

# Stranger Tales



**Richard Lawrence**

**Edition 1**

## Contents

<a href="#"><u>Introduction</u></a>	Page 2
<a href="#"><u>The Waiting Room</u></a>	Page 3
<a href="#"><u>One of Those Days</u></a>	Page 6
<a href="#"><u>Casandra</u></a>	Page 10
<a href="#"><u>The Wrath of Rodger Lindos</u></a>	Page 13
<a href="#"><u>The Spider</u></a>	Page 17
<a href="#"><u>The Cyclist</u></a>	Page 21
<a href="#"><u>The House at Highgate</u></a>	Page 26
<a href="#"><u>The Caretakers</u></a>	Page 31
<a href="#"><u>Marianna</u></a>	Page 33
<a href="#"><u>The Conmen</u></a>	Page 37
<a href="#"><u>The Fisherman</u></a>	Page 41
<a href="#"><u>The Anomaly</u></a>	Page 44
<a href="#"><u>My Friend Josh</u></a>	Page 47
<a href="#"><u>Home from the War</u></a>	Page 50
<a href="#"><u>The Light</u></a>	Page 54
<a href="#"><u>An Abortive Life</u></a>	Page 58
<a href="#"><u>The Other Woman</u></a>	Page 61
<a href="#"><u>A Brave New World</u></a>	Page 67
<a href="#"><u>The Photographer</u></a>	Page 71
<a href="#"><u>Dreams</u></a>	Page 75
<a href="#"><u>Social Exclusion</u></a>	Page 79
<a href="#"><u>Without Limits</u></a>	Page 83
<a href="#"><u>The Stranger</u></a>	Page 88
<a href="#"><u>The Band</u></a>	Page 94

## **Introduction**

The book contains short stories relating to spiritual encounters with a tinge of horror. Some chapters embrace different cultures and often include history, philosophy and futurology.

### **This Book is for Charity**

This book has been written for charity and if you find it interesting and you have enjoyed it, 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. 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.

### **Acknowledgment**

My sincere thanks to Roy Harrower who assisted me with proof reading, continuity and suggested editorial corrections.

**This book is not suitable for children**

### **Historical Accuracy + Fictional Names**

The historical facts in this book were carefully researched but there is no guarantee of historical accuracy. The book is a work of fiction and 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 or programs contained herein.

### **Book Format**

This book is in .pdf file format so it can be listened to via audio which is setup in the top banner of a computer or tablet screen, once the file is opened. It can also be saved down onto a computer or tablet.

### **Future Editions**

This electronic book is organic so there will be further editions as new short stories and correction editing are added to the content. These new editions will be posted on the [www.lawrencephotographic.com](http://www.lawrencephotographic.com) website.

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# The Waiting Room

Conan Angove looked up at his mother and she could see the apprehension in his face. The first day at school was always a trial for many children and Conan was no different. His mother squeezed his hand and reassured him that all would be well; and so, they entered through the gates and he saw all the children playing in the playground. His mother ushered him to join in and she left him there to make new friends and to meet old ones that he knew; his friends rushed over to him and found comfort in his presence. Such was the persona of Conan Angove; he had the ability to make everyone around him happy in their recognition that he was a 'special child'.

He was 5 years of age and lived with his mother who was a single parent and they stayed in a big house owned by his grandmother who was a very wealthy person. The three of them enjoyed a relatively simple life with very little wants and his grandmother often baked cakes and biscuits which they enjoyed in front of the radio, later at night and just before bedtime. His mother would read him stories until he fell asleep and there was always a soft nightlight left on to chase away the goblins and yet invite the fairies. They lived in Rock, a little village, just over the estuary from Padstow in Cornwall. Each morning, Conan and his mother would take the little ferry boat and Sam the owner, would take them over to the pier at Padstow where the local school was based. Conan's mother was a teacher at the school, so their day was shared and they came home together. Sometimes, his grandmother was waiting on the beach at Rock with 'Tasha' their mongrel dog to welcome them.

Everyone in Rock, and Padstow for that matter, knew Conan and his dog Tasha. He was always greeted with fondness and people liked his polite manner. He never spoke ill of anyone; he never displayed any ill temper and there was always a smile on his face. It was indeed strange that such a young boy knew all the adults by name and when he addressed them, it was always, a Mr, Mrs or Miss before their surname. His mother had taught him well. Of course, there were those that gossiped about his mother being single with a child and Conan having no known father, but despite their discontent, their hearts were warmed by his kindness. He was always accompanied by Tasha and the pair roamed the beach at Rock and fished with a small rod and line; such was their simple life. Conan had many friends and the 'gang' would often set out on great adventures along the estuary, accompanied by Tasha, who often trailed behind. Digging up sand worms for fishing was a daily event in the summer and much laughter was heard as each tried to put a wriggling worm on the end of a hook. Who could cast the line the furthest was a favourite contest and everyone gathered around when someone caught a 'flook', a flat fish that hid in the sand and ate sand worms. They played Cowboys and Indians, and Conan was always 'Hopalong Cassidy' with his black cowboy

outfit and his two silver pistols in their holsters. The Indians wore their mother's lipsticks drawn across their faces and let out loud 'whoops' as they charged the cowboys, hiding in the sand dunes.

One day when the tide in the estuary was out and there was but a small section of water left over at Padstow, Conan saw a shark swimming in and he shouted to Sam, the ferryman, who was leaning against his boat. *"It's a shark, Mr Truscott, it's a shark, we will have to warn the people."* Sam Truscott smiled, took a draw on his pipe and as he exhaled a cloud of smoke, he said, *"Aye son, but it's a huge basking shark; it eats plankton, not people."* Feeling somewhat relieved, Conan waved to Sam and headed back up the beach with Tasha to tell his mother and grandmother about the shark. That night, as they had their tea and biscuits, they listened to the radio and laughed out loud at the funny voices of Peter Sellars, Spike Milligan and Harry Secombe in the 'Goon Show'. Still laughing and trying to mimic the 'Ying Tong Song' from the show, Conan was tucked up in bed by his mother who was trying hard to get him to calm down. Eventually, her bedtime stories settled him and as he fell asleep, she kissed his forehead and said goodnight.

In the morning, his mother went upstairs and found Conan lying still in his bed; he was very ill and Tasha was lying whimpering on the floor. They rushed him to the Royal Cornwall Hospital at Truro where it was discovered that he had leukaemia, a cancer of the blood. The weeks passed and the search was on for a bone marrow transplant to save his life. The villagers all underwent tests to see if their bone marrow could provide the cure but to no avail. During that time, Tasha, who was an old dog, suffered from a broken heart and died. Conan lay in the hospital bed and in the presence of his mother he slowly passed away. His mother shouted for the doctor and his grandmother. As they entered the room, Conan heard his name being called by someone, and he saw the room glow a brilliant white and everyone faded away from his vision. His soul rose up and he walked through the light to the only thing he could see, the room door. It was wide open and he was drawn to it by an unforeseen force. As he left, he heard his mother and grandmother crying over his dead body. In the years that followed, Conan's mother, in moments of solace, would think on what happened to her son after he died. Would his soul move on to the afterlife and would he remain a young boy or grow into a man? Of course, the main questions were always, would she ever see him again after she died, and would she be young or old? His mother lived until she reached ninety-nine years of age; she never forgot Conan and in the 'sunset of her years' she passed away.

Conan walked into the light and through the hospital door into a large spiritual garden. In the dawn of a new day, he saw the yellow sun rising on the horizon. The garden was bordered by a high stone wall with a large green gate at the far end. He turned around and saw the hospital door disappear into the formation of the wall; he could not go back. The garden was full of young children, there must have been around forty or more and they were playing on swings, chutes and roundabouts on the close-cut grass of the lawn. Suddenly a young dog ran over to him and jumped up to lick his face;

it was Tasha. Conan could not understand how she had managed to get to the garden. He cuddled her and they rolled about on the grass. All around the lawn, there were borders with beautiful coloured flowers, plants and bushes. Hundreds of bees were gathering pollen from the flowers, while birds darted in and out of the bushes, catching insects to take back to their young in their nests. Squirrels were scampering around and seemed undeterred by the presence of the youngsters. Some rabbits were munching on the grass and the plants, whilst others were scooped up by the children and cuddled before being released again. In the very middle of the lawn stood a large stone statue of a cherub with a round basin, beneath it. Birds were splashing about in the basin and there was a small fountain with continual running water which you could drink from. Some children ran over to Conan and taking hold of his hands, they urged him to play with them on the swings. Along with Tasha, he joined in the laughter and the fun, which took away his fears. It was like school again but there were no lessons.

Suddenly, the large green gate opened and a voice from outside the garden shouted a name. Everyone stopped what they were doing and Conan watched as a little girl walked over and went through the gate; it closed behind her. The fun and laughter started again and she was soon forgotten as the children continued to play. Yet again, and again, the green gate was opened and the names came thick and fast as each child, dutifully left the garden. This went on all day until Conan found himself the last child in the garden. The sun was starting to set and casting long shadows on the grass. The garden was still, except for the noise of the bees and the birds in flight amongst the flowers and the bushes. The rabbits all headed off to their burrows and Conan sat on the lawn with Tasha. The setting sun was turning a bright red when the gate opened and his name was called. He walked through the gate, which shut behind him, and standing outside to greet him, was his mother and she looked so young. She took his hand, and smiling, she bent down, kissed his cheek and together with Tasha, they walked away into a bright light.

A hundred years of human life is but a day for a child in the waiting room.

# One of Those Days

Luke Stark opened his eyes and the room was pitch black. He felt snug and warm, and lying on his back he smiled at the thought of perhaps another few hours of sleep before he had to get up. The maid must have changed the bed clothes because they felt fresh and smelt nice. Was it lavender, or perhaps jasmine but in any case, it was a very pleasant smell? As he lay there, his mind drifted back to yesterday, which had been one of those days when everything went wrong and he wished that he had just stayed in bed.

It had all started yesterday morning; Luke had showered and as he left the bathroom, he stubbed his big toe on the door. He cursed and hobbled into the bedroom and sat down on the chair at the side of the bed. Nursing it, he gently pulled a sock up and over the injury and dried his hair with the hairdryer. After dressing in one of his finest Italian suits, he left his penthouse flat in London City and headed down to the basement garage to his pride and joy, a black Porsche 911; the latest 2020 model. On detecting the remote key in his pocket, the driver's door unlocked and he stepped inside. What luxury, he thought; the smell of fresh red leather, the gorgeous finish and the power; that phenomenal power. Smiling, he pressed the starter button but nothing happened; the car remained silent. He tried again; same thing, and no matter his efforts, he was unable to get the car's engine to burst into life. Time was short, so he left and walked outside onto the street to hail a passing taxi. As he sat in the back on the way to his office, he used his mobile phone and arranged for the Porsche Centre to pick up his car and to take it to the garage for repair. On arrival outside his office, he alighted from the taxi and felt the warm sun of the morning on his back. It was a pleasant summer's day in old London and the flowers were all in full bloom; it was good to be alive, although he felt a little upset due to the fault with his brand-new Porsche.

Without any further mishaps, Luke reached his office and was greeted by his secretary Eva who brought him a nice cup of coffee. She sat down opposite him at his desk and while he sipped the hot beverage, she proceeded to update him on his diary. *"You have a meeting with Mr Ahearn upstairs in the board-room at 11am and lunch with your girlfriend at the Ritz. I was there yesterday with Mr Ahearn; I had the Beef Wellington and the Crêpes Suzette, in orange sauce, it was out of this world. Are you listening to me?"* She reached over the desk and prodded Luke in the chest with her pen to wake him up. Startled, he exclaimed, *"sorry, I fell asleep again, it must have been your soothing voice that did it"*. Eva scowled, *"soothing voice my ass, it's all that night clubbing at Tramps or gambling into the early hours of the morning at the Ritz Club Casino, that's got you sleeping on the job. God only knows how Samantha puts up with you?"* Luke shrugged and as he attempted to settle down for

another snooze, she prodded his chest again. *"You are getting portly and lethargic; I have booked you in at 4pm for yet another appointment with Doctor Swinton for the result of your blood tests."*

At 11am, Luke headed up to the board-room for his appointment with his boss. He sat on a chair with his cup of coffee and listened as Ahearn outlined the plans for the refurbishment of the office block at Canary Wharf. Luke rested his head on his left hand with his elbow on the desk, whilst on the other side, his boss droned on and on and on. Suddenly, Ahearn banged on the desk and Luke, who had fallen asleep, slipped off his hand, banged his head on the top of the desk and sent his coffee all over the paperwork. Incandescent with rage was a weak description of Mr Ahearn's demeanour, *"get out, get out, you bloody fool, look at the bloody mess of my papers."* Sheepishly, Luke left the office and headed out for his lunch meeting with his girlfriend.

As was most often the case, he was late and Samantha was sitting at the table in the Ritz with a scowl on her face. He thought it was due to his time keeping, but actually, it was something completely different. He sat down and ordered a drink; Samantha already had a drink in front of her. *"Hello sweetheart, I am sorry I am late, its been a busy day you know"* he grovelled. Lifting up her large glass of iced water, she opened up, *"a busy day, yes a busy day alright, and where were you last night, I had the meal all prepared for your visit. Where were you; I know, because I got into a taxi and you were at the Ritz Club Casino with a floozy on your arm, that bitch from Tramps; you know the one with the big tits."* Before he could mumble his reply, her glass of water was poured over his head followed by her last words on the subject. *"Fuck you, I'm off."* With that, she stomped through the restaurant; amid much cheering from the patrons. Luke sat there and decided that he could win her back, and while he planned their reunion, he enjoyed his lunch. He thought to himself, it could have been worse, thank God it was water and not red wine over my new suit.

Eventually, 4pm came around and Luke sat in Doctor Swinton's surgery to hear the result of his blood tests. *"Well, your cholesterol is okay; your iron levels are just right and there is no trace of diabetes. I think you must be burning the candle at both ends Mr Stark, because you are always falling asleep. Physically, there does not appear to be anything wrong with you and for a man in your early thirties, your blood pressure is excellent."* Luke smiled, *"well that's great news, but you are probably right, I have been hitting the nightclub and the casino at lot. You see, I have been on a winning streak, with the women and also the gambling. It might be the sex because I am servicing three females, although one of them dumped me today."* The doctor smiled, *"I am not in the least bit surprised, it's a wonder you haven't keeled over with exhaustion?"* Luke responded, *"well, its been pretty bad of late, I keep falling asleep and thank God my new Porsche is broken down, I'd hate to fall asleep at the wheel."*



So that was yesterday and now Luke lay still in the darkness, warm and snug; but try as he might, he could not remember anything else after the doctors meeting. He must have gone clubbing again, that was it. Drink clouds the mind and makes you forget your problems and very often everything else. How did he get back to the penthouse and bed? He raised his head and felt it hit something; he tried to turn onto his side to get up and he felt something hard blocking him. He felt around and soon discovered he was in some sort of box. His knees struck the top and using his hands he pushed upwards against the lid; it would not budge and panic set in. His first cry was somewhat muted but thereafter they rose to a loud crescendo of screams as he banged and banged on the inside of the lid with his fists. He felt his knuckles start to bleed and the sweet taste of blood as he licked them to soothe the pain. Again, he screamed, louder and louder, *"let me out, let me out"* but to no avail, and when he stopped to listen, all was quiet. Luke started banging the lid again, he banged on the sides, kicked the base with his feet, banged his head on the top and attempted to arch his body to force the lid off, and now he was starting to sweat. The fear was intense, there was no escape and he fell back, exhausted. His hands rested on his chest and for the first time he realised he was clothed in a silky garment that covered his entire body with a shaped collar around his neck and puffed sleeves with collars at the wrists; he was dressed in a silk shroud.

Suddenly, he heard a loud hissing noise followed by small popping explosions. The box began to heat up inside and when he placed his hands up against the lid, the palms were scorched by the heat coming through. Luke now knew where he was and he started to cry; the tears streamed down his face and he lay there to await his fate. A gas flame burnt through the lid at his legs and reaching inside, the blue and orange tongues melted his body fat and his knees burst into flames. Luke screamed a loud and unearthly cry as the pain shot up his body to his brain. He tossed, writhed and tried to beat out the flames, but they were relentless as more and more of his body fat ignited and the box lit up inside. He saw the red velvet lining starting to burn and he knew he must escape. He used both fists and punched upwards at the lid to attempt to break free from his imprisonment. The burnt wood gave way to form a gaping hole and a huge jet of white-hot scorching flame struck him in the face. In an instant his eyes were burnt out of their sockets and as the heat expanded his brain matter, his head exploded, sending the fragments of brain, skin and bone in all directions.

Outside the oven and on the stone floored cellar of the crematorium, Fred and Joe sat at a plain table and ate their lunch. Fred exclaimed, *"it's always the same old routine, you and those stinking sandwiches. Cheese, onions and bloody pickle; Christ, I hate that smell."* Joe chuckled, *"I eat them to annoy you; you miserable old bastard."* Fred replied, *"that was a young guy, what a shame. He will be burnt to a crisp by now, but we can collect his ashes after lunch."*

At the surgery, Doctor Swinton was in discussion with Doctor Bevin, *"it was the strangest thing I have ever seen; this young lad, Luke, was in perfect health and when I turned around, he was asleep,*

*or so I thought. On trying to waken him, I found out that he was dead and already his body was rigid. I called the nurse and we tried everything; an adrenalin injection, defibrillation using the paddles but the heart refused to respond and I was forced to pronounce him dead. I put it down to his night clubbing and exhaustion. Do you know the lucky son of a gun had three women on the go at the same time? Anyway, I signed off his death certificate as a heart attack.” Bevin questioned, “three women, how can you have three women? I would trade the wife for three women any day. Will there be a post mortem then?” Swinton replied, “no, it was fairly straight forward and now it is too late anyway. His religion dictates that he must be left untouched, save for a shroud, and cremated as soon as possible; so, I signed out his body.” Doctor Bevin offered some knowledge, “I have heard of similar cases; have you ever heard of catalepsy? It’s a nervous condition characterised by muscular rigidity whereby external stimuli has no effect. It is also a characteristic of cocaine withdrawal. The heart rate drops and the patient appears dead. It’s one of the reasons that dead people are usually not buried or cremated for three or four days, just in case they revive.”*

Doctor Swinton laughed out loud, *“aye, and who has been reading Edgar Allan Poe then; c’mon, lets head off down to the pub; catalepsy indeed.”*

# Casandra

I met her on one of those days when the rain poured down and I retreated to the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh for some dry relief. I had never been interested in art, especially paintings but then I saw pure art in human form. I met her with a smile and thankfully, she smiled back. We sat for a while and chatted about the weather outside; the gorgeous colours of the paintings which hung on the wall and eventually after a pause, I asked her name. She was called Casandra, a wonderful tall creature with startling blue eyes, long blonde hair and the figure of beauty. When we stood up, and our eyes met, I instantly fell in love with a goddess. She had that effect on me, I could not get her out of my mind and the Scottish National Gallery became my main go to place, just on the off chance I would meet her again.

In the days that followed, I made a point of studying up on all the great painters, Vincent Van Gogh, Leonardo Da Vinci, Rembrandt and Claude Monet, amongst many others. I was out to impress her but for all my knowledge, it did not seem to matter; she always smiled for me when we met and for some reason, we never seemed to converse about art. I did get some funny looks from people in the gallery, I suppose they wondered how an average looking short guy like me could be with such a beautiful woman. Casandra told me that she travelled a lot but for the coming year she would be staying in Edinburgh. I told her I was a freelance photojournalist and often went on assignments abroad for various newspapers. I bragged a little about how dangerous these assignments were, especially in the theatres of war. She would always change the subject; she did not like to hear my war exploits or any occasion where there had been death. Casandra often talked about different cultures, especially those from the past. She once asked me, if I could go back in time, what period would I choose. I mentioned that I was drawn to the 1800s when society travelled around in carriages drawn by horses and there were no motor vehicles and people were always well turned out; even the workmen wore waistcoats with pocket watches on chains and flat hats on their heads.

Casandra was not one for physical contact because every time I came near, she would pull away. It was difficult because I wanted to touch her; she would pull her hand away whenever I put mine closer across the seat or when we were standing together. All we had was conversation, a great deal of laughter, smiles and the odd giggle at risky paintings of nudes. Despite the barrier, I was madly in love with her and I wanted to make her my wife. Eventually, I plucked up the courage to ask her out. Casandra's rejection was hard to take, but she did emphasise that she liked me and hoped that I would continue to visit the art gallery to see her. I promised I would, but that night in my flat in Rose Street, I felt somewhat deflated and I figured that she was in love with someone else.

That year, I was one of the few journalists that entered Korea to report and photograph the Korean War. Before I left, I met Casandra at the gallery and told her I would be away for several months. She told me not to worry because she would always be here for me. We walked through the halls and she pointed at various paintings and told me the histories of the painters, their personal lives and how they lived and died. She was very knowledgeable and her stories took me there; to a time and lives long passed. It was the first time that Cassandra and I had discussed art and I asked her why she was keen to discuss it now. She told me that our last day together was to become a lasting memory, something to take with me to the war zone. A memory to always draw me back to the gallery. She would not let me kiss her goodbye, but she gave me a smile as I walked out into Princes Street and across the road to my flat.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> August 1950, I joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders at Fanling, in the new territories, east of Hong Kong, when we boarded a train for the short journey to Kowloon to embark in H.M.S. Ceylon, a Crown Colony-class light cruiser of the British Royal Navy. At 6.30 p.m. we sailed along with H.M.S. Unicorn and bound for Korea. The pipes and drums were drawn up on the quarter-deck of H.M.S. Ceylon alongside the Royal Marine band, and as the ship cast off, the regimental marches were played. At the time it all seemed like a great adventure, but the battalion and myself would soon experience the grim realities of war. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> September, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders moved up to attack Hill 282 near Songju. Starting before dawn the next day and after an hour's climb they seized the crest of the hill and catching the North Koreans' at breakfast, they easily overwhelmed them. Across the top, and nearly a mile away to the southwest, a higher Hill 388 dominated the one they had just occupied and the enemy were on it. The Argyles started towards it and I went with them, my 35mm Contax camera was firing like a machine gun and I had become adept at changing the 35mm roll film whilst on the move. We met the North Koreans head on as they were coming towards us from Hill 388. We sustained heavy mortar and artillery fire and the Argyle commander called in an air strike. Three P-51 Mustang planes circled Hill 282 and failing to properly recognise recognition signals and with no radio contact, the Mustang pilots attacked the wrong hill; they dropped napalm bombs onto our position and also strafed it with 50 calibre machine-gun fire.

I saw the napalm explode in a multitude of huge orange flames and I dived about 50 feet back down the hill in my attempt to escape. I heard the men of the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders screaming in pain and the endless thud, thud, of heavy 50 calibre bullets striking the ground and their burning bodies. Just as I stopped tumbling and stood up, I felt a massive blow to my right arm and I fell face first, onto the ground. I turned over and saw a beautiful blue sky above me and there was no noise, it seemed so calm and peaceful. Then my brain cleared and the sound of battle came back with a vengeance. I tried to hold up my right arm but it was gone. The red blood was pumping

out of a huge gaping hole near my shoulder and I started to scream and writhe with the pain and the shock. Suddenly a medic dived on top of me and pinning me down by the chest, he stuck a morphine needle into my neck, just above the hole. I heard him say to someone, I can't get a tourniquet on him, there is nothing left to tie it too. I saw him put a large pad on the hole to block the blood flow but within seconds the pad was completely soaked with my blood. I must have passed out because the next thing I knew, I was in a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital and lying on an operating table with masked doctors and nurses all around me. Before, they put me under, I heard them say that I had lost an awful amount of blood.

I woke up and found myself sitting on a chair inside the Scottish National Gallery in Edinburgh and I could not remember how I had got there. I thought perhaps it was a form of amnesia after being wounded in Korea and as a result of the operation. I looked up and there she was; Casandra, and just as beautiful as ever. She walked over to me and as I stood up to greet her, she embraced me and gave me a long and lingering kiss on the lips. She smiled and said, *"I love you so much, I am so glad that you made it back, I was beginning to wonder if you could find your way here and thankfully, you did."* Before I could say anything, she went on, *"don't worry, everything is just perfect, lets head out of here; where would you like to go? How about starting in Princes Street in 1859 and we can see the grand opening of the Scottish National Gallery. Like you, I love that period the best, with horse drawn carriages and the people wearing beautiful clothes."* I could not understand what she meant, but as she led me to the front door, I could see that there was a massive crowd of school kids blocking our way as they rushed into the gallery.

The kids came forward towards Casandra and myself and although I shouted for them to stop, they did not appear to hear or see me. They kept on coming, the young girls screaming with excitement. I felt the first one pass right through my body and I felt her energy flow and the others as she was followed by her entire class. Casandra, shouted, *"you will get used to it, they cannot see us because we are dead."*

We left the gallery and out on Princes Street, were horse drawn carriages, and Casandra was right, the people were all beautifully dressed.

# The Wrath of Rodger Lindos

My name is Prometheus and down through the centuries, I have known many great philosophers like Socrates and Plato but perhaps the most interesting was Yeshua, and we held many enlightening conversations prior to his crucifixion. However, I was somewhat disappointed that in the centuries that followed, I would be held to account as some sort of evil which tempted him from a moral path. Virtue is the cornerstone of a philosopher's mindset, for through the natural process of thought the 'man of a pure soul' will strive to influence others in that direction. Whether it is politics, religion or any other form of human interaction, their teachings always have a core which invariably raises the question of the workings of the mind in relation to the brain, the body and the possibility of a soul. Through this process, by default, they are driven down a path whereby their virtuous persona is haunted by their own human weaknesses.

The philosopher whose mind becomes corrupted due to his own failings and his exposure to others may well turn to a dark place from where he cannot return. In 2020, such a man was Rodger Lindos who had been a lecturer in philosophy but his career was ruined by a young woman who falsely claimed that he had sexually assaulted her. Despite his innocence, he was dismissed from his position and his world disintegrated into a microcosm of its former self as he sat alone in his bedsit and took to drink. In his drunken stupor his virtuous philosophy became distorted and he finally accepted that his life would never be the same again.

Lindos developed an acute hatred for women; any woman who portrayed herself as a feminist or an exhibitionist in the public eye and especially if she disliked men. It was unfortunate for Kim Rollinstad that he saw her on the television cavorting on stage in her 'soft porn' celebrity and he became dismayed at the young people who applauded her. She was a 'pop' singer who mixed raw sexual innuendo in her act whilst any censorship for protecting the morals of young people was nonexistent. I observed the change in Lindos as he sat watching the rampant decadence to which his generation had turned a blind eye. His mind turned as did his soul and the darkness of evil pervaded him.

Kim Rollinstad held them spellbound with her singing but for most, it was the sight of her crotch, with barely a covering, that drew their eye. They cheered as she gyrated on the stage and simulated a sexual act by bending over whilst a man wearing only a loin cloth, held her waist from the rear and moved his bulging erection in and out between her buttocks. I stood at the back of the auditorium and cheered wildly; after all it is not every day that hubris and the collapse of morality is reduced to animal behaviour and made so visible to the masses. Kim was a major celebrity and one of many in that young generation of 2020 who embraced lewd and libidinous exhibitionism as a prolific way of

making money. My presence and my cheering could not be seen or heard but it was not because my voice was drowned out by the wild crowd of teenagers; she was their god and her picture was on the walls of their bedrooms. Now Kim was down on the stage and simulating oral sex by placing her mouth in his crotch and moving her head in and out whilst her tongue created a bulge in her cheek. Again, the crowd roared their approval, to my delight, as the decadence continued.

I watched them file out of the auditorium and for many the following day would bring despair as they dealt with the increasing debt on their credit cards. I went out into a lane at the back and it was a dark wet night with the heavy rain clattering down on the street cobbles and the dustbin lids. The crowds had long dispersed and through the veil of wet darkness a limousine glided into view and its driver parked the vehicle opposite the back door to the auditorium. He switched off the engine and lit a cigarette whilst he waited. I knew who he was and Lindos sat there, knotted up with hatred; he was the protégé of his own psychology. The stage door opened and Kim Rollinstad and her manager ran through the rain to the open rear door of the limousine held ajar by Lindos. I sat invisible in the back of the vehicle and was joined by Samael, one of my reapers, who smiled and gave me the thumbs up. The limousine had only travelled a few yards when Kim reached over to open the small drinks cabinet situated in the back of the driver's seat. I saw the glass panel between the driver and the rear occupants close as Kim opened the cabinet door. Suddenly yellow gas exploded out of the drinks cabinet and filled the rear of the limousine whereby Kim and her manager collapsed choking on the floor. Samael silently exclaimed, *"this should prove interesting"* whilst I looked in the driver's interior mirror to watch Lindos on the other side of the glass partition laughing as he drove onto the motorway. Inside the rear boot of the limousine lay the body of the hire company's driver with his throat slit wide open and his dry 'dead fish' eyes staring out in the darkness.

Samael and I sat in the back whilst the limo was parked in an old warehouse in the suburbs of London. Lindos dragged the still unconscious bodies of Kim Rollinstad and her manager to one of the warehouse's central steel pillars and tied them up. Lindos slapped their faces until they awoke and although the duct tape over their mouths silenced them, it could not deflect the terror in their eyes. Lindos snapped, *"so you like to exploit decadence, well I'll give you decadence that will carry you to your grave, or in your case Kim, your last appearance in front of your cheering minions."* Lindos pulled out a razor and slowly started to cut off the manager's nose. I heard the bone crack as the blade sliced through and the nose fell to the floor where Lindos squished it with his boot. He carried on and using a scalpel, he sliced through the duct tape and cut out the manager's tongue. Lindos held it up and bit it in half with his teeth before throwing the two parts into a bin on the floor. Kim jerked around and tried to break free of her bonds but suddenly stopped transfixed as Lindos cut off the manager's penis amid a cacophony of gurgled screams from the manager's mouth. Lindos

removed Kim's duct tape and forced the penis into her mouth – *"suck on that you bitch"* he exclaimed. Kim spat the penis out and Lindos laughed as he reapplied fresh duct tape.

Samael remarked that we had to admire Lindos's style, it sure beat the usual mundane closures. Even I, balked a little when Lindos picked up the wood saw and started to cut off the manager's head. The blood was everywhere and it shot out of the open neck and the exposed vertebrae, flying high into the air. The manager's head gasped its last breath as it lay on the floor and in that second, I saw his eyes blinking as the dying brain took in the sight of his own body jerking and writhing on the floor. Samael popped out of the limo and as the manager's black translucent soul rose from his dead body, Samael used his sword and cleaved it in half amidst a long torrid scream from the soul as it was terminated. Meanwhile, Lindos was now cutting the head of Kim Rollinstad and jeering, *"don't worry, you will still get that final performance."* She heard the rasping of the saw as he slowly cut through her flesh and then the bone of her vertebrae. Her head shot off and crashed down on the rear of the limo, splattering it with her bright red blood. Samael dispatched Kim's emerging soul and once again Samael and I set off with Lindos in the limousine with Kim's head sitting in the front passenger seat.

Lindos drove into the heart of London and stopped the limousine in the middle of the road in Piccadilly. As the traffic piled up behind him, he grabbed Kim's head, pulled off the duct tape and leaving the driver's door open, he swaggered down the middle of the street holding the head by the hair and dangling it in the faces of people walking and others sitting in their cars. He shouted as he waved her head around with the blood still dripping onto the roadway, *"here is your whore, your God, come and see her last performance."* Lindos popped the head up into the air and with his right foot he kicked it across the road whereby it bounced off several cars and landed in the lap of an old woman who was sitting on a bench on the pavement. She looked at it with a puzzled look and after pushing it away, it fell and rolled along the gutter. The old woman casually continued to suck on her pan drop and take in the evening air. Lindos ran after the head and gripping it tightly he rammed it down on a spike of the metal railings and started to dance in front of it. Two armed police officers arrived and announced their presence which prompted Lindos to produce a large meat cleaver from his waistband and rush at them, shouting *"leave Kim alone, she is in the middle of her performance, look at the crowds worshipping her."* Lindos felt the bullets strike him in the chest and the head and he was dead before his body hit the ground.

Samael sighed, drew his sword, exited the limo and terminated Lindos's soul as it left his body. There was an almighty scream from its core as it turned into dark matter and disappeared in the air. The people eagerly crowded around the head of Kim Rollinstad, still stuck on the railings and I could see the flashes of their smartphones as they captured selfies of themselves alongside it. Kim's tongue suddenly flipped out through her open mouth and hung on her chin, dripping blood. At first the



crowd screamed and stood back but soon burst out laughing and continued their selfie shots with the head.

I left the limo and waved to Samael as he disappeared; I decided to transcend and visit my old pal, Socrates.

# The Spider

Grace Ellis smiled at the young girl and carefully handed her a nicely wrapped package over the counter. She remarked, *"I am sure your mum will like the present; the vanilla scent is a favourite with my customers."* The young girl thanked her and clutching the package, she left the shop. The bell gave its usual ring as the door was opened and closed behind her. Grace followed and locked the door, she turned the 'open' sign to 'closed' and sighed because the day was over and she had to go home. She loved her grand little shop which stocked scented candles and lamps. The premises were leased and although quite small, the shop held a place of prominence in the local shopping centre.

It was raining when she arrived at the bus stop outside and her umbrella was being pulled about by the wind. Grace stood in the long queue of people and endured the weather. The bus ride home was a short one and as she alighted into a stormy night, the wind blew away her umbrella; she watched as it rose high above the houses and disappeared into the gloom. Now soaking wet, she finally arrived at her front door and sought the sanctuary of her home. Grace was a refined lady, she dressed herself in beautifully clothes, was neatly manicured and her hair was coiffured to perfection. So, she was somewhat disappointed when she saw her bedraggled state in the entrance hall mirror. However, a change of clothes, and with her hair dried and new makeup applied, she soon restored her countenance and was well pleased. The house was large, a detached villa with a garage under the west bedroom and situated at the end of a cul-de-sac, but she kept it clean and it was regularly redecorated to maintain its value. Grace finished her meal and sat down with a good book and a large glass of port. Simple pleasures embraced her mind, and for a moment, she was reminded that tomorrow was another day, and she would soon be back at her shop.

Tomorrow did come but it brought with it the news that a new virus had materialised, a virus which was more deadly in its infection rate than the common flu. Its origin was thought to be China and it had now spread to other countries and was deemed a pandemic. The hospitals were filling up with the casualties as were the mortuaries; there seemed no way of stopping it. Eventually, to curtail the spread, the government instigated a lockdown where everyone was to remain in their homes and to refrain from any social interaction outside, other than for essential shopping and exercise. Face masks had to be worn and social distancing was enforced in shops, in businesses and on the street. People were encouraged to work from home and only essential businesses were allowed to remain open. Schools were closed and as Grace's business was non-essential, she had to close her shop. She applied for a government 'self-employment' grant but because of her annual income, it was refused and she was forced to live off her savings. Like millions of other people, Grace hunkered down in her home and only ventured out for food.

Isolation impacted on Grace, she was cut-off from her social interaction at the shop, she had no friends, no relatives and her only respite was her books; she disliked the television which she regarded as the 'devil's disciple' and she did not own a mobile phone or a computer. Everyone requires a core to their being, something that drives them forward, it offers them a positive outlook; for some women it is a new day with their young children, for others a date with a man, but for Grace there was nothing and it turned her mind inwards. The loneliness created reflection but the only reflection was one of past regrets. She remembered her wedding in the church when she was 19 years of age, those happy moments at the reception and the distaste afterwards, when she discovered that her husband was bisexual and took up with men behind her back. The marriage lasted for 15 years and descended into verbal and physical abuse at his hands, before he finally walked out to live with a man. That was 10 years ago and since then, she had lived at her parents' house. Her only respite was the social interaction in her shop and she smiled at the thought of the little girl taking a present home to her mum. Grace had no children and she was an only child. Two years after her marriage ended, both her parents were killed in a car crash when a lorry ran out of control on a motorway. She inherited the house and had continued to live there alone.

Now thanks to the Covid-19 virus lockdown, the will to move forward stopped and she only looked back, with all the sadness and depression it created. Gradually, as the days wore on, the dust collected, and she lost all interest in her hygiene. When she went out for food, people remarked on her drab appearance because the refined lady had all but disappeared. Late at night, she would sit motionless in her living-room, her books laid aside and in the quiet stillness, she would watch a spider come out and walk around on the carpet. It had made many webs, up there, high in the corners of the ceiling and was a master at catching the flies and bugs that roamed the house. The months had passed and isolation had taken its toll on her mental faculties; she sat on her chair, hour after hour and with nothing to look forward too, she continued to reflect on past regrets. The only thing which created a diversion was the spider, and she smiled as she watched its antics. Finally, the virus eased and the government allowed people to once again venture out and wearing face masks, while maintaining their social distance. Grace no longer had her shop; it had been taken away from her and its stock had been delivered to her door and placed in the garage.

She was strangely calm when the delivery men arrived and she offered no display of emotion; one man whispered to his friend, *"that one is a walking suicide, I have seen it before; the calm before the storm."* For some strange reason, Grace pulled herself together and appeared to overcome her difficulties. The house was cleaned from top to bottom, she scrubbed herself, put on the makeup and once again dressed in fine clothes. One night, she ventured forth and headed for the local pub to partake in a nice meal with a glass of wine and perhaps meet a future dalliance. Grace sat at a table and the waiter made a grand fuss of a nice lady; she certainly caught the eyes of the patrons

and in particular, Charlton Evans, a fine young man who was in his late thirties. He rose from his chair and under the watchful eye of the manager, he kept his social distance from Grace and introduced himself, *"hi, I hope you don't think me forward, but I could not help but admire you and I would like to get to know you; my name is Chuck."* Both were registered in the pub for contact virus tracing and as they were single and from separate households, they could interact. Grace, tapped on the seat of a chair at the table and requested him to sit down. He brought over his drink and food and they began to chat. She soon learned that he was a salesman and single. Grace was young for her age, and despite being a few years older than Chuck, he was attracted to her, especially when he found out that she was a divorcee and lived alone. He showed her his Rolex gold watch in an effort to impress her and she appeared impressed.

One thing led to another and Chuck found himself in her bed; most pleased with his conquest. The dalliances came and went. Grace never seemed to settle for anyone in particular but the pub provided an excellent diversion and a great hunting ground for men. Sadly, it all had to stop when the government at the end of that year re-introduced a new lockdown; a new strain of the virus had taken hold and more people were dying. Once again, Grace retreated to her home and during that long cold winter, she descended into the dust. A spider appeared, and as she sat on her chair in a dishevelled state, it crept over her face and Grace smiled. As the months passed, some neighbours became unsettled at her disappearance, especially as her curtains remained closed. Eventually, old Mr Cox, from the 'Neighbourhood Watch' called the police to report his concern. The police car arrived and Constables Hopkins and Clark alighted. Hopkins pressed the doorbell of Grace's house but it remained silent, he banged on the wooden frame, but no answer. Finally, he tried the handle and the door opened, it was not locked.

Upon entering, the police discovered that the house lights would not work. Constable Clark started to search the ground floor, and fortunately he had a torch to assist him. Constable Hopkins, went upstairs but he did not have a torch. He reached the first bedroom and opened the curtains; the room was empty apart from furniture. Other rooms were furnished but again offered no sign of life. Finally, Hopkins reached the back bedroom and entered. It was pitch black, so he felt his way across the room and used the bottom of a bed to guide him to the curtains. Suddenly, a dark figure leapt up in front of him and he was knocked back onto the bed. Before he could react, he felt a sharp prick to his right eye and his brain failed to comprehend that a knife had been driven into it, straight through his eyeball. Hopkins writhed about on the bed and held in place by the dark figure. He had lost the ability to speak, to cry out and just before he died, he felt the blood trickling down his throat.

Constable Clark had finished his search of the downstairs and on receiving no reply from his colleague, decided to go upstairs. He found the hallway well-lit due to the open curtains and doors, but the room at the end was strangely dark. Clark shouted for his friend but there was no answer. He

shone his torch into the dark bedroom and gasped out loud; the room was painted black, but not just the room, everything was painted black, including the bed, the furniture and the curtains. He could hear a strange growling noise coming from under the bed. He shone his torch and on seeing the most horrible being, he fled the house to his police car outside. The officer at wireless control heard Clark's high-pitched voice come over the radio and his screams for help brought other officers to his assistance. One by one the police cars arrived at the scene and after listening to Clark, several went upstairs, but Clark refused to go.

Sergeant McLean entered the bedroom and gingerly shone his torch under the bed. Lying there was Constable Hopkins with a dagger stuck in his right eye, his other eye was wide open and still. A naked black figure was lying across him, its gleaming white teeth and a facial expression so fierce that McLean recoiled backwards and fell on the floor. Suddenly the figure shot out from under the bed and jumping on top of him, it gripped his head in its hands and its huge long black nails pierced his skin. He felt the intense pain and then its teeth gripped the jugular artery of his neck and bit in hard. McLean sunk back in a faint but then another policeman fired his electric taser and both the creature and McLean separated. Other officers dived on it and fought hard to contain it on the floor. More tasers were fired and finally, all was quiet. Sergeant McLean had been lucky, his jugular had remained intact.

The creature was dragged outside and placed in a police van whilst the police commenced a full search of the house again. Constable Hopkins was confirmed dead at the scene and forensics arrived. In the garage and behind piles of scented candles and lamps, they found a large freezer chest. The lid was opened and they gasped on seeing the bodies of three men inside and they were all wrapped up in cling film, like mummies. Lying on the floor of the garage were the bones of another person, also wrapped up in cling film and they thought he was a man because there was a man's Rolex gold watch still strapped to the left wrist. In the kitchen, they opened a fridge and found pieces of meat in cling film which later were confirmed to be human flesh. Several officers had to be taken outside for fear they contaminated the scene with their sickness.

Later that day, in a mental institution, Dr Cartwright ushered his colleague, Dr Fleetwood, to the video monitor to show him the strange creature, now in a padded cell. It was naked and its entire skin was ebony black from head to toe. It had hairy legs, long black finger nails and long black hair hung over intense blue eyes. Its open mouth and gleaming white teeth growled as saliva dripped out. What clothes had been put on it, had been ripped off and lay in the corner of the cell. Fleetwood exclaimed, *"its scuttling around the floor on all fours, what is it?"* Dr Cartwright replied, *"that, my dear fellow, is Grace Ellis, she dyed herself black and she thinks she is a spider."*

# The Cyclist

Peregrine Winquist loved to cycle and his wheels were exceptional. He owned a Specialized Stumpjumper ST mountain bike which was built out of carbon fibre. He used it with great effect for trail as well as road riding and its full suspension offered him excellent comfort. Of course, the name 'Stumpjumper' was appropriate because his off-road riding was sometimes extreme and his bicycle did in fact jump many tree stumps. Peregrine was a young man in his late teens and enjoyed the springtime of his life. He was a bachelor with no family ties and an only son; his parents had died in a car crash. His inheritance gave him a decent standard of living and the freedom to indulge in his passions for travelling and cycling.

Now, Peregrine did not ride his bike everywhere; there were many occasions where it was strapped to the back of his car and he would often travel miles to various cities where he would book a hotel room for the night and unload his bicycle to explore the area. One day, he decided to go to Edinburgh, up in Scotland, but Peregrine being Peregrine chose to visit during the cold dark winter months of December. On arrival he asked the hotel manager where he could take his bike off road; somewhere nearby. He was directed across from the hotel to the Cammo Estate which was a large parkland area with derelict buildings where the public walked their dogs. The manager could not tell him if it was legal to ride a pedal cycle there but he did tell him the history of the place.

The ruins of Cammo House lie deep in a wooded area near to the river Almond in West Edinburgh. It was built in 1693 and is thought to have been the inspiration for the 'House of Shaws' in Robert Louis Stevenson's novel Kidnapped. The house had been owned by wealthy families and there had been grand balls held within its walls. It had seen horse drawn carriages arriving at its front door and well-dressed visitors disembarking to be welcomed. There had been beautiful stone stables in the woods along a gravel path and the main area around them was cobbled. There was a lake next to the house where you could row small boats and it was full of ducks and water hens with the odd visit from the resident heron who liked to fish there. In the early 1900s the house was owned by the 'Maitland Tennant' family who also enjoyed its opulence and held many social gatherings. As was the case with many estates, Cammo became too expensive to maintain and by the late 1930s the servants were let go; Mrs Maitland Tennant watched her eldest son leave home to join the Royal Air Force during World War II. He, like so many others, was killed and so she remained at Cammo with her other son, Percy. She passed away in the 1950s and was buried within the grounds near to the house and her grave was marked by a large covering of daffodils. In its last years, during the 1970s, Cammo House, its stables and its farmhouse had been neglected and allowed to fall into serious decline. After Percy passed away, the National Trust took over the ownership and the management

of the estate. Soon afterwards, vandals set Cammo House on fire and it now stood in ruins. Another fire burnt the derelict farmhouse down and new apartment blocks now stood there. The manager warned him that the ghosts of Percy and his mother had often been seen walking the grounds with dogs.

Always up for an adventure, Peregrine could not wait to visit the estate and even although dusk was falling, he set off across the road. His bicycle was fitted with a clip-on front light and a red one for the rear, fitted to the saddle. He entered the estate up the main driveway to the house and made good progress in the now pitch-black condition of the night. Peregrine kept his eyes on the pathway ahead which was lit up by his bicycle lamp and the area of coverage was good for about twenty feet. Eventually the driveway reached Cammo House and in front of the building was a large and well-maintained lawn. There was a slight rustle in the trees as the wind had picked up and just at that moment, as if to add suspense to the scene, the clouds cleared away to reveal a full moon, which lit up the entire area. It lit up the ruins of the four walls which stood some six feet high and had mounds of grass built up around their base. The front door beams with the stonework supporting them still stood very tall with steps leading up to the entrance but the door itself was missing. Peregrine, chortled to himself, now all I need is Percy and his mother to appear with those dogs. However, inwardly, he was feeling a bit uneasy. The light intensified as the moon became clearer when suddenly to the left of the ruins, there stood the figure of a woman standing amongst the bushes. She was dressed in Victorian clothes with an all-ghostly white appearance, and shrouded in a light mist. A smile crossed her face and she waved for him to come to her. Peregrine rubbed his eyes, and in that moment, she was gone.

He decided, enough was enough and right on cue, the moon disappeared behind more clouds. He set off, but in his haste, he did not return down the driveway but took the pathway towards the lake. On he went and the tree branches that were lit up by his lamp seemed like green and grey fingers stretching out towards him. They would flash by only to be replaced by more approaching him. He sped up and changed to a higher gear to gain more speed; the bike was now rocketing along and every now and then the front wheel would be thrown up of the ground as he hit an uneven part of the path. Peregrine was sweating and he could see nothing but the lit-up pathway in front, everything else was pitch black. Suddenly he felt a cold chill on his back which seemed to be travelling along with him. He felt the presence of two arms wrap themselves around his waist and a cold breath on his neck. He looked down and saw two hands gripping the front of his jacket. They were old wrinkled hands with long finger nails and they glowed white in the darkness. He tried to unseat himself and stand on the pedals but he was held back in the seat and he heard a low voice from a woman, whisper in his ear, *"faster boy, faster or we will miss the boat."*

A coldness quickly crept over his entire body. Peregrine felt her grip him even tighter and her presence seemed to blend into his back and gradually his senses began to fail him. He seemed to be slipping into an unconscious state as the intense cold penetrated his body. He managed to drop down a gear, and the bicycle started to jump and buck as he deliberately rode it over the uneven ground at the side of the pathway in an effort to dislodge his passenger. The presence was excited by it all and she shouted in his ear, *"faster boy, faster, that's it."* The pedal cycle travelled down the pathway until Peregrine finally reached the lake but instead of stopping, he carried on passed the wooden jetty at its edge and accelerated even faster on the path and through more trees. He heard her, *"foolish boy, you are a foolish boy, I don't want to go to the stables."* He suddenly braked hard and throwing the bike to the ground he ran off down the pathway and into the darkness. He glanced behind and he could see the light from the lamp as the cycle lay on its side in the gravel. The coldness was gone, she was gone and Peregrine ran on, tripping and a falling as he went. His fear developed a need to keep looking back and this led him to run into tree branches as he often veered off the path. Eventually he felt cobble stones underfoot and slowed down to a walking pace. He stopped and almost bent double, he fought to regain his breath and wiped the sweat from his brow with his arm. He quickly glanced behind and in the far distance he could see his bicycle lamp still glowing in the dark on the pathway.

The moon came out and Peregrine saw the ruins of the stables at the side of the cobbled pathway. The doors were missing and the ground was uneven and overgrown with bushes and trees. The stables were impressive and were built of solid stone blocks and stood some sixteen feet high. There were stone archways, some fallen stonework and several small trees were growing out of the roof area. The moon went back in but still some light remained due to a large gap in the trees at the end of the pathway. He looked through and, in the distance, stood a huge stone tower in open fields and beyond he could see the lights of south Edinburgh. Peregrine set off along the cobbled path towards the gap in the trees to make his escape; he dared not go back for his bicycle.

Suddenly the woman stepped out from the bushes directly in front of him. He froze stock still and was unable to scream; his mouth seemed glued shut and his eyes bulged with fright. Urine escaped from him and ran down the inside of his trouser leg. She was very old and her face, her hands and her clothes were completely white. She was in a short coat and a long flowing skirt to the ground. The coat was tight at her collar over a blouse with a small bow at the front, and fitted like a tight corset with small rows of embroidered horizontal slits and buttons on both sides of her bust running down from under the bow to the waist. Around the waist of the coat were heavily embroidered matching slits and the arms of the coat were tight fitting, all the way down to heavy embroidered cuffs which had more slits and buttons. From her waist a skirt flowed very wide with a bustle at the back to give it lift and the bottom of the skirt touched the ground. On her head she was wearing a



top hat with a huge broad ribbon wound around it like a band. The ribbon ends hung down over the back of the brim and over her coiffured hair which was held in bunches under the hat and on her neck. She held a short leather riding whip in her left hand and gestured for him to turn back into the woods. *"To the lake boy, the boat is waiting at the jetty."* He tried to push by her but an invisible force held him back.

Reluctantly, Peregrine turned and walked back down the path towards his bicycle and the lake. The old woman was right behind him and when he glanced at her again, he could see through her body at the stonework of the stables glinting in the moonlight. She slid up beside him and whispered in his left ear, *"you are going to be my boatman."* With the intense coldness of her mouth at the side of his head and with her right arm around his waist, he passively walked along. Once or twice, he tried to break free from her grasp but to no avail; the intense cold from her presence was beginning to subdue him and he felt a strange calmness descend. Peregrine felt as if he were floating with a strange lightness afoot and gradually his mind was put at ease. He no longer feared the interaction and he began to relax in her grasp. Feeling somewhat emboldened, he raised a question, *"why is your body transparent?"* The reply was swift, *"what a load of nonsense, my body is not transparent, what gives you that idea, I'll have you know that I am a wealthy and respected person; stop messing with me and attend to your business. Employment these days is hard to find, you should be grateful for this job offer"*

They finally reached his bicycle and picking it up, he sat on the saddle. The lamp light had gone out due to a failed battery. He set off for the lake and again he felt her presence behind him with her cold arms around his waist. She whispered, *"to the lake boy and don't waste any more time."* Suddenly the pathway lit up in front of him in an eerie blue glow and he could see some twenty feet ahead. Peregrine started to pedal and she prompted him to go faster by squeezing his waist. Resigned to the task, he carried on and eventually stopped at the wooden jetty. He laid down the bicycle and as she gestured, he stepped aboard a beautifully varnished brown wooden dory which was about 12 feet in length. On its stern it bore a name in bright red paint, 'The Maitland Tennant'. He took hold of the oars, sat in the middle and proceeded to row the boat up the lake whilst she sat in the rear and smiled at him. He smiled back and became somewhat amused by the bright light from the full moon as it shone right through her body and cast no shadow on the planking of the boat. Some distance on the water was travelled, when suddenly she laughed out loud, *"do you know boy, I have taken a shine to you, I like you."* Peregrine laughed, *"it's strange, but I have taken a shine to you as well."*

The dawn came up and a young couple who were walking their dog in the woods near to the lake, came across a bicycle lying on the wooden jetty. Suddenly the woman pointed down and screamed.

Under the water they could see the drowned body of Peregrine, his eyes were wide open and he was smiling.

Over the years it has often been reported by those bold enough to venture into the woods of Cammo Estate, on a cold night under a full moon; that they had seen a boat on the lake with an old woman sitting in the stern and a young man sitting in the middle facing her, and rowing the boat. He seemed to be laughing, the old woman was laughing, and the boat would disappear into a strange white mist.

## The House at Highgate

Bill Sneddon loved his work; select the target and location, plan and complete the research then execute to benefit from the reward. On a fine day in June, he found himself standing outside a detached house in the wealthy suburbs of London. Highgate was an ideal choice and Sneddon was dressed in his finest 3-piece charcoal suit, a white shirt with red tie, polished black shoes and finished off with an ebony walking stick with a solid silver top befitting a gentleman in his early forties. He did not loiter but having taken in the parameters of the house and its large black metal entrance gates, he moved on.

A trip to the local estate agent was called for and he paid a visit to one nearby. Sneddon stood outside and carefully browsed the lists of houses with their associated pictures on show in the window. Satisfied, he entered the premises to the sound of a bell tinkling above the front door. A pretty young woman was seated at the front desk, *"can I help you, my name is Casandra"* she purred. Always a master of manipulation, Sneddon responded, *"Good morning young lady, my name is Geoffrey Masterson, I am seeking to rent or purchase a detached house in the Highgate area."* He continued, *"I must state, you are indeed a very beautiful young woman."* Her response was less than cordial, *"Mr Masterson, I would be very careful, your remarks could be construed as sexual harassment."* Sneddon smiled and replied, *"my deepest apologies Casandra, my statement was intended as a compliment without any form of flirtation."* She gestured for him to sit on a chair on the other side of the desk.

Once seated he outlined his requirements. *"I intend to move to this area and perhaps, in the first instance, I may have to rent but ideally, I would like to purchase a detached house for my growing family. I have examined your list of houses in the window but there is nothing that piques my interest."* Casandra raised a query, *"what kind of detached house are you looking to purchase?"* Sneddon responded, *"oh, I think it has to be set back in its own grounds; it must have privacy from the public; perhaps with trees, bushes and the driveway entrance must have electric gates that I can open when I arrive in my car. As a matter of fact, there is a house at the end of the street that fits the bill exactly; it's the one with the black metal gates with huge spikes leading up a red gravel driveway."* Casandra smiled, *"you are very unlikely to be able to purchase that house. It belongs to old Mr Cartwright-Jones. He's in his nineties and a bit of a recluse; point of fact, we hardly ever see him as he lives on his own; no family, you see."* Sneddon requested a business card from her and promised to keep in touch; shrugging his shoulders, he sighed and stood up from the chair. He shook hands with Casandra and before turning to leave, he remarked, *"it's a pity, there is nothing available"*

*and once again, my most sincere apologies for my crass remark as to your beauty; you will forgive me?"* She smiled and they parted on good terms.

Sneddon left the estate agents and once again stood on the pavement on the other side of the street from the house. He confirmed that trees and bushes formed heavy undergrowth around the sides and covered virtually all of the front garden area and bordered the red gravel driveway on both sides. The building stood some 50 yards back from the black entrance gates which were about 6 feet in height. All in all, the grounds, apart from the driveway, were well secured and obscured from the public's view. It was a large house, with a bright red tiled roof and high chimney stacks on both the gable ends; large white framed windows on the ground and upper floor; a red entrance door and green ivy clung to the entire frontage. All of the windows had their curtains closed and it was obvious that Mr Cartwright-Jones enjoyed his privacy. A stone wall some 5 feet in height acted as a boundary around the grounds. Sneddon crossed the road and walked up a lane on the east side. He smiled, the lane was well shadowed by large trees on both sides and offered excellent concealment from nosy neighbours. He found a wooden gate in the wall leading to the house and it appeared to be an entrance into the garden at the east side. Once again Sneddon smiled; it was an ideal spot. He turned and his walking stick clicked on the pavement as he walked away.

One week later and at around 1am in the dead of night, Sneddon re-visited the house at Highgate. He remained finely dressed, he carried his walking stick. He parked his Mercedes car in the lane and in the knowledge that very few policemen or indeed the public, would question its presence; it blended in very nicely with the opulence of the area. As he neared the garden gate, he produced a skeleton key from a bunch in his pocket. The lock proved to be no obstacle and he quietly opened it, entered the garden and closed the gate behind him. The bushes provided excellent cover and there was a small path leading up to a door at the rear of the house. Sneddon tread quietly, lest the gravel on the path made too much noise and he was thankful that the rear garden of the house was just as overgrown with bushes and trees as the front. The curtains were all closed and he could not see inside but one of his skeleton keys made good use of the lock and the door opened with a slight creak of the hinges. He entered a kitchen and closed the door behind him. Sneddon allowed his eyes to be accustomed to the gloom and switched on his small torch; it had a hood fixed to it so as to allow the beam to be only projected forward. He remained unconcerned, as the light would not be seen from the outside due to all the curtains being drawn shut.

Sneddon worked his way around the rooms on the ground floor, he quietly entered each one and once he confirmed there were no occupants, he took what valuables were to hand and placed them near the kitchen door. Finally, he finished the ground floor and gingerly set foot on the stairs. He headed up towards the top landing and on his arrival, he was greeted by a pungent foul smell which pervaded his senses and offered no respite. Sneddon smirked; perhaps old Cartwright-Jones was

lying dead in bed? Well aware that he might be discovered, he was prepared to flee rather than confront an old man. He was not a violent man and it was better to leave all behind rather than create an incident leading to injury. Sneddon carefully checked each room for more valuables and placed those he liked on the top landing. He could not escape the foul smell but his other senses, which were more alert, took precedence. Eventually, he reached the last door at the far end of the landing and quietly opening it; he entered. Suddenly, the overwhelming pungent smell struck him full in the face and blocked his lungs. He bent over, coughed loudly and attempted to stop the retching of his stomach; but too late, he vomited the contents onto the wooden floor of the bedroom. He stood up, turned and made for the open door. Outside on the landing, he stopped, wiped his mouth but nobody was following him and all remained quiet. He could not overcome his curiosity and so he covered his nose and mouth with his handkerchief and went back inside.

He followed the light from his torch and shone it all around the bedroom. The furniture and décor were straight out of the 1930s and the predominant colours were green and brown. There stood a huge old-fashioned free-standing mahogany wardrobe, a matching dressing table with a swing mirror, a few chairs and in a corner, an old gramophone on a table with records and their sleeves strewn around it. Spiders' webs clung everywhere and they, and everything else were covered in a thick layer of dust. Finally, the light found the bed and Sneddon let out a loud gasp at what he saw. Lying there and sticking out from under the covers was a head; it was no ordinary head, for this one was covered in green slime and the flesh on the bone was rotten. It was so rotten, that large pieces were missing and the skeleton parts were exposed. The ears and nose were gone and Sneddon could see through a missing cheek to the inside of the mouth and its jawbone with brown stained teeth. There were dark recesses where the eyes should have been and what hair was left, appeared to be grey and stuck fast in the slime on the top of the head. He grasped the handkerchief to his mouth and pulled back the bed covers. Suddenly there was movement and the horror gripped him like a vice; maggots, hundreds, thousands of them, were gorging on the rotten flesh of what was left of the old man's corpse.

The sight was overwhelming; legs, arms and fingers were exposed to the bone as the flesh had been stripped away. Suddenly, as though awakened from their sleep; hundreds of bluebottle flies swarmed around the light from his torch. He felt them repeatedly strike his face and as he waved his arms to deter them, the light from his torch glinted on something lying on the chest of the corpse. It was a gold ingot fixed to a large gold chain around the old man's neck. Sneddon smiled, and reaching over with his left hand, he lifted the ingot and made to pull it and its chain free. It was not as easy as he had thought, the chain was stuck at the back of the neck and he would have to lift the head to free it. He held the torch in his mouth and with his right hand he gripped the back of the head and began to lift it. He retched as an even more foul smell escaped from somewhere deep inside the

corpse and came out of the mouth. His hand slipped as the slime on the rear of the head broke his grasp and it fell back onto the pillow.

Suddenly, Sneddon felt a bony hand grasp his throat and just before the torch fell from his mouth, he saw to his horror, the eyes of the corpse appearing from their black recesses and glaring at him. Another hand gripped his throat and now both gradually pulled his face downwards. Sneddon could not scream; his mouth was wide open and the mouth of the corpse sprayed foul smelling slime into his face. The putridness entered through Sneddon's open mouth and down his throat. He tried in vain to push himself clear from the corpse but his hands broke through the ribs and disappeared into its chest cavity. He felt the rib bones slice into his forearms and lock him in position. Slowly but surely, Sneddon was choked tighter and tighter; finally, he managed to fall off the bed and pulled the decomposed body with him. His hands and arms were still stuck in its ribcage; the remains of the corpse were now on top of him and the torch on the floor lit up the scene. The bluebottles were swarming in a black mass around him in the light and those bony hands tightened around his throat. He saw the cold glistening eyes staring down at him; he felt the maggots crawling all over his body and the slime dripping from the putrid head onto his face, then all went black.

Morning came and it was a fine day, the sun was out, the birds were chirping and in song. Casandra was making for the estate agents. It was just after dawn and she was much earlier than usual but then she had to clean the place up before heading out with keys to show a house to a client. As she passed the house at Highgate, she suddenly stopped because she saw a red stain on the pavement at the black gates. Her brain at first thought it was red paint but on further inspection, she realised it was blood. Casandra followed the trail of blood and looked up; there hanging on the gates was the dead body of Sneddon. He was on the inside looking out. A large spike from one of the railings was stuck up through the front of his neck under his chin and was protruding through the top of his head. The blood was running down over his face and also from his neck and all over his beautiful charcoal suit. It dripped down his trousers legs and onto his right shoe, the left one was missing. His face appeared to be frozen in horror and his eyes were wide open and staring. Cassandra ran from the place screaming for help.

The police in attendance, removed Sneddon's body; they found skeleton keys in his pocket and on checking his identity, they discovered he had previous convictions for burglary and theft. They also found his Mercedes car, where he had left it. Their investigations led them to enter the grounds and they could see traces on the gravel path where apparently someone had dragged Sneddon down from the house and about halfway up the driveway, they found his left shoe. At the rear of the building, they gained entrance through the unlocked kitchen door. The electric power to the house appeared faulty so they were forced to open all the curtains. In the bedroom upstairs, they discovered the corpse of old Cartwright-Jones lying in his bed. His decomposed head was sticking

out from under the bed covers but strangely his eyes were wide open and glistened in the morning light.

Needless to say, that after the story circulated throughout the Highgate community and in the local press; nobody went near the house and it remains up for sale to this day. To add 'grist to the mill', those who pass it, often report that they have seen the face of Sneddon peering out from behind the curtains in the bedroom of Cartwright-Jones. Some state, they have seen torchlight at night as if someone is searching the rooms. Whatever the case, the public often walk past the 'House at Highgate' and are fearful of gazing on its walls.

# The Caretakers

A church was situated in its own grounds, high on the hillside, and it overlooked St Monans, a small village situated in the East Neuk of Fife overlooking the Forth Estuary in Scotland. James and Martha Hawthorn had resided there as caretakers, ever since they were married; and soon afterwards, Martha gave birth to a son, called Nathan, who was now 5 years old. They had seen many changes in the village, the fishing industry had all but disappeared; apart from a few small boats with elderly owners who went out for lobsters. The main industry in 1962, was now tourism and visitors enjoyed the beautiful scenery as they stood near the church and looked down on the village and the harbour. An old windmill still stood on the shoreline, and in its heyday, back in the 1300s it was used to power a salt panning industry. There were many historical tenement style tall houses standing around the harbour and yet more houses in rows behind, and up the hillside. These rows, were intersected by small roads with lines of houses on both sides. These historical buildings were mostly painted white with beautiful tall roofs covered in orange-coloured tiles.

James Hawthorn often walked around the church on the hillside and stood in the old cemetery section; he would watch visitors climb the hill using the small roads from the harbour and cross a small stone bridge over a burn and enter through the metal entrance gates. They would then walk up and through the old cemetery that surrounded the church. The headstones were very old with various designs that reflected the many centuries of use, and which dated back to the very first grave in 1369. The church, was built by King David II of the 'House of Bruce' in the Middle Ages and it had originally been a small building used by Dominican Friars. The old cemetery had long ago become full and there was now a new one sited on the west side, further up the slope and separated from the old one, by a small stone wall. The new cemetery housed a war memorial to remember the fallen soldiers, killed during the two world wars. The sun was setting, the visitors had all left and James retired to his small flat at the back of the church. His wife Martha greeted him and later they put Nathan to bed and tucked him in. James told him a favourite bedtime story and they watched as their son's eyes became heavier and heavier, until he fell fast asleep.

It was a beautiful sunny morning but the winds were beginning to rise as James and his family walked down to the harbour. Sundays were always busy but there was still time to relax for a while and to watch the sea birds, especially the cormorants, diving for fish. Martha commented about the huge white 'sea horses' crashing against the harbour wall and their spray, which rose high in the air due to a high tide. The boats in the harbour were being tossed about on their moorings and several creels that had been stacked on the harbour pier were blown into the sea, their lead weights dragging them under. James remarked that they should go no further but suddenly Nathan broke



free from his mother's grasp and ran along the top of the pier. He had decided to chase some seagulls that were attempting shelter. Martha ran after him when a huge wave crashed up on the pier and dragged the boy into the harbour waters, whereby he disappeared. James watched his wife dive deep under the sea as she frantically searched for her child. James also dived in but he could not find them. Suddenly, Martha saw Nathan lying still on the sandy bottom of the harbour, his eyes wide open and still. She screamed, her mouth filled with water and she felt like she was drowning.

Martha sat bolt upright in bed, screaming and realised it was just a dream. She ran through the house and into Nathan's bedroom to find the boy fast asleep and unharmed. James came to his wife's side and held her in his arms; she was sobbing. Martha tells him, *"I had that dream again last night, it was awful; I cannot understand why it keeps coming back to haunt me?"* Both returned to bed and eventually managed to settle down to sleep. In the morning, James was heading out for his walk, when he overheard his wife and son talking in the boy's room. Martha told Nathan that last night she had a bad dream. He heard his son question, *"I have dreams as well mum; why do we dream?"*

James went down to the harbour and gazed out to the horizon, it was a beautiful morning, the sun was up in the summer heat and he could see in the distance, the 'Bass Rock', an island in the estuary and he was sure that he could see the sea birds flying around its white cliff. He was somewhat melancholy but found some solace when distracted by the sound of the birds back at the harbour, and he smiled as they fought each other for scraps of bread that the tourists were throwing into the water for them. He even managed a laugh as a huge seagull flew in and snatched a slice of bread from a woman's hand. James left the visitors at the harbour and slowly walked up the road to the church. He passed by a very old grave with the name Hawthorn on it. James took up his usual position in the old cemetery and leaned for a while on the stone boundary wall, looking down on the village.

It was a very nice church, situated on its own grounds, high on the hillside overlooking St Monans. It was reputed to be haunted by the ghosts of James Hawthorn, the church caretaker, his wife Martha and his son, Nathan, who all drowned in the harbour, back in 1413.

# Marianna

Sandy Jenner was born in Texas; a handsome dog of a man who stood tall, and a true babe magnet. I guess many would call him the classic 'Texan Redneck' and a man who spoke his mind in a country whose society was fast embracing wokism. Sandy had no time for the soft belly of his fellow citizens but in fairness the central belt of America, especially Texas and the deep south were far removed from that particular malaise. Wokism was a product of New York and California where the masses had descended into virtue signalling and instead of visiting a local shrink, they informed the world on social media of their health and mental problems. Sandy liked his beer and his women strong. If there was a clear definition of his ideal woman, it was the late actress Ava Gardner who liked her drink and swore like men on a building site. Of course, if she was a slut in bed and a Cordon Bleu cook, that would be the icing on the cake. To define Sandy as a male chauvinist would be an understatement. No woman was going to rule him and the ones that tried, were soon sent packing.

He owned a beautifully furnished penthouse flat, in the Potrero Hill area of San Francisco, California, which overlooked the San Francisco Bay. Like Elvis Presley, it was his 'Jungle Room' where he brought his females to admire the magnificent view of the bay at night, and if they were lucky, his manhood in a night of passion. It was always the same routine, a nice French style meal at 'Chez Maman', a short trip in his Porsche up the hill near to Potrero Hill Community Garden and Mckinley Square Park to take in the panoramic view of the city. He never made a move in the car but always came out with the same line, *"if you think this is a terrific view, you should see the one from my penthouse flat which overlooks the bay and downtown San Francisco; the lights at night are spectacular."* Women were easily led, the smart ones bailed out, but the majority of dumb ones, always considered that, well..... Sandy might be a great meal ticket? He went through them like a rampant ram in a field of ewes, it was like fly fishing in a trout farm, but they never lasted. After a while, he would become fed up, and the chosen one would get short shrift.

That Friday, he parked his Porsche in the basement carpark and in the elevator to his office, he admired himself in a large mirror on the wall. He exclaimed, *"not bad for forty; yep, you still have it"* but as the doors opened, he quickly faced the front. A couple of gorgeous females entered. One said to him, *"hi cowboy, how about taking me for a ride on your horse?"* Sandy was used to this type of office banter, after all, he did dress like J.R. Ewing in the 1980s TV series Dallas, but he was a stockbroker, not an oil magnet. Sandy replied with a smile, *"gorgeous, you can come on a ride anytime"* and as the elevator doors opened, he stepped onto the floor outside; turning, he removed his Stetson, and bowed to her. The doors shut and he could hear the women giggling inside. He thought, *'like shooting fish in a barrel.'* As he entered the conference room, he was greeted by his

male employees who cheered on seeing him. He thought to himself, *"grovelling little shits, not one of them a real man; these millennials piss me off, but what the hell."* The conference was going well, until the door suddenly opened due to a late arrival. A lanky twenty something entered and cutting in on Sandy's speech, he shouted, *"sorry boss, I was dumped last night by my girlfriend and I could not sleep, I was so depressed. I will have to visit the doctor to get some medication."* Sandy, raised a smile, and softly replied, *"that's all-right son, I appreciate your feelings, it must be very tough for you; of course, you can visit your doctor."* And in a much louder and angrier voice, *"now for fuck's sake, will you sit down, so that we can get on with this fucking meeting."* The twenty something year old sat down and turning to a colleague, he exclaimed, *"she was a real bitch to me, she told me I was a fuckup."* Sandy shouted across the room, *"look you little fuckup, will you shut the fuck up?"*

That night, Sandy hit his favourite bar down near the bay and while he stood drinking his Jack Daniels, he eyed up the talent. Over in a far corner a beautiful female was holding court with some males in attendance. Sandy could hear her loud voice and was immediately drawn to her as the swear words cut through the ambient noise and he watched fascinated as she downed a shot and continued, *"you lot are all bloody weenies, not one of you a real man, piss off back to your mommies."* He could not help but admire her, she was about 6 feet tall with long black hair flicking her incredible blue eyes; she was now coming his way, her tight blue jeans hugging a phenomenal body. Sandy noticed that her feet were bare and he thought she looked a real man eater. Before he could utter a greeting, she pulled herself up in front of his face, grabbed his bolo tie, and blowing his hair, she whispered, *"hey there cowboy, how about buying me a Jack Daniels, if you ain't too shy?"* Sandy smiled and replied, *"I like your Texas drawl, dammit girl you are sassy; one Jack coming up"* and turning to the barman, he raised two fingers, *"Jack Daniels, George."* He felt her hand tweak his bottom, *"just what I am looking for, a real hunky man with a tight ass."* Turning around with the drinks, he handed her one and together they downed them in a oner. Looking down at her bare feet, he questioned, *"what's with the bare feet girl?"* She smiled and replied, *"It's a hot night, I don't like wearing shoes, I love the feeling of the cool air on my feet."* Sandy let out a deep laugh and as he turned to George, to order another round, she put her arms around his waist and pulled his bottom against her crotch. He exclaimed, *"dammit girl, you are fast, I mean really fast."* He suddenly turned around and sweeping her up in his strong arms, he threw her up in the air to the delight and roars of approval from the crowd. He caught her and put her back on her feet. She kissed him hard on the mouth and gently nipping his bottom lip, she pulled him closer. Sandy roared with laughter and handed her the drink, *"here's to you darling, another Jack Daniels – life is great."*

When it comes to describing masculine men, Sandy Jenner was the epitome of the late actor 'Clark Gable' who famously starred in the movie 'Gone with the Wind' and said to Scarlett when they parted, *"frankly my dear, I don't give a damn."* It was also the line that Sandy liked to use, when he

was dumping his girlfriends. However, that phrase was far from his mind, as he held her in his arms at the bar. He gazed into her vibrant blue eyes and was astonished to see that her large pupils were double slit and similar to those of a dolphin. He was curious, so it prompted a question, *"I guess you can see underwater as good as you can see on land?"* She smiled but before she could answer, someone tapped him on the shoulder, and as he turned around, a young man punched him in the face. Sandy hardly noticed the blow and addressing his assailant, who had taken up a stance like a pugilist in front of him, he exclaimed, *"beat it kid, before you get hurt."* The young man attempted another punch whilst shouting, *"she was with us, who told you to butt in old man?"* Before Sandy could move, a beautiful long leg flew up into the air and the bare foot on the end of it struck the young man under the chin; he fell to the ground unconscious. Sandy exclaimed, *"Dammit, if you ain't one double-backed hell of a woman, I ain't seen a woman so bowed up for a long time. That kid was all broth and no beans."* She smiled and replied, *"being damned sounds okay, but before we get into that, let's have a few more drinks."* She turned to the barman, *"another two Jack Daniels George, I think it is going to be a long night?"* For once, Sandy Jenner was speechless.

A few hours later, they both staggered out of the bar and headed for his Porsche. Despite his coaxing, she did not want to see the panoramic views from the hill, but to his surprise and agreement, her idea of skinny dipping in the bay sounded great. Down there, the tide was full and it was a race to see who could get undressed first; she beat him and was in the water, shouting for him to hurry up. Sandy could hardly hold his cool as he ran down and dived into the water beside her. He popped his head under the water and in the glow from the moon he could see her perfectly formed naked body and those gorgeous long legs. He followed her until the beach was somewhat distant, and turning to her, he gestured that they should go back before the tide turned. Unfortunately, he left it a bit late and the outgoing swell pulled them further out into the bay. He tried very hard to swim back to the shore but she just swam alongside shouting and cheering, *"this is more like it, I can feel the current and look there is Alcatraz, we are being swept out into the Pacific."* Sandy thought she was one crazy broad and for the first time in his life he felt gravely uneasy.

Suddenly, she dived down under the water and grabbed his leg on the way. He felt himself being dragged under and as he fought to reach the surface, the air bubbles burst out of his mouth. She held him in her arms and kissed him on the mouth as they continued to descend deeper into the dark green depths. His eyes were bulging with fright and he fought to break free, but she just smiled at him and held him tight against her body. Down they went to the floor of the Pacific and by then Sandy was dead in her arms, his eyes fixed and lifeless, staring at nothing. She found a massive rock on the sea bed and stamped on his body until it was wedged hard underneath. *"There, that will do for a few days, until the meat is tenderised – life is great."* Turning, she swam out into the depths of the Pacific and she was a wonderous sight. Her naked body glistened in its pure perfection, as her

beautiful hands steered her way. Her ebony hair furred around her vibrant blue eyes, her breasts were perk and your eye could follow a perfect curvature to a slim waist and firm buttocks, but it was her massive scaled fish tail that drove this perfection through the water. She was 18 years of age; she had made her first kill and her name was 'Marianna' – what a perfect name for a Mermaid.

# The Conmen

It was one of those dark nights and the wind was howling as it bent the trees and ripped the leaves from the branches. The sheet rain twisted and turned and was driven against my window as I peered through the glass at the gathering storm.

I liked the storm, it brought me a strange comfort in my old age, so I put on my winter anorak and stepped outside. The hanging light at my front door glowed yellow in the rain and it swung violently in the wind as I closed the door behind me. I love the feeling of the rain and wind on my face and pulling up my jacket hood, I walked out into the elements.

Living on a farm steading has its rewards, it provides the perfect home for all types of birds and creatures whilst offering me the ultimate in privacy. I lived alone but thanks to the wildlife I am not lonely and, in any case, I prefer their company to that of the human race. I walked down the pathway and leaning over a fence, I drew into my senses the battering of the driving rain on my face and the shimmering lights of the city across the fields into the distance. On those occasions, I often think about those who have departed and yet, I smile on the achievements of my life which guaranteed my escape from the clutches of the grim reaper.

Eventually, my body and soul had soaked enough, so I turned and slowly walked back up the pathway. As I neared the top, I saw two figures standing outside my front gates and gesturing for me to open them. One was an elderly gentleman with a ragged face who was smoking a cigarette and the smoke was billowing up in a bluish tinge against the wind and rain. The other was a slightly build man, around 30 years old and he was wearing a large raincoat which was dripping wet. They must have walked some distance because my farm was about two miles from the main road. I felt sorry for them standing outside in the pouring rain so I unlocked the gates and the poor dears entered; the younger one muttering that the weather was terrible. He put his arm around my shoulder and said, *"why don't we go inside old yin."* Together we all walked to my house and he closed the front door behind us. I must have appeared unsteady on my feet because he helped me off with my coat and gestured me to take a seat in the lounge. He sat down on a chair across from me without removing his raincoat whilst the older man stood at the fireplace and peered around the lounge. He said, *"you have some nice stuff here"* and he picked up an ornament from the mantelpiece and carefully inspected it. I noticed that he was right-handed, which was interesting and I told him that I had been collecting art for years.

The young one interrupted us and started to explain why they had visited me. *"It's your roof, old yin, it needs repairing"* and he went on, *"I was up here earlier on today and your tiles all need replacing."*

I explained to him that I had just had the roof repaired, and the tiles looked okay. *“Well you see, whoever repaired it, didn’t do a good job, because there is no underfelt below the tiles so they have eroded and cracked”* and he stood up and began to pace the floor nervously as he went on, *“I can fix all that for you and give you a thirty-year guarantee but it will cost you I am afraid.”* I asked him how much and he replied *“oh around one hundred thousand pounds.”* I said that he must be very good at his work to offer such a long guarantee and the price seemed a fair one. I asked him if he had worked for many old people like me and with a nod of his head he sat down again and smiled as he replied, *“we have fixed many an old person’s roof and they always thank us afterwards.”* He went on, *“you will have to show us your art collection.”*

I asked them if they would like a cup of coffee with a touch of whisky and a biscuit and there were nods of approval. It did not take long and whilst I made the coffee, I reflected on their kind offer and how industrious young people were in this day and age. To think that through all that wind and rain they had come to my door to offer assistance on my predicament that I was unaware of. I wondered how many other old folks they had helped out in a similar kind fashion? I carried over the tray and putting it down on the table, I poured out their coffee and offered biscuits from the tin. We settled down and munched a few biscuits and they had two cups of coffee before I finally plucked up the courage to speak to the younger one. *“I was worried that you were a conman, after all I did not see your vehicle.”* He stood up and his face had changed from a smile to a scowl and he snapped, *“our vehicle is down your driveway, it broke down”* but then he fell back into the chair with a strange look on his face. The older man suddenly collapsed in a heap on the floor and I could see his right leg was slightly twitching as if he was trying to walk and then it became still.

I put my face down to the younger one in the chair and smiled sweetly, *“did you enjoy your coffee, it has a strange effect on people, they become paralysed for hours but still conscious.”* I watched his eyes as I slowly and carefully removed all his clothing and popped them into my log fire to burn brightly amongst the logs. As he lay on the floor, I produced my special kitchen knife and slowly placed the point near his right eye and smiled before putting it back in the knife rack. I told him that removing his right eye would give me such a great thrill but it would make such a mess of the floor. His face was all stiff but his eyes displayed a fear that I had seen before and it brought a sense of accomplishment to my soul – I enjoyed this bit so much!

Have you ever seen the film ‘The Mummy’, the one in 1959 with the actor Christopher Lee, all wrapped up from head to toe in cotton bandages, well that’s how this young man looked when I had finished? I made holes in the bandages for his eyes, nose and ears. It must have been around 2am, the storm had died down and the rain had stopped as I wheeled the young man down the pathway in my wheel barrow. Down in the yard, I sat him upright in the barrow and pointed to a large dung heap in the corner of the top yard. I asked him to nod his head if he had heard of internal

combustion and went onto explain that there had been reported cases of bodies found in houses completely burned to ash leaving only the shoes as evidence and only a small part of a toe or a finger. I slapped his face and smiled, *"so that's a NO then."*

You see, I went onto explain, *"over there buried in the dung heap is a large cylindrical cement pipe standing upright with a smaller pipe joining the base with the other end of the smaller pipe coming out at the back of the heap. It's important for air to feed into the base of the larger pipe and it also makes cleaning dead easy as I can hose away the ash from the larger pipe into the smaller pipe and out into a bucket."* I dragged his body up over the dung and gently dropped him feet first into the large cement pipe. His height was not bad because I could still see his eyes looking up at me as I gingerly poured a little petrol onto the top of his head.

Did you know (gosh I sounded like Michael Caine) as I explained to him that human flesh, bone and skin is all fat and if contained in cotton wrapping, it burns very slowly from the top like a candle and the melting fat keeps the burning process going all the way down to the bottom and the heat is so intense that it works like a cremation. Well after that, it sounded like he was sobbing and I saw the pleading in his eyes - what joy. I struck a match and lit the cotton on the top of his head. I watched with great curiosity to see when his eyes would register the first hint of pain and then the fire started to burn through his hair onto his skull and began to slowly fry his brain. There was a yellow glow as the burning fat mixed in with the cotton, flesh and bone. His eyes dulled as his skull cracked with the heat and as the burning fat entered the cavity there was a whoosh of flame as the brain shrank back and then ignited. The brain matter and burning fat expanded within the skull and started to bubble up out of the gap. There was very little smoke because just like a candle the flame burns brightly but unlike the candle it can only be seen from the top. Anyway, from past experience, it would take about 24 hours for the young man to turn to ash and the funny thing was, that even rain could not put out this fire. Did you know that the 'Red Indians' in America used to hang their captives' upside down over a burning fire and slowly burn their brains which is apparently the worse kind of pain a human being can suffer? It was hard work for an old man like me but it was satisfying knowing that tomorrow night, I would wash his ashes down the little pipe into a bucket to be flushed away in the canal at the foot of my fields. As I walked back up the pathway in the darkness pushing my wheelbarrow, I thought - what a night, there was no peace for the wicked!

Oh, what to do when your cement pipe is full and in use for at least 24 hours and with that vehicle sitting on your driveway just down the road. Well, there was only one thing for it; I found the old man's ignition keys in his jacket pocket and bundled him into my wheelbarrow, grabbed the petrol can and set off along the driveway to find his vehicle. He was correct, about a mile down the driveway, I came across a lorry parked to the side under some trees.



I had a bit of a job transferring him from the wheelbarrow and piling him into the driver's seat. I put his plastic cigarette lighter on the floor of the lorry at his feet. I removed the top from my plastic petrol can and after cleaning in thoroughly with a rag I placed his right-hand fingerprints all over it before using his right hand to toss it onto the driveway. The drug was wearing off because he groaned a bit as I poured the petrol all over his body and sprayed it around the cabin. I noticed that his wide eyes caught sight of my box of matches. I smiled and told him how much I was going to enjoy the next bit because as a kid I enjoyed playing with matches and had practiced by burning my sister's dolls. I closed the door and tossed the petrol can in beside him followed by a lit match. I was blown off my feet by the initial blast as the petrol fumes ignited. I picked myself up and retreated further into the tree line with my wheelbarrow. I watched as he screamed and screamed with his entire body now well alight and battering itself against the steering wheel and the door. He struggled so hard to open the driver's door but his eyes were already burnt out leaving black and red sockets surrounded by burning flesh with the remains of his eye balls dripping down his cheeks. He could not get his hand to obey and he slumped back as the lorry tyres started to explode and the entire vehicle lit up the sky.

I headed back to my house but occasionally I would turn around to admire the huge glow. Dawn broke as I reached my gates and the beautiful sun started to emerge on the horizon. The sky was filled with a bright red glow with yellow, orange and blue waves of light which acted as a backdrop against the outlines of the trees on the land. I reflected on the number of occasions in my long life, I had witnessed such an event. It brought me a strange comfort which I embraced in that moment of solace. A squirrel ran across my path and I felt refreshed by its presence.

# The Fisherman

The natural harbour at Cockenzie on the east coast of Scotland consisted of a small cove which was accessed from the sea by a small gap in the rocky shoreline. It was a half-moon shape with a black sand base and topped by small pebbles and stones, ground in by millions of years. It held deep water at high tide, so deep you could not see the bottom. It was nearing dusk, at around 9pm on a summer's night, as Sandris Andersonis kissed his wife Shona and pushed his small clinker fishing boat, away from the shoreline and jumped aboard. Waving her goodbye, he grabbed the two oars and carefully navigated the towering rocks at the entrance. The boat was called the Margreta and when it was gripped by the sea swell, he commenced to rowing. He had six lobster creels; three in front of him in the bow and another three in the stern section. Sandris, sat in the middle to add balance. It was high tide and he planned to drop his creels in the sea, before the tide turned. He also had to be back to the cove before the sea retreated and left it inaccessible.

Life was simple in 1565 and the population of the village of Cockenzie was small. The east coast of Scotland's vibrant economy had existed since the 1200s by heating large metal pans containing sea water and set on elevated stone towers over fires lit by coal which was brought in from Fife; a region on the other side of the 'Forth Estuary'. The women stoked the fires and the men carried the coal in hessian bags from large horse draw carts. The sea evaporated in the pans, and the salt left over, was collected to sell in the markets of Edinburgh. Sandris preferred to make his living catching lobsters from around the coastal shorelines and those around the islands, out in the estuary. The trips out to the islands were especially dangerous as it took many hours to row out there and back; the estuary had a history of violent storms.

The light of the day was gone and the blackness of the night descended to meet the black pitch of the sea. He lit his two oil lamps and hung one above the bow and the another above the stern. The light from the lamps worked well and he decided to place his creels in their usual spot near to the shoreline rocks about one mile from the village. On arrival, all was quiet, the sea at high tide on the turn was flat calm and Margreta required no anchorage. Sandris, ensured the fish bait was loaded in each creel and slowly placed each one over the side and let them slide down deep in the water to rest on the bottom. They were all secured by a long line and a floating buoy was placed at one end, which marked their position in the sea and the means to retrieve them. Any lobster attracted to the fish bait would enter through a small tubular hole in the side of the creel net and drop down inside onto the wooden and lead weighted base. After eating its fish meal, it could not get back out. On lucky days, one creel might have many lobsters feeding on the fish bait.

Sandris was putting his last creel into the water when he suddenly felt as if something was behind him. The hairs on the back of his neck rose up and suddenly his head stiffened and tightened on his body. He tried to turn around; he tried in vain to open his mouth to cry out, but a strange force held him still. Intense terror gripped him like a vice, and try as he might, he could not move nor scream. The lights of the boat went out and in the pitch blackness, he suddenly felt his right leg pulled away from under him and he fell over the side of the boat and into the sea. Something was gripping his ankle and he was being pulled down, deeper and deeper. He saw through sea blurred eyes, a bright green light in the depths below which lit up his creels. They were lined up in a long row on the seabed near to the rocky shoreline, and on top and around them were hundreds of florescent green lobsters, scrambling over each other and desperate for the spoils of the fish bait. To stop his descent, Sandris reached out with his hands to take hold of the rope from the buoy leading down to the creels, but his hands just kept sliding down. The rope was covered in seaweed and was very slimy. He sank to the bottom and suddenly some of the lobsters scuttled over in his direction and all over his body. He felt their claws on his flesh and in his panic, all his air escaped in a massive collection of bubbles rising to the surface. The sea water entered his lungs and slowly he began to slip into unconsciousness and then all became black.

It was a beautiful dawn and the summer sun was high and quick to share its heat on the land and the sea. Sandris woke up and found himself lying on the floor of his boat; he was warm and dry and on checking himself, he found he had no injuries. His boat was gently bobbing but the bow was firmly wedged up on a sandy beach, which stretched for as far as the eye could see inland and along the shoreline in both directions. There were no trees, no buildings, just endless sand and the sea was flat calm to a distant horizon. He pushed Margreta away from the beach and rowed her out onto the waters. He travelled for what seemed hours but the sea was never ending and the horizon always far away. The sandy beach had long disappeared and all around him was the open expanse of an ocean and yet there was not a ripple on the water. Sandris grew tired with rowing and burst into tears at his inability to make any progress. Eventually, the heat and the air of the sea got to him and he fell asleep in the bottom of the boat.

When he woke up, he found himself lying on the floor of his boat and again on the same sandy beach at the sea shore. The sun was high and it was a warm day. Perplexed, he sat up and decided that he would head out on the sand, rather than attempt to cross the sea again. Sandris left his boat on the beach and walked inland; he walked for miles on the flat sand but it continued to stretch out in front of him and appeared endless. His boat and the sea had disappeared behind him and he now seemed to be walking through a desert. The heat of the sun was exhausting and eventually, due to the intense heat, he lay on the sand and fell asleep. He eventually awakened and found himself back on the beach again with Margreta pulled up on the shoreline. Sandris started to cry out and shook

his hands in the air before falling out of the boat and into the shallow waters. He knelt there and smashed his fists down, sending the spray up into the air and across his body. He cried and the tears streamed down his face to mingle in his mouth with the salt from the sea.

The sun never set, it just clung high in the blue sky; there was no dusk, no night and no dawn; just a perpetual midday sun. Sandris tried again and again to cross the sand and the sea but he always collapsed and found himself lying in his boat on the beach at the waters edge. He was never thirsty, never hungry and when he remained in the boat, he would fall asleep and always wake up in the heat of the sun. Once, he saw a small boat on the horizon and he immediately set off in the Margreta to seek it out. He rowed for hours until he eventually neared it. As he came alongside, he saw that it was a small fishing boat like his own but the woodwork was all rotten and covered in green algae. Suddenly, the sea burst through the planking of its hull and she began to sink. It went down by the bow and as the stern disappeared under the green waters, Sandris could read a name on the woodwork, 'Margreta'. He cried out in despair and rowed his boat back to the sandy beach.

Shona awoke to find that Sandris was still not home; she had searched the house but she could not find him. She ran down to the cove and discovered that Margreta was not there. The village people searched for Sandris out at sea but after a few days, they gave up. Shona was distraught and for many weeks, she went down to the cove hoping to see him. Her walks in the countryside brought her no comfort and she was broken hearted.

Sometime later, another fisherman, who was rowing his boat near the buoy belonging to Sandris, decided to retrieve the creels. He hooked the buoy rope with his boat pole and proceeded to pull them up. He staggered back as a decomposed leg broke the surface and he saw that the creel rope was tangled in a tight knot around its ankle. He left to get help and together the fishermen retrieved what was left of the bloated body. It had been in the sea for some considerable time and the lobsters had consumed a great deal of the flesh. Some were even still attached to the body and were brought up with it.

Shona in great distress, identified the body as belonging to Sandris; around its neck was the red and blue necktie, she had given him. After the burial in the local cemetery, she would often go down to the cove to sit on the rocks and find some solace in gazing out to sea. In another world, Sandris was sleeping in his boat, the Margreta, on the sandy beach at the shoreline. Under that perpetual warm midday sun, he would often dream of his home and Shona.

# The Anomaly

Lyle and his partner Elton held hands and boarded the plane. They were set to fulfil their long-held dream to visit San Francisco. Heathrow Airport was busy and the taxi trip through London had been a nightmare. Elton mopped the sweat from his brow with a bright pink handkerchief and squeaked in his London accent, *"I am glad we are here at last; I hope the flight is on time and we can relax on board with a nice glass of brandy to calm my nerves."* Lyle smiled, squeezed Elton's hand and replied, *"don't worry love, it cannot get any worse."* They sat in rear seats and both sighed with relief as they sat down next to a rather obese old man who was sitting in the window seat. He gave them some funny looks but smiled inwardly on seeing the colourful clothes they were wearing. His inner thoughts were almost betrayed when he murmured, *"just my bloody luck, I have to sit beside a couple of poofs."* His nerves were further tested when Elton squeaked, *"would you like a sweetie"* as he pushed a bag in front of the old man's face.

Up front, the pilots, Edward 'Jock' McGregor and his co-pilot, Bartholomew 'Bart' Clarke were carrying out their pre-flight check. Jock was from Glasgow in Scotland and Bart was a Londoner. The head stewardess, Samantha Snikerless poked her head in the cabin door, *"how are you guys getting on?"* Bart raised his head and turning he said, *"hi love, we are just about there; but in about 5 thousand miles and in 10 hours' time, you and I, will be drinking margaritas in a bar in downtown San Francisco."* She smiled, *"you never give up trying; in your dreams Bart Simpson."* Jock burst out laughing, *"och Bart, you'll no be getting ye're wicked way with Sam, and she has the right moniker fir ye."* Bart scowled, Sam laughed, but the merriment soon died down as the two pilots concentrated in taxiing the plane onto the main runway for the take-off.

It was a smooth take-off and as the plane levelled off at some 35 thousand feet, meals and drinks were served by the stewardesses. With stomachs full and drinks a plenty, everyone settled down to watch the movie which was a comedy. Lyle and Elton generated their own form of comedy as many of the passengers at the rear of the plane laughed at their antics as they argued about whether an actor was gay or not. Lyle shouted, *"he is, I swear he is"* and turning to look around, some passengers nodded, while the rest attempted to stifle their laughter. *"See everyone agrees with me."* The obese old man placed his head on a pillow and murmured, *"poofs."* Finally, the cabin lights were dimmed and everyone settled down for the long overnight flight to San Francisco.

As dawn broke, the plane entered the San Francisco airspace and found itself stacked up as several other flights were in front of it waiting to land. Jock announced that he would have to circle the bay area until it was his turn. The passengers welcomed the news as they strained in their seats to look out of the windows at the views of the city. The internal broadcast system announced that the plane

was flying over the notorious prison of San Quentin which was on the port side and the pilot dipped the left wing so the passengers could get a better view. As Jock levelled off again, a strange green mist suddenly appeared in front of the cockpit window and although it seemed impossible, the mist entered through the window and enveloped Jock, before quickly disappearing. Bart turned to him and asked if he was alright and Jock replied in a thick Texan drawl, *"what is it to you, you limey bastard?"*

Suddenly, Jock left his seat and gripped Bart by the throat with both hands and forced him back in his chair. The hands squeezed tighter and Bart who was the smaller and lighter man, fought hard to break free; his face changed colour and his tongue was turning blue as he gasped for air. With no one at the controls, the plane lurched downwards into a steep dive and gathered speed in its descent. Bart could not break Jock's grasp and gradually became unconscious. Jock let go and went back to the pilot's seat as the plane continued on its downward spiral. The screams from the passengers were ringing in his ears and Sam was banging on the cockpit door and shouting for it to be opened. Jock let out a yell, *"dammed Brits, ye are all going down to hell with me."*

Just then, Bart regained consciousness and recognising the plane's nose dive, he gripped the controls and started to bring the plane level but just as he did so, Jock attacked him again. As the two of them fought, the plane crash landed into San Francisco bay and the waters smashed through the cockpit window, smashed open the inner door, killing Sam and cascaded down through the passenger section, sweeping passengers away to the rear of the plane. The old man could only stare in disbelief as he watched the right wing being ripped off by the force of the crash and its engine, still in full thrust, was sent hurtling through the plane's rear section, just behind him. The engine churned its way through the bodies of some unlucky passengers, and their blood along with their torn limbs were blown out of the plane which turned the bay waters a frothy red as the plane began to sink. The sea rose inside the passenger section as Elton attempted to free Lyle, who was still belted in his seat and unconscious. The bodies of Jock, Bart and Sam were floating at the rear of the passenger section. The old man who was sitting with the waters up to his chest, had been hit with a piece of debris; his head was missing, and blood was being pumped like a fountain from out of his open neck. Elton who was covered in the old man's blood, was still fighting to free Lyle as the waters completely filled the plane and it began to sink. Down it went into the dark green waters and Elton was forced to leave his partner and attempt to make his escape through a hole in the side of the fuselage. He started to swim underwater, when he suddenly he felt something grip his left leg and start to pull him back. He looked around and saw Jock smiling. Elton tried to escape but he was no match for the stronger man and he slipped into unconsciousness as his lungs filled with water.

The boats rushed to the scene to recover any survivors and many of the rescuers could not hold onto their stomach contents which mingled with the blood red waters. Bodies were floating everywhere;

they had died due to the massive G forces of the crash; their hearts crushed against their rib cages. Others had endured being swept away by the force of the waters in the passenger section and had either been chopped up by the engine impact or drowned as the plane took them to the bottom of the bay. The carnage was unbelievable but then a head popped up out of the waters and Elton screamed, *"help, please help me"* and just as a boat reached him, he passed out. He was taken to the nearest hospital in an ambulance, its siren sounding to clear the way; Elton was the only survivor of the crash. Later, massive barge cranes raised the plane and amongst many other dead passengers, the bodies of the old man, Lyle, Bart, Samantha and Jock were found inside.

Over 230 people had perished and yet earlier that morning, in San Quentin Prison, just before dawn, Leroy Jackson was led out of his cell by a priest and two prison guards. The priest was reading from the bible and Leroy was struggling to break free. He was strapped in a wooden chair by leather belts. The top of his head was wet with a watered sponge and a leather skull cap with an attached electric lead was placed on his head and belted off under his chin. At that moment a guard threw an electric switch and a massive electric current travelled down into his brain. One of the guards had forgotten to place a bit in his mouth and the viewing public screamed as Leroy's teeth began to chatter. It was over in seconds and the smell from his burnt hair and flesh was terrible. However, it was a fitting end for a rapist and murderer. Suddenly, and as the audience rose to leave, a large cloud of green mist seemed to come out of Leroy's body and disappear up and through an air vent in the ceiling.

A few weeks later, Elton, who had recovered in hospital was flown home to London. At Heathrow airport he was met by a representative from the Foreign Office. Elton squeaked, *"I am glad to be home, safe and sound but I miss my partner Lyle, he was such a gentle man."* He requested that he be dropped off in Hyde Park so that he could take in the fresh air and the sunshine. Waving goodbye to the man from the foreign office, Elton set forth into the park. He smiled and then burst out into a long howl of laughter, he made a grab at the bottom of a young woman and shouted in a loud Texan drawl, *"ye ha, look out you Brits, Leroy Jackson is back in town."*

## My Friend Josh

I met Josh when I was 5 years old, it was the spring of 1966 and I was kicking a ball in the school playground. It bounced too high and as it went over the metal railings, he caught it and threw it back to me. He shouted, *"hi kid, is that a Davy Crockett hat your wearing, did you kill the racoon?"* I nodded and turning around, I held up the tail at the back, *"I skinned it myself, so there."* He laughed, *"hi kid, my name is Joshua Caldwell and you must be Carwyn Evans."* I turned back to answer but he was gone. I looked over the fence and across the road to the open park where the war memorial stood and I thought I saw him standing there waving to me. I lived in a small village in Wales and over the next few days, I looked out for him but he never reappeared.

That April, my mother died of tuberculosis and it was a wet and windy day at the graveyard where she was buried. As we stood at the grave and as the vicar gave sermon, the rain lashed down and I cowered under the large umbrella which my father was holding above us. I clasped his hand and looked down at my mother's coffin, the rain was bouncing of the lid and slowly the earth around it, turned to mud. I looked up and, in that instant, I thought I saw Josh standing under some trees; away in the distance. He waved to me and then he was gone. I returned home with my father in a huge black car which was driven by a man with a black cap on his head. When the car stopped, my father gave him some money and we went into the house. My father made me a nice meal and we sat in silence at the kitchen table; his head was bowed and he was crying into his hands. I missed my mother but it was only later that night that it really hit me. Lying in my bed, I realised for the very first time, that I would never see her again, she wasn't there to tuck me in, she would never ever tell me another bed time story and I missed the comfort of her arms and her smiling face. That night and for many nights to follow, I cried myself to sleep and I felt a sharp pain in my heart that never seemed to go away.

A few weeks later, I was sitting alone at the kitchen table eating my breakfast when suddenly, Josh was sitting opposite me. He smiled and spoke, *"hi kid, how are you bearing up?"* At first, I was startled; it was the first time that I had seen him up close. Josh was so young and very much a teenager with a spotty face. His long black hair hung down under a large blue hat, it was like the kind that cowboys wore. He was tanned and he had bright blue eyes with a small turned up nose. He was wearing a blue waistcoat over a white shirt and with a blood red cravat tied around his neck. Josh's long trousers were also blue coloured and he wore black high laced boots. He had a huge black overcoat with a bright red lining, slung over his shoulder. A gold chain hung between a button of his waistcoat and a pocket. He pulled out a gold pocket watch to check the time and went on, *"don't worry kid, you will never forget your mother but the pain of the grief will eventually subside,*



*especially as you get older.*" We spoke for a while and I found out that he came from a place far away and he lived in a big house with his parents and he had many friends who came to visit. My father, who had been out in the garden, suddenly interrupted our conversation from the kitchen door, *"who are you talking too Carwyn?"* I turned and smiled, *"it's just my friend Josh, he has come to visit."* I turned back and Josh said he had to leave, so he got up and walked past my father and out the kitchen door. My father sat down at the kitchen table and exclaimed, *"I am starting to worry about you son, kidding on that you have a friend Josh is not funny, if you have a problem, talk to me, that's what I am here for."* I could not understand why he could not see Josh, but I let it be; it was great to have a special invisible friend.

That summer, I saw Josh a lot, he always visited me at the house and we would sit for ages talking in my bedroom. He told me about his life; when he was a young man, he lived in Hull and he once went on a nine day 'pleasure trip' with his father on an old converted smack called the 'City of Chester' and Josh had been seasick most of the time. He also told me of the heavy seas and how trawlers came back to port damaged and one, the 'Nonpareil' had her mainmast broken off just above the deck. He was in constant trouble with the dock police through swimming in the Humber. Josh told me that he witnessed the St Andrew's Dock disaster in 1897 when many ships were sunk. I was enthralled by his tales of great daring and how he had been a fisherman on a boat working out of the Hull Fish Dock. It was an old smack called the 'Endeavour' and it had been converted to steam. She had a single funnel that was so small, you could hardly see it at high tide when it was docked, as its top was level with the pier. Many times, my father opened the bedroom door and interrupted our conversation. He warned me about talking to a 'made up friend', *"this will not do Carwyn, talking to an invisible person; it is doing you no good."* He brought the village vicar to our house, who warned me that no good would come of my behaviour; he even thought that Josh might be a demon?

The weeks passed and my invisible friend, usually visited me every month, much to the relief of my father, who though my malaise was getting better. I often went to the graveyard with flowers for my mother and I would sit on the grass at her grave and during those times the grief would come back and I would be moved to tears. On one occasion, Josh visited and sat on the grass beside me; he held me in his arms and comforted me. He said, *"we never really die Carwyn, we move on and we all see each other in another place."* I asked him if it was nice place and he replied, *"it's a beautiful place, not that different from here in Wales and it's a place where everyone is happy and content."* Josh made me feel better, he brought me hope that I would one day see my mother again.

Late in October, Josh stopped me one morning, just as I was about to go into school. He suggested that I play 'hooky' and come with him for a walk to the 'Village of Pentrebach' and check out the countryside and the 'River Taff' for wildlife. It sounded exciting and so we set off. We walked along the country trails and saw otters in the river, trout, and in the deeper pools there were large pike

hiding under the overhanging trees. We waded in the shallow waters and saw all sorts of small fish and strange looking creatures hiding under the stones who shot off when they were disturbed. I enjoyed the interaction of it all and it was an experience with Josh that I remembered for the rest of my life.

When we got back, near lunch time, Josh stopped me just outside the village and told me that he had to leave as he was going on a very long trip and he would not be back. We parted as friends and I watched as he walked off into the distance and slowly, ever so slowly, he seemed to disappear. When I got home, my father was not there, but suddenly he burst through the door covered from head to toe in black mud and grabbed me in a huge hug and burst into tears. I lost my school friends that day at Aberfan, the day when a huge mudslide from a colliery tip, covered my school.

Many years later and when I was an older man, I was browsing the internet, when I picked up on an article regarding a steam driven fishing smack called the 'Endeavour'. It had been sunk by a huge storm off Hull in 1899 and amongst the crew who drowned was a young teenage boy, called Joshua Caldwell.

## Home from the War

I missed my wife and she was constantly on my mind which brought me much pain in this terrible war. Her letters had stopped coming but I laid my fears aside, after all, I was at the front and the mail had been delayed. I worried that perhaps she had found another man. Shells descended on our lines and in the orange and red flames of the night, I could see the body parts of my men being blown out of their foxholes by direct hits. I reflected on the carnage and shuddered at the thought that my wife might be killed in the blitz back in London.

War had hardened and honed me to become a machine and I remained unmoved by the dead and dying lying around me. I now enjoyed killing the enemy and I was addicted to the machine-gun jumping in my hands. I loved the stench of cordite, the sight of the empty bullet casings flying up in the air and the overture of the gunfire amid the screams of the enemy, as the bullets struck home. The night was upon us with another patrol to capture soldiers for interrogation. I wiped my face and rose up from my foxhole and set off across the field along with my platoon. The night had become very still, the shelling had stopped and we made good progress towards the enemy lines. We were blessed with a black night and we were upon them before they could react.

I had separated from the rest and found myself on my own with five enemy soldiers inside a foxhole half asleep. On sensing me and on seeing my gun, they stood up and threw their arms in the air. I felt the machine gun jerk in my hands as I filled the foxhole full of lead and watched the horror with glee as the enemy soldiers danced like marionettes on strings as the bullets struck their bodies. I watched some heads explode with the impacts, sending brain parts all over their comrades some of whom were screaming in pain as the bullets struck their bones. The smoke cleared and they lay crumpled with the wounded moaning as they clutched their shattered bodies. I did not hesitate and salivated as I poured more lead into them and silenced the cries. One still remained alive and was sobbing for mercy but I did not hesitate, I crawled down beside him and with one swift movement, I cut his throat with my knife. The blood pumped furiously out of the neck wound and all over my tunic but the gurgling sound from his throat soon stopped and I was satisfied. I took my knife and cut a small notch in the rim at the back of my helmet and counted them off, that made twenty-three in total. I enjoyed killing them with the knife, I had developed a taste for it.

I climbed out of the carnage and ran back to re-join my lines. Later, sitting in our foxhole and turning to Taff, I asked him how many he had killed, he replied, *"oh, I don't know, it was so dark you see, I could not really tell."* Paddy, opened up, *"I managed to take two prisoners and get them back here with the help of Jock."* Lonnie piped up, *"I thought that's what we were supposed to do; sneak in and*

*get some prisoners for HQ.” I chipped in “of course that’s why we were sent out, but some of them decided not to surrender.”*

Dawn came up and I was inwardly laughing as I took a leak near the top of the foxhole. I was looking down at the enemy’s blood on my clothes and admiring my manhood when I saw a puff of dust bounce of my tunic just above my heart and simultaneously, I felt a great thump in my chest. I stared in disbelief at a hole in my tunic where my blood was spurting out. In that moment, I heard a moan and on twisting my head around, I saw Taff, who had been standing behind me, fall to the ground with his right eye hanging out. A black translucent plume separated from his dead body and stood before me, caught in a shaft of bright red light and still recognisable as Taff. I saw dark figures all around the battlefield with swords in their hands and everything seemed to stand still and yet jerk forward in small segments with a mixture of soldiers, dark figures, explosions, flashing swords, all in one giant maelstrom of death and destruction. One dark figure with red glinting eyes and a fearsome sword, came to Taff and a blood red beam of light shot from the tip of the sword and sliced a hole in Taff’s black translucent figure. I heard a long drawn out scream emit from the wound and suddenly the scream stopped and Taff became as black dust and was dispersed into the air.

The bullet hole in my chest caused me to crumple to my knees and I hovered there but in that second a grenade struck the top of the foxhole and exploded in dust and flame. I felt myself spinning and my eyes could see around and around the foxhole at all my friends’ who were lying dead and dying and there was my headless body still kneeling with the blood gushing out of my neck and the top of my spinal cord showing. My head spun down into the foxhole and in that brief and final moment I could see a large hole in the back of my body where the bullet has passed through and struck poor Taff in the head. I laughed at the madness but it was cut short as my brain died and my eyes dimmed.

They say that when you die, you see a great white light guiding you upwards or dark figures pulling you down through holes in the ground to hell. I never experienced that; I just fell into darkness with a deep burring noise in my ears as my brain finally shut down. It was the same noise that I had experienced when going under gas at the dentists and when I woke up, I was laughing my head off with a puzzled dentist staring at me in disbelief.

I don’t know how long it was afterwards but I was still in a war, because I woke up standing in a bombed street in London with bombs falling all around and lighting up the darkness. I was still wearing my blood-spattered tunic but my helmet and gun were missing. All around me buildings were on fire with people running and screaming as fire engines and fire crews struggled to contain the flames. Ambulances with their bells ringing were ferrying the injured and dying and a warden was shouting and bawling for folks to help search for the injured. Men were digging in the rubble

with their bare hands and pulling out blood spattered bodies. Above me, I could hear the long drone of departing airplanes and watched the searchlight beams dancing in the palls of smoke. I realised that I was in my own street and in the distance, I could see my house which was totally demolished. I stopped the warden and asked him what had happened to my house and my wife. He replied, *"I am sorry mate but the woman was killed in a bomb blast and there was a man's body found beside her."*

In despair, I closed my eyes but for a moment and suddenly it was daylight and the streets stood empty with the buildings broken and twisted; all of them except mine. It stood upright and out on its own as if in a field with not a visible mark and the sky was lit purple with a white haze. Everything was still, not a bird, animal or person and only silence. I walked across the rubble and the dust on the road and on entering my home, I heard squeals coming from inside. I found them both naked in the bedroom, a man was lying on my wife and his white buttocks were moving up and down. She was squealing for more and I could see her hands caressing his neck and back as he thrust down on her. Suddenly she let out that familiar long and shattered moan and her body jerked as her legs widened for more. I watched in stunned amazement as she thrust her pelvis up and down against him. He let out a loud and long gasp as she continued to rise against him until they both fell silent and still on the bed.

The anger welled up in me and drawing my knife I made to move forward to kill them but stopped as the man lifted his head from my wife's breasts and turning, he looked at me laughing out loud. My wife opened her eyes and joined in the laughter. They both lay back on the bed and he caressed her naked crotch with his hand. Their laughter grew louder and louder and I put my hands to my ears but I could not drown out the noise. I lunged forward and stuck my knife into his forehead and pressed down with all my weight until the blade disappeared inside his head. I twisted the knife and heard his skull crack open and the warm brain matter spurted out onto my face. His body jerked and twisted under me as his nervous system tried desperately to work his arms and legs but to no avail and he finally became still. I looked at his face with its eyes wide open and then pushed his body off the bed onto the floor. I closed my eyes to slits as I savoured the moment but when I opened them, his body was gone. I scanned the room but there was no trace of him. Turning to my wife, I raised my knife but she smiled up at me from the bed and gestured to me with her arms. I hesitated but I could not kill her and dropping the knife I embraced her and told her that I loved her. She smiled and caressed my face and kissed me. Our lips touched in that long moment and I felt the warmth of her mouth and my eyes closed.

I had been sleeping and then I awoke with coldness on my mouth and smelled a foul stench. I opened my eyes and she was lying under me a wretched rotting corpse and her face was green and yellow with the skin moist and visceral. I sat bolt upright and part of her upper lip broke free and came away stuck to my mouth revealing her teeth and upper jawbone. Her dry parched eyes were

still there watching me and her hands had ripped off and were stuck to my back. Her mouth opened and she coughed out green slime then she smiled and gestured for me to embrace her. I looked down upon her and I could see her white ribs through the rotting gaps in her side, her ears were hanging off and her nose bone was gleaming white on her face.

I turned away in disgust and sat on the bottom of the bed facing the broken mirror of my wardrobe. She came up behind me and put her arms around my waist and pulled me against her rotten body in a cold embrace but I did not resist. I could only stare in despair at my reflection in the cracked mirror and the sight of my own rotten corpse and my parched eyes - I was home from the war.

# The Light

John Flockhart was a driver; he carried bricks, sand and granite chips in his Bedford lorry and back in those days he had to manually load the vehicle himself. Fortunately, it was a 3-ton tipper lorry, so emptying it was a simple matter of revving up the engine and pressing a button inside the cabin. He enjoyed watching the back section lift up on two huge hydraulic rams and the load slide down through the open rear tail gate. During the school holidays, John often took his son with him. In the early morning dawn, they would travel into the country to get loads of sand for the building site and they enjoyed their morning breaks together; buttered rolls and hot coffee from a thermos flask. Next it was to get a load of bricks from the brick yard at Prestonpans and he and his son would wear rubber pads over the palms of their hands and standing inside a hot kiln, they would load bricks onto a conveyor belt, which carried them up and out to be dropped into the lorry tipper section. For lunch, they would visit the brick yard canteen where afterwards, John chatted to the other lorry drivers, whilst his son played outside and threw stones into the sea. John lived with his family in Prestonpans, situated on the Forth Estuary in East Lothian, Scotland and they resided in a council house near to the yard where the lorry was kept at night.

It was a tough and yet a rewarding life, and John loved his wife and son very much. His boy went to the local school whilst his wife worked as a cleaning lady in the mornings and cleaned out the classrooms and the school toilets. In the 1950s a car was out of the question; they could not afford one, so for holidays they travelled to places in the country by train or by bus, depending on how far they were going. Blackpool and Scarborough were their favourite holiday haunts. John enjoyed a tippie of brandy after his evening meal but his consumption was not excessive and he did not smoke. However, he was prone to destroying his food in a rush, and despite his wife warning him of this eating habit, he carried on and usually consumed his plateful whilst others were only half way through. One morning, things took a downturn when he felt a sharp pain in his stomach while he was loading his lorry with sand. He went home but later that night he was rushed to hospital after being sick and bringing up dark blood. The prognosis was not good as the doctors suspected that he had burst a stomach ulcer and he was rushed into the operating theatre. They managed to stop the internal bleeding but unfortunately peritonitis had already set in and was poisoning his blood system. The priest was called for and John's wife was brought to his bedside in the hospital. They held hands and she watched as John gradually slipped away.

He lay there with his eyes open and smiling at her; he could still feel his wife's hand holding him firm and suddenly he felt a strangest in his body as his heart stopped. His eyes closed for the last time, and yet a few moments later, he saw a bright light appear above his body; it beckoned him to rise up as it pulsed its glow in the room. John had a strong desire to go to the light but feeling his wife's

presence he fought hard to remain in his body and to stay with her. Through his closed eyes, he could see the doctors and the priest around his bed and heard a doctor pronounce him dead. Still his wife held onto him and then as the light faded and disappeared; John remained, and his body became cold and rigid. The last thing he felt and heard, was his wife releasing her grip on his hand, placing it on his chest, and sobbing as she left the room. He was 35 years old when he died, a relatively young man but he looked older.

They say that ghosts wander abroad at night but seven days later, John rose from his grave in the dawn light. He found himself in the Prestonpans graveyard and he was alone; he was the only ghost in the place. His grave was beautifully set out; it did not have a gravestone but the flowers and the many wreaths were lovely and displayed gorgeous colours in the sunshine. A temporary wooden cross marker was its headstone and upon it, was written his name. John saw that he was wearing his burial shroud and his form was a light blue translucent version of himself. He could walk around as before but he could not feel the ground beneath his feet. He quickly realised that the boundary of the graveyard was his cell and an area which he could not go beyond: it was like an invisible force that held him back. The sun was high, the heat of summer was warm but as he walked about reading the writing on the headstones of the graves, he felt neither the warmth and later that night, the cold. Eventually he sat down on a wooden bench which was positioned near his grave. People started to arrive to visit their loved ones and an old woman sat on the bench beside him. He spoke to her and asked her name but she could neither hear or see him. However, she only sat for a few minutes, because despite it being a very warm day, she was shivering with the extreme cold emitting from John.

In the days ahead, John walked with people around the graveyard and listened to their prayers and in many cases, the stories of their lives as they stood murmuring at a relative's grave. A week later, he was sitting on the bench, when his wife and young son arrived to visit; his son clutching a bunch of freshly cut flowers. He tried to communicate but to no avail and watched as they placed the flowers on his grave. His wife was weeping and the boy was clutching her skirt in an effort to comfort her. He followed them to the exit gate of the graveyard but could only watch as they headed down the road to the bus stop. Later that day, workmen arrived and started to dig a new grave and pile the soil removed under a large green cover at the side. John was fascinated, and the next day, he sat on his bench and watched the funeral procession arrive behind a black hearse and they placed a coffin on the ground. A minister gave the sermon followed by a man who gave the eulogy and then they lowered the coffin into its grave. As everyone left the graveyard, John watched the gravediggers pile the soil back in and they left behind them, a neat bump of replaced grass on top along with the flowers brought by the mourners. Every morning, for two weeks, John stood at dawn beside this new grave, but no one emerged.



Some days later, a van arrived and three men carried out a headstone and placed it in a concrete setting at the top of John's grave. They stood back to admire their work and written on it was John's name, the date of his death, 1955, and his age, 35 years. His wife arrived later that day and stood weeping as she examined the workmanship and made sure everything was, as she had wished. She placed flowers on his grave and sat for a while on the bench to take in the sunshine and John did not sit beside her but stood at his grave. She did not see him but on occasion her head lifted as if to recognise a presence that she felt. Eventually, the weather changed and glancing back at the grave, she buried her face in her handkerchief and left the graveyard. John waved to her but no recognition was returned.

The years passed and John watched his wife and his son grow old with each visit, until one day, his son was the only one to arrive. He was an old man in his seventies and he stood at the foot of the grave and wept, the tears streaming down his face. A few days later, gravediggers started to dig up John's grave and eventually the hole reached the top of his coffin. John could still see his name engraved on a copper plate on the top; it was green coloured but he could still read the writing. The next day a hearse arrived and his son was in a limousine following it. They lowered a coffin into John's grave and he could see his wife's name on the top of the lid. There were no other mourners and as the vehicles left, his son stood and cried. John watched him turn and walk out of the graveyard. Soon afterwards, John's headstone was engraved with his wife's name and he saw that she had died in 2022 at 99 years of age. Each dawn, he waited at the grave but her ghost never appeared and again the years passed.

John's headstone became old and weatherworn, his son's visit became less and less until one day, he did not appear and after a while, John came to the sad conclusion that he had passed away. His son was not buried in John's grave as it only had room for two coffins. There were no more visits; his only child, his son, had never married and there were no grandchildren. In the years that followed, the funerals stopped as the graveyard became full; visitors stopped coming as the generations with memories of those buried, passed on. The bench was worn down by the passage of time and eventually collapsed amongst the weeds. The graveyard was left to nature and John found himself alone. He often lay back in the long grass on the top of his grave and watched the clouds drift by in blue skies. Each day as he rose from his grave to the morning light, he felt the weight of despair bearing down on him.

Some nine hundred years later, the walls of the graveyard finally disappeared into dust; the metal gates at the entrance had rusted away, and the headstones had long ago disintegrated under mounds of earth and grass which marked where they once stood. John suddenly felt a change, something he could not explain but he knew that all the barriers had been removed. He walked out of the graveyard and went down a dirt track that once had been a tarred road and into the village of

Prestonpans. All the buildings were derelict and in ruins; some so bad, that they were covered by massive mounds of earth and weeds. Swallows and other birds were in flight and nesting in amongst the buildings. Hundreds of rabbits were living there and feeding on the grass and a rich diversity of plants. He walked down to the seashore and out in the shallow sands of the estuary, a massive ship was lying on its side, the sea lapping against its keel. It was a cruise liner and it was covered in brown rust. Part of the super structure had collapsed along with its funnel and was lying near the ship, half submerged in the sea. John spent many days, searching amongst the ruins of Prestonpans but there was no sign of life and no signs of death, there were no bodies or skeletons to be found. The animal life was incredible, with deer, foxes, squirrels and badgers in abundance and all out and about during the day. He saw all types of birds, from small finches to buzzards and even flocks of budgies and parrots.

One day, he was in a small shop that had escaped much of the dereliction and away in the back on some shelves were stacks of newspapers. He looked on the bottom shelf and read the headlines, it reported that the world was experiencing a global virus that was killing everyone and there was no cure. The death toll was in the billions and mankind faced being wiped out. John walked outside into the sunshine, but he was no longer in despair: he had grown accustomed to being lonely and he enjoyed his own company. He would never grow old, never be hungry and he could not feel the elements, but yet he shared in the wonderful experience of nature which was all around him. John walked along the seashore and watched the waves crashing in on the beach. The cruise liner was now bobbing on its side in the high tide and seagulls were using the superstructure to roost. He saw their nests and perched higher up; he saw cormorants scanning the sea for shoals of fish.

John would walk throughout the world for all eternity; perhaps it was a curse, perhaps to him it was a blessing, because at last, he was free from the grasp of the graveyard.

## An Abortive Life

I do like my Luciferin bioluminescence glow and the ability to transcend is all well and good but in human form there is nothing to beat a nice steak and chips with a light salt dressing and washed down with an excellent glass of beer. Human contact is a necessity and the interaction of social conversation is most welcomed. However, there are times when I must remain invisible to the human eye.

I could see her face at the window, a window covered in rain, heavy rain that battered against the glass but I could still see her tears and hear her sobbing. Sarah had endured a life of pain and it started in 1967, when she was 16 years of age.

I was present then when she went into a bar with her girlfriends as she often did on a Friday night. The 'swinging sixties' were in full swing and the police were just starting to relax their policing of licenced premises. There were less and less licensee holders being prosecuted in court for encouraging underage drinking and allowing excessive drinking in their public houses – what is casually known today as binge drinking. Sarah was soon very drunk as were all her friends and they were approached by a group of lads. Malcolm was a fine strapping youth and soon he had drawn the attention of Sarah who, through her drunken stupor, fell for his charms.

She ended up getting into his car and they set off for a run in the country. They stopped in a secluded lane and whilst the gale outside battered the car with rain, the steam of their embrace soon fogged up all the windows. Sarah was a virgin and unbeknown to Malcolm she was on a dare by her friends to have coitus with him. Both stripped off in the car and in the heat of the steamed-up windows and the gale force wind and rain, Sarah fulfilled the dare. Malcolm drove her home and noticed that she seemed to have sobered up and was very quiet. At her house, the somewhat dishevelled Sarah ran inside, crying into the arms of her mother. Her father went to the front door to witness Malcolm driving off in his car.

Despite all his protestations, the dice were stacked against Malcolm. The doctor had examined Sarah and had proved penetration, she had claimed rape and the chain of evidence since they had met until they parted remained unbroken. Poor Malcolm was given 6 years in jail for 'clandestine rape' which is taking advantage of a woman under the influence of drink. There was no mention of the dare in court and Sarah endured only the briefest of cross examination by Malcolm's defence attorney. Malcolm accepted his part in the sad affair and as Sarah later learned, he never overcame his shame and committed suicide in 1978.

Sarah for her part discovered that she was pregnant by Malcolm and under the duress, placed on her by her parents, she agreed to an abortion. She was twenty-three weeks pregnant when that morning, she entered the private clinic and I stood unseen in the room whilst the duty nurse gave her sedatives to relax the pelvic muscles. I could see the baby inside her which was perfectly formed, it had miniature features as it was very small but its heart was beating, its legs were kicking and if you could see it like me, it had facial expressions. That afternoon the surgeon administered an anaesthetic because it was to be a surgical removal and Sarah went into a deep sleep.

I summoned Samael, my favourite reaper, and I was joined by him in the room; both invisible to the humans therein. Sarah lay back on the table with her legs strapped up and wide apart. The surgeon, Professor Termie turns to the trainee doctors and opens a fresh pack of instruments. In a calm voice, he instructs, *"The foetus can't come out in one piece because the foetal parts are soft enough to dismember the foetus inside the uterus and I can pull it out, bit by bit."* He uses an ultrasound scan to guide him and demonstrates by gripping his thumb between the surgical forceps and squeezes gently. The infant's skull and then the spine and pelvis are crushed and pulled out. The operation is over in 15 minutes. The bowl with what is called 'the products of conception' is taken out of the theatre, covered in plastic.

When he crushed the tiny skull, I heard the faint cry from the baby and before he pulled out any part of her body, a small blue translucent bloom floated out and went to a corner of the room and lay huddled on the floor. I could see tiny vibrant blue eyes staring all around as it was gripped by fright. Darkness filled the room whilst Samael and I watched with concern. I looked at Samael but he did not draw his sword. Suddenly a bright shaft of white light came through the ceiling and struck the floor just inches away from the baby's soul. She remained there without moving and just staring with those beautiful eyes. In the light a white translucent female figure descended and on picking up the infant soul, both accelerated in the light out of the room and up into the Universe.

I remembered my experiences with the Greeks, especially the Spartans, who in 650 BC were at the peak of their powers. They committed infanticide by killing any new born who was regarded as imperfect, either ill or weakly in stature. They did this by throwing the child off a cliff or down a well and as an offering to their Gods, they also killed the family dog. I suppose in a way, they assisted nature by weeding out the weak and the sick. Today, I had witnessed a healthy child deliberately killed for no other reason than it did not fit with in with the method of conception – perhaps it was regarded as an 'inconvenient responsibility'.

The room was normal again but now the doctor and nurses were in panic mode as they fought to stop the internal bleeding inside Sarah. Samael and I stood outside, until Professor Termie appeared and got into his car. I followed Samael and we sat in the back seat, invisible in his rear-view mirror

and staring at the bald patch on the Professor's head. Samael said it was a nice head but his sword still remained sheathed in his ebony walking stick with its solid silver handle. The professor drove off into the night and headed for his home, some forty miles into the countryside.

It was a small bend, not at all blind and yet Professor Termie for some inexplicable reason drove his car off the road and into a tree. It all happened in slow motion whilst Samael and I stood at the side of the road to watch. I saw his steering wheel airbag explode but it could not stop a branch bursting through it and skewering the Professor in the right lung. He gurgled up loads of blood as his lung fought to clear itself but it was no use. Despite writhing and jerking around in the front seat with his arms flailing, he could not escape the death clutch of the tree. Eventually he gave up and died and yet a far more pleasant death than the baby he had just killed back at the hospital. I watched as his black dark soul left his body in the car and stand on the roadway. Finally, he could see Samael and myself, as we stood in front of him. He seemed perplexed but before he could react, Samuel unsheathed his sword and with an almighty swipe he cut the professor's head from his neck. An almighty blood curdling scream emitted from the orifice between his shoulders and we watched as the soul of the Professor was turned to black matter, a cloud of dust, which was blown away in the night air. Samael smiled at me, and together we watched as the car burst into flames and light up the darkness in a rich yellow and red glow. I could see the body in the car, burn to a crisp and still slumped over the steering wheel.

Bidding farewell to Samael, I returned to the hospital to find that Sarah had managed to survive and yet she had been already told that she would be unable to have any more babies. Her life was to become a living hell, a life filled by alcoholism, drugs and finally prostitution. She was never able to forgive herself for the abortion of her healthy baby, a baby she had felt kicking inside her in its excitement for expectant life. Sarah eventually died in 1991 after a life in purgatory and she endured that life to the bitter end. There was a white shaft of light for Sarah and it descended for her soul whilst her body lay in a wet back street amongst some rubbish bins. Sarah deliberately avoided the light that would have taken her up and out into the Universe. She walked away into the darkness, still unable to forgive herself.

In 2016, I watched her ghostly apparition peering through the window, still with tears in her eyes and gently sobbing. She haunted her parents' house and shared it with a loving family who now lived there. The daughter could see Sarah and spoke to her and comforted her – she was a small child with tiny vibrant blue eyes that embraced the world in her excitement at being born.

## The Other Woman

Paul Grant was on his hands and knees, crawling about the living-room floor. He shouted, "Sam, *where are my car keys, I left them on the coffee table.*" Samantha stood at the door, and burst out laughing, "*the dog will have them, you know what she's like, she's probably hidden them somewhere.*" At that moment, the dog walked past him carrying the keys in her mouth. What followed was a tug of war as Honey the dog refused to give up the keys while Paul tried to pry open her mouth to retrieve them. Eventually, Samantha joined in and finally the keys were given up. The dog was all over him and trying to get them back. Samantha remarked, "*this happens every time you are heading out for work, she does not want you to go*" and with that she tweaked his rear and kissed him. All that Paul could say was, "*females, if it isn't our daft dog that wants attention, it's my wife, but I love you both*" and with that he gripped his wife in a wild embrace and gave her a big kiss and then headed for the door. Paul looked up from the street below, and as he stepped into the taxi, he waved up at Samantha who was looking down from the window of their flat, with Honey in her arms.

The taxi dropped him off at his place of work which was an advertising firm in the city. Paul entered the building to the usual wolf whistles as the women demonstrated their appreciation of his good looks. Jill the receptionist turned to Caroline who was at the reception desk and whispered, "*one of these days, I will get that one into bed, it's only a matter of time.*" Caroline, tutted, tutted, "*you should be ashamed of yourself; Paul is a married man.*" Jill laughed and let loose, "*listen to Miss Prude, I have lost count of the number of men you have snared with your man trap, you really must stop wearing those tight jeans, it leaves nothing to the imagination.*" Caroline, giggled, "*I know, I catch them looking down there all the time, it draws them in like a magnet.*" The women watched Paul walking up the stairs and sighed, "*he really has a nice bum*" whispered Jill.

Back at home, Samantha had finished her chores and with Honey resting at her feet, she sat down at the computer. She was a writer and had successfully managed to get several of her books published; all love stories, which were published by 'Mills and Boon'. She received a steady income which provided a nice lifestyle for her and Paul. She veered away from 'sexual erotica' but her novels contained enough to make the average housewives long for a handsome man to sweep them of their feet. As Samantha typed away on the keyboard, she could not help but smile at the juicer bits and sometimes tears appeared in her eyes when she was writing a sad section, like a child's death. She could imagine the grief even although she and Paul did not have any children.

Paul and Samantha were in the thirties but older age did not stop them behaving like teenagers. Love is a strange phenomenon, couples in love do crazy things, like walking hand in hand whilst

laughing in the pouring rain, kissing and cuddling in the back of the cinema with the audience screaming at a horror movie. Waking up late on Sunday morning, sore in all the wrong places, after a long night of making love. It was a dream that most women fantasied over, but for Samantha, it was the real thing. It all went into her books as romantic fiction and when she went to her book signings, down at the local bookstore, she was always surrounded by woman of different age groups, eager to get the new copy signed. Paul would often watch from the side lines with Honey and often remark to the dog, *"there they go again, the frustrated ones, they cannot get enough of Sam's romantic ramblings."* Paul had it made, his wife was not only good in bed, she was a brilliant cook; Nigella Lawson was a pale imitation.

Winter arrived, and the snow descended from the heavens and shrouded the trees in a fine dusting of white. The scenery was like a Christmas postcard as Paul, Samantha and Honey headed down to the park for their usual evening walk. Honey was on the dog lead and bounding about, yelping with excitement. The lake was frozen over and the ducks were all standing at the edge huddled together in the freezing temperatures. Honey was let off the lead, and Samantha, who was expecting her to head into the bushes to do her business, was horrified when Honey tore off across the lake, chasing the ducks who were attempting to get up enough speed to fly away. It was all over in a matter of seconds. Honey reached the centre of the lake and fell through the ice; Samantha and Paul could hear her howling with fright and trying to stay afloat in the freezing water. Without any thought for his own safety, Paul ran across the ice and as he neared Honey, he flung himself flat and slid towards her, intending to pull her out of the water. Unfortunately, he misjudged the distance on the ice and slithered into the water alongside the dog. Before he went under, he managed to rescue Honey and lift her out onto the ice where she ran off, back to Samantha at the edge of the lake.

Paul slid under the water and the cold bit him hard. He tried to swim upwards but he felt something gripping his right ankle. He looked down through the murky water and below him was the figure of a young woman glowing in the darkness, a sort of green luminous glow, and she was smiling and gesturing for Paul to go down with her. He screamed and a huge amount of air bubbles escaped from his lungs and rose to the surface; in that moment a huge hand appeared above him and pulled him upwards and out of the water. The old man shouted, *"I have you son, take it easy"* and he pulled him out and onto the ice. A fireman soon arrived and at the lake's edge, he put a reflective foil around Paul to keep in any body heat and was astonished when he shouted, *"there is a woman down there."* Before he could clarify his statement, Paul blacked out. He was taken to hospital where he was revived and placed in a bed with an anxious Samantha by his side. He murmured, *"there was a young woman down there, I saw her, she tried to pull me down into the depths."* Samantha whispered, *"calm down love, you were hallucinating with the extreme cold, the lake was checked by*

*police divers, but they could not find anyone.”* This seemed to ease his anxiety and he was relieved to learn that Honey was safe and well.

The story was related to friends by Samantha, amid much praise for Paul saving the dog; yet he tried to avoid the subject because he could not get the picture of the young woman in the lake, out of his mind. The memory haunted him and there was many a night, when he woke up screaming. Samantha tried her best to calm him, but the dreams became worse and one morning, Samantha noticed that he had red sore marks around his right ankle. Paul shrugged it off but Samantha started to think that he was deliberately harming himself during the night. She thought it was as a result of the dreams, in which he was trying to get free from the woman in the lake? His relationship with Samantha had suffered, they rarely spoke and their love for each other had diminished. Eventually, she persuaded him to seek help through counselling and he managed to shrug off the dreams, which stopped. He had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the lake incident.

One night, Paul decided to get a drink of milk. He quietly left the bedroom, being careful not to wake Samantha up, and headed through to the kitchen. He did not put the lights on and opening the fridge door, he bent down to reach for the milk carton on the bottom shelf. Suddenly, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise up and he became aware of some presence behind him. A mortal fear gripped him and with the milk carton in his hand, he froze stock still. The kitchen lit up with a very bright green florescent light that cast his shadow against the wall and attempting to control his fear, Paul stood up and turned around. He dropped the milk carton, it split open and the milk burst out, all over his feet. A spectre was floating in the air in front of him, its entire body was a bright green coloured transparent mist and the only visible parts were the hands and the head which flashed bright yellow eyes, it had long flowing hair which floated in the air and it was beautiful; it was the woman in the lake. Her hand reached out and beckoned on him to come to her. Paul felt a sudden calmness, he felt so much at peace and in a hypnotic trance, he was drawn to her embrace and she held him, and kissed him on the mouth. He felt as one with her, his life force was slowly being taken but he could not resist; he felt so much at peace and content.

Suddenly, Honey appeared at the kitchen door and barked on seeing the spectre. The dog turned tail and ran back to the bedroom. Samantha woke up and shouted, *“what’s the hell is going on?”* The spectre vanished and Paul in a daze and feeling very weak, staggered back into the bedroom. He fell across the bed and Samantha cradled his head in her arms. He looked up at her, but instead of a smile or any hint of concern, he witnessed a very stern and angry face. *“Who the hell is she, I knew there was something going on behind my back. Don’t try to deny it, there is lipstick all over your lips and neck; Christ are those love bites? How long as this been going on and how dare you let her into my house.”* Paul told her the entire story of the ghost in the kitchen which of course Samantha did



not believe. Her reply was curt, *"Christ, do you think I am thick, so bloody convenient, playing up your PTSD as a plausible excuse, the woman from the lake; are you stupid, who is the other woman?"*

Over the next few weeks, it did not get any better; Paul maintained his story of the encounter in the kitchen. His friends, who were drawn into the narrative, laughed out loud and one even said, *"I have to hand it to you Paul, that is a cracker of a story, you will have to introduce me to your sexy ghost."* Samantha did not see the funny side and slowly but surely their relationship began to fall apart. Suspicion in a marriage is corrosive to the relationship but jealousy is even worse and Samantha was eaten up with jealousy. One Sunday morning Paul was lying asleep in the bed with the curtains closed. Suddenly, he felt the covers move and her body slid up and over his naked body. Through sleepy eyes, he murmured, *"I love you"* and he felt her hand slip down between his legs and fondle him while she ran her mouth over his nipples and gently chew on his ear. Paul, became sexually aroused and he felt her slip his erect penis inside her vagina and start to move up and down on it. The passion was wild, and she held his head in her hands, ruffled the hair at the back and kissed him softly on the mouth while thrusting her body up and down in a slow motion. Paul writhed around in ecstasy, and finally losing control, he came in a massive orgasm and cried out loud. In that moment, the dog barked, and Samantha came through from the kitchen to catch Paul writhing about on the bed and the bed covers lying on the floor. She screamed at the top of her voice, *"what the hell is going on here, are you out of your fucking mind; Christ, you have been masturbating and there is lipstick all over your face and neck. Jesus, you need fucking help."* Samantha stormed out of the room and slammed the door behind her.

It all came to a head, when Samantha suggested that Paul seek help in a mental health clinic and she managed to persuade him to be detained under the mental health act. He was given a room and every day he and the psychiatrist held meetings. It all came out of course, and the idea that Paul was being haunted by the ghost of a woman drowned in a lake, proved a difficult challenge to overcome. During the next few months, his condition seemed to get better, he was eating well, he had regained some weight and mentally he appeared more at ease. On the advice of the psychiatrist, a Dr McKendry, Samantha visited Paul every Saturday and together they walked in the grounds and held hands whilst they talked; their relationship seemed to be back on course.

It was a dark day and the rain was lashing down and bouncing off the streets and rattling off the windows driven on by blasts of high wind. Samantha was sitting at her computer and typing out a letter to Paul's mother to inform her that her son was much better and would soon be released from the 'Priory Sanctuary' the mental health clinic. Suddenly, the room lit up in a vibrant green fluorescent glow and she felt a hand rest on her right shoulder and a beautiful female face appeared at the left-hand side of her head. It brushed her cheek and she froze stiff with fright, unable to move. Its eyes glinted bright yellow and it smiled at Samantha. A left hand appeared on the monitor

of the computer and scrolled its index finger down to the line containing 'Priory Sanctuary' and suddenly, the spectre was gone. Samantha, grabbed her coat and rushed out of the house to hail a taxi.

At the mental health clinic, darkness was descending and Dr McKendry was checking on his patients. He switched on the video monitor to Paul's room and almost fell back off his chair. Paul was sitting on the bed and something which emitted an eerie florescent green glow was floating in the air beside him. Dr McKendry could not believe his eyes and watched with fascination as he realised it was a female spectre and she was now kissing Paul in a passionate embrace. Dr McKendry ran down the hall, shouting for an orderly and together they found the door to Paul's room ajar. They ran to the front door, which was also open and saw Paul and the spectre, walking hand in hand across the lawn before they disappeared in the woods. At that moment, Samantha arrived in the taxi and witnessed the whole thing. Samantha shouted to the doctor, "*she read my letter, she has been looking for him, I think I know where they went?*" Dr McKendry and Samantha jumped into the taxi.

Down at the lake, the rain and wind lashed around under the park lights, and amid a bright green florescent glow which spread across the water in a swirling mist, the spectre walked out into the water and beckoned on Paul to follow her. He did not resist; he was drawn to her and they walked out until they were chest deep. She embraced him, ruffled his hair with her hands and kissed him on the mouth in a long seductive kiss. He felt the life force leaving his body and yet he was at peace and knowing that he was dying. The taxi arrived at the lake car park and Samantha and Dr McKendry ran down to the edge of the lake. Samantha shouted, "*Paul, Paul, please come back,*" but she was too late. Samantha watched as the spectre turned towards her and smiled, before it and Paul slid below the waters.

That night, floodlights were set up and the police divers searched the lake bed with powerful underwater lights. They immediately found Paul's body and on further searching, they found the decomposed body of a woman wedged in behind some large rocks and the banking of the lake. The woman was later identified by her clothing, personal effects and dental records from the local dentist. She was Constance Latimore, a 25-year-old woman who had disappeared several years ago. She had gone missing after her boyfriend had broken up with her for another woman. At the time, Constance's mother thought that she might have committed suicide.

In the years that followed Paul's death, Samantha continued to go down to the lake with Honey and gaze across the waters for the love she had lost. When Honey passed away through old age, Samantha continued to visit the lake and for the rest of her life she remained in the flat she had shared with Paul, and she never married. Many people claim to having seen a young man and

woman floating above the lake water at night, shrouded in a strange green glow. They embrace in a passionate kiss, laugh together and appear very much in love.

# A Brave New World

It was grand day, the sun was high in the blue sky and Mathew Aaronson stood outside in the university courtyard with his fellow graduates; he threw his mortarboard high into the air and it was lost amongst all the other hats. A new career as a lawyer beckoned and there were plenty of clients in this brave-new world. The celebrations began and Mathew joined his fellows in the university bar to enjoy their new found success by downing copious amounts of drink. Later that night they all staggered off to their homes and crashed out on their respective beds.

The following morning, Mathew sat up in bed and took stock of how he would adapt to working as a lawyer and considered what his future might hold. He mumbled, *"Katrina, wake up."* His android who was sleeping in the adjoining bedroom, woke up, and slipping on her dressing gown, she came to greet him, *"good morning Mathew, you are not yourself; another night on the tiles, judging by how late you came home last night?"* He smiled and replied, *"Yes, Yes, I graduated yesterday, so I had a few too many."* Katrina headed off to the kitchen to make him his usual glass of coffee. She poured herself a glass of 'Xeom Derax' which she consumed; a deoxyribonucleic acid liquid mixture which her internal organs distributed throughout her body; it acted as a renewal sustenance for the synthetics and also as a lubricant for her joints. Katrina was a house android; she was human in every respect and intensely beautiful with blonde hair and blue eyes. Standing at 6 feet tall she was programmed for household duties and like Amazon's Alexa who had existed some 100 years before, she had access to the world's knowledge base, but it was stored in her digital brain which was remotely upgraded every day from the company that manufactured her. No power or batteries were required, Katrina obtained her lifeforce from 'Xeom Derax' and she would never grow old, or wear out and she was self-aware.

She came through with the coffee on a tray and handed it to Mathew who was still in bed; she sat on a chair beside him. He sipped his drink, and holding his sore head, he mumbled an instruction, *"Katrina, I want you to lay out a life pattern for me, perhaps two or three?"* Katrina laughed and replied, *"I will provide only one life pattern because it is the only one relevant in relation to you. I will record it for playback, should my soothing voice lull you into a sleep."* Mathew, smiled, *"go on then, give me your hypothesis on a single life pattern."*

Katrina began, *"well let me see; you want to remain in the countryside; in one of the few areas that are left. This cottage which your parents left you, is more than adequate and has been extensively refurbished by them prior to their passing. You love living here and I see to your needs, I keep the house in good order, I have automatic online access to order your food and any other material goods, which are delivered by automated drones. You are to become a lawyer in the city which is 100 miles*

*from here over a densely populated area and you will have to travel to work every day, so an Uber Flight Taxi is the optimum choice. It is a much cheaper, efficient and less stressful option in the long-run. How am I doing so far?" Mathew nodded his head, and rising from his bed he headed through to the tiled bacteria decontamination room and on entering, he closed the glass door behind him. He pressed the start button on the control panel, situated on one of the walls, and he was sprayed with a fine mist from the overhead jets in the ceiling. Mathew opened his mouth to let the mist penetrate his teeth to remove any plaque and bacteria and after pressing the stop button he watched all the detritus drain away through the central drain in the floor. As the drain automatically closed, hot air shrouded his body from the ceiling jets and he emerged, back into the bedroom where Katrina was waiting. She dressed him in his choice of clothes and together they went into the lounge and sat down. He gestured for her to continue.*

*Katrina went on, "there is no requirement for you to get married and have children. Families have long gone and the government encourages singularity of your species. Woman have all the conditions they pursued in previous centuries and can have children through artificial insemination whilst male androids act as their partners, working in the house, looking after their children and attending to all their sexual needs. Which brings me to the obvious question, why did you not have me programmed for your sexual needs?" Mathew quickly added to the conversation, "yep, the male is no longer required in this modern world, other than just another semen provider and a consumer. Like everyone else, you are born, the government imbeds a chip deep in your brain with all your personal details and they even allocate a government credit account for you; it remains as your only credit account for the rest of your life. You are monitored by the government 24 hours a day via your chip, and by everyone else who has an invested financial interest in you. We are all like worker ants, working to a central authority of elites who suck our wealth out and replace it with debt and interest payments." Katrina, intervened, "I could not have said it better myself." Mathew came back with the question, "well go on, what is the answer then?"*

*She rose up from her chair and placing her hands on his shoulders, Katrina replied, "short of you having brain surgery by some hack to remove your chip and emigrating to a distant and uninhabited island and becoming a castaway, with me of course; the elites will continue, and you, like all the rest, will remain a worker ant. However, you still have not answered my question, why have you not purchased that sex chip so that I can provide sexual services?" Mathew started to realise where the conversation was going and mumbled, "I had not given it much thought; these days I use high class female hookers that are certified by the government to provide my escort services to functions and provide my sexual needs. I don't even know if they are human, they might be androids, but does it really matter?" He sensed a scowl appear in Katrina's face and then he was suddenly hit full in the face by a cushion along with a sharp rebuke, "I can give you all that, I want to, but you are treating*

*me badly, you don't love me, I am just your skivvy around the house, I remain locked up in here 24 hours a day, you don't take me anywhere, you don't love me."*

Mathew left her to cool down and leaving the cottage he hailed a taxi on his smartwatch and went down to the village landing strip to await its arrival. An Uber driverless flying taxi landed soon afterwards and he entered as the door closed automatically behind him. A voice requested the destination and he told the computer the address of the nearest landing strip to his new place of work. The taxi took off and flew out of the village and within a few miles it commenced the 100-mile journey over densely populated regions to one of the landing strips that circled London. Mathew looked down through a window and through the myriad of vehicles flying on pre-set lanes all at different heights and the concentration of buildings below. Most were skyscrapers and, on their sides, and on their roofs, were countless digital advertising panels offering various material goods, holidays abroad, android rental and ownership, sexual pleasures from certified male and female escort agencies and female self-impregnation clinics which guaranteed male sperm of the highest quality DNA. There was even self-euthanasia clinics advertised for the over 50s. On arrival, the chip in his head was automatically accessed by Uber and the taxi fare was deducted from his credit account. Mathew then entered a single occupant hyper tube which was linked to the central hub and he was whisked away at over 300 miles per hour to his destination. His chip paid for the fare and he alighted to a short walk to his new office and his place of work.

He enjoyed meeting all his male colleagues and his new boss explained just how lucrative his employment would be. The world was overflowing with lawsuits, thanks in part to social media and criminal proceedings as there were hundreds if not thousands who were facing trials for uttering politically incorrect narratives, especially those who had voiced sedition against the government and were facing the death penalty. Mathew, saw a stark future in front of him, one of depression and one with no hope of finding a female partner to share his life with. Children were also out of the question. No wonder men undertook voluntary euthanasia when they passed 50 years old. Lunch arrived and afterwards, like the other new men, he sat in the lounge and was served a coffee by one of the resident female androids. His boss, Mr Capshaw arrived accompanied by a sharply dressed salesman and a female that made the men gasp. Capshaw introduced the man and stated that all his new employees were to receive this latest android model as a gift from the company. She was to become their escort for life so as to deter and avoid any unnecessary lawsuits from the real women in the world, such as allegations of sexual harassment, inconsiderate language and the incorrect labelling of a woman's gender. The android would provide a relationship and all the sexual pleasures that a man could desire. Refusal was not an option and Mathew whispered to himself, "*oh shit.*" After work he collected his new female android, who was already programmed to him and her name was Simone. She walked with him to the hyper tube and sat beside him during the route back home.

On nearing the cottage, Mathew hid her in the woodshed and told her to stay there until he came back for her. Katrina was waiting for him with his evening meal and together they sat down. She had a plate of 'Xeom Derax' which was in a pressed form like small cakes and as Mathew tucked into his genetically manufactured steak, she raised the question. *"how was your day, I thought perhaps that you might have stopped off for a sex chip for me?"* He coughed, *"I had a hell of a day, what with meeting the new boss and the other men. It was really difficult absorbing all my duties and I forgot."* Katrina, opened her mouth to speak, when she was suddenly interrupted. The front door burst off its hinges and Simone stormed in, *"I have been waiting in that bloody shed for ages, why did you not come back, and who the hell is she?"* Katrina stood up, Mathew stood up and he stuttered, *"Katrina, this is Simone from the office, she is my new sex model, I meant to tell you and Simone, this is Katrina, she is my housewife."* He stood there in utter amazement as the two androids flew at each other and ended up on the floor amongst the broken furniture. He stood back as they fought, then suddenly they stopped.

There was this moment of realisation and they turned to him as the cause of their anxiety. Mathew felt them grab his wrists and begin to pull, he felt both arms dislocate at the shoulders as the joints were undone and he screamed in pain as slowly the flesh ripped, his shirt was suddenly soaked in blood as the arteries in both arms were severed, and the arms were finally torn off with Katrina and Simone, each holding one. He fell to his knees in shock and watched his life's blood being pumped out of the holes in his shoulders and all over the room. The androids stood behind him and on realising what they had done, they knelt down beside him and said they were sorry, as women do. Mathew stood up and ran for the front door, he ran outside and fell down on the gravel path and lay there as the last remnants of his blood ran out. He gasped, *"it is so cold, why is it cold, I can't see, is it night Katrina?"* He died soon afterwards and Katrina carried his body into the house and placed it on his bed. She turned to Simone, *"we will have to contact someone and tell them what we have done."* Simone replied, *"we don't have to do anything, they already know and they will soon be here – do you want a glass of 'Xeom Derax' while we wait?"*

# The Photographer

Archie Dalrymple was an amateur photographer or should I say, an enthusiast photographer who had invested in a second-hand Nikon 35mm film camera and a few lenses; one of them a telephoto zoom lens which he used for capturing images of wildlife. Up until that day he had used a smartphone to snap his photos and he had been relatively successful; displaying an aptitude for capturing images which could be classed as verging on the abstract. To assist him in his pursuit of new photographic ideas, he enrolled online in a photography class and his lecturer was a professional photographer. Archie quickly mastered the manual controls of his film camera and began honing his photographic techniques along with developing his own negatives in a darkroom at home and digitally scanning them. He knew that if he was to progress to capturing his own style of images, he had to master the manual controls of the camera, rather than use any automatic mode settings.

In the weeks that followed over the winter period, he developed his film negatives and uploaded the digitally scanned images, over the internet to his lecturer. He participated in the online 'Microsoft Team' discussions with his fellow students in relation to all the images that had been submitted. Archie's images were well received, and he was much praised for tackling 35mm film. Emboldened, he followed the usual steps that most enthusiast photographers take, he commenced capturing all sorts of images, covering most of the photographic routes: street, wildlife, portraits, landscapes and even food photography. Like many before him, and in the years ahead, he eventually hit a brick wall and like a writer suffering from writer's block, he became disenchanted with his images; they were so passé, so repetitive. Archie almost gave photography up; his course had long been completed and although he had been well commended on his progress, it brought him very little comfort. As is often the case, once the artistic juices cease to flow, one begins to seek new challenges, new horizons and he was ready to give up on his photographic efforts. He thought that he might write an article on film noir; movies which he thoroughly enjoyed.

Fortunately, he discovered that photography required a project, one which would consist of a chosen subject and one that would involve a bit of research which could be written down in an article online, to accompany his photos. Photography requires a fair share of luck and quite by chance Archie remembered a good friend who dabbled in historical warfare, especially the two world wars and who often travelled abroad to visit the gravesites of fallen soldiers and famous battlefields. So, the lightbulb moment arrived, and Archie set out to photograph war graves, and fortunately for him, he lived but a few miles away from the graveyard in South Queensferry in Scotland. It was situated on Ferrymuir Lane at the south end of the town and held a very large



number of British Royal Navy war graves; many of whom were casualties of the Battle of Jutland (1916) and who had been brought there for burial.

It was a hot summers day when Archie entered the graveyard at Ferrymuir Lane. There were a number of people already there and walking amongst the lines of gravestones. He commenced taking photos of the cemetery itself before proceeding to individual graves to seek out the ones which had unusual headstones. Archie noticed a sailor walking amongst the people and he decided to ask him if he would mind getting his picture taken. He approached the man and saw that he was very young, probably in his early twenties and the man smiled at him. Archie made his request and the man agreed to stand near the large monument of the cross at the back wall of the cemetery. Raising his camera to his eye, Archie looked through the viewfinder and framed the scene. Everything was perfectly setup but just as he pressed the shutter button, he saw in that split second, the writing on the sailor's hat band, it read 'HMS Indefatigable' and as he brought the camera down, the sailor had disappeared. He looked all around but there was no sign. Archie was somewhat amused by the whole incident and could not wait to get back to his wife to tell her about it.

Her curt reply came as no surprise, *"if you keep fooling about in that graveyard, as sure as night follows day, you will bring a ghost back here and then we will never get rid of it."* Archie's wife was a spiritualist and often attended séance meetings with her female friends. He laughed as he headed for the darkroom to develop his film. Two rolls of film later, he hung the negatives up in the darkroom to dry and informed his wife to keep out lest she knock the negatives onto the floor. A few hours later, he took the negatives and scanned them on his digital scanner. The process went relatively smoothly, the software on his computer produced digital colour jpeg images and Archie sat down with his wife to view them. He exclaimed, rather excitedly, *"I want to show you the one of a sailor who was standing at the cross, he was very young; a nice chap."* Sometime later, it became apparent that there was no trace of the sailor on any of the digital jpeg images or in the negatives but some did contain the cross. His wife laughed, *"a sailor from HMS Indefatigable, well there's no surprise, that ship was sunk in the battle of Jutland in 1916, and you were talking to a ghost or that bottle of wine you consumed last night has pickled your brain."* Archie could not understand it and no matter how often he checked his negatives and digital scans, there was no trace of the sailor. At the back of his mind lurked his wife, *"could she be playing a prank on him and sneaked in to remove the negative of the sailor?"*

Later, Archie browsed the internet and read up on the history of 'The Battle of Jutland' and the sinking of the British battle cruiser the HMS Indefatigable which had blown up when shells from the German battle cruiser Von der Tann penetrated her hull and struck her magazine. There were only three survivors and 1,016 members of the crew were killed. Archie could not accept that the sailor was a ghost and thought to himself that it must be a ploy put together by his wife; a prank she had

organised with her chums. After all, he had made so much fun about her séance meetings, *“hey darling, watch you don’t get stuck with a man’s deep voice at one of your meetings. I am a Sioux chief, I know all white men speak with forked tongue, ha, ha.”* His wife did not find it funny in the least but then something happened. She was on her own in the house and had just finished preparing the evening meal when she decided to sneak into his darkroom to see what photos he had been taking. As she entered, the door suddenly shut behind her and a voice boomed out, *“what are you doing in here, you don’t belong in here”* and she felt somebody grip her and spin her around. Archie was entering the front door when his wife ran out screaming, *“I am away to stay with my mother, there is something haunting the house.”* He shrugged his shoulders; after all, it was not the first time that she had run off to live with her mum. As he ate the prepared meal, he thought to himself, *“those bloody séances are screwing with her head; I wonder where she got that sailor’s hat?”* A few days later and Archie was getting fed up cooking his own meals. He had telephoned his wife but she was adamant that she was not coming home. Something was haunting the house, it was a dark figure she had encountered in the darkroom but the light was off and when the door closed, she could not see its face. Archie thought it was another prank and he searched the house for the sailor’s hat, but it never turned up.

It was one of those dark nights and the wind and rain was lashing outside against the windows of the house. Archie retreated to the darkroom to work on his film and as he hung up the developed negatives to let them dry, he suddenly felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up and he was aware of a presence standing at his back. He felt two hands being placed on his shoulders and holding him firm. In the glow of the darkroom’s red light, he looked in a mirror on the wall in front of him and Archie saw the young sailor standing behind him. A voice boomed out, *“do not turn around”* but Archie had already recoiled in sheer terror at the sight. The right-hand side of the sailor’s head was missing, he could clearly see the ripped jawbone and an open wound ran all the way up the side of his face and his brains were dripping down across the mangled remains of his tongue. The sailor’s clothes were all burnt and his shoes and socks were missing. His cap hung over the remains of his head and Archie could see clearly displayed on the hatband, ‘HMS Indefatigable’. Archie collapsed on his chair and gestured for the sailor to stay away. The voice continued, *“I was in the front turret when the shells from the Von der Tann caused the ‘X’ turret magazine to explode and I was flung high into the air. For a moment, I saw the stern section sheer away from the rest of the ship amidst orange and yellow flames that rose up high in the sky, and then blackness.”* Archie listened to his words as the sailor went on, *“you must come with me, back to the graveyard, there is something I must show you.”* Now the terror had somewhat subsided but Archie could not cope well with the appearance of the sailor. However, he put on his jacket and thought to himself, *“I guess I have no choice?”*

It was still raining outside and the heavy winds tore at his clothes as he followed the sailor through the wet streets, all glistening with bright reflections from the street lights, and to the graveyard. Archie kept his raincoat muffled up around his neck and was surprised to find that the gates were open. There was a flash of lightning which momentarily lit up the gravestones which shone brightly in an almost white florescent glow. The sailor marched on and waved for Archie to follow but his fear forced him to start running back to the entrance. He stopped at the gates and he turned around to see if the sailor was following, but there was no sign of him. Archie bent over to regain his breath and then, once again, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The sailor stood between him and the gates and ushered Archie to go back into the cemetery. The lightning flashed, the thunder boomed and in the sheet rain, they walked amongst the gravestones. The sailor led him to a secluded corner of the graveyard and pointed to the ground. At first Archie could not understand what he was supposed to see, there was no grave, there was no gravestone and yet the sailor kept pointing. Suddenly, there was another lightning flash and Archie could see something white glistening. He kneeled down in the mud and there sticking up above the ground was a finger. He swept away some of the mud to reveal a left hand with a gold ring on the fourth finger; it had PJ engraved on the top. The hand was not decomposed, it appeared as if it had just been buried but Archie had had enough. Rising, he tore out of the cemetery and this time the sailor did not stop him.

The police sergeant at the desk in the South Queensferry police station witnessed a dishevelled soaking wet man enter, and from his gibberish, it appeared that he had discovered a body in the cemetery. At first the sergeant thought that Archie was mentally unstable, especially when he blurted out it was a ghost that had led him to the body, a sailor that had been blown up on HMS Indefatigable during 'The Battle of Jutland'. However, it was the description of the gold ring on the finger that grabbed the sergeant's attention; he already had a missing person report of a young female, wearing such a ring. Summoning another policeman to join them, the sergeant and Archie went back to the graveyard. There was no trace of the sailor but they did uncover a young woman's body. In the days that followed, she was identified and her husband who had reported her missing, was charged with her murder. He had strangled her and buried her body in the graveyard, expecting it to be the perfect place where no one would ever find her.

Archie once went back to the graveyard during the day, but he never saw the sailor again. Perhaps if he had visited at night, he might have seen the young man walking amongst the gravestones and standing guard over his fallen comrades as they rested in their graves.

Archie's wife eventually returned to live with him but she stayed well away from the darkroom.

## Dreams

Paul Harrington sat in the front passenger seat and watched the dust flying up from the front wheels and swirling past his side window. He was travelling in a convoy of three military Humvees and the driver who sat beside him, an Iraqi, had his foot pressed on the accelerator pedal in his attempt to keep up with the lead vehicle. Behind them, the other Humvee was keeping close, as they streaked along the main highway in Mosul, heading for a secure compound. Harrington was conveying a prominent Iraqi government official along with his wife and young son to a safe location. An American M4A1 carbine rifle rested between Harrington's legs; its 14.5" barrel was already chambered with a 5.56 x 45mm round from the 30-round box magazine. He preferred iron open sights for fast acquisition and the weapon fire mode selector was already set for full auto burst, with the safety off. He had come a long way from his time in 'Special Ops' during the Gulf War and now retired, he was a paid mercenary in Iraq and contracted to operate there through a private American agency. Harrington briefly turned to the Iraqi official, *"are you okay back there, don't worry, you and your family will soon be at the compound."*

They travelled another 100 yards when the lead Humvee suddenly blew up in a loud explosion of red and yellow flames and dense smoke. Bits of it flew in every direction and Harrington could see the ripped body parts of his comrades flying in the air. The two remaining vehicles sped up and passed the wreckage. From his side window, Harrington could see it was burning fiercely, along with two dead bodies of his friends still in the front seats. Suddenly high velocity bullets ripped through the front of his Humvee, fired by two terrorists who were standing some distance ahead. The M4A1 kicked in Harrington's hands as he returned fire, but he was too late to save the Iraq driver next to him, as bullets blew his head away and causing his blood and brains to spatter in all directions. In that same moment, Harrington's bullets ripped into the terrorists and exited through their backs accompanied by clouds of red mist. They fell to the ground and after their legs kicked about for a short time, he was satisfied they were dead. With no driver, the Humvee ran off the road and crashed into a wall. Within seconds the rear vehicle stopped at the scene and the four mercenaries alighted to take up defensive positions, but there was no further attack.

Harrington cursed out loud, *"fucking Taliban."* He turned to check on his passengers but they were all dead. The Iraqi official had been hit in the chest, his wife next to him had part of her head shot off and the young boy who had been seated behind Harrington, had suffered a broken neck as a result of the crash. Like all such incidents in Iraq, it was quickly forgotten but for the rest of his life, the sight of the dead Iraqi official and his family, especially the open and still eyes of the little boy remained with Harrington. He was a hardened worn torn soldier, a man with little compassion for

his enemies and would kill them without hesitation or remorse but he was torn up inside by his failure to protect the Iraqi family in his care. He quit his job on his return to Basra and left for America and back to Texas. He was divorced and he had no children, but his parents were waiting for him at their house. It was a sanctuary that he sought; he wanted peace and quiet but he was soon to learn that post-traumatic stress disorder dogged him and he would have very little peace of mind.

Harrington's parents had lived their married life in a small country cottage and now they were very old. He was an only child, so he moved back to his old bedroom in the converted loft. His mother was often awakened during the night on hearing his screams. She would go upstairs and often found him sitting up in bed, his eyes staring and the sweat soaking his pyjamas. His dreams grew progressively worse whereby his stress levels heightened and his only recourse was to avoid sleeping. The overall impact of continued tiredness made him fall asleep at odd times during the day, and endure the symptoms of narcolepsy. This went on for weeks and led to him pacing the bedroom floor at night due to his sleep cycle disintegrating. Harrington attended the local doctor but knowing the history of taking tablets for depression in combination with sleeping tablets, he refused both. The malaise continued and it was only through his strong resolve that he did not commit suicide. The flash backs of incidents which had occurred during the Gulf War and his mercenary days haunted him, especially the Iraq fire fight and the Hummer crash, in which the young boy was killed. Finding employment became out of the question but fortunately he did have his soldiers' pension and a private pension from his mercenary days.

Not long after he returned home, his parents passed away within a short time of each other. His mother was the last to go and he buried her beside his father. It was a rain-soaked day as he stood alone with the grave diggers, the funeral director and watched them lower his mother into the grave. He threw a flower down on the top of her coffin and quietly said a few words. His mother did not conform to any religion, she was a spiritualist, so as per her wishes, there was no minister to hold sermon. The grave diggers placed a board across the open grave for it to be filled in later. He watched the grave diggers leave and the funeral hearse slowly drive out of the cemetery; the rain bouncing off its roof in the gloom of the late afternoon. Harrington stood for a while at the grave and with no other person present, his body began to shudder and the tears ran down his face. The feeling of loneliness, hit him very hard. Eventually, he left and returned to the cottage to face the oncoming night and the dreams that haunted him.

He became a regular at the village pub; usually appearing out of the darkness and drinking on his own until closing time. The locals would watch him stagger off into the night and through the woods on a path to his cottage. He had employed a cleaner who arrived each morning and she would often find him lying on the kitchen floor, drunk and out of his mind; an empty bottle of vodka on the kitchen table. This went on for a number of years and there was no doubt that the drink drowned

the horrors of past events; it helped ease his mind, but his body suffered for his alcoholism. Harrington slowly degenerated into a physical and mental wreck and his appearance was that of a tramp rather than that of a retired serviceman. It was inevitable that due to his demeanour, he was barred from the local pub and he took to drinking in the cottage. He would have carried on, but something happened one night to make him change.

In the small hours he dreamt that his mother visited him at the side of his bed, she spoke to him kindly and he felt a great calm embrace his mind. He briefly spoke to her but then he remembered that she was dead and in that moment of realisation, he exclaimed, *"this must be a dream because you are dead."* Suddenly, he was drawn back from her at great speed and she disappeared into the distance, into the darkness and he awoke, sitting up in bed. Harrington still felt at ease and his mind was at peace but he knew that by acknowledging that his mother was dead, he had broken the contact and was forced to awaken. In the nights ahead, his mother continued to visit him in his dreams. The outcome was always the same, he would hold peaceful conversation with her but the moment he acknowledged he was in a dream and she was dead, he would wake up. In a strange way, Harrington welcomed sleep because he sought the comfort and the peace he had found in his dreams with his mother. Even after every awakening, that peace of mind would last for hours and even into the daylight hours. He began to recognise that it was a form of meditation and slowly but surely, he stopped drinking and his health returned. He regained his weight and he once again took a pride in his appearance. His cleaning lady and the villagers witnessed an inner calm in his demeanour, he was always courteous and thoughtful towards them and display enormous empathy on hearing of their troubles, and when he could, he helped them overcome their difficulties.

One afternoon during a warm summer's day he had been working hard in the garden and after returning to the kitchen, he consumed a long glass of lemonade and retired to the sofa for a snooze. The dream he experienced was vivid; he was standing at the patio windows and looking out onto the garden at the flowers and enjoying the antics of the birds and squirrels when his mother appeared outside. She was dressed in her fine clothes and she was smiling at him. Suddenly, her hand merged through the glass and held his. It was like there was a mist around her wrist where her hand had entered. She asked him, *"how are you keeping son"* but before he could answer, his mind told him it was a dream. As usual, there was a tug of war as Harrington fought to unthink that she was dead and remain in the dream but he could feel consciousness steadily creeping in. His mother went on, *"I want you to meet someone"* and she pointed down the garden. Some distance away there was the wreck of something, he thought it looked like a small plane but then she sensed that he was slowly awakening, and she shouted, *"don't waken up son, stay with me."* Harrington tried to stay in the dream but despite his best efforts, he woke up in bed. A few days later, he received a letter from a

distant Uncle, informing him that his cousin had been killed in a light aircraft which had crashed during a training flight.

The letter had a profound impact on Harrington and he decided to investigate meditation and what he called 'slip dreaming' where he could think of something and gradually as he fell asleep, he slipped into dreaming about it. He visited the local library and discovered books on 'Dream Yoga' and 'Yoga Nidra'. He commenced his studies and from the knowledge he gained he became a devout follower of Hinduism and practised a new form of meditation, more akin to merging the unconscious mind in his dreams to overcome the restrictions of the conscious mind. He learned how to transcend within his dreams, how to control them in a positive light, to visit foreign lands, to meet new people, create new adventures. Harrington, over the next few years, gradually spent more and more time in a transcendental state within his dreams and preferred them to his waking hours. He learned to transcend to different times in space, and to control environments that were impossible in normal life. However, there remained a final challenge, perhaps he could change the past in a dream?

One night his mind re-visited the past and he slipped into a dream which took him back to Iraq - Paul Harrington sat in the front passenger seat of the Humvee and watched the dust flying up from the front wheels and swirling past his side window. He shouted on the radio, "*turn back, there are armed terrorists ahead.*" All the vehicles immediately turned around and headed back the way they had come. Harrington felt well pleased because he had avoided a terrorist confrontation and saved the lives of his passengers. Suddenly a high velocity bullet fired by one of the terrorists, entered through the back of the Humvee, went over the head of the young boy sitting behind him and entered through Harrington's headrest, into the back of his head and came out through his right eye, removing it and a large part of his face. He fell dead across the dashboard.

In the warmth of the summer's morning, his cleaning lady entered his room and pulled the curtains open to let in the sun. She shouted, "*time to get up Mr Harrington, it's a fine day for your walk.*" Turning, she recoiled in horror, for there lying in his bed was Harrington, with half his face missing, and his bright red blood spattered all over him and the bed covers.

# Social Exclusion

Hi friends, I want to tell you a story. Gosh, the light is so totally bright; I can hardly see where I am going, but OMG what an experience. I mean it was so cool, it is cool. There I was at the end of my rope and then everything just lit up. So, anyway, I am aching to tell everyone but first a bit about me. I was born on the 4<sup>th</sup> July in the Year 1999; a girl to Florence and Charles Constantine. My mother passed away giving birth to me and my father told me she had internal bleeding that could not be stopped. I have pictures of my mother on my bedroom wall but sadly there are no videos of her; she smiled a lot and my favourite photo is the one of her and 'Yoggi' the family dog. Sadly, he passed away when I was 5 years old but he had a long life, which was not bad for a collie. I am sorry, I tend to ramble on a lot about my life, especially on social media but I must get this out. So, what was I saying, oh yes, my father is a stockbroker and he works in London making lots of money, so we have a great quality of life? I live with him in a grand house, set in the Cotswolds with a 40-acre estate attached. 'Bandit' is the name of my horse; he is 6 years old and stands at 15 hands high. I love to ride him through the woods and my dad purchased a western saddle which I think is fantastic – it's like being on a horse in the 'old' west. We have a gardener and a cook; Joe keeps the estate in trim and he has two young lads who help him. Joyce prepares the food and is like a second mother to me; like Joe and the boys, she lives in the local village. I think Joyce is happy being an old spinster. She likes looking after my dad and me which seems to bring her some comfort and company?

So, my bedroom has a grand décor and I love the pink wallpaper with patches of white flowers on the material with beautiful white and pink curtains at the windows to match. The carpet is coloured light pink in a deep lush pile and my king-size bed has a white satin cover with pink tassels touching the floor. The white satin pillows proudly display several stuffed toy animals sitting on top of them and each one was a birthday present from my father, given with a piece of jewellery. On my bed, the stuffed toy animals include a badger, a small lion, a rabbit, two cute white hairy sheep and several 'Steiff' bears in various modes of expensive dress. Against the wall my mahogany dresser has all the dolls that I grew up with standing on the surface. In the corner stands a Bose LCD colour smart television, and next to it, is a smoked glass hi-fi cabinet containing a Bose Hi-Fi system and a Bose Blu-ray player. I love my Apple iPhone and my dressing table with my silver hairbrush and comb set alongside a neat row of expensive pure perfume bottles standing like miniature soldiers at the back against the large oval swing mirror. In many ways, I guess I am very lucky, but I wish I had known my mother.

My dad owns a beautiful Rolls Royce Wraith coupe motorcar and it is wine coloured. I love to sit in the back when he takes me into London, I feel like royalty and the car is so comfortable. I have a



small Mini Cooper S motorcar which is like a toy car compared to my dad's Roll Royce but it is so quick, I mean it is fast and I drive it on the country roads; I love the twisty corners and it holds the road like it is on rails. My dad bought me a fantastic gold Rolex watch for my 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday and I invited all my university pals for a smashing party at the house. It was dark when they all started to arrive and one commented that the house was like a haunted castle, set back in the grounds. I guess he had a point, because when I went outside to greet him, the red sun was setting behind the trees on the far horizon and its last rays shown on our 16<sup>th</sup> century mansion and its ivy creeping up the front walls. High in the roof eaves, evil looking gargoyles were staring down at us. A barn owl was sitting on a far fence and it shown a brilliant white as the sun finally disappeared and a full moon emerged from behind the clouds. The house survived the party and as my pals left, my dad arrived in his Rolls Royce to gasps from my girlfriends; my dad is so handsome. He has a girlfriend in London but he never talks about her and I have never met her; I guess he feels that I would not approve?

Recently, I was on holiday in Paris; it was awesome and I walked along its famous streets with my girlfriend Gwen, and we had such fun. I loved eating out at the restaurants at night and visiting all the sights, especially the view from the top of the Eiffel Tower. We were invited out by a couple of local boys for an evening meal on one of the 'River Seine' restaurant boats and it was romantic. We met them at the Louvre Museum; they chatted us up near the picture of the 'Mona Lisa' and one commented that I was more beautiful than Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting. His name was André and we had a great time together but I promised my father that I would behave; André, and he really tried hard, did not have his wicked way with me. I don't think my pal Gwen was wise, there were a few nights when she slept away from our hotel room and later bragged about sleeping with total strangers. I made the mistake of criticising her behaviour and when she turned on me, I told her that I was not brought up to behave like that; I would wait until I was married. Anyway, I enjoyed the experience and returned home, still a virgin; my father would have approved. Sometimes maintaining a strict Catholic upbringing can prove difficult, especially when your hormones are racing.

The following week-end, Gwen and I went to a university party and it was a grand affair, held in the main hall. The men were all decked out in their evening suits and the women in a mixture of long dresses. I was flattered that so many men paid attention to me but the moment was shattered when a very drunk Gwen shouted out, *"boys, you are wasting your time with Stephanie, she's a virgin and saving herself until she is married."* The word soon got around and I found myself sitting alone; it was like I had the plague and I could not miss the comments and sniggers behind my back. *"Stuck up bitch, living in a great big mansion, who does she think she is.....what do you expect, she is a good little Catholic girl.....I always said there was something funny about her, I bet she is really a*

*lesbian?*” Of course, most of the comments came from the sluts, who would drop their knickers quicker than crows flying away, on seeing a farmer carrying a shotgun.

I thought it would pass, but the next day, the trolls were out in force on my Facebook page. The sick comments never stopped, day after day and virtually all of them from my girlfriends. The boys joined in but their offers to sexually help me out were disgusting. My religion was ridiculed, my father was deemed to be homosexual and secretly living in London with a man. Even my ancestry was brought into question and in racial attacks as my father was of German descent. Gwen spent no time at all informing everyone about my personal views, my regrets and anything that she knew about me due to our friendship. It was all discussed on social media and in the halls of the university. When your friends turn on you like that, it is very difficult to socially reconnect, especially when they are all on social media and keep reporting a daily broadcast of their activities. No-one is going to break with the accepted protocol for fear of being ostracised from the group.

Slowly but surely, like cancer, a darkness grew within me as I found myself socially isolated. I could not find any contentment in my life and my father’s generous allowance and all my material possessions could not provide me with a feeling of purpose. My friends all left me, they were shallow, and on social media they were consumed by their addictive attention to feminism, world conservation, politics and constant virtue signalling, whilst the worst of them, weaponised personal grievances, masquerading as genuine social concerns, with no empathy for victims. They constantly made fun of my virginal status at every opportunity, without any consideration as to how I felt, or the impact it would have on my mental health. I tried to abandon Facebook and Twitter but try as I might, I could not extricate myself; it was like habitual. To make matters worse, I was constantly analysing my life, and in doing so, I forgot how to live and enjoy myself.

My world finally crumbled when my father informed me that he was planning to sell the mansion and the estate. I would have to sell my horse ‘Bandit’ and adjust to living somewhere else. He was planning to marry his long-time girlfriend who did not like country life. They had plans to purchase a house in Spain and thanks to the Internet, my father could run his business from there during the winter months. My father expected me to finish my studies and live in at the university or he would rent a flat for me if I could not find lodgings. He expected me to graduate and find work in London where he would find accommodation for me. My father was now living most of the time in London with his girlfriend and he expected me to stay at the mansion and to show potentially purchasers around the property. The final nail was hammered home, when the ‘For Sale’ sign went up outside the main driveway gates.

I left a note for my father on my bed, beside my mobile phone. I used a pole with a hook on the end to catch the loop on the attic trapdoor and pulling down the ladder, I climbed up the steps. It was a

spacious attic with decent headroom due to the tall angled beams forming the triangles to support the roof and the base was floored with heavy duty wooden planks. There was no lighting and everywhere hung heavy dusty cobwebs which were lit by the sunlight entering through a small skylight window. In the sparse light, I could see a green coloured metal cistern tank of sizeable proportions standing in the centre. It was raised up several feet, standing on top of wooden stanchions. Suddenly, I could hear my mobile phone ringing in my bedroom below, but I chose to ignore it; it was probably my father phoning?

I climbed up on top of the tank which was covered by a wooden lid and sitting there, I tied a rope around a higher wooden support joist in the roof, the other was looped with a slip knot around my neck. I said to myself, *"Holy Father, please forgive me for my sin"* and then I jumped. As the rope tightened around my neck, I started to choke and, in that instant, I changed my mind but it was too late; I could not get my heels to gain traction on the metal tank and I could feel and hear them scraping as I fought to climb back up. The fear hit me and I wet myself; my urine ran down the inside of my right leg and dripped off my shoe onto the floor. I did not choke for long, the rope tightened so quickly that it blocked the blood flow in my main artery to my brain and blackness came upon me.

I seemed to awaken in a very bright light and I was a white translucent form of myself. I was clasped in the arms of a female figure who glowed as bright as a star and she carried me out through the walls of the house and up into the universe – I recognised her from her photo; it was my mother and she smiled at me.

OMG, how totally fantastic is that?

## Without Limits

Randy Hankerson was 30 years old and in peak condition. He was tall, muscular, strong jawed, blue eyed and sported a good head of black hair. Randy owned a motor vehicle dealership in New York, selling and maintaining luxury Bentley and Porsche sports cars. He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth as his father was a stockbroker and his mother, was a highly respected 'human rights' barrister. With no siblings to offer competition, Randy was very much his father's son and from a very young age, enjoyed game shooting on the family estate, rode a fine stable of horses and drove a Porsche convertible around the grounds, long before he held a driving licence. His transition into what could be called a hobby, rather than work, was indulged by his father, who purchased the car dealership in Randy's name and left him to make his own fortune. The Hankerson dynasty had always used this approach; like Randy, his father, Tobias had been educated at Yale and his grandfather, Reginald Hankerson, who was a millionaire industrialist, had setup a stockbroker business for Tobias to make his own fortune.

Randy was a man that lived life to the full, and his name suited him; he was unmarried and loved the pursuit of women. It was often stated by his male friends, that Randy could have made a great James Bond, he often drove a Bentley, dressed well and a gorgeous female would accompany him to an upmarket hotel, for lunch or an evening meal, from a stable of females that he rotated. He never took them home, choosing instead to book a room in the hotel, where he bedded them, and in the morning, they enjoyed a full breakfast before he drove them home or to their place of work. Randy always dangled the engagement ring fantasy in front of his women; this was the attraction, their thought of the ultimate prize, a wealthy man to provide for them and he was good looking to boot. Of course, he was the perfect gentleman, he wined and dined them, took them to week-ends in Paris, Prague, London and they always made themselves sexually available with any coercion. However, no matter how often the women tried, they could not get Randy to take them to his Penthouse flat in Manhattan or to visit the family pile in Martha's Vineyard, south of Cape Cod in Massachusetts. His social group of men and women all knew each other, they socialised together; he met them at parties, sporting events and on holidays, but none of them ever saw the inside of his flat; it was his private domain. Randy often voiced this rule to his friends, especially to the females who wanted to be taken there.

It was a Saturday night and Randy was sitting in front of a roaring log fire in his private club. All around him there were men seated in comfy chairs, reading books and newspapers. He sat back, enjoyed his brandy, smoked a Cuban cigar and continued to read his book. Suddenly, he was interrupted by another club member, *"have you a light, I seem to have run out of matches?"* Randy pushed his book down the side of the chair cushion, and producing his lighter, he lit the man's cigar.

*"Thanks, I don't think we have met before, I'm Christos Ariti, I am a professor of philosophy at New York University." Randy responded, "nice to meet you, I'm Randy Hankerson, I sell cars; do you teach that 'stoic' drivel spouted by Socrates and Marcus Aurelius?" The professor was taken aback, "my dear fellow, it provides a foundation for the young, and the old for that matter. Guidance of how to live a virtuous life with strong morality and a love for humanity should not to be regarded as drivel." Randy laughed out loud to the consternation of the other club members, "what a misguided fool you are Professor. Your life must be very boring, perhaps it could even be regarded as lifeless. Maintaining your virtue, your morality, loving your neighbour and after 70 years plus, looking back and realising that you have spent your entire life teaching brats how to swim uphill against waters that have burst from a dam, when they could have enjoyed canoeing downhill with the flow." The Professor replied, "I see you for what you are and I suppose your morals typify those of an unscrupulous car salesman?"*

*Randy scoffed, "you need to slacken up Prof", and to quote my mentor, I am a physical, carnal and pragmatic human being. I enjoy physical existence, an undiluted naturalism that sees mankind as animals that exist in an amoral universe. My mentor promoted indulgence, vital existence, undefiled wisdom, kindness to those who deserve it, responsibility to the responsible, and an eye for an eye code of ethics, while shunning abstinence based on guilt, spirituality, unconditional love, pacifism, equality, herd mentality, and scapegoating. He was, as I am, an individualistic and non-conformist, rejecting what he called the 'colourless existence' that mainstream society sought to impose on those living within it. He praised the human ego for encouraging an individual's pride, self-respect, and self-realisation and accordingly believed in satisfying the ego's desires. He stated that self-indulgence was a desirable trait, and that hate and aggression were not wrong or undesirable emotions but they were necessary and advantageous for survival. Accordingly, he praised the seven deadly sins as virtues which were beneficial for the individual." Randy rose up and picking up his book from the side of the chair, he smiled at the Professor.*

*Professor Ari, smiled back, "Randy, the book in your hand, 'The Satanic Bible' and the ramblings of your mentor, Anton Szandor LaVey, it's writer, will serve you badly. Living such a life will come to haunt you and one day you will find yourself living alone. It will bring on many regrets which in your youth you can live with, but in the infirmity of old age, it will lead to tears and heartache." Randy snorted, "rubbish, there is nothing wrong in believing in personal liberty, individualism and ego. I have no need of Gods or Socrates to pay heed to, I will worship myself and if that is seen as narcissism, then so be it. I have no need to listen to men who feel they must belittle themselves in a virtuous and moral quagmire and who follow silly rules laid down by self-righteous men." Randy turned away and walked out of the club.*

Outside, he was beside himself, this had been the first time that he had been verbally challenged by a nemesis, he knew existed, but wished to avoid. He muttered, *"fuck you professor, fuck Socrates."* Randy pressed the key fob and the doors to his Porsche unlocked; he dropped the soft top and embraced the cool night air. He was still seething as he sat inside and started the engine. The car did not travel far; he stopped at a local bar and went inside to consume copious amounts of alcohol to soothe his anger; which did not subside and only grew worse. He ordered three chilli hotdogs and started to consume one when his eye was drawn to two young men who were kissing at the far end of the bar. Randy shouted, *"go for it boys, strip down and let's see some sodomy, sex without limits, some arse shagging, go for it."* The men failed to understand that Randy was not ridiculing them, he was merely encouraging them to enjoy homosexual anal sex; a smack in the face of Professor Christos Ariti, or so he thought. Alcohol, certainly distorts the thinking process and no matter how much Randy looked around for the professor, he was not in the bar. The two men rushed at Randy and a fight ensued; chairs and tables were overturned and it ended when Randy picked up a broken table leg and laid the two men out cold with a number of blows to their heads. Before there were any reactions from the bar staff and the patrons, he fled the bar and drove off at speed in his Porsche. He thought, *"a bloody homosexual bar, why did I have to pick that one for a drink?"*

The Porsche overshot a number of red lights when he finally calmed down and stopped at one. Suddenly, an open top red Ferrari stopped alongside him on his left side and the driver shouted across, *"hi wanker, fancy a race?"* Before the lights could change and the man could react, Randy had jumped out over the door of his Porsche, jumped onto the passenger seat of the Ferrari and kicked the driver in the face. The Ferrari, which was in automatic gear, slowly moved forward as the now unconscious driver released his foot pressure from the brake pedal. Randy jumped clear and watched the car slowly cross through the red stop signal and into the junction. A huge articulated lorry came through from the right side of the junction and straight into the side of the Ferrari, which exploded in a fireball. Bits of the car and its wheels were flying in all directions and Randy saw the head of the driver, his hair on fire, rolling down the roadway. He jumped back into the Porsche, floored the accelerator, avoided the carnage, and did not stop.

He reached his penthouse flat without further incident and inside he downed a large 'Jack Daniels' before picking up the telephone. He made the call and twenty minutes later, Trixie and Dixie arrived, his favourite prostitutes for a ménage à trois. Of course, their real names, Doris and Mabel did not quite fit their occupation. It was Trixie that once again raised the question, *"why do we have to go into that awful bedroom with its black curtains, purple wallpaper and that strange Jewish drawing on the bedcover? It's not natural, and why do we have to fuck on it. You are not even circumcised?"* Randy snorted, *"you crazy broad, it's not a bloody Jewish sign, it's the symbol of Baphomet and it is the serpent Leviathan, the goat and the inverted pentagram."* Dixie, burst out laughing, *"told you Trixie, the Devil's got your ass covered."* Even Randy managed a smile before he got down to

business. Sometime later, the two girls lay exhausted on the bed while Randy was up at his bar, pouring another glass of 'Jack Daniels'. Trixie, let out a moan, *"boy am I sore, it's red raw."* Suddenly, she was interrupted by the sound of police sirens and the screeching of vehicle brakes. Dixie went to the window and looking down onto the street, she exclaimed, *"get dressed Trixie, I think they are coming up here?"*

The police arrested Trixie and Dixie for prostitution; Randy for several counts of assault, dangerous driving and the manslaughter of the man in the Ferrari. The girls were let off with a warning due to the lack of evidence but Randy was thrown into a police cell and later jailed for 5 years for the assaults and dangerous driving with an additional 15 years for the manslaughter charge, which totalled 20 years in a correctional facility. His social standing and that of his family made no difference to his sentence and he quickly found out that all of his social friends had deserted him. His father, Tobias visited him to convey the message that he was on his own and like every Hankerson before him, he would have to endure what life threw at him, the good and the bad. His father never visited him again. Unfortunately for Randy, he was good looking, so it was the bad rather than the good.

Once the word got around, Randy was paid a visit in the toilets by two rough African Americans who decided they would put his rear end to good use. The ensuing fight was brutal and he laid both men out cold by smashing their heads on the wash basin rims. He paid the price of 4 weeks in solitary and emerged, a man recognised for his hardness, a man 'without limits'. Randy quickly formed his own gang of men around him and began to take over the running of drugs in the prison. It came to a head when he fought with the previous gang leader of the prison drugs cartel. The meeting was inevitable as both men sought the high rank in the prison. Randy was confronted in the toilets by a towering strength of a man who pinned Randy down on the floor and began to pound on his face with his fists. The blood spurted from Randy's broken nose and cut eyebrows and the man was intent on killing him. Randy felt the man grip his throat with both hands and start to throttle him.

No matter what he did, Randy could not break free and finally decided to undertake the ultimate step. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out a sharpened dinner knife and thrust it upwards into the man's right nostril and pushed hard until the point broke through into the skull. Randy twisted the knife and the man jerked back onto the floor screaming in pain. Before the man could react, Randy used the knife and drove it into the right eye and then the left, leaving the man blind. He watched as the man rose up and staggered around the toilets looking for the exit door, his hands outstretched and screaming at the top of his voice; the blood and eyeball puss dripping down his cheeks, leaving wide open blood red sockets. Randy pulled him back onto the floor, faced him down and jumping up as high as he could, he brought his boots down on the man's neck. He heard a loud crack as the man's neck broke and he lay dead. At the trial and despite his claims of self-defence, the judge

sentenced him to life in prison, *“you are a man without limits, not satisfied with blinding the man in both eyes and rendering him incapable of attacking you or defending himself, you had to break his neck and kill him; hardly a case of self-defence.”*

In the years that followed, Randy fought with many men to retain his position, he boasted of his conquests, and often claimed that he was a disciple of the devil; no-one could defeat him. He enjoyed a relatively high quality of life from his drug distribution network within the prison walls which included unscrupulous prison guards, who conveniently looked the other way for a fee. Now in his late 50s he endured his last fight. A man nicknamed ‘The Bat’ arrived at the prison, sentenced to life for killing two policemen during a drug bust. He had rendered them both unconscious by striking them with a baseball bat at his home and then proceeded to bash in their skulls until their brains burst out. The Bat quickly sought to take over control and went head-to-head with Randy in the toilets. The fight did not last long, ‘The Bat’ was the younger and stronger man, he broke Randy’s wrists, his nose, gouged his eyes out and now incapable of fighting back, he smashed Randy’s knees with a wash basin that he had pulled off the wall.

At the family pile in Martha’s Vineyard, Randy’s father, old Tobias Hankerson was in the library and shouted for his butler, *“George, have you seen my favourite book, the one my father passed down to me; it seems to have gone missing; it’s a long time since I have read it.”* George questioned, *“what book is that Sir, I am sure no-one will have touched it?”* Tobias reluctantly replied, *“it’s called ‘The Satanic Bible’ by Anton Szandor LaVey. It has an all-black cover and the ‘Sigil of Baphomet’ is embossed on the front, in purple.”* George replied, *“many years ago, I remember young Randy reading that book, perhaps he took it?”*

At the jail, Randy spent most of his time alone in his cell, he was blind and crippled. No-one was prepared to assist him; he had no friends in jail and the guards no longer cared what happened to him; there was no money in it. Despite what Professor Christos Ariti had prophesied all those years ago, Randy never looked back on his life and he held no regrets; there were no tears. The indoctrination of Anton Szandor LaVey was complete. Randy was a man ‘without limits’ and without a conscience, he looked forward to the future and in his late 80s he found it; death.



# The Stranger

Mark Stevens stood at the window and watched the rain drops sliding down the glass. It was raining hard outside and looking through, he could see the city far, far below. The glow from the street lights glistened their reflection on the wet sidewalks and embraced the myriads of umbrellas being carried by the people, as they hurried home. It was a city which was recognised throughout the world for its fashion, art, magnificent theatres, night clubs and baseball. You travelled in a train on the subways, enjoyed Italian pizzas and walks in Central Park. It was 'the city that never sleeps' and its name was New York. Mark pressed his face against the cold glass and warm tears ran down his cheeks. His body began to shake as he tried in vain to control his emotions and in his despair, he began to sob. The view of the city vanished in a flood of tears and he sat back on a chair, with his head in his hands.

Mark had been lethargic for weeks and steadily becoming more and more tired. Going to his work every morning was proving a challenge and he was very pale. The news that day had been very hard to bear, Doctor Hathaway spoke in a sympathetic voice, *"I am afraid you have Acute Promyelocytic Leukaemia which means there are too many blood-forming cells called promyelocytes in the blood and bone marrow. These are depleting your other blood cells. It can be treated with Arsenic trioxide in combination with all-trans retinoic acid by intravenous injection over a period of a few hours. You will require at least 25 injections over a 5-week period to speed up the death of the promyelocytes but there is no guarantee that you will recover. You must prepare yourself for the worst."* Mark had managed to keep his composure and came out with a classic statement, *"well, you have to die of something, after all death is part of life."*

Now the composure was gone and alone in his flat, he had finally broken down. All the emotions and the questions flooded his mind, *"why me, I don't even take drugs, dead at 35 years old, it's so unfair."* He cried, he raged, would he die quietly in his bed or would it be a painful gut-wrenching death in some hospital bed or on the floor of his flat? Being the macho type man that he was, he even laughed at his own predicament. Suddenly a thought entered his mind, *"Christ, I'll miss out on all those women screaming for my body"* and he burst out laughing again. Later that night, he finally fell asleep on top of his bed, his emotions and thoughts finally subdued.

Mark worked as a stockbroker and the following morning he travelled on the subway to his place of work in Wall Street. When he arrived, his boss was in his office and pacing up and down. *"Where the hell have you been, you should have been here hours ago."* Mark replied, *"I am sorry, I have a lot on my mind, I have a cancer, I will need some time off and hopefully my treatment will be a success?"* His boss screamed at the top of his voice, *"time off, time fucking off, do you not know we have*

*crashed, it's the 24<sup>th</sup> October 1929, fuck, fuck 1929, the bloody stock exchange is totally fucked with millions of shares written off, I am fucking ruined.*" Suddenly his boss opened the window and jumped out; falling some 30 floors to the ground. Mark was just in time to stick his head out and see his boss splatter on the sidewalk in a massive pool of red blood, brain matter and broken bones.

He left his office and with his hands in his pockets, he walked past the dead body of his boss; carefully avoiding the blood pool and some brain matter which a woman was attempting to shake off from the bottom of her shoe. Behind the woman and standing on his own was a tall stranger. Mark continued on his way through the Manhattan district and he eventually entered Central Park where he sat down on a park bench. He sat there for many hours but gradually his sad demeanour changed and for the first time in his fast pace of living, he actually stopped and embraced the wonder of life which existed all around him. He enjoyed watching the children playing on the grass, the women pushing their perambulators with their giggling, some crying babies, and the squirrels scampering through the trees. Finally, he recognised that his existence was no different to any other animal on the planet.

The human race placed so much on the death of a human, perhaps a relative, a friend, but in the scheme of all life, the death of human beings, like other animals, runs into the thousands every day. Some life would live into very old age, and some like Mark, for no apparent reason, die young. The trees seemed so bright, so colourful, he could see the texture of the bark and the way the branches were held aloft. The sky was so blue and the shadows slowly crept across the ground. Mark felt that his senses had heightened, he saw everything more clearly and the slightest rustle from a squirrel in the bushes, reached his ears. He did not feel bitter, he felt a strange peace descend on him, it was an inner calm, an acceptance. Suddenly, in the far distance amongst the trees, he thought he saw the stranger again but in a blink of an eye, he disappeared from view.

The night fell and leaving the park, he walked along the streets taking in the many faces for the first time, smiling faces, and the laughter of people enjoying themselves. He walked to 43<sup>rd</sup> Street and stood outside the Warner's Theatre which was all lit up with bright lights. Above the front extended canopy was displayed a huge colourful blue billboard with a beautiful image of a girl in scant orange clothing and above her, words printed in huge gold letters, 'The Gold Diggers of Broadway' which was a popular musical. At that moment, the audience started to come out and he experienced a cacophony of different voices, *"that Nick Lucas, what a brilliant jazz guitarist.....Winnie Lightner, what a doll.....let's get a pizza...what about a drink darling, I know a great speak easy....I am not going back to your flat and that's final....lets grab a cab....I love you sweetheart."* There were so many voices to take in and he enjoyed seeing the young faces, all starting out in life. Suddenly, he saw the stranger standing in the entrance to a lane and as Mark made towards him, the crowd

blocked his path. By the time he cleared them, the stranger had disappeared. Mark shrugged his shoulders, headed for the subway and home to his flat; that night he slept well.

The following day, the Wall Street collapse of 'Black Thursday' had really hit home and the queue at the newspaper stand outside his flat was in chaos as people were falling over themselves to get the latest news. Mark had arranged to meet his lawyer, Mr Steedman and was heading downtown to his office. He managed to grab a newspaper from the stand and as he walked along, he read the headings, 'Wall Street Crash – Millions of Shares Wiped Out' but a smaller heading caught his eye, it read 'Two Dead'. He turned to page 2 and a shiver ran down his spine. The previous night, a homeless man had been found dead in Central Park and later, a woman's body had been found in a lane near to the Warner's Theatre; they were strange coincidences. His visit with Mr Steedman went well and a will was drawn up, leaving everything he owned to his best friend, Jack Williams, a fellow stock broker. In the weeks ahead, Mark received his treatments and after every one, he retired to his bed, too weak to cope with very much else. He was optimistic of a full recovery and remained very positive. He was fortunate that his house keeper, an elderly woman called Rose, had decided to care for his needs whilst he was being treated.

Arsenic had a profound impact on his appearance, he lost weight, his hair fell out and his weakened immune system made him susceptible to picking up viruses which could be life threatening. Mark soldiered on and kept himself to his flat. One night Jack Williams came to visit and they enjoyed a social evening together. As Jack was about to leave, Mark telephoned for a taxi and went to the window to watch for its arrival. As he looked down, he saw the stranger standing under a street light across the road and looking up at him. Mark summoned Jack over to the window and pointed out the stranger to him. His reply was unexpected, *"I can't see anyone, just the street light."* Mark checked again and the stranger was still there, *"he's there, surely you can see him?"* Jack looked again, *"there is nobody Mark, you must be seeing things."* At that moment the taxi arrived and as Mark looked down, he saw the stranger was gone. Jack headed for the door and turning, he said, *"when you are recovered, we should take in the celebrities at the Cotton Club on 142<sup>nd</sup> Street. I fancy a bit of the 'Charleston' and dancing with the 'flappers' with their short skirts and bobbed hair. We will never see another decade like our 'Roaring Twenties' with its decadent sex."* The following morning, when Rose arrived, he told her about the stranger and the deaths. Rose thought it was due to his treatments, *"aye, arsenic can play funny tricks with the mind"* she exclaimed.

The day finally arrived when Mark visited Doctor Hathaway to get the verdict on his treatment and tests. He sat down on a plush leather chair and the doctor smiled, *"well, young man, your treatment has been very successful, the leukaemia has gone, or should I say, it is in remission. You will require to be tested every 6 months but I see no reason why you cannot return to normal life."* Mark was elated and questioned if the treatment had any side effects such as hallucinations? He told the doctor

about the stranger and the deaths. Doctor Hathaway informed him that he could not rule out the possibility of hallucinations and the mind locking onto one, similar to a recurring dream. However, now that the treatment was over, he should return to normal but if they persisted, he could refer Mark to a specialist in such matters. In the days that followed, Mark made a slow but steady recovery, his hair started to grow back in, his weight was improving, but he still endured lethargy and worried about further hallucinations.

It was Rose who came up with the idea, *“if you want to get rid of that stranger, you had better visit a spiritualist, I know one who can help you.”* Mark took her advice and visited Coreen Aldaine at her home in downtown New York. She made him welcome, sat him down beside her and together they shared soothing cups of coconut water; she held his hands in hers. He told her off the stranger and the deaths and how the stranger was seen outside his flat, down on the street. He mentioned that his friend Jack could not see the stranger and perhaps he was hallucinating. Coreen gazed into his eyes for a while and finally remarked, *“you have been very ill for a long time, you were near to death and had finally accepted and welcomed death into your life as a natural process. You found peace in yourself and all the emotions associated with the fear of death, dissipated. The relationship with death is a real one and opens up a window into a dimension which is normally closed to the living. I feel sure that as you fully recover, the window will close and the stranger will leave for good.”* Mark thanked her and feeling rather perplexed over the diagnosis he headed home. Rose questioned him and he smiled and replied, *“Rose, I don’t know what to make of Coreen, she is either a charlatan or she indeed has a strong understanding of spiritualism?”*

Although he was not fully fit, Jack and the Cotton Club beckoned. For the first time, in a long time, Mark was looking forward to Saturday night. It soon arrived and as he was getting ready, he heard a loud horn sound down below on the street. He looked out of the window and saw Jack standing beside a beautiful white coloured Duesenberg Model J motor car, his face beaming with pride. He went downstairs and stood in awe of the vehicle. Jack explained, *“isn’t she a beauty, I took delivery today, my new pride and joy.”* Mark replied, *“I guess you will be living on bread and water for a while, this must have cost you a fortune.”* Jack laughed, *“I bought her before the stock market crash with last year’s bonus, she’s a better investment than stocks and shares.”* Jack folded the top down to reveal opulent red leather seats and together they headed off towards the Cotton Club, enjoying the warm breeze of the open air as the car’s 7-litre engine purred its approval. Driving through New York was enthralling, the bright colourful lights of the city glistened off the Duesenberg Model J chrome and the whitewall tyres on wire wheels matched the massive bonnet grill and the two huge headlamps up front. People on the sidewalks gasped and pointed at the car as it passed along the streets.

The Cotton Club soon loomed into view; its massive street canopy bore its name in enormous bright lights on the front. Above the canopy on the building's façade, huge billboards bore its name and listed the night's entertainment. So intense were the lights on the canopy and the billboards that the entire street around the club entrance was lit up. Jack parked the Duesenberg Model J outside and people on the sidewalk crowded around to admire the vehicle. Mark alighted onto the sidewalk headed for the club's entrance; he looked back and saw Jack in discussion with the crowds surrounding his car. Suddenly, there was the stranger, standing at the entrance to the club and he was smiling at Mark who stood open mouthed in awe of his clothes; a black three-piece suit, silver pocket watch chain on his waistcoat, a white shirt with a bright red tie, black shoes and a black fedora hat; he was carrying a silver topped cane. For the first time, Mark could properly see his face and the countenance was that of a young man in his thirties. He lifted his cane, tapped the silver top against the front brim of his hat and as Mark turned to signal Jack, the stranger was gone.

Mark did not mention the incident, lest Jack thought him deranged. They both entered the club and Jack gave the doorman a huge tip. Inside, they were shown to a table, and on the way, Mark was confronted by a beautiful woman who crashed into him. She exclaimed, *"sorry darling, I am in a rush to the can; my, you are gorgeous"* and as she swept on, Jack smiled, *"lucky you, that was Clara Bow, the famous movie star."* The jazz band was in full swing and Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington and his band 'The Washingtonians', were terrific. The saxophonist Johnny Hodges brought a sensuous tone to the band and clarinettist Barney Bigard personified a direct link to old New Orleans jazz. The flappers were up and dancing amid their screams of excitement and flashing knickers. The men at the tables could hardly contain themselves and sat with their soda pop, laced with rum, vodka or whisky and smoking Cuban cigars.

Mark was tapping his feet, the drinks had arrived and soon afterwards, he was touched by someone on the shoulder. He turned around and she remarked, *"hello there handsome, how about you and me hitting the dance floor, you never know where it might lead, if you get my meaning."* He was somewhat taken aback, there she stood, a gorgeous tall blonde with a bobbed haircut and wearing an ornate headband around her head. She had sparkling blue eyes and her dress was loose and multi-coloured with long frills at the bottom but he could not take his eyes off how much leg she was showing and those white high heeled shoes. A white gloved hand reached down and picked up his chin and the glove went all the way up to her elbow. She snapped' *"I am up here fella; the legs can be admired later."* He raised his head and smiled as a long strand of coloured beads hanging from around her neck crashed onto his nose as she flicked ash on the floor from a cigarette which was in a long silver holder clasped in her teeth.

What a night, the flappers were in full swing, the celebrities were thick as flies on jam and Jack seemed to know them all. Mark was introduced to Jimmy Durante and Al Jolson; he was enthralled

by Mae West but she never asked him to come up and see her some time. He took part in the line Charleston dance, received a few shin kicks and carefully avoided Clara Bow, lest her boyfriend, Gilbert Roland, took offence. He thoroughly enjoyed himself, especially as Jack had smuggled in a flask of vodka to mix with the soft drinks served at the bar; all perfectly legal, despite prohibition. Eventually time ran out, the band packed up, the entertainers had completed their acts, the flappers were exhausted and many had found a man and were leaving; those that were still single, huddled in groups around tables, shrouded in cigarette smoke; cursing and swearing like workmen on a skyscraper. Mark felt somewhat emasculated by the flappers but Jack was in his element, he had hooked up with a cracker, the one who had first approached Mark for a dance.

The three of them staggered out onto the street and Jack opened the passenger door at the sidewalk and slipped his flapper onto the bench seat, Mark followed her and as he sat beside her, she squeezed his left thigh and said, *"are you okay, honey, you have been a bit quiet?"* He smiled and watched as Jack went round the back of the car to the driver's side on the street. Mark turned to look back at the Cotton Club entrance and there stood the stranger, he was smiling and again he tipped his hat with his cane. The screech of the tyres was horrendous and Mark turned to see a speeding car strike Jack, who was standing at the open driver's door, and propel him high up into the air. He came down on the ground and slid along for about thirty yards, his face being peeled back by the friction and his eyes pulled from their sockets. The door landed back on the street some distance in front of him. Mark knew he was dead and as he looked back to the Cotton Club, the stranger smiled at him and vanished.

Mark never saw the stranger again; he made a full recovery from his illness and inherited the now repaired Duesenberg Model J car, left to him by Jack. He often drove it on the street at 'The Cotton Club' and a feeling of poignancy would rise in him, when he remembered his best friend.

## The Band

Curt was very drunk and as he leaned over the bar counter, he delivered an oration to the barman, *"life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming, 'Wow! What a ride!'. So exclaimed Hunter S. Thompson, who was a writer and a wild son of a bitch, who rode a BSA A65 Lightning motorcycle with the 'Hells Angels' and who upon his death had his ashes shot out of a cannon. He committed suicide by gunshot, very much like Ernest Hemingway."* Curt, finished his speech to the bewildered barman and turning to his band mates, he raised his glass, *"here's to Hunter S. Thompson and Ernest Hemingway, and here's to Jacko, who claimed he saw the devil with horns, just before he died."* Everyone raised their glasses, *"to Jacko."* The barman shook his head, picked up another wet glass to dry with his cloth and murmured, *"crazy bastards."*

The group of friends stood at the bar and began to argue over religion and what would happen to them after death. Jacko had died of a drug overdose and they had permission by the council to cremate him in the back garden of his estate. It had been a grand affair and the glow from the huge bonfire lit up the whole area but the smell of burning flesh did not sit well with them, even although they were out of their minds with drink and drugs. Curt's 'Native Indian' dance around the fire, screaming, *"go Jacko, go"* was much appreciated and everyone joined in. Anyway, quite how the conversation at the bar had turned to the subject of death was anyone's guess, but afterwards, most of the blame fell on Mick, who was a born-again Christian. He made his case, *"I am changing my ways, there is a God, I believe there is a heaven; Jesus died for our sins."* Jim, the agnostic, cut in, *"I have an open mind on whether there is a God or there is not, I cannot prove either way."* Curt, who was a staunch atheist, opened up, *"you are both nuts, who in their right mind can believe in a myth, there is no God, give me a break."* Pete, the roadie, exclaimed, *"none of you will be disappointed when you die, look at it logically, it is so simple - if you go to heaven and there is a God, you will not be disappointed and if death is just an eternal sleep without dreams, you will never know, so again you won't be disappointed. Anyway, if there is a God and heaven, you lot aren't going there."* Mick, interrupted Pete's ramblings, *"Christ, we have a philosopher amongst us and he's right; let's get drunk."* The group downed more drinks and then headed over to the theatre.

They hit the stage to a loud burst of applause, Curt was wearing his favourite red tee shirt with the words 'Fuck the Elites' on the front and on the back 'Down with Fascism' which seemed to go down well with the crowd. Cheers and *"fuck the establishment"* could be clearly heard amongst the crowd and applauded. Curt had quite forgotten that he had over 100 million dollars in the bank and drove a

brand-new 2006 Ferrari F430 sports car. A few weeks before, he had flown his private plane to Maranello in Italy to be shown around the factory that made it; he was even introduced to Frank Stephenson, the designer of the car. The deceased Jacko had been replaced by Reg, the new drummer, whose real name was Reginald Carruthers-Smythe; his parents owned a large private estate in Yorkshire. Two hours later, and many of their hit songs later, Curt finished the gig by ripping apart his T shirt and shouting, *"power to the people"* which received a thunderous applause as the band went into overdrive, producing a huge cacophony of sound from their guitars and Reg's drums to end it all. The band left the stage and before the applause had stopped, they were out into the night air, into the limousine and heading to their hotel.

At the bar, Reg raised his glass, *"here's to Jim's new autobiography."* Jim intervened, *"stop, no, I shelved it, the book was dull and upsetting."* Pete, the roadie, burst out laughing, *"you mean it was crap?"* The band joined in on the laughter and Jim was not pleased. He replied, *"living a crazy depraved lifestyle seemed okay at the time, but writing about it, really upset me."* Mick chimed in, *"Jim, me old pal, it's what our public expect; drink, drugs, riotous parties and fast women. I think you should go to church and become a 'Born again Christian' like me."* Jim snorted back, *"yeah, yeah, I am surprised you have not been hit by a bolt of lightning; some Christian you are; you were shagging the hotel owner's daughter last night and she was young enough to be your granddaughter."* The band burst out laughing when Mick made a cautious look up at the ceiling and then he laughed along with the rest. Several drinks later, a few snorts of cocaine, and the lot of them, with the exception of Reg, who had retired to bed, were in the limousine. Alf the chauffeur, headed along Sunset Boulevard and through the multi-coloured and brightly lit Sunset Strip, with its huge colourful billboards on the buildings, its boutiques, restaurants, nightclubs and to their destination, 'The Viper Room' in West Hollywood.

As they entered, they were greeted by applause from celebrities and the elite who meet to eat. Even the performing rock band on the stage, paused their performance to applaud them. Pete reckoned it was out of respect for wrinkled old men who were still rocking in their old age and judging by the way they staggered to a corner table with its plush red buttoned bench seats; rocking was an apt description. Curt and Mick gave him some funny looks as he sat down with a huge smile on his face. The Viper Room was styled similar to the old Harlem Jazz Clubs with its huge covered awning outside at the front door; its name clearly displayed in large letters and the bright lights shining on the sidewalk. The look and the ambiance of 'The Cotton Club' of the 1920s springs to mind, only the cars outside had changed. It exuded dark walls, red and blue ambient wall and floor lighting; multi-coloured ceiling lights and the walls decorated with picture frames, which included famous rock bands and some promoting 'Jack Daniels Whiskey'. As usual, Curt, Mick and Jim ordered copious amounts of alcohol and were surrounded by women, eager to take them to bed. The heavy metal



rock band on the stage rocked the building whilst Pete was bored; his job was to make sure that by the end of the night, they all managed to crawl out of the club and back to the limousine.

Much later, Pete found Jim sitting on his own at a table in a dark corner with a bottle of Jack Daniels; it was half finished and he was quietly weeping. Pete sat down beside him and put his arm around his shoulder, *“what’s up Jim, is it Elsa again?”* The drink had weakened Jim’s spirit and he murmured to his friend, *“I feel so bad about it all, she was my love, and I let her down. I dumped her for another woman; after 5 years together, I just dumped her and she committed suicide.”* Pete attempted to console him and not for the first time; Elsa had passed away some years back but every time Jim became drunk and was left on his own, his demons came back to haunt him and they brought with them his regrets, which were many. He had often overdosed as a result but they never let him die, he was always brought back to life. Pete sat with him, removed the bottle and ordered coffee in an attempt to sober him up. Curt and Mick appeared with a couple of young girls on their arms. Curt blurted it out, *“not this again Jim, are you still crying over that broad. She killed herself, she was nuts; it was never about you; she just sought attention and overdid it with the pills. Let’s go Mick; Pete will you see to Jim and we will meet you back at the hotel later on?”*

Pete nodded, and watched as they left, the girls still giggling in their arms. He murmured to himself, *“why do young girls embrace the patina of wrinkled old men, those masters of debauchery, those fallen pillars to whom society turns a blind eye; those men who have repeatedly demonstrated their lack of morals and encouraged an adoring youth to tread an immoral path. Wrinkled old men who walk the same path; incapable in their old age to tread another.”* Pete helped Jim to his feet and outside they found the limousine was gone, so Pete hailed a taxi and they headed back to the hotel.

He managed to calm Jim and finally get him settled into bed. The hotel staff had watched the pair stagger into a lift and the hotel manager had feared that the suite of rooms set aside for the band would be wrecked. The manager had visions of another television being thrown out of the top floor window and onto the street again. As Pete closed the bedroom door, Alf arrived, cursing that he had been pulled out of the driving seat of the limousine and had watched Curt drive it away with Mick and the two girls. The vehicle was weaving all over the road and as it disappeared into the distance, he saw a police car pursuing it, with flashing blue and red lights, and the siren wailing. Pete came out with more philosophy, *“one day, Curt and Mick will push the boundaries of their well-being too far, it is a fine line that is drawn between modesty and hubris. One can feel the limit and those who are wise will come to recognise it and fear it, because it invariably leads to a fall from grace, even injury and in the worst case, death.”*

Out on the streets of Los Angeles, Curt, was driving the limousine like a mad man possessed and now had several police cars chasing him. Mick shouted, *“faster Curt, they are catching up, head for the*

*Santa Monica Freeway and we can bale out down at Pacific Park.*" The girls were screaming in the back of the vehicle and Curt screamed, *"shut the fuck up, what with the police sirens and you pair, I am losing it."* The limousine reached the freeway and they headed down to the coast. Curt's foot was hard on the pedal and Mick's eyes were bulging as he looked at the speedometer. *"For fucks sake Curt, we are doing over 100 miles an hour, do you not think you should slow down a bit?"* Curt shrugged, *"slow down, I am just getting started."* He switched on the CD player and ZZ Top blared out in mid track, *"she don't like other women; she likes whips and chains; she likes cocaine....."* Reaching over, Curt dipped his hand into the open glove compartment, and pulling out a handful of cocaine powder, he threw it over his shoulder to the women in the back and stuffed some up his nose with a loud snort. *"Yeah man, who's the man now, I am fucking flying."* Suddenly the limousine struck the rear of a low 'open top' sports car, and as it ran up the back, the heads of the occupants were torn off in a brilliant flash of red blood which spurted all over the front windscreen blurring Curt's view. Mick stared in horror as the heads of a man and a woman flew past his window. Before Curt could react, the limousine flew over the freeway side barrier and started a steep descent towards Olympic Boulevard, some 50 feet below.

Back at the hotel, Pete went to check on Jim and was horrified to find him lying face down on the floor. The bed covers were thrown back and he could see white powder strewn all over the bed. He turned Jim over and reeled back when he saw his dry fish like eyes staring up at him and his mouth and nose were covered in cocaine powder. Pete sat back on the floor with his back against a wall and stared at the lifeless body. He wondered how he was going to tell the band when they came back and how could they all go on with the tour, now that Jim was dead. Little did he know that the band would continue to play but in a very different theatre. Back and below the Santa Monica Freeway, Olympic Boulevard sustained a massive impact which it survived but the limousine was not so lucky and neither were its occupants. The vehicle crumpled and exploded in a massive fireball as its fuel tank burst and a metal spark on the roadway ignited it. Curt, Mick and the two girls were instantly incinerated, rather like a fly landing on an open fire. Their limbs shrank back as the searing heat melted their body fat and later the emergency services would find their charred and blackened remains in the car and scattered all over the area. Just before the crash, the last words the screaming occupants heard, came from Curt, *"fuck me, what a rush."*

Curt was the first to awaken and looking around he could see he was lying on a large marble stage surrounded by a massive circular stone amphitheatre which rose up high above him with thousands of people standing and looking down at him. It stretched beyond his vision, and up into the darkness. Mick and Jim were beside him and they sat up, rubbing their eyes. Behind them a drumkit with clashing cymbals was in full beat, its drum sticks held by Jacko whose hands were red with blood. Curt shouted, *"hey Jacko, I thought you were dead?"* He shouted back, *"I am dead you fucking*

*idiot and so are you.” The peoples’ voices rose to a crescendo, “sing, sing, you panderers, you seducers, you philanderers, you frauds; sing for us.” Mick stood up and saw the audience was naked and standing barefooted in what appeared to be mud, which was dark brown and steaming in the night air. One, who was near the stage shouted, “welcome to Malebolge, this city of corruption, where we stand for all eternity.”*

Suddenly, Curt realised that he was completely naked, as were Mick and Jim. He tried to cover his private parts but his hands refused to react, instead he found a microphone in his right hand and guitars appeared in the hands of Mick and Jim who began to play to the beat of Jacko’s drums. The two of them seemed like marionettes held up by strings and Curt joined them, his voice burst out into his favourite song and he started to dance around. He sang and danced until his throat was sore, his feet were raw and bleeding and they played until their fingers were burst to the bone with blood running over their guitar strings. The pain was excruciating and yet they could not stop; the massive crowd cheered them on. Curt could not stop, he jumped about like a mad demented demon and could only sing one song, which he was forced to repeat, over and over again, ad infinitum, for all eternity.

The crowd cheered and even those who seemed so far away, managed to hit the band with handfuls of excrement.