Shades of Creativity

Short Stories by
Kenton & District U3A
Creative Writing Group
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Short Stories from

Kenton & District U3A Creative Writing Group

Edited by Paul Burns

www.kentondistrictu3a.org

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All of the stories are works of fiction.

Jacket image from an untitled painting by Rosemary Wolfson.
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If you have received a free copy of this book

Please make a small donation via https://mydonate.bt.com/fundraisers/shades
All proceeds will go directly to St. Luke’s Hospice, Kenton.
“Esmerelda you'll damn well have to get your arse off that bed now and deliver George to school in your fancy jimjams like bloody yesterday. His Maths A-level exam is at 10:15 and it's already 9:45. His career depends on this. I can’t drive him myself; I have to ‘see a man about a dog’ at 10:30”.

“Derek, don’t you ‘Esmerelda’ me - Esme if you please! Only named Esmerelda at birth, otherwise I wouldn’t have inherited from my spinster aunt! And if you use the ‘arse’ word again, or worse, or similar, it will seriously add to my grounds for divorce”

George appeared in our bedroom, eyes as hollow as a well of eternity, a face like pasty pastry before cooking, and hair as if pulled up by the gravity of the moon! Our beloved son, George, the infant prodigy, the child genius, the mathematical whiz kid.

“Mater and Pater” he enunciated, “I could pass this exam with my eyes closed and somersaulting towards a hurricane on my way to Timbuktu. Last night I made this amazing discovery, which I had to work on. On my computer I developed a program, which would transform the world. Isis could no longer operate with the controls I have designed. America wouldn’t believe a teenage boy unless I hacked into their system, which I did last night. Will I still deserve to end up in prison in spite of my discovery?”

Derek looked as if he was going to head-butt me following the declaration of this news, as if George’s actions were my fault. I shot out my hand to avert this crisis. Going by past experiences, should we have believed George or not?

Then Derek said, “Never mind that now. We’ll send you to a CBT person after your exam to finally rid you of your OCD, autism, Asperger’s or tinnitus”.

George said, “Tourette’s Syndrome you mean! I ain’t got ringing in my ears, nor non-stop swearing! I’ve also read bloody Agony Aunties on how to deal with your troubled teenager!”

Now 10:00; what to do? I’d have to drive George to school in my scanty white pyjamas with the massive red hearts on them - a Valentine gift – and with a plunging
neckline. Weather in the 30s, no air con in the car, dressing gown and jackets wet in the washing machine. Winter coat stored in loft. No time to get loft ladder down now of all times!

George said, “You should have sent me to a private school. With the fees they charge and wanting to take credit for my brilliance, they’d have put me up at least three classes so that I could have taken A-level Maths at 14 when I was ready and had already covered the syllabus on my own. But hey, Del Boy Dad, your businesses kept failing, so you could never afford the fees.”

Derek interjected, “Oh no, for every school entrance exam you passed, you took along to the interview a plentiful supply of paper pellets to flick at the head teachers. You considered it beneath your dignity to be asked to do the primary school mental arithmetic that you could actually do by the age of 7.”

Anyhow, I managed to rush downstairs pulling George with me, slung porridge in microwave, forced open George’s mouth and poured it down.

“Mum, you’re burning my throat. I’m about to throw up!”

He did! We left the sick.

Derek found our lad’s uniform, which we just managed to pull on over his jimjams, in spite of George gesticulating all over the place. A frantic search found the boy’s geek glasses with the black horn-rimmed frames and his beloved nerdy knapsack. He insisted on wearing his sweaty anorak over his school blazer. Derek and I hauled Anorak Man into my blithering banger. No time for seat belts. George and Mum finally arrived at school five minutes after the exam started! Again, what to do? I would have to get out of the car, puff my chest out, threaten the school that I would resign my most successful school governorship, impress on the authorities that I had friends in high places, which I really did have, in order that the invigilators would bend rules for my son. And they did!

As George went through he whispered “Darling Mummy, you should have sent me to Eton. With their more than adequate pastoral care, they would have coped with me to add to their prestige.”

As I was leaving the premises I heard faint whisperings and giggles, and then, “There’s the Queen of Tarts with her Georgie Porgy.”

A few moments later a chorus sang:

“Georgie Nerdy
Pudding & Pie
Kissed the girls
And made them cry
When the boys came out to play
Georgie Nerdy ran away”

Quick as a football star in a Ferrari going up the M1 as if trying to outrace light, I said, “George will be in Silicon Valley in the time it takes you lot to brush your venomous rotten teeth in the morning! Eventually you'll be sending him bloody pleading emails while you’re on blooming benefits, reminding him of so called sunny semesters at this shit hole of a school.”
The taxi drops me at the door and I am glad to reach my destination. I have been away for more years than I care to remember, and am over-whelmed by a feeling of guilt and uselessness. In my mind’s eye the house is bigger, ivy-covered and surrounded by blossoming fruit trees. In reality the shabbiness shocks me. Is this truly the fairy-tale house that has been so deep-rooted in my memory?

The key turns in the lock after a struggle. The junk mail blocks the door at first, and I struggle to enter the hall. The dust-sheeted furniture surrounds me like so many ghosts. I am engulfed by the chill air, and am reluctant to go further. At last I climb the stairs and reach the bedroom, the goal of my visit. I open the wardrobe door, and reach up to the top shelf. The large box is still there, just where my grandmother showed me so many years before. It is dustier and shabbier than I remember. I carry it downstairs to the dining table, and lift the lid. The contents are jumbled as if she had hastily thrown them in after looking at them one last time. I open the bottle of wine I have brought with me and pour myself a large glass. I have a feeling I will need it.

Before I start to delve into her life, I take a moment to remember my grandmother. An autocratic figure from another era, she has always been part of my life. Born in 1895, she was there for the start of air travel, space travel, television, the use of antibiotics, and so many other things that are integral to our modern existence. With a shock, I realise that she must have been among the first women to be allowed to vote, although I doubt that she was involved in any suffrage movement. She took pride in writing well-crafted letters to her family and friends, turning the page sideways to write in the margins if she ran out of space. For most of her life she had never left the house without hat, gloves, and stockings. Her preferred jewellery was a string of pearls. She defiantly wore her fur coat long after it was deemed unacceptable to own one.

I recall some of her reminiscences about her early married life in London. How the milkman and his horse-drawn cart arrived several times a day to fill the jugs she provided. How she put a card in the window if she wanted the carrier, Carter Paterson, to collect something. How she watched from her back garden as the
Crystal Palace burned. How the refugees arrived from war-torn Europe, penniless and without possessions.

When her husband retired they sold their London home and moved back to the village in north-east Scotland where he had grown up. She has spent the past four years in a residential home, protesting bitterly every day. At every visit, she begged me to take her back to her home, and I still feel intense guilt, even though she was too frail to cope on her own. And now I am in her house, after her funeral, to arrange its sale. The proceeds should be just enough to cover the loans taken out to pay for her nursing care.

I think back to the previous day. So few people at the service: just two members of staff from her nursing home, an elderly relative of my grandfather, and me. The nurses had gone straight back to work, so my aunt and I had tea and a cake in a nearby cafe before going our separate ways. My sister couldn’t make the long journey from New Zealand, and my daughters said they could not organise childcare. I don’t really blame them. It was a long way from London and not a very exciting day out. To compensate, they did send lovely flowers. And now she is laid to rest beside her beloved husband.

I turn my attention to the box and remove an item at random: a little book with a tiny attached, tasselled pencil. A dance card! From what long forgotten ball has she saved this? Did any of the people she danced with become an important part of her life? There are no names, not even initials, so I lay it to one side. I am intrigued by a twist of silk fabric, tied up with black ribbon. Inside is an intricately knitted baby’s bootee, and a lock of hair. Surely from one of her children. I suspect it is the son who died of influenza as a tiny baby. Was his name George? As I grew up, he was seldom mentioned, but here is evidence that she had never forgotten him.

Next I find a faded letter headed France, 31/8/18 and starting: It is with very deep regret that I have to inform you of the death of your son who was serving in my battery. This must refer to my grandmother’s younger brother, who died during the Great War. A faded pressed flower falls from the envelope. Is it a poppy? Did he die at the Somme? I must start to research the family. But even as I think this, I know I never will. The letter ends: I had his remains moved and buried with Military Honours and perhaps later on I will be able to let you know the exact spot. At present I cannot inform you. Did the family ever find out where his remains were laid to rest?
At least they were luckier, if that is the right word, with the death of my grandmother’s son David during the last days of the Second World War, while trying to take a French village from the German army. I know his grave is recorded because I have visited it, in a peaceful, well-kept military cemetery in northern France. The crumpled and tear-stained telegram announcing his death is here in her treasure box. If the war had ended a few months earlier, what kind of life would he have had? I might have had cousins and there may have been more people to grieve for her.

I suddenly shiver and realise that the day is ending and I am getting chilled in the unheated house. I am not sure that the electricity is still connected. When did I last get a bill? My mind moves to the many things I must do before any house sale is finalised, but I gather my thoughts back to the task in hand. I pull my coat back on, pour another glass of wine and continue my search, opening a packet of documents. My grandfather’s death certificate. He died in 1953 at the age of 60. I work it out. She was a widow for longer that she was a wife. I remember how she told my eight-year old self of his death while she was energetically washing the windows. At the time I thought this attention to house-work was very odd. Now I realise that, having just heard from the hospital, she was doing anything she could think of to take her mind off the pain.

Their wedding certificate is here too, together with their birth certificates. I hadn’t realised that she was born in Portsmouth, moving to London a few years later, although I remember her telling me that her father worked as a draughtsman for the Admiralty, and each year she watched the Trooping of the Colour from a window of the Admiralty building in Whitehall. I study the discoloured documents, then add them to the pile. Where is the telegram she got from the Queen on her 100th birthday? Or her medal for long service to local charities? She loved the visit to Buckingham Palace to collect her award, but obviously it was not important enough to be added to her treasures.

I look out of the window and watch the confetti blow from the wizened fruit trees. I don’t even know what fruit, but think it might be apples. She always loved her garden, and it pains me to see it overgrown and derelict. Perhaps the reminder of weddings is wrong; maybe the falling petals are the tears I couldn’t shed yesterday.

I wonder how my grandparents had coped with their permanent move to this tiny Scottish community. My grandfather had grown up here and they had returned for
most holidays. They had always intended this house to be where they ended their lives. He had almost achieved that goal. I remember visits to him in the local hospital as he died of cancer without complaint. I think my grandmother would have preferred a similar swift exit. My only other wispy memories of my grandfather are of a gentle, soft-spoken man, who delighted in his family and had an amazing ability to blow interlocking smoke rings. My adult self realises that this much-rehearsed skill probably contributed to his death.

I pause, and remember the long summer holidays we spent with them as we grew up. As young children we loved the beaches and long walks, but as we got older we chafed at the boredom. I have a sudden memory of sitting at this same dining table with my ear glued to the radio trying desperately to hear the drifting sounds from Radio Luxembourg. This leads to an image of my grandmother using the table as an ironing board, with the iron plugged into the light socket. I shudder at the risk.

I take a sip of wine and think more about these holidays. When I was very young we travelled by steam train. After the branch line to the village was axed by Beeching, my parents drove in a battered mini-bus, with us children sitting on the rear bench seats, long before the days of seat belts, or lying on the floor in the back with our colouring books. The cat and his dirt box also travelled in the back with us, and the smell ripened as the journey progressed.

Once in the village, there was a regular pattern of outings. A climb to the water tower, where you could hear the constant gurgling as it provided clean water to the village. A harder climb up the local hill, redolent of pine trees. Walks to the local stony beach, where waves from the North Sea sucked the smaller pebbles away with a whoosh, and threw them back with frightening force, and where a deafening machine chewed up the larger stones and turned them into building sand. I have a memory of a corner house on the way to the beach, with a monkey puzzle tree in the front garden, where a tiny monkey cavorted while chained to a branch. A vivid memory, but my grandmother, when quizzed, had no recollection of the monkey. It must have been the association of ideas and childish imagination on my part.

Sometimes we went to more distant, sandier beaches, with shallow seas and sandy sandwiches, where a quiet, elderly bachelor uncle treated us to high tea at the local beach-front hotel. Every Sunday morning the family attended the local church, my sister and I straw-hatted and lace-gloved. An increasingly red-faced small boy
vigorously pumped the organ, allowing an elderly lady to produce dirge-like music. To our great delight, grandfather as a juvenile had carved his initials on the family pew. This was regarded with mild amusement by the grown-ups, but I can imagine their reaction if we had done the same.

Midway between the church and the village is the cemetery, high on a bluff where it is always windy and there are no houses to spoil the views over the surrounding farmland and the winding river mouth. The graveyard is full of memorials to long-dead ancestors, mostly shipbuilders called George or Alexander. After my grand-father joined them, we went every week to put flowers on his grave. It is only now that I am older that I realise that my grandmother never recovered from the loss of his early death. She has now joined him, as she had long wanted, but I am acutely aware that no-one will visit regularly to put fresh flowers in the battered vase that is always there.

I return to the contents of the box and am amazed to find a few of the letters that I sent her while I was back-packing in my twenties. I had not realised she was interested in my trip, and wish I had taken the trouble to talk to her more about it. I know I hardly thought of her or the rest of the family while I was away, and regarded the writing of the letters as a chore that had to be performed.

In a corner of the box is a silver three-penny piece. Surely a memento of a Christmas long-past. Why was it significant? I will never know. No one puts silver coins in Christmas puddings any more. Reluctantly I drag myself away from this thought and delve again into the box. There are a few photos, but not as many as I had expected. Some studio portraits of her three children, of whom only my mother survived to have children of her own. One of her husband, sitting at his desk, balding, be-spectacled, and looking very serious. Why had such a picture been taken at work? Was it for a staff magazine, or was a colleague experimenting with his first camera? A photo of the two of them after their move to Scotland. She is wearing a tweed suit with thick stockings, brogues and a sensible hat. He sports plus-fours and leans on a shooting-stick. Photos of my sister and me as we grew up, but none of the great-grandchildren, although my grandmother loved to see them if they were quiet.

Tucked in the bottom I find a studio portrait of herself as a young woman. Although brown and faded, it is still obvious that she was blessed with a head of luxuriant long fair hair. I know it was her pride and joy when she was young, but she
had decided to have her curls cut off when she was looking after her young family. I remember my sister and I complaining bitterly that we had not inherited her thick, blonde tresses.

There is a knock at the door: the estate agent has come too soon. Presumably he is eager to take his photos while there is still some daylight, and put the property on the market. I will have to organise a house clearance, but I am sure he will know who I should contact about this. Most of the contents will go, but I will keep the box and its mementos. So few items for such a long life.
MUSICAL MOMENTS

Rita Sinha

The profoundly soothing sound of the morning raga jogia filled the bedroom. Light from the rising sun filtered through the blinds making a linear pattern on the bed. Anita, as she cuddled her husband Ravi, thought of how much she loved this time, the best part of the day for both of them. Their morning ritual was for her to make a pot of tea and bring it to the bedroom, put on some Indian classical music, usually bhajans and she and Ravi would relax while listening to the devotional songs. They might discuss over tea their plans for that day, read some poetry or just lay quietly absorbing the music. They had been married for twelve years, and after postings in various countries, were now living in London. This part of their daily routine had never changed. The raga jogia playing that morning was by Pandit Raghu Raj and it was Anita and Ravi’s favourite piece.

As they lay there, their son Sameer came in and got under the duvet with them. “Can I have some tea?” he said.

“Go and get a cup” said Anita.

As Sameer had grown up listening to this music, had developed a taste for it and he added his lovely sweet voice to the bhajan. He had a natural gift for singing and Anita had arranged for him to learn Indian classical music at the Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, the Indian Cultural Centre in Chiswick, from the age of six. He was now ten and surprisingly still not bored with it. Anita had been a bit worried that with most of his friends being English and listening to pop music he might lose interest. However, Sameer had developed a strong interest in the classical music, which did not mean that he did not enjoy pop music too.

Pandit Raghu Raj, usually referred to as Panditji, was Anita’s favourite classical musician. She was a great fan. She had read up all about him and the ups and downs he had faced in his life. In the world of Hindustani classical music, Panditji stood out and was highly respected. Having been born into a conventional middle class Indian family, following a career in music was not exactly encouraged. His parents had firmly refused to let him follow a musical career and insisted that he study to be a doctor or engineer, or accountant or some other profession that had more chance of providing a decent income than being a musician. It had taken some
courage for him to run away from home to follow his quest. Painstakingly he had cultivated his art, following various gurus or teachers, until he became the chief disciple of the celebrated Ustad Ghulam Ali Khan in Benaras. Panditji had worked very hard and had his first solo appearance at the young age of eighteen. He had then got in touch with his parents and invited them to his first concert. They had then made up as the parents realised where his heart and talent lay and they accepted his choice of career. Anita suspected that the big audience that had filled the hall for their son’s concert had also led them to appreciate that he could earn a good living.

Over a period of time, Panditji had developed a distinctive style of singing and acquired a large following of connoisseurs as well as lay people as fans. Through all his hard work and passion he had become a perfectionist, and for him nothing less would do. Due to this dedication to perfection he had become an eminent player in the Indian cultural scene and had won several notable music awards as well as the Padma Bhushan medal, the highest accolade for a musician awarded by the Indian government. However, Panditji had said that the greatest reward for him was that his parents had finally acknowledged that music was a worthy profession.

Panditji had travelled extensively, performing in concerts across the USA, Canada and Italy. He was now in London for the first time to participate in the festival of Indian classical music and would be performing at the Southbank Centre. Anita and Ravi had bought tickets as they really wanted Sameer to hear him in person. Panditji had been a great source of inspiration to Sameer. He simply worshipped the musician.

On the day of the concert, Anita just could not stop smiling. So what if the curry she had made for lunch did not turn out as well as expected, the evening certainly would. She had known for days which sari she was going to wear. From four o’clock onwards, she was urging Ravi and Sameer to get ready and kept hurrying them. The idea of being late was too dreadful to risk. She had bought Sameer a kurta, churidar and a lovely waistcoat. She urged Ravi to wear his best Indian clothes too, and he went along with this just to please her. Finally they left at five, giving themselves ample time to reach the Southbank Centre.

Anita literally sensed the electric excitement in the foyer. It continued to build as they made their way to their seats just ten rows back from the stage and right in the
middle of the row. They had a wonderful view of the stage. After thunderous applause, the master of ceremonies introduced first the musical team as they tuned their instruments and then Panditji, regaling him with praise, calling him an “incomparable maestro”. An expectant silence followed as Panditji stood up and bowed modestly to the audience before sitting on the floor and setting in motion an evening of mesmerising and soul-touching music.

Sameer was totally immersed and could not stop himself from humming along gently when he recognised certain pieces of music. Anita was thrilled by this. What a wonderful evening it was turning out to be. Her family were all in cloud heaven, as were the rest of the audience.

However all good things must come to an end and so it was that the magic of music gave way to the audience drowning the hall with heartfelt applause. Sameer was still grinning from ear to ear as the clapping came to an end. He said that he must see Panditji and before his parents could stop him he had rushed towards the back of the stage.

Sameer swam like fish through the tide of people; his parents could not keep up with him.

Anita shouted, “Wait we must ask permission first.”

But Sameer could not hear or would not hear and pressed on. The parents lost sight of him and then as they entered the backstage area, they saw their son striding towards where Panditji was talking to certain well known sponsors. When two security men tried to hold Sameer, he dodged them and reached where Panditji was standing and bent to touch his feet.

“God Bless you son,” said Panditji patting his head.

“I loved every musical moment today, please, please will you be my Guru?”

Anita and Ravi were still in shock, but Panditji was smiling, “Sure I will, but I will have to test you to see if you can be a worthy student.”

Years later when Anita looked back, it was hard to believe what had happened the next day. Panditji met the family at his hotel and he heard Sameer sing raga jogia. Then maestro had accepted the boy as a shishya, a great honour as Panditji was known to be very fussy and took very few pupils.

“He has a natural talent,” he said.

“Anita felt very proud to think that Sameer had met the guru’s high standard.”
Anita and Ravi arranged to travel with Sameer to Benaras the following month to leave him at the music school. Times had certainly changed since Panditji had started his career thought Anita. He had fled from home to pursue his dream and here she was so excited for her son. She would have to suffer being parted from Sameer for so long, but she really wanted him to follow his heart.

Somehow, Anita endured the eight years Sameer was away and being able to see him only once a year. Fortunately, modern technology had enabled them to Skype every other day. She noted how he became more and more serious and adult in many ways. His playfulness had gone and she really missed him joining them in bed for tea. He, however, continued to say that he missed her laddu,” the little round Indian sweets that she used to make for him.

“Are you happy?” She had asked him.

“Very happy,” he had said, “To be learning from Panditji is the greatest experience! It just could not be better!”

Eight years later after that backstage encounter meeting with Panditji, Anita and Ravi were again at the Southbank Centre in the Queen Elizabeth Hall. She was more excitable than ever despite Ravi’s attempts to calm her down. They had front row seats this time as their son was not only supporting Panditji, but would be performing his debut solo in none other than raga jogia, singing the bhajan that had started his career. Panditji had made a special concession for Sameer by allowing him to sing the morning raga in the early evening.

As everybody settled into their seats, gently the string of the tanapura and the sitar merged with the melody of the harmonium and rose to the ceiling like the fragrant scent of incense. Then slowly the touching voice of Sameer began the rise and fall of the notes applied in raga jogia.

Anita thought that this was pure heaven because, apart from the sublime music, she could see the happiness and fulfilment in her son’s face.
MY DAD
Vivien Spiteri

He was an amazing man my Dad.

According to Mum he was present at my birth and loved me from the moment I was born. I cried loudly as soon as I was delivered. According to Dad, I never stopped! Because I arrived with a mop of dark hair, he said I reminded him of Bagheera, the Black Panther from Rudyard Kipling’s Jungle Book.

About the time I was born, my parents were forming a new property maintenance company. Dad had been made redundant just after the birth of my older brother and he had worked with an uncle for a couple of years to gain experience before starting on his own. He was a highly qualified toolmaker, but he hated being confined to an indoor workshop. Hence Mum was sitting up in hospital with me in her arms, filling in forms for the launch of the company.

Home was a three bedroom mid-terrace house in the London suburbs. Mum and Dad had saved hard during the first years of their marriage and managed to buy this very run down property with a mortgage, which left them with very little spare cash each week once Mum had stopped work to have children.

As and when money permitted, Dad would do a bit more to the house. He rewired, re-plumbed and then began redecorating. Mum worked alongside him whenever she could. She also found the time to make curtains and covers.

The company took off and both my parents worked all hours of the day and night to support us all.

When I was about five, they landed a big contract to refurbish a large garage complex on the A40 and that summer, whilst their children played in the garden, Mum and Dad organised a dozen men to get the work done. Dad did the project management; Mum did all the paperwork including the wages and VAT. Busy, happy days – but they always had time for us. Their labour was rewarded and the contract went to time and budget and we were RICH. Well, their children thought so! There was talk of a big holiday and completing the work on our house until the news that we were to have a sibling!

Later that year my younger brother was born, Dad finished refurbishing the house and then it became apparent that the place was too small. So the next year,
my parents started all over again by buying a four bedroom semi in a quiet cul de sac. We all had our own bedrooms, but they were dark and dirty and unloved. Dad set to work. Within months and with the help of the company workforce, we had lovely rooms with matching curtains and duvet covers. The derelict garden was turned into a large lawn for us to play on bordered by patches for fruit, vegetables and herbs.

He continued to run his company and provide for us for over thirty years, by which time my elder brother and I had flown the nest leaving just Mum, Dad and my kid brother at home. Life was getting easier for them with not so many mouths to feed and the end of the mortgage in sight.

I will never forget the awful words Mum spoke to me that quiet Sunday when the family were all at home for Sunday Lunch.

“I have some sad news for us all. Dad has been diagnosed with Early Onset Alzheimer’s and, as he can’t relearn the Gas Regulations, he will have to give up some of the more technical work. He will concentrate on the painting and decorating, but we will slowly have to wind down the business as the illness progresses.”

How would it affect us all? I didn’t even know what Alzheimer’s or dementia was! While my older brother and I were with partners and had our own homes, my younger brother was still at school. He and Mum felt the full brunt of living day to day with the issues of Dad’s deterioration.

Mum managed to hold it all together until my younger brother completed his GCSE’s and started work. We all helped where we could, but gradually it became apparent that Dad would have to stop work and he was the company. Sadly, Mum closed the business down and found part-time work. Dad being without a job and the end of the company was hard for us all.

We watched this amazing man who had turned his hand to most things, spoke three languages fluently and could make himself understood in three others, slowly go downhill until he had to be prompted to shower, shave and get dressed. We three siblings alternated between crying and wanting to be to be strong for our parents. Mum had to give up work to look after him and she too was reduced to tears at times. But mostly she placed the needs of Dad first and then her children.

Between us we managed to keep Dad at home for seven years. Mum did the lion’s share of the caring with her children helping when they could. Taking him out for the day to give Mum a much-needed break was hard work. He questioned who
we were and wanted to know why we were taking him by the arm to guide him or cutting up his steak. It was difficult for him to understand that he couldn’t manage many things without help.

He went to a day care centre three times a week and Mum would have flipped without this support. Apart from these three eight-hour sessions, she was his carer 24/7 and he didn’t always sleep at night. At times, he wandered off in his PJ’s and Mum went out in the middle of the night to find him.

As well as this confusion, he became aggressive and Mum began to suffer at his hands. One morning he knocked her across the bathroom and she hit her head on the tiled wall. Her language, she said, was unprintable. The following day he asked her how she got all the bruises and was mortified to learn that he had inflicted them.

Then one Sunday evening, he decided he didn’t want his roast beef dinner, threw it across the dining room and stomped off. Mum tried to restrain him and again got knocked to the floor. She was still recovering from this when the door bell rang and a neighbour said he thought he had seen Dad being put into an ambulance in the next road.

Mum drove to the spot and, sure enough, there was an ambulance. She knocked on the rear door. Dad lay inside with wires all over him whilst they tested him to see what had happened. To this day we don’t really know. Did he have a heart attack? Did he trip and the fall brought a heart defect into play? Either way, he was admitted as a cardiac patient. Mum asked for a full assessment of his dementia. Because of various cuts, he had not had been assessed for almost two years and no one had checked on my mother’s needs as a carer despite the enormous pressures on her.

During Dad’s five weeks in hospital, both of my parents were fully assessed. The result was what the family already knew; Mum couldn’t continue as sole carer. Wisely, she refused to take him home until proper care had been arranged for him and eventually they agreed that he qualified for continual care. He was granted a place in a local nursing home specialising in dementia. Despite her campaigning for this, the decision devastated Mum.

An ambulance transferred Dad to the home. My younger brother went with Mum after Dad had settled in. Within a few days the staff had shaved him and he looked more like our dear old Dad. The hospital staff had decided he was too aggressive to have more than just the bare basic personal care and he had looked like the Wild Man of Borneo!
Dad responded to the care provided by the home’s amazing staff. They cared not only for him but also for Mum and the whole family. Slowly Mum regained her sense of humour and her children were able to laugh with her again. Both my parents had been such fun and to watch them brought low had been soul destroying.

For the first few months, Dad was able to help in the home’s gardens. He almost reached Australia one day when they asked him to dig a big hole and forgot to tell him to stop! He also painted. One of his favourite pastimes was to change the colour of a large wooden box. He would forget that he had painted it the day before and happily applied a new coat. The caretaker, a real gem, took an interest in Dad and would take him with him to do little jobs around the home. He could often be found handing up tools, but not necessarily the right ones.

Then Dad suffered a series of mini-strokes and slowly lost yet more of his abilities. He couldn’t walk even when staff supported him and tried really hard to get him to use his legs. He had lost the ability to bear weight. This resulted in him being confined to a chair for most of the day.

Mum visited him daily if she possibly could and if she couldn’t make it, another member of the family went to see him. Friends too were amazing and visited him if Mum had a few days away. When Mum was with him, she told him what she had been doing, what their children were doing and what was happening in the world. He rarely replied to her. However, he had occasional moments of lucidity, such as the day I told him that I was going to do a parachute jump in aid of the Alzheimer’s Society. He listened intently while holding my hand.

When I had finished, he smiled and quite clearly said, “I know, Mum’s been telling me about it.”

There wasn’t a dry eye in the house.

And on another occasion, someone on the unit sneezed and Dad said quite clearly,” Bless you.”

We learned never to stop communicating. You just never know when something might produce an unexpected response in someone suffering from dementia.

Slowly he lost the ability to feed himself. Then he couldn’t chew properly and had to have pureed food. He began to forget how to open his mouth and needed help to do this. He became unable to move in bed and had to be turned every two hours day or night. It was so sad to see this great man slowly degenerating.
He had become doubly incontinent whilst in hospital. Mum used to prompt him before that and had managed, apart from the odd accident, to keep him clean and dry. Staff are paid to do this type of work, but the love and care shown to Dad with good humour and great gentleness were second to none. When he died there was not a mark on his body; no bruises, no cuts, no bedsores. What a tribute his unblemished skin was to those amazing, loving staff.

He had suffered a number of urinary tract and chest infections. The latter are unfortunately common in people who are so immobile. Six years after moving into the care home, he developed yet another chest infection. By this time he couldn’t swallow antibiotics. It was decided to nurse him in his room, which in that care home usually means the resident is very unwell.

Mum took up her position beside him and stayed with him day and night. My younger brother and I joined her two days later and our older brother, who had family commitments, also visited. Family and friends supported us all and for that we will all, always be grateful.

Six days after the decision to nurse him in his room, the inevitable happened and Dad died peacefully in the presence of family, staff and a church minister. Years earlier, Dad had elected to be a brain donor and that donation required that his body was refrigerated within four hours. Kindly and efficiently, the necessary preparations in the care home for the transfer of his body were undertaken and we said goodbye to a wonderful Dad.

His death certificate cited Bronchopneumonia with Alzheimer’s Dementia. It struck his relatives as significant that dementia was registered as a cause of death. For most of the time, his chest infections had been minor issues compared all that Dad had lost and suffered from due to Alzheimer.

His committal was a quiet family affair. Later, a thanksgiving service for his life was held in the church where Mum and Dad had met 47 years earlier during a Scout show. The church had also been their place of marriage two years later and where their three children were christened.

The pews were packed and the tributes were many and varied. There were people of my parents’ generation and older; our minister and people from his congregation, scout leaders, workmates, relatives and friends of my parents. There were also many from the next generation; friends of their children from school and
beyond school, and people met through Guides and Scouts. Every one of these people attended to say “Goodbye” to the amazing man I had called Dad.
The front door bell rang. It was Alice. She pointed to a bright orange, plastic shopping bag on my doorstep.

“Is this yours? Do you want me to bring it in?”

“Someone’s dumped it on my doorstep, probably rubbish. Just leave it. Do come in.”

The evening with Alice was fun. Fair, fat and fifty-something with a scorpion strategically tattooed below her right ear. She was a longstanding friend to Jack and myself. I forgot about the bag.

Next morning, I went to take in the post and found the bag on the doorstep. Curious, I looked inside. No, it was definitely not rubbish.

“You’re stupid,” said husband Jack, “It could be a bomb. Get rid of it.”

He tends to be overdramatic. For him, a twinge of indigestion is a duodenal ulcer or worse.

“I’ll just check.”

I emptied the bag onto the kitchen floor. Out fell lots of small black boxes, jewellery boxes. I counted them. There were 37 of varying sizes, most were for rings.

I looked in each box, lifting the velvet and satin interiors. Nothing, absolutely nothing not even a loose diamond. So disappointing!

But Jack was not looking or hearing me. “Just put the lot in the dustbin,” he advised and went into the lounge to watch the football.

The black satin and velvet interiors gleamed with opulence providing comfy beds for, I guess, some extremely expensive jewellery. I returned the boxes to the bag and had decided to follow Jack’s advice when the phone rang.

It was Alice. “Thanks for a lovely evening and by the way, I know I am being nosey, but tell me what was in the plastic bag?”

“Oh, just empty boxes.”

I described them and added, “It seems a pity to get rid of such lovely boxes. Our local charity shop might like them.”
“No, you can’t do that,” Alice replied quickly. “They could be from a smash and grab raid on a jewellers or a salesman’s samples. You must report your find to the police. It could be valuable evidence and it’s the right thing to do.”

Bin, charity, or hand into police. I was undecided.

I asked Jack. “I’ve already told you, don’t get involved, bin them”. He was angry that I was even considering alternatives.

Alice is a trusted and sensible friend whose advice I have always respected. So, without telling Jack, I decided to inform the police.

“Thanks for the information,” said the pleasant-sounding lady, your reference number is BX19887”.

“What do you want me to do with the boxes? I enquired.

“Hand them in to your local police station.”

My “local” station is about ten miles away.

Jack’s mantra is, “You never listen to me” so, next morning, I told him I was going shopping.

Jack did not go into work, had a slight cold. I left him feeling very sorry for himself despite my supplying him with a honey and lemon drink, tissues and sympathy.

At the police station, two men were ahead of me. One sat holding a car number plate which had different numbers on each side. The other was a youth of about 18 with curly, black hair, blue jeans and ear phones. He swayed from side to side in time to the music in a trance-like state. I sat down and waited and waited. I was getting fidgety.

The queue grew longer as the morning wore on. After 75 minutes, my turn came.

“I’ve come to hand in some boxes that I’ve found," I explained tipping the lot onto the counter. The questions came like an automatic pistol firing.

“How did you get them?”

‘Have you removed any contents?

“Where exactly did you find them?”

“What time was it?”

“Did you see anyone put them there?

“Your friend who found it, what’s her name?”
“What’s her address?”
“What relevance is that?” I did not want to involve Alice. I refused to answer.
“Have you looked inside the boxes?”
“Yes, of course I have.”
“Oh, that’s bad” he said, “All your fingerprints are on them”.
He disappeared. Ten minutes later he returned wearing blue plastic gloves. He opened and examined each box very carefully tipping it upside down and looking under the velvet cushions.
Another twenty-five minutes passed.
Finally he completed the task, put the boxes into a large transparent plastic bag and labelled it. He continued with his pointless questions. He then typed my replies onto his computer.
I was getting impatient. The queue had grown to twelve people. I could see through the glass booth they were getting restless and ready to riot.
“How long will you be? I enquired in a dulcet tone, suppressing the urge to scream at him.
“Be patient!” he admonished. “I have to take full details”.
My watch read midday; I had been at the station for over two hours.
“If you don’t finish by 12.30pm, I’m going”. He started reading his narrative report back to me.
It was laborious, filled with irrelevant detail and overly pedantic.
“If you agree with it, sign here and I will put it into my records”.
I signed. “Now I must go.” I felt my blood pressure rising.
He continued typing some other statement onto the computer.
“I’m going at 12.45 whether you have finished or not”.
At precisely 12.45, he was still typing. I looked at my watch and said
“Open the doors, I have to go”.
He looked disappointed. I haven’t finished yet.
“Why have you got to go?” he asked.
“My husband is very ill, bedridden and he needs to be given his lunch.”
“Well, legally I can’t stop you from going.” He pressed the button which opened the door.
I was free!
On the way out I told the queue, “Sorry to keep you all waiting. It was a very minor matter. Thought it would take only a few minutes.”

I dashed out of the doors, down the stone stairs, tripped on the last stair, fell, broke my glasses and twisted my left ankle.

I sat on the steps feeling utterly dejected with a painful and swelling ankle. A policewoman was very helpful. I ended up with a bandaged ankle and still unable to walk. The policewoman got me a taxi. That cost £12 and wasn't the end of it.

A week later I got a phone call from the police. The boxes had been identified as being from an armed robbery at Sparklers, the local jewellers.

The following Monday, there was a knock on the door. Two burly uniformed policemen stood there.

“We are arresting you for handling stolen goods.”

So what did I get for helping police with their enquiries?

A bill for £250 for new glasses, a twisted ankle, and three months for receiving stolen goods. I never saw Alice again so I lost a “good” friend as well.

On the other hand, Jack got five years for the Sparklers shop robbery.

I knew I should have listened to Jack!
Mr Jones, the recently appointed RE teacher, entered 5C’s classroom to be met by such a level of noise that he expected to find at least five times the number of pupils actually present. He strode to the table at the front of the room and with as stern a face as he could muster glared at the occupants and waited for the din to die down. His presence was eventually noted and the youths slowly took their seats and glared back at him with barely concealed indifference.

"Right, " he said "Who can tell me who knocked down the walls of Jericho"
There was complete silence.
"Okay we'll try again, who caused the walls of Jericho to tumble down?"
Silence again and this time virtually the whole class seemed to find something of great interest on their respective feet.
"Come on now, no need to be shy, I'm sure you all know who was responsible for the walls falling down."
As there was no response he gestured at a boy on the back row.
"Well, Stephen, I repeat who knocked the wall down?"
"It wasn't me sir," replied Stephen in a semi-defiant manner.
"It wasn't you," said Mr Jones incredulously. "I don't believe what I'm hearing"
"But I was helping at the vicar’s Bingo session for old fogies yesterday evening.
Ask my parents, they were there as well."
Mr Jones next glared at a boy in the middle of the front row.
"Okay Michael, are you going to tell me who was responsible?"
"It wasn't me neither sir, not this time anyway"
Mr Jones went round the entire class only to receive a chorus of denials:

“I was with my Probation Officer, sir.”
“I had to take the dog to the vet, sir.”
“I had to attend my grandfather’s funeral, sir.”
“I was in A & E with my kid brother who got his head stuck in a saucepan, sir.”
“It was flower arranging night, sir.”
And so on and so on.
Mr Jones realised he was getting nowhere and sank into his chair.

"Just read your text books, class, pages 55 to 60 and then write how you would react to a plague of boils and whether this would have persuaded you to have let the Hebrews leave Egypt."

Mr Jones was utterly deflated; he had not expected this reaction to what he felt was an eminently reasonable question. After reflecting for a few minutes, he determined not let this appalling lack of knowledge rest. He would inform the Head Teacher of what had just occurred.

When the bell sounded he dismissed 5C without bothering to check if anyone had actually written anything. As he now had a free period, he seized the moment and strode down the murky corridor towards the Head's study. Knocking politely on the door he entered the room. He noted that the Head Teacher quickly slipped a newspaper into the top drawer of his desk, but not before Mr Jones had registered it was open at "Today's Racing Selections".

"Er... its Mr Jones isn't it. How are you settling down. Finding your feet are you?"

"Headmaster, I really think you should know that I have just had a session with 5C. When I asked them who had brought down the Walls of Jericho, not only did no boy know, but every one of them denied it was anything to do with him."

"Look, Mr Jones, you are new here. Let me tell you, I know the lads are a little boisterous and even cheeky, but I have known each and every one of that class and their families for many years. I can guarantee that if the boys said it wasn't one of them then it just wasn't."

Mr Jones was speechless. As he did not know what to say next, he meekly turned towards the door, muttered his thanks and left the room. But the matter still bugged him and he became more determined not to let it rest.

As it happened, he had a close friend who was an Assistant Secretary to the Minister of Education. Jones felt now was the time to call in a favour. A brief telephone conversation secured him a 10 minute slot with the Minister the following morning.
He arrived at the Ministry at 10 a.m., was met by his friend and quickly shown into the Minister’s private office. The Minister, who was charming, shook his hand and gestured for him to sit in a comfortable armchair.

“How can I help?”

Mr Jones quickly and precisely outlined what had occurred.

The Minister looked very serious and thoughtful and eventually said, “Look, my dear fellow, I am sure you appreciate how sensitive education and the quality of our schools is at the moment and quite frankly the last thing we need at present is another potential scandal. So, I'll tell you what we'll do. You write down the address of the said wall and I will arrange for a couple of brickies to repair the damage before anyone is the wiser.”

Mr Jones left the Minister's Office determined that he would join a circus.”

This story is an extended version of a joke that has been around for some years.
THE DISTANT ROAD

Christine Zincke

Day after day she gazed at that distant scene as they exercised in the yard until they had to go in, back to the relentless routine. Day after day she imagined walking the winding hill road in the sun, shaded by clouds or surrounded by mist. Night after night she dreamed of following that twisting road wherever it went; to be as free as the breeze stirring the grass up there.

She tried to escape by asking a friend to bring an extra jacket, slipping it on and leaving with the other visitors. Her discovery before she got to the gate led to being hauled back for a spell in solitary to discourage further attempts.

Eventually, she was allowed, as preparation for release, a stay with her sister. The prisoner had attempted painting before, but without the time or motivation to focus that came during this taste of freedom. The sister persuaded her to try again. Light and colour fascinated as never before. All too soon she had to return to complete the rest of her sentence.

Back inside, a request for painting materials was allowed as a reward for good behaviour. She felt compelled to wield a brush, to represent the stillness and movement seen through eyes that sensed a world alive and glowing and sometimes dark and menacing.

Her sister, without saying anything, entered two of the paintings done in prison into an exhibition in the large town where she lived. Both sold. Yet the prisoner dared not dream of supporting herself through art. She prepared for release by finding, with great difficulty, a job as a waitress.

In time, she had some money legitimately earned. She and her sister decided on a short holiday. Talk of where to go led to speaking of the tormenting view from the prison yard into the distance and the longing, which had never gone away, to discover what existed beyond the folds of that landscape.

This led the sisters to walk that road. They meandered past the hills that had limited the view from the prison and found wooded slopes and terraces in different shades of green, fields golden in the sun with patches of pale crimson or misty violet flowers, and then a vista stretching to the sea. The reality was more beautiful than she had dreamed.
Soon she was back in her small flat in a busy town. There was no return to a longed-for family life or the sudden opening of opportunities for a brilliant career as an artist. Just the day-to-day struggle Freedom was harder than she had imagined.

Ahead of her, the open road wound into the distance, on and on.
“Mum, Mum, please wake up,” begged the girl as she shook her mother’s arm. The woman lay sprawled on the settee with her arm hanging over the edge. Another shake and still no response. What should she do now? The lack of an answer produced the first murmurings of panic. What had Mum said to do? The girl struggled to remember until the instructions came back to her. She picked up the phone and pushed the first speed-dial button. The noise meant a phone was ringing.

“Which service do you want?”
“Please help me. Mummy’s asleep and I can’t wake her up.”
“My name is Jenny. What’s yours?”
“Molly”
“Molly, how old are you?”
“Six”
“OK, Molly. Can you tell me where you live?”
“I’m not sure.”
“Are you calling from home?”
“Yes.”
“Not to worry, we can find out. Just stay on the phone and I’ll send people to help you and we’ll keep talking till they arrive. OK?”
After some hesitation, the girl said, “OK.”
Jenny took pains to sound calm. “Molly, did Mummy just go to sleep or did she fall down?”
“She said she felt unwell and had to lie down. I think it might be her beatis”
“Does your Mum have diabetes?”
“Yes”
Jenny keyed “probable coma” onto the alert form as she spoke. “Molly, I’ve just been told that help will be with you very soon. A police lady called Jackie will soon call through the letter box. Can you open the door for her when she arrives?”
“Yes, I can open the door.”
“You’re doing brilliantly. I’ll stay on the phone until Jackie speaks to me. You mustn’t worry. Jackie will help you and the ambulance crew will take care of your Mum. She’ll be very proud of you.”

They talked about Molly’s school until the doorbell rang. A woman’s voice called “Molly” called through the letterbox.

The girl put her mother’s hand back on the settee to make her look more comfortable before going to the front door. She had to stand on tip toe to pull down the catch. A police lady stood in the porch with two men in green uniforms behind her.

She smiled and said, “Hi Molly. I’m Jackie and this is Fred and Albert. They’re here to help your Mum”

Jackie saw the child’s face was chalk-white and her body was trembling. She had been told the girl was six, but Molly looked younger.

The officer held out her hand, “Come and show us where Mummy is.”

Molly placed her tiny cold hand into Jackie’s larger, warmer one and led her to the settee.

Fred checked for a pulse while Jackie updated Jenny.

“We’ll give her oxygen first,” said Fred.

Jackie took Molly into the kitchen so she wouldn’t see the men working on her mother.

“Molly, are you thirsty or hungry?”

“Will Mummy be OK?”

“We’ll have to wait until the men have given her some medicine. Can I get you a snack or a drink?”

Molly shook her head.

“Have you got someone to look after you when Mummy is ill?”

“Yes, Sally.”

“Who’s Sally?”

“Mummy’s best friend. She takes care of me sometimes when Mummy has to go out”.

“How do I find Sally?”

“Let me show you.” And she pressed the second speed-dial button on the cordless phone in the kitchen
Jackie was relieved to see Molly’s breathing had slowed down and the trembling had somewhat abated. She kept up the conversation by asking questions about favourite animals to distract her from thinking about what was happening in the next room until they were ready to take the mother to hospital.

“Come and say good-bye to your Mum. She’s feeling better already, but is very tired and groggy, so don’t take too long.”

Then they stood by the front door to watch the stretcher go in the ambulance and the vehicle drive away.

Jackie made Molly a sandwich and left her nibbling it while she took the cordless into the lounge.

“Hi Ronnie, it’s so good of you to phone.”

“This isn’t Ronnie, I’m afraid. My name is Jackie and I’m a police officer. I’m with Molly because she dialled 999 after her Mum collapsed. It seems she had problems with her insulin levels.”

“Oh my God! Is Ronnie OK?”

“She’s on her way to hospital and may be there for some time. It’s Molly who needs help at the moment. Could you come and take care of her?”

“The poor baby. I’ve just driven to Yorkshire because my Mum died last week. I can’t drive home till after the funeral in two days.

“Is there anyone else who could step in?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“Then Molly will have to go into temporary foster care. Can you give me Ronnie’s details so I can get onto Social Services?”

Jackie explained to Molly that Sally couldn’t look after her immediately. “But I’ll find someone to take care of you until Sally gets back or your Mum is allowed to come home.”

“OK.” Molly held back tears.

Jackie got Molly a coke and left her again to make more calls. Social Services said one of their social workers would arrive within two hours.

“Molly, someone will come and take you to a new home for the next two nights. Let’s pack clothes for the next few days.

“Will Mummy be better soon?”
Jackie used her most reassuring voice. “Doctors and nurses will be making sure she has everything she needs to get better quickly.”

“Can I take Paddington with me? He’s my bestest friend”

Jackie was relieved that Molly had something to take with her that was a familiar comfort. “Of course. Will you introduce me to him?”

Jackie spent the next ninety minutes finding out what she could from Molly about her relatives, where she went to school and who were her best friends. They also played with Molly’s favourite jigsaw puzzle.

Then Jean, a social worker arrived. “I’ve found you a family who’ll look after you for the next couple of days.”

“Why can’t I stay with Jackie?”

It was all getting too much for Molly. She didn’t want to go and live with a new family. Her trembling returned and she struggled not to cry.

Jackie gave her a big cuddle, which helped. “I’m still on duty, Molly, but Jean is here to help you.”

“Will you come and see me and make sure I’m alright?”

“I’ll come tonight after I finish work and you can show me your new friends.”

Jean took Jackie aside, “Given the circumstances, visiting her may help, but please don’t get too attached or build up expectations you can’t meet.”

Jackie gave Molly a farewell hug.

The girl was still smiling and thinking that it would only be a few hours before they saw each other again when Jean said, “Time to get your bag and Paddington.”

Molly looked around her room and felt very sad to be leaving it. Mummy had painted it in the girl’s favourite colour, pink. She said goodbye to her other five teddy bears lined up on a cupboard.

“Be brave without me. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Come on Molly, chop, chop,” Jean was brusque in the hope of deterring any tantrums. “We have some way to travel to get to your new family.”

Molly clutched Paddington tightly to her chest to help her go through the front door without releasing the sobs building up inside. She took a deep breath as Mummy had shown her and somehow swallowed the tears with a huge sniff.
The journey seemed to take ages and there was no cushion to sit on for a better view. Jean seemed busy coping with the traffic. The there was a quieter street and the car turned onto a drive in front of a cottage. The front door opened as they got out.

"Hello, Molly. I'm Helen, welcome to our house. I'll take care of you for the next few days. I've a daughter called Jane who is eight and you'll be sharing her room. Jane come and meet your new friend, Molly.

Jane didn’t appear and Helen led them into the kitchen. "How about a cuppa, and letting the girls get to know each other? Go on ahead Molly, Jane is waiting in the front room and she’ll show you the bedroom"

Jane had her back to Molly and when she did turn around there was no smile.

“I’m Molly. Can you show me where to put my things?”

“Follow me,” Jane said gruffly and stamped up the stairs without waiting.

Molly hurried to catch up and wondered what she had done to annoy Jane.

At the top of the stairs, Jane pointed to the room at the end. “That’s the bathroom and this is our room.” She pushed a door open. “Your bed is the small one. Just remember that this is my house and you have to do what I want. You’re only here because my Mum gets paid to look after you.”

Molly was too upset to speak, so she nodded.

“Good. From now on Paddington is mine.” And she snatched him away from Molly and put him on the larger bed. “You very kindly gave him to me as a present. Now let’s go downstairs for tea.”

Jean was waiting for Molly in the hall and said a quick goodbye. “Sorry to rush, but the traffic will be worse now. Be a good girl and I’ll see you in a couple of days when we know what’s happening.”

Molly was too upset to want to eat and didn’t like pizza, but was too frightened to say anything or leave it on her plate. She drank lots of water to help it go down. This made her feel sick and she asked to use the toilet. Once she was alone she struggled not to cry. Helen left the girls to watch television. Jane watched what she wanted without consulting Molly. She felt miserable until she heard the doorbell followed by Jackie’s voice. She ran to the door.

“Hi Molly, how are you doing?”

“OK,” she whispered.
“Here, use the kitchen,” said Helen and left them alone.

“Where’s Paddington?”

Molly didn’t know what to say. If Jane got told off she would be even nastier.

“What’s wrong? I thought we were friends?” Jackie looked puzzled.

It was all too much and Molly burst into tears. Jackie’s great hug helped the girl to feel a bit better.

“You’ve had such a horrible day. We’ll go for a drive and I’ll buy you an ice-cream as a reward for getting help for your Mum today”.

They were soon eating Molly’s favourite strawberry ice-cream.

“Now tell me about Jane and Helen. Are they looking after you OK?”

“Yes”

“Come on, we’re friends aren’t we. Tell me everything that’s happened since you arrived here.”

Molly wanted to share but couldn’t. She was worried that Jane would find out. So she said that the pizza was great and that Paddington was in the bedroom.

“Will you drive me to school tomorrow?” Molly asked as they drew up outside the house. “Please”

Jackie saw how upset Molly was and agreed. “You’re lucky I’m not on duty for another three days. I’ll pick you up at 8.30.”

Helen said it was time for bed when Molly returned to the house. As soon as the two girls were alone, Jane, who was a strong girl, pinched the flesh on Molly’s wrist and kept applying pressure.

“What did you tell her?”

“Nothing, I promise!”

“Keep it that way.”

Jane turned out the light. Molly was used to a night light at home but said nothing. Her wrist hurt badly. She pulled the covers over her head and let the tears held back for hours fall without sound. By the time she had stopped crying her mouth was dry and sore. She kept thinking that she would be in this strange house for only two nights.

“Come on girls, it’s seven o’clock; time to shower and get dressed. Breakfast will be on the table in half an hour.”
Jane dashed off to the bathroom and Molly got out her school uniform and waited. Only when Helen called that the porridge was getting cold did Jane leave the bathroom.

She was downstairs well before Molly and complained to Helen as the visitor sat down, “She’s such a slow coach.”

Just then, the letterbox rattled and Helen went to get the post.

“We eat our porridge with salt,” said Jane sprinkling a lot onto Molly’s bowl.

Molly, who had never tasted porridge before, took a small mouthful and almost spat it onto the floor. It was horrible. Jane laughed. Molly was trying to decide whether to stir the salt and eat or tip the porridge down the sink before Helen came back when the doorbell rang. It was Jackie. Jane went to the door and Molly seized the chance to empty her bowl.

“We’ll put your school bag in the boot,” Jackie said.

As Molly offered the bag, the sleeve of her blouse moved up her arm and revealed the bruise made by Jane.

“Where did you get that?”

“Please can I stay with you?”

“Tell me what has happened so that I can help you”

Then it all came out: Paddington, pizza, pinching and porridge.
THE GRIM EATERS
Paul Burns

“I was never really insane except upon occasions when my heart was touched.”
Edgar Allan Poe

Dear Tompkins, I am saddened to learn that the quacks and their mountebank assistants are subjecting you to shock therapy. As I know from experience this weakens recall. Therefore I will repeat things that I have told you in case they have been zapped from your memory.

You are my dearest friend here. Our backgrounds brought us together; we both went to boarding schools and better universities and worked as managers in long-established businesses serving the privileged. You used to add that we both have a history of mental illness in our families. However, I much regretted the way you cited inherited insanity as the reason for murdering your wife.

You might remember me saying, “Slippery slope, old boy. Inherited suggests inevitability. And insanity is such a damning term compared to, say, a moment of weakness or succumbing to a flash of passion.”

I also shared with you the above quote by Poe on how others mistake acting on great emotions for madness. However, I declaimed the great writer’s words so loudly that a nurse overheard. He reported this and the psychobabblers who run our latter-day bedlam regarded me as such a bad influence that they have prevented us from seeing each other. Fortunately, people can be bought here and I have found a man prepared to sneak these pages to you. I look forward to your reply via the same messenger.

I would like to dispel the fear that your genes made you crazy. After much thought, I am recording my story on paper to encourage you to take a more sanguine view of your lapse, which was merely a single act of violence lasting seconds. As I can live myself without such self-castigation despite doing worse, I want to inspire you to dwell on what few pleasures our accommodation allows rather than an act that no amount of regret can undo.
My father fell out with his older brother after their mother left Uncle Felix the family home, a large detached Victorian residence. My great-grandfather had built the house from London stocks made from local clay and in the brickworks he had founded. What a delightful and peaceful retreat from London the property must have been until the M25 was built nearby. Now a blackbird in the garden could carouse like Caruso a few feet away from your ears and you would struggle to follow his song over the roar of the motorway. The Romantic Gothic house was built on clay. Indeed, a large quantity was dug and taken two miles by horse and cart to be fired; perhaps some of the bricks that make up the house made the return journey? The excavation allowed my forebears to live above the kitchen, laundry and cellar rooms dedicated to storing various foods, coal and wine. Visitors using the wide front steps saw nothing of the basement or the flagstones surrounding it on three sides. To glimpse the netherworld from ground level required peering over the stone balustrade flanking the sides and the back of the house. The servants’ entrance was at the rear down a flight of steps. Despite the idyllic setting of the property, my grandfather had a breakdown there not long after inheriting it. He snapped one day after finding a brick garden path was uneven, which is only to be expected when laid on ground that swells after rain and shrinks during droughts. He grabbed a spade off the gardener to prise out bricks and then began throwing them wildly, knocking his wife unconscious, injuring the maid who came to help her and terrifying his two young sons. Grandfather spent the rest of his life in a private asylum because he never expressed remorse for his outburst and for attacking staff and other inmates.

The family business suffered and Felix could do nothing to help it as he spent his late teens and early twenties in a sanatorium. By the time he emerged, his younger brother was running the firm and, as my grandmother didn’t want Felix to risk a relapse, she kept him at home till 1940. She left the older son the house and shares in other businesses and bequeathed the brickworks to Dad, who thought the will unfair. Not only had he toiled to keep the business going and his family in their home, he had served on destroyers and taken part in sea battles while Felix had spent the war behind a desk at the local town hall and was exempted from the Home Guard and fire watching service due to his history of tuberculosis.

Although my uncle lived less than ten miles from where I grew up, we had no contact and no other relatives mentioned him. They probably knew better than to wave a red rag at a bull. What little Dad said about his brother, usually after several
stiff drinks, suggested a roguish and feckless malingerer. Only when my father
denigrated me for wanting to study languages at university before joining the Royal
Navy – his idea of a career for me – did I begin to suspect Felix might be less of a
cad.

Dad sneered at my first term’s grades by suggesting language Bs were the
equivalent of science Ds. In a fit of pique, I sent uncle a Christmas card and he
responded with a brief note. Along with his best wishes and a postal order, he said
he assumed his brother knew nothing of my card and suggested not communicating
without his blessing because Felix had no wish to deepen the feud or cause conflict
between a father and his son. It was already too late for the latter and the more time
I spent at university the more my views infuriated Dad, not least my opposition to the
USA waging war in Vietnam. A degree in Spanish and Portuguese led me to join a
wine importer. Dad branded my rejection of the Royal Navy in favour of what he
called, “piss and plonk merchants” as “the final act of betrayal”. He accused me of
further disloyalty three years later when I married, Cruzita, a Brazilian woman met in
Oporto. Her eyes, hair and skin were no darker than my mother’s, one of those
swarthy Welsh Celtic beauties. Dad saw in Cruzita only foreignness and feared she
might have more than Portuguese ancestors. My mother tried to excuse his racism
by saying he was under a lot of stress at this time due to trying, unsuccessfully as it
turned out, to keep the brickworks from being taken over.

Cruzita and I had two children. My mother insisted on seeing them regularly and
these visits persuaded Dad to set aside his initial xenophobia and welcome his
daughter-in-law. Thanks to a less demanding job in the conglomerate that had
acquired his business, he became quite the doting grandfather despite his continuing
tetchiness with me. However, we usually managed to avoid rows by limiting our
contact to a few hours at a time and the diplomatic skills of our spouses.

I was making a reasonable fist of my life until Mum announced that she had
breast cancer. We had always been close because she doted on her only child. The
treatments ravaged her and then came the ugly terminal stage of the disease. I
spent much time at the hospital and then hospice; putting on a happy face to bring
her what little joy I could. On leaving her bedside, I switched my attention elsewhere,
especially the wine business. I thought about my role in great detail outside work by
reviewing meetings I had attended, mentally rehearsing future tasks and studying the
memos and reports I took from the office as if close reading them would reveal some esoteric mystery. By working so hard, sad thoughts had less chance to dominate and sleep came more quickly.

After the funeral, I enrolled on a demanding Open University accounting course because I still felt the need to keep out dark thoughts by being busy. My new qualification and suggestions for updating the wine company’s Dickensian financial system led to the offer of managing the Cádiz branch. I leapt at it because being in Spain would reduce the number of things that brought Mum to mind. The decent thing would have been to have invited Dad, by then retired, to share the large villa that came with the job. But as well as his irascibility, he would have been a constant reminder of Mum and Cruzita’s looks already provided too much of that.

By travelling far more than the previous Cádiz manager, I expanded the range and volume of wine sent to England. The market for the output of boutique vineyards was growing and I took the time to deal with these smaller businesses. Many became profitable because of the markets I opened up for them and my boss in London also appreciated his new streams of income. The extra stock required expanding our Cádiz storage and I hired a local builder to enlarge our ancient cellars. He became a friend of sorts, the sort of person Cruzita and I bumped into from time to time at parties and functions, or at least the ones I felt obliged to attend to promote the interests of my firm.

My focus on work meant that I became a stranger at home. In time, Cruzita took a married man as a lover. I wouldn’t have known except that she told me, perhaps in the hope that the affair might bring me to my senses. The lover was the man I had given the cellar contract to and I couldn’t enter the new storage area without thinking about Poe’s tale of revenge, *The Cask of Amontillado*. I longed to brick the builder into a corner and leave him there to die. But wishing a death, even over time, is different from acting on an impulse.

Cruzita’s lover provided an excuse of sorts for withdrawing further from her. I had got to the point where, on the rare occasions my wife and I made love, I needed darkness to avoid being reminded of my mother. When news of the adultery sent me looking for a mistress, she had to have blue eyes, pale skin and hair that was naturally fair. Pirrko, a struggling Finnish artist living in Cádiz, more than fitted the bill; any paler and she would have been albino. We agreed that I would rent her an apartment with two bedrooms so that she could use one for a studio. In return, I
could spend as much time as I wanted with her between six in the evening and six in the morning; she wanted the daylight hours for painting. I often went to the apartment from work and spent the night. Sometimes we made love, sometimes we didn’t. Pirrko was undemanding and didn’t complain about my lack of conversation or falling asleep so quickly; she may have regarded my silence and torpor as blessings. I never imagined she was attracted by anything in me other than the chance to devote her days to painting. And I never pretended to love her. However, I did fantasise that the time we had together was uncomplicated, a delusion that ignored the impact of spending so much time away from the villa. My children became estranged from me and Cruzita dropped the builder for an unmarried Brazilian businessman based in Gibraltar, where she sometimes went shopping. The first I knew of this second affair accompanied her announcement that she was leaving me for him. I suggested we stay together for another four years until the younger child was eighteen.

“No. I want the children to have a father and not the pretence of one.”

I agreed to the divorce with the expectation that our daughter would want to remain in the villa with me because she argued so much with her mother. Cruzita readily agreeing to let the children choose should have warned me that I was going to lose. Instead, hearing my daughter opt to live with her mother and brother in Gibraltar shocked me. I retaliated, or so I thought, by ignoring my children. I bought them no gifts, made excuses at short notice for times when I was scheduled to be with them in Gibraltar, and made little effort to entertain when there. After Cruzita married the Brazilian, she announced they would return to Brazil. Again, I couldn’t enter the cellars at work without thinking of how horrible a death it would be to die entombed there without food or water. Sometimes I imagined luring the new husband and at other times Cruzita.

A lawyer advised against mounting a challenge to maintain face-to-face access to the children, which might have stopped the move to Brazil, because I had so damaged my chances by repeatedly disappointing my son and daughter when they were expecting to see me. Dad greeted the news of his grandchildren going to live in Sao Paolo with a torrent of abuse because he didn’t expect to see his darlings again. I turned to drink in the evenings. Perhaps I said something offensive while drunk because Pirrko announced with little notice that she would soon quit Cádiz for Finland.
Her parting words were, “You don’t have to wait till you hit the bottom of the ocean before you start swimming for your life.”

By this time, I was craving drink before noon and only my work habits and the need to drive kept me spitting the wine samples and avoiding excessive amounts with lunch. I held the line until the evening and then drank heavily. I may well have sunk further had it not been for my uncle dying in hospital ten days after a heart attack at home. His solicitor rang me at work to say Felix had often spoken of me, knew where I lived and what I did. The solicitor gave me details of the funeral and said he hoped at least one relative would attend as Felix had no wife, let alone children. I rang Dad. He hadn’t heard about his brother and didn’t want to know. When he again berated me for the loss of his grandchildren, I retaliated by saying that I would attend Felix’s service.

“You turncoat. Don’t bother visiting me while you’re in London.”

The funeral would have been sparse had not members of the Oddfellows turned out in force. I was the only relative. Many of the men spoke highly of Felix’s work for charities adopted by the lodge and his good company despite always limiting himself to a single glass of wine a day. One of the Oddfellows was Felix’s solicitor. He asked me to visit him later that day to discuss the will and said he had apologies for me from Felix’s housekeeper who was bedridden with gastric ‘flu.

Two men in their fifties arrived at the crematorium chapel as the coffin was disappearing on its way to the furnace. They apologised as I was leaving, saying buses had let them down. I offered them a lift to the pub where a buffet had been arranged by the solicitor. It seemed the least I could do as they had come on a cold showery day and had made an effort to dress soberly even though this meant wearing white shirts with frayed collars and dark suits that were shiny from wear in places.

“So how did you know Felix,” I asked as we followed a local driver who knew the way.

“We met at the hospital,” said the man who was sitting in the back of my car.

“What was he being treated for?”

“We did ask, but he avoided answering. He was much more interested in us. Whenever we met, he seemed to want to talk about what we got up to rather than himself. I felt selfish at times, but I couldn’t get him to say much at all.”
“I never met him. What was he like?”
“A very nice bloke,” said the man alongside me.
I left it at that, apart from thanking them for coming. I noticed they ate and drank heartily, but so did many of the Oddfellows. And only the need to remain sober to drive my rented car had stopped me from knocking back several double brandies.

The solicitor said that Felix had left half of his money to charities connected to his lodge and the other half, almost £200,000, and his house and chattels to me. My surprise turned to shock when he advised that I would have received nothing had I not gone to the funeral; Felix had stipulated that my inheritance depended on attending without knowledge of the will.

After I had recovered from this news, the solicitor said, “Felix’s housekeeper may be upset that she has received nothing. She was with him for almost six years.”

“Why do you think he didn’t assign her a sum of money?”

“She’s not much of a cook and doesn’t put herself out with the cleaning from what I’ve seen. It didn’t help that Felix’s sight was failing. Anyone except Felix would have sacked her for the food she prepared; he was too kind for his own good. I suspect he found it easier to disappoint her after he had passed on, rather than confront her face-to-face. Anyway, I suggest you take this inventory and check it and the household accounts before she learns she has received nothing.”

As I was leaving for Cádiz the next morning, I went from the solicitor’s office to the property. I parked in the street to avoid blocking the exit of a white van occupying the narrowest part of the gravel drive. Signs on the van advertised window cleaning, but the roof rack was fully loaded with ladders and the house windows looked decidedly soiled. I walked up the side path and glanced over the balustrade. The kitchen’s large and grimy windows revealed a middle-aged woman and two men in their twenties at a sizable table under fluorescent tubes. They were eating from large and full plates, each had a tumbler and a wine bottle was open. I continued to walk around the house, my footfall deadened by thick moss growing on the uneven brick path. Part of the steps at the rear, what would once have led to the door used by humbler people, had collapsed. The rubble had been cleared and the balustrade extended to replace where once a gate or at least an opening must have been. Ferns and buddleia grew from the bricks that lined the walls of the great cavity in
which the house stood. The flagstones below appeared to be covered in green algae rather than moss.

The front door was answered by the middle-aged woman in a grubby apron. She was a foot shorter than my 5’10”, showed no sign of illness and had a surprising amount of dirt under her fingernails. With her came the smell of grilled meat. As soon as I introduced myself and said that I had inherited the property, her stern face wilted to a sickly grin. I asked to see the kitchen first. She spoke more loudly than was needed for my benefit. Despite the grimy hands and having complained to the solicitor that morning about gastric ‘flu, she had been feeding large steaks to herself and the two men, whom she introduced as my uncle’s window cleaners. The men had tried to hide a bottle of Madeira under the table and perhaps they thought I wouldn’t notice the tumblers in the sink. I left the three to finish their ample meal while I checked the inventory room by room. Among other things, I noticed that the wine cellar at the centre of the basement had a key in the door and less capacity than I had hoped for given all the bottles I wanted to bring from Spain. In many rooms, flocculent black dust rested on surfaces and objects above the height of the housekeeper. And the interior of the property was in a poor state of repair from the basement backdoor – so warped that it no longer opened – to a bucket to collect drips in what would once have been a servant’s garret.

Three things leapt out from the account books I found on my uncle’s desk along with one of those anglepoise-mounted magnifying lenses with a built-in source of light. A generous amount of cash was paid each fortnight for window cleaning and the wine cellar was low in stock given the recent bills from vintners and my uncle’s limited intake of alcohol. The window cleaners had gone, without attending to the windows, by the time I had finished in the study. I asked the housekeeper for any recent receipts for the books and found that the amount spent on food had increased after Felix had gone into hospital.

“Such expenditure is unacceptable. You’ll pay for any groceries in future apart from what I authorize. I’ll return in a month and want every room completely free of dust, cobwebs and musty smells. And use a ladder to reach the ceilings.”

When she protested about the size of the house, I pointed out her lack of cooking duties for over a fortnight and that she would have none until I returned. She gurned another sickly grin.
I gave my boss notice the next day and within a week they had appointed a replacement. He rang to discuss the firm’s villa and what furniture to bring. We agreed that I would use his removal van to take my belongings to London. My plans were vague other than living in Felix’s house until I had decided what to do with my inheritance.

Although cleanliness had improved four weeks later, I paid the housekeeper off and offered another four weeks’ pay if she would leave by the end of the next day. Her nails were still filthy and if I couldn’t bring myself to eat a biscuit she offered with instant coffee, her cooking would be intolerable. Another sickly grin accompanied her nod of acceptance for pay in lieu of notice. That evening, she witnessed me staggering drunk and then sleeping on a sofa downstairs.

The next morning, my belongings arrived. She saw me directing the driver and his assistant to fill the wine cellar and put the remainder of the many wine cartons, many of which were gifts from boutique winemakers, into the basement back room once used to secure valuable groceries. As the external bars were much corroded, I fastened the internal shutters.

Two nights later, breaking glass disturbed me not long after midnight when I was using the toilet at the back of the top floor. I hadn’t switched on any lights since retiring and didn’t need them to find the bathroom, where frosted glass was illuminated by lamps flooding the M25. Then came the sound of breaking wood. I guessed that burglars had assumed I wouldn’t hear them from my bedroom at the front over the drone of the motorway. My uncle’s study was at the back and had windows with net curtains. I stood to one side and gathered that someone was in the pantry and passing cartons through the window. A man who remained outside took them up a ladder and passed them to a short woman who loaded a van, which had another ladder on its roof. On the way to the phone, I tripped and, being drunk, failed to catch my balance. I was dazed and bleeding and very fearful that the noise of falling had alerted the burglars. I imagined them coming up the stairs to attack and prevent me finishing my call. I very much feared being murdered and between my funk and being drunk, made a garbled request for assistance to the police.

They arrived after the van had driven off. All that was missing were the cartons from the laundry as I had left the wine cellar locked. I gave the name of the housekeeper, but had no idea where she had gone to and couldn’t remember the
names of the window clean\-ers. I suspect my forgetfulness and slurred speech did nothing to encourage the assignment of more than the minimum of resources to solving the crime.

The break-\-in left me feeling so shaken that I called builders at eight in the morning. Phil, the first to offer to come that morning, said it would be cheaper to brick up the window than repair it and replace the bars. He could also do the work that day, whereas a robust grille to fit would have to be ordered.

“The only disadvantage I can see,” he said, “is that you won’t be able to get a mobile signal in the pantry.”

And he demonstrated how his phone went from minimal signal by the window to no signal if he moved to either side of the opening.

I went with his suggestion and also asked him to brick up the exterior door and fit two stout bolts to the pantry door, which was a very solid piece of Victorian joinery and already had a lock.

“You won’t need bolts when the only ways in from the outside are bricked up.”

“I need peace of mind.”

“I could fit the house with an alarm system.”

“How soon?”

“Tomorrow if I can get a mate to help me.”

“I’ll help you. But I still want the bolts done today.”

I was in quite a state. Such was my fear of another break in, with or without an alarm system, that I resolved to give up alcohol and managed to do this. I also bought a shotgun, which I kept loaded near my bed.

I enjoyed assisting Phil and learning from him. He was a jack-\-of-\-all-\-trades and I also worked with him to repair the leaking roof and decorate my bedroom and the kitchen. He was a very good teacher and, after I had decided to keep myself busy by redecorating the whole house, I called him in when a job was particularly tricky or needed two people. I became somewhat obsessive because after finishing the upper floors, I made over the basement. Every cellar wall and door was painted and even the old pantry with the bricked-\-in window looked quite presentable.

Pride in my work led me to collect Dad to see his refurbished childhood home. He was still seething about my inheritance and said little during the drive other than mocking my beard and long hair, a reaction to years of grooming to fit in with
conservative customers and business people. I let him wander rather than show him round. While making tea for us, I heard a clumping sound on the stairs. He had fallen and was dead by the time I reached him. Waiting for the autopsy and all clear for burial was hellish as the police suspected the death was no accident. They even took away my shotgun for a time. Fortunately, my father’s solicitor was able to confirm that I had been aware that Dad had altered his will to favour his grandchildren. Of course, I said nothing to the police about how much I had resented this. Nor did I let on that what had prompted the new will was my attending Felix’s funeral and acquiring the house that Dad had so long felt should have been his.

While waiting for the release of the body and for the police to stop treating me like a man guilty of patricide, time dragged like a two-legged tortoise. I had nothing left to decorate and it was too wet and cold to work outside clearing the garden. Between guilt for his death – I shouldn’t have left a frail old man alone on the stairs – and the grief for my mother that flooded back, I became a little unhinged.

Thus when the two men in shabby clothes who had come late to Felix’s funeral service again turned up at the crematorium and again pretended to know the deceased, my father, as someone met in an outpatients’ clinic who had said little about himself, I decided to teach the grim eaters a lesson. With my hirsute appearance, not even the surname of the departed helped them to realise they had met me before.

When they looked merry from the drinks provided, I spoke to them. “I’m sure you know my father had two passions, Poe and wine.”

They nodded doubtfully.

“Are you fans of Edgar Allan Poe’s stories?”

The taller said, “Oh yes.”

“Which is your favourite?”

“That’s hard to say.”

“How about you, what are some stories that come to mind?”

“The Raven?” said the shorter man.

“Oh yes, that has such a nice twist. Only The Cask of Amontillado has a better ending. Do you remember how it goes?”

Their blank faces studied their drinks.”

“No matter. I’m sure Dad would want you as his friends to have some of his fine wines. Shall we say six bottles each? And you shall both have one of his finest
Sherries. There are some exceptionally valuable ones from Bodega Montresor of Montilla. Have another drink or two and after I’ve said goodbye to the others, I’ll drive you to collect them.”

We were in the living room of my house an hour later. I left them with a bottle of port while I prepared their comeuppance by carrying a number of empty cartons from the wine cellar and placing them beneath the now concealed bricked-up pantry window. I left on one carton a copy of Poe’s stories with a bookmark inserted at the beginning of *The Cask of Amontillado*.

The port was half-gone by the time I returned and the men’s walk downstairs ungainly.

“Careful,” I said. “This way, the best wine is in the back room.”

I wish I could have seen their faces when the door slammed, the lock turned and the bolts slammed home. I quite envied Poe’s Montresor watching Fortunato shackled to a wall as he bricked up the man’s tomb. However, the end result was just the same. The basement had a bad smell for several weeks before, after donning a gas mask, I manoeuvred the rotting bodies into tough plastic sheeting and secured the packages with gaffer tape in order to transport the remains to shallow graves in a rural wood.

*In pace requiescat!*

Nine weeks after I had disinfected the pantry, I bumped into the former housekeeper in the car park of a hypermarket. She was pushing a trolley towards a white van that carried ladders. Her nails were as black as ever and she gave me one of her sickly grins.

“I’m so glad to bump into you. I was under a lot of strain when we met and drinking a lot. I’m sorry for the way I treated you. As I’m on the wagon now, I’d like to give you what’s left of my wine. There’s must be at least two hundred bottles. Why don’t you come and collect them when you’ve finished here. Help me by removing the temptation.”

She arrived that evening in the van and, as I’d hoped, came with the two men whom she had paid for the window cleaning that had never taken place. I had placed a number of empty cartons and the Poe anthology in the pantry as before. While the men walked towards the back wall, she hesitated at the threshold as if suspecting
something. I gave her shoulders a mighty push and before they knew what was happening, I had locked and bolted the door.

They had the keys to the van, but I was able to push it into the garage. I intended to retrieve the keys in order to transport the bodies to a remote cliff and roll the van into the sea.

However, a policewoman came to the door before that happened. She was checking a former address of a missing woman, the housekeeper. By then my nose no longer registered the smell that alerted the officer’s suspicions. She returned with two colleagues a little later. I knew the game was up, led them gagging into the pantry and also confessed to dispatching the fake mourners. Perhaps owning up to other victims of my revenge was as well; otherwise detectives might have again suspected patricide.

Forensic psychiatrists have deemed me unfit to plead. I don’t think that I am or ever have been criminally insane. Everyone is a little unhinged from time to time.

Let me conclude, dear Tompkins, as I began, with Poe.

*Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence – whether much that is glorious – whether all that is profound – does not spring from disease of thought – from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect.*

Your loving friend

Arthur Gordon
ABOUT THE GROUP AND THE AUTHORS

The Group
A chance meeting made Paul Burns aware of Kenton & District U3A in the summer of 2015. When he saw the branch had no writing group, he offered to set one up. The first meeting occurred in September. Most of the group then were new to writing fiction. Even so, they were keen to bring out a group book.

The group has been sustained by the tea, coffee, homemade cakes and biscuits of Viv.

Anita Maund
Anita is Treasurer of Kenton & District U3A and is semi-retired. She is a qualified accountant and has worked in the film industry (on a Bond film), West End theatre ticketing and a hotel booking agency. Also she has run her own computerised accountancy business for over twenty-five years. She loves travel, books, films and theatre and spends all her free time following those pursuits.

Christine Zincke
Christine has always been interested in writing and recently joined the group that has produced this book. She has had more time for writing and other interests since retiring. The group provides the impetus to crystallize a fleeting idea or inspiration which might otherwise get lost. What always surprises her is how such ideas appear suddenly and must be captured just as quickly.

Esther B Lipton
Esther is a retired lawyer and has been writing short stories and poems since her school days in Newcastle. Her work has been published in national and international anthologies, in magazines and on the internet. She co-edited Exiled INK Magazine and has given readings at the Poetry Café, Covent Garden.

Howard Goldstein
Howard progressed from being a member of the Steering Committee to being current Chair of Kenton and District U3A. A former civil servant, he enjoys the challenge of developing a short story around the subject matter set by the group.
facilitator. He believes it is peer group pressure that encourages him to find the time to complete the assignments.

**Marian Rummer**
Marian has been a member of Kenton and District U3A since retiring from local government. She has always lived in London, and has loosely based her contribution on childhood memories of her grandparents, in both London and Scotland. After many years of producing factual reports she appreciates the opportunity to develop her writing skills more creatively.

**Paul Burns**
Paul lived in Wales and England before his family migrated to New Zealand in 1960. Returning to England in 1978, he worked in continuing education and organisation development. He has a Certificate in Novel Writing from City University.

**Rita Sinha**
Rita Sinha is a member of the Kenton U3A. She is a retired civil servant, having worked, in various departments including, Job Centre Plus, Inland Revenue and the Department of Work and Pensions. She was born in Calcutta, India. Her father was an officer in the British army and had fought in Burma during World War Two. She has a degree in English Literature and Library Science from India. She had worked for the British Library and the Bombay University Library In Bombay before coming to London. She is married and has two daughters and two grandchildren. Now she follows her heart with art and literature appreciation.

**Rosemary Wolfson**
Rosemary has always been interested in fiction reading and writing since she was a child. This was the result of her mother's and grandmother's efforts. Her mother read with her stories that had very evocative illustrations. Rosemary's grandmother retold traditional fairy stories, which she knew by heart!

**Vivien Spiteri**
Viv (as she prefers to be known) is vice chair of Kenton and District U3A and was part of the steering committee which helped to set up the new group two years ago. She writes from personal experience and enjoys the stimulation and discipline the Creative Writing Group gives her. She is a widow and the mother of three grown up
children and enjoys helping in the child care of her two grandsons during the school holidays. She is the facilitator of the Cookery Group and enjoys cooking and gardening. The cookery group often eats fruit and vegetables grown in Viv's garden. Her husband was diagnosed with Early Onset Alzheimer’s in 2000 at the age of 55 and her piece is written through the eyes of her daughter and tries to provide insight into the effect dementia has on the whole family and not just the patient.