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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF ENGLISH

Creative Writing

Volume 1 of 1

The New Forest: Setting, Sanctuary & the Supernatural

by

Kathryn Wendy Barton

Thesis for the degree of Master of Philosophy

October 2017

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF ENGLISH

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THE NEW FOREST: SETTING, SANCTUARY & THE SUPERNATURAL

Kathryn Wendy Barton

This project began with a love for the New Forest and a wish to understand the ways in which writers utilise it as location. It was asked how writers capture, convey and utilise this particular place and whether intimate knowledge of it can enhance their work. An analysis was made of the impression of the New Forest given by writers, whether as a setting, as sanctuary, or by utilising its supernatural effects. The knowledge gained from such research enabled the production of 23 short stories of varying lengths, entitled *Haunts & Shades*, with the New Forest as their linking location.

Research was conducted into both fiction and non-fiction writing featuring the New Forest, ranging from Daniel Defoe in 1724 to writers of the 21st century. Specific writers were then chosen and analysed in more depth. The effect of location on a writer was evaluated. Professional writers' advice on the use of location was studied. The New Forest itself was explored, historically and physically. Residents of the Forest, some of whom can trace their ancestry for several hundred years, were used as character studies in the story collection.

Analysis revealed the advantages of a 'total immersion' approach and showed the pitfalls of relying on research alone for details of location. The short stories benefitted from the application of knowledge gained from such research. Each use of location in *Haunts & Shades* was influenced by awareness of its particular ambience, gained by the writer in a unique way. A first-hand knowledge of a location helps to provide a particular literary effect, an intimacy to the work. The thesis acknowledges that a writer, by meticulous research, can produce a valid and popular work. However, in order to convey a sense of a chosen location, a writer benefits from being immersed in its sights and sounds, myths and facts.

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Academic Thesis: Declaration Of Authorship

I, Kathryn Wendy Barton declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

The New Forest: Setting, Sanctuary & the Supernatural

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signed:

Date:

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SECTION 1 – COMMENTARY:

The New Forest:

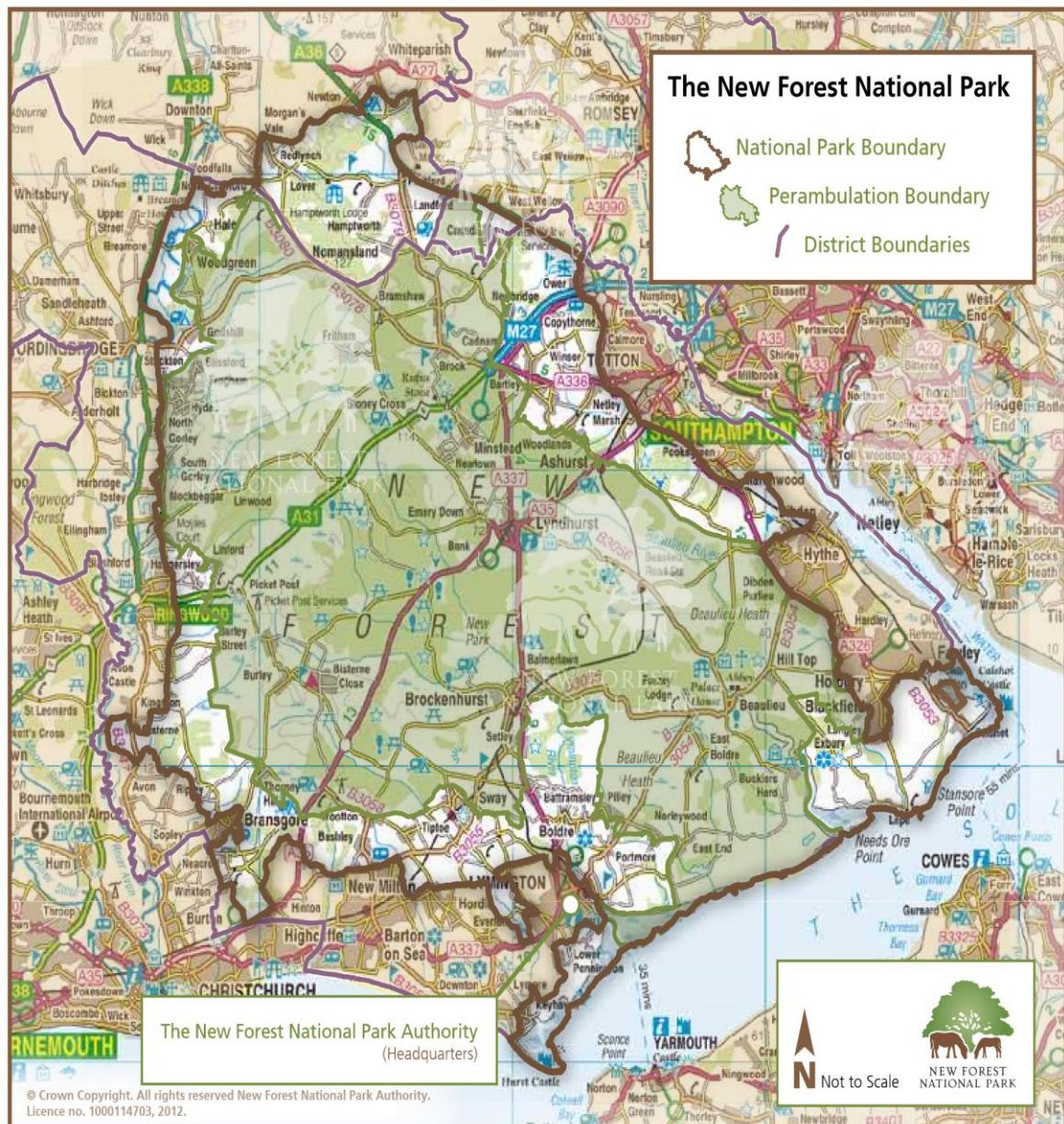
Setting, Sanctuary

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INTRODUCTION

I cannot claim to be born and bred in the New Forest, which is a drawback: I shall always be considered an incomer. However, my love and respect for the Forest are such that I hope it will consider me an honorary child. I think of it as a sentient being, influencing those within its jurisdiction. Jolley says, when speaking of a writer's use of location as an integral part of their work: 'The landscape has to be seen with the poet's eyes. The special quality is often in the loyalty and love that the writer feels towards a particular landscape.'¹ I knew I possessed the loyalty and love; my challenge was to convey them, by the medium of short stories, to a reader.

I asked whether a writer can, by portraying a well-loved location, engender a reader's interest in that place. I researched the work of other authors, analyzing how the Forest, its history and its inhabitants, affected their writing. I wanted to learn how writers may convey their own sense of place to entrance the reader.

Having decided to study various aspects of the Forest, I wanted to portray them in a way that reflected my own feelings. I chose the area within and around Lyndhurst. When it came to the 'Winterbourn' series of stories, I based my setting on two of the 'big houses' in the Lyndhurst area. There is no record of a Victorian Mental Asylum within the forest; afflicted residents were sent into nearby Wiltshire. However, my setting for the Asylum, confirmed by Tubbs' work, is accurate.² There are such bleak areas of the Forest.

In my writing, I like to explore interaction between people, especially non-communication within marriage. I prefer my characters and their predicaments to show ordinary people. I am fascinated by the diversity of characters and the effect a setting may have on their lives and attitudes.

I decided that short stories, with their precise focus, would be the best vehicle for a multiplicity of views. I appreciate the words of Victoria Hislop,

¹ Elizabeth Jolley, 'Literary Landscapes', in *The Agony and the Ego: Art and Strategy of Fiction Explored*, ed. by Clare Boylan (London, Penguin Books Ltd: 1993), pp. 165–175 (p. 168). Further references will be given in the main text

² Colin R Tubbs, *The New Forest*. (Lyndhurst, New Forest Ninth Centenary Trust: 1986). Further references will be given in the main text.

who says 'I discovered that it is possible for a short story (unlike a novel) to attain something close to perfection. Its brevity can mean that an author has the chance to produce a series of almost perfectly formed sentences.'³ I therefore studied various short story collections.

I considered the reaction I hoped to elicit from a reader. As a storyteller, I wish to entertain. May says, 'novelists, even the most serious ones, are in the entertainment business. We are purveyors of pleasure as well as knowledge.'⁴ I wanted to share the Forest with my reader: it has always fascinated me. Mists arise from low-lying heathland, out of which ethereal deer drift across a bemused motorist's path. Copses and rides confuse a walker, pixie-led. The Forest is a place of mystery, other-worldly. It can be sanctuary or threat. Its moods may be benign or malign. One thing it never has been, from the time of invading kings to modern bureaucratic decisions, is predictable or boring.

³ Victoria Hislop (ed), *The Story: Love, Loss and the Lives of Women: 100 Great Short Stories*. (London, Head of Zeus Ltd: 2013). p. 2

⁴ Stephen May, *Teach Yourself Creative Writing* (London: Hodder Education, 2008), p. 117

THE NEW FOREST

1. Introduction

The generic forest has long been used symbolically. Spufford explores such symbolism, saying: ‘The forest was the domain of magic where everything might happen that had withdrawn from the tamed landscape of the present. In the psychoanalytic tradition the forest is therefore identified as the great symbol of the unconscious.’⁵

In fairy tales, a forest is a place to be feared, in which to get lost and to be pursued by horrors. At one time, wolves were a real danger. I expect fairy tales such as Red Riding Hood have their roots in facts?

Maitland has extrapolated, exploring various forests and setting her retelling of fairy tales within them.⁶ She says ‘you can get lost in the forest, but you can also hide in the forest, and for exactly the same reason: in forests you cannot get a long view’. She adds ‘the forests that remain are strange and wonderful places with a rich natural history, long narratives of complex relationships – between humans and the wild, and between various groups of human beings – and a sense of enchantment and magic, which is at the same time fraught with fear’ (p. 10). A forest can be a place of safety from the terrors of the world, a sanctuary for righteous outlaws or a hiding place for fugitives from justice. Maitland says ‘forests are very good places to hide. Slip away between the trees, lurk in the greenwood, vanish into the thickets of wild wood: step outside the laws that bind you to the present and you become the Out Law – the free hero of romance and folk tale.’ (p. 71).

Spufford says that he carries ‘the sensory load of fiction’ (p. 1). I was an omnivorous child reader, building up my own ‘sensory

⁵ Francis Spufford, *The Child that Books Built*. (London, Faber & Faber Ltd: 2002). p. 21.

⁶ Sara Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest: The tangled roots of our Forests and Fairytales*. (London, Granta Publications: 2012). p. 6.

load,' with Frederick Marryat's *Children of the New Forest* never forgotten.⁷

The death of William Rufus in the Forest is widely considered to be political assassination, but there are other theories. O'Leary (a local storyteller) says: 'Mind you, the Forest did kill kings. The death of Rufus is the classic example. ... This was passed off as a hunting accident, but was probably an assassination. However, there are lots of stories and theories that have grown up about it being some sort of a sacrificial killing – Rufus having to atone for poor harvests'.⁸

Daniel Defoe, writing in *From London to Land's End* in 1724, vilifies 'that violent tyrant William the Conqueror,' who 'laid open (this waste and wild part of the country) for a forest and for game.'⁹ In 1862, John Wise refutes this in *The New Forest, its history and its scenery*.¹⁰ He claims that: 'the briefest analysis of Domesday and a comparison of its contents with those of the survey made in Edward the Confessor's reign, will more clearly show the nature and extent of the afforestation ... only the waste lands were enclosed and the cultivated spared.'

The Forest's poor soil makes it mostly unsuitable for agriculture, so it could be argued that William did, in fact, improve the area.

An excerpt from *The Rime of King William*, found in the Peterborough Chronicle's entry for 1087, shows the king's attitude to forests and hunting:

⁷ Frederick Marryat, *The Children of the New Forest*. (London, Home Page Ventures Limited: 2008). Further references will be given in the main text.

⁸ Michael O'Leary, *Hampshire & Isle of Wight Ghost Tales. + Hampshire and Isle of Wight Folk Tales*. (Stroud, The History Press: 2016). p. 21. Further references will be given in the main text.

⁹ Daniel Defoe, *From London to Land's End*. (London, Cassell & Company: 1724).

¹⁰ John R Wise, *The New Forest, its history and its scenery*. (London, Gibbings & Co, Limited: 1895). Further references will be given in the main text.

Original Text¹¹

*He sætte mycel deorfrið, 7 he lægde laga þærwið
bet swa hwa swa slogue heort oððe hinde, bet hine man sceolde
blendian.*

He forbade þa heortas, swylce eac þa baras.

Swa swiðe he lufode þa headeor swilce he wære heora fæder.

Translation¹²

*He established many deer preserves and he set up many laws
concerning them,
such that whoever killed a hart or a hind should be blinded.*

He forbade (hunting of) harts and also of boars.

He loved the wild deer as if he were their father.

Although the Forest may be thought to be unchanged and unchanging, its story is continually being updated.

21st century technology allied with a passion for conservation has led to the formation of the Pondhead Conservation Trust, where volunteers coppice the hazels, providing fuel for a charcoal burning enterprise. Purkis, burning charcoal when William Rufus died, might not recognize modern methods, but he would appreciate the product.

In the New Forest Post, Yandell writes about ‘the high-tech system that has pinpointed more than 3,000 historic sites in the New Forest.’¹³ The LiDAR system ‘enables experts to fire harmless lasers from light aircraft.’ Yandell quotes Lawrence Shaw, the National Park Authority’s Heritage Mapping and Data Officer: ‘the creation of the New Forest in 1079 produced a unique situation where archaeological sites have been almost frozen in time, mostly free from pressures such as intensive modern farming techniques and

¹¹ Stefan Jurasinski, ‘The Rime of King William and its Analogues’. 2004. In *Neophilologus* 88: 131–144, p. 133

¹² David Wallace, ‘Translation of The Rime of King William’ in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* pp15–16. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 1999).

¹³ Chris Yandell, ‘New Archaeological method named UK’s top innovation’ in *New Forest Post*. (Redbridge, Southampton: 2017).

urban development. As a result, LiDAR has enabled us to find fantastically well preserved sites that have been undisturbed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. We have been able to peel back the layers of the New Forest's history and see how it has been shaped by human activity from the Bronze Age all the way through to World War II'. Hopefully, publication of their findings will inspire future writers.

2. The Forest's People

Herbert says of the Forest:¹⁴

‘The later the hour, the more unfriendly and secretive the forest feels. To an outsider, that is.’

To an insider, the Forest is a unique, comforting, home.

According to Wise, the indigenous families may well stretch back further than expected. Agg Large, in *The Lonely Men of the Forest*, says of Purkis¹⁵:

‘The most famous charcoal burner of all time was undoubtedly Purkis, who transported the lifeless body of King William II in his cart from the fatal spot near Stoney Cross where the arrow pierced the monarch's forehead, to Winchester, the then capital of England. This would have been a familiar journey for him, for the burners often used to travel to the City from all parts of the Forest to sell their charcoal.

‘The trade was practised by the Purkis family at Castle Malwood right up to the end of last century when another local family the Tinsleys, took over most of the production.’

The Purkis name and its variations are found throughout the area, with a local thatched hostelry, dating back to the 12th Century, claiming to have incorporated his original cottage in their premises.¹⁶

¹⁴ James Herbert, *The Magic Cottage*. (London, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd: 1986).

¹⁵ J S P Agg Large, *The Lonely Men of the Forest, an account of past and present charcoal burners in the New Forest*. <http://freespace.virgin.net/j.purkis/lonely.htm> [accessed 21.06.2015].

¹⁶ Sir John Barleycorn, Cadnam.

Edward Rutherford says in the introduction to his novel *The Forest*:
'I suspect that the Forest roots of these old families go back to pre-Roman times.'¹⁷ A writer in *Forest Reflections* says:¹⁸

'The Register of Claims to Forest Rights, which was published in 1858, contains the names of innumerable people whose descendants are still living in the Forest.'

In 2012, our New Forest pony was stabled with an old forest family. The main house was hidden at the end of a sandy track and occupied by the matriarch. Her offspring ran various businesses from its satellite buildings and lived in newer cottages on the property. Their ponies ran loose on the forest. When I came to describe a New Forest smallholding in *Mole*, I drew heavily on the impressions gained, seeing the family as an ancient tribe established in a secret location.

3. The Forest's Language

The Forest uses its own language. Residents enjoy the annual 'drifts' when riders chase and corral the ponies in a down-sized Wild West scene. Ponies congregate in their 'haunts' and escape the biting flies in a 'shade,' often the middle of the road, to the great annoyance of motorists.

The word 'haunt' has other connotations. Ivey in *A Commoning Heritage* quotes Dan Mansbridge:¹⁹

'The Gypsies were mostly local: if they went away, they came back to the same haunt.'

Commoners, subject to Forest Law, answer to the Agisters and Verderers, based in their Court in Lyndhurst.²⁰ Commoners have

¹⁷ Edward Rutherford, *The Forest*. (London, Century, Random House Group Limited: 2000). Further references will be given in the main text.

¹⁸ H Pasmore, *Forest Reflections*. (Lyndhurst, Forest Views: 1995). p. 95. Further references will be given in the main text.

¹⁹ Jo Ivey, *A Commoning Heritage: The Mansbridges of Longdown*. (East Boldre, Ytene Artizans: 2011).

²⁰ The Verderers of the New Forest, *Verderers' Court: the History of the Verderers*, 2015. <http://www.verderers.org.uk/court.html> [accessed 12.08.2015].

the ‘right of Turbarry,’ allowing them to dig turf for burning, while with the ‘right of Mast’ they can turn out their pigs in the autumn.

Forest rights are overseen by the Verderers. In 1917 they were incensed because local children, organised into collecting acorns which were used in the manufacture of ammunition, had deprived the pigs of their rightful harvest.²¹ In 2015 the season produced a glut of acorns (healthful to pigs but poisonous to ponies) and the Verderers agreed to extend the pigs’ tenure of the forest.

Kaye, in the novel *Runaway Boy*, refers to a ‘deer seat’ rather than a ‘hide.’²² I wondered about the use of ‘purlieu’ in villages such as Dibden Purlieu and Hale Purlieu, on the outskirts of the forest. According to *Forest Reflections* ‘purlieus are disafforested land which adjoins the forest itself, having been formerly part of the Forest’ (p. 86). King William’s changes are part of everyday Forest parlance.

4. Writers and the New Forest

The Christopher Tower Reference Library in Lyndhurst houses a comprehensive selection of work on the New Forest. I carried out research there, studying fiction and non-fiction of the New Forest. Appendix 1 shows their bibliography for fiction involving the New Forest.

Charles Kingsley's *A New Forest Ballad* mentions several New Forest locations still extant.²³ Elizabeth George in her novel *This Body of Death* also uses the New Forest as a setting.²⁴ Garry Kilworth in *A Midsummer’s Nightmare* introduces his theme:²⁵

²¹ Items in *The New Forest Magazine*. Monthly Church news, parish by parish. From 1870 to 1973. Various publishers.

²² Geraldine Kaye, *Runaway Boy*. (Birkenhead, Willmer Brothers Limited: 1971).

²³ Charles Kingsley, *A New Forest Ballad*. 1847.

<http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnLine/19188/> [accessed 10 May 2015]

²⁴ Elizabeth George, *This Body of Death*. (London, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd: 2010). Further references will be given in the main text.

²⁵ Garry Kilworth, *A Midsummer’s Nightmare*. (London, The Orion Publishing Group Ltd: 1996).

‘Titania and the other Shakespearean fairies live in a rapidly diminishing Sherwood Forest whittled away by urban development. On Midsummer’s Eve, a most auspicious day, the fairies embark on the long journey to the New Forest where the fairies’ magic will be restored to its former glory’.

I looked at the work of writers who have used the New Forest as their location. I divided the research into Setting, Sanctuary and the Supernatural: a somewhat alliterative division, encompassing the aspects that were clear themes in the writers’ work and, to me, most important aspects of the Forest. In some cases, I learned nothing new about the subject itself, but was encouraged (and sometimes inspired) by the way in which authors convey their love for their chosen location. My findings are summarized in the following sections.

a) The New Forest as Setting

I. C R Tubbs

The Editors’ Preface to this book states unequivocally ‘there is nowhere in the world quite like the New Forest.’ (p. 7). They say ‘those who live within its boundaries have a strong sense of local patriotism, and are generally opposed to any developments which would alter the character of the landscape.’

In his Author’s Preface, Tubbs describes the Forest as ‘a recognisable piece of medieval England, still with its unenclosed heaths and woods, still with its commoners and their stock.’ He states ‘my intention in this book is to portray the Forest’s ecology. The vegetation and the animals, both domestic and wild, are part of the picture, but people, their attitudes and the way in which they use, exploit, administer and manage the Forest, are also key elements.’ (p. 11). He goes on to say ‘the pastoral use of the Forest depends on the continued existence of a close-

knit human community. The Forest survives as an ecological system of interacting natural and social elements which now has no parallel, at least in scale.' (p. 16)

In his first chapter, Tubbs states that the Forest has been 'of constant and absorbing interest,' and 'time increases rather than diminishes the degree of spiritual renewal and intellectual wonder to be derived from the familiar woods and heaths.' (p. 15). Looking at Domesday records, Tubbs says 'the modern settlement pattern of south-west Hampshire was well established 900 years ago, though there was then much woodland and heath where now there is enclosed farmland.' He details the role of the Verderers' Court as 'a good measure of the Forest temperature: if there is controversy it will surface there.' (p. 91).

Tubbs brings the story up to date, saying 'the decline of the age-old Forest economic system has been hastened by spin-offs from increased national affluence and by new perceptions of living. The New Forest has proved highly attractive to both commuters and the retired.' (p. 104). He sums up: 'circumstances are often such that Forest holdings fail to pass from one generation of commoners to another. Sadly, the inheriting relatives often prefer the capital to the farm.' He feels that 'today, turning out stock on the Forest is mainly a useful management option for small farms and a spare- or part-time occupation for a community which draws on commoning to maintain its social ties and traditions'.

Tubbs' book was published in 1986, since when the Forest has seen changes, not least of which is its new status as a National Park. Commoning, however, is alive

and well. In 2017, as through the Forest's history, the new crop of pony and donkey foals on the Forest has been a delight, though the ponies are, perhaps, becoming outnumbered by the herds of heavier cattle enjoying the Forest grazing. I overheard a local bird-watcher bemoaning the fact that such cattle destroy the nests of ground-building birds. The original law-makers of the Forest, who allowed Commoners the right to pasture their cattle on the Forest, could not have envisaged lorry-loads of Charolais cattle dotted like white boulders on the heathland.

II. C A Brebbia²⁶

Professor Carlos Brebbia is the founder of the Wessex Institute of Technology, a postgraduate research centre based in the New Forest. He has had a distinguished academic career in the field of computational mechanics and is a specialist in numerical methods, finite and boundary elements and the computer solution of engineering problems. *The New Forest*, first published in 1998, is a labour of love.

In his Preface, Brebbia states that the New Forest is 'very different from many other national parks in Britain and other places around the world.' (p. xi). He explains that it is 'home to a large number of people and this makes it a more dynamic environment.' In Brebbia's opinion, 'since the 11th century the New Forest has continued to develop and change without losing its unique ambience'.

Brebbia continues to sum up the history of the Forest, saying that 'it has been a royal hunting ground, a

²⁶ C A Brebbia, *The New Forest: A Personal View*. (Ashurst, Southampton, WIT Press: 2014).

source of timber to the nation, an area for grazing cattle, a producer of minerals and charcoal and, more recently, a place dedicated to leisure activities. The different uses of the Forest have generated numerous industries: since Roman times it has been renowned for its pottery and, more recently, industries as varied as shipbuilding and gunpowder manufacture have taken place.'

He begins his book with a look at the Forest's history from the ancient burial barrows, most of them dating from the Bronze Age, which still exist and contain cremation urns, artefacts and pottery. Brebbia talks about the effects of WWI on the Forest. (p. 17). He mentions that a grenade school was set up at Boltons Bench. The effects are far-reaching – the discovery of ordnance which has to be exploded under controlled conditions has caused consternation recently within Lyndhurst residents. Brebbia categorises the inhabitants of the Forest as 'a race apart, fiercely independent, self-reliant and suspicious of strangers,' (p. 21).

I found this book, with its clear prose and comprehensive knowledge, one of the most delightful and useful sources of inspiration for my own work.

III. Elizabeth George

I chose to study George's novel *This Body of Death* as much of the action takes place in the New Forest. Having read that George undertakes meticulous research, I looked first at her non-fiction book *Write Away*, which gives advice to aspiring writers.

George asserts, 'ideas can come from setting if the writer gets herself out to explore the place she wishes to use in her novel. Likewise, setting can be yet another tool that illuminates everything from character to theme.' (p.

22). Later, she says ‘your setting should be a place that you want to know about, a place you are interested in exploring, a place you want to describe, a place that resonates with you, or a place that evokes a personal and intensely visceral response in you. ... it’s tough to make a place come to life unless you’ve been there and allowed your five senses to experience it, ... if you’re lucky, the place in which you live is a place that resonates with you. If that’s the case, you should certainly consider using it for a setting because you’ll more than likely be able to *render* it and not merely *report* it.’ (p. 29).

In *This Body of Death*, George interweaves a back story with scenes in London and the New Forest.

She also deals with the injury of ponies in motor accidents and the subsequent actions of the Agister. (p. 222, p. 471). There were inaccuracies, which destroyed credibility. George missed an opportunity to create atmosphere and ‘show’ the reader a scene rather than so much plain ‘telling’. Presumably, despite her research, she has never seen a forest valley filling with twilight mist, which floats up to form a dense curtain across a road, in which a stationary pony is invisible to an unwary motorist?

On first reading I found this novel satisfactory. When I came to analyse the New Forest sections I came to other conclusions. I felt that I was reading a reasonable travel brochure, but that George did not paint a picture of the Forest. She captured its statistics but not its soul. Perhaps, to show a chosen location in its true form, meticulous research is not enough. Should a writer live in a location until its essence has been absorbed?

IV. Edward Rutherford

Rutherford writes large, well-researched novels, each one centred on the history of a particular area.

Once I had read the book, I re-read, concentrating on passages that reflected the times of my own work. I started in 1874. (p. 560). Immediately, Rutherford launches into facts: ‘The job of woodman was a pleasant one. He had to keep up the inclosure fences and maintain the drains. That was easy enough. More interesting was the management of the woods themselves, supervising the felling, replanting and thinning of the timber.’ The author goes on at length, detailing a woodman’s life.

Rutherford continues with an exposition on the art of making planks with a wedge and a hammer, that being considered superior to sawing. (p. 561). There were moments in Rutherford’s book when I wanted to cry ‘too much information!’ He does, however, redeem himself with paragraphs such as: ‘There are times in winter when it seems as if the whole Forest is turning into water. A misty haze enveloped the trees, clinging to the ivy-wrapped trunks of ancient oaks, seeping into the interstices of stricken branches, soaking into softening logs. The Forest floor was waterlogged. Huge puddles covered paths and greensward and leafy carpet, turning everything to a brownish, peaty slush. Above, below, in every direction, an all-pervading dampness seemed to be offering to sink into the soul. The Forest was often like this in the months of the old winter heyning.’ (p. 563).

Rutherford, having spent much time on facts interwoven with the history of his fictional characters has one of the main characters from a previous chapter, now 83, reminiscing. This device allows Rutherford to impart

more information, such as ‘I can just remember when Eyeworth was a pretty little keeper’s lodge. ... But then the Office of Woods sold it – to a man who wanted to make gunpowder there. ... A gunpowder factory right in the middle of the Forest?’ (p. 573). There is more historical fact, redeemed by such things as a description of the ‘dark and sulphurous’ waste seeping into the nearby brook and poisoning the cattle. To someone who enjoys walking round Eyeworth Pond, this is not extraneous information.

Rutherford is a popular author, treading a fine line between fact and fiction, in places erring on the side of facts. The Fiction Book Review in Publishers Weekly says of this novel:²⁷

‘Though the geographic landscape is rich, Rutherford rarely generates enough focus and excitement to sustain interest in the mundane anecdotes he strings together, and longwinded passages of exposition and description overwhelm his ambitious narrative.’

Despite this, I found *The Forest* to be an enjoyable and useful book. I used it, alongside other research, as a check on my own grasp of facts, appreciating his undoubted skill as a storyteller. I focus more on storytelling than history, but endeavour to make certain that my facts are relevant and correct.

b) The New Forest as Sanctuary

I. Philip Klitz²⁸

This book, originally published in 1850, is a collection of Klitz’s short sketches of life in the Forest. The version I

²⁷ <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-609-60382-6>. Publishers Weekly, *The Forest: Edward Rutherford, Author*. [accessed 8 July 2017].

²⁸ Philip Klitz, *Sketches of Life, Character and Scenery in The New Forest*. (London, Orr & Co: 1850).

studied is produced in A4 format, the pages held together by wire spiral binding. Ann Perrett (nee Klitz) prepared and published it for the Klitz Family Archives. The book retains the authentic voice of the nineteenth century, with no editing or embellishment. In his chapter 'Life in the New Forest.' Klitz declares 'each succeeding change produces some variety beneficial and congenial to man and it is in his occupation of watching the revolving time, the attitude of his uplifting hands receiving from the passing season its peculiar gifts, that the character of the forester becomes interesting in its native simplicity and patient depending upon Providence. Here, if he has implanted in him any sympathy with that feeling which ought to pervade every breast, he finds ample space for admiration, abundant incitement for gratitude to the Great Power who so wonderfully worketh all things to promote his creatures' happiness.' (p. 5).

In his story 'The Life Insurance,' Klitz writes 'therefore had the forest become a sanctuary and its stillness had tranquilised his spirit and abstracted from it all desire to roam.' (p. 18). In his treatise on Beaulieu Abbey he points out that the Abbey was, literally, a place of sanctuary, in that 'this abbey likewise became especially favoured of holy men, for it was invested with the privilege of sanctuary.' (p. 84).

Although Klitz's 'tales' may seem simplistic to a modern reader, throughout the work his admiration and love for the Forest is evident. I found the book inspiring, not for the facts it contains, but for the feeling that suffuses it, the knowledge that others, throughout the centuries, have felt about the Forest as I do.

II. Radclyffe Hall²⁹

In *Adam's Breed*, Hall portrays a man (Gian-Luca) forsaking his everyday life to seek his soul. He wanders, until he comes to the New Forest. She describes her protagonist's approach 'the trees grew no thicker, nor were there more of them, yet the whole landscape seemed suggestive of trees – for the strange, mysterious spirit of the forest hung over it like a spell.' (p. 356). He passes through 'Cadnam! The name of an unimportant village, having neither interest nor beauty, yet for those who pass through it in search of dreams the name of a deeply-enchanted gateway, for just beyond lies the softly-breathing forest – still dreaming after eight hundred years.' (p. 357). These days, Cadnam is the last exit from the motorway, but the contrast between bleak tarmac and the welcoming forest-lined road to Lyndhurst could still constitute an 'enchanted gateway'.

Hall's description of the Forest is lyrical. (p. 363). 'Gentle and fierce by turns was the forest, like a great, throbbing human heart. Its gentler thoughts came to life in its bracken, in its delicate mosses and silvery lichens, in its little wild berries – the food of the birds – in its pools and its glades and its flowers.'

Gian-Luca, unkempt and starving as hermits often are, finally finds his God within himself as he dies in the sanctuary of his forest glade. 'A leaf drifted quietly down and touched him, but Gian-Luca lay very still.' (p. 378). In my *Old Graves in Lyndhurst* I use the symbolism of leaves being 'lovely in their death' to induce the same feeling.

²⁹ Radclyffe Hall, *Adam's Breed*. (London, Virago Press Limited: 1985). Further references will be given in the main text.

III. Captain Marryat

This is probably one of the best-known adventure books for children. I certainly knew and loved it before I had encountered the reality of the Forest. It is written with a healthy dose of religious instruction, true to its time, and shows the Forest offering sanctuary to its participants.

Marryat's story centres on the four children of Colonel Beverley, living at Arnwood near Lymington, which 'abutted on the New Forest, and might have been supposed to have been a continuation of it.' (p. 2). The children have been orphaned and are living in the care of an elderly relation. Threatened with death at the hands of Cromwellian troops, they are taken into the care of Jacob Armitage, an old forester who 'had been all his life under the greenwood tree and could not bear to leave the forest.' (p. 3). Although Marryat is very practical in his descriptions of the forest, which he treats pragmatically as a source of good hunting, the feeling that the family has, indeed, found sanctuary is very strong. Armitage dies soon after their arrival and the four children are left to manage on their own. Edward, the eldest, reflects later 'I and my brother and sisters have been preserved and protected.' (p. 171). Throughout, the Forest shelters and provides for them.

After many 'adventures', the eldest boy rides to join the army of King Charles II, defeated by the Parliamentarians at Worcester. He and two companions, in Puritan disguise, head for the New Forest, destined once again to provide sanctuary. As one of them says 'it is almost Arcadian.' (p. 283).

At the end, Marryat adopts a precis style and rounds off the book by taking a 'happily ever after'

approach. Everyone, from the king down, regains their rightful place. The Beverleys retain their connection with the Forest cottage which provided sanctuary in their childhood. The reader is left feeling that the Forest is an enduring presence, waiting to shelter and protect in times of trouble.

Children of the New Forest was written in 1847, in a style far removed from later children's literature. The fact that I, and no doubt countless other 20th Century children brought up on the work, remember it so fondly and in such detail, is a testimony to the author's craftsmanship. I consider it a foundation stone in the fascination that the Forest has always held for me. Re-reading it as an adult, I am aware that his descriptions of forest scenery resonate with me, matching the locations I have used for my own stories.

IV. Philip Hoare³⁰

In *England's Lost Eden*, Hoare describes the New Forest as 'a place where the pagan worship of trees conflated with the verdant cross of Christian immortality, ever subject to the immemorial cycle of life, death and resurrection, this new-old forest stands for all threatened wildernesses. It promises a sylvan idyll, the greenwood of all our imaginings, invested with certainty and superstition, hope and fear; a place of sanctuary, mystery and magical transformation, here in the heart of England, our lost and ancient Eden.' (p. 7).

The first third of Hoare's book traces the progress of 'the Girlingites' until the point where they have become too unpopular and need to flee from London. (p. 136). He

³⁰ Philip Hoare, *England's Lost Eden: Adventures in a Victorian Utopia*. (London, HarperCollins Publishers: 2005). Further references will be given in the main text.

says: 'Mary Ann now experienced a new vision. She was told to gather her Children together for the Second Coming, and was issued with a specific instruction: "God had given to her New Forest Lodge at Hordle, Hampshire, for this purpose", as if from some heavenly estate agent.' Hoare quotes the *Daily News* of 18 December 1874: 'Had they searched England through these peculiar people could not have pitched their camp at a more suitable place for quietness and repose. The New Forest is the sleepiest hollow we have left to us.' (p. 139).

Hoare writes with the eye of a poet and consummate skill. He paints a vivid picture of a deluded but charismatic figure seeking sanctuary in the New Forest. I gained greater confidence in my own beliefs knowing from Hoare's work that Mary Ann Girling found sanctuary and ultimate burial in the Forest.

c) The Supernatural New Forest

I. Introduction

Passing Beaulieu at dusk, when plainsong can be heard from the cloisters, the head may insist that the sound is computer-generated, but the heart will wonder what other voices may be joining in. The Forest keeps its secrets locked away, its mysticism unviolated. The sight of a burial mound outlined against a pink-streaked sky, of mist coiling in a valley bottom where a white stag grazes amongst his hinds, must surely suggest that the New Forest is a supernatural place, where the world of myth and fable is just out of reach and may intrude on humanity. Apparently, this is not the case. The paranormal database records (see Appendix 2) for the New Forest show no more manifestations than are recorded elsewhere, although it would seem that the ghost

of Alice Lisle is busy, with sightings occurring in five places.³¹

Alice Lisle ((1617 – 1685) was the last woman to be executed by a judicial sentence of beheading in England. She was sentenced by Judge Jeffries at the Bloody Assizes. Her ghost apparently appears regularly at Moyles Court, her home, and Winchester, her place of execution. Nor does she lie peacefully in her grave at Ellingham.

There appears to be no record of the compilers of the Paranormal Database, though it does claim that it '*is a serious ongoing project to quantitatively document as many locations with paranormal/cryptozoological interest as possible, region by region, in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and the Channel Islands. One hundred and three areas are currently covered, now totaling over 11,300 entries, with frequent additions and current stories continuously updated. This is not a 'paranormal tourism'.*' Even the 'Contacts' page only provides a form on which to record paranormal experiences.

It is interesting, however, that two of the recorded manifestations are of 'fairy entities.' John Wise in the mid-19th century recounted 'a widespread belief in a "tricksy fairy", a mischievous creature that inhabited the bogs, drawing people into them, and then laughing at their misfortune. Westwood and Simpson in *The Lore of the Land* record nothing other than the death of William Rufus as the source of supernatural happenings in the New Forest.³²

³¹ <http://www.paranormaldatabase.com/hampshire/hampdata>. *Hampshire - Paranormal Database Records*. [accessed 9 February 2017].

³² Jennifer Westwood, Jacqueline Simpson, *The Lore of the Land: A guide to England's Legends*. (London, Penguin Books Ltd: 2005).

II. Sonia Smith³³

Smith claims in the introduction to her book that ‘all of the stories in this book are authentic,’ adding ‘I have used artistic licence in the writing of them to make them more readable, but all of the basic facts of the strange happenings are true’. (p. 5). She sums up ‘these unexplained happenings will remain a delicious mystery that sends a shiver down our spine when we read about them.’ (p. 6). She covers 19 stories, of which six are set in the New Forest. Unfortunately, a closer analysis of these six stories shows that their subject matter is mundane and none, in fact, draw in any way on the ambience of the New Forest to make them readable.

I hoped that *Stories of the Supernatural* would include manifestations in the Forest and would clarify for me the atavistic sense of menace that can sometimes imbue the Forest. I was disappointed that there were no such stories and, certainly, no ‘shiver down the spine’ to add frisson to my own work.

III. Thomas Brown³⁴

Brown has always loved dark fiction, listing amongst his literary influences Friedrich Nietzsche, S T Joshi and Russian novelist Andrei Makine. His novel’s genre is Horror, his story centres on the greed of human nature and the convenient amnesia and isolation that allows its manifestation in a lonely Forest village.

Brown sets the forest scene immediately, describing a woman walking her dog ‘beneath the alder trees, which grew near Mawley Bog, and around the

³³ Sonia Smith, *Hampshire & the New Forest: Stories of the Supernatural*. (Newbury, Countryside Books: 2009).

³⁴ Thomas Brown, *Lynnwood*. (Sparkling Books Ltd: 2013).

outskirts of Lynnwood'. He describes how the village 'dated back to the fourteenth century when settlers first flocked in real numbers to the Forest,' and 'ancient oaks hemmed in the village, and beech and yew and holly. Together they kept the place their own'. He is already establishing the isolation of his setting.

In Chapter two, Brown increases the tension when describing 'a church for a parish which needed spiritual nourishment, when the nights drew in and the dogs began to bay.' By Chapter four, with some backstory, he is more specific, describing how visitors 'were watched by someone or something between the trees; a spirit of the wilds or perhaps the trees themselves, standing guard over the clear waters from which they drank.' Relationships between various characters are explored; in Chapter seven, Brown returns to the idea of the Forest as a tangible entity: 'the hallowed quiet of the Forest in the absence of bird calls or the trickling brook, their dirges frozen on the air, as water to sheets of ice'.

Brown's main theme is gluttony, an aching hunger which afflicts his protagonists until they take to the Forest and transmogrify into horrific creatures. He makes the reader see the Forest as a place of shadows and fearsome presences, lurking on the outskirts of village life. Throughout the book, he becomes more specific as hidden horrors move out into public view. One section finishes with a statement reminiscent of Hall's God-seeking hero: 'I go to the Forest, where I shall run and be free and perhaps find Him in the trees and the earth, if not in myself'.

Brown is aware of the dark places within all men; his novel is Rural Gothic, a modern story of spirits, of

presences. The Forest is a looming presence in the lives of his protagonists, a living thing that eventually draws them into its embrace. The novel follows its inexorable course, until the protagonists have all transformed and vanished into the Forest. Throughout, Brown establishes the supernatural aspects of the Forest in a masterful manner.

I found that immersing myself in Brown's version of the Forest renewed my own feelings of the hidden menace lurking behind its smiling face which, hopefully, I can convey to readers through my stories.

IV. Michael O'Leary

In O'Leary's *Folk Tales*, he starts his section 'Ytene: The Forest,' with the statement 'the first thing to say about the New Forest is that it is old; indeed it is ancient. The oak and beech woodland is typical of how much of England's landscape would have been in pre-medieval times – 'climax woodland', the mature stage of natural forest succession'. He goes on to explain how the Forest contains 'great stretches of heathland and bogland – some of which, like Cranes Moor, are the same today as they would have been after the last glaciation. This is highly unusual in the intensely managed landscape of England.' Later he talks of the people of the Forest – 'there are the people who seem to have been in the Forest forever – the people who may have resented the Saxons and Danes as much as they resented the Normans.'

In his introduction to *Ghost Tales*, O'Leary says 'before any keeper of the county's folklore – one who would fossilise the fragments of communal memory and transmission into the proper and the improper, the correct and the incorrect – whacks me over the head with a

dictionary of folklore, I confess that I have been guilty of applying my own imagination to these stories. Just a bit'. As a follower of storytelling tradition, he is aware that the teller's imagination is what keeps these tales alive, adding to the frisson of a dark night around the fire and a recounting of supernatural events.

In his first story set in the New Forest, O'Leary shows the lyrical quality of his imagination when setting the scene: 'Andrew had been walking through an area of massive beech trees, many of which had dropped whole limbs after recent storms, and the lordly but battered beeches, the holly trees between them, the deer-scabbed stumps, the occasional gnarled old oaks, set a scene that was full of strange, primeval faces, twisted expressions and crooked fingers'. Later, he refers to 'standing at the tree line on the edge of White Moor, looking over the ground mist to a stark, white skeletal silver birch tree.' The reader is aware of the menace of the forest before any supernatural event takes place.

In *The Groaning Tree* O'Leary's first sentence sets the scene: 'I've heard the groan in the Forest.' Later, he says 'the Forest doesn't always feel benign: sometimes unsettling feelings, thoughts and sounds seem to emanate from the tree line.' Once again, he has captured the ambience long before any supernatural happenings.

O'Leary retells the story of William Rufus' assassination. He adds, 'but the Forest is a strange place – and there is another tale, a tale that lurks deep within the psyche of the Forest, and that's the story of blood sacrifice.' He talks about the 'theory that the killing was a ritual sacrifice. The killing took place on Lammas eve'. He puts forward the suggestion that 'the Rufus was part of

a Mithraic cult, and was offering himself for sacrifice.' He finishes by saying – 'these stories of the Forest stretch back in time – to when there was still blood in the soil, and where something ancient and terrible was lurking, should you be unlucky enough to feel it.'

O'Leary concludes with the statement 'folklore lives and breathes – it doesn't die, it adapts. The Forest is full of folklore, which reaches back into a distant past, but, like a tree, it still continues to grow, and even when an old oak has fallen, new branches grow out of the trunk.'

O'Leary is a local storyteller and collector of folk lore. In his books, I found the atmosphere and inspirations that reinforced my own view of the Forest and gave me faith in the veracity of my own work. I may not have heard the '*creak of wheels and the plod of a pony's hooves as the body of a tyrant king is taken on a peasant's cart to Winchester*' (my story *A Philanthropic Gentleman*), but I have no doubt that it could happen. O'Leary takes the stories handed down through the Forest generations and, adding his own skill and imagination, passes them on to the next generation.

d) Writing with the New Forest as Location

I am fortunate in that, while immersing myself mentally in the work of other writers, I am physically immersed in the Forest, so am constantly aware of its ambience. I may not appreciate the Forest's proximity when deer decimate my garden, or a lonely fox fills the night with its cries, the tawny owls hooting their mating calls in derision. But in my opinion, there is no better place to live.

I wanted, in my stories, to cover various ages of the Forest. I start with *The Gamekeeper and the Silver Lady* and *A*

Spell for Love, featuring the beginnings of the house which, in the last story, is known as ‘*Silver Lady Cottage*’. The *Winterbourne Years* section is set in Victorian/Edwardian times and in ‘*Breaking News*’ I take a tongue-in-the-cheek look at the future.

One deep-rooted controversy in the Forest concerns the provision of a Lyndhurst by-pass to relieve the terrible traffic congestion through its narrow High Street, particularly in the summer months. I have featured ‘the Lyndhurst tail-back’ in my stories *The Unmentionable Miracle* and *Silver Lady Cottage*.

In *The Gamekeeper and the Silver Lady* I have deliberately made no attempt to establish the exact period, trying to lend a fairy tale atmosphere to the whole, but hope that it reads as though set around 900 years ago. Tubbs says ‘the Forest was a place of small hamlets among the woods and heaths, on which the inhabitants depended for grazing and other resources.’ (p. 47). He details the role of the Verderers and the jurisdiction of the Verderers’ Court, which still meets today. (p. 91). I have used this method of local government in my story *Breaking News*, postulating that the court is the obvious place to site a parliament in the event of the New Forest claiming independence.

Tubbs sums up: ‘circumstances are often such that Forest holdings fail to pass from one generation of commoners to another. Sadly, the inheriting relatives often prefer the capital to the farm.’ My story *Mad as a March Hare* shows a Brockenhurst-reared person returning by obtaining a newly-converted cottage, but in *Orlando* I have a couple buying into the Forest on an open market.

The Institute which Brebbia founded is based at Ashurst Lodge, near a circular hill fort, dating from between the late

Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age.³⁵ In my story *Angelic Dilemma*, I have been disparaging about Ashurst village, which grew up around the railway station, but the Lodge is a typical New Forest settlement, secreted in a Forest glade. Brebbia mentions that the old airfield at Beaulieu is the only place in the Forest where the flying of model aircraft is allowed – I have used it as a playground for a transgressing husband in *The Bread Man*.

Brebbia says ‘it is remarkable how many families are still living here since the first records were produced, their names being associated with the Forest since its origins.’ (p. 22). Certainly, as the local telephone directory demonstrates, the Purkis name, in its variations, is still found throughout the area. I have used the name to show this continuity in *Emily, Mole, Leave Well Alone*.

Rutherford’s chapters are short stories, each linking back to the previous one. He traces families through the centuries and stresses the continuity of the Forest. Similarly, in *The Winterbourn Years* I have carried on location and characters from one story to the other.

Brebbia offers his book as a personal view, limiting its coverage to those places he knows. Because of familiarity with the area, I have set my work in or around Lyndhurst, with the exception of the mental asylum which appears in *A Philanthropic Gentleman*, *The Power of a Whisper*, *The Story of Emily and Me* by Edward, *Mole*, and is imaginary but based on existing landscape. Lyndhurst’s church contains a poignant memorial to two of Alice Hargreaves’ three sons. She was a major force in village life, so I find it sad that she is remembered, to the point of it being recorded on her grave, as ‘Alice in Wonderland.’ She came to Lyndhurst as a young

³⁵ The Wessex Institute of Technology (a postgraduate research centre).

bride, when her ‘Alice’ years in Oxford were over, and immersed herself in village affairs. I have used her home as inspiration for ‘*Winterbourn House*’ and Alice herself for my character of Esther Winterbourn in *Death of a House*.

Brebbia describes Minstead as ‘one of the most charming villages in the Forest,’ (p. 36). I concur and used it as one of my settings in *Oh for the wings....., The Unmentionable Miracle*.

Hoare writes of the death of William Rufus: ‘some saw Rufus as “the Divine Victim, giver of fertility to his kingdom”, killed on the morrow of the pagan feast of Lammas in order to propitiate the gods.’ (p. 3). In ‘*A Philanthropic Gentleman*,’ I wrote ‘*as a born and bred son of the New Forest he is attuned to its moods. All seems well. Samuel knows in his very bones that the New Forest, shaped by the royal predator become prey, is a place of secrets and shadows, of sacrifice, for a king’s blood nourishes the earth.*’ This character sees the Forest as a threat, insisting that ‘*at the first signs of dusk, when the forest trees reach black fingers across the garden hedge, all the curtains in the house must be drawn tight.*’

I realised in assembling the collection that, although I had criticised other writers for not incorporating the particular ambience of the forest, much of my work deals with human relations within the location. I therefore included a piece of flash fiction, *Forest Meditation*, as my personal tribute to the ‘other worldliness’ of the Forest.

I am fascinated by the variations within relationships, the fact that what, on the surface, is a contented way of life may contain hidden currents. Of particular interest is inarticulateness within a relationship and the way in which people who have known each other for a lifetime still find it difficult to communicate.

My story *Orlando* is an attempt to portray, in a third-person narrative, a couple who have gone through a marriage together without being able to express their feelings. Frances, the wife, has expended her emotional energy first on her children and latterly on her cat. I wanted to show a couple who do all that they can for each other, who show their love in practical ways, but are unable to articulate it. Because of the isolation of my characters, I have used little dialogue to break up the narrative. Apart from one ‘mutter’ from Henry, the only speech comes from Frances talking to herself, which illustrates her loneliness.

The original purpose of *Leave Well Alone* was to write a light-hearted ghost story, with no particular sense of menace. I realised that I was in fact producing a variation on the ‘eternal triangle’ theme, plus murder, with a ghost as the main protagonist. ‘Fran’ is a pragmatic character making the best of a strange situation in a practical way.

For ‘*The Bread Man*,’ I wanted to explore the simmering resentments that can build up in a marriage. I deliberately did not name the narrator, a woman who has lost her identity in the morass of marriage and motherhood. There is a precedent: Daphne du Maurier referred to her heroine only as ‘the second Mrs de Winter,’ keeping her in the shadow of her glamorous predecessor.³⁶

Alan Bennett’s story *The Clothes they stood up in* features a woman with the same dilemma: ‘Marriage to Mrs Ransome had often seemed a kind of parenthesis.’³⁷ The story ends after her husband’s death, with the words ‘Now, she thinks, I can start.’ (p. 160). A. S. Byatt in *Crocodile Tears* portrays a couple, looking at exhibits in an art gallery, who

³⁶ Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*. (London, Virago Press: 2003).

³⁷ Alan Bennett, *Four Stories*. (London, Profile Books Ltd: 2006). p. 159.

‘were happily married and harmonious in their stares, on the whole.’³⁸ Yet when the husband drops dead on that excursion, the wife walks away, returns home and packs, leaving her life behind. Byatt says ‘vanishing without trace was an idea that had teased her through all the happy years of her married life, her working life.’ (p. 11).

I have been fortunate in knowing genuine born-and-bred foresters. I have found them sturdy, pragmatic people, steadfast in adversity, standing no nonsense and certainly not suffering fools gladly. Characters such as my protagonist in *The Bread Man* and Dora in *Leave Well Alone* show the calm acceptance of life’s vicissitudes that is my impression of a typical Forest woman.

³⁸ A S Byatt, *Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice*. (London, Vintage: 1999). p. 3.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PRECIS

1. Introduction

First person narration excites me most. I feel that there is an element of the actor in this style: the author, like the actor, needs to know the character well in order to use the correct voice. Lawrence Block in *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit* says of writing in the first person: 'You don't observe from without. Instead, you get under your character's skin and speak to the reader in his voice, and by doing this you not only make the character come alive for the reader. You make him come alive for your own self as you write.'³⁹

Neale states that 'writing is a perceptual art, one in which images are created via language.'⁴⁰ He also says 'perception should involve all of the senses, not just the visual.' (p. 49). I have found that my initial drafts tend to be mostly visual. Rewrites need a conscious effort to involve the other senses, with smell and taste the most difficult.

Anderson says 'settings can be more than backdrop to action.'⁴¹ I have tried to convey the forest almost as another character, an intrinsic part of the plots.

2. Short Stories

I took Lydia Davis' *Collected Stories* as an exemplar.⁴² I credit Davis with my own liberation as a writer; it was her work that taught me that a story could be as short or as long as it needed to be. Previously I had restricted myself to the 'accepted' length of stories.

³⁹ Lawrence Block, *Telling Lies for Fun and Profit: a Manual for Fiction Writers*. (New York, Harper: 1981). p. 156.

⁴⁰ Derek Neale, 'Writing what you know' in *Creative Writing: A workbook with readings*, ed. by Linda Anderson (Milton Keynes/Abingdon, The Open University in association with Routledge: 2009). p. 45.

⁴¹ Linda Anderson, 'Setting as symbolic power' in *Creative Writing: A workbook with readings*, ed. by Linda Anderson (Milton Keynes/Abingdon, The Open University in association with Routledge: 2009). p. 96.

⁴² Lydia Davis, *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis*. (London, Penguin Books: 2009). pp 123, 298

Davis' *Safe Love* is only 73 words long, her *The Outing* is 60 words, but both are complete stories.

My characters are unreliable narrators, blinkered by their own prejudices and limited point of view. As Anderson says 'first-person narrators are inevitably fallible.'⁴³

Some of my stories use the omniscient narrator voice.

Newman and Mittelmark satirise the amateur writer who has 'given yourself the freedom to know the history of all the world, see into every mind, and explain the chemical formula for dishwashing liquid in a scene where the only animate character is a backward child.'⁴⁴ They continue with the sensible advice that 'you must first create an authorial voice that belongs to the omniscient narrator, not to any (or all) of the characters.'

Studying the work of short story writers, of whom Lydia Davis a prime example, confirmed my feeling that this is the discipline that appeals most to me. I bear the words of Simon Heffer in mind: 'concision is the writer's weapon against obscurity, and precision his shield against incomprehension.'⁴⁵

I have discovered that in both reading and writing I tend to be more interested in character than plot. Anderson when talking of character creation considers that 'building characters is a gradual process,' but quotes Elizabeth Bowen who considers that 'characters pre-exist. They are found.'⁴⁶ Gardner, however, considers that 'the writer must do more than simply make up characters. ... He must shape simultaneously ... his characters, plot, and setting, each

⁴³ Linda Anderson, 'Point of view: Trying on voices' in *Creative Writing: A workbook with readings*, ed. by Linda Anderson (Milton Keynes/Abingdon, The Open University in association with Routledge 2009). p. 105.

⁴⁴ Sandra Newman & Howard Mittelmark, *How Not to Write a Novel: 200 mistakes to avoid at all costs if you ever want to get published*. (London, Penguin Books: 2009). p. 163.

⁴⁵ Simon Heffer, *Strictly English*. (London, Random House Books: 2010). p. 227.

⁴⁶ Linda Anderson, 'Character Creation' in *Creative Writing: A workbook with readings*, ed. by Linda Anderson (Milton Keynes/Abingdon, The Open University in association with Routledge: 2009). p. 70.

inextricably connected to the others.⁴⁷ Anderson points out ‘you need never sacrifice fiction’s gift of being able to render a character’s inner life in all its complexity.’

⁴⁷ John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. (New York, Vintage Books: 1991). p. 46.

CONCLUSION

I started with a genuine love for the New Forest. When I decided to use it as a location, I wanted to know whether a writer can convey a sense of place in a way that will also entrance the reader.

I read as widely as possible about the New Forest, both fiction and non-fiction. I found it interesting that non-fiction writers such as Tubbs and Brebbia, while recounting facts, display their love for the Forest as eloquently as many fiction writers. Learning from Tubbs that the poor soil of the Forest does not encourage earthworms, which in turn leads to a paucity of hedgehogs, may not have inspired a short story, but such facts do enable one to regard the forest with a more discerning eye.

Each of the writers I studied helped to give a fuller dimension to my own work. Their understanding of the Forest, together with their crafting of it as a location, enhanced my own sense of its importance. I wrote my stories, immersed in the sights and sounds, myths and facts, of the New Forest. I based my characters on the pragmatic, forthright nature of Foresters I have met, trying to convey their varying types and attitudes. Without trying to ‘sell’ the Forest to a reader, I tried to convey its unique nature. Elizabeth Jolley summed up the dilemma of the writer attempting to make their writing ‘creative’, to tell a story that will resonate with the reader, while using a place that exists and can be explored. (p. 168). She says:

‘There are little seams in fiction where the old and the new, the half-forgotten, the remembered, the understood and the misunderstood are pieced together. The faithfulness, the loyalty of the writer is often stretched, the seams might be vivid with stitching or blurred and indistinct, but the essence of the real is confined in the imaginative use of the material’.

Appendix 1

Fiction: Bibliography from the Christopher Tower Reference Library.⁴⁸ Nb: this is a verbatim (hence the repetitions) copy of the bibliography, using the Library's own reference system.

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Appendix 2

Incidence of paranormal occurrences in the New Forest. The following quotes are taken verbatim from the Paranormal Database. There appears to be no record of its compilers.

‘The Paranormal Database...⁴⁹

‘...is a serious ongoing project to quantitatively document as many locations with paranormal / cryptozoological interest as possible, region by region, in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and the Channel Islands. One hundred and three areas are currently covered, now totaling over 11,300 entries, with frequent additions and current stories continuously updated. This is **not** a ‘paranormal tourism’ site - many of these places are private, and as such, the owner’s privacy should be considered paramount.

‘Found in the south of England, Hampshire possesses a good mix of great coast and pretty countryside. Of its 1650 square miles, 145 is made up of the New Forest, the largest ancient forest to be found in England. The coastal towns (in particular Portsmouth) are popular with both holiday visitors and paranormal events.’

New Forest, Hampshire - Paranormal Database Records

Location: Beaulieu - Palace Lane Cottage

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: Mid twentieth century

Further Comments: This cottage was haunted by loud whispers and footsteps heard in empty rooms. The presence also opened and closed doors around the building

Location: Bisterne - Dragon Fields

Type: Dragon

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: The area was held to ransom by a fire breather who demanded a pail of milk once a day. The knight who engaged the dragon in battle barely made it out of the conflict with his life, and though the dragon lay slain, the victor died shortly after.

Location: Braishfield - Dark Lane, and the surrounding area

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: The area is reportedly haunted by the shade of an Edwardian woman looking for a hoard of treasure she hid while living in a building along the road. She is said to be more likely to be seen by dogs, which react by howling for no apparent reason, rather than people.

Location: Burley - Hill known as Burley Beacon

Type: Dragon

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: This dragon terrorised the neighbourhood after demanding a sacrifice of sheep - the locals gave him milk instead. Before long, the reliable knight of yore came along, covered his armour with birdlime (a sticky substance made from bark) and powdered glass, and engaged the creature.

⁴⁹ <http://www.paranormaldatabase.com/hampshire/hampdata> (accessed 09.02.2017).

The knight won the fight, but his two hunting dogs were killed and he later died of his sustained injuries.

Location: Burley - Queen's Head Inn

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: A former smuggler, Warne is now said to haunt this inn.

Location: Burley - New Forest

Type: Other

Date / Time: 26 December 2005

Further Comments: While driving around lost, looking for a road sign, a couple passed a patch of purple / blue smoke, around 2 metres by 3 metres in diameter, hovering around 2 metres off the ground. They drove back to have another look, but the smoke had gone.

Location: Cadnam - White Hart Inn

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: Twentieth century

Further Comments: Though never seen, this woman's perfume has been reported on several occasions, while her presence is also denoted by a sudden change in temperature.

Location: Emery Down - New Forest Inn

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: 2000s

Further Comments: A phantom woman is said to haunt the corner of the bar, removing the pictures from the walls and drawing the curtains when no one is looking.

Location: Holbury - Old Mill Inn

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: The phantom monk reported here has an intense red beard.

Location: Lyndhurst - Swan Inn

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: A local legend says that the inn is haunted by the ghost of a tall man, thought to be a former landlord who killed himself.

Location: Lyndhurst - Glasshayes Mansion (scheduled for demolition in 2016)

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: 07 July (reoccurring)

Further Comments: The first Duc de Stacpoole is said to throw a party for the dead in July, the music from which can be heard. At other times of the year, people have reported faces at the windows of empty parts of the building or experiencing the sensation of being watched.

Location: Minstead - New Forest

Type: Fairy

Date / Time: 1920s

Further Comments: It was said around this time that several little people climbed the trees of the forest, possessing catlike attributes for better balance.

Location: Minstead - New Forest, the Rufus Stone

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: 02 August (reoccurring)

Further Comments: Murdered (allegedly) on this spot by a close friend, William II is now doomed to rise on the anniversary of his death and walk to Winchester.

Location: New Forest - Cold Pixie's Cave, Beaulieu Heath

Type: Fairy

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: A horse-like pixie, this fairy entity would play mild pranks and call out to horses so they became lost.

Location: Pilley - Fleurs de Lys Inn

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: Said to be the oldest pub in the New Forest, the Fleurs de Lys is haunted by a woman with grey hair, seen in the kitchen area.

Location: Setley - Filly Inn (formally Fillie Inne)

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: 2000s

Further Comments: This inn was built where a much older inn once stood. The latter building was demolished soon after three men were arrested within for a murder and highway robbery. It is said that one of the robbers tried to repent, but was hanged regardless. The entity is now said to make his presence known by throwing things around the room.

Alice Lisle

Location: Ellingham - Moyles Court

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: For assisting two fugitives, Alice Lisle was hanged in 1685 - though her defence was that she did what any good Christian would do. The rustling of her silken dress and footfalls could be heard echoing down the corridors for many years after her death. The road outside the hall was also haunted by Alice in a coach, pulled by headless horses.

Location: Rockford - Area around Alice Lisle public house

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: Alice Lisle was the last woman to be executed by decapitation, at the hands of Judge Jeffreys. Her ghost rides around the area in a driverless coach, pulled by headless horses.

Location: Winchester - Moyles Court

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: After her execution in 1685, the ghost of Lady Alice Beccomsawe Lisle was reported in three areas of her old neighbourhood. At her former home, Moyles Court, she could be heard walking along corridors; her disembodied footsteps always accompanied with the swoosh of her silken dress.

Location: Winchester - Ellingham Lane

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: Unknown

Further Comments: The driverless phantom coach is said to contain Lady Alice Lisle, one of three locations where her ghost haunts. Though the coach and horses have not been seen for many years, it has been said that the sound of a carriage can still be heard.

Location: Winchester - The Eclipse public house

Type: Haunting Manifestation

Date / Time: 1685 onwards

Further Comments: Beheaded opposite the pub for assisting local rebels, the tall grey shade of Alice Lisle now haunts the area where she spent her last night on earth. This is one of three locations reportedly haunted by Lady Lisle.

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SECTION 2 - SHORT STORIES:

HAUNTS & SHADES

**STORIES OF
ORDINARY
PEOPLE IN AN
EXTRAORDINARY
PLACE**



In the New Forest, ponies congregate in their 'haunts', and escape the biting flies in a 'shade,' (often the middle of the road, to the great annoyance of motorists).

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I

In the beginning

The Gamekeeper and the Silver Lady

The old man sits in the inglenook, soaking heat into his aching bones. The small granddaughter tasked with his care sleeps with her head on his knee.

He can smell new-baked bread. When his wife made bread, he would spread the warm crust with butter from his cows and honey from his hives, licking the golden drops from his chin, meeting his wife's eyes, alight with the promise of sweeter delights to come.

His eldest grandson's wife brings him his supper. Bread soaked in warm milk and swirled with honey. Sweet and kind to an old mouth. He can remember the feel of his strong white teeth tearing the flesh from a mutton bone, his strength as he sang the old songs and told the old tales. Breath comes harder now, but still the grandchildren gather at his knee before bed, begging for just one more of his stories.

The hubbub of the children's play subsides into a gentle murmur and the scrape of spoons as they settle to their supper. He slips into sleep.

In his dream, he is building his home, the strength of youth coursing through his veins. He can work all day and half the night, for he is about to marry. He is extending an old cottage. Small but sturdy, rooted in the forest ground. None of the villagers have a memory of it being built, nor do they know how his family came to own the land on which it stands. They were already there when the village began to grow at the foot of the slopes and when it became an important settlement. They were there when the surrounding trees were but saplings and the land was unfettered, free to those who could work and hold it, before the invaders fenced and ravaged. They were there, so it is said, when magic ruled the land and wolves roamed free.

In the condensed time of his dream, he leads his bride home. He has built them a room for living and a room for loving. He will build more rooms as their children arrive to fill them. At the back of his new cob cottage is the original building. It has one room, which he will use for storage, and a strange, built-on room. His grandmother and her grandmother before her claimed that room, for it is fashioned from living trees that reach up and shade

it from the glare and heat of the sun. The low window looks out onto a forest glade, carpeted blue in spring and russet in Autumn. Apples grow there and mystic mistletoe. A spring rises, the water clear and sweet, never failing. There is a great oak under which the badgers build their sett, bees hum amongst the violets and wild garlic. Birds sing sweeter in that place. His bride's spindle and loom await her busy hands.

The Old Man awakens to a tugging on his sleeve and a gentle but insistent tapping on his knee. He opens his clouded eyes.

'Granfer, Granfer, wake up.'

He can smell the clean smell of a child who has scampered in the sun all day, the miasma of a pony that galloped with its young dreamer through the ancient ways. A granddaughter is at his elbow, spring-clear eyes intent on her task. A grandson, hopefully cross-legged in front of him, maintains the assault on his knee. The despair of his mother, this one, his skin infused with horse sweat and his clothes covered in horse hair. He fears nothing and no-one, setting forth each day intent on valorous deeds.

'Granfer, will you tell us a story before bed?'

'Please, Granfer, please.'

He loves them all, but these two are the children of his heart. The other children, clambering to collapse on the floor around him, know it and send them as their emissaries.

Only one child stays apart, a strange boy, with moonlight hair and eyes like gorse on the heathland. He sits by the door, carefully opened to a crack that a thin boy can slip through. He rarely speaks and mostly tends the beasts. The womenfolk have given up trying to put him to bed, for he will not stay indoors at night. No-one knows where his hides may be, whether he sleeps in a den or a tree, but he will always be there for breakfast and never seems to take harm.

'Can a man not sleep in peace? Ah well, if it will get you to bed the sooner, a story it shall be. Which one tonight?'

The Old Man's daughters hide their smiles. He loves this quiet time and, truth to tell, they are glad to clear the mayhem of the day in peace, knowing that their young will go to bed with their heads full of good dreams. They may pay lip service to the new religion, but a rowan tree at the door guards against witches and ancient charms protect the windows and the hearth stone. The sleep of contented children does not attract the wicked or mischievous who roam the forest at night.

‘Dragons.’

‘No, knights and castles.’

‘Fairies.’

‘Granfer,’ a quiet boy at the back of the group, soon to grow away from childish things. ‘Will you tell us the tale of the gamekeeper and the silver lady?’

‘Sit close, then, and hush. For this is a tale of the days before days, when the rich ruled wisely and the poor worked their land happily, before the invaders came and misery stalked the forest. It is a tale of ancient ways, of ancient mysteries, of ancient magicks. So, by the power of three I tell this tale and on those who hear it may blessings be. As I will, so mote it be.’

Not a child moves, barely breathing, caught in the spell an expert storyteller weaves.

Once upon a time our forest was prosperous and peaceful. This, you must understand, was in the far-off days when knights were brave and ladies beautiful. The Lords looked after their people, who worked cheerfully. Even, it is said, even the children were well-behaved.

There are muffled giggles. His grandchildren have heard this opening before.

There was in those days a young gamekeeper who nurtured his Lord's game, cherishing the noble stags with their docile hinds and fawns. He kept his lands free of predators. He was a man, browned by his life in the forest sun and wind, who dressed in woodland colours to blend into his surroundings. He built for himself a cottage in a shady clearing. Living trees

formed his corner posts, mossy bark clothed his walls, lake reeds thatched his roof. He was happy in his life, but lonely. As he went quietly about his work he told his troubles to the forest spirits and asked that he might be sent someone to companion his heart, to love and comfort him, to whom he would be faithful all his days. He was young and careless. Not all who listen in the forest are friendly and man is not granted favours without payment.

The young man came into a forest glade. Bluebells and sweet wild violets wove a carpet and a fallen birch tree made a throne. There sat a maiden, her long silver hair caressing the birch bark, her eyes glowing. She wore a gossamer gown, grey as the breast of a turtle dove, fine as a cobweb. She held out white hands to him.

'I do not know how I came here, nor have I any memory of life before this moment. What is this place and who, handsome stranger, are you?'

'I am the keeper of these woods and the custodian of those within them.' Young men are prone to boasting of their own importance when in the presence of a beautiful woman. Lost in his first love he failed to hear a chuckle from the oak tree behind him.

The air in the glade spiralled gently, carrying the scent of flowers and young bracken, of the sweet breath of deer. The young man was intoxicated. An older, wiser man might have detected an underlying carrion reek.

The gamekeeper poured out the longings of his heart and, bedazzled by love, begged her to be his. The maiden agreed to live with him and be his one true love, but she had a wish of her own.

'Each full moon, my woman's sorrows come upon me and I must sleep alone. Will you make me my own room? Will you promise never to open the door or set foot inside?'

He made her a room, cool and sweet as a forest glade. He kept his promise and they loved well and truly. He longed for them to have children and for a while he thought it might be so. But she had another wish.

'I have loved you and never gainsaid you. But I feel in my heart that I must go into the forest and be alone. Will you let me go and believe that I will

return? Will you promise that you will not look to find me or bring me back against my will?’

He promised through the pain in his heart. For a long weary time, he kept his promise. She returned and their love was as before, though there would be no children.

Then she came to him with her third wish.

‘When I sleep alone in my room, I am afraid. At the time of the full moon, will you sit vigil by the hearth and promise never to go out and leave me?’ He promised.

The old man’s breath deserts him. He inhales, fire-smoke catching his throat. Coughs rack his body, pain like a glowing ember lodges in his chest. His youngest daughter brings him a cup of cool ale, shaking an admonitory finger at the children.

‘Don’t you be wearing out your Granfer, now.’

‘Can you finish the tale, Granfer?’

‘Please, can we have more?’

‘More, more, more.’ The youngest granddaughter, her thumb in her mouth and her head pillowled on her brother’s shoulder, does not understand the words, but the cadences lull her to sleep. The strange boy sits on the floor, arms wrapped around his knees, mesmerised by the story. If anyone approached him, he would scuttle like a mouse in the grain store. In fact, the family call him ‘Mouse.’

‘I will finish this story, but that’s all. You need your sleep and so do I.’ Once the children are put to bed, in the bedchamber that grows more crowded with each new arrival, it will be his turn. He has taken for his own the little built-on room at the back of the cottage and the womenfolk will help him there, tucking him into bed with a pat and a kiss as they would a child.

As time went on, the gamekeeper became uneasy. His beloved forest felt dark, disturbed. He found animals, slaughtered and half-eaten. Shadows slunk just out of sight, vanishing when he turned his head. There were

rustlings in the undergrowth, a trembling amongst the trees. There was danger in the night. He warned his wife to stay close to the cottage.

On the night of the full moon, as the logs in the fireplace burned low and he kept his vigil, he heard a terrified screaming. He forgot his promise. Seizing his bow, he ran from the cottage. His Lord's stag bayed in anguish, his doe cried out. Their fawn lay, torn apart and bloody. The gamekeeper saw the glow of golden eyes, the silver flash of wolf fur. He fired an arrow and heard a howl.

The gamekeeper remembered his promise. The cottage was open, his wife unguarded. He raced back. On the floor, etched in blood, were great paw prints, leading to his wife's door. He burst the door open, stepped inside. She lay on her bed, her only coverlet her long silver hair, scarlet now from the blood welling from the arrow in her breast. She looked at him, golden eyes dimming.

'You broke your word,' she said.

The old man looks at the children and smiles.

'That is the story, my dearlings, as my Grandfather told it to me and his Grandfather to him.' He knows this is not the end, they will ask him questions as they always do.

'Granfer,' a serious little girl, this one, already mothering the smaller ones. 'Did the lady die?'

'She died, my dear, some say of a broken heart. Some think she vanished as mysteriously as she came, others that the gamekeeper buried her in the glade, with bluebells and violets as her coverlet and the song of birds for her lullaby.'

'What happened to the gamekeeper?'

'He grieved and was eaten up with guilt. He wandered the forest, forgetting both food and drink. A widow in the village saw his plight and married him. She knew she would never have his love but they were comfortable. Their only sorrow was that they had no children.'

The boy who will soon be a man has been thinking adult thoughts.
'Granfer, the tale in the village is that our family comes from that gamekeeper and his fairy lady. They say that our strange old rooms are where they lived. But if they had no children, how could that be?'

'The faerie folk have mysterious ways. Soon after his new marriage, the gamekeeper found twin children in the forest. The boy was hurt and his sister trying to cleanse his wounds with stream water. He saw fair hair, eyes with the glint of gold in their depths. When he took them home his new wife knew from the set of their jaws and the tilt of their brows that they were his. She took them in and brought them up as her own, though they could never bear to sleep inside.'

'The blacksmith's daughter told me that in their family stories, the boy married a daughter of their line and took her home to the old cottage.' The boy flushes as he speaks of the blacksmith's daughter. The old man sighs. They grow so quickly, these beloved ones.

'So they say, and the girl married a young farmer. Both had large families and prospered. But in every generation, there is born one child who is different, who loves the animals and cannot abide within man-made walls.'

The old man looks over at the door, but Mouse has gone.

The cough takes the old man again, the ember in his chest burning fiercer. The womenfolk hustle the children to bed and then tend to him, leaving him tucked up in cool linen, a cup of warm ale steaming beside him, laced with honey for his throat and poppy for his sleep.

He is never alone in this room made for women. His wife's presence is here, the touch of her cool hand on his cheek, the whisper of her laugh in his ear. His mother's hand smooths his pillow, his Grandmother's acerbic but loving presence rebukes his faults. There are other women who have left their scent in the walls, their forms in the shadowy corners of the room. Try as he might, there is only one he can see. The woman who sits now, as she does nightly, at the window. Her silver hair flows free, her eyes gaze sadly into the night-cool glade. She will not look at him, nor speak, but he has never feared

her presence. They exist, the old man and the silver lady, in their separate realms, united by blood.

The cough racks him again, tearing at his worn-out lungs, besieging his old heart. There is a stirring in the shadows. His wife is there, beautiful as the day he led her to her new home. She moves to take his hands. He does not feel the surrender of his lungs, the pain as the ember in his chest flares into consuming fire.

This time, the wife leads the husband home.

A Spell for Love

I gathered the berries at the correct phase of the moon. Cool they are, but red as new-flowing blood. The other things were ready. Some, like the silver bark which I stripped from a sapling with apologies for the rough handling, were to hand. The fungus, with its smell of old, dark secrets, was harder to find and I had to go deep into the forest. The bowl and knife, of course, were mine since childhood. Some other things were distasteful, but necessary.

The hardest of all was to get some of his hair. In the end, I waited for a rough night when he came to the inn. Watching in the darkness, I saw him throw his muffler over a peg in the hallway. I was only allowed in when there was nobody to see and the floors were in need of scrubbing, but that night I took a chance. I gathered enough hairs for my purpose and was away, unmolested.

On the right night in the right place, I mixed my gleanings and sang my spells, dancing beneath a moon that is all the mother I have ever known. It felt good and it felt right. After that night, he would be mine. Never mind the milk-and-water maid he'd fixed his heart on, he would see that she could do nothing for him. I was what he needed, she was nothing to him or me.

In my arrogance, I underestimated her. I thought her too high and mighty to notice me, but that night she spied and the next day she informed. Although there was a pretence of a fair trial my fate was sealed. But he spoke for me with warmth and compassion.

Tomorrow I burn, but sewn into my rags are a scarlet berry, a scrap of silver bark, spores of a fungus and a dark, curling hair. As I burn, so will his soul. He will be forever mine.

II

The Winterbourn Years

A Philanthropic Gentleman

Lyndhurst is the proud capital of the New Forest. To the north-west, the wooded ground rises steeply. Here stands Winterbourn House, four-square, pillared and white. On the morning of 23rd July 1886, Samuel Winterbourn wakes before his man-servant arrives. Indolently comfortable, he senses the forest day. As a born and bred son of the New Forest he is attuned to its moods.

Samuel knows in his very bones that the New Forest, shaped by the royal predator become prey, is a place of shadows, of sacrifice, for a king's blood nourishes the earth. From the top storey of his house on a fine day Samuel can look over trees and heath and water to the Isle of Wight and a queen immured in grief. His father and his grandfather before him gazed at that view, dreaming of the sea voyages on which their family's fortune was founded.

The forest grows thick behind the house, crowding its hedges. A lane, overshadowed and gloomy, winds where trees give way to heath. The credulous say that on a still night, when bats swoop low, you can hear the creak of wheels and the plod of a pony's hooves as the body of a tyrant king is taken on a peasant's cart to Winchester. Crowned stags rend the dark air with their bellows, foxes scream their passions. Commoners close and bar their doors.

Samuel, as a lonely little boy wandering in the forest, once rounded a gorse thicket, coming face to face with a grossly fat sow and her piglets. He ran for his life, roots catching at his feet and thorny tendrils whipping at his eyes. Later, he was told that the king's huntsmen still roam the forest, arrows nocked, hunting for naughty boys. A grown man does not, of course, believe such tales. But Samuel Winterbourn insists that at the first signs of dusk, when the forest trees reach black fingers across the garden hedge, all the curtains in the house must be drawn tight.

When Samuel Winterbourn, businessman and philanthropist, turned thirty he was ready to repopulate his family home. He was disappointed when

his first-born was a girl, but the advent of Joshua and Jonathon, lusty twins, has ensured the succession. Unfortunately, Martha did not recover swiftly from the twins' birth and the subsequent miscarriages, but now Samuel's plans are back on track. It doesn't really matter if the child expected imminently is a girl, though a man can never have too many sons. He can afford to found a dynasty.

Samuel should be careful in his boasting. The Forest holds jealous gods. They will not tolerate hubris in a mortal, even in his secret soul.

There is noise: a swiftly hushed voice, a sudden clatter. The maids are getting slack. They need discipline. He must not be disturbed.

Once Forbes opens the curtains and places hot water on the wash-stand, he lays out Samuel's clothes for the day. Samuel can't remember the man's real name, 'Forbes' has been used since his Grandfather's day: a handy convention. They don't speak, master and man-servant. If Samuel wants conversation, he will initiate it.

Samuel intends to begin his day with a visit to his Southampton barber. He will luxuriate in the feel of warm towels against his skin, the slide of oil, clever fingers massaging his scalp. In anticipation, he foregoes his usual Macassar Oil as he smoothes his muttonchop whiskers. His wife has embroidered antimacassars to protect every chair. A lesser man might have thought these expressed disapproval, to Samuel it is confirmation that she is practical and complaisant. When he married the eighteen-year-old, slightly plump, only child of a widowed northern mill owner, he congratulated himself that he had made a wise choice. Her settlement was eminently satisfactory; she is her father's only heir.

Samuel looks forward to the afternoon progress meeting at 'his' asylum. True, he had to form a consortium: his funds were not enough to bear the whole cost, despite his wife's dowry. But the Winterbourn Asylum was his idea, for which he graciously accepts the credit. There is no shortage of patients. A private asylum is not regulated by the intrusive inspections of officialdom.

Samuel will dismiss his carriage and take the afternoon train, alighting at the special stop for asylum visitors. He enjoys these meetings with his key staff, gratified by their deference. The children's villa is nearly complete. Soon, he thinks, the poor young idiots overcrowding Southampton's workhouses will enjoy healthy fresh air.

With a final smile at his reflection Samuel proceeds to breakfast. His nose twitches; devilled kidneys lie under one of the silver domes on the sideboard. To his surprise, his wife is not waiting to pour his coffee and butter his toast. The housekeeper blushes as she explains that her mistress is indisposed. Ah! That would explain the household noises this morning. Martha must be in labour. No doubt she will conduct the business efficiently. By the time he returns there will be one more small soul in the family cradle. In the circumstances, he will butter his own toast, though Mrs Treadwell pours his coffee.

Samuel uses the starched linen and gleaming silver that is his birth-right. By the time he has finished, his carriage will be waiting. He looks out of the window at manicured grass, at ranked and colourful flowers. This is indeed a good day.

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The Asylum carriage is waiting at Winterbourn Halt and takes Samuel past a tiny village and over heathland to the asylum wall. Here he elects to walk. He savours the day and his own benevolence as he passes through the ornate gates opened for him by the obsequious man from the cramped gatehouse. The gateman has a large family, but is lucky to have a home and employment. His children will eventually work in the asylum, where his wife resides since her last pregnancy robbed her of her senses. The man has a reputation for being too free with his fists, but there is nothing wrong with discipline: wives and servants are all the better for it. Samuel smiles benevolently and hands over a bag of peppermint humbugs for the children, who are thin but sturdy, healthy from the good country air. The eldest girl, at thirteen, keeps the house and children clean and tidy; she is already spoken of as good nurse material. She is a pretty girl, thinks Samuel, he must arrange to interview her.

Samuel walks through young trees and bushes. He can smell sun-warmed loam and the feral tang of fox. Behind the nurtured trees are old woods, fenced on the asylum side. He gets his first glimpse of the house. Despite the outcrop of pillared portico, it is a basic forest dwelling. Behind the ornate reception area lie the administration offices, the lavishly decorated parlour where visitors to the asylum are regaled with tea and small cakes and the conference room where today's meeting will be held. The female domestics sleep in the attics. The first floor is converted into spacious accommodation for the Asylum Superintendent and his wife, a formidable (and somewhat moustached) lady. Adjacent to them live the Matron and her husband, who manages the Home Farm. The extensive kitchen in the basement is the undisputed domain of the cook/housekeeper, while behind it are the somewhat malodorous quarters where the handyman, who doubles as hall porter when not wrestling with the huge coal boiler, eats and sleeps.

There are male inmates wandering on the lawns that slope gently to the house. These are the mildly afflicted, who are docile. It is a shame that there is a slight ammoniac tang on the warm air: incontinence is an unfortunate by-product of imbecility. The women have airing courts behind their separate block; the Superintendent's wife is very strict on segregation. Samuel produces another bag, handing out humbugs and pear drops to the idiots. Really, they are just like children, always grateful and eager to please

The handyman, his bulk forced into a uniform, opens the door. Someone has tried to clean him up, there is a haze of carbolic, but his nails are ingrained with coal dust. Samuel is relieved to see the trim figure of a housemaid. She bobs a curtsey as his large figure, silhouetted against the sunlit door, approaches her.

‘Hullo, my dear. You are new here, are you not?’

‘Yes, sir. The housekeeper, she’s my Auntie and she’s giving me a trial.’

‘I’m sure you’ll do very well.’ Samuel reaches out and pats her on the head, running his hand over the curls that the starched cap fails to confine.

‘How old are you?’

‘I’m twelve, sir, nearly thirteen. But I’m strong for my age and I’ve always helped Mam, so Aunty -Mrs Baxter, I mean – she reckoned I was half-way trained already.’

Samuel’s hand slides down to rest on the child’s shoulder. ‘I’m sure you’re very strong, are these muscles I can feel here?’ His hand playfully squeezes her upper arm. She has a delightful giggle. ‘What is your name, my dear?’

‘Please, sir, I’m Emmie – well, Emmeline really but they all calls me Emmie.’

‘Well, Emmie, I’m very pleased to meet you.’ Samuel reaches into his pocket and produces the remains of his bag of sweets. ‘Here, tuck these into your pocket to eat later – can’t have you greeting guests with a full mouth, can we?’ Yes, that really is a delightful giggle. He heads for the conference room.

* * *

Once the business of the day is over and the participants have departed with the appropriate courtesies, Samuel is persuaded into a tour of the rose garden. The air is heady with mixed scents, blending in a mixture that is almost intoxicating. On being offered a bunch of the long-stemmed beauties, Samuel remembers the ‘indisposition’ of his wife. He will be given a hamper containing fresh produce when he leaves so will use the asylum’s carriage, there is no way he can be seen clutching a bunch of flowers and a wicker basket on the train, like any suburban clerk. McElvin is left to cut the roses, while Samuel makes a hasty bid for the higher ground where the children’s villa is under construction. There are mires and boggy areas of forest nearby and on such a day as this, gnats breed there in their millions, floating over on the air currents, drawn by the perfume rising from the roses. For some reason the creatures find Samuel’s flesh particularly irresistible and he reacts badly to their bites. He has no inclination to return home covered in itching bumps.

Samuel is very pleased with the progress of the new children’s area. There are sections where active infants can play, babies and immobile children can lie in the shade and boisterous older children run safely. The nursery awaits delivery of its cots. One of the builders with an artistic bent has painted

woodland animals on the walls. The schoolroom is nearly complete, as is the small infirmary. Beds are installed in the two dormitories. Standing in the one designated for the girls, Samuel visualises neat rows of little heads, sweetly asleep on their pillows. He sees himself handing out sweets to little girls clustering at his knee. He will allow the smallest to sit on his lap and instruct them to call him 'Papa.'

* * *

Samuel has an enjoyable journey home. The asylum stands just inside the forest boundaries, within old woods and a high encircling wall. It is at the centre of land that by some geological quirk is inhospitable and sandy, held together by the intertwined stalks of heather and the roots of stunted bilberry bushes, bitter fruits desiccated by the winds before they can come to fruition. Adders bask on outcrops of rock. Crows, the ragged edges of their wings vibrating, drift overhead on sluggish air currents. It is said that this forbidding part of the forest, with its hidden lethal bogs, is patrolled by a ghostly and malevolent black stag, his eyes burning red in the moonlight. None care to approach or leave the asylum after dark.

There has been sufficient rain this year, the asylum farm is in good heart and at least there is no shortage of labourers. Samuel sometimes wonders whether he should visit the family's West Indian plantations and see for himself how they are managed: with lash and manacles, according to the painting that hangs in his study. He has been content to leave the running of the plantations to a distant branch of the family, but as his progeny increases, it might be well to familiarise himself with it.

He reflects on his father-in-law, whose business affairs are not going well. As one of the premium mill owners in the north, Silas Hardcastle was a shining example of a good businessman. Now, at the age of sixty-six, he is old and tired, losing his grip. Samuel knows that Silas is a proud man, resenting any interference in his affairs, but possibly he should appoint a competent manager. Perhaps the old man would care to pay a visit to his daughter? After all, it is her inheritance he is risking. Samuel makes a mental

note to broach the matter when he reaches home. Sitting back in his seat, he gives himself up to a satisfied survey of the forest.

* * *

The Winterbourn establishment boasts a semi-circular drive winding around a large flower bed with an ornate fountain at its heart. Samuel is very proud of this fountain. It features a pair of children, with a suggestion of simplicity in their features. Each holds a bowl into which water flows from a vessel held by an androgynous figure behind them. The sculptor has managed features that bear a passing resemblance to Samuel. The water overflows into a small pool, bordered by ferns and circled by plants.

Samuel alights from the carriage. His first task is to inspect the flower bed. He and the gardener have a running battle, Samuel trying to find evidence of neglect and the gardener ensuring that not one weed is evident, no flower needing dead-heading or daring to wilt. Samuel's shadow falls over the pond and there is a flash of movement and colour as ornamental fish dart for the safety of the ferns. As expected, the flowers are immaculate, the soil as damp to his questing finger as it should be. The gardener is no artist, his predilection being for red, white and blue flowers in serried ranks, but he is conscientious and a hard worker. Samuel does wonder if one of the younger inmates of the asylum could be trained up to assist the man: perhaps one of the lads with the big smiles and oriental eyes? They seem docile.

Satisfied that all is well, Samuel enters his house. Coming down the stairs is the doctor, an unctuous smile on his face, hand outstretched.

‘Mr Winterbourn, sir. Let me be the first to congratulate you. Your wife has been delivered of a fine, healthy girl. Both mother and child are doing well.’ He doesn’t feel it necessary to mention that he was called to Mrs Winterbourn as he was about to partake of lunch with a rather charming companion. He didn’t hurry. In fact, he arrived as the midwife delivered the child. But there is no reason to point that out, he has a reputation as a miracle worker in accouchement.

‘Thank you, Doctor. Perhaps a small sherry?’ Samuel ushers him into the library where Forbes, well versed in these matters, has already laid out a

tray. The two men, both successful, both astute in business, enjoy their conversation. The Doctor's connection with the Winterbourns is proving lucrative; he has already been consulted by several influential men on their recommendation. If Mrs Winterbourn continues reproducing at this rate he should do very well.

When Forbes has shown the doctor out, he returns for the tray. 'Excuse me, sir, but will you be dining in tonight?' It is Samuel's habit, during his wife's confinements, to take himself off to a discreet private club in Southampton. Sometimes he visits a less salubrious establishment that caters for gentlemen of particular tastes. After two weeks, a wet-nurse will move in to take care of the new baby's requirements and his wife will return to grace his table.

Finally, Samuel makes his way to his wife's room.

* * *

The picture presented to Samuel each time has been of domestic harmony, his wife a little wan, the new arrival snugly asleep in the cradle, Nanny in overall charge. Never has he had to see any unpleasantness, nor does he need to know more of the infant than a small round face in a lacy bonnet. Unfortunately, a domestic crisis arose this morning. Tilly the nursery-maid suffered an abscess under a tooth. The pain became too much and Nanny dosed her and sent her to bed. Ada the under-nursery-maid, a scrawny workhouse child, was awake all night with the children. Esther is running a mild fever and is correspondingly fractious; the twins are restless and wake each other up through the night. So Nanny, alone in the nursery, had no option but to leave matters in her mistress's bedroom in the capable but strange hands of the midwife.

As Samuel enters he is followed by a housemaid, bearing the roses in a vase. They bring a wave of scent with them, masking the odours of blood and ether in the room. It is unfortunate that as the maid bends so that Martha can smell the blooms they frame both faces, accentuating the difference between her young, soft skin and Martha's, grey from her labour. Already she is

showing signs of the old woman she will become. Samuel cannot understand her weakness, after all, are women not designed for childbirth?

The midwife, who unfortunately has left her fearsome instruments, some blood-stained, where Samuel can see them, has been bathing the baby. Now, not knowing that he has never held any of his children, she places her into Samuel's arms. He looks at soft golden down, blue-veined translucent lids over sleeping eyes, the perfect cupid's bow of a tiny mouth. Martha has been watching in some trepidation.

'What shall we call her?'

Samuel tentatively strokes the round cheek. 'Emmie' he says absently, then at the startled look on Martha's face 'Emily – Emily Rose.'

Martha sinks back on her pillows. The baby opens large blue eyes. Her questing mouth finds Samuel's finger. He feels the tug of tiny lips, the rasp of a tongue against his skin. Greedy heat spirals from his lower belly.

A Very Important Birthday

I wake early. Today is very important. I am five.

I feel sad because Papa will not be coming in to kiss me good morning. He is away, but he has left a present for me. I know he loves me, he often tells me so. Nanny says Papa held me in his arms when I was born. When I was very small he would come to the nursery when I was being bathed, wrap me in a towel and pat me dry, feeling carefully in all the fat little crevices to make sure no dampness lingered. Nanny says he used to blow on my tummy to make me giggle and would stretch out my arms and legs, to see how well I was growing.

Papa doesn't take much notice of the others. Esther is ten, so very grown up. She doesn't have a nice nature. The twins only like each other, and they're boys anyway. Sometimes I feel lonely, but I know everything will be all right because my Papa loves me.

We have not been happy. My little brother Esau only lived for a few days. When he was born he was all yellow with screwed up eyes; I thought he looked like the picture of a Chinaman in the big atlas. He didn't really cry, just a sort of thin wail that made the hairs on the cats' necks stand up. We all have what we call 'the Winterbourn bump' in our noses. Papa's is big, Mama says it makes him look like an eagle. I thought I heard Nanny mutter 'or a vulture.' I have a short, pretty nose. Esther's is long and pointed. You could see Poor Esau's nose pointing out of his blanket like the beak of Mama's parrot.

I hate that parrot. Because Mama's sitting room is crowded with lots of things, it is difficult not to get too close. It waits, its nasty little black eyes on me. It catches my hair and gives it a tug, or squawks in my ear. I'm frightened of its nasty beak, which it clacks as soon as it sees me. The dust on its feathers makes me sneeze.

We all had to kiss Poor Esau goodbye. Esther has a doll with eyes that open and shut. When I looked at it, she suddenly pushed it up so that its eyes stared. She said it came alive at night and would come into my room and push

its stiff little fingers into me to see if I was fat enough to eat. Poor Esau looked like that doll and I thought he would sit up and stare at me.

Mama has been ill for quite a while. Esther says Papa has gone away because I'm so ugly he can't bear to look at me, but that isn't true. He went to look after Hardcastle's Mills because Grandfather was too old. Now Grandfather has died, Mama is sad but Papa will come home again. Nanny says that I mustn't grieve for Poor Esau; there will soon be other babies for her to look after and for me to love.

Esther and the twins have their own rooms, at Mama's end of the corridor. Tilly is now her maid and sleeps in her room. Papa said it wasn't good for me to be in the nursery with a crying new baby. He had the room next to his converted into a pretty little bedroom. Ada looks after me. Papa said she should sleep in the attic with the other maids. He leaves the door into his dressing room open, so that he can hear me if I wake in the night. I don't think Nanny liked me leaving her nursery, she had her funny pursed-mouth face on.

Now I am five I will have to spend my days with the Governess. She wears a thick dress in dark mulberry. Her hair, worn pulled up on top of her head, has little white flecks falling onto the shoulders of her dress, which has a strange, musty smell. I think her scalp must hurt; the skin by her eyes is stretched upwards by her hair. She is very clever, like Esther, so I don't think we will get on.

Apart from Papa, the person closest to me is Ada. She knows all about the forest, says it is born and bred in her, that her family were forest people until they lost their money and had to go into the Ashurst workhouse. She takes me for walks. We follow deer tracks through the trees. Sometimes we lie in the sun in a clearing buzzing with bees. Both of us love the forest, but avoid the charcoal burners' camp. When the gypsies are around we are told not to go out.

When it begins to get cold, we search amongst the fallen trees and mossy humps, seeing how many different fungi we can count. Ada always makes me wash my hands carefully when we get home; she says that you can

die from them. Once we found a fairy ring of scarlet toadstools spotted in white. Ada said we must sit in the middle and told me that there were fairies dancing around, bringing us good luck if we wished wisely. Of course, you have to be careful. Ada knew of a girl, sent from the workhouse to be a scullery maid. She wished for shoes and that very evening, just as she thought she could rest, she was told that one of her duties was to clean the whole family's shoes.

Sometimes Ada takes me to a badger sett in the forest. She says we must not walk into it, for the 'badger bears,' are sleeping and would not like their ceilings shaking. I think their tunnels look like caves for the fairy folk. I would have liked to come out at dusk to see them with their roly-poly cubs, but Papa forbids it unless the grooms come with us. Ada knows that the men are more likely to set terriers after the badgers, so we keep the sett secret. I am good at keeping secrets. Papa tells me that badger hair is used in his shaving brushes and that the nearby village of Brockenhurst was called that because of all the badgers living there. I was very disappointed when I visited and discovered only ordinary people.

Papa is away a lot, always during the day but sometimes at night as well. When he is home he comes through his dressing room to say good-night to me. If I am restless Papa takes me on his lap and strokes my back and legs until I feel all fuzzy and peaceful. Then he kisses me and tucks me back into bed. Once when I was upset and all hot from crying, he took my nightgown off and sponged me down, then cuddled me till I felt better. I always feel safe when Papa is near. Papa has told me about the asylum where he goes for a lot of the time, how he built it to help poor people who aren't as lucky as us. These people are called idiots and can't manage to live their lives without help. My Papa is such a good man.

Today Ada and I have planned one of our favourite walks. We will go down to the big gates. There is a house there where Joseph and his wife live: they open the gates when we go out in the carriage. It's a funny house, from the road it looks like a small version of our house. The back is all higgledy-piggledy. I asked Papa about it and he said:

‘That house is very old, Emily, nobody knows quite how old. In the back, where you can see the big window looking at our drive, that’s the oldest bit. Our drive wasn’t there then, nor was our house. Then in what we call the Tudor age, the first Winterbourn that we know of built on. All the bits that have black beams and white plaster were built by him.’

I’m not very good at working out years, I wondered if this Winterbourn was a sort of Grandfather?

‘No, my dear, much older than that. What we call a “great-great-great,” which means that we don’t know how long ago. We do know it was in the time of the great Queen Elizabeth, because he was a boat builder. He had a yard at Bucker’s Hard, so our family made ships that defeated the Armada. Mind you, that’s what people say. Bucklers Hard as we know it wasn’t built then. Anyway, he extended the old cottage. It has also been said that he was a pirate and that’s how he made his money. We don’t know if the cottage was already owned by the Winterbourns, which would make us a very old family indeed, or whether he bought it.’

‘What about the front that looks like our house, Papa?’

‘My great-grandfather had that done. His father built our present house, high on the slope, overlooking the old cottage. He was not a Winterbourn, he married the only Winterbourn daughter and took their name. She was a proud woman and not a very nice one. When her husband died, she ruled the house and terrified her son.

‘My great-grandfather wanted to marry. His mother did not like that, not one little bit. My great-grandmother refused to move into the house while the old lady was in it. So, the extensions to the cottage were built to make a dower house.’

‘I think it’s a sweet little house. Did she like it?’

‘No, my love, she hated it. Her servants lived in the old part and she had the new rooms. She was unhappy, so she made everyone else’s life a misery as well. When she died, various other people tried to live in it, but they never lasted. They say her spirit is still there and she hates anyone coming in.’

‘But Joseph and Mrs Joseph live there, Papa.’

‘Indeed they do, but only in the old part at the back. The great rooms are shut up, the furniture covered. Nobody goes in to them.’

From the Josephs’ garden Ada and I can go through the gate into a forest drove. There, tucked amongst the trees, is a small farm. I love the cows, with their big kind eyes, and the pigs who like to have their backs scratched with sticks. Ada and I keep well away from the sty with the boar in it; he is a fierce thing with wicked tusks, though Farmer Purkiss says he’s soft as butter. The dogs know us now and greet us with waving tails and snuffling noses.

There is always a glass of fresh milk, still warm from the cow, and some of Mrs Purkiss’s latest baking. If she has made scones, there will be butter from the best milkers and blackberry jelly, the fruits gathered from the hedgerow every autumn. Farmer Purkiss comes from a big family, there are farms all over the forest with his relations in them, so Mrs Purkiss says she has to be on her mettle with jam and cake making. I often think that I would like to live in the little house, with its small rooms and low thatched roof in which forest creatures rustle and run, but Papa would not like it.

It is time to get up. Ada brings in my presents. I can see which one she wants me to open first. A set of handkerchiefs, lace-edged and embroidered. Ada must have sat up late into the night to make them. Esther’s present is a pen-wiper, grubby and cobbled together. Esther doesn’t like needlework. The boys have sent a box of sweets and Nanny a collection of pretty ribbons for my hair. Ada coos over them. She must be about fifteen, but she has never celebrated a birthday. Now she hands me Papa’s present and together we unwrap it. He has given me the prettiest necklace and bracelet of rose pink coral.

Only Mama’s present is left and my heart sinks. I can tell that it is a book; probably something improving that Mama will expect me to read to her. As soon as I try to read, the lines seem to wiggle up and down and blur. Sometimes I do find a word I recognise but I have to put my finger on it or it

will disappear. Tilly thought I might need to have my eyes examined, but the optician said there was nothing wrong and I was just being lazy.

I have a lovely birthday. I ask Mrs Joseph about the old lady in her house.

‘Yes, miss, she’m here all right. Mind you, she doesn’t bother us none, we stay in our place and she stays in hers. It’s the young maids she don’t like, when we come to spring cleaning there’s an awful to-do. One lass, clumsy she was, she fell down the stairs and swore she’d been pushed. Others came to me crying, saying that their hair had been pulled or they’d been pinched. She’s mostly in the great bedroom or the drawing room, goes very cold it does when she’s in one of her takings. And an awful smell – sort of vinegar and rotting things. Funny, though, the men can come in and do jobs around the place, she leaves them alone. It’s the young lasses she can’t abide.’

Ada and I agree that we wouldn’t like to be in that part of the house. I expect the twins would like to go ghost-hunting, it’s the sort of thing boys like, but she probably wouldn’t mind them.

The final and best present of my birthday comes at the end of the day, just as I am dropping off to sleep. The door from Papa’s dressing room opens and there he is, in his night clothes. I think he must have been at his club. When he does that there is a funny smell in his hair and on his breath: sweet and smoky and not very nice. His eyes look different; they are very big and brown and the pupils look like little pin heads in the middle of the brownness. He doesn’t always stroke me so gently either, his fingers dig in.

Now he sits in my low chair. I curl up on his lap, wind my arms about his neck, and tell him about my day. He tickles me to make me giggle. I don’t always like it, sometimes he tickles me in places that don’t feel right, but I don’t like to upset him. I am wearing my coral necklace under my nightgown and he makes a game of trying to look down inside the lace trimming to see it. Then he asks if I like it and, of course, I have to shower his face with kisses to prove how much. Suddenly, to my surprise, he stands up and puts me back in my bed.

‘I must go to Mama.’ And he is gone.

I know I'm a big girl now, but I don't want him to go. Then I realise that Mama needs him to comfort her and I am being selfish. What a wonderful man my Papa is.

The Power of a Whisper

The Winterbourn Mental Asylum, safely hidden from sight in a far corner of the New Forest, is a testament to the enlightened thinking of this new Edwardian age. Of course, ‘enlightened thinking’ does rather imply capability for thought. Many inmates are capable of very little and, to be honest, some of the nurses and attendants are not much better. But one must take what one can get and be grateful. Not everyone wants to spend their days shut away behind walls and trees in a corner of the forest renowned for treacherous bogs and bleak heathlands, where black crows hover in wait for the souls of the unwary. Nor is night work popular when local legend has it that the perimeter is patrolled by a gigantic black stag, his antlers tipped with silver and his eyes malevolent red pits.

An exception to the rest of the nursing staff, Sister Turner is dedicated and well trained, a student of the great Nightingale and inculcated with her values. She is exceptionally tall, her width almost equalling her height. Below her rolled-up sleeves, muscles bulge when she stands in a position of authority with her fists on her hips. Deep frown lines between her brows, which almost meet over a beaked nose, give her the look of an extremely belligerent raptor. She is terrifying. Few people have bothered to look beyond her fierce exterior to the warm-hearted woman within. Those who do, value her friendship.

* * *

Sister Turner finishes a long morning’s work and hurries back to her quarters. There is time for a hot bath and to shampoo her hair and rinse it until it squeaks. She is always terrified that when she goes out she will take the stink of the asylum with her. Her walking-out costume is airing on the wardrobe. Very impressive it is, a plaid skirt and matching jacket which she feels is correct for her station but satisfactorily fashionable. Her black broad-brimmed hat is perched on the back of her bedroom chair, jaunty with pheasant’s feathers from the woods. She trimmed it herself in green grosgrain

ribbon to match the plaid, a rosette at one side holding the feathers in place. Her buttoned boots are polished and ready.

One of the advantages of living in such an out of the way place and, to be honest, of having an asylum Director with considerable influence, is that the railway company has been persuaded to designate a small platform as a halt for the occasional train puffing its lofty way to and from Southampton. The asylum carriage takes her to Winterbourn Halt and her adventure begins.

The train deposits Sister Turner on time; the uphill walk into the centre of the city seems to have grown steeper. She reaches her goal and stands for a moment admiring the windows in the semi-circular frontage of Plummers Department Store. Women jostle her, their chatter assailing her ears. Perfumes mingle. She breathes deeply; there is not a trace of incontinence amongst them. She makes her way over marble floors she will never have to scrub, inhaling the sprayed scents and admiring the glint of diamonds she will never wear. Her progress is slow through the department displaying clothes for the larger lady, velvets and silks are fingered carefully: a woman who makes soap from lye has fissured fingers that will catch on delicate fibres.

In an area redolent with fine teas and buttered teacakes she finds her friends, seated at a table with dainty accoutrements. They epitomise the new Edwardian era, these fine ladies taking tea and talking trivia amongst the tea cups. They are so much more. All four of them are Nightingale Nurses, survivors of rigorous training, bound in a friendship which never falters.

* * *

Charlotte Ashworth, a fine full-bosomed woman who has rejected numerous suitors, has been appointed Matron of the new Union Infirmary in Shirley Warren, where she rules her nurses with an iron hand that Florence herself would have appreciated. She is much admired and is listened to respectfully by the gentlemen who rule her profession. At the other side of the city Maud Jessop, a fragile-looking and petite blonde who has been known to turn a twenty-stone labourer in his bed unaided, terrorises the surgeons at the Royal South Hampshire Infirmary. Tabitha Lee, exotically dark and

enigmatic, is much in demand for private nursing. Between them, these four fine ladies taking tea have their fingers on every medical pulse in the area.

Once the tea has been poured and the cakes passed, each brings the others up to date. Violet Turner shares her concerns over the moral depravity of a certain Director of her institution. He is altogether too fond of visiting the small girls in the children's wing. Rumours have reached her ears of his presence in certain secret areas of Southampton. Matters have come to a head with the admission of a new inmate. The girl is pregnant and bewildered. Although her name has been changed, it is whispered that she is the daughter of the Director himself. Her hysterical fits have given the staff hints of her home situation and they are rightly appalled. The time has come, Violet Turner has decided, to investigate and end such depravities. But they are women and powerless. Or are they?

Both Charlotte and Maud know of this particular Director and have heard rumours about other prominent men of the area. There are private clubs in the docks area of Southampton that have a very unsavoury reputation, which most genteel ladies will never hear about. Those who nurse the sick learn much that is not suitable for well-bred ears. The friends are suitably horrified at Violet's disclosures. They are quite happy to play their part and use their connections (which may involve a little genteel blackmail) in the unmasking of a monster. They do not think to ask Tabitha for her help. What can one private nurse, with only one patient at a time, do to help? She smiles.

* * *

Tabitha Lee was born in a bender, deep in the forest. Her mother gave birth amongst the ferns like a deer with its fawn. The wagon was crowded and noisy with her man and their brood, each of whom had been produced with a minimum of fuss. This one was different from the start, giving her mother a long and weary day. Eli Lee, finally seeing his new daughter, said that she was not worth the fuss.

Tabitha was a solitary child, dark-eyed and solemn. Things could have gone badly for her when a farmer found her clutching one of his fat hens, blood and feathers spattering her ragged dress. There were tears coursing

down the child's face. The hen, determined to lay away from the farm, had been caught by an enterprising fox and Tabitha was desperate to heal it. Many more creatures were rescued before her mother could add them to the cooking pot. The farmer recognised the intelligence of the child and persuaded the local squire to sponsor her.

* * *

Now Tabitha Lee is a trained and skilful nurse. Her current patient, his body bed-bound but his brain as sharp as ever, is editor of the local newspaper. His wife supports him in all his endeavours and his employees regard him as a force to be reckoned with. Tabitha Lee has the means to ignite his crusading zeal and start a campaign to root out perversion and bring justice to abused innocents.

* * *

Standing on the platform of Southampton station, Violet Turner waits for her return train. She is clutching a bag containing a self-indulgent tin of Yardley's lily of the valley talcum powder, the matching soap and a small bottle of lily of the valley perfume. They might even hold their own against the asylum aroma. Visiting the city is exhausting. So many well-dressed and cossetted ladies. She feels herself to be a Brobdingnag giantess amongst them. She is more at home on the battlefield or in the seclusion of the forest. However, she has enjoyed a productive day.

Sister Turner, returning to her exacting but rewarding work, feels as though she and her friends have been standing at the top of a mountain, rolling a snowball down its slope. Who knows whether that snowball may grow, or dwindle away to nothing? Daughter of a nation of crusaders, she holds her head high and dares to hope.

THE STORY OF EMILY AND MEBY EDWARD

1886	Emily was born.
1896	Emily's Papa took her to visit the hospital. Emily was frightened. She cried. Papa was cross.
1898	Papa took Emily to the hospital again. Emily read stories to the poor backward children. Papa was pleased.
1901	Emily was not well. She was going to have a baby. Papa was cross. He took Emily to the hospital. A rough nurse put her in a ward with girls who frightened her.
1902	I was born.
1903	They said I was a big boy now. I would have to live in the boys ward. When I cried the bigger boys slapped me. Emily worked in the laundry.
1907	I learned to read and write. I did not learn many words. The others could not do it. We spent a lot of time on cat and mat.
1908	I sang in the choir on Sundays. Some people had visitors. We did not.
	I was allowed to visit Emily for tea. She did not say much because the other women were nasty.
1910	We had a teacher who showed me how to use a dictionary. He gave it to me.
	I went down the drive to the big notice at the gate. Now I could look up Mental Asylum.
1916	I was put to work in the Kitchens. It was hot. My back ached from scrubbing all the big pots.
1918	I had to go and live in the mens block. The older men showed me how to get out at night. They went to the womens block to find girlfriends.
	I found Emily and we were able to talk.
	I said I would write down everything she told me. And I did.
1920	I was called bad words because I did not have a girlfriend. I asked Rosie to be my sweetheart. She said yes. She was not good at remembering things.

	One of the bigger girls took me into the woods.
	I did not know what she wanted. She showed me. I was not very good.
	She laughed.
1922	Emily died. I was sad.
1950	I was allowed to go out with the other men to the village.
	I did not like it. People laughed because our trousers were too short.
	We used to wear canvas trousers because some people wet themselves.
	All the trousers were boiled in big coppers.
	Now they used other materials but still boiled so the trousers shrank.
1969	They said there would be an exhibition of work.
	I sat down and wrote all about the hospital and Emily and my life.
	I won a prize and went to a presentation.
	There was a big picture and they said it was my Grandfather.
1970	I had to see the head doctor.
	He is called that because he can see inside your head.
	He said that I was normal and should not be there.
	Then he said I was something called institutionalised and could stay.
1972	I am seventy. They made me a big cake.
	The nurses gave me pencils and exercise books.
	A volunteer said she would help me find out about my family.
	I said I did not like my Grandfather but she thought he would be dead.
	If I do have family perhaps someone would visit me.

Mole

The New Forest is ancient and powerful. In places the land is more heath than wood, with ridges of land where ponies are silhouetted against the dusk sky. One valley between such ridges contains a lake, fed by a stream. There is a settlement, grown with the generations into a considerable property. The family has spread, some have moved to other holdings, but by tradition the main house has always been occupied by the eldest married son, a sanctuary for his family.

Nobody knows how long the Purkiss family has lived here. Family legend tells that there was once a charcoal burner, living his secretive and lonely life deep in the forest. The forest laws were harsh and he trained his two hounds to lie hidden and silent when the king's hunting horn rang through the rides. No king's lackey was going to mutilate his beasts or stop him from poaching in the silence of the night. He knew every inch of ground and his catch was well hidden. He slept in a rough shelter beside his smouldering charcoal heaps: a rough and silent man, his skin blackened from his trade. Few bothered with him.

One day, Purkiss was about his legitimate business, loading his cart for regular charcoal deliveries. There was a shout and a scuffle and the neigh of a horse ridden hard. He barely had time for the hissed command that sent his hounds to safety before the king's men, pale and bloodstained, were upon him. Instead of charcoal, Purkiss loaded his cart with the bleeding body of a king and made his delivery in Winchester. From that day, the Purkiss family prospered. They were given land and money and became a power in the district.

Now the hunt is no more, the country ruled by an ageing queen who weeps for her heart's love in her great house on the nearby island.

Old Zeb has been in the Purkiss farmstead so long that no-one remembers who he is. Succeeding generations call him 'uncle' and 'great-uncle'. He holds forest rights and his own brands, runs his ponies on the

forest and sends his sows and their piglets out to root for acorns every autumn. Wherever the pony sales are held he is to be found, his only indulgence an occasional drink at the nearest inn when his foals have done well. There he shows a deep bond with the local gypsies. He can be found with them, nodding his head to the beat of their music and joining in with the old songs.

Purkiss children are taken to watch the pony round-up, where the ponies are corralled to be checked, branded and for some of them to be taken to the pony sales. They love the sight of the drift coming over the skyline and the thunder of hooves as they sweep across the forest. There is the smell of wood smoke as the men kindle fires to heat their wicked looking branding irons. The youngsters scream when they smell burning hair, feeling that the ponies are being tortured by the branding, imagining it on their own soft flesh. It is gently explained that only the top hair is burned off, that the ponies are not a bit bothered by it. Indeed, they stand still and seem almost to show off their new brands.

The men cut the ponies' tails in particular patterns, to identify which Agister is responsible for the ponies on that patch of forest and to show that the Agisters' fees have been paid. They are very careful, the animals do not like having their tails touched and are very quick to show it with their hard hooves. One poor man who is doing a good job on a mare's tail is bitten from behind as two ponies jostle in the confined space. The children's ears are covered so that they will not hear the words he uses. Strands of horse hair blow around, catching on the bushes like strange, strong cobwebs. One of the children's treasured possessions is a bird's nest, round and perfect, woven from discarded horse hair, chestnut, black and grey intermingled.

The homestead is managed by a young man with a growing and lusty family. He and his wife are kind to Old Zeb, but he wishes for quiet. At the far end of the holding is a copse and in that copse a wattle and daub cottage. The thatched roof is surprisingly sound. There is one of the green mounds which some commoners think contain the bones of their ancestors, while others hold that they are gates to the homes of the fairy folk. It is not wise to disturb them. Old Zeb declares that he has lived long years at peace with the creatures of the forest and none will harm him now. The family enclose a

paddock around the stream for his mares and foals and build up the old pig sty for his fat sows. He takes with him his old lurcher, his rights and brands and, presumably, the hidden fortune with which gossip credits him.

Old Zeb takes his foals to the sales, where he does very well. He turns, hands empty and pockets full, and drops dead on the hoof-pocked turf. His gypsy friends carry him to the inn, some of the foresters take off for the farmhouse to alert the family and the rest decide that his cottage should be visited in case he left the fire burning. The local magistrate is no fool and announces that he will accompany them and see the place is secure “in case any treasure hunters decide to visit.” He thinks it a pity that the old man can’t be present; he would appreciate the chagrin on their faces.

When they reach the cottage, Zeb’s lurcher heads for a pile of blankets in the corner. A laughing boy is revealed. He hugs the dog, saying “found Mole.” Then he sees the men and cringes into the corner. He is dressed in rags and looks half-starved. They offer him food; he shares it, bite for bite, with the dog.

The men declare that the strange child is one of the ancient folk, a changeling, and are for chasing him into the forest. The magistrate decrees that the child is obviously mentally defective and neglected. He, himself, will take him to the Winterbourn Mental Asylum. The dog, who showed no interest when his master died, howls inconsolably.

The asylum staff do their best. They try putting Mole into school. He seems intelligent, but it is as though he sees no point in anything they try to teach him. Gradually he comes out with more words if they are needed, as though he pulls them up from a store of knowledge deep within him. Once he discovers the farm he is happy. Even the bull will follow him around as docile as you like.

Mole is put into the children’s block. One thing they can’t do is make him sleep in a bed. Every night he disappears into the wood, every morning he appears again in time for breakfast. It’s finally accepted that’s how Mole is.

Gradually, Mole settles down. They give him clothes. He wears the trousers and shirt, politely leaving the coat, hat and shoes in a neat pile. The Farm Manager is eager to have his help. Somehow, the cows seem to give richer milk, the hens lay more eggs, when Mole looks after them. Even the old boar, vicious as his wild ancestors, will graciously allow Mole to scratch his back with a stick. The feral cats bring him their kittens to admire, panicked ewes grow calm and deliver their lambs into his comforting hands.

A group of young friends accepts Mole. Edward has a mother, who lives in the women's block and works in the laundry. He spends some of his time with her. George is a year older than Edward, but is very small. He has strange eyes and a rather loud voice, as though he can't hear himself properly in his head. George's best friend is Albert, whose arms and legs flop around and keep twitching. He can't sit himself up and his hands won't obey him, so he can't get food to his mouth. The attendants have to sit him up or get him into his wheelchair, but George always feeds him. They giggle all the time.

One of Mole's hiding places is a huge willow tree; its branches sweeping over the old wall behind it and touching the ground in front. It has great roots forcing their way out of the ground, with hollows between them. One of them is lined with bracken and leaves and Mole stretches out on them, saying 'Mole's place.'

On fine afternoons, the friends meet up under the willow tree. They lift Albert out of his wheelchair and put him in one of the cradles. The roots hold him securely and the trunk supports his back. He can put his hands on the earth and rub his face against the bark. He draws in great breaths of earth and sweet sap, tilting his face up to feel the breeze that moves the tendrils of leaves. He closes his eyes as the sun, filtering green through the branches, bathes them. Mole says 'Lady Willow heals.' George sits on a root beside Albert. Mole curls up in his sleeping place, Edward stretches out, looking up through the leaves at the sunlight. Then they talk as friends talk, about nothing in particular.

Mole is often to be found with his hands on the encircling wall, raising his face to the sky and breathing deeply of the forest air. Regular meals have

put flesh on his bones, but it seems that his spirit is longing for his beloved forest. A Purkiss lad, delivering wheat to a local mill for grinding, calls in to enquire how the strange waif is faring. When he leaves, not even the pony notices the slight extra weight amongst the sacks.

Mole's friends accept that the vanishing is part of the mystery that is Mole. Old Zeb's cottage is looking less neglected, his ponies are sleeker and his sows once more happily nosing amongst the great oaks. Old Zeb's lurcher, who was wasting away to skin and bone, is racing around like a puppy. It is no hardship for the Purkiss wives to cook a little more and leave it at the cottage door. They enquire no further. Forest folk know how to keep their own counsel and there is, after all, a fairy mound in the clearing where the cottage stands.

Death of a House

Those who despoil the Forest must tend their depredations carefully, for it will, quietly and firmly, take back its own. After Samuel Winterbourn's death, his daughter closes up most of the house. Esther Winterbourn was a bitter child, she became a bitter woman. She sees no point in maintaining a house in which she has never been happy, never felt loved.

The trees circling Winterbourn House extend their reach, planting saplings in the lawns. During hot, dry days the cannon fire of the gorse can be heard throughout the forest. Young plants are taking over Samuel's flower beds. Brambles and briars slowly smother and strangle the hedges. Fences buckle from undermining bracken and gates hang from rusted hinges.

Deer forage in the kitchen and herb gardens. One white stag, a creature of myth and legend, circles the house with arrogant disdain, plundering as he pleases. Foxes den in the sagging stables, warm in mouldering hay. A heron, flying homeward to his heronry at Beaulieu, sees a flash of exotic colour around the cracked and dried fountain. As the water in the pool slowly seeps away and the fish can no longer escape beneath broad leaves, he feeds his brood royally. Cats, grown feral and cunning, share his plunder. The central statue cracks from the pressure of myriad questing roots as ivy softens its angles and masks its features.

Most of the house's fine rooms are cleared and closed, the staff dismissed. Miss Winterbourn and her cook live together in a state of mutual dislike, one in her study and one in her kitchen. Winter gales take vengeance on the roof. The attic rooms suffer first from the encroaching rain, which makes its way down walls and through floorboards. Fungus and mould flourish behind locked doors. The fine creeper, famous for mantling the house with autumn colour, covers the front windows, its leaves bringing perpetual twilight. The glass roof of the conservatory gives way to pressure from the great grape vine which donated its fruits to family dinners for so many years. Tendrils climb, seeking support from the mortar between the bricks, which loosen and slip, allowing ingress to the damp and the cold, to insects and

rodents. The ubiquitous ivy colonises every remaining space, bold tendrils nudging through cracks in one window frame, where a small girl used to curl up on the window seat to watch for her Papa's carriage.

Miss Esther Winterbourn sees no point in tending money. After all, there is no-one to inherit it. The businesses are sold. An old lady does not eat much. After her cook departs, rancorous to the last, she lives alone and exists on bread and butter. Kindly souls try to keep an eye on her. They receive little gratitude for their solicitude. Finally, Authority – purely for her own good – incarcerates the screaming nonagenarian in a home.

The house is left to the forest, which proceeds slowly and surely as it intended all along.

At the rusting gates the older house stands patiently, watching death as it watched birth. Forest folk are not fussy about man-made laws. They live where the forest allows them. The gatekeeper strengthens the walls and fences around the cultivated plot, making sure that the fresh, pure spring is safely enclosed. He builds a tunnel to take the water safely away for the forest animals. His ownership of the house is never questioned.

Today, the casual eye sees nothing but ridges and humps under the sward, where the Winterbourns laid the foundations for their proud house.

III

Domestic Affairs

Oh for the wings.....

I could have done with wings. The wings of a dove might be inadequate for my sturdy frame, perhaps a passing angel could lend me a pair? Or send a UFO? With an extra-terrestrial crew to beam me up and deposit me safely, discreetly, in my car. But I'd settle for a clanking helicopter with a swinging ladder, especially if it contained a hunky paramedic to comfort me with blankets and hot sweet tea.

Normally, of course, you'd have your mobile 'phone in your pocket, could ask the police to send a burly constable with a stout stick and a ladder. But when you're in an oak tree in a rising wind and you're wearing only frivolous knickers and a washed-out T-shirt, the only communications device available is prayer. I'd tried that, but I wasn't getting a signal.

It all started out so well. Inner-city life proved too much for a country girl, so with my uncle pulling strings (isn't that what relations in the trade are for?) I'd landed a job in the picturesque New Forest village of Minstead. With a week to spare I stored my heavy possessions in a friend's garage, piled my luggage (including my work clothes) into the car and threw my camping stuff on top. I set off on a sunny Saturday morning for a leisurely journey, culminating in a camp site and anonymous exploration of my new territory. There is a fascinating pub called 'The Trusty Servant.' I could start my explorations there. After all, I had tried for a long time to be a 'trusty servant,' even though the effort burned me out.

Woman proposes, God disposes.

Thanks to road works, accidents and eccentric map reading, it was dusk before I recognised All Saints Church. There was a field. That would do! A nearby owl and his mate announced good hunting, taunted by a yelping fox. I parked, threw my tent over the locked gate and climbed over, puffing with all my gear up the slope to find a good spot.

I spread out my sleeping bag, kicked off my trainers and jeans (with my mobile 'phone in the pocket) and, on a whim, went out for a last look at the sunset. There was a smell of sunburned grass and meadow herbs, undercut

with a sharp, feral tang. Bats were skittering overhead on a last-minute insect gorge before roost-time. I don't mind bats, though preferably not in my belfry, but with hair as short as mine there's no need for hysteria.

Then I saw him.

Old Scrat rose on cloven hooves, silver beard rippling with leaping flames in the dying sunlight. His eyes, slit-pupilled like nematodes in amber, measured me balefully. His head dipped, aligning sharp-tipped horns, and his muscles bunched for the charge.

I ran!

Adrenalin took me up a handy oak tree. It wasn't too uncomfortable, as trees go, with a lovely view over the churchyard. I could see Conan Doyle's grave, still on the outskirts of society. The huge goat marched round and round the tree, Joshua circling the walls of Jericho. Occasionally he butted the trunk, as though he could shake me down like a ripe apple. Perhaps he'd get tired and go away, eat my tent or something, letting me sneak over the gate and into my car.

I dozed a little, thinking when I woke that the goat had gone, until a waft of ammoniac musk on the night air disillusioned me. When morning broke, he was still glaring at me with no intention of giving up. After all, he had a full water trough, a field of healthy and nutritious grass and no inhibitions about sanitary facilities. He'd last longer than I could.

My eye was caught by movement in the churchyard. Of course! Sunday! Some good Christian soul would rescue me. Later I discovered that my 'good Christian soul' was the church-warden, a man of dubious character and unpleasant disposition. As a keen bird-watcher (and self-appointed guardian of village morals) he carried a long-lens camera. I shouted, but all I got was a derisive, challenging bleat. I needed something to wave – a flag – to catch my putative saviour's attention. I only had two items available. Heads or tails? Either way I was going to be left with neither modesty nor dignity. I would be a source of scandal and gossip for ever. And my uncle the Bishop had worked so hard to get the villagers to accept a lady vicar.

The Unmentionable Miracle

Minstead's new vicar was finding it hard going. Her church was partly 13th century, she felt that her elected officials had probably been there when the foundation stone was laid. As if her gender didn't cause them enough problems, her 21st century attitudes caused much teeth-sucking and wagging of heads. Still, new millennium, new mores. She soldiered on. Tonight, her flock was carol-singing around the village.

Cold-scoured throats were cleared, recorders and guitars tuned, lanterns lit. Choristers and village worthies gathered outside the Trusty Servant. They were warmly wrapped, huffing gently into the frigid night air. The doctor's wife, gleefully dissecting reputations with the organist's sister, glanced up. She saw a small figure clamber over a stone wall and hurry, splay-footed, towards them. She groaned.

'Oh no, it's THAT BOY. I thought they were going to stop him. Last year's carol singing was such an embarrassment.'

'They ought to do something about THAT BOY. They don't discipline him. Social workers and these new-fangled 'house mothers' – too soft, if you ask me.'

'I was only saying to my dear husband the other day; you can take Christian charity too far.'

'Costs the taxpayers money, you know,' said the organist's sister, who lived on invalidity benefits, adding spitefully 'good thrashing, that's what he needs.'

THAT BOY hurried up, face beaming in a triumph of hope over experience. His Guardians, in a never-ending war against head lice, had reduced his pale hair to an uneven shading. Through it his disinfected scalp gleamed in the lamp-light. He was under-sized except for his ears, which made his head look like a decimal point in parentheses. With his moist red nose and pink-rimmed eyes, he was as appealing as a shaved ferret. But he wanted, oh how desperately he wanted, to be a carol singer. Unfortunately, he

possessed a nasal whine that could sever nerves at forty paces. His tonsils and adenoids needed the urgent attention of a good ENT man. He was also, loudly and undeniably, completely tone-deaf.

‘Please, please, oh please! I will be good, I promise. Please?’

‘Wasn’t it explained to you? We thought you were needed indoors tonight.’

‘I’m not needed. Not never. Please let me come.’

They gave in for the sake of peace and quiet and allowed him to carry the scrubbed industrial-size jam tin for donations. He must never, under any circumstances, open his mouth. He promised; and he really, really did mean it. He was even allowed in the vanguard as they perambulated around the small village. He was so proud that he almost stopped shivering.

Eventually the excitement became too much. The singers stuttered to an embarrassed halt as he brayed joyfully into the bitter air. After the second lapse from grace, at Her Ladyship’s small but tasteful dower house, he was gagged with a woollen scarf. The frosty winds did indeed make moan that evening and the scarf was soon reclaimed. He failed again, was divested of his jam tin and sent packing. He tried for a jaunty whistle, thrust his chapped hands into his pockets and strode away. His head was held high, his walk conveyed ‘am I boverred?’ and the night air froze the tears on his cheeks.

As THAT BOY passed the church he slowed, puzzled and a little alarmed: the door was ajar. He peered in, the darkness reaching out to him. Deeper shadows lurked behind the old, huge pillars, the red eye of the votive candle stared at him. The nativity scene was a warmly lit tableau of family life. He sidled up the nave and knelt before it. Fresh hay had been used to carpet the stable and fill the manger, which held a fluorescent pink baby. The summer scent, mixed with a slight tang of the paint with which the vicar had done some hasty refurbishment, reached out to him. They were there: Mother, Father, Son. The shepherds and the kings, the donkeys, sheep and cows. Behind them, towering over the stable roof and leading an invisible heavenly choir, was an angel. He was huge and beautiful, with a chipped but freshly painted halo and great, white, encompassing wings, each carved

feather edged with gold. His head was back, his mouth open. He was, obviously, singing in a loud and wonderful voice and with perfect pitch. It was too much. THAT BOY's head sank into his hands and he sobbed.

In the shadows, a shape stirred. The light made prisms of the child's tears and he could only see a shifting form.

'What is wrong?'

THAT BOY knew all about strangers, the older boys had been specific about the dangers awaiting unwary and innocent youths. Somehow, though, he found himself spilling out his woes. He was unable to move as a cold, light touch traced across his ears, his brow, his lips and his heart.

'If you want to sing, listen and think. Then, open your mouth and sing from your heart.'

The presence moved away, tendrils of darkness coalesced in the organ loft. He heard music so beautiful that he would have cried, had he any tears left. It whispered to him. It flowed over him. It filled him with all those things for which his poor heart longed.

* * *

Next morning, the church was packed. The hard, narrow pews far to the side of the church had long been known as 'the orphanage pews.' Political correctness be damned, said the church-warden. THAT BOY made no complaint as his peers jostled into their pew, meanly pushing him into the corner against the cold, damp pillar. He had been strangely quiet all morning, neither fighting for a fair share of breakfast nor claiming his right to tepid washing water. In fact, a brisk scrub in freezing water seemed to have given him quite a glow.

The party from the Manor was snug in their box pew. Replete from an overloaded breakfast table and happily anticipating lunch and shiny, expensive gifts, they raised their voices.

'What can I give him, poor as I am,' they sang – breathily, but more or less in tune.

The choristers, scrubbed faces shiny above their starched and goffered ruffs, fingered weapons smuggled in under their cassocks. Once this duty was over they would be free to battle in the churchyard.

‘If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb,’ they piped.

The organist, high in his loft and surveying his domain through a rear-view mirror, sighed wearily. Definitely a few bum notes there and several voices about to break. He was an ambitious man. All he needed was an opportunity. Meanwhile, his sister had kindly volunteered to frisk the choristers before they left. Sighing again, he pressed the keys.

In his damp, cold corner THAT BOY listened and thought. Then he opened his mouth and let his heart sing.

‘Yet what I can I give him,’ the pure, clear treble soared, ‘I give my heart.’

* * *

The church worthies were pragmatic men and did not care for the subdued chaos in the church. Nor was the church-warden happy with hearing the word ‘miracle’. Let that develop and they would have pilgrims coming to the church, coach-loads of sightseers, an end to rural tranquillity. Their peaceful roads would be worse than the Lyndhurst tail-back in holiday season. They might even get, horror of horrors, media attention. Their dreadful new vicar woman might well welcome that.

‘No, no, my dear – just a little Christmas surprise the organist and I planned,’ he cooed.

‘I think a miracle would have to be rather more than that, old chap,’ he asserted.

‘Our organist has worked so hard with such unpromising material. I think we should give him every credit for his hard work, rather than talk of divine intervention.’ The organist had joined him to usher the flock out and he wanted to make sure they ‘sang from the same hymn sheet’ – a small clerical joke that made him smile.

The organist was bemused, his mind furiously working. He would make sure THAT VOICE was given to him to train, to be a ticket out of his strait-jacket existence. He agreed with the church-warden: miracles didn't happen, not in this day and age. One thing, though, neither would ever mention.

On entering the church that morning they found on the floor, in the corner where a small boy sobbed, a long white wing feather, edged with gold.

Old Graves in Lyndhurst

Where autumn leaves are lovely in their death,
smooth, ancient tombstones lean their lengths
as anvils for the thrushes' killing spree.
The central chapel waits, a way-station
linking church and earth, a barren mother
fostering her sleeping family.

Seraphim,
Cherubim,
small, heart-sore-carved cradle.
Angelic outstretched hands,
chipped wings,
protecting,
cherishing,
the babe who *never breathed*.

Here, where lonely souls speak low,
their whispers strumming twisted stems of grass,
a crumbling wall divides the faithful dead.
On mounds below the pale lie waxen wreathes
with plaster saints and coated photographs;
more sober graves are at the chapel's head.

**Three stones conjoined, a bed in marbled
pomposity;
sister, husband, wife in primly pious
impropriety.**

Deep-laid within the chapel's rounded slopes
beneath recorded rows of village dead
much older bones support their younger kin.
Outside, where linden trees lacquer the grass,
unkempt, unintended ponies prune the gorse
and graze on unmarked hummocks of old sin.

One stone leans above the sunken
grass AUNTIE
and then in granite quotes
“YOU’LL MISS ME WHEN I’M GONE.”
They added AND WE DO.

Laughter twines around the graves
where children play as yet untouched by grief.
They tease the resting spirits with their games
and find, engraved on mossy, weathered stones,
those chiselled chapbooks of slow village life,
forgotten bearers of their homely names.

The Bread Man

It's been a month since I made the bread man

I hadn't set out that morning to kill my husband. I'd walked into Lyndhurst because I fancied a nice thick venison casserole. Dave's not so keen, says it gives him wind. So do most things.

I got my venison and had a nice chat with Bernie the Butcher. He lives in the same Close as us, just on the outskirts of Lyndhurst. Used to be council, but most of us have bought our houses and all sorts of strange things are being grafted on. We had a laugh over the latest monstrosity. The pretentious idiots built on a conservatory nearly as big as the house. As it was a nice day I wandered up the High Street, window-shopping. If Dave let me have a dog I could have gone home and walked it, there's a nice stretch of forest behind the houses. Then I wouldn't have had any spare time and that would have saved him. At the top of the high street, just after the traffic lights, there's a craft shop. I used to hover like a Victorian waif at Christmas, on this day I wandered in, fingering all the wonderful things I would love to use.

I yielded to temptation and bought some glittery coloured pens. It must be thirty years since I last bothered with art work. Forty, in fact, since I was sure that I should become a famous sculptor. What happens to the certainty of youth? I did have talent, everyone said so. Well, no, not everyone – Henry Moore never actually saw my work, let alone commented on it. The Art Department staff thought I had something.

Then my hormones developed, or woke up, or whatever they do. My bust and my spots became enormous. I had unusual dreams and became very conscious of the builders on the corner site. Perhaps if the doctors developed a hormone displacement therapy for teenage girls we'd have fewer wasted lives.

If you go back a few shops, you find the bakery. They have a railed-off area where you can sit and have a cup of tea and a cream cake. I work on the principle that if you don't have to go up a trouser-size, then a cream cake doesn't hurt. While I was licking cream and jam off my fingers I noticed their display of gingerbread men. I haven't made them since the children were

small. Funny how the mind works, I think they call it 'free association' or something. I'd watched a documentary about voodoo and how they make these little dolls and stick pins in them. I looked at the gingerbread men and the plan was there, fully formed, in my head.

So, I went home and made bread. Most of the dough I formed into a loaf we could have that evening with the casserole, but some I saved. I kneaded, thumped and punched it into a rough man-shape. That felt good. Then, with the loving accuracy of hatred, I moulded the features, flab and scars. Some appendages had to be done from memory, but I think they were reasonably accurate.

I was afraid that the bread man wouldn't cool before Dave came home, but it did. I put it at the bottom of my knicker drawer, one place he definitely wouldn't find it. I tucked it under the lacy wisps that won't go over my post-menopausal hips and piled the sensible cotton numbers back on top. Then I served up the casserole and fresh bread and didn't listen to his insults.

He stayed in that evening, which was unusual. Maybe *she* wasn't available. I don't hate her, haven't hated any of them. I suppose I don't really hate Dave. He reminds me of a cat we once had. Couldn't keep old Tom at home when there was a female around, but he was under your feet and demanding attention when there was nothing better to do.

It was a nuisance Dave staying home, he likes football on the television and I had planned to listen to a concert. Still, I filled in the time thinking about the little bread man and wondering what to do next.

Next day Dave overslept and blamed my cooking. It wouldn't occur to him that an extra supper of cheese, pickles and beer at eleven o'clock makes for bad sleeping. Thank Heaven for single beds. I've learned to sleep through the moaning and groaning (and the other body noises he doesn't bother to hide from me) and I woke quite refreshed. It's nice to start the day with a sense of purpose.

I made Dave's breakfast, found his clean socks, handed him his lunch box. I listened to him slam the front door. I washed up before I allowed myself to open the knicker drawer. I suppose, in a way, I was scared.

You know, the bread man was really rather good. I laid it tenderly on my bed and looked at it. How should one start? Shouldn't there be incantations or potions or some sort of magic? I'd just have to improvise. How would the fates, or the malignant spirits, or whoever does these things, know who the bread man was? Should I have carved 'Dave' on the chest before I baked it? Funny that the 'phone should ring then.

'So sorry, I must have dialled the wrong number. Sorry to bother you.'

'That's quite all right.'

Why does she play these ridiculous games? Come to that, why do I? Why don't I tell her Dave's not at home? But I did spot the message pad and pen I keep there. Pens – and I had a new box of beautiful ones.

Dave has three tattoos. I thought they were sexy when I first met him. At that stage, there was very little I didn't find sexy. It helped that he had muscles rippling under them and a good tan. They look sad now he's sagged and wrinkled and blotchy. Strange that young women still find him attractive, although the current one's not that young – probably reached the desperate stage, the one that comes just before we give up bothering and life becomes our own again. I could quite like her, I think, if she didn't go to such lengths to avoid me.

I lovingly recreated the wriggling snake on the left arm, the sailing ship on the right. The rose on the left thigh gave me a few problems because the red wasn't quite right, but I found an old lipstick that mixed in well. I was pleased with myself when I'd finished, it seemed a shame to mutilate such a work of art.

Bernie the Butcher shuts for lunch and you've never a chance of a decent chop if you leave it too late. I'd spent half the morning with the bread man, so I hid it away in its nest of forgotten desires and hurried out. Perhaps the fresh air would clear my mind and I could decide how to start. I met a couple of the WI ladies and we ended up lunching. So, it was quite late when I got back. I suppose it was because I was in a rush when I was doing the beans that the knife slipped and nicked my finger, but it gave me the right idea. If I did just a little thing to the bread man first, I'd know if it worked.

Dave's old van was turning in through the gate as I nipped upstairs, groped under the knickers and broke off the bread man's little finger. I didn't know what to do with it, so I ate it.

I burned the chops, of course. Well, Dave would have been disappointed if I hadn't. If I give him something small to nag about it keeps him happy for hours. I knew he couldn't go on too long. Tuesday's his model aeroplane club night and he likes to get all gussied up for that. I'm sure Derek and John and the rest of the lads really appreciate the clean nails, washed hair and two gallons of cheap after-shave. He goes to the club, no doubt about that, it's what he does afterwards that's interesting. Very late home he is, some nights. Does he think the other fellows' wives don't tell me what time the club finishes?

Then, of course, there are the long summer evenings when he flies his planes on Beaulieu Heath. The other wives complain that there's more time spent in The Royal Oak than actual flying. Does he really think I'm that stupid, or doesn't he care about covering his tracks? I've no doubt he's flying, but it's not on the Heath. Her bedroom curtains could have been closed because she had a migraine, of course. Yes, I checked – I always do. Then I know how long I've got to read my sort of books, listen to my sort of music, think my own thoughts, before the affair runs its course and he's sulking around the house getting under my feet: until he meets someone else and off he goes – flying again.

I didn't hear Dave come home that night, my head was bad so I'd taken my pills and gone up early. One thing about him coming home with a bad conscience, he does do it quietly. If I'm woken and the pain gets a grip it can go on for days. In the morning, I groaned and turned over when the alarm went off and he took the hint and got himself off to work. I must admit, my heads are the one thing he's always managed to understand. Anything else has always been something I do just to upset him. Anyway, I had a good sleep and by lunchtime on Wednesday I felt fine again.

I didn't look at the bread man that day. Well, there was a lot of housework to catch up on. I love to have the house tidy and polished, which I

suppose was the real reason for killing Dave. Divorce is less drastic, but it takes a long time and he wouldn't be civilised about it. He's far too comfortable here, with me doing everything for him. The only way to get him to agree with you is to make him believe it's his idea. Can't see that working.

It would be a relief to have the house to myself with no mess and dirt around. I know Dave works with oil and grease and OK, he can be dirty – but why a dirty slob? Why does he take it for granted that he comes home, cleans himself up and goes off to the current *her*, while I clean the greasy ring off the bath, hang up the towels and put his grubby underwear in the wash?

I did wonder during the afternoon about the bread man. I suppose I didn't really expect Dave to walk in and casually wave a hand *sans* little finger at me; I think part of me was hoping nothing was going to happen. It's like vacuuming up spiders, you can always kid yourself they've got a chance, whereas putting your foot on them is messily final.

So there I was, singing quietly to myself over the fried liver and I heard the door bang in his usual 'the master's home' manner. Gave me quite a shock when I turned round and there he stood, bit pale under the day's dirt with a bandage wrapped round his little finger. Of course, I did break off the bread man's finger completely. Dave was only suffering from a nasty gash with a chisel. But it made me think, I can tell you. Perhaps I wouldn't have done anything more, but Dave chose to be in a foul mood that evening.

'Can't you even pick out a bit of liver without gristle?'

'Even you should have learned to make decent gravy by now.'

'You've always got your nose in a sloppy book or some stupid magazine. I thought you were supposed to be the intelligent one!'

By the time he'd taken himself and his whisky bottle off to bed, I'd made my mind up.

I had a good think while I was doing the ironing. I do all my best thinking over an iron, actually. It was a job that I hated when I was young and thought that life had something to offer. Wonder where all that ambition and hope went? Eroded, I suppose.

I used to stand up for myself. But then the first baby came along, followed by the second and the third; I was so tired. When he shouted, it frightened the kids, so I gave in and let him have his way. Well, not actually 'have his way' – it was when I stopped arguing with him that he lost his interest in me. Suppose I can't blame him. Three kids, a husband who demands one hundred per cent attention when he's home and all the housework to do. Well, it doesn't leave a woman at her best.

You'd think it would get better as the kids got older (I suppose in a way it did). I got out more, joined things. But it didn't last. Dave didn't like it. Strange that; he had no time for me himself, but got very ratty if I was interested in anyone or anything outside the home. Then, of course, for a long time I wasn't feeling too good, went through a difficult change and just let things drift. Now it's different, time to put myself first, make a new life before it's too late.

I thought it all out over the ironing. If the bread man really did work, then it was simple.

Thursday was obviously one of *her* nights and by the time he'd carped about the way his shirt was ironed, used up all the hot water and slammed out of the house on a tidal wave of after-shave, I was feeling really spiteful. As his van pulled away I nipped upstairs, reached into the drawer and broke off – one particular part of the bread man. I didn't stop to wonder exactly how it would work, or how I'd know.

Dave came home early, seemed very subdued. We had the same performance a few nights later, the clean shirt and the hopeful after-shave. He was home even earlier and even more subdued. The next day I saw her in the supermarket. She looked like she'd been crying. It made me wonder.

He changed after that, didn't go out any more, but it wasn't the way it usually was. He started sitting by the fire of an evening, not even reading, just gazing at it. He got keener on his food, almost greedy; that wasn't like him at all.

It took a while to work out what Dave reminded me of and then I realised. That old tom cat, the one who was a real devil. Out on the tiles all

night, fighting, typical tom behaviour. Half the kittens in the village had a look of him about them. Finally, we took him to the vet. After that, it was pitiful. Poor old Tom, lost all heart he did. Took to sitting by the fire all day, pestered for his food, got fat. And all the time, a look in his eyes – oh, my God. What had I done? Poor old Tom was put down in the end. It broke your heart just to see him.

I didn't look at the bread man again. Couldn't forget it was there, though. Dave got steadily worse, more and more quiet, seemed to need me. It was a funny feeling. I don't think he's ever needed me. As Dave changed, so did I. I couldn't hate him anymore. I got a pain inside that wouldn't go away, like I'd carried all the hate in my stomach and now it was hollow.

I told myself it wouldn't last, he'd had a row with *her* and was taking it badly, he'd soon be back to his old arrogant self. But it went on. This week, he hasn't gone to work. Just sits. And he's getting all – well – dried up, somehow. Seems to be getting smaller and quieter every day. I dare not look in the knicker drawer.

What happens to bread as it gets older? I've never kept a loaf very long, but if you leave a crust at the bottom of the bin it goes all hard and brittle. And how about mould? He keeps scratching at the tattoos. What am I going to do?

What would happen if I threw the bread man away? But where? Bury him in the garden – oh, my God, no. Not the dustbin – the dustcart chews everything up. Not the fire, no, not the fire.

Could I make it better? Should I put him in water, swell him up again? But he's been baked, he wouldn't absorb. And if he did, it would be like throwing bread for ducks. It gets all soggy and bits break off. The bread man might be too brittle even to pick up. What am I going to do?

It's been a month now since I made the bread man. Dave is sitting by the fire, where he sits all day. He's so stiff he can hardly move. And so quiet, it's an effort for him to speak. I'm not sure he really understands any more. Only his eyes follow me, follow me all the time. And the look in them....

Deirdre

L

incontinence is not incompetence ringing in the ears is
not bats in the belfry mind your manners girl you will
soon be old

naked on dew-wet grass saluting the sun my hair
netted with mist drops the boys stroked that hair
inhaled its fragrance were hurt when I laughed at them
don't pull so hard there's more hair in the comb than
on my scalp

dancing through long star-struck nights the line of
boys begging for just one dance for the chance to bring
me drinks a dainty supper plate

don't grit your teeth when food falls from my fork
between plate and mouth at least you have teeth to grit
on the terrace with the crickets percussion to the
nightingale the shock of ice in the mouth and bubbles
down the nose we called it giggles in a bottle

don't avert your gaze from gnarled and broken rhino
horns on the toes of calloused feet go call my footman
let him gouge and clip and file and charge me a day's
pension for five minutes' work

soaked sand under the soles the white lace of waves
foaming round ankles and tentacle toes tumbling sea
salted shells

don't click your tongue when I am slow to rise my
brain sends messages my legs refuse to hear
whirling under the golden moon with the smell of

jasmine stronger than wine and strong arms round my
waist

don't scrub so hard at paper skin pleated in empty
folds a geriatric origami

firm white arms holding broad brown backs of lovers
the cool touch on flesh-filled skin of gold bands
find me my box let my fingers wander over jewels drink
that nice tea take those pills try not to drool mind your
manners girl you will soon be old

That was the last recording I made of Deirdre. She had finally decided to allow her biography to be written and as she said, 'Colm, who could do it better than you?' Deirdre – 'Deirdre of the Sorrows' as she would style herself in her depressive times. Or 'Deirdre O'Malley' when she was getting playful with her fans. She changed her name as she changed her hats, but was always just 'Deirdre' on her poems. It was as 'Deirdre' that they loved her, all those earnest young men and bespectacled girls.

The only name she would never use was 'Jerome.' 'Colm, darling,' she would say, 'we're having too good a time to be stuffy – you know I love you.' Yes, she did, in her own way. And if I was to keep that most important love, then I must give her freedom, close my heart to the hurts she dealt so casually and live for the times we were together.

When I came in to her room on that day (and why are we not given an instinct for the last day, when we should say all those unspoken things we will always regret?) she was alone. We had chosen the nursing home with great care, Deirdre and I, when she was still able to choose. It was just outside Beaulieu, not a great distance for me to travel. My eyesight isn't so good now and I avoid the main roads. You would think it was just another of the forest's gravelled tracks, but amongst the trees there was a gate and beyond that gate an old house. The refurbishment for the needs of the terminally ill was graciously done and the atmosphere welcoming.

It was one of those times when she talked to her ghosts, so I set the recorder going and sat quietly.

‘Naked on the grass saluting the sun.’ Yes, I remember that so well. She was in her natural living/Indian mystic phase. Yoga was the craze at the time. We lived in my old forest home, just outside of Lyndhurst on the Beaulieu Road, which was lucky because the garden was sheltered from view. We both loved the garden, but had to employ a green-fingered old man. I asked her not to practice yoga poses when he was there, but of course she dazzled him as she did everyone.

‘Darling man, you live close to the earth. Does it bother you that I work sky-clad?’

He spat thoughtfully. ‘Well, maid, it seems to me there’s not much I haven’t seen by now. If that’s how you want to be, it won’t make much difference at my age. I can admire a statue now without wanting to carve it, if you get my drift.’

She laughed, as only she could laugh, and there was nothing the old man wouldn’t have done for her in that moment. She put him in a poem later and I hope he never read it.

I played the recording to the Hospice staff. They were indignant and, I think, genuinely bewildered. As they said, they had only given her palliative care and she had kept her dignity to the end. Every member of staff loved her. I had seen no signs that she wasn’t happy, ruling that last little court as she had ruled hearts all her life.

I taught at the University of Southampton when Deirdre first agreed to live with me. It was lucky I had an independent income, a prestigious history degree and an understanding faculty, or I could never have held her. She was a humming bird, enticed by nectar. I took time off from a crowded marking schedule one time, because she had, just *had* Colm darling, to go to Cambridge for some sort of poetry fest. She wrote the piece that everyone seems to quote.

*broad brown backs of carefree young men
the King's fishers
perched on the parapet above the Cam
rods quivering between sun-burned thighs
muscles small foetuses beneath stretched skin
sweat in the runnels shining the sharp planes
of shoulder blades and ribs
and their only catch
a pretty undergrad
taken home for tea.*

She called it ‘the backs of Cambridge,’ an in-joke I rather liked. I didn’t like the poem: she got careless with fame. But it was loved, apparently mostly within the gay community. Of course, she caught and brought home one of the fishermen. Peter, his name was – introduced as ‘Pedro the Fisherman, darling, I’ve brought him for tea and to act as my muse. Isn’t he divine?’

How could I compete with a brown back, me with my white skin and narrow shoulders? He moved down to the forest with us. Still, suntans fade and so does summer. Autumn saw the departure of Pedro, back to academe. Deirdre craved sunshine, excitement, warm nights and sharp, local wine. We were off again. The University sighed and accepted.

I would have liked, as always, to go north. I have a passion for the Vikings, that warrior race who live on in so many of us. But to Deirdre it was ‘anathema, darling, pure anathema. You sly old Bluebeard, are you trying to kill me off? You know my soul craves warmth, I would curl up and die if you took me to those dreadful places.’ I packed my wide straw hat, my cotton trousers and long-sleeved shirts and we went south. I think in some ways Deirdre was kin to those tiny jewelled lizards she loved, basking beside them on baking rocks, every pore greedily sucking in the death rays, while I lurked in the shadows.

I have, not exactly a phobia, but certainly a strong dislike of lizards. I came to realise how much I had to thank them for. Deirdre loved them. When she moved in with me she was enchanted to learn about the sand lizards, apparently rare, to which the New Forest is home. Her imagination was caught by the fact that they were once nearly extinct in Britain and are now protected by law. ‘My God, Colm. For once the politicians have done

something right. Can't you see how beautiful these lizards are?' No, I couldn't. Apparently, our heathlands are one of the few places they still live. Deirdre, always one for intense enthusiasms, was reasonably content with our quiet forest life while she could study these creatures and meet others equally besotted.

On this particular holiday, was it a goat-herd or an innkeeper who was her post-Pedro muse? I can't remember now. I know she worked at her best when the scented air was hot and the wine flowed from pottery jars, poured by a young man with brown skin and tender hands. I had my own work, my magnum opus that will, one day, be finished. I could work with my feet on cool floors in shaded rooms while she and her friends sun-worshipped. Oh yes, there were friends. We might set off alone, but her coterie of fans soon found us and every diver, climber, farmer and shopkeeper became her friend as soon as she met them. She produced her 'songs from the sun' during that holiday, some of her best work. I'm glad she had that happy time.

I sometimes think that living with Deirdre was akin to being a falconer. You can love your hawk, but the day must come when you take her to a meadow where the air blows soft and enticing. There, heart in your mouth, you must remove the hood, untie the tethers and throw her into freedom. You watch as she soars and wheels, knowing that wild young hawks lie over the horizon and their flights will take her where your earthbound feet can never go. You can do nothing as she disappears into her own world but wait in the hope that love will bring her home, for no other lure is strong enough.

II

To whom it may concern.

And why should it be your concern? This is my business.

Anyway

Being of sound mind in the opinion of my doctors (the critics, bless them, have long held different opinions) I leave all of which I am possessed – does that mean my demons?

Should I inflict on my dearest friend the red-hot pricking of pitchforks in the night, the giggling whispers that urge me to insanity?

Anyway

All my things. My jewellery, which he may sell that I may contribute in death as I failed to do in life.

My clothes should go to auction for the same purpose.

I cannot leave my organs, the cancer took its pick and gave its leavings to the chemicals.

My work, such as it is, may be obtained from any library and I have no new manuscript to earn a posthumous fortune, the morphine took my brain.

Anyway

To my truest friend, to Colm Jerome, I leave all my tangible things, including my copyrights and royalties.

I hope I leave him memories.

I am told I must appoint that fearsome thing, an executor.

Who but my darling Colm?

Look at all he has executed for me: the black dog on my shoulder, its teeth sunk into my neck until the agony.....

(At this point the pain became too much for Deirdre, who had been gradually weakening, so I wrote the rest at her dictation. The two witnesses are Deirdre's nurses and I certify that they witnessed the whole process. I am assured that this will is a legal document. Signed: Anne Tennant, Matron).

My beloved dog-whisperer tamed the beast with gentle reason.

My fears, my phobias, my frenetic fascinations – when it was their life or mine his execution came in time.

So, as the man who in life did everything for me, I ask that he undertake this one last task for me.

I wish him to consign this poor, wracked body to the flames, though not as I would wish him to go – riding the waves on a ship of fire – and then take my ashes and scatter them to the warm winds in the presence of my little jewelled lizards.

They handed me her will while I was still too numb to take it in. Now the tedious legalities have been completed, I am free to use her keys without guilt. The small locked suitcase which she took with her everywhere, hiding it in the bottom of her wardrobe when we were at home, is mine to investigate.

Her passport is lying on top of the assorted papers. Despite all our travelling, I have never seen the details, she would never let me hand it to the officials with mine. Her name was SULLIVAN, DAISY MARY. She was born in January. I had always celebrated her birthday in August, when the heat was at its height and she bloomed. Her place of birth was PORTSMOUTH.

There is a large brown envelope and, to my astonishment, it contains everything (from letters to postcards to shopping lists) that I ever wrote to her. There are bundles of documents – birth, marriage and death certificates – that I put aside to study later, together with a folder of newspaper cuttings. At the bottom is an envelope, uncreased A4, with my name and a note in her distinctive writing on the front:

Darling Colm. The things in this case will help you in your research, but the enclosed story will save you a lot of detective work. For the first time in my life, I have told the truth. Try not to hate me my darling. You have always been my true guiding star. Your own, Deirdre.

I don't think I have ever been a coward, but I can't open that envelope. I hide the case away. It will be some days before I can return to it.

III

The Story of Daisy Mary Spriggs

Daisy was born in January 1950, the only child of Martha Spriggs, a chambermaid. The child's father was unknown, but Martha obtained the deeds to a narrow terraced house in Old Portsmouth and an anonymous annuity. Daisy was given all that was necessary, apart from love.

Martha became ill. Daisy never knew if the doctor gave a firm diagnosis, but before long her mother's life was confined to bed and wheelchair, with Daisy her constant attendant. School attendance varied according to Martha's demands. The only lesson Daisy loved and tried never to miss was English, but even that was spasmodic. Her ears constantly rang with the refrain 'mind your manners, girl, you will soon be old.'

Finally, a school attendance officer gained entry to the house and was appalled at what she found. Just after Daisy's fifteenth birthday, the authorities sent Martha into a convalescent home for respite care while her daughter went away for a fortnight's holiday. Daisy meekly packed a small suitcase and set off for Harbour Station, the train ticket and ten pounds she had been given safely in her purse.

Many young carers were booked into the Bognor Butlins. Staff did their best, but the absence of one child was not noticed. It was late the next day when they realised that Daisy had never arrived. By the time a search had been organised, Daisy was in Liverpool. The money she had siphoned off over the years as she collected her mother's various benefits (the annuity had suddenly stopped) stood her in good stead until she could find her way around.

Daisy Mary may have been only fifteen, but she had an ability to look sophisticated and a natural charm that she soon learned to use. A naive child with no moral instruction and a feral instinct for self-preservation will take the obvious route. At one point she travelled with a hopeful rock group and helped the lead singer with his lyrics. Then she knew that she was meant to be a poet.

When Daisy met Arnold Sullivan and discovered that he owned a small specialist publishing firm, she left the rock world without a backward glance. By the time she was eighteen (and Arnold fifty-nine) she had two collections published. She became Mrs Sullivan. Two years later (by which time she had become Deirdre) he died, leaving her whatever clothes and jewellery she might possess. The house and business went to the ex-wife and children he had forgotten to mention. But Deirdre had that most precious thing of all, a reputation. She had also, following ingrained habits, salted away a good deal of Arnold's generous allowance, so was ready to launch herself amongst the intellectual elite. Eventually, her success took her to a poetry reading at Southampton, where she met a history professor named 'Colm Jerome.' From that day, she never left him.

IV

I put Daisy's story back in the envelope, conscious of a great sadness. Perhaps I should condemn her behaviour, but then this was Deirdre. I just feel pity for that lost, abused child.

The birth, marriage and death certificates match up to the story, the newspaper cuttings deal with her disappearance and the abandonment of Martha Spriggs. There are no 'Deirdre' cuttings, but she knew I always collected those. When the authorities accepted Daisy's disappearance, they realised that the querulous old lady in the respite care home was now their responsibility and moved her into a nursing home. The house was sold to meet their fees. And there the cuttings end.

As a good researcher, I have to investigate further. Elementary detective work has found an elderly and confused Martha Spriggs. A little inventive talking obtained an appointment to see her 'for all the good it will do you.' So, with some trepidation, I catch the Portsmouth train.

Martha (a shrivelled, dry chrysalis from which the butterfly Deirdre once emerged) barely registers my presence. I sit through a eulogy of her Daisy: 'an angel sent from Heaven,' who had been 'abducted by them creatures from space.' I try to ask a few questions, but am met with a blank stare.

As I leave, a care assistant moves in with a cup of tea. The last words I hear from Deirdre's mother are 'mind your manners, girl. You will soon be old.'

V

Deirdre and I are ready to fly to the sun. I pray that the forest will be strong enough to call me back.

Do Slugs have Souls?

I've put my hand in the rubbish bin. There's a slug convention going on. They ooze in by the porch door hinges and make their way inside the bin.

Do slugs talk to each other? How do they know I've just thrown away lettuce? Not a thing I usually have in the house, must have had a fitness fit and now it's gone all brown and slimy. Does one slug have a minute megaphone? What sort of voice would a slug have? Hissy and bubbly with a bit of a rasp perhaps? Sort of 'sssssmellsss of lettussss, chapsss?'

I wasn't aware of slugs for most of my life. I was an urban child and when I married we lived in a second-floor flat on a city street until the children left home. Then I lost James and was offered voluntary redundancy. Suddenly, I was alone and purposeless.

Fortunately, (for me, at any rate) an old aunt died. I think I met her a couple of times when I was very small. Perhaps that's why I was the only one of the family she hadn't disinherited. I couldn't believe it when I got the Solicitors' letter telling me that the house was now mine

I went down to the New Forest to take a look. One look. I didn't go near the place again until it had been stripped, cleaned and refurbished. I nearly asked for it to be disinfected, but I reckoned that would be standard in these cases. Television programmes on hoarders had nothing on it.

When I next saw the house, clean and smelling of new paint, I fell in love with it. It has its quirks, it is Victorian, but I have a twenty-first century kitchen and bathroom. It stands in a quiet street just off the Cadnam Road and backs onto what used to be the racecourse. It's now an open space and it's local dogs who get a good gallop. There's a marshy stream crossing it that in season is choked with yellow iris. The mares bring their foals there in spring, so I had the garden designed so that I had a sheltered space where I could sit with my coffee and watch.

Salt, that's what I need. Poured over them. Do slugs have feelings? They twist and turn and curl up. Can a slug scream? What if there is a God

and I look like a slug to Him? Will the next shower I'm caught in be celestial salt?

I suppose I should pick them up. Put them out on the grass. I could use kitchen paper so I didn't have to touch the beastly things. But then I'd drop them, probably on my feet. What if I'm the slugs' destiny? What if their God wants them massacred and I'm the divine instrument?

My designers were very good and the garden looked lovely. I thought I'd live from the soil and be healthy and self-sufficient. They didn't think to mention the slugs. And snails. And caterpillars. Probably hundreds of other guerrilla invertebrates. But the slugs have been the bane of my life. The New Forest, for all its beauty, is damp. A slug's *Shangri La*.

If I tip the salt in and close the lid quickly I won't know what happens. In case God exacts divine retribution and sends down a shower of salt I'd better have a quick gin. No, amend that. Better have a slow gin. I made sloe gin one year, it was good. The last ones were a bit too quick. Surely this one will finally drown out the voice in my head?

'I'm sorry, Charlotte, but this just isn't going to work.' Says Adrian, ever pompous.

Why does he say that, over and over? Oh, sod it, drown him in a quick flood of gin. I can have the slow one later.

Actually, Adrian is a bit like a slug. An immaculate, City Banker slug with a well-bred voice; a slight slur on his sibilants. And a certain paleness about the belly, the fat concealing the musculature he'd need to crawl on it. I'd like him to crawl. And if he kept saying 'ssssorry, ssssharlotte, sssso sssssorry,' that would be the icing on the cake.

On the wedding cake? The one I'd already designed. Fairly plain and in good taste – Lord, that's a weak pun. Don't want a lot of show at my age, none of that chocolate with butter-cream nonsense the youngsters go for, I like a good old-fashioned fruit cake fed with brandy.

'Charlotte, you must realise that we're mature, set in our ways. I really don't think we could make it work.'

Slug, slug, slug. Shut up. Did you try to make it work? Or was it just me? Me with my home-making skills and my cheque-book? Was I your last sexual fling before maturity took its toll? Before your God poured salt on your penis and it curled up and died?

Time for that slow gin, methinks. How did the bottle get empty? Strange. That only leaves the wedding cake brandy

I can keep the cake for Christmas. I haven't seen the children for an age, but hopefully I'll get an invite. We used to see more of each other. They live quite a long way away, of course, and Rosemary's busy with the little ones. I do miss them. Richard and I are probably best apart, I may be his mother, but I have my doubts about the way he makes his money. I'm not good at keeping my mouth shut.

They never met Adrian, he didn't want to get to know them. He didn't like me seeing them. Perhaps that way he could ignore the fact that I'm a Grandmother: not good for his studly image. Not that there's been much studliness recently. Oh, well.

This brandy's too good to waste on cake.

He would have had to meet them eventually. Little Sophie would have made a lovely bridesmaid, she's a pretty little thing. I've been walking round the Southampton stores looking at dresses. They do some lovely things for children. There's a little shop in Lyndhurst that sells minuscule garments, though I was a bit put off when one little boy's outfit was labelled "three peace suite." I shouldn't be an intellectual snob. Can't see Thomas as a page-boy, he could possibly be bribed into holding the rings, but he'd insist on wearing his Batman costume.

At least I don't have to hide bottles now. Adrian has a Calvinist eye and a bloodhound nose. Oh dear! What a picture; a slug in a Savile Row suit with beady eyes and a wet rubber nose. Why am I giggling? Adrian would call it 'drunken hysteria.' Always pompous.

'Really, Charlotte, would you like the children to see you drinking?'

Not averse to a pre-dinner sherry, were you? Nor an after-dinner brandy. So long as I bought the good stuff. And appropriate wine with the exotic candle-lit dinners he liked me to cook. That was just him being a civilised gentleman.

Actually, I never have drunk in front of the children or grandchildren. Not even to dull the pain when James died. I was comforting everyone else then. In fact, slug-in-my-head, I didn't drink until I met you.

Just a stiff one at first, to calm the nerves. I equated the aristocratic air with intelligence. Worshipped at his feet, I did. Only until I discovered that he wore toe separators because of his hammer toes. He wooed me with scraps of poetry. I was big-eyed with awe until I popped in one day with a cake I'd baked for him. He didn't quite manage to hide his well-thumbed Oxford Dictionary of Quotations. I went straight to the Lyndhurst Library and there they were, all those beautiful words.

It's a cliché, but this brandy really is like liquid velvet.

I'm seeing things more clearly. The cramping pain in my stomach, which I thought was transferred pain from my broken heart – could it be hunger? When did I last eat?

The fridge is a bit of a jumble, but I find some tomatoes. Must have bought them when I got the lettuce, but they seem all right. I search for the huge hunk of cheese I vaguely remember buying. I've seen a form of border collie called a 'blue marl', the puppies are balls of white and blue-grey fluff. The cheese looks a bit like that, but if I cut its fur coat off I'm sure it will be fine. There's a loaf sitting in a damp patch on the draining board, I must have got it out of the freezer at some time today. I've found butter in the butter dish, we're in business.

I assemble my ingredients on the kitchen table and set to work. Hefty slices of bread (the slightly icy heart will soon thaw) and thick, thick layers of butter. In case it's unsalted (Adrian always insisted on that) I sprinkle some salt on it, though I get a bit of a pang about the slugs. Then I add chunks of de-furred (as in deferred gratification?) cheese and overlapping circles of sliced tomato with more salt. I'm salivating.

To Hell with candles, napkins, lady-like behaviour. I sit at the kitchen table, knees well apart, elbows firmly rooted. I bring a door-stop sandwich to my mouth in a two-handed grip. Bliss! As my James used to say, ‘that first one didn’t touch the sides.’ I’m more circumspect with the next one, really savouring the taste. And for dessert? How about a wedge of rich fruit cake and a large coffee? Replete, I feel warm and happy. I shall make a list – that’s always good for the soul. I head it in large letters:

Things to do Tomorrow

1. Clear out fridge. Throw out all ‘exotic’ items. Replace with plebeian food – lots of it.
2. Find anything Adrian left here. I know he brought over a bag of washing, which I’ve done. And I picked up (and paid for) his dry cleaning. There’s his spare suit and his striped pyjamas. Toiletries in the bathroom – he likes expensive ones and expected me to replace his stock as needed. How can one man use so much deodorant? Put it all in black bags and take it to the car park. Throw it, with precision and glee, into the steel maw of the vast green recycling bin. Pull the lever and watch it disappear into the metal depths.
3. Abandon self-improvement project. Take back to the library that stack of ‘good’ books and take out loads of non-literary trash, escapism that I shall enjoy. While there, study their ‘clubs and groups’ folder.
4. Go into the travel agents and look at singles holidays to warm, happy places.
5. Ring Rosemary and arrange to visit.
6. Go back to travel agents, if she agrees. Find out about holidays suitable for a lively grandmother and two small children. Why not?

But first, there is something I should do. I go out to the porch and open the bin. Some of the salted slugs are dead, others have hidden beneath the lettuce leaves and are now munching their sanctuary. I get the barbecue tongs and pick the lettuce up. Carefully, I take it outside and leave it, with its

passengers, under a bush. The fresh air is making me a bit woozy; perhaps I should head for bed. I think, now, I can sleep.

I look at the kitchen table. On it stand the two bottles. Dead soldiers awaiting burial in the bottle bank. I salute them, knowing they are the last of their kind.

Forest Meditation

The clamour of life too much.

Need the forest.

My favourite spot.

Great saucer shapes in the ground, where mists collect in the autumn, scarlet toadstools glow and cobwebs are dew-beaded. I like to think they're Neolithic dwellings and I can commune with the spirits of my ancestors. But possibly they're modern artefacts, munitions stores, from the war. There are days, even now, when the forest reverberates from controlled explosions.

There is a ditch and bank, great pines. Crabapple and holly, gorse and elder. Blue sky, wiping sunlight from its face with cotton wool balls. Just enough breeze. Caws and hoots, rooks and pigeons. Aerial guardians of the place.

Stand in green saucer, feet sturdily apart. Soft shoes, too many holly and gorse seedlings for bare feet. Spine straight, head up. Feel roots growing from feet into the forest earth. Balanced.

Breathe.

Sway weight over left foot. Turn waist, facing left. Sway back and over right foot. Turn waist to right. Continue until one continuous movement. Eyes growing heavy. Arms loose from shoulders. Let them swing with the movement. Eyes closing.

Sway left, turning. Hold 'ball'. Mine is a compressed rainbow, smooth between my fingers. Right, rotating hands on ball.

Breathe.

Feel the exhaled breath from pines, gorse, grass. Draw it in, together with the clear tang of the little stream. Feel it flow through as body turns, synchronised now, no conscious effort. Let the tensions, the stresses, the bad things of life flow out. The forest will absorb and cleanse.

Breeze whispering, world receding. Nearly there, don't strive. Let the forest take you.

Where do I go? I don't know. I never know. Out of myself and into the forest, part of its beauty, its mystery. There are voices, forms. Soaring over the trees, the lawns, the rides. One with it all.

Back. Never allowed to stay too long. Humans who linger in the faerie realms return to find their world changed. Movement slowing, eyes opening.

Ponies have filed by, unconcerned, and are lipping the close grass. A robin perches in a holly tree, head cocked, watching me. Collared doves coo from a silver birch. On my hand, white petals from the crabapple. The Forest's balm on my skin.

Over the little stream where deer come from the shadows to drink. Under the great oak where squirrels frolic and raise their families, chittering in the drey. A distant hum now, the sound of traffic, the world returning.

Through the gate.

Down the path.

Home.

Leave Well Alone

My name is Annie Parker. I live at Bank in the New Forest. I suppose I should say that I'm in my right mind – well, I think so, anyway. It's rather dramatic to be locking this away marked 'to be opened in the event of my death,' but I think it's wise. After all, I may be younger than Dora, but I'm no spring chicken.

It's years now since we moved to Bank, all bright-eyed and ignorant. I was an urban girl and a new bride and if it hadn't been for Dora and George Purkiss, I don't think I could have stuck the life. Bank, or to be formal Bank and Gritnam, since there's not much between them, is little more than a few houses on a lane, though there is a pub. In the good old days before bureaucracy got a bee in its bonnet, it was a favourite place for the gypsies. We all got along very well, they're nice folk. I've heard stories of a treacle mine, which I'm sure are made up for the credulous, but it's surprising how often it's mentioned. Of course, we're just outside Lyndhurst with its *Alice in Wonderland* connection, so who can tell?

Phil, my new husband, wanted to try his hand at a market garden. I went along with it because at that time I would have done anything he said, but looking at the little cottage and its land, lost amongst all those towering old trees, my heart sank. Still, we've done all right.

Dora and George have a very small farm. No-one knows just how old it is, but almost certainly it would have been well established when William the Bastard King came along. George was very partial to his pigs and it was quite a local sight in the Autumn when he turned his sows and piglets out to enjoy the delights of the forest. He reckoned it wasn't just the acorns they benefitted from, there were all sorts of nutrients and minerals in the soil that 'do 'em a world of good, so they do, and help make our bacon so tasty.' Dora was a little too fond of the piglets and absented herself when they went off to slaughter. Enjoyed a bacon sarnie, though.

Now George has gone, Dora lives on the farm alone. There aren't so many animals now, but she's surprisingly happy, considering all the fuss at the time. Nine-days' wonder in the forest, it was.

The local press had a field day with the ‘Farmer in the Well’ story. All the usual theories about a village vendetta, a disturbed tramp and even (most ridiculous of all) a jealous wife, were aired and discarded. Dora put up with some nasty questioning, though. At the height of the excitement, the Farmers Weekly ran a piece, grossly overestimating George Purkiss as a ‘prosperous and popular farmer.’ Even the Pig Breeders’ News used the case as a filler, though George’s old sow hardly justified the headline ‘Great Pig Breeder’s Death Mystery.’ We weren’t sure if the ‘great’ applied to the pig, the breeder or the mystery. But in the end, after all the measuring and muttering died down, the inevitable ‘death by misadventure’ verdict was announced. Media attention switched to political peccadilloes and life in our little community returned to normal.

I popped over, as I do regularly, to see how Dora was doing. She was singing! Her voice didn’t exactly soar through the open kitchen window. It crept over the sash and fell heavily on a broody hen, nesting hopefully in a geranium bed. I know that as I picked my way through the muddy yard I tutted critically: not so much at the tone-deaf noise but at the thought of a new widow singing at all. I unlatched the door with the ease of long friendship, not surprised to find the kettle steaming and two cups set out. That window has always been the neighbourhood lookout post and I would have been seen turning in from the lane and plodding across the field.

George’s old collie was stretched out on the rag rug, soaking in the heat from the Aga. She gave a perfunctory thump of her tail to acknowledge that I was a friend, then went back to sleep. She couldn’t sleep in her bed, poor old thing, because it was occupied by a new collie pup and an orphan lamb, quite comfortable curled up together. It’s rare that there isn’t a young animal of some sort being nursed in Dora’s kitchen. There’s even been a fox cub from time to time. And, of course, any excuse to nurse a piglet or two. Dora’s heart will never make her a good farmer.

Dora smiled at me. ‘Sit down, Annie, take the weight off your feet and the frown off your face. There’s some fruit cake left over from the funeral if you want. That recipe’s a good keeper.’ She smiled at my look, my obvious embarrassment at hearing the funeral mentioned. ‘What should I have done?’

Buried the leftover cake with George? Not that he would have minded, it was always his favourite.'

'How are you managing, love?' Holding the sympathetic look was making my teeth hurt. Dora was looking far too well, really, it was almost indecent.

'I'm fine, Annie, thanks.' Dora was well aware that my social face was becoming a strain. She could see there was something on my mind.

'Dora, I've been thinking – we've known each other for a long time, do you mind if I ask you something?'

Not that it would make much difference if she *did* mind. Once I get the bit between my teeth, as Phil always says, there's no stopping me.

'Well, this probably sounds silly. It's your front room.'

Dora raised her eyebrows, a slight smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

'In all the years I've been coming into this house, all the doors have been open. But not that room, you always have it closed.'

Dora said nothing, she wasn't going to make this easy.

'You've got the telly in there, because we can see the light on every evening.' Now I felt really silly.

Dora sighed.

'Ah, so that's what's eating you. Well, someone has to know one day. We didn't talk about it while there was two of us, but now... It's been going on for a long time and I'm not getting any younger. If anything happens to me, somebody will have to look after everything. And I must admit, after all this time it will be nice to confide in a friend. I often wanted to, but George was dead set against it.'

'It all started so long ago, practically a new bride I was...'

At first, Dora and George blamed each other for the ever-open doors. Each would know they had shut a door, only to find it open again and a howling draught around their ankles. Then there were the puddles. Well, they

didn't blame each other for those, of course, but the dog came under suspicion. One night at the pub Granfer White asked George if he'd ever seen a ghost and it all began to make sense.

A couple of hundred years before, some chap had fallen down their well one dark night and drowned. Ever since then he had dripped up from the well and gone wandering about the house. Dora and George weren't the sort of people to worry about a little thing like that: Dora knitted them both thick socks and they left the doors open, though it did seem a bit funny that a ghost couldn't go through them. As he felt like one of the family they called him 'Fred,' and he was really no bother, until George bought their first television.

'Fred took to the television at once. We never saw him, just a little fuzziness at the corner of the eye, but he'd come in and stay right to the end. He didn't have any favourite programmes, he'd watch until we switched off and then pop off back to his well.

'We didn't have any bad feelings or anything, but there was a problem. Puddles in the kitchen and hall were one thing, we still had the old stone flags there, but on my good carpet – and with him staying in one place for so long it was a big puddle – that was a real nuisance. Fred was very accommodating. I put a bucket in his favourite spot and he got the idea at once. I called him "Fred Inabucket" after that, it seemed nice for him to have a proper name.'

Everything was fine for a while: each night they'd switch off, say goodnight to Fred, empty the bucket and go to bed. Then George turned funny. Silly, really, but he seemed to be jealous of Fred. George only liked sport and the news, but Dora enjoyed a good play and some of the situation comedies. If there was an old weepy film on, that was bliss. She knew Fred was enjoying the same things.

Perhaps if Dora and George had children it would have been different, but more and more often George read his paper while Dora and Fred enjoyed the television. Then George started saying that Fred was a nuisance and they ought to get rid of him. Didn't think it was healthy, shutting themselves in the front room like that, not inviting anyone in, living with a dirty great bucket in

front of their television. On and on he went. One night, after Fred had gone back to his well...

‘That’s it, I’ve had enough. That damn ghost gets more of my wife’s company than I do. I’m going to go out there and tell him he’s got to stop coming in here.’

Dora was very upset. She and Fred understood each other, she’d miss his company. In fact, she was in such a sulk that she stomped off to bed and fell fast asleep. It wasn’t until morning that she realised George hadn’t come back. She searched the farm very carefully before calling the police. She didn’t like to suggest where they should look, but in the end they got around to the well and found George.

Dora led me to the front room. It was such an ordinary room. The television took pride of place, Dora’s comfortable old armchair in front of it. From the door stretched two neat lines of newspaper. At the end of one, beside the chair, stood an old, battered bucket. The other line, headlines still clearly describing the ‘Farmer in the Well’ mystery, led to a new, shiny bucket.

Dora was smiling affectionately at both.

Jamie's House

'When you're dead what happens to this house?'

An unusual question, but my troubled, genius son doesn't do 'usual'. I explain about legacies and that he will be looked after until his majority, when the house will be his, free and unencumbered.

'So you can't die until I'm eighteen?'

Jamie, as usual, is looking past me. The setting sun through the kitchen window sparks his flat grey eyes with fire. He's grown so big and strong. His father used to tuck me under his arm, calling me his 'pocket Venus.' Jamie has inherited his size, but the muscles are the result of the hours he spends with an axe, keeping our wood-guzzling stove fed.

Jamie marches out, going up to the front bedroom. I hear the rise and fall of his voice. My good hand grasps the edge of the old sink, the pitted surface harsh against my fingertips. I'm almost gagging on the smell from the unwashed dinner plates

My face, reflected in the darkening window where the sun is sinking in bloodlust streaks, is that of a haggard woman. I look a great deal older than my forty years.

* * *

I was desperate to find the right house, without near neighbours, within walking distance of Lyndhurst. A house that would be surrounded by forest, calm, undisturbing. Jamie could continue at the 'special' school where he seemed happy. This seemed perfect.

Until then I had been very lucky, the neighbours on one side of our council house were elderly and hard of hearing, the other side worked at nights. Now we had new neighbours who were intolerant of Jamie's nocturnal habits. As he grew older and heavier, so the noise levels increased.

Jamie's father was unable to face the harsh facts of his son's condition. His solution was to disappear without trace, leaving us without support, moral or financial. Fortunately, his family had more conscience. A timely legacy

from a forgotten cousin, left to me in trust until Jamie's majority, made it possible to purchase our own place, so the house-hunting started.

* * *

The Estate Agent, knowing that Jamie would not respond in the presence of a stranger, had let us have the key, so we were free to explore on our own. We stood in the hall, which was generously proportioned and light. 'What do you think, Jamie?'

'It's all right.'

'Why do you think that, Jamie?'

'Dunno.'

Well, that was an improvement. The previous four houses had received a flat 'no.' I was so tired. But then I'd been bone-deep weary since Jamie's birth. It was the emotional strain, never knowing if an unguarded word would cause a scene, coupled with a fierce need to protect him from the outside world.

'Would you like some lunch?'

I had realised that our appointment to view would cut across Jamie's lunch hour. If he didn't get fed on time there would be trouble. My question got the back-of-the-head treatment, but I was prepared. Life with Jamie was like crawling blindfold through a minefield.

'Why don't we have a picnic in here?' I spread his blue cloth on the floor.

'If we buy this house, this would be our dining room.'

Silence. I placed Jamie's plastic lunch box precisely in the middle of the cloth, turning my back to sort out my own lunch, letting him set out in a neat row his slice of bread and butter, piece of cheese, packet of crisps and carton of drink. He would eat it, one item at a time, starting from the left. Every day. Any variation resulted in tantrums.

Jamie is hard work, but it isn't all doom and gloom. On good days he can be charming, with an infectious giggle and wry sense of humour. And I love him so much.

‘Upstairs.’

I heard the door close. Well, that was a surprise. He had refused to look upstairs in the previous houses. Perhaps, this time, we had found the right place. A dilapidated Victorian vicarage, its only view over the churchyard. Its drawbacks, presumably, were what made it so affordable.

I cleared away the debris of our picnic and joined Jamie in the big front bedroom. It needed a lot of bright, clean paint and there was a strange smell, a combination of antiseptic and lily-of-the-valley.

‘This is a nice room, Jamie. Shall I have it as my room?’

‘No. Out.’

I turned to go out, stumbling over the threshold. The biggest back bedroom, which I had thought would be Jamie’s room, was sunny. If I took that one, I could set up my office units by the window and look out at the garden. Well, more of a wilderness, but I liked a challenge

‘This is a nice big room, Jamie. Wouldn’t you like it? I thought if I had the front room this could be yours.’

‘No. Your room.’ Jamie marched out. ‘This one.’

Not only was the room small, there were bars at the windows. I would have expected him to run screaming from it. Still, it was such a relief that he was even looking at the house, I wouldn’t push my luck. It was in the right area: his school bus, with the patient driver he already knew, could pick him up and drop him. As a freelance accountant, specialising in farms, I am able to work from home, so can always be there for Jamie. I’ve built up quite a satisfactory client list from neighbouring farms, a lot of the work is done electronically or the farmers drop papers in to me. If I do have to go out and visit it can be fitted around Jamie’s hours. As long as I’m there at the beginning and end of each day it works.

Everything about the sale went through in record time. The agents allowed me in before completion so that while Jamie was at school I was able to decorate his new room, making sure that everything matched his old one. Jamie's neophobia makes me wary. I always buy his clothes, once he finds a style he likes, en masse in increasing sizes so that he won't be upset. The actual move was accomplished during the school day, so that I saw him off from the old house and met him at the gates of the new one. He went straight up to his room and seemed happy to be there.

Jamie seemed fascinated by the front bedroom, would go and sit in it whenever he was upset. I tried to use it one day, putting a table in the window alcove where I could get more light on my papers. I didn't do it again.

Then several things happened at once. I had a message from Jamie's school, asking me to go in and see the Headmistress. My heart sank. Had his behaviour deteriorated? Would I have to find another school? To my surprise, it appeared that he was a computer genius, he had done something that was incredibly clever and could earn him a lot of money. I gratefully accepted their offer to provide him with the equipment to work at home and allowed him to take over the front bedroom as his study/workroom.

Within a year, Jamie was a teenager with his own business manager and solicitor. His earnings were invested until he was eighteen, but he had the potential to support himself through his life, which was a great relief.

Then I landed a big commission. It would be hard work, but I could afford to employ help. I had broken my arm. Such a silly accident. I usually avoided the front bedroom and certainly would never touch Jamie's machines and papers, but I did feel that the room should have a thorough clean. I hardly saw Jamie, apart from meals, but he spent hours in that room. The smell of antiseptic and lily-of-the-valley was getting stronger. It now combined with the old trainers and testosterone aroma of adolescent male. I sometimes smelted it as I came through the front door, as though it was taking over the house.

Within five minutes I was shivering. As I went out to fetch hot water I felt a blow to the side of my head. I lost my footing and fell down the stairs. I ended up with my left arm in a sling and a spectacular black eye.

Mrs Forbes in the village shop offered me her niece. ‘Our Charlene. Didn’t do well at school, poor love, and hasn’t got a job. But she’s a good girl, strong and works hard.’

Charlene was a breath of clean country air. I looked at her as we sat over a cup of tea in the kitchen. Her hair was like rusty barbed wire, her freckles merged with the remnants of teenage acne, and no-one would have called her svelte, in fact ‘sturdy’ could be an understatement. But she shone with goodwill and was, bless her, always cheerful. She also knew, through her vast extended family, not only all the village gossip but the history of my house.

‘I do think you’re brave,’ she said, siphoning tea through the gap in her front teeth. ‘You wouldn’t catch me up here after dark.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, they say old Lady Frobisher never left. Me and me mates come up one night for a dare, it was horrible.’

‘Why? What did you see? And who was Lady Frobisher?’

‘Well, we didn’t really see anything, just a dark shape at that front bedroom window, like. But it felt bad. And it was her that had this house, bought it off the Church after her husband died. Reverend Bennett, he was, but she wouldn’t give up her title. Her lad was called Sebastian Frobisher Bennett, poor kid, not that it did him much good. Only a nipper when he died. She had her bed put by the window and took to it, spent hours looking out at his grave, they say. Became more of a tartar than ever. Couldn’t keep staff. Poor old Vicar, he had a time of it. He’d often come to church with a black eye or his arm in a sling.’

Her eyes grew round as she looked at my black eye and arm in a sling.

‘Vicar always told people he was clumsy. He died from a fall down the stairs, which made people talk. Then she died in that bedroom and this

house stayed empty till you come. Funny, people who viewed said they liked it and something always went wrong. One poor soul tripped over the step and broke her leg, another left in tears, saying “she hates me.” Then you and your boy came along and everything went through so quick.’

* * *

I suppose it was that conversation that finally made me face reality. Jamie spends his time shut away upstairs, usually in the front bedroom with his machines. I hear him muttering as I go to bed. I tell myself it’s just that he has an imaginary friend, understandable as he has never had a real friend, but do I really believe that?

As I gaze at my reflection in the black window, the air behind me stirs, the smell of antiseptic and lily-of-the-valley drifting around me. Over my shoulder I can see the pearl glow of an old face, the eyes malevolently red. Skeletal hands reach for my throat.

Angelic Dilemma

Ashurst, New Forest. Sounds like green trees, soft breezes and sweet little ponies, within groups of charming thatched cottages. An idyllic place where the sun always shines. Not so, this weather makes you think of the anatomical properties of brass monkeys. And no thatch in sight. A lot of post-war development coupled with Victorian monstrosities; and the main road to Southampton right through it.

It's all right for Jane, marching around in her furry boots and her little bubble of happiness, but I'm cold and I'm bored. A fellow does like the sun on his wing feathers. If she had to fall in love, couldn't she have done it in summer? And falling for someone called Ewan! What a pathetic name. I know mine has fifteen syllables and is unpronounceable by the human tongue, (I'm always known as 'Zak'), but at least it doesn't sound like the cry of a lost lamb. 'Ewe-aaan' Jane cries. 'Oh, Ewe-aaan.' Yuck!

I wasn't there when they met. Guardian Angels PLC has very strict rules about dereliction of duty, but we get around them. I put a friend in as a substitute while I nipped off for a bit of rest and relaxation. You won't find our home world with a telescope, but with inter-dimension travel we're not tied to our jobs as we used to be.

I'd better correct a misapprehension. No, we're not ex-humans who've led a good life and gained a prefect's badge. We have many similarities, but we're a different species. There are many representations of us, some by humans with acute peripheral vision. We're usually depicted in long white robes – ghastly thought. We don't need more than our natural, dense white down. The fact that it's luminous probably gives the robe effect. Of course, every painter and sculptor sees us with a human face. Our skin has a phosphorescent glow that masks our features; probably anthropomorphism is a good thing.

Children, of course, are more likely to see us. But who takes notice of a toddler in a buggy pointing at a 'birdie?' Some older children may think they spot a hovering pigeon or seagull, but they don't mention it. Adults, we

suppose, need to think of us as bigger and wiser beings, there to comfort and protect them. Well, we do try.

Oh, and another misapprehension. We're not with one human from cradle to grave – ghastly thought. Think of us more as special agents, each with our own specialities. For some reason, I've been lumbered with the post-pubertal, pre-marriage lot. About time I requested a transfer, perhaps to the geriatric brigade. I fancy making soothing noises and instilling calm acceptance of the inevitable. Don't worry, though, we do look after you. We have regular meetings to compare case notes. And, of course conferences that give us a chance to meet others in our speciality.

Jane is waiting for the bus from Southampton, a transport of delight that should be bearing Ewan to meet her and sweep her off her feet into the little café, gossip-hub of the row of shops just behind the bus shelter. One would have to wonder about the culinary habits of the Ashurstians from these shops. The row ends in a very large, family-friendly pub and contains a bistro, an Indian, a Chinese and a chippie that also does kebabs. Everything becomes clear when you realise there is a big camp site next to the pub. Cosmopolitan life in the New Forest. There is also a small station, at which very few trains condescend to stop.

Jane lives just across the road, in a small flat cut into a large Victorian house. Handy for the bus into Southampton where she works. I have to grudgingly admit that Ashurst is a good starting point for explorations of the forest. Jane likes to walk down past what was the cottage hospital, originally the workhouse, and explore the tracks amongst the trees. She did think of getting a dog, but fortunately changed her mind. Knowing her, it would be something small, furry and yappy. Judging from her relationship history I haven't been too good at helping Jane understand men. I'm looking forward to meeting Ewan's angel, Jasmine, who I've heard described as 'a bit of a cracker.' Well, I did say that we have similarities to humans.

'Ewe-aaan.'

I know from listening to endless phone rhapsodies from Jane, that Ewan is a rising young executive with eco-warrior tendencies, earmarked by

his firm for greatness. This is not what I was expecting. I suppose he's not a bad-looking lad if you like them skinny and blonde. If he was a girl he could put mascara on those pale lashes, at least then he'd look as though he's got some. Pity he's not taller than Jane, I know her furry boots have heels, but so do those cowboy things he's wearing. Distressed denim may be fashionable, but should those jeans really distress the onlooker? His narrow shoulders are bent under the weight of an enormous backpack topped with a tent. All that for a weekend's camping? That would be why he hasn't come in on his bike. Ah well, it takes all sorts.

I look behind Ewan. I can feel my neck feathers standing on end. It's an unavoidable and rather obvious physiological trait in the males of our kind. Jasmine politely averts her eyes, but I think I can hear a muffled giggle. She's gorgeous! Both my hearts are beating faster, a step-ball-change rhythm that catches my breath. Luckily, Jane and Ewan don't need much supervision, they appear to be attempting a total merge, so Jasmine and I can get to know each other. I'd like to say that we perch on a cloud to do so, but that wouldn't be truthful. But there's a handy tree and we settle cosily together on an overhanging branch.

'You selfish pig!'

Jasmine and I jump as a loud 'crack' breaks the silence. Ewan is ruefully rubbing the hand-shaped red mark on his cheek.

'Jane, please, listen to me.'

'No, Ewan. I've heard all I want. I thought you cared for me, but you only want to please yourself.'

We drop down from the tree with only time for a meaningful touch of the wing tips. I have to flap quite hard to keep up with Jane, leaving Jasmine to fold the white-faced, bruised Ewan in her wings.

It's lucky, though frustrating because we're a tactile species, that we're able to communicate telepathically. For the next few weeks Jane alternates between misery eating, crying bouts and long, intense telephone calls to any friend with enough patience to indulge her. Jasmine tells me that Ewan has

lapsed into sullen silence, interspersed with frenetic bouts of boxing up his possessions. I eavesdrop on Jane's telephone calls.

‘Oh Mel, I really thought Ewan was the one.’ I've met Mel, Jane won't get much sympathy there.

‘Yes, I know I said that about Stuart and Chris.’ No, definitely not much sympathy.

‘OK, and Wayne. But this time I really thought... and when I tell you...’ She listens, flushing.

‘I'm sorry, Mel. Of course I didn't mean to interrupt you and Jason. No, I'll be fine.’ Looks like Mel's off the Christmas card list. Jane dials best friend Tiffany, who likes a bit of drama.

‘Tiff, Ewan's been offered a job in New York and he says he'll be going at the end of next month. I'll never see him again. How could he do this to me?’ While Tiffany is making the mandatory soothing noises I have a quick word with Jasmine.

‘Jaz, did you know about this? We can't let it happen, we're just getting to know each other. Can't you stop him?’

‘We're in a meeting with his boss now. It really is a good offer and Ewan's an ambitious young man. A stubborn one, too. He's very hurt because Jane wouldn't let him explain. I don't like the way the e-mails between him and the New York secretary are getting flirtatious.’

That reminds me, Jane's usual way of getting over a broken heart is to plunge straight into another disastrous relationship. I tune back into her conversation, suddenly realising that she's looking more cheerful.

‘What's this Mike like then, Tiff? Not that I'm interested of course, but Ewan needn't think I'm staying at home crying over him.’ But she is. I'll never understand women.

I listen in horror as Jane and Tiffany arrange a night out. I'm getting too old for noisy nights at a club, making strained conversation with some spotty youth's angel, who doesn't want to be there either.

'Jaz, we've got to do something to bring them back together. I can't stand this.'

Jasmine gets straight to work on Ewan. We're not allowed to put too much pressure on, but we can whisper suggestions in ears. The upshot is that he decides to sort things out with Jane. Unfortunately, just as he rounds the corner on his bike, his little legs working nineteen to the dozen, Jane's front door opens. Tiffany comes out with her boyfriend, closely followed by Jane, hanging onto Mike's arm and laughing up into his big brown eyes. It's a pity Ewan didn't think about things like the sharp suit Mike is wearing before he turned up in sweaty spandex. Not a good look on a young man.

Ewan brakes hard, nearly pitching over his handlebars, and adjusts the helmet that's fallen over his eyes. He's just in time to see Jane climbing into Mike's sports car. This is not good, especially in a skirt that short and heels that high. Jane has rather pretty soft brown hair, like one of the little forest mice, and she's taken pains with it. I can smell her perfume at forty paces and, no doubt, so can Ewan. Once again Jasmine is left mopping up a disconsolate boyfriend while I frantically try to keep up with Jane. Mike drives far, far too fast – or am I getting old?

The club is every bit as bad as I'd feared, noisy and dark and crowded. I keep trying to whisper in Jane's ear, pearls of wisdom like:

'He doesn't dance as well as Ewan.' Unfortunately, he does.

'He does like to talk about himself a lot.' Well, that's true.

Mike's guardian, who could probably be described as dour on one of her better days, isn't at all happy with me for interfering. We manage to have a chat and she thaws as I explain my situation. She even goes so far as pointing out to Mike just how irritating Jane's giggle can be. It seems that Mike already has a semi-serious girlfriend, with a guardian much more to her taste than me, so we end up understanding each other. I check in with Jasmine.

'It's been bad. Ewan's bruised his toes kicking things, his Valentine's teddy bear is in the bin, he's found the whisky and we're about to hit the

maudlin stage. I've been in touch with his boss's guardian and set up an emergency meeting, she's on her way.'

Well, those two could out-strategize Napoleon. To my surprise, Jane suddenly wants to leave and Mike is quite happy to put her in a taxi. Safely home, she bursts into tears. 'Ewe-aaan, oh Ewe-aaan' she sobs. Well, I never thought I'd be pleased to hear that particular bleat.

Jasmine's come up with a plan. We put in a conference call to anyone we think can help. A week later, after an exhaustive whispering campaign, things seem to be improving. Mike's been kept away from Jane. Ewan's been encouraged to be positive. After a relatively cheerful day at work, Jane listens to my suggestion of an evening's pampering. She looks quite rosy and sweet. When the doorbell rings, she opens the door to a huge bunch of flowers. Ewan's worried eyes peer through the foliage. The hall fills with the smell of lilies and aftershave. She takes a step back in surprise and Ewan is quick to follow up, with a sharp shove from Jasmine. He thrusts the flowers into Jane's arms and kicks the door shut behind him.

'Jane, please listen to me.'

'Ewan...'

'No, Jane, this time you must listen.' Well, that's masterful. 'Yes, I'm going to New York. I wanted to ask you to wait till I'd saved up the fare and got somewhere to live and then come and join me.'

'Oh, Ewe-aaan.'

'Jane, I've been talking to my boss. If I was engaged, they'd find us an apartment and pay for us to go over together. Oh, Jane, will you...'

He manages the drop to one knee quite gracefully. Unfortunately, his jeans are so tight he can't get the ring box out of his pocket. They seem to be sorting it, though it's a pity the flowers are getting crushed. Jasmine and I retire discreetly. We have things of our own to discuss.

The next weeks are hectic. There is nearly an Anglo-American crisis on the celestial level over Jane's visa. Luckily, Ewan's boss has a meaningful

relationship within the Consulate, so strings are pulled. I'm subjected to more of Jane's 'phone calls.

'Oh, Tiff, I can't bear it. I'll be so far away from you.' Steady on, Jane, don't have second thoughts now. I whisper '*e-mail*' urgently.

'Of course, I'll text you every day and send you e-mails. And we can Skype. But it won't be the same.'

Tiffany, bless her, offers to come around. By the time they've downed a bottle of red wine and admired the ring yet again, Jane is happy to plan an intensive shopping campaign for all the must-have new clothes. Tiffany, proving more sensible than I'd thought her, introduces the subject of New York shops. Crisis averted.

Jasmine isn't having too much trouble with Ewan, happily subletting his flat and packing little apart from his good suit and his second-favourite jeans. His favourite pair were ripped beyond fashionable in the extraction of the engagement ring. There could have been a hiccup from the anticipatory stag party and its obligatory stripper, but what Jane doesn't know won't hurt her.

Jasmine and I are exhausted by the time the happy pair are finally strapped into their seats. We're also excited, anticipating the buzz of a new place, a new life – for all of us. We'll stay with them until they're actually married. I find that I'm missing the New Forest. There's something about it, once you're hooked it keeps reeling you back. Jasmine and I have requested a dual assignment. There are plenty of care homes there.

I have one wing protectively around Jasmine, the wind off the water ruffling our feathers. Life is good. The view is magnificent when you're perched on the shoulder of the Statue of Liberty.

Lepe Beach

Our beaches were not hot or gold,
no calm jade water in our lives,
our pleasure never in cool pools
or bubbling dives for treasure trove.

We walked on stones that hurt our feet,
grew white salt marks on sturdy boots.

We loved the water's ebbing flow
swirling across the shingle spit,
the tide in maritime embrace
made it a rollercoaster ride.

But then you crossed the foaming bar
and this one chair became my world.

Yet still the wind is in my face,
the sea spray lingers in my hair.

Orlando

Thirty years ago, they moved into their house. It had everything they wanted apart from the fact that it faced onto a main road. The New Forest was the place they had always wanted to live and this house, within walking distance of Lyndhurst, ticked all the right boxes.

The house had a decent front garden, so the noise from the road wouldn't bother them. The back garden was big enough for Henry to potter as much as he wanted. From their gate you could walk into the forest. They didn't realise, of course, that gates work two ways and that the local deer would find Henry's prized roses just too tempting. The only deterrent was a stout fence and Henry could design a garden with fenced areas of 'can't bear to lose' plants and leave the rest to chance.

The problem was the cats. The house faced onto the Southampton Road, always busy. Across from it was White Moor, with heather and gorse to shelter prey and vast expanses of heath to tempt an adventurous predator. Frances couldn't bear the thought of a beloved cat meeting its end on that road.

They compromised, as they always did on big decisions. Henry built a stout fence and gate at both ends of the house and installed a cat flap in the back door. So far as the cats were concerned, the front garden did not exist. After all, they had immediate access to trees and a stream (small but stocked with bullheads). Frances didn't like the bullheads; so far as she was concerned they might be a species of catfish, but must the cats find them so irresistible? She learned to always wear slippers afters standing on a slimy fish on her kitchen floor. Mind you, she felt guiltier about the occasional goldfish from a neighbour's well-stocked pond. For the really intrepid, there were the wide-open spaces of the golf course and then more forest.

Over the years Frances had cats of varying hunting abilities. She and Henry became quite knowledgeable on the smaller creatures of the forest as 'presents' were lovingly brought home to them. Frances did think it a bit much when she found a live adder on her carpet. It was, she often thought, a

miracle that cat survived to old age. Henry was her knight in synthetic armour, garbed in stout gardening gloves and armed with a plastic carrier bag. Deftly, he inserted his gloved hands into the corners of the bag, grasped the reptile's head and tail and flipped the bag inside out, trapping it inside. Rather like getting a duvet into its cover. He transported the adder back to its proper home. Frances admired his self-possession, then she noticed the beads of sweat on his forehead and made them both a cup of strong tea.

The days and the years went on, the children grew and left home. Frances always had at least one cat and none of them went near the main road. Today, standing over the small, raw mound, Frances and Henry are alone.

It is spring, the time of new beginnings, of lengthening days and good hunting. Death has no place in sunshine.

‘Such a small grave. For the amount of love you gave us, it should be bigger. Rest well, old friend.’

She walks away from the grave under the apple tree. Henry was very good; he'd laid Orlando in it (wrapped in a silk scarf because she couldn't bear the earth in his orange fur). Then he'd covered it over and, with only one muffled sniff, walked away and shut himself in his shed.

She makes her way to the house. No playful stalker in the grass, no reproachful mew when she walks too fast for old paws to catch up. Orlando had been her friend for so long. She feels he would have been grateful, trapped in such an old body, for his final sleep. But the tears inside her mourn his loss.

From the kitchen window she watches as Henry makes his careful way down the garden.

‘That’s right,’ Frances mutters, hands jabbing viciously at the pastry for Henry’s favourite steak and kidney pie, ‘go and dig something, like you always do. Heaven forbid you should think of something comforting to say to me.’

She has the pie dish ready, one half of it with a double ration of kidney for Henry. She uses some of the left-over pastry to make an ‘H’, adding it to

indicate his portion before glazing the pie. Sometimes she decorates her work with fruit and flowers, but today she hasn't the heart. She automatically puts a small portion of meat on a saucer, but there is no warm, furry body winding his way around her ankles, purring for his treat.

Henry makes his slow way; they are both showing their age now. At least his feet in the leaky (and rather smelly) sauna of his wellington boots should be comfortable. Her arthritic fingers ached as she knitted those soft, seam-free socks, but his hours in the damp potting shed haven't produced chilblains this year.

Frances slides the pie into the oven and peels the potatoes. She'd had to buy this lot, but later in the year Henry would leave offerings at the back door, potatoes straight from the ground and whatever fresh vegetables were in season. He used to march in with them, his cheeky smile heralding a snatched kiss. Now he knows better than to track mud into her kitchen. Sometimes she thinks it would be nice to have a bunch of roses. She went through the village to the farm shop for the butter to put into those potatoes. Henry likes his mash yellow and creamy, with no thought of cholesterol, and swears that no supermarket butter is as good as the local product.

The house is quiet. It was different when the children and their friends were there. Even when Susan married she was always popping in. Then Susan's husband realised how much better his prospects would be in Australia. Susan's very good about keeping in touch and sending photographs.

Simon, of course, was always Henry's boy, quiet and withdrawn. His passion for computer programming took him to America, where he is considered 'a big noise in Silicon Valley.' On his last visit home, he brought them a computer and set it up with all the latest technology. Frances felt it was all too impersonal – you can't hug a computer – but Henry really took to it. He sends photographs of enormous marrows and prize-winning beans winging their way over the oceans.

The days go on. Frances and Henry keep to their long-established routine. On the evenings when she wants to watch 'soppy' television, Henry goes to the Working Men's Club in Lyndhurst High Street for a few pints and

a gardener's chat. He says (every time!) 'just going into the village, a brisk walk there and a quick stagger back.' If the weather is bad or he can't be bothered to change, he shuts himself away in the workshop where he likes to work with wood.

One-night, Henry returns from the club looking a little unsure, with a bundle in his arms. Frances recognises the crumpled mass as the sweater, blue to match his eyes, which she knitted laboriously for Christmas. He mutters 'met a chap in the club. Did him a favour. Saved him the bother'.

He drops the bundle in her lap and bolts to the kitchen to make their nightly cocoa. The sweater moves and mews, warm and damp on her knees. A tiny triangular head peeps out, clouded eyes meeting her gaze.

Summer that year is long and hot. There is a sunny spot in the conservatory, a favourite place where Orlando kept his green gaze on the birds, Napoleon on Elba recalling past victories. Frances notices that the tortoiseshell kitten, now named 'Mini,' always skirts that place.

....*

On Frances' birthday she switches on the computer, pleased that Susan and Simon have both sent messages. There are new photographs of the children, growing up so fast. Henry disappears to his workshop without acknowledging the day. Ah well, that's Henry and he will never change.

Hands deep in washing-up suds and lost in reverie, Frances is startled when Henry suddenly comes in and hands her a badly-wrapped parcel. Inside is a double photo frame, laboriously crafted in a golden wood. It contains photographs that Henry must have taken the year before. One shows Orlando in the conservatory, surveying his kingdom. In the other he is curled up, replete, in the sun. Then Henry takes her hand and leads her to the apple tree. There are marigolds on the small mound, their orange faces raised to the sun. The breeze ripples through them, ruffling their petals.

For a moment Frances sees a fierce young cat, the wind playing in the thickness of his coat, joy in his movements. And somehow it really doesn't matter that Henry has never been able to bring himself to say 'I love you.'

Mad as a March Hare

My parents were commoners. Not the sort of people who shouldn't marry into the aristocracy, they were New Forest Commoners with some of the forest rights. We could have turned our pigs out to forage for acorns, if we had pigs. We could have collected wood for our wood-burning stove, if we had a stove. What we did have, though, was a paddock. That meant that we could turn a pony out to run on the forest. It sounds good, doesn't it, a pony and a paddock? My father used to say that we were 'land rich, cash poor.' The land and house came with the job and what spare cash Dad had he gave away. One of the occupational hazards of being a vicar. Mum gardened passionately and most of what we ate was home-grown or home-made.

My pony, bless her, wasn't likely to win any rosettes. In fact, I think the knackers might have been in her near future if Dad hadn't rescued her. She was good sturdy New Forest stock and I adored her.

The wanderlust didn't hit until later. I thought Brockenhurst was the best place in the world to live. I grew up and went to school with other forest children. Then I went to Brockenhurst College and met Luke Faraday. I had never seen anything like him.

One evening, I went into Badger Wood with Luke. It was the culmination of my dreams, the reason I'd joined the Natural History Society. I wore my best sweater and filled the spaces in my bra with cottonwool to give me some sort of shape. Pity it was cold enough for my old coat, but still... Luke walked me through the wood to the far edge, overlooking the meadow where he was convinced hares should be playing and fighting. I didn't like to tell him that I'd never seen any there, nor were they likely to be that late. It doesn't pay to know more than a boy does. There were plenty of hares Winchester way, where you'd see them on those great rising fields. We waited for a while. Then we moved to the badger sett. No luck there, either. The old wives in our village say that any girl who goes into Badger Wood with a boy gets what she deserves. Apparently, I deserved insect bites, a cold behind and a stiff neck. Still, it was a nice time.

Back at college, Luke accepted me as a fellow nature lover. We spent lunch hours and break times together, him expounding on the wonders of nature and me, breathless, agreeing. I introduced him to Charmaine, my best friend. When Charmaine walked across the campus, boys fell to either side like the bow wave of a stately galleon. Charmaine, she of the short skirts and tight blouses. Charmaine, who didn't need cottonwool. When Charmaine fancied a boy, she opened her big blue eyes, took a deep breath and that was it. Luke was borne away like a drowning sailor clinging to a figurehead. And to add to her faithlessness, she told the entire Natural History Society about the cottonwool.

How overwhelming hurt and humiliation are at that age. I survived. I was, though I say it myself, brilliant at art and specialised in, of all things, nature. I had a talent for animal studies. When I left, I was able to work freelance and make a reasonable living.

Along the way I married, produced a baby and unmarried. I packed into an old motorhome my few possessions, a good supply of artist's materials, one dog, two cats and a baby. We travelled all over the forest as the mood took us. When I found a good place, I'd park in a friendly orchard or field and paint, occasionally for pleasure but usually to keep us. Michelle was a joy, she grew up strong, healthy and independent, thriving on our gypsy existence.

Once my baby got past the 'don't chew that, darling' stage and it was time to think about 'proper school,' followed by 'big school,' I worried about serious things like stability and continuity. So my choice of parking centred on her schooling, but we still went far afield during the holidays.

Overnight, it seemed, Michelle was at University and I began to think that perhaps a little country cottage somewhere, a few ducks, a cat or three and a comfortable decline into middle age was quite an attractive proposition. When she was taking her finals, she had every prospect of becoming the brilliant engineer her father should have been, before the lure of exotic places and indigenous alcohol became too much for him.

I acknowledged the tug on my roots and came back to Brockenhurst. A recent conversion of an old house into two cottages became available and I was able to move into the right-hand one. I chose that one with sickening sentimentality because they'd called it 'Badger Cottage.' Anyway, with foxy Charmaine's perfidy still at the back of my mind, I couldn't live in 'Fox Cottage,' could I?

The cottage was small but had good light and a conservatory that would make a wonderful studio. Michelle came home to bite her nails while she waited for her results. She was the first to spot that the next door cottage had been sold. When the new owners moved in, we were away on our travels, now conducted with propriety in a rather small car. I came back with a mountain of work, so had to immure myself in the conservatory and rely on Michelle to find out about them.

The house had been bought by a writer, a widower with one son. The youngster was a chef, specialising in freelance work and living at home while he waited for his big break. He wanted to be a TV Chef, a career in itself these days. The father was incommunicado, shut away in the attic he had appropriated as his study and struggling with a deadline that kept him chained to the computer.

That was all we knew until the day Michelle and Tom's eyes met across a dusty privet hedge. My sensible, intelligent daughter became prey to blushes and an irritating giggle. Tom became very conscious of his father's need for privacy. As he said to me, with great earnestness:

'The trouble with Dad, he's working to a deadline, which he hates. He locks himself away all day with a kettle and a catering sized tin of coffee. Then he comes down at night and bangs around the kitchen looking for food and washing up umpteen mugs. At these times I think he must be part-vampire, though he's pretty decent on the whole. I know you've got a terrific lot of work to do and you like to work undisturbed, so we thought - Michelle and I – that if we went out and did things, you'd both appreciate it.'

Michelle may have been an experienced graduate, but she went a bit pink. Ah, the guilelessness of youth. My mother always used to say: 'the old

woman who's been in the oven knows where to find her daughter.' A silly expression, but I understood it.

I would open the door in the morning to find Tom waiting hopefully on the step and I had to boot him out at night. It suited me well enough, when Tom was working Michelle went as kitchen assistant. They took over our catering. He really was a superb chef, TV or not. I spent my days in the conservatory, presumably my neighbour was locked in his attic. Shades of Jane Eyre. The mad author in the attic? I never set eyes on him.

The peace and quiet was rudely shattered one day when Michelle and Tom turned up on the doorstep with guilty expressions, Michelle laden with ominous shopping bags, Tom holding ... Oh, no! They explained, well-rehearsed, that they had been worried that we older people might get lonely with them out so much. They had done the catering for a 'do' at the Springer Spaniel Rescue Centre and there just happened to be ...

What could I do with four pairs of pleading eyes looking at me?

The dogs assured me that they had fallen in love with me at first sight, that their greatest ambition was to lick me to death, and would there soon be a little something in their nice new food bowls? We let them off their leads and they raced round the garden, cannoning off shrubs and each other in delight.

'Mad as March Hares,' I said. That was it. The bitch, which Michelle and I kept, became 'Maddie,' and the dog, soon to be introduced to Tom's unsuspecting Dad, was 'March.' So we settled down, Tom's Dad and I as the invisible working parents, Michelle and Tom unable to be apart. Maddie and March, apparently, felt much the same.

There were times, of course, when we tried to keep the spaniels apart. But March could find the smallest gap in the hedge and wriggle through. I'll swear that Maddie could unlatch doors. It wasn't long before she was waddling around with a very smug expression.

Michelle wasn't as thrilled with her excellent degree result as I'd expected. My feelings were exorcised in paint and paper. Nobody knew what Tom's father felt.

One warm day when the children and the dogs were out for a long walk, I retired to a secluded spot in the gardens to sunbathe. I was drifting off when the hedge seemed to elongate, cutting off the sun, and a man-shaped shadow fell across me.

‘Hullo,’ said the shadow, ‘don’t need cottonwool any more, then?’

I kept my eyes shut, unable to think of a brilliant retort. Then I bleated, feebly, ‘Tom said his father was Lucas Michaels, the crime writer.’

‘Pen name,’ said Luke.

I’ve been into Badger Wood with Luke Faraday.

There were no hares.

There were no badgers.

But I got what I deserved.

Breaking News

01.02.2082

We have just learned that, following Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Cornwall and the Isles of Man and Wight, the New Forest has declared independence.

* *

02.02.2082

From our Royal Correspondent.

We understand that today, hearing the news of the New Forest's declaration of independence, King William V of England was heard to mutter 'thought that one was mine.' George, ex-Prince of Wales, explained:

'When one is approaching one's one-hundredth birthday, one does tend to be confused about one's predecessors. Papa is not always sure which William he is.'

A source at the Palace said: 'his Majesty is sometimes heard to request a visit to the New Forest for a right royal hunt.'

* *

03.02.2082

In Parliament today, the Secretary of State asserted that the New Forest should be very careful. In view of the fact that it shares boundaries with England throughout its circumference, any act of war would be met with ultimate force. She said:

'If the New Forest attempts any act of aggression we shall close our fist and squeeze it like an orange, skin, pith and pips.'

There was uproar in the Commons and she was asked to put £5 (the price of a cup of coffee) in the swear box for mentioning aggression. It was pointed out that England is a pacifist country and, in fact, has no army or navy.

* *

04.02.2082

Speaking today from her terraced council house in Basildon the Prime Minister, Ms Stacey Dobbs, said: 'I like the New Forest. We used to have holidays there.'

* *

03.03.2082

Citizens of the New Forest are reminded that application forms for their new passports are available and should be completed as soon as possible.

* *

01.04.2082

It has been announced that the National Park Authority has renounced its responsibilities for the New Forest. Temporary authority has been assumed by the Verderers Court in Lyndhurst.

* *

16.05.2082

New Forest Polling Day.

Voting between Lyndhurst, Lymington and Brockenhurst for the position of capital of the New Forest takes place today. Lyndhurst, in view of its traditional position as capital of the New Forest, with the Verderers' Court at King's House already in place, is firm favourite. We will bring you news of the polls as soon as we receive them.

* *

01.06.2082

It was revealed today that the New Forest plans to build a check point and toll where the M27 crosses its boundaries. Drivers are advised to carry their passports at all times.

* *

30.06.2082

It was announced today that the New Forest will be holding a referendum on whether to become a monarchy or a republic.

* *

02.07.2082

To reign or not to reign?

By Giles Brandylegs.

Should the New Forest (or *Nova Foresta*, to give it the ancient title) opt for a monarchy, one must ask who would fill the role? It could be considered an ideal job for Prince Harry, but unfortunately there have been no sightings of him since he led a party of ex-soldiers in wheelchairs into the Himalayas five years ago. The wheelchairs were spotted by a reconnaissance plane, neatly piled on one of the mountain tops.

There have been renewed rumours over the presence of the Yeti, but no firm evidence. Some believe that the Prince's party received spiritual healing and has founded a monastery on the spot. Groups of disciples are attempting to reach this mythical monastery. Unbelievers have pointed out that as the Prince was 93 when he made the trip, it is unlikely that he has survived. When asked, the King replied:

'Balderdash. We're a long-lived lot. Look at my grandparents.'

Prince George said:

'Why not take one of my grandchildren to do the job? Any of the little buggers.'

Royal watchers say that in view of the young people's habitual behaviour, this would be extremely unlikely.

Nearer to home, the most likely candidate would be Lady Montagu of Beaulieu. When questioned about the prospect, she replied:

'Not on your bally life, old sport. Too much to do, don't you know? Since we turned the Abbey into an old people's home (why are there so many of the blighters these days?) and sold the grounds to the villagers for allotments, haven't had a moment to meself.' She refused to elaborate.

So, will it be a republic? Who knows how the *Nova Foresta* public will choose to vote?

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30.07.2082

New Forest to choose a President and Senate. The Chief Verderer, who has held the post *pro tempore*, has denied that he will run for President. Elections will be held as soon as political parties have formed and chosen their candidates.

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30.09.2082

The New Forest Green Party has won the elections by an overwhelming majority and representatives are taking their seats in the King's House, Lyndhurst – now the official seat of government for the New Forest. It was mooted that the name should be changed to the President's House, but in view of the history involved the motion was denied. The new President (once the local vet) said:

‘I can faithfully promise that as long as I am President, no forest dogs will be submitted to ordeal by stirrup and hideously mutilated.’

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05.10.2082

The new currency for the New Forest (now to be known as Nova Foresta) has been revealed and will shortly be in circulation. Based on English currency, where the lowest denomination is 50p, it will be as follows:

50p	1 weasel
£1	1 nadder
£2	1 rabbit
£5	1 fox
£10	1 pony
£20	1 badger
£50	1 fallow deer
£100	1 red stag

This paper, therefore, will cost a nadder, while an ice-cream made and sold in the capital would cost you a nadder and a weasel. The editor welcomes comments from her readership.

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06.11.2082

It was announced today that the Yacht Club in Lymington has agreed to become the base and provide the ships and personnel for the Nova Foresta Navy. Army Cadets are being granted time away from school to form the Nova Foresta Army.

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06.12.2082

In a surprise announcement today, the Isle of Wight announced a trade agreement with Nova Foresta. IOW garlic will be exchanged for venison. The Isle of Man's offer of tail-less cats was refused. A spokesman for IOM said:

‘Our trading offer, made in good faith, was refused in an arbitrary and insulting way. We consider this an act of aggression by these southern countries.’

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20.01.2083

Scotland has now joined with IOM in their argument with IOW and NF. Speaking from Sturgeon House, a representative said:

‘What is wrong with haggis? We would have been happy to trade, but no approach was made. Well, see how those southern fat cats like it when they can’t get our whisky.’

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7.01.2083

Cornwall has leapt into the fray with a statement showing its allegiance to NF and IOW:

‘We would like to make, in good faith, an offer to NF of Cornish pasties in fair exchange. As a country which has already seceded from the degenerate rule of Great Britain we understand the problems facing a new government and would be happy to help in any way.’

Ireland has declared itself to be neutral.

A spokesman for Wales said:

‘Don’t bother me now, I’ve just discovered I’m sitting on a gold mine.’

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25.02.2083

In view of the worsening tension between what have become known as ‘the Brexit countries,’ an embargo has been placed on all reports from Nova Foresta. In the last forester-outside-the-working-men’s-club interview we were able to obtain before being unceremoniously (and literally) booted out, the following was said:

‘Waal, it do seem to me that we done for that Willie Rufus when he were sticking his neb into our business. If another one wants to try, bring it on, I say. Us in the forest, we’ve always bin our own masters and that’s the way we’ll stay.’

With these illuminating words the Foreign Affairs Minister lurched his way back to his seat in the King’s House.

If we are able to obtain any more breaking news we will, of course, bring it to you straight away.

IV

The Wheel Turns Full Circle

Silver Lady Cottage

‘No.’ I stamp my foot. I’m ashamed to say it, I stamp my foot. Brackish water slops over and into my shoe. Forgetting that newly-wed brides are polite and demure, I swear. ‘I’m turning round and going back.’

‘Nicola.’ Oh dear, Chris is angry with me. Are we going to have our first marital quarrel, lost in the middle of the New Forest, the rain trickling down our necks? Some idyllic honeymoon this is turning out to be.

‘Nicky, darling.’ That’s better. ‘Look, love, I know you’re fed up and tired.’

‘And wet.’

‘OK, and wet. So am I, in fact more than you as you’re wearing my jacket.’

‘I was cold.’ I am definitely sulking now.

‘Listen. We’re lost and if we try to go back we’ll probably end up going around in circles. According to the map we’re never far from a road.’

‘That’s what you said when we started out. You remember, hours ago when the sun was shining?’

There is a distant sound, all too familiar to urban dwellers. Chris’s eyes light. ‘Did you hear that? It’s a car horn.’

‘Well, I didn’t think it was an enchanted hunting horn.’ I am a children’s book illustrator, which is a problem. I immediately see a picture and feel myself drifting away. Chris coughs.

‘Your eyes are glazing, come back. Listen really carefully – do you hear that hum?’

‘A giant bumblebee?’

‘No, idiot.’ At least he uses the term affectionately – I think. ‘It’s traffic. Somewhere not too far up ahead, there’s a road.’

‘Why are we standing here? Road – civilisation – warmth – hot baths and cold drinks. Let’s go.’

‘Are you sure you don’t want to go back? After all this is your enchanted forest. The road may be a mirage; we may be lured into unimaginable horrors.’

‘Unimaginable to you, perhaps, oh great and scientific brain. I can imagine them only too well. But nothing daunted, I shall press on. Mayhap there will be dragons to slay.’

‘Idiot.’ This time he is definitely affectionate. We link hands and press on.

We come to the edge of a glade. Chris points to the trees at the far side, through which bright flashes of colour show a steady progression of cars. ‘Look, Nicky, it’s the Lyndhurst tail-back.’

‘I bet it’s the first time someone’s been glad to see that.’ I look up, but not at the cars. Across the glade stands the most wonderful hodge-podge of a house. I presume that it shows the road a more cohesive front. At either end is Victorian brick, with sash windows. In between is Tudor timbering bracketing rough cob and, in the very centre, a lop-sided painted wall holding a large window. The window of a room, I somehow know, that would make an ideal studio.

I move forward, failing to see the remains of a garden wall. Chris hauls me up and brushes me down. It doesn’t help very much, given my general dampness. We can see that there was once a sturdy wall, later a half-hearted attempt at a wire fence. The deer and ponies have treated both with contempt. A good thing, perhaps, at least they have kept the grass short and some of the brambles nibbled back. There were once roses, which would have attracted the deer, and I think I can see the remains of herb beds. The house looks deserted but, somehow, not as depressing as such places usually are. More, I think, as though it is waiting.

We move around to the front, which is solidly and Victorianly brick, with a portico and the remains of a gravel sweep to enable guests in their carriages to get indoors in the dry. It looks more like a sandy lay-by now, but

you can see the outlines. The Victorian parts have roof tiles, whereas the older, lower centre at the back is thatched. But the most exciting part is the drunken post at the front gate, from which droops a worn ‘For Sale’ sign.

* * *

I first met Chris at a party. It was just after Art College, when I was beginning to make a name for myself. The sort of party that served flat prosecco and soggy canapes, but the invitation carried kudos. A professional hostess with weary eyes brought Chris over and, knowing neither of us, made a perfunctory introduction. ‘This is Chris, he’s in oil.’

‘I prefer water-colours.’ It was a weak joke that should have had him making polite excuses and leaving rapidly, but for some reason he stayed and we eventually left together. We’ve been together ever since, heaven knows why. Chris is organised, methodical and neat to the edge of obsession. I am not. Chris plans and thinks things out. I do not. By all the laws of nature, we should drive each other crazy. Perhaps it helps that being ‘something in oil’ means that he is away for long periods, sometimes at a moment’s notice. When I’m working, I tend to be oblivious of everything around me, which doesn’t suit the male ego. Chris not only keeps a precisely-packed grab-bag by the bedroom door for these emergency trips, he also has a second one, in case the turnaround time is too short to do his laundry. My clothes live in unsorted piles on the floor, from which I grab whatever colour sorts my mood. I have been known to nip to the shops for a pint of milk in paint-spattered jeans, brushes stuck through my hair and slippers on my feet.

We lived together in London. When Chris proposed, he did it beautifully. A discreet restaurant, soft lights, good food, music in the background. Down on one knee to produce the ring, the works. He would have looked a right Charlie if I’d said ‘no,’ but he knew me pretty well. Then came the long discussions.

We neither of us had close family and, as Chris pointed out (with a spreadsheet to prove it), a small unfussy wedding would leave us enough savings to put a decent deposit on a house. I was orphaned in my early twenties and haven’t enough relations and friends to make a good showing on

the bride's side of even the smallest church. Chris doesn't fare much better, so it did make sense. Then came the big question: neither of us liked London, where should we live?

We are not tied to one place. I work freelance, Chris can be called upon to go anywhere, any time and can do the rest of his work at home. Chris is an East-End boy through and through, his family holidays were always spent on a beach in Spain. I'm a Home Counties girl. I would always plead for holidays in the New Forest.

Chris pointed out that an idyllic forest cottage on a bright summer day would be wonderful, but how about the long, wet days when he was away and I was alone? I didn't want a little cottage. I wanted a bigger house, to run as a bed and breakfast business. I even had a catering qualification. Chris had the business head, he could see to that side of it when he was home and the guests would keep me company when he was away. With savings and a London flat to sell, we could afford it and the icing on the biscuit was that I had a squirrelled-away legacy which would pay for any refurbishment needed. We didn't know how lucky that was.

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The Estate Agent doesn't raise an eyebrow when we track mud across his carpet and drip on his chairs. I suppose that can be expected in a village where the local grocer has a sign saying 'please ensure that your wellies are clean.'

'Ah yes, an interesting property. It's known as "Silver Lady Cottage" on the deeds, though it's had other names. Listed, of course, and in dire need of care and attention. You need to take that into account. Shall we say a viewing this afternoon?'

Time for a hot shower, dry clothes and a quick lunch. Plus, a quick trip to the camping shop for wellington boots and a waterproof jacket for me. I packed in a bridal euphoria. Chris, of course, thought ahead and was well prepared. Perhaps in fifty years' time we will have rubbed the corners off each other and become one of those Siamese-twin old couples? Chris buys a rather splendid multi-purpose knife. He says it is for poking into wood work

to test for rot (dry or wet, he isn't sure), but I suspect it gratifies the small boy within.

The Estate Agent (call me Julian) seems to have gone off the idea of selling the house. Previous sales fell through, buyers left in a hurry, losing money in the process. The surveyors might condemn the whole place. Of course, refurbishment would cost more than the house itself, it has so much wrong with it. It is a listed building, so our hands will be tied. All before we climb into his top-of-the-market car (Heaven forfend his shiny shoes should come into contact with forest mud) and make the short journey to the house. Which, of course, we fully intend to buy, though we try to look like a cool London couple used to dealing in large sums and without an ounce of sentiment between us.

The front door swings open in welcome. The hall is huge, with a gorgeous staircase swooping up and branching at the top. I expect a musty smell, but it is fresh and sweet, except for one corner which smells unpleasantly of rotting cabbage and an underlying, vinegary smell. Chris writes 'drains' in his notebook. 'Victorian,' says Julian disparagingly, peering doubtfully into the dim area behind the staircase. 'Early. Just missed being Georgian, though it has some of the features.' He shivers. 'Draughty. You'd have problems installing heating.'

Chris is beginning to dislike Julian; his chin juts out when he's preparing for conflict. 'It's a good size, how about we see the rooms?' The drawing room stretches from front to back of the house and, to me, is breathtaking. The cornice has a design of flowers and twisted leafy branches. Grey with age and home to a million spiders, but I can see how it would look with fresh paint. The ceiling rose is large and picks up the theme.

The dining room, on the other side of the hall, is as wide but not so long. Someone has tried purple paint on top of layers of wallpaper, which are curling away from the walls. I long to dig my nails in and start peeling, there must be a catalogue of ages and styles under there. I want to strip it back and make it comfortable again. The windows face north and east, so I'd need warm tones. It would have to contain one long, gorgeous table, however much

guests might like segregated café tables. I could always have different place settings.

Leading out from the back of the dining room is the library. The books have left a dry, musty scent in the air. We could stock the shelves, Chris and I, partly from our own stored collections and partly by browsing antiquarian booksellers for gorgeous old tomes. No ‘yard of books’ so loved by interior designers, this room deserves well-read and adored books. Perhaps when we are established I could branch out into dinner on request? Then I could serve coffee in the library, with soft lights and a log fire.

Julian is impatient and Chris is looking long-suffering. We pass back into the hall. A door behind the grand staircase leads into a dim corridor, a wooden stair at the end. Doors open into the older, rear part of the house. The Tudor rooms have had some attempt at modernisation, with a basic and rather cheap kitchen installed. Light floods through south-facing windows and when we see the sitting room we both know we have found our quarters. Let the paying guests have their Victorian parts, this is for us. The little room in the centre has obviously been a storeroom. I could fit fridges and freezers in there without broaching the integrity of the walls. The only room unopened is the one with the large window. For some reason the men hang back, so I turn the handle.

The light that streams through carries with it the scent of bluebells and violets, of cool dew-sprinkled grass. The room is bare, but welcoming hands are drawing me in. There is room for an easel and a drawing table, against one wall could be a day bed for thoughtful moments. ‘Look,’ I turn to the men, ‘look at the view – straight down the glade, with the woodland behind.’

‘Lawn,’ says Julian.

‘Pardon?’ I look at the lumpy patch of nettles and ragwort which, presumably, was once a manicured lawn.

‘What you call a glade. In the forest that’s a lawn – an open space which has been grazed down. The Forest lawns are a unique eco-system, so they are strongly protected by law.’ For a moment, I almost like Julian.

‘Shall we move on?’

No, I don't like him. I want to stay, but Chris is looking restless. Neither of them have set foot in the room.

Once we clamber up the wooden staircase, our fate is sealed. There is a Tudor solar which would be our bedroom. The walls are panelled; the ceiling is coffered. There is a lingering smell of mint, chamomile and roses. The room must have been strewn with rushes mixed with herbs. There is an attempt to install a bathroom and another, smaller room to make a guest room.

We return to the main hall and thence up to the Victorian bedrooms. With the addition of en-suites we could make six rooms for paying guests. I don't find this area exciting, though it will undoubtedly be considered charming. I have seen my home and I just want to get on with it. Chris is still diligently filling in his notebook.

The main bedroom is an imposing room (where does one find a four-poster bed?) but again we notice the peculiar smell that was in the hall. Julian seems anxious to hurry us away. I trip as I reach the door, though I can't see any roughness in the rather fine sanded boards. It feels almost as though I have been pushed. I must be tired, my head too full of new things.

‘Tripped over your new wellies?’

I look up and see that Chris's face is dark and malevolent, his lips twisted in a sneer. I am aware that I am short and insignificant, embarrassingly clumsy, not worthy of any consideration.

‘Come on, old love. Getting tired?’

A hand tugs me over the threshold and Chris and I are ourselves again. I must, indeed, be getting tired. ‘Let's go outside and look at the garden.’ I have a sudden longing for air.

In the far corner of the garden is a spring, surrounded by a rusty fence. From it a clear stream, bridged by the wall, runs into the forest. I lean on the fence, gazing into fern-lined depths. At some time, the surrounding ground has been dug out and the hole lined with hewn stone, the bottom filled with pebbles. The water rises clear and pure.

‘Nobody knows how old this is, it’s thought to have been sacred and, at one time, the meeting place for important decisions.’ I find myself liking Julian again, his rigidity softened by his surroundings. ‘It’s said that it has never been known to run dry and, certainly, the stream is a boon to the forest animals in a hot summer. At one time, it would have provided water for the house.’

‘With no chlorine.’ Ever practical, my Chris.

‘Certainly not. This spring has been tested and the water is as pure as you can get. The animals respect it, always drinking downstream although this fence would be easy to breach. The water is continually replenished.’

If we have any doubts about buying the house, they vanish beside that spring.

* * *

Most people on honeymoon laze on sun-kissed beaches or something equally clichéd. The rest of our honeymoon is spent in a whirl of solicitors, surveyors, architects and builders. We do take some time off to explore. We go to Mottisfont and are transfixed by the font. This is how we want our spring to be. We take photographs and Chris fills in several pages of his notebook. He puts on his business hat and offers a ludicrously low sum for the house, which is immediately accepted.

We are too delirious to see this easy capitulation as a warning sign.

* * *

When I first moved in with Chris, he was living in an inherited family flat – one of those made from a space-guzzling London Victorian house on the wrong side of the tracks. We haven’t noticed the stealthy creep of gentrification, but when Chris tentatively puts the property into the hands of an Estate Agent friend, we find ourselves at the centre of a feeding frenzy. It is sold immediately at what, to us, is a ridiculously high price. So, we rent a flat above the fish and chip shop in Lyndhurst and put most of our possessions in storage. Before we have time to take breath, our lives have irrevocably

changed. Chris is called to the other side of the world and there I am, in sole charge. I have contracts of my own to fulfil, but enough time to site manage.

Over the months, the scene changes from a building site to a house that it may be possible to live in. The various teams get used to a sturdy figure in shiny wellingtons and a yellow sou'wester trudging up the road towards them. On the whole, we get on well. Chris comes home to handle the administration and the walls are covered with spreadsheets and graphs. Our various bank accounts must have holes in them, the way the money is running out. In the way of these things, our various tradesmen know others, including landscape designers and an all-lady team of decorators, so we are able to source our labour locally.

We have setbacks and altercations, of course. I don't have much patience with officialdom and I can't really see that using modern fixings can make such a difference, but we were warned that the building is listed. Fortunately for my blood pressure, our building foreman is a gem, placid and sturdy. He has an unparalleled source of the correct artefacts.

The oldest parts of the house are habitable first, because I want to decorate them myself. The storeroom has its electric points installed ready for my fridges and freezers; there are plenty of storage shelves. The walls are whitewashed. As I acquire more possessions, from an antique shop in Lyndhurst full of unexpected treasures or local auctions, I store them in this room.

* * *

We have moved in. Chaos surrounds us, the Victorian parts of the house are still works in progress, but our quarters are snug. My studio is complete with drawing table and easel, an ugly but extremely comfortable chaise longue and a tub chair in which I intended to sit while gazing out of the window. Every time I tried to place it in the window I found myself unable to do so. In the end one of the builders did it for me, with a quizzical look because he'd seen me lift far heavier items. The next morning it was against the wall. This went on until I conceded defeat.

I found paint (in an extremely expensive designer range) the shade of violets in sunshine. With this on the walls and the woodwork picked out in white, my studio is the room I dreamed it would be. I know I'm never alone there. There's the lady with the long, silver hair, always at her post in the window. We make our peace over my attempts to put a chair in her place and smile at each other. I don't see the others so clearly, just a flash of a petticoat or a homely bread-baking smell, but I know they are there and wish me well.

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At last came the day when the building men moved out and the decorating ladies moved in. The men had finished the two small guest bedrooms first, in a neutral shade – not quite magnolia, slightly warmer. I wanted to decorate those rooms with studies of the forest. I was careful not to make them too cartoonish, there might well be teenagers or adults in there, but I wanted to be family-friendly and they were crying out to be children's rooms. The trouble came when the decorators started on the drawing room and the great bedroom (yes, I did find my four-poster).

We had trouble with that bed, the builders and I. Because the room had a north and a west window, I wanted the bed to come diagonally out from the corner, so that it would be possible to lie in bed and look out at both sides. There was plenty of room, but it refused to push into place. Even if we got it where we wanted it, the next morning it was back against the wall. My foreman got very red-faced and cross, in the end I don't know what he did (it was probably illegal) but there was no way any one could move that bed again. The smell was back; it couldn't possibly be our nice new drains. Chris asked if I'd had them gold-plated when he saw the bill.

After a few days Penny, leader of the team, comes to see me.

‘Nicky, I think we have a problem.’

‘Please don't tell me you can't do the job. Your work is so good and we're nearly there. I'm reckoning on going ahead with publicity and catching the tourist season.’

‘It's not that. We've all heard the stories about this house, in fact most of us are local and grew up with them. But we've come to realise they weren't

exaggerated. I can't have any of my girls physically hurt – and it could come to that.'

This calls for extreme measures. I put the kettle on. We take our tea into the studio.

'OK, Penny. Tell me all, from the beginning. Remember I'm not local – I'm aware of course that strange things happen in this house, but I don't know the stories.'

'Janine – the little one who's a whiz with the roller? Well, her Mum's a medium in her spare time. She's the local midwife in her day job. She's done a fair bit of research on this house. You know the green humps up the hill?

'I've wandered up there and seen them.'

'They're the remains of the great house that used to stand there. Never a very happy house, by all accounts. Anyway, a matriarch of that house lived here. Her son married and built this up as his dower house. Gossip has it that she bribed the workmen to make a secret tunnel and used to go up at night and make mischief.'

'Secret tunnel, Penny? Oh, please.'

'Scoff not, my dear. No-one's yet found the one linking the Queen's House with the Crown, but everyone believes in it. And we have proof – when the big house was demolished, the tunnel was found.'

That puts me in my place. Penny agrees that for the time they will continue working, but insists that none of 'her girls' should work alone and there should always be at least one to hold a ladder – my ghost apparently has a penchant for shaking ladders. As well as pinching, punching and pushing. Not nice at all. Janine's Mum should be asked to come with them next day and, as Penny inelegantly puts it, 'sort the old bitch out.'

I stay in my studio, taking deep calming breaths. I look at the work I left out the night before and smile. It sometimes alters overnight – not by much, usually some detail I've got wrong. Cooking pots too modern for a rustic kitchen, the cauldron on the wrong sort of spit over an open fire. This

time, a cheerful red skirt has changed to the colour of blackberries, at that moment before they're perfect for picking. 'Thank you,' I murmur softly, and think I hear a faint chuckle. Although I feel rather stupid, I face the empty room.

'Ladies, I know this is your room and that you're kindly disposed towards me. We have a real problem – I'm sure you all know the nasty ghost. She seems to have held sway in the front of the house far too long. We're going to confront her tomorrow and I'd be really, really, grateful for any help you can give.'

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I suppose we all tend to think of a medium as a Madame Akarti figure - all flowing scarves and jangling necklaces. Janine's Mum couldn't be more different. She and I meet in my studio and she is smiling as soon as she comes through the door. 'Oh yes, such a happy room. Good morning to you all.' And that isn't at all creepy. 'Right, let battle commence.' We all troop out. To anyone watching it would seem strange to say 'all,' as there's only Janine's Mum (call me Betty) and me there. But I know what I feel.

We meet up with the rest of Penny's girls by the drawing room door. Rotting cabbage and vinegar, as usual. Betty sighs.

'Nasty smell – how terribly old hat. OK, let's be having you.' She takes a deep breath. 'Isabelle Winterbourn. Stop skulking behind doors and give us a look at you.' A waft of really foul air has us masking our noses with handkerchiefs. Shadows stir. 'Ah, there you are. Oh, you poor old thing. Saw off two husbands and a son and you never had anyone to love you, did you? Really, it's a bit daft to still be taking it out on prettier women, don't you think?'

A rather splendid Moorcroft vase I'd found in the antique shop is raised above an invisible head. As it begins to crash down, unseen hands catch it and return it gently to its place. Betty tutts. 'Naughty and childish. I expected better of you.' For a moment, I catch a glimpse of a birch broom making contact with an ample behind. 'Now, my dear, it's time you stopped thinking of other women as your enemies. We're quite nice, you know. Let's

have some plain speaking here. First, it's time you met Nicola instead of trying to scare her away.'

A dark force rushes towards me. Suddenly, it stops. There is the sound of something heavy dropping into a nearby armchair. Betty laughs. 'Thank you, Dorcas.' She turns to me. 'Dorcas was a dairy maid, the best butter and cheese maker in the district. All that churning gave her the most splendid muscles'.

She faces the chair, 'I know a lot about you, Isabelle. Your son's wife kept comprehensive diaries. It's a pity you didn't make friends when he died, instead of sneaking up that silly tunnel and trying to make her life a misery. You would have got on rather well, she was quite a character.' Is it my imagination, or is the armchair sobbing? 'I know you were an excellent housewife and manager, if they'd only given you the chance. Why don't you give Nicola a hand instead of hindering her? Can't you do something about that pathetic attempt at pot-pourri?' I'm rather proud of my bowl of dried rose petals, even if they do smell slightly of curry. I did them in the microwave.

A rather lovely smell of roses and sandalwood drifts over to me. Betty smiles, 'that's much better. Now, as I see it we have options here. Nicola intends to make a business out of running this as a guest house. You may not like it, but it's the only thing stopping it from falling down. We intend to help her and you could join us. You'd enjoy swapping recipes with Dorcas. Or you could persecute the poor girl until she gives up and you'd be on your own again. These ladies won't hang around if you do that.'

I've only seen my silver lady when she's been silhouetted in the studio window, but suddenly she's leaning over the armchair in which a dark figure is huddled. There is a swirl of skirts all around and a compassionate clucking. The hall feels empty and Janine moves swiftly to her mother's side.

'Let's make Mum a cup of tea and give her space to breathe. It's not as easy as she makes it look, you know.'

We all have a cup of tea – we have several cups of tea. Betty's colour comes back.

'Is that it, Betty? Has she really gone?'

‘Oh no, my love. Your friends have taken her away. She won’t give up her bad habits too easily, but there will always be someone at hand to help her. You lot – back to work. Work in pairs for a while and keep a weather eye out, but you should be all right. Janine will keep me in touch, but I think you’ll make a success of life here. The house likes you.’

* * *

It isn’t all plain sailing, of course. Isabelle has her little rebellions. I learned not to leave an opened tin of paint around overnight, but it was more mischief than malice. I can always make a game of getting visiting children to find the purple rabbit. I wonder if Isabelle had a repressed childhood? If my cakes won’t rise and my jam won’t set I call on her help. Prospective guests comment on the wonderful ambience in the house and always admire the pot-pourri.

We’re fully booked next week – great bedroom and all. Chris will be home to hold my hand. I think Isabelle rather fancies him, in a good way. I’m nervous, of course I am, but Betty often pops in for a cup of tea and reassures me. It is going to be a success.