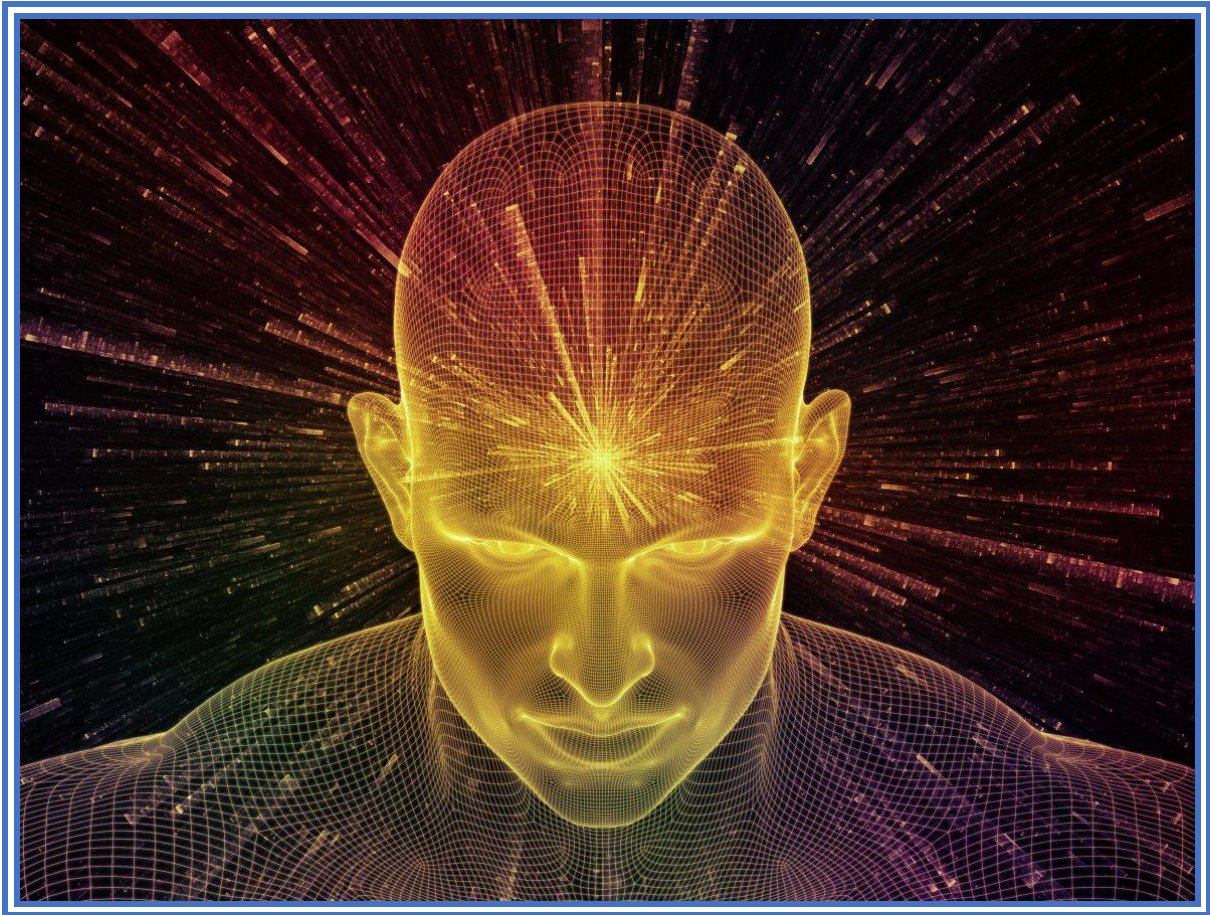


Shadows of my Mind



Richard Lawrence

Edition 4

Introduction

This book is made up of small and large vignettes; some are true to the events and others originate from my imagination – I will let the reader decide, which is fact and which is fiction.

Any likeness to actual persons, either living or dead, is strictly coincidental. The author shall not be held liable or responsible to any person or entity with respect to any loss or incidental or consequential damages caused, or alleged to have been caused, directly or indirectly, by the information contained herein.

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This Book is for Charity

This book has been written for charity and if you find it interesting, please consider a small donation to my charity of choice, [‘The Sick Kids Friends Foundation’](#) who support the Royal Hospital for Sick Children (RHSC) in Edinburgh which was the first children's hospital in Scotland. It was built on its present site in Sciennes Road, Edinburgh in 1895 and opened by HRH Princess Beatrice of York, the granddaughter of Queen Victoria. The current patron is HRH Princess Beatrice of York, granddaughter of Queen Elizabeth II. Every year over 100,000 children pass through the doors of the hospital, ranging in age from just a few hours old to aged 16 in some specialities. The majority of the patients come from Edinburgh, the Lothians and Fife, but the hospital treats children from all over Scotland.

Acknowledgment

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The Doll

I had watched the documentary on the television and I could not quite believe that a society could openly and without any form of criticism, accept them. Not only them but the men that embraced them. I sat back with my brandy, switched off the television and put on a vinyl record. I thought Strauss would be ideal for mediation and as usual, my mind drifted off into another world.

It had become the custom in Japan for men to take up with dolls, even the married ones. The birth rate had been falling for years as many young men preferred a doll rather than the hassle of marriage and children. Many old men who were widowed and even some who were married, preferred a doll as a companion.

Of course, these were no ordinary dolls, they were human size and beautifully adorned with sparkling eyes, gorgeous hair and all the correct bits; if you know what I mean? Akihiro was in his late fifties and he slept in a separate room and bed from his wife. Their relationship was not strained, as it had become more of a friendship, rather than a love match. Those days had passed, although he still demanded the odd sexual liaison with her; much to her annoyance. Therefore, when Akihiro asked Emica, his wife, if he could purchase a doll, she obliged his request. Afterall, there was no female competition and if he wanted to have sex with the doll, well, that was okay, because it saved her the trouble of having to perform with him.

Together they visited the Japanese adult doll shop in Tokyo and chose a lovely dark-haired one with sparkling blue eyes and from the racks of clothes they purchased a few outfits for her. They also bought a wheelchair which was specially designed for dolls and they dressed her and wheeled her out into the street. Not one head turned as they pushed Koharu, the name for the doll, along the street to their home. In the days and weeks that followed, Akihiro spent more of his time with Koharu and although they slept together, his wife did not seem to mind.

It was a very happy relationship and the three of them would often go for walks in the city, to the park and even to the cinema. Emica was delighted with the arrangement but then she worked in a department store and for several years had been having an affair with her manager, a younger man called Hideyoshi. To this day, her husband, Akihiro, thinks that the doll was his idea but actually, it was his wife's all along.

On Your Bike

In retirement, life was so boring. I had done the 'around the world' thing and now back home I could not seem to find contentment. I missed the cut and thrust of my earlier life, the exposure to danger,

and the adrenalin punch. It was all so negative and I considered that I might only have a few years left – perish the thought of eventually going out in a whimper and me being only 65 years old.

However, one night, I found my favourite DVD and I watched ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ again, a movie of the great warrior in World War 1 and his eventual death whilst riding a motorcycle. It gave me an idea, I had to find something positive to do, a project that would provide that adrenalin punch, something that could act as a core to everything else.

I had to change and I did, I threw off the negative outlook, enjoyed motorbike lessons for 3 months with all their social interaction and passed my test. The same day as my test, I sat on a brand new 1255cc sports motorcycle and rode it out of the bike shop; the same shop that had provided the lessons.

Have you ever ridden a horse at full gallop, experienced the sheer power of the animal and your eyes water as the air strikes you? Well, I have and the next best thing is a motorcycle; it delivers a great sense of freedom and danger. The exhilaration you get, heightens your senses and brings with it an awareness that you are more alive and yet exposed to potential death.

The motorbike opened up a door to a new life for me; I guess all that was missing was that adrenalin punch that I had enjoyed in my youth.

The Metaverse

I had completed my research on the subject and collated my thoughts as to the future. As usual, my mind drifted.

George Plummer was naked apart from an adult nappy. The room in his penthouse flat in London was warm as he slowly lowered his huge 20 stone body down onto a weary bed which complained with a loud creaking noise. George put on his virtual reality headset and lay back on a dirty pillow. He smiled as his eyes and brain automatically entered the internet and onto his chosen virtual city; one of many in a virtual world. So far, Los Angeles, London, New York, Paris and Mumbai had been established and each by different well known tech companies. Every month, another virtual city (in reality a website) was added to the Metaverse. Google supplied the search engine to establish a link for the consumer. Once the consumer entered a virtual city they could travel virtually to another city, very much like in the physical world, but at internet speed.

George used his microphone and built-in headphones on his VR headset to give voice and hearing to his avatar, which was an ebony coloured 20-year-old, 6-foot gorgeous, brown eyed, female called Samantha with an awesome slim body. Yes, George was a transgender and he was in the Metaverse as Samantha for some fun. In his virtual world, he entered a fantastic Los Angeles with its hyper tube

transport, some thirty feet of the ground, which looped around massive skyscrapers. Digital adverts were all around, on billboards, on the sides of buildings, in fact almost anywhere they could be placed by the tech companies for corporate profit. They flashed up on video screens, and constantly changed their content, to draw the eye of the consumer. On the main broad pedestrian street, there were hundreds of beautiful slim people, and in avatar form, they were socialising together. Some were in the malls shopping and others were sitting at outdoor restaurants and bars.

Back in their homes, their human forms drank and ate to add to the social simulation and stimulation. Samantha waved across the street at some friends and continued to the hyper tube station. Along with others, she sat in a canister, on opulent red leather seats, and was whisked away in the tube at a fantastic speed. Within seconds she had arrived at the Biden Centre, a virtual skyscraper set high on a hill overlooking the city. It stood on the old site of the Hollywood sign and within its walls was a luxury hotel, office spaces and a shopping mall.

Samantha alighted from her cannister and taking the lift, she entered the mall. She briefly stopped to play a Ladbrokes virtual slot machine which was standing near the lift doors. Her hand tapped the payment window and she pulled the lever. Back at his home, George's right hand motioned her movements in mid-air. He was delighted to see through his VR headset that Samantha had won 5 digital bitcoins. A few moments later, his VR headset popped up a second window to his eyes and he saw that his Ladbrokes winnings had been digitally transferred to his digital bitcoin wallet.

Samantha left the slot machine and out of curiosity visited the JP Morgan Chase Lounge where she was greeted by a roaming digital tiger and a digital portrait of the bank's CEO, Jamie Dimon. There was a presentation on the economics of crypto currency but she decided to give it a pass. She left and entered a virtual Amazon supermarket. The shelves were full of virtual foodstuffs, tech gadgets, watches, jewellery, clothes; in fact, everything and virtually anything you could wish for. Samantha used her wrist embedded chip and tapped her hand on the items she required, especially a large cream cake. Samantha selected her food, a new watch and a package of adult nappies.

Back at his home, George's bed was still groaning under his weight but a short time later a robot air drone arrived with his Amazon order and placed his goods in the delivery tube to his house. George smiled, as he heard his order swish through the tube into his kitchen. He shouted for Janice his housewife robot to open it up and bring him the cream cake. George remained in his virtual world with his VR headset on and having left the supermarket, his avatar Samantha took the outside glass lift to the 250th floor and enjoyed the incredible view of Los Angeles and the various virtual backdrops. In the west, she could see a virtual volcano spewing red lava high up into the air and down to a beautiful blue sea. In the east, there were mountains, their sides covered with green forests of trees flanking many meadows where gorgeous flowers of many colours raised their heads in the green grass. Finally, the lift stopped and Samantha entered her office.

She waved at her fellow workers, their avatars sitting at virtual desks. She enjoyed the banter, some jovial remarks and then Samantha sat down at her vdesk to work for the next 4 hours. She enjoyed her job, which was to programme software for a new range of housewife and pleasure robots that the Musk Corporation was developing. Samantha typed away on her virtual keyboard while George lay at home on his bed, his fingers tapping thin air while pausing only to scoff the huge cream cake that Janice had brought him from his Amazon delivery.

Her work finished, Samantha left her office and headed to the hotel reception; meanwhile, back with George, his VR headset popped up a second window to his eyes and he saw that his days wages from the Musk Corporation had been sent to his bitcoin wallet.

Samantha booked a virtual room at reception and met up with her boyfriend in the foyer. His name was Rodger, a handsome 6-foot 'Greek God' of a man with a body to die for. His white skin glistened and his blue eyes sparkled their approval of Samantha's body. They had met up a few days before at the 'Zuckerberg Facebook Metaverse Cinema' which was based in virtual London. They had discovered the location by searching the Metaverse using Google. Both had enjoyed a virtual movie 'The Metaverse World According to Jeff Bezos' and conversation at the bar, where Rodger had tweaked Samantha's bottom; not a crime in the Metaverse.

Of course, and in reality, Rodger was actually a female called Ismitta, an 8 stone black transgender who lived in a wooden shack in downtown Johannesburg, in South Africa. Samantha and Rodger went up in the lift to their room and enjoyed a few drinks from the room's fridge before undressing and taking to the bed.

What their avatars got up to in that hotel room, is anyone's guess, but I know what their human forms got up to in their individual bedrooms in London and Johannesburg. It wasn't just drink to add to their avatar's simulation and stimulation.

A Meeting with Marion

When my mind is active, perhaps after reading a book or writing a story, I often find it difficult to unwind at night and sleep usually eludes me.

I travelled to Southern California to a time just after his bodysurfing accident and when he had started with Fox. He was sitting on a small wall outside Studio 1 and smoking a cigarette. I had always admired him, despite some of his faults, which were few. I said, *"hello, can I sit beside you for a while, I am kind of tired."* He smiled and ushered me down on the wall. He questioned, *"what film are you in old timer?"* I laughed, *"I like that phrase and you being older than me."* He looked puzzled and questioned, *"come on, you are not wearing makeup, you must be in your seventies, at least?"*

He was young, slim and very tall and smiled a lot. I smiled back and before any more questions were raised, I offered him a cigarette out of my pack of Marlboro. He took one and I told him to keep the pack as a memento of my visit. Again, he was puzzled and taking the pack, he said, *"Marlboro, I smoke them."* I said, *"I know you do, but why don't you read the warning on the front?"* He started to read out loud, *"warning, smoking causes 92% of oral cancers, quit now."* He quickly followed up, *"when did they start putting this on the packs, mine don't have warnings?"* I smiled and replied, *"the warning notices on the Marlboro cigarettes first appeared in the early part of the 21st Century."*

Before he could utter another word, I went on, *"whatever you do, never make a film in Utah after they have test dropped the atomic bombs, because the ground will be radioactive and some of the cast gets cancer, including you; although your smoking might also cause it?"* He was just about to speak, when I interrupted him, *"I must go Mr Wayne and please pay heed to the warning on the Marlboro pack."*

I still could not sleep but visiting John Wayne in my imagination had helped, perhaps a visit to Steve McQueen on the set of 'The Magnificent Seven' might ease my insomnia?

Tramps and Beggars

I was in Edinburgh, Scotland the other day and enjoyed a walk around with my camera and indulged in some street photography, which is a hobby of mine. As usual, I was on the lookout for a subject, shot in monochrome and inspired by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Of course, it was all in vain; no inspiring subject appeared. I was amazed at the number of beggars lying on the pavement in Princes Street and some had dogs. Times have changed because back in the 1960s that would never have been allowed by the police but these days the 'Chief Constable' in charge of the police force is controlled by the ruling council, who turns a blind eye to beggars on the street. In the 1960s, tramps were allowed to walk the street as long as they did not stop to beg and many a kind policeman slipped a pound note into a tramp's hand as they walked past each other.

Constable Turner was on his 1st hourly turn around his beat, a turn which had designated streets to walk within an hour and his primary functions were to prevent crime and protect lives and property. Afterwards, at his police box, he would ring in to the station to confirm he had indeed completed his 1st hourly turn and that he was still alive. The 2nd hourly turn followed with more designated streets and he knew that his sergeant was likely to visit him in his car to make sure his duties were being completed. Lying on the pavement, he saw a beggar with a cup in his hand but Turner felt sorry for the man and simply walked past and continued on his way.

A short time later, his sergeant drew up alongside him as he walked along his designated route and the one-sided conversation went like this: *"Well Turner, what the hell are you doing here, you should*

be 100 yards further on in your 1st hourly turn. I saw a beggar lying on the pavement on your beat, what the hell are you playing at. If we allow one, there will be more and then even more, so lock him up and set the proper example to the rest. You know the law, if he is lying begging with no money on him or in his cup, lock him up under 'The Vagrancy Act' and if there is money in his cup, lock him up under 'The Beggar Act'. Get a grip man and clear those bloody winos away from Castle Terrace, they are lying on the benches drinking cheap wine and annoying the public."

After the sergeant drove off, Turner went to his police box, phoned for a van and locked up the man lying begging on the pavement.

Today, the beat system has gone and many of the police boxes in Edinburgh have been turned into tiny cafes, serving coffee.

The Record Player

I was in-between wives and feeling great; I grabbed my camera and headed into the city for some lunch and some street photography. I had come to the conclusion that a wife was not worth the hassle. Once they get to know you, they want to change you.

Women by their very nature are usually submissive to a man in a relationship, however they will use guile to attempt to change him into their way of thinking whilst forgetting that a man, who was once a boy, was brought up by another woman who may have had different ways in handling his nature. A newly married man is a bit like a dog; confused by a new owner that does not understand his ways.

Anyway, there I was in the National Museum of Scotland, when I sensed a female creeping up behind me. She whispered in my right ear, "*hi, what are you doing?*" I turned around and told her I was taking a picture of a record player in a glass cabinet. I figured it was my posh clothes that had drawn her in; like a spider. I must admit, I was a bit startled because her nose was level with mine, she was one hell of a tall woman.

It turned out she was recently widowed, some 2 years back and we hit it off; I mean we really hit it off. It lasted 6 months, which was great; she was very intelligent and studied philosophy, art, spoke Greek fluently and played classical music on her piano. She had a nude painting of herself on a wall in her house which she promised to give to me, but she never did. She hooked up with a rich Greek guy whilst on holiday abroad and eventually went to live with him in Athens. The last I heard, she had dumped the Greek guy and had married a Serbian, 10 years younger than herself – very nice!

Yorgan

I was standing in my field and watching the planes coming into land at Edinburgh Airport. They approached down the Forth Estuary. I could see as many as three in a line, stretching way back into the far distance. Their front landing lights were shining bright white beams which made them look like alien spacecraft in the dark night sky.

Suddenly, his Starship gently descended, and with no lights on, it had remained completely undetected. Coming from outer space at an unimaginable speed was no mean feat, especially as he had to slow down to enter the earth's atmosphere and land. A door opened and briefly, the light from inside, lit up the grass.

The door closed and there he stood in all his splendour at over 7 feet tall; a florescent and almost transparent slim body with two massive yellow eyes set in a splendid head which matched his body in a wonderous blue glow. His head was smooth like a billiard ball, his ears were two tiny slits which matched his nose and a straight mouth, another slit without lips. He was naked and yet there were no genitals and his bottom was non-existent as his legs merely extended straight down from his body and his feet were formed like rounded flippers. His arms were slender and long, and each hand consisted of three long fingers and a large thumb.

I greeted him, *"welcome Yorgan, my friend, did you have a good trip?"* He smiled and replied, *"it did not take long. Proxima Centauri to Earth takes very little time, thanks to my new Xeron powered drive. Yes, travelling thirty trillion of your earth miles takes no time at all."* I led him up the field and we entered my house where we sat down to a nice cup of tea and biscuits. We chatted about Albert Einstein, a subject that often came up and with some amusement from my guest. Yorgan laughed, *"the thought of that fellow Einstein always tickles me; him with his absurd theory of relativity and the physical constraints of light speed. I guess I am being a bit harsh, after all my race is several billion years ahead of yours; so, his theories and miscalculations are only to be expected."*

I questioned, *"will you ever provide the earthlings with the knowledge of space travel, a means of traversing the entire universe in days?"* We sat down to enjoy a smoke and I offered him my St Bruno Flake tobacco which he fed into his pipe; and as the smoke came out of his mouth, he nodded his approval. Eventually, he spoke, *"you know as well as I, that we will continue to monitor them, contain them, and I suspect they might eventually succeed in a trip to Mars but that is all. However, they can never be allowed beyond their own solar system, that is the ruling."*

We enjoyed our smoke together and then I bade him farewell as his spaceship gently lifted from the ground, engaged its Xeron powered drive and in a flash, disappeared into the darkness of the night sky and out into the universe towards the stars. I smiled as I took in the wonder of it all.

The Open Road

The dawn broke and it was a warm summer's Sunday morning. Outside the birds were chirping and my favourite red breasted robin was in full song, trying to outdo all the others. I lay there for a while and wondered if it would really be a nice day as the weathermen had forecast? It was 5am and the sun was rising; so, I rose and showered.

After breakfast, I went outside to fill up the bird feeders but they were still full, the birds were in the trees and bushes, especially my fir trees, catching all the insects to feed their young. Nearby, I could see the sparrow hawk but he was having a poor time hunting; my garden offered enough close foliage cover to deter his flight attack. A little wren was able to traverse the entire garden area from bush to bush without breaking cover.

I changed into my motorcycle clothes and boots, a no mean task. It was the one thing I disliked about motorbiking; the hassle and the time it took to put on protective gear. There I stood like some mean machine ready for war; my body armour neatly concealed in the clothing at the shoulders, the elbows, the knees and especially a huge piece, running down the back of my spine, inside my jacket. On went the backpack, the full-face helmet and I headed for the garage. I nodded to a passing neighbour, who questioned, *"what one today, Richard, the black one or the white one?"* I replied, *"I think I will take out the black one, I feel the need for speed."*

I lay across her and she fired into life, her exhausts throbbing with anticipation. I smiled and together we quietly rolled along the village street at around 10 mile per hour. I entered onto the main road and made short bursts of acceleration in my attempts to heat up her tyres for the main event. I stopped at the roundabout to the slip road and blipped the throttle to clear her throat. A woman in a car beside me, gave me a disapproving look. The traffic lights changed to green and we were off down the slip; the front wheel of the bike was just a few millimetres of the ground and as we entered the dual carriageway, we were in full flight.

A couple of miles up the road the entire dual carriageway was blocked in both lanes by a huge queue of vehicles that seemed to stretch on forever into the far distance. Not a problem, I selected 2nd gear, dropped the speed to 20 miles per hour and rode her between the two lanes of stationary cars and lorries. My eyes were constantly scanning for any wrong move made by vehicles and many simply moved further over, especially the lorry drivers who were always courteous. Eventually, after a short while, I emerged ahead of the queue onto the Dalkeith Roundabout to see an empty dual carriageway in front of me.

The traffic lights changed to green and I opened her up; my left foot quickly flicking the quick shifter to change up the gears as the rev counter hit red. She picked up her front wheel, the traction control

maintaining the slight lift from the roadway. The twin Arrow exhausts roared their approval and the open road beckoned.

Fate

I watched as my sister-in-law's coffin was driven into the crematorium car park in the back of a beautiful black hearse. She had died of a sudden heart attack whilst on a holiday in Italy. Her husband, my brother-in-law, has passed away 5 years previously of cancer and their son had passed over 34 years ago at the age of five; he suffered from an immune disorder as a result of injections for a holiday in Africa. Some years after the boy died, I witnessed my brother-in-law and his wife sitting in the back of a limousine with two small white coffins on their laps; inside were babies, both still-born.

Life is indeed strange and why does fate demand that a man who has led a moral life and who is extremely wealthy, is subjected to so much grief through the deaths of his young son, his two babies and then dies a relatively young man; followed very shortly by his wife. How is it that other people experience life without much incident; perhaps the odd mishap, like a parent passing in old age but nothing unexpected? Then there are those, who for no comprehensible reason, rise, fall and rise again. It prompted a short story which lingered for a long time in the shadows of my mind.

Alphonse Daudet Beaulieu was at a loss; his whole world was crumbling around him. Sitting alone in his Parisian home, he wept; an empty bottle of Grand Marnier Cordon Rouge sat on a table and he held an empty glass in his hand. He was very drunk and as he rose to go to the bathroom, he fell over and struck his head on the table and fell to the floor unconscious; the glass rolled away. Alphonse was an only son without any family of his own but he had relatives, not that they cared about him, they were too busy living their lives.

When he was born, his mother had named him after the French writer, Alphonse Daudet; a man she greatly admired. His father had died that year of consumption and being a single parent, his mother raised him in her house in Paris, which was rented. In 1905, his mother died after developing breast cancer. In 1910, Alphonse met his wife at the opera and after a short courtship, they married and continued to live in his mother's home.

France was experiencing difficult times; it was now 1915 and the 1st World War was in progress and claiming thousands of lives. The newspapers were full with news about the ongoing battles, the number of fatalities and it made for grim reading. Alphonse, who was too old to be called up to fight remained at home. His wife, Annette, whose occupation was a violinist in the famous Palais Garnier opera house had passed away that year due to childbirth and the baby had also died. She was only

35 years of age. He had been a pianist in the Palais Garnier and now, thanks to his alcoholism, he had been dismissed from the orchestra.

Alphonse woke up and staggered to a chair, the blood on his cheek from the cut to his forehead was dry and his head had stopped bleeding. He sat down and gazed through the rain-soaked window into the far distance at the Eiffel Tower. Outside a storm was brewing and the wind and rain lashed the streets of Paris. It is said that even strong-willed men are the first to take to alcohol when enduring grief or any form of negative disposition. Alphonse, certainly fitted the bill; he was a well-built man and the whites of his eyes had turned a jaundice yellow. He crossed the room to his drinks cabinet and opening another bottle of Grand Marnier Cordon Rouge liqueur he poured it neat into a tall glass and clutching the bottle, he returned to the chair at the window. As he drank, tears formed in his eyes and they merged into his vision with the rain drops on the window pane.

It was inevitable that he would be ejected from his home for failing to pay his rent and his furnishings were taken as payment to offset the debt. Alphonse found himself alone and destitute on the streets of Paris. He spent his days wandering the city and his nights sleeping rough under the bridges of the river Seine. The bottle of Grand Marnier Cordon Rouge was replaced with bottles of cheap wine which he drank along with other men of equal disposition. They were funded through begging and petty theft, mainly pickpocketing wallets at the train stations. Slowly but surely, a gang of thieves formed under the bridges at the Seine and Alphonse, who had become quite adept at physical violence, found that his status had risen amongst his fellows. One night, in the late October of 1916, a Corsican immigrant appeared and made himself known. He was a well-dressed, well-built man in his fifties; who stood tall and spoke with a commanding voice. He was seeking men to assist him in a bank job; he required lookouts to be positioned outside the bank. Alphonse volunteered along with some other men.

The underworld beckoned and after the successful bank robbery, he was retained by the 'Corsican Mafia'. They dried him out by placing him in a padded room; under guard. He endured many days and nights of sweating, shivering and hallucinations which racked his mental and physical being. Eventually, the delirium tremens subsided. They dressed him in fine clothes, fed him well in up market restaurants and moulded him to their way of thinking. Given a second chance and thereafter, Alphonse drank only coffee, instead of alcohol and he developed a natural gift for logistics and planning. He portrayed a cold, hard and ruthless individual cloaked in a heavily muscular frame and quickly found himself working as an assassin to Paulu Luciani, the leader, known as Don Luciani. The Mafia had groups controlled by other Dons in Marseille, Grenoble and Lyon. Private meetings between the Dons were held every six months at the Hotel Lutetia, a luxury hotel in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés region of Paris. Alphonse attended at these meetings with Don Luciani where

decisions were made regarding their criminal operations, promotions and new staffing appointments; mainly Mafia foot soldiers.

By 1918 and the end of World War 1, the Corsican Mafia had expanded their criminal activities to include, prostitution, bank robbery, control of betting, the fencing of stolen goods, smuggling and hijacking lorries. Parisian subordinate gangs would be allowed to continue in petty crime and pay a levy, a percentage of their criminal gains to Don Luciani. These smaller gangs provided a recruitment source and Alphonse, now the main enforcer, had no regret in shooting anyone who stepped out of line. He usually took great pains to plan the execution and shoot them in the forehead between the top of the eyes and the hairline, which meant instant death. His orders came directly from Paulu Luciani and as the years passed and the executions rose, Alphonse enjoyed all the luxuries of wealth; plenty of money, beautiful clothes, a fine automobile and a grand Parisian flat but he chose to remain single, despite his many dalliances with females.

Once a man becomes at ease with his day-to-day life and standard of living, things for no apparent reason start to fall apart. Lurking in the background was his nemesis, which was alcohol, and whether he was enduring grief for the loss of his wife and child or living high on the luxuries of life, it was ready to strike. Once he fell back into his old ways and rekindled his taste for alcohol, Don Luciani had to take steps. Alphonse had become a liability, a threat to the organisation and one cold night in Paris, his body was found under a bridge at the river Seine with a bullet hole in his forehead.

Fate weaves intricate strands throughout our lives and for some unfathomable reason we seem to have little control over it.

The Crab

I was sitting in a restaurant in York with my girlfriend Carol and I was scanning the menu. The starters were very appealing until one in particular caught my eye. It read, 'Crab Meat with Avocado Cream' and was described as 'delicately sweet crab meat is well partnered by a voluptuous avocado cream and a zesty lemongrass vinaigrette'. Suddenly, from the shadows of my mind, a memory came forth and in reflection, I re-visited Cockenzie Harbour where I played as a child.

I did not hear it scream; I was far too young at 5 years old to even think of such things. I had been with my friends down behind the harbour wall at low tide and I could hear them scuttling inside the large holes in the wall. Not my friends, the crabs. I inserted a long piece of hooked wire and waited for one to grab hold. Success, I pulled it clear and grabbed its rear legs to hold it in my hand and avoid those front claws which were making snapping noises as they viciously opened and closed.

Its little eyes were watering, I don't know if they were tears at being caught or just some sea water from its little pool inside the wall? I was too young to even think of such things. My grandfather was a seaman and he taught me that I could eat all the crab except the part inside the main shell; I often wondered if it was true because I always gave him the cooked shell part. Anyway, we obtained a few clean paint tins from the boat builders' yard and built a fire on the rocky shore.

I filled my tin with seawater and left it to boil. I always wondered just how the paint came out of such tins and left no residue; perhaps the yellow metal of the tins had something to do with it? The water boiled and I popped my crab into it. Within a short time, its shell turned bright red and it was soon able to be removed, cooled a bit and then the claws, and the legs stripped and the crab meat eaten. I had a pin in my collar which I used to pick out the inside of winkles which we collected in the harbour and cooked along with the crabs. Now, I am rather sad – those watery eyes of the crab still haunt me.

Carol's voice stirred my senses and I heard her question, *"what starter are you going to have?"*

Acceptance

Retirement can be a traumatic experience and for some there is an inability to adjust and to accept a new kind of life. There is no longer the cut and thrust of the mental and physical side of work, the interaction with your workmates and everything shrinks down into a microcosm of its former self. Retirement brings with it a period of adjustment and despite those holidays abroad, it took me several years to adjust. I found other interests and hobbies to tax my mental and physical limits which also mellowed me in my approach to social interaction. I found peace and contentment as I reached into the winter of my years. I know of many retirees who have failed to adapt to a new style of life; they sit in their houses, lonely people and by today's standards, not that old in their late sixties. For some, they cannot relinquish a way of life which meant so much to them, and for many, they commit suicide.

Mathew Johnston had been a manager in a large corporation with many workers under his control. This was back in 2016 and he relished his position; taking a keen interest in the lives of his staff but his control of them often stepped into their domestic matters, a step beyond his official duties. This did bring him sharp criticism and as is often the case, most of his staff took a dislike to him. Mathew, of course, was oblivious to all of this and in his way, he thought he was well liked. However, the root cause of his desire to domestically control people was driven by his desire to be seen to be doing good which hid an inner feeling of inadequacy and a deep desire to be loved. Whether this desire had manifested itself in his childhood or a rejection of love in later life, is anyone's guess. To state

that he was emotionally weak, almost 'woke' in his approach to social interaction would be an understatement.

The day came for his retiral but he had already been offered a job by his former boss to manage the company pension fund with several civilian staff under his control. This new occupation suited him well, because once again he was back in control. However, within a short space of time, most of his staff had had enough of his controlling nature and left the organisation. During this time, Mathew became part of a book club and its members regularly met at a local restaurant in the mornings for breakfast and for a monthly review of the books they had been given to read. He had met the group in the restaurant, purely by chance and a member of the group, who knew him, or thought he knew him, invited him along to the next breakfast meet.

Once again, and despite the book club having existed for over 16 years prior to his arrival, Mathew's controlling nature took over and he attempted to become the sovereign in a group of pennies. Of course, there was resentment from some members of the group, at his obvious intrusion. The leader of the group was well recognised because he had founded it with another member. The members recognised this and disliked Mathew's covert attempts to take over control.

A man who is emotionally weak will eventually begin a course of self-analysis, and as is often the case, discover that he is not as popular as he originally thought. A strange reaction often occurs whereby he strives even more to be accepted by his social circle but begins to realise that despite all his efforts of social reassurance he is not well liked. Eventually, Mathew left the pension fund committee and found another job as a trainee security consultant. Once again, his emotional weakness led him down his well-trodden path of his controlling nature and social interference in seeking acceptance.

At a seminar with fellow members of the staff, who held equal status, he began lecturing them on security and his thoughts on the subject; quite forgetting that he was a trainee. A young girl, no more than 16 years old, piped up, *"what a load of rubbish, you really come out with some tosh."* Mathew sat there with a red face and he took it to heart. For the first time in his life, he accepted that he was emotionally weak and through the years, he had used his authority over others to cover it up.

That night, he retired to bed and consumed a vast quantity of Remedeine Forte, which is dihydrocodeine, an opiate painkiller which the doctor had prescribed for his back pain. That night, all of Mathew's emotional problems ended.

The Missing

I banged on the door and man answered. He said, *“my wife is missing, I saw her in her bed when I left for work this morning, and I have not seen her since. Her handbag and personal belongings are still in the house.”* I went inside, the door closed and I questioned him, *“has she gone missing before, have you checked with her relatives and has there been any sign of depression?”* He replied, *“she has never been missing before, she has not gone to her sister’s but she has been depressed over the death of her mother.”* I asked if there was anything untoward around the house and I established that one item that was missing was a small ladder that he used to enter the attic roof space which was accessed through a trapdoor in the roof in the common stair, just outside his front door.

I stood on his shoulders, pushed open the trapdoor and climbed in. I did not have a torch but there was light coming from a skylight. The small ladder was lying on the floor near the trapdoor. I crawled about the attic and eventually to a huge metal tank standing in the middle. As I came around it, my face bumped into a leg. She was hanging there from the roof rafters, her eyes open and her face contorted; the rope tight around her neck. I could see many scrape marks on the metal tank immediately behind her legs, where she had changed her mind, and her shoe heels had gouged the marks as she tried to get back up on top of the tank.

From the tip of her right shoe, her urine was still dripping. It had run down her dress and soaked in before slowly dripping down her leg onto her shoe – she had wet herself with fright in those last moments leading up to her death.

Polar Opposites

I must admit that I am becoming fed up with the worsening financial condition of the UK. The news on the television is simply appalling and there are millions of people lurching into poverty due to rising inflation, food prices and heating costs. There seems no end to it and it reminds me of the many times I have experienced such periods during my long life. It got me thinking.

Peter Balls had the largest belly of any drinker; he consumed copious amounts of beer on a daily basis after he had finished his work of cleaning the streets. On his way home, he would adjourn to his favourite pub and sit there until closing time; sometime with as many as 3 pints of ale on the bar in front of him. His wife had long ago abandoned him because she felt he was a fat slob and, in any case, she had found a younger man to do the business. Fortunately, and mainly to his ‘brewer’s droop’ he had not managed to sire any children; probably most fortunate, under the circumstances.

Every Saturday he headed down to the bookies, met up with his mates and gambled on the horses. Afterwards, they all retired to the pub to play darts, drink themselves into a drunken state, tell dirty

jokes amid ruckus laughter; before being thrown out at closing time. During the evening, he would often be seen standing at the front door of the pub smoking a cigarette in a cloud of smoke. He often held court at the bar and addressed his mates in the usual manner, *“these politicians are all wankers; we are paying over the odds for our petrol and diesel, Shell is making shit loads of money from us and the government is planning to hit Shell with a ‘windfall tax’ and all our money will go to the government to help pay for the debt they created. It is a form of tax on all of us. And what about the poverty, the foodbanks and the cost of living?”* His mates would cheer him on; Jackie Smith shouted, *“fucking right Pete, those bastard politicians are all wankers.”*

When Peter was not down at the pub, he was either cleaning the streets or lounging on a worn-out sofa in his sitting-room, scoffing beer and crisps, while watching the television. He would order in a pizza, perhaps a KFC chicken bucket and when the news or a politician on the TV angered him, he would throw empty beer cans at the screen. Many would wonder if Peter Balls was happy and the answer was, yes, he was not only happy, he was very happy. He enjoyed a grand life, free from any responsibility; his job was simple and he made quite a bit of side money from the coins he often found lying in the gutters.

Johnathon Smethurst had just returned from climbing Mount Everest and his friends cheered him as he entered his private club in Bond Street, London. Sitting down, the waiter brought over his brandy and said, *“jolly well-done Mr Johnathon, quite an achievement, if you don’t mind me saying so?”* Johnathon nodded his approval and sipped his drink. His friends gathered around and they all sat down on chairs beside him. Cary Carruthers opened up, *“quite a lot been happening old bean, since you have been away. Inflation is going through the roof, the Bank of England is raising interest rates and the blasted government is preparing to hit Shell’s huge oil profits with a windfall tax, so we can say goodbye to our shared dividend in Shell. I guess the CEO of Shell is having a fit right now? On the other hand, the overall share prices in our portfolios are going up, so I guess it is a win, win?”*

Justin Cromwell piped in, *“I filled the Range Rover up with petrol the other day and it cost me well over a hundred pounds. It forced me to rethink my overall strategy of my business. I held a meeting and the board all agreed that we would have to raise our prices on our goods and pay ourselves more to make up for the shortfall.”* Edward Popplewaite chimed in, *“quite bloody right old sport, let the plebs suffer in their poverty. I have shifted most of my dosh abroad. I am all for the government but there is only so much that a fellow can stand. The politicians have got themselves in a right old mess with catastrophic government debt and are caught between a rock and a hard place. They can raise interest rates and create a depression with massive repossessions of cars and houses or borrow and print more money which raises inflation and creates a higher cost of living.”* Johnny Ross-Homes commented, *“hah, hah, let them eat cake, who the fuck cares, I am alright. Mine is sitting in a bank*

in Monte Carlo; I am heading over there to my flat for a few months, even a few years; especially, the way things are developing in the UK."

Johnathon Smethurst smiled and looking around at his friends he said, *"I think I will head off tomorrow and enjoy partying and scuba diving in the Bahamas for a year. I must get away from it all to more pleasant surroundings. There is not much point in living in a country that is depressed both financially and in spirit. I think I will take Samantha Snickerless with me; after all, a man has to keep on top and she is a top-notch mare."* His pals burst into ruckus laughter much to the disapproval of the club chairman, who gave them a dirty look.

In the end and for all his financial wealth, Johnathon Smethurst fell off a mountain in Tibet and when he hit the ground his guts burst open like a ripe blood red melon; he was only 35 years old. As for Peter Balls, he was found lying dead on his sofa at 65 years of age. His mates had missed him at the pub and the bookies, and after 3 weeks, they decided to investigate by breaking down his front door. Jackie Smith threw up all over Pete's body when he saw the magots, the bones sticking out through rotten flesh, and the smell was just awful.

The Bubble Car

I was sitting at the traffic lights on my Triumph motorbike when my attention was caught by a man helping a woman into a vehicle parked on the other side of the road. It was a red Isetta bubble car and the man had opened up the large front door which made up most of the front section. They both climbed in and the door was closed. I smiled as it evoked a funny memory from my teens.

My old man was a poacher but he did not wander about with a gun on a farmer's land, he shot at pheasants from his car and quickly went to retrieve the dead bodies. I loved those early morning rises in the dead of winter and the flask of coffee and buttered rolls he used to make. I'll say one thing in his defence, he never shot anything out of season.

He was always getting different cars and having me fix them with his help. I have lost count of the engine rebuilds, the body repairs and resprays I have done in my lifetime for him. He would take a car to his work, sell it to someone and then come home in the bus. Afterwards we would head along to the local garage and purchase another old car that the garage owner did not want. I would rebuild it; knowing full well that my father would sell it for a profit at the first opportunity.

Anyway, it was a winters morning and we set off in his latest vehicle, a red and white bubble car with a large door that opened from the front. I was the driver and having just passed my test at 17 years old, I was enjoying the fun of driving the vehicle; it was like a dodgem car at the shows. Down in East Lothian he fired the .22 rifle at a pheasant from the open side window and I saw it drop dead in the

field. I opened the front door which took the steering wheel with it and my father got out to retrieve the pheasant. As he was coming back from the field, I saw in the rear mirror, a farmer running up the road some 200 yards away.

My father shouted, *“drive away before he gets the number plate.”* I drove away at speed and looked back through the rear-view mirror. My father was running after me clutching the pheasant, and blocking the farmer’s view with the farmer running after him. Eventually the farmer stopped and bent double, he waved his fist in the air. My father caught up and we sped off as fast as the bubble car would go. He looked at me and I looked at him, and we burst out in hysterical laughter.

Suddenly, a car horn behind me hooted and I saw the traffic lights had changed to green. I was still smiling as I popped the bike into first gear and moved off.

Innocence

It is supposed to exist somewhere deep inside all of us, and therein, resides the pure innocence that you see in a child when it is first born. As a baby develops and begins to grow, it is rare indeed for that innocence to remain visible; invariably, and thanks to human interaction, the barriers go up. It is claimed that only humans have souls, but I would dispute that. If you take the time and look hard enough, you will see the same innocence in a puppy dog when it plays with its toys. Its nature can also appear to change as it grows older and interacts with other dogs and humans.

I knew a hard man, he was solidly built and never displayed any empathy, even when we dealt with a road accident where a child had been killed. Most of us had a tear in our eye but not Sean, he just got on with it without any emotion. Over the years he earned a reputation for his cold callous approach to life, and no villain or friend ever disrespected him. I often wondered what made him like that, and I was one of only a few friends he had. We met up on occasion for a casual pint, but I never managed to break through to his inner self. He never railed against the world but then he never showed any sympathy for it or anyone in it. Sean never married and he lived alone in a small flat in Gorgie Road, Edinburgh.

In his 60s, Sean was diagnosed with terminal cancer and his demeanour changed. He phoned me every day which was something he had never done. We spoke about old times, past adventures in the job and I sensed that his hard exterior was fragmenting. He told me that his mother had passed when he was very young and his father had beaten him as a child, especially if he had shown any signs of mental or physical weakness. It was drummed into him that he must be tough and stand up for himself in life. The beating stopped when he grew old enough and left the home.

As death approached, the barriers he had built in life came tumbling down to reveal a humble man, a man who loved humanity. I visited him in hospital, and finally, I saw the innocence of the inner child which had been concealed for most of his life. He closed his eyes, I kissed him on the forehead and he smiled as he passed away.

Mr Carter

I entered into the dark through a back door and the cold freezing air strikes my face. There is a strange smell, I know it well; it is the smell of death. My torch alights on faces, so many faces, those dead faces, their eyes closed and some wide open, fish like in their stare. The storage cabinets are full with bodies, the doors left open. On the floor, bodies are piled up on each other, row upon row and the freezer doors have been left open to chill the air of the huge room. There is no-one to attend to them.

Carefully, I clamber through the human detritus, sometimes around, sometimes over and I eventually reach the far light switch. I am accustomed to death, I have witnessed and dealt with it most of my life but in amongst the bodies are little children, and many are mangled through road accidents, the sight is always heart rending. If only I had the power to fix it all, fix them and watch them smile once more as they embrace life.

I introduce a new addition and Mr Carter's body is laid out on the floor and I tie a label to a toe and enter his details in the journal. What fate awaits him; perhaps cremation or a burial and he is no Hitler, no Mahatma Gandhi; later generations will not remember him. I switch off the light of the mortuary; clamber back over the bodies and curse 'The Winter of Discontent' and the gravediggers' strike. I lock the door and leave.

The Preacher

I guess we all get preached to at some time or another? It takes many forms, like a mother lecturing her son on keeping his room clean, *"I am sick and tired of cleaning your dirty room; if you don't change your ways, no other woman will put up with you and you will live a very lonely life."* For sure, we have all been lectured to in our lifetimes but very few of us consider the true persona of the preacher.

Magna Stewart had just left university and having studied religion it was a subject she was pretty hot on. However, the degree she eventually graduated with was psychology; the scientific study of the human mind and its functions, especially those affecting behaviour in a given context and the mental characteristics or attitude of a person or group. Never the one to shy away from experimentation, she hired a minister's regalia from a local costume shop and putting it on, she headed down to the

local town square one Saturday morning. This was in 2022, the social age of political correctness and Magna was all set to test its impact on society.

Down at the square, that Saturday morning, she stood on an orange box and read from a bible, *“and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.”* She carried on, *“and they will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”* Not a murmur was heard, no replies and the crowds of people simply ignored her and walked on. Sheila continued for several hours before taking a break and retiring to the local toilets.

She emerged sometime later dressed in a very short mini skirt, a very low-cut blouse, high heel boots and her raven black hair hung around her gorgeous blue eyes and voluptuous body. She had the nerve to still wear a minister’s white Roman Collar around her slim neck. Standing on her box she repeated, *“and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.”* She carried on, *“and they will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”* Immediately a crowd of men gathered around, their eyes on stalks at the site of her erotic beauty. One shouted, *“love the sexy collar.”* Another thinking she was a stripper, shouted, *“I love the preaching, a nice touch of foreplay, how about I hire you for my stag party, its next Saturday?”* More crass comments followed, *“get them off love your long legs.”* Women gathered around and started to shout at Magna, *“get off your box, you dirty cow.....filthy bitch...slut...Jezebel.”*

Finally, just as the men and the women were ready to grab her and for quite different intentions, the police arrived and escorted her away into a waiting police van. The sergeant at the station addressed her, *“Constable Stewart, this has got to stop, I am fed up with you practising your dammed psychology on the general public.”*

The Gun

The other day, I peered into my display cabinet and admired my little brass gun. It was modelled on an 1800s cannon, its little wheels nicely engraved. It carried me back to the early 1960s and that day at metalwork. I was a dab hand on the lathe and after shaping the barrel, I drilled a hole inside, almost down to the back end and a smaller hole through the top near the back end for the fuse. I shaped the wheels and carriage and joined the pieces together with a brass strap which went over the barrel and secured it to the carriage. The wheels were held onto the carriage using a brass rod with tiny brass nuts on each end.

I managed to sneak one of my father’s shotgun cartridges and broke it open. In those days the cartridges contained black gunpowder, so I popped some into the barrel, inserted some wadding,

popped a few of the lead pellets in and added a wee smidgin of wadding – ramming it all down with a round piece of dowel. I used a fuse from the model shop and popped it into the hole I had made for it.

Crazy, I know, but I sat it on the work bench and pointed it at the entrance door as the entire class, including the teacher, gathered around. I lit the fuse and watch it slowly burn its way into the rear of the barrel and down to the gunpowder. It looked like one of those guns at Waterloo and we all waited in anticipation.

There was a huge bang and the gun rolled slightly back on its wheels and stopped. There were huge cheers from the class. It was only later that I saw 8 neat holes in the wooden door where the pellets had gone straight through.

Thank God nobody was standing outside.

Street Photography

I was in Edinburgh and enjoying my street photography. I was using my Nikon FM3a 35mm film camera with its Nikkor 28mm f2.8 lens and the combination was proving a nice diversion from using a digital camera. There was something about a film image that digital could not emulate. I must have gone through three rolls of film when I decided that a rest was called for and a meal at my favourite pub, down in the Grassmarket. I went in and ordered my meal and pint of beer. It soon arrived and I scoffed it down and sat back with my pint.

Normally, with digital, I would preview my images on the back of my camera on its LCD screen but with rolls of film, I would not see the final results until they were developed. I enjoyed my pint but sitting back in my chair I became a bit restless and somewhat frustrated; I could not feel the same contentment due to my inability to preview my images. I picked up my smartphone, looked up her contact number and phoned her. We agreed to meet in Paris down at the Seine and have lunch on a Bateaux Mouche boat. I requested her to bring her mother as she was too young to be in my company unescorted. I went home, picked up my Canon camera gear and took the first flight to Paris.

We met as planned and she introduced me to her mother who looked stunning. The meal was a grand success and the conversation delightful. I enjoyed the lobster, the wine, the ice cream and feeling quite full, we sat back and took in the sights of Paris as the boat cruised along the Seine. For a 19-year-old, she was a beautiful young woman and I felt privileged that she had agreed to be photographed. Her mother certainly drew a lot of attention and as we made our way to the Eiffel

Tower for the photo shoot, we were constantly stopped by Frenchmen seeking her mother's autograph.

Eventually, we arrived and both women posed for me at the foot of the Eiffel Tower; they were wearing trouser suits like men would wear but, my God, they were so sexy, so beautiful. My Canon camera clicked away and I was aware that several policemen had arrived to keep the crowds of people back. After the shoot, I slung my camera over my shoulder and holding their hands we walked away to the loud cheers of the crowd. I hailed a taxi and we were dropped off at the Café de Flore in Saint-Germain-Des-Prés for a coffee.

Later, I saw them to the airport where they boarded a plane for New York. I waved them off and thought how delightful it had been, to share a day with the supermodel Kaia Jordan Gerber and her gorgeous mother, Cindy Crawford. I returned to the pub in the Grassmarket and after finishing my pint, I started out for some more street photography.

The Sledge

I recently wrote a short story about 'The Life of Reginald Carter-Jones' which contained a reference to 'Citizen Kane' and in the movie there is mention of a sledge called 'Rosebud' and Kane's happiest moments. The movie had generated my short story but it also evoked a memory and a happy time in my life.

When I was little, my father would often take me with him to his work. On those country backroads he would often let me steer his lorry as I sat between his legs and he worked the accelerator, the clutch, the gears and the brakes. However, the best times were when the roads were covered with snow and before the gritters had reached them. My father and I were out most mornings at around 6am so the snow was still fresh.

The snow was thick on the road and my small wooden sledge was very fast in its grooves. I guided it with my feet which dangled out the back; my little shoes grinding down, and the snow flying up. I changed my direction; sometimes correctly, sometimes not. The cold air stung my face and my eyes watered, but I was enjoying the exhilaration of it all.

The sledge was gaining speed and yet the country road was flat. I waved at him and shouted "*faster, faster*" and he complied. Those days on my sledge in those winter snows were fantastic and so was my father. In front, the Bedford tipper lorry with its load of sand continued to pull me; the rope joining the sledge was strong and life was fun.

The Agenda

Agenda is an intriguing word and it means the underlying intentions or motives of a particular person or group and a plan of things to be done or problems to be addressed. In its simplicity, the word applies to virtually everything we do, we all have personal agendas. Invariably our agendas are no different to those in high government office but usually on a much smaller scale. Of course, we may not even realise we are applying it, as it is a subconscious application. A typical and a small example might be that a woman wants a new dress and as so often in the past her agenda is almost cognitive because she has become adept at getting her own way with her husband. Usually, it commences with sex in bed, followed by a cuddle and a hint for that new dress. Torn down to its basic concept, an agenda is about control.

Sheila Stevenson grew up in the early 2000s and by 2022, she had reached 18 years of age and became a student at a university. This was in Great Britain or as the country is known today: The United Kingdom. The university she went to does not matter, because at its heart it contained the same political curriculum that every university preached. That curriculum had developed a life of its own and was supported by certain political groups and the media who now wielded great controlling power; a form of 'political correctness' indoctrination, you could call it. Sheila was sucked into the vortex of this liberal agenda and found it extremely difficult to escape its clutches. She was bombarded ever second, every minute, every hour and every day by the media, her teachers, the political elite of all political parties and on her social media platform.

Eventually, she shouted "*fuck it*" and she left to live in Russia.

Out of the Darkness

It is said that hearing is the first sense you experience, even before you are born. When I opened my eyes, I must have seen the light and eventually, so they say, my first face. Of course, I cannot remember those moments. It was a damp morning, and we were crossing the park on a dirt path that was angled downwards. I was being dropped off at my Grans, I was around 1 to 2 years old and a little bit podgy, as most youngsters are at that age.

I was high in the air, sitting on my mother's shoulders; well at least I thought it was high. My mother was carrying her handbag and a large carrier bag with all her shop things. She had rented a small shop in Musselburgh in Scotland and sold foodstuffs and all sorts of household items to attract custom.

I heard her shout out as she slipped and we both fell onto the muddy path. I was propelled forward and landed on my podgy bottom. As I picked myself up, I could hear her weeping as she started to

gather her things and she asked if I was okay. We carried on to my Grans where we cleaned up and my mum went on her way to her work.

It was also the day that I stuck my finger in my Grans hot toffee dish which had not cooled down and set. My screams brought her to the kitchen and I spent most of the day being rocked in her arms whilst she sat in a chair and held my burnt finger in her apron. Women of fisherfolk have very little time for doctors and I was told to suffer in silence with little empathy shown.

Strange how those memories are burned into my mind and when I visit both their graves, I often recall those times. I loved them both very much – I still do.

Death Comes on Swift Wings

When you are young, death is the last thing on your mind; you are far too busy enjoying life. It is only when you become very old and experience the death of relatives and friends that the thought of your own death comes to the fore. This is especially brought into sharp focus when you suffer illness, even a mild illness like the flu and even the common cold.

Death comes on swift wings and very often a person will die without even realising it. A man in his 80s is walking from a lift; he is looking forward to going out for a meal with his wife, his son and daughter-in-law. He steps out into the hallway of the care home and experiences a strange feeling in his chest. There is no tightness, no pain but something is different. Before his brain can register anymore, he falls to the floor unconscious – his heart has suddenly stopped. Within minutes and without regaining consciousness, his brain stops working and he is dead. The question is, does he know he is dead?

I remember my appendix operation. I was wheeled into a room, lying flat on a trolley and I saw a man drawing fluid from a small bottle into a needle. He told me it was a pre-operation injection to make me sleep. I felt the needle go into my arm and he told me to count to ten and I started. I heard a very loud buzzing sound in my ears which seemed to be inside my head and I fell asleep. I experienced no dreams, no movement, just nothing.

I could have died during the operation; would I have known or would I just have slept forever?

A Cycling Day Out

The other day, I rescued my pedal cycle from the old shed at the bottom of the garden and took it to my garage for repair. The bike had lain unused for some twenty years and the tyres were flat. Once I cleaned the dust of it, oiled the chain and the mechanics, and pumped up the tyres, she looked pretty good. Of course, at 73 years of age, I am not as agile as I used to be, but I managed to clamber

aboard and went out for a spin on the country roads. As I cycled along, a distant memory got me smiling.

I liked playing with my cousins and their pals; they were all girls and a few years older than my 10 years. Even at that age, I fancied one of the girls, who lived opposite my Grans house, across the lane. We all played 'kick the can' a hide and seek game and used the gardens in the lane to hide in. There were no cars and we often played into the dark winter evenings, under the orange street lights.

One day in the summer months, it was decided that we would all get our push bikes and cycle out into the country. My cousins knew of a river pool just outside Pencaitland that they wanted to swim in. After about an hour of cycling, uphill and down, and around 9 miles, we finally arrived at a wooded area just outside Pencaitland. The bikes were left at the side of the road and we all clambered through the woods to a clearing with a deep pool in a flowing river.

I built the fire out of sticks and brush while the girls all stripped off in the bushes to put on the swimming clothes and to keep away from me. My youngest cousin Julia, who was 12 years old, appeared out of the bushes with her top hanging down and her perky little breast bumps showing. She was immediately scolded by the rest for standing half naked in front of me. I was an only child so it was quite a revelation. Julia had always been a 'tom boy' and she was not in the slightest bit bothered by the rebukes. I put the potatoes in the embers of the fire, they were wrapped in tinfoil to cook, and I sat back to watch the girls swimming – I could not swim.

It was the same at Cockenzie, I would sit back while they climbed 10 feet up the huge black crane on the harbour pier and dive into the deep clear waters. The crane is gone now, and so is Julia, she passed away in her early forties of leukaemia.

Conformity

In simple terms, conformity is the behaviour in accordance with socially accepted conventions. However, the crucial question is: who sets those social conventions? There is no doubt that social conventions in the 21st Century are driven by politicians, activists and of course the media, who hook onto the narrative and drive it forward. Invariably, the owners of the media, perhaps a TV channel, a newspaper or a website, have their own political views and in fact, often create the springboard for a new social convention that aligns with their aspirations. As examples, we are experiencing 'Political Correctness' and 'Black Lives Matter'.

Fred Smith was a weak individual, he was small built, bald headed and lacked any kind of mental or physical strength. At 31 years of age, he looked about fifty and he smelled; boy did he smell. It was

no surprise, considering that he lived in a small one bedroomed flat in London and hardly ever washed. Each day, he arrived at the newspaper offices and sat alone at his little desk. His boss, the editor, and an ardent labour supporter, would arrive and re-issue the standard orders for the day, *"Smith, I want more muck thrown on that little fat shit, he has to go. Use your usual 'from a reliable source' angle and dig up some crap about his party drinking during lockdown. And Fred, for God's sake, have a shower from time to time, you smell like a pig's arsehole."* Fred smiled inwardly at the thought of his boss, down on his hands and knees, smelling the rear end of a pig. However, he knew that the 'Boris' stories were eagerly consumed by the unwashed and along with his colleague, Joan Crawley's stories about the 'Royal Family', and Jack Crawford's efforts on the 'Ukraine War', the newspaper was attracting a lot of advert placements.

A voice shouted across the newsroom floor, *"I have a great one, this university has just suspended a philosophy professor for speaking out of turn during a debate. He argued that 'The Black Lives Matter' activism was in real terms, driving a wedge between the black and white races as the working-class whites were taking exception to the black race being continually promoted as oppressed and given a higher status in social standings to compensate for that perceived oppression. The university has released a statement, distancing itself from his remarks."* Another voice joined in, *"great stuff, that will really get the social pot boiling, great clickbait for the political correctness articles in our online newspaper. All our friends will become apoplectic with rage in seeking his dismissal and the usual raft of liberal politicians, in all the parties, will voice the same. This story will run and run."* Fred started to type his piece and suddenly burst out in spontaneous laughter; once again, he had imagined his boss down on his hands and knees in a pig pen, smelling a pig's rear end.

The following morning, Boris Johnson was sitting at his desk and reading his newspaper when he came across Fred's article. His face went as red as a tomato and contorted with rage, he stood up and started to strangle the newspaper. Meanwhile, Ted Bloggs, who was at home with his wife and ten children, burst out laughing; he shouted to his well-worn wife, *"heh, Jennifer, come and read this about Boris Johnson. He's at it again, drinking wine at another private party, during lockdown."* She replied, *"do you think there is any truth in it?"* He replied, *"who cares."*

Hanging Around

I saw his feet as he ran around, he seemed to be running on the roof but it was an illusion. I was hanging upside down, my hands holding onto wall bars and I was facing into the room with my head about an inch of the ground. The PE Teacher was running around the gym.

I looked about and all the others were hanging there on the bars which were fixed to the walls on the sides of the room. Again, the belt snapped and a boy crashed to the floor as he ran past. The

poor soul had to get back on the wall bar and once again hang there facing inwards with his head off the floor before he came running back.

I looked across to the far wall and another boy had allowed his head to rest on the floor to ease the pain in his arms. Again, the belt flashed and struck him in the stomach. I watched the boy crash to the floor and then rush to get back up on the bars.

Such was the penalty inflicted by an ex-army sergeant, who now worked as our physical education teacher at our school. The incredible thing – we thought the world of him.

The Human Rat

My son once had a pet rat and she was not that different in looks to your normal wild rat. When she was young and small, she was adorable and loved to ride around the house on the back of the family dog, who did not seem to mind. I would put her on a small table in the centre of the room and she would leap onto the dogs back as he passed by. I kept horses and their food store was a natural lure for wild rats who came up from the canal when the rain or the snow was most heavy. I kept all the horse dry food in metal dustbins. Rats tend to breed in numbers to a food source that can sustain their numbers so there were not that many to contend with. It's strange how a story can be generated by the sight of rats and one came to my mind as I watched the young playing.

It was Friday night and the girls were getting ready. Rebecca was standing at a broken mirror and started the conversation, *"Ginny, I hear you are on the scamper again for a man. How about we get together and scamper down to the local barn, I hear there is a grain gathering tonight. I was speaking to Patsy, and she would like to come along, she's looking for a man as well."* Ginny brushed down her fur and exclaimed in a loud voice, *"what about you Rebecca?"* She replied *"no way, I am just hungry for some food; I am not ready for a man, if one comes near me, he will get a sharp nip on the nose."* All sorted, the girls headed out of the shed and met up with Patsy who was waiting for them at the barn door. She was smiling and obviously eager to impart a story. *"You will never guess what I saw when I was coming through the park? There were two humans lying on the grass but in the darkness, they did not see me, I was only a few yards away. He was on top of her and they had no clothes on, she was moaning and shouting, yes, yes! He was giving her one."* Rebecca replied, *"were they breeding?"* Patsy snorted, *"breeding, they copulate for enjoyment, they are always at it; in the park, in their houses, I have even seen them at it on the street. They are vermin, there must be about 68 million of them in the country and they keep on breeding."* Ginny grimaced, *"how horrible, imagine copulating for enjoyment; no male rat is going to get me until I am ready to breed."* Rebecca ended the conversation, *"okay Guys, lets head into the barn, Ginny and Patsy are ready but God help any man who comes near me."*

John and Roland entered the barn and inside the 'mischief' was in full swing. There were rats everywhere and the grain bags were spilling their contents out through the nibbled holes in their sides. Of course, John and Roland were hungry but they were also on the lookout for females in season. As they ate some grain, Roland exclaimed, *"John, look at that slim one up there in the hay, I swear she's winking at me."* He replied, *"rubbish, Roland, it's me she fancies, but I like ones with a bit of meat on them."* Roland shrugged his shoulders, *"I have never figured out why you like the fat ones?"* John raised his head and gave Rebecca a long loud wolf whistle. She turned her face away and exclaimed to her friends, *"who does he think he is, he's a smart Alec but he has a nice bum."* Patsy laughed, *"I'll have him, you watch, I'll head on down there and make myself available."* Ginny replied, *"I think you enjoy it too much Patsy, one of these days you will be chucked out of the 'mischief' for over breeding. You are becoming like a female human; you are breeding brats all over the place and they are all from different men."* Patsy, started down the hay and shouted back, *"I like it; every 22 days is a long time to wait. I wish I had human hormones and I could copulate every day, every night and have a different man when I want one."*

Rebecca sighed, *"there's no hope for that one, one of these days she will go too far. She likes it too much, and she is forever pinching men from other females"* Ginny snorted, *"one day, when she is sleeping with her brats under that tarpaulin, the farmer will set his terriers in and she will end up dead."* Rebecca sighed again, *"I suppose you had better get down there Ginny, the boys won't hang around for much longer and you need to breed. The one that wolf whistled seems a big strong boy, he should do the business okay."* Ginny brushed her fur and sliding off the hay bale she scampered down.

The Cosmopolitan

The other day, I was going through my vinyl record collection looking for 'Rumours' an incredible album from the pop group, 'Fleetwood Mac'. I loved the voice of Christine McVie who was a member of the band. As I flicked through the albums to find it, I saw the words 'Paint Your Wagon' on one, which brought back some poignant memories.

I was in my early twenties and in the cinema was 'Paint Your Wagon' a movie set in the old west where two men, shared the same wife and then there was 'The Cosmopolitan' a magazine for progressive women. That magazine had a lot to answer for but in a strange way, I experienced the changing times.

I met a beautiful woman; I mean she was absolutely gorgeous and when we went out together, people in bars would stop and stare as she entered. The first time it happened, she asked me why

people were staring at us. I just smiled; I was sure it was not me because I was not that handsome. Perhaps they were questioning, what is that ugly guy doing with such an incredible woman?

She loved Neil Diamond and of course her flat was strewn with Cosmopolitan magazines. The first time I went there, she put on Neil Diamond and retired to the bathroom a redhead and came out a blonde. She sat down on the couch beside me and started to read the sexy bits from 'The Tropic of Cancer' which sent me over the top. Before I could react, and I was ready, she once again went into the bathroom and came out with long black hair, draped over her shoulders and gave me a smouldering look.

Afterwards, I remember heading for my car and I have never been so sore as I was back then. It lasted around 5 months but, in the end, I was beginning to feel that I was being used to fulfil her 'Cosmopolitan' fantasies. Still, it was an adventure and those wigs were a nice touch; I mean she was a different woman every time we went out together.

The Man on the Moon

The Russian conflict with Ukraine bore heavy on my spirit. I endeavoured to think positive thoughts, happy thoughts, but a worldwide nuclear war still lurked in the back of my mind.

It was a nice clear night, so I went outside in the warm air and leaned over a fence to take in the view of the city. The street lights blinked through the trees in the middle field and the moon's glow, lit up the scene. I saw my fox watching me from behind some trees, his eyes glinting yellow in the reflection of the light; he was waiting on the food that I put out for him every night. It was a full moon, a huge round ball in the night sky and I felt I could almost touch it. I looked up and wondered.

Li Qiang switched off the power drive to his spider cab, an eight wheeled electric vehicle which he used to travel back and forth from the mining site, some 200 metres away from his base, a pre-fabricated moon module. His daily work consisted of drilling down into the moon's crust for Helium 3 samples using a mobile drilling platform. The electrical power to maintain the base, the platform and to charge batteries came from a hydrogen gas driven generator. Every 6 months a supply ship arrived to deliver food stocks, water and hydrogen gas.

He entered the air lock of the module and removed his helmet, space suit and underclothes. He entered the cleansing cubicle and stood naked as the dry chemical reaction cleaned any dirt and contamination from his body. He dressed in a cotton shirt, cotton trousers and canvas shoes before entering the lounge. The moon module consisted of a bedroom, a lounge, kitchen, a communications room and a conservatory. He sat down on a comfortable chair with a glass of Baijiu which he had distilled in his kitchen from his home-grown grain sorghum in the conservatory. He

looked at the massive digital screen on one of the walls and marvelled at the image of the Earth, some 238,555 miles away. Its image filled the entire screen, thanks to the module's power telescope that magnified it. Li Qiang enjoyed watching the beautiful planet because he could clearly see the land masses, the vibrant blue oceans and at night the city lights in each country, blinking like miniature galaxies.

Eventually, he grew tired and retired to bed. After 8 hours, he was awakened by the soothing piped sounds of Strauss and arose to enjoy a coffee in the lounge and listen to the music. He sat and watched the dark outline of the earth on his screen and the flickering lights of the tiny city galaxies. Suddenly, he thought he saw a firefly, its yellow and red mating flash popping up on the screen, and then another and another. His first impression was that they were dancing in front of the telescope but that could not be the case; there were no fireflies on the moon. More appeared, and he realised they were not on the telescope, they were actually nuclear explosions on Earth. Entire cities were being destroyed. Strauss played in the background and the flashes on the screen seemed to be in synchronisation with the music.

The atmosphere of the planet turned into a maelstrom of vibrant red and black clouds. The dust and heat from the nuclear explosions converged to form a worldwide firestorm with massive flashes of lightning cutting through it. On the land, volcanoes erupted, spewing forth lava and firing dust, debris and flaming rocks high into the sky.

Li Qiang now saw the Earth as it had been viewed, billions of years ago, when it first formed. The man on the moon faced an uncertain future and I knew how he felt.

Contact

Could it be possible that the dead walk amongst us? What if they do and can see what we get up to in our daily lives? Even more disconcerting, do they watch us at night in our beds and are privy to all our actions? Imagine that you are lying on top of the bed and naked, making love to a woman and your dead parents are standing at the foot of the bed watching. Even worse, what if it is a couple or even a crowd of your dead mates watching?

After my mother passed away at 94 years of age, I started to experience dreams about her, which lasted for about 6 months, and then they stopped. Even now, five years later, I still have the occasional dream but these are not ordinary dreams. At first, I dreamt that my mother visited me at the side of my bed; she spoke to me kindly and I felt a great calm embrace my mind. I briefly spoke to her but then I remembered that she was dead and in that moment of realisation, I exclaimed in my dream, *"this must be a dream because you are dead."* Suddenly, she would be drawn back from me at great speed and disappear into the distance, into the darkness and I awoke, sitting up in bed.

This was repeated in many similar dreams with the same outcome, until I learned that by acknowledging she was dead, I had broken the contact and was forced to awaken.

Those dreams were so frequent, that I learned to avoid exclaiming that she was dead and I could hold a conversation with her and very often, I could remain in the dream for what seemed quite a long time. However, and eventually, I could feel myself being drawn away from her and no matter how much I fought against it, I would wake up.

I have often wondered, is my mother visiting me in my dreams from another dimension and why now does she only visit me occasionally – perhaps she is fed up with the conversation?

Iodine

Every now and then something pops up which tickles my senses and makes me laugh. Like that video of the NASCAR racer, Brandon Brown who was recently interviewed on American television. The female interviewer started, *“Brandon, as you also told me”* (in the background the entire crowd shouts fuck Joe Biden) she continues, *“as you can hear the chants from the crowd, ‘let’s go Brandon’* (again from the crowd, fuck Joe Biden) she continues, *“let’s go Brandon”* and so it continued as she attempted to change the crowd’s chant. In a flash, the comical video was transmitted all across the world and soon American retailers caught on and T shirts began to appear for sale in the shops. They had ‘Let’s Go Brandon’ emblazoned on them and they sold like hot cakes.

There is no doubt that Joe Biden, the American President is a tad dozy and to all accounts incapable of leading his country. Over here in Britain, the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, seems no better.

Quite recently, I was at a meeting between Joe Biden and Boris Johnson and it was a hoot. It was held in Biden’s \$2.74 million Delaware vacation home and they had invited me along as an advisor. We were on first name speaking terms so the conversation went smoothly. I remember, the helicopter landed on the massive lawn and as I clambered out, I saw an old man, fully clothed, standing in the water at the edge of the lake and every now and again he lifted up a shoe and looked at it, with a puzzled expression. Another man, who was rather fat with straggly fair hair, ran down to help him and immediately slipped on the mud at the water’s edge. He got up to steady himself but fell backwards into the lake. There were some other men nearby wearing dark sunglasses and all dressed in black. They were hooting with laughter and rolling about on the grass, holding their sides.

Anyway, I immediately went into the house, escorted by two security guards and told to sit on a chair at a huge table in the meeting room. Of course, I was thoroughly frisked by a rather sexy female with beautiful long legs attached to an awesome body, and who seemed to take great delight in groping me. She whispered in my ear, *“my, you are a big boy, pity you are so old.”* I was getting

fed up waiting, when finally, the door opened and in walked President Biden and Boris Johnson. I heard the President exclaim, *"hi Brandon, it's nice to see you again"* and we shook hands. I tried to correct my name, *"its Richard, Mr President, Richard"* but he ignored me and sat down in a chair. I turned to shake hands with Boris and I heard him murmur, *"I thought we were going to have lunch, where is my bangers and mash and my Tignanello red wine; did you know Meghan Markle also likes it?"* I nodded in agreement and advised him that although Tignanello was rather expensive at £180 per bottle, I was sure the President would have some in his cellar.

The two of them sat opposite me and Boris opened the discussion, *"well Mr President, er, what, what, what are we going to do now? Putin is demanding payment for oil and gas in roubles; its just not on."* I could see the President was slightly perplexed and he eventually replied, *"who is Putin?"* I swiftly interrupted, *"Mr Putin, is the Russian leader and he will have to be countered."* He came back at me, *"of course Brandon, what do you suggest?"* Before I could reply, Boris waded into the conversation, *"we don't have any roubles to trade."* I quickly suggested we could trade some UK gold for roubles. His reply was short and to the point, *"gold, gold, er, we don't have any gold. Brown and the labour party sold all of our gold."* Just then, lunch was served from large silver trays and yes, Boris did get his bangers and mash and his Tignanello red wine. I watched with slight concern as the beautiful sexy female with the long legs placed a massive plastic bib around the President's neck and handed him his soup spoon. I heard him murmur, *"thank you Jill."* I heard her say, *"I am not your wife Mr President, it's me, Samantha, your personal security guard."* Boris interrupted, *"when you are finished Samantha, er, could you help me with my napkin. It has fallen to the floor and I can't seem to reach it."* I watched as his eyes lit up at the sight of Samantha's rather elegant derrière as she bent over to retrieve it. Otherwise, the meal went without any further incident.

Afterwards, we adjourned to the conservatory where coffee and mints were served. The President put down his cup and exclaimed, *"well Brandon, we could nuke the bastard, oh yes, we could nuke him in his house. Do you know where he lives?"* Boris spluttered over his coffee, *"er, I don't think that would be a good idea, what if we missed and then there would be hell to pay. He might bomb Downing Street?"* I stepped in as the advisor, *"Mr President, perhaps it would be wiser if we met with Mr Putin and attempted to resolve our differences. Whatever the agreement, and we could include Europe, it is better than witnessing our societies descending into civil war due to a massive rise in the cost of living and the people having to choose between food or heating."* Boris intervened, *"we can't, er, go back on what we have stated. It would mean a loss of face and the Ukrainians would be furious."* I held my head in my hands as the President questioned, *"who are the Ukrainians, are we at war with them?"* Boris answered, *"no Mr President, they are our allies."* I interjected, *"Mr President, does America have any gold at Fort Knox that you could use to trade in roubles to pay Putin for his oil and gas?"* The President rose up from his chair, crossed to the window and stared out. I thought he was going to come out with a brilliant solution when he replied. *"I must get those daffodil bulbs*

planted for next year, I fancy a sea of yellow over there near the lake” and he raised his hand to point. I heard Boris whisper across the table, “don’t confuse him anymore, they don’t have any gold, we don’t have any gold, we both just keep printing and borrowing money. Both our countries are in so much debt, that the phrase ‘we are fucked’ is an understatement.”

Suddenly, the President’s voice boomed across the room, *“we will have to nuke the bastard in his house, it’s the only answer.”* I sat back in my chair and picked up my smartphone. I ordered a huge bottle of iodine pills that afternoon.

The Meeting on the Cheese

There was a time in the 1960s, in my early teens, when I worked as a delivery boy at Coopers in Roseburn, Edinburgh. If you have ever watched ‘Open All Hours’ I was a young Granville carrying customer’s orders in the front of my bike, which was just like his on the TV. I would pile up cardboard boxes full of foodstuffs into the front box frame of my bike and head off up the hill.

Anyone that knows Roseburn will recognise that all the posh folks lived on a massive hill with streets running up it; streets known as Ormidale, Murrayfield Avenue, Murrayfield Gardens, Garscube, Blinkbonny and the ultimate of the posh on the top, Ravelston Dykes. Invariably the bike was pushed up the streets, the foodstuffs delivered, and the joy of hurtling back down to Coopers with my feet of the pedals and resting on the front box frame.

In the shop, my job was to unpack stuff and stack shelves. I knew very little about life but one day, I experienced something I will never forget. Well, my experience was based on the experience of someone else, his name was John and he was the shop assistant who administered goods in, customer orders out, and served at the counter. He was in his early twenties and a smart looking guy. I was sitting on a huge roundel of cheese down in the basement and enjoying a cup of tea. In came John, his face all drawn looking and tired. He sat down beside me and held his head in his hands. There were no chairs so the cheese was well used but be of no concern, it was covered in cotton wrapping and was intact, not yet sliced.

Eventually, I heard him mumble, *“I am done for; done for, and I don’t know what to do?”* I asked him what was wrong and he replied, *“she’s bloody pregnant, that’s what’s wrong. Christ, I might have to marry her?”* I asked him if he wanted a cup of tea and he replied, *“yes; God, what if her dad finds out?”* I left him and went upstairs to make the tea and when I returned with his cup, I swear he was near to tears. Anyway, his distress continued for several days and each day his seemed to get physically and mentally weaker. However, one morning I went downstairs and found him dancing around like a big kid. I could hear him shout, *“never again, never again; thank God she’s had her period.”* I doubted very much that it would be ‘never again’.

Casper and Wendy

One experiences a terrible grief when a pet dog dies; even if it is old and the death is expected.

Old John sat in his house and wept. His dog had passed away and he had spent most of that day burying his pet in the garden. He felt so alone as the dog had been his sole companion. John was in his 70s; his wife had passed over and he had no children. His brother had also died and his nieces and nephews were too busy living their lives to care much about him. John had always worried that he might die first and his dog would have ended up in a dog home seeking a new owner. He considered getting another dog but his old age 'thinking' kept getting in his way.

One day, he was passing the local dog home and decided to walk in to have a look around. The woman at the reception listened to his story and advised him that the best solution was to get a couple of dogs from the home that no-one wanted; old dogs. In that way, if John passed, the dogs could be returned to the dog home but at least they would have experienced some love from a new owner, even if only for a little while. However, he would have to accept that if the dogs died first, he might have to endure the grief of losing them.

She went on, we always have old dogs that no-one wants, so you could become a carer and who knows, you may live to a ripe old age and care for many old dogs? Old John had a look around and a couple of weeks later, after a few visits to get to know them, Casper, a 14-year-old collie and his lifelong friend Wendy, a 12-year-old Shih Tzu were delivered into his care.

The Brickyard

Not that long ago, I visited the historic brickyard at Prestonpans in East Lothian, Scotland and I took some pictures with my camera of the buildings and the old machinery, which was lying about. It was a sunny day and as I sat back on the small wall outside the old canteen, I recalled a favourite memory from my extensive library.

My father's Bedford tipper lorry pulled up at the Prestonpans brickyard just outside the kiln. I put on my thick black rubber pads that covered the palms of my hands with thin rubber loops fixed over my thumbs to hold them in place. I went inside and it was very warm and humid. The hot bricks lay in piles just in front of the conveyor belt which rose up through the kiln to the lorry outside. I helped my father load the bricks onto the belt and watched as they travelled upwards and outside to fall into the lorry. Every now and then my father would move the lorry to make more space for the bricks as they fell.

My palms were often slightly scorched when a pad moved, but it was to be expected, my 6-year-old skin was still very soft. We finished loading the lorry and went over to the canteen for a bacon roll

and a hot mug of tea. I remember standing at the window of the canteen and looking out at the sea. There was a small inlet in front of me with a derelict schooner beached up there. In later years, they reclaimed the land from the sea and buried the boat.

We left the brickyard and headed out into the country to deliver the load to a building site. My father loved to poach pheasants and he had a .22 rifle in the lorry. It fired small rounds to limit the range as the larger rounds could travel a mile. Anyway, we stopped and he lowered the driver's window. However, it did not go all the way down as the small metal clip on the top of the glass, which you used to slide the window up and down, rested on the door sill, creating a small section of the glass pane to remain above the sill.

I laid the rifle across my father's lap, resting the barrel on the door sill but unfortunately the end of the barrel was behind the window pane. I pulled back the cylindrical knurled part of the gun to cock it, and taking careful aim, I fired at the pheasant in a field. The gun barked, the bullet struck the glass, the window exploded, the shattered glass fell inside the door and incredibly the small metal clip was still on the door sill with a small piece of glass inside it - I missed the pheasant.

My father never truly explained to his boss how the window had been broken. I think he made up a story about a flying granite stone at the granite quarry from the loading machine that was filling the lorry.

I took some more pictures but some people nearby were giving me some funny looks. I guess if you are laughing out loud for no apparent reason – folk might think you are daft.

Samantha Honeycutt

Gold is such a precious metal and much sought after. Of course, the nearest that the ordinary person gets to it is usually in his or her wedding ring. However, there are those rich stereo types that like to wear huge gold chains around their neck, with lumpy gold diamond encrusted rings on each finger and drive massive pink American cars. In these unsettled times, there are daily adverts promoting the purchase of gold ingots and Britannia coins with the idea that you can pass them onto your grandkids or perhaps gold will be a 'savings backstop' should the UK currency take a fall and we have to load up a wheel barrow with pound notes to purchase a loaf of bread.

Alan Salt had become very rich through some wheeling and dealing; he was a typical barrow boy that had made his fortune through selling computers in the 1980s. His secret; he had them made in Taiwan and shipped all over the world to his dealerships in various cities. He had no expertise in electronics but that did not matter. Salt, very rarely saw what he was selling as others did all the design, manufacture and distribution. He just sat back and undercut every other computer

manufacturer; the money rolled in. Like many millionaires he turned to gold as a lucrative means of consolidating some of his finances. There was nothing more lucrative than turning the British pound note into the yellow metal. He made a killing because he purchased his gold at the same time the British Government was selling off theirs.

Salt was a smart son of a bitch, not for him the piece of certification paper stating the supplier was storing the gold for him. He knew, in many cases, it was a giant Ponzi scheme and based on the premise that no-one, in the future, would actually demand their store of gold to be sent to them. If there was ever a rush on gold due to the British pound note failing, Salt knew that a piece of paper was no guarantee that his stash of gold existed. Over a period of several years, Salt purchase more and more gold and had it delivered to his London office and under the cover of darkness, he transported it in the back of his Rolls Royce motor car to his mansion in the Cotswolds. He had a massive safe built into the floor of his bedroom, set in a concrete block and the floorboards replaced. He had a trapdoor carefully designed so that he could gain entry when he wished to deposit more gold. It was concealed under a plush carpet and a drinks cabinet placed on the top.

Salt relished his stash and very often in the evenings, he would open up his safe and bringing out all the gold, he would sit on the floor with a glass of champagne and count it. Sometimes his wife, Delilah, would come in from her bedroom, but his reply was always the same, *"I am counting my stash, piss off."* His young wife would leave the room crying and with no children, she felt so alone. Despite all his wealth, he had no class, no breeding and people knew it. However, he managed to mingle in the social circles of high society and of course to keep up appearances, Delilah was on his arm. She was the daughter of Lord Rostein and held in high esteem by the elite. It was at one of those gatherings that Salt made the greatest mistake of his life but it was not unexpected.

Lord Rostein had invited Delilah and Salt to his country estate for the week-end, along with many others in high society. Salt could not contain himself and when sitting at the large dinner table that evening, he openly bragged that he had converted a very large chunk of his money into gold, *"yes, I have it stashed away in my mansion, I don't trust those gold bullion people or the banks to keep it safe for me. I like to have it in my possession and then I know it is truly mine."* Many at the table were appalled by his crass remarks and one or two murmured under their breath, *"typical barrow boy, no breeding."* In the background, a member of a company, brought in to provide the catering was smiling.

Some months later, Delilah was away visiting her father in London. She had arranged to have lunch with him and do some shopping at Harrods. She planned to stay overnight at his flat before returning home to the Cotswolds the next day. Seizing his opportunity, as well as his privacy, Salt moved aside his drinks cabinet, lifted the carpet and the trapdoor underneath, to open his safe. He put down his glass of champagne on the floor and sat back to count his gold stash. Darkness had

already fallen and in the glow of his bedside lights, the reflection of the yellow metal glinted in his eyes. Well pleased with himself, he secured everything and went into the bathroom. Suddenly, he heard a noise behind him and turning, he stared into the double barrels of his own shotgun held by gloved hands.

In that split second, his eyes exited through the back of his head along with his brains as the gun went off. He fell lifeless to the floor; warm red blood drained out from his head wound and pooled on the bathroom tiles. In Delilah's bedroom, those same gloved hands emptied the contents off her jewellery into a bag. Downstairs, the shotgun cabinet was locked with its key and the cabinet glass was smashed with an ornament which was left lying on the floor. The key was returned to its secret location and the rear kitchen door was unbolted, left open and its window smashed using a brick lying outside. The key to the front door which had been used to enter the mansion re-locked the front door and the shotgun was purposely dropped on the lawn outside.

A year later, Delilah married her lover at a civil wedding and afterwards they celebrated at her father's country estate. Lord Rostein stood at the head of the dinner table and toasted their health. A guest murmured under his breath, *"I am glad Salt is not here; killed by a burglar, good riddance."* Of course, Delilah inherited all of Salt's wealth and she and her lover, Samantha Honeycutt, honeymooned in Rio. A year later, they were on holiday on a boat in the Mediterranean, when Delilah, who had gone swimming on her own, mysteriously drowned.

Samantha inherited everything, including Salt's gold and purchased a large ranch in Arizona. She became a leading breeder of Arabian horses and died an old woman with a smile on her face. At her funeral, someone remarked, *"did you know that when she was a young woman, she worked as a waitress for a catering firm?"*

Feral

The other day, I was down at Cockenzie Harbour in East Lothian, Scotland. It was my stomping ground when I was a child. Many things had changed, the old black crane was gone, the waters were not as clean and there were only a few boats. I sat on the edge of the pier where I had once fished with my pals and gazed out to sea.

I was let loose on the streets of Cockenzie in East Lothian, Scotland at the age of 4 years old. My working mother left me with my grandmother; gave me an old red tricycle, and I was off. I had the harbour, the farm, the east coast, the coal bing and the countryside as my domain to play in. With my pals, we made toy boats, down at the rocks at the back of the harbour, using a flat piece of wood with a nail in the top with a piece of paper for a sail and an old hacksaw blade from the boat yard hammered into the bottom to form a long-angled keel. We sailed them in the large sea pools caught

between the rocks and when we were heading home, we put them into the harbour and watched them sailing away. Like all children, we searched the sea pools for small crabs, small fish, eels and shrimp; just to watch them swimming around. The attractions at the farm included watching the pigs eating, playing with cats and climbing the bales of hay in the barn.

We climbed the huge black 'Coal Bing' near Prestonpans and slid down using old pieces of wood or coal bags to sit on. I would go home to my Grans, covered in coal dust and she had to get me cleaned before my mother picked me up. We jumped between the huge rocks down at the sea as the tide came in, with huge waves crashing between them and I could not swim. It was called 'follow my leader' and it was very crazy stuff; we jumped as the tidal waves turned back and before they roared in again - but I was too young to even think of such dangers.

In those days I could see the bottom of the harbour at high tide; all the fish swimming about and all the rubbish lying on the bottom. There were discarded seaman's boots, old pieces of rope half buried in the mud, old tins and seaweed strangling everything. During the storm on the East Coast of Scotland during 1953, when I was 5 years old, I stood at the bottom of Lorimer Place in Cockenzie and watch the huge waves rising high about the houses in the distance. The seawater and sand were running down the main street some 200 yards from the harbour. Later, when the storm subsided, I went down and part of the harbour wall had been smashed to pieces; the large bits of stone had crashed down on some moored boats.

My grandfather's wooden boat, 'The Margaret' had her engine punched out through the bottom of her hull and the wreck was washed out of the harbour. It was recovered down at Eyemouth, further down the east coast. The boat was brought back and she was put on a dry standing between Cockenzie House and the British Legion Hall. We played pirates on her but she was never repaired. A few years later, my tricycle gave up the ghost when it broke in half as I cycled up the lane with my pal standing on the back. I guess I had become too heavy for it?

I would be down at the harbour in the winter months when darkness fell and my father would come back from his work to pick me up from my Gran's. She would tell him that I had been out all day and had not come home – she would get my father all worked up. My father, rightly concerned, would head off down to the harbour and he had a knack of creating a very loud whistle with his fingers. When I heard it, I would head back to Gran's in a different direction, thinking he would be angry. When he came back to Gran's his face was furious and I would hide behind my Gran's skirt while she calmed him down. I realised, as I grew older, that my father had a knack of looking furious which actually hid his worry about some possible harm that had befallen his only son.

I left the memory and I left the harbour and walked back up to the main street and looked over a wall at my pal's garden where he once threw me over his shoulder when we were wrestling. Walter

was a strong young lad, even at 11 years old. Later, he suffered from pain in all his joints and for many years he endured operations to have them all replaced. I last saw him, some twenty years ago standing at the same garden wall and we briefly spoke about old times when we went fishing and played at the harbour. His heart must have been slowly weakening and he passed away in his fifties.

Life delivers incredible ironies and cruelty. Walter was in love with my cousin Julia who left Cockenzie to live with her parents up north at Red Point. Julia passed away in her early forties and was buried in the churchyard up there. I went to her funeral and standing over her grave, I recalled Walter's love for her and mine – bittersweet memories.

Without Honour

World events are never far from my mind, especially those that threaten security and peace. The harsh reality of the world's societies expanding at a phenomenal rate and converging makes the probability of another World War seem inevitable. The 'Thucydides Trap' is an apparent tendency towards war when an emerging power threatens to displace an existing great power as a regional or international hegemon. It has been used to describe a potential conflict between the United States and two rising superpowers, Russia and the People's Republic of China. It is based on a quote by the ancient Athenian historian and military general Thucydides, who concluded that the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta had been inevitable because of Spartan fears of the growth of Athenian power.

Honour is defined as knowing and doing what is morally right. An honourable man, is a phrase which is often used to describe a person who displays great virtue, humility, integrity and a strong moral code. His morality will not be compromised by the weaknesses of decadence, cheating, prevarication and outright lying. However, there are forces at play which cause the most moral politician, even a President to compromise his or her honour.

As an example, one only has to look back at the massive slaughter of the American indigenous people, the Indian tribes, as orchestrated by the American Government in the 1800s. This genocide was condoned, not only by the American President and successive America Presidents but also by an entire American society. The purpose and the reason that honour was set aside was in the pursuit of land and gold as the population of European immigrants into America expanded and moved west across the country. Treaties with the indigenous Indian tribes were habitually broken and the clearest example was with the Lakota Sioux who originally were allowed by treaty to keep the Black Hills of Dakota. When gold was discovered there, the treaty was torn up and the Sioux were removed to an Indian Reservation. In the year 2022, in the American Court, the Lakota Sioux won their case but instead of returning the land to them, the American Government awarded them

billions of dollar currency in compensation. The Sioux refused the award and are still fighting for the return of their lands.

When in 1942, the Japanese without warning, killed thousands of American military personnel and civilians in Pearl Harbour there was no honour. When in 1945, an American government sanctioned dropping nuclear bombs on Japan, simply to test the technology, under the guise of shortening the war and killed thousands of civilians in the Japanese Cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there was no honour. Such dishonourably atrocities and genocides have been endured for thousands of years as the human race expanded and converged for land, resources and financial wealth to sustain its societies. America seeks global hegemony, global power and control over all countries of the world, backed up by military power and the American dollar as the reserved currency of the world. It has over 800 military bases spread throughout the world and sited in countries which have bowed to the financial and military wealth of America.

My country 'Britain' is totally subservient to American hegemony and sites 'The Special Relationship' with America as paramount and which must be maintained at all costs. Successive British Governments have stood back, and on many occasions, even assisted the American Government to cause political regime changes in those countries which will not bow to American hegemonic will and I site as the latest examples, Kosovo, Libya and Iraq, especially Mosul in Iraq, where thousands of civilians were slaughtered when the Americans, carpet bombed the city. Today, the bodies of women and children, still lie under the rubble. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon, the Greeks under 'Alexander the Great', the Romans and many other great empires stretching all the way back to 'The Assyrian Empire' have employed the same 'regime change' practises.

The entire western hemisphere is now without honour and follows the decadence and immorality of the United States of America. When you watch on national television Hilary Clinton, the 67th Secretary of State for America, openly boast and laugh, on the death of a sovereign country's leader, you recognise that something is seriously wrong with that country.

Today, there are over a hundred countries, many in Asia, who refuse to be dictated to by the United States of America and its assimilated, Western alliance of countries. Under the guise of NATO and democracy for all countries, America marches forward in its assimilation of countries towards its hegemonic corporate ambitions. Currently, the U.S. is engaged in attempting the overthrow of the leaders of many sovereign states, including Iran, Venezuela, Syria, Cuba, North Korea, Belarus, Russia and even China. The U.S. president is attempting to crush the governments of those countries through sanctions, embargos and by financially limiting their growth. It's a dangerous game because the U.S. desire for regime change is geared to feed their corporate world ambitions, especially in relation to oil and gas. What makes that approach different today, is that despite it being an undercover 'covert' action by the U.S. for centuries, it is now entirely visible to the rest of the world.

America, especially seeks regime change in Cuba and Venezuela as both are socialist sovereign states. These countries have been heavily sanctioned financially and have suffered various military insurgents backed by the U.S. to overthrow their leaders and for the Americans to insert their own puppet governments, which will be sympathetic to American corporations, especially in Venezuela to take control of the enormous oil reserves. In an incredible hypocrisy, the American claim that the leaders of Cuba and Venezuela are the cause of the financial crippling of those countries, especially in Venezuela which is blocked by the U.S. from exporting its oil and has to import oil from Iran.

The western elite in positions of power, and their media, have decided to ignore, and even cover up, the advance of America's illegal imperialist ambitions, and its attempts to crush and dominate the leaders of other countries, especially those with socialist governments. This immorality had always resided in the shadows but today it is visible for anyone who possesses an open mind and cares to look. There is hubris at play, when a President of the United States declares that the Americans are exceptional and cannot be judged in an International Court. This is despite the many war crimes they have committed as individuals and as a country. History had shown that individuals and even countries, pay a terrible price for their hubris.

Phew, I feel better now; that was a nice rant. Time for a brandy and to listen to some 'classical' music on vinyl.

The Apples and the Hound

I often walk along the lane but the apple tree is gone. I guess, like me, it grew old, but I am still standing. It's funny, how some places draw on your memories and the lane never fails.

It was a nice summer's day in Cockenzie and my cousin Joyce and I knew where there was an apple tree just waiting to be picked. It resided along a lane in a garden with a very high wall. Joyce's friend, a very nice girl, came along.

Joyce and I managed to climb the high wall while her pal kept watch. I climbed the tree and dropped the apples to Joyce who had a bag to put them in. It was a successful raid and we felt well pleased with ourselves. When you are 9 years old, girls tend to giggle a lot and there was a great deal of giggling as we climbed back over the wall.

Anyway, just as we dropped down, a man appeared at the top of the lane with a massive hound of a dog, an Alsatian. He was the owner of the apple tree, who we knew quite well. The three of us took to our heels in the opposite direction with apples spilling all over the place and rolling down the road. He shouted, *"stop, stop, don't run and the dog will not touch you."*

I stopped dead in my tracks and so did Joyce. We both watched as the hound, its mouth slavering, ran past us to chase Joyce's pal who had decided to keep running. I watched in horror as the hound reached her and grasping her dress, it tore it completely off and she was standing there in her knickers. The dog proceeded to vent its apparent anger out on the remnants of the dress in its mouth. Of course, the man was mortified at what had happened and thankfully she was uninjured. He escorted us home and paid for the torn dress – the apple theft was forgotten about.

The Trophy Wife

John Hinkle-Smythe was very rich and ran several lucrative businesses. In his twenties, his wife and baby girl had died during his wife's childbirth. John had dalliances with the females during his life but he never remarried. Now in his 70s, he was being regularly serviced by his younger black housekeeper, in more ways than one, but she had recently passed away. John was at a loss and the thought of breaking in yet another new female housekeeper was fast becoming impossible. After making sexual advances to the last six applicants, he had been lucky not to have been arrested, but in America during the 1920s there was much more leeway in such matters. Of course, it helped that he was mega rich. Due to his position in high society, he found it impossible to entertain prostitutes and now he was finding that his right hand was fast developing arthritis. He had to do something quick, so he advertised for a wife who had to be in the age group 40 to 50 years of age.

Naturally his social circle was somewhat bemused, but after all, in America during the Roaring 20s, anything goes and his rich friends just quipped to their 'tutting' wives, "*why not?*" It was not long before Maria Ursula Bowie was installed as John's trophy wife. She came from Texas, and she was tall, incredibly good looking with an awesome body. It was reputed that she was a direct descendent of the famous James Bowies who died at the 'Battle of the Alamo' but it was more in relation to her father, Pedro Bowie who had named her after James Bowie's wife. Naturally, Maria, who was in her early forties, had a touch of dusty brown colouring from her Mexican heritage.

Together they lived in a huge mansion set high on the hills surrounding Los Angeles. John and his wife had many black servants so they were well maintained and Maria played her part by being on his arm at social functions and servicing him in bed. The maids of the household were not amused as Maria made such a noise at night during their sexual activities. Her yell of, "*yeeha*" as she assumed the top position of a cowboy, were of particular annoyance. For his part, John endured pure ecstasy which on many occasions nearly killed him.

As was her plan, Maria Ursula Bowie tried in vain to cause the old man to succumb whereby she could inherit his riches. No matter how strenuous her sexual activities, old John somehow managed to survive. He was a Hinkle-Smythe and the family were renowned for their strong hearts and

longevity. Eventually, Maria learned the hard way, that old men still fire live rounds and she fell pregnant. Not for her, a straightforward little boy or a girl, she gave birth to triplets, all boys. The Hinkle-Smythe's were old school, so Maria was forced to look after and bring up the children; not for her the black nanny to care for them. Three children leave their mark on a woman and Maria was no different; she never managed to get the weight off and in fact, put more on, to finally reach an optimum weight of around 18 stone.

Suddenly, John stopped taking her to his social functions and she remained at home to look after the babies. In retribution, Maria stopped providing sexual services and chose to sleep in a separate bedroom from her husband. Both found themselves trapped in a soulless and sexless marriage. The years passed and John was now nearing his late 80s but his reputation prevented any clandestine sexual extramarital liaisons. His hands were now useless due to acute arthritis and as is the way in most old men, his prostrate dried up like a walnut; a cancer formed and he died as a result.

Maria Ursula Bowie found herself fat, middle aged and alone. She sat in the mansion, tended by her black servants. She scoffed chocolates and drank champagne and rarely went out; other than a short walk in the large garden. Her children all went to Harvard and eventually they ran the family businesses with great success. One day, a servant found Maria slumped in her favourite chair. Her lips were covered in chocolate and an empty champagne glass lay on the floor. It took six men to carry her body out of the house to the waiting mortuary vehicle.

The English Teacher

Recently, I visited my old secondary school and noticed they had built a new one on the other side of the road. I remembered that my English teacher had taken me and my pals (we were 16 years old) for a pint in a pub in the High Street of Edinburgh during a concert we were all attending. He was a remarkable man and not unlike the teacher, Mr Chips in the 1939 'Goodbye Mr Chips' played by the actor Robert Donat. I looked at the old school and I could still see him sitting at his desk in the classroom.

The class was silent as we read intently what the English teacher had given us. We knew that afterwards he would expect our individual interpretations of the passage. I lifted my head very slightly and he was sitting on his chair and leaning over his desk with his spectacles slanted down on his face.

I sensed that he was watching the class over the top of his glasses. There was a voice coming from up the back but I dared not turn to look, I kept my eyes on the teacher because I knew what was going to happen and I guess most of the class did as well.

Suddenly the teacher lifted his head and shouted, “*you boy*” and as the noisy culprit looked up, the teacher, with his right hand, pulled the belt from out under his coat at the shoulder and I watched as the belt snaked across the room, over the heads of the pupils and wrapped itself around the noisy boy’s neck. I thought to myself, that was a fantastic shot.

The boy was ordered to bring the belt to the teacher and on doing so, he received six of the best across the palm of his right hand.

Surveillance

Surveillance is now common place on the streets of Britain and can be found in CCTV cameras, vehicle dashcams and GoPro video cameras worn on the helmets of cyclists and motor cyclists. It may seem a great idea in assisting the police detect criminal offenders and insurance companies to clarify responsibility in road accidents but the negative impact is to set individuals against each other. It has become so bad that some even take to the internet and their video websites to shame people committing road traffic mis-demeanours. The police force was created to prevent crime and in later years to police the roads and motorways to deter people from driving recklessly. However, Britain no longer has adequate policing thanks to low numbers of policemen and the government openly encourages CCTV and video surveillance by the public.

Tom Clatter-Horn was on his pedal cycle with his GoPro video camera switched on and fixed to his helmet. He enjoyed drawing up alongside cars and videoing the occupants. Invariably, they would be using their mobile phones and he relished exposing them on his website. Of course, he was drawing substantial income from YouTube for the adverts that were posted on his video channel. His name became known around the world and especially in his home town of Hull, England. Sadly, and as a result of his videos, many individuals were prosecuted. This set many people against Tom as they saw it the duty of the police and not a vigilante to pursue offenders.

One day, he made a grave mistake, he was being overtaken by a van on a country road when he videoed the driver who was using his mobile phone. The van suddenly swerved to the nearside and knocked Tom into the bushes at the side of the road. Before he could react, the driver of the van alighted from his vehicle and hit him over the head with a hammer, knocking him out. The driver dragged him into the nearby woods and threw his pedal cycle in as well. Unfortunately for Tom, no-one saw this occurrence and the driver set to work on him.

The next day, another cyclist was passing the same spot when he noticed a flash of light in the trees; it was the sun glinting off Tom’s pedal cycle handlebars. He went to investigate and was horrified at what he saw. He immediately called the police on his mobile phone and they attended to find the burnt remains of Tom Clatter-Horn. The police surmised that he had been strung up to a tree branch

by a rope and a fire set below his head. Remnants of the rope were still tied around the tree branch and on his ankles but all that remained of Tom was a burnt-out shell. Thanks to a detailed search of the area for clues, they later identified him through his video camera which had been dislodged from his helmet when he had been thrown off his bike.

Thanks to Tom's video, the driver of the van was also apprehended and prosecuted for murder. When sentenced, all he said in court was, *"well at least the little bastard will not be taking anymore videos of folks going about their business."*

The Woman on the Phone

There is nothing worse than a woman venting her anger on you for no apparent reason. I have endured my share of such incidents and I can remember them all. Over the years as I grew older, I could even figure out what triggers the wrath. You learn what to avoid saying to a woman; they are a bit like a stropky mare in a stable, sometimes you have to pet them and talk sweetly.

My secretary put the call through and I spoke to a woman on the other end. She began to shout and bawl at me, *"and this bloody alarm will not work, you will have to come out and fix it. I have put up with this for far too long"*. She continued, *"this is causing me so much stress and I am not paying for the repair."* Then she hung up the phone.

I turned to my secretary and smiled, *"I guarantee that this one is going through a divorce."* I put on my coat and drove my car to the woman's address. On arrival, I found the front door open and she was sitting on a chair in the hallway, crying her eyes out. I checked the alarm which was working okay and without any faults; she just did not know how to use it and had reacted out of frustration and stress.

I showed her how to work the alarm system and when I finished, she apologised, *"I am so sorry for taking it out on you, my husband has left me for another woman and we are going through a divorce after 30 years together."* I told her it was alright and left her to her troubles. Not long afterwards, the house was sold and a new occupant moved in. Once again, I had to show someone how to work their alarm but this time it was a young couple, with a new born and just starting out in life.

The Candy Man

I remember the horse and cart as it slowly travelled up the lane. The man walked beside it and the horse knew when to stop. He shouted, *"rag and bone"* and we kids would raid our mother's clothes and rush out into the street, sometimes with our mothers' chasing after us to retrieve them. The reward was a small toy, a balloon and very often, candy.

Jeffrey McCallister kissed his wife on the cheek and headed off down to the pub to meet up with his mates. She shouted after him, *"don't be late and don't drink too much my love, I will have your supper ready for you coming home."* His entry into his local, brought forth welcoming shouts from his pals who were gathered around the bar with pints of beer in their hands and cigarettes in their mouths; the smoke covering them in a nice bluish grey haze. The barmaid, Tilda Ogden, poured his usual order, a nice cool pint of Guinness. Holding court was Jeffrey's speciality and his pals gathered around to discuss the events of the day. One exclaimed, *"guys, did you read that story in the Star about this guy who left his wife for another woman and he kept the family dog. The headline was a cracker 'Man Leaves Wife for a Dog'."* Jeffrey joined in, *"ah, those weak-minded infantile journalists who lack the intelligence to properly seek out genuine news stories. Those undereducated pathetic individuals who seek to embellish everyday human nothingness with a disingenuous grabbing headline which often precedes callous rumours and the prevarication of the truth. It's called 'Yellow Journalism' and is gorged upon by even more undereducated pathetic juvenile individuals."* His pals stared through their drink filled eyes and shouted, *"fucking A Jeff"* not quite understanding Jeffrey's characterisation of Star readers which included them.

Later, Jeffrey left the pub and headed home. He has just reached his garden gate when he felt a sharp pain in his lower back which refused to go away. He thought it must be wind circulating in his body from the beer he had been drinking. He staggered into the house and sat back in his favourite chair in front of his concerned wife. She brought him a cup of tea which seemed to help and the pain gradually dissipated. Jeffrey concluded it was wind as he was an overweight 30-year-old individual, who worked as a fork lift driver on a building site, unloading building materials from delivery lorries. In the days that followed, the pain came and went in spasms and he became more concerned. Eventually he decided to visit his doctor and made an appointment. As was the case in many clinics, he did not have his own doctor but the receptionist paired him with one of many who worked there. The doctor concluded that he may have strained his back at work or it may be due to his obesity. At first, he was prescribed paracetamol and warned not to exceed the doze as the tablets could damage his liver. On a second visit to another doctor, he was prescribed Nurofen and warned not to exceed the dose as the tablets could damage the lining of his stomach and cause ulcers.

Despite the medications his back pain spasms continued and became gradually worse. He even attended physiotherapy sessions and undertook strenuous exercises to strengthen his back muscles and to open up his spinal vertebrae. Eventually, and after a few months, he had to leave his work on sick pay and rest at home. Jeffrey revisited the clinic, and yet another doctor prescribed Remedeine 40, a powerful and addictive concoction of dihydrocodeine and paracetamol; an opiate painkiller. This medication helped to dull the pain but after a few months he started to experience heart palpitations and after a further visit to another doctor at the clinic and a cholesterol blood test, he was prescribed beta blockers and statins to reduce his high cholesterol and high blood pressure. He

was warned to lose weight, reduce his alcohol intake and to stop smoking. The fear was that he could experience a blood clot, even a stroke.

In the months that followed and despite his ailments and medications, he continued to visit his local pub to meet up with his mates, but by now he was in a battery electric driven wheelchair, thanks to extensive joint pain, thought to be a known side effect of taking statins. Surprisingly, his alcohol consumption seemed to help his pills dull the pain and of course due to his short-term memory loss, yet another known side effect of statins, his usual intelligence took a backseat in his brain. His pals often found him repeating his statements to them within a few minutes. When they pointed this out to Jeffrey, he became quite annoyed. Eventually they learned to just let him ramble on. His wife took him back to the doctor, who did a memory test and diagnosed the early stages of vascular dementia; for which there was no cure.

The pain in his back and joints became unbearable, he had lost a lot of weight and one morning, he collapsed and was rushed to the local hospital. Extensive tests discovered that he was anaemic through the loss of red blood cells and was given a blood transfusion. He was also terminally ill with metastatic cancer or as it is commonly known, 'Stage IV Cancer'. They thought it may have had started in the region of his lower back due to his back pain and gradually the cancer cells had spread throughout his body and into his bones, his joints, liver and lungs. It was decided that he would be brought home and his wife and a daily nurse took care of him in his last few days. His mates from the pub paid their respects by gathering around his bedside but were heart saddened to witness the emaciated body of a once strong man. Finally, one early morning and as the wind and rain battered his bedroom window, he passed away peacefully with his wife at his bedside and holding his hand.

Meanwhile, back at the clinic, a doctor was prescribing opioid painkillers, beta blockers and statins to another ill patient. Like a sheep being dipped in a pen, the patient would be ushered in and ushered out, clutching his prescription for his tablets, his candy. There was no follow-up from the doctor regarding his condition, he was simply a name to be forgotten; unless, he came back of his own accord. Eventually his death might be noted and his name removed from the roster – “next”

Bashing the Tin

In the early 1950s my mother rented a wee shop in Musselburgh and I being around 3 years old was sent to the local nursery which was held in a huge hall in Musselburgh. I played with the other kids and there must have been around thirty of us, all running around like wild animals. In the afternoons we were all forced into camp beds under grey coloured coarse blankets and told to go to sleep. Anyway, it did not last long, within a few weeks, I had tripped up a running kid who bashed his nose and I was expelled.

Thereafter, my mother looked after me at her shop and to a certain extent let me run loose in the back garden of the premises. Later that year, the council decided the shop was to be demolished and flats built on the site. So, mother was emptied out and returned to being a housewife. Fortunately, she had saved all the profits as we had lived on my father's wages, him being a lorry driver. She paid a deposit to the bank for a loan and purchased a big ice cream, grocers' shop in Joppa, Portobello. It was a massive place and had a large cellar which you accessed via a trapdoor and ladders.

My mother had nowhere to let me run loose so I was often put down in the cellar amongst the stock. That came to an end when I found a hammer and a big empty tin. I had great fun banging the tin and eating cheese but when I cut my thumb with the hammer, my mother could not cope with it anymore. Eventually, I was emptied out and from then on, my Gran looked after me at her home in Cockenzie.

I still have the scar on my thumb which should have been stitched. Back then, the doctor was the last port of call for my family; the large cut was allowed to heal on its own with a bandage for comfort.

Misano

It was a terrible day; the rain was lashing down; it was cold and I was trapped in the house. I had been hoping to get out on my motorbike and head down the Borders for a country road blast. I was sitting in my house, when I thought, what the hell, so I picked up my smartphone. He answered my call and I asked him how he was doing. He was at Misano or should I say, the Misano World Circuit Marco Simoncelli next to the town of Misano Adriatico (Province of Rimini) in the frazione of Santa Monica-Cella in Italy.

I was not surprised; Marco Simoncelli was his friend and had been killed in an accident at the 2011 Malaysian Grand Prix at Sepang. He often visited Misano to remember his friend. I told him how the weather in Scotland was bad and surprise, surprise, he invited me over for the week-end. He told me not to worry about gear and he had a spare motorbike for me.

I jumped at the chance and the following day boarded a plane for Italy. He met me at the airport and we enjoyed a lunch at the Ristorante Locanda LIUZZI which was great. I enjoyed his company and he was so down to earth and typically friendly, which was not surprising, after all he was Italian. We discussed what he was doing now that he had retired; and as usual, he was enthusiastic about his future projects and especially his young team of riders.

We travelled to the circuit and I donned some spare leathers and sat on a beautiful Yamaha MotoGP motorcycle and together we set off around the track. He led and I tried to keep up. After a few laps, I

was getting the hang of the bike and doing pretty well, although at around 150 miles per hour, he seemed so relaxed. I guess at that speed, for him, it was similar to how I felt doing 40 miles per hour on a motorway? It was a terrific afternoon and I learned a hell of a lot following him around. Afterwards, there was a sadness in his eyes and he told me that he missed Marco a lot.

It was a great week-end, we hit the bars, the shows and I stayed in the fantastic Atlantic Riviera Mare Hotel in Misano Adriatico. On the Monday, he saw me to the airport and we said our farewells.

Back in Scotland, it was still raining but I had enjoyed my week-end with Valentino Rossi, the famous MotoGP motorcycle racer.

The Janitor

Once, every now and then, you meet someone that is special. There is an instant liking to them and they always remain in your memories. The other day I was in my gardening hut and hanging there was my father's old brown working overall; well not quite overall, it was like a light boiler suit but without the trousers. It was three quarters length with huge pockets and it was still there, thirty-nine years after his passing. I smiled at the thought of him wearing it and then I remembered another person who wore a similar light brown coat.

Another day at school, another gathering at lunch time and we all headed to the boys' toilets to watch. The two pugilists raised their fists and squared off against each other. The blows were struck, blood was spilled but within a few minutes, perhaps even seconds, it was over.

The victor was cheered, the loser was picked up and we all headed for the exit. There he stood in his brown overalls, a kind man, an Irishman. He stopped us in our tracks and shouted, *"well, what will it be, the headmaster or me?"*

Sheepishly, the two pugilists walked with the janitor to his little hut at the side of the main playground. They entered and a moment later, I heard the belt being administered to their hands as the janitor laid into them. I watched as the door opened and the janitor smiled and patted them both on the head as they made their way to the classroom – of course the headmaster never knew about the fight.

Sadly, the janitor, who was well liked, died a relatively young man.

The Wolf

I am fortunate to have a pond in my garden which used to have fish in it but thanks to the passing of the years, and a heron and some mink from the canal, it now only has some newts living there. I

refuse to restock it and remain content with keeping it clean and watching the local fox, pheasants, rabbits, squirrels and the small birds drink from it. Every year, the frogs spawn in the pond and their tadpoles have a greater chance of survival. Most summer nights, I open the patio doors and sit outside to listen to the waterfall running. Quite often when the weather is bad and there is a full moon, I look through the window and watch the night wildlife come to life. Usually, a barn owl sits on a nearby tree and takes small mice that come up from their nests which are under the pond in the soft sand. On those dark moonlit nights, I imagine all sorts of creatures are lurking in the bushes.

Brian Pearson stood at his lounge patio door and peered out through the rain-soaked glass into his garden. Night had fallen and he could see very little, other than his own, and the room's reflection in the window. To try and blank out the reflection he pressed his eyes and nose hard against the cold glass and strained his eyes to focus outside. The moon came out and the grass, bushes and trees were shrouded in a white light. Suddenly, he saw a dark figure lurking near the garden pond and it appeared to be drinking the water. He banged on the window to get it to look up and he saw two yellow piercing eyes glinting in the moonlight; it looked like a very large dog, like a wolf. It saw Brian and calmly walked up to the patio doors. In that brief moment, he saw its sharp teeth. Brian yelled out in fright and the animal ran away.

After breakfast, he checked with the local zoo and scanned all the newspapers but there were no reports of large canine creatures or wolves wandering the neighbourhood. He smiled; the thought of a wolf running abroad in Scotland was very unlikely but nevertheless, he reported the incident to the police. They informed him that it was not uncommon for members of the public to report large animals like panthers wandering the countryside but this was the first time that someone had reported seeing a wolf in their garden.

That night, Brian checked his back garden through the patio window but apart from a rabbit on the grass, there was no sign of anything else. Shrugging his shoulders, he retired to his bed. Sometime during the night, he was suddenly awakened by a long-drawn-out howl. He sat bolt upright in bed and outside, the wolf was standing on its hind legs with its front paws up on the bedroom window sill and peering in. It seemed happy to see that Brian had awakened and raising its head up, it let out another great howl. Brian reached for his mobile and called the police who thought him deranged, *"hi sergeant, we have a nutter on the phone; he thinks a wolf is up at his bedroom window trying to attract his attention."* Brian received a verbal caution over the phone from the desk sergeant for wasting police time and was told to go and see his doctor.

In the days and nights that followed, there were no further incidents or sightings of the wolf and Brian felt more at ease. When he was out for a drink, he told the story to his friends who hooted with laughter. The weeks passed and once again the moon was full and hung bright in the night sky. He decided that he had to overcome his fears and went for a walk outside to take in the beauty of

the landscape in the moonlight. He walked down the driveway and started across his middle field to watch the light glinting of the nearby canal. He leaned over a fence, breathed in the cool and clear night air and watched the bats flying around. Suddenly, he froze stiff, the hairs on the back of his neck rose up and he could sense that something was behind him. He turned around and sitting there was the wolf with a dead rabbit in its mouth. It dropped the rabbit at his feet and just sat there, its mouth open and its tongue hanging out. It looked just like a large pet dog and there was no aggression.

Brian had no-where to go as his back was pressed hard against the fence. The wolf rose up and walking towards him, it gave him a playful nip on his hand which unfortunately caused a small cut and drew blood. The wolf stood on its hind legs and placing its paws on his shoulders, it gave him a lick on the face with its tongue. It was then that he realised the wolf was a female and as it sat back down on its haunches and stared at him, Brian slowly walked around the animal and headed back up the field for his home; not daring to look back. He was aware the wolf was following him and then it appeared at his side and walked with him like a pet dog would walk with its master. He went into his house and looking out of the bedroom window he could see it sitting outside and looking at him.

There were no further sightings of the female wolf and Brian settled into his normal lonely routine. Sometime later as the full moon came round, he was sitting in his lounge when he had an urge to go outside and he found the female wolf sitting at his front door. He started to sweat, his body created a tremendous heat and as he ripped off his clothes he began to change.

In the months that followed, the neighbours noted that Brian had taken up a dalliance with a neighbour who had moved in next door to him. She was a bright young woman and they could often be seen walking together in the village and they were very polite to people. At the same time, when the full moon came around, there were reports of two wolves prowling the area around the village. The authorities never traced them but, in any case, the villagers thought them harmless because no-one was ever attacked and they seemed to keep the rabbit population under control.

The Clock

The clock hangs on the wall in my memory room where I store all the things that mean so much to me. I put all my mother's ornaments and her pictures there along with some items belonging to my grandmother and grandfather. I often sit in the room, listening to my vinyl records and to absorb the memories. It is a nice German clock and you have to wind up the chime and the time mechanisms. It is made of very dark wood, it has a large round face, with a wooden ledge below and above the face is ornate carving with a huge eagle standing on the top.

It is probably one of a kind because the villagers who owned one during the 2nd World War, removed the eagle and threw it away. You see, in their mind, it represented Nazi Germany. However, my grandmother decided to keep the eagle, so it remained on the wall in her living-room since the 1920s and right up to my grandfather's death in 1978. Today, it is on my wall and I regularly wind up the mechanisms and I enjoy the chimes.

When I was very, very young and my hair grew long, my Gran would stand me on a chair facing the clock. She would place a small foil covered chocolate figure on the ledge below the clock's face. I watched it until she cut my hair and then I was given the figure to eat as a reward.

I liked the chimes and they would sound on the half hour and on the hour. Back then, I would lie under the table in the living-room and listen to the wireless, while my grandfather would smoke his pipe and my grandmother would be knitting.

Black and White

We have come a long way since the first influx of black immigrants arrived in the country. In 1948, Britain's Caribbean immigrants came to London on the SS Empire Windrush at the invitation of the governing labour party and Clement Richard Attlee who was the Prime Minister at the time. Many settled in Brixton, and it gradually expanded into a prominently black district. Life back then must have been very tough and one can only imagine what both races went through as the blacks sought to establish a new home and the whites resented their presence.

John Leadbetter was a tough son of a bitch. If anyone crossed him, they were in for a swift hiding; even if it took place in front of the public and even the police. By the time he had reached 30 years of age he had been in jail many times; and each time, for assaulting someone who angered him. I was in prison with him for grievous bodily harm. We were released the same day and I joined him for a pint of beer in a backstreet pub in Brixton. I guess John invited trouble, him being black and all, but thankfully the place was full of black people and as John's friend, and me being white, I was left alone.

We became very good friends and we were constantly in brawls, usually with white guys who picked on him in the street and of course I had to back him up. Over the years, he had picked up a few scars to his face and body. John had been stabbed, shot and almost beaten to death by white guys who ganged up on him. He had learned to avoid white neighbourhoods and he worked as a labourer on building sites, carrying huge amounts of bricks on a hod over his shoulder. I worked with him and he would climb up several tall ladders, carrying the load. The brickies called him 'Smokey' after 'Smokey Robinson' the famous black singer from the 1970s and the name suited him, because, despite his scars, he was a good-looking guy and had no problem drawing in the girls, especially the white

blondes. I did alright; I may not have been as good looking but the leftovers were okay, especially the black birds.

They were different times, back then, when I knew John. Health and safety did not exist and if someone died on the building site, their body would be carted away in an ambulance or a police van and we would all just get on with it. If you were a guy that displayed any softness, whimpering, self-pity, like you have today; or worse, if you were a homosexual, you can guarantee that you would be a hospital case before very long or found dead in a back alley. It was a tough life being a black man and even tougher being a white friend of one. Like most guys we attended the 'gee, gees' and the 'dogs' to watch the races and place our bets; we spent many a Saturday shouting them on and tearing up our betting slips. The main event was in the pub afterwards with much banter and laughter. Most guys had this ongoing erotic idea of converting two gorgeous lesbians into becoming heterosexual, but to my knowledge, it never happened. The other one was bathing in a communal pool with a bunch of naked women after an all-women football match. That certainly never happened, despite the wishful thinking.

I enjoyed waking up on a Sunday morning lying beside a black bird, her ebony skin glinting in the sunlight coming through a window. They were gorgeous, those black birds and once you have sex with one, you are ruined for life. No more white birds. Anyway, I have strayed off the plot so I must get back to being John's pal and our experiences together. We were in this pub, not our usual; we had made the mistake of walking into a white bar and the patrons were not amused. One shouted at me, *"hey, you stupid white bastard, what you doing with the nigger; are you his bitch?"* I smiled and replied, *"what's it to you, you fucking poof?"* The next thing he walked over to me and as I broke his jaw with my right fist, the place erupted. White guys were coming at us from all angles, and John and I stood back-to-back and decked them as they approached. Afterwards, we fled the place and I reckon they ran out of ambulances to carry off the hospital cases. The police never did trace us; no CCTV back then.

It all ended badly many years ago. We got into a fight on the street with a black gang who took an instant dislike to me and I took them on. I was punched to the ground and as they all started to kick me. John intervened and he was stabbed in the heart. He fell to the ground in a huge pool of blood and they all ran away. After I recovered in hospital, I paid my respects at his graveside and then I left Brixton and went off to live in Wales. I married a nice black girl and we have two beautiful grown-up kids, a boy and a girl. I worked down the mines and many of my pals are black men who worked alongside me. In our retirement, we all meet up from time to time for a drink at the local pub.

I often think about my time with John; he saved my life and gave me a second chance.

Gran

Every time I visit my Gran's grave and I visit it a lot, I often sit on a bench in the graveyard and draw on all those glorious moments with my relatives; their graves are all around me. However, amongst the joy is the melancholy and some memories are better embraced rather than blanked out. I often think on my Gran's last moments in my company as a boy.

I heard her moaning as she lay in her bed, which was in the sitting-room. It had always been in the sitting-room, a bed shared by my grandfather and my grandmother in their small terraced house. I slept upstairs in the attic on a camp bed, whilst my uncle slept in a bed next to mine. He often threw shoes at me because I cried a lot and kept him awake. I was missing my mother who lived in Edinburgh and I stayed behind in my Gran's house to finish my primary education.

Now Gran was seriously ill and despite the visits by the local doctor he did not send her to hospital; he just gave her pills. Eventually the ulcer burst and I brought her a basin to the bed and held it there as she spewed up dark red blood. I heard her gasp, "*I am dying.*" Finally, the doctor arrived and immediately called for an ambulance; she died later that day in hospital.

I had been out down at the harbour and when I came back, I found my grandfather weeping in the kitchen. She was buried in Prestonpans cemetery and we were all there; I helped lower her coffin into the ground.

The Theoretical Physicist and the Barman

I guess I have been lucky in my occupation as I never suffered from any Monday morning blues. Each day brought its own rewards and accomplishments and I was well contented. When I retired, I never felt that my life, in relation to my work, had been wasted. In my travels, I heard many of my fellows' moan about being trapped in their job, unsatisfied and yet they remained with much discontent. It must be terrible to look back on one's life and consider it a wasted one.

David Klein was in his 60th year and a professor of theoretical physics at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) which is a private research university in Pasadena, California, in the United States of America. He had never married and had devoted his career in the pursuit of his work in relation to 'string theory' - bringing together quantum mechanics and Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity. One of the many vibrational states of the string corresponds to the graviton, a quantum mechanical particle that carries the gravitational force. Thus, string theory is a theory of quantum gravity. Having spent nearly 35 years of his life on the study, he was reaching an impasse that he was unaware of but one soon to be recognised.

It was late evening and David had left the campus and was walking down Fair Oaks Avenue when he called in at a local bar for a drink. There were few customers and he sat at the bar and after he was served, the barman welcomed his conversation, and stated, *"I am guessing that you have just come from Caltech, I sense you are a teacher; they often come in here."* David replied, *"You are right, I am a professor in theoretical physics."* The barman smiled, and poured him another drink and was offered one himself. The night wore on at the professor's expense because he matched his drinks each time, with one for the barman. Both of them became inebriated and merry. In the relaxed atmosphere of a new friendship, through the consumption of alcohol, the conversation began to open up.

The barman leaned over the counter and spouted some philosophy, *"surely, is it not a waste of one's time, to consider Einstein's theory in relation to quantum mechanics and attempt to unravel the 'gordian knot' of the universe when it cannot be undone. It is generally accepted; there is no conclusive resolution; it is all theory and conjecture. After all, it is like seeking the answer for possible life after death; remember the line in Horace's book of Odes – do not ask how long you will live for it is forbidden knowledge?"* David sat at the bar with a stunned look on his face and in his own quiet way he marvelled at the barman's statement and then felt slightly depressed. He ordered another drink for both of them and taking a sip of his double 'Jack Daniels' he sat back to ponder.

Eventually, and as if seeking to defend his position, he questioned the barman, *"have you always been a barman?"* The reply was a swift one and to the point, *"ah, you think because I am a barman that you might think you could belittle me. Perhaps, my remarks have stung your ego or on the other hand, you are genuinely intrigued and wish to understand my background?"* The professor replied, *"the latter."* The barman finished cleaning his glasses with his cloth and placing them behind the bar, he responded, *"I am 51 years of age and up until a few months ago, I was a professor of philosophy at the Pasadena City College in Colorado Boulevard. I thought of myself as a modern-day Socrates but all I achieved in my 25 years at the college was to mimic and adapt the great works of the 'historical philosophers' like Aristotle and Marcus Aurelias. It is all very well living a moral lifestyle but when you realise you have nothing to add, and everything you teach has been written over and over again in books that anyone can pick up and read; I felt I had wasted my life and I became unhappy. One day, I simply picked up my stuff, retired early and came here to work in this bar. I am now very content."*

Professor David Klein, did not reply at first, he just sat there pondering the drink in his glass. Eventually, he answered, *"I have not been unhappy in my work and I admit I have added nothing to Einstein's work and many other theoretical physicists before me. However, each day is the same as the last and like many other people, I just muddle on in life without much thought to it all. I go home at night to my flat, read a book, enjoy my music and a drink before retiring to bed. I repeat the entire*

sequence all over again the next day. I guess it is like a bird being born in a cage, I know no better; the cage is my sanctuary with no thought of escape. Meeting you has made me pause to think and perhaps really think on other matters outside theoretical physics for the first time."

David Klein sat back in his chair and stared at his now empty glass. The barman poured him another drink and said, *"this one is on me professor."* David picked up the glass and drank it down; he smiled at the barman and standing up he thanked him for his kindness and his backstory. He added, *"it has been a revelation meeting you"* and turning, he walked out of the bar, waving his right hand in the air as he left. He went home to his flat, enjoyed his music and read a book before retiring to bed. The next morning, a sober David, repeated the entire sequence again as he had done all his working life and never did leave his sanctuary.

The Gang's Dog

When I was young, I played with my pals and we had a gang dog called Prince, who belonged to my grandfather and he was as feral as me; we went everywhere together. He was a huge collie and would fight with any male dog who came near us. He often disappeared for days, after leaving the gang, to follow a bitch and he would return to my grandfather's house, the worst for wear. Prince was a bit of a devil, he slipped into a yard behind the shop on the front street in Cockenzie and killing two chickens, he proceeded to attempt to carry them off across the main road and up the lane to my grandfather's house. He was chased by the owner who managed to get his chickens back, albeit they were dead.

The highlight of my younger years at Cockenzie primary school was the annual summer holiday Gala when the villagers decorated their houses with bunting, coloured flags and stood outside to watch the Gala Queen being paraded through the village from the Pond Hall (the village hall at the outdoor swimming pond where dances were held) to the local park where everyone sat down to picnic. Some of the kids from school were dressed as sailors and the others as pirates. I was one of the sailors and we all went out into the Firth of Forth Estuary in fishing boats and had mock battles before the pirate chief was captured and paraded at the Pond Hall.

I remember when I was about eight years old and when I arrived home from school to my grandmother's house, I asked where Prince was? She said, *"aye, he was old, so he was taken away by a man in a van and he would be gassed in the back of the van by the time they got up to the top of the road."* It was my first taste of grief; I missed my pal.

Indoctrination

I have lived for over 7 decades and in my early years I never questioned my governments narrative, I just accepted what I was told in the newspapers, on the television and by the western media. However, as I grew older and especially when the internet arrived, I searched further afield for world news and began to recognise the UK, especially the government, in a different light. As the famous Scottish Poet, Robert Burns wrote, *"O wad some power the giftie gie us, to see oursels as ithers see us!"* In modern translation, *"Oh would some power the gift give us, to see ourselves as others see us."*

The five strengths in Buddhism are faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. Mindfulness is a form of mediation, it is the psychological process of purposely bringing attention to one's feelings, mental states and mental qualities. Mindfulness is where you are constantly watching your sensory experience in order to maintain duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues and the right way of living. Self-awareness relies upon sensory experiences, which are linked to the perceptions of the world. Sensory experience creates a material and stimulating learning that is adaptable and it can evolve into knowledge.

In general terms, sensory experience relates to the nature of observation and through observation, you use your own senses to make sense of the world around you and to maintain an awareness of reality, especially when a fact or situation, which you observe, is in question.

Throughout history, people and entire societies have been indoctrinated into a way of thinking which is conducive to the agenda of their government. Probably, the best example of this is the 'German Nazi Regime' in the 20th Century which created youth camps and indoctrinated the young from a very early age to become fanatical in their belief that they were the chosen 'pure' white race. The classic way to indoctrinate an entire society and a country is to create an enemy. Adolf Hitler, as the leader of the Nazi Party and the German Chancellor, successfully created two enemies, the Communist Russians and a race within the German society, the Jewish population. Eventually, it led to the extermination of over 5 million people of Jewish origin and World War II with the deaths of millions.

Every country and government have their own agenda and the indoctrination of their peoples' is a slow and deliberate process which takes many years to reach fruition. On the odd occasion, it is a spark that ignites and an entire society falls very quickly into line. A classic example was the 'McCarthy Era' in America when Senator Joseph McCarthy led a hunt for communists in the U.S. and the following is a reprint from an article on the [Internet](#) -

“While in congress, after his Lincoln's Day speech at a women's club in Virginia, McCarthy toiled at trying to find people across the nation to call a communist. His methods would ruin the lives of thousands and disregard the constitution completely. McCarthy's main method was to get America into anti-communist hysteria through a series of speeches and rallies against Communism. The scared masses would then accuse each other, either because they were actually scared or if they just resented the person, ruining the lives of thousands in the process. McCarthy would violate the right to privacy by using his connections with the FBI to wiretap people's phones to listen to conversations and see if they were indicative of "subversive activity". He assembled a committee to hear cases of those accused of communism. In these hearings, McCarthy would make accusations at those on trial, yelling at them and calling them liars whenever they denied his accusations.

Often McCarthy had no concrete evidence supporting these statements. This technique came to be known as McCarthyism, and was McCarthy's signature technique. Most of the time the people on trial in front of McCarthy and his committee were innocent and just accused of communism by their enemies. Even though most of the accused were innocent, McCarthy was able to convict them with little to no evidence, and even if they had won, their lives would be ruined, as merely being called to a trial would ruin one's reputation and credibility in both the job market, and day to day life.”

Governments use the media in all its forms to indoctrinate their society. When they are approached by a journalist that contradicts their narrative for a comment prior to publication, the government can slap a D-Notice on the information to block it from public view. This D-Notice invariably states that it is to preserve the country's security. Sometimes but not often, the D-Notice is ignored as in the case of Harold Wilson, the UK Prime Minister in 1967 in the D-Notice Affair. On 21 February 1967, an article in the Daily Express Newspaper written by Chapman Pincher claimed that "thousands of private cables and telegrams sent out of Britain from the Post Office or from commercial cable companies are regularly being made available to the security authorities for scrutiny." According to the memoirs of Harold Wilson, who claimed that there were many inaccuracies in it, the story had come "from a disgruntled ex-employee of a cable company." The legal position at the time was that a warrant was needed under Section 4 of the Official Secrets Act 1920, similar to that needed to intercept mail. Harold Wilson accused the Daily Express Newspaper of breaching two D-Notices which advised the press not to publish material which might damage national security. When the newspaper asserted it had been advised of no breach, an inquiry was set up under a committee of Privy Counsellors. The committee found against the Government, whereupon the Government refused to accept its findings on the disputed article, prompting press outrage and the resignation of the Secretary of the D-Notice committee.

In the 21st Century and thanks to television, mobile phones and the internet, the world's populace has instant access to news as it happens. Social media websites spawn thousands of activists,

millions of individual posts, links to millions of articles and are saturated with false or as it has become known, fake news. The Western and Eastern governments strive to stifle each other's propaganda and preserve the indoctrination of their own societies. Individuals and journalists are fearful of prosecution and some face jail terms should they go against their government's accepted narrative. The internet was designed to educate, distribute knowledge and promote free speech but unfortunately it became politicised for the personal agenda of individuals and governments.

Indoctrination requires a catalyst on which to build an agenda around. The catalyst may be an individual, a regime, a government, a country or simply a belief. Future generations will experience continual indoctrination through the media. Every second, every minute, every hour, every day, they will be bombarded with fake news which has an underlying political or manipulative agenda. It is already happening and for some strange reason, societies are keen to embrace it. To add grist to the mill and very much like McCarthyism, people are only too keen to spy and cheat on each other. Perhaps the worst case of this is the private policing via CCTV, the motor vehicle Dash Cam video camera and the GoPro video camera worn by motorcyclists and cyclists. Insurance companies promote these devices to settle vehicle accident claims but many individuals even use the video footage to report road traffic incidents to the police. There are even individuals who then post the videos on their website to promote themselves.

Groups of people will create their own agenda for their beliefs, their popularity and or financial gain. Today, thanks in the main, to the news media and social media we have political correctness and cancel culture where an individual's narrative which disagrees with the group's consensus is effectively barred from society. They can lose their employment and even become ostracised by their own family and friends. This only serves to weaken the trust within a society and in the end, individuals become less social and more insular.

A Strange Comfort

It was a very bleak morning and I had hoped that the weather (26th May 2022) would have improved; but that was not the case. To boot, a financial depression was settling on the country which did not help my mood. The United Kingdom's finances were in dire straits and unlikely to be resolved. I felt sorry for the youngsters who were just starting out and those in their early twenties who had not experienced the hard times. The country was in serious debt, and a return to the late 1970s was on the cards. Cheap money, borrowed from the banks on low interest rates, was coming to an end. The public were facing a massive rise in the cost of living, high energy bills, high inflation, rising interest rates, lower wages in real terms, strikes, unemployment and bankruptcies. Houses, shops and vehicle repossessions would start as the banks sought to claw back some revenue from loan defaulters and eventually there would be mob riots on the street.

The Bank of England was caught between a rock and a hard place; raise interest rates to combat rising inflation and the country goes into financial freefall and a recession. Leave interest rates as they are and inflation will rise, causing the same impact. Of course, like the 1970s, it all takes time, even a year or more for the full impact of a long-term recession to bite. Although this time, I figured it would be a depression, even one like the 1930s.

We don't have gladiators and lions killing Christians in the Colosseum these days to divert the mob's attention, although the movie 'The Hunger Games' comes pretty close. To add grist to the mill, the media are in league with the elites, from all political parties, the bankers and the corporations, who recognise only too well that the country is in turmoil and diversion is the name of the game.

There was no doubt in my mind that I was witnessing the final nail in the coffin for 'The British Empire' and its fall had been a relatively swift one. During my years, I had watched its decline and all that was left was a failing consumer economy and a broken infrastructure. Every government over the last 77 years had been run by failed politicians who continued to divert the public's attention away from the real issues. If you look at the UK Parliament, there is not one statesman amongst them; the real statesmen have run for the hills and probably left the country. I thought about 'The French Revolution' when the people had had enough and rose up against their government, especially the elites, to cut off their heads.

I let my imagination run wild and it delivered a strange comfort.

The Prime Minister looked out of the window at the mob gathering and his face was a picture. He questioned, *"do you think they will storm the building, Paul?"* His Private Secretary replied, *"I am not sure Prime Minister, they look really mean and the policeman at the door cannot stop them."* Inwardly smiling, Paul went on, *"I hope they don't hang you from a lamppost outside, like the Italians did with Mussolini."* The fear spread across the Prime Minister's face and he murmured, *"I wonder if I can hide Paul; until you come up with one of your brilliant ideas to divert their attention?"* His secretary replied, *"I don't think that will work anymore Prime Minister, the internet has made them more knowledgeable, they know now how the game is played. They have smashed all the windows of the high-class retail shops in Oxford Street and I can see that the Harrods fire is still blazing. Even worse, they have set alight all the electric buses on the streets and the fire brigade cannot put out the electric batteries that keep re-igniting. There are dead bodies everywhere, people killed by the toxic fumes."*

The Prime Minister suddenly let out a yell as he watched the television, *"look Paul, look; they have strung up the Governor of the Bank of England. Look, he's swinging from a lamppost in Threadneedle Street."* Suddenly the door of 10 Downing Street was smashed in and the mob entered, some carrying meat cleavers.