blood started to ooze from the wound; it ran over his fingers which were pulling at the axe, trying to pry the blade free. As he pulled, more and more acid seeped out of his stomach and into the deep, penetrating gash – and then the burning started. The acid began to devour Brian's flesh, a pain so extreme that he dropped to his knees and began to scream. In her delectation of the events unfolding before her, Dawn was grateful that the shop building was old Victorian stock with thick, sound-proof walls. Plus, since the overpass had been build outside, any noise was masked by the heavy roar

of HGVs thundering by. And of course in the times we live, even if someone did hear screaming they were unlikely to muster the energy to do anything about it.

‘Shit! NO! You crazy bitch what have you done!’ Shanty yelled as she too dropped to her knees. She wrapped her arms around Brian and pulled him to her covering her top and sweat pants in blood. ‘Those stains will never come out,’ Dawn thought, and then smiled at her pointless musings.

‘Please, sweetheart, stop screaming, I’ll get you some help.’ Shanty pleaded

‘He’s screaming because his flesh is being eaten away by his own stomach acid. Doctors say it’s the closest thing you can get to being embalmed alive.’ From the noise Shanty was making it appeared that she was trying to outdo Brian’s screams. They were like those babies who cried for nothing, Dawn remembered every good mother’s war-cry, ‘if you keep that up, I’ll give you something to cry for!’

With that thought crisp in her mind, Dawn reached into her bag and said, ‘maybe if you’re going to cry so much you might want to feel what your husband’s going through.’ Dawn’s words were calm and serene amongst the chaos. Shanty looked up at her killer, her tears stopped for a second and the scowl returned.

Stepping up to one knee she started to lunge for Dawn. Before Shanty made it onto both feet a vial of liquid hit her in the face. She raised her hands up to her burning flesh, rubbing at the skin, which did nothing to ease the mind-numbing pain; instead skin just came away in her hands.

'Hydrochloric acid', Dawn read off the label, glad that she'd gone to the trouble of buying an acid and a base. From the flesh on Shanty's hands, she thought it a toss-up which of the two gave the best results. Shanty was back on her knees, bent over her husband who now lay prone on the floor clutching his stomach in agony.

'What a pitiful sight you both make.' Neither answered, Shanty was pulling at her face, trying to stop the acid burning further. Her hands were covered in large chunks of flesh and the entire room smelt of sulphur as the acid burnt up the keratin in Shanty's hair.

Kicking Shanty to one side, Dawn reached down and with a foot on Brian's chest she freed the axe. Brian screamed and tried to sit up, but the pain allowed him to move his head no further than an inch off the ground. Shanty managed to sit all the way up, but with one swift movement Dawn kicked her in the head, making sure to use the blade of her foot like she'd been taught in her self-defence class. The kick knocked

Shanty back to the floor and dazed her long enough for Dawn to plant the axe in the centre of Brian's forehead. The cracking of his skull echoed around the room rousing a scream from Shanty, 'how could you? What the fuck's wrong with you?' Shanty yelled but the acid had burnt away her lips and most of her tongue so the words were even less understandable than her usual destruction of the language.

Freeing the axe, Dawn wrapped it in plastic and popped it back into her bag. Then from out of her bag of tricks she pulled a sparkling gold stiletto with a metal-capped six-inch heel.

Shanty screamed, 'No', the word mixed with blood and a portion of her tongue and spat onto her Lycra top.

'I'm sorry, Shanty; it has to be this way. The last thing I want to be is predictable. The press are all too quick to label and I don't want them to think I only have one killing style. I don't want to be 'The Ice pick killer' or some other such concoction. I want to be like Mary Ann Cotton.' As Dawn ran through her monologue, Shanty was trying to back away but every movement sent a fresh blast of pain arcing throughout her body.

Dawn watched her victim move, she looked into what was left of her eyes and continued, 'not that I expect you to know who that is but they thought she killed over twenty; but the

best thing is that they weren't sure. I want them to give my murders the full CSI treatment, complete with pointless montages and still not be 100% sure I did them all.'

'You're mad,' Shanty spluttered.

'Wow, and here's me thinking you were completely dumb!' Dawn stepped over Brian, whose evacuations were now stinking up the room and with a vicious stamp, brought her foot down on Shanty's chest – levelling her victim and forcing her to gasp for breath. Without removing her foot Dawn held the spike of the heel just above Shanty's right eye – she went for the eye that hadn't been too damaged by the acid, hoping Shanty would see what was coming.

'Please... please, no, I'm pregnant!' Shanty pleaded. Dawn hesitated for the briefest of moments; debating whether she had time to hack Shanty open to see if she was serious. But the milky look in her victim's eyes, told Dawn that Shanty was lying in one last desperate bid for her life. Without any further hesitation Dawn lifted her foot from Shanty's chest and stamped down on the stiletto. Not that Shanty would hear, the six-inch spike killing her instantly, but as she stamped Dawn said, 'if you are pregnant, then I think I'm doing the poor thing a favour; saving it from having parents like you.' The second half of the sentence accompanied a second stamp – just for good measure.

Chapter Six

Thank goodness for the summer sales

‘So, what criteria did those two meet?’ Laurie asked, she had clearly been waiting for Dawn’s return.

‘I think they matched two; Degrading the Gene Pool and Destroying the English Language.’ Dawn was back at her desk. She’d moved the two bodies to the centre of the store room and covered them too with petrol. She had then changed her dress and shoes – thank goodness for Marks and Spencer’s spring sales and work providing her with a locker to store several changes of outfit. Then with the storeroom door locked she had returned to work. It was now just after 11am and her visitor would be here really soon.

‘Both of those seem fair enough and that takes you past Rosemary West and well on the way to your target. Have you given any more thought to the reasons you’ll give if you get caught? You know you can’t just plead insanity?’

‘I know, I know, the McNaghten Rules: If I cover up my crimes I know what I’m doing is wrong and if I know the difference between right and wrong I can’t be insane. Poo to that rule. I could have just killed and not covered it up?’ Dawn mused at the idea as she drank another cup of green

tea – it helped calm her nerves.

‘What fun would that be if you just killed randomly, you’d be like one of those common postal workers, who start shooting just because they can’t get their own way – no one wants that!’ Laurie wrote, her smiley, a teddy bear with a rather large handgun.

‘You’re right but it might have been fun just to plough down the high street running over whoever got in my way. But then I’d have no way of checking them against my criteria.’

‘Perhaps you could go down the route of the French nobleman Gilles de Rais; I’m sure when asked why he tortured and killed countless he said, “I did it entirely for my own pleasure and physical delight and for no other intention or end.” How perfect does that sound?’ Again the message was accompanied with a smiley face, this one a yellow smiling face wearing a French beret – for Dawn, each smiley grated just a little bit more than the last.

‘Wasn’t he a paedophile though? I’m not sure I want to steal my reasons from someone who can’t keep his hands off of young children.’

‘Good point, I’m...’ Dawn didn’t let Laurie finish, out of the corner of her eye she noticed Katie walking up the road

towards the shop.

‘Katie’s back!’ Dawn blasted off, unsure what she expected Laurie to do about it.

‘I thought you sent her away for the day?’

‘I did, I thought that once she found out her mum was ok, she would take the rest of the day off – tits!’ Dawn wasn’t accustomed to profanity but she really felt the situation required it.

‘I best go, she’s here, I’ll sort something out.’

‘You’ll never believe this; it was a trick – someone pretending to be a doctor. No wonder they didn’t want to speak to me. I bet it was one of my so-called friends playing a joke.’ Katie said as she stormed through the door.

‘Does that mean your mother’s ok?’ Dawn said, racking her brains for an explanation for the lack of staff.

‘Yeah, my mother’s fine, just a bit upset that someone claimed she wasn’t – I don’t suppose you remember much about the voice?’ Katie took a seat at her desk across the room from Dawn, for the minute she seemed contented to wrap herself in the mystery of the phone call, giving Dawn

time to think.

‘It was a man’s voice, he sounded like a doctor, or at least he sounded like he knew what he was talking about. I can’t tell you any more than that, sadly. Cruel joke though, I thought you might have just taken the rest of the day off? It’s not like you owe our mardy Gail anything.’ Dawn drank down the rest of her green tea, trying to keep her mind from panicking and stopping her thinking clearly.

‘I thought about it, I was just going to say that it was a joke but, by the time I got over to my mother’s to check she was ok, it was too late to come back into work. But you know what Gail’s like, she would have wondered why I didn’t just call mum and then docked me a day’s pay. Where is she by-the-way?’ Katie looked around, finally noticing the empty office and added, ‘where is everyone?’

‘Well the five old dears...’ the politer of the two names given to the five oldest women in the office (women who always backed one another up and woe betide you if you got on the wrong side of any of them as they had wickedly sharp tongues) ‘... the five old witches have gone on a training course, it seems Gail wasn’t happy with how slow they were with the new online ordering system.’

‘Oh, I bet they were happy when she told them that!’ Katie said as she logged herself into the same system.

‘They weren’t and they really weren’t happy to go on the training on a Sunday. Still, it is often a slow day; our place being one of the few shops in the town which actually bothers to open on the Sabbath.’ Again, Dawn was amazed how easily the lies flowed from her mouth; she wondered if this was how it felt to be a man.

‘And the others?’ Katie asked while jabbing at her computer, it doing what it usually did, taking forever to login.

‘Oh it’s been one of those odd mornings. Helen started to feel really ill; I’m not saying she was faking it but she looked ok to me. Still, Gail decided to take her home, otherwise it would have taken her hours on the bus with the Sunday service. And Betty has just gone off to the supermarket – she said she had some birthday presents to get while Gail’s away and all that.’

Dawn was surprised that Katie was buying her story so readily, but then she was still only nineteen and, as a teenager, she had very little concern for things that didn’t affect her directly. Sadly, Dawn thought that used to be true only of teenagers, but these days it could be applied to almost everybody.

‘Well, if Gail’s away, I best go put the kettle on.’ Katie’s words forced Dawn to leap to her feet, a little too quickly, but

Katie didn't appear to notice. If Dawn had thought first she would have known that she was the only person who ever made a drink, so what Katie had meant was 'why don't you pop up two flights of stairs and make me a drink? It's not like you're twice my age or anything.'

As Dawn walked up the stairs she thought that perhaps there was a reason to kill Katie after all. One of the criteria did say it was ok if the person was lazy.

'But I like Katie,' Dawn said to the empty stairwell.

'And I like you, too,' Katie said from behind her, Dawn hadn't noticed her following. Dawn's shocked expression forced the teenager to add, 'oh don't worry, I locked the door and put the closed sign over, if Gail won't be back for a while I thought we could have a nice drink and a gossip.'

Dawn smiled and carried on walking up the stairs. 'Reason two' she thought, 'I don't like gossip, it's vulgar.' Her numerous chats with Laurie flashed in the front of her mind, but she quickly wrote those off as just general conversation and discussions. Gossip used to be just for old people over the back fence talking about what 'her at number 42' had been up to. But now, thanks to women whose lips are anything but loose (Botox having a lot to answer for), gossip is the primary social pastime – that's when people weren't watching other people on TV gossiping.

Dawn hadn't planned for this one, though she did have her bag with her and in it she still had all manner of tricks. Walking up the last flight of stairs, she weighed up her options. She could open the staffroom door, let Katie in and when she'd done screaming she could beat her to death with the hammer, or go to town with the axe – done, and done she thought. Not the Katie screaming part, but then Shanty had done enough of that and Dawn could feel the beginnings of a headache.

'I could let her go,' she thought, but as she approached the top of the stairs her thoughts concluded, 'too late for that.' Then, after pausing a second in the guise of catching her breath, she waited for Katie to reach the step behind her and then, in one complete movement, she spun around, placed her hands on the startled girl's shoulders and pushed. Dawn followed after as the teenager toppled backwards. Katie reached out for the banister, missed, and within a few thunderous moments she was in a pile at the bottom of the stairs – moaning. As she hit the floor the cracking of bone sent a tingle down Dawn's spine. Katie's arm had broken as she'd collided with the floor – bone now jutted through the skin just below the elbow.

'Did I feel polyester in that top?' Dawn asked as she followed Katie down the stairs, 'how can you wear polyester so close to your skin like that – did your mother not tell you only cheap tramps wear polyester?' Katie, battered from the

fall, squirmed at the base of the stairs, drifted in and out of consciousness. Dawn had been hoping that she would break her neck on the fall, saving her having to think of an inventive way of killing her, but that seemed too much to hope for.

‘Oh it’s worse than I thought,’ Dawn said after reaching down and pulled the label out from the back of Katie’s blouse, it read ‘80% polyester and 20% Lycra’

‘Oh... oh... I have an idea!’ Dawn said, after noticing they were standing at the side of the storeroom. She took out the key, and with a cheery smile on her face – one that remained despite the foetid odour Shanty and Brian’s bodies were giving off – Dawn picked up a brochure from the stockpile of back issues.

The thickest was the ‘Far Off Lands’ brochure, which seemed fitting as that was where Dawn had sent so many people today.

Re-locking the door, she watched as Katie struggled to regain her senses. She tried to speak, but nothing more than garbled pleas made it out of her bruised mouth. As Dawn rolled up the brochure she thought about how much she was looking forward to hearing one of her victims beg properly. So far they had all done it through some form of impairment which, for Dawn, put a dampener on the moment.

Katie started to mummer, 'please,' but the word was stifled by Dawn's insertion of the rolled up brochure.

'I saw this on that TV show "Bones" once,' Dawn said. Though Katie was a petite girl, being starved of oxygen seemed to give some people extra strength, which in this case required Dawn to use all her strength to keep the rolled up brochure in place. 'Of course on Bones, the murderer set the girl on fire afterwards but one of the science geeks worked out that the flames hadn't killed her asphyxiation had – clever show that. You about done? This looked much easier on TV.'

It wasn't working properly, the brochure was cutting into the lining of Katie's mouth, and as she choked for air, blood splattered over Dawn's tiring arms.

'You dirty... Dirty little cow!' Dawn screamed as she looked at the mess Katie was making. Some of the blood had even stained her bright flower print dress. Dawn pulled the rolled up paper out of the teenager's mouth and before the girl was able to take in her first complete gasp of air, Dawn threw the brochure to one side and then tightened her hands into hammers and began pounding them into Katie's face. The girl's nose breaking acted as fuel to Dawn's growing fire, forcing her to slam her fists down harder and harder.

‘You dirty, dirty cow; look what you’ve made me do! I didn’t plan to kill you. Too stupid, it’s not my fault you’re too stupid to stay away.’

Pound, pound!

Blood hit the walls around the dying girl, forming patterns a modern artist would claim as a masterpiece.

‘You’re just like the rest of them! They think I don’t have this in me. Think I’m just a tiny wasp, best ignored or batted away!’ Tears welled at the corner of Dawn’s eyes; any ability to cry had long since been smashed off the dead teenager’s face.

Pound, pound!

‘He’s not laughing now, my fat freak of a husband. He beat me for years, and what did I do, I let him get away with it. Let him think he was screwing me, when he was just bashing his tiny thing into my thigh! No more. No one will laugh at me any more’ Dawn looked down at the mess. Katie’s face had vanished; a mix of skull, gray brain matter and blood, lots and lots of blood, now glared back at her. After letting one last fist splash gray mush and bone onto the wall, Dawn stopped as abruptly as she’d begun. Her tears stopped too; she took a breath and said, ‘oh dear, oh dear oh dear – I

think I'm going to need another change of dress.'

Chapter Seven

The golden age of cinema

'I thought you liked Katie? Still, polyester – you did the right thing. And, so what if you lost it a little, it's good to let go once in a while. Plus, that brings the count up to thirteen, and going a little psycho can only help your reputation,' Laurie typed.

Dawn had explained what happened; how it had taken bleach and elbow work to get rid of the noticeable stains, though her dress was ruined. Still, she'd changed and now felt fresh and summery again. Katie's body now lay on the pile with Shanty and Brian, doused in petrol and ready for the big fire.

'There's a man coming this way!' Dawn typed, her fingers tripping over the letters with hopeful anticipation.

'What does he look like? Young, old, fit?' Laurie replied.

'Tall, fit, short hair – neat, he looks neat, I like neat.' The man was still walking down the hill towards the store. Dawn started smiling, she wanted to make sure the first thing he

saw was her big, bright smile – she looked maniacal.

‘Age?’

‘Young, I’d say around the 25 mark.’ Dawn’s smile widened still further; he was definitely heading towards the shop.

‘That’s young, but then you did say you wanted someone who reminded you of Fred in his prime.’ Laurie said.

‘Believe me; Fred never looked like this even in his prime. Best go, he’s here.’

‘Hi there, I’m looking for Dawn, is she around?’ The man looked more like a boy to Dawn close up. He could barely have been more than 23. His face, though squared from hours in the gym, looked warm and welcoming. To reply Dawn nearly had to extend her neck fully – the boy was tall, well over six foot and well over a foot taller than her.

‘I’m Dawn.’

The rent-a-stud smiled, looked around to make sure they were as alone as the store suggested and then said, ‘I’m here to take you for coffee and perhaps to buy you some flowers.’ This would have seemed like a strange thing to say if you’d been an outsider listening into the conversation. But

to Dawn it made perfect sense, it was in fact the code sentence she'd filled in as the website had requested. It removed ambiguity, allowing both parties to be sure who they were talking to.

'I only have an extended lunch hour, two hours max,' Dawn lied, 'I've booked us into a hotel not far from here, we can walk it if that's ok with you?' The whore introduced himself as Adam and said that all sounded fine. His tone was sure but calming, he made Dawn feel comfortable, but then that was of course part of his job.

'Can you just wait for me outside, I have to set the alarms, and I'm the only one in today.' Adam agreed and went back out onto the street.

With the door closed behind him, Dawn grabbed her bag and rushed up to the third floor. She opened the door, held her breath against the stench. She then threw some simple belongings onto the pyre, earrings, a broach, both of which she'd bound nail clippings to in the hope of melting in DNA evidence, she wanted, at least initially, the police to think that she'd gone up in the blaze. Once done she took a fire lighter out of her bag, lit it and set it on top of the pile of bodies. She thought the fire lighter was best, having read that petrol doesn't catch fire as quickly as the TV would have you believe. Though in this case the TV was right – the pyre went up in a whoosh that forced Dawn back towards the

door. She fought through the smoke briefly to retrieve a bottle of white wine from the fridge. She then watched for a moment, glad given the smoke, that she'd disabled the smoke alarms a few days before and then rushed down to set the second set of bodies alight.

Her work done, she grabbed her umbrella out of her bag – not the yellow one she had used this morning, that had gone on the fire, this was white with yellow daises to match her dress – and then after actually setting the alarms, she went out to meet Adam.

'Is it going to rain?' Adam asked, he was holding a hand to his forehead to protect his eyes from the sun as he looked up at the beautiful blue sky.

'Oh no, the sun's bright today and I burn easily that's all.' That and the high street was plagued by CCTV. The cameras hung on every lamppost; watching, waiting and in some cases they were even fitted with speakers so they could berate passersby. Dawn hated CCTV cameras, she'd read that ancient Indians believed that a photo took away a piece of your soul and if that was the case, what damage must all the CCTV cameras do?

'Talking of burning, can you smell that? It smells like something's on fire, something nasty.'

‘Oh I’m sure it’s nothing,’ Dawn said as she started marching towards the hotel.

In the interest of staving off too much embarrassing small talk, Dawn had picked a hotel just across the bypass from the travel agents.

Her shop was one of the last in the row. The town had two rows of shops, all facing one another apart from the last couple in the row. They faced a road which led up to the bridge over the bypass. The road was noisy and didn’t lend itself to chatting. But then there wasn’t much to say. On the website under special requests/pointers, Dawn had written that too much talking made her nervous, that this was her first time so she would need a man who would take the lead and she didn’t want to be asked about her home life. This had all seemed reasonable requests which Adam had kept to; he just smiled a lot and every so often made simple comments about the weather or the roar of the traffic. The only thing he did ask of note was whether Dawn had heard about the murder this morning, a prostitute in the toilets. The police had apparently said the killing was ‘brutal’ and most likely the work of her last male punter. Given his profession this was clearly an interesting news story for him.

Adam and the hotel had already been paid online – using the old woman’s credit card (a present from a friend if

anyone asked why the name she used at reception was different to that on the booking card) – which took away any awkwardness of having to talk about money.

Inside the plush hotel lobby, Dawn asked Adam to take a seat on one of the many black leather settees while she checked them in. She had chosen the nicest hotel in town; hoping the £120 a night price tag would ensure them some privacy. She had already paid for three nights in advance, and as she wouldn't require room service, she was asked for no more confirmation of the booking than the computer printout. No passport, like the hotel would require from a foreign national, in fact she wasn't asked for any form of identification at all.

After instructing the receptionist to put a note on their file that they didn't want to be disturbed, Dawn walked back over to Adam, told him it was all sorted and then they caught the lift up to their room.

'This is nice!' Adam said after gesturing for Dawn to go into the room first and then following her in. Dawn had to agree, though she preferred traditional to contemporary styling, she did like how neat everything looked: no unnecessary fittings, clean lines. The room was more comfortable than huge. Enough room for the over-sized double bed, two bedside tables, a velvet padded chair and a desk running down the length of the wall opposite the bed, which housed

a TV and internet access point.

Adam took off his shoes and lying out on the bed he said, 'there's nothing like living in style.' Dawn forced a smile, though she was slightly disappointed that the silk bedspread was a dark red colour, she had rather hoped that all the bedding would be white – the sheets were, of course, but she wanted to cover all the bedding in blood.

'I just need to pop to the loo and I'll be ready.' Adam said, hopping off the bed and going through the door that led off the bedroom. Inside, Dawn caught a glimpse of marble, she couldn't see a bath but she really hoped it would be in there as she requested.

With the bathroom door closed, Dawn got to work. She hadn't entirely decided how she was going to kill him, a task that wouldn't be as easy as she had hoped – he was cute and made her feel maternal, which wasn't ideal given they were about to have sex.

She closed the curtains, which had blackout linings that plunged the room into near-darkness. Though she had always kept herself in shape, she was still twice the age of the lad she was going to have sex with and she didn't want him to see her in the full light of day. Rummaging in her bag she pulled out the knife she'd killed the prostitute with earlier and slid it under the mattress. She then pulled out the bottle

of wine, which despite the heat outside still felt chilled, and took the two glasses off the side, grunted that the hotel had only provided tumblers, and then filled them both. Out of her bag she took a small bag of white dust, emptied it into Adam's glass and swilled it around until the powder had dissolved.

Hearing the toilet flush, Dawn went over and sat on the bed, regardless of the colour, the silk felt inviting under her fingers. Adam came out of the bathroom looking fresh faced. He had obviously splashed water on his face and then run his fingers up through his thick, blond hair. At his hairline the water turned the blond a dark shade of gold – Dawn wanted him.

The man-whore, in her head Dawn wasn't sure what to call him, gigolo seemed too old-fashioned, rent boy too cheap and his name, Adam, just seemed too personal. Whore, at the end of the day suited as he was nothing better than the woman she'd put-down this morning. Dawn put the urge to lash out, out of her mind as Adam walked over and stood in front of her. She handed him the glass of wine which he drank down in two gulps.

The whore's tight, fitted t-shirt just met the top of his distressed jeans. Through the join Dawn could make out a faint line of blond pubic hair that led down to where she wanted to be. Adam reached down and placed his hands on

her arms as if to raise Dawn to her feet. She didn't comply instead Dawn placed one hand on Adam's stomach, to signal that she was ok as she was and a second hand went to the button's of his jeans. Beneath the fibres of his shirt Dawn could feel his taut body. She ran her fingers over the humps and lines that formed his stomach muscles.

Warmth ran down her spine, penetrating her body, jetting from her back to the newly moist fire between her legs. The ease with which Adam's jean button popped open made Dawn's morality sensor flare and with the realisation that he wasn't wearing underwear, it was all she could do to stop herself leaping to her feet and screaming, 'WHORE!'

She managed to restrain herself, the erection that bounced free of his jeans, its warm musky odour, proved too much of a distraction. Even after straining her jaw, Dawn struggled to get more than its head into her mouth. Adam's penis pulsed; Dawn's tiny hands making it look even bigger than it's already impressive size. After a few more attempts Dawn resorted to licking up and down the member's length, swapping between wanking with both hands and licking down to his balls.

Being a professional, Adam didn't like to see his clients struggle, he watched carefully making sure she was enjoying herself, poised to move on as soon as she was ready. All of this was a change for Dawn, Adam was fit and

handsome, had a cock big enough so that he didn't piss over three of his fingers and apart from a warm manly odour it didn't smell. Plus, Dawn could actually reach it; she could suck the end, lick the shaft and wrap her tiny hand around it without her finger tips meeting. All the time, it seemed to her like such a shame he had to die – but then a whore was a whore.

Fred on the other hand should have been killed years ago and it was only by some kind of miracle that nature hadn't killed him off decades before given his copious amounts of drinking, his obesity and lack of any exercise bar dragging his fat arse out of his car, a task that often left him severely short of breath.

The last full blowjob Dawn had given him, she'd had to wet her fingers and hold them near her face. Fred had pushed her onto the bed and knelt over her trying his best to force his cock towards her mouth. With his huge bulk and tiny penis, Fred hadn't been able to get his knob close enough for Dawn to actually suck it. But he'd been drunk, and kept thrusting and thrusting, grabbing at her hair and screaming, 'come on you skinny bitch get my fucking cock down your throat.' The only thing Dawn had in her throat was vomit. Wrapping wet fingers around his cock had done the trick, she'd only needed to wet them once, Fred hadn't lasted more than 30 seconds.

Dawn took one last slow lick from base to tip and then looked up at Adam, who had been watching diligently. Every so often he had let out a soft moan to let her know she was doing a good job.

Adam, again put his hands on her shoulders, this time she let him lift her and gently move her onto the bed. He moved her to the centre; Dawn didn't like facing the wrong way, it seemed wrong somehow to lay crossways when the bed wasn't designed for that use. Still, she didn't protest, instead she raised her head to watch as Adam dropped and stepped out of his jeans, he then took off his t-shirt and seemed to hover there for a second, as if to let Dawn admire her purchase.

Adam took off Dawn's white pumps, and then slowly ran his fingers up and under her dress, lifting the material as he went, he pushed forward, Dawn lifted and let him take the dress all the way over her head, leaving her in only a white silk camisole and bra. His fingers, tender and warm returned to Dawn's thighs, closely followed by his tongue. A tongue strong and determined, working its way up towards her damp, wanton hole. Dawn ran her fingers along Adam's strong arms, over his biceps and round past his triceps as they tensed to hold his body in a press-up position as he worked his tongue up her inner thigh. Dawn looked down at her strong man, money well spent. She wanted this, needed this.

Adam looked up at her and smiled, then without warning, his eyes rolled backwards revealing the whites which gave him the impression of a man possessed. His arms buckled and he dropped forward, his face landing on Dawn's stomach.

'No, no! This isn't meant to happen yet!' Dawn screamed at the empty room, 'it's not meant to kick in for an hour! AN HOUR!' Dawn had gone with diluted chloral hydrate as her sedative of choice, she hadn't wanted to be so obvious as to use Rohypnol, or as cheap as to use GHB. Plus, the latter would have ruined a decent white wine, its salty addition doing nothing to complement Australia's best.

'Well, this just isn't fair.' Dawn said as she pushed her way out from under Adam. She checked to see if he still had an erection and if something was salvageable; sadly not.

'Fine! Back to my plan' Dawn said, aware suddenly that she was talking to herself, though having someone else in the room seemed to make it more acceptable, even if they were unconscious.

After taking a couple of gulps from her wine glass, to prepare herself for the upcoming exertion, Dawn took the room's only chair and positioned it in the space between the bed and the desk. She wanted to ensure that she could move freely around it. Rolling Adam to the end of the bed

Dawn placed his legs over the chair, then using them as a lever, she dragged his naked body into an upright position. It wasn't until she'd used plastic ties to bind him to the chair that he stopped falling sideways – his arms tight behind the chair back and legs strapped in place.

After gagging his mouth with a balled up sock – from her bag, she didn't want to use one someone had been wearing – and tying it in place with a thick strip of fabric, Dawn went back over to the bed, lay down and took a well-earned rest.

After twenty minutes of staring blankly at the ceiling, thinking of nothing more than how it could do with a coat of paint, Dawn got up from the bed, took her wine tumbler with her and after rinsing it thoroughly in the bathroom sink she filled it up with water and walked back through to the bedroom.

Standing in front of the handsome prostitute, Dawn wished that her life had been different. She wished that she hadn't fallen for a drunk, wished that her only daughter hadn't left the country as soon as she'd been old enough and most of all she wished that she didn't have a perpetual compulsion to kill. Well not just kill, more she needed to see the pain on the faces of her victims. It somehow made the world seem a fairer place. When she saw someone or for that matter something suffer, her mind calmed. To Dawn the world had always been cruel and unrelenting and killing something evened the score for her.

In the geriatric ward, when she'd sealed her fingers over her father's nose and mouth she had watched with a smile as his eyes screamed for mercy. He was weak, in there because of a second heart attack, though they did think he would recover and at 68 have plenty more years left. He'd been a doting father when Dawn had been a child, always showing her special attention. But after Dawn's mother had died a few years before – in her sleep, natural causes – her father had shacked up with another woman. They were living in sin and, if it was a sin in the eyes of Jesus, then that was good enough for Dawn. Not that she had much time for the good lord, he was letting too many things slide, but she'd decided long ago that someone still had to do his work in these New Testament times.

Adam stirred. Dawn checked the gag and then threw the cold water into his face. He spluttered, shook his head and then dazed, he opened his eyes.

'Hello, sleepy head, I thought you were never going to come around.' Adam regaining his faculties struggled against the ties. He tried to scream and to ask her what she was doing but it only came out as a stifled groan.

'There's no point fighting, those plastic ties aren't going anywhere – amazing things, as if someone invented them for kidnaps and serial killings.' At the suggestion of his own

mortality, Adam struggled again, harder this time nearly succeeding in toppling the chair. Dawn reached across to the desk where she'd moved the knife, picking it up she let the reflection of the blade fall on Adam's face and said: 'Sit still or I'll gut you like a fish,' as she finished the sentence, she moved the blade across his lower stomach, making sure she brushed the top of his penis to add impact to the gesture.

'Oh, I've always wanted to say that line. I love *Scream*, do you love it?' Dawn was smiling again, her face a picture of hell, maniacal and lost. Adam's face didn't register that he had any idea what Dawn was talking about which prompted her to continue: 'You must have seen *Scream*; it's one of the best horror films of all time. That scene at the beginning where Casey, played by Drew Barrymore, has to answer questions about scary movies, or else her boyfriend, Steve, would be gutted. I don't know the name of the actor, not sure he did much after *Scream*, but then I guess you can't when you're dead.'

Dawn looked away, took a few steps, unsure if she was mixing reality with fiction, she turned back and said, 'well, she got the questions wrong, so the killer gutted him – he was sat in a chair just like this one and the knife split the stomach dropping his innards to the floor.'

This time when she ran the knife across as to demonstrate, she pressed a little harder causing a line of blood to appear in its wake. Adam moaned at the intrusion and began to struggle again. He stopped abruptly when Dawn tapped him on his forehead with the blade, and then waved it in front of his face, like a wagging finger telling him to stop. Dawn was still caught up in thoughts of the Scream film, this time near the conclusion just before Billy Loomis went a little power crazed and cut his accomplice too deeply.

‘I know, I’m a little too old to love a teen horror so much – but then who doesn’t love horror? Blood and pain...pain.’

Dawn drifted off again, her original plan for Adam hadn’t worked out and she so wanted to feel a proper man inside her. It had been such a long time since she’d felt fulfilled or at least if she couldn’t managed that she’d settle for just being filled – plastic toys did a pretty good job but she’d paid for a chance at the real thing.

Dawn dropped to her knees and started kissing Adam’s thigh in about the same place he’d passed out kissing hers. She looked up at him and smiled with her eyes, she decided not to give him a full-faced smile as she knew that her best efforts sometimes gave the wrong impression.

She carried on kissing, moving closer to his balls. His thighs were taut, and unlike her departed husband’s you could see

there were two of them, rather than having what looked like two large white garden sacks stuffed with fat and joined in the middle.

Dawn put the knife down within easy reach and then placed one hand on each pert buttock as she worked her tongue up and over his balls. His skin felt soft under her fingers and his balls had been shaved smooth, something she'd never experienced before. With Fred she had left his balls well alone; they were covered in hair so thick it resembled brambles, and she always feared that she would find something living down there – a mouse perhaps, making its nest in the thicket.

The tool of the whore's trade stirred. Moving her tongue along his shaft Dawn liked to think that at least part of the movement was due to her diligent work. Though deep down she knew, given the unfortunate circumstances, the blue pill most male prostitutes surely took was more likely the deal maker.

When Adam was fully erect Dawn stood up, a smug look on her face, 'you weren't meant to pass out so quickly, we were meant to have sex before I killed you.' Adam's face had been calm during Dawn's hard work, as if he believed she was just a kinky bitch and this was how she got off. He took the reality like a slap across the face, but Dawn's expression changed the moment he looked like he was going to

struggle again – it told him he had better behave or there would be trouble.

Delving in her bag Dawn found her purse and took out a silver-wrapped condom. She would have much rather felt skin against skin, worrying that the latex would feel like her home entertainer with a man attached, but then Adam was a prostitute after all, a thought that nearly made Dawn take a knife to his throbbing erection instead of the condom, but she calmed herself and slid on the latex sheaf.

Standing as she was in front of her captive Dawn was glad she'd invested in new bra, cami and pants, the latter she dropped before stepping over Adam's impressive cock and taking a seat. Blood from his stomach wound stained her white silk. It streaked across her top as she rode up and down, shocking crimson red against the white.

'How could I have stayed with that fat freak so long' Dawn thought as she held onto the prostitutes strong, toned shoulders and slid up and down – a man inside her, a fit, hard man. The pleasure of such a big piece of meat mixed with a tinge of pain as she rode harder and harder.

Dawn wanted an orgasm; she wanted to explode, let out years of tension. Feel her body release under the attention of a man not just a piece of silicone rubber. A blank expression took Adam's face; his teeth were gritted as if he

was fighting his orgasm. He seemed scared of what would come next and hating himself at feeling pleasure under such tortured circumstances.

Harder and harder, Dawn forced the prostitute's meat inside her, banging her hips into his. She knew he was close but she wasn't quite there, she couldn't let go, she needed something more, a final push. Sitting down, Dawn took Adam's full length and, instead of riding up and down, she sat and ground him into her, then reaching over she picked up the knife. She knew what would do it for her, what would give her that last push.

Still grinding down, Dawn pulled Adam's head into her chest. Her small frame had little fat, and she certainly didn't have enough fat to fill out a pair of breasts. Still her B cup masked most of the prostitute's face. Dawn debated for a second then adjusted her position so that Adam's head was on her right shoulder allowing her to look down the length of his tanned back.

Adam started to tense, he was close and Dawn knew if she was going to come she would have to get started. With the knife held tight, knowing Adam was bound to start struggling at her actions, she drew the blade up from the base of his spine to his neck. Adam arched his back desperately trying to pull it away from the pain. The first cut wasn't too deep, just enough to let Dawn see blood. The second was deeper

and the third deeper still – she was close.

Placing the blade in the centre of his back, just left of his spine, Dawn started to push. The razor-shape point of the eight-inch blade had little trouble breaking the skin, the wound sent Adam bucking forward, to which Dawn replied by grinding his cock into her even harder. Each time she pushed the blade she felt his spasm inside her. Blood rushed from the wound, the blade had dug an inch deep and now, rather than push, Dawn moved the knife from side to side, doing what she could to illicit Adam's forward defensive response. She had never felt a man so deep, never felt so alive – hot, horny and alive. It was time!

With one hand she took hold of Adam's hair and pulled his head back so she could look into his face. With the other hand she began to push on the knife. She was riding again, bouncing up and down, it was time, it was now – 'yes! Yes! YES!' Dawn screamed, the whoosh of air as the blade made it through the lung, and the look of unadulterated terror on Adam's face had finally brought her to climax.

Orgasmic guilt rushed in with the orgasm, not because she had caused a pleasant young man such grievous harm but at the mess the blood and her juices had made of her silk under-garments.

‘What a waste, what an absolute waste.’ She said to Adam as she stood up and went to the bathroom to clean up, leaving him with tears running down his face that dripped onto his fading cock.

‘Are you still not dead?’ Dawn asked her fourteenth conquest. She had showered and changed and in the twenty minutes it had taken to get herself cleaned up she had expected Adam to have died. Instead he managed to look up as she walked back into the room. He was right in thinking it was too late to plead for his life so instead he had switched off, resigned himself to bleeding out.

After bouncing up and down on the spot, a look of childish glee on her face, Dawn said, ‘it’s a SCREAM baby. No, it really is, I can gut you, just like in the film – such a good film.’ The words didn’t sound right coming out of a menopausal woman’s mouth. In the film they had seemed poignant; in the dark of the hotel room they had seemed sad, though she certainly managed to capture the words’ maniacal intent.

Relishing the unexpected opportunity, Dawn took the knife back out of her bag – she’d cleaned it and put it away, still, she didn’t mind, she was happy to do a little play acting. Then doing her best to keep from getting any splatter on her dress, Dawn watched Adam’s face as she forced the knife deep into the right side of his stomach. Unlike the killer in

scream she wasn't strong enough to slice the blade across; instead she had to spend several, slow, mind-exploding, minutes cutting the knife across the dying whore's belly.

'Disappointing,' Dawn said as she pulled the blade out. She'd expected Adam's guts to fall to the floor; instead they just oozed out like emptying a can of spaghetti into a bowl. Not satisfied, Dawn pushed on Adam's head to open the wound. That did the trick, the push allowing most of his insides to fall to the floor.

Smiling, Dawn grabbed her bag, wiped the knife off on the bed and returned it to a carrier bag and then replaced it in her case. In the corridor she clipped the 'Do Not Disturb' sign over the handle and singing a few bars of 'I Get A Kick Out Of You,' she walked off towards the lifts.

Chapter Eight

Soft centre anyone?

Umbrella up, Dawn made her way across to the rental car company. Hours of thought and endless discussion with Laurie had gone into how she could get a fake driving licence – rent the car as someone else. She couldn't just steal one from the pensioners; the licence had a picture ID. In the end they realised that getting a fake ID might create a

greater paper trail than actually just going and renting a car. The former was against the law and might be traceable; the latter was a common occurrence.

The hired gray Ford Focus was ubiquitous – the perfect unseen car. It seemed a shame to have to pay out and hire a car. But the necessity soon became apparent as Dawn drove past the carpark where she had left her car. The whole area was cordoned off. The body must have been cleared away as there wasn't an ambulance, just four police cars and two dark blue transits, which Dawn guessed must have been for the forensic unit.

A tent had been set up, a base of operations, and from the traffic lights opposite where Dawn was held at red; she could see the police were asking people returning for their cars to come in for a chat. The news on the car radio had said that the local emergency services were over-extended. With two serious incidents in the one day, they'd had to call help in from the next county. There had been no mention of any bodies in the shop yet, on the last news it had only been reported as a severe fire – still, Dawn knew it was only a matter of time.

'Supermarket, services and the airport – nearly done,' Dawn said as she headed up the bypass for the hanger-sized out-of-town supermarket.

As casual as the day is long, Dawn browsed the store, moving from lane to lane picking up the odd item here and there. Within ten minutes she had shopped and was back in her car. Having parked with her bonnet close to the perimeter wall, and having checked on a number of occasions Dawn was in the best space to hide her actions from the killjoy CCTV cameras and any passersby.

Putting the rest of the arbitrary purchases in the boot, Dawn took out the huge box of chocolates, plus a smaller bag of individually wrapped chocolates and then went back and sat in the front.

Out of her bag she pulled a red pencil case covered in blue embroidered anemones. Inside were five identical syringes, each filled with a dirty brown solution. Dawn had always had an interest in poisons. She loved that it could be subtle and secretive, taken as part of a romantic pact, both parties just drifting off to sleep in each other's arms. And by complete contrast it could be explosive, deadly, killing thousands horrifically, people coughing up blood, bleeding from their eyes, dying in minutes while praying it would take seconds.

Research began early, back when her daughter still lived at home, even before Dawn knew she was going for the female serial killer record she had spend many hours digesting whatever she could find on poisons. While her precious daughter was young, Dawn would spend time reading

copious amounts of horror novels, where poisons formed part of the plot. Each year she would get the latest serial killer and murder part-works, always investing most of her time in those who chose to use the 'silent killer.' 'Silent killer' being the common strap-line used by many part-works, though from Dawn's experience this morning, she'd found her poisons of choice anything but silent.

Without removing its tamper-proof cellophane covering or opening it, Dawn turned over the large box of dark chocolate, soft centres. With a deft hand she took one of the syringes and poked the needle through the base of the cardboard, through the plastic base and with a certain practiced precision she squeezed in a measure of poison into each chocolate. It had taken several purchases before she had been able to find a box that didn't have too much wrapping and one where the chocolates weren't spread over several layers. Having Fred out at work all day and out at the pub most nights gave plenty of time for practice and preparation. She had done this so many times before she was confident that she could inject each chocolate without needing to see what she was doing.

The box contained thirty-six chocolates. It was a box aimed at lovers, rather than a box for the whole family to enjoy. On Dawn's criteria lists she had included the sin of greed. In her mind buying a box this size for two people to share was just plain greedy and the people who bought it deserved to die.

The poison of choice, more of the Curare. This time, because metal hooks weren't a practical delivery method, the poison had been mixed with dishwasher fluid. Horrendous if swallowed at the best of times, a poison that had killed many old people in nursing homes when it had inexplicably been mixed with flavour masking blackcurrant juice. It seems in recent years, bed-wetters, constant complainers and those who stink of death are no longer given the pillow treatment, instead dishwasher fluid is the disgruntled care-worker's weapon of choice.

To kill a person, a larger quantity than could be injected into chocolates, would be needed. But from the many websites that list the effects of poisons, Dawn had learnt that dishwasher fluid would quickly burn into the flesh of the throat as it's ingested, which would allow a perfect in-route for the Curare.

Injecting chocolate after chocolate, Dawn smiled at how far she'd come. As a teenager she had tried hard to lead a normal life. Her urge to kill had always been there, but society continually told her that one should fit in. Dawn tried; she married, had a child soon after marriage and busied herself with housewifely duties. In the early days, Fred had worked hard, he had drunk, but rarely to excess. Dawn had always known that it was best for her to minimise the number of people she associated with; the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, through his play 'No Exit'

said, 'hell is other people', and to Dawn there was no more certain a fact. Sartre also said, 'there is no "right and wrong" apart from human needs,' which was why Dawn was such a fan of his work. Her need was to see pain, see it in the eyes of others, cause it, to even out life's disparities. But society judged, said there were rights and wrongs, it ignored her human need. Dawn knew that if she spent too much time in the company of others her needs would have to be satisfied. As it were, Dawn had still found ways to cause pain on those who deserved it.

Neighbours, for example, who made too much noise or played their music too loudly had found their tyres slashed or bleach thrown on the bonnet of their new SUV. As a doting mother Dawn couldn't risk experimenting with poisons while she had a child in the house, only research. But when Fred's drinking drove her daughter to leave home at sixteen and leave the country altogether at twenty, the planning started to pick up.

By the time her baby left for New Zealand, Dawn had already created most of her 'Acceptable Criteria' list. And though she had never touched Fred while her daughter was at home, with her out of the country she knew she had to act. But then there was the list, there were so many things on there, so much bad in the world, and she just couldn't get her head around how killing one man would make a difference. Plus, if she got caught, her killing would end at

that man.

So the planning started. First came the part-time job. Her plans needed money and though Fred didn't care what happened to his earnings as long as he had enough to get hammered each night and his dinner was on the table, skimming from the house keeping budget didn't yield much.

The travel agents had been perfect, twenty-five flexible hours a week. This allowed Dawn to save, to take classes in her lunch break, such as self-defence, keep-fit and Chinese firework making. It gave her an excuse to be out of the house during the day, whenever she wanted, not just on a Monday to do the grocery shopping – it was perfect. Dawn worked out how much money she needed, how much time she needed for research, which picked up and improved no end when she bought the home computer – she told Fred it belonged to the travel agents so she could work from home now and then. He didn't understand computers and hated that she did. When he had first beaten her till she was unconscious it had been over the computer. Fred had seen something on the TV about women finding lovers online. He thought with all the time she spent on there that she was doing the same, and he beat her so 'you know what will happen if you ever leave me!'

The morning after that first beating Dawn had mixed his cornflakes with rat poison. She got halfway to the table

before she managed to persuade herself that she had made a plan and when you make plans you should stick to them.

It was Laurie who had first said ‘well if you’re going to kill lots of people, why don’t you make sure you kill enough people to be the UK’s greatest female serial killer.’ It was an idea that had lodged deep in Dawn’s compulsive mind and from that thought today’s events were playing out.

The box of chocolates finished, Dawn pulled a set of pre-addressed envelopes out of her bag. The A5-sized envelopes were made of plastic, a mix of bright colours and each covered in pictures of presents. Dawn had found them on a Christmas website, she wanted to find envelopes that looked professional and that could have been sent from a marketing company.

In each bag Dawn placed compliments card that said ‘Free Trial – Please Enjoy Our New Deliciously Special Chocolates.’ Then after filling each of the individually wrapped chocolates with the same poison as the others, she placed four in each and sealed them shut. The envelopes were all lick and stick. This was for the same reason that she’d left the condom on the prostitute. His murder along with the ones from the chocolates needed a way of being traced back. During the planning stage murders had been classed as ‘seen’ and ‘unseen’. The ‘seen’ murders involved Dawn taking the lead in the killing, for example, smashing

her co-workers heads in with a hammer or gutting a prostitute. The problem with only going with 'seen' murders was how difficult it would be to kill over twenty people in one day without someone stopping her – or as so often happens, the killer stopping themselves. Even if she succeeded, she would be running the risk of only being seen as a mass murderer. If Dawn mass murdered, like the postal workers, or the parents of the children in America who allowed their kids access to guns, then her classification would change. Dawn didn't want to be seen as just another mass murderer, anyone could do that – governments did it on an almost daily basis – she wanted to be a serial killer, she wanted her own issue of Serial Killer Weekly and this is where the 'unseen' murders came in. These were murders that took place over time, where she wasn't actually at the scene of the crime. Dawn knew that some of her actions would be seen as mass murder – poisoning all her work colleagues for one, and what she had planned for later this afternoon. And the more Dawn reasoned it out the harder it got to make the distinction between being a mass murderer and a serial killer. She just felt that if the people she attacked didn't all die on the same day and if she chose a number of ways to kill them she was sure to get on that coveted magazine cover.

With the chocolates finished Dawn had to move on with her plan. She had the receipt for the chocolates and had only been gone from the store for ten minutes. At the customer services counter she would tell them that she'd bought the

chocolates as a gift, but her husband had just phoned to say he had bought the exact same gift and could she please return them. The chocolates would go back on the shelf and would go to work soon enough. The envelopes were addressed to several of Dawn's neighbours, the ones without kids, like choosing chocolates aimed at grownups, Dawn chose the neighbours who didn't have or didn't see their kids to minimize the risk of killing children. Dawn had chosen neighbours using her criteria list: cheating husbands with wives who let it pass, owning cars big enough to herd sheep, when they weren't a farmer and so on.

On her way back from successfully returning the chocolates, Dawn posted the ten envelopes. If the police did their job they would link the poisons used in both locations and she would get credit for all the deaths.

Chapter Nine

Do you have anything in a wool blend?

Very few cars kept Dawn company on her trip to the motorway services. But then it was a Sunday after all, a time for family dinners, for all day drinking. A time for good catholic priests to hear confessional, for sinners' cries and God's servants' prayers to get God's suggestions on new ways to push the collection plate. Priests around the world knowing the collection plates will need to ring loud if they are

to replace the two billion dollars their church had paid in compensation to the victims of hundreds of the paedophiles in priests' clothing.

Dawn had been to confessional. She wasn't catholic, it was research. While looking for reasons why she had to kill, at least reasons that she could tell the courts if she was ever brought to justice, Dawn had tried out a number of religions. 'God told me to do it', seemed a common war cry of many modern day psychopaths. And it was a path she was going to follow until an American president used it as justification for war. When she had watched the man on TV, looked into his eyes as he spoke, she really didn't want anyone thinking about her in the same way that she and, she was sure, many others thought about him.

In the end, Dawn believed using a God as an excuse to kill people was just too trite. It had been done for centuries; when men were still living in caves they were killing one another because their gods told them to do it. For Dawn, using God as an excuse was something only a man would do. She often wondered if men could actually cope with the guilt of killing another or the guilt of killing thousands of others if they didn't have a higher power on their side. If there is no God, then there is only man and that's far too much guilt for your average weak-willed hero with a machine gun or army to balance on their shoulders.

So blaming it on religion was out. Other than the usual stuff, Dawn had no issues with her mother. Her dad had wandering hands, but using that as an excuse would just make her appear a man-hater and, with the body count so far, men were faring far better than woman.

From what Dawn had read, the most commonly accepted profile of a serial killer was: a white heterosexual male, in their twenties or thirties who is sexually dysfunctional with low self-esteem. It had always seemed funny to Dawn that the social group which had the most chances in the modern world were the ones most likely to be serial killers. Out of that list, Dawn only really matched two of the criteria – she was white and heterosexual. She was in her late forties, had no issues with sex, she'd just been stuck with a man too fat to get it for too many years. And as for a low self-esteem, well, Dawn knew who she was and was okay about it. Plus, she had always known what kind of person she would become. It had only been through having a daughter that Dawn hadn't blossomed many years before.

Dawn drove the Ford Focus into the carpark of the motorway services; she still didn't know what she would tell a court, though she wasn't sure she cared. Yet perhaps she might blame it on the notorious 'glass ceiling', the figurative ceiling that keeps women from progressing further. Maybe, her actions were just rebellion at being held back for so long, serial killers were predominately men, and surely that was

unfair – Dawn was just acting for women's rights everywhere.

Dawn smiled at her own musings, then after pulling out a wig and small make-up case she gave herself a quick makeover and headed for the main building.

On entering the services, no one gave Dawn a second glance. Not a cleaner or security guard, not even the floor manager, who looked her right in the face and didn't show a hint of recognition. Three months before Dawn had taken a week's holiday from work, because three-and-a-half months ago she had applied for the job as a cleaner at the services. She didn't tell the travel agents or her husband what she was doing, instead she gave false details to the services, she wasn't planning on staying long enough for it to be an issue, and as far as Fred was concerned she was going to work as usual.

It had only taken three days to find out the information she had needed: which areas of the carpark were missed by the CCTV cameras, how often were the toilets really checked and did they contain a CCTV camera.

With her face powdered to an ashen gray, an equally ashen wig and a hunched over walk, Dawn made a passable old person. If nothing else she looked inconspicuous, another face in the crowd. From the few days that she'd worked

there, Dawn had noticed just how many old women came through the service station. Coach after coach dropped off hundreds each day, all desperate for the loo, most unable to make it there without at least a little leakage.

Dawn had parked on a space she'd identified as a blind spot for the CCTV cameras, and after ten minutes of waiting she followed a coach load of old women into the centre. It was now nearly 4pm and though the toilets were meant to be checked every fifteen minutes, they were usually checked around 3pm and then not again till after the rush hours had passed. A camera watched the corridor the toilets but there was no camera in the toilets themselves. Plus, the corridor was usually so busy that it was hard to see who entered and left.

Walking slowly, Dawn made her way down the amenities' corridor. She was heading for the disabled toilets, but she had to go slowly, so to keep in character and to make sure it was empty on her arrival.

It was, and once inside, Dawn put the lid down on the loo, sat down and took stock. What she was about to do had caused the most heated of discussions with Laurie.

'You surely can't justify killing someone disabled? Which criteria do they come under?' Laurie had asked when Dawn had first mentioned her plan.

‘Well... They don’t contribute to society,’ Dawn replied, not actually believing what she had just written. She did get annoyed that disabled people got parking spaces nearer to the supermarket than her, when in her opinion they had more time to shop and thus should get free parking further away. But other than that, as a group, disabled people didn’t fit the criteria, Dawn had different reasons for using their toilet she just hadn’t wanted to explain for fear it sounded callous. Laurie hadn’t believed Dawn either and had shot back with:

‘How can you say that, what about Steven Hawkins? Did he prove there wasn’t a God? You said you liked him for that, said it made things far easier. He contributes, so if not that, then what?’

‘Well...’ Dawn paused; she didn’t want to give her real reasons as they went against her overall plan of only killing people who deserved to die.

‘Come on, Dawn, tell me.’

‘Well, I have no reason for wanting disabled people dead, it’s just a lot more convenient to use their toilet rather than the women’s. I don’t think I’d get out of the women’s toilets before my plan was executed. There’s bound to be a queue, and I might not make it out in time.’ Dawn’s other reason she

didn't bother explaining, it being just a little too depraved even for Laurie. Dawn knew that if she killed a disabled person then she would be vilified even more highly, and that would surely guarantee an issue of Serial Killer Weekly all to herself.

'Collateral Damage' Laurie typed the text accompanied by a smiley – a buff teddy bear with huge muscles and a large syringe hanging out of its bum.

'What, that dreadful movie starring Arnold Schwarzenegger? I didn't see it all, fell asleep!' Dawn replied, her eyes still fixed on the hateful smiley.

'Not the movie, you're right it was dreadful, I think Schwarzenegger made the right move into politics when he did, his films have gone downhill since that lovely one he did alongside that small bloke.'

'Who, Danny Devito?' Dawn replied, unsure where the conversation was going.

'That's him, anyway, that film's point... I think... was that sometimes people will get killed in the cross fire, it's one of those things. Some men are lost in the mission – the ends, and the means and all that.' Huge smiling teddy.

‘That’s what I thought but I really did want a reason for killing them.’

‘Well the hope is that you’ll kill several people, so there’s a good chance you’ll get someone who really deserves it and, in reality, you’re actually more likely to get some lazy sod who can’t be bothered to walk the extra feet to their own toilet.’

‘And, if I do that, then it’s a win/win,’ Dawn was happy with all the reasoning. Plus, there was that woman who drove her electric wheelchair past the shop each day. A huge woman who had changed chairs three times. Dawn had heard once that the woman’s disability was overeating, and the only reason she was in the chair was because her thighs had gotten so fat she couldn’t walk anymore. One day Dawn had been on the phone and the fat woman had wheeled by, on her way past she had shot Dawn a wobbly smile and it took all Dawn’s willpower to not rush out side and beat it off her face.

All in all, Dawn would be happy if she killed someone like the fat woman or someone who shouldn’t be using a disabled toilet in the first place, or at the very worst the death count was high enough to ensure sufficient criteria could be ticked off her list.

From her bag, Dawn had taken out a heavy container about half the size of a shoebox. Opening her legs Dawn moved so she could place the box on the seat. It was too heavy to place on her knees, its contents, three-inch nails mixed with sliver drawing pins were packed tight. Insulation tape covered the entire outer surface of the box, several layers to keep everything in place.

Dawn hadn't wanted to be called a 'nail bomber'; she certainly didn't want to be known as a nail bomber who targets disabled people. This was why the box contained the drawing pins; Dawn wanted to be little inventive. So, in the interest of being that, she had used the drawing pins and the contents of the box had all been soaked in yet more Curare – Dawn had ordered in bulk and hadn't wanted to see it go to waste. Plus, at risk of being called the 'Curare Killer', Dawn knew the repeated use of the poison would tie all her killings together.

It had been clear from Dawn's first foray with the internet that any research she did online could quite easily be monitored. She had no doubt that if she entered 'nail bomb' into a search engine, it might very well trigger some form of surveillance. Of course the town she lived had several internet cafes, so whenever came time to research a contentious subject she had paid one a visit. Of course it hadn't taken Dawn long before she had tracked down a couple of valuable resources that hadn't required the use of

the search bar. The first had been the websites of her favourite serial killer magazines; there was always more information online, extra details that helped any budding serial killer get a head start. The second was mystery writer's websites; there were no end of people wanting to know about poisons and bombs, all in the name of researching their latest book. Dawn didn't have to ask a single question here, just hang around long enough and they all got answered. The last was eBay, that wondrous auction site where given enough time all the best things come up for sale.

It was from a writer's website that Dawn read how you can make your own explosive charge. In fact it was quite simple; at least the website led you to believe as such. In fact, the explosive was nothing more than a glorified firework connected to a pull trigger. Initially Dawn had bought a box of Chinese fireworks from the auction site, taken them to pieces and experimented in her cellar when Fred was out at work. In the beginning she had only actually managed to send the nails a foot away from the box and make a hell of a bang.

It took an adult learners' taster course, run during the summer, called 'how to make your own Chinese fireworks – dazzle your friends and amaze,' to sort out her explosive issues. It was a course for bored housewives, it was meant to get them out of the home during the long summer

holidays and to give them time away from the kids. Only Dawn and one other, elderly lady, turned up – Gladys. Gladys managed to eventually blow off ends of her fingers, leaving Dawn to pick the brains of the tutor. By the end of the day, Dawn knew what she was doing wrong and had contact details for a firework store where she could buy a pull trigger. Apparently, the course had run for years without disturbance, mostly because only a few people had ever turned up. It had also flown under the Health and Safety Executive's radar – until the Gladys incident of course, when they promptly banned any future courses.

Later attempts within the cellar worked out better, not for the neighbour's cat that Dawn had used for her last experiment, but for the overall plan at least. The pull trigger was a wire that ran from under the firework, you could do as its name suggests and pull the trigger to set the firework off when ready. Out of the top of Dawn's bomb a thick metal wire was all set to be pulled.

Using more of the black insulation tape Dawn strapped the box to the top of the toilet seat; it needed to be held firm so that when the wire was pulled it didn't move, just explode. Then after wiping the toilet down for finger prints – she wanted people to know it was her, but not too soon – she attached the other end of the wire to the inside door handle. There was enough leeway in the wire for Dawn to squeeze through without looking suspicious, but the moment the door

was opened more than a foot the bomb would explode.

‘I wouldn’t go in there if I was you, someone’s done something pretty nasty.’ Dawn said to an able bodied man on exiting the loo. He grunted in disapproval and marched off to the men’s toilets. Dawn grunted, too, he would have made a perfect candidate, but she had to be clear of the corridor before the bomb went off.

It went off just as she was reaching the exit, it sounded like a one- man-band exploding, crashes of metal, screams and blood. The explosion had dropped Dawn down onto one knee; her ears rang like cymbals had landed inside her head. Looking back Dawn watched as the dust settled. Half a toilet bowl lay in the corridor, the rest of it had shattered and added to the many lacerations suffered by the thirty or so who’d filled the packed corridor. This was again a mass murder, though Dawn did hope that at least some people would die over the following days in hospital to add weight to her serial killer credentials.

Through the horror and the screams Dawn nearly asked herself, ‘what have I done?’ But then the intoxication of others’ pain swallowed her up. Her spine tingled. A certain wetness returned between her legs and, as she watched, Dawn was glad she’d decided to wear the old person’s cardigan she got from the Oxfam as it covered her now erect nipples.

Then the poison got to work. There were those who had been killed outright, shrapnel severing major arteries or, like one woman Dawn could see, a nail had gone in through her eye and was now the only thing holding her up as it held her fast to the wall.

Even those with only the slightest of grazes started to fall. Their bodies paralyzing as the Curare went to work. There was so much screaming; though not from the poisoned, the Curare had their tongue.

Dawn took a deep breath, held it for a second and then forced herself to leave the carnage. She wanted to stay, to help out, to see the dying, hopeless looks on the faces of the soon-to-be-dead. But she knew she had to go, from a rough head count she could see that she was now the UKs number one female killer. A smile beamed across her face and then left as quickly as it arrived. Police would be examining the CCTV tapes here soon enough and she didn't want to give them anything to go on – she had a flight to catch.

Chapter Ten

Coming in at number thirty four we have...

The TV in the airport departure lounge was showing BBC News 24. There was no sound, but the copious and some would say intrusive strap-lines that streamed unabated across the bottom of the screen gave Dawn a clear idea of what was going on.

The melodramatic wording read 'FIFTEEN DEAD AT MOTORWAY SERVICES! MANY MORE TAKEN TO HOSPITAL! TOO EARLY TO SAY HOW MANY MORE WILL DIE!

Dawn didn't mean to smile, but the news was showing so much pain. As she sipped at her overly-sweet coffee and moved her head from side-to-side to see around milling passengers, Dawn felt a growing sensation inside. She knew the feeling, it had been there most of her life, but today it was stronger than ever, it wanted her to act, needed her to kill one last time.

In between showing one grieving relative after another, the news said that the police suspected this was a terror attack and that people needed to be extra vigilant.

'A terror attack,' Dawn thought, 'it won't be long before they are raiding mosques.' And then as if the news channel had heard her thoughts, the strap-line announced 'SEVERAL MOSQUES RAIDED IN THE SEARCH FOR TERROR SUSPECTS'.

‘That should keep the police busy and out my hair,’ Dawn thought and smiled again.

‘One more kill, one more kill,’ a voice in Dawn’s head kept repeating. But this was an airport on the day of a terrorist attack, there was no way she could get away with something here. ‘Stab someone and leave them in a cubical!’ The compulsion told her, to which Dawn replied ‘I can’t, they’d surely find the body before my plane lands. It’s a 12-hour flight; I could never keep a body hidden for that long’

‘Poison someone!’ The inner voice continued. ‘The same issue,’ Dawn told herself, ‘I could never keep the body hidden. I’d be a suspect; they could detain the plane at the other end.’

The feeling inside Dawn wasn’t listening; it grew, called to her, a compulsion, telling her, commanding her to act. Dawn got up and paced towards the toilets. She had to stretch her legs, give herself time to think. Checking the board on the way past told her that she should make her way to her gate. The plane was due to leave in twenty minutes.

In the toilet, Dawn splashed water on her face. Again she splashed, then again, the cold water bit into her face but still the compulsion wouldn’t be quieted. ‘One more kill, you have to, one more kill, you need to, ONE MORE KILL!’

A girl, no older than eighteen, walked into the toilet. She was talking a little too loudly on her mobile phone. Bragging about a boy she'd pulled last night, how it 'so wasn't like me to spend the night at a stranger's!' That was something Dawn seriously doubted. In front of the mirror the girl fiddled with her shirt. She pulled at the pink crop-top, trying to get it to cover at least some of her belly but without much success. On its front, in sequins, the word 'Easy' didn't help the girl's continued insistentences down the phone that she 'ain't a slapper.' Dawn wondered who the girl was talking to, 'probably her mother,' she thought given the day and age in which we live.

'She's perfect,' Dawn thought, she ticks so many boxes; whore, no moral standards, too fat for skinny jeans etc.

'One more, just one more kill,' Dawn's compulsion screamed at her, 'the girl is perfect' Dawn agreed. One hand inside her bag, Dawn reached around for a weapon. She had wiped clean and dumped anything that wouldn't pass through the airport metal detectors. She had nothing left, she thought, until her hand fell on a pen – one hard thump and the pen would enter through the eye and piece her brain.

'Job done,' Dawn said, she had meant the words to be thoughts but lost in the planning they had echoed around the bathroom eventually reaching the girl's ears.

‘What’s that? What job’s done?’ The girl asked, and then added to her caller ‘not you, just some woman, no, don’t know what she wants, one second.’

‘You all right love? You’ve got a strange look on your face?’

Dawn’s fingers wrapped around the pen. The hook of the ballpoint that would be used to clip it to a pocket dug into her hand. She felt stinging as the metal broke through her flesh. ‘Do it! Do it now!’ Dawn’s compulsion screamed. She had no choice, she had to act, had to kill the wretched girl.

As Dawn drew her hand from the bag, the airport’s tannoy broke the tension. The mention of Mexico, her travel destination, broke through Dawn’s fixed intentions. The world rang around her head, screaming ‘you don’t have time, you have to do something but you don’t have time!’

Dawn turned and fled the bathroom.

‘No, some crazy woman, she’s gone now, just ran out... I know, stupid cow,’ the girl said down the phone with no idea how close her life had come to ending.

‘Six, seven, gate...’ Dawn counted the numbers out loud as she marched down the airport corridor looking for the number the tannoy had announced.

Inside, Dawn's emotions screamed. Her compulsion, her need to kill, to see pain, whirred round her stomach. Like acid in a washing machine, her emotions whizzed, spinning, making her feel sick, the emotions eating their way free, and if they make it through to the surface they would have to be satisfied.

At the gate, boarding card in hand, Dawn finally gave in, and in a calm inner voice she told herself. 'Before I next lay my body down in a bed to sleep, I'll kill again, just one more, the last of this run – I promise.'

* * *

'Wow you made it at last! I'm so pleased to see you.' Laurie said. On arrival at the five-star hotel in Mexico, Dawn had been told that her friend was waiting for her on the private beach.

'And me you, how was your trip – I take it you are now husband free?' Dawn asked. She had brought with her two drinks from the all-inclusive bar. Laurie was laid out on a sun-lounger. A portly, middle-aged woman, with a bright orange tan-from-a-can – 'tick, tick' Dawn thought.

Laurie spoke continuously for ten minutes; to Dawn it seemed like she did it without taking a breath. She certainly

did it without taking a sip of the drink Dawn had brought her.

‘And you, how are you?’ Laurie asked at last.

‘I’m just really tired, it’s been a long day, I really need to get some sleep.’ Clear water lapped around the base of the two loungers. Dawn was sat on the edge of hers, waiting. The white of the sand reflected the heat upwards, and she was starting to sweat underneath the wig.

It was the middle of the day and most sensible people had moved to the shaded loungers around the hotel pool. The two hundred metre private beach housed no more than eight people, all spread out like lobsters on a barbecue rack.

‘Of course you’re tired, let’s finish up here and then go for a nap. Laurie sat up and then following Dawn’s lead she downed her bright orange cocktail.

‘So what’s the final tally?’ Laurie asked.

Dawn smiled her bright maniacal smile and said: ‘Well, there’s Fred, the whore in the toilet, nine staff at work, that awful fat family, the man- whore. No wonder I’m tired, it’s been such a busy day. That’s not all of course, there’s the yet unknown number from the supermarket, and the chocolates sent to my neighbours, if I say one from each of

those just to be really conservative. Then, at last count, seventeen had died in the services, so...' Dawn thought for a second and then said '...that's 33. And you, of course.'

Laurie didn't reply, the poison in her drink, mixed with a hint of ground up glass to allow the poison access into the blood stream, had paralysed most of her body by the time Dawn had finished adding up the death rate.

Dawn got up and lay her friend back down in her lounge. Laurie paralysed but not yet dead begged with her eyes – not for her life back, she knew it was too late for that, she wanted to know 'why?'

'I know, I know, Laurie,' Dawn said looking down on her friend, 'it would have been great to be here in the sun; find some nice Mexican men, travel around all these warm countries that aren't keen on extradition – I know, perfect. But surely you realised I couldn't let you live? So you killed your husband? That's one killing – nothing! If you live, and we get caught, you'll get some of my limelight – you'll be an accomplice. You'll share my issue of Serial Killer Weekly, and that just won't do.'

'Still, there was a point where I thought having a friend for my future adventures would be good, outweigh the cons but all those damn smileys – why? Why did you have to post a stupid face with every message you sent. The last straw was

the teddy Arnold Schwarzenegger; I just couldn't let it pass!

Dawn put the novel Laurie had been reading on her chest to make it look like she'd just fallen to sleep. Though not technically dead yet, the poison taking twenty minutes or more after the paralysing stage, Dawn was still able to close Laurie's eyelids without objection and leave her there to bake in the sun.

'I'm sorry, my friend,' Dawn said as she walked away.

In the toilets, Dawn took off the black wig and washed the whitening makeup off her face. She also changed her clothes, and by the time she left the washroom she looked like a vibrant forty-something in a bright summer dress and a million miles away from the dowdy old spinster she'd arrived as. The booking in the hotel had been for a twin room for Laurie and guest, so there were no records of her ever having been there.

Dawn got into her hire car and set off for a nice drive along Mexico's coastline. In the passenger seat she had her trusty cord bag. In it was a collection of passports; a man had been waiting for her at the airport and handed them over in a brown paper bag, 'amazing what money can buy you,' Dawn had thought. And she had no shortage of money. Before leaving the UK, just before the credit crunch, she had taken out a mortgage on their house, one she had no intention of

paying back the bank had almost thrown money at her.

With money, passports and a bright maniacal smile, what more did the UK's greatest female serial killer need – other than the title of world's greatest serial killer of course.

Cats in a bag

It didn't matter how many times Jamie looked at the letter in his hand the words carried the same pain, 'Suspended pending investigation.' Jamie sank further down into the car seat hoping that the faded grey fabric would finally tear open and pull him inside. It didn't. 'That would be too easy,' Jamie said to the empty car. Well, it was not entirely empty; the back seats were down and the car was packed with boxes that he had barely had time to unpack. On the top of the heap he could see one of his psychology text books. It was pristine and he imagined the new book smell and the promise it represented when he had peeled away the protective plastic wrap it had arrived in. 'You got all As. ALL As! Oh God, what am I going to do?' This time Jamie didn't just scream to the inside of the car he screamed at the whole world. No answer. Though he did startle a dog walker who picked up her pace and scurried away. I can't just sit here, Jamie thought as his eyes traced the words of the letter. 'Sending explicit photos to a minor' - Who the hell knew that sending pictures to a 17 year old when you're 18 could get you in so much trouble? Jamie thought - Once he reached the Vice Chancellor signature he traced the extravagant loops that made up the L in the Philip of Sir Philip Harman and said to the car 'clearly Sir Philip Harman did' he then looked over at the dirty white PVC door stood guardian over his childhood home. Folding the letter and

putting it back in its crisp white envelope Jamie noticed a droplet of blood fall from his hand and onto the front of the letter, the bright red expanding and obscuring his name. 'I am such a freak, such a freak,' Jamie said as he looked down at his wrist. Without realising, he'd been picking at the scab he had there and it was now trickling blood down into his hand. Opening the glove compartment Jamie reached in and pulled out a rag he used to clean his windscreen and began dabbing up the blood. 'You already in there, mate? What you doing?' said a deep northern voice accompanied by a heavy tap on the car window that caused Jamie to jump and let out a small squeal. Great timing, Jamie thought as he jumped out the car before his old school friend bashed on his window again. 'Friend' was probably a little strong. More Ian lived on the same street as Jamie and they used to go to the same school. 'You all right there, mate? Looks like you've cut yourself?' Ian said as he stepped round the car and got a little too close for Jamie's liking. Jamie stepped back and pressed the rag hard against his cut. The pain galvanised his thoughts, pulled them away from the stupid letter and the hell about to be let loose when his dad found out what had happened. 'Yeah, I'm great mate, just caught my wrist on one of the boxes.' 'Catch it a few times there did you?' Ian asked as he saw the small wounds, in various states of healing, running up Jamie's arm. 'I'm clumsy, it's a curse,' Jamie said offering a bright smile that he hoped would move the subject on. He pulled down his sleeve to cover the other marks. 'Lot of boxes in your car? I thought you were off at Uni doing psycho something or other?' Ian

said as he lent heavy against the Ford Fiesta's wing. Jamie wanted to say, 'what's this, the inquisition? Mind your own business, you drop out, sandwich factory working piece of scum,' but he didn't because it seemed excessive. Instead he went with 'psychology, I'm studying psychology.' 'Oh right, so psychology students don't need much stuff then if you're bringing all that back.' Ian had that aggressive tone many men had in the north of England. His mum would always tell him that the boys in his school weren't really aggressive, they were just cursed with an accent that made them seem so. His mum was from the south and had unfortunately found herself on an ex-mining estate with a man who, at best, could be described as lacking. That was one of the many reasons she hadn't survived into her thirties. Walking to the boot of his car gave Jamie a second to come up with an excuse for why he had so much stuff. It wasn't that he thought he owed Ian one, but he had to say something. 'You know what London's like, everything is so small and so expensive that I couldn't get all my stuff in.' Jamie hoped that Ian would have no clue what the capital was like as he probably shared the same view as Jamie's dad that 'there's nothing they have there that you can't get here'. His answer did the trick and Ian replied simply with, 'oh, right,' and then went on to ask, 'so do you need a hand with all this?' Jamie suppressed a gasp at the idea, it was bad enough he turned up out the blue at his dad's but bringing a relative stranger with him would send his dad into a screaming fit. That was something that Jamie was sure would happen anyway but he hoped that he would at least

have chance to make a cup of tea first. Ian hadn't waited for an answer and was in the back of Jamie's car hooking his rough fingers around one of the boxes. 'NO mate, it's good, I can manage.' Ian ignored him and started to pull out the box. 'Just LEAVE IT!' Jamie snapped and pushed the box back in the car. 'All right, mate, I'm just trying the help,' Ian said stepping away, adding 'I'm not a cat you know, I'm not so easy to get rid of.' Excellent, Jamie thought, as he realised he had been back less than an hour before someone had brought up the cats. That was such a long time ago. Mostly. 'Sorry, mate, I'm just tired, been a long drive. I'll need to clear room at my dad's first before I take anything in.' 'Well if you will choose a Uni at the other end of the country, you've only yourself to blame,' Ian said. 'Well you know how it is, mate, I just wanted to get as far away from here as possible,' Jamie said as he shut the boot of his car. Ian's tone lightened and, taking on as much of an air of sympathy as he could muster, he said, 'yeah, of course, mate, we still see Dave, pissed as a fart stumbling down to the late shop before it shuts.' There was no reaction from Jamie at the comment. His dad's drunken antics had been formed into an insult throughout his teen years and the words now just bounced off his thickened skin. And it wasn't as if Ian had meant anything by it other than to give a nod to why being miles away from the village was a good idea. As it didn't look like he was going to be able to return to the relative comfort of his car, not with Ian hanging around, Jamie said his goodbyes, took a breath and headed towards his front door. The dog was barking before Jamie had made it to within ten

feet of the door. Jamie picked up his pace but it was already too late, from the other side of the door he heard his dad shout at the dog to shut up and then the fumbling of keys. 'What are you doing here?' Jamie's dad snapped as he opened the door just far enough to let him in. Nice to see you, too, Dad, Jamie thought as he squeezed himself through the door way and into the house. Thankfully, the dog's frenzied fussing and a barrage of, 'sit down, Lucky...come away, Lucky... stop making such a fuss, you dumb dog,' allowed Jamie to make it through to the kitchen and get the kettle on before he had to answer. Not such a Lucky dog are you, boy, in this mess, forever breathing in clouds of smoke and living with an alcoholic, Jamie thought as he gave in and bent down to fuss over the dog. His dad pushed his way past and starting making drinks. 'What you doing here, then? That snotty Uni of yours not keeping you busy?' Dave had hated his son going off to Uni mostly because he thought it was a complete waste of the money Jamie's grandparents had left him when it was clear the boy would amount to nothing. Jamie ignored the question again, he just kept stroking the dog and hoping his dad would move on. He didn't. 'What you hiding? You've done something, haven't you?' 'Christ, dad, why do you always have to think the worst of me?' Jamie said. He then grabbed his coffee intent on storming out of the room. The cup was a little over filled and as he moved, the coffee leapt over the side of the mug and covered his hand. He didn't scream, nor did he look back. Instead he let the pain wash through him. The burning liquid eating into his skin caused his skin to react

and turn red. But Jamie only clenched his teeth and held everything in until he was in the front room, out of sight of his dad. Once there he dropped himself down onto the settee and Lucky climbed on at his side. As the dog's head flopped into Jamie's lap in search of attention Jamie opened his mouth and let out a silent scream. His jaw cracked and resisted Jamie's first attempt to close his mouth. The burn on his hand needed attention but, as that wasn't going to happen, the silent scream would have to do. And much like the cuts on his wrists and arms, Jamie let the pain clear his mind of the constant barrage of intruding thoughts that urged him to do stupid things. His dad thundered in, his excessive weight nearly taking out the room's wooden floor boards that were half rotten after absorbing one to many split beers. 'You're going to have to tell me at some point. What the hell have you done?' Dave's graceless figure entering the room and looming over Jamie sent Lucky cowering off into her tatty basket. 'You've always thought the worst of me,' Jamie said as he moved along the settee making room for his father. He could feel his dad's rancid breath on his face and it brought back too many childhood memories to stay in smelling range for long. 'It's 'cos you have always done something. You're a freak and no amount of fancy schooling is going to change that. Please, God, tell me you didn't fill your halls with dead cats?' Jamie made it to the third cushion of the settee but his dad followed. Each word spat from his dad's mouth cut him with a pain worse than he could ever inflict on himself. 'Is it worse than that? Should I be expecting the police again? They won't let you off with a

caution this time.' Ignoring the attack, Jamie yelled, 'I knew this was a bad idea, how stupid was I to think you'd be any help?' When he got up to leave, Dave blocked his way. 'You're not going anywhere until you tell me what you've done.' 'Get the hell off of me,' Jamie yelled and batted the hand away. 'I don't have to tell you anything and, when I leave here this time, I'm not coming back.' 'Yeah, yeah, James. I've heard that one before.' With two hands Jamie pushed his dad backwards. 'You bastard, you don't call me James, you never call me James.' James was how his mother had always referred to him. In the letter she'd left him to read after she had died, she had written, 'you'll always be James to me'. The letter had been a huge apology, accepting that she should have been a better mother and really how could she call herself a mother at all as mothers don't stay quiet when their husband was doing what he did to their child. The memory of the letter flashed through Jamie's mind and blurred his vision red. 'I named you, you stuck up cat-killing bastard, I'll call you what the hell I like.' Dave shoved his son back. 'You didn't name me, by all accounts you were drunk for my birth and used it as an excuse to stay hammered for a week.' This time he shoved his dad hard enough to push him down into a chair. The look on his dad's face was one he'd seen before. It was the one that covered it after he had closed the door on the policeman's visit. On that occasion he had punched Jamie so hard a rib cracked. That wasn't going to happen again. As Dave leapt from the chair, Jamie's eyes scanned the room, his head darting left to right until he spotted the brass statue.

He grabbed it and, as Dave lunged forward, he swung it with such force his dad crashed backwards, knocking over the 1930s glass cabinet that had been left to his mother by her great grandma. You could see part of Dave's brain. The blow had sheared off large chunk of skull and taken a hefty slice out of the grey mush beneath. Jamie dropped the statue to the floor, half hoping that his dad would sit up and tell him off for dropping one of his prized brass ornaments. He didn't sit up, so instead Jamie sat back down on the settee and called over Lucky. The dog took some coaxing as she knew full well that when the fighting started it was best to run for cover. 'Well, that didn't go so well,' Jamie said to the now quiet room. After a minute of stroking the dog, Jamie got up, poked his dad in the eye with his finger and when there was no movement he sat back down again. There was much too much blood to take a pulse and, if there was no reaction from being jabbed in the eye, then it seemed a fair assumption that his father was dead; certainly when you took account of the chunk of brain that rested near his father's feet. 'So, girl, what are we going to do now?' Jamie said to Lucky. There was no reply other than a look that Jamie took to mean, 'what are you going to do now?' Thankfully, there were one or two bonuses of being a little strange or a 'cat-killing sociopath' as his dad liked to call him. Psychiatrists would probably have labelled him a sociopath, too, if his Dad hadn't always been drunk on the days Jamie was meant to go for his assessments. The main advantage was that he was able to think clearly during times of extreme stress, like now when your dad's brains were

lying on the carpet and a thick ooze of blood was soaking into the already rotting floor boards. 'I need options, Lucky, do you think you could eat the body? I could pretend I arrived home and you'd gone all mental'. The sad eyes of a rather unlucky dog told him that was hardly an option. 'I could go on the run - that always seems fun on the TV. Though I have no money and I doubt there's anything in this place that would cover more than my petrol to the edge of the village.' One plus that just occurred to Jamie was that he knew his dad's neighbours were out at work. That meant no one could have overheard the fight. They had been his dad's neighbours since before Jamie was born and Jamie knew full well that if they had been at home and heard the shouting they wouldn't have been able to resist banging on the paper-thin walls and telling them to keep it down. Disturbing the viewing of a soap opera was a mortal sin on the estate where Jamie grew up. 'I could chop him up,' Jamie said and smiled. He liked this idea, it didn't actually help the situation but he knew that it would at least give him a few moments of happiness before the police caught him. 'Lucky, this is getting us nowhere - we need an actual plan, silly dog. And no, I'm not going down the insane route by taking a dump on his body - stilly animal.' Jamie stroked the dog as he mocked her for her silly ideas. Then two relatively viable options came to Jamie. Both, he thought would land him in prison but both seemed worth a try. The first, he could drag his dad to the top of the stairs, throw him down and say that he slipped. Though as he thought this over it became clear that it was flawed on too many levels. According to TV

the police can tell if a body has been moved. There was now a huge blood stain in the front room and how would he get rid of the brass statue. He guessed he could see if the 1970s would take it back. Jamie laughed out loud and then said to Lucky. 'this is no time for humour, we have to be serious.' Jamie gave Lucky one last stroke, her last, got up picked up one of his dad's beer bottles, one that was already broken. Came back over to Lucky and with one quick blow he stabbed her in the head. He then got up and rang the police. 'My dad went mental, he killed our dog, and attacked me,' Jamie cried down the phone.

Lisu Hill

Some bruises never go away

‘What does that sign say? Did it say ‘Camp Death?’ I bet it does.’ Mark asked as they passed a sign in Thai script. He had aimed the question at all the occupants of the pickup truck, but the roar of the 4x4s engine stopped anyone other than Mark’s partner, Keith, being able to hear.

‘Don’t say things like that?’ Keith said as he clung to the back of the truck, dodging the other guest’s knees. There was only room in the trucks cabin for two and some luggage, which hadn’t bothered the six guests, who had relished the idea of sitting out in the open as the truck took them up to the mountain retreat.

At least they had relished the idea last night, before a heavy drinking session – this morning was a different matter. Before getting into the truck they’d been told that they could stand up, enjoy the sights, but risk feeling sick, the road up to the camp being nothing more than 30km of muddy mountain track, no tarmac just a steep, continuous slope full of potholes. Or they could sit down, which Mark and Keith had chosen to do, the other four people in the truck had decided to stand, so for the last one-and-a-half hours the

couple been bounced and bashed, risking head- butting the truck on one side and a face full of knee on the other.

‘Why not? This place is bound to look like something out of a horror film, out here in the middle of nowhere.’ Mark said just before he took another knee to his temple.

‘Well, people might hear you, that sign was in Thai, it could say something sacred.’

The pair had wanted to stand up shortly after they truck had set off. The 4x4 had come to a convenient stop but before they could get to their feet, the driver and the guide started piling in bags of supplies, this left no room to stand, they had even been asked if they were okay holding a bag each of breakables, which truly made standing up impossible.

‘Look at the place though, it’s just wooden huts on the top of a mountain – nothing says “killing spree” to a crazed murderer like huts in the middle of nowhere!’ Mark held up the camp’s advertising leaflet for Keith to see, then realising he wasn’t interested , he put it down and checked the contents of the carrier bag on his knee, he was sure he’d heard eggs crack after that last bump in the road.

‘Have you broken them?’ Keith asked after noting the look on Mark’s face.

‘There’s a good chance. Still, if you’re stupid enough to put eggs on the back of a truck what do you expect!’ Mark replied.

‘I think they expected you to keep them safe.’ Keith quipped back.

‘Well, the leaflet promised me “A beautiful tropical hideaway, free from the noise and pollution of Chiang Mai, a chance to stay with one of Thailand’s ancient hill tribes.” This leaflet forgets to mention the hellish journey to get here.’

‘Will you stop moaning? In fact, it’s my fortieth tomorrow, if you practice not moaning from now, you might have it down by then!’

‘Those two are still at it!’ Freddy said, he was trying to speak without making any actual noise, his head pounding from a well-deserved hangover brought on by last night’s drinking session. He’d chosen to stand up in the hope that wind in his face would help clear out his tortured head. Plus, he’d been sick twice this morning already, so hoped he was safe from a repeat of that.

'I guess that's what happens when you've been together fifteen years; you get to jibe at each other as much as you want.' Amber smiled, for two reasons really, one in the hope that she wouldn't have to explain that last point any further, as much as she liked a drink, last night's session was a real blinder and she really wanted time to blank out and stare into the distance. The second reason for the smile, the one that actually lit up her entire face was who she was casually brushing her body up against Freddy, the American Jock.

They hooked up last night, not that either of them could remember much about it. The hill tribe home stay had a guest house in Chiang Mai and most people who were going to spend a couple of days trekking through the jungle, staying with the hill tribe, stayed at the guest house first.

The guesthouse, attractive (if a little cramped) had ten double rooms though, as it wasn't quite at the end of Thailand's wet season, only half the rooms were full. And out of the guests staying, eight were making their way up to the hill tribe the next morning. The staff who worked at the guesthouse seemed a cross between guides and pushy travel agents. They were keen that everyone who stayed at the guesthouse spent at least a couple of nights on the mountain. They smiled, served drinks and cajoled until guests agreed it was a good idea. Of course, when you give most people enough drink they'll think almost anything a good idea.

Amber hoped that she was more than one of Freddy's drink-induced good ideas. He was tall, her age, 23, with blond hair just the right length to run your fingers through – Amber desperately wanted to run her fingers through it now, despite the hangover, and her fingers being covered in mud from gripping onto the side of the truck. His eyes were like deep blue oceans that begged to be swum in; Amber thought Freddy must have stepped right out of the pages of the Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue.

'I am what I eat, more like,' Amber whispered to herself after deciding that if she was going to be a model, it would be the 'before' person for whatever was the current dieting show. When Amber had left the UK to go travelling, one TV show was doing its best to make the populous feel bad, by proclaiming you resemble your diet, this made Amber a concoction of beer, kebab meat and chips – though since Amber had been in Thailand she was mostly made up of cheap spirits, that and the odd dish of rice or noodles to keep her strength up.

The show had once inspired Amber to spend a bewildered five minutes in a health food shop. The brief time she was in there had been taken up trying to work out how dried fruit, which looked like rabbit droppings after a week in the sun, could possibly be good for you. But then after catching a glimpse of dried organic apricots, their skin covered in deep wrinkles, their misshaped body a washed-out mustard

yellow, Amber did at least work out the presenter of the show's favourite food.

The truck climbed through verdant rice paddies, steadily creeping its way to the top of the mountain. As it rounded the next corner a low gasp went up from the 4x4s occupants as a view down the entire mountainside unfolded. Lush green jungle, gave way periodically to tiny villages containing a selection of ramshackle buildings, each with its own neatly tended vegetable plot.

'What do you mean they can just jibe at each other as much as they want?' Freddy asked when the truck slowed to ready itself for the next steep climb.

Amber wasn't sure what he was talking about, it had been at least ten minutes since either of them had spoken, both had been lost in the beauty of their surroundings and a shared need to keep their headaches under control.

'Oh right,' she started after her tired brain handed over what they had last been talking about, 'I just meant that when you've been with someone for a long time, you know what you can get away with. I think you can be nastier, because you know it's unlikely that you're going to split up.'

'Oh, I see,' though Freddy wasn't sure he did. Or at least the man playing drums in his head wasn't letting him fully understand. He looked down at Amber, watched as her nose ring glinted in the sun and wondered what he'd done. The used condom he'd skidded on this morning on his way to the bathroom had cleared up one of the many dark voids left in his memory from last night. He was at least sure they'd had sex.

The night was a drunken blur. He couldn't remember any of it with absolute clarity. He turned his head and looked down at the two men bickering. The guilty smile that broke onto his face as he watched the truck's bounce causing Mark to bash his head into the side was quickly punished by his own head erupting in retaliation of the facial movement. Freddy winched at the pounding in his head and wished for a handful of painkillers, or failing that a beer to help numb the pain.

He looked at Keith, his tall athletic frame crammed awkwardly between a sack of rice and a bag full of fly-attracting vegetables. If it wasn't for the deeply cut lines around Keith's eyes, it would be easy to believe that last night was an early thirtieth birthday celebration rather than a fortieth. The lines, though a shade lighter than the surrounding skin, gave Keith's face a mature masculinity.

‘Shit! shit! I kissed him!’ Freddy blurted, then cursed that his thought had escaped his mouth rather than stayed in his mind how he intended.

‘Memories coming back to you?’ Amber asked. She’d wondered how long it was going to take for the big jock to remember what he’d got up to last night.

‘What? No, err, no.’ Freddy stumbled; the shock of kissing a man seeming to take away his ability to speak. He was a football player, not quite a star and never the team captain, but good enough to get a scholarship that saw him through college. He’d never kissed a man before, hugged plenty, showered with more than he would like to mention, but kissing just wasn’t something one man should do with another, at least not on the mouth, and certainly not with tongues – it’s against God!

‘I saw you kiss Keith last night,’ Amber said. She knew Freddy would never own up to it. A good mid-American boy, she thought it was a minor miracle he’d found his way out of the States at all, never mind to go travelling, but actually seeing him kiss a man last night had been a real shocker. A challenge to the stereotype she applied to all men from America’s Bible belt. Still, she had only met the man the day before and even though they had sat and chatted for hours on the night bus up from Bangkok, she knew her opinions of him were recent and sure to change.

‘What was I doing kissing a man? Was it a dare?’ Freddy knew deep down it wasn’t, he knew that for some reason he’d thought it okay to give Keith a birthday kiss. Acceptable in itself perhaps, if it had been done as a joke while in the company of others, but as the fog cleared from his memory, he remembered that he’d followed Keith to the toilet to kiss him in private and used tongues.

‘No, it wasn’t a dare, and I only know about it because I followed you to the toilet. I thought you’d heard me say I’d come with you, but obviously not.’ Amber had followed Freddy with the same intention as his – to get a kiss. Of course she had no excuse other than she fancied him, no convenient birthday to give her reason, still, she had been so drunk last night that any sense of reason had gone out the window.

A light mist of rain cooled Freddy’s face. He looked up at the sky, one lone cloud, lost against the bright blue sky fought to make its presence felt. The rain lasting seconds before the heat of the sun burnt through the cumulus. The cool brought temporary calm and clearer thoughts.

‘I was wasted last night, no clue what I was doing. And I can’t remember any of it with any detail and that suits me fine.’ Freddy was from Carlton, a town fifty miles from Austin Texas, where most people had strong, drawling accents,

stretching out individual words, so that even forming a basic sentence seemed like it took most of the morning. As Freddy spoke his accent and country of origin were apparent. However, having spent most of his summer vacations growing up with family in Scotland, and spending time with his Spanish au pair, his accent had flattened and speeded up to the point where it could now be described as 'non-descript American.'

The slight extension of the word 'any' had been enough to antagonise Amber. Clearly she was just another part of last night which Freddy wanted to forget, not that she remembered their encounter either. She remembered the bar closing, and then telling everyone that she had a bottle of Laos whiskey back in her room. Somewhere in her mind she found a vague memory of a bunch of people dotted around her room drinking. There was the taste of whiskey, the after-taste of which was still in her mouth and kept promising to make her vomit. But that was it, the next she remembered she was lying face down on the bed, her face and hair covered in vomit with Freddy asleep at her side. He had found the condom and after sliding on it, he'd picked it up and given her a 'well, we must have' look. Amber had hoped they must have, at least she had until he'd drawn out that word 'any'.

In retaliation at being considered forgettable Amber said, 'you know it was straight after that kiss that we must have

had sex,' it wasn't, at least an hour must have passed, but Amber knew she could play on Freddy's memory lapse, 'are you sure you weren't thinking about Keith?'

'Fuck off, don't be stupid!' Freddy snapped, and then shocked at his own outburst, it not being his nature to swear at women, he offered, 'sorry about that, my hangover got the better of me.'

The speed and ferocity of his reply wasn't lost on either of them and just as Amber was about to make a trite remark about him protesting too much, the truck pulled to a bumpy halt at the base of a near insurmountably steep hill. At the top of which a sign heralded that they'd arrived at 'Lisu Hill'.

Chapter two

Man whore

'I can't breathe! My lungs are burning!' Mark gasped when he finally made it to the top of the hill. At the bottom the guide had asked if any of them had wanted to walk up. Keith and Mark had jumped at the chance, desperate to avoid further head bashings. Freddy had waited until Amber decided to stay put and then hopped down from the truck. The final couple, Armando and Emilia were Spanish and had very little spoken English. At the suggestion to walk up the

hill they had smiled and with little understanding of what they'd been asked, Armando had said in broken English 'we go hill.' The Thai guide, unsure of whether that was a yes or no, had hesitated for a second and when he saw the couple weren't moving he'd got back in the 4x4 and started the drive.

'Yeah, it's so great to get the heart pumping!' Freddy said as he bounced past Mark and Keith.

'It's such a shame murder isn't legal.' Mark muttered in reply to Freddy's youthful exuberance while he still tried to catch his breath.

'Oh leave him alone, the boy's cute.' Keith replied once Freddy had moved off to meet the others who were getting down from the truck.

'Oh, why don't you just fuck him?' Mark snapped. He was sick of how much time Keith spent objectifying younger men. Even though technically he was a younger man, but he knew he was at least ten years' older than Keith's preferred age.

'Oh, I might, perhaps he could be my fortieth birthday present?' Keith replied; his tone airy as if his mind was already unwrapping his present.

Mark took a deep breath, which at last returned his breathing to normal. Then after glaring at Keith, he went off to join the others who were now sat around a long wooden table, in an open-sided building sign- posted as the restaurant. The building was dug into the mountainside, and accessed from the road on which they'd arrived on. The road continued past the restaurant and wound its way up through a tatty village of wooden houses with corrugated iron roofs. Three sides of the restaurant were open, one overlooking the village while the other two offered amazing views down a steep valley of jade-green jungle.

While Mark stood in the restaurant and looked over the wonder that unfolded in front of him, Keith turned around and from the top of the hill did the same. Both shared the same thoughts. Coming on this holiday as a final attempt to rebuild their failed relationship was a really bad idea.

The couple had been together for fifteen years and at least some of that time had been happy. But now, staring out over such magnificence, both men knew they had wasted the last five years of their lives.

'Ok, so if we need something to spice up our sex lives what about having a threesome?' Keith had suggested one dark winter's night and from that suggestion the rot grew. Several attempts further down the line and they started to realise

that they had very different tastes. Mark liked older men, Keith liked younger. Mark wanted to have sex with forty-year-olds and Keith wanted guys in their early twenties. The threesome idea never quite got off the ground, but the having-sex-with-other-men idea flourished.

Again a single sentence had passed judgement on the relationship, this time from Mark:

‘Well, I guess its ok for us to have sex with other guys, just as long as the other one doesn’t find out.’

A month ago, when he’d come home to find Keith still inside another guy, one who looked young enough to be his son, Mark’s resolve finally broke. He realised he’d become everything he hated about being gay. He’d fallen for the idea that it’s okay to have sex with other guys because you only ‘make love’ to one person, your partner. For years he’d told himself that it was straight people who had it wrong, that the only way to have a successful relationship, one with a fulfilling sex life was if that sex was with a range of other people. Of course more than fifty per cent of straight relationships involve having affairs, but the difference was that they are rarely spoken about, whereas Mark and Keith had spent the last few years openly cruising gay websites to find their next encounter.

What he hadn't realised was that sex is not a thing that is just done to service need. It involves other people, feelings, emotions, and the development of relationships no matter how brief. More importantly, it involves the individual's time. The process of finding, wooing and then the deed itself all took time, time that should have gone into building a strong and successful relationship.

So what if the sex wasn't as exciting as it was when they first met, surely there were ways they could make it at least bearable, and though it might be utilitarian, with some effort at times it could be exciting and fun. Of course, that would take work and some acceptance that a long-term fulfilling partnership involved certain sacrifices. Perhaps the greatest sacrifice was that they would no more experience the rush of adrenalin that comes from a fresh, unexplored body.

Mark had put this argument to Keith, explained that they should both try to build a strong, monogamous relationship from this point on, or they part forever. Keith, feeling the pressure of his imminent decade change, hadn't wanted to start dating from scratch and had suggested a holiday from which to make a fresh start.

Thailand had been a bad choice. They spent their first week in Phuket, which could quite possibly be the rent-boy capital of the world. The Paradise Complex – thirty-plus gay bars and clubs that fan out from the imposing high-rise Paradise

hotel. Each bar was populated by glorified hookers, young men in tight clothes who'd do anything they could to entice men onto the premises. Once there, it was custom to buy drinks for your new 'friends' before choosing which one of the lucky guys will be your entertainment for the evening. At a cost of course, to the bar manager for taking away one of their alluring staff members and then to the boy for whatever particular delectation you'd like to partake in.

A drunk expat had explained this concept to Mark and Keith. They had been sat in one of the quieter bars overlooking the main stretch. From 11pm, and every half hour until the early hours, the largest club on the street paraded its best looking staff out onto the street. A row of fifteen men, some of them barely out of their teens, marched into the road and lined up for all to see. The rent boys faced front, then to the left and then the right; like soldiers auditioning for a porn film. The first time it happened, Mark watched as an old man worked his way down the row with a video camera, making sure he got body and face shots of all the sex workers – perhaps to aid in deciding which one to take back to his hotel.

Keith had tried his best to look disgusted, he found the expat sufficiently so – late fifties, bald, fat and, if not quite literally, figuratively drooling as the tight-vested men paraded their wares. But at the idea of young men lining up, desperately seeking his approval, willing to do anything he wanted for the right price, well there was something about that he found

truly beguiling.

Keith's resentment had built during the first week. He wanted to play with the bar boys. He was going to be forty the following week and he wanted to prove he could still please a man half his age. A huge fight followed by some tired, half-hearted make-up sex and the first week was over.

For the second week they'd flown to Chiang Mai in the north, hired mopeds, stayed away from the bars and had a decent time. However, both knew that something was missing.

'Is there sign of any staff? Or at least a clue what we're meant to do now?' Keith asked as he climbed the three steps up to the wooden restaurant. Mark didn't turn around to greet him so Keith turned towards the table and acted as if the question had been aimed at everyone.

'The guide said he'd be back in a minute to show us to our bungalows.' Amber offered, adding, 'he left us this booklet, said we had to pick which one we wanted to stay in.'

'What they like? Expensive?' Keith asked, taking a seat at the head of the five-metre table. It was a low-tech affair, roughly crafted out of heavy timber. A row of dirty plastic chairs ran down either side, the Spanish couple on one side, Freddy and Amber on the other. A few spaces down from

Amber, sat reading a book was a new face, a long-haired man in his mid-twenties. Keith could see that the guy was Asian, but as to which Asian country he was from, he had no idea. 'Mark would know,' Keith thought, cursing his own ignorant racism – Chinese, Japanese, they were all the same to him, not that he would ever say that out loud, at least not in front of anyone other than Mark, who he knew would give him a disapproving look and then laugh.

A quick look back at his partner of so many years, who was still looking out over the valley, made his heart sink. Still, at Keith's side was a very handsome American Jock, his favourite kind of American, and someone who last night had kissed him so enthusiastically.

'It seems they have two basic rooms at 150 baht, a couple of bungalows at 500 and 750 baht, though from the picture I can't tell any difference between them.' Freddy had taken the booklet from Amber and was flicking through the pages; holding the bungalow pictures for Keith to see as he quoted the prices. 'I wonder why he's looking at me like that?' Freddy thought each time he caught Keith's gaze. Freddy paused for a second, distracted by the colour of Keith's eyes, they were light gray, with green sparkles, a mixture of colours the jock hadn't seen before, the colour seemed to hold promise and foreboding both at the same time.

'Is that it?' Keith asked, he could see from the booklet that it wasn't but then his question was more a response to Freddy's eyes as they held his, what he was really saying was, 'is that kiss it? Was it a one off? Will there be more?'

'I'm sure he wants me, he does, he wants me, I can see it in his eyes,' Freddy's mind screamed. He couldn't be wanted by a man, well at least not so obviously, as a football player he'd noticed the odd lingering look from some freak or another, but this was so blatant. There had been that time when he was battling with puberty's hormonal onslaught, experimenting with his best friend, but that was a long time ago and a memory he mostly kept hidden in his mind's darkest recesses. This was real, this was an invitation.

'Oh, err, right' Freddy struggled to drag his attention to the matter at end so he could answer the literal meaning of Keith's question. 'There is one luxury bungalow, it's a 1000 baht, but it looks nice from the picture.'

'Well, I guess that's us sorted, hey Mark!' Keith said, Mark didn't reply, 'that's if no-one else wants the posh one.'

'Lo quieres?' Freddy said to the Spanish couple who had been chatting quietly to each other.

‘You speak Spanish?’ Amber asked Freddy. Adding in her mind, ‘well, you’re not just a fuck-and-run merchant, you’re a bilingual fuck-and-run merchant.’

‘Yeah, we’ve always had Spanish help,’ Freddy smiled at the bunch of memories that rushed into his head at the mention of their Spanish help. He had actually learnt Spanish from a cleaner they’d had, until his mother had found him in bed with her – something entirely inappropriate.

The Spanish couple said they were ok with one of the 500 baht bungalows.

‘What about you two, will you be sharing again?’ Keith asked Freddy and Amber, it was pretty clear from the look on Freddy’s face that they wouldn’t, but it seemed a fun question to ask.

The pair looked at each other, Freddy spoke first, ‘I think I’d rather have my own room, I could do with a good night’s sleep – I’ll take one of the 500 baht ones.’

Although she would have expected to feel slighted by this casual insult, Amber’s opinion of Freddy had already started to change and she was able to shrug it off. After the comment about wanting to forget last night, which hadn’t done her ego any favours, and now talk of what he’d learnt

from his Spanish help, Amber was more than happy to act like Freddy and put any thoughts of a further encounter out of her head. Of course, if he had said, 'yeah lets share a room, she would have gone along with it just to see what happened, but he hadn't, forcing her to say:

'That's cool, and 500's a bit rich for my blood, I'll take one of the cheap rooms.'

Chapter three

Welcome to the cheap seats and, oh, for some scented writing paper

'Wow!' Amber said from the doorway to her room. Not that it looked much like a room, at least not a guest room, more just a wooden shed with a bed in it. The guide had given her the key and pointed her to a large dark wood building across from the restaurant.

The two cheapest rooms were up a flight of dilapidated wooden stairs. A missing third step, and broken banister rail almost saw Amber plummet into a mass of overgrown vegetation. The rooms were above the kitchen and when Amber had opened the door a whoosh of aromatic, if slightly stagnant aromas had rushed her senses.

'It's not quite so bad if you open the window,' said an anglicised Asian voice, startling Amber who was still debating whether she dare enter the grubby room.

'Oh, right, okay... err... it's a bit... grimy in there.' Amber looked down at the rough wooden floor. Usually she would take her sandals off before entering a room, but the floor's clearly visible dirt stomped on that notion. Once across the threshold things got easier, Amber made her way around the bed and pushed open the window. Sun flooded the room, a light breeze brought fresh vibrant scents and at the sight of the incredible view Amber took a seat on the bed.

'Impressive! Kind of makes you forget about the grime. I'm Okie by the way.'

'Okie, that's an unusual name?' Amber said, dragging her eyes away from the view and looking over at the man stood in her doorway. Silhouetted against the clear blue sky, Okie reminded Amber of a martial arts movie star from one of the many Kung Fu films her older brother had forced her to endure as a child. Thick, jet-black shoulder-length hair framed a chiselled face and as Okie stood with his arms out in an upright press-up position against the door frame the long sinewy muscles in his arms tensed.

'My name is much longer, I'm Japanese born but raised in Oxford in the UK. Okie's much easier for westerners to get

their tongues around.'

'You've never had your tongue around a Japanese man have you?' A little voice asked Amber from somewhere in the back of her mind. 'It would be a good way to get my mind off Freddy, and if I can pull a guy like him last night, there might be chance for me with this one.' She thought, answering the internal voice and taking the idea a step further.

'It's cute, I like it. Have you been travelling long?' Amber said, then cursed under her breath at asking the all-time clichéd traveller's question. When Okie said that he was on a year's round the world ticket and had been travelling for six months already, she bit back the urge to say, 'oh, cool, where have you been already?' This would have again seemed trite so instead she went with, 'cool, so what's been your favourite place so far?'

In front of the two rooms there was a small balcony with two chairs looking out over the valley. They moved to the chairs and the afternoon passed into early evening.

'What am I going to do? Shit I'm talking to myself again, shit!' Freddy carried on talking to himself but this time he

moved his thoughts back inside his head which seemed more acceptable.

His 500 baht detached bungalow came with a tiled floor, clean sheets and a balcony with a view down the valley. From the edge of which he could look up and across to the luxury bungalow Mark and Keith had taken, Mark wasn't in sight but Keith had been sat sunning himself since everyone had gone their separate ways.

'I'm not attracted to a man; I can't be attracted to a man!' Freddy insisted. Keeping his thoughts bottled up in his head seemed inadequate, contained, so he went back to ranting out loud.

'I've had a woman, I've had loads of women, but last week, I had a woman last week – shit, I took her from behind, maybe that's a start.' Freddy went back to the balcony and looked up at Keith.

'Nothing, see, nothing, he does nothing for me, why would he, he's a man? And he's a fit man, no shirt, tight shorts... stop it.' Freddy said his words to the jungle but got no reply other than the screeching cacophony of a million cicadas.

Back in the bungalow Freddy lie down on the bed. It was so hot, taking Keith's lead he stripped to his underwear and let

the breeze from the ceiling fan cool his over-heated body.

In his head Freddy told himself, 'I was drunk; I just kissed him because it seemed like a cool thing to do for the guy's birthday. I didn't have sex with Amber because the kiss turned me on, she's a girl and any hole's a goal.' The implications of his last statement took a few moments to sink in.

'Men have holes, are they goals?' Freddy's deep masculine tone pieced the thick, dry air inside the bungalow. The question appeared to hang until a voice from the balcony replied.

'I think personally I tend to pay more attention to who the hole's attached to before I go diving in.'

At the intrusion Freddy jumped up from the bed and reached for his shorts.

'No need to get dressed on my account, it's nothing I've not seen before.' Keith said moving to the doorway. He had barely dressed himself other than to put on a shirt that he hadn't buttoned.

'You haven't seen what I've got before.' Freddy replied and put on a pair of shorts.

‘Is that an invitation?’

‘No, err... No, I’m not gay you know?’ Freddy wasn’t sure what to do. Until last night he would have considered himself a red-blooded American jock. College might be over, but he’d been travelling for the last eight months and in that time he hadn’t been short of female company. In fact he had made it his mission to enjoy the delights of a local woman from each of the countries he’d travelled through – he’d budgeted for it in fact.

‘I never said you were gay, but after last night I think you might want see yourself more as bisexual.’

‘This is fun,’ thought Keith, the look of confusion on the jock’s face fortifying his belief that the lad was ripe for plucking.

‘What do you mean? I gave you a kiss, that’s all, I was wasted – that doesn’t make me bisexual!’

‘Is that all you remember? A kiss?’

‘Why? What else was there?’ Freddy wracked his mind in the desperate hope that he would remember more about last night, but all he could remember was the taste of cheap whiskey – so much whiskey.

‘Wow, you really can’t remember anything else?’ Keith watched as the jock fought against his clouded memories. Sweat ran down Freddy’s gym toned muscles, his naked upper body was tanned golden brown. Keith debated making a move now, but he knew he hadn’t yet landed his bombshell – Freddy was a big fish, and they needed time to reel in.

Freddy stuttered and then said, ‘I remember following you to the restroom, doing whatever and then when I got back everyone had gone. Then I remember going to some room, not mine, lots of laughing and the next thing I remember was waking up naked at the side of Amber.’

‘What about sex, do you remember having sex?’ Keith asked, a wicked smirk holding court on his face.

‘I remember finding the used condom this morning, well tripping on it actually.’

‘Nice, and who do you think filled the condom?’

Freddy really didn’t want to let his mind show him where this was going. He didn’t want to answer Keith’s questions. He wanted to tell him to go, or at least say something to stop him looking at him like a piece of meat.

‘Just tell me what’s going on, stop dragging stuff out, if you know something tell me.’ Freddy’s tone betrayed his growing anger at the situation. Despite the near thunderous whir of the ceiling fan the room sweltered – the fan doing nothing more than moving baked air from one place to another.

Starting to bore of his cat and mouse game Keith said ‘fine, I’ll spell it out for you, there was sex last night, the filled condom is yours, but you didn’t fill it inside Amber!’

‘Shit, no, shit, that’s not possible, you took advantage of me!’ Freddy marched from one side of the bungalow to the other, he wanted to run, he would’ve if Keith hadn’t stood in his way. He couldn’t have had sex with a man, he wasn’t gay, he liked women, it didn’t make sense.

Keith laughed at the notion that he’d taken advantage of the jock. ‘Look at the size of you, you’re far too big for me to take advantage off, plus, think about it, if that were the case, surely they’d be my bodily fluids inside the condom not yours.’

‘I don’t believe you!’

‘That’s up to you; I have nothing to gain whether you believe me or not. I just thought you should know the truth. Think about it, out of the blue, you decided that it’s a good idea to

kiss a guy, maybe somewhere inside you've always wanted to. It's only natural, a bit of experimentation – surely you've done that before?'

'I would remember, and if I was in such a state that I can't remember, how come I managed to do the deed?' Freddy didn't need to hear Keith's response; he knew he was young fit and horny. And he knew from past experience that he had memories of starting sex but no memory of how it ended. He could always remember the start though, a thought that only comforted for a second as he realised the kiss could have actually been the start.

'Fine, whatever, if it happened or not, I can't remember, so I think it's best we forget about it.' Freddy reasoned.

'That's fine by me, I'm sure you haven't been sat around wondering if you're gay or not – I bet that never even crossed your mind.' Keith tried not to sound as smug as the statement made him sound. 'I tell you what if you want to know one way or the other, if you want to kiss a man, just to see if it does anything for you. Or you want me to, well, you know, do other things to see if you get excited,' Keith's eyes lingered on Freddy's surf shorts at this point, 'all you have to do is whisper the word 'now' and we can find somewhere private to help you work this out once and for all.'

Freddy wanted to scream that there was nothing to workout. He looked at Keith's naked chest through his shirt, let his eyes linger on his toned stomach, nothing. 'And maybe any hole is a goal, but surely it makes sense, at least when sober, to go for ones attached to pretty woman...' But then there was the kiss, and perhaps the sex. Thoughts spun and thrashed like water leaving a sink. Freddy wanted to lie down, go to sleep and wake up tomorrow when this was all over. And if it wasn't for the fact that he was getting hungry, that would have been his plan of action.

'I best go, I'm sure Mark's waiting for me – just remember what I said, whisper “now” and I'll help you deal with the confusion.'

Mark heard Keith call from the balcony that he was going for a walk. For the previous hour Mark had drifted in and out of sleep. Dreams mixed with reality, images of a happy family, a dog, walks in the park, melded into the heat of the luxury room. How a room could call itself luxury when it didn't offer aircon, Mark couldn't understand. The picturesque bungalow appeared to be styled on a Tuscan villa with burnt orange walls, white tiled floors and a sumptuous four poster bed. All details that Mark would have usually found impressive, but all he could think about was how much he wanted to go home. He wanted to be somewhere he knew, somewhere

he felt safe, a place where what he was about to do would have been so much easier, given the support of his friends.

Back in the restaurant he could hear in Keith's tone that he'd wanted the American. From their balcony, Mark had watched his partner step up to Freddy's door. The impulse almost took him to scream some abuse, let the whole world know that Keith was a cheap whoring bastard!

But the time for shouting was over, as were the days of reconciliation. Mark searched through his bag and after finding a notepad and some paper he wrote:

Dear Keith,

Remember when we first met at that dinner part all those years ago? You looked so handsome, so smart and funny. You were with your boyfriend, it didn't stop you cornering me for a kiss and at the time it never occurred to me to mind. I should have left you then.

I checked your emails once, years ago. It was a week before our fifth anniversary. I didn't mean to but my computer was down and your laptop was on the side. You were in the shower, I think. You had two emails from different men, wanting you to confirm plans for the weekend. That was a weekend you said you were away on a conference.

I was young, I worked in a shop, not in an office like you, so I never thought to question why the conference was being held on a weekend. I blocked out the emails, convinced myself I'd been mistaken, that the emails were just about work. It couldn't ruin our five-year anniversary, I wanted it so badly, I wanted to flaunt to all our friends how long we'd been together. Prove to them that it's possible, that gay men can be happy and have long-term relationships. I should have known better, I should have left you then.

I know, I'm just a fool to myself, but I loved you all those years. Even after you suggested we have sex with other people, I forced myself to believe that it was for the best, that it would bring us closer together. I thought it would stop the arguments if you were having more sex.

I thought all I ever wanted was to be with you, but I was wrong. All I really wanted was what all my straight friends seemed to have, a stable relationship. So what if none of them seemed particularly happy? I wanted the norm, the ideal, I wanted to live in the straight world wanting all the things heterosexuals are conditioned to want; a nice house, car, LCD TV – I wanted it all.

You wanted cock, cock and more cock, and the younger the better! I know what you're up to now, I know as I'm crying my eyes out writing this letter that you're off trying to get in to

some cheap American whore's pants.

I just can't do it anymore. I can't be that gay cliché – the gay couple who are only interested in a third. I want to be with someone who wants to be with me, someone who loves me and would kill any man who touched me.

You're not that man, and this 'fresh start' holiday has proved it. So I hope you're happy, I hope the jock was worth it because I'm done, I'm going home. And when you arrive back, don't come to our home, because you don't live there anymore.

You know, I hope the young guys make you happy, because soon enough you'll be a sad, old man, regretting that you let go of the only man who will every truly love you.

I'm leaving you now.

Mark.

After wiping tears from his eyes, Mark toyed for a second with adding a kiss. Then he toyed with the idea of adding 'P.S FUCK YOU!' He decided on neither, instead he put the letter inside Keith's day pack and started packing his stuff. He was going to leave it on the bed, but he wanted time to get away before Keith realised he'd gone. The fact that he

wouldn't be in the room wouldn't be a clear enough clue for Keith, not if he was distracted by another. So Mark knew he had enough time to arrange a lift back down to the airport.

Chapter Four

Oops

'Oh sorry, I didn't realise you were busy,' Freddy said to Amber when he reached the top of the creaking stairs.

'It's ok, we're just chatting; this is Okie.' Amber said, seeing Freddy reminded her of the reasons why she had been so keen to talk to Okie in the first place, to make him jealous. A fact she'd actually forgot as she'd had such a pleasant afternoon chatting.

Freddy nodded a hello to Okie and managed a brief smile before his face returned to its previous darkened demeanour. Hesitating at the top of the stairs Freddy wasn't sure whether to stay or go, he wanted someone to talk to, but he wasn't in the mood to join the happy chorus.

Perhaps sensing his dilemma, Okie got up out of his chair and said, 'I think I'm going to go for a walk before dinner, give you some time to chat with your friend.'

The look on Freddy's face stopped Amber protesting Okie's departure. It was clear there was something wrong and, though they weren't exactly friends, she wasn't about to ignore someone in need, at least not until she had satisfied her curiosity at Freddy's gloomy countenance.

Freddy smiled in gratitude as Okie walked passed him and down the stairs. He then took a seat at the side of Amber, took a deep breath and proceeded to tell her everything about his encounter with Keith. He really needed to talk to someone, get another opinion and on the night bus Amber had proven easy to talk too.

'So, we didn't have sex together?' Amber asked. She wanted to scream it! Freddy was the fittest man she'd ever had sex with, so what if she couldn't remember, she wanted the experience as a tale to tell her friends when she returned home. Freddy might be happy they hadn't had sex, though the alternative could be considered far worse, but it was a blow in the guts for Amber.

Freddy saw her question as an annoyance. He wanted her to focus on whether or not he should whisper anything to Keith.

'Well, it doesn't look like it; neither of us can remember it and you would have thought at least one of us would. So Keith's explanation seems plausible at least, and I did kiss him, I

remember that, plus, I've been feeling really strange all day.'

'But you don't fancy men – surely that's an end to it?' Amber knew it wasn't but she thought she would at least try. It was getting dark and she hadn't eaten in hours, plus her afternoon with Okie had proved so entertaining that she was keen to continue it into the evening.

'Well, I never thought I did, but I kissed a guy last night, and if what Keith said is true we went much further than kissing.' Freddy looked out over the balcony, the sun had dropped half its grandeur behind the tree line. The jungle's foliage split the sun's rays to create a kaleidoscope of colours that bathed the valley below.

'It sounds as if you've already decided what you need to do.' Amber said, trying to draw the conversation to a close.

'I guess I have. It's only one kiss, that should do it, if I have no reaction sober then I'm sorted, not gay and I can get back to, well, I'm not sure entirely what, my non-gay reality?'

On that suitably light-hearted remark, Amber suggested that they venture down for some dinner.

In the restaurant Okie sat at the long table doing his best to have a conversation with the Spanish couple. Keith sat

facing down the valley, a folded book in his lap, the setting sun proving too much of a distraction.

‘If you’re going to do it, now’s your chance?’ Amber said as they stepped into the restaurant. ‘I’ll go sit with Okie and you can do whatever it is you need to do.’

‘Will you be here when I get back?’ Freddy asked, he really wanted someone to talk to about how it went.

Amber nearly replied, ‘it depends how long you’re going to be, I don’t want to be sat around all night,’ but she decided that was a little insensitive. Instead, she nodded a yes, and then gave Freddy a gentle push in Keith’s direction and went to sit with the others.

‘Should I make conversation, or should I just say it? Should I make conversation or should I just say it?’ The question spun around Freddy’s head as he approached Keith.

‘Now,’ he whispered into Keith’s waiting ear.

‘Good choice,’ Keith replied as he got up from his seat, ‘why don’t we pop back down to your bungalow?’

Freddy followed Keith out of the restaurant and down the short slope to his bungalow, neither man spoke, it was as if

their actions were already a fait accompli.

Opening the door Freddy walked into the bungalow, he heard Keith close the door behind him, a sound that made him want to bolt through a window. 'What am I doing? I'm not gay, this is stupid, I don't want this!' Freddy's thoughts screamed. Then, as if he had spoken his thoughts out loud Keith said from behind him, 'just one kiss, that's all it is, then you'll know one way or the other.'

Turning around the jock clenched his fists at his side, his whole body felt like lead, unyielding like the day after a hard football game.

Keith stepped forward and put his hands on Freddy's shoulders. He could feel the lad was shaking. He thought about leaving, telling the jock he should go back to girls. But his libido sang too loudly – 'an American jock, a big strapping American jock, don't you even think about sending him away.'

Freddy shut his eyes, lent forward and let his lips meet Keith's. The kiss started tender, then as Freddy felt Keith's hand on the back of his head the pressure increased.

'How was that?' Keith asked when the kiss naturally ended. Freddy wasn't sure, it hadn't felt bad, just strange, different.

Physically, Keith's slight stubble had irritated his face, liking kissing a mouth surrounded by sand paper. It had been harder too, more pressure, more tongue in his mouth than he would usually get from a girl. Emotionally, there had been nothing other than the preternatural sense that something wasn't right.

'Any twinge down here?' Keith added, it was clear by Freddy's shocked expression that he hadn't known what to make of the kiss and now, having a man's hand on the front of his shorts was really too much. Keith gave Freddy a minute and then when there was no answer forthcoming he said:

'I tell you what, if you're still not sure, why don't you just stay there and I'll give you something else to think about.' With that Keith dropped to his knees and started to lower Freddy's shorts.

'That wasn't much of a walk?' Amber asked Okie as she took a seat at his side.

'No, I bumped into Keith's partner, he was crying, we had a bit of a chat.'

'Is it ok? Where is he now?' Amber asked, realising that all the time she had been encouraging Freddy to kiss Keith; she had forgotten that Keith had a partner.

'He's gone, he said he'd left Keith a note, though he doubted he would find it in a hurry as he left it in his day pack.' Okie had a beer, as did the Spanish couple, who were doing what they could to follow the conversation. Every so often, Emily would translate things for Armando, who would gasp or laugh accordingly.

Realising his manners Okie explained the honesty system to Amber, there was a fridge in the restaurant where you can help yourself. You then mark what you've had in a book and pay when you leave. Amber helped herself to a beer.

The conversation fell silent, so after she took a few huge gulps of the biting liquid.

Without really thinking what she was saying, and as it was the thought uppermost in her mind, she started explaining everything Freddy had told her about last night. Once she had begun, she realised that she was betraying a confidence and paused.

Okie raised a quizzical eyebrow in hope that she would continue with the rest of the story.

Amber blushed slightly but, thinking that it was unlikely the Spanish couple would fully understand what she was saying, and realising that sharing something confidential could allow her to develop a personal bond and shared understanding with Okie, she continued.

Of course she embellished a little for fear of embarrassing herself in front of her new friend. She mentioned that she and Freddy had woken up in the same room, but didn't say they were both on the bed or that either of them was naked. It seemed prudent to forget all about the idea that they might ever have had sex.

She mentioned that it was a mystery that they'd found a used condom on the floor, adding that they found it outside on the doorstep ('and it could have been anybody's!') to throw suspicion off her night's activities with Freddy and to cast herself in a better light for Okie .

At the mention of the condom, Emily and Armando started a heated banter which after a few seconds led Emily to say:

'El condón es nuestro, err... Mmm, perdón, the condom, it is ours, sorry, mucho sorry.'

'What? Err, I don't understand: how can the condom be yours and Armando's?'

Okie smiled at Amber slyly, seeing the implication that she had lied and knew more about the condom than she had let on.

‘Despacio... slowly,’ Emily said.

Amber blushed, then paled. Before anyone had chance to speak again, she said more to herself than anyone else, ‘ifg they used the condom, it means Keith lied to Freddy. And worse, it means that Freddy’s down there now, doing God knows what because that lying bastard Keith tricked him into it!’

‘STOP!’ Amber screamed as she kicked open the door.

Her actions sent a large ornamental vase crashing to the floor. Red glazed china clashed with the crisp white tiles and as quick as the commotion had began, it ended and silence held the room. Initially, Amber had considered Freddy’s actions none of her business. If he wanted to kiss Keith that was up to him even if Keith did lie. But having a pint of Laos beer inside her and a new friend to impress, affirmative action seemed her only recourse.

Freddy's shorts were around his ankles and the man practically old enough to be his father and kneeling in front of him had one hand posed to lower his CKs.

Unfortunately, Amber had only thought through her actions as far as the word 'STOP' and with that out of the way, she was unsure what to say next so, in a rush, blurted, 'Keith lied to you, the condom belonged to the Spanish couple – you never had sex with him!'

The jock looked down at Keith for some form of confirmation. And Keith's eyes seemed to say, 'oops, sorry, she's right!'

Without thinking further, Freddy punched his fist into the side of Keith's face! Keith's cheek split open, adding blood splatters to the china fragments on the floor.

'You bastard, you lying, fucked-up bastard!' Freddy's punch had dropped Keith onto his back and his words were accompanied by a pounding kick to the floored man's ribs.

After a second kick, Okie rushed forward and shoulder barged Freddy to one side. 'That's enough, any more and you'll end up in trouble.'

The jock ran from the room and was gone from sight before anyone could call after him.

In Chiang Mai the next morning, Freddy lay on his guesthouse bed and watched the ceiling fan spin.

He'd returned to his room, collected his things and left the camp the previous evening. He had managed to avoid the embarrassment of bumping into any of the others; though he need not have worried about whether he'd meet Amber or Okie – when he passed the restaurant they seemed to be happily entwined in each other's company and oblivious to anything else.

Strangely, somewhere inside he'd kind of hoped he would bump into Keith. He felt guilty for attacking him, he realised now that punching and kicking Keith was really him attacking himself for his burgeoning feelings.

As Freddy lay on the bed his mind felt different, like a balloon full of air that, once expanded, would never return to the same constrained size.

'Still,' Freddy thought as whooshes of air from the fan bathed his face, 'this is Thailand, no better place in the world

to have fun with a newly-opened mind!

Collecting Memories

The Filipino nurse smiled as she walked past the two old men, the pair grunted and snored as they slept in two plush, high-backed chairs, their hands never parting, their memories entwined. One dreamt of the time they came face-to-face with a leviathan, a monster of the blue, mouth wide, a dump truck of the sea. The other felt the grains of a thousand beaches under his toes, the memory of their continuous search for the perfect white sand. `Do you remember?' an ancient voice shouted, the words drifting at the end, this was the old man's war cry, much used and, when the other wasn't able to recall, a box was deftly pulled from a nearby table and dug into with the glee and anticipation of a child's Christmas. Worn and tired each man's face, yet each line recalled a memory of a life well spent, a life lived, one of adventure and countless detours, of a route not set, of a path not laid. More past than future held little worry for the two grumpy travelers, for they had seen more than most. Each thankful now that they had not listened to the pressure of society, a call to settle, to lay down roots, to climb property and career ladders and to collect material things, not memories. Each had possessions greater than any physical thing; each had knowledge, wisdom and an annoyingly smug grin. `What would you say?' said one. `What?' replied the other. `To you, if you were you, 70 years ago?' `What?' the older of the two asked

again. `You know, if you could get hold of one of those time machines they've been advertising on the super, super, super, super, super, super, super flat screen, HD, 3D TV?' `TV?' the older man yelled, not because he had to yell for any particular reason, he just did it because he knew how much it annoyed the nosy neighbor who lived next door. `Yes, TV, come on, what would you say?' Finally understanding what his husband was after he said, `I would tell me to be brave, remind myself that I can deal with whatever is put in front of me.' He continued, `I would tell myself to man-up, to say "yes" more, truly to live by the mantra "life is about collecting memories".' He thought for a moment longer, drifted into a dream and then shook himself so he could add, `actually now, after all these years, I know that it's not just that, it's not collecting memories as a man would collect butterflies - remember them?' `What?' the younger man had drifted off, he had been called to sleep by the memory of a deserted beach when the two of them had baked the day away in the sun. `I was talking about butterflies, but that's not important, stay with me, it's your question I'm answering.' `Get on with it then,' the younger man chided, he didn't want to mention that he'd forgotten what the question was that he'd originally asked. `I would tell my 70-years-ago self that to collect a memory you have to live it first, be in it, hold in the moment, and be so much in the moment that you don't know that you are in it until the moment has gone. Say "yes" to all things that have the potential to leave a wonderful memory, treat memories as something to be sought, to be hunted and to be prized

above all other things. I would tell myself to live, to love and to never allow fear to stand in my way. `So collect memories then?' the younger man asked. `Were you listening? Sometimes, my handsome man, I think my words vanish with the wind.' `I heard, and I agree, I just wonder if that advice would be like preaching to the converted?' `What do you mean?' The younger man held up his finger and pointed at not one box, but ten or more. He pointed to the attic, to a spare room, memory boxes everywhere. `Oh, I see,' the older man said, his face bright with a smile of achievement, the smile of a life well lived, of learning from regrets, of living in the moment and for the moment. He squeezed the hand of his life-long love, and both men drifted back into dreams of the amazing places, of the bold and the wonder they had seen.

George's Second Christmas - Part One

George's Second Christmas - Part One George glared at the basket. It wasn't its fault that Food-giver had just moved him out of it - again - but still it wasn't fair. It was just so comfortable, with its soft cushion that he could just snuggle into and sleep. George tried again, but once again Food-giver pushed him out of it and said, 'that's not yours, now go sit on your own cushion'. This made no sense to George. Of course he understood the words; they were easy enough. It turned out that the language of the things who occupied his house was easy to learn. Though it was annoying for George that his language appeared much too hard for them to learn; and he'd tried all sorts, even waiting till Grumpy, the largest of the things (or Lumps as George preferred to call them) was asleep, when he then licked one of Grumpy's eye-lids and yelled in his face. That did not have the desired affect at all. George had been locked in the kitchen for the rest of that night. No, it made no sense because, as far as George was concerned, all the cushions in the house were his so what made this one so special? Plus, why was it in its own basket, why did a cushion need a basket? This isn't over, thought George and, while he decided what his next plan of action was going to be, he plonked himself down in the middle of the floor and went to

sleep. As he drifted off he heard one of the Lumps say, `why do you have to sit right in the middle of the hall? Such a trip hazard!' George smiled as he heard his favourite nickname and then let the world fade away. It had been a fun year for George, not that he had any real concept of time. As he understood it this was something that the Lumps got very concerned about. There was always lots of fun in the mornings as the family rushed around getting ready to leave. This was George's favourite time of the day. Cry baby, the evil thing that was always trying to hug the life out of him could now walk. Which had turned her into a real menace. If George wasn't careful he would find himself dragged out of a wonderful slumber and squashed so tightly that bringing out his claws was his only recourse. Actually, they were George's only recourse the first time he'd been squashed but hacking at Cry-baby's face appeared to really upset the other Lumps, like really upset, so instead now he was much more careful and, if she did get him, he'd just struggle, keeping his claws neatly tucked away. First thing in the morning, Cry-baby got strapped into some form of containment device where food was placed in front of her. There was no escaping this contraption which meant that if George was quick, and the other Lumps weren't looking, he could sneak up and push Cry-baby's food onto the floor, a couple of gentle taps and the slop she ate was everywhere. After that, George would walk around the feet of the Lumps. Quickly going from one to the next was the most fun. He would count the number of times he heard his name called, `George move', `George stop it', `come on, George, get out

the way', 'ah, no, you're a menace, George'. Seven was the sweet spot, it was just enough to get the Lumps in a flap but not enough to get him evicted from the room. Several months' back there had been a revelation at one of his morning tripping sessions. Grumpy had yelled, 'I can't believe we got a Maine Coon, oh no, we couldn't just get a moggie, had to get a posh cat, and a stupidly-large posh cat at that!' Though not entirely sure what a 'moggie' was, George knew it sounded hateful and he was so glad that he wasn't that. A stupidly-large posh Maine Coon on the other hand sounded amazing. Like a super hero. Since that day, George had taken full charge of his domain. He had always seen the Lumps as there to meet his needs but it was now clear that he wasn't just any cat, he was cat royalty. True to Grumpy's outburst, George grew and grew. He could now block an entire step on the stairs, two if he draped his feet over and now he could push full plates of food off the counter top, not just empty ones. Though, to be polite, he reserved this course of action only for when the Lumps didn't feed him quickly enough. Of course, when he wanted feeding changed according to his mood, but as a king, they really should pre-empt his hunger. 'Today's the day, George,' said Food-giver as she picked him up and brought him to the settee. George didn't protest, he liked attention - as long as it was at the right time. Plus, he loved allowing the stroking for so long, drawing in a Lump and then biting their hand when they aren't expecting it. What's today? George wondered, but then the rubbing around his eyes and under his chin distracted him and he thought of those little

brown treats he got in the evening, tripping and rolling on his back so he can see the ceiling. George looked up. He wasn't sure why but he always knew when one of the Lumps was about to arrive home. Moments later, Grumpy's car pulled into the drive and without any thought given to the fact that George was enjoying the strokes under his chin, Food-giver got to her feet and said, `they're here George, how exciting! Who's here? Please, please don't let it be another Cry-baby, one was enough, thought George. He hated the fact that that tiny Lump stole so much of his attention and, though he'd had more than one urge to do the thing serious harm, he had resisted. And he was a king and kings shouldn't have to resist anything. George leapt onto the sill and looked out the window. He tapped on the window as snow drifted down and then watched Grumpy get out of the car and make tracks in the white. If it was another Cry-baby it seemed a little mean of Grumpy to be carrying it in a box, George thought, trying not to get distracted by the house plant on the sill. He really, really wanted to push it off, but decided now wasn't the time, he really wanted to know what was in the box. Grumpy's entrance caused quite a stir. Food-giver ran to the door giddily saying, `they're here, they're here!' The excitement of what was in the box must have gotten to George too, as, though he knew he could get between Food-giver and the door, and perhaps even bring her down (it wouldn't be the first time), he did nothing but stare. Well, bite the leaves on the plant and stare, he was king after all.

Going Postal, well more Council

Jake was bored again. He sat glaring blankly into space, prying for something to fill the void that these days seemed to be his entire life. He looked at his computer, he counted, he had six different internet windows open, random shit that meant nothing.

Jake had read once that if you were bored with the internet then you were bored with life – was this true? Realising that the blank space he was staring into, was still blank, Jake knew that it had to be.

‘What am I going to do? I can’t do this every day – I’m so fucking bored’. Jake’s voice echoed around the empty, open plan office.

Jake’s department in the vast council building was devoid of life. There was a team meeting talking place on the other side of town, but Jake couldn’t bring himself to go. Instead he had faked an emergency deadline, which he ‘just had to finish.’

Of course he didn't have any work to finish. Jake just couldn't bear another team meeting about 'council business'. Meetings which seemed to cover everything from the increase in council tax to the cost of wheelie bins. And it was typical of the council to arrange a half day meeting, covering 'general issues', on the morning when the Christmas party was planned for the afternoon.

Jake just couldn't face it, he had decided that staring into nothingness was a far a more suitable alternative. Nobody would miss him, and they would all be back soon enough with thoughts of buffet food, and the free glass of wine would surely put them in high sprits

Jake thought about this time last year, before his 'promotion'. He nether felt like this back then, he felt useful, not empty. His life had meaning, or at least his life was busy enough that he never had to think about it one way or the other.

'You're 35 now. You're not getting any younger. You've can't stay a supervisor forever. This policy management job would be fantastic, just think about what we could do with the extra money. Christopher needs new football boots, and Nicky is growing at such a rate that she is going to need a whole new set of clothes soon.'

This was Jake's wife, and she had gone on and on. In his head, Jake had screamed 'Thanks, you bitch, thanks for pointing out that I'm not getting any younger. I'm amazed that you haven't pointed out I'm not getting any thinner either – you usually do - though I wouldn't have this beer gut, if you didn't drive me to drink, or for that matter, if you let me play footy with the lads once in a while.

And maybe if you got off your fat arse and went back to work, I could keep a job I really enjoy, rather than having to take the most boring job man ever invented, just so that you can sit at home on your fat lazy arse. Plus, it would be handy if when you did bother to drag yourself away from Trisha, you didn't spend my hard earned money on stupid football boots for Chris, especially when we both know that he would rather have a Barbie doll.

And the only reason that Nicky is growing so fast, is because she takes after you – I mean, does she really have to stuff the entire packet of biscuits down her throat. If she stuck to one, she might still be able to tie her own shoelaces.'

Of course none of his rant ever left his tired brain. Jake chose to go with 'yes dear' instead as he thought that this would save a lot of fuss.

Jake looked around his partition to make sure that the vast open plan office was still empty. A five grand rise and grey partition was all his promotion had really amounted too. That and now he was trapped at his desk the entire week, because now as a policy manager, Jake got the choice of either researching policies or writing them. Oh, no, as Jake began to flick once more through his bunch of random websites, he realised that he also got to re-write policies, because very little of what he put on paper ever made it to the final draft. And generally, his new boss, the policy director, would get to write the final version of the policy, or if nothing else, the lazy shit would just put his name to it.

Jake looked at the policy he was meant to be working on now, at the top it said 'Draft 19'. Which was a new record, the last being set by the 'staff smoking policy', which had been sent back from high, seventeen times. At the thought of the smoking policy, Jake could almost taste the bile building in his throat. He had sworn the day he had sent off draft eighteen, that if this one was returned he would knife the policy director in the face. A reaction he had felt a little strong, but necessary.

After taking a second look around his partition, just to be doubly sure that it was empty, Jake took out his car keys and located the small flash hard drive that was attached to the key ring. Once plugged into the USB port, Jake waited for it to be recognised and then clicked on a file marked

simply, 'The end'.

The file opened in Word and was entitled:

| | |How to deal with my fucked up life | | |1. Release some tension. | | |1a Wank, a lot. |2b Have sex with the wife (though remember that this requires a | |lot of drink). |3c Cut yourself (remember to keep them small, so no one notices) | | |2. Get another job | | |Interview 10th Jan – didn't get it | |Interview 12th Feb – wanted someone with less experience | |Interview 15th Feb – didn't get it | |Interview 2nd March – didn't understand why I wanted to take a pay| |cut | |Interview 5th March – didn't go down to well, when I called one of| |the interview panel a wanker | |Interview 20th April – called back for second interview | |Second Interview 25th April – didn't get it, thought that with my | |experience I wouldn't stay long | |Interview 8th May – didn't go, rang in sick too, spent the day | |watching 24 | | |Giving the applications a rest for a while | | |3. Leave the wife | | |3a Sat down and talked with her, told her that I didn't think | |things were working. She said that we should work on it, and then | |went to bingo. | | |3b Tried to have sex with her sober, she wasn't interested, I told| |her that I thought we were supposed to be 'working on it' she told| |me I needed to work on my beer gut first. | | |3c I told her I thought we should get a divorce. She said that | |there was no way that we were splitting up while the kids were | |still in school, and if I tried she would take every penny I have.| | |

|4. Have sex with someone in the office. | | | |4a Started talking to Jackie, she's the office bike, and should be | good for a bit of entertainment. Spent ten minutes flirting with | |her at the cooler, she seems up for a bit of fun. I asked her if | |she wanted to meet for a drink on Tuesday. | | | |4b Went out for the drink, went well, had a good laugh, meeting | |her again Thursday, for some dinner and a bit of a drive – not | |that the wife cares, but I'll start talking about late meetings | |anyway. | | | |4c Dinner was nice, drove somewhere quiet, kissed. I got a nice | |feel of her tits, but then she reached for my knob, and it just | |ignored her. Worse, she went to suck it, but it just lay there | |like a dead slug. 'Don't you fancy me' she asked, but given that | |she has told everyone in the office about what happened now, all | |the excuses I gave her on the drive back did answer that question | |satisfactorily. | | | |5 Kill them all | | | |5a The poison arrived today, the wife nearly opened it and I had | |to tell her that it was clear paint for my model airplane, she | |believed me, but not before she called me a sad, fat, bastard. The | |internet site said that the bottle was big enough to take down an | |elephant, though, given that the container is only the size of a | |small pill bottle, it might only work on small elephants. | | | |I can do it at the Xmas party. I need to get a bottle with a spray | |on it so it'll spread over the food. Either that or I could just | |mix it in the wine and water jugs, which they should have if | |everything is the same as last year. | | | |5b Kill them at work, go home and kill the family and then sort | |out myself. | | | |5c If the above fails, use the gun - GO POSTAL! |

Jake read over his words, the bitter insults from his wife stung and jarred his emotions. Every time he read over his list, made notes, added to it in any way, it was like the events had taken place for the first time. Like he was back standing in front of his wife, looking at her sagging body, wondering where the slim, fit, princess of a woman had vanished too – who had stolen her and replaced her with this 18 stone, fool-mouthed tyrant. Most of the time he managed to put all thoughts of his wife out of his mind, he had been with her nearly sixteen years, and over that time, he had managed to make her all but an irritating blur.

Jackie on the other hand he couldn't blank out. Mostly because he couldn't walk from one side of the office to the other without someone making a derogatory remark, or if nothing was said, the sound of laughter was always apparent.

He was just stressed, he couldn't believe that he wasn't able to get an erection, when he was by himself, practicing a1 he was able to get hard, and he did lots of practicing, so maybe he just didn't fancy the office bike after all.

Jake reached over and unlocked a draw in his desk. He took out a small bottle of clear liquid and a compact black, foe-leather toiletry bag and placed them on his desk. He looked at the bottle and smiled at the fact that such a small

container was going to bring an end to his pointless life, but better than that, it would bring an end to those people who made his life what it was. Jake put the bottle to one side for the minute and picked up the toiletry bag. He unzipped it and took out the three items it contained. Jake carefully positioned the five items next to each other in size order. First, a small plastic tray, second a packet of tissues, then an anti-septic wet-wipe, next a packet of plasters and last a packet of razor blades.

The ritual brought Jake a feeling of comfort. The familiarity of the items, the noise of the tissue packet being torn open, the rough texture of the plaster and finally the feeling of cold steel between his fingers made the blood leave Jake's head and course (wrote course?) down to his other head, which was rapidly increasing in size.

Placing the inside of his forearm over the plastic tray, Jake then took the razor and with a practiced hand made a short, deep cut into his flesh. Jake no longer feared the insertion. The inch long cut offered little or no pain. The agony came when Jake forced the wound apart. With his finger and thumb Jake worked the cut until it began to ooze blood. He watched it fill the base of the plastic tray. As the dark red fluid ran from his body, Jake clenched his teeth against the pain and imagined the emptiness of his life draining from his body. He pictured his obese wife, his spoilt kids, Jackie the whore, draft 19, Jake saw it all and with perfect clarity he

watched it run from his body.

When the blood had reached the mark etched into the side of the plastic container, Jake let go of the wound and then after giving it a once over with the anti-septic wipe, he covered it with a plaster.

The wound sealed, Jake placed all the contents, except the tray of blood back into their bag, and placed them neatly in the draw. From the same draw it took another small plastic container, this time with a lid, and then took it and the blood off to the toilets.

The blood washed away; Jake locked himself in a cubical and dealt with the throbbing in his pants.

Three minutes later Jake was back at his desk, he placed the tray into its case, and then after checking that the lid was on tight, he tucked the pot of cum in the draw between a couple of files so that it couldn't fall over. Jake liked to collect any cum he produced at work – normally one or two pots a day – and then stay late after work, so that when no one was around, he could throw his sticky seed over his boss's desk.

At midday the caterers began to set up the party. To Jake there looked enough food for a hundred people, though his office had fifty at most. Jake could see his target, the drinks table. Six large jugs of wine, two each of red, white and rosé and for the drivers/dull, a jug of water.

Jake waited diligently for the caterers to finish setting up and then when they had disappeared for a coffee break, he made his way over to the drinks. With much considered precision Jake opened the bottle of poison and shared the contents eight ways, the last portion being left in the bottle – he would need that for him and his family.

‘Starting early? I thought you were meant to be back here working hard.’ The voice belonged to Vince, a wanker from HR, who thought he was a god just because he’d had to make a hundred staff redundant last year.

‘If he is working hard that’ll be a first!’ This second voice was that of Steve, one of the managers from the IT department, and self-titled ‘office comic’.

Jake didn’t want to exchange any words with them. He mostly just wanted them dead. The website had promised that one drop was enough to bring a man to his knees. The death was said to be horrifically painful, the poison eating through the stomach lining and allowing the stomach acid to eat away at the internal organs.

Desperately Jake wanted to stay around and watch, see them gasp their last breaths. Watch blood drip from their eyes as they begged him for help. Instead in laughed off his colleague's comments and then after making a suitable excuse in went out to sit in his car and wait for the ambulances.

As Jake watched party goers continued to arrive. He looked at his watch, hoping that no one would die before everyone had chance to have a glass of wine. He doubted anyone would touch the water, his office being a bunch of work shy luses. And no one was allowed to touch on the booze until the party had officially been started by the section manager, who in this case was his boss, the policy director.

Ten minutes passed, each minute being filled by more happy people arriving. Jake cursed their smug faces, all of them in little cliques, none of which he was a part of.

Jake wondered if he would hear the screams. He hoped he would, he had been planning this day for over six months. It had taken days of research to find the right poison. Who would have thought it was so hard to find something undetectable when mixed with liquid, and one that didn't kill straight away. Jake specifically needed a poison that took around twenty minutes to start working – he had to make sure everyone inside had chance to take in a killing dose.

Finally, Jake watched his boss arrive in his new five series BMW, apparently he had wanted a three-series sport, but the seats hadn't been big enough to accommodate his fat arse, though Jake wasn't sure if this was true.

Jake watched him fight his way out his car, and then sweat his way across the car park. At 5'2 and at least fifty percent body fat it wasn't a pretty sight.

'Not long now.' Jake said to the empty car. He looked at the contents of the bottle he was clutching in his hand. There was just enough to take out his family, then settle in front of the football, and pour the last few drops into a nice cold beer.

Jake tapped his fingers on the steering wheel of his people carrier. A car he hadn't wanted, but his wife had told him that they had to have one for 'the school run'.

The fact that the school was two hundred meters up the road didn't seem to matter. A people carrier was the 'must have', though he had thought that slim, fit children was a far better 'must have' but his wife hadn't agreed.

'Come on!' Jake shouted, bashing his hand down on the dash. His watch had just clicked past the twenty minute mark since his boss had arrived. Time was getting on and

the football kicked off at three.

Another ten minutes passed and there was still no sound of screaming, and Jake had wound his window down just to make sure that he wasn't missing anything.

'Fucking poison, stupid internet crap bollocks!' Jake raged as yet another ten minutes past.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jake noticed a door open, someone had come out for a fag break, and the newly open door blew a wave of vocal enjoyment across the car park.

'Fuck it. Useless internet crap.' Jake yelled, then as he opened his car door to get out, he said in a more considered tone:

'Time for 5C'

The Book in Practice

Hands up who thinks the book works in practice? Soon enough the book was ready.

The king, not a patient man, had not waited for the book to be finished before he'd begun work.

There were things to be done, temples to burn, ceremonies to crash and subsequent parties to plan in their place.

He'd been a busy man.

Tirelessly, too, the three generals and Dent had worked.

Dent had given each a task, by order of the king of course as none of the generals would ever take commands from Dent.

Durian had been tasked with winning over the soldiers.

He had taken them into battle, small battles that it was clear they would win.

And before they'd gone, he'd led them in prayer, something of an oddity at first, but something that quickly caught on amongst the generally poorly-educated men – they were very superstitious and liked anything that would bring them good luck.

After their inevitable victories, Durian had thanked The Good Lord for watching over them, and stated that they couldn't have done it without His help.

He had also spoken about a great place, where any soldiers who had died were lucky to go, as they would rest in beautiful peace for all time.

The men lapped it up.

Prayer groups sprang up throughout the camps, thankful for the victory, but also asking God if he could bless the soldiers' families, or watch over their homes – everyone wanted something.

The more creative men or those who could see a way of making money didn't bother with the prayer groups; they instead started carving images of God's son, who they had been hearing so much about.

Once carved, the men would sell the images on, targeting specifically, those men who hadn't done so well in battle, or they would hang around the hospital tent, selling their tat to the weak and dying.

The king was happy with Durian's results, so much so that he lavished on the general land and riches, which only served to push the general into even more creative ways to get The Good Lord's message across.

Dent had given Lekk a task that played up to his talents.

Dent knew the general was sly and conniving, two skills that were much needed when it came to fabricating history.

It was clear from the very first meeting that if the king's plan was to work, history would have to be changed.

The history books didn't contain a single reference to The One True God and this wouldn't do.

Lekk, a brilliant strategist, excelled.

He'd been working with the writers and between them they'd come up with a reason The Good Book was only coming out now.

In the past it had been a collection of stories told from generation to generation, and these were only now being collected together to continue the Lord's work.

Some of these stories had been written down, and had been written down at the time of the Lord's son.

This had meant creating old-looking tablets, before having someone "stumble" across them, and leaving some to be found at a later date.

Without the tablets people might have claimed that the stories had distorted over time and that there was no truth to them and Lekk couldn't have that.

The general had his men plant artefacts and scrolls.

He worked the Lord into every conversation and soon enough everyone in the palace was doing the same.

These were slow and simple times, people were easy to convince and those who weren't were often drawn in by the growing weight of opinion.

Or, they just loved the first party that was thrown in the name of God's son's birthday – an amazing time where the king gave away gifts plus food and drink for the masses.

New songs were written telling the world about God; all of which had almost hypnotically catchy tunes that could soon be heard all over the kingdom.

For the present at least, they'd decided to leave killing the non-believers until after the book launch.

Again the king was ecstatic and generous when he heard about Lekk's successes.

He particularly liked Lekk's idea to have the tongues cut out of all the craftsmen who worked on the project.

The scribes would have suffered the same fate if Lekk hadn't needed them to vocalise their ideas for the book – they, instead, were under pain of death if they spoke to anyone outside the palace about their grand endeavour.

General Score had been ordered to work with the king.

Pagans didn't burn themselves and when local religious festivals were crashed, General Score's men were ready and able to deal with any uprising.

The book was finished and everyone involved was gathered in a stateroom.

There were actually very few people who had been in on the secret.

The king, the three generals, Dent, several scribes and the odd craftsman here and there who had been needed to make tablets or fake scrolls, plus a couple of slaves.

Everyone else had been kept out of the loop.

Outside of the fifteen or so people in the stateroom – those of any importance seated, the others standing around the outside of the room - everyone believed what they were being told was the truth.

The king had also invited the seer, not that he put much stock in her words, but because she was present at the first meeting, and he needed everyone who knew about the plan to attend this gathering.

The holy man at the first meeting had long since died.

King Barkus sat on a mighty jewel-encrusted throne at the end of the stateroom.

The king had scanned the leather-bound black book that he held in his hand.

He'd flicked through the ten main laws – they seemed ok, a little too much protection for neighbours, and he wasn't sure about the honouring your mother and father part (especially given he'd killed his), but it all looked ok.

At least that page and the few others he'd looked at; he hadn't scanned much deeper than that, the text had been small and the book huge.

Plus, he'd ordered the scribes to give a rundown of the book at its launch.

Two scribes stood in front of the king; there were eight in total who had worked on the book, but these two were deemed most articulate and given the honour of doing the presentation.

The other three men were sat on the third row back.

Fifteen chairs had been set out in three rows facing the king and now all eyes were on the scribes.

The scribes began to speak.

They told a story, a before and after story.

They explained that God used to act a lot more.

He used to throw thunderbolts, talk through burning bushes and all kinds of other fun stuff, but that was all before he'd sent his son to earth.

While his son had been around, the son had instructed a bunch of people to spread the Lord's word and it was the stories of these people that had been written down in The Good Book.

(This wasn't going to be the final name of the book, it would need something catchy, something singular – a list had been given to the king, but as yet, he had been too busy terrorising other religions to choose the final name.) 'So, if God acted so much before he sent his son to earth, why doesn't he act after?' asked the king.

He was doing his best to follow what the scribes were saying, but all he really wanted to hear is that this book would make his life easier.

And when he'd agreed to this project he hadn't expected the scribes to write a mighty tome – surely a leaflet summarising the major points would have been quicker? 'Well, my king, we needed to show that God is indeed powerful.

We had to show him act and show that he will act with vengeance if his words are not followed.’ The scribe was old, his voice slow and plodding making each word seem to hang in the air, gasping for breath before slowly dying as another word came to take its place.

‘Of course, we also needed the world to know that they must do as the king says, that the king’s word is important and that king’s act as God’s right-hand man.’ The king interrupted: ‘so, you show the god, sorry, God, killing and maiming before he sends his son, then after his son is no more, you put the choice to kill into the hands of man.

This means my hands, me being king and all.’ ‘That’s right my king, we explained it through a set of stories, told about the God’s son dying for man’s sins and ... ’ ‘How did you kill God’s son in the end?’ The king interrupted again, he wasn’t really interested in all the details, just the juicy ones, and just how it helped him.

‘Crucifixion, after a pretty horrific drag through the streets carrying the cross on his back,’ the scribe said, sensing the king’s lust for the more gory parts of the new work.

‘Cool!’ the king said, trying his best to focus on the proceedings though the sun was blasting into the room and everything was getting very hot.

It all kind of made sense to the king now.

He liked the idea that he could kill and say he was doing it in the name of God.

He loved that he could quash his enemies and plan huge parties three or four times a year.

Plus, having new holidays did deal with his slaves wanting time off to go and celebrate one deity or another.

They would now have to stick to his God's holidays.

The scribes continued to expand on their new work.

They gave a list of things that God did not like – a pretty extensive list, the King thought, but then none of the stuff in there actually applied to him.

'So, in this "before" part of the book, what kind of things does God get up to? You mentioned thunderbolts?' the king interrupted and then talked over the older of the two scribes, a man who looked like he might have actually died several years before.

‘Well, my king,’ the old scribe started, his voice slow and ponderous, and much to the king’s annoyance, the scribe didn’t come with a wind up key, ‘we decided that The One True God, would smite regularly throughout the Old Testament “before” section.’ The king already knew this, he wanted to know who God would be smiting, and when had they decided to call it The Old Testament? ‘Get on with it would you, scribe, you might look dead already, but some of us have lives to lead!’ ‘Sorry, my king.’ ‘And why are you calling me “my king”, surely I’m your lord?’ the king snapped, the heat now really getting to him.

He’d expected this whole affair over in twenty minutes.

All he wanted was a quick rundown, and then he could kill everybody and go get some lunch.

‘Well,’ the scribe hesitated,’ we thought “Lord” could be saved for The One True God’.

The king bit his lip; he knew what was coming, so decided against butchering the scribe.

Instead of reacting, the king simply said, ‘so, who does God throw his thunderbolts at?’ The scribe, amazed that he wasn’t dead, continued ‘well, one example is where God decides to destroy an entire city.’ ‘Cool, why?’ asked Barkus.

His words suggested interest, but his tone was clearly screaming 'get on with it!' 'Well, we chose a city where the people were keen on sodomy?' 'Sodomy? What the hell is that?' the king screamed, he was sick of all these new words, pissed that they dare give away his title of Lord, and getting increasingly hungry, which never helped anything.

'Oh sorry, my king, that's the word we've coined for any kind of sex that can't produce babies.

The example we use in The Good Book is "man love" – so when two men have sex with one another that counts as sodomy.' 'Really? You decided to make 'man love' a bad thing? Surely it isn't?' the king sniped, looking at Boy who gave Barkus a warm smile that calmed the king and allowed the scribe to answer and not get his throat cut for deriding one of the king's favourite pastimes.

'Well, it might not be, my king,' (at this last 'my king' Barkus decided that if the scribe said it one more time he was going to hack out his heart and feed it to him or something equally as vile), 'but a lot of our worst enemies indulge in this practice and, if we make it a sin, then we can use these new teachings to wipe them out.' Again, the scribe's words made sense.

The king didn't like the idea that what he did with Boy would be seen as a sin.

But still, he was the king and the rules in *The Good Book*, didn't apply to him.

And outlawing 'man love' might make the practice just something for the great and the mighty to participate in and not something for the masses.

He let the scribe continue but when he went on to talk about how, when writing the book, they'd been purposely vague, how they'd used lots of stories with hidden meanings and other such crap, he'd pretty much switched off.

The last thing he heard before his thoughts left the room entirely was the notion that by being vague, it left the book open for interpretation.

He thought this was a pretty stupid idea, favouring himself a more clear and direct approach, but given he'd already made up his mind about the book, he didn't bother interrupting.

'So, what do you think? My king, what do you think?' Luckily for the scribe, the king hadn't been paying much attention.

Barkus pulled his thoughts away from how he'd like to be entertained that afternoon and tried to focus on the question.

But as he hadn't been listening for the last twenty minutes, he wasn't sure what he thought.

He looked around the room, trying to catch someone's eye who he could call upon for help.

He looked to the generals, but they all knew better than to hold the king's eye.

Even General Score was looking away, as he had been distracted by a slave who had come to tell him that dinner would be ready in half-an-hour.

At last the king's eyes fell on the seer, she wasn't looking at him either, instead she was batting imaginary flies away her face.

Still, she offered him a way to save face..

Henrietta – A strange name for a goldfish

‘Hello, I didn’t notice you arrive – been here long?’ The other goldfish didn’t reply.

‘Hello?’ Henrietta tried again, she could see the other fish staring at her but she couldn’t work out why she wasn’t replying. ‘Are you one of those slow goldfish? Not all of us have been blessed with a brain – at least not a useable one. I came from the circus, thousands of us all living in one tank – praying we’d get scooped up as the first prize on the Hook-a- Duck stand – and out of all those thousands of fish only my mother and me appeared to have a working brain.’

Henrietta swam up and down her tank as she spoke, the memories of the circus were crisp and vibrant in her mind. Her childhood reminiscences felt like only yesterday, unlike the thoughts of what had actually happened yesterday, or this morning for that matter, which she’d started having trouble holding on to. It had been such a happy time, surrounded by her friends and family; though even back then she’d known she was special. So many of the other fish would just swim backwards and forwards, blank looks on their faces; faces that broke into a smile every six seconds or so as they swam past the tank’s castle and saw it as if for

the first time.

'We're special, Henrietta,' her mum had told her one day. Henrietta's mum was a large, powerful fish, queen of the tank and though well-travelled, she had never dropped the cockney from her accent. Sadly, her size had kept her from ever being scooped and bagged – the children wanted their fish small and cute. Still, that had meant she'd travelled with the circus and seen the world, meeting fish from all parts of the globe.

'Most fish are stupid, every time they see something it's like they're having a whole new experience – which is great for them, all very exciting – but it makes them terrible conversationalists. Still, if you ever just want to chat, pin one of them in a corner and they'll be all ears for as long as you need. But you and me Henrietta, we're different, call it a blessing, call it a curse but that's the way it is. We can think and talk and more importantly we can learn.

'Of course, the reason most goldfish don't remember anything is because they're trapped in a tank all day long. Who wants to remember that? Still, if you're lucky my girl, you'll be taken in by a nice family who'll look after you. Soon you'll learn to understand human and then you can just watch and listen all day long. And then, if you're really lucky you'll come across a smart fish and you can have a nice long chat – tell them all you know. And failing that you'll get

housed with one of the dumb fish and they'll just listen – listen, listen and then listen some more – and when they do, tell them everything, rant and rave, don't worry about the order or going off at tangents, just go for your life. There will come a time when you really have to get everything off your pretty golden chest.'

Her mum's words had stuck with Henrietta these last sixteen years. And in that time the little goldfish had seen a lot but sadly had not had much chance to speak.

Twice her owners had tried to give her some company. First, there had been an odd fish, speckled red and white with a flashy tail. He did nothing but race around the tank. He never stopped long enough to chat; he lasted only a couple of days – his frantic movements attracting the attention of the cat!

The second fish seemed to have some manner of deformity. She had a huge head and large bulbous eyes – if she could speak, she didn't; though Henrietta was sure she heard her cry when she popped one of her balloon- like eyes on the turret of the tank's castle. It took three water changes to clean up the mess!

Henrietta moved closer to the new fish, who moved closer to her. 'Oh I see, you're not in my tank – that's bright of him. Him being Jared, my owner, well I guess your owner now,

too – this way I get some company but you get your own space – clever.’ Henrietta whooshed around her tank, excited that at last she had someone to talk to. The ache in her bones that that had grown these last few months and the call to close her eyes and surrender to the dark, left as the excitement took her – she had so much to say, a lifetime of thoughts needed to be set free.

Noticing that the other fish was also giddily swimming around its tank, Henrietta swam back up to the end of her tank and asked: ‘I know you can’t talk, but can you at least hear me? I have so much to tell you, I have views and opinions; my mind is full of random stuff that I really want to share. Can you hear me?’ Henrietta asked again, nodding with her head to see if she could get the other fish to make the same gesture. ‘Hooray!’ Henrietta cried as the other fish nodded back.

‘Yay, at last I have someone to talk to.

‘Well... now, I don’t know where to start.

‘Oh, ok, I know, I’ll tell you some important stuff that lets you know where my opinions have come from, I’d hate you to think me opinionated without at least thinking that I’ve given my opinions some thought.’

Henrietta smiled at the other fish, who smiled back and then she continued: 'I guess the most important thing is that I can understand and read human. Understanding the language was easy enough. My mother said it would be and she was right. I guess you can't spend every waking hour around it and not eventually start to understand. The reading was harder. But I think I've been lucky, Jared has a younger brother, and when I was first brought home I was a present for the both of them. I used to be in a room with the brother, who was six, and Jared, who was twelve. Every night one of their parents would come in and read to them, spending extra time with the younger one, helping him pronounce words – I guess just general learning-how-to-read-type stuff – but soon enough I could read, too.'

'When the family moved house and the two boys got their own rooms I went with Jared, and I've been with him ever since. I went to his University – heady days – and now we're here, in his flat. We've been here two years. It's perfect for me, I can see the TV, which never gets turned off and I have a perfect view of his computer screen, so I get to know what's going on in his world – ideal.'

Henrietta was happily swimming up and down as she spoke, every so often flitting back to the end of her tank to see if the new comer was still listening and every time she was there, returning Henrietta's smile.

‘Of course our owner here, used to be a much happier man,’ Henrietta said, looking out to where her owner was in his customary place in front of his computer. ‘He was care-free, always partying, lots of friends around. But then he met his girlfriend and fell in love – which was amazing for a while. But then on their first holiday together she sadly died in a freak accident – she was hit by a coconut. But I know what you’re thinking; it must have fallen from the tree and landed on her head – which would have been bad enough. Oh no, our man here picked one up and threw it at her. He screamed “heads-up” and assumed she’d catch it. She didn’t, the thing hit her square in the face, not pretty and worse, she had a weak skull – fell down dead, then and there.

‘He was cleared of all charges, it being an accident and all, but he’s never forgiven himself. Neither have the rough and ready family of his departed girlfriend. They regularly egg the windows and put all manner of unsightly stuff through the letterbox – sick really – and you wonder where they store that much waste matter until they’re ready to post it.’

Henrietta paused for a second to let that last, vulgar, idea process, and then went on.

‘But for me, at least it’s not a bad life, I’ve got the TV on all day long – usually a news channel – and when he’s not aimlessly flicking from website to website, our man here’s a

writer.

'Oh, as a side note, the sites he flicks between are “social networking” sites. Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous?

'This man hasn't been outside in over a year, he's the epitome of anti- social. Yet he blasts off messages, leaves comments, sends all manner of flashy things – hand shakes, nudges, beer mugs. None of his messages is longer than thirty words and yet he has a thousand plus “friends” on one site alone – imagine, the idea of calling someone you've never had a proper conversation with a friend, or for that matter getting excited about the fact that someone has added you to their contact list.

'Look at our boy here, whenever he is forced into a social situation – usually nothing more than having to answer the phone to his mother – he freaks. He can barely manage more than a “yes” or “no” – it's crazy.

'I think, if anything, these social sites do more harm than good. They damage people's ability to form proper relationships – before they came along, people had to speak to each other, they made links (real links, not hyperlinks), I would even argue they cared for other human beings more.'

Henrietta could feel herself turning from her usual shade of washed- out orange – it used to be bright orange but the years had taken their toll – to a rich crimson as her rant blazed.

‘Now-a-days, people are members of online social groups and that excludes real-world interactions. They have affairs online, arrange to meet up with people and never go – why would you when that would require the use of more than thirty words? And if people ever do get brave enough to meet someone, they’ve already talked so much that they’ve created a fantasy, a dream of what the person would be like in real life. Of course, that is just asking for trouble because fantasies are just that – fantasy – they aren’t real and people get disappointed when reality doesn’t live up to their delusion. But then if there is one thing humans can do well, it’s to create and live inside a delusion. ‘

Henrietta, realising that she was already raving and she hadn’t been talking for more than a few minutes, slowed her pace around the tank. She gulped down the oxygen-rich water as it passed over her gills – the equivalent of a fish taking a deep breath – and then popped back to see that her new companion was still listening.

The newcomer still smiled brightly, so Henrietta continued:

'It seems to me that humans are constantly trying to escape their lives – or at least parts of their lives. Western society expects certain things, get an education, get a job, get married, buy a house, have kids, retire and die. Maybe not always in that order, though you would hope that dying would be last on that list!

'But you have to admit that those things are so dull. It seems that everything that humans “have to” do, they rebel against. They want out; it’s as if all the things that society expects are actually a punishment rather than offering the average person any kind of a fulfilling life.

'I guess that’s why so many people watch “Reality TV” shows. Have you seen them? I think you have to wonder when they say “Reality” whose reality they’re talking about because the people they dredge up for these shows inhabit no reality I’d like to be part of. Marx called religion “the opiate of the masses” but I think it’s clear that for the last ten years it really should be changed to; “Reality TV is the opiate of the masses.”'

Henrietta doubted that the smiling fish in the tank next to her had a clue what opiates were, and she only knew because she was effectively just regurgitating an article she’d seen Jared write once. Still, she’d grown accustomed to thinking through her owner’s words, and she had seen enough Reality TV shows over the years, to accept his opinion as

her own and, with this in mind, she continued:

‘Of course, perhaps all you have to look forward to in life is sixty years of working, broken up by that yearly holiday you can’t afford followed by another one your credit card really can’t afford.

‘Plus maybe you want a few kids (who may or may not turn out to hate you, but are sure to turn into something that is unlikely to live up to your grand expectations).

‘ Then you may come to a quick end – perhaps because you got up too quickly in the middle of the night and it triggered a heart attack. Your already-depressed wife (who chokes down anti-depressants and sleeping pills as if they were Smarties) is then only woken when the growing stench from your death-emptied bowels invades her nightmares. Or, if you’re really unlucky, you get a slow, drawn-out demise that requires countless bedpans and no matter how hard you try you can’t remember what you had to eat that morning, never mind any of your life’s “accomplishments”. Of course, with all that joy to look forward to, no wonder the average man turns to Reality TV – it’s a perfect way out. It makes sense, the man, his wife, their friends; none of them are as bad as the people they see on TV.

‘None of them have dreamed of being “the next singing sensation” since being a small child.’

Henrietta looked out at her owner who was doing what he often did in the early afternoon – take advantage of his high-speed internet access and the delights of “X-Tube”.

‘I’m not sure why,’ Henrietta continued, preferring to divert her eyes rather than watch the slightly melodramatic proceedings, ‘but Jared screams at the TV every time he hears one of the “never-going-to-bes” say those three words “it’s my dream”, to which Jared replies: “It’s not your dream at all you stupid, delusional sap. You were just told to say that by the producers. Even if you did win – which is unlikely given you look like a pig that’s been taught to walk and sound like a man raping a dog – you’ll have the Christmas number one and then disappear, like every other sad Reality TV show winner – fucking Celebritards!’” Henrietta winced at using a swear word, her mother had told her never to use the ‘F’ word in polite company and, if you ever did, quickly apologise – which she did. Her companion returned the smile, which told her that no harm was done.

At least she’d not used the ‘C’ word – that was much harder to recover from – bad, bad word.

‘He’s a writer, you know,’ Henrietta said as Jared got up and wandered off to get cleaned up. ‘Well, he has two jobs, he has one that pays the bills and the other, well sadly that wouldn’t keep him in tissues – though he does go through a

lot to be fair – but still he seems to like it – the writing I mean. The paying job is as a travel researcher – he wanted to be a full-on travel writer and he has travelled a fair bit – they were fun times, I used to go and stay with his mother.

'She had prayer meetings three times a week – oh, I used to laugh. All those old grave-dodgers, gathered in Margaret's "best room" – she had a perfectly good living room, but when the church folk came around she liked to use the room she kept for best. Of course this meant that the seven or so attendees were always on tenterhooks for fear of making a mess. At times there were as many as ten, though often people were excluded, well, not excluded, just advised not to come.' Henrietta was struggling to find the right words. She didn't want to make Margaret sound at all mean as she always meant well. Henrietta tried again.

'It was just that the "best room", being so spick and span, kept even those who did attend from ever sitting fully back on the sofas and making themselves comfortable for fear of over-crinkling the cushions. So the idea of an old dear turning up with a weeping sore or the slightest whiff of incontinence was entirely unthinkable.'

Henrietta's heart warmed at the thought of her times with Margaret – her husband, Jared's dad, had died at forty. Margaret had woken up one morning to find him perched on the toilet. He had pushed a little hard and his heart had

given out. Still she never complained and soon enough God took the place of her husband; well, God and her “Rabbit Warrior” a pink plastic friend that arrived one day wrapped in discreet brown paper.

Henrietta again took a deep breath; all this talking was getting the better of her. She knew she was getting old, if nothing else because Jared asked her with every feed, ‘how you doing there, old girl?’

Apparently, fourteen was old for a goldfish – really old. And it was at times like this, when her body ached and all she wanted to do was sleep that she was glad she wasn’t a Christian. At least she would never have the disappointment when she found out there wasn’t a God. Margaret loved her Lord – she prayed to him at least once a day, twice when the bible group were around. Of course her real prayers were never answered because not once had her departed husband come walking back into her life.

Henrietta liked Margaret; her loneliness had meant that she had talked to her, a lot, whenever she had gone there to stay. Margaret had even asked if Henrietta could stay after Jared returned from his last trip. But that had been the trip where his girlfriend had been killed and he wanted to hold on to some sense of normality. So he took Henrietta home, but not before getting his mother a kitten, which she loved and hugged so much he didn’t make it more than three

days. ‘Don’t worry mum, I think it must have died of cat ‘flu – I’ll get you another one, a grown up one thats stronger’, Jared had told his mother when she rang him after the kitten had died. He replaced it with a bruiser of a cat, a big tom that liked the idea of being fed and warmed by the fire but didn’t like to be touched. This turned out to be a fine arrangement for both parties as Margaret was happy just having someone to talk to.

Henrietta was resting on the bottom of the tank now. She glanced over to the other tank but the fish had disappeared out of view. The old fish rested and thought of what might come next. Margaret had told her that fish didn’t go to heaven as they didn’t have souls. Not the most caring words, Henrietta had thought and from that point on she decided that it was best not to believe in God. This had seemed a prudent move because it wasn’t long after that when Jared started work on his second writing job – disproving religion.

Like his mother, Jared had been swept up by the Christian Vampires who prey on the weak – if they didn’t how else would the church get its new roof or the vicar the money to wine and dine all those handsome young choir boys?

After his father had died, Jared liked the idea that there was a “better place” that people went to after they died. He even went to bible meetings and prayed.

But Jared was a smart man, no sap or pushover and certainly not the kind of man who just accepts things as fact without any actual proof. So alongside his Christian readings he liked to read works that offered an opposing view – he always liked to see both sides of an argument. And because he wasn't good at hiding inside a delusion, it didn't take Jared long to see that the Church and the bible were just a collection of lies, all bound together in a neat package aimed at controlling the masses. Of course his views didn't go down too well at his church and one bright spring afternoon, he was taken to one side by the vicar and asked not to attend any longer.

So, now shunned by the Church, Jared decided that God was just a social construct, something dreamed up by the people in charge to keep others in check – a means to start wars, to keep women down, to punish free thinkers, single parents and men who loved other men. With his new enlightenment, Jared set about a one man hate campaign. He had already secured his job as 'travel researcher' – basically someone who reviewed travel websites and moderated the travel boards of a couple of well-known travel sites. It didn't pay great, but it paid enough for him to keep his flat and have all his food delivered by the local Tesco. Internet shopping! Every lock-in's dream.

Now, sat around all day long, Jared managed to bad-mouth religion around the internet so much that he managed to get

himself noticed. A website called 'livelifeandbedamned.com' contacted him and asked if he would write for them. The pay was poor but Jared didn't care, he'd been given a forum for his work and that was more than enough payment.

The following months he went berserk; he spent hours researching, making sure that he didn't just come across as a ranting fool – he wanted proof that God and not just the Christian one – all gods – didn't exist. Plus, it was his aim to show the world the destructive nature of religion and that to follow any religion was proof that you were delusional.

The strap-line for the website was 'Prove it, come on, just once!' Not the catchiest of phrases to plaster across a site but it did stand up there as a challenge to anyone, from any religion around the world to prove that their deity did actually exist. No-one took up the challenge. Of course in reality very few people actually read the site, well they did, but they were mainly already converted to atheism.

Every so often one of Jared's articles would catch some mainstream attention. The one about how the Christians had invented the Devil hadn't gone down too well. In it, he had only said that there was no devil until the crusades. He argued that in the first set of battles, the Christians tramped across Europe killing in the name of their God – but that wasn't enough to win any battles. That was nothing better than just conquering. They needed something more,

something evil – a stick to beat the locals with, or more exactly a sword. And like magic, the devil as we know him today was invented. Of course the idea of a devil existed long before the crusades, but he didn't have form, he lacked horns and hooves. So, the Christians knew of the ancient God Pan – a man with the legs of a beast and the body of a man, a man with horns. This old God made a perfect devil. Now whenever the Christians found anyone worshiping Pan, or any God who wasn't their own – they could proclaim them devil worshipers and rightfully kill them – and they did, in the millions.

It was Jared's comment about it being funny that even after nearly a thousand years nothing much had changed. Modern, and if you believe Michael Moore, illegally-elected Warlords, were still killing thousands of people in the name of the same God.

A tirade of abusive emails had packed Jared's inbox for weeks. Mostly these were about how the troops were protecting civil rights – Jared just saw it as the troops disobeying one of their primary commandments – thou shalt not kill – it's either a rule or it's not. In fact this line was all Jared ever used to reply.

Henrietta's eyes popped open, she'd been dreaming about her owner and his job as 'Sanity Crusader – warrior for the non-delusional' – a tag that he included at the bottom of all

his emails.

After stretching out her old bones, Henrietta swam back over to the corner of the tank where her bright-eyed companion looked ready to hear more of her tales.

‘So, there was this one time when Jared’s articles got him in some real trouble,’ Henrietta picked up where her thoughts had left off, not bothering to explain them for the new-comer, but still the other fish was smiling and appeared to be listening. ‘In fact, one particular article caused so much trouble that he was actually told not to write anymore about one mainstream religion – Islam. To be fair, given that Muslims have a habit of declaring holy war at the drop of a hat or, if not a hat, at a book of offensive poems – not all Muslims of course, just some of them and if they are going to kill you, upsetting one of them is clearly enough – then writing what Jared did was more than a little stupid.

‘He wrote something called “Buy them all Alarm Clocks”, it was an article written after he’d been watching the news. There were a group of Muslims who wanted to sing the “call for prayer” out across a small Yorkshire town. Of course the locals had freaked at the idea; five half- hour calls in a language they didn’t understand, blasted out of loud speakers from the local mosque and all starting at 4am was more than they could bear. There was talk of burning the place to the ground, of all out war. The “call to prayer” was

never sounded, but it was enough inspiration for Jared.

'He wrote about how the "call for prayer" had originated. It seems that way back when people never used to wash. Disease was rife and people were dying. So when their holy book was first being dreamt up, some bright spark decided to include in five-times daily "call to prayer" – the clever part was that before you can kneel down to pray, you had to clean yourself up – no God wants to see one of his minions with dirty hands and face. Is that clever or what?

'Of course, pointing out that something Muslims hold so sacred is no more than a reminder to wash didn't go down well. He also suggested that if they just got themselves alarm clocks they could wake themselves up and pray without bothering the less delusional – Jared does like to over-use the word delusional. Well, talk about hate-mail! It wasn't helped by the fact his remarks were picked up by the local newspaper and then a national paper. He was called a bigot and a racist. He just asked anyone to prove him wrong – no one did. Thankfully no one did kill him; I'm not sure who would feed me if they did.'

Henrietta pondered for a while and then said, 'to be honest, I don't know what I make of religion. I don't hate it in the same way as Jared does, I just don't understand it. I don't get how there can be so many gods – in some religions, like Hinduism where they have a myriad of them. So do all these

Gods live in the same place, alongside the Greek Gods? You would have thought by now that they would have fought it out for top God – I know in Hinduism there is a top God, one who is in charge of the others, but surely the gods from other religions should have fought it out before now?

'But nothing. We'd have heard of it if they had – surely the results of a fight like that would be posted on the internet within minutes. And I find it odd that people just pick and choose the bits that they like. They tolerate one thing but not another – everyone is equal and welcome, as long as they behave in a certain way.

'Religions to me are clearly about control. I guess nothing much has changed. In times past, leaders needed a way to control the masses and fear is the best way to do that. For a country to be successful they need a hardworking populace, who spend what they earn and don't get any ambitions about leaving their homeland.

'In the days when the bible was being made up, fear was generated by the invention of a God – if you did wrong, you went to hell and if you did really wrong, hell would take reign over the earth – oohh!' Henrietta wagged her fins for dramatic effect.

'I think the control thing is still clear today, it's just that western governments are less obvious about how they

exercise their control. Look at debt, we're told it's a bad thing, but is anything ever done about the countless adverts for credit cards on TV – the fact you can get as much money as you need pretty much within twenty-four hours? No!

'But then, why would the government act, I'm sure they like seeing their people in debt. If you're in debt you have to stay put, and you have to work hard in order to pay it off. And it starts even before people leave school; people are told that if they want a better life they must get a degree. But what no one ever tells them is that the debt they get from seeking this better life will keep them tied down, until the rest of society's wants and "must have"s gets their claws into them and they are chained down like everyone else. A nation in debt is a nation that doesn't leave, they pay taxes and they die – ideal. Of course people are dying later, which seems to have caused a bit of a problem. What people are never told when they go seeking a degree as a key to a better life is to get a degree in something that qualifies you to do something.

'Each year Jared rants on about the results tables universities publish – all declaring the nation's getting smarter – he says all it means is more people are passing degrees and that's not the same thing. I have to agree with that, given the number of people who sign up for those awful Reality TV shows I was ranting about earlier.

‘No one ever says, “if you want more out of life, you have to do more with your life – and getting into debt isn’t the way to do it”. Everyone seems so worried about their retirement – the crappy end of your life, where there is a good chance you’ll be wearing nappies and dribbling food down your bib anyway. Do things while you can, that’s what I’d do if I were human. I try to tell Jared the same thing – but of course I have no way of communicating with him. It is so sad, because I swim here and watch him frittering away his life. Still, as far as society is concerned he is a good citizen. He has his own place, pays a mortgage, has a car – not that he uses it – has some debt, and even has a flat-screen TV – his life is made!’

But Henrietta knew her owner's life wasn't made and that made her feel sad. She swam to the other end of her tank so the new fish wouldn't see her shed a tear – she so wanted her owner to be happy, to lead a wonderful life, a life that starts now, not one that's saved for and hoped for in retirement, when his knees won't be up to doing all the cool stuff that he could do if he just got off his arse and did them now.

Henrietta felt weak; all her ranting had taken its toll. And yet there was so much she had left to say. She wanted to know why everyone on Jared's travel websites thought that Laos was such a chilled-out place when Jared always called it Thailand without the charm. He said that people only

thought it chilled-out because most of the people who go there spent their entire time either drunk or stoned. He'd called it lots of other things in an article once, but he'd been told he couldn't post it because it was racist. People said the same thing about his comments on the Philippines. He'd said that Filipinos were lazy and that they saw every westerner as a walking ATM, plus almost all of them thought they could speak English when the best they can managed was a mashed-up version of their own language, Taglish rather than English. I personally think this is a little mean. And it's never a good idea tarring an entire nation with the same dirty brush – but then I'm a goldfish and by nature we're far more rational than your average human.

As Henrietta lay on the bottom of her tank; several fleeting thoughts rushed through her head. There was so much to say and yet she could feel time slipping away.

She lay for a while and rested. While doing so, Henrietta was able to read what Jared was typing. This was her favourite pastime; she loved her owner and had longed to be able to tell him things, to talk to him and make his life better. Silly thoughts. She watched him typing about the country he hated most, one he'd spent seven hellish weeks in once – the aforementioned Philippines. He really wanted to write something that expressed his feelings for the place that he could actually post without fear of being called a racist. He wrote:

I think there are many ways we can judge a country. There are different ways to round up our thoughts and feelings and offer a final summary of our time spent there. I think one of the most interesting ways is to look at how a country goes to the cinema.

In the UK, I think the cinema is traditionally a quiet affair. People will watch the film in near silence and, very rarely, if the film is particularly special people may give a round of applause at the end. Who that's aimed at I'm not certain, but still, I'm sure it makes the projectionist smile. If the worst happens and some people are talking then people generally... do nothing. Well, a couple might whisper about how rude it is to talk through a film, some may even offer the offenders a dirty look. But rarely does it go further than that. When it does, it will be a rushed change of seats, getting as far away from the talkers as possible or, occasionally and as if by some kind of telepathy, the entire cinema will 'hush' the talkers (not by choking them to death on the overpriced popcorn, but by all actually saying the word 'hush').

When I've been to the cinema in the States it has been a much louder affair. The audience seem to take a greater part in the film that unfolds. People will scream at the screen, offer advice to the actors, cheer and even boo! It doesn't make it easy to watch the film but it can be even more fun just watching the audience.

Laos doesn't have any cinemas. This, I think, says a lot.

So to the Philippines; the way they go to the cinema exactly reflects the nation as I found it.

In the giant mall nearest to my hotel there was a clean and new cinema. Ten screens, sadly not ten screens in the one place, they had decided to split them over three different venues at different ends of the mall. There is no central booking office, each ticket has to be bought at each separate venue, so if you want to watch more than one film, you would have a fair walk to pick up your tickets. When building a new mall, I don't think it's rocket science to put the cinema in the one place, still that's just the start.

When you buy a ticket, it allows you to see the film as many times as you want throughout the day. A nice idea, if you wanted to see the film by yourself in the morning perhaps, and if it was good you could go back later with friends. But this is not how the ticket is used. Instead, Filipinos rarely bother to come in and watch the film from the start. They arrive at any point throughout the film, even ten minutes from the end. And then they'll just sit there until they have seen it all – not seeming to care that they are watching it in the wrong order.

What this means is that people are wandering in and out of the cinema all the time you're trying to enjoy the film – a perfect example of how the country as a whole is run.

Henrietta smiled, 'another piece of writing that's bound to offend,' she thought.

Her smile carried with it warmth that drifted up through her body. She knew that thought was nearly her last – it was time to go.

She was only left with a few simple observations. She was about to die. She hadn't said goodbye to the new fish, which was a little rude. And as she floated towards the surface of the tank she realised that there was a heaven and hell after all – but not in the way that the Christians saw it.

There is a common belief that our lives flash before our eyes as we die. Now if our lives have been full of woe, if we've done nothing more than what society expected of us, then welcome to hell. The last thing you'll see before you disappear into the darkness is your own failed life, the disappointment that you have left nothing, achieved nothing, are nothing – your life has not marked the world – that would be hell. But if you've been someone, done something, stepped away from the norm and denied society its expectations then your last memories will shine – welcome to heaven.

As Henrietta's life flashed before her there was an overwhelming sense that it was far from complete – there was still more to come – her life was yet to be lived.

* * *

'What's wrong with my tongue?' Henrietta tried to say. But rather than the customary bubbles that sprang from her mouth whenever she spoke, all that vented forth was a stream of drool and a low growl.

'What's going on? I don't understand?' she said – more drool, more growling.

And then she heard familiar voices: 'I think it's a really good idea that you're getting a puppy. I'd rather you just found yourself a girlfriend but at least this is a start.'

Henrietta recognised Margaret's motherly tone and hoped...

'You're right mum, it is a good idea to get a dog – I need something to force me out of my flat; can't keep moping around all day long. Plus, now Henrietta's passed on, I could do with the company.'

Henrietta moved towards the voices and for the first time she realised that she had legs, four of them in fact but none of them were doing as she asked. She took one step and then tumbled over. As she struggled to stand she realised that it wasn't night time, she just had her eyes shut – she wasn't used to having lids that actually shut out the light. Forcing them open, Henrietta only saw a blur. All she could see was fur, it seemed to be coming down over her eyes giving the world the impression that everything was fuzzy. She shook her head and promptly fell over. On her feet again she shook her head, gentler this time.

The fur parted allowed Henrietta to gauge her location. She was in a cage, and given that it can't have been more than two-feet tall, this meant that she can't have been very tall herself. She tried to give herself the once over but this just resulted in her, once more, falling over.

'What about this one?' she heard Jared ask.

'Oh no!' Henrietta yelped. 'I'm obviously some kind of freakishly hairy pet and if he doesn't notice me soon, he might pick another one.' Henrietta rushed towards the front of the cage; after falling over her front feet and getting a mouthful of hair she made it. From her new vantage point she could see her owner. Jared's eyes were moving from one pen to the next; he seemed disappointed somehow, like the puppies before him were of scant value as a

replacement for his lost pet. Margret on the other hand was cooing up a storm – if she could she would've taken every one of the adorable puppies home.

Realising that any minute Jared might come across a puppy that would 'do' – Henrietta yelled: 'Look at me, Jared, Jared, look at me – it's your Henrietta! I know I'm some kind of foul, horrendously hairy freak-dog – but it's me! Arrrrrrr awwwwww – LOOK AT ME!' The diatribe leapt forth and filled the room; the sound's presence tangible – inescapable.

'What the hell was that? Did a puppy just die?' Jared asked as he searched out the offending noise.

As Henrietta watched Jared move from cage to cage, getting closer to hers, she shook her head slightly so that her excessive fringe would get out the way so that she could look into her owner's eyes, licked her lips to make sure she wasn't drooling and then did her best to offer up a smile.

'Wow, Mum, look at this one. It's so cute, it looks like a ball of shaggy wool.' Jared said as he looked into Henrietta's eyes.

'"It's" a "she", and you'll never guess what?' Margret said, happy at the bright smile that had washed onto her son's face and happier still as she read the white name card at the

side of the kennel.

Jared didn't reply, he was transfixed by his new puppy 'who's a pretty girl then? You are, you are'.

Realising that Jared wasn't going to ask 'what?', Margaret read out the name card.

'Let me introduce you to Henrietta, an adorable 8-week old long-haired sheep dog.'

Henrietta smiled her biggest smile and moments later she was up in Jared's arms being held warm and safe. As she fell asleep in his arms, Henrietta's last thoughts were of reincarnation, not that she was sure a drooling, shaggy puppy was a step forward but it was certainly something. And as she dreamt, she imagined that next time she would be reborn as a beautiful woman and that she would see out the final third of her life as Jared's wife. Of course, somewhere in her dream she realised that the idea of reincarnation was entirely against her belief structure and as a voice barked that perhaps she needed a re-think, a brightly-coloured ball was thrown and causing Henrietta to gallop and yap in her dream, an action that just made Jared hold on even more tighter.

Life Coach

The guests entered the conference room, in singles and pairs. Then a group of three arrived, which made Patrick smile. He desperately wanted a full house. This was his first "sampler" night, so he wouldn't make any money however many guests arrived. The idea was to get as many of the attendees as possible to sign up for his course, and pay for the privilege, so the more attended tonight the more chance there was that this new venture wasn't going to be a complete disaster. 'Hello, come in, we'll be getting started very shortly,' Patrick said to a couple of ladies with matching shampoo and sets. He pointed to where the free biscuits were and told them to be careful as the free coffee and tea were piping hot. Another group arrived, this time a group of older gentlemen all wearing more layers of clothing than he thought an evening like this required. And ties, too; that was odd. Even odder was the average age of the group. So far, twenty people had arrived and not one looked younger than fifty. Still, they were people after all. Even if his online training course had led him to believe "Wealth Creation and Psychological Empowerment" would attract a young and diverse mix of people, Patrick was just happy that the room was nearly at capacity. 'The more minutes, guys,' Patrick yelled over the din in the room. Everyone seemed to be talking so loudly and there was a queue for the tea and lots of moaning about the now empty biscuit plates. 'Guys,

doesn't really suit this lot,' Patrick thought, if anything it seemed disrespectful and a little American, though his training was certified by The Los Angeles School for Personal Growth and Development so there was no wonder the course material was a little ill-matched in places. Patrick flicked through his course manual one last time. He knew the stuff inside and out. He'd even been awarded a distinction when he had completed the online exam and was sent a wonderful completion certificate. It was a printable one, of course, they couldn't be expected to send something out from the States but Patrick had still been very proud. The huge discount they had offered for the next level of training was an added bonus that they only gave to those who achieved a distinction. People started taking their seats, filling up the rows of chairs in front of him and, at the front a woman with thick make-up applied with a trowel, reminded him of his wife's supportive words when he had first suggested the career change. 'What do you mean you're giving up your job to become a life coach? What do you know about life? You've been on the buses for the last twenty years.' Not that he saw working on the buses as a career, being sworn at when he said that he had no change, or having his plastic protective window vomited on when he was stuck driving the night bus; no that was no career at all. 'Will we be starting soon? I can't leave my dogs for too long, they won't talk to me for the rest of the evening if I do,' yelled a woman on the second row back after waving a huge handbag filled with so much stuff it sounded like a maraca. 'Just two more minutes,' Patrick said after checking the

clock. That would mean they would start right on time. And as the manual said, 'punctuality is profitability'. The woman dug into her handbag and pulled out a graying handkerchief, muttering to the woman at her side as she did; 'ten minutes, two minutes, he should make up his mind. At this rate I'll be picking up my little darlings' poo bombs and you know how they always aim them at my best Axminster rug when they get upset?' 'Do not get bogged down in the swamp of negativity,' Patrick read from the "Tip Sheet" that he had placed on the desk at the front of the room. He had underlined this tip several times. Post-it notes saying the same were dotted around his home, partly to encourage him but mostly to discourage his wife from her incessant naysaying. After a month of moaning he had finally had to tell her that it was his father who had died, so it was his inheritance and he refused to spend it on a conservatory when he could finally give up the job he despised and do something for himself. That hadn't gone down well but had meant a week of peace while she had gone to stay with her sister. In the end, when the washing had piled up and he couldn't bear any more takeaways, he'd given in, sent flowers, apologised and, after promising her a new kitchen, normality returned. And thankfully his wife shopping for a kitchen had given him the time to complete his course. Patrick watched the second-hand tick around the old school-style white clock on the wall. In thirty seconds his new life would begin. His palms were sweaty, though thankfully nowhere else thanks to his persistence with the super-strong deodorant the course had recommended.

What was a blistering rash and a few sleepless nights if it meant he would be free from sweat on his first outing? The clock ticked closer to the start time of 7pm, his papers were ready, his opening remarks rehearsed to perfection, Patrick had spent hours ensuring that not only did he know what he was about to say, he could deliver his presentation with punchy intent and without a hint of trite glibness. Tick, tick... Patrick watched the clock... it was time... Patrick took a breath, a deep one from his diaphragm as he'd practiced and said... Well, he said nothing because before he could make his dramatic and timely opener a woman bounced through the doorway, her enthusiasm sending her countless pieces of heavy costume jewellery clattering back and forth. 'There you all are! We've been looking all over for you!' the woman said and then turning to Patrick added, 'I'm really sorry, there was some kind of mix up with the signposting. This lot are here for chair-obics: the council picks them up from round and about and brings them over here to get some exercise.' The woman smiled at the group and seemed not to notice Patrick's spirit breaking. He should have guessed; so much blue hair, Tweed perfume and that slight hint of urine. His wife was right, Patrick thought, this was a stupid idea. Who in this day and age wanted to take a course on self-improvement? 'Right,' the woman bellowed, her slightly crazed, over-enthusiastic tone reminded Patrick of a Spaniel he'd once owned, a mental dog who liked to eat the cat's poo out of the litter box. He should pack up and leave, go back to the buses and speak no more of this little misadventure. The woman turned on Patrick and, after

repeating the 'right', added, 'I think it's easier if I stay in here with this lot, and you take my room. It seems to make the most sense to me given that your lot are already waiting for you down there. It's the end of the corridor, third door on the right.' Patrick wanted to ask if 'your lot' meant one, two, seven, but that seemed a little needy. Thankfully he didn't have to as the woman added. 'It looks like you're in for a fun evening, the room is packed and they look like an eager bunch.' As Patrick walked down the corridor to his room, he only just resisted the urge to do a little skip.

Madness Served with a Hint of Crazy

Madness served with a hint of crazy 'You, Seer! Stand before me and tell me of this book,' the king said, as he gestured for the old woman to move to the centre of the room.

The old woman gave the flies one last swipe and then, after wrapping her long, tattered cloak around her, she started to move to where the king was pointing.

Holding her cloak tight made her look like a huge bat, an image helped by the seer's weather-worn features and dirty black hair, that stood on end giving the impression of pointy bat ears.

'Come on, you old hag, don't keep the king waiting,' snapped Dent, as he watched the seer hobbling forward.

Noting that the woman's pace hadn't increased, regardless of his chiding, Dent – hungry now as he could smell the inviting aroma of lunch drifting through the palace, took The Good Book out of the scribes' hands.

And, as the seer took her place in front of the king, he thrust the book into her arms.

The instant the book reached her wizened fingers, the seer screamed 'NO!' Her word filled the room, bouncing off the walls and giving the impression that the word was repeated over and over.

The seer clutched the book in both hands and held it high above her head.

'Excellent,' thought the king, he loved a seer who could put on a good show.

'This book must be destroyed – it's EVIL! No good can come from these words.' The king looked over at one of his guardsmen, who read the king's expression and took a step forward towards the seer – don't let the woman destroy the book.

The king, almost imperceptibly, raised a finger to let the guard know, that for the minute, he wanted the seer watched, not killed.

'Don't keep me in suspense, seer; tell me why you're creating such fuss,' the king demanded.

Like an angry volcano the seer erupted, her words a mixed up torrent of things yet to come.

Millions will die because of these words.

Women, made out of a rib, will be hailed as second class.

Men will be tortured and killed for not accepting this imaginary God.

Women will be called witches for doing nothing more natural than to bring children into the world and for this great good they will be burnt alive.' The seer's arms were shaking under the weight of the book but she didn't abate.

'For thousands of years, wars will be started in the name of this God.

Man will divide; find new ways to worship and each time they will want to destroy anyone who doesn't worship their way.

One church will become many, one religion will split and contort and names will be given to every new branch, each one longer than the last.' The room was silent, or at least no one could be heard over the seer's screaming.

With each new sentence she seemed to raise the volume a decibel.

‘Man will be controlled.

They will no longer live for this life, no longer enjoy the time they have, they’ll do everything in the hope that things are better in an imaginary heaven.

They will ignore innovations in science, ignore what can be proven; instead they will create a delusion that will infect the simple-minded masses.’ The king watched, enthralled by the seer’s passion.

He didn’t understand everything she said, but he was getting the gist.

‘A man will be appointed as a speaker for God, and through his words, millions across a great continent will die of a devastating disease.

Through this man’s lack of action and his devotion to the words of this book, our world’s population will grow to catastrophic levels.

People will suffer and starve and die!’ On the word ‘die’ the seer dropped to her knees; her strength almost gone yet still

she held the book high.

'Has she done?' the king wondered, but as if to answer his questions the seer managed a last few sentences.

'This book will force people into marriage, force love on those who aren't yet ready.

It will punish women who have children without a husband.

And it will cause the death of thousands of men for doing nothing more natural than loving another man.' The seer's breath was coming hard and fast now, as if she was trying to draw in enough air to make one last statement.

'But of all the evil this book will bring on our great planet, the worst will surely be how the book will cause us to JUDGE one another.' The words were now falling from her mouth, the seer was gasping for air, but she needed to finish; her words had to be heard.

She took one final breath and said: 'And from these judgements the worst sins will be committed!' As the last word dropped from her lips the seer fell to the ground, dead, the book hitting the ground in front of her with enough force to create a sound like a clap of thunder right there in the room.

The king waited for the brief commotion to subside as the seer's body was dragged out of the room and then said: 'Well, it's a shame you scribes couldn't put on such a show – if you had we might have been done ages ago and I could be sat feasting right now!' At the king's words a scribe stepped forward and offered, 'I wouldn't worry, my king, the seer's talking rubbish.'

We've built fail safes into The Good Book.

You will be the one acting for God, no one else would be allowed, so that last part about judgement doesn't make any sense plus, ultimately the only person who can judge is The One True God and you'll be sending people up there to meet him.

The woman was clearly insane.' The king let the scribe finish.

He wasn't worried.

He understood that this new book was his to control.

He knew why so many things had been put in there as being bad – it just added to his ability to control the masses.

He doubted the book would ever take off, but if it did, so what if things got out of hand? That wouldn't be in his lifetime, so why should he worry? What he did worry about was the use of 'my king,' it made his stomach retch in indignation.

The king reached down the side of his throne and pulled out a gilt-handled knife.

The weapon was weighted perfectly for such occasions as this.

With a violent throw, the knife left the king's hand and before the scribe had chance to duck, the blade hurled through the air and pieced the scribe's windpipe.

On entry it sliced through the neck's artery which sent jets of bright red, oxygen-rich blood shooting into the air.

The scribe fell to his knees, his eyes finding the king, looking for a reason why he was about to die.

When he didn't get an answer, he dropped face first onto the marble floor, the impact forcing the point of the blade to crack out of the back of the scribe's neck, causing the enraptured onlookers to gasp in horror.

'That,' Barkus screamed 'is the fate of anyone who feels it's ok to use "my king" instead of "my lord", a trivial matter, I admit, but I'm sure you'll agree, one not worth dying over.' The king again waited for the corpse to be dragged out of the room.

He even waited for a servant to clean up the small pool of blood that had collected around the scribe's throat.

Though he wasn't actually sure why he was waiting, given the mess that was coming.

But if nothing else it gave him time to take a few breaths and calm a little.

When all traces of the body had gone, other than the faint odour of death that clung to the heat of the room, the king stood up and said: 'my loyal servants, you can't honestly think that I'd listen to the words of a mad woman.

I am the king, and now I am the speaker for the One True God.

I will have order throughout my kingdom and I will reap the rewards of being a king!' The king's stomach rumbled, he felt a little dizzy in the heat and his head had just started to bang.

He wanted this little party over and done with, but first there was some cleaning up to be done.

Sometimes after Boy had proved entertaining he would get his slave to tell him any gossip from the palace.

Not that he was really interested but servants would often overhear things that could prove useful to a king.

If Barkus's father had spoken more to the servants he perhaps would have heard what his son was planning – given that Barkus had talked his plan out with his advisor while they were in the company of several servants.

Last night, while listening to tales of the palace, Boy had told the king about Dent's visits to the kitchen staff's quarters.

It seemed that Dent would often make such a mess of the younger kitchen girls that they wouldn't be able to work for weeks.

This consequently put added pressure on the rest of the team.

Time to try out my new powers, thought the king, as the brief recollection of last night's gossip passed by his mind.

‘Dent, my loyal servant,’ Barkus said as he walked towards his advisor, ‘you do realise that if this book gets out, and becomes the word of God, then you’ll have to stop your nightly pleasures.’ Dent wanted to step back but his back was already against the wall.

There was something about the look on the king’s face that he found unnerving.

‘I’m sorry, my lord, I don’t understand what you mean.’ Dent made his voice as servile as he could muster and bowed his head as the king approached.

‘Well, Dent, all those little virgins you get such pleasure out of defiling, all that will have to stop.

You will have to choose one and marry her, and that would be your lot, this one woman, for the rest of your life.

And any virgins you defiled after you were married would count as adultery, and that would be a sin – a sin for which you could surely be punished.’ Dent wasn’t sure how to reply, but the king looked expectant, so he knew he would have to say something.

‘I’m sure I’ll be able to find a good woman, my lord, and love her how The Good Book says.’ Dent’s words repulsed the

king, well not so much the words, more the way Dent said 'The Good Book' as if the work of fiction had already taken on a certain reverence.

'Really?' the king asked, to which Dent replied without thinking, 'yes, my king, really.' It was only when Dent had finished speaking that he realised, to his horror, that his answer had questioned the king – not something anyone should do.

Before Dent had time to worry further the king pulled another knife out of his belt and with a force that lifted Dent off his feet the king brought the eight-inch blade up and under his servant's ribcage piercing his heart.

Barkus then gave a second quick thrust of the knife, turning the blade to destroy what remained of Dent's heart, before shaking the dying man loose and letting him fall to the floor.

As blood trickled from Dent's mouth he uttered, 'wow, my king, how many knives do you have?' and then died.

These hadn't been the deep meaningful words Dent had hoped to say as his last, but through the shock of his sudden demise, they seemed better than nothing.

'Guards!' Barkus screamed.

At his command the room was flooded by his royal guard.

They followed a plan that had been put in place the night before.

They came in number, knowing that it would take several men to overpower two generals of the king's armies.

It actually only took one man to get the better of Lekk, but seven of the king's guard's died before General Durian was finally silenced.

King Barkus and General Score stood in the corner of the stateroom and watched the massacre.

The king had pulled Score over to one side when the carnage had begun.

Given the sheer number of soldiers that had rushed the room, the outcome was inevitable, but still the two men chose to watch the thrill of the fight.

Watching his fellow Generals get hacked to pieces forced General Score to ask: 'And where does that leave me, my Lord?' the General instinctively moved his hand towards his sword, an action not missed by the king.

‘There’s no need for that, General; I trust you, as much as one man should trust another.

And I need a general.

Someone is going to have to take over from Durian and Lekk – Durian was too stupid to be trusted and Lekk too slimy.

So I’m going to need you.

I’m sure some people are not going to take kindly to our God, and they will need to be dealt with – the quicker the better.

Satisfied, and rather smug at being the one general saved, Score said, ‘I take it you had this planned all along, my lord?’ His voice raised over the screams of pain as swords found their victims.

‘I did, General.

I instructed my guard last night.

I decided a long time ago that for this plan to work everyone who was part of its creation must die.

That's the only way I could really stop anyone talking about what really happened.

Talk of God is already out there, it's spreading throughout my kingdom and I don't want anyone to stand in its way.' 'Very good, my Lord.

But can I ask, have you actually read the entire book? There are a few dodgy things in there, giant scorpions, burning bushes, men with wings – were the scribes on something when they wrote this?' As the General spoke he kicked off a dying scribe who was clinging to the General's legs and begging for his life.

After watching his guards finish off the last man in the room – by severing the slave's head – the king gestured for him and the General to leave.

'I wouldn't worry about what the book says; it's all open to interpretation.

The scribes have made it sufficiently vague that from this point on we can do and say whatever we please in the name of God – what more could a king ask? There are good times ahead, my friend, good times.' And with that the king and his number one general went for lunch.

From this point on the world became a different place that only the deluded would argue was better.

Everyone believed in the new God.

There was no reason not to.

They had his words in a book, they had scrolls and tablets proving the book true and there was no one alive who would say otherwise.

Now, remember, these events took place far from this world.

They didn't happen on Earth.

Surely nothing like this story could ever happen on our green pastures? Still, like all good stories, proving them true or false is rarely the name of the game.

The game is getting people to believe – do you still believe? Rochelle and Dave A wave of excitement rushed through the mass of people in the waiting crowd as, at 10:02am, the doors finally opened on the UK's premiere, and only, Crime and Punishment Expo! The crowd resembled penguins in the zoo at feeding time; bobbing heads, bodies clambering forward, arms discreetly and not so discreetly doing what they could to get their owner nearer to the arena's doors.

Dave and Rochelle didn't have to rush; they had been here hours and when the security guard finally pulled open the huge glass doors, they were the first in line.

Even when they stepped inside Birmingham's cavernous National Arena, the pair took it easy.

They had come here for one thing, and one thing only, to see Jessica Fletcher, and she wasn't due to arrive until 2pm.

'Can we go and eat now?' Rochelle whined.

The nineteen-year-old's distinctive northern accent distorted her words so when she said 'go' it sounded as if the word had extra 'o's and her 'now' had been pronounced 'narr', with the final 'r' being dragged out for several seconds to emphasise her need to food.

She had taken Dave by the arm and, using her considerable bulk, she'd ushered her similarly-proportioned boyfriend through the mass of cooing fans and off into a safe corner.

'Can we just work out where in the hall she will be first? It won't take a minute.' On the walls around the entrance hall were a variety of posters advertising the prestigious guests who were signing autographs that day.

Dave's gaze leapt from one to the next, trying to find his heroine.

'But we've been queuing for hours!' Rochelle said, this time she managed to sound like a spoilt ten-year-old.

'Yeah, 'Elle, but your mother made you a whopping breakfast before we left, and I got you a burger to eat in queue!' Rochelle wanted to whine further, so what if her mother had made her beans on toast for breakfast? And, of course, there were the cheese and ham sandwiches she'd been packed off with, and already finished on the train – while Dave had been away at the loo.

And so what if she'd had a burger? She was soooo hungry! Still, sensing this was a losing battle she said, 'fine, yeah, anyway, let's go see what time 'Mrs, "everyone dies the moment I enter the room" is on.' 'It is what we're here for,' Dave replied.

He was getting increasingly annoyed that he couldn't find any 'Murder, She Wrote' posters, surely given that Jessica Fletcher was the star of this murder mystery extravaganza, the show's poster should be everywhere.

'It might be what you're here for! It's you who loves that old show.

Me, I only came for the day out.

Plus, it was fun getting my dad up at stupid-o'clock to drive us to the train station this morning.' Seeming to speak without the need to take a breath, Rochelle dropped her tone into something deep and gravelly, mimicking her father's, and said, 'I don't know why you have to go all way 't Birmingham, 'Elle', there's nowt there you can't get here!' 'Except Jessica Fletcher of course; you can't find her in our scrod-bucket of a town!' Dave snapped, his annoyance at not being able to find any posters was reaching the boil.

'Where the fuck are the posters? I don't understand, surely, she's the star?' Dave began pointing at the various posters and said, 'look, there's that no-name from CSI, and the one who died five seasons ago in, oh God, what's the name of that stupid show?' 'Crime and Punishment,' Rochelle offered, her voice quieter now.

Partly due to the fact that most of the other attendees had gathered up timetables and maps, and made their way out of the entrance hall, and partly because she had started to feel nauseated.

She knew that if she didn't get to the toilet soon, she would lose her breakfast, the sandwiches and that burger.

And if that happened she really would feel hungry! 'That's the one, "Crime and Punishment", and look, they've even got people from "The Bill".

Who wants to see them? It's only watched by old grannies anyway – where is she?' Dave demanded; a question that gave Rochelle a means of escape.

'I tell you what darlin', why don't you go and ask someone while I nip off to the loo?' Dave liked that idea; he nodded an ok and then stalked off to find out what the hell was going on.

In the toilet cubical, Rochelle fought to get her dark blue leggings up past her knees.

The lycra cut into the acres of fat on her thighs and gave the impression of string tied around bags full of congealed yogurt.

Dropping to her newly bared knees, Rochelle pulled back her streaked blond hair and retch after retch she said a second 'hello' to the partially digested contents of her stomach.

'I can't keep this up,' she said to the empty bathroom once she'd finished.

After wiping away the remnants of vomit from around her mouth, swilling to get rid of any remaining chunks in her teeth and the smell, she then splashed her face with water, and made her way back out into the entrance hall.

Dave greeted her return; his face bright, his demeanour that of an excited puppy.

‘There’s no need to worry, follow me.’ Rochelle did, though she wasn’t worried – not about this at least – in fact she kind of hoped the “Murder, She Wrote” woman wouldn’t show up, then they could go off into the city centre and do some shopping.

‘Look, see...’ Dave said as he dragged her out of the entrance and into the main hall.

Dave had dressed up for their trip; he’d broken out his best trousers.

But as an apprentice bricklayer, in a tiny Yorkshire town to many Dave was very much a stereotype.

His ‘best’ trousers only saw the outside of their drawer once or twice a year – mainly Christmas and Easter, or for the odd wedding that might come along.

And this particular pair of trousers was now a few years old, and judging by the fatty overhang, they had been bought back when Dave was still a size-38 waist.

Originally, Dave's mother had laid out a crisp white shirt for him to wear with the black trousers, but it had quickly become clear that he would need to leave the trousers' top button undone, and wear a belt to keep them up – which negated a tucked-in shirt.

So in the end he'd gone with his favourite green polo shirt.

Which though it looked smart, it barely covered the bottom of his belly, which protruded out like a hairy beach-ball, and from the side the shirt made him look like a large, and probably dull sounding, bell.

The main hall was a vast square cavern.

Its domed roof was made out of diamond-shaped pieces of frosted glass, which made it seem like everyone was standing on the inside of a fly's eye.

Lining the outside of the square hall were hundreds of vendors: comics, action figures, books, puzzles, collectors' cards, posters – a fan's wet dream.

On the inside of the square there was a second tier of stalls, these formed a broken circle; effectively two semicircles, again containing stalls, with two parallel row of stalls running down the centre of the hall, breaking up the circle.

On the far wall, opposite the entrance, there was a long podium above which posters of the attending stars had been placed.

From where they were standing it was hard to make out any of the other star's faces.

Still, Dave wasn't concerned about anyone other than the woman who was going to take centre stage.

And her poster was clear enough, a huge, ten-times' life-size head shot, dominated the hall.

It looked down on proceedings like Zeus watching over ancient Greece.

'Wow! Could they have got her head any bigger? Surely they could've shown her body too? That thing's frightening!' Rochelle said; she was trying to scan the room for any sign of an eatery, but with little success as her eyes kept being drawn back to the iconic figure holding court in the hall.

‘How perfect is that? Right up there where she deserves to be!’ Dave said, his face a picture of star-stuck awe.

Oblivious to the grunts, moans and the small scene made by a woman with a pushchair, Dave stood right in the middle of the main thoroughfare.

His 6’4 frame held enough fat to keep a chip shop in business for a week and, as he’d chosen to wear clothes just slightly too small, he looked like a skinny man with bags of potato’s strapped to all sides.

To the people trying to pass him in the centre of the pathway, his bulk was like trying to pass a dump-truck on a single-lane highway.

‘I tell you what she deserves – hanging! If a woman like that had been around a hundred years ago she would have been burned as a witch – so many dead people – to her, dead bodies are like flies round shit!’ Dave looked down from the poster and said, ‘crude and nasty.

That’s my girl, always there with a heart-felt word! Now shut up for a minute and let’s get a closer look.’ Then noticing that she was about to protest, he added ‘once we’ve got closer, we can go and get some food.’ That did the trick and a rosy smile broke across Rochelle’s perpetually sulky face

– a smile that didn't last because two steps further into the hall and a man accidentally bumped 'Elle's' shoulder.

'Watch were you're going, geek!' Rochelle snapped, her round pudgy face screwing up and giving her the impression of a ripe apple that had been left to rot for a week.

The man apologised, though his tiny frame had suffered far worse from the impact than Rochelle's.

The impact was the first of many.

The hall was heaving, though Rochelle continued to get bumped into because she refused to give way.

And like a baby rhino she barged her way down the central runway, leaving bruised shoulders in her wake.

'I don't see why you need a closer look – that thing must be twelve metres tall!' Rochelle said as they approached the podium.

'I told you before, whine-a-lot, this is what we came for.

I've been saving months for this – I said you didn't have to come along – you insisted.' Dave replied.

This trip had cost him more than a week's wage; he wanted to enjoy it.

Since boyhood, he'd loved 'Murder, She Wrote.' As a young child, he'd sat in his Nan's arms and listened to her do her best to guess who'd done it.

His Nan's cunning tactic was to work her way through every character, declaring they were the one.

She would then sleep her way through the middle section, and when she woke, and the murderer was revealed, she could legitimately claim that she was right all along.

Dave missed his Nan; she'd passed away two years now.

His Nan had been at the centre of his upbringing; always there when he'd needed her, a place to run when life got too difficult – which with alcoholic and often abusive parents, it often did.

He missed her huge Sunday dinners, the house's roaring coal fire – red face, cold back – and the way she made tea in a pot, and left it to stew so long that you could almost stand a spoon up in it when it was poured.

As Dave looked up into the face of Jessica Fletcher, her kindly eyes watching over him, and the rest of the hall – keeping an eye out for any clues the incompetent police department were sure to have missed – he felt safe again.

He felt free of the worries that spawned with the onset of adulthood.

‘You’re twenty now, it’s about time you thought about doing the honourable thing with that girlfriend of yours – not wasting money gallivanting half way across the country to see some TV woman!’ These had been his dad’s words when he’d told him he couldn’t do any overtime in the family building firm, as he needed the Saturday off to see his childhood idol.

In his boyhood, playing in the garden at his Nan’s the world had offered so much promise.

But now, with her gone, and ‘real life’ upon him, he felt lost.

Somewhere in the periphery he could hear Rochelle moaning – she did nothing but – but he managed to blank her out as he looked at that warming face.

Five years they’d been together, met at school, in detention.

Dave had got a week for faking letters to get him out of P.E.

and Rochelle had thrown another girl out of a window – it had only been from the a first floor, which is why she'd got a week's detention rather than getting expelled or a prison sentence.

By the end of the week, Rochelle was the first, and still, only, girl he'd had sex with – he was her fifth boy.

Rochelle wanted to get married – their names were already on the list for a council house – have babies, watch TV all day long and not have to work.

Dave guessed at this last part, but if Rochelle's three older sisters where any indication, this is what the future would hold.

Dave wanted to travel, 'your mind's like a balloon,' his Nan had told him once, 'it might be ok and pretty the way it comes out of the packet, but it doesn't reach its full glory until it's filled.

And travel is to your mind as air is to the balloon.' She'd also told him that it was bad luck to cut your nails on a Friday and Sunday, that children over two shouldn't have dummies and you should never trust anyone the colour of night.

This last, racist, remark, he'd put down to his Nan's advancing years, rather than any actual malice.

Marriage would not allow him to travel, or at least marriage to Rochelle wouldn't – not unless he went first and left her a trail of cake to follow.

Plus, there was the other small matter of the new trainee at work – Gavin – shy, handsome, Gavin.

This wasn't the time, Dave thought, though he knew he had to make time with Rochelle soon for what he knew would be a difficult conversation – still, not now.

Dave pulling his gaze away from the poster, and turned back to Rochelle.

'... I never understood what people saw in that old show, some old woman roaming the countryside solving murders – stupid.

Just think how many people's lives they'd have saved if they'd locked her up at the end of the first episode!' 'Wow, your mouth never stops working does it?' Dave said, but Rochelle was on a roll.

'The police would never let some old granny near a crime scene, "scuse me Mr Policemen, I've written some murder books, could I please have a look around, I might tamper with some evidence, spot a clue you've missed and give a knowing look to the camera, but at least I promise to be quick", it's all bollocks.' Several people from the surrounding stalls were glaring at Rochelle's rant.

Dave noticed them, but thankfully Rochelle hadn't and before she could, and cause an even bigger scene, he ushered her off to the food hall.

'You could go shopping you know? It's not that far into the city centre from here.' Dave offered, after ordering two plates of chips and a couple of burgers.

'But I don't want to go on my own, can't you come?' Rochelle replied in her customary whining tone.

Taking their completed orders they worked their way through the throng of people who, though it was still before 11am, had decided they were in need of fast-food.

Rochelle raced a much smaller woman to a newly vacated seat in the window – she didn't win, but that didn't stop 'Elle taking the table's other seat and glaring at the women until she went elsewhere.

‘So, can we go shopping?’ Rochelle asked again, Dave having failed to answer her the first time round.

‘You can, I’m not! You know how much I’ve been looking forward to coming here – I don’t know why you have to ruin it.’ ‘Oh don’t start that again, you always say I ruin stuff – I’m sick of you treating me like shit.’ Rochelle took a bite of her burger and chewed.

The mushy slopping sound she made with each over enthusiastic chew, grated on Dave’s already fried nerves.

‘How do I treat you like shit? I spend all my money on you, and what I don’t I have to save up cos you want to buy “pretty things” for our flat – if the council ever give us one, which I’m sure they won’t given we’re bound to be at the bottom of the list!’ This was how it always started, for the last year now; they had not been able to spend more than a few hours in each other’s company before the arguments had set in.

Rochelle didn’t understand why all her friends were either married or at least living with their boyfriends, while she was still at her parents.

At this rate she’d be stuck working, part-time, in ‘Superdrug’ for the rest of her life! Dave knew what he wanted, to travel,

and to work out why he was having feelings for Gavin – sweet, handsome Gavin – and the last thing he wanted to do was get married.

Rochelle finished stuffing her burger into her mouth and then added a couple of chips.

Dave could see from the look in her eye that she was stalling for a second to give herself time to think of a suitable response.

Before she'd fully emptied her mouth, her reply came to her, Dave braced himself and as her first words shot from her mouth, so did small lumps of burger.

'Well, I'm sure we won't be on the bottom of the list for long; at least not in seven or eight months or so.' Rochelle was a subtle as an Eastenders plotline – her favourite soap.

'What?' Dave snapped, though he'd heard her clear enough.

'I'm pregnant! In a couple of months we'll be at top of that stupid housing list!' 'Elle's voice raised as she announced her status, it was as if she'd been waiting for the right moment to tell him, and now that she'd found it, she'd decided everyone should be in on her secret.

‘How the hell can you be pregnant?’ Dave asked, wiping a small lump of chip off his cheek.

‘Shit Dave, I know you’re a bit slow at times, but I thought you’d at least know where babies come from!’ At her sarcasm Rochelle looked around to see if anyone was listening in, she wanted someone to collude with, have someone appreciate her superior wit.

No one was interested and anyone who was, quickly looked back to whatever action figure, or comic they’d bought, not daring to catch her eye – a storm was coming.

‘Yeah, you smart bitch, I know perfectly well where babies come from – I mean, I thought you were on the pill?’ Dave was reacting rather than reasoning.

He couldn’t think.

She couldn’t be pregnant.

How could he have a child with her? He didn’t love her, wasn’t sure he ever had, he wasn’t even sure he could ever love a woman.

‘Well you know I don’t take it all the time – it gives me stomach ache.’ Rochelle had always seen Dave as a fish

caught at the end of a line, over the years she'd done what she could to reel him in.

She'd gone from a size 24 to a size 12 and back up again, but it hadn't made a difference.

But now, she felt like she had the reel in her hand and she was bringing her catch home.

'I never knew that.

Surely if you weren't taking them we should've been using something else.' Dave felt like he'd been dumped in a giant oven-top kettle.

At the start of the day he'd felt warm and excited, just the odd bubble here and there as he'd argued with his dad about him going today.

But then the boil had started, 'Elle's whining, her need to be fed continually, like a baby walrus, and now this.

Now the kettle boiled away, the bubbles all around bashing him against the sides.

And Rochelle's voice was like the screeching whistle announcing the kettle was about to explode! 'Like you'd ever

wear a condom, and anyway, it's not like we have sex that often – you're always too fucking tired.

So I thought we'd be all right! And you don't even sound like you want this baby?' Before he gave himself enough time to think through his reply, Dave just sort of screamed, 'I don't!' And if that wasn't enough to wipe the smug look off of Elle's face, he added 'why the hell would I want a child, I'm twenty, I don't want to settle down, plus there's Gavin!' Rochelle's mouth dropped open.

In it Dave could see half masticated lumps of chips and burger clinging to her filling encrusted teeth.

'What the fuck do you mean "plus there's Gavin"? Who the shitting hell is Gavin?', then as if a distant memory had hit her in the head with a spade, Rochelle's face contorted as she spat out, 'are you talking about that manorexic freak at your work – don't tell me you have a thing for him! What are you, some kind of fucking queer?' Dave wasn't sure what he was, he'd been trying not to think about it, but he couldn't have Gavin talked about that way.

'He's not a freak, and if manorexic means skinny then not everyone wants to be the size of a blimp you know!' Dave's voice had risen to the same level as Rochelle, and he knew that more and more heads had turned their way.

He looked for the door, looked for an escape route – but all the time in the back of his mind was the reason why he'd come here – to see Jessica Fetcher – and he couldn't go without meeting her.

Still he knew what was coming and it wasn't going to be pretty.

'How the fuck can a man like you be a homo? You're a sodding bricklayer for Christ's sake!' Rochelle's tongue was sharp and doing its best to draw blood.

'What's that got to do with anything?' Dave asked, hoping that his newly lowered voice would help to lower Rochelle's.

But it didn't, as she wasn't listening – her words just kept on flowing.

'And look at you, poofs are meant to be fit, the only thing you fit into these days is a bin bag, you're growing fat on your fat!' Dave wanted to retaliate, call her a fat cow but less useful as she couldn't even produce milk.

But he knew it wouldn't help.

What he really wanted now was for her to leave him, storm out, and then he could see his idol and face whatever trouble she'd cause another time.

'Look, I'm not saying I'm a poof, or that I won't take care of you and the baby, it's just I've been having feelings for this guy at work.' Dave said, trying to build an apology into his tone – it didn't work.

'Do you think you're getting your dirty homo hands near this baby?' She asked, holding her stomach, 'there's no way I'm having you touch the little thing after you've been sticking your cock up God knows whose arse – sick! Wait till your dad finds out!' As full of venom as Rochelle's words were, somewhere inside her she felt a sense of relief.

All she wanted out of life was to sit and watch talk shows all day long, and at night settle down and watch an evening of soaps.

She knew, like her sisters, that she could palm her kid off on her mother.

And now it looked like she'd be able to get Dave to pay for it all, without actually having to make any of the compromises that would surely come with living together.

'You can't tell m'dad.

Shit he'd kill me!' When Dave had mentioned Gavin, he'd seen his revelation as a step forward, a way of moving towards actually telling Gavin that he had feelings for him, but that's as far as he'd thought it through.

His life would be over if his dad found out, he was sure to tell the lads at work and then if he wasn't in a living hell already, he soon would be.

'Well, you should have thought about that before you started bumming around!' Rochelle looked longingly at her empty plate.

Her stomach was still aching for more – well she was eating for two – and her hunger wasn't helping her mood.

'I haven't been bumming around, I didn't even know I had a thing for guys before Gavin started working, and that's only a couple of months ago.' Rochelle's face screwed up still further until it took on the features of a fire-damaged Spitting Image mask, 'you have a "thing for guys"? That makes me feel physically sick.

What's your mother going to say down church on Sunday, 'I'm sorry Vicar, my son won't be coming today he's decided

he likes cock!” It’s a sin you know!’ Dave felt the heat under the kettle, the flame had been turned back on and the temperature rise started to make him forget he was in a packed cafeteria, surrounded by people all staring at them intently.

‘It’s only a sin if you believe in all that bollocks and quite frankly any fool who believes in a man sat on a cloud shouldn’t be listened to anyway.

Plus, I haven’t been to church in years!’ ‘Well maybe that’s the problem, if you had, you might have realised that what you are isn’t normal, it’s sick, and whether you believe it or not you’re going to burn in hell.’ And the kettle boiled.

‘Listen here you rancid, hog.

Like you’re ever going to get a place in heaven, apart from the fact you’re gunner be an unmarried mother – a big fucking no-no – you’ve had more pricks in you than a pin cushion.

And I don’t think God lets whores in heaven!’ The look on Rochelle’s face told him he’d gone too far, her face and the shocked expressions on everyone around them.

This included the counter staff on the other side of the room who had stopped serving to listen.

Without thinking Rochelle whipped her arm up and smashed her palm across Dave's face.

The slap hit him like a horrific storm crashing waves against the rocks.

The violent movement forced Rochelle's enormous thighs into the underside of the table which sent their empty plates tumbling to the floor.

The white crockery shattered, the noise of which echoed around the now whisper quiet cafeteria.

And as the plates broke so did Rochelle.

Tears vented forth and as she got to her feet and tried to speak, she could manage nothing but a blubber.

Everyone had stopped eating, they were waiting for Rochelle's next move and she knew she only had two real choices – cause an even greater scene or save her dignity and run for the door.

She wiped her face, sucked back the tears and never one to let an audience down she bellowed, 'YOU SICK.

FUCKING.

QUEER.

I CAN'T BELIEVE I LET THAT NASTY LITTLE KNOB OF YOURS INSIDE ME WHEN ALL YOU REALLY WANTED WAS TO STAB SOME FUDGE! WELL, YOU'LL REGRET THE DAY YOU EVER MET ME, I PROMISE YOU THAT!' Rochelle's face shone red, her eyes demented and then with one last lurch forward, sufficient enough to make Dave think she was going to hit him again, she thundered from the room.

Of course Dave was already regretting the day he met her.

And now, as a hundred eyes rested on him, all desperate, he was sure, to see him break into tears, too.

He calmly got up from his seat, looked around for a different exit – well away from Rochelle – and then after finding one, he left the room.

All the time he kept his head held high and his hand away from the tormenting pain that throbbed from the strike on his

cheek.

Once he'd made his escape, he found the nearest toilet, locked himself in a cubical and cried.

He cried, cried, and then cried some more.

His tears were for his lost childhood, his Nan and how he knew his world was going to change forever.

He knew that by the time he made it back home that everyone would know he was gay, even if he wasn't a hundred percent sure himself.

Rochelle would make sure his entire world knew what an evil person he was; a pariah of the highest order.

Dave felt like his tears would never stop, but then this was the first time they had ever been allowed to start.

At the death of his Nan, his father had told him to 'suck it up, men in our family don't cry.' And he hadn't, he'd been strong, done the manly thing.

And when he'd realised what the strange feeling was whenever Gavin spoke to him, feelings he knew he'd been capable of for many years, he didn't cave in, even though he

knew how much they could potentially change his life.

But now, sat here, in the dank-smelling toilet, reading messages off the wall written by the rainbow-loving brigade he was soon to join, he had no choice but surrender.

And he was going to be a dad, a realisation that sent another stream of tears rolling down his cheeks.

He didn't know what to do, he wanted to sit here forever, to die here.

Then in the background he heard the muffled sound of a PA system.

The words 'Murder, She Wrote' – he listened intently, and though the words weren't entirely clear he managed to make out, 'starting early,' 'question time', and 'five minutes' – enough words to stem the flow of tears.

'Shit, shit, shit, must look a mess', Dave said to the empty cubical.

New baby, evil girlfriend and home-life ruined or not, Dave thought, there's no way he was going to miss what he'd come here for.

After two minutes in front of the bathroom's mirror, he'd managed to reduce the puffiness from around his eyes.

At least now he didn't look like a psycho fan who'd been crying at the thought of seeing his idol.

The crimson hand print on his left cheek was another matter.

He cupped cold water to it in a vain attempt to bring down the bruising but like his battered ego, it was here to stay.

Still, no matter, Jessica Fletcher awaits.

Back in the main hall, ten rows of chairs, 25 chairs per row, had been set up facing the central, spot lit podium.

By the time Dave arrived, most of the chairs were filled.

Fortunately, they had filled from the front backwards, which allowed him to sit where he'd already intended, at the far back corner.

He knew people were going to stare – he was the queer who'd got his girlfriend pregnant – but he could at least force people to have to turn around if they were going to do that.

As he took his seat a few disapproving eyes caught his, but they soon looked away as a celebritard from a local radio station spent several minutes running through upcoming star's credentials.

Dave watched as his beloved idol made it to the stage.

She looked older than when he'd last seen her on small screen.

But that just added to her Grandmotherly charm.

Her smile was warm and bright and the whole audience erupted as she said her first hello.

Dave watched in mouth-open awe as the actress breezed through question after question.

She was witty and smart and even when the most die-hard 'Murder, She Wrote' fan asked an obscure question relating to a confused plotline years before, she didn't falter.

To Dave, the question and answer session felt like a dream; each word that flowed from her lips seemed like a lullaby drifting on the wind.

Her answers soothed him and her warmth and compassion made the events of the day vanish into the ether.

But soon enough it was over, Dave heard the compere say, 'that's about it folks, there's just enough time for one last question' and as an action without thought, Dave shot his hand into the air, 'you sir, you at the back'.

'Shit, shit, the bouncy compere's talking to me,' Dave said under his breath when he realised what he'd done.

'Come on son, don't be shy, come on, stand up, we can hardly see you back there – what's your question.' Dave looked at the compere's eager face and did as he was requested.

'Oh, you have been in the wars, you poor dear,' Dave's idol said as he got to his feet.

'I'm sure I'll be ok,' Dave muttered, as he reddened at the kind words.

'I'm sure you will, now what's your question?' the compere asked, doing his best, and his job, to keep proceedings to time.

Dave wasn't sure what his question was, he had so many, and so he just took a deep breath and let the words flow from him.

'Well Mrs Fletcher,' the audience laughed at the use of the actress's screen name, but his idol just smiled and nodded for him to continue, 'over the many years the show has been running, you must have met and worked with hundreds of people.

I was just wondering, either on the show or off, what is the best piece of advice you've been given.' 'Well done kid, what a great question to end the proceedings with,' the compere said, seeming genuinely pleased that Dave had managed to sum up such a good, almost rehearsed, question.

'That is a good question,' the actress agreed, then looking up for a second as if to retrieve some gem of knowledge locked away in the deepest part of her mind, she continued 'year's ago on the show, I think in the very first season, there's an episode where I'm debating going travelling, I'd been invited on a book tour but it meant leaving Cabot Cove.' Dave liked that his idol was talking in the first person, and hadn't bothered to say 'my character' because as he saw it, the woman in front of him was Jessica Fletcher.

'I remember that there was a heartfelt moment with an old friend – a dear woman who's long passed now.

We were sat in front of a roaring fire – faces warm, backs cold – having a nice cup of tea and she told me a little thing about a balloon.

She said our minds were like balloons, they look ok out of the packet, but only through travel do they expand to their full glory.’ At her words fireworks seemed to explode inside Dave’s head.

The idea that this wonderful lady would give him the same advice that he’d been given from his Nan was sheer heaven.

And of course he didn’t consider for a second that his Nan many have actually got her quote from the TV show, why would he, in his eyes his Nan was perfect, and so too was the wonderful Jessica Fletcher.

The crowd again erupted in applause as the star stood up, took a bow and was then ushered into another room where she was signing autographs.

Dave debated joining the queue for an autograph but he decided that his encounter had been perfect and he didn’t want to ruin it if perhaps she only gave him a passing ‘hello’.

Plus, he’d already bought a signed photo off of Ebay and the compere had said that signings would be limited to the first

one hundred people due to time constraints.

And by the time Dave had snapped himself out of his delirium there was easily more than that in the queue.

Leaving the arena he felt renewed.

His idol's words filled him with hope.

The memories they invoked warmed his heart, and gave him the strength to tattle whatever his homecoming would throw at him.

Out in the fresh air, Dave made his way over to the train station but, as he approached, his eyes met Rochelle's.

She was a hundred yards in front of him, a king-size Mars bar in one hand a bottle of full-fat Coke in the other.

Her face was a mess of tears and smeared makeup; she looked pitiful and very much alone.

He wanted to run off, catch another train, but he knew he would have to face his fate at some point so it might as well be now.

Walking over to his ex-girlfriend, Dave took the empty seat at her side.

He half expected Rochelle to move away, or worse, start screaming again.

But she did neither.

Instead she forced the rest of the Mars bar into her already full mouth, chewed, swallowed, swilled around some Coke, and when it was gone she said, 'I'll be a laughing stock.' Her words were quiet, almost a whimper.

'What do you mean?' Dave asked, matching her voice's level.

'Think about it, people might have sympathy to start with, but soon enough people are gunner say that I turned you queer.

Or worse, they're going to say that the thought of you having my baby turned you gay.' Dave wanted to disagree, but the 'people' she was talking about, 'Elle's friends and family, her sisters in particular, could be real bitches.

They already mocked her for being unable to 'land her man', so they'd have a field day with all of this.

Dave saw his chance; part of him wanted to reassure his simpering ex, but it was clear her pain could work in his favour.

‘What a nightmare that’d be, you know how nasty your sisters can get at times, they’d never leave you alone.’ Dave’s words caused a tear to run down Rochelle’s face.

He knew she’d had enough; it was time for him to be the hero.

‘Of course we don’t have to split up, you know?’ Dave said, offering her a gentle smile.

‘We don’t? But you’re a poof?’ Though Rochelle offered up a valid point, she was taking the bait.

‘Yeah, but only you and me know that.’

We don’t have to tell anyone and, given you’re having my baby, that changes things a little.

Not that we have to stay together forever.

Not long after the baby’s born I’ll be a qualified bricklayer and there’s really good money working aboard these days.’ ‘You’d go away,’ noting Rochelle’s reservation, Dave quickly

continued.

‘I would, but think about it, I’d be in a really good job, earning good money – money that I can send back to you and the bairn.

You could lead the life you want, I could do what I wanted and, after a certain time, you could say that you dumped me because you wanted a man at home – win, win.’ ‘But surely people will find out you’re a homo eventually, and what about this Gavin lad?’ It was clear that Rochelle liked the idea, her face had brightened, she was gulping rather than just swilling her drink and she was now just clearing up some loose ends.

‘Well if they ever do find out, and let’s face it, I’m not about to rush and tell my family or anyone else for that matter, then that’ll be years from now, and well after we’ve split up.

I could always claim that I couldn’t find another girl to match up to you, so I turned to guys.’ Both parties were getting into the idea; it appeared to be an acceptable solution for both.

‘And what about this Gavin, can you keep your hands off him?’ ‘Elle asked, the last thing she needed sorted.

'Well, firstly, I'm sure he's straight, and secondly someone like me would never be able to pull a guy like that,' Rochelle's eyebrows raised at the idea of her huge, manly, bricklayer boyfriend talking about another guy.

But she knew it was something she was going to have to get used to if their plan was to work.

And she wanted it to work; it meant money for nothing, and all the chat shows she could watch.

'And even if those first two things weren't enough, the idea that I'd act on anything under my dad's nose is just crazy, he'd string me up!' Dave added, of course if Gavin did turn out to be gay, and a 'chubby chaser' at that, then what his dad or the rest of the world thought wouldn't matter, and this new, ill-conceived plan wouldn't stand in the way of his happiness either.

But this latter eventuality was unlikely and, as he'd been hiding his sexuality well enough for the last twenty years, he thought that there was a good chance he could manage it for another year or so.

Then he'd be off, filling his balloon and the tiny minds of his mining town would be long behind him.

Dave looked into Rochelle's bloodshot eyes and smiled, she returned the gesture and the plan was set.

'That's quite a bruise you've got there, we'll have to come up with a good story for it on the train home.' Rochelle said, the sense of quiet satisfaction could just about be heard in her tone.

'I'm sure we'll think of something.' Dave answered.

'So how was she, the "Murder, She Wrote" woman?' Elle asked as the train pulled into the station.

'Fantastic!' Dave said as they walked hand-in-hand for the train.

And, as they stepped into the carriage, Rochelle looked back at the arena and couldn't help but ask, 'has anyone died in there yet?' Going postal ... well, more council Jake was bored again.

He sat staring blankly into space, praying for something to fill the void that seemed to be his entire life lately.

He looked at his computer.

He counted.

He had six different internet windows open, random shit that meant nothing.

Jake had read once that if you were bored with the internet then you were bored with life – was this true? Realising that the blank space he was staring into was still blank, Jake knew that it had to be.

‘What am I going to do? I can’t do this every day – I’m so fucking bored’.

Jake’s voice echoed around the empty, open plan office.

Jake’s department in the vast council building was devoid of life.

There was a team meeting taking place on the other side of town but Jake hadn’t been able to bring himself to go.

Instead he had faked an emergency deadline that he, ‘just had to meet’.

Of course he didn’t have any work to finish.

Jake just couldn’t bear another team meeting about ‘council business’.

Meetings which seemed to cover everything from the increase in council tax to the cost of wheelie bins.

And it was typical of the council to arrange a half-day meeting, covering 'general issues' on the morning when the Christmas party was planned for the afternoon.

Jake just couldn't face it.

He had decided that staring into nothingness was a far a more suitable alternative.

Nobody would miss him and they would all be back soon enough with thoughts of buffet food, and the free glass of wine would surely put them in high spirits Jake thought about this time last year, before his 'promotion'.

He never felt like this back then.

He had felt useful, not empty.

His life had had meaning, or at least his life had been busy enough that he had never had to think about it one way or the other.

Jake's wife had been insistent.

‘You’re 35 now.

You’re not getting any younger.

You can’t stay a supervisor forever.

This policy management job would be fantastic, just think about what we could do with the extra money.

Christopher needs new football boots and Nicky is growing at such a rate that she is going to need a whole new set of clothes soon.’ She had gone on and on.

In his head, Jake had screamed, ‘thanks, you bitch, thanks for pointing out that I’m not getting any younger.

‘I’m amazed that you haven’t pointed out I’m not getting any thinner either – you usually do – though I wouldn’t have this beer gut if you didn’t drive me to drink or, for that matter, if you let me play footy with the lads once in a while.

‘And maybe if you got off your fat arse and went back to work, I could keep a job I really enjoy, rather than having to take the most boring job man ever invented, just so that you can sit at home on your fat lazy arse.

Plus, it would be handy if when you did bother to drag yourself away from Trisha.

You don't need to spend my hard earned money on stupid football boots for Chris, especially when we both know that he would rather have a Barbie doll.

'And the only reason that Nicky is growing so fast, is because she takes after you – I mean, does she really have to stuff the entire packet of biscuits down her throat? If she stuck to one, she might still be able to tie her own shoelaces.' Of course none of his rant ever left his tired brain.

Jake chose to go with, 'yes dear'.

He knew this would save a lot of fuss.

Jake looked around his partition to make sure that the vast open plan office was still empty.

A five-grand rise and grey partition was all his promotion had really amounted to.

That and now he was trapped at his desk the entire week because, as a policy manager, Jake got the choice of either researching policies or writing them.

Oh, no, as Jake began to flick once more through his bunch of random websites, he realised that he also got to re-write policies, because very little of what he put on paper ever made it to the final draft.

And generally, his new boss, the policy director, would get to write the final version of the policy or, if nothing else, the lazy shit would just put his name to it.

Jake looked at the policy he was meant to be working on now.

At the top it said 'Draft 19'.

This was a new record, the last being set by the 'staff smoking policy', which had been sent back from high, seventeen times.

At the thought of the smoking policy, Jake could almost taste the bile building in his throat.

He had sworn the day he had sent off draft eighteen, that if this one was returned he would knife the policy director in the face.

It was a reaction he had realised was a little strong, but necessary.

After taking a second look around his partition, just to be doubly sure that it was empty, Jake took out his car keys and located the small flash hard drive that was attached to the key ring.

Once plugged into the USB port, Jake waited for it to be recognised and then clicked on a file marked simply, 'The end'.

The file opened in Word and was entitled: 'How to deal with my fucked up life!' One - Release some tension.

One A - Wank, a lot.

One B - Have sex with the wife (though remember that this requires a lot of drink).

One C - Curse God every day for my wretched life One D - Cut myself (remember to keep them small, so no one notices) Two - Get another job Interview 10th Jan – didn't get it Interview 12th Feb – wanted someone with less experience Interview 15th Feb – didn't get it.

Interview 2nd March – didn't understand why I wanted to take a pay cut.

Interview 5th March – didn't go down to well, when I called one of the interview panel a wanker.

Interview 20th April – called back for second interview.

Second Interview 25th April – didn't get it, they thought with my "experience" I wouldn't stay long.

Interview 8th May – didn't go, rang in sick, spent the day watching 24.

Giving the applications a rest for a while Three - Leave the wife Three A - Sat down and talked with her, told her that I didn't think things were working.

She said that we should work on it and then went to bingo.

Three B - Tried to have sex with her sober, she wasn't interested.

I told her that I thought we were supposed to be 'working on it'.

She told me I needed to work on my beer gut first.

Three C - I told her I thought we should get a divorce.

She said that there was no way that we were splitting up while the kids were still in school and, if I tried, she would take every penny I have.

Four - Have sex with someone in the office.

Four A - Started talking to Jackie, she's the office bike and should be good for a bit of entertainment.

Spent ten minutes flirting with her at the cooler.

She seems up for a bit of fun.

I asked her if she wanted to meet for a drink on Tuesday.

Four B - Went out for the drink.

Went well, had a good laugh.

Meeting her again on Thursday for some dinner and a bit of a drive – not that the wife cares but I'll start talking about late meetings anyway.

Four C - Dinner was nice, drove somewhere quiet, kissed.

I got a nice feel of her tits, but then she reached for my knob and it just ignored her.

Worse, she went to suck it, but it just lay there like a dead slug.

'Don't you fancy me?' she asked, but given that she has told everyone in the office about what happened now, all the excuses I gave her on the drive back obviously didn't answer that question satisfactorily.

Five - Kill them all Five A - the poison arrived today, the wife nearly opened it and I had to tell her that it was clear paint for my model airplane, she believed me and left it for me but not before she called me a "sad, fat bastard".

The internet site said that the bottle was big enough to take down an elephant though, given that the container is only the size of a small pill bottle, it might only work on small elephants.

I can do it at the Xmas party.

I need to get a bottle with a spray on it so it'll spread over the food.

Either that or I could just mix it in the wine and water jugs, which they should have if everything is the same as last year.

Five B - Kill them at work, go home and kill the family and then sort out myself.

Five C - if the above fails, use the gun - GO POSTAL! Jake read over his words.

The bitter insults from his wife stung and jarred his emotions.

Every time he read over his list, made notes, added to it in anyway, it was like the events had taken place for the first time.

Like he was back standing in front of his wife, looking at her sagging body, wondering where the slim, fit, princess of a woman had vanished to – who had stolen her and replaced her with this eighteen-stone, fool-mouthed tyrant? Most of the time he managed to put all thoughts of his wife out of his mind.

He had been with her nearly sixteen years and, over that time, he had managed to make her all but an irritating blur.

Jackie, on the other hand, he couldn't blank out.

Mostly because he couldn't walk from one side of the office to the other without someone making a derogatory remark or, if nothing was said, there was always the sound of laughter suppressed as he approached and breaking out again as he left.

He was stressed.

He couldn't believe that he hadn't been able to get an erection.

When he was by himself, practicing, he was able to get hard.

And he did lots of practicing.

So, maybe he just didn't fancy the office bike after all.

Jake reached over and unlocked a drawer in his desk.

He took out a small bottle of clear liquid and a compact black, faux-leather toiletry bag and placed them on his desk.

He looked at the bottle and smiled at the fact that such a small container was going to bring an end to his pointless life.

Better than that, it would bring an end to those people who made his life what it was.

Jake put the bottle to one side for the minute and picked up the toiletry bag.

He unzipped it and took out the items it contained.

Jake carefully positioned the five items next to each other in size order.

First a small plastic tray, second a packet of tissues, then an anti-septic wet-wipe, a packet of plasters and last a packet of razor blades.

The ritual brought Jake a feeling of comfort.

The familiarity of the items, the noise of the tissue packet being torn open, the rough texture of the plaster and finally the feeling of cold steel between his fingers made the blood

leave Jake's head and course down to his other head, which was rapidly increasing in size.

Placing the inside of his forearm over the plastic tray, Jake then took the razor and with a practiced hand made a short, deep cut into his flesh.

Jake no longer feared the insertion.

The inch-long cut offered little or no pain.

The agony came when Jake forced the wound apart.

With his finger and thumb Jake worked the cut until it began to ooze blood.

He watched it fill the base of the plastic try.

As the dark red fluid ran from his body, Jake clenched is teeth against the pain and imagined the emptiness of his life draining from his body.

He pictured his obese wife, his spoilt kids, Jackie the whore, Draft 19, Jake saw it all and with perfect clarity he watched it run from his body.

When the blood had reached the mark etched into the side of the plastic container, Jake let go of the wound and then after giving it a once over with the anti-septic wipe, he covered it with a plaster.

The wound sealed, Jake placed all the contents, except the tray of blood back into their bag, and placed them neatly in the draw.

From the same drawer, he took another small plastic container, this time with a lid.

He took it and the tray of blood to the toilets.

The blood washed away, Jake locked himself in a cubical and dealt with the throbbing in his pants.

Three minutes later he was back at his desk.

He placed the tray into its case, and then after checking that the lid was on tight, he tucked the pot of cum in the draw between a couple of files so that it couldn't fall over.

Jake liked to collect any cum he produced at work – normally one or two pots a day – and then stay late after work so that, when no one was around, he could throw his sticky seed over his boss's desk.

*** At midday, the caterers began to set up the party.

To Jake there looked enough food for a hundred people, though his office had fifty at most.

Jake could see his target, the drinks' table.

Six large jugs of wine, two each of red, white and rosé and, for the drivers (and dull), a couple of jugs of water.

Jake waited diligently for the caterers to finish setting up and then when they had disappeared for a coffee break, he made his way over to the drinks.

With much considered precision Jake opened the bottle of poison and shared the contents nine ways, the last portion being left in the bottle – he would need that for himself and his family.

The small portion that went into each jug, didn't seem like enough but, from what Jake understood from the website, a few drops of the poison would be enough to kill hundreds of people.

'Starting early? I thought you were meant to be back here working hard.' The voice belonged to Vince, a wanker from

HR, who thought he was a god just because he'd had to make a hundred staff redundant last year.

'If he is working hard, that'll be a first!' This second voice was that of Steve, one of the managers from the IT department, and self-titled 'office comic'.

Jake didn't want to exchange any words with them.

He mostly just wanted them dead.

The website had promised that one drop was enough to bring a man to his knees.

The death was said to be horrifically painful, the poison eating through the stomach lining and allowing the stomach acid to eat away at the internal organs.

Desperately Jake wanted to stay around and watch, see them gasp their last breaths.

Watch blood drip from their eyes as they begged him for help.

Instead, he laughed off his colleague's comments and then, after making a suitable excuse, went out to sit in his car and wait for the ambulances.

As Jake watched partygoers continued to arrive.

He looked at his watch, hoping that no one would die before everyone had chance to have a glass of wine.

He doubted anyone would touch the water, his office being a bunch of work-shy lushes.

And no one was allowed to touch on the booze until the party had officially been started by the section manager, who in this case was his boss, the policy director.

Ten minutes passed, each minute being filled by more happy people arriving.

Jake cursed their smug faces, all of them in little cliques, none of which was open to him.

Jake wondered if he would hear the screams.

He hoped he would, he had been planning this day for over six months.

It had taken days of research to find the right poison.

Who would have thought it was so hard to find something undetectable when mixed with liquid and one that didn't kill straight away? Jake specifically needed a poison that took around twenty minutes to start working – he had to make sure everyone inside had chance to take in a killing dose.

Finally, Jake watched his boss arrive in his new Five Series BMW.

Rumour had it that he had wanted a Three Series Sport, but the seats hadn't been big enough to accommodate his fat arse.

Jake watched him fight his way out the car and then sweat his way across the car park.

At 5 foot 2 and at least fifty-percent body fat it wasn't a pretty sight.

'Not long now,' Jake said to the empty car.

He looked at the contents of the bottle he was clutching in his hand.

There was just enough to take out his family, then settle in front of the football and pour the last few drops into a nice cold beer.

Jake tapped his fingers on the steering wheel of his people carrier.

It was a car he hadn't wanted but his wife had told him that they had to have for 'the school run'.

The fact that the school was two hundred meters up the road didn't seem to matter.

A people carrier was the 'must have'.

He thought that slim, fit children was a far better 'must have', but his wife hadn't agreed.

'Come on!' Jake shouted, bashing his hand down on the dash.

His watch had just clicked past the twenty minute mark since his boss had arrived.

Time was getting on and the football kicked off at three.

Another ten minutes passed and there was still no sound of screaming, and Jake had wound his window down just to make sure that he wasn't missing anything.

'Fucking poison, stupid internet crap bollocks!' Jake raged as yet another ten minutes passed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jake noticed a door open, someone had come out for a fag break and the newly open door blew a wave of vocal enjoyment across the car park.

'Fuck it.

Useless internet crap.' Jake yelled, then, as he opened his car door to get out, he said in a more considered tone: 'Time for Five C!' A New Dawn.

Oh mister postman.

‘Come on love, haven’t you finished yet, I’m trying to watch the footy.’

‘Won’t be long love, I want to try to make it to twenty minutes tonight.’ Jeana’s exercise bike had only just beeped past the five minute mark, and already she had to gasp out her reply. This was week eight of her exercise program and today was the first day Jeana had used her upright exercise bike. For the last eight weeks she had been using a floor bike. This was a machine which allowed the participant to lie with their back on the floor and pedal, it was the perfect starting point for anyone who’s thighs too big for the conventional bike.

‘Can’t you just give it a break tonight; I can’t hear what’s going on with all that squeaking?’ Jim didn’t look away from the TV; he barely took his eyes away when he took a swig of his beer, or forced a handful of Pringles into his mouth.

‘Would it kill you to be a bit more encouraging?’ Jeana gasped, she was finding being sat upright and peddling much harder than lying on the floor.

‘Is going out to work and paying all the bills not encouraging anymore?’

Oh great, the usual war cry, Jeana thought, though she didn't say it as she didn't want to get into the same tired argument, at least not when she was barely able to breathe.

Jeana's silence prompted Jim to add 'I don't know why you're bothering love, you're fifty in a couple of month, it's a bit late to start getting fit now.' Jim spat Pringles as he spoke, he appeared to have lost the ability to chew, instead just relying on a constant supply and shoving from his hand to get the crisps down to his stomach.

Jeana tried to ignore him, she looked at the bike's computer display, it told her she had five minutes left to go, and so far had burned 200 calories. Jeana could feel her heart banging against her chest, but even though her thighs were starting to chafe against the now sweat covered metal of the bike, she peddled on, determined to make it to the twenty minute mark.

'It all just seems like a waste of time to me'. Jim said, resting is fresh can of beer on his ripening belly. 'I love you no matter what you look like, so you're just getting sweat all over the carpet for nothing'.

You might love me, thought Jeana, but you haven't touched me in years. Or at least you haven't but it's been after a drunken night out with the lads and a couple of Viagra. And

even then Jeana couldn't be sure they'd even had sex given Jim's knob was only average but sadly his belly wasn't.

At the twenty minute beep, Jeana almost fell from the bike, and dumped her newly attained size sixteen frame onto the settee.

'Love you're getting sweat everywhere!' Jim said, covering the carpet with the contents of his mouth in the process. Jeana took a gulp of from a glass of water from the side table, took a deep breath, another, another gulp and then said:

'The settee's leather and it'll wipe off, much easier than those crisps you've just spat on the floor.'

'I haven't spat anything anywhere.' Jim snapped, this time adding beer to the carpet.

From the hall the phone ringing halted Jeana's retort and instead allowed Jim to jibe.

'Oh, is it a day ending in 'y' that'll be your sister then.'

Oh fuck off! Jeana wanted to yell, she never, her pleasant, but strict upbringing stop her voicing foul language. For her, foul language was something only meant for the TV, and

only then after 9am.

Jim used to swear when they had first met, and worse he had sworn in front of Jeana's mother. This was one reason, one of many reasons her mother had always hated him. Now though, after many years of nagging 'not in front of the kids' Jim now kept his swearwords for the pub.

'I've just managed twenty minutes Bev?' It was Jeana's sister, it was always Jeana's sister, and these days her only friend, well her and the Prozac.

'That's great Jean, you'll be in your size 12 party frock before you know it. Your 50th's going to be fab, shame you have to bring mardy arse along.'

'Bev don't say that, he's not that bad.' Jeana knew he was a mardy arse, and that was on his good days, but she felt some antiquated duty to defend him.

Jeana moved the phone to the stairs. This was as far as it reached, Jim had not wanted a cordless phone, he had said that he 'didn't see the point as nothing in their relationship was a secret.' What he should have said of course was, 'we have a perfectly good phone and he didn't see the point in spending his money just because you want to talk about me to your sister'.

As Jeana took her seat on the stairs she could hear Jim adjusting the TV volume. Bev must have heard it to, prompting:

‘Not that bad, he’s just turned the TV down hasn’t he? That mans a swine to you; I don’t know why you don’t just leave him?’

Jeana wanted to say ‘I don’t know why I don’t leave him either, he’s a fat, abusive lush, who doesn’t nothing but feed his face and pick his arse.’ But she thought better of it given the fat abusive lush had just turned the TV down to find out what she was saying.

‘We’ve been together a long time Bev, you have to work at these things, you can’t just walk out on a relationship, it’s not that easy.’

‘You mean you won’t leave him with the kids, just in case he misplaces them. Well that argument might have worked five years ago, but you don’t see them kids anymore expect on holidays, when they come back from Uni, needing their ironing done, and some money.’ Jeana wondered why Bev bothered ringing her, like Jim had said, she did ring every night, and it was mostly just to tell her how crap her life was.

‘Did you want anything Bev, I’ve just got off the bike, and I could do with a shower?’

Bev went on to babble for another twenty minutes more before finally getting off the phone and letting her sister go for a shower.

Jeana let the shower wash over her, the warmth of the water calming her senses. Emptying her new Avon cleansing scrub into her hands Jeana became to give herself a gentle wash down.

She had now been dieting for nearly six months and exercising for the last two. Jeana hadn’t wanted to start an exercise program until she had started to lose some weight, which wasn’t easy when her husband only wanted to eat chips.

‘I’m not eating any of that rabbit food crap, I work long hours and need more than a lettuce leaf to keep me going!’ Jeana would never have even considered offering Jim a salad for his tea, but he had felt the need to point out his feelings on the subject any way.

Because of the salads, and more recently the exercise Jeana had lost over four stone. Now when she ran her hands over her body, she could no longer feel the two extra rows of fat that give everyone the impression she had three rows of tits.

Jeana took the showerhead from the rack and began to warm her nipples, the focus on her breasts fetched back Jim's thoughts on the subject.

'Jees love, if you lose anymore weight I'll have nothing to hold on too'. This kind of remark had long since stopped causing Jeana any pain. These days she let the comments go, it was easier. In this case, the remark made her smile as she knew the only time he ever touched her tits was when he was so drunk he needed something sizable to help him maintain his balance.

But as Jeana moved the showerhead downwards she smiled at what only she knew. All this dieting, the nightly exercise, it had nothing to do with turning fifty, nothing to do with Jim, or to do with giving her an escape route out of her sad monotone life. No, it was about none of these things – it was all about Sam the postman.

Jeana clicked the showerhead setting to pulsing and began her nightly thoughts about Sam. He was perfect. He came, without fail, every morning - though this was mostly because

of Jeana now posting letters to herself.

‘Are you a bit dirty down there love, or has that bike chafed you?’ Jeana lost her balance in her fight to return the showerhead to its holder – which wasn’t a graceful sight and left Jim staring at her in confusion. ‘Are you alright in there love?’ Jim asked.

‘I’m fine’ Jeana snapped adding ‘now pay attention sweetheart you’re weeing all over the floor.’

As she regained her composure, Jeana watched her husband empty six pints of beer from his bladder. It wasn’t a pretty sight. Thirty years ago, she had found it embarrassing, though somewhat horny the first time she had watched him pee. Back then they had been camping, it was cold, so he Jim hadn’t gone far from the tent. Jeana was sure Jim had noticed her watching through the crack in the tent. He never tried to turn away, was semi-erect, and at one point she was sure he had waved it at her – the sex had been good in those days.

Now, under an extra six stone of fat, Jeana could barely make out his willy. And if thirty years of shrinkage wasn’t enough, what remained, Jim’s short stubby fingers obscured.

Jim left the room and went into the bedroom. 'Bugger' Jeana said talking to the showerhead, adding, 'looks like we're not having any fun tonight.'

'Turn the light out love.' Jim said when Jeana got in bed beside him.

'I was going to read for a while.' Jeana said not knowing why she had bothered, given that she knew the reply, which duly came.

'Oh give it a rest love, you know I have to be up at six, and I can't get to sleep if you have the light on.'

Jeana did as he said, and within minutes of the room falling into darkness, Jim was snoring and gasping his way into a deep sleep. As she lie there, staring at the ceiling, Jeana missed the days when even if they weren't having sex, they would at last kiss for a few minutes before sleep. But then that had stopped when Jim got so fat she had to get onto her knees to kiss him, and she had gotten so fat, she couldn't be bothered.

She looked at the clock – twelve hours to go. Twelve hours would make it 10am and Sam's usual delivery time. At ten to ten, Jeana was always outside; tending the garden, putting something in the car, sweeping the path - anything that gave

her an excuse to see her postman. Over these last six months, since Jeana had first answer the door to the blond haired beauty, she had become more flirtatious. At their first meeting Jeana had opened the door in her five-year-old nighty, covered in coffee stains and Pringles and cramming a peanut butter sandwich down tripled-chinned neck. At the time, the only word she'd managed to spray his way was 'thanks.'

Now, Jeana spent nearly an hour getting ready. She had new clothes, which had to come from the catalogue. Jim wasn't keen on her working, and the housekeeping money he gave her wasn't enough to buy anything nice. And she had moved far beyond one word conversations, now they would talk for ten minutes or more, their conversation becoming more flirtatious by the day.

'One more stone to go, and you're mine.' She said to the image of Sam she had conjured up in her head. Jeana didn't worry that Jim might hear, she knew that the six pints, an easy night for her husband, would render him unconscious till the alarm screamed for his attention at six.

'I'm going out with the lads straight from work tonight, it's Dave's birthday.' Jim said has he chucked down his fourth Weetabix.

‘Are you not coming home first?’ Jeana wasn’t sure why she had asked, knowing that it would just get a snapped reply. Maybe it was because she now faced eighteen hours in the house by herself. Jim didn’t like her going out during the day, or at least over the years, he had been aggressive towards her friends, or constantly questioning her actions that now, she spent the days alone. Well not alone, she had her soaps, her Prozac and her daily meetings with Sam.

‘God love, I only get two nights out a week, and it’s Dave’s birthday, I can’t believe you mind.’

Two nights out from week my slimmed down arse, Jeana thought. That was two nights out a week, where he got so drunk he couldn’t get the key in the door. He had plenty of other nights out too, the snooker club, his poker night. But because he was usually in by eleven, he didn’t count that as time away. Well when the postman is delivering more than his letters, I’ll have the last laugh.

‘Sorry darling, of course you should go straight from work – give Dave my best wishes.’

By 7am Jim was out of the house, sent on his way with a packed lunch and a peck on his chubby, vein encrusted cheek.

By 8am Jeana had cleaned through the house. This wasn't a hardship because sadly she had married for looks. Like her mother had said 'he won't amount to anything.' And she had been right. Because even though Jim harped on about being a supervisor now at the local sandwich factory, this only accounted for an extra 10p an hour.

Jeana checked the clock; she had an hour now to watch one of her soaps she had recorded last night, while Jim was watching the football. She could then take one of her pills which would relax her while she was showering and getting ready for Sam's arrival around ten.

'You're late this morning.' Jeana said as she rested her sweeping brush against the fence. She had been sweeping the path for the last thirty minutes and had started to get looks from the neighbours.

'Tell me about it. I had to call and get some travel money, and the queue in there was shocking.' Sam took his postbag off his shoulder and placed it on the floor. Jeana took this as a good sign that he was going to talk for a while, though she was a little disconcerted about why he needed travel money.

'Are you going away?'

‘Yeah, the girlfriend found a cheap deal on the internet and wants to get away for a week. So we’re off next week.’

Bitch, Jeana thought, she hated it when he mentioned his girlfriend, though she thinks they not suited. From what she had managed to find out, she was an up coming solicitor, and she got the impression that Sam’s girlfriend wasn’t too keen on him staying a postman forever.

‘Are you going anywhere nice?’ Jeana did her best to smile, she didn’t want to seem inappropriate, or crazy, but she did want to beam. She knew her smile lit up her face, and at nearly 30 years his senior, Jeana knew she had to appear as youthful as possible.

‘The girlfriend thinks it’s nice.’ As he spoke, he moved to lean against the wall. Resting both elbows behind him pulled his shirt tight against his chest, and allowed Jeana to get a better look at her prize.

‘Are you not so sure?’ Jeana asked, doing what she could to lay the groundwork for more flirtatious comments.

‘Well, her idea of a good holiday is looking round museums and visiting galleries.’

‘And you’d rather be stripped off on a beach?’ Jeana was glad that she had chosen to wear a jacket this morning as the thought of Sam in a pair of Speedo’s had made her nipples erect.

Sam smiled, which filled his face with a mischievous look, which seemed suitable as he replied:

‘Well, you know, I do a lot of exercise in my job, it keeps me pretty fit, and it’s nice to show that off once in a while.’

‘I bet, and I bet you look great in a pair of Speedo’s?’ A month ago, comments like this would have mortified Jeana. But the goal was set, she wanted Sam and if that meant being a little risqué with her comments than so be it.

Sam laughed, his tanned skin and natural blond hair shone in the early summer sunshine.

‘Well, what can I say, if you have what it takes to fill out a pair of Speedo’s it’s only right that you wear them.’

Both of them were laughing now, then without thinking Jeana said ‘now that’s a sight I wouldn’t mind seeing.’

Damn she thought, I’ve gone too far, he’s surely offended. He wasn’t. His reply was quick, and gave the impression he

had been waiting for an opportunity like this.

‘Well, given how fit you’re looking today, may be I’ll give you a private viewing when I get back. It’ll be nice to get the opinion of an experienced woman – you can tell me if I have what it takes to pull them off.’

Sam’s words made her moist. She wanted to drag him inside and pull his pants off her and now. His words had left her blank, her mind too full of lustful thoughts.

Sensing her embarrassment Sam said ‘don’t you worry I’ll be gentle with you.’ Before Jeana could regain her composure and reply, one of her neighbours arrived back home and called over to Sam to see if there was any mail for them.

Before he left, he winked at Jeana, and said a simple ‘see you in two weeks.’

That night as Jim thumbed to find his shrivelled penis, Jeana thought about Sam. As Jim bashed against her, his fat surrounding her like a jelly coated coffin, she dreamed about what it was going to feel like to have Sam’s young hard flesh pressed against her. And as Jim gave neared having a heart attack as he came, Jeana dreamed of a life far from this place, somewhere with a beach, so she could admire Sam

in his Speedo's all-day long.

The two weeks soon past. Jeana made it to thirty minutes on the bike. At last managed to squeeze into a size twelve, and by some minor miracle, well mostly just not eating, she dropped another stone.

She had even maxed out her credit at the catalogue, buying new underwear, and a stunning little black dress.

At ten to ten, Jeana stood at the front door looking out the window. The dress didn't lead itself to any excuse that would allow her to venture outside. But she didn't need too. Yesterday, she had posted a parcel that needed a signature, so Sam had to knock on the door making there no way she could miss him.

'NO!' Jeana said as she noticed a postwoman walking towards her door.

Before the postwoman had reached to door, Jeana opened it and demanded.

'Where's Sam, he's due back today?'

Jeana's stark words stopped the young postwoman in her tracks. It was clear she didn't know how to answer. Jeana wasn't impressed, the dress had cost over £300 and she needed Sam to see it.

'Well?' Jeana said, her tone causing the postwoman to take a step back.

'Err, well, he did arrive back.' The woman paused, as if a piece from a puzzle had fallen into place.

'And?' Jeana demanded.

'Err. Well.'

'Come on, spit it out.' Jeana said. Again the woman took a step back, this time it looked like she was preparing to run.

'Well, I'm not sure why, but Sam asked for a transfer to another route.'

Jeana couldn't reply, she had no words; instead she stepped back into the house and slammed the door. The postwoman left, deciding the parcel could wait for another day.

Jeana cried. She said on her stairs and let her heart wale.

An hour later, she stood up, phone the doctors surgery, and ordered a repeat prescription of Prozac.

Rochelle and Dave

A wave of excitement rushed through the mass of people in the waiting crowd as, at 10:02 am, the doors finally opened on the UK's premier, and only, Crime and Punishment Expo! The crowd resembled penguins in the zoo at feeding time; bobbing heads, bodies clambering forward, arms discreetly and not so discreetly doing what they could to get their owner nearer to the arena's doors.

Dave and Rochelle didn't have to rush; they had been here hours, and when the security guard finally pulled open the huge glass doors, they were the first in line. Even when they stepped inside Birmingham's cavernous National Arena, the pair took it easy. They had come here for one thing, and one thing only, to see Jessica Fletcher, and she wasn't due to arrive until 2 pm.

'Can we go and eat now?' Rochelle whined. The nineteen-year old's distinctive northern accent distorted her words so when she said 'go' it sounded as if the word had extra 'o's and her 'now' had been pronounced 'narr', with the final 'r' being dragged out for several seconds to emphasise her need for food. She had taken Dave by the arm and, using her considerable bulk, she'd ushered her similarly-proportioned boyfriend through the mass of cooing

fans and off into a safe corner.

‘Can we just work out where in the arena she will be first? It won’t take a minute.’ On the walls around the entrance hall were a variety of posters advertising the prestigious guests who were signing autographs that day. Dave’s gaze leapt from one to the next, trying to find his heroine.

‘But we’ve been queuing for hours!’ Rochelle said, this time she managed to sound like a spoilt ten-year-old child.

‘Yeah, ‘Elle, but your mother made you a whopping breakfast before we left, and I got you a burger to eat in queue!’

Rochelle wanted to whine further, so what if her mother had made her beans on toast for breakfast? And, of course, there were the cheese and ham sandwiches she had been packed off with, and already finished on the train – while Dave had been away in the loo. And so what if she’d had a burger? She was soooo hungry! Still, sensing this was a losing battle she said, ‘fine, yeah, anyway, let’s go see what time ‘Mrs, “everyone dies the moment I enter the room” is on.’

‘It is what we’re here for,’ Dave replied. He was getting increasingly annoyed that he couldn’t find any ‘Murder, She

Wrote' posters, surely given that Jessica Fletcher was the star of this murder mystery extravaganza, the show's poster should be everywhere.

'It might be what you're here for! It's you who loves that old show. Me, I only came for the day out. Plus, it was fun getting my dad up at stupid-o'clock to drive us to the train station this morning.' Seeming to speak without the need to take a breath, Rochelle dropped her tone into something deep and gravelly, mimicking her father's, and said, 'I don't know why you have to go all way 't Birmingham, 'Elle', there's nowt there you can't get here!'

'Except Jessica Fletcher of course; you can't find her in our scrod- bucket of a town!' Dave snapped, his annoyance at not being able to find any posters was reaching the boil.

'Where the fuck are the posters? I don't understand, surely, she's the star?' Dave began pointing at the various posters and said, 'look, there's that no-name from CSI and the one who died five seasons ago in, oh God, what's the name of that stupid show?'

'Crime and Punishment,' Rochelle offered her voice quieter now. Partly because most of the other attendees had gathered up timetables and maps, and made their way out of the entrance hall, and partly because she had started to feel nauseated. She knew that if she didn't get to the toilet

soon, she would lose her breakfast, the sandwiches and that burger. And if that happened she really would feel hungry!

‘That’s the one, “Crime and Punishment”, and look, they’ve even got people from “The Bill”. Who wants to see them? It’s only watched by old grannies – where is she?’ Dave demanded; a question that gave Rochelle a means of escape.

‘I tell you what darlin’, why don’t you go and ask someone while I nip off to the loo?’ Dave liked that idea; he nodded an ok and then stalked off to find out what the hell was going on.

In the toilet cubical, Rochelle fought to get her dark blue leggings down past her knees. The lycra cut into the acres of fat on her thighs and gave the impression of string tied around bags full of congealed yoghurt. But with little choice, rather than sitting down, she dropping to her newly bared knees, pulled back her streaked blond hair and with retch after retch she said a second ‘hello’ to the partially digested contents of her stomach.

‘I can’t keep this up,’ she said to the empty bathroom once she had finished. After wiping away the remnants of vomit from around her mouth, swilling to get rid of any remaining chunks in her teeth and the smell, she then splashed her face with water and made her way back out into the

entrance hall.

Dave greeted her return; his face bright, his demeanour that of an excited puppy. 'There's no need to worry, follow me.' Rochelle did, though she wasn't worried – not about this at least – in fact, she kind of hoped the "Murder, She Wrote" woman wouldn't show up, then they could go off into the city centre and do some shopping.

'Look, see...,' Dave said as he dragged her out of the entrance and into the main hall.

Dave had dressed up for their trip; he had broken out his best trousers. But as an apprentice bricklayer, in a tiny Yorkshire town to many Dave was very much a stereotype. His 'best' trousers only saw the outside of their drawer once or twice a year – mainly Christmas and Easter, or for the odd wedding that might come along. And this particular pair of trousers was now a few years old and judging by the fatty overhang, they had been bought when Dave was still a size-38 waist.

Originally, Dave's mother had laid out a crisp white shirt for him to wear with the black trousers, though it had quickly become clear that he would need to leave the trousers' top button undone and wear a belt to keep them up – which put pay to a tucked-in shirt. So, in the end, he had gone with his favourite green polo shirt. Which though it looked smart, it

barely covered the bottom of his belly, which protruded out like a hairy beach-ball, and from the side the shirt made him look like a large, and probably dull sounding, bell.

The main hall was a vast square cavern. Its domed roof was made out of diamond-shaped pieces of frosted glass, which made it seem like everyone was standing on the inside of a fly's eye. Lining the outside of the square hall were hundreds of vendors: comics, action figures, books, puzzles, collectors' cards, posters – a fan's wet dream.

On the inside of the square, there was a second tier of stalls, these formed a broken circle; effectively two semicircles, again containing stalls, with two parallel rows running down the centre of the hall, breaking up the circle. On the far wall, opposite the entrance, there was a long podium above which posters of the attending stars had been placed. From where they were standing it was hard to make out any of the other star's faces. Still, Dave wasn't concerned about anyone other than the woman who was going to take centre stage. And her poster was clear enough, a huge, ten times' life-size head shot, dominated the hall. It looked down on proceedings like Zeus watching over ancient Greece.

'Wow! Could they have got her head any bigger? Surely they could've shown her body too? That thing's frightening!' Rochelle said; she was trying to scan the room for any sign of an eatery, but with little success as her eyes kept being

drawn back to the iconic figure holding court in the hall.

‘How perfect is that? Right up there where she deserves to be!’ Dave said, his face a picture of star-struck awe. Oblivious to the grunts, moans and the small scene made by a woman with a pushchair, Dave stood right in the middle of the main thoroughfare. His 6’4 frame held enough fat to keep a chip shop in business for a week and, as he’d chosen to wear clothes just slightly too small, he looked like a skinny man with bags of potato’s strapped to all sides. To the people trying to pass him in the centre of the pathway, his bulk was like trying to pass a dump truck on a single-lane highway.

‘I tell you what she deserves – hanging! If a woman like that had been around a hundred years ago she would have been burned as a witch – so many dead people – she’s like flies round shit to a dead body!’

Dave looked down from the poster and said, ‘crude and nasty. That’s my girl, always there with a heartfelt word! Now shut up for a minute and let’s get a closer look.’ Then noticing that she was about to protest, he added ‘once we’ve gotten closer, we can go and get some food.’

That did the trick, and a rosy smile broke across Rochelle’s perpetually sulky face – a smile that didn’t last sadly as two steps further into the hall and a man accidentally bumped

'Elle's' shoulder.

'Watch where you're going, geek!' Rochelle snapped, her round pudgy face screwing up, giving it the impression of an overly ripe apple. The man apologised, though his tiny frame had suffered far worse from the impact than Rochelle's.

That impact was the first of many. The hall was heaving, though Rochelle continued to get bumped into because she refused to give way. And like a baby rhino she barged her way down the central runway, leaving bruised shoulders in her wake.

'I don't see why you need a closer look – that thing must be twenty feet tall!' Rochelle said as they approached the podium.

'I told you before, whine-a-lot, this is what we came for. I've been saving months for this – I said you didn't have to come along – you insisted.' This trip had cost him more than a week's wage; he wanted to enjoy it. Since boyhood, he had loved 'Murder, She Wrote.' As a young child, he'd sat in his Nan's arms and listened to her do her best to guess who'd done it. His Nan's cunning tactic was to work her way through every character, declaring they were the one. She would then sleep her way through the middle section, and when she woke, and the murderer was revealed, she could legitimately claim that she was right all along.

Dave missed his Nan; she had passed away two years ago now. His Nan had been at the centre of his upbringing; always there when he had needed her, a place to run when life got too difficult – which with alcoholic and often abusive parents, it often had. He missed her huge Sunday dinners, the house's roaring coal fire – red face, cold back – and the way she made tea in a pot and left it to stew so long that you could almost stand a spoon up in it when it was poured.

As Dave looked up into the face of Jessica Fletcher, her kindly eyes watching over him, and the rest of the hall – keeping an eye out for any clues the incompetent police department were sure to have missed – he felt safe again.

He felt free of the worries that spawned with the onset of adulthood. 'You're twenty now, it's about time you thought about doing the honourable thing with that girlfriend of yours – not wasting money gallivanting halfway across the country to see some TV woman!' These had been his dad's words when he had told him he couldn't do any overtime in the family building firm, as he needed the Saturday off to see his childhood idol.

In his boyhood, playing in the garden at his Nan's the world had offered so much promise. But now, with her gone, and 'real life' upon him, he felt lost.

Somewhere in the periphery, he could hear Rochelle moaning – she did nothing but – but he managed to blank her out as he looked at that warming face. Five years they had been together, met at school, in detention. Dave had got a week for faking letters to get him out of P.E., and Rochelle had thrown another girl out of a window – it had only been from the first floor, which is why she had received a week's detention rather than getting expelled or a prison sentence. By the end of the week, Rochelle was the first, and still, the only girl he'd had sex with – he was her fifth boy.

Rochelle wanted to get married – their names were already on the list for a council house – have babies, watch TV all day long and not have to work. Dave guessed at this last part, but if Rochelle's three older sisters were any indication, this is what the future would hold.

Dave wanted to travel, 'your mind is like a balloon,' his Nan had told him once, 'it might be ok and pretty the way it comes out of the packet, but it doesn't reach its full glory until it's filled. And travel is to your mind as air is to the balloon.' She had also told him that it was bad luck to cut your nails on a Friday and Sunday, that children over two shouldn't have dummies and you should never trust anyone the colour of night. This last, racist, remark, he had put down to his Nan's advancing years, rather than any actual malice.

Marriage would not allow him to travel, or at least marriage to Rochelle wouldn't – not unless he went first and left her a trail of cake to follow. Plus, there was the another small matter of the new trainee at work – Gavin – shy, handsome, Gavin. This wasn't the time, Dave thought, though he knew he had to make time with Rochelle soon for what he knew would be a difficult conversation – still, not now. Dave, pulling his gaze away from the poster, turned back to Rochelle who was wittering:

'...I never understood what people saw in that show, some old woman roaming the countryside solving murders – stupid. Just think how many people's lives they'd have saved if they'd locked her up at the end of the first episode!'

'Wow, your mouth never stops working does it?' Dave said, but Rochelle was on a roll.

'The police would never let some old granny near a crime scene: "Excuse me Mr Policemen, I've written some murder books, could I please have a look around? I might tamper with some evidence, spot a clue you've missed and give a knowing look to the camera, but I promise to be quick", it's all bollocks.'

Several people from the surrounding stalls were glaring at Rochelle's rant. Dave noticed them, but thankfully Rochelle hadn't and before she could, and cause an even bigger

scene, he ushered her off to the food hall.

‘You could go shopping you know? It’s not that far into the city centre from here.’ Dave offered, after ordering two plates of chips and a couple of burgers.

‘But I don’t want to go on my own, can’t you come?’ Rochelle replied, in her customary whining tone. Taking their completed orders they worked their way through the throng of people who, though it was still before 11 am, had decided they were in need of fast-food. Rochelle raced a much smaller woman to a newly vacated seat in the window – she didn’t win, but that didn’t stop ‘Elle took the table’s other seat and glared at the women until scurried away.

‘So, can we go shopping?’ Rochelle asked again, Dave having failed to answer her the first time round.

‘You can, I’m not! You know how much I’ve been looking forward to coming here – I don’t know why you have to ruin it.’

‘Oh don’t start that again, you always say I ruin stuff – I’m sick of you treating me like shit.’ Rochelle took a bite of her burger and chewed. The mushy slopping sound she made with each over enthusiastic chomp, grated on Dave’s already fried nerves.

‘How do I treat you like shit? I spend all my money on you, and what I don’t, I have to save up cos you want to buy “pretty things” for our flat. That’s if the council ever give us one, which I’m sure they won’t given we’re bound to be at the bottom of the list!’

This was how it always started, for the last year now; they had not been able to spend more than a few hours in each other’s company before the arguments set in. Rochelle didn’t understand why all her friends were either married or at least living with their boyfriends, while she was still with her parents. At this rate, she’d be stuck working, part-time, in ‘Superdrug’ for the rest of her life!

Dave knew what he wanted, to travel, and to work out why he had feelings for Gavin – sweet, handsome Gavin – and the last thing he wanted to do was get married.

Rochelle finished stuffing her burger into her mouth and then added a couple of chips. Dave could see from the look in her eye that she was stalling for a second to give herself time to think of a suitable response. Before she had fully emptied her mouth, her reply came to her, Dave braced himself and as her first words shot from her mouth, so did small lumps of the burger.

‘Well, I’m sure we won’t be on the bottom of the list for long; at least not in seven or eight months.’ Rochelle, as subtle as an Eastenders plot line – her favourite soap.

‘What?’ Dave snapped, though he had heard her clear enough.

‘I’m pregnant! In a couple of months, we’ll be at the top of that stupid housing list!’ Rochelle’s voice raised as she announced the news, it was as if she had been waiting for the right moment to tell him, and now that she’d found it, she felt that everyone should be in on her secret.

‘How the hell can you be pregnant?’ Dave asked, wiping a small lump of chip off his cheek.

‘Shit Dave, I know you’re a bit slow at times, but I thought you’d at least know where babies come from!’ At her sarcasm Rochelle looked around to see if anyone was listening in, she wanted someone to collude with, have someone appreciate her superior wit. No one was interested and anyone who was, quickly looked back to whatever action figure, or comic they’d bought, not daring to catch her eye – a storm was coming.

‘Yeah, you smart bitch, I know perfectly well where babies come from – I mean, I thought you were on the pill?’ Dave

was reacting rather than reasoning. He couldn't think. She couldn't be pregnant. How could he have a child with her? He didn't love her, wasn't sure he ever had, he wasn't even sure he could ever love a woman.

'Well you know I don't take it all the time – it gives me stomach ache.' Rochelle had always seen Dave as a fish caught at the end of a line, over the years she had done what she could to reel him in. She'd gone from a size 28 to a size 18 and back up again, but it hadn't made a difference. But now, she felt like she had the reel in her hand and she was bringing home her catch.

'I never knew that you've never told me that! Surely if you weren't taking it, we should've been using something else.' Dave felt like he had been dumped in a giant oven-top kettle. At the start of the day he had felt warm and excited, just the odd bubble here and there as he'd argued with his dad about him going today. But then the boil started, 'Elle's whining, her need to be fed continually, like a baby walrus, and now this. Now the kettle boiled away, the bubbles all around bashing him against the sides. And Rochelle's voice was like the screeching whistle announcing the kettle was about to explode!

Slamming her fist on the table Rachelle snapped: 'Like you'd ever wear a condom, and anyway, it's not like we have sex that often – you're always too fucking tired. So I thought

we'd be all right! And you don't even sound like you want this baby?'

Before he gave himself enough time to think through his reply, Dave just sort of screamed, 'I don't!' And if that wasn't enough to wipe the smug look off of Elle's face, he added 'why the hell would I want a child, I'm twenty, I don't want to settle down, plus there's Gavin!'

Rochelle's mouth dropped open. In there, Dave could see half masticated lumps of chips and burger clinging to her filling encrusted teeth. 'What the fuck do you mean "plus there's Gavin"? Who the shitting hell is Gavin?', then as if a distant memory had hit her in the head with a spade, Rochelle's face contorted as she spat out, 'are you talking about that manorexic freak at your work – don't tell me you have a thing for him! What are you, some kind of fucking queer?'

Dave wasn't sure what he was, he'd been trying not to think about it, but he couldn't have Gavin talked about that way.

'He's not a freak, and if manorexic means skinny then not everyone wants to be the size of a blimp you know!' Dave's voice had risen to the same level as Rochelle, and he knew that more and more heads had turned their way. He looked for the door, looked for an escape route – but all the time in the back of his mind was the reason why he had come here

– to see Jessica Fetcher – and he could not go without meeting her. Still, he knew what was coming and it wasn't going to be pretty.

'How the fuck can a man like you be a homo? You're a sodding bricklayer for Christ's sake!' Rochelle's tongue was sharp and doing its best to draw blood.

'What's that got to do with anything?' Dave asked, hoping that his newly lowered voice would help to lower Rochelle's. But it didn't, as she wasn't listening – her words just kept on flowing.

'And look at you, poofs aren't meant to be fit, the only thing you fit into these days is a bin bag, and you're growing too fat for that. It's like you're growing fat on your fat!'

Dave wanted to retaliate, call her a fat cow but less useful as she couldn't even produce milk. But he knew it wouldn't help, and in fact, very soon she would be able. What he really wanted now was for her to leave him, storm out, and then he could see his idol and face whatever trouble she will cause another time.

'Look, I'm not saying I'm a poof, or that I won't take care of you and the baby, it's just I've been having feelings for this guy at work.' Dave said, trying to build an apology into his

tone – it didn't work.

'Do you think you're getting your dirty homo hands near this baby?' She asked, holding her stomach, 'there's no way I'm having you touch the little thing after you've been sticking your cock up God knows whose arse – sick! Wait till your dad finds out!' As full of venom as Rochelle's words were, somewhere inside her, she felt a sense of relief. All she wanted out of life was to sit and watch talk shows all day long, and at night settle down and watch an evening of soaps. She knew, like her sisters, that she could palm her kid off on her mother. And now it looked like she'd be able to get Dave to pay for it all, without actually having to make any of the compromises that would surely come with living together.

'You can't tell m'dad. Shit he'd kill me!' When Dave had mentioned Gavin, he had seen his revelation as a step forward, a way of moving towards actually telling Gavin that he had feelings for him, but that's as far as he'd thought it through. His life would be over if his dad found out, he was sure to tell the lads at work and then if he wasn't in a living hell already, he soon would be.

'Well, you should have thought about that before you started bumming around!' Rochelle looked longingly at her empty plate. Her stomach was still aching for more – well she was eating for two – and her hunger wasn't helping her mood.

'I haven't been bumming around, I didn't even know I had a thing for guys before Gavin started working, and that's only a couple of months ago.'

Rochelle's face screwed up still further until it took on the features of a fire-damaged Spitting Image mask, 'you have a "thing for guys"? That makes me feel physically sick. What's your mother going to say down church on Sunday, "I'm sorry Vicar, my son won't be coming today he's decided he likes cock!" It's a sin you know!'

Dave felt the heat under the kettle, the flame had been turned back on and the temperature rise started to make him forget he was in a packed cafeteria, surrounded by people all staring at them intently.

'It's only a sin if you believe in all that bollocks and quite frankly any fool who believes in a man sat on a cloud shouldn't be listened to anyway. Plus, I haven't been to church in years!'

'Well maybe that's the problem, if you had, you might have realised that what you are isn't normal, it's sick, and whether you believe it or not you're going to burn in hell.'

And the kettle boiled.

‘Listen here you rancid, hog. Like you’re ever going to get a place in heaven, apart from the fact you’re gunner be an unmarried mother – a big fucking no-no – you’ve had more pricks in you than a pin cushion. And I don’t think God lets whores in heaven!’ The look on Rochelle’s face told him he’d gone too far, her face and the shocked expressions on everyone around them. This included the counter staff on the other side of the room who had stopped serving to listen.

Without thinking Rochelle whipped her arm up and smashed her palm across Dave’s face. The slap hit him like a horrific storm crashing waves against the rocks. The violent movement forced Rochelle’s enormous thighs into the underside of the table which sent their empty plates tumbling to the floor. The white crockery shattered, the noise of which echoed around the now whisper quiet cafeteria. And as the plates broke so did Rochelle. Tears vented forth and as she got to her feet and tried to speak, she could manage nothing but a blubber.

Everyone had stopped eating, they were waiting for Rochelle’s next move and she knew she only had two real choices – cause an even greater scene or save her dignity and run for the door.

She wiped her face, sucked back the tears and never one to let an audience down she bellowed, ‘YOU SICK. FUCKING. QUEER. I CAN’T BELIEVE I LET THAT NASTY LITTLE

KNOB OF YOURS INSIDE ME WHEN ALL YOU REALLY WANTED WAS TO STAB SOME FUDGE! WELL, YOU'LL REGRET THE DAY YOU EVER MET ME, I PROMISE YOU THAT!' Rochelle's face shone red, her eyes demented and then with one last lurch forward, sufficient enough to make Dave think she was going to hit him again, she thundered from the room.

Of course Dave was already regretting the day he met her. And now, as a hundred eyes rested on him, all desperate, he was sure, to see him break into tears, too. He calmly got up from his seat, looked around for a different exit – well away from Rochelle – and then after finding one, he left the room. All the time he kept his head held high and his hand away from the tormenting pain that throbbed from the strike on his cheek.

Once he'd made his escape, he found the nearest toilet, locked himself in a cubical and cried. He cried, cried, and then cried some more. His tears were for his lost childhood, his Nan and how he knew his world was going to change forever. He knew that by the time he made it back home that everyone would know he was gay, even if he wasn't a hundred percent sure himself. Rochelle would make sure his entire world knew what an evil person he was; a pariah of the highest order.

Dave felt like his tears would never stop, but then this was the first time they had ever been allowed to start. At the death of his Nan, his father had told him to 'suck it up, men in our family don't cry.' And he hadn't, he'd been strong, done the manly thing. And when he'd realised what the strange feeling was whenever Gavin spoke to him, feelings he knew he'd been capable of for many years, he didn't cave in, even though he knew how much they could potentially change his life.

But now, sat here, in the dank-smelling toilet, reading messages off the wall written by the rainbow-loving brigade he was soon to join, he had no choice but surrender.

And he was going to be a dad, a realisation that sent another stream of tears rolling down his cheeks. He didn't know what to do, he wanted to sit here forever, to die here.

Then in the background he heard the muffled sound of a PA system. The words 'Murder, She Wrote' – he listened intently, and though the words weren't entirely clear he managed to make out, 'starting early,' 'question time', and 'five minutes' – enough words to stem the flow of tears.

'Shit, shit, shit, must look a mess', Dave said to the empty cubical. New baby, evil girlfriend and home-life ruined or not, Dave thought, there's no way he was going to miss what he'd come here for.

After two minutes in front of the bathroom's mirror, he'd managed to reduce the puffiness from around his eyes. At least now he didn't look like a psycho fan who'd been crying at the thought of seeing his idol. The crimson hand print on his left cheek was another matter. He cupped cold water to it in a vain attempt to bring down the bruising but like his battered ego, it was here to stay. Still, no matter, Jessica Fletcher awaits.

Back in the main hall, ten rows of chairs, 25 chairs per row, had been set up facing the central, spotlit podium. By the time Dave arrived, most of the chairs were filled. Fortunately, they had filled from the front backwards, which allowed him to sit where he'd already intended, at the far back corner. He knew people were going to stare – he was the queer who'd got his girlfriend pregnant – but he could at least force people to have to turn around if they were going to do that.

As he took his seat a few disapproving eyes caught his, but they soon looked away as a celebritard from a local radio station spent several minutes running through upcoming star's credentials.

Dave watched as his beloved idol made it to the stage. She looked older than when he'd last seen her on small screen. But that just added to her Grandmotherly charm. Her smile

was warm and bright and the whole audience erupted as she said her first hello. Dave watched in mouth-open awe as the actress breezed through question after question. She was witty and smart and even when the most die hard 'Murder, She Wrote' fan asked an obscure question relating to a confused plotline years before, she didn't falter.

To Dave, the question and answer session felt like a dream; each word that flowed from her lips seemed like a lullaby drifting on the wind. Her answers soothed him and her warmth and compassion made the events of the day vanish into the ether.

But soon enough it was over, Dave heard the compere say, 'that's about it folks, there's just enough time for one last question' and as an action without thought, Dave shot his hand into the air, 'you sir, you at the back'.

'Shit, shit, the bouncy compere's talking to me,' Dave said under his breath when he realised what he'd done.

'Come on son, don't be shy, come on, stand up, we can hardly see you back there – what's your question.' Dave looked at the compere's eager face and did as he was requested.

'Oh, you have been in the wars, you poor dear,' Dave's idol said as he got to his feet.

'I'm sure I'll be ok,' Dave muttered, as he reddened at the kind words.

'I'm sure you will, now what's your question?' the compere asked, doing his best, and his job, to keep proceedings to time.

Dave wasn't sure what his question was, he had so many, and so he just took a deep breath and let the words flow from him.

'Well Mrs Fletcher,' the audience laughed at the use of the actress's screen name, but his idol just smiled and nodded for him to continue, 'over the many years the show has been running, you must have met and worked with hundreds of people. I was just wondering, either on the show or off, what is the best piece of advice you've been given.'

'Well done kid, what a great question to end the proceedings with,' the compere said, seeming genuinely pleased that Dave had managed to sum up such a good, almost rehearsed, question.

‘That is a good question,’ the actress agreed, then looking up for a second as if to retrieve some gem of knowledge locked away in the deepest part of her mind, she continued ‘year’s ago on the show, I think in the very first season, there’s an episode where I’m debating going travelling, I’d been invited on a book tour but it meant leaving Cabot Cove.’

Dave liked that his idol was talking in the first person, and hadn’t bothered to say ‘my character’ because as he saw it, the woman in front of him was Jessica Fletcher.

‘I remember that there was a heartfelt moment with an old friend – a dear woman who’s long passed now. We were sat in front of a roaring fire – faces warm, backs cold – having a nice cup of tea and she told me a little thing about a balloon. She said our minds were like balloons, they look ok out of the packet, but only through travel do they expand to their full glory.’

At her words fireworks seemed to explode inside Dave’s head. The idea that this wonderful lady would give him the same advice that he’d been given from his Nan was sheer heaven. And of course he didn’t consider for a second that his Nan many have actually got her quote from the TV show, why would he, in his eyes his Nan was perfect, and so too was the wonderful Jessica Fletcher.

The crowd again erupted in applause as the star stood up, took a bow and was then ushered into another room where she was signing autographs.

Dave debated joining the queue for an autograph but he decided that his encounter had been perfect and he didn't want to ruin it if perhaps she only gave him a passing 'hello'. Plus, he'd already bought a signed photo off of Ebay and the compere had said that signings would be limited to the first one hundred people due to time constraints. And by the time Dave had snapped himself out of his delirium there was easily more than that in the queue.

Leaving the arena he felt renewed. His idol's words filled him with hope. The memories they invoked warmed his heart, and gave him the strength to tattle whatever his homecoming would throw at him.

Out in the fresh air, Dave made his way over to the train station but, as he approached, his eyes met Rochelle's. She was a hundred yards in front of him, a king-size Mars bar in one hand a bottle of full-fat Coke in the other. Her face was a mess of tears and smeared makeup; she looked pitiful and very much alone.

He wanted to run off, catch another train, but he knew he would have to face his fate at some point so it might as well be now.

Walking over to his ex-girlfriend, Dave took the empty seat at her side. He half expected Rochelle to move away, or worse, start screaming again. But she did neither. Instead she forced the rest of the Mars bar into her already full mouth, chewed, swallowed, swilled around some Coke, and when it was gone she said, 'I'll be a laughing stock.' Her words were quiet, almost a whimper.

'What do you mean?' Dave asked, matching her voice's level.

'Think about it, people might have sympathy to start with, but soon enough people are gunner say that I turned you queer. Or worse, they're going to say that the thought of you having my baby turned you gay.' Dave wanted to disagree, but the 'people' she was talking about, 'Elle's friends and family, her sisters in particular, could be real bitches. They already mocked her for being unable to 'land her man', so they'd have a field day with all of this.

Dave saw his chance; part of him wanted to reassure his simpering ex, but it was clear her pain could work in his favour.

'What a nightmare that'd be, you know how nasty your sisters can get at times, they'd never leave you alone.' Dave's words caused a tear to run down Rochelle's face. He

knew she'd had enough; it was time for him to be the hero.

'Of course we don't have to split up, you know?' Dave said, offering her a gentle smile.

'We don't? But you're a poof?' Though Rochelle offered up a valid point, she was taking the bait.

'Yeah, but only you and me know that. We don't have to tell anyone and, given you're having my baby, that changes things a little. Not that we have to stay together forever. Not long after the baby's born I'll be a qualified bricklayer and there's really good money working aboard these days.'

'You'd go away,' noting Rochelle's reservation, Dave quickly continued.

'I would, but think about it, I'd be in a really good job, earning good money – money that I can send back to you and the bairn. You could lead the life you want, I could do what I wanted and, after a certain time, you could say that you dumped me because you wanted a man at home – win, win.'

'But surely people will find out you're a homo eventually, and what about this Gavin lad?' It was clear that Rochelle liked the idea, her face had brightened, she was gulping rather than just swilling her drink and she was now just clearing up

some loose ends.

‘Well if they ever do find out, and let’s face it, I’m not about to rush and tell my family or anyone else for that matter, then that’ll be years from now, and well after we’ve split up. I could always claim that I couldn’t find another girl to match up to you, so I turned to guys.’ Both parties were getting into the idea; it appeared to be an acceptable solution for both.

‘And what about this Gavin, can you keep your hands off him?’ ‘Elle asked, the last thing she needed sorted.

‘Well, firstly, I’m sure he’s straight, and secondly someone like me would never be able to pull a guy like that,’ Rochelle’s eyebrows raised at the idea of her huge, manly, bricklayer boyfriend talking about another guy. But she knew it was something she was going to have to get used to if their plan was to work. And she wanted it to work; it meant money for nothing, and all the chat shows she could watch.

‘And even if those first two things weren’t enough, the idea that I’d act on anything under my dad’s nose is just crazy, he’d string me up!’ Dave added, of course if Gavin did turn out to be gay, and a ‘chubby chaser’ at that, then what his dad or the rest of the world thought wouldn’t matter, and this new, ill-conceived plan wouldn’t stand in the way of his happiness either. But this latter eventuality was unlikely and, as he’d been hiding his sexuality well enough for the last

twenty years, he thought that there was a good chance he could manage it for another year or so. Then he'd be off, filling his balloon and the tiny minds of his mining town would be long behind him.

Dave looked into Rochelle's bloodshot eyes and smiled, she returned the gesture and the plan was set.

'That's quite a bruise you've got there, we'll have to come up with a good story for it on the train home.' Rochelle said, the sense of quiet satisfaction could just about be heard in her tone.

'I'm sure we'll think of something.' Dave answered.

'So how was she, the "Murder, She Wrote" woman?' 'Elle asked as the train pulled into the station.

'Fantastic!' Dave said as they walked hand-in-hand for the train.

And, as they stepped into the carriage, Rochelle looked back at the arena and couldn't help but ask, 'has anyone died in there yet?'

Steam Room

Wow it's hot in here; which is probably an odd thing to say given that this is a steam-room. Still, it's rare to actually have it this steamy. I've had words in the past with the caretaker about the steam. He said that it's not meant to be so hot and steamy in here that it strips your skin. I told him, I can generate more steam in my bathroom. To which he replied that he was surprised it wasn't always steamier in here given how much hot air I produced complaining. Which is just rude! Still, he's dead now. At least dead to me.

Where was I? Oh yes, the steam. You need it in here; I find it far too awkward when I can see other people. Especially if it's someone I've had a go at in the swimming pool. I am prone to shouting. I have medication for it but I find it works better if I don't take it. My doctor said that makes no sense, but then what would he know? The last time I went he looked my symptoms up on The Google; which proved rather embarrassing for the both of us given the net's desire to flash naked pictures across the screen at every given opportunity.

Still, it's not that I shout often, depending on who's definition of 'often' you are going to use - I prefer mine. It's just that some people who use the swimming pool are so stupid they

shouldn't be allowed in unsupervised. I just don't get how hard it is to swim in a straight line?

Yesterday, there was a girl in the pool who insisted on just standing there, resting on the side, blocking my lane. Every time I got to that end, she glared at me and moved over slightly. She was just stood there, doing nothing? It's not like it's a kid's pool or one run by the council where they have to train the life guards to remove nappies. I said that to her in the end and she left crying.

Personally, I think if you're going to stand in someone else's lane then you're going to have to toughen up a little.

The worst was a tiny man with unnaturally long arms was back stroking his way across three lanes. I was just about to point out the error of his ways, when I spotted the caretaker, and at the time I was more concerned with the steam room than the flaying of what looked like a drunken windmill. Though do windmills get drunk? I'm not sure, either way it wasn't pretty.

But surely, if people are being stupid then it's only right that someone shouts at them? That's what's wrong with the world today, no one yells for the right reasons. There are those TV chef's losing it over undercooked turnips, but people start naming their children things like: Yoga, Aero or Donathan

Donathan!

And no one says a word. Well they do on the internet but that's not a real thing. Plus, it's much better to write a stern letter. No one expects a letter these days so the surprise of receiving something hand written shocks them into a response.

That's how I got them to stop playing Fairy-tale in New York at the local shopping centre. I hate that song.

Anyway, where was I? Oh, it doesn't matter, she's found me.

`Mr Walker, what are you doing in the laundry room again. You know we have to keep it baking hot in here to get rid of the smell of the old dear's urine. Have you taken your pills. Come on, grab your walking frame and I'll see you back to your room'.

The End of the World

The end of the world as we know it, well, as they knew it 'What's taking them so long?' King Barkus asked Dent.

He didn't shout his words, he couldn't be bothered.

They fell from his mouth.

It was the fifth time he had asked, and the question had been shouted twice, sighed once, whined and now the question fell almost, rhetorically, onto the war room table where the king had positioned himself at its head.

Dent looked at his young master; he was nothing more than a petulant boy really and yet in charge of a mighty kingdom.

Still, he'd been strong enough to defeat his father – though that wasn't much of a feat given his father's advanced years or that it's ever very courageous to stab someone in the back.

'But he hasn't killed me yet', thought Dent, which has to be a blessing – kings did have a bad habit of murdering their advisors.

‘They’ll be here shortly my lord, I’m sure if of it.’ Dent offered the king by means of placation.

Sadly, he’d offered the same servile assurance one too many times, forcing Barkus to snarl, ‘they’d better be, because I’m bored, and I hate being bored.

And there’re only two things I like doing that are guaranteed to deal with my boredom and that’s either let Boy here entertain me – but it’s far too hot for that...’ Barkus looked up at Boy, who had followed him from his side at the throne to the head of the table.

He’d been fanning the king for well over two hours now and his arms, though toned and used to the rigors of a stiff workout, were aching and screaming their anguish deep into his pain receptors.

Boy wanted to stop, but knew that would mean his death.

Still, after what the Kkng said about it being too hot, at least he wouldn’t need to muster any extra energy to satiate the king’s passions, a new-found knowledge, that for the moment at least, gave him the strength to keep heaving the huge fan backwards and forwards.

The king smiled up at Boy, a smile so bright that Boy's knees weakened for a second, and a breeze of light-headedness swept over him.

The king lost track of his threat.

He was going to tell Dent that the other sure fire way of alleviating his boredom was by feeding a slave to his dogs.

But any hateful thoughts had passed; Boy's deep, wilful eyes held him.

He could gaze into their beauty for all eternity.

Grateful of the king's lapse, Dent offered a bow, and then backed away towards the war room's door.

From there he signalled a servant and whispered for him to find out if there was any news.

When the king had asked him for his solution to the problem Dent spent ten minutes outlining, he had faltered.

Not that he'd let the king see his predicament.

He liked the job of advisor; at least he liked it while he stayed in favour with the king.

If he managed to do that, then he was the king's number one servant.

This had its perks, like plenty of food, nice living quarters and first dibs on any new young servants that started work in the palace.

Unlike the king, Dent wanted children, lots of them and yet they seemed to elude him.

His deceased wife had said there was something wrong with him.

She had told him he was broken inside and that was why he'd been unable to get her pregnant.

She'd said it one too many times and the last time she'd said it Dent had punched her so hard in the face that fragments of her skull had pierced into her brain – he'd told everyone she had fallen down the stairs.

Killing your wife was actually quite common – so much easier than getting a divorce – but Dent thought that it would reflect badly on his character so had chosen to lie.

Dent wasn't proud of what he'd done but his wife wouldn't shut up, he wanted a baby too, and he was sure everything inside him was working fine.

Since his wife's death, he had made it his mission to prove himself right.

He decided that if it wasn't him who was broken then it had to be his wife, she was too old – 24 was a little old in those days for women.

What he needed was a nice fresh young thing.

And he found them; cleaners, kitchen staff, maids, yet no matter how hard he tried none ever fell pregnant.

'All spoiled!' he'd insisted to a friend one drunken night.

The friend had completely agreed and told him he must find himself a virgin, a girl pure of flesh, whose eggs were strong and waiting for his seed.

'But how do I ensure they're a virgin?' Dent asked, to which his friend replied, 'you just have to get one who's very young and make sure she bleeds when you take her.' For the last couple of days, Dent had been eyeing up the new

dishwasher.

She didn't look much older than nine, her parents had been killed when the king's army had taken her village and she'd been sent back to serve her life out as a slave.

He was looking forward to seeing if she bled; she would be his treat when the current situation was over.

Dent knew if he wanted to carry on enjoying his privileged life; he had to keep the king happy.

And he'd been thrilled when his master had bought into his ideas.

And he was even more thrilled when he'd thought to say, 'great King, I can only outline the problems and guide you towards a solution.'

And as the problems in front of you are so great, I suggest you call your generals, a seer and a holy man – use their vast knowledge to solve your dilemma.' When the king had wholeheartedly agreed, Dent had set his plans in motion.

He sent messages out for the king's generals.

Well, not all of his generals; in reality he had only called for the three smartest.

The king had seven generals in total, but two were just puppets worked by two of the generals he'd called.

And the final two had vocabularies which only contained the words 'Kill!', 'Smash!' and 'Maim!' Dent was hoping for a solution that was a little more sophisticated than that.

Of course the three general's he'd called weren't just waiting outside the palace, all geared up to do the king's beckoning.

They were off doing what general's do – raping and pillaging – or at least winning battles and then instructing their men on the best ways to rape and pillage.

They needed time to put things in order before setting off to see their king.

Much to Dent's relief, the generals eventually arrived.

'Is there no time to rest? I've been riding for hours.' General Durian demanded on arrival.

Dent heard the question while still a hundred yards from the main entrance and he feared for the servant who told

Durian, a giant of a man, that there wasn't.

'General Durian, sir, come with me if you would.

I'm sure after a quick audience with the king, you'll be able to go off and wash up.' The general, relaxing at the sight of Dent, whom he viewed as an old and, if not trusted, certainly dear friend, threw down the servant he'd questioned and strode to meet his greeter.

'What's going on, Dent? What's this all about?' The long ride had taken its toll on the general, forcing the advisor to hold his distance, for fear that the noxious smell Durian was omitting may also carry with it disease.

'I'm sure the king will tell you – he's waiting.' The general had been following Dent down the corridor towards the war room when Dent's answer stopped him in his tracks.

'I asked you what this is all about.

I want to know now!' The general was tired and not used to his friend dodging questions.

Before Dent had chance to answer, a voice roared, 'did you not hear him general? I am waiting!' Before the echo of his words had finished the king retreated back into the war

room, leaving Durian startled and hesitant.

Physically he had no fear of the king, he was fifteen years the king's senior, that was fifteen years of battle training and hardening.

Plus, he was taller than the king and as broad as an oak.

But the king had his royal guard, who would rip the general to pieces for nothing more than making the king angry and at the moment, the king seemed far from jovial.

Durian rushed into the war room, dropped to one knee and said, 'I'm sorry, my lord; I'm road weary and in need of a clean-up.

I didn't mean to keep you waiting.' The king, at 21, still suffered the hormonal upheaval caused by his youth.

This meant that his anger, that had glowed so bright only a second before, had now passed.

He leapt from his chair and after helping the general to his feet (which at least meant that Durian could stand at his full height, the act having given him implicit permission); the king shook the general's hand and offered him a seat at the table.

King Barkus, seeming unaware of the general's smell proceeded to make small talk.

He didn't mention why he'd dragged Durian here, he wanted to wait for the other generals first as he hated repeating himself.

So, as far as the general could make out, Barkus had brought him to the palace on a whim – which he sadly had no option but to indulge.

Neither man had to wait long before Dent announced the arrival of the other two generals, Lekk and Score.

They had met up on the road five miles out of town and travelled in together.

After a round of pleasantries, Barkus invited the three generals and his advisor to take a seat.

At this point Dent ushered in the seer and the holy man – they had been waiting in the wings.

He knew the king wouldn't want to sit with either of these two servants while he waited for his generals, so he had kept them out of sight.

They had both been easy to find.

The seer was easy.

She was one the palace used regularly.

Dent didn't believe a word that (usually) was bellowed from the old crone's mouth, but she always seemed to put on a good show.

Plus, she wasn't quite as hideous as some of the other fortune tellers who set up stalls around the palace gates.

He really didn't want to spend several hours sat across from a woman with a beard or one covered in grotesque hairy warts! The holy man had been easy, too; the hard part had been choosing which religion the man should represent – so he just chose one who said he could speak for them all - ideal.

Once everyone was seated, the king stood up at the head of the huge, marble table, and repeated the impassioned speech Dent had given earlier.

Of course, he gave the speech as if it were his own, no credit going to his advisor.

'Well, my lord, I'm glad you thought of us to help you with this matter,' General Lekk offered when the king had finished.

'Kiss ass', thought Dent.

He wasn't a fan of Lekk; the general was average height, thin and slimy.

'Not literally slimy,' he acknowledged to himself, though Dent would hate to ever have to touch general Lekk as he could never be sure.

Lekk won his battles through back-handed methods – killing squads in the night, torture and blackmail.

Lekk was not a man to be trusted as his every action served only to further himself.

In this case he was out to ingratiate himself with the king.

'I don't think there is one answer that will deal with all you require, sadly my Lord,' General Score, held the king's eye for a second as he spoke, a privilege that came from having been the king's sword instructor back when he was in his late teens.

The brutishly handsome general, now in his late thirties had taught the king more than just the sword, and it was this once shared intimacy that allowed him to look at the king for this extended moment without losing his head.

‘Oh, come now, General Score, that’s not what the king’s looking for, he wants solutions not negativity!’ said Lekk.

Again Dent’s thoughts screamed ‘kiss ass’ as General Lekk spoke.

The king hated anyone attacking his old instructor and his thoughts screamed for the death of General Lekk.

If Lekk hadn’t been right, more than his thoughts would have screamed.

‘Ok, Lekk,’ General Score didn’t offer the courtesy of calling Lekk by his title.

In his mind, you had to earn the title through acts of valour, not those of treachery and deceit.

‘Why don’t you offer the king a solution?’ Whether he had earned his stripes through valour or by darker means, General Lekk was still a general.

It was a title earned through winning more battles than the other two generals put together.

He was sly and self-serving, but still very smart.

General Lekk thought for a minute, the faces of everyone in the room posed for his answer.

Everyone, that is, except the seer, she was staring off into the distance, clearly looking at something no one else in the room could see.

‘As you said, my lord, you need a way of controlling the masses.

Something that gives you the right to judge others, say what they are doing is wrong and then have no one stand in your way when you have that person or army, or even kingdom destroyed.

Well, the only way to do that would be to make yourself into a god; it’s worked in the past.

Wasn’t there a kingdom that ruled for 5,000 years? Remember, the one who built all those pyramids?’ ‘I find it hard to say this, but I like your idea!’ admitted General

Score, 'the problem is that it stopped working in the past.

The kings of the time were living gods, but the people also worshiped a multitude of other gods, which meant that control was diluted.

We need something just a bit different.' 'Perhaps just the one god then?' said the King.

He'd thought he best say something, if nothing else than to stop himself getting too bored.

With three of his generals in the one room, he'd kind of hoped for a big punch up, but as that didn't seem to be happening he thought it best to participate.

'Yes, my lord, you, the One True God,' the holy man hissed.

Like most holy men of the day he was very old, so old in fact that he'd had at least one stroke and part of his face had frozen, causing his words to fall from his mouth as a hiss.

'No!' Lekk snapped, then realising how his words must have sounded he qualified 'as much as you could be the One True God, I don't think that's the answer.

'Why not?' the king demanded, he quite liked the idea of being turned into a God.

'Well, my king, if you just declared yourself a god, there would be no reason for anyone outside our kingdom to accept you as such.

The idea of a god is a good one and it has to be a god we can control.

But it can't be a person; it has to be something on high, something powerful that people, all people will fear.' 'But you can't just create a god,' the holy man hissed, a small gob of spit shooting from his mouth as he spoke.

He was ok with the idea of having yet another king declare himself a god, but the idea of trying to create an ethereal being felt very wrong.

'Why not?' Lekk asked, his eyes were wide, it was clear he'd been caught up by his idea and didn't want anyone pissing on his parade.

'Well,' the holy man started but then seemed to stumble, looking for a definitive reason why a god couldn't just be created.

‘Well,’ he tried again, but before he had chance to offer anything else General Score interrupted, ‘actually I think you could create a god.

But it wouldn’t be a god, it would be The God.

The One True God! It wouldn’t be the leader of other god’s either, it would be the only god – all other gods, from all other religions would have to be put aside.

This god wouldn’t have a fancy name, he wouldn’t be the God of War or God of Love, he would be God of everything.

In fact he wouldn’t even need a name.

He could just be God! And anyone found not worshipping this God could be put to death.’ ‘Oh, I like it,’ Lekk said, ‘the magical thing would be that you, my lord, would control God.

You could control what God liked and disliked, you could say what was good and what was bad.’ ‘But, to do that wouldn’t this information have to come from somewhere else? If people realised that we had created God surely no one would believe it.’ Durian could see the potential of having only one god; he was just looking for clarity.

And like the king had the urge to participate.

General Score took up Durian's point and expanded, 'you're right, General, if God were seen as a creation of the king, no one would believe it.

But, I'm sure there's a way around it.

We could make God older, spin the propaganda, and make it seem that God has been here since forever.' 'Better than that,' Lekk interrupted, 'we could make God our creator, so not only has he been here since the dawn of time; he was the cause of the dawn of time!' 'I love it!' the king yelled, he got up to his feet, turned to a servant waiting in the wings and screamed for him to bring scribes.

'I want to start straight away; I want to get this down on paper so we don't forget anything.' 'That's it, my lord, scribes, brilliant,' Dent yelled, the mention of scribes had given him an idea, 'we create a book, a Good Book, the book that tells the world about God – we set down laws and rules, we find traits in our enemies and make them somehow against God – genius!' Although excited, Dent said his words in such a way that they seemed like they came from the king.

The room filled with energy, the king, his generals, Dent, the holy man and even the seer could all see that the future of the world was about to be changed forever.

And all but the seer felt this to be a truly good thing..

The Hunting Analyst

by Dante Harker

Author Bio: I am Dante Harker (a northern UK man whose parents thought it amusing to give him an Italian name) I'm 37 and just returned to the UK from spending two years travelling, writing and working in South East Asia. I have written five novels, two of which are on Amazon Tarnished Knight and Therapy and I am hoping to get my new novel, Escape the Race, published next year.

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Thank-you for reading my work.

A banded wren signalled to his neighbour that the dawn was finally upon them. That first call triggered a cacophony of ever-increasing enthusiasm that bounced around the forest. And, as the sun's rays penetrated the dense canopy, the hunter's keen eyes swept over the scrub to the clearing in the hope of seeing his prey. Moments earlier the beep of his

phone's alarm had created nearly as much fuss in the forest as the banded wren. The screech of his alarm had dragged him out of an uncomfortable sleep. He really wished that he'd packed an airbed and ignored the disproving glances from the other shoppers at the out-of-town hunting outlet. He was glad that he hadn't talked himself out of the easy-light camping stove as, with one click of the starter, bright flames burst into life. The kettle sat neatly in the cradle on the top of the burner and as he waited for the water to boil he rubbed at his thigh in the hope of relieving the dull ache that crept around and into his lower back. The pain didn't ease and after pulling back the green, plastic over-trousers, his actual trousers and his thermal layer he saw the dents the rocky ground had left in his thigh. No wonder it hurt. He rubbed again but to no avail; the edges of the dents had already started to turn mustard yellow. He knew that by tomorrow they would be a rainbow, but one leading to a limp rather than a pot of gold. 'I want to hunt,' he remembered telling his work colleagues. They had all laughed and told him to buy a sports car like every other forty-something-year-old caught in a midlife crisis. The kettle hissed and bubbled water out of its spout. There was no whistle, another concession to the judging eyes at the outlet. The hunter liked the idea of a whistle: a clear indication that the water was ready. Clear indicators were his thing and formed part of the jargon that went along with his business analyst job. Four men in the last year had arrived at work in a shiny sports car. They had used their time in life to justify the purchase and laughed self-satisfied laughs as they told tales of disapproving wives.

Wives who had moaned about mortgage payments, the damp course needing replacing or the unstable economy. The men had held firm and they loved their new cars. Of course, the economy is hard to ignore and mortgage payments don't pay themselves, so none of the sports cars were brand new. The self-satisfied men played down the fact that none of them had the money for a new Ferrari or that two of them had actually sold the family car to make their purchase. They just smiled at how wonderful their 'vintage' soft top looked. They blissfully ignored summer's drift into autumn and froze out thoughts of how much fun the car would be once the winter rains hit the leaking roof. Being the fifth person at that particular party was not how the hunter wanted to enjoy his midlife crisis. His wife was not one to stop moaning so doing anything that affected their finances was always going to be out of the question. A career bound to his desk had left the hunter or rather, back then, the businessman, craving something different. His crisis wasn't a sudden thing, he hadn't woken up one morning and decided that he must search out the nearest hunting supplies; this had been a gradual descent. At the start of his descent, sensing that he might need money before he reached the bottom, the businessman had opened a midlife crisis bank account and, whenever he thought his wife wouldn't notice, he made a discreet deposit. The first expenditure was on a selection of outdoors-y magazines. He knew he wanted to do something out in the wilderness. His first thoughts led him to mountain biking. The bikes looked so cool and the riders in their matching outfits inspired a visit

to a sports shop. Sadly, though they made lycra cycling tops in double-XL, the image that looked back from the changing room mirror was less inspirational and more what a tennis ball would look like if forced into a sausage skin. Mountain biking was out. Hiking felt too sedate, fell running was a no go due to bad knees and laziness. So that him led neatly to hunting. Who would have known there was so much printed media dedicated to the art of hunting? The businessman didn't know hunting was an art, not at first, but the magazines soon enlightened him. They were filled with talk of graceful and artful hunters, silently making their way through the forests in search of prey. Man against beast, and if the magazines were to be believed, man only won if he had the right clothing and equipment. On a conscious level the businessman liked the idea of hunting because it evoked in him a sense of adventure and allowed him to dream of unlocking the rusty chains that bound him to his desk. Plus, on a level just below where you have to admit it to yourself, he liked how portly many of the hunters appeared to be, no lycra vests here just chunky knits and a range of waterproof over garments. At first his friends mocked him, even going so far as to buy him a mug that said 'world's greatest desk hunter'. Everyone laughed even though the slogan made little sense. But the businessman kept reading, he ignored his friends. Who were they to judge? They were not his peers, at least not his hunting peers. As yet he had no hunting peers, not until the arrival of Bud. After reaching his magazine saturation point and in search of something more tangible, the businessman took

the next step and drove out to the hunting outlet on the edge of town. There he met Bud, the proprietor; a snappy old man who knew only one way to hunt and that was Bud's way. Bowing to the man's greater knowledge the businessman allowed Bud to transform him into a hunter. On his first visit, at Bud's suggestion he had bought a hunting hat. It seemed that every hunter needed a hat; forget about the weapon, clothes or camouflaging face paint - a hat was the start of the transformation. Even though he was yet to go on his first hunt or own a weapon, from the moment he put on his red hunting hat he thought of himself as a hunter. At Bud's suggestion he had gone for a fleece-lined beauty that, if the sales pitch be true, would keep his head warm while allowing it to sweat at the same time. A new hunter was born and he didn't care if the hat had cost him a day's salary, he'd saved the money, though he told his wife the hat was a five pound bargain. The hunter drove to work in his hat, from home to the parking lot and then home again. During his time at work, no matter how many encouraging pep talks he gave himself, the hunter remained hat free. At his failure to wear the hat around his work colleagues, the hunter was at least able to rationalise that perhaps all of his hunting garb should stay away from work; and that might reduce the urge to bring in a rifle on rough days. Not that he owned a rifle. Bud told him that before he got to the fun stuff he really had to decide what he wanted to kill. This had come as a shock to the hunter who, through all of his adventures in hunter-ville, had given very little thought to the idea of actually killing something. Well, he had known, of course,

that killing was involved but he was yet to give his intended victim a name. The names turned out to be plentiful, it turned out he had the option of legally killing a whole range of animals. There were the animals you could kill en masse, assuming your shot was up to the task. Ducks, pheasants and grouse were always popular if you liked to hunt birds. Hares were also good if you wanted a bouncy challenge or had the need to kill something fluffy. These required a shotgun, however, and after the bruised shoulder that came from an afternoon's clay pigeon shooting, the hunter decided that that wasn't for him. Deciding that killing en masse wasn't his thing, the hunter then put some thought into the one or two animals per hunt category. For example, you could hunt foxes if you knew the right people and weren't put off by protesters and the moral debate; all a little too much effort for the Hunter. So if small birds, bouncing mammals and pompous pursuits were out then he was really only left with one challenge: the one that had been staring him in the face all along. On the wall of the outlet shop hung a poster of a glorious red stag with the tag line, 'if you're man enough to meet the challenge, you'll need the Deer Hunter.' The Deer Hunter was a compound bow. A silent hunting bow that would have made Robin Hood wet his pants in excitement if one had landed in his lap. The Deer Hunter was perfect, with the help of carbon fibre it was light and strong, and ingenious pulleys made it easy for even the flabbiest arms to use. But best of all, it was super cool. Especially as it came with a free hunting jacket the same colour as the hunter's hat. When he'd told everyone he was

going hunting alone, just him and his bow, they had thought him insane. Even more so when he explained he would camp the night and wake up fresh, ready to go, man against beast. He had practiced at the shooting range which had a section for bows. He had tried practicing at the local park but only just escaped with a police caution. The yellow around the dents in his thigh were being joined by flecks of purple. By tomorrow he would limp and his leg would look like rotten beetroot. The kettle held just enough water for a second cup of coffee. The hunter watched the steam drift up from the hot brew and he wondered at what time he could legitimately call it a day. This wasn't the first time he had taken an idea too far, though this was the first time the idea had been stupid enough to sleep in the woods alone and without an airbag. So many times yesterday he had nearly shied off. He desperately wanted to tell his work colleagues and perpetually unsupportive wife that he couldn't go. Yet none of his reasons sounded good enough for that time or would save him from future escapades. The hunter looked at the equipment in front of him, most of it still packed away. The waste of money, the bragging, the need to be different had all come to this: a bad night of sleep, a bruised thigh and camp fire coffee. Still, he could spend the day playing the hunting games he'd downloaded onto his mobile phone. And there was the deer carcass in his carboot. The internet was an amazing thing, with a bit of research you can buy anything. Once he'd driven past work, he could drop it off at the local butcher and they'd be having venison for dinner. The hunter smiled at his madness and, as he clicked play on

the first of his games, a banded wren chirped along in time with the tinny music.

The Book of Commandments

This story really isn't set on Earth, honest! The story that's about to unfold happened a long time ago.

It's hard to say exactly when as all evidence that the following events ever took place has long since been erased.

If I had to guess, and I will because I'm the narrator and it makes the story flow smoother if I offer the odd piece of unsubstantiated information, then I would say the story is set around 1600 years ago.

I would say it took place around 400AD but that would be silly because this story did not take place on earth so would have had different dates.

The story is set on a distant planet, in a universe that's yet to, or in fact may never, be discovered by humans.

The place looks like the Earth of 1600 years ago, the people behave the same and, if you were looking in from above, you might even think that it was Earth, or if not our Earth,

maybe a parallel one.

But you will see as the story goes on that although this Earth may share similarities with our Earth.

There is bound to be the odd fact here and there that makes you say 'no, that didn't happen on my planet, or if it did, it happened 50 years earlier!' And if nothing else, it will be these out of place facts that stop you getting upset, or screaming, 'blasphemy!' and help you see that this story, as many stories that happened a long time ago or in other places are best read, laughed at, and then either thrown away or, if the story is crammed in with lots of other stories and thus forms a thick, often leather-bound book, used as a doorstep.

Anyway, my disclaimer, sorry introduction is out the way; let's move on with the story.

No, actually, just before the story gets under way, there is one last thing, all the characters you're about to read about are white and talk in English (Yorkshire English at that, which is kind of odd, as the story takes place in one of the hottest countries on this far-off world).

It is a country so hot that the people would surely be dark brown, their skins tanned and hardened by the sun.

Plus, it's highly unlikely that they would ever have spoken English, but still, this isn't Earth as you know it.

If anything it more resembles one of those "historical" programmes that still get aired once in a while.

So, with that in mind, all the characters are white, English speakers.

*** 'Report!' screamed King Barkus, as always living up to his name.

Dent, the King's advisor, knelt in front of him.

Sweat poured down Dent's face; he could feel trickles running down his chest and over his over-fed but, today, empty stomach.

It felt like he hadn't eaten in days.

In reality it had only been around twelve hours.

He had just been so busy.

Plus he had seen what his master had done to his last advisor when he had caught him eating, rather than working.

The idea of being roasted alive and then served undercooked and, sadly, still alive, to the hounds, was enough to take away anyone's appetite.

'The battle's won my lord.' Dent knew that the day he had to tell his master they'd lost would be his last day.

But given what he had to tell his master next, today might well still see his end.

Dent told his master the casualty figures, they were bad, very bad.

Then through gritted teeth he began to explain facts that he knew his master would probably be already holding clearly in his head.

But he was the advisor and there were things that he had to vocalise in case the King, was choosing a head-in-the-sand approach to leadership – something common in these dark times.

'This is our fifth battle in less than three months, my lord.

We won, but the casualties this time added to those from previous battles means it's unlikely we will win again in the

next few months or even years.

We have to do something, if nothing else, my lord, we need more men.’ Dent knew they needed something.

They had been defending their homeland for centuries.

This feat would have been easier if the kings, who had ruled over the kingdom, had not had such fetish for conquering other lands.

Each successive king had felt the need to extend the kingdom – to strike out into other lands, to take what wasn’t theirs.

But this had all come at a price.

Their lands were now so expansive that at any one time at least one of their borders was under threat.

And, in recent times, the battles had barely been won.

The men didn’t want to fight anymore, they’d had enough.

Land was just land; it wasn’t even theirs it belonged to the King.

Dissent had flooded the ranks, the soldiers wanted to be at home with their families, they didn't want to fight for a cause that hadn't felt like their own.

King Barkus glared down at his servant.

They were in the war room at the middle of the King's glorious and, in these times of devastating poverty, expensive palace.

The King's last advisor had sealed his own fate, not so much by eating, though that was the final straw, but by suggesting to the King that he should perhaps hold off building a new palace until they had stabilised their lands and renewed control over the King's people.

But King Barkus hadn't been in power long, the last two kings having been killed within the last year.

The first king was stupid enough to go into battle, feeling that his presence would rally the men.

It didn't.

His men, like those manning the armies today, wanted to stop fighting, and hearing their king tell them they must fight

and even die so that he might have more land was more than they could bear.

So, rumours abound, it was actually his own men who took advantage of a battle and killed the king.

The second, King Ovulatus, had been stabbed in the back by King Barkus.

That wasn't the official line of course; the people had been told an assassin had crept in during the night and seen off the sleeping monarch.

It seemed the people of the time would believe anything they were told, at least they would if the story was laden with either blood or woe.

King Barkus wanted a palace and as king he got as he ordered.

The king, who was far wiser than his 21 years, perhaps having the wisdom of a 24 or even 25-year-old, chose to have the palace built during the harvest.

He knew that with enough slaves he could get the majority of the building work done while everyone was out bringing in the crop, thus limiting the chances of his new home being

attacked.

And as the King had enough food and wealth, he didn't bother thinking his plan through far enough to realise that by using thousands of slaves to build the palace, there would be fewer slaves where they were needed at that time of year – working in the fields.

Now as he looked out from his war room he knew that his palace might have been a mistake.

His people were starving and the men he had protecting his borders were threatening to abandon their posts and come home.

Nevertheless, his palace was glorious.

There were 200 rooms in total, though to reclaim space in the centre of the city he'd needed to order a little clearing.

Still, sending out death squads in the middle of the night, to kill everyone who lived on the land he needed, if nothing else had given a few hundred men work.

From the sky, the palace looked like a round piece of bread with a hole poked in the middle – a food that would later be called a doughnut.

Around the outside of the palace there was a fashionable moat, which the King had ordered be filled with crocodiles.

This was a request that had yet to be fulfilled as the soldiers he had sent to carry out the order were poor wrestlers and kept getting eaten.

In the hole in the centre of the palace was a garden open to the sky.

Great palms grew up and spread throughout the space.

Caged exotic birds, given as gifts to the King from rulers of distant lands in the hope of staving off an invasion, filled the garden with song.

And in the middle of the lush green haven, a marquee had been erected to house the king's entertainment.

Young men and women, if fourteen and fifteen-year-olds could be counted as men and women, spent the day prettying themselves in the hope of attracting the king's attention.

They were seldom lucky.

The king, a creature of habit, had, since puberty, picked one man and one woman as his entertainment.

He wasn't an overly sexual man; he left the raping and pillaging to his generals.

But he had needs, and his boy and girl of the moment were more than enough.

He was still young, and as yet he hadn't felt the need for children, so his chosen girl served only to accompany him on official engagements.

His recent choice of girl, and he only tended to change them every couple of years, preferring his entertainment no older than sixteen, had been a gift from a distant king, and spoke very little English.

This was something he'd found a bonus, as he had no need of her conversation he just wanted her to look good on his arm.

Boy, was the name he imaginatively used for his current male companion – it wouldn't do for a king to waste his time learning the names of all his slaves, and it certainly wasn't worth him learning the names of his entertainment slaves as he went through them so freely.

Boy provided his nightly and sometimes afternoon entertainment.

‘Mmmm, afternoon entertainment!’ the king muttered.

‘What’s that my lord?’ asked Dent, glad that the king’s mind had drifted off; he didn’t like the glare he’d been receiving.

‘Would you like me to fetch Boy?’ he asked after working out the king’s mutterings.

‘Yes, errr, no, I have serious things to deal with.

You’re right, we have to do something.

I think the days of fighting to protect land are gone; at least fighting to protect distant lands.

It was different before; the men were fighting to protect their lands, their families but now we are asking them to fight for their king, and as much as that should be enough, those times have passed.’ King Barkus slumped in his throne.

He wished he’d been born a few hundred years earlier.

Back then the world was a different place.

The kings in those times were adventurous; they sought out distant lands, though not so distant that they couldn't send back the spoils of war.

But soon enough distant meant distant and the spoils stopped and soon after so did much of the support for the king.

'Booooooy!' the king yelled, and before the king had fully pronounced the 'y', a strapping adolescent boy, no older than sixteen ran from the shadows of the war room and stood at the king's side.

'Bring me food, and come back with your fan!' the king ordered and, after forcing lustful thoughts out of his mind as he watched the scantily clad teen rush away, he looked at Dent and in a deep tone, edged with venom, he said 'you're my advisor, advise'.

Before Dent had time to stutter and spurt out his best, and he knew, unacceptable, advice, Boy returned with a large silver platter of food and a palm-shaped fan on the end of a long pole.

Boy hesitated for a second before handing his master the platter of food.

He first waited to see if the king looked at him and opened his mouth, a sign that indicated that he was too busy to feed himself and needed Boy's help.

There was no look, so Boy handed over the food and then went about fanning down his lord.

'Bring a bowl,' Barkus said to Dent, adding, 'I know a man thinks better on a full stomach.' Dent, a rotund man in his late forties, did indeed like his food.

Having been up most of the night, waiting for any news of the battle, and in that time having missed all his meals, Dent's head was pounding.

And as he bit into a chunk of chicken that the king had scraped into his bowl, he felt queasy at the sudden intake of food.

Both men ate without speaking.

The only noise that filled the thirty-by-twenty foot war room was the whoosh of the fan powered by Boy and a faint chirping that crept in through the open door that faced onto the garden.

The king ate, over-filling his mouth with a mixture of meats and bread and then doing his best to chew it all down without choking.

If his mother had still been alive, he was sure she would have chastised him over his eating habits.

But then she wasn't alive, so he could eat how he wanted.

Barkus had ordered his mother killed after she wouldn't stop bleating on about him stabbing her husband, his father.

As he chewed he watched Boy work.

All of his entertainment dressed in the least possible clothing needed to cover their dignity – not that slaves were actually entitled to dignity, but the king wanted to ensure that his slave's assets were only seen by him.

In the case of his current boy, he had a white cotton loincloth wrapped around his assets.

The king watched as Boy's labour caused beads of sweat to break over his tight body.

Barkus wanted entertaining; he wanted an easy life where the kingdom didn't look upon him for all the answers.

He had only killed the previous king because if he hadn't someone else would have, and if that had of happened, he would surely have been the next one put to death to quash any claim to the throne.

Dent did his best to will the king to go off with Boy; they were heading for late afternoon, some of the heat of the day had passed and now was often the time the king found for his daily pleasures.

Dent prayed to one god after another, but none seemed to be answering.

After he'd tried a god on his reserve list, the god of water – he thought that the king might at least have to leave to go to the toilet if this god answered his prayers – he gave up and decided that he would have to, for once, live up to his job title.

'I think, my lord that you need to find a way to control the masses.

And the only way to do that is give them something to believe in, something to fight for.

In years gone by ... ' Dent continued, with each word his confidence grew, he could feel he was on a roll, and though

he knew he was making everything up on the fly, he knew from the look on the king's face that he at least had his master's attention.

'... men fought to protect their home, and then they fought for glory by conquering lands, and for a time they fought for their king.

But we both know that's not enough anymore, we need to give the men something else to fight for.

We need something that allows you to control the people, rally your forces as needed and give us a reason to attack whomever we please, rather than always having to wait until they have attacked us first.' The king listened.

Everything Dent said made sense, and all he wanted to hear now was his advisor's conclusion, what one thing could bring him all these things? Before Dent had got anywhere near finishing speaking he realised that he only knew what the king needed, he didn't actually know how to achieve what he was confidently advocating.

In fact, as Dent stood up and almost bounced around in front of his master to add power to his words, he knew that the flaw in his speech might just see him killed.

'You're right, I agree,' cried Barkus, as he got up from his chair to join his advisor.

Thankfully for Dent, the king was tall, over six feet tall and he was short, only an inch over five feet.

This saved him having to fall to his knees, or have the pain of keeping his head bowed for fear of having it removed – the penalty for having your head above the king's.

That was unless of course you were a slave with a fan standing to the king's side, but then laws made by kings were free to be broken by kings.

'So, what is this great thing I need, what can I use to control my people, rally my men and squash my enemies? Come on, advisor, don't keep your king waiting!'

Three heads are better than one.

‘It’s a bit late to be tidying this place now, don’t you think Graham?’

Graham did, but he wasn’t about to tell his mother that. Instead he rushed around the flat, doing his best to make the place look presentable.

Graham knew that his actions were a superficial measure. No amount of cushion-plumping would distract from his putrid yellow, nicotine-stained wall. The walls weren’t really his fault, more just a by-product of him being a house-bound chain-smoker.

‘Don’t you think you should do the dishes at least, rather than wasting all this time straightening the cushions?’ Graham’s mother spoke with her usual accusing tone. These days Graham’s mother didn’t venture any words that weren’t designed to make him feel weak or a failure.

‘You’re mother’s right, Graham,’ his father added before he had a chance to respond to his mother’s remark. ‘What if these new support workers want a cup of tea, they aren’t

going to drink out of any of those cups?’

‘They aren’t going into the kitchen; I’ll show them in here. And they couldn’t have a drink of tea anyway, I’m all out.’

‘Oh yes, that’s right, your Tesco delivery isn’t due until tomorrow is it? God forbid you actually went out and got some shopping for yourself!’

Graham ignored his mum; he didn’t want to get into another long debate about why he would only leave his flat under sedation. And, as he didn’t get many visitors anyway, having tea and coffee in didn’t seem that important. He used to get visitors, for a short time at least, when he had first stopped going out. Back then he had social and care workers, people from the local church and, for a time, he even had a bereavement counsellor. It was just that, over time, they seemed to disappear one by one.

‘What did you expect?’ Grahams mother snapped after reading his thoughts, ‘they all wanted you to get better, you didn’t! You mostly just got fatter. Just living off the benefits they heaved your way, as if it was your money.’

‘You know they wouldn’t let him go back to teaching mother. If they won’t let him do a job he enjoyed you can’t blame the boy for taking the State’s money and staying at home

instead.'

Graham gave the cushions another whack, not that he thought that they could get any plumper; he just liked imagining that it was his mother's face every time he smashed his hand down onto the worn valour fabric.

'I'm not well, mum,' Graham said at last, he hadn't wanted to get drawn into the debate, but he knew that his mum never left anything alone, and he didn't want to be having this conversation when the new support workers arrived.

'You're not well? You're not well? Pathetic, that's what you are.' Graham's mother said, the sound of her voice making his head pound. Her words were like a scythe – sharp and rounded so when aimed at his head, they cut and levelled their target. 'And these people arriving' his mother continued 'they're not support workers are they? They're "Befriending Coordinators".'

Graham picked the letter up off the ash stained coffee table. He shook it and read it again. His mother was right; these weren't support workers who were coming to visit him. It seemed that he was being assessed to see if he was suitable to have a Befriender. Not that Graham was sure what a Befriender was, but he guessed it was a person who was somehow paid to be his "friend".

'It is a little sad son', Graham didn't like hearing from his father, his mum he could ignore, blank out (sometimes), but his father had always been a voice of reason. He had looked up to him, and his words, though few and far between, still held more power than his mother's.

Not letting her husband continue, Graham's mum took a breath and began, 'it's more than sad. It's pitiful. A grown man, well more than a grown man, really, what were you the last time they dragged you to the hospital? 38 stone?'

'36,' Graham whispered

'Either way it's disgusting, a grown man not able to find his own friends. And worse, you can't even hide away in your own stench. They are now sending people in to find friends for you, paying someone to come and spend some time in this mess. I hope you're happy.'

Graham thought about his mother's last line and wondered when he was last happy. He was certain that he had not been so for the last five years. The accident had taken everything away from him. Before that he must have been happy, though it seemed so long ago now that he couldn't be 100% sure. He could remember enjoying teaching; he had qualified at twenty-five, and had taught for ten years before it happened. 'That must have made me happy,'

Graham thought.

‘They wouldn’t have you back would they?’ said Graham’s mum, adding ‘they said you weren’t stable enough to work around children, they were afraid you might damage them.’

‘That’s not what they said at all, and you know it.’ Graham stormed across the flat heading for the window. He was desperate for a sight of his guests, hoping that their presence would shut his mother up for a minute.

‘They might as well have done though,’ she continued, her voice attacking. Graham was angry and on the defensive, his mother could sense a victory.

‘I’ve told you a thousand times before.’ This was, in fact, true, or maybe not, Graham thought, maybe it’s more than a thousand now.

He repeated, ‘I’ve told you a thousand times before, that wasn’t what happened. They said that they thought I wasn’t well enough to come back to work. They said that I could in the future, I just needed more time away.’

‘Five years is a long time away,’ his dad said.

‘They’re here!’ Graham screamed out. ‘Now shut up and don’t bother me while the Befrienders are here.’

After they had introduced themselves at the door, Graham showed the two coordinators into the living room. They took a seat on the plumped settee opposite Graham’s specialist, “big man’s” chair and, after opening her bag and taking out a file, the female coordinator said:

‘Ok Graham, we’ve been given your file by your social worker, who would like us to find you a volunteer Befriender. That’s someone who would come and visit you at home each week.’

The coordinator looked down at her file, scanned the paper and continued:

‘It says here that you have a problem with hearing voices, and this all started when your parents were killed in a car accident five years ago.’ She paused, allowing Graham time to take in her words and then added:

‘Don’t worry Graham, we’re here to help.’

Tia

The metallic clang of coins hitting the collection plate woke Tia from her sleep. The calming darkness gave way to a view of legs rushing along Manila's busiest tourist street. Tia took a deep breath and let the fetid odour of burst garbage bags, petrol fumes and the sweet scent of the church goers fill her lungs.

Today would be a good day. It was Sunday and though last night, like every night, Tia's mother had been drunk, she had still managed to move them to her favourite haunt opposite the cavernous city church.

Through the open church door, Tia could see the service was nearly over. It was almost time.

'Mum. Mum. Wake up.' Tia said, shaking her mother and praying for a response. The only one she got was a brief murmur followed by a hacking cough that left a red smudge on her mum's hand as she wiped her mouth.

'Please Mum, it's time for us to move, we have to get over to the other side of the street before they start coming out,' the little girl said, but her words were lost on her mother, who had spent most of yesterday's begging money on a bottle of

white liquor.

Tia gave her mother one last shake, but another hacking cough told Tia she would have to go to the church alone. She stood up, stretched and then battled through the roaring traffic to get over to the church gates.

It was 11:30 and the full heat of the Filipino sun had started to beat down. Acrid vapour rose from the pavement under the sun's heat and added to the stench of the day. Tia positioned herself under the shade of a large broad-leafed tree that grew up through the three metre high railings that surrounded the church. The little girl stood just far enough away from the church's entrance so as not to draw attention to herself from the guard who sat in a little box, ready to block the path of anyone who didn't look wealthy enough to pray in the new city church.

The guard sat on a stool and glared at anyone who came too close. He was fat enough so that his crossed arms rested neatly on his expansive stomach and Tia knew that, if she had to, she would have no problem out- running him. But that wasn't her plan. In five minutes or so the parishioners would leave the church and, if Tia was lucky, they wouldn't have given all their loose change to the collection plate and she could beg enough for a decent meal – that's if she managed to get to the shop before her mother got her hands on any of the money.

A lifestyle of begging, hiding from the authorities and a mother who felt that alcohol was the only necessary food group, hadn't allowed for much growth on Tia's eight-year-old frame. At barely a metre tall, Tia struggled to see her way past the various plants and statues that led up to the church doors. The little girl debated going back over to the other side of the road, where the distance gave her a better view. But time was getting on and she knew the service couldn't go on much longer. Plus, she had noticed that a couple of grubby little children had started to gather too and she didn't want to lose her place. Instead, she stood on her tiptoes and craned her neck, which gave her a passable view of the entrance.

An old woman with skin like sun-beaten leather took her place at the church door. She was holding a huge gold plate that was filled with shining coins and a wealth of banknotes. Tia caught a glimpse of the old woman's eyes, they were dark, almost black and even at a distance they had a way of making you feel guilty.

The priest joined the old woman and they stood side-by-side and thanked the parishioners as they left. Tia was sure that those who gave, again, to the collection plate received an extra warm handshake.

As she stood there in a filthy pink t-shirt, the picture of a 'Care Bear' that had once been printed on the front, long gone she wished that she had been born rich so that she could have a God, too. If she had an aim in life, other than to find her next meal and make it through the night, it was to have enough money so that she had some to give away. Then perhaps she could dress-up in smart clothes and shake the priest's hand every Sunday.

A gentle wind caught the front of Tia's blue, pleated skirt. It rushed through the holes in the fabric and gave the rip in the seam, caused by a tramp's grabbing hands, a boost in its suicidal quest to tear completely from bottom to top and end the skirt's grubby life. Brushing the skirt down, Tia inched forward as the parishioners made their way down the path and towards the large iron gates. At their approach the guard dragged himself out of his chair and offered up a pleasant smile to the passersby.

'Please!' Tia said, as she rushed into the crowd. Her right hand was held open and high, she knew it didn't shine like the collection plate but she hoped it would be filled nonetheless. With her left hand she pulled on people's pockets, pointed at bags, made feeding gestures and generally did whatever she could to attract the attention of the parishioners who seemed determined to ignore her.

On the other side of the street, Tia's actions cracked a lurid smile across a pallid white face. The fifty-something-year-old man wiped sweat off his face as he watched. He wiped his newly wet hand on the back of his crisp blue jeans. He looked around quickly, not wanting to lose sight of the pretty little girl, his eyes found a café with empty chairs outside. He moved, sat down, and continued to watch the girl at her work.

'Miss, please, sir, sir, please!' Tia continued, working her way through the crowd but getting nowhere. From the other side of the mass, Tia could hear, but not yet see, the sound of a mother calling for the parishners to provide food for her baby. It seemed the baby was sick, and needed money for medicine. It was probably a lie, which, sadly for Tia, was working. In reality, Tia knew the baby would be perfectly healthy; in fact it was unlikely the baby even belonged to the bag lady who was succeeding where Tia wasn't. Her mother had told her that sometimes people who ran day-care centres rent out the babies for the day while their mothers are off working. No one wants to give a dirty old bag lady money but lots of people are suckers for a clean little baby.

Not one of the parishioners caught Tia's eye, she dragged at their clothes, pulled at their bags, but they all kept on talking, moving slowly towards their aircon cars and soon they would be gone – leaving Tia with nothing. This was Sunday, it was meant to be a good day; a day when she got to eat.

The little girl heard the familiar clink of coins hitting the collection plate and turned her head to find out the source of the noise. Through the crowd, Tia could see that the coins weren't actually hitting the plate; they were being emptied from it. The notes had been removed and Tia watched the sun glint off the silver coins as they were poured into a black velvet bag. The coins sent sparks of radiant white light streaming through the trees, each shard catching a leaf which made the trees shine.

Soon enough, Tia stood in front of the old woman. She looked up into her dark eyes, held out her hand and said, 'please'. The child's gaze moved from the heavy-set eyes down to the bag that now held the parishioner's guilt money.

'Please!' Tia said again, mustering up what was left of her childhood naivety. Even looking straight into the old woman's eyes it was as if Tia didn't exist. The woman's long dark fingers worked quickly at the velvet bag, making sure that every coin made it into its safe confines.

'Please!' Tia tried one last time but the woman kept working. The bag full, she pulled tightly on the cord to seal the bag and placed it back on the collection plate.

As the woman moved her hand away from the bag Tia saw a chance, she could snatch the bag and be away before the

old crone realised what had happened. It would mean finding another church but still, the money in that black velvet bag would be enough to keep Tia and her mother fed for a month. At least it would be if Tia hid half the money so that her mother couldn't piss it all away.

Without another thought Tia whipped her hand forward and wrapped her fingers around the bag. The soft velvet made her fingers tingle and she could already taste the first meal bought with the church-goers' generosity.

Before Tia had chance to move the bag more than a centimetre away from the plate, the old woman struck. A hand slapped across Tia's face knocking her to the floor. The little girl clung to the bag as she fell, but before she had time to settle and realise how much pain the slap was going to induce, like a cobra bearing down on its prey, the old woman struck again. In a single movement she managed to kick Tia in the ribs and snatch the bag out of her hand. The kick was subtle enough not to be picked up by the gawking onlookers but Tia felt it, it would surely raise a bruise on her ribs that would match the welt she'd have on her face.

'YOU EVIL, EVIL CHILD! YOU'LL GO STRAIGHT TO HELL FOR THIS!' the old woman bellowed. Tia could almost taste the woman's venomous breath as it rushed passed the remnants of octogenarian teeth and fell on her face.

The bruised child didn't wait for further retribution; she scrambled away from the myriad accusing eyes. Somehow she managed to get to her feet and run from the crowd.

'STRAIGHT TO HELL!' the old woman screamed after her but Tia was no longer listening, her only thoughts were of escape. Chapter Two

Pretty Things and dirty deeds

'This way,' the fifty-something man called to the little girl as she made it away from the crowd. The man was speaking English but over the years, Tia had learned that if she wanted to make any money from begging she had to speak the language of commerce.

Against her instinct she followed the man down a side street and away from the screams of the old woman. Her face hurt, the hag's ring had cut her cheek and a drop of blood had found its way into her mouth. The blood's coppery tang made her feel weak and when they eventually stopped running, both were gasping for breath.

'Not the brightest move,' the man said when he found sufficient breath.

'I need food,' Tia said, her instincts returning to normal.

‘You sure do. Look at you, little thing, all skin and bones. And look at that little outfit of yours; we really need to get you cleaned up.’

The man smiled a bright white smile. For a man of his age the whiteness of his teeth looked unnatural, they almost shone in what little light was managing to penetrate the alley.

‘My name’s George. What’s your name, little one?’ George’s words sounded melodic, like a nursery rhyme. Tia hadn’t spoken to enough white men to know the accent but it had a calm ring to it and the look in his eyes seemed to promise a good meal.

‘Tia,’ the little girl said; her voice almost a whisper at the side of George’s.

‘What a beautiful name, it suits such a pretty little girl.’ Tia couldn’t follow everything that George was saying but she understood his tone. She had heard it before, many times, but then she was usually positioned outside the popular tourist bars, trying to get money from the westerners who were out to impress the local girls. Early in the evening, when the men were still in full wooing mode, Tia knew they would often give out change to the beggars to make themselves look generous. Sadly, to get that change, Tia

would have to sit for hours listening to men spit out tacky chat-up line after tacky chat-up line.

Maybe this is how all western men talk to females; Tia thought and then smiled back at George. He had just about regained his breath. The escape down the alley had taken its toll on the aging westerner and the impromptu exercise had caused a huge sweat patch to form on George's white shirt. The fabric, now translucent, showed off his extensive beer gut, covered by a rug of matted gray hair.

'I have to go and change,' George said after looking at the mess he was in, 'I could grab us some food from the 7/11 and we could eat it up at my room.'

Noticing Tia's face drop at the idea of going to his room, George gestured at his sweat-soaked shirt and added, 'I can't eat like this; I can get us a load of food, then you can tuck in while I get cleaned up.' Then as a final selling point he said, 'plus, I think you're about the same size as my daughter, I'm sure she won't mind if you have one of the new dresses I was going to take back for her.'

The thought of a new dress and 'loads of food' was enough to convince Tia of the idea. She knew she could handle herself and her stomach was screaming at her to take the offer – it hadn't been fed since yesterday morning.

The little girl nodded, she then waited outside the 7/11 and watched as George filled a basket full of food designed to entice children and then she followed him back to his hotel. He spoke the whole way back but she wasn't entirely sure what he was saying. All the time his voice sang a lullaby and her quiet 'yeses' and nods of her head seemed more than enough to keep George happy.

The hotel was less grand than Tia had hoped. Every day she would gaze into the gleaming hotel lobbies of Manila's ubiquitous five-star hotels. She would see the finely dressed tourists and wish she could, just once, go into the hotel and enjoy its grandeur.

The lobby she followed George into belonged to a budget class hotel that didn't have a star rating. They walked past the two coffee tables that had been placed outside the building and saw a further five inside. At each, a man, resembling George in many ways, held court. Each smoked; which over the years must have caused the thick yellow staining on the walls, and with each sat a smiling bar girl, doing her best to seem interested in whatever was being said.

George smiled at the girl on reception, who didn't return the gesture and only briefly looked up from her magazine long enough to offer him his room key.

They climbed the three flights to George's room. It was an act of exercise that once again took all George's breath, and entered the tiny double room.

'Sorry... it's... a... bit... small,' George offered. He was leaning against the bathroom door, trying to calm his breathing. Inside Tia could see a shower had been placed over the toilet and she wondered how you were meant to clean yourself in a room so impractical. Still, she couldn't remember the last time she had washed and she wasn't sure if she'd ever taken a shower.

'I'll get myself cleaned up and you can dig into this stuff.' George moved over to the bed, and emptied out the contents of the carrier bag. Chocolate bars, cola and crisps tumbled onto the bed, and Tia could hardly contain her excitement at the feast that lay ahead.

'Tuck in, you pretty little thing, and I'll be back in a second.' Tia didn't notice George lock the door and remove the key, she didn't even notice George go off to take a shower – she was gripped by hunger and George had bought enough food to keep her busy for hours, well at least ten minutes, but certainly long enough for George to get cleaned up.

'I see you're enjoying that,' George said, fresh from the shower. He hadn't dressed; instead he had a red bath towel

wrapped tightly around his waist. The little girl looked up at his fat sagging body, the gray hair that seemed to cover him like a woollen overcoat, and doubted that a hotel such as this, had supplied such a luxurious towel. But any thoughts of George's near nakedness soon passed as there was still food to eat.

As she opened her third chocolate bar, her eyes followed George to where he was now fishing inside his suitcase. He had two large, leather cases. They were well used and their worn texture reminded Tia of the old woman who had earlier caused the bruise on her face.

The case he was rummaging through was filled with girls' clothes. He seemed to be looking through the labels, as if they weren't all the same size. Tia didn't understand why George might need girl's clothes in a range of sizes; the question never entered her head. Instead, she just watched and hoped that soon enough one of the pretty, flowery dresses would be presented to her.

She didn't have to wait long. 'What about this one, a pretty dress for a pretty girl,' George said as he held up a bright white dress covered in vibrant red flowers.

'For me?' Tia asked without waiting for her mouth to empty of chocolate.

'It is, but you can't wear it until you've cleaned up. Finish eating then you can go take a shower and get changed.

The little girl looked at what remained of the food, then back at the bright new dress. She then stuffed in one more mouthful of chocolate and pushed the rest of the food to one side.

George handed her the dress and after showing her how the shower worked he left her to it.

Thick lumps of dirt streamed down the little girl's body as she applied handful after handful of the rose scented shower gel George had given her. She scrubbed at her skin, having to scrape at parts of herself to free up the oily muck. Her body feeling clean she moved onto her hair and after three washes it regained a hair-like texture rather than that of old matted dreadlocks.

Finally, Tia just let the warm water pour over her. Her skin was a colour she hadn't seen for a long time and her hair smelt like nothing she'd ever experienced.

'Are you ok in there?' George asked, his accompanying knock reminding Tia where she was.

‘Fine, soon finish,’ Tia called through the door and then, after reluctantly turning the shower off, she quickly dried herself and put on her new dress. Sadly there was no mirror in the bathroom. Looking down at herself, Tia could see she looked nice but she really wanted to see the dress in all its glory.

She rushed out of the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. George got off the bed and stood behind her – he had pulled on a pair of jeans, but still wasn’t fully dressed.

‘You look stunning, a picture of beauty!’

Tia had to agree, the dress fitted her gaunt frame perfectly. Her freshly scrubbed face looked rosy, and the cut the old woman had left had cleaned up to barely anything.

George took a step back and sat then sat down on the bed, he then lugged his large frame up the bed until his back was against the headboard. ‘Why don’t you come and sit up here with me and finish the food?’ he said, nodding to his side and then to the bed’s side table where he’d moved the food.

Tia took one last look at herself in the mirror and then took the place at George’s side. She took a bag of crisps and, carefully this time, so not to make a mess of the dress, she began to eat.

The food was on the table at the side of Tia. This allowed George to reach across the little girl when he took food. He did this repeatedly, first for a chocolate bar, then for some crisps then for a cola. Each time, he rested his hand on Tia's shoulder, just for a second, but, each time, the little girl froze until the hand had been removed.

When George moved his hand for a fourth time, he didn't bother going for food, he just placed it on Tia's shoulder. 'You don't mind if I rest my hand here do you?' he asked.

Tia wanted to say that she did mind but there was still food left and she didn't want to upset him and have him take everything back.

His hand settled on her shoulder, George took his free hand and placed it on Tia's knee 'inacey wincey spider, climbed up the spout... one step, two steps...' as he spoke, George walked two of his fingers up Tia's leg, he walked them up past her skirt line and nearly to the top of her thigh. As he got to 'and tickley under there,' he jumped his fingers from a few centimetres below the child's groin up to her armpits in an attempt to make her laugh.

Tia forced a laugh. It was that or scream.

'Did you like that?' George asked. He smiled down at the small child. Long white hairs clogged his nose like dirty pieces of cotton wool. As he spoke Tia felt his breath on her face, it smelt like the first breath she had taken that morning, but without the church women's perfume.

'Don't like being touched,' Tia said. She reached for more chocolate; she was getting ready to run for the door and wanted to take some of the delicious food with her.

George reached down, put his hand on Tia's thigh and said, 'oh, you don't have to worry about me little one. I'm not going to hurt you.' As he spoke his little finger slid up and down the little girl's thigh. It pushed against the beauty of the dress, moving slowly upwards.

Tia didn't bother flinching this time, nor did she bother screaming. Instead, with a movement that startled George, she leap from the bed and ran for the door. In seconds she was there, yanking on the handle, pulling with all her tiny might, desperate to be free from the sickness she knew was coming.

The door didn't open. This time Tia screamed, 'help me, someone please help me.'

‘Tia, there’s no need for this.’ George was behind her. His mammoth frame blocked out what little light was entering the boxy room.

‘Let me go!’ Tia screamed.

George wrapped his fingers tightly around Tia’s arm, ‘come, sit down, we haven’t finished.’ He dragged the screaming girl over to the bed. She was flaying wildly, trying her best to punch and kick her way free. But her actions proved useless. Her tiny frame shook like a rag doll as George dragged her onto the bed. He pushed her forward and with one hand pinned her to the bed by her chest.

‘Please don’t do this,’ Tia said, for the first time anger giving way to tears.

‘Don’t worry, pretty Tia; this will be over soon enough. It’ll be easier if you don’t struggle.’ With his free hand George worked his fingers up and under the white flowery dress.

‘Is this because I tried to steal the collection money?’ Tia sobbed. ‘Please, I didn’t mean any harm. Please!’

George didn’t answer. His mind was full of purpose. He placed one knee at either side of Tia’s and moved his free hand from her thigh to his zipper. Tia screamed, this couldn’t

be happening. She raked her hands up towards George's eyes but he just pulled his head away and glared at the tiny girl. His face instilled fear, enough that she left his face alone and looked around for another means of escape.

She reached out, trying to find anything to use against her attacker. Her hands found the bedside table and fell on a heavy lamp. George fought with his zipper, losing his breath as he yanked at his jeans trying to pull them down to his knees. As he paused for a second to catch his breath, Tia moved her fingers up and over the thick base of the lamp. When she eventually reached the lamp's slender neck she wrapped her tiny hand around the heavy object. Then without hesitation, and empowered by anger, panic and fear she mustered all her strength, and smashed the lamp into the side of her attacker's head. The lamp shattered, cutting into George's head. Chunks of blue pottery covered the bed and floor, leaving only a handful of lamp left in Tia's hand.

George cried out in pain and fell to the floor. As he fell he grabbed Tia's dress and dragged her after him. Scared that the blow hadn't done enough damage, Tia fought to free herself. George held on and pulled them both to the ground. But as the fat man's body hit the white tiled floor, his head smashed backwards and the tiles finished the work the lamp had started.

George's dead body filled the space between the bed and the window. Tia, afraid to move, lay still on top of the fat man. She looked at his eyes. They had fallen back in his head, leaving only the whites to stare at her and accuse. George's body shook in death and then released his bowels, an action that mixed the stench of digested matter with the coppery smell of the blood that had formed a pool around the George's head.

Tia lay on top of near naked man, her tiny body lost against his flattened gut. As her senses started to return, the little girl realised where she was, she looked down at the man she'd killed and screamed as she pushed herself backwards and off his body. She kept moving backwards until a wall stopped her retreat, at which point she pulled her knees into her body, wrapped her hands tightly around them and rocked backwards and forwards.

She shut her eyes tight, praying that when she reopened them, she would be back lying with her mother. She would have never tried to steal from the church, and this day would never have happened. But when, eventually, she opened her eyes, George was still lying there in all his dead glory. Tia looked at the wound on his temple. Bits of lamp jutted out from the gash. Her eyes moved down his body. He'd managed to get his jeans and pants down to his knees. His weapon of choice was still hard. It rested against his stomach – twitching slightly.

The little girl cried. She lifted her hands to her face to cover her eyes but as she brought her hands up near her nose the coppery smell grew stronger. She looked at her hands, they were covered in blood. Some sticky, some still wet, still flowing. The pieces of lamp she'd yet to drop had cut deeply and only with this realisation came the pain the wounds deserved. Tia winced and cried some more.

She didn't know what to do. She wanted to run, but where could she go. She couldn't leave like this, covered in blood. She could change and go but George was a white man, a tourist. They would hunt her down.

'But, I didn't do anything,' Tia thought. The words screamed inside her head, they even formed on her lips but she dared not say them aloud - she knew they stood for nothing. Her mother had told her many times that she wasn't important, that none of the street people were.

Tia thought of her mother, wondered if she ran back to her if she could sort this all out. But the thought almost brought a laugh to the doomed girl's lips. Her mother was a drunk and if Tia even found her sober, all she would do was dish out a beating, and then whisk her off to the police to see if there was a reward.

Tia felt empty, alone. Her hand was bleeding freely now, dripping crimson onto the white tiles. She looked at the large shard of lamp she still held in her hand and saw a way out – the only way out.

She tried to think of her future, try to find some hope. But she could see nothing but misery. Her past had been hand-to-mouth. A constant battle to find food, keep the wandering hands of tramps at bay and survive through the night. She had often wished that the tranquillity of sleep would hold her in its grasp forever, and now knew that her only way out was to fall into its all encompassing darkness. A permanent sleep, free of the world and the hate it had forced upon her.

Picking up the makeshift knife Tia cut deep across the veins of her left wrist, and then quickly before the pain got too great, she repeated the process across her right. She was numb, and had hardly felt the blade cutting through her flesh. Her mind had given up, and as she rested her arms on her knees and watched the blood start to flow, she let her mind drift off to another place.

Tia was in her pretty dress, she was being led into one of the five- star hotels. Her feet were bare and the marble floor felt cold and clean under her feet. She looked around. There were plush settees covered in luxurious fabrics that just begged to be relaxed in. Everyone was smiling. The woman

behind the huge teak reception desk knew her name – Miss Tia – the smiling lady used it as she offered Tia the key to her room.

But as the life drained out of the little girl, hell came calling.

A flare of brilliant light flashed across Tia's mind and cleared away the images of the hotel. She was now outside the church; the scenes from earlier today about to play out. She heard the old woman's voice scream that she would go to hell. And, as the last vestiges of life drained out of her body, Tia saw hell – a final vision of a beaten and wasted life.

Move
