

David L Nightingale

# **For Woods**

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First Published by: D L Nightingale Ltd

Second Edition: March 2006

**ISBN 978-1-84728-723-6**

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## **Preface**

When we listen to calls, we often only hear one side of the conversation, and so it is with this tale. There are what may seem like spelling mistakes, a few are, but most are used to indicate colloquial speech variations.

## **Get Your Greens**

Ryan and Lydia walked slowly through Half Penny Woods, it was a beautiful summer evening, the birds singing cheery tunes. A little wren just fledged would have been reprimanded for exceeding the noise safety levels, had an environmental health officer been in earshot. Shafts of light spotlighted the path as they ambled along. Romantically they held hands reflected on how the woods had been saved. Thinking back to those six environmentalists, who in sixty days had raised six hundred pounds the nominal sum asked by the local farmer.

John Thackery had been keen to get rid of the damn woods. Unfortunately it was adjacent to the churchyard, the Vicar was constantly writing to to the Parish Council and County Council with complaints. John was looking at the costs involved in carrying out remedies to the various issues, his proposed solutions had come to the ears of the local greenies. They then also wrote letters to the Council protesting that his proposals were outrageous, leaving a bewildered Council, and a frustrated Farmer. Now it was six greenies versus the Vicar, two Wardens, the Major and Mrs Richardson a lady of impeccable organisation.

Mrs Richardson's right hand descended to rub her aching leg, she had just run and was feeling her age. The smooth sheer fabric brushing against her skin, triggering a distracting thought. Her mind wandered back to years ago when she pulled on some new Nylons. Then such things were in short supply.

"These are gorgeous, thank you Tony." She looked at him with a grin

and a twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, my dear you're welcome," said Tony with a wily smile.

"Nobody saw you did they?" her expression turning to worried concern.

"Don't worry honey, I went round the back of the church and through the woods, didn't you see me come up your backyard?" he said with a sly look on his face.

"No, I must confess I did not," she expressed.

"Well then, if you didn't who else would?" he said putting his arm around her.

They began to caress each other, their lips meeting like two train buffers colliding. From then the only sounds they emitted were of the carnal pleasures, brought on by their enduring lust for each other.

Meanwhile next door in Rosebud Cottage, Mrs Green and her friend Hilda sat having tea. "Well I'm sure I saw somebody come up her garden," said Mrs Green, all concerned and serious.

"Are you sure Ethel?" said Hilda, leaning forward.

"Yes I am," said Ethel, as she peered out of the window her neck straining.

"Must be Mr Richardson back on leave," said her friend.

"Oh no I'd know Mr Richardson," she said assuredly.

"So who is it?" asked Hilda.

"Reminded me of a chap I see in the village now and again," came the reply.

"Who?" said Hilda, trying to follow her friends gaze.

"I'm just trying to remember," said Ethel her eyes momentarily moving up to the sky for inspiration.

"Is he local?" asked Hilda trying to assist.

"No, no not someone I know," she said still thinking hard, "I've seen him somewhere, but where?" The wrinkles in her brow turning into canyons.

"In the bakers?" enquired Hilda.

"No," said Ethel curtly.

"In church?" Hilda offered another suggestion.

"Ah that's it, in the Churchyard, he visits a grave round the back, saw him one day." Her face glowed with such a good recollection. Ethel was pleased with herself, and glad that her memory was still working well.

"Perhaps he took the path through the woods and got lost, its easily done with all those tracks to peoples back gardens," Hilda said knowingly.

"Yes yes you might have a point, still I shall just pay a quick visit, stay

here Hilda I won't be long. Now you keep a watch on the outside dear." With that Mrs Green left her friend and went to the front door, but before leaving she did a quick check in the mirror, how important it was for her to be respectable. Mrs Green reached her neighbours door and knocked hard.

"Hello Mrs Richardson are you alright in there?" Mrs Green thought she heard sounds, peering through the net curtains she could only see an empty front room. Moving around the side of the bungalow she tried to look in the bedroom window but the curtains were drawn. Funny she thought, wondering what might be going on. Mrs Green marched back to the front door and began knocking again with all the power of a trebuchet.

"Oh God its Mrs Green," said a panicking Mrs Richardson

"Who the heck is Mrs Green?" asked Tony.

"Keep your voice down," she replied, frustrated by Tony's carefree attitude.

"Sorry," he grovelled in a whisper.

"She lives next door in Rosebud Cottage," came the quiet reply.

"Oh shit, what's she got a siege weapon," said Tony in a far to jovial tone for Mrs Richardson.

"My poor door, I'd better go and answer it." She grappled with her cloths, then raced to the mirror and carefully brushed her hair back to normal.

"How do I look?" she said turning to look at her lover.

"Fine honey, just fine." Came the reassurance from the suave man who sat sprawling on the bed.

"You stay here and be very quiet." Came a harsh whispered order.

"Yes, mam," he said saluting her.

Mrs Richardson opened the door, "Yes, are you alright?, what's the panic?"

"Oh well sorry to bother you but I saw a strange man come up your back passage," she said feigning concern.

"Did you?" replied a flustered Mrs Richardson, who was somewhat irate at this interference. Some people have a knack of timing their interjections just when fun is coming to a climax.

"Yes, just wanted to check you were alright." As she said that her foot edged into the doorway and within moments her body was inside. "I won't stop because Hilda is next door, but I do think I'd better come around the house with you and just check. Don't want you going to bed and something dreadful happening."

"Eh, no, look there...." Before Mrs Richardson could say more, Mrs Green was of like a ferret looking for a Rabbit.

Just as Mrs Green opened the bedroom door, Tony had slipped out the window pushing it too, and found a hiding place behind a rather over active azalea bush. Mrs Green keen to be like one of the ladies in the detective novels she was always reading, nosed in all the obvious places. Under the bed, in the wardrobe, behind the curtains, luckily her mind was too sharp, she discounted the window having already looked at it from the outside. Believing in her own mastery of deduction, she finished the inspection and conclude that there was not a man in the house. However her suspicion had been aroused, and on return to Rosebud Cottage, she made plans with Hilda to keep watch on Mrs Richardson's premises.

"Where are you?" said Mrs Richardson in a half whisper, looking around the room.

Tony opened the window and clambered back in. "Jesus that was close," he said, slightly out of breath.

"That bloody woman's a pain." Mrs Richardson's mood had flipped from love to hate.

"Would she tell your husband?" enquired Tony now realising the potential gravity of the situation.

"Oh, yes," said Mrs Richardson, her mind racing with ideas for disposing of Ethel Green.

"Fuck," came the reply. "What are we going to do?"

"We can't go on like this Tony," she said her voice now tinged with sadness.

"What are you saying?" said Tony fearing collapse of their relationship.

"We are going to have to give up seeing each other," she said with sorrow welling up inside.

"No." Now Tony was getting pissed, all this because some nosey old busy body.

"Yes, I'm sorry but I don't want to screw things up with my marriage." Tears ran down her cheeks.

"Ok." He frowned and went towards the door.

"Where are you going?" she said, scared he was going to walk out the front door.

"To the bathroom, where did you think?" he said, clearly emotional but in a macho way.

"Out the front door." She looked with a sorry face

"Don't worry I will sneak out, but you best come up with a distraction," he said resigned to the fact that it was over.

"I will." She sat and thought, trying to dry her eyes, sniffing she blew her nose.

Later Mrs Richardson paid a visit on Mrs Green and Hilda. The three of them sitting in Ethel's front room, supping tea.

"Thank you for being concerned, sorry I was a bit abrupt with you but I had been listening to a program on the wireless," she said trying to sound convincing.

"Oh that's ok," they both said, continuing the conversation.

"What was the program about?" said Hilda prying with her usual skill.

"I did not hear much because it had only just started," said a quick thinking Mrs Richardson.

Meanwhile Tony snuck off for the last time, keeping low until he was well away in the woods.

A few weeks later, Mrs Richardson's husband returned on leave. He was glad to be home with his darling wife, he was so pleased that she was loyal unlike many women who's husbands had gone off to do their duty in the services. How did he know his wife was a good woman, well lets just say Ethel Green had promised to keep an eye on his wife, and the reports were all favourable. Eight and a half months later, Mrs Richardson was in labour, with an "early" birth!

"Now Mrs Richardson," said the Vicar, sitting at the head of a large oak table in the Vestry.

Startled from thoughts of her past, she turned, "Oh yes Vicar, you were saying."

"We now have Satan's spawn to deal with," he said in a calm but considered tone.

This remark almost made her blush.

"What do you mean?" said the Major looking at him, and thinking was the Vicar getting carried away.

"Well this is a test of our resolve now that John Thackery has sold the Woods we are no longer up against a simple farmer, but a bunch of evil people masquerading as environmentalists who put a few trees ahead of this beautiful house of God."

"How do you know they are Satan's spawn Vicar, that seems a bit strong," said Bernard one of the church wardens.

"They paid six hundred pounds, they raised it in sixty days, and there are six of them, its a sign." he replied with certainty of the facts.

"Oh my God, Vicar its the ...," said Bernard realising the significance.

"That's right," said the Vicar with an air of superiority, "and do you know not one of them has ever visited this Church."

"I bet they are a bunch of Liberal Homosexual Atheists who want the woods so that they can go around hugging trees and doing other perverted sexual activities," said Bernard in a loud forceful voice.

"A few years ago I might have challenged what you just said," said the Vicar, "but when one reads about so many strange goings on and some of the crazy beliefs that people hold I would not be surprise that you are right."

In a nearby house down one of the village streets a man in his mid thirties sat slouched on a bean bag. A phone cable snaked across the floor to a phone on hands free, Dave was chatting a mate, "My ears are getting hot, must be this phone." In one hand he held a can of V8 in the other a cereal bar.

"No mate its someone talking about you," joked the friend, "so go on what happened about this computer?"

The two of them had regular sessions, discussing the issues that wound them up. The wonders of technology, how little people realised that to get to solving others problems they had to spend a vast amount of time keeping up to date with the latest stuff. These regular exchanges helped to pool their experiences.

A few doors down the road two ladies sat in one of their front rooms. They had a pot of tea and biscuits, one had shall we say, a biscuit enhanced body.

"He must be doing ok," said the plumper lady.

"How do you mean?" said her friend sitting forward, her floral pattern dress slightly strained.

"Well do you know how much he charges per hour?" Came an expectant question.

"No," said her neighbour.

"Go on have a guess?" The plumper lady was keen to tell.

"I don't know thirty pounds," guessed her neighbour.

"More than that." The expression on the plumper lady's face was priceless.

"Forty." Came another guess.

"Fifty pounds, can you believe it," said the plumper lady.

"Fifty pounds, some people are so greedy," came the reply with a sense of disbelief that anyone would charge so much.

"Yes now you work it out he does long hours so lets say he does a fifty hour week that's two thousand five hundred per week," said the plumper lady. "That's one hundred and twenty-five thousand per year." she said looking at her calculator."

"Gosh, and he's so tight," said the other lady.

"Really," expressed the plumper lady, shaking her head.

"That type always are, do you know he only gave two pounds to relieve poverty," said the neighbour looking aghast.

"No," came the shocked response, with a tilt of the head feigning disbelief.

"Yes and look at that beat up old car he drives," she said.

"Its no wonder he's not got a woman, what a tight bastard," said the plumper lady.

"I have seen inside the house, furniture its really minimal and there's a really naff old chair," said the neighbour recalling a visit.

"And lazy, just look at that garden," said the plumper lady.

"You would think he would get a gardener," she said thinking about how untidy it looked.

"I know its a disgrace," said the plumper lady her mind contrasting their neat gardens to his.

"Its not like he has any overheads, no office or staff to pay," said the neighbour.

Later in the day the two of them sat one each side of the window in high easy chairs.

"He's home again," she said peeking from behind the curtain edge.

"No," said the neighbour.

"Yes, well on his money," said the plumper lady.

"Still has not done the garden or cleaned that car"

"Disgusting," said the neighbour.

"I bet he just lazes in bed all day," said the plumper lady.

"I knocked and it took him long enough to get to the door, no socks on," said the neighbour.

"That's a give-away I bet you're right," said the plumper lady.

Across the road Dave was well into a technical conversation. "Those anti-virus people gave me my money back, said to get a full version from the computer shop. Bought it, went home advert on tele next day half price in the sale. That's about the same as my mums luck."

Meanwhile his neighbours continued their verbal dissection.

"Do you know he never goes to church," said the plumper lady. Her thinking back to the good old days.

"He must be one of those atheists," reasoned the neighbour.

"Well judging by his selfish tight attitude he must be a sinner," said the plumper lady, reaching for another biscuit.

"Undoubtedly," said the neighbour.

## **Nice Nurse**

In a nearby town, a nurse sat, holding the hand of Jack. What a sweet old chap she thought, they always sat for a little chat. She was saddened as his health was failing. There was so much that Gail wanted to learn from him, she was fascinated by the way people used to live, and loved to hear their tales.

"Do you know anything about Half Penny Woods?" she enquired.

"Oh, yes, but I'm not sure I should, well...." His voice faded as the mention of that name brought happy memories flooding back. His lost youth came alive like it was yesterday.

"Ah did something sad happen there?" She felt his mood swing and was unsure what to say or do.

"Oh, in those days we had to be secret, it was illegal you know. Now though..." He tailed off.

"What was illegal?" she spoke softly.

"Why are you interested in those Woods?" he said.

"Well my boyfriend." she started to say.

"Dave?" he reacted rhetorically.

"Yes?" she replied, "he and five other people have bought the wood to try and save it."

"Why? who would do anything to that place it's so beautiful." His mind dropping back into another time.

"Oh, there were a few problems affecting the Church and so it looked like the farmer was going to have to destroy it, the councils were involved, its

quite complicated story.”

“So who's trying to destroy it then?”

“Oh the Vicar, some 'Mrs Know It All' a Major and the church wardens, not sure of their names think one is Bernard Brown, Dave mention him a lot because he is very vocal in supporting the Vicars plan.”

“I might have known,” he said in contemplation.

“You know I think he just hates to remember what we had together.”

Jack understood Bernard, did he understand him so down to the last rivet.

“Who?” said Gail.

“Bernard, it's where we met, deep in the Woods there was an old bomb crater, some Jerry plane had dropped its load in the wrong place. It was quite deep you know. I bet it's overgrown by now, back then it was only a few years after the war. People were scared to go to near because they feared unexploded bombs. Of course there weren't any, it was great for us, totally illegal but we were young. It was ideal as a secret meeting place. You could go round the back of the church out of site and off into the woods. He used to go in from the field to the west of the Wood. His parents had a house down Piddle Lane, nice stream ran through the woods, great for pooh sticks, that was going back when I was a child. In those days you had to make your own amusement, none of those computer games.”

She chuckled, “Now they say they're bored.”

“Bored, they don't know they're born these days.” he managed a little smile.

There was a knock at the door. “Oh there you are,” said a tall woman.

“I'd better go, talk to you later Jack.” Gail wandered off with the woman, her ears suffering a barrage of comments.

The vestry was in session again the group of concerned citizens sat around the table.

“We have to do something fast, all this shilly-shallying with those council wallahs, I don't know what we fought a war for. Church survived the bombs and all that, now a bunch of loonies are stopping us saving the church, it's a disgrace, absolute disgrace, do you know I think we might have to take action of our own.”

“Steady on Major we don't want to go breaking any laws, if we do that you'll have the loony left branding us as the bad ones,” said a concerned Mrs Richardson.

"It's good that you are here to calm us down Mrs Richardson," said the Vicar, "But the Major is right we can't leave it much longer."

"What's this about the enquiry I spoke with Mrs Frimby and before she went to see her sister she said that they might have to investigate both sides of the story to resolve the claims on the woods," said Bernard in a gruff what's that all about attitude.

"Well we are lucky to have Mrs Frimby as a warden, especially as her husband is on the Parish Council, and from what I hear they will be doing some sampling from the site, plus gathering records and documentation, then holding a public meeting," expressed the Vicar.

"That could take ages," said Mrs Richardson her organisational mind processing all the possible activities that may be involved.

"They can't just go digging up the woods can they," said Bernard, suddenly worried at the ramifications. He was getting on in years and as with most of us things from the past disappear from our minds, until one day some trigger brings them back.

"Bernard, you sound like one of those environmentalists, so what if they dig a few samples what to we care," said the Vicar.

"Just did not want them coming with JCBs through the graveyard that's all," said Bernard feeling pleased with his response.

"Good point," said the Major.

A woman had made her way through a small jungle, its owner convinced that this plant matter was helping to lock up green house gasses. The house was not big, but comfortable, she wished its occupant was a little better at keeping things clean and tidy. She was in her mid twenties, slightly plump but with such a kind face free of the usual war paint. Her dress style was plain, practical but retained a femininity that gave her a gentle beauty. On entering she was greeted warmly.

"Hi Gail how was your week?" said Dave, always glad to have a woman in his house.

"Ok, had a bit of a grilling from a relative of one of the people in care," she said in a happy tone, Gail was always positive even when explaining something that would have had others in grumpy mode.

"Oh that one who comes once in a blue moon then complains about the things you should be doing for her mother?" said Dave recalling the many tales from within the hallowed walls of the fine establishment where she worked.

"Yes that's the one, and the old lady next door who is always ill", she

grinned.

"Not again?" said Dave wondering what the old girl was supposedly suffering from this time.

"Yes, we have to get the doctor, and sometimes send her off to hospital it's such a waste when there are people genuinely ill," said Gail just sounding slightly annoyed.

"If you did not and she was ill though!" said Dave, fully aware of how the procedures worked.

"Yes I know, but the doctor says for someone of 99 she is remarkably fit for her age," said Gail with a sigh, "It's so funny I was talking to her daughter about her health and she said how one day when over with a friend they were waiting in her room while she went down the corridor to the loo. Well she puts on this slow moving act, the chap who brought the daughter over, pokes his nose out the door, gestures to the daughter to take a look."

Dave interjected, "Mother doing the Grand Prix down the racing line."

"Yep she is in the Zimmer frame Olympics," said Gail with a chuckle.

"People hey," he said, grinning.

"Yea and another thing, not sure if I should tell you, well," she paused, "No I'd better check with Jack first."

"The old guy you chat with?" he replied.

"Yes he said some things but it was kind of private stuff," said Gail her face more serious as she considered the confidentiality.

"Oh Ok," he shrugged.

"You are so laid back Dave." Sometimes it bothered her.

"Like how laid back." He looked at her all smooche.

"Like you're horizontal," she said in a playful naughty retort.

"Wooooo." Came a typical response.

"Silly," she said thinking he was so childish at times, in fact worse than the old people and they could drive you potty.

"Who me?" he said with a big silly smile.

Later that day Gail dragged Dave away from his keyboard, it really frustrated her that he did not take more time off from the damn computer. In his car that had seen better days they went some distance, winding down some very narrow roads. Banked hedge rows abounded, fields were occasionally abutted to small woods and copses. The sun was shining as they pulled into a small car park at a tree filled historic site. They walked around the Hill Fort, it was a favourite of theirs, and

with some beautiful views in summer and very romantic.

"Well Vicar sorry it's been a while but we are quite busy at the moment," said a smart looking youthful man.

"Oh, that's ok, just keen to know how long we have got?" said the Vicar anxiously.

"You are not going to like this, our structural checks have revealed some serious problems, which if they get much worse you will have to find somewhere else for your congregation."

"As bad as that?" A worried look turned to thoughts of prayer.

"I'm afraid so," continued the man, "It seems that there are a combination of forces, and your supposition that the woods were a factor is quite right. We also think that at some time in the recent past the structure has been subjected to perhaps an earth tremor, or at least a sizeable seismic force that has started the process."

"Oh", said the Vicar, in a blank expression, he was never comfortable with anything remotely technical.

In a bungalow not far from the church surrounded by an exceedingly neat garden, where a couple considered by many to be model citizens. The regimented rows of begonias, neatly trimmed lawn edged to perfection and immaculate house were the envy of many.

"I don't know why you watch those soaps Marjorie," said Bernard as he scrapped at a dish in the sink.

"Oh Bernard you can be so serious at times," she said, then exclaimed, "Anyway what's wrong with them?"

"Well the sort of characters they have on them set a very bad example, all sorts of weird ideas, it's not good", he replied.

"Are you worried I will be influenced by them?" she said watching the tiff that had broken out between two of the characters.

"No, no but the youth might, promoting characters like that," he said, "It's disgusting."

"Bernard there were people like that when we were young too, it's just they could not express themselves like they can today," she said.

"You could leave your door unlocked, you can't now," he said, trying to change the subject while making a sort of point. His vigour increased as he scoured the baking dish.

Marjorie, was a plain woman, who's father had been friends with Bernard's father which is how they had both met. She was timid and

quiet, and it had pleased her parents no end when the two had married, her mother had begun to despair that her daughter would become a lonely spinster. The phone rang.

Marjorie got up and answered it, "Hello."

"Oh it's Ethel Bernard, excuse me Ethel I'll turn the television down." she said reaching for the remote, a skill that Bernard had not mastered, the on-screen volume bars went into decline.

"Yes I was just watching the soaps," she continued. There was a pause as she listened, "No it's ok, don't worry."

Her friend expressed concern at the interrupt.

"So how are you?" she said listening attentively.

"Ok I'll pop around for a chat tomorrow." With that she replaced the receiver.

Dave and Gail sat by a small stream it ran through some trees, the sunlight shone on the stones below making it seem like the Klondike. A track forded the stream and connected two roads as a bridleway. "So you're working tomorrow?" said Dave, feeling a bit annoyed as it was going to be a nice Sunday.

"Well I have too, we have people off on holiday so they needed someone to cover," said Gail.

"Oh, I bet you're just saying that," he said it was always the same when he had a plan she would have to work.

"What do you mean?" said Gail, wondering what he was implying

"It's that fancy man of yours isn't it?" he said in a very serious voice,

"Come on admit it?"

"Jack," she said, twiggling on to his childish jest.

"Yes that's it you've got a date with him," he said in a jealous voice.

"You silly sod," said Gail, pecking him on the lips.

Where does all the time go said Jack, one minute you are getting up to have breakfast, the next it's time to go to bed?

"I know," said Gail counting the potential years to the menopause, "I was going to tell my boyfriend Dave about your bomb crater and its other uses, then I thought I better ask you first. Did not want to embarrass you."

"Oh, at I my age I don't give a damn, you tell him," said Jack, who however ill he might be kept a very positive, and mentally most lively

attitude.

"But what about Bernard, I mean I know he is against Dave and the environmentalists but..." She tailed off.

"Him, dear it's about time he got his comeuppance, I should have said something years ago, it would have been better all round, poor Marjorie," said Jack wondering what might have been.

"His wife?" interrupted Gail.

"Yes, she was such a nice woman, was so pleased to be married, wanted a family they never did have any, well not to my knowledge. He hated women," said Jack with pity.

"So why did he marry?" asked Gail.

"Well why do you think", he paused, "Why she put up with him? He could be so aggressive you know, proper Jeykl and Hyde."

"Why, what do you think made him aggressive?" she questioned.

"Reaction to cover his emotions, just look around you. Look at those lashing out at others and ask what are they trying to prove," said Jack thinking about all those who create conflict.

"Like we'd say 'What's their problem', and say 'Get a life' ," Gail responded.

"It's conformity, you see a lot of people live in fear of what other people think. So they never live the life they really want, this makes them bitter," said Jack.

"You are quite a philosopher aren't you," she said in a happy tone.

"Oh deary, if you had been a hairdresser as long as me you get to hear a good many things about peoples lives, that it makes you think," he said with a wry smile.

"Why did you become a hairdresser?" she was curious.

"Can you imagine a chap of my persuasion doing anything else!" he grinned.

"People do all sorts of jobs doesn't matter about their persuasions," she said.

"Oh now it's ok, back then there were not so many places you were accepted," he said thinking back to the things he would have liked to have tried.

## **Cracks**

Yet another meeting was taking place in the vestry. The Vicar now

armed with new information was getting very impatient to make some progress.

"Welcome back Mrs Frimby and thank you all for coming to this special meeting, sorry it was short notice", said the Vicar.

"Very nice service Vicar," said Mrs Frimby, her praise always very welcome.

"Yes it was well chosen", said Mrs Richardson not to be outdone in carrying the Vicars favour.

"Thank you ladies, now I spoke with the surveyor, as you know it was only a preliminary survey but it confirmed my suspicions and he said that if we did not act soon we would need to find another location to hold the services." His anxiety at the situation was obvious to all.

"That bad?" said the Major, leaning back in the chair.

"Yes, that bad," came an anguished reply.

"We must act, we must do something, we can't leave it," blurted Bernard.

"Yes Bernard I think we all share your sentiments," he said.

"I have written another letter to the environmentalists, the councils are taking far to long, and much as it grieves me to have to talk to those people I fear we must do something."

"Talking is no good Vicar, we need action," shouted Bernard.

"Here here," said the Major, "He is right those bunch of no goods need a good seeing to."

"Yes well I'm sure you are both right but we must be careful to keep the public on our side. I have also sent round a leaflet, as you will have seen asking for support from the villagers, we have now had a response from most of the parishioners. About eighty percent of whom are on our side, a few sentimental people have either abstained or oppose our solution."

"Well that's wonderful," said Mrs Frimby, never one to hide her admiration for the vicar.

"Yes, I organised it all, didn't I Vicar," said Mrs Richardson, playing the one-upmanship game with her usual finesse.

"Yes we should thank Mrs Richardson for her good work," said an appreciative vicar, his disdain for paperwork was exploited by her.

"So if we have all those people on our side why can't we do something now?"

"Because Bernard the greenies have support from some national environmental groups, we could be swamped with weirdos living down holes and in trees, do you really want their sort in the village?"

"Could we not get help from the church?"

"I spoke with the Bishop, he will support us but only if we keep things peaceful, his concern was not to give the media more reasons write negative articles about the church. It's no good us saving our building if people are turned away from religion."

"What about Christian Voice, they stopped that horrible theatre play, they would help," said Bernard, frustrated by the lack of action.

"Yes, I don't care what anyone says, they are standing up for what they believe in, which seems to be more than we are doing," said the Major in a gruff voice.

The meeting went on for some time, with various arguments and propositions, but as the light faded that Sunday evening, no decisions were made, the Vicar and his two loyal ladies, fought off the aggressive Major and his Bernard army.

In a small end of terrace house there gathered a group of people, the more youthful element of the village.

"So anyone like a drink?" said a tall lanky chap.

"Yes please, what have you got Tim?" asked Dave.

"Well we have organic apple juice, mineral water or orange juice, oh and some fair trade coffee."

"Coffee, trying to give it up... mineral water.... me too." The group turning into an expectant party and poor old Tim into the local waiter.

With all the refreshments dished out they sat down in a circle.

"Well we have had a message from the Lord," said Tim irreverently

"Shut up Tim," said Sharon, digging him in the ribs with her genetically engineered specially sharpened female elbow.

"Hey we have a fifth columnist," said Jeremy.

"Not all of us Christians put buildings and dogma before nature you know," said Sharon.

"Well said a wood is just as good a place to worship as a man made edifice," said Jeremy.

"Oh shit, they're breeding." Tom looked at Tim, with a silly grin.

"You two are living very dangerously," said Sharon, giving them the evil eye.

"Shit mate you better play ball or you will be sleeping in the shed," spoke Tom, staring at Tim with a false worried look.

"You are quiet tonight Dave, anything wrong?"

"Gail rang to tell me a bit about the woods."

"Oh yea go on," said Tom, eager for information.

"Well we think that Bernard has a reason to see it go as it is a painful reminder."

"Of what," said Tom.

"Shut up Tom let him finish," said Sharon.

"Well he had a little thing going with a chap called Jack, but we should be careful what we say, Jack said he was ok about people knowing but the management at the care home might not be to keen on Gail talking about it so, I think we should protect our sources."

"Shit yea man," said Tom, "Hey but he had a go about me and Jeremy, shit what a fucking hypocrite."

"Bastard," said Jeremy with venom.

"You know it really pisses me off how we have been portrayed as a bunch of hippy weirdos, I mean we weren't even around during the hippy period," said Tom.

"Look we have this letter what does it say," said Sharon.

"Well let me read it," said Tim as he undid the envelope addressed to the group.

*Dear Half Penny Woods Conservation Group,*

*We understand your concern for the wildlife in Half Penny Woods, and share with you the wonder of God's creation. We hope you will understand that we may be able to offer you a similar size plot of land on which you can plant a new wood. In consultation with various experts we feel it will be possible to transplant a lot of the flora and fauna to the new location.*

*As I'm sure you are aware we and the majority of the residents of the parish are concerned for the the safety of those coming to church, and that you understand our need to take action on the woods to prevent further deterioration in the building. We do hope our offer will be satisfactory and reasonable.*

*Thank you*

*God bless*

*Yours faithfully*

*Reverend Vicar*

"What about the rare orchids, oh yea like they can be moved, we don't even know about the soil type or anything. This is just PR shit," said Tom.

"Yes, but it's the Orchids that few can or have seen versus a bloody great building that everyone can see and many are very attached to," said Dave.

"Right, but they don't know for sure that the problem affecting their precious building is even coming from the Woods, and like what experts have they consulted in moving Orchids," said Jeremy.

"Mrs Frimby's gardener," said Tim, in an air of jest.

"Yea, spot on Tim," said Sharon.

"So what shall we write back? "

"Do we need to write back Tim?" said Dave, wondering about the interpretation that might go with a reply.

"Yes we have to or they will get the upper hand, if they make a gesture and we ignore it then we will be the ones pointed to as being obstructive," said Sharon, "We should ask to see the report from their plant moving experts."

"Yea, cool," said Jeremy.

"Don't write to much, we don't want to give them any ammo," said Tim.

"We just thank them for the suggestion say we will consider it further, pending receipt of the report on moving the plants, and a survey of the alternative site," said Sharon.

"Yea, cool," said Jeremy.

"I wish you would enhance your vocabulary," said Tom.

"Oh shut up," said Jeremy.

"Lovers tiff," said Tim.

"What you mean you and Sharon are the perfect couple!"

"Dave, watch it mate," she bites.

"Uh huh."

They continued in a jovial chat, Tim typed up the reply on his PC with Sharon acting as editor.

## Nature

It was a nice morning Dave had got up taken one look out of the window and decided that a mooch in the country was called for.

"Hi there Mr Thackery," said Dave.

"What, day off?" he replied.

"Well in my line of business you either get it all at once or have a quiet period," said Dave.

"So hows Half Penny?" enquired the farmer.

"Don't ask," came a curt answer.

"Still having fun with that lot up in Heaven," said John with a smile.

"Yes," said Dave nodding his head.

"Glad you got it and not I, you can't win against them lot, was gona cost me a tidy fortune," said John Thackery, sympathetic to their cause.

"Well we are going to have a good try," said Dave always determined to succeed.

"Remember what happened to the them American Indians, when they went up against the God squad, bloody massacre," said John who had a great love of history.

"Well I hope it won't come to that," said Dave, who had a feeling that this farmer was wiser than he looked.

"Best of luck mate still I must be off got some cattle to worm." John Thackery was a well built chap, with a weather worn face and ruddy complexion. Dave had made him laugh a while back when, in stereotypical fashion the old farmer had had a piece of straw in his mouth.

"You realise that there is a new rule that applies to that," he had said.

"To what?" the farmer had replied.

"You need to get yourself a straw in the mouth holder, under farming mouth hygiene rule 42 it is necessary to have a plastic straw holder, stop germs getting in your mouth," said Dave with great confidence.

"No, you serious?" John had looked at him, unsurprised that there was not yet another regulation.

"Oh yes," Dave remembered how his face began to crack under the pressure of keeping a straight face.

"Bloody youngsters, your havin me on, mind don't you go suggestin it or they do it bloody daft lot," had come the matter of fact reply.

It was this initial contact, and that had befriended Dave to the farmer, and from several conversations, John had realised that Dave and his

greenies might be the cheapest way out of Half Penny Woods. Farming was tough and funds were always short more so for a small farm.

As Dave strolled down the lane past the farm, he turned up the track into the woods. Ahead sat high on an old dead tree, with its back towards him was a magnificent buzzard. Edging closer to get a picture it sensed his presence and flew of high into the sky. Its pale underside and the white flashes on its wings that reminded him of two Gurkha Kukuri. He remembered seeing three such birds riding high on the thermals above the hill fort. On entering the woods a deer moved across his path, the beautiful animal bounding effortlessly away as if by magic disappearing. This sparked another memory of a deer that had been resting in a field, disturbed it ran off, doing so in jumps flying from one leap to the next in an elegance only matched by ballet.

Back in the village people were going about their daily life. An elderly gent was making his way slowly along the footpath. On one side was the road on the other a little stream ran down the gently sloping hill. Small foot bridges crossed into peoples front gardens, the houses set well back. The gent stopped for a moment, looking across the road at a house, its car still sat in the parking space. From behind the low garden wall a head bobbed up from weeding, the man rose up.

"He went off this morning, with a ruck sack," said a tall thin man standing in front of a well tended garden.

"All right for some hey," said an elderly villager.

"Yes, oh are you going to the Village Hall?" said the thin man.

"What's it for?" said the elderly villager.

"Save the Church, apparently those bloody idiots are preventing work to save the building," said the thin man.

"Really", he expressed concern, "Isn't he one?"

"Yes he is, and bloody outsider as well," said the thin man with a harsh undertone.

The sun was high in the sky when, its warmth was just a bit too much. Dave got back home, he had seen lots on the walk including some new posters on the village notice boards.

"Hi Tim, it's Dave, just letting you know they are having a meeting and fund raising event at the Village hall to save the Church, makes me laugh when that lot have billions of pounds yet they ask us residents for

money!" Dave left the message on the answer phone.

Later that day, at the Majors house, Bernard arrived in his well polished ford escort, an old model but the way he looked after it you would think it was new. He parked the car and stepped out, Bernard was a wiry character, who's wife behind his back called him Mr Piano on account of him being highly strung. It was her way of coping with his snappy moods and fiery temper.

"Good afternoon Bernard, lets go into the study." The Major ushered him in. "Now what we need is some action, don't get me wrong Bernard, the Vicars a decent fellow but he's all talk. So are you with me?"

"Yes Major," came the eager reply.

"Now here's the plan." The Major placed a map on the desk and beside it a timetable for the battle with a list of actions.

The unfolding events had by now caught the eyes of the local press. The first article had reached the renown naturalist Sir Gerald Stanley Smyth, who puzzled by the claims of the Church being endangered by the woods decided to pay a visit.

Before the event in the Village Hall, the Vicar unable to contact Bernard or the Major called a meeting of reduced number.

"Well ladies thank you for coming, I have some good news, unfortunately I have been unable to locate neither the Major or Bernard," he said with a worried look.

"Have you checked with Bernard's wife," suggested Mrs Frimby.

"Yes, I called in on Marjorie she had not seen him since this morning and had no idea of his movements."

"I do hope he and the Major are not up to anything silly, they were a bit hot headed at the last meeting," said Mrs Richardson with some concern.

"Yes, so do I, having secured some backing at very high levels it looks like the various councils are going to swing in our favour, we also have several MPs asking questions in the house, and I received a letter of support from the buildings heritage foundation, plus we have hit the headlines, the national press picked up the article in the Echo. Look," he showed them an article.

### *Green v God*

*A bunch of environmental extremists are hell bent on saving a few trees with total disregard for our heritage. A beautiful Church building is under threat from a wood, yet they don't care about this unique building. We spoke to the Vicar who had offered them an alternative site, his kindness was met with unreasonable demands beyond the scope of the church. 'It appears they are just finding reasons to be obstructive', one villager said. People were appalled that a building which has stood for hundreds of years was threatened by a bunch of tree hugging extremists. We tried to ask the farmer why he had sold the land to them in the first place shirking his responsibilities to rectify the issues, he declined to comment.*

"It's only a small article but it's a start," said Mrs Frimby.

"We are going to save the church," said the Vicar.

"Well done Vicar," said Mrs Richardson.

"Well now I guess we must prepare for this evenings event." All three of them aware that there was a lot to do steamed into it with diligent enthusiasm. The hall was prepared seating arranged, a table erected on the stage and seating for the Vicars team and guest speakers. All was set for a lively debate at which the Vicar hopped to bolster funds.

That evening at seven a lively bunch of villagers from the concerned to the curious, filled into the hall. It was well attended with people standing around the sides. The Vicar surveyed the old wooden hall with its, tin roof that rattled in the rain. He looked at its lights dangling from the roof, the flex with its bulb and plain shade which reminded him of a Chinese rice pickers hat from his visit to the far east. That brought back memories of happier times and the village slide shows. Now however he, snapped back into the task at hand.

"Firstly I would like to thank you all for attending this evening, it is wonderful to see so many of you here. We will begin by giving you an update on the situation, followed by a talk from the Bishop who I'm sure many of you know, and I would like to give a special welcome to our local MP and also the Minister for Heritage both of whom deserve a round of applause for their help in aiding our cause. As I'm sure you are all aware,

our battle is not an easy one, many of the public seem to think environmentalists are always right. We hope to show this evening that there are other things worth saving." He rambled on for a while longer, followed by an emotive speech by the Bishop and more measured talks by the two MPs. After which the Vicar thanked them and turned to the audience. "Now if anyone has questions or would like to make a point, please put your hand up and please one person at a time."

One of the MPs whispered to the other, "Is that Sir Gerald at the back there?"

"Yes I do believe you are right." said the other.

The six local environmentalists had been disheartened by the response from both the government environmental agency and two environmental organisations one local and one national. Someone was leaning very hard, and they did not want to lose support being seen to protect such a small patch of wood with such opposition for fear of losing support on bigger projects. So Sir Gerald turning up was all they had, and he had not declared his interest.

Dave was the only one, who of the group who had plucked up the courage to go. Jeremy and Tom had declined because they felt they would be picked on, Sharon and Tim had to go off with Sharon's mother to the hospital, and Graham their money man was still working on his 18 month contract. Dave looked around the hall, he had only noticed Sir Gerald towards the end of the speeches during one particularly emotive ramble by the Bishop.

Sir Gerald put his hand up, the crowd's eyes focused on him necks straining to see who was asking a question. For many it was cut and dried the Vicar held sway with most and they needed no convincing, others suffered from the usual apathy, more interested in seeing the VIPs and checking out what people were wearing.

"Yes the tall gent at the back," said the Vicar, pointing to a clean shaven man, with plain shirt, most could not see his trousers with their many pockets. "How is the wood affecting the building?" he asked, this seemingly obvious question had not been answered in all the speeches.

"Well I'm no expert but we have had a surveyor do some checks on the

building, and the information indicates that the problem emanates from the woods. Anyone else with a question?" said the Vicar. Who was then startled by the same gents response.

"Before you ask for more questions I would appreciate an answer to my question." This man was not easily satisfied.

"Now sir with due respect I have given you an answer," said the Vicar, looking down at him from the stage.

Sir Gerald wondered about pressing the point, as he deliberated another hand went up. The Vicar at first relieved at avoiding the first questioner, was deflated when he recognised that it was one of the greenies. "Yes," he said sharply.

"Can I see a copy of your surveyors report?" said Dave a tad nervous at being obviously outnumbered and one of the so called villains.

Sir Gerald looked at him then at the Vicar, thinking, now if that Vicar says no it will seem like he has something to hide, if he says yes then that gives us something to go on.

"Well I don't have it with me," next question.

"But you could send it to one of us couldn't you?" said Sir Gerald. One of the MP's leant across and whispered to the Vicar.

"Yes yes of course," the Vicar stumbled a bit which was unlike him.

Dave looked at Sir Gerald they exchanged expressions that said without words alliance.

"Any more questions?" asked the Vicar almost afraid that these two would continue, but surprisingly they did not. Mrs Richardson and Mrs Frimby stood either side of the door with collection tins as the villagers and others wandered back out into the cool night air.

Meanwhile in Half Penny Woods a crack team was on operational manoeuvres.

"What have you found Major?" came a whispered shout.

"It's a bloody great hole old chap come down and take a look," said the Major.

Bernard scrambled down the bank grappling with the undergrowth as he did so.

"See," the major shone the torch around.

"What?" said Bernard as he edged closer.

Then they both froze.

"What was that?" said Bernard looking around nervously.

"Sounded like a .. ," but before the Major could finish the ground gave way. Both of them tumbling into an abyss.

Their fall broken as they hit water.

"Aghh," the Major let out a cry of pain.

"Major," cried a frightened Bernard as he lashed around for something solid.

"Over here old chap." The major still with a vice like grip holding the torch waved the dim light around. Bernard clumsily half swimming and bumping into rocks moved towards the major.

"This waters bloody freezing," said the Major, we must get to a dry place.

"Where are we?" said Bernard shaking from the effects of the cold water.

"In a bloody cave, now pull yourself together man and help me to that ledge over there." He shone the light over to an outcrop of rock. With some struggling Bernard like an ant with a beetle hauled the rotund Major up on the shelf.

"What now Major?" said Bernard, needing reassurance.

"Quiet man, let me think." The Major loved to be in command, here he was in his element. To most a broken leg would have been depressing news, to the Major it was just another war wound. With stiff upper lip, grit and determination he set to thinking.

"Couldn't we climb out Major?" said Bernard, his mind racing.

"Up there." The Major shone the torch. "Don't be a bloody fool man it's far too high."

"Lets shout for help," said Bernard anxiously clutching at straws.

"Bernard everyone will be at the Vicars bloody meeting, besides who goes into the woods this late a night?" snapped the Major, his patience wearing thin. " Now shut up man and let me think."

He switched off the torch and sat silent for nearly an hour, Bernard shivering huddled nearby worrying, so much going over in his mind.

The major felt around inside his tweed jacket. "Ah," he exclaimed taking the brandy flask and having a couple of swigs, then thrusting it towards Bernard thumped him in the chest. "Finish it then give me the flask."

Bernard gulped down the remains and then waving it around in the dark made contact with his commander. "Good, now gotcha pen and paper lad?"

"Yes," said a frightened Bernard.

The Major switched the torch back on and grabbed the flask.

"Write down that we are in a cave below a crater in Half Penny Woods

put the date and time and our names. Best put how we got here." He looked at Bernard who was scribbling frantically.

"Done," said Bernard

"Now put it in the flask." Bernard folded the paper and put it in.

"Do it up tight man, then put it afloat," barked the Major.

Bernard did as instructed, wondering what the point was, who was going to find it down here?

## **Rich Tea?**

It was morning around 11 o'clock and the two ladies sat in the front room, supping coffee.

"Sixty five pounds," said the plumper lady.

"No !" said her neighbour in disbelief.

"Yes that's what my Frank says, he looked it up on the Internet," said the plumper lady, taking a bit on a custard cream.

"Where's my calculator," after a slight pause, "My god fifty times fifty times sixty-five do you realise that's." She said showing her friend the screen.

They were interrupted by a knock at the door. They both wandered through into the hall, the plumper lady in the lead.

"Excuse me ladies," a tall officer said.

"Yes officer," they said in unison. He was very attractive, the plumper lady was especially attracted to a tall dark man in a uniform.

"We are conducting a search for the Major and Bernard who went missing several nights ago. We would just like to ask a few questions." The policeman opened his notebook and proceeded with his task. The officer soon left and after they had got over their carnal designs on his body they continued back in the front room.

"Well really with what I've heard from Marjorie it would not surprise me if Bernard hasn't eloped with the Major," said the plumper lady.

"Made for each other dear," came a sarcastic reply. She then got back to the calculator screen. "One hundred sixty-two thousand five hundred."

"How much?" gasped the plumper lady.

"On the calculator," said the neighbour.

"No, some people live in another world," the plumper lady was quite taken aback.

The Vicar was just going into the Church, when he heard footsteps. "Hello Vicar any news?" said Mrs Frimby as she strolled up the path. "No, I fear those greenies have done something and I told those officers so," said the Vicar sure of himself. "Kidnapped them?" she responded. "Who knows Mrs Frimby who knows, but I do have some good news," he continued. The two of them went inside the church.

At Tim and Sharon's a meeting of the environmentalists was taking place. Dave was telling them the latest news.

"No, that's terrible," said Tim.

"What we went through was bad enough," said Sharon with a very sombre look.

"Any news on Graham?" asked Dave, hoping for some good news.

"Yes we think they have discounted him, the officers we spoke to had established his whereabouts in Dubai

"So Dave have you heard the other bad news?" said Tim.

"No?" said Dave, "Can it get any worse."

"Well with all the bad publicity focused on us, and now with the disappearance of those two, seems that opinion has swung in favour of the church's argument.," said Sharon depressed at this turn of opinion.

"You mean they are going to cut down the trees and divert a water course, because they think our woods are drying out the soil below the foundations," said Dave with incredulity.

"Yep, but it's worse, we are going to have to pay the contractors for the work, and compensate the church because of the damage to the building," said Sharon.

"What?" said Dave.

"Apparently we can afford it!" said Tim, shaking his head.

"Eh!" Dave looked surprised, "Shit I can barely pay the bills and my mortgage."

"Well it seems that's not the perception of some people around these parts," said Sharon, she sighed and looked at the floor.

"They have not even proved it's the cause," said Tim he felt like they were in some weird dream.

"Yes but that report does show it's the drying of the clay soil below the foundations that has cause the subsidence," said Dave.

"Right, so it must be the trees which have been there how long?" said Sharon with great emphasis.

"That's what they believe," said Tim bluntly.

"So it must be true," said Dave sarcastically.

The three of them stood looking at each other, swept by feelings of disbelief, anger and frustration.

"So what do we do about Jeremy and Tom?" said Dave he was worried by their plight.

"They have no alibi, what can we say that is going to convince anyone that they had nothing to do with it?" said Sharon, shrugging her shoulders, throwing her arms out with palms upward in a questioning gesture.

At the local police station press conference was in full session.

"Well we have searched the entire village and surroundings, we have officers making enquires further afield but so far we have no leads," said the Inspector.

"Inspector, we understand you have arrested a couple of suspects?" shouted a reporter from the back.

"Yes we, have two of the environmentalists in custody on suspicion of kidnapping, unfortunately they have not revealed anything during questioning," he said looking for the next question.

"Do you think they did it?" came another.

"Circumstantial evidence and motivation are two big factors that lead us to suspect them," he replied.

The press continued to tax the Inspectors knowledge and patience, he would much rather have been helping his men and women to solve the issues.

"Oh we know they did it," said Mrs Richardson, "Don't we Vicar?"

"Well it is the most likely answer," said the Vicar, the two of them standing at the back of the crowd, "But we must leave it to the inspector."

Down a leafy country lane another police engagement was about to take place.

"You can't drive down there, please turn back", said an officer looking at the odd couple in the van.

"Why not?" said the driver.

"Sorry there is an exclusion zone around the village," said the officer thinking about these two.

"We are going to visit his mother," shouted the woman passenger.

"Sorry you will have to come back another time," the older policeman

said, as the younger officer eyed their vehicle.

Earth turned the vehicle around, the beat up old Volkswagen van, its air cooled engine chugging away, wobbled a bit as it was backed round into a farm gateway.

"How can they do this?" Sky turned to Earth and looked at him, "You should have said that your mother was ill."

"Look we have been at too many of these confrontations to know when to leave," said Earth resigned to thinking of plan b.

"That's all we need, bloody ecowarriors, a sarge."

"Yes, lad we have enough on our hands with the search, to piss around with a bunch of tree hugging nutters," said the Sergeant watching the van disappear back down the lane.

"Did you see the state of that van, I reckon we should have had a closer look at that sarge," he said in a spirited voice.

"Maybe, but the last thing we want right now is a traffic jam down this narrow lane, ey lad?" The older Sergeant, looked at the youthful PC, thinking back to his days as a keen constable, we have to protect those good folks in the village.

"You've got to see your mother Earth," said Sky forcefully.

"I know I know, maybe we could park up over on Christmas Heath," said Earth thoughtfully.

"What and walk in?" enquired the love of his life, Sky was a delicate thing, looking very ethnic in her hand made cloths, but she could be very tenacious and had a very strong will. Very often Earth's, laid back attitude had gotten him into fixes where he wished he had objected to her ideas, but how could he resist, besides she was usually right.

She switched on the radio, "Listen to that, that's why..so they must have thought we were.."

"Yep...," he said slowing the vehicle as they approached a junction.

"Shit...that is bloody typical, my God, they just assume," she was getting angry.

"Yep...," he said the steering wheel flowing through his hand.

The van leaned to the right violently as Earth almost drove past the entrance to the car park on the heath. "Fuck," he blasted as he hit the breaks, the top of the van stopping just a nats whisker from the bar.

"Bastards," said Sky.

"Where to now!" he exclaimed, "Shit can't see mother, can't park on the

heath, can't do fuck all and they call this a free country." Earth was usually so calm and tranquil but from time to time events would combine to make him erupt, a lava of angry words flowed from his mouth.

"We could go back down on the coast road, there was a parking area there remember," said Sky who never liked to see a volatile Earth, this gentle giant of a man could be very scary when he was filled with rage, and she always acted as a calming factor.

"That's bloody miles away if I'm thinking of the place you mean," he responded fuming at the bloody authorities.

"The one just past the Pub with the bull on top," she said calmly.

"I know, but we will never walk back to mums from there," he said trying to think of other options, his brain was not in a thinking mood. Resigned to the facts, they headed back.

In the churchyard the Vicar was looking at the structure he so loved, and the cracks that had defaced it. He was accompanied by his two trusted ladies.

"Well Vicar we are both sorry to hear about the Major and Bernard, but it's so good that that woods will be sorted," said Mrs Richardson.

"Yes work starts tomorrow," said the Vicar pleased that at least things were moving in the right direction for a change.

"So soon," expressed one of the ladies with an element of surprise.

"Yes, there are many good people on our side and if we are to save this fine building we must act quickly," she said.

"That's so right," said the other lady.

"Besides the police are keen to get some of the bracken cleared to see if there is anything they have missed over in the western edge," said the Vicar.

"Oh that bit is so overgrown, and right near the graveyard, it's a disgrace," said one of them.

"Yes indeed ladies." The Vicar felt happy in their company.

"Do you know that farmer has a lot to answer for, he should have keep it in order, shouldn't he Vicar?" The diminutive lady looking up at him expectantly.

"Yes indeed, but he said he did not have time or the money," replied the Vicar in a tone that intimated a hint of sarcasm.

"Poppy cock, oh excuse me," said the second of the dynamic duo, her face reddened with embarrassment, "Well I mean if he had done a bit each week it would have taken no time at all."

"Oh, I'm sure you are right, but these days people don't want to put in the effort, I remember his father, he kept that farm in much better order, a very proud and honourable man," said the Vicar his mind drifting. "Oh you are so right Vicar, so right, people had respect for the Church, oh what is the world coming to?" said the diminutive lady, "When I think back it saddens me.." Her mind recalling the past.

"Hey what's this?" shouted one of the contractors, as his machine cleared some scrub.

The Vicar and the two ladies turned to see contractors running over to the now static yellow monster, all of them peering down. A policeman sprinted over to the spot, and the Vicar and his two lady disciples walked to the wall surrounding the churchyard, nearest the commotion.

"Down there." Pointed one of the men.

"Oh yes, looks like a hole," said the officer peering down into dark gap in the ground.

"Or a trap shouted the ladies," avid readers of crime novels.

The officer grabbed his radio and called for backup, and in a short while he was joined by several colleagues.

"How long till the brigade get here?" asked one of them.

"Shouldn't be long now," the other replied checking his watch.

It was but a few minutes later when the fire engine arrived, throwing up clouds of dust as it made slow progress down the bumpy lane at the back of the churchyard. An officer opened the gate into the field that ran directly below the woods, the big red engine bouncing around as it turned in the field to park back near the entrance and nearest to the excitement. By this time many villagers had spotted the commotion and word had got around. Soon the sanctity of the graves in the churchyard took second place as the living outnumbered the dead in a frenzy to see what was occurring. The firemen brought with them ladders, ropes and lamps.

"So what have we got here?" said the chief fireman to the trio of police and attendant contractors.

"Looks like a crater, but there appears to be a hole in the bottom," said one of the officers.

"Ah yes," he said peering down into the patch of blackness.

They soon had a ladder secured at the top of the crater, leading down

the sloping side to the mouth of the hole, a fireman roped up for safety made his way down to the base of it.

"Can you see anything?" he heard from above.

The fireman, shone his torch down into the darkness, "Not from here he shouted back."

He stepped off the ladder and lay down near the hole, his head just over the edge, shining the torch around, he could just see rocky surfaces, looks like a cave of some kind he shouted back, with a slight echo from his position near the hole.

"You best get back up here." shouted his chief.

He followed instructions, and while the brigade called the local cavers, the police busied themselves cordoning off the area, the blue and white incident tape fluttering in the breeze.

It was mid afternoon by the time the Milton Moles arrived, the four men arrived in a sturdy old land rover, the field was collecting quite a diverse crop of engineering equipment. Dave on a stroll, had stopped on a footpath running up the slope of the neighbouring field, with his monocular he eyed the unfolding events. Hidden by the hedge, he felt less conspicuous, as he considered all the machines, mulling over the irony. How country people objected to town folk interfering in their lives, yet depended on them for so many technologies.

The cavers, went down the ladder, affixing their ropes securely two of them descended into the darkness below, head torches bathing patches of limestone in light.

"What's down there?" said one of the men above.

"Looks like an underground river, we are in a big pool of water," a caver shouted back up.

Their eyes scanning the cavern, "Hey over here," shouted one to the other.

"What is it George?" Their gaze fixed on two bedraggled men, huddled on a ledge.

"Better get some paramedics fast." George radioed up to the team above, "Two men look like they are alive but unconscious".

By the time the paramedics arrived the field, looked like some open air event, a few traction engines would have completed the scene. It took a while for the Major and Bernard to be hauled up through the narrow hole. Soon they were off in an ambulance which carefully negotiated the

narrow lanes back to the main road and off to town.

In the local hospital a rather worse for wear couple of chaps were laying in two beds. An officer approached a nurse, they chatted then he and another officer went over to one of the beds.

"Sorry to disturb you Major, but we are holding a couple of suspects and need to check a few facts with you," said the officer, pulling up a seat.

"Not those blasted greenies?" groaned the Major, if it had not been for them we would not have ended up down there.

"So did they put you down there?" the officer spoke softly.

"Bloody right they did, we fell right into their trap, bastards," said the Major with some fury.

"So you are certain they are responsible?" questioned the officer.

"Officer I can assure you that as a Major, I know a trap when I see one," said a Major sure of his facts.

"Yes of course," said the young officer showing respect for this military gentleman.

The officers left the Major, "Nurse may we see the other victim now?"

"Yes," a tall elegant woman, with a hint of a European accent lead the officers to a second room where Bernard lay quietly. The officers moved over to the seats by the bed, sitting they started to speak,

"Excuse me sir, but we need to ask you a few questions"

"Yes," said Bernard, softly.

"Can you tell us what happened?" said one officer keeping his voice low.

"Well, I was following the Major, mmm," he pause, "Then he said he had found something, err then we were trapped in that cave, it all happened so fast," replied a rather shaken man.

It was a nice view from the top of the office in the nearby town. Inside the folks could not enjoy the vista, there were other things to worry about.

The chairman of the company stood at the head of the table, "I have not called you all here to do a rain dance, although I must admit it had crossed my mind."

Some of the staff chuckled at this remark.

"Now we have been extracting more ground water in the last few years to make up the shortfall, unfortunately the main source is close to running dry, so I must ask you all to put forward your ideas and proposals with regard to the supply problems we now face. As you know the newest source near Christmas Heath has been quite limited. So

John lets start with you." He turned to one of the people in the room.

The meeting went on for many hours, various papers flying around the large polished table, as each member scrutinised reports and documents. Increased house building had put too much strain on the infrastructure, but they were duty bound to supply water to meet the needs of the population.

The chairman sat thinking, his mind drifted, it was ok for the electricity companies they could generate anywhere and with some extra cable make up the difference, electricity from Scotland, no problem. Ah he though those damn politicians, then the regulatory bodies come and beat his company with a big stick, while capping the prices.

"Sir," interjected, a smartly dressed lady, Mary the lady who held the office together. She was a little, how shall we say, to indulgent with her passion for chocolates, but had a heart of gold.

"Oh, sorry just thinking," he jerked back into action..., "Ok, now we come to the end of the meeting, certainly we can use the idea John put forward but it will take time. Now I know we don't like to be silly but many of you are probably sitting on ideas that you may think are a bit stupid, but who knows, so I would like to end with a brainstorming session just throw in any silly ideas you can."

"Sir?" said a small dark haired man.

"Yes Simon," he replied.

"Well, I was reading that trees can change a local micro climate, and I wondered if that might have an effect on rainfall, so perhaps if we planted some on land we own it might have a small effect on increasing the amount of rain," said Simon.

"Might need a small forest to have any significant effect, but that's not such a daft idea," he paused looking around the room, "Anyone else?"

## **One Battle**

Weeks later in a courtroom in the local town things had come to a head, with the Major and Bernard recovered sufficiently the police were keen to press ahead with the case.

"I would like to bring to the attention, exhibits A and B your honour."

"Carry on," replied a serious Judge.

"Here we see, item A which belongs to Mr T Williams and exhibit B, a knife which belongs to Mr J Archibald, both found within yards of the trap into which the victims fell. It is our belief that these two deliberately set out to capture Major C K Norman and Bernard Brown."

"Objection your honour this is pure conjecture, the defendants had been working in the woods and had lost those items during a recent visit."

"Objection over ruled", said the Judge.

"We have, motive, no alibi, and evidence, and I think no one will dispute two victims who have been injured, do you really expect people to believe that these two fanatics are innocent."

"Objection, your honour they are not fanatics," said an incensed defence council.

"Objection overruled, people who are prepared to trap in such a dangerous way people who oppose them are in my view fanatics," said the Judge.

"Thank you your honour, I may hardly need to remind the court that holes don't dig themselves!" The lawyer said with a grin, James Wilson Bletchworth had never lost a case and he was not about to let these deviants get away.

"And I may remind the court that there is no proof that my clients dug that hole."

"Then will the learned gentleman please explain exhibit C?" A ray of sunlight glinted on the handle of the spade.

"We also have exhibits D and E." two pieces of paper were passed around the jury. They looked at the credit card statement, highlighted was a payment to Twiggles Garden Centre, and then at the computer records from the point of sale showing various items including a spade.

"Notice," said James Wilson Bletchworth, "That these were bought just days before the victims went missing, bought by the defendants."

"My clients have a garden," said their lawyer.

"Mr Williams please explain to the court how long you have lived your house?"

"About five years."

"Five, years", he said with emphasis, "So in five years you have not needed these tools, yet now you suddenly decide get a spade?" said JWB.

This rhetorical question, set many of the jury's minds in stone. None of them had seen the crater, and their minds raced with visions of these

two environmental fanatics, setting traps for any who would intrude into their Woods.

"Please your honour we have already explained that they were indenting to make a pond in their garden, which is why you know about those exhibits." James Wilson Bletchworth did not wish to dwell on the tools, he wanted to paint a picture in the minds of the jury, "Mr Archibald, is it not true that you were let off with a caution for violent behaviour?"

"Yes," he mumbled.

"Sorry a bit louder please," he said with intimidation.

"Yes, but they started it."

"That's not what I read," he paused, "Seemed as though you provoked the incident, hmm!"

"Irrelevant your honour," said the defence.

"I am sure that it is," said the Judge.

The Major was called to the stand, he babbled away, turning an ordinary event into something far more sinister, lying on oath did not bother him when he was up against such an enemy.

"Of course your honour, we need to establish what kind of people we are dealing with."

Bernard, sat quietly wondering how many people would still know it was a bomb crater, few he thought, the fewer the better. When these two moved into the village they had made him uneasy, if it had not been for Marjorie's father they would have moved. He was glad that this might be the last of these two for a while to come. It was then that he was called to the stand.

"So they definitely trapped you, you are sure about that."

"Oh yes, definitely it was them alright."

The trial dragged on all day, each side bringing witnesses, Jeremy and Tom could not believe what was happening, they were innocent yet nobody except their lawyer and friends seemed to believe it.

That evening the remaining group of environmentalists had an emergency meeting.

"Hi Graham," said Dave.

"Sharon, Tim, Dave, hey guys I came back as soon as I could, what the fucks going on? The media seem to be having a field day," said Graham as he was welcomed into the room.

"Yes it's a big story, and we are not completely off the hook, they are trying to get us for conspiracy", said Dave.

"Why?" said Graham.

"Because, those two bastards could have been killed, and we own the woods, and 'must have known what Jeremy and Tom were up to'," said Sharon, her mood was foul.

"What? and people believe it!" said Graham in amazement.

"Yep, not only where we trying to destroy the church, now we are sinister eco-terrorists bent on the destruction of all who oppose us," said Tim backing up his wife.

"We must appeal against their conviction, it's bloody ridiculous, not to mention the sentence," said Graham he was appalled at the situation.

"Well pleading not guilty went against them," said Dave.

"But they were fucking innocent Dave," shouted Graham.

"Yea, ok ok we know that," said Sharon feeling for Dave who had kept all of them informed.

They continued well into the night, coming up with ideas, scrapping them going around in circles.

The sun rise had been beautiful, two early birds had sat on the beach watching the natural beauty and wondering at human stupidity. A man was coming towards them, he walked slowly observing the sea and the birds.

"I know you, aren't you that naturalist?" said Sky as the man came in front of them.

"There are a few," said the tall man.

"Sir Gerald Stanley Smyth," blurted Earth.

"Yes, and who might you be?" he replied wondering about these two characters.

They introduced themselves, and explained more than he had expected from his usual beach conversations with other visitors.

"So they still won't let you into the village to see your mother?" he said surprised at what they were telling.

"Nop, apparently all the media coverage has caused the village to be overwhelmed and so the Police have maintained a cordon", said Sky.

"But you are family," said Sir Gerald.

"Oh yea try telling them that," said Earth.

"It's mad, the environmentalists never trapped those two idiots," said Sky.

"How do you know, some of you can be quite radical," questioned Sir Gerald Stanley Smyth.

"Earth went to school with Dave, and he would not get involved with anything that was not strictly legal," said Sky.

"People change," said Gerald.

"Yes but Dave is still Dave and he is a very cautious chap, you won't find him buying those expensive cars with special dispensation to exceed the speed limit," said Earth.

"Well nice meeting you, I'd best be off wife to go to," he said with a smile.

"Nice bloke," said Earth.

"Yea but what's he gona do to get them free?" said Sky.

In the village hall there was a joyous mood.

"Hello Vicar," said the Major back on form.

"Hello Major and welcome back, poor old Bernard not feeling to well I understand," said the Vicar, expressing sympathy.

"Yes still onwards and upwards," came the positive reply from the man of action.

"Three cheers for the Major," said the Vicar.

"Hip hip hara, hip hip hara, hip hip hara," they all shouted ending with smiles.

The party in honour of the victors started well, most of the village had turned up to celebrate.

"Well done Major, at last the church is saved and those to perverts are where they belong," said one man.

"We should not get carried away," said a mousy lady, "There are still four of them at large."

"Yes and I warrant that if it were not for the police cordon we would by now be swapped with the buggers."

"Well said Major," said the mousy lady.

"So how did you get there in that hole Major?" asked one of the villagers.

"We were lured in old chap, could of kicked myself for not seeing the trap," expressed the Major.

"Must have been awful for you," said a lady in a flowery dress, very rotund, her concern genuine.

"It's a shame they won't let us fill in that damn great hole," said the Major.

"Environmental Agency, apparently as an underground river it is an important water source," said the Vicar

"Still at least it's well fenced off now," said Mrs Richardson.

Another storm, lingered overhead, there had been a lot of downpours in the months after the recent events. Dave sat indoors, wanting to get out, but also not wishing to get damp. The four remaining environmentalists had narrowly escaped sentencing because there was insufficient evidence, although that was not the opinion of most in the village. The appeal had also failed, and so Graham went back to Dubai, Sharon and Tim continued in a more sombre mood, Sharon suffering mild depressed at times. Dave continued to try to get rich quickly but was in reality getting poor slowly. All of them were drained mentally and financially, the compensation sought by the church had put even more burden on them. Even Graham's generosity had been stretched to breaking point, and Sharon and Tim having re-mortgaged their house were struggling to maintain their relationship.

"Well Vicar, how's the church now all those blasted trees have gone?" came a question as two men stood in the churchyard.

"Much better thank you Major, they have had to do some work, but apparently the soil moisture levels are slowly increasing and the surveyor thinks it could all stabilize soon," he replied somewhat relieved.

"So the buildings safe then?" enquired the Major in a pleased tone.

"Yes, Major our village Church is safe," said the Vicar.

"Good, good, well must dash, cheerio," the Major now fully recovered trotted off onto his next mission.

The Vicar, walked over to his car, he too had a mission. Mr & Mrs Washbone had convinced their daughter to have a proper church wedding, their daughter May had already organised for the hire of the village hall. Now at her parents insistence she was going to have a chat with the Vicar.

"Hello Mr & Mrs Washbone. How are you both?" said the Vicar as they greeted him.

"Very well Vicar, thank you for coming." said Mr Washbone ushering the Vicar in.

"May," her mother shouted, "The Vicar's here."

May came through to the lounge, her plain dress reflected her simple tastes and her desire to save.

"Hello May," the Vicar greeted her warmly.

“So are you expecting lots of guests?” he enquired.

“Yes,” she replied, ‘Thanks to my parents’, she thought.

Her mother and father had wished this to be a grand event and felt there were few in the village who could be omitted from the list. The Vicar talked to them about the arrangements, scheduling in a rehearsal and making notes to talk with Mrs Richardson with regard to the times as she was in charge of the village hall.

Some weeks later the big event occurred, the Vicar was so pleased he had not had such a big wedding in years. He was touched by the Washbone's kindness to their daughter. The church was packed, with many standing. After the ceremony they all gathered outside, the professional photographer making full use of his sheepdog gene to herd them into a group photo session. ‘Taking the photo was the easy bit’, he thought, wishing he could freeze them in position for just one second, but oh no there was always one who had to move, or do something stupid. They then moved on down the road to the Village Hall, to which after many toasts, speeches and flowing of champagne the great multitude were invited in, as the tables shrunk the quality of tailoring was tested as many a belly expanded to meet the challenge of free food. Finally they all gathered outside ready for the departure.

Wow good luck, the crowd all shouted as the car drove away.

“You certainly gave them a good start Vicar,” said Mr Washbone.

“All made possible by her loving parents,” said the Vicar turning to Mr & Mrs Washbone.

“That was nice darling,” said Mary the Vicar's wife, “All those people we must have had half the county here.”

“Yes dear, you know I think so,” said the Vicar.

“Do you know this year is getting better as the days pass,” she said.

“Yes, when one looks at how it started, this wedding is the icing on the cake,” he replied, “So what's for tea?”

“After today, you must have eaten enough for a week!”

“Well those vol-au-vents were rather delicious,” he grinned.

“Oh and that cake, it was lovely,” she said her mouth watering at the thought of it, “Crystals Bakery made it, they are expensive but you know it was good.”

“I agree dear, must say I did sample quite a few slices,” said the Vicar licking his lips, “That was a jolly good champagne.”

"Hmm," she said thinking of the cake.

The newly weds arrived back, their old car with its low gear rattle alerted those not so hard of hearing. They were renting a caravan, from John Thackery, whatever his faults and many in the village kept lists, he was kind to May and Les. It was the advert for a labourer that brought Les to the village, attending John's pigs. He had taken pity on the couple on hearing how Les was not liked by May's parents. John judged people on what he found and he had liked Les, hard working with a sense of humour, decent and honest and that suited him just fine.

No sooner had the dust settled and there was a knock on the door.

"Hello Les how you doing mate?" said Dave, "Good honeymoon?"

"Yes not bad," he replied trying to fight with May for space to unpack.

"Where did you go?" enquired Dave.

"North Wales," replied Les with a bit of a laugh.

"What, no Bahamas?" Dave expressed surprise.

"No we are saving up to buy a house", said Les.

May showed Les the cheapest house she had found.

"Lets have a look?" said Dave.

"We can't afford it," she said, the thought saddened her.

"Why not it seems pretty cheap," exclaimed Dave.

"With our savings and a mortgage we are still short by eight thousand," said May despondently.

"What about your parents May?" said Dave, he grabbed the suitcase to steady it as Les unpacked.

"They won't help us," said Les, "The reason May is upset is we have just had a row with the old man."

"Oh, well I guess they did just do that wedding for you!" said Dave understandingly.

"That's what everyone thinks, but we ended up spending five grand mate!" said Les, as May looked down, "Don't suppose you could lend us a bit?"

"Unfortunately you're friend the Vicar has seen to that mate," he said dejected in tone.

"What about Graham?" said May.

"Don't even go there, if it was not for Graham our little group of environmentalists would be jumping off the nearest cliff. He bailed us

out, what with all the legal costs, the bills for clearing the Woods and the huge wedge the church had, then a bit more for the appeal. Sharon and Tim had to re-mortgage so they are now in the shit because Tim's boss has not been giving him any overtime lately," said Dave feeling sad for the two of them.

"Looks like we have all been shafted," said Les.

"Yep," said Dave.

Sharon was very upset, she was having a go at Tim. Their small house was becoming a war zone.

"Tim, we have to sell that bloody Woods, there are no trees left what's the point it's been wrecked."

"But we fought so hard for it, if we give it up now Jeremy and Tom are in there for nothing," he countered.

"There's nothing left, we need the money, I wish we had never got involved," she was close to sobbing.

"It was your idea," he said realising after that his diplomatic powers were waning.

"Oh that's right blame me why don't you," she snapped back, "You agreed you're just as much to blame."

"Ok ok I'll call Graham see what he says," said Tim feeling fed up with the whole situation.

They had to wait because of the time difference till the following morning, Graham understood Sharon's views and although he was not keen on the idea of giving up what they had, her logic did seem practical, he said to Tim, look mate we've lost the Woods, I would hate for you two to lose your marriage. Tim, realising Graham was right agreed to ask Dave that evening.

"So Dave what do you think?" Tim sat opposite them, it was a tough question.

"Is there no other way we can raise the money to help you guys?" he asked.

"Dave," screeched Sharon, "Do you think we would be sitting here if there was?"

Tim looked at Sharon then at Dave.

"Ok, but on one condition, I'm going to visit Jeremy and Tom over the next couple of days, now if they both agree then I will go along with the plan, but if they object then lets remember they are sacrificing more than

any of us. If they do object then I will somehow try and help you, I realise we can't expect more from Graham. You must understand, I'm trying to keep their mortgage running, which is a sore point with Gail because it means she has to pay whenever we do anything," said Dave who was himself feeling the strain.

"Sure Dave, understood mate," said Tim.

Sharon sat silent, she would be on edge until Dave came back with news, and Tim was in for an icy time.

It was a few days before Dave finally dropped in to see them.

"So what did they say?" said Sharon, before he had even got through the door.

"No," said Dave, "They are having a hard time in there and the only thing that's keeping them going is the dream of replanting that wood and restoring it."

Sharon sat down on the stairs, she felt gutted. Her instinct was to go into a rage, but all she could manage was a flood of despair, tears rained monsoon style. Tim tried to comfort her, but the atmosphere was like a harsh winters day in Siberia.

"Hello," said the Vicar, not enamoured by the visitor.

"Would you be interested in buying the Woods?" said Sharon, she had had a sleepless night and with or without the consensus of the group had determined to sell, the problem was who would buy a patch of waste ground with a hole in it.

"Hmm," the vicar looked at her, "I would have to give it some thought let me get back to you."

The Vicar was still mulling over the idea in his head when he had bumped into Mrs Frimby while doing his rounds in the village. He had informed her of the proposal.

"What do you think Mrs Frimby, could we use the land?" he said non to enthusiastically.

"Well Vicar, it would make an excellent graveyard," she said and that was her only suggestion.

"Ok that's decided," he said, as it did make sense.

Later that day he popped in to see Mrs Richardson and explained the idea to her, "Would you be so kind to organise it."

"Of course Vicar," said Mrs Richardson always pleased to help.

"What the fucks up with you Tim?" said Dave, "Sharon?"

"We have just had the biggest row you have ever seen, man I just had to get out of there," he said in a dull voice.

"Why?" asked Dave.

"She has gone over our heads, and is intending selling the Woods to of all people the Vicar," he said expressing his anger.

"What?" said Dave, "Can she do that?"

"She is the main signatory and Graham the other, apparently technically yes," said Tim, his nerves obvious.

"Jeremy and Tom are going to be well pissed off," said Dave putting the sponge back in the bucket.

"Fuck I know we are in the shit, but you helped us a bit last month and I said to her to be patient, but no...." Tim shook his head. For years he had stopped smoking but now he felt in desperate need.

"Look Tim, don't beat yourself up if she sells, she sells, besides who else but the Vicar would want that land," said Dave trying to conciliate.

"It was her fucking idea in the first place, that's how you guys got sucked in, and I persuaded you lot to sign up to it all," said Tim feeling pangs of guilt at getting his mates involved in what had become a mega mess.

Dave was unsure what else to say, he pulled the sponge from the bucket almost instinctively and slopped it down on the bonnet of the car, taking his emotions out on the grime.

A lanky chap got out of his convertible, sitting beside him was a blonde of stereotypical proportions.

"Won't take long dear, papa says this is where the Major lives," he said opening the car door and sliding out of the low slung vehicle.

She smiled, with a little right leaning droop to her head.

He crunched up the gravel driveway, the house was large but relied on its build quality rather than maintenance to stay upright. Various plants trailed up the walls, windows partially obscured. The garden tended, was simple but well stocked. He pulled the handle, deep within the bowels of this redbrick lair came a creature, moving slowly. He rang again, turning back towards the love of his life admiring the Mazda, its gleaming bodywork. Momentarily he was distracted by a fluttery wave. He his eyes focused once more on the door, oh well one more go he thought, considering that the Major may not be to nimble on his feet he decided to pull for a third time and wait just a few more minutes.

"Come on darling, there's nobody home, I'm getting board sitting here," shouted his passenger.

Just as he was about to leave, foot turning to move a shuffling sound just barely audible caught his attention.

The door opened just a short distance and a rather elderly woman's face poked through the gap straining her neck, "Yes," she said.

"Oh, sorry to bother you is the major in?" said the lanky chap.

"No, can I help?" her curiosity aroused.

"Oh well, would you be so good to give him this, and tell him that Nigel Bisserans found it, he knows my father." He handed her the item.

"Of course, thank you." She closed the door, the thud startled him.

He spun on his feet and walked back, wondering should he have given it to the old woman, still he thought they were going back to France and his father was in not mood to visit the Major so he really had no choice.

Later that day, Old Mrs Thackery wandered back down the lane to the farm, still wearing her piny. She was comfortable and content, and had a good reputation in the village for cleaning. Her son did however give much cause for concern, his attitude had won him few friends in the community.

"What you got there mother?" said her son.

"Oh some chap left it for the Major, forgot to give it to him," she said, back at home.

"It's a hip flask," he said looking at the object.

"Yes, now you leave it alone, it belongs to the Major," she smacked his hand, and began to make the evening meal.

"I don't like you having that couple in the caravan, they are friends with some of those envomantorists," she chastised him.

"They bring in some extra income mother, besides I need Les to help on the farm it's hard to get good people," he said standing up to her.

"From what I hear he's no angel," said the mother stirring a stew.

"Who says?" said her son.

"May's parents and they should know their daughters married to the fellow," said the old Mother in a crochety voice.

"Mother I don't care," said John and he did not, he got tired of people and their tittle tattle.

The two of them sat down in the large farmhouse kitchen eating the evening meal, watching tele.

"Who was the narrowtator?" she shouted.

"I don't know mother," said John his mouth full.

"Thought you was watchin it," she said disappointed that she would not know the name of the man with the lovely voice.

"I was, but I don't know who e was," said John as he tried to eat the food before it got cold.

The following morning Old Mrs Thackery wandered off on her cleaning rounds, and John to the farm. Later he came back into the house for a cuppa, and noticed pushed to one side the hip flask.

He saw it was rather battered and scratched, on it was written to Major ... wow he thought it was the Major's, and there was a rattle from inside it. He opened the lid, to find a small rolled up piece of paper, unfurling it he looked at the nervous scribbles.

"Hello John," said Dave around the back of the cow shed.

"Here I though you might like to take a look at this." John Thackery handed him the flask.

Dave looked at the flask, "So it's the Major's."

"Yes, it is and some fellow delivered it to is ouse except e weren't in so mother took it, forgot to give it to im then this morning she leaves it here, very forgetful is mother. Found this inside it." He passed the paper to Dave.

Dave read the scribble, "Shit", he exclaimed, "This is a note asking for help from Bernard and the Major when they were down the hole."

"Yep, but read it carefully," said John, who to those who did not know him often seemed like a big slow giant with a brain to match. But he was quite astute, "Notice anything?"

"Please help we have had an accident," said Dave.

"Yep, not we have been trapped, kidnapped, are in the hands of a couple of deviants," said John, "No offence meant with the last word but you know what I mean."

"Yea sure John, cheers," said Dave who was pleased that at last something seemed to be going in the groups favour.

"Always thought that trial was a bit to neat, know what I mean," said John.

"Yes, oh yes," Dave agreed.

"Should we tell the Police?" said John.

"They would probably say your mother stole the flask and that we fabricated the note, you know how friendly Inspector Rogers is with the

Vicar," said Dave looking at the downside.

"I guess with the way folks minds work around here you might be right." John understood only too well the old adage, 'It's not what you know but who you know.'

"First we have to find the chap who brought it, get the evidence of where he found it, then call the papers," said Dave trying to reason it through.

"You think the media will go against the combined forces of God and the Military." John was ever the sceptic.

"Shit it don't get any easier does it." Dave sighed.

"Tell me about it, you should have to put up with my mother," laughed the farmer.

"Sure," came an understanding reply.

"Trouble is eventually mother's going to remember that damn thing," he said.

"Maybe she did take it, but lost it on route bending over perhaps, you said her memory is not always good." Dave hoped the suggestion might be a good one.

"I might have a chance to convince her, you take the flask best not leave it here no hiding places in this house, have to leave me whisky with the pigs," he laughed.

"Hope your mothers not listening," Dave smiled.

"We're fucked if she is, you better get off lad," said the farmer.

"Cheers John." Dave made a discreet exit with the evidence.

Later that day, Old Mrs Thackery came at quite a pace down the lane, her portly stature making her wobble slightly from side to side. In her haste she looked like a clockwork toy on some aimless mission. Yet in reality, she was hanging onto the edge of a thought.

"Where is it?", she muttered, looking all round the kitchen there was no sight of that flask. Within minutes she had left the house like a guided missile her target, John.

"Where is it?" she shouted at him.

John was sat on the tractor, he turned startled, "Where's what mother?"

"You know that flask, you had it yesterday," she said with some force.

"Yes mother and you smacked my hand and it's where you put it," he replied.

"No it isn't I've looked everywhere." She was clearly cross.

"Well I don't know mother, perhaps you took it with you this morning?" he

suggested.

"Don't remember," she hesitated, "No, no I would have remembered."

"Well it'll turn up, besides the Majors been without this long a few days here or there who cares," said John, he never had liked the Major.

"The Major that's who, I told him what happened," she said anxiously.

"So tell him we are looking for it," he said, "It's only an old battered hip flask for God sake, he's got plenty of money can't he get a new one."

John sometimes got a bit upset at how the Major would have his poor old mother running around for this and that without much reward for all her efforts.

"It's been stolen, it's that couple, Les he must have stolen it," she said determined to find it.

"Mother, he has not been to work today, they had to go into town remember," said John trying to reassure her.

"Crept in before they went, folks say they need money to buy a house, stolen it I bet," said his mother.

"Les would not steal mother." John was getting worried at where his mother was going with this.

There was a loud banging at the Caravan door, Les opened the door.

"May we have a word with you sir?" Two officers, stepped into the caravan. There beady eyes on full scan mode.

"Where were you and your good lady between eight this morning and three in the afternoon?" said one of them.

"We left at about seven thirty for Taunton, it's a long drive and we had an appointment at nine with the Building Society," said Les.

"And after that?" The second officer stared at Les.

"We drove to Bude and spent the day there, we only got back here sometime after six," said Les, puzzled, "Why?"

"We have reason to believe that an item belonging to the Major was stolen from the farmhouse, should you hear anything you will tell us won't you?" He stared again at Les, the other officer scanning the room then him and his wife.

They left, but Les and May were no longer at ease, the nice day in Bude which had made up for the negative response from the Society had now been smashed like a wooden ship hitting the rocks.

"I'm going to go down and have a word with John," said Les, "Something has been said about us and I want to know what's going on."

"Leave it tonight," said May, drained and feeling tired.

"Ok but tomorrow," said Les keen to get to the bottom of it.

"Alright," said May trying to smile.

Les strode down the farm track faster than a dog out of a trap.

"High John, what's going on?" Les approached John with a less than friendly attitude.

"Oh, sorry Les I wanted to let you know but mother got the upper hand, then called the police," said John feeling guilty about the whole thing.

"Why?" said Les.

"She was given the Major's hip flask some chap found it, she forgot to give it to the Major. Brings it home, loses it then blames it on you. I tried to reason with her but you know what she's like." He felt for Les and May they had taken the brunt of his actions. Yet he could not tell them in case there were more questions, besides he knew that he was doing the right thing and that eventually they would understand.

Now John worried about Dave, he somehow had to let Dave know because he knew Les and May were friends with him. 'Oh for the simple life tending sheep', he thought, and all this because of some bloody church.

It was a few days later when Dave on one of his hikes marched by John ploughing a field. At the last meeting they had agreed not to talk for a while not wishing mother to make any connections, so he was surprised when John shouted at him.

"What's the problem?" said Dave, walking over to the tractor.

"Look, lets be quick, mother fingered Les for the disappearance of the flask, nothing happened but it was close. She has the police involved, so just to warn you and by the way don't be in too much of a hurry to find that chap if you go off they may well think it's you running off with the Major's flask," said John hoping his quick outline of the situation was enough.

"Right cheers," said Dave, fully understanding what the farmer was getting at.

"One more thing, I was in the kitchen when mother made her statement, said she was given it by a chap in a sports car with a blonde woman. Said his name were Nigel Bisserans, well that's what it sound like." John climbed back in the cab.

"Cheers, I'd better be off." Dave veered rapidly away disappearing down a footpath, through a small copse.

"Ok lad, good luck," said John watching the youngster.

Dave wondered what to do next as he strode along through the trees. He did not have a whole lot to go on, his main worry was the evidence.

Where to keep it, in his house, garden or at any friends would be risky.

## **Believe**

"Well Vicar it looks like you have your old problem," said a man holding a gadget.

"No it can't be they tested the soil and it had stabilized," said the Vicar in disbelief.

"No disrespect Vicar but when we did the work under that corner conditions were different," he said defensively.

"Are you saying that a surveyor who has been doing his job for over forty years knows less than a mere builder such as yourself," questioned the Vicar.

The builder turned and walked off down the the churchyard path, through the gate and climbed back into the lorry. He was fuming, how dare anyone criticise his work, he was a stickler for quality.

"Well gov?" The builders mate turned towards his boss eager for news.

"Trying to blame us for the new cracks, reckons we did not do it properly.

"It's the soil but he won't have it," said the builder.

"Yea but they got rid of the trees, gov," his mate observed.

"It ain't the bloody trees, and it ain't our bloody underpinning," said the builder.

"How rude Vicar, so he just walked off?" said Mrs Richardson.

"Yes Mrs Richardson he just turned and walked off," said the Vicar,

"Trying to blame the soil."

"No," she said in a tone of disbelief, "But you had it tested after the trees were chopped down and they said it was alright."

"I know and I told him," said the Vicar.

"Typical builders you just can't rely on them," said Mrs Richardson, "Just take my sister she had an awful time with her extension."

Jenny looked out of the window, she knew the sound of the old lorry. Opening the door she saw her husband get out.

"Hi dear," she shouted.

He shook his head. 'Oh dear bad day', she thought.

"Blamed us he did," he said in a very disgruntled voice.

"Who?" asked Jenny.

"The vicar, he only blames us for a new crack in the tower," said her husband.

"Oh, no Mike," she said, thinking of all the ramifications.

It was several days later when a letter arrived. Mike had come home early and picked it off the mat. "Oh what?" he said to himself. It was a letter from the Vicar's solicitors, demanding that they rectify the situation. He sat slumped in his favourite chair, with a six pack, one of the plastic rings was empty, the contents held in his hand and the liquid glugged down his throat.

Jenny came in and found a plastic skeleton, cans lying around and a sleeping mass sprawled in the chair. She picked up the letter, it was the first of many. Mike really dug his heels in, determined not to budge.

It was a Saturday evening and Mike had gone off to the Pub, with Alan his builder's mate. They were chatting rather loudly about the soil drying out and the woods, the church got copiously mentioned. A group of four men sat opposite them, one of them had been earwiggling the conversation, he turned with some questions of his own.

"Would that be the church near Half Penny Woods?" he said looking at the two men.

"Yes," said Mike.

"You know there's an underground river," he said, taking a sup.

"Yes," said Mike blandly, thinking, 'So what mate?'

"Well we did the rescue, of those two blokes," continued the man.

"Oh, yea," he replied with a spark of interest, Alan sat listening. "You're those cavers." The penny dropped.

"A week ago we got permission to go down there, to see where it went." said the man eager to tell others about their subterranean explorations.

"Right," said Mike, still not quite sure what this had to do with the church.

"I overheard you saying about the soil drying out," said the man.

"Yea," said Mike, his ears were now on full alert.

"The first time there was about a metre of water, this time it had dropped to about half a metre, now we followed it down as far as we could," said the caver.

"So what stopped you?" said Mike.

"A bloody big pipe, which we learned later was that new Christmas Heath pumping station. They don't use it all the time, but if there's a water shortage it's used to pump extra from this river," said the caver hoping the knowledge would help the builder.

"Cheers mate, let me get you and your pals a round of drinks." Mike was now putting things together in his head, and was keen to get these blokes on his side.

"Oh really, are you sure, I see well, hmm er, yes thank you," said the Vicar.

"Who was that darling?" said Mary.

"One of our legal chaps," he replied, his face sullen.

"Oh," said Mary, her face serious as she looked at her husband.

"Seems they have finally had a reply from the builder," he said with an unsettled voice.

The two of them sat in the lounge on a floral pattern suite, the old building full of character. It had lots of shelves and Mary had put lots of porcelain around the rooms, so the rectory had an air of antiquity.

Sharon, sat in the kitchen thumping the table, she just sat staring at the wall thumping the table, Tim hesitated, she was in a strange mood. He was not sure how much longer he could take this. She sat silent, apart from her pounding on the wooden surface. She did not even acknowledge him, he picked up the letter, read it and realised why she was sitting there, all hope gone. In the months that had passed he had learned of earlier attempts she had made to sell the Woods, but with all the controversy and the fact that there were a distinct lack of trees, no one wanted it, now all her hopes were dashed. The letter explained that due to a change in circumstances the Vicar had decided to withdraw from negotiations to purchase the land.

"Are you ok Shaz?" said Tim, worried about her.

She did not answer, the struggle had become too much for her.

"Dave, can you come over mate?" said Tim, "Cheers." He put down the

phone and sat holding her other hand. Dave came into a sorry scene, the once happy couple in ruins, he remembered Sharon, who was the life of the party always positive, now in what he thought must be a state of manic depression.

"We must call the doctor," he said quietly to Tim. Sharon made no signs, where once she would have interjected she just sat passive, switched off.

"Hi Tim." Dave was at the door, it was a day later and he decided to look in and see how Tim was coping.

"They took her in Dave, my Sharon in some psychiatric ward, I can't believe it." Tim was in a state, he still had the same cloths on from the day before, unshaven and dishevelled hair. Dave wondered if he should leave for France, but he thought the sooner he got to the bottom of this whole thing the sooner they could sort out their lives.

"I guess you have not been to work today?" said Dave.

"Nop," came Tim's muted reply.

"Have you eaten?" he asked.

"Nop." Tim's response worried Dave.

"Come on Tim you have to be strong, you have to for Sharon's sake, look I can't say much because it's only a hunch I have, but if I can get a bit of info it might help us," he said trying to inject an air of hope.

"What are you on about?" said Tim not really interested.

"Look I have to go off for a few days, are you going to be ok?" he said, worried at the state things were in.

"Yea, sure whatever," said Tim, himself heading in the same mental direction as Sharon.

Dave left that evening, it was difficult to know what to do, the longer he left that flask the higher the risk that the evidence would be found and destroyed by those he feared would want the case buried. There were a lot of people who would be embarrassed and worse by its revelation. He had to act, comforting Tim and Sharon was not going to make them better.

"You are English?" said an elegant woman behind the counter.

"Oui," said Dave his rusty French vocabulary being short on words, but he liked to try native languages.

"Ah yes, room four, this way please." She escorted him to a small room

up a labyrinth of tiny stairs. The hotel was off a small side street and appeared to be several buildings glued together, adding a rather higgledy piggledy arrangement of rooms and floors. "Mind your head sir, it is quite old building non."

"Ah Oui," he said, "se bon?"

"Thank you," she smiled, "Here is your room."

It was a small but well apportioned dwelling, with fine views over the town. All he wanted to do now was put his feet up and rest.

He had travelled over by Eurostar, then taken some local trains to get to the town. His plan for the next day was to hire a bicycle and pedal around in search of the Bisserans villa. It had been an amazing piece of luck, he had seen a woman reading one of those celebrity gossip mags, she was sat waiting for a train and he sat beside her. This was a few weeks ago in England, he asked what she had found so amusing. "Oh her," she said pointing to the blonde, the caption caught his eye the man this blonde was dating. He had tried to find a phone number, or address but neither were to be found, but buying a copy of the magazine did give him some clues as to places to start.

"Are you ok darling?" said Mary. The Vicar sat contemplating in his study.

"Thinking about a sermon?" she enquired.

"No dear, worrying about this builder chaps response," he replied looking at the paperwork.

"Oh, yes," she knew it was upsetting him.

"I don't want people knowing that it's the underground river, can you imagine, I mean we honestly believed it was those trees," he said fidgeting.

"It's not your fault darling, how were you to know about the river and everyone knows trees consume lots of water," she said, sympathetically.

"Yes, thank you dear, but alas I fear a backlash if this was to become public, and with all the work that's needed on the church the last thing we want is to have to pay out money." His concerns well founded.

"I know darling, perhaps I should have a word with the builder," she offered. Mary was the best diplomat he knew.

"Yes dear, you do that." He smiled at her.

"Oh, hello," said Jenny opening the door, a very smartly dressed lady

stood before her in a navy two piece suit, "Can I help you?"

"Is your husband available?" she enquired.

"He should be in soon, you could wait if you want. Is it about some building work?" Jenny asked.

"Kind of, I'm Mary by the way, the Vicars wife," she said.

"Oh, right." Jenny ushered her in and they sat chatting in the Kitchen. It was twenty minutes or so before Mike got home.

"High love," she said pecking her husband on the cheek, we have a visitor. Introducing the Vicar's wife they began to chat round a cup of tea. Mary worked her charms, and some time later.

"Well thank you so much," she left feeling happy that her husband need have no further worries.

"Well what do you know," said Mike, scratching his head.

"What with the Greenies and a senile surveyor seems like the poor old Vicar's been having a hard time of it," said Jenny, feeling sorry for them both.

"Does, and we have some more work, very lucrative work," he said rubbing his hands together.

"Yes love, well done it's good to keep in with them, the Vicar has a lot of friends in the right places, we must remember all the work that has come through him in the past."

"Nice lady," he said.

"Who, Mary?"

"Yes, very sensible attitude, not quite so aloof as him, if you know what I mean."

"Nigel your on the wrong side of the road," said the woman, an expression of shock and fear on her face.

"What dear." Nigel turned his head to look at her, he was enjoying the exhilaration of his new sports car, his mind not fully focused. Out of the corner of his eye a cyclist loomed.

"Oh shit." He tried to swerve away but it was too late, Nigel hit the breaks so hard the air bags inflated and the road was resurfaced with best quality rubber.

They both sat in the car, stunned.

A rather dishevelled chap bruised, bleeding with aches and pains from all parts of his body pulled himself from the ditch. The front wheel of the bicycle was ready for the Tate Modern, a chain lay in the grass and the

back wheel had several spokes broken. Stinging nettles had only added to the sensations. The car did not move, strange he thought, 'Are they ok? Why did they just sit there? Who was the maniac behind the wheel, this was the last straw.' Over a week of bad luck and no results, the day he was due to go home and his morning cycle ride was ruined.

He walked painfully over to the driver, both people were like some sort of frozen exhibits, 'A right couple of dummies', he thought. Although that cleavage was a little compensation for the ordeal, eyeing up the well endowed blonde. He knew that lady, where had he seen her?

"Bonjour Monsieur, vous et un idiot!" he shouted, thinking that should wake the dozy bastard! But the chap just sat there, the two air bags had deflated and sagged on their laps. The lady shook her head, saved by the headrests from an serious whiplash she started to compose herself, turned to the driver, nudged him and shouted, "Nigel, you're a fucking shit."

The cyclist, stared at her, what delicate language from one so pretty, obviously a lady of class.

"Answer the man," she said, in a non to pleasant tone.

Funny thought the cyclist, I seem to understand her well, then he twigged, that would be because she's English.

"Oh, er er hmm ah oh." Nigel turned and looked at the man who was dripping blood on the car door. "Excuse me would you mind awfully not leaning on the door, one does not want blood on the upholstery".

"Nigel," she screamed at him, "You are such a... a .. oh speak to him in French, she was exasperated by Nigel's selfish behaviour."

"Pardon Monsieur, S'il vous plait, je ne desirer votre sang dans mon voiture," he said worried by the man's position.

"I don't believe what I'm hearing Nigel," she said, "All you care about is your bloody car, while that poor bastard bleeds to death."

"Are you cross with me poppet?" said Nigel, looking at her, "Now look I shall offer this simple peasant some cash and we can be on our way. OK."

"Egh." She was close to screaming at him, sometimes he could be so obnoxious.

Nigel pulled out his wallet, grabbed a bundle of notes and handed it to the cyclist. "Monsieur, S'il vous plait," he said with a false smile.

It was then that this simple peasant realised who she was and rather

who he was, but would he get anywhere with this arrogant imbecile. It raced through his mind, should he ask where they had found the Majors flask or keep quiet, this fellow obviously lived in a world where only he was important, and what he needed he bought. To take the money? or call the police? who would win? This was a man of great wealth, who would most likely twist it to the peasant cyclist being in the wrong, Dave thought.

"The man must be simple," he said to the blonde, "Look he does not realise what I'm offering him."

"Maybe he's insulted by your gesture," darling, she said sarcastically. He opened the glove compartment and pulled out another sizeable wad of notes, "If the idiot does not take this lot I give up," he chuckled, it was all a laugh to him.

Dave, wanted to hit him, never before had Dave felt so angry, but this smug bastard was really starting to bug him.

"Here, darling." He handed the woman the money. "You get out and give it to him."

She, did as he suggested, "Look I don't know if you understand English, but this is probably the best deal you are going to get mate so take it ok." She thrust the notes into the pannier that lay on the grass verge, walked back round and got back in the car. Dave looked at the bag, then back at the car as it drove off down the quiet country road.

After a while of assessing the damage, applying some plasters, he hobbled back with the remains of the bicycle.

"Ah mon dieu, what as append to you Monsieur?" said the man in the cycle shop.

"Idiot in a car, ran me off the road, then drove off," he replied, not feeling to good.

"In a mauve sports car by an chance?" said the man.

"Yes." Those nettles had left some itchy spots.

"Oh, it would be no good to take it further believe me, that family are very powerful. My brother is a very keen cyclist, very good you understand.

That idiot was on the wrong side of the road, I image the same for you, non?"

"Oui," replied Dave, with a hopeless grin.

"Oui, he took to court, they say my brother was over the centre, he was not but that idiot always has a passenger and always pays them off. Insurance, mon dieu," he shrugged his shoulders.

Dave wandered back to the Hotel, the lady in reception, rushed to him. "Are you hurt Monsieur?" she said very concerned, "Do you need to see a doctor?"

"Merci, I'm not to bad," he said, his hope for the human race buoyed by her kindness.

"Oh, what happened?" she enquired with a sad face.

"Idiot on the wrong side of the road," he shrugged.

"Mimi," she called, towards the open door behind the reception.

"Oui," came the reply.

"Monsieur Bisserans is back." Her dulcet tone extolling the 'delight'.

"Mon dieu," the lady in the room shouted.

"Oh, he is one of your countrymen but I'm afraid he is a menace on the roads, we hate it when he comes to his villa, I'm sorry what happened to you, today you leave, but if you want you can stay longer." She knew he must be in pain.

"Thanks but I'd better get back, work," he said jerking his head up.

"Oh, but of course, let me carry that up the stairs for you." She kindly grabbed his bag and helped him through the labyrinth of stairs, steps, and low beams. As she put the bag down, she turned and looked at him, "Now you will call reception when you're ready to leave?"

"Ok thanks," he said, then she turned closed the door behind her, footsteps fading as she went back to her duties.

'Well', he thought sitting, stunned in the chair, 'What to do next?' He went into the bag, and pulled out the wad of notes. He worried that he should have offered some to the cycle shop, then he thought of Sharon and Tim, there were a lot of Euros. Shit how would he change this lot without getting mugged, or someone asking questions? And still he had no witness to the finding of the flask, for all he knew it could have been someone else who found it.

"Uh, what's this?" His mind raced finding a piece of card in between some of the notes. It had the word Monica on it and a phone number, just a name and number nothing else. The blonde woman, he mused, could it be there by coincidence or on purpose? She did seem upset with his the idiots behaviour, "I'll ring back in England."

The scenery rushed by and then into the dark as the Eurostar descended into the tunnel. The new fast line through Kent made such a

difference, in no time London, with its mass of human life greeted him. It was quite a contrast to the small French town, its narrow cobbled streets, quaint family run shops, and buildings that would have many going into raptures over the picture postcard vistas in all directions. His mind recalled the friendly faces, greeted by complete strangers. Yet in London, with all its noise and bustle, this anonymous sea of faces remained silent. No more talkative than the Auton's mannequins and many moving with less speed and grace.

"Burial Vicar?" said Bernard.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," said the Vicar, "These young people one wonders about what gets in their heads sometimes." The Vicar puzzled by the modern youth.

"Oh," said Bernard looking quizzically, "Why?"

"One of those greenies took his own life, you know I'm not surprised his wife had a breakdown," said the Vicar despairingly, "Mary says they had money problems."

"It's not surprising Vicar, no discipline, in our days if you did not have the money you went without, now with these credit cards," he paused, "Probably on drugs."

"Quite, apparently they were both receiving financial counselling. Mary saw a lady who works in town in the citizens advice bureau on their financial support desk, visiting the house one day."

"They get help we never had and this happens, makes you think Vicar," said Bernard.

"Yes, you know what I think Bernard," said the Vicar, looking at him digging in the churchyard, "I think it's a lack of spiritual guidance."

"Undoubtedly Vicar, undoubtedly." He dug deeper.

"We never had all these problems years ago, people never had as much and life was harder, but people were happy and they went to church," he said reflectively.

"That's true." The spade struck the soil.

"Occasionally you got the odd drunk and maybe a bit of crime from a passing vagabond, but apart from that things were good. Now, sometimes I despair." He shook his head.

"These new faith schools should help." A dollop of earth sprayed across the grass.

"Yes, that's one good thing the government have done, years ago most schools were run in conjunction with the church," said the Vicar with a

note of force.

"Yes, and we had discipline, no messing about in class like they do now." The spade clanged as its edge struck a large stone.

"I agree, it's all these liberals and those homosexuals," he said feeling pleased that he knew the culprits, "Back then it was illegal which is quite right, it's an abomination Bernard, it says so in the Bible."

"I know Vicar," said Bernard, "Bloody queers I hate them."

"Good man," said the Vicar, "The sooner we get back to following the path of God the better."

"The world will be a better place, Vicar," said Bernard, standing upright for a moment, it was hard work, digging for a man of his age, took it out of you.

"Indeed, indeed," said the Vicar looking at the sweat run off Bernard's brow.

"So why are you burying that greenie, it's not like he came to church?" said Bernard, preparing to dig further.

"His parents are good people Bernard, they do come to church and it is for them, otherwise I would not," he sighed, "Better be off things to arrange."

Dave battered and bruised arrived back to find a letter from Tim's parents. He could not believe what he read. 'No way, no way', he thought. Tim was depressed yes, but even in that state he could not imagine him giving up, not Tim.

He phoned Tim's parents, they told Dave how they had found Tim in the garage, door closed, the engine had been running until the fuel ran out. Apparently the police did not find anything suspicious and the conclusion was suicide. Sharon had been moved to a home for the mentally insane.

Dave, went to see Sharon's parents, partly to say how sorry he was, and also to find out why she was in the home.

"Oh, she's very bad Dave," said her mum, "Very bad."

"When I last saw her she was in hospital, but I thought with modern drugs and counselling?" he half questioned them.

"Doctor Richardson said it was for the best."

"So which home is she in?" he asked.

"It's a private one son," said her Dad, "They told us it is for the best."

"Apparently she's been trying to harm herself," said her mother quite distraught.

"No!" said Dave, he found this very hard to accept, "And who is going to pay for that?"

"Tim's parents have agreed to selling the house, Sharon can come back here when she's better," said Sharon's dad, "She won't want to go back there, to many memories."

Dave noticed a tear roll down her mothers cheek.

"I should have been here," said Dave, "I should have stayed."

"You have your business son, don't blame yourself, you couldn't have watched over them day and night," said her Dad.

"But," he exclaimed.

"Dave, you're a good friend to them you always have been, you did so much to help them, Sharon told us you were giving them money to help them, what with Tim's lack of overtime, don't blame yourself," said her mother, crying.

"Oh love," her husband hugged her.

Later that day Dave tried phoning Gail again, why didn't she answer, he began to get worried. The phone rang for ages, he put it on speaker, and sat dejected on a beanbag. This time to his relief it was not the answer phone.

"Hi are you ok?" he said the concern in his voice discernible.

"Look Dave can we cool it for a while, you're just so weird lately, sorry but I can't cope with you like this."

"What do you mean?" he said. We often perceive ourselves differently from the way others view us. We also sometimes can't grasp how small imperceptible changes, can be magnified by friends and relatives. Gail was quiet a sensitive woman, damaged by previous relationships, she was always on a high alert status. Dave was making her nervous, and this made it uncomfortable. She did feel for him, he was a nice chap but she could not cope.

"Sorry Dave, someday I'll explain." She put the phone down.

At first he was upset, the emotional roller coaster was whizzing along the neural net. This turned to sadness, and finally concluding that with the things that had been happening maybe it was better this way. Better that she was out of the loop.

## **Tim**

"Are you ready Vicar?" said Mrs Frimby, the day had come for Tim's burial.

The doctor had said Sharon was too ill to come, Jeremy and Tom were still at their government hotel, and no one had been able to contact Graham in Dubai. So the gathering was quite small, Tim and Sharon's parents, Dave, John Thackery, Les and May and two friends of Dave, Earth and Sky who now there was no cordon had finally made it to see Earth's mother, and upon hearing Dave's tale of the battle for Half Penny Woods were determined to come and pay their respects, even if it was in a building which they did not feel comfortable.

"Bloody cold in here," whispered Earth

"Just like the people who worship here," Sky whispered back.

The Vicar, came from the vestry, moving to the pulpit, he placed a sheet of paper on the old wooden lectern.

"We are gathered here today to pay our last respects to a fine young man, who gave love and support to his dear Wife. A loving son, it is with sadness that we remember him. He was a man of principles, he loved nature and it came as a great shock to us all. He worked hard and was a credit to his parents.... " , the Vicar droned on for some time with notes of praise, listing his many achievements, sports he enjoyed, the fun times, and many other anecdotal facts.

"I may just finish in saying how sorry I was that, we clashed over a recent issue. Sharon and Tim were such a lovely couple and it saddens me to think that it has ended this way," concluded the man of the cloth, "Let us now pray to God that he will help Tim find a place in heaven. Dear God, o most merciful redeemer ....." They all bowed their heads, as the Vicar continued with the prayer, his parents had chosen what they considered appropriate hymns, these were duly sung, the most vigour coming from the Vicar and Tim's parents.

Back at Dave's house, Sky, Earth and Dave sat in sombre mood on his bean bags, their battered old van parked neatly on the front lawn, or as he called it the prairie.

"So Dave," said Earth, "What do you think?"

"About Tim?" said Dave.

"Yea, we don't buy it, like he was so laid back," said Earth.

"Yep," said Sky, "Like he loved Sharon, I don't buy this suicide thing."

"What I find odd is Sharon trying to harm herself, and the Doctor putting her into a private clinic." Dave looked at them both, his eyes darting back and forth.

"Like that's so weird man," said Earth.

"Mind, they were both at rock bottom, Sharon especially," he said.

"Yea, but Dave you helped them right?" said Sky, she knew Dave's nature too well.

"Yes, yes but obviously not enough," said Dave saddened by the situation.

"That Vicar, he was so smarmy," said Sky, "So nice."

"He's a good man," said Earth, this brought a strange look from his partner.

"O yea right, sorry I forgot," she said sarcastically, "But like if Tim was not suicide and Sharon is in that place for other reasons, like why?"

"Yes, maybe we are over reacting, maybe we have a conspiracy theory with no conspirators!" said Dave trying to hold onto a less scary world view.

"Like the Woods got the chop, the church is fixed, so where's the shit." said Earth mulling things over.

"Where'd you go anyway Dave?" said Sky.

"Yea, tell us man where did you get to?" Earth looked at him eager for the low down.

Something inside told Dave not to say to much, if there were forces at work then the less he said the better.

"And what's with all the bruises man?" said Earth waiting for a response

"I just needed to get my head straight, had hit a mental block with work and all the shit going on with the woods, so I took a few days in France," he replied.

"So what's with the war wounds?" said Earth noticing the various skin tones.

"Oh, haven't cycled for a long time, tried it again, was going a bit to fast," he was interrupted.

"You did a Bush?" said Sky with a playful grin.

"Well I never hit a police man!" he replied with a smile.

"Not even a sleeping one?" said Earth, pulling into the joke lane.

"Yea, but by the look of those scratches you hit something nasty!"

laughed Sky, she had some wicked images going through her pretty head.

Dave was so glad that these two friends were staying with him, he was beginning to get a bit paranoid, was there a conspiracy? Had his imagination been working overtime? Should he call the blonde? Dr Richardson?

Then his mind drifted, Sky put on a mellow CD and they all sat around meditating. Graham, he always had some gadget or other. They always joked that he was an integral part of the Net, Tim called him Node Man, he remembered Sharon laughing when she said, "There is the London Node, the Sheffield Node, and the Graham Node." Like she was talking to a child. Then Tim had said, "Idiots there are 3 nodes in the UK, don't these people know anything." They had had Graham in stitches, it was so funny, those were good times. Dave had a kind of puzzle in his head, but did he have the right pieces, where they all from the same puzzle, was it even a puzzle. His neurons were firing, in all directions, thoughts spinning, had he been wired, the EEG machine would have gone off the scale, probably blown, up he mused.

It was peaceful in the Rectory, Mary was preparing some food in the kitchen.

"Ok darling?" she said noticing her husband enter the room.

"Oh yes thank you dear, just thinking, you know," said the Vicar, as he pulled a chair up.

"What about?" she said, opening the fridge.

"Oh those youngsters, funny lot. Was chatting to Bernard earlier," he said.

"Good man, Bernard," said Mary, as she poured him some tea.

"Yes, yes he is, you know we are lucky." The Vicar reflected on those around him.

"How do you mean darling," she asked, being attentive to her husband.

"Well our upbringing, having faith, it's stood us in good stead, kept us on the straight and narrow," he said, pleased he knew God.

"Yes darling, I quite agree, it's such a shame, you do feel sorry for them," she said thinking of the six greenies, "Even those silly pair who trapped the poor Major and Bernard."

"Yes dear, even them." He spotted an interesting article in the local paper. His hand as if by magic reaching out to the cup handle, slowly

still reading he brought it to his lips for a sup. Then just as automatically, like a slow motion robot arm he placed it back on the saucer, not quite in the centre of the base, it caught the inner edge and rested at an angle, the liquid listing to one side.

"Aren't you seeing the bishop tomorrow?" she enquired.

"Hmm." he glance up at her, "Yes, why?"

"I think we need to re-connect with today's youth," she suggested.

"Yes, you have a point dear, but I feel those infernal computer games have the edge on us. Laurence is always playing the damn things, drives Albert and Lena nuts," he said. Albert was the Vicar's brother, who had a totally different temperament.

"Your brother has been far too soft with the boy," said Mary, this appealed to her husbands traditional views of family values.

"Yes dear." He glanced at another article which caught his attention.

"You mentioned the Bishop?"

"I had an idea, sort of a modern equivalent of Sunday school," she said, hoping he might realise she had a brain.

"Oh, he put down the paper, you know I'm too busy to get involved in much more," he said thinking of his weekly schedule.

"I could run it, and I dare say Mrs Richardson would help a bit," she offered.

"You really think so, dear it's a lot of work!" He knew only too well what the behind the scenes efforts that went into such projects. He wondered if his lovely wife realised what she was saying.

"We could dedicate it to Tim, his parents would appreciate that don't you think?" said Mary, continuing with her drive to do something outside the house.

"Yes, yes I expect they probably would, sort of use it as test, if it works here it will work anywhere," he grinned.

"Indeed darling, I have drafted a rough idea, would you like to see it?"

She went over to an end cupboard, opened it and pulled out some papers.

"Hmm, alright, pass it over." She handed her husband several sheets of A4 stapled in one corner, he gave it a quick glance. "My word you have been busy."

"Read it darling," she said, seeing his cursory scan.

"Oh I will, hmm," he muttered, "Good, hmm." He continued to emit various positive sounds. The cup of tea cooling, he reached for the

occasional sip. "Well dear I like it, I shall show the Bishop this is most interesting."

It was a sunny afternoon, the two men sat outside in the shade. The grounds were well kept, adorned with topiary and well tended beds. "You must be very proud of Mary, she has done a very thorough job," said the Bishop, impressed by the documented proposal.

"She certainly put a lot of effort into it," said the Vicar his eyes on the papers held by his friend.

"Indeed, most enlightening, tell me why is it called the TIM Club?" came a curious question.

"Oh after the poor young chap we buried the other day," said the Vicar in sombre tone.

"Oh yes I remember," mused the Bishop, "So this is dedicated to him to help others."

"Yes," smiled the Vicar.

"It is a good idea, and the activities are very inventive, makes Sunday school seem a bit plain." The Bishop looked up from the papers towards the Vicar.

"When you have to compete with computer games!" said the Vicar.

"Oh, I quite agree, if this works as a trial then perhaps we can expand it nationally," said the Bishop, his enthusiasm evident.

"Mary did wonder about that as a possibility," he said pleased by the thought.

"I must say this could be an answer to all our prayers, the decline in numbers is worrying," said the Bishop who had for some time been involved with trying to stem the tide.

The two men continued to chat, birds flitted around them in the tranquil surroundings. The Bishops house was a fine old stone building dating back several hundred years. The grey stone was nicely offset by the Clematis Montana climbing up the walls, the flowers adding to the beautiful location.

"What soil have you here?" enquired the Vicar.

"It's got quite a bit of clay in it, the gardener does quite well, digs in a lot of manure helps to break it down." He was proud of the garden and felt lucky to have such a good man to look after it.

"Lovely plants." The Vicar admiring the borders.

"Yes, I find it a nice place to think," said the Bishop his head making a

sweep of the garden.

The conversation went on for some time, once formal business was covered they digressed to chatting on their mutual interests. The Vicar always felt at ease with the Bishop, he was a friend, mentor and boss rolled into one.

"Oh before I go Bishop." He handed a beautiful object to the Bishop. "Mary found this apparently wrapped in some old rag down behind the back of a cupboard. She showed it to me, not our sort of thing but I believe you collect them."

The Bishop was always pleased to add to his collection, "Well thank you so much Vicar this is kind of you." The Bishop always considering others thought for a moment. "But what about your brothers son, Laurence I believe?"

"He wouldn't want it, if it hasn't got a keyboard attached he's not interested." They laughed, the Bishop thought about the Bishops before him, those who in the past had commanded real armies.

A week soon flew by, for Mary it had been quite exciting. Thrilled at the Bishops backing for her plan, she had sought approval from Tim's parents. Pleased at the idea, she had them behind her and Tim's father had asked if he could make a short speech during the launch ceremony at the village hall. Recent events had galvanised feeling amongst the community, this was seen as a vehicle for change a way of helping the younger generations.

Mary was pleased with offers of support and help Mrs Richardson keen to show her organisational skills had within a very short space of time produced a schedule of activities and fund raising events.

Dave stood at the door, it was Sunday and his friends had itchy feet. Earth and Sky were not ones to remain still, their wander gene could not cope with long stays.

"Keep in touch," he said, as they drove off, the sound of the air-cooled engine almost drowning out his words.

"Sure, take care," shouted Sky, Earth waved his hand as they turned onto the road.

It had been good having them around, he listened to the drone of the old

Volkswagen engine fade to nothing. He was still worried, he felt more uneasy than ever, but he did not know why. The Major was old, he could not believe that he would be stupid enough to do anything silly, but Dave guessed he probably had some powerful connections.

Dave looked at Monica's card, to ring or not to ring? If he left it much longer she would likely have forgotten him.

He went to call on the phone, then put it down. Grabbing his mobile and rucksack, he locked up and wandered off down the lane towards John's farm.

"Hello, Monica," he stood in a field behind a tree, It's the guy in France. There was a bit of a delay while she thought.

"Yes that's the one, bleeding over his poor car," he laughed.

She was quite brief.

"Ok, right, yes I can meet you there, yes fine, many thanks." With that he heard the phone hang up.

So he thought that was short and sweet, at least she did want to meet with him, but why?

"Fancy him making all that money and his friends with troubles," said the plumper lady.

"I heard he only gave them small amounts," said the neighbour.

"No! what when they were in difficulty," she said expressing surprise.

"Yes that's what Tim's mother said," the neighbour continued doing a bit of hoeing.

"Did you tell her how much that fellow makes," said the plumper lady.

"Enough upset, it didn't seem right not with their loss, you know," she said in a sympathetic voice.

The two ladies stood chatting over the fence. Both were remarkably plump considering the workout they gave their jaw muscles.

"Our first Tim Club was a great success," said Mary excitedly.

"Well done dear, I'm very proud of you," his face glowed, seeing her put a rasher pudding on the table.

"Thank you darling," Mary sat opposite her husband, pleased and happy.

"The Major has asked me over tomorrow afternoon, I've heard he has a new sit on lawnmower," said the Vicar, hoping he might get to try it.

"You'd better go and admire it then," said Mary still in her state of

euphoria, "You know how the Major likes to show off now and again."  
"Yes, one has to humour him." The Vicar glance at the clock, then at his plate being piled up with the pudding and his favourite swede and peas.

"Hello Major," said the Vicar wandering over to the Major who was admiring the new machine.

"Come in old chap, good to see you," he said, looking around, "Glad you could make it." The two of them went into the old house.

"What's up Major?" said the Vicar, he noticed how the Major was acting.

"Bloody hip flask," he looked worried shaking his head.

"Still not found it?" The Vicar looked at him, "Perhaps Old Mrs Thackery dropped it while bringing it back, these days she is becoming a bit of a liability."

"Yes, old chap that's what worries me." He looked at the Vicar.

"It's only a hip flask, no need to get upset about it," said the Vicar, "Of course you are attached to it, can't blame you but there are more important things in life."

"Look I trust you Vicar, and I trust Bernard and that's as far as it goes," he looked warily around the room, then back at the Vicar. "It's what was in the flask that's what's worrying me."

"Why?" he looked into the Major's eyes.

"When we were down that blasted hole I came up with a damn fool idea. Message in a bottle," he paused, the Vicar realising that this was a more serious matter listened intently. "We wrote on a note explaining that it was an accident we gave the time and location and who we were."

"So?" he could not see the problem.

"Don't you see man, at the trial we said it was those two pooftas that had trapped us." The Vicar was trying hard to make the connection. "The note made no mention of them, it said ACCIDENT," he screamed at the Vicar.

"Alright Major calm down, so what if it did couldn't we disclaim it as a fake." The Vicar trying to console his old friend.

"Maybe, maybe not, but I will not rest until it's back in my hands and I personally see that note destroyed," he was fuming, "If that stupid, stupid silly old cow had."

"Why do you continue to employ her if you dislike her so." he said in a calm voice

"Because if the stupid bitch finds the bloody flask she's more likely to bring it back," he caught his breath, "It's a good job you did not have to

plan a campaign Vicar.” The Major was beginning to think he was the only one in the village with any savvy. Standing before him was a dim chap, his cleaner was senile and as for Bernard's breakdown after the being in the hole.

“What's that worried look for?” his stare bored into the Vicars cranium. “That young lad Tim's suicide,” he said softly, “You didn't think he..” the Vicar had become disturbed by his friends obsession with the note. “Good god man no, no of course not, I'm an honourable man,” the Major shook his head, “The flask will turn up, silly cow will remember where she left it eventually.”

It seemed rather an out of the way place, Dave began to worry checking his digital compass. He never carried a watch, his mobile had a clock on it and so did the compass, that was enough for him. The car park was deserted, he stood over near a descriptive plaque. It described the wildlife to be found in the forest.

“Psst.” He turned looking for the source of this sound, Monica stood to one side of a Douglas Fir. “Come this way.” He followed her down a trail, she remained silent, he did the same. “Down here,” she said quietly. They had stepped out onto a narrow rough track, he noticed she had looked around before proceeding. “Where are we going?” he asked. “Shhhh,” was her response, still the rear view was nice. To the side of a tall pair of metal gates was a smaller side entrance, it too was metal and like the main gates decorated with the latest style of razor wire. They went through and she locked up, then motioned to him to follow. Ahead was a large lawn, beyond which stood a very low bungalow. As he went down the steps he noticed a stone pavement that went around the sides of the building. She slide open a French door, he stepped inside, the door slide shut.

“Sorry about the cloak and dagger, those bloody journalists and some idiot fans are a pain. I've managed to keep this place a secret, I hope I can trust you to be discreet.” She looked him in the eye. “Yes of course, I like a quiet life myself, sure,” he said with emphasis. “How are you?, you're adventure in the ditch must have been painful.” Elegantly she sat on the plush sofa.

"Yes, yes it was." He felt a bit nervous in her presence, there was something about women who were exceedingly attractive.

"Sit down," she gestured.

"Nice place, must be good having a cleaner." Trying to think of something to say was not his strong point. When his mother visited, or he visited her he had come to realise that the main occupation was to listen, this is what his brain was now conditioned to do when in the company of women.

"I have one up at my old house but not here. The last one decided to make some extra money."

"At the station once I saw a woman reading an article on you in EchoValley," he said.

"Yes that was the one, would you like a drink?" she got up.

"I don't drink alcohol." He looked worried that this admission would go against what little street cred he may have.

"That's ok, I only do it at events for the public image." She moved towards a worktop in the corner of the room, the fridge light came on.

"We have mineral water, organic pure orange juice, organic apple juice, organic carrot juice, or a smoothie I made myself."

"From organic fruit?" he joked.

"But of course," she said.

"Great ok, cool." His face reddened, what was he saying, cool oh god. Bet she thinks I'm a right prat.

"So what do you do Dave?" She handed him a large glass full to the brim.

"Thanks." He took it from her, IT Support, bit of Webdesign.

"Do you use Linux?" Wow he thought she knows about Linux.

"Yes, yes I love Linux." Looks like this guy has a brain, she considered all the nice but dim playboys she had met.

"Hey you don't want to talk about work," she said, "I get fed up of endless questions about my job."

"Sorry, you'll think I'm a boring twitcher, but I could not help noticing you have two bird tables and quite a few bird boxes around the garden." His radar had picked up the birds flying around them and the little bluetit hanging off a feeder.

"There is nothing wrong with ornithology, I love watching them it's nice to know what you've seen, ask some people and all they can reply is 'a bird'", she paused to take a drink, "The money that is spent on some peoples education makes you wonder."

"You must meet with some major VIPs," he said with a smile.

"Some of them are very imbecilic prats, oh my god you're not an undercover reporter are you?" Having been subjected to some very devious people had made her very cautious.

"No way, but I do understand your paranoia," he looked at her.

"Why?" she enquired.

"There may be bugs in here I tend to wander into the natural world to make calls and stuff." What he said made him feel a bit stupid.

"I have several gadgets to sweep my houses for bugs," she said reassuringly, "But why are you so worried. Do you work on military stuff?"

"No, look I don't know who I can trust, for all I know this could be a setup," he said with some fear in his voice.

"Shit, you are worried aren't you?" She leaned towards him. "Look, I am fed up of men I can't trust, that's why I dumped Bisserans. So .. she shrugged her shoulders."

"Why did you ask me over?" He looked at her face, with out the make-up it was very plain but with an underlying beauty.

"After the way that sod left you, he was more worried about his stupid car than either you or me. I felt so bad leaving you like that." He noted the sincerity in her voice.

"Ok, I guess I have to tell someone, but I don't want to put you in danger." He continued to explain the battle for the Woods, the sad tale of Sharon and Tim's alleged suicide. Then he told her how Graham had disappeared of the radar and how Jeremy and Tom had been shafted, linking this to the hip flask.

"Wow, she sat back, I can see why you are thinking conspiracy," she paused, "So you weren't in that part of France by accident, were you?" Her face became quite serious.

"Nop, and you are not the dumb blonde that the media make you out to be," he said, adding, "I meant that as a compliment."

"That's how I read it," she stopped to think a bit.

They sat in silence for a while, she got up and wandered around the room, he from time to time followed her, he could not help admiring that full figure. He felt so, so silly that at a time like this the emotional part of the brain was trying to override the logic and reason half.

She did a lap of the sofa and sat back down, "Now I'm getting paranoid, I

just had tabloid headline vision, dumb blonde pissed in pool and a picture like your friend Tim. Sometimes you think status protects you, but there is always another edge to it, one that will cut you down."

"Like my friends Jeremy and Tom were shafted by a stupid set of coincidences and prejudice," he remarked.

"Yes, Dave," she said, "I can see you need help, and you want to get them out of that hell hole, you want justice for Sharon and Tim. You need to know Graham is safe."

He looked at her, she sat pondering on the problem. "You must have spent hours thinking about this lot," she said.

"Yes, and with Earth and Sky gone I don't sleep well which makes things even tougher," he replied.

"Earth and ..?" she quizzed him.

"Sky, some traveller friends of mine, Earth was a mate from school days, they have been a great support over the last couple of weeks, but they have wandering genes." He pictured the old van with his two friends.

"Have you told them?" Monica knew what it was like to be facing a problem alone.

"No, I didn't want them involved, after what happened to Sharon and Tim," he expressed his concern.

"Just in case," she intimated.

"Yes, I was worried the house might be bugged."

"Sure," she gave a big sigh.

Again he sat and Monica, made her tour of the room.

"Nice fish." Dave broke the silence, observing the large tank behind him.

"Is that a Sailfin Pec?"

"Glyptoperichthys gibbiceps." she replied.

"Wow." He was impressed that anyone could remember it let alone say it.

She chuckled, "Not good for my image hey". He smiled, she continued, "It helps keep the algae under control."

Dave got up and went over to look more closely, "Is that a a Black Winged Hatchfish?"

"Yes, sometimes they can be a pain when you want to clean the tank." she smiled.

"I bet."

For a moment they were both lost in the world of fish, he continued, "It's true what they say about fish helping you relax."  
"I can watch them for hours." his emotional half of the brain responded to her remark, 'And I could watch you for hours.'

"Look you seem very worried about staying at home alone, I have several spare rooms why not stay here tonight?" she said.

"Are you sure?" his emotional brain, kicked the rational part at what it considered a stupid remark.

"Of course," she said, meaning it.

"What about my car?" 'Oh god.' thought the emotional part, 'Now she'll think your another Nigel', "Sorry it's only an old Rover but I thought if someone sees it's there overnight they might report it as abandoned, trace it to me, find I'm not home, then start a search of this area, sorry brains getting carried away again."

"Can you remember the way through the woods?" she asked.

"I think so," he said not totally confident.

"I'll let you out, when you get to your car, turn left out of the car park, follow the road for about two hundred metres, then turn down a track, ignore the sign that says authorised forestry commission vehicles only, travel down quite a way until you reach a track on your right, it goes down hill for about three hundred metres then bares left you will see the gate ahead, when I see you I'll open them, don't blow your horn. When they open just drive straight in, when the gates are closed follow me to the garage. Drive in and wait in the car."

He did as she said, and some half hour later was sitting in the dark, in her garage. It felt spooky, his mind wandered back to an image of Tim sat in the car. Suddenly there was a mass of light, he saw Monica walk over to the garage. Her tee shirt top was doing things to his emotional half, which is unprintable.

"It's ok," she tapped on the window.

He opened the door, "Cheers."

"That's ok, hey want something to eat?"

"Yes please." he hesitated, "But I'm a pain to feed."

"Oh," she said looking at him quizzically.

"Vegan," he mad a comical expression.

She burst out laughing.

"Is it that bad?" he said.

"Vegan's fine, I'm vegan how else do you think I keep this figure," she shook her head, "Your expression it was priceless." She continued giggling, "Sorry."

He looked at her and shrugged his shoulders.

She was some mean cook, they both flaked out in the lounge, the sumptuous furniture was just the thing for an after dinner nap.

"Hey sleepy," she said nudging him, "I need my beauty sleep. It's time for bed."

"Ok, boss." He followed instructions and went into a luxuriously appointed room with on suite everything. Some guest room he thought. After a relaxing bath he hit the sheets, thinking of the decorative razor wire that adorned the gates and fences, he felt contented enough to doze off without the usual worry.

It was morning and he kept hearing a knocking at the door, no it was a dream, no it was not, he came too. "Yes," he shouted.

"Dave, get up quickly." He heard her feet disappear down the passageway. Rushing he quickly dressed, and went down to the where she stood in the lounge in front of a huge wide-screen TV.

"So do we know what happened?" asked the news reader.

"At the moment all the British Embassy will give us is his name and the fact that they have contacted the relatives, back to you in the studio John."

"Thanks Richard." The picture flipped back to the newsroom, "We will keep you updated on any further developments in the mystery of Graham Brown a computer contractor, who's body was found in suspicious circumstances."

"Fuck, shit." Dave sunk to the floor.

Monica looked at him then back at the tele, she hit the remote off button.

Maybe he was right, was this a coincidence? Arab countries could be dangerous, there is always a small group of extremist fanatics.

She tried putting this to Dave, but his mind was in turmoil.

All she could do was comfort him, sitting down by his side and putting her arms around him. His emotional half was so focused he did not even react to being held by such beauty. They sat there for over an hour, his

brain's neurons close to nuclear melt down. Her mind, going through all the things he had said, her logic assessing each piece of evidence, was there something going on?

"I've been thinking if something is going on why has nothing happened to you?" she said reassuringly.

"Hasn't it?" he turned and stared at her.

For a moment her expression was blank, then her face sunk as she said, "Bisserans".

All he could reply was, "hmm." He looked at the fish, "God the car."

"What about it?" she said.

"Suppose they bugged it? They'd know I'm here you could be in danger." He was worried.

"Shit." She ran off, her return was fleeting as she went past him carrying an armful of gadgets, like a distorted set of bracelets swinging too and fro as she moved. He followed her into the garage. They spent hours combing every inch, yet nothing, absolutely nothing.

"Your phone," she said, like a bullet ricocheting around a building she headed to his room.

"What?" 'Where's she off to now?' he thought.

"Is it on?" she asked, as he came up behind her.

"No, why?" his jaw dropped.

"If they send a message to it your position can be tracked, where is it?" she said with a note of urgency.

"In my bag," he replied.

Like a praying mantis her arms sprang towards it grabbing it, frantically emptying everything on the floor. Finding the phone she quickly removed the battery, then proceeded to scan it with one of the gadgets.

"Shit," she looked at him, "Are we over reacting?"

"Maybe," he shrugged, "I don't know any more."

They both sat on the floor, looking at each other.

"Another meeting with the Bishop darling?" said Mary, as she watered the pot plants on the windowsill.

"Yes my dear," said the Vicar putting on his shoes in the hall.

"What about?"

"What dear?" he had half heard her.

"What about?"

“Oh some church business I believe.”

“I hope you're not late tonight, I'm doing your favourite roast.”

“Thank you dear, I will bear that in mind, bye dear.”

She heard the clunk of the front door as he pulled it to. Watching from the window she saw him walk over to his car.

## **What's**

“Look why don't we go to a lawyer with that flask. I could vouch for where it was found and you said yourself that as far as anyone was concerned the old woman had lost it. So you found it down the lane, saw the evidence and decided to hand it in.” Monica was beginning to wonder why she invited this chap. There she was having a quiet break, then all this!

“Because, they would claim the note was a fake, deny ever writing it. They'd say we were in cahoots.” Dave's scepticism was becoming set in concrete.

“Yes and the worse that would happen is your friends stay where they are. The trail of bodies might be the result of your mad Major desperate to find the bloody thing.” She flung her arms in the air.

“Then why Graham he was well out of it?” He stared at her, didn't she understand.

“Maybe it was just a coincidence, these things happen,” she almost shouted.

The tension was growing, Monica got up and left the room. She stood at the French windows, looking at the birds on the table nearest the bungalow. A sparrow was coming into land, while a Bluetit pecked at one of the hanging feeders. A blackbird hopped around on the grass.

Mary waited about ten minutes, continuing to water the plants, her husband was quite forgetful and had a habit of leaving things behind. When she was sure he was not coming back, she moved gracefully into the kitchen. She placed the small watering can under the sink. This was her domain, he never went here, by nature anything practical was too greater challenge for him.

She bent down at the knees, her tight skirt quite restrictive. Opening a corner cupboard her hand reaching round into the inner recesses, while

with her left hand she steadied herself. Pulling out a small box, it was labelled cake decorations. Hardly an everyday thing that anyone would want to use. Rising up she walked over to the kitchen table, pulling up a chair the box in hand, placing it on the table. She sat staring at it, opening it was always a challenge, she felt guilty of deception. It was a feeling of betrayal to all her husband's values. Grasping the lid, the plastic seal gave way, slowly the contents were revealed. Now as always began the difficult choice, a glance at the clock, then back at the open box.

It was some time later, hearing the sound of a car on the gravel drive her heart raced. My God she said to herself, the time. It can't be?, her mind raced yet her body froze. Listening for the key in the door, but nothing, snatching a look at the horological device. Relieved that it was not so late, was it him? She remained sitting on the bed, cloths strewn untidily all over the room.

Straining to hear a sudden banging at the door scarred her. The solid oak door, was under siege. Scared she pulled on her knickers, gathering up a stocking she put it on her foot slowly pulling the delicate fabric up her leg, nervously attaching the suspenders. She repeated this operation, then reaching for her skirt she stopped her head jerked up. The knocking had stopped. Listening, but nothing, quickly she pulled on the skirt, grabbing the blouse from a chair next to the bed. Her fingers fumbling with the buttons, then the banging started again. She tucked the blouse into her skirt, damn she thought looking at the bra lying on the floor. Bending down she grasped it and shoved it into a half open draw which she pushed shut with great care so as not to make a sound. The banging was now coming from the back door. 'Why was she so nervous?' she thought, her eyes looked across to the bedside cabinet. The box, she picked it up making sure its contents were all present, where to put it? She wondered where to put it, the kitchen had no net curtains and was nearest the back-door, sliding under her side of the bed, it seemed the only place her husband was unlikely to look.

The thumping sound again stopped, taking small steps in the pencil skirt towards the bedroom door. Smoothly she slid out onto the landing, here she was away from all the windows, normally her instinct would have been to look out of the window. Something spooked her, looking up at

the loft hatch. Could she pull the ladder down quietly, the cord was difficult to reach, standing on tip toe she was just able to grasp the end pulling it down the newly fitted ladder slid down. The noise panicked her, hitching up her skirt to climb the metal rungs. On her accent with a spark of inspiration her hands grappled with the knot attaching the cord to the hatch. Once removed she continued into the loft, with some difficulty she was able to pull the ladder up.

In the loft, she sat her hands clasped around her knees, back against the wall. "Why was she so scared, why?" her brain confused. The banging started again with even more intensity, then it came to her, there was no voice to accompany the commotion. 'People always shouted is there anyone in, didn't they?', she thought, 'Yes of course she was right of course, and people would leave if there was no reply.' The rectory was a distance from the church, it was a quiet beautiful location. Their garden, covered several acres, one end bordered the church, the rest surrounded by fields, a tree line gravel drive linking the house to the road. Then all went silent, she could hear her heart beating, anticipating what would come next, she had no idea of the time. Looking up at the skylight in the roof it was still bright and sunny. 'Huh', she gulped, gasping for breath, the banging at the back door began again, it was so loud she wondered that the whole village must hear it.

Her phone, she should have taken her mobile, her mind visualised it sitting on the dressing table. Fear overcame her attempt to move to the hatch, she would have to re attach the cord, worried that if she did not it might close and leave her trapped with the intruder. Moving back to the position against the wall she froze, as the door did its best to resist the onslaught. 'Who was it, why did they persist?' she thought, imagining the door. Although sturdy it was not in the same league as the oak front door. She wondered why they did not break a window, perhaps she was making too much of it. 'Was it the guilt of her activities?', she thought, 'Or the recent news articles', her mind recalled the run of incidents, the chap found in the garage, a spate of ghastly attacks on livestock, that man in Dubai? Then she recalled, a woman who had been assaulted while praying in a church only twenty miles away. Her decision to hide in the loft seemed logical to her after considering this depressing list.

The sound of metal falling to the floor, a key flying across the stone slabs

echoed up the stairs. She fought to control her emotions, hyperventilating she had to stay calm they would hear her. Who were they?, her scared mind conjured up menacing images. What she heard sounded like a stampede of cattle moving systematically through the house, then a pause footsteps moved slowly up the stairs. Heavy pounding steps, she imagined an elephant, then a storm started moving one room at a time, it grew louder. Right below her was their bedroom, as things clattered to the floor an image of the item came into her mind. She fought to keep quiet. Would they see the loft, would they try to get into the loft, a bead of sweat ran down from her forehead. The salty drop ran down her nose, for a moment all went silent. The heavy feet moved back onto the landing, minutes seemed like hours. Then the feet moved louder, quieter, louder, again moving into the rooms, then they clunked down the stairs.

She felt relief, that was until the elephant came back up the stairs. They stopped, then a sudden shock, she nearly had a myocardial infarction. The loft hatch jerked upward, the ladder rattling. Bang, again, BANG again, fear gripped her. She wanted to move to the hatch, she wanted to make sure it was secure, but she could not move. BANG, BANG, BANG, the hatch was subjected to a furious attacks. She had to move, she told herself, you have to use the cord to tie up the ladder to the rafters, do it, do it, but be quiet. Her mind shouted commands but her body did nothing, the sound was unbearable, she knew the hatch would give way. Finally she crawled with great stealth, her head near the hatch she was startled as it bounce up in front of her. Without thinking some survival instinct controlled her hands, winding the chord around the rungs, then onto a beam knotting it as tight as possible.

It was lucky that the loft had recently been boarded in, moving across it only a month ago would have been far more hazardous. She moved backwards in an automatic response as the broom handle poked up between the rungs of the ladder. Who ever it was they were very strong, then it disappeared. She sat still awaiting a new onslaught. Crunch, she heard, then a clatter of fragments hitting a door. More, and more attacks on the ceiling around the hatch. The thin board crumbled, suddenly the loft board nearest to her position came under assault, this board was strong and thick. When Mike did a job he did it well, the strong nails held against the initial thrusts. She heard a crack, it was the sound of the

broom handle snapping. Again she listened to the great heavy feet move down the stairs.

'What next?', now only her heart beat filled her head. She sat back against the wall, hands sweating, head shaking. Nothing no sounds, nothing. Some time went by, a car door slammed several seconds later the engine started and she heard tyres on gravel. Yet she could not bring herself to move. Fear turned to shock, her body involuntarily rocked.

Some hours later the Vicar arrived home, he opened the front door. His nose expecting the smell of his favourite roast, he was quiet unprepared for the devastation that lay before him. His immediate reaction was concern for his wife. "Mary, Mary," he shouted running into each room, he then ran up the stairs negotiating debris that was strewn everywhere. "Mary, MARY," he shouted at the top of his voice. There was no reply, Mary was unable to respond still stunned and in shock she continued sitting in the loft, her mind retreated into the inner recesses.

When he opened the bedroom he scanned the mayhem, his eyes focused on a broken box. He was shocked at what he saw, who put those disgusting things there? He could not believe it had anything to do with Mary. 'Where was she, where?', his mind raced to try and comprehend the situation. He went back downstairs, to the hall and picked up the phone as he dialled the number realising there was no sound. The phone was dead, he fumbled in his bag for the mobile. After calling the police, his mind again went back to the box and its contents, 'Suppose it was his wife's. What would people think?', he could not countenance the consequences. Running back up to the bedroom he grabbed the box, ran back downstairs and out to the car opening the boot he chucked it in, locked it, moved back to the house and awaited the police. He sat dazed, in the kitchen.

"Vicar." The Inspector entered the kitchen finding the front door open, he had carefully wandered down the hall spotting a dejected man sitting head down near the kitchen window.

The Vicar raised his head, looking towards his friend, the Inspector could see he had been crying. When his officers came back from the checking the house and gave him an assessment he realised why.

"Mary," was all he could utter.

"Where is she?" questioned the Inspector.

"I don't know?" he shook his head, "I don't know." A tear rolled down his cheek.

The Inspector instructed his men to look for the Vicars wife.

"We'll find her," he reassured the Vicar.

Some time later they helped her down from the loft.

"She is in a state of shock Vicar, we have called for medical assistance," said the Inspector.

"Is she hurt?" asked a concerned Vicar.

"No, no, she seems ok but in shock," said the Inspector, putting a hand on his shoulder,

He saw her but she was like a zombie, trembling and mute.

An ambulance arrived, driven by a stocky ambulance man, a female paramedic helped Mary into the rear of the vehicle. After closing the rear doors, it drove off.

"You can't stay here Vicar", said the Inspector, "Is there anyone you could stay with? We need to gather evidence here," he said softly.

"The Major," muttered the Vicar.

The Inspector left his men to do their work, he knew the Major and soon had the Vicar settled into one of the Majors spare rooms. The Major, was more angry than shocked. He launched into a verbal attack on the state of the country.

"How could this happen, here?" he expressed with emphasis, "To the Vicar of all people!"

"I know Major, it's unbelievable," said the Inspector.

"You are not safe anywhere," said the Major, "Who would think it in village. A town maybe, you get a lot of louts in towns, but here."

"Yes, Major, it is terrible," said the Inspector, trying to placate the Major.

"Drugs, that's the problem, probably a junky. They are everywhere, have you thought of that Inspector?" he spoke in a questioning tone. Looking into the inspectors eyes, exercising his perceived military authority.

The inspectors radio squawked, it was one of his officers. The officer puzzled by the arrival of another ambulance was reassured by the Inspector.

"They have a new computer system," he said, "There have been quite a

few mix ups lately.”

The officer was satisfied with his superiors explanation.

“Well Major, I think I should be getting back to the Rectory,” he said, moving towards the door.

Dave and Monica had calmed down, they were joking about how silly they had been. Monica had put it down to her paranoia about the paparazzi, and his series of coincidences. They sat in the garden, relaxed and watching the birds flying around. A robin sat on the arm of a garden chair, he was a cheeky little fellow. She called him Fearless, as he would feed from her hand.

Fearless suddenly took fright, there was a banging on the gates, Monica ran into the house and checked the monitors. It was a woman, she went over to the gates. “What do you want she enquired?”

“Please let me in,” pleaded the woman.

Monica opened the side door and beckoned her in, Dave looked on, the woman seemed familiar. Monica then re-locked the side door, her air of calm evaporated.

They walked slowly towards the house, the woman taking short steps restricted by her tight skirt. Monica held her hand, the woman was dishevelled, hair more punk than coiffured. Dave walked ahead opening the French doors, he stood watching the two women. He contrasted Monica's youthful beauty with the elegance of the more mature woman. Odd he mused as he noticed the gentle movement under the woman's blouse, his rational side thinking 'typical, trust you to notice', the thought aimed at the emotional half of his brain.

They sat in the lounge, the woman sat in silence for some while, Dave looked hard at her. Monica saw him staring and was about to tell him off, when he said, “Mary?”

The woman looked across to Dave, this woman reminded him of the Vicar's wife.

“You know this woman?” said Monica.

“I think it's the Vicar's wife,” he said, “But I don't understand we are miles away from the village.” He looked at the woman, “What happened to you?”

“I knew, I knew,” she blurted, “They were not taking me to the hospital, it

was all wrong.”

“What happened?” said Dave trying to get answers.

It was some time later when she had opened up to them, about her escape when the Ambulance was going down a back road and a tyre had punctured. While the large man was changing the wheel, the paramedic woman checking the patient was still asleep on the stretcher, wandered off for a leak. Mary had seized the opportunity to escape.

Dave and Monica looked at each other, then back at Mary then again at each other. They were both confused, and swept again with a sense of fear.

“Why would they take her?” he was disturbed.

“Perhaps they thought she had seen the intruder, perhaps it was the same man as the Ambulance driver,” said Monica.

Dave was impressed by her, she was so smart, he liked brainy women.

“But what I don't understand is why the Rectory was trashed, what were they looking for?”

“I doubt it was the Majors,” she almost said flask, but then she wondered cautiously if the woman was a plant, “The Majors thing.”

Mary looked confused by this odd remark.

“Will you excuse us a minute, I need Dave's help,” said Monica, “Could you give me a hand.” She gestured to Dave, he followed her down the corridor back into his room. She closed the door, “Do you think she might be a plant?”

“She does not seem very green,” he joked.

“Don't be silly, I'm serious,” she looked worried, “What if you are right, she is one of them.”

“Fuck,” he said, “No, no the Vicar maybe, but Sharon's mother was friends with Mary.”

“So?” she said, demanding a better answer.

“It's a long story but from what I was told this woman is not like her husband, trust me on this.”

“Ok,” Monica felt that she should trust him on this one.

They wandered back into the room, Monica walked over to a console, pressing some buttons, Dave watched metal shutters slide in front of the windows and doors.

“Blimey,” he said, looking at Monica.

"Neat huh," she said flicking through the monitors, just in case they followed her.

"You had all this done?"

"When you have been stalked, and not just by the media, it's this or bodyguards," she said.

He could see Mary looking at the gap disappear as the shutters finished closing. All three of them sat and pooled their data, there seemed an increased urgency.

Monica made them a meal, although none of them felt much like eating, they then retired to their rooms. Monica's room was at the other end of the bungalow, this worried Dave a bit. He voiced his concern, but she felt safe behind the fence and the shutters and told him not to worry.

Mary was in the room opposite his, in the second guest room. Dave lay on his bed unable to sleep, his mind drifted. He mused over the strange partnership, chalk and cheese he thought. Mary was much younger than the Vicar, a man who had married later in life. He wondered what she saw in him, his mind drifted back to the days events.

Mary sat on the corner of the bed, for a moment she was lost in a sea of confusion. 'This won't do', she said to herself, getting up she slid the skirt off stepping out of it. For some reason this triggered something, changing direction from the bathroom to the door which she opened quietly. With a mouse like tap, she knocked Dave's door and whispered, "Can I come in?"

Dave, slid off the bed and went to the door, 'Was it Mary?', he thought, 'What did she want at this time of the night?'

He opened the door, "Yes".

"Can I come in?" she whispered, looking at him in his Y fronts and tee shirt.

"Sure." He closed the door. "What's up?" He wandered back over to the bed and sat down on the edge.

"I'm concerned, what if the flat tyre was deliberate? What if your invite was planned?" she said, keeping her voice low. She was still standing by the door. The room was filled with shadows illuminated by his bedside lamp.

"Sit down," he said, it seemed surreal, there was the Vicar's wife

standing in stockings at his door. She came over and sat by him on the bed. "I can understand why they might be out to get me. But you, you have nothing to do with our environmental group." He looked puzzled. "Suppose, it's something else?" she said, "Who is this Monica woman?" Dave was confused, there were now two women, could he trust either of them? The vicars wife turning up like this, was it really a coincidence? He started to ponder the statistics, no not of the woman sitting next to him tempted as he was. He overrode those thoughts, it was the number and nature of the recent events which he needed to resolve.

"I'm scared," she looked into his eyes, "It was so frightening."

"Look I hear what you're saying but right now we both need to get some sleep," he yawned.

"This is important," she pleaded.

"Look go back to your room, let me think about what you have said, I'll come over if I have any thoughts."

"Promise?" she said, needing support.

"Yes, now go and get some sleep." He flicked his hand in the direction of the door. She went across the room and slipped out and back into her room. Looking around she was uneasy, 'maybe he's right', she removed her stockings, slipped out of her knickers and unbuttoned the blouse, then slid under the sheets.

Dave now could not sleep, what she said played on his mind. Over and over he ran the scenarios. He considered Monica, then Mary, but he kept coming back to the same conclusion. 'I suppose I'd better tell her', he said.

He wandered to the door, he did a gentle tap, he waited.

Mary could not sleep, 'Was that a tap at the door? It must be Dave.' With her usual elegance she got out of bed and wandered to the door,

"Dave?" she whispered.

"Yes," he whispered back.

She opened the door, he stepped in and she gently closed it.

Embarrassment came over her. Sorry, she did a funny hand signal.

"Oh," said Dave, "Don't worry", as he got the message.

"What do you think?" she was eager for his answer.

"Look I've been here for several days and I might be wrong but Monica seems pretty genuine to me," he said sincerely.

"Are you sure?" she had to be certain, "She's very beautiful and I know what men are like sometimes a pretty face can cloud their judgement."

"Look for all I know you might be the bad apple?" he countered, mind he

hoped not. His mind was drifting as he thought about how well she normally hid her assets. His emotional brain was, trying to get the rational part to do a bit of mental measurement estimation without much luck.

“So you think we are ok here?” Mary needed reassurance.

“Yes, yes I do,” he said their eyes meeting.

“Ok,” she said, her thoughts wandered down what she imagined would be a path to hell. She kept telling herself she was safe here, it did not work since her parents had died she could not bear to be alone. It's what drove her involvement in so many community projects. “I'm frightened,” her voice strained, “Please, please don't go.” She realised she must be making him feel awkward, ‘You silly woman you're the Vicar's wife, he's embarrassed, let him go be strong, you'll be ok’, her mind raced.

“I don't want to be alone,” she blurted, ‘oh God what must he think of me?’, her head full of mixed emotions. “Please,” her eyes watered, ‘can't he see I'm terrified, doesn't he realise what I've been through.’ ‘How will Monica react if he stays and she finds them together!’ he considered Mary's plea, ‘Why was life so bloody complicated? How could he sleep in the same bed as the Vicar's wife?’ He realised it was not some sordid romp she wanted, the woman was nervous as hell, but if he did remain that's most likely where he'd end up, he mulled things over in his mind.

“Hold on I'll be back,” he said. He wandered off down the passage leaving the door ajar.

Monica jumped, “Who is it?” she called.

“Dave,” came the reply, “Can I come in?”

“Why?” she wondered what he wanted at this time of night, looking at the clock.

“It's Mary,” he said.

Monica got out of bed and walked to the wardrobe, ‘I better put something on’, hanging from the door was a pink silky dressing gown. Her hands slid down into the sleeves, wrapping it around her body. She opened the door, “What's the matter?”

“She's scared,” he said, “She wants me to stay with her tonight.” He paused, “I felt awkward, I don't know what to do?”

“Dave, after what she's been through!” she looked at him, ‘men! Didn't he realise the woman needed comforting’, “Then do it you silly man and let me get some sleep.”

“But, she's the Vicar's wife!”

“And he's not here, so you'll have to be his stunt double, Dummy, now go be the hero.” She gave him a dismissive wave and wandered back to the bed, 'Fuck this is a disaster zone', she thought, 'What a bloody mess.' She removed the gown flinging it down and fell backwards on the bed. He ventured back to Mary, walked in and shut the door.

“Please,” she beckoned him pulling back the sheets on the other side of the bed, “Thanks I know you must feel, well.” she stumbled for the right words, “What with me being the Vicar's wife.” She stared at him for a moment, “Are you sleeping in those?” Typical man, never changes his cloths until they rot from his body.

“But, but.” he stuttered.

“How long have you had those on?” 'God she though I must sound like his mother. All men were silly kids, look at him.' “Take them of and go have a shower.”

“It's late!”

“Oh, go on,” while she waited for the whining child she thought of her mother telling dad to change cloths before going to do the garden, or work on the car. 'Men cloths.'

He came back into the room, naked and rather sheepishly got into bed.

“I won't bite.” she looked at him, laying on her side with her head towards him, 'Look at him, staring at the ceiling.'

Pulling up the sheets, she bid him goodnight, and rolled over onto her other side to reach for the lamp. That's a nice feeling, she enjoyed the motion of her breasts as they rolled over her chest, now the left one lay on top the right. 'At least he has taken my mind off things', she lay motionless, her hand still hovered near the bedside lamp. 'My bra', her mind saw it stuffed in the wrong draw. 'Would he notice, would my darling notice, no no he just waited for cloths to appear clean and fresh. It feels nice without as they move under the smooth fabric, oh but people must notice. Oh my box, what if they have found my box', she drifted off in a sea of scenarios.

The Major and the Vicar were taking breakfast, when their meal was interrupted by the arrival of the Inspector.

“How's my wife?” said the Vicar, worried he was missing her.

“Ah,” said the Inspector

“Ah,” said the Major, “Come on man spit it out.”

"I sent an WPC to the hospital to ask a few questions," he paused.  
"And?" said the Vicar, the Major was reconsidering his opinion of the Inspector.

"It would appear she never arrived," he said, his embarrassment clearly visible.

"What," shouted the Major startling the Vicar.

"She never arrived, I have launched a search operation, we are doing everything we can", his voice trailing off.

The Vicar, looked hard at him, "The other ambulance!"

The Major, spoke first, "What are you getting at old chap?"

"The Inspector had a call from one of his officers that another ambulance had arrived, they all looked at each other, Don't you remember?" he continued, "You thought it was the new computer system."

"Yes, I did didn't I," the Inspector stroked his chin, analysing the new evidence.

Later that day Gail was regretting her relationship with Dave. The Inspector and a female officer were giving her a grilling. Bombarding her with question after question sometimes repeating a previous one. She sat in a small room on one side of a table, the female officer stood in one corner, the Inspector sat staring at her with a ferocious intensity.

The Inspector got up, he paused the interview. Later after checking her story he let her go, lucky he thought, lucky. She had a good alibi, now he had to think again he had already enquired about Sharon. At least he had a main suspect, he thought as he travelled back to visit the Major's house.

"So you think it is the one remaining greenie," said the Major.

"He's gone missing, and by God he certainly has a motive," said the Inspector confident in his surmising.

The Vicar looked at him, he responded, "After you won Vicar they have had several tragedies."

"So where is the blighter?" barked the Major.

"I wish we knew Major, I wish we knew," said the Inspector.

He blinked his eyes, it was still dark, the clock radio had a bright display, his eyes tried to focus. 'Ten seventeen, that late huh.'

Mary reached for the light cord above the headboard, both of them

struggled to cope with the mass of photons bombarding their retinas. She pulled herself up and sat against the pillows and board, "You sleep ok?"

"Yes thanks."

"I'm sorry," she looked at him sympathetically

"Hey," he shrugged, taking up a similar position.

"He blanks out his mistakes, it wasn't you're trees," she felt sorry for the environmentalists.

"Who?" Dave's head turned in towards hers.

"My darling husband?"

"Oh," he paused, "We had a hunch it was more to do with that underground river."

She leaned towards him, "Hmm." was all she said.

Monica got up she had to tell the other two the latest news. She looked down at her chest wandering to the mirror. With all the commotion of the last few days she had not admired them since the op, moving from one side to the other noticing that the scars were less visible. 'Just to earn a living', she contemplated them. Dave, he'd looked but not like some, and last night she'd been hard on him. 'He always looks into my eyes when he speaks', her respect for him was growing. She picked up the gown and put it on, then went to Mary's room.

There was a knock at the door. "Come in," said Dave.

"Hi you two, how are you Mary?" Monica sat on the bed beside her.

"Dave told me how you were feeling."

"Did you get him to stay last night?" Mary asked.

"Yes, he was so worried, you being the Vicar's wife." She looked away from Mary towards Dave, "Sorry if I was a bit harsh."

"Hey, a lots happened." He gave her a forgiving look.

Mary piped up, "I think Dave was worried that he might incur the wrath of God," she giggled.

Monica smiled, her look of joy faded quickly as she turned back to Dave, "You're wanted, there are pictures on the news."

"Why?" said Mary.

"They think he kidnapped you, and they are also looking for a blonde woman, last seen dressed as a paramedic. Not all ambulances are what they seem, one was found abandoned ten miles from here."

"Shit." His expression said more than the word. "Makes you kinda

understand how a fox must have felt when it was legal.”

“But will they dig us out?” said Mary.

Sir Gerald Stanley Smyth, sat glued to the screen.

“Are you ok in there?” shouted his wife.

“Yes just looking at the news,” he replied.

The hatch opened and a gentle slightly weathered bespectacled face looked across at him. “More trouble?”

He turned and looked at her, “Isn't there always?”

“He'd stay in doors for days,” she looked at the other lady.

“Yes, very odd, all the curtains drawn,” the woman looked back at her neighbour.

“Well it's obvious now,” it all fitted in place.

“You knew him then?” questioned the reporter.

“Oh no, not really, no he kept himself to himself,” she said trying to disassociate herself.

“The couple opposite, he went over to them from time to time,” interjected the plumper of the two.

“Yes your right dear he did,” she said backing up her neighbour.

“Very well off you know, of course we thought it was his work,” she explained, “Now we realise he gets it all from kidnapping.”

“Of course dear, that's why he had that old car,” of course it all made sense.

“Oh?” said the reporter, here was a bit more to the story.

“He couldn't go round living it up,” said the neighbour.

“Why?” said the reporter.

“Immoral earnings he did not want to attract attention,” she wondered that the reporter had to have it explained to him, but then she mused, 'He is only a reporter, you can't expect to much.'

“Well you wouldn't would you,” said the slightly pumper lady.

“No, no it all makes sense now,” said the neighbour pleased that at least her and her friend were on the ball.

The two women looked at each other.

“Well back to you in the studio John.” The screen changed back to the newsroom.

“Thanks Richard.” The newsreader turned back to face the camera, “We will bring you more news from our reporter who is following the events

surrounding these six environmentalists." The screen cut to six pictures of the Half Penny Woods Conservation Group members. It then cut back to the newsreader, who continued with other news.

Gerald stroked his beard, he grabbed the remote and switched the thing off. Alice came into the room with a tray of cucumber sandwiches and a pot of tea, "Lunch is served your Lordship."  
"Thank you my good woman," he replied as she placed the tray on the table. Ever since his knighthood she had teased him. Both of them had come from humble backgrounds. Gerald's father had worked in a shoe factory as a supervisor. The building that had been a hive of activity now stood empty, decaying by the canal side. A family of rats had taken residence, there was a colony of bats in what remained of the roof space and copious different species of wild plants had colonised the open spaces. A nature series had been made, in which Gerald had looked at Industrial Nature.

Alice had met him with her parents, his father took his wife and Gerald away from the grime whenever possible and one day they came upon another family sat on atop a hill in their picnic spot. It was a jovial exchange, that cemented a bond between both groups. Alice had been very shy at first, but with Gerald she opened up and their passion for wildlife made them a great team.

"Well Major?" The Vicar pleased to see him back.

"I'm worried about Mary, don't want to alarm you old chap but down at the village shop they reckon this Dave fellow might be a murderer." He was very blunt, the Major was never the diplomat.

"Oh." The Vicar's expression betrayed a sense of foreboding. "Why?" he blurted out.

"Look, this chap disappears, leaves the country then a few days later returns. One of their number dead in his garage, this chap seems to have an alibi. Then we hear another of their number found floating in the gulf. This fellow had been to France."

"You think he may gone the the Middle East from there?" questioned the Vicar.

"Why not, those French suck up to the Arabs, you know," he said with an air of contempt. The Major remembered the loss of Normandy and Duke, or should we say King William's lands as though it were yesterday. "Why

not?"

"Do you think I should?" He went quiet.

"What Vicar, what?" urged the Major.

"Well, I found something in our house, hideous things."

"What sort of things man, came a gruff response, come on out with it."

"Major, please," stuttered the Vicar his mind dishevelled by hideous visions.

"Sorry old chap," he apologised, "Your a bit delicate at the moment, understandable."

"I hid these perverted items, I was worried the press might, you know?" his face blushed.

"Oh, yes they do get the wrong end of the stick," he looked at the Vicar, "Didn't want a scandalous headline."

"Exactly yes, but well they can't belong to Mary, she wouldn't have," he shuddered, "Such filth."

"No, Vicar, quiet right," he looked at the Vicar, "Your Mary is a fine woman."

"Perhaps," he hesitated.

"My God, see what your saying, the bastard's a bloody pervert, been doing abominable things to your wife," he stopped, "By God man if I get hold of him I'll rip the buggers balls off. They're too bloody soft on these, these scum. Look man you have to call the police, it's evidence. The Inspector's a good fellow he'll be discreet."

"Yes, would you mind." the Vicar slumped back in the Chair, he wondered why God was punishing him so. It was unbearable, this year had been so trying, only his faith gave him the strength to go on.

The television sat in the corner of the lounge. The two women sat on the sofa, tea and biscuits sustaining them.

The newsreader spoke, "We now go over to a live update. John what do you have for us?"

"Well Richard the Inspector is about to make a speech."

"Thank you all for coming," said the Inspector, the camera focused on his face.

"We are appealing to the public for help, we must stress the main suspect is considered dangerous and should not be approached."

"Do you have any new evidence?" shouted a seasoned reporter who

looked like his mobile office had connections with a brewery.

"Yes, we can't give any details, but we do have evidence linking the suspect to France, our colleagues in Interpol suggest a man fitting his description flew on false papers to the location of the murdered contractor."

"Do you still think Tim's death was suicide?" said another reporter.

"We are in the light of new evidence reviewing the case."

"You said that the suspect could be a danger to women. Can you elaborate on that?"

"Some items have come to our attention, leading us to suspect he may be a deviant, I can say no more than that at this time."

"You have issued photos of the Vicar's wife and the main suspect, do you have any of the blonde woman?"

"No, unfortunately we only have a brief description from one of my officers." The inspector looked around at the crowd.

"Do you have a motif for the murders?" asked Richard.

"No we are still puzzled as to the reason behind these incidents." The Inspector looked away towards a woman reporter.

"How is the Vicar coping?" she said.

"He is receiving care, and police protection," came the curt reply.

Richard turned to camera, "Well it looks like this small quiet country village was hiding a monster."

"Richard what is the reaction of local people?" said John leaning towards the screen behind the newsdesk.

"Well, throughout the day I have been interviewing them. They have been stunned and shocked by the news, many are angry that such an evil man walked amongst them."

"Thanks Richard." The studio came back into view and the newsreader continued.

"Oh my, well that does not surprise me," said the slightly plumper lady dusting a shelf.

"He was friends, if you can call it that?" the neighbour her lips curled as she spoke, "with those two..", she nudged, "you know."

"Disgusting, disgusting, makes ya flesh crawl," replied the plumper of the two.

"I know, that poor woman, you're not even safe in you're own home," she said shaking her head slowly.

"What is the world coming too. The poor Vicar he must be distraught."

“Poor man.”

The two women deliberated as they watched the news report.

Earth returned with a newspaper, they had holed up in Derbyshire, hundreds of miles from the centre of media attention.

Sky's first reaction was, “Suppose they think we are involved.”

“Na,” said Earth dismissively.

“Don't be like that, you know what people think of us travellers.”

“Fuck, this is some bad shit,” he thumped the dashboard.

Oh no thought Sky watching him read, “What's up?”

“You are not going to believe this crap.” His lava pressure was building,

“Fucking media pricks, fucking pigs, they are accusing Dave, my mate Dave, of being a homicidal, kidnapping, deviant pervert.”

“What?” said Sky, her face screwed in disbelief at what he was reading.

“You're fucking me.”

“No I ain't,” he shoved the paper at her, “You read this shit.” He sat looking out to the horizon, a sea of heather sky and rocky outcrops filled his view. He wanted to do something, he knew they had to help, but Sky was right, two travellers would be like carrion to those bastard vultures.

“This is a load of bull,” her head moved forward as she expressed her amazement. “It's like they've hung the him already.”

“Fuck them, fuck them,” he was well angry.

Sky looked at him, “What can we do? Jeremy and Tom, Innocent yet they got banged up, now this.”

“Sharon's probably drugged up in that fucking clinic, Graham's dead, Tim's dead, there is something fucking crazy going down.”

“But what?” she looked at Earth, straining for some kind of answer, she just could not get her head around this crap.

They sat for a time just looking at the view.

“Richardson,” said Earth.

“What?” Sky looked at him, why did he say that name.

“Dave,” said he contacted the clinic but a Dr Richardson would not allow any visitors.

“So?” She did not see where he was going with this.

“That name, that name, it rings bells.” His head froze.

“Are you ok?” Sky looked concerned.

“Fuck, Mrs bloody Richardson, one of the Vicars cronies.” He was starting to make connections.

“So, I don't see the local do gooder and her doctor son going on a

psycho trip.”

“Let me think.” He gestured to her, she slumped back in the seat.

Monica walked around the side of the bed, “Budge up.” she said. The three of them sat in Mary’s bed, with Dave sandwiched in the middle.

“We have to try and work out what’s going on, we have too.” Monica was showing the strain.

“What if the police search this area, what if they come here?” said Dave, looking straight ahead.

“We tell them what happened,” said Mary, looking at him.

“You’re so naïve Mary,” said Monica leaning to look at her, “They will say you’re traumatised and don’t know what your saying, Dave will be thrown to the wolves and they will have me as a dumb neurotic accomplice. You saw the news, you saw what they were saying, you saw what happened to his friends. There are some powerful ruthless people out there, I should know, I’ve met some of them.”

Mary looked back speechless.

“The police might not be police,” he turned his head and looked at Mary.

“Both Mary and Monica gasped, they both understood what he was implying.”

“What’s the best scenario,” he continued, “We have the victim and two suspects, if the real police find us we might change things, might.” He emphasised the last word.

“But if we had some kind of accident,” continued Monica, “And then they found us!”

The thought scared all of them rigid.

“How long could we last here?” Dave directed his question at Monica.

“God, I’m stocked up for a paparazzi siege.” she shrugged her shoulders, her gown loosened. “Maybe a couple of months, if we ration it.”

“Give me a hand Les,” said John struggling with a plank. He was trying to patch up the old barn. “I don’t believe a word of it Les.”

Les looked up, at him on the ladder, “Word of what?”

“Where have you been lad?” said John, gazing down.

“Oh the stuff about Dave.” He handed John another plank. “No, it’s typical speculation.”

“Bloody witch trial if you ask me,” said John his speech awkward, as he held several nails in his mouth.

"Good old British Justice," said Les.

"Tis, if your rich, same as if your ill." He banged a nail in, Les passed him another couple, "Do you know I were readin an article about Death Row in America."

"Oh yes." said Les.

"Seems, number of white people who get the chop is much lower than those blacks." He banged in another nail.

"Whys that then John?" said Les, passing up a plank.

"Well, it seems the rich white folks get good lawyers for their miscreant sons and daughters." He positioned the plank lipping it under the edge of the previous one.

"That sounds about right," said Les.

"Everyone equal in the eyes of the law," John mumbled.

The sun caught on the head of the hammer, the light reflected like a dancing ghost on the dry black timbers.

Monica, looked at her two companions. "Look they aren't looking for me, so if we get any visitors I will handle things."

"Suppose they want to search?" Dave looked at her, "Police or villains they are both going to be meticulous."

"He's right," piped Mary, "When I think what happened in our house."

Monica, dropped her head in thought, Dave and Mary had a point, real police or fake she would have to play along. Her mind wandered to the priest holes used by the aristocracy to hide clergy during the persecutions. She watched her cleavage as her breasts rose and fell on each deep breath. She though how hard it was to hide them under the flimsy gown, now she had to hide two people.

Monica wandered back through her thoughts. She remembered the consultations with the surgeon in Paris, when he had first shown her the new implants. They seemed big, but it was only when she woke after the operation that it hit her just how big. Now she stared at them for inspiration. 'God if she could stuff these two under some baggy top, like she did with her boobs', Monica lifted her head and spoke to them, "Come on you guys, help me out here?"

Dave and Mary looked at Monica, then each other, then back at Monica. Mary timidly said, "It's not like we know your place." She could not think of what else to say and after her loft experience she discounted it as and

idea.

Dave spoke, "We could stand motionless by your pond, with fishing rods."

"You could not grow white beards fast enough and besides I'm right out of bobble hats." Monica had to laugh, he had a good sense of humour she would give him marks for that.

Mary stared at them both, Monica realised that she had not got the joke, she nudged Dave, "Explain to Mary".

"Oh, ah, gnomes Mary." he watched a smile grow, he continued, "Do you know it might just work."

"Don't be silly." said Mary.

"No it's, not silly if Monica tells them we are Czech gnomes they will be convinced."

"Eh." Monica, was beginning to question his sanity, 'had he lost it?'

"When I have travelled by coach into the Czech Republic there are markets near the border entry points, there you can see huge gnomes." He looked at each of them in turn.

"What do they feed them on?" she paused, "Steroids?"

"Gnomes on steroids," Mary looked at Dave, "You should give sermons, you'd have packed pews." again she looked at Dave, "God my husbands dull"

Dave remembered, The Life of Brian and Eric Idle's end song, 'here he was the most wanted evil man in Britain yet here he was sat in bed with a beautiful woman on either side. His main worry right now was that he would wake up and find Teddy on one side and his Linux penguin on the other. But he was no Buddha dreaming about being a butterfly and waking to find he was a butterfly dreaming about being a Buddha. God he thought if only he could be one of those shape shifters, well if they all could.'

"Have you got an idea." Monica nudged him.

"No, no just thinking," he replied.

"You don't have a priest hole?" he grinned.

"No the architect was protestant," she replied.

"You ok Mary?" said Monica, as Mary swung her legs round to the floor.

"Fine, just need the loo." Monica's head dropped again in thought. As Mary walked around the bed, she thought she noticed a fleeting glance from Dave, she saw his eyes go up focusing on the lampshade in the middle of the ceiling.

Mary sat on the loo, none of them had made any effort to dress or eat. Her thoughts went back to Dave's glance, somehow she was pleased. She knew he had been watching the sway of her breasts as she walked slowly past the end of the bed, she wondered if he would watch them again when she went back to the bed. She mused on her husband, the only thing that stimulated him was God, Viagra was useless in his world.

She moved slowly back past the end of the bed, looking away from Dave so as not to put him off. He was looking, he was she new it, 'Thank you Dave, thank you', she said to herself. At last a nice guy who appreciated them, she sat back next to him. "That's better," she said.

He smiled at her, he worried that she might have seen him looking at her breasts, sometimes he thought men who preferred other parts of women's anatomy were so lucky. He had to pick the two most obvious things in direct visual range. 'You can't look at anything these days without someone accusing you of some thing or other', he said to himself.

"Monica," he said.

"Yes," she replied.

"Have you got an indoor pool?"

"Yes why?"

"I just had a stupid idea that if we dived down into it we would find a secret airlock below one of the filter gratings, and below that a series of secret rooms where we could hide. I just was considering a place where dogs would not be able to sniff us out. Stupid idea." he said shaking his head.

Mary closed her eyes and made a slight hmm sound in response.

"Best you've had so far, keep at it. My turn now." She slid off the bed and wandered into the bathroom.

On the way back Monica grinned at him, she knew he was peeking, she didn't mind. He smiled at her as she sat back on the bed. "So genius, anything?"

He shook his head.

"I feel a bit silly you two naked and me wearing this, do either of you mind if I take it off?" she heard a stereo, "No"

Dave thought he had gone to heaven, he watched her stand up, slip the gown of, turn and sit down again. Mary was still resting with her eyes closed, but Dave's were on stalks.

"Tired Mary?" she said concerned.

"Yes I didn't sleep much, nightmares," she said, eyes closed. Trying to focus on their predicament, he came up with a suggestion, "Why don't we make a list of all the locations within your home and then consider the suitability of each as a hiding place?"

"That's a start." Monica looked at Mary then at Dave, "Come on, lets leave Mary to get some rest." She beckoned Dave to follow her. They wandered down the passage into the lounge, he looked in the direction of the bird tables, but the shutters were still closed.

"I'll get a pad and pen." Monica went over to some draws, pulled open the top one rummaged a bit, then like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat. "Volare," she said with a satisfied look. "I'll navigate, you note," she said handing him the pen and pad, "I'm curious, do you like them?" she asked, "Some men don't."

"Like who?" said Dave, wondering what subject they were on. He was lacking sleep too and felt like he was not keeping up. Had he missed something.

"My friends," she grinned.

"Which friends?" probably the wrong reply.

"These two," pointing out the obvious.

"Oh silly me," he spluttered, "Yes there fantastic, amazing." He thought 'What do I say?', come on brain, come on. His face went serious, she looked at him. "This is probably going to sound very corny and I bet a thousand men have said it to you, but well, I mean this with all my heart." Monica looked at him. "When I saw them in the bedroom, I just thought that they suited you so much and your just so beautiful." She considered what he said. "But even more than that, over these past few days, well from the moment I found your card, you're caring, smart, you're all the things that those stupid people out there think you're not." Emotions were bubbling, "I just think your wonderful, and thank you for all you've done, helping me, helping Mary. Your really really kind." A tear rolled down. 'Oh god what's she going to think of me, a snivelling, paranoid crybaby', he thought. He was not prepared for her reaction. She was so used to people making judgements, stereotyping her like she was a dumb mannequin with no feelings. She recalled with seething anger the headline in one paper after she broke up with Bisserans, "Plastic Boob Bitch." God that made her angry.

He looked at her face, it had grown fierce, involuntarily he could feel himself trembling.

"It's ok." She noticed the look in his eyes, his awkward stance, she

smiled trying to reassure him, "Sorry I was thinking of a newspaper headline it made me pissed, it always does whenever it remember it." He gulped, she took one of his hands, now she was starting to cry, "Thank you for what you just said." She snivelled, sitting on the sofa she pulled his hand, he sat beside her, the other hand still clutching the pad and pen.

"We're not getting far with the list, are we?" he said quietly.

"We'll do it in a minute, lets just sit here for a few moments." She pulled her feet up under her onto the sofa, leaning her head against his, she felt her left breast press against his side. It was nice she thought, just to be able to sit snuggled up to a man who cared about people, rather than one who thought he could buy everything including women. She thought back to the men who had showered her with money, jewels, dresses, fancy meals, what hadn't they tried she reminisced. "What's wrong with men looking at pictures of naked women? It's not like I do that porn stuff, the money gives me freedom, I'm happy no one gets hurt."

"Control freaks, the world is full of them. Not happy unless the entire planet conforms to some narrow minded view," he muttered.

"It's no wonder there are idiots fighting each other, it's all your control freaks pulling the strings," she said, adjusting her position.

Later that day, plastic bowls in hand, Earth and Sky sat outside the van, perched on some rocks eating a strange concoction that Sky had mixed up.

"This is good," said Earth, "What's in it?"

"Rice, peas, sweat corn, that tin of mixed beans, few nuts, pumpkin seeds, some sunflower seeds I had left over, bit of red pepper from yesterdays salad, and some cherries. "

"Tasty," he munched away.

The meal finished they sat arms around each other watching the sun go down. "Nice wine," said Earth, taking a sip. As he put the plastic cup down on the rock, she gave him a big hug, and planted a juicy one right on his moist lips.

"Good God that's obscene," remarked the Major, as he sat in the drawing room, reading the paper.

"Major," came the response, expectant of a reply.

"My Dear Vicar, there's an article here about some bloody whore," she's

the one that upset my Godson.

"Young Bisserans?"

"Yes, damn fine fellow, silly fool though went off with this harlot. His father said he needed a woman of class, you know these youngsters."

"Ignored the advice of his elders and betters!"

"Quite Vicar," the Major continued, "Says how much she got paid for her latest spread in some filthy magazine for perverts. It's obscene Vicar, quiet obscene, what's wrong with women these day's."

"It's all that nonsense about equality," offered the Vicar, "Took me quiet a while to find a good woman."

"It's a lack of religion in people's lives Vicar. That's what's needed", he barked, "And a good dose of National Service."

"Discipline, Major," uttered the Vicar.

"Quite old chap, quite." The Major continued mumbling the words as he read the article.

"The Bishop is considering a woman Vicar for the parish of Tiddleham, can't think what's possessed him."

"What about the Archdeacon?" said the Major, looking up from the paper.

"Not sure major, they both have to do the interview, God knows what kind of people they have in the PCCs, they voted to accept a woman," said the Vicar taken aback by the thought.

"It's no wonder congregations are declining, too much of this modern rubbish. People don't want it, that's why they're not going to church," said the Major, forcefully. "It's like that company, what's it called, high street retailer?"

"I would not have the foggiest, never go to the High Street. Shopping is Mary's department."

"Well anyway, sold my shares in them. Stupid lot, I told Bisserans." His flow was interrupted by an interjection of the Vicars.

"The son?"

"No, the father, I said to him they've lost customers selling all that modern rubbish. People don't want it, they want proper cloths. He agreed, he knew I was right."

"You're a wise man Major," commented the Vicar.

"Dave," Monica poked him with a finger, "We better find the priest hole, just in case."

She stood up, looking down at him, "You dozed off."

"Sorry." he said looking at her towering above him.

They wandered into each room, looking in cupboards, space under beds but nowhere seemed suitable. All the places were so obvious.

"Do you want to check the loft?" she enquired remembering Mary's ordeal.

"I guess we better, you never know besides we're running out of options." he said.

As they climbed back down after their lofty mission, each looked at the other with a degree of hopelessness. It seemed everywhere they could find would be found by anyone else with half a brain.

"You know, when we were all sitting on the bed, I thought of the baggy tops I use to try and hide these two." she said with a little wiggle.

"Hey." A spark went through his mind.

"What?" she said, "Do you have an idea?"

For some reason an Anderson shelter came to mind, and he visualised her garden. Then he the words Saddam and Capture came into his head. He shook his head.

Monica turned on the news. "Oh shit."

The newsreader explained how the search was being widened. "I've got to dump your car, we can't hide that."

"But suppose you're spotted." he was worried, it seemed sensible, but dangerous.

"There's another big forest about twelve miles away, I used to go there before I found this place, at this time of the day it's very quiet.

"What if there are road blocks?"

"They aren't searching this area yet and that's miles away."

"How will you get back?"

"I know the tracks." She held his hand, she went down to her room.

He sat waiting in the lounge, 'Car Keys', he went back to his room, found them, then made his way back to the lounge.

"Keys." He handed them to Monica, "I see what you mean about baggy, nice wig!"

"Cool huh!"

She drove the car out of the garage, he checked then opened the gates.

As she drove through she said, "Don't worry, go and see if Mary is ok."

After locking up, checking and double checking until he was absolutely sure, he hurried back indoors, making a note of the time.

"Hello dear." said the neighbour polishing a brass ornament.

"Hello." replied the plumper of the two ladies, as she made herself at home.

"Any news on the Vicar?"

"No, nothing no-one knows where he is." She shook her head.

"It's such a shame, he's such a nice man."

"I was telling my Bob about the time when old Mrs Albert was ill."

"Oh yes I remember, he was good to her, visited almost everyday."

"Such a comfort for her," said the plumper lady.

"Lovely man, always so cheerful," the neighbour smiled.

"I know," the lady paused for a moment, "I know what I was going to tell you, she stopped again."

"Go on dear."

"Ah, yes I've got it, my Bob was fishing."

"Down on the pier?"

"Yes, well he saw this very posh boat."

"Really."

"Yes, ever so expensive he said, ever so."

"Go on," an expectant expression on her face.

"Well, apparently when he packed up his gear to come home. You know how the pier forms part of the harbour wall."

"Oh yes!" The other lady looked eagerly for more.

"Well, Bob walks along there, goes past the Marina."

"Did he see it?"

"Yes, he said he's never seen such a big one."

"They do get people with money in there, we saw a few nice boats when we were there."

"I know the type you mean, but he said it was like them what they have in Mostacarco."

"Must be someone important."

"I said to him did you see anyone?"

"Did he?"

"No, he walks by without stopping to look."

"Silly man."

"Isn't it typical," she frowned.

"Isn't it," the other lady duplicating her expression.

"So tonight I said he has to take me down there, could be one of them celebrities."

"Oh, they have them boats, you let me know."

"I will dear don't worry, and I'll call you if I sees someone."

"Thank you," said her friend rubbing furiously.

"Best dash got make myself look presentable." The plumper lady left in a hurry, her skirt swaying around like a small whirlwind. The neighbour looked at the fruits of her labour, her face reflected in this funny mirror, reminded her of the old days when the pier had more attractions.

Mary was still on the bed, eyes closed. He pushed the door too, and turned towards her.

"Hi," she said her eyelids flickering, she swung around so her feet touched the floor and stretched her arms up above her head. "Any luck?" she said.

"Monica has gone to hide my car elsewhere," he said, the concern obvious.

"She's very brave, I hope she will be ok," pausing Mary, looked at him, "Did you have any ideas where we can hide?"

"No, well", he paused, "I had a stupid idea, then I remembered Saddam's little hole." She stood up and wandered over towards him, he couldn't help staring. They moved from side to side so beautifully, they hung down quite round and full. "They're widening the search."

"We've got to do something, if those others get us. We have to have a place to hide." Panic filled her voice.

"We will, we will," he said trying to reassure her.

The lane was bumpy, 'I'm not used to this car', thought Monica crunching a gear, "Sorry Dave, sorry car. I'm going nuts talking to his car now." Monica had a bit of a thing with her own cars, something endured her to this one, she wasn't sure why. She cautiously turned onto the forest track, at each junction expecting a SWAT team, or a giant and a blonde. Once on the road her desire was to get off of it, speeding down lanes where she would normally be so cautious. There was the main road route, faster but more cars or a long series of narrow winding single track roads. It had to be the latter, she could not believe her luck, thirty minutes on the road and no other cars. Sometimes peoples passion for watching sports was a wondrous thing, of course that must be it. Reaching the forest she rattled further and further down a maze. Down a track so rough, overgrown with nettles and other nasties, she wondered if the car would make it. On the edge of the forest was an old tin shed,

like a bean can chopped in half lengthwise and placed on the ground, the old corrugated iron structure had seen better days. She parked the car just in front of the doors and waded through a mass of undergrowth. To open the doors wide enough took all her might, it was a battle against the rusty doors and plants. When she had enough gap she had gone inside and pushed them outward.

It was a tight squeeze, the shed had not been built for a car. Once in her problems really started. The doors would hardly open, she backed out. Opened the boot and folded the back seats down, 'Thank god for hatch backs.' She pushed the drivers seat as far back as it would go and then the passenger seat as far forward. Again she edged the car into the shed. Pulled the boot release and prepared to crawl out, she tried to squeeze through the gap between the two seats. "Damn." Monica tried to wind the passenger's seat down, but with the back seat down it would not go very far, not far enough. Winding the back up as far as it would go and then lowering the drivers seat as much as she could. She was beginning to worry both about the time she had been there, the time to get back in daylight, and how to get out.

She looked down, 'Maybe if I took my bra off, god I have to do something.' Monica, pulled the baggy jumper up over her head, then grappled with the hooks. "Shit, I know how a fish feels, can't get the bloody hooks out, fuck." A piece of loose thread had got caught when she had got dressed in a hurry. She pushed the straps off her shoulders, not so easy with the industrial strength system she was wearing. "It's going to get caught." She pulled it down her, off over her feet. "Shit". "At least they move more freely, Men! God Dave if only you knew how how awkward these can be." Laying on her back she wiggled around the drivers seat arching around it, and while skewing the rest of her body around the back of the passenger seat. She lay for a moment on in the space, praying that nobody came right now. Stretch her arms she pushed open the boot hatch. Laying on her back she moved her head to one corner, and crab like walked the rest of herself in-line with the bumper, rather inelegantly sliding her feet down almost falling to the ground. Bag, jumper, bra she grabbed each, keys I have everything, lets close the boot and get those doors shut, she shoved the bra in the bag with the keys, donned the baggy jumper and closed up. You could see they had been opened by the marks in the foliage, but she hoped it

would soon grow back. "Keys shall I take them? Hey if I'm hiding two people, what's a set of keys."

Monica grappled her way back down the track, deeper into the forest. She checked the time, it was getting on a bit. She stopped to try and put the bra back on, she gave up when she heard voices. 'Bugger', she thought, Still at least she had seen no-one while hiding the car. It was a couple out walking, she instinctively hid. Several hours went by and she was making slow progress, her feet were wet, the nettles had managed to go through her trousers, and she was tired.

Dave sat on the bed. "I'm worried Monica has been gone nearly four hours." She came directly towards him, turned and then walked to the far corner. "I know," said Mary, she was pacing up and down.

"Why did you marry him?"

"The Vicar?" she said.

"He is your husband I believe."

"Both my parents had died, I was grieving I came to the village to stay with an aunt of mine. She introduced us, the rest as they say is history."

"You both always seem a very happy."

"Lots of people seem happy, don't always believe what you see," her voice was sad, melancholy.

She stopped pacing, stood in front of him. He had been watching her pace but now he felt embarrassed, should he look at her, or away.

Mary moved to his side, "Can I talk to you?"

"Yes of course you can," he assured her.

"I mean in confidence?" she pressed him on this, she wanted to tell someone, but had no-one to confide in.

"Yes, I won't tell anyone, promise." Dave looked into her eyes. He thought of the song, 'All the Lonely people.' So many people living together, yet he wondered if they were not more lonely than many single people. It seemed an odd thought.

Monica clambered over a stile, the path would take her across a couple of fields where she could pick up a bridleway. 'What's wrong with me, I'm so unfit', she sat on the top rung of the stile. 'Just a few minutes rest and I'll get going again.' She chuckled, thinking back to the last time she had done any serious walking. 'I did not have these two weights on my

chest', she looked down. The air was getting cooler, "Time to make a move". Funny how everything seemed so tranquil, the Bridleway was much easier, apart from the occasional lakes of mud that took some circumnavigating. It joined a farm track that had at various times been resurfaced with a patchwork of hardcore. She noticed birds singing, now and then the screech of a buzzard. The lane went up a gradual incline, 'How much further', she wondered, there should be a road soon. She stopped and pulled out the map, to her left was the edge of a copse, to the right fields, and quite a way back down the lane she could still see one of the farm out buildings. A smile came upon her, as she realised that the road was hardly any distance at all. Nothing coming, she made a dash for the other side, it hurt a bit, 'I should have walked across.' A few yards along the verge then she disappeared under a canopy of trees to a stile and a path across a wheat field, after which was her forest and home. The sun, was fading as she reached the edge of the field.

Mary had been, pouring her heart out, 'Blimey', Dave thought. Mary stopped, "Sorry, sorry you must be sick of listening to me?" she looked at him, this patient man. The Vicar would never have sat this long just listening. "Monica will be back soon, I'm sure she will." "Yes." he looked at her, "Look if, if life gets back to normal, or something approaching it", he smiled, "Your married, and it might be awkward but if you want to call round for a chat. It can help to talk to someone even if they can't change anything." "Thank you," she looked at him, 'I want to hug you, dare I' she was unsure. "Would, would", she mumbled and stuttered, "He never hugs me, would you, just for a moment, please." He could not say no, she seemed so in need of simple warmth and comfort, "Sure." He felt her arms pulling him close with all her strength. "Hold me tight, as tight as you can," she whispered. They stood embraced for several long minutes, "Thank you, thank you." She sat back down on the bed, again he sat beside her. They sat silent for a long time.

'This is so scary', Monica made her way down the tracks between the trees. She had no torch, and her nerves were on edge. Her track, it was her track, her pace quickened as she sensed home was just a few yards away. She pressed the button near the side door, "Come on Dave," she whispered to herself.

"Is that the buzzer?" he looked at Mary.

"Yes, there it goes again."

Dave rushed out of the room, grabbed the keys. He did not wait for the shutter to fully open, and ran across the grass. "Password," he whispered.

"Open the fucking gate," she whispered back.

"That'll do." He opened it, she slid in then he put all the bolts back in place.

They waited till the shutter was back down before talking. "Are you OK?"

"Yes Dave, bloody nightmare getting out of your car!"

"Why?"

"The shed was tiny, I couldn't open the sodding doors, had to crawl out of the back I was cursing you and these."

He looked at her with a sorry expression.

"Oh come here and give me a hug," she said embracing him, "I'm starving what say we all eat, go and get Mary."

"What's the latest?" said Alice.

"They're widening the search, still haven't found the Vicars wife," said Gerald, sitting in front of the goggle-box.

"Dinners on the table," she said.

"Oh good," he said getting up off the settee.

They sat around at the table eating, neither talking.

"That was excellent," he said

"Very good your Lordship," she looked across the table at him, "Gerald."

"Yes dear." He felt a question coming on.

"You met that chap, what's his name?"

"Dave," he replied.

"What was your impression, do you think he would bump off two people then kidnap the Vicars wife?"

"Vegans aren't usually too keen on killing animals," he said, "And at the time he was seeing a woman, can't remember her name, but anyway I hardly think he'd need the Vicars wife as well."

"You do wonder if the people in charge of our society are capable of cognitive thought," said Alice.

"I never bought the Vicars story about the trees, much more likely to be a lowering of the water table," he said, picking a piece of food from

between his teeth.

"People have to wash their cars dear," said Alice with an air of sarcasm. "O gosh, how right you are dear," he chuckled, "Tempted to do a bit of digging around myself, doubt if that poor chap has much in the way of allies."

"If there is a link between those other two and remember also what happened at the trial, it could be rather dangerous, I know you mean well." Alice was genuinely concerned, there did seem to be more to this than met the eye.

## **Bob's Whopper**

"Ooo Bob it is a big one," said the plumper lady as she stared in awe.

"Steady on love." Bob loved his wife, she was always coming up with something, never a dull moment.

"Looks nice, all lit up like that." She strained her neck trying to see. "Can we go down, take a closer look."

"Best not luv." Bob was a quiet type, he liked his fishing, nice and peaceful very relaxing. He liked his job too down at the local garage.

"It might be one of those celebrities,"

"Celebrities," he corrected her.

"That's what I said, besides what's the harm, maybe they could let you go fishing from it. You never know I might work my charm on the Captain. I've never been on a cruise you know," remarked his wife, dropping a subtle hint.

"You and your bloody cruise, they aren't going to let me fish of the back of that monster," he said looking at her.

"You are so negative, you should be more positive like the nice Vicar," she said still staring down at the boat. "Come on." She tugged at his sleeve.

"I wish I'd kept me trap shut about this bloody boat," he grumbled.

"You're an old misery, come on." She made a slow but determined walk around the marina looking for a way down to the jetty where this ship was moored.

He reluctantly followed his darling wife.

"Ah over here," she shouted

'Oh god here we go', he thought, watching her negotiate one step at a time while holding the single side rail with both hands. It was painful to

watch, there were times when she was a distinct embarrassment. Both of them had made it to the jetty, she started to walk towards the boat, turning to ask, "Are you coming?" Bob stood and pointed, she turned her head. "Ooooooooo OOOooooo, hello hmmm." It was very rare that Bob witnessed a lack of speech from his wife. "Oh, begging your pardon wrong jetty." She turned and made for the steps, "Come on then" her pitch had gone up several octaves when she addressed Bob. At the top they both sat on a seat to catch their breath.

"Blimy e was a big bastard," said Bob, glad to be well away from the Marina.

"Oooooo, oooooOOooooo OOOOooooo." It was all his wife could manage. She was trembling, she had come within inches, and it had scared her. "I want to go home Bob"

"What about the meal, I booked it special? Had you forgotten?"

"Home, home, home," she was insistent.

'Oh well', he thought best do what she wants. They drove home in silence, he followed the A road up from the small seafront town, then took a left fork down a B road following it for several miles until they were back in the village. Even the dark stretches of unlit road with the shadows of big trees were terrifying her. She closed her eyes most of the way.

The following morning there was some drizzle in the air. The plumper lady had gone round to see her neighbour.

"So did you see it?, was it as big as he said?" enquired the neighbour.

"It was a huge big long one," said Bobs wife.

"My word, did you see anyone important?"

"Oh, I tell you I was terrified," expressing the look in her face.

"Really?" The lady could see she was troubled.

"Well my Bob was lagging behind as usual, we were on the jetty, well I turned to see where he was."

"Did you, go on."

"Well, he was pointing."

"At what?"

"He was, he was, so so big and scary."

"Who?"

"This man."

"What man?"

“A man from the boat, like Frankenstein's monster, that's what he were like.”

“Then what?”

“We legged it dear,” she said, recalling it in her mind, “We never saw any clebritis. I couldn't face staying there, made Bob bring me home. Couldn't face the meal.”

“Not surprising, you must have been in shock dear,” her neighbour consoled her.

An old Bentley drew up in front of a rather grand house, the stately home dated back to seventeen fifty five and had changed hands several times. It had been extended considerably from the wealth amassed by the slave trade and sugar in the days when certain occupants had enjoyed the fruits of an expanding global influence. The Major stepped out onto the gravel drive, it crunched under his feet. A smartly turned out butler opened the door, the Major was quite impressed by this fellow, noticing the shine on his shoes. He bid him enter where upon he was ushered into a side room off the main entrance.

“Morning Major, glad you could come, still have the police there?” said the man in the tweed suit.

“Yes old chap, protecting the Vicar, can't think why,” expressed the Major cynically.

“So have they any idea who did it?” said the man. He was very sharp, his eyes bright and piercing. The oak panelled room looked out over a neat landscaped garden. “How's the Rectory?”

“Think the police have finished, by God it was a mess, went down to collect some of the Vicars things just after it happened,” explained the Major.

“Repairs needed then?” enquired the man, taking a glance out over a lush lawn.

“Indeed, don't think the Vicar will want to move straight back in,” he reflected, “He's a decent chap, bit dim, don't get me wrong, likeable fellow but I will be glad to see the back of him. Gets under your feet.”

“I have a good man, does all the repairs on this place. Any good to your Vicar?” he said thoughtfully, “Help get him out of your hair, sooner it's habitable.”

“Jolly decent of you old chap,” said the Major, impressed by his friend.

“Got the fellows number?”

"You call me, I'll do all the arranging, have to do our bit," he paused, "Besides you've helped me plenty of times Major, it's the least I can do." The two of them continued to chat for some hours, before the Major returned home.

"How was your friend?" enquired the Vicar.

"Very well thank you Vicar." The Major, stopped for a moment to remove his shoes. At the sound of his entrance the Vicar had appeared in the reception area. "Owes me a few favours Vicar. When the Inspector's chaps have finished, I'll get my friend to send his man down, have your place fixed."

"That's most kind Major, most kind indeed." The Vicar felt lucky he had such a fine friend as the Major. "Thank you Major, thank you."

That afternoon a car drew up outside the Major's fine country home. A tall man decanted himself like an awkward frog, his long gangly legs moved like those of the Martian tripods. His hat adjusted, he reached for the bell handle, he did not get chance pull on the old mechanism. The Major always alert opened the door to greet him.

"Inspector."

"Major."

"Come in old chap, any news?" he enquired.

"Just popped by to update the Vicar," said the Inspector not giving anything away by his non-expressive face.

"Excellent, he's in there." The Major gestured with military precision at the lounge.

The Inspector, entered the room automatically scanning it, as was his nature. He noticed the Vicar, sitting quiet back towards him.

"Excuse me Vicar, may I have a word." He explained the current situation to the Vicar, the news was not good. This upset the Vicar who upon seeing the Inspector had got his hopes up.

The Major saw the Inspector off then came in to see the Vicar. "He did not stop long, any news?"

"Mary is still missing, they have finished at the house forensics found nothing." His sad demeanour said it all. The Major had never seen the Vicar like it, he was usually so jolly, even after the events at the house and disappearance of Mary his attitude although subdued was still positive.

"Look, I'll get that chap in to sort your place." He patted the Vicar on the shoulder. "Don't worry the Inspector will get the blighters."

That evening, Alice stood glued to the news. There was an update on events surrounding the village.

Gerald came in from the garden, "What are you watching dear?"

"Shhhh." Alice was listening, after the report went into the usual endless speculation she broke the silence. "They're still searching, makes you wonder if they will find her alive."

"You know when I was at school they told us God watches over us all, he knows what we are doing and where we are," he said.

"So?" Alice looked at him.

"You'd have thought he might have the decency to tell the Vicar!" he said, with a straight face.

"This is no, joke there's a poor woman out there somewhere," she reprimanded him.

Early the following morning the Major left the Vicar confined to barracks, he marched around to the rectory to meet his friend's man. As he marched up the drive, he noticed an old red transit van. There was the ghost of a removed logo like a faded tattoo that told a story of its past. Sitting in the seat was a man and his mate, the man climbed down from the cab. The Major was well built of good solid stock, but this man seemed to be from an even sturdier mould.

"Come to sort the house?" barked the Major, his parade ground now the Rectory drive.

"Yes," the man replied, "You have key?"

"Certainly." The Major handed him a big round ring, with keys that fitted some large old solid locks. "You foreign?"

"Foreign?" The man did not quite understand.

"Country, you where from?" the Major spoke loud and slow trying to reverse the order of the words.

"Russia," he said, "Moscow".

"I see, well good show!" The Major turned and left. Wondering why his friend had sent a bloody foreigner, not only that a Russian. His march quickened as he determined to get to the bottom of this.

"Back so soon." said the Vicar.

"One moment Vicar." The Major made directly for the phone. His fingers

quickly dialling the number.

"Hello." There was a pause as the other end answered. "It's the Major." He listened, then responded. "Yes, you did not tell me your man was Russian." There was another pause, "Yes, yes I'm sure he is very good, but how do you know he is not one of those damn Communists?" He listened some more. "Well, I must say," he paused, "Yes, yes, ok yes thank you." The Major replaced the receiver.

"Is everything alright Major?" questioned the Vicar.

"Yes, don't worry Vicar, all in hand. Just checking never can be to careful, we don't want any more problems." He reassured a worried man. "Thank you Major thank you, I must say you are most thorough." Pouring praise on his friend.

Mrs Richardson had waited until the Major was well away from the Rectory, she had to be sure he would not return. Her nerves were on edge, until now the Rectory had been filled with police. Now apart from the van it had returned to a scene of tranquillity.

She knocked at the front door, nervously looking around while she waited. A big man opened it and beckoned her in.

Mrs Richardson noted the youthful person standing behind him, the overalls looked too big, and the baseball cap was ill fitting. She greeted him, "Здравствуйте (Zd`rastvuyte)"

He replied likewise, their conversation continued in Russian, she asked him, "What went wrong?"

"The bloody woman was still here. That posh idiot at the house gave us bad information." he replied.

"And the woman. Where is she?" Mrs Richardson was firm in her questioning.

"We had to improvise, we didn't know if she saw me." His face was serious.

"Did she?"

"No, stupid cow. My colleague asked who did it. She said she had no idea."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, yes." he laid it on.

"But where is she?"

"How the hell should I know? We got lost, I took wrong turn, we had puncture. Irina." He emphasised and pointed his fingers like a gun at her head, "Silly bitch went to pee while I changed wheel. The cow ran off."

“Did you search for her?”

“No, we knew other ambulance would arrive, we did not want to be driving around in stolen vehicle all day! It would have been to risky. So we lay low. “

“Where did you have this puncture?” Mrs Richardson's reputation for organisational thoroughness was well respected, deservedly and not just by the people in the village.

“How should we know!” He through his hands up.

“Could you take me there?”

“We don't remember and besides there are police everywhere, it's like Moscow.” His gestures grew more intense.

Mrs Richardson looked at him, she was frustrated. In her mind she cursed this big oaf, 'Amateurs, amateurs.' He could see she was not pleased.

“We did not expect all this environmentalist shit!” he countered.

“I know.” she said thinking.

“So why did we not wait?” said Irina, her voice betraying her sex. She looked at them both, questioning with her eyes.

“This is a complex operation, it's not like going shopping Irina,” said an angry Mrs Richardson. She turned back to look at the big man, “You are sure it is not here?”

Even he was frightened of this woman, he replied like a naughty boy admonished by an angry parent, “No, no, I looked everywhere, where you said and more and today both I and Irina look again but it is nowhere I tell you.”

Mrs Richardson did not reply, she walked past them, slowly at first then her pace increase she went from room to room. The two of them stood and waited, later she came back shaking her head. “Suppose you missed it, suppose the police found it!”

“No.” he said, “I tell you the first time I looked it was not here.”

She looked puzzled, then frustrated wondering at how her meticulous plan had come to this.

She debated about asking the Vicar, he might have seen it, she smiled as she knew he would have not realised its significance. Then her smile faded as she considered that the Vicar had about as much grasp of his domestic surroundings as a fly does of window glass. Mary if only she knew where Mary was, she was the only one who may have seen it and

known where it went. But to ask her would invite too many questions that was assuming she turned up, it seemed hopeless.

"Ok, you better get this place fixed." she made for the door, turned, "I need to think, I'll contact you later." she continued and walked back down the drive.

Mrs Richardson walked briskly back through the village, she did not wish to meet anyone. The last thing she wanted was some long winded trifling conversation, they were so stupid these people. She focused her anger on them, her problems began to consume her.

Her small but well appointed house was a welcome sanctuary, although she had cursed the destruction of the woods and her back garden was now so open. She had gone along with the Vicar, it would have seemed out of place not to and there was more at stake than a few measly trees.

She went into her kitchen, her husband had gone away on a golfing trip that she had planned. 'Funny', she thought 'How he had believed her story.' The aunt that left her some money, and her so thoughtful for her dear husband. 'Aunt', the word made her laugh. She looked out at the Buddlias that screened the kitchen, outside a man was waiting. Hearing her laugh he stood up and peered through the window.

He made her jump, but she soon regained her composure, opened the door and let him in.

"What are you doing here?" concern ripped her face, "If someone sees you."

"They won't." She found his words hard to believe, he filled the kitchen, not many men scared her but this one did. He had an intimidating way of moving his head combined with his physic made him formidable. He continued in a slow smooth menacing tone, "My boss is upset, we should have left. He grows tired of waiting, all the police and media around here, it is not good." He moved right up close to her, his chest right in her face. She looked up, his face came down to meet hers, she could smell his breath. "You will get it to us by noon tomorrow." He did not have to say anything more, failure was not an option.

"How are you dear?" The woman stares at her friend awaiting a reply, "I just popped round to see how you are."

"Oooo,oooo," said the plumper lady.

"Hhhave you sseen that man again?" Her friend was worried.

"I," she hesitated, "I just got off the bus opposite Mrs Richardson's, well I had just turned up the footpath and got to the bit where it goes along behind the hedge." She paused for breath, her neighbour eager for more. "Well I heard this car, so like any good citizen."

"We all are in neighbourhood watch dear." The other lady said expressing solidarity.

She continued, "I looked through the hedge, this car," she paused again, "Pulls up all dark tinted windows, black. That man got out and went down Mrs Richardson's back passage."

"Oh." The other lady gave a look of deep concern, "Have you phoned the police?"

"Nnn, no," she stuttered, her hand going up to her mouth.

The other lady rose to her feet, got up and went to the phone. After making the call she sat back down and provided comfort.

"Here Sarge, that woman called in again," said a young constable, "Her neighbour saw something."

"What is it now, God if we followed up all her leads they'd have to move New Scotland Yard to that village," the Sergeant laughed. He looked at the notes, reading them out. "Big scary man got out of car with tinted windows, went down Mrs Richardson's back passage!"

"What do you think Sarge?" said the PC. "Should we tell the Inspector, it might be genuine."

"Perhaps we should, he drew breath, let him decide if it's relevant that way we cover our arses lad."

The Inspector mused over the information, "Did she get the vehicle reg?"

"No sir."

"Have you checked with Mrs Richardson?"

"No sir."

"Send the young PC around, let me know." The Inspector was overloaded he did not want to get to deeply involved in what he considered were those silly women's fantasies.

"Right sir." The sergeant left the room and instructed the PC.

Later the PC rang Mrs Richardson's front door bell. She was startled, still trying to work out what to-do. She went through to the hall, the glass in the door revealed the police presence, this on top of all her other troubles made her mind race.

"Hello," he said, "Mrs Richardson?"

"Yes," she replied

"We had a call from a concerned neighbour, they saw a suspicious man go down your back passage. Just following it up to see if you have any information regarding the alleged incident."

"Oh well I guess with all the things that have happened", her voice tailed off.

"Are you ok madam?" he enquired.

"Yes," she replied, looking at him in a very feminine fragile way. She was racking her brains, should she say yes and make up some story or just deny it. If it was who she thought it was that had seen him then the police would probably dismiss it. She had met the Inspector on many occasions and knew he was not enamoured by the crack neighbourhood watch team.

"Sorry to press you madam but we are very busy right now, I do need an answer."

"She knew her neighbours were all out, should she deny it?"

"Madam." The PC was becoming impatient.

If she stalled much longer he would become suspicious, "No, no I saw no one."

"Thank you, madam." With that he turned and got back into the car.

"Well son?" said the Sergeant.

"She said no." His reply was very considered in its intonation.

"You don't sound convinced."

"She took a long time to say No," he replied.

The Sergeant looked at him, "Lets go and have words with the Inspector."

Mrs Richardson was now completely loosing her composure, she sat on her settee curled up crying. This was most unlike her, then again the door bell rang. The ringing became a demand, she tried to wipe her eyes. Straightening her cloths then opening the door she was confronted

by the Inspector and the young constable who had visited earlier. Briefed by the Neighbourhood watch ladies and full of questions.

They all went into the front room and sat. She could not stop looking at the clock, every minute she wasted with them was a minute less finding what should have been at the Rectory.

As the two policemen drove back in the car they discussed the visit.

"I still don't believe her sir, do you think we should check the other ladies story?"

"I have known Mrs Richardson for a good many years. She's a good woman, puts a lot into this community," he paused to consider the facts, "Maybe you are right, maybe we should."

"Sometimes they're the worst." He looked at the Inspector

"You're very cynical for one so young," said the Inspector, "Must be working with Sarge."

The Inspector put a call through to the harbour master, they confirmed the boat and who owned it.

"Well Inspector?"

"A very very very wealthy man owns that boat." His mind focused how to best approach their visit.

It was late afternoon, the two men walked down the steps onto the jetty. Ahead of them was a magnificent super-yacht, it loomed up before them. The Inspector, stopped for a moment, his PC stopped too.

"Won't get one on your pay," said a cheeky Police Constable.

"Son, one of the Majors friends has one of these, I went on it," he turned to the PC in fatherly way, as imparting his wisdom to the next generation.

"The quality and build of these is something else, they are fantastic." He was about to go on when his speech was interrupted.

"Hello gentlemen, can I help you?" An average looking man, with a rather prominent stomach stood before them.

The Inspector explained the report of the man who visited Mrs Richardson's bearing a striking resemblance to a man seen by the same lady on a visit to the marina.

The man thinking on his feet, "Oh yes my butler was collecting some items from the town and he found a shopping bag in the car park, it had

her details. So I told him to take it back, she was out so he left it around the back, maybe she did not see the note.”

“Now she was watching the clock, when we challenged her, she said she had to get back to the shops before they closed. Probably just neglected to mention the bag.” The Inspector could see how the pieces would fit.

“Sorry to disturb you, there have been some major incidents and we do have to follow up every lead at the moment.”

He bid the man farewell.

The last words the man on the boat heard them say were, “Bloody neighbourhood watch women.” Back inside the boat his words were less polite.

Mrs Richardson had tried to calm herself, she made a list of all the places and events that may have connections to the Rectory. She thought back to the event that had caused her to move it. When the loft water tank had burst they were away for the weekend at her mother-in-laws. On arrival back the whole house was a complete mess and it would be several months before they could move back into her house. The builders had to replace a lot of the wooden structure, and then the decorators and plumber would have to do their bits. Her reaction was to hide the object somewhere else. She had carried it around for some time, initially wondering weather to bury it, however with all the dogs, cats, squirrels and an army of moles this seemed less sensible. She had considered the church, but Mrs Frimby was the most fastidious woman on the planet and with Bernard tending the churchyard of equal nature this had also been dismissed.

On many visits to the Rectory she had got to know the Vicar well, he never touched women's work, and from her observations of Mary she was not to keen either. The day had been particularly beautiful weather, it was spring and Mary had gone off to paint a woodland scene, bluebells and wild garlic were abundant. Mrs Richardson was helping the Vicar with some arrangements. She was wearing a two piece suit, convenient because it had a pocket in which she could secrete the object. On a trip to the toilet she had walked past an old cupboard and nearby an old piece of cloth. On closer inspection there was a tiny gap, most suitable she thought. The Vicar and Mary were due to go for a summer sabbatical, she would have the duty of looking in on the rectory.

She got further wound up considering the chinless wonders decision to send 'his man' in to retrieve it. "Sent a bulldozer to dig up a daisy", she said out loud. The Vicars correspondence was building up on her desk, a pile sat temptingly on the corner. In a fit of rage she pushed it. The room was strewn everywhere, despondent she made for the kitchen treading on the paper without caring. Laying in front of her was a letter from the Bishop, she glanced at it. "Fuck the Bishop", she screamed.

Her house in a mess having not slept, she set off early to work on the list of places to look. The rummage for the steeple fund was stored at the back of the Village hall and had been neatly stacked and sorted by Mrs Frimby. A tornado would not have caused as much devastation. She next visited the Major, claiming to have dropped an earring the last time she visited, the Major could not believe what he was seeing. He wondered if she had taken leave of her senses. The Vicar's expression was priceless.

"Is Mrs Richardson on medication Major?" It was the only conclusion he could imagine.

"Must be, she's barking Vicar absolutely barking." The Major looked at all the open cupboards, draws opened. His military souvenirs in a state of disarray, the broken glass in the display cabinet.

Swiftly she had moved on, there were spin marks on his drive where her car had stood. Some time later the Major answered the phone. "Yes he's here I'll fetch him."

"It's your brother Vicar, sounds distressed." He handed the phone over.

"Albert." The Vicar stood speechless as he listened to his brother. He then replaced the handset, turned and looked at the Major.

"My brother was just off to work, she barged in. Straight into Laurence's room, he wasn't even up. Pulled his room to bits, Laurence was terribly upset, Lena wanted him to call the Police. He stopped her, thought it better to call me."

"What's got into the woman?" said the Major, "She's gone mad!"

"Maybe it's the time of the month?" pondered the Vicar.

"A woman of her age." The Major looked at the Vicar concluding that he was right about this chap being a bit dim.

It was gone ten when she arrived back, exhausted. She slumped in a chair and began sobbing, through a haze of tears that letter caught her eye. "Thank you Vicar", she read aloud, "BLOODY VICAR", she swore. She picked it up, "for the .. oh my God he gave it to the Bishop, for his collection." She was back in gear, she had never driven so fast in all her life. The car screeched up the drive into the grounds barely stopping but a few inches from stonework surrounding the main entrance.

The Bishop was not in but his cleaner opened the door, Mrs Richardson knocked her to the ground. Her bucket went flying, she fell backward her head cracking against a wooden beam. It did not take long to locate the item in question, Mrs Richardson left the woman unconscious, all she could think of was getting to the harbour. As she entered the town two people barely escaped with their lives on a zebra crossing, reaching the harbour the concept of slowing down eluded her and it was only a split seconds difference that saved the car from becoming an artificial reef. A trail of rubber, and two wheels precariously perched on the harbour side.

On the boat the occupants looked up in horror as a mad woman ran along the quayside. "Do we want attention?" said the main with the bulging stomach, "NO."

She ran along the jetty and came to a halt in front of the big man. With one hand he grabbed her wrist, she felt the pain under the pressure exerted. With the other he grabbed the object, as he let go of her she collapsed in a heap. People had started to gather around the Marina, the man jumped back onto the boat as its engines roared into action.

"Studio, you know where, then loose the trinket," said the stomach. The big man did as instructed. The boat pulled away, the crowds increasing further.

With the boat gone Mrs Richardson looked up at all those eyes, all staring at her. She turned and stared at the boat shrinking in the distance. Blue lights flashed behind the crowd, officers started to question some of the onlookers, while two female officers ran down to Mrs Richardson's position.

"Hello dear how are you?" said the lady as she took the washing to the line. It was several days later and the slightly plumper lady was weeding

the border by her neighbours fence.

"Oh did not see you there," she expressed with surprise looking up from her endless task.

"What about Mrs Richardson!" exclaimed the lady as she pegged up a pair of knickers.

"I know," said the plumper one, "They say she's gone mad, had some kind of mental breakdown."

"According to Mrs Frimby the Vicar thought she was possessed. He said it was most unlike her, not the Mrs Richardson he knew."

"Er, you don't think she was on them cyclotic drugs?"

"Maybe that big man was one of them dealers", the woman paused to consider, "It's disgusting a woman of her age taking drugs."

"That would explain why she stole from the Bishop."

"Oh yes, to fund her habit."

"It all makes sense when you stop and consider it dear."

"It's a good job we are watching the village."

"Can you imagine what it would be like if we hadn't spotted that drug dealer!"

"It doesn't bear thinking about," she said expressing dismay at what might have happened.

"My husband Bob," said the plumper lady, "He had a chat to one of them officers what came into the garage. And do you know they think the Rectory might have been down to them druggies."

"Oh my good, makes you wonder what's happened to the Vicar's wife?"

"I know dear, terrible", she took a breath, "It's a frightening world we live in."

"Very scary, surrounded we are, murders, druggies, them homoerectuses."

"And them environmentalists." she interrupted.

"They're the worst, crazy they are," she paused, "I bet there all on drugs."

"That's why they want to save all those weeds dear."

"Of course, they smoke weed and grass."

"Exactly, exactly," she said, pulling hard on some cooch grass.

The Inspector assumed his visitors were from the Drug squad, he had been advised that due to the most recent events the case was now being taken over.

"Sorry Inspector this is a bit out of your depth." The men before him were

all armed and wore flak jackets. Four plain clothed men accompanied them, two spoke with a distinct accent.

They spent some time questioning his officers, for several days they sifted through the evidence then they vanished.

“What was that all about sir?” said the Sergeant.

“I don't know they said it was need to know and we did not need to know,” he replied.

“Something big then,” said the young PC, “Took Mrs Richardson didn't they!”

“Yes, they did.” This puzzled the Inspector, he was still no further forward in finding the Vicar's wife, or any of the other issues.

### **Everyone's A Winner**

A little morris minor was chugging down the motorway. Those who passed them saw an elderly couple, the driver complete with flat cap and his dear wife resplendent in her mauve outfit. She was determined to show those French that the English had style.

“O that lorry's slowing down.”

“You'll have to overtake.”

“I will.” Jimmy moved into the middle lane slowly passing the lorry.

Spotting another not far ahead he moved up to a safe distance behind it and settled in to a steady pace.

“It would have been much quicker by plane,” said Mavis succumbing to the boredom of a motorway drive. It was getting quite dark now and Jimmy was pleased to be in convoy with his articulated friend.

“Oh no what's he doing,” said Jimmy, observing the lorry ahead.

“Pulling off at the junction dear,” said Mavis.

“I can see that, but it's so inconsiderate he never even asked. Now who am I supposed to follow?” He could see the tail lights of a car ahead, this spurred him on to go a bit faster than normal.

As they approached the channel tunnel Jimmy started to worry, ahead he could see lights, buildings, signs everywhere, the massive road and rail complex gave him the jitters. He wished they had gone by boat. He

loved boats, but he also loved engineering and he so wanted to see the marvel of the tunnel. As they drove down past the massive silver worm, he saw the cover telescoped back as a snake shedding its skin, and like the wings of a butterfly on a warm day outstretched to take in the sun, flaps extended onto the roadway. He drove onto this carriage and down into the bowels of the beast. Before the machine moved the doors between each carriage closed, Jimmy was very impressed. "Nice piece of engineering this Mavis."

"I hope this luxury lifestyle prize is worth it", said Mavis, "It's a long way just for the weekend."

Both of them caught a bit of shut eye, half listening to the various on-board messages. In a mere thirty minutes they were exiting the train and following a whole new set of roads.

"Now we don't want any of them toll roads them French get enough from us already," said Jimmy, as he turned to look at Mavis grappling with the maps.

It was the best part of a day later when the tiny car arrived in the south of France. It was early morning sunny and few people about. They were both somewhat tired as they parked the little car in a space they found down a side street. Decanting their wheelie cases they trundled in search of the marina. It was a little while before they found themselves standing in front of a beautiful super-yacht. At nearly sixty metres long it overwhelmed them.

"Which one is it?" said Mavis looking at the one before them and then across a mass of smaller boats to another birth.

"What dear?" said Jimmy admiring the fine lines, "Oh I see what you mean dear."

"It must be this one the other has a load of people on-board," concluded Mavis.

"Probably celebrities," said Jimmy.

"I think you're right there is a photographer," she said confident of her summation.

On the other super-yacht waited an anxious group of people.

"Any news?" said a very smart lady.

"No they still have not arrived at the airport," reported her assistant.

"Well I must say this is a poor show no one here to greet us," said Mavis. They moved around the boat, "Hey I've found the controls," shouted Jimmy.

"Are they like our boats," enquired his wife as she went over to him.

"Bit more complicated, nothing I can't handle dear. Shall we go to sea then," he said eagerly.

"Well I didn't come all this way to stay on land, can do that at home," said Mavis.

"Do you think we should?" Jimmy was a bit worried that the keys were in the boat but no other signs of life.

"It said in the prize that the boat was ours for the weekend you cant get clearer than that." Mavis was becoming impatient to cruise the Med.

On the other super-yacht the captain approached the very smart lady. He was concerned that they had not got under way.

"We should be moving." He looked over at the other super-yacht as it made for the open water. "That should be us."

The smart lady asked for patience although she herself was running short of it.

"Call London," she snapped at her assistant. While the photographer snapped at the scene in the harbour.

After a short call, the assistant reported back, "They were never on the plane and there is no answer from their home number."

"So what are they going to do?" Came a pointed question.

"They're sending someone to check the house," she replied.

"Trust us to get an elderly couple," said the smart woman condescendingly.

Jimmy and Mavis did not see concern stirring on the other vessel as 'their' ship passed through the harbour entrance and into the open sea.

"We could go to Egypt," said Jimmy trying to think of a destination.

"Sail down the Nile how lovely," she paused, "But will we have time?"

"This is a fast boat Mavis, we'll be there in no time. The Mediterranean is not very big Mavis, not like the Atlantic."

'To see the pyramids how lovely', her mind filled with romantic thoughts.

That evening far from land they dropped anchor. Mavis had found the galley and produced a veritable feast.

"This is all very nice," she said admiring the sunset over the tranquil blue sea, "But I am going to complain when we get back."

"Why dear? don't you like it?" said Jimmy, watching the orange, red and pink horizon.

"Oh the views lovely, there was no butter or lard, I had to use some of that horrible oil."

"Oh dear, I wondered about the taste, not quite right I thought but didn't like to say," he said sympathetically, "Surprised me it were all self catering. It's like when we take the caravan, but on water."

"Love this is bigger than our caravan." She said looking at him as though he were daft.

"I know that, I were thinking of concept," he replied.

"Oh of course dear, I knew what you meant," she said responding in support.

That night as they enjoyed a peaceful snooze, French gendarmes pulled the body of a man from the harbour. They were amazed at how big and ugly he was, but the Inspector knew who he was.

"This is the bodyguard of the rich man with the stomach," he said with confidence.

"But where is is ship, inspector?" said one of the gendarmes.

The inspector thought the rich man with the stomach had left on the boat and so arranged to track it down in the morning.

"Oh look it's that helicopter again," said Mavis, her husband concentrating on some navigation charts. "Will we be in Egypt soon dear?" she continued.

"Ey love not too long, might take a bit more than the weekend."

"Well I'm sure they won't mind." She held a personal stereo up to her husband. "Look what I found in that room full of gadgets."

"Did you bring any tapes then?" said Jimmy.

"No but they did have a few I liked," she smiled at him, "Do you think they'd mind if I kept it?"

"They'd have to be pretty mean if they did," he grinned.

Some days later they finally arrived, it was a beautiful day when they

approached Alexandria. They decided to drop anchor as a little wooden boat came towards them.

"I take you ashore sir?" said an Egyptian boatman, looking up at Jimmy.  
"O yes jolly good," said Jimmy.

The little boat chugged back to shore, its jolly Egyptian pleased to accept their pound notes.

"You want guide sir?" he addressed Jimmy.

"Oh yes that would be good, tell him we do," said Mavis.

"Yes we do, thank you," said Jimmy.

"When you go back to boat?" said the jolly man.

Jimmy looked a little befuddled.

"What time I take you back to boat?" said the boatman.

"Mavis?" Jimmy turned to his wife.

"Tell him about seven in the evening," she said not wanting to be in foreign parts after dark.

"Seven."

"Very good, I tell your guide Salim, you wait here one moment please." he scuttled off.

"Thank you," said an appreciative Jimmy.

Their guide Salim was a wiry young chap who knew his way around. It was in the market while trying on some cloths, that a small boy spotted the personal stereo Mavis had deposited in a somewhat precarious position. They never knew it was gone until hours later during a meal.

The boy ran into a run down part of the city, past an old house in a side street. A man grabbed the boy.

"What have you got." said the evil man.

The boy trembled in fear, thrown to the ground after the evil man had taken the personal stereo. The boy ran off and the man went back into the building.

"Any news?" shouted the evil man with impatience, "He says that he doesn't have it, says the boat was stolen and one of his guards was killed. Found floating in the harbour."

The two men were startled as another ran into the room.

"He is here I have seen his boat at anchor in the harbour." The man panted catching his breath.

"Are you sure," said the evil one.

"Yes, yes," he said panting.

The evil man looked at the others, "HE LIED to us, his is double crossing us I know it. Come."

The three men made their way down through the narrow streets, to the harbour. There they took a small rowing boat and made for the super-yacht. Climbing aboard the evil man pulled out a gun, he passed it to the youngest his brother, "You check below search all." Then he pointed to the other man. "You keep watch, I will take the upper decks."

Meanwhile back in the city the law enforcement agents which included Egyptian police who were accompanied by four plain clothed men, descend on the house of the evil men. Two of the suites spoke with foreign accents. The house was empty, "This is where the operator said that the signal was static." said one of the suits. "Come on lets leave." said another.

The three men scoured the boat, down in the lowest decks below the water line the youth was becoming scared, frustrated and anxious to find what they were looking for. A large cabinet was locked, he could not budge it. Hitting it as hard as he could with the gun butt, it held firm. He stood back and without a thought fired the gun at the cabinet, he had never used such a high calibre weapon before and the kick sent him backwards. During his attempts to recover he emptied the clip, bullets flew everywhere. Outside the boat a fish floated to the surface in a red sea which wasn't the Red Sea.

"What was all that shooting?" his brother said as he returned on deck.

"Rats," he replied.

"Anything?"

"Nothing", his expression belying the truth. Trying to change the subject a thought struck him, "I heard running water did you check the shower ?"

"There's no one."

The three men angry unable to locate the item they needed returned to the shore. Later the evil man discovered the rich stomach man had been seen at Lloyds of London concerning the loss of his ship. He was becoming more and more angry, this man had what they needed. As no-one knew who he was, he made plans to go to London.

Some time later Mavis and Jimmy returned with Salim, they stopped at a small house on route back to the harbour.

"Please wait," said Salim, "I fetch my brother."

A short time later they both appeared at the door.

"Thank you Salim," said Mavis and Jimmy.

His elder brother took them down to the harbour. Looking out into the sea of ships, nowhere could they see the super-yacht. The boatman wandered around asking various people around the harbour, eventually he came back with a very glum face. When he told them what he knew they shook their heads in disbelief.

"So it was low in the water?" said Jimmy.

"Yes then man looks again and it not there!"

Mavis and Jimmy looked at each other, after much deliberation and help from Salim they eventually were able to get a flight to London.

Back in the in a town near the village, the Inspector was feeling the pressure. He had received a communique from higher powers.

"We have been told to drop the investigations into the local lad Graham," said the Inspector.

"What the chap in Dubai?" said the young PC.

"I have to tell the press what's in this script!" He waved a some papers above his head. "Mind I think there is more to it than they are letting on. National security, need to know and all that, probably some operation, my guess you understand."

"Yes sir, well best of luck with the vultures," said the Sergeant.

At the Press conference the Inspector stood before an expectant crowd of journalists, it reminded him of John Thackery's chickens at feeding time. 'Except they were more useful', he mused, thinking of the boiled egg he had for breakfast.

He started to speak:

"We have discounted any links between the two deaths. We understand that the Dubai incident was an accident. Forensics are still re-checking the other victim, we will inform you later with any further developments."

"What about the Vicars Wife?"

"We have no news," he said keeping the answers short. The questions kept coming but he had specific answers to give and he stuck with them like super glue to your fingers.

"That's good news," said Monica as she sat watching the news with Dave.

"Is it?" he said, "They still are checking on Tim's suicide and what about Mary they think I kidnapped her."

"Maybe I should give myself up," said Mary.

"With those two nutters who tried to kill you at large?" said Monica.

Some days later in a London hotel, an evil man walked into the kitchen entrance. He was dressed in a smart waiters uniform. For a few moments he had stood outside smoking, anyone looking at him would have thought he was on a fag break. He slipped through the kitchen where they had finished the breakfast shift.

From the information he received there should be a back staircase, his informant was correct. Walking up the stairs at a steady pace he soon reached the top floor. Here was the penthouse, he rang the bell.

"Who is it?" said a gruff voice.

"Room service, I have an urgent letter," said the evil man, with his excellent command of English.

The rich man with the big stomach opened the door, as he did so it flew open sending him sprawling. The evil man had pushed hard and made sure he was inside, slamming the door behind him. He was furious, and the rich man with the big stomach was shitting himself. How he wished his bodyguard had not been crushed between the jetty and the ship. He had not yet replaced him, so concerned was he to find the boat.

"My boat was stolen I have no idea where it is," he screamed.

"Liar, we went on your boat, we searched it, later we hear you had left and the boat was gone."

"I never left France," he was almost pleading, the flash of the evil man's knife made him sweat with fear.

"Don't lie you were in Alexandria, I was on your boat and I speak with many who saw you get off with a lady."

Locked in a heated argument, neither heard the lock being opened but they did see the door swing open.

"Freeze armed police, drop your weapons and lay down on the floor," shouted an officer.

"You set me up you work for the police, I will kill you, bastard." shouted the evil man while an officer restrained him. As he was pulled to his feet

the personal stereo clipped to his belt fell to the floor. Another officer picked it up as the two men were led out of the room. If the rich man with the big stomach had seen it he might have twigged how they were tracked down, not all high tech contraband is what it seems, so be careful where you hide it! But then would he have known, his boat was lost and lots of people have personal audio.

"Hello Richard I understand there has been a development."

"That's right John, I'm here outside New Scotland Yard where we have just been briefed. They told us that two men have been taken into custody, and that they have unmasked the mastermind behind many of the recent atrocities both here and in Moscow. Also involved was a wealthy business man. That's all the detail we have for now, so back to you in the studio."

"Thank you Richard," said the newsreader, and some other news, "The suicide of a young environmentalist has been confirmed. It had been thought that two deaths were linked but this has now been discounted. The local police have confirmed they still want to question one man with respect to the disappearance nearly a month ago of the Vicars wife." The newsreader continued on with a list of other stories.

## **Mary**

"Pissin around, I hate pissin around, all these stupid people who won't fuckin spend a bit of money, what happens, to keep thins goin you end up pissin around. Life is short, I don wan a be pissin around, makes me pissed fuckin pissin around," said Luigi. He had just finished speaking to one of Dave's customers while trying to get their anti-virus working on an obsolete operating system which was running on obsolete hardware and had an obsolete email system and an obsolete accounts system. He wouldn't have minded if it was some business in an old tin shed trying to scratch a living, or if they were charging them mega bucks but these people were getting a good rate and they themselves charged a couple of ton so it wasn't like they couldn't afford it. When Dave had to make the trip to France he had asked Luigi to hold the fort. Luigi was miles away from the village but through the magic of Voice Over IP and VPN he was able to provide remote support. Luigi was quite a sceptical chap and had not believed Dave had gone on a killing spree or

kidnapped Mary. He was glad to see the police judgement in the two deaths no longer implicated his old mate Dave. Worry did fill his mind now and again because it had been the best part of a month with no contact at all. Had he known Dave was sitting in a lounge with Monica and Mary he would not have been so concerned.

"I have to go back to the Vicar," said Mary, responding to the news item.

"Yes but what are you going to tell them?" said Dave.

"That I was kidnapped by a man and woman in an Ambulance, and I escaped."

"You escaped ages ago," said Monica.

"I will say because of the ambulance I was not sure if all the police around were real police," said Mary.

"Yes but where will you say you stayed, the last thing I want is this place swarming with press and public," said Monica. Fearing that her sanctuary would be sucked away in a media frenzy.

"The Retreat!" she said with some excitement at thinking of it.

"What's that?" said Dave.

"Last year, my dear husband was left an old house near the coast. He planned to convert it into a retreat for bible study, contemplation and all that stuff. With all the church problems it got forgotten."

"Is it far from here?" said Monica recalling her previous venture.

Mary pointed on the map and after some pondering they had come up with a route to get there. Dave was to stay back and hold the fort.

Monica readied her small hatchback, it was neither smart nor tatty, just plain ordinary. When a discrete vehicle was needed this was the one.

With a wig on and some totally unglamorous cloths she looked a different woman. She waited for Mary, who walked over to the car, Dave stood by the gate waiting to open it and his eyes followed her. It was his thing, he blamed it on his genes, but those two gently swaying pendulous breasts under her blouse exerted an hypnotic effect.

Mary climbed into the boot of the car, she felt somewhat squashed in.

"Good job I'm not Claustrophobic," she said to Monica, who placed a blanket under her head. Mary lay on her side, like a embryo cocooned in the metal womb of the car, breasts one laying on top of the other, she felt the one on top slide over the other which was touching a knee as it lay on the floor of the boot. The bumpy lane was not comfortable at all, her lower arm was getting pins and needles, she tried with the other to

hold the upper breast as it bounced in time with the pot holes. This dark confined space was enough to give anyone a phobia, and the continued bouncing around could at times be quite painful, even the so called mettled roads were not so smooth. "I really must get on to my husband to have words with the council about the conditions of the roads." she said quietly to herself.

The old house was part way down a narrow single track road through a valley. Monica made as though to turn in the road. Then another car coming in the direction she had been travelling decided to wait and let her out. 'Just when I don't need a considerate driver she thought', quickly she picked up her mobile put it to her ear and then with her other hand waved him on. He went by and gave a wave, 'Probably lost, women drivers!', he thought.

When the coast was clear she went round to the boot, opened it and let Mary out. In the cramped conditions pins and needles had taken over and her exit was not quick and slick but slow and a bit painful. "Glad that's over. Thanks Monica you had better go," she said concerned about being discreet.

"Will you be ok here?"

"Yes there's a key hidden."

"I'll wait while you check," said Monica, not keen to hang around too long. Mary wanted to walk faster but her right leg was still waking up from the trip. She came back showed Monica the key and then they parted. The return journey always seemed worse Monica always worried that some paparazzi vulture would be waiting behind the bushes. Before she could get out of the car to ring the bell Dave opened the gates. She drove straight in to an open garage, he shut the gates and followed her to the house.

"That was slick," she said with a smile.

"All part of the service." He grinned, and grinned even more when she gave him a peck on the cheek. "So how was the mission? Did you land agent Mary safely into enemy territory?"

"You watch too many war movies," she paused, "It went fine apart from Mary being a bit numb down one side and I think maybe a collection of bruises."

"Not the most luxurious boot on the planet!" he said, thinking about the

little car.

"Are you insulting my car." She looked at him fiercely.

"No, no," he said in a rather grovelling tone.

Monica could not keep a straight face for long and burst out laughing.

Mary wandered around the big house, the floorboards were bare, the walls had been stripped and various half started jobs lay in evidence that some initial work had begun. It had come to a rapid halt when funds were diverted elsewhere. Down in the kitchen were stacks of biscuits, and plenty of tea and not much else, but Mary was thankful of these as at least she could claim to have used them as sustenance. The electric was still on as was the water, but where was the phone? Mary wandered around, there was a phone point near the door but no phone, she checked under the stairs, no phone, What to do, she wandered through each room in turn but no phone. How was she going to call the Vicar? Was he even at home?, maybe he would be with the Bishop they were great friends, or maybe the Major? "Oh God what are their numbers?" she screamed as they were not people she called, they were her husbands friends.

Mary wanted to call her husband because she knew he would come and collect her without puzzling how she had stayed in such an empty house. There was a call box some way back up the road near the junction, but she had no money. "This is so frustrating," she gasped.

Opening the back door she made her way to the shed down the bottom of a long overgrown garden. Fighting through the jungle she came to the rotten old shack. It had seen better days, the padlock had rusted but the wood around the screws fixing the metal plates to the shed was rotten. As Mary tugged the whole lot came away and the door opened. It was a dusty dank place filled with cobwebs, "Good job I don't suffer from Arachnophobia," she said aloud. Below the surface hundreds of tiny feet scurried for cover as this giant human invaded their world. 'Nothing nothing here at all of any use.' She closed the door as best she could and went back up towards the house. Before entering she realised what a mess she was in, covered in dust and grime with bits of *senecio viscosus* sticking to her skirt. Back in the house she locked the door and decided to try and clean up a bit. On her way to the bathroom she noticed a ladder lying on its side against the wall on the landing, if there

was a phobia for lofts she had it. Up there was the only location unexplored, using the ladder to push open the loft hatch she started to climb, her pencil skirt elegant though it was did not lend itself to such an expedition. She could hitch it up a bit or take it off. "Sod it," she said removing it before returning to the ladder. In the loft it was dark the only light was from the landing below, grabbing hold of a beam to steady herself she felt around it, a finger made contact it was a switch. Thank you, she said as the whole place was illuminated. It was an Aladdin's cave, the old man who's home it had once been was an avid collector of everything that might 'come in useful someday even if you never use it.' She remembered coming over with Bernard, it took them weeks clearing the house. The builders were due to start so as time was running short they never got around to doing the loft. Phone or money she did not mind either?

She had spent hours and finally gave up, closed the loft put the ladder back and now sat on top of the stairs. As she place her arms behind her one hand came to rest on a lose floor board which made her jump. One nail held it in place, with various thumps and a few kicks the board flew up out of its position, like a see saw on one of the supporting beams. It hit her shin. "Ouch, fuck," she said, after recovering from the pain she scanned within the space. It was littered with wood shaving, bits of old wire and short lengths of insulation that had been stripped during re-cabling, but nothing of use.

For a moment Mary sat on the stairs again, wondering. She thought about making a collect call but if the plan was to work she had to speak to the Vicar. Back in the kitchen she realised her skirt was upstairs, so ran back up to get it, something caught her eye. There was a scratch card screwed up on the floor, below it was a ten pence piece.

Mary walked slowly to the phone box, her skirt limited her stride. Normally she liked its elegance the lines and the feel, but right now a change of wardrobe would have been very welcome. "Minimum twenty pence, shit I don't fucking believe it." she hit the side of the phone, now you know why they get vandalised. She thought about the language she had used over the last few days. It was a reflex action to curb any possible outbursts with her husband, who would have thoroughly disapproved.

Back at the house she was pacing, frustrated at walking all that way to be thwarted. Hours went by she was determined not to stay the night in there. A frenzied search of the kitchen began, it was the only room she had not thoroughly checked. In an old bucket covered by a rotting sponge was a courtesy phone that BT had left when the line was reconnected.

The phone rang and rang, no answer. Unable to recall the Bishops number she tried what she thought was the Majors.

"Sorry I was after the Major." There was a pause as she listened, "Oh I must have put a 9 instead of the six, thank you."

She dialled again, "Hello." She listened to the other end. "I don't want the Major, it's you I want."

Reacting to the recipient, "Yes it's your wife Mary I'm ok."

The Vicar was soon over to The Retreat, after a meeting less emotional than you might have expected he drove back to the Majors relieved at finding her safe. In a while the Inspector came over and she explained, "What had happened", so to speak.

"Well glad you are back ok, but this does leave me with a puzzle, if that computer chap did not kidnap you then who did, and what's happened to the computer chap. Maybe he is a victim of some foul deed, after Mrs Richardson's madness nothing would surprise me."

"What happened to her?" said Mary.

"Went berserk dear, totally off her head," said her husband.

When the Inspector announced that Mary was safe and well he felt a lot of pressure was off his shoulders. When one has the wife of an eminent man of God missing, one feels the hands of those infinitely more powerful. It's amazing the connections some people have, he thought after the press had finished.

Monica and Dave had become news addicts, keen to find out where Dave stood in the most wanted charts. It came as some relief when they heard the Inspector considering the possibility that he might be a victim of the strange goings on in the village.

"What now Dave?" said Monica.

"Trying to get rid of me," he joked.

"No, Mr Silly," she said, "But you will have to appear back on the radar someday. Your poor old mate Luigi has his own business to run, and from the sound of your customers I bet he will soon need a shrink." At first Dave laughed, it soon faded to melancholy.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Oh just thought of Sharon in the funny farm and poor old Tim."

"Sorry," she said, understanding that the situation was far from good.

"Hey." he said pausing to think, "I guess you're right. His face regained a cheeky smile, On one condition."

"Oh," said Monica, looking at him.

"You will grant me access rights to see the twins?" his grin grew wider. It took a moment for the penny to drop, "Oh you mean the twin 1.5 litre outboards?" she beamed.

They sat and chatted about loads of ideas mostly silly, many that might almost be believable.

"Shit, I can't just appear a day or even a few days later after Mary, it would look a bit suspicious."

Monica, had plenty of News headlines flashing through her mind, none would have pleased the Vicar.

"You're right," she said.

It was a cool summer evening, into the grounds of a large country house walked a short, slightly balding dark haired man. Upon reaching the large doorway he noticed all the signs, and rang for reception. A thin lady with glasses hanging around her neck opened the door, she gave him a cursory glance up and down. One could never be too careful.

"Hi I come to visit Sharon," said Luigi.

"Please come in and take a seat," said the lady.

"Dr Richardson there is a man here to see Sharon," said the lady.

"Ok send him in I'll see what this is about," said the doctor.

"Hello, I visit Sharon, I don't know where my friend Dave is, I think maybe I ask her he used to visit," explained Luigi.

"Well Sharon is rather too ill, I'm afraid you will have to ask elsewhere", he said in a stern voice.

Luigi desperate to do something pressed home his request but the doctor held firm. Shaking his head and muttering in Italian, Luigi left disgruntled at the Doctor's attitude.

The local university was a quite a sprawl having developed from a polytechnic. The buildings once modern were showing their age. The construction was functional and unlike those of the oxbridge establishments had not like a good wine improved with time. *Vitis vinifera* however was still a subject of research amongst the students and staff. As a centre for learning it had good links with the local community, one department more than most was very often involved with digs and research carried out on the regions rich history. Into this came many people. Simon was one of those people, who through his hobby had assisted in finding many items of interest. He was a good ambassador and as a NCMD member followed all the rules to the letter. When people asked he would very keenly explain what he was doing and about the National Council for Metal Detecting to which he belonged.

"Hi Simon what have you found this time?" said the archaeologist.

"I was detecting up on Christmas Heath and I found this," said Simon, handing him the find.

"Looks like a rather battered hip flask," said the archaeologist.

"Something inside but I thought it best to let you guys check it out," he said.

"Anna," called the archaeologist, "Can you use your dainty skills to get at what's inside."

Anna walked over to the two men, she was incredibly skilful and managed to extract a piece of paper. Delicately unfolding the paper on a desk, they all peered to see what was on it.

"Weren't those two the ones that were kidnapped?" said Anna.

The archaeologist thought for a moment, "Yes, but if this was written by one of them why not mention the kidnap?"

"Perhaps it's a plant," said Simon.

"You would have to go to a lot of trouble to acquire the flask then write a note and bury the lot in a place where it may never be found," said the Archaeologist

"Perhaps it is real and someone tried to hide it?" said Anna.

"Why would they do that?" said Simon, "Surely if it was evidence you'd take it to the police."

"Perhaps to prevent incrimination?" said Anna.

"If it got back into the hands of those two!" mused the archaeologist, "But why leave the paper in why not take it out and destroy it then there is no problem."

"Maybe they did not have my skill?" said Anna, "Maybe they panicked and just buried it."

"We had better call the Police," said the archaeologist, "Let them decide."

"Well what are you going to do Inspector?" said the Sergeant.

"I'm not sure," he replied doodling with his pen on the desk pad.

"Shouldn't you get the handwriting analysed?" said the young constable.

"Graphologist," said the Sergeant.

The Inspector was torn between his duty and his friend the Major. He looked at the other two, "You realise if this is real and the Major's moniker certainly looks genuine, we could have a mess on our hands."

"Perjury?" said the Sergeant.

"Not just that, the fallout from the actions, that poor chap who committed suicide, those environmentalists lost all their legal battles it must have put a terrible strain on them," said the Inspector, weighing up what to do.

"You can't suppress it sir," said the Sergeant, "If it came out later you would be crucified."

"But Sarge who's going to know, it's only us three," said the young PC realising that the Inspector needed support.

"What about the archaeologists and that treasure hunter, they are the sort who would ask us about our findings," said the Sergeant.

"Couldn't we say it was a hoax," said the young constable.

"He has a point Sarge," said the Inspector, impressed by the suggestion.

"And suppose someone decides they want to see the Graphology report?" said the Sarge.

"Couldn't we say we lost it?" said the young constable.

"No they'd just ask us to get a copy from the Graphologist," said the Sarge.

"No I meant the evidence," said the young constable.

"Then we would most likely have an enquiry on our hands," said the inspector, "I think we'll store it but 'forget' it. Maybe they will to."

"Hi Anna," said the archaeologist, "Has the Inspector got back to us?, it's been a while."

"No," said Anna remembering the flask.

"I think I shall give them a call," he said. The archaeologist went to his office, a short while later returning back to the lab.

"Well, apparently they'd been so busy they had forgotten about it!" he said rather sarcastically.

"What!" she could not believe what he had said, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I mentioned those two environmentalists and the potential miscarriage, he just said don't worry about it they will be looking into the evidence soon!"

"They'll be fossilised at the rate they're moving," said Anna.

"At least the Palaeontology Department will have a future," said the Archaeologist.

It was evening and at Monica's Dave was pacing up and down in the living room. He was on edge and Monica was getting tired of his moodiness.

"I've got to do something, I'm going to go get my car go to Christmas Heath get the evidence and take it to the police," he said decisively.

"Have you thought this through? What if they ask where you've been?" she said still watching him moving like a wiper in front of the patio doors. "Look what if you came back from a camping trip from somewhere where there aren't too many, people get some souvenirs work on a story then get the evidence. They are more likely to believe a plausible lie than the honest truth I should know."

"So where do you suggest?" He stopped pacing and looked at her.

"Scotland," came the short reply.

"Scotland," he snapped, "Why Scotland?" His mind was considering the massive distance he would have to drive.

"Because I can tell you where you've been and the Highlands are not swarming with people. Now what will you do for money?" she questioned.

"I haven't even decided to go," he said. Dave did not like other people planning his life, it had happened so much in the past and now it seemed to be happening again. He did however appreciate that Monica was trying to help. He settled down a bit in his mind, thinking about how much she had done. He switched back to thinking on her question. "I have twenty quid and a credit card."

"Forget the credit card." she said.

"Why?" he asked.

"It would look odd if you just started using it in the last few days." she said thinking things through. "I'll give you some cash."

"I'll pay you back later." He did not like to owe money especially to

friends.

"No I have a better idea, you work it off looking after the twins." She gave him a cheeky grin.

Dave's face lit up for a moment then a sudden attack of reality struck.

"Don't you think this is a bit elaborate just to keep you out of the picture?"

"It's you I'm worried about suppose the inspector links you to your friend Tim." she was genuinely concerned. Monica had come across some very devious people in her time and what many might consider unthinkable she knew only too well that the darker side of human nature could hide within the most respectable civilized humans.

"Case close." He knew where she was coming from. "What about camping gear?"

"Sorted," she said, going to a wall cupboard, "And remember you took cash because you thought in the wilds of Scotland they may not accept credit cards," she said handing him a one man tent. "When you get back don't contact me until you're sure the dust has settled, ok."

"Yes boss one minor point I've never been," he said grabbing a rucksack that she passed to him.

"I'll give you maps and an itinerary." She was smart.

"You go a lot?" he enquired, interested to learn more about her.

"I love it, the scenery is fantastic and it's cooler," she smiled.

"Cooler?" He wondered for a moment.

"Think about it." Her eyes went south.

"Ah more layers," he said, with a slight nod of the head.

"Yep," she said, pleased that he seemed to have a functioning brain cell.

"I think I'll go to Christmas Heath first." This made her re-evaluate the neural analysis.

"Don't be daft someone is bound to see you it's a dog walkers paradise, besides if you take it with you it might get lost or if stopped how would you explain it?" She was amazed at this stupid idea.

His face showed what his silence hid. Then struggling to regain his brownie points he asked, "Do you have photos at this time of year from the places I've visited?" The emphasis on I've made her laugh.

"Why?" she said with a quizzical look.

"Let me use your computer and you'll see," he said, pleased with his idea.

"Oh very good, very good." Monica thought, he may possibly have two functioning brain cells.

They spent a long time preparing, Dave was a great believer in a quote

from Abraham Lincoln which went something like, 'If I had six hours to chop down a tree I'd spend four sharpening the axe.' He would leave to get his car the following evening. Monica spent some time preparing in detail both the trip and his route to the car.

"Now are you sure you don't want me to take you to the car?" she asked keen that all would go to plan.

"I'll be fine, don't worry," he reassured her.

"And remember try to make sure you buy things that are only available to visitors, NO Scottish Dolls made in China, ok," she said with a smile.

"Ok," he said, then kissed her. He was soon wandering his way through the woods. It was some time before he got to the old tin shed. This was a heart stopping moment, if the car was not there the plan would be scuppered.

In a tall building somewhere in the heart of London sat a well dressed lady. She was in the company of some suits, it was all very formal. The office with its smoked glass windows and a modern table surrounded by swivel chairs was bang up to date.

"Well we are still not sure exactly how things came together but the main thing is the mission was successful in no small part to your excellent work," said the most senior suit. His attention focused on the woman.

"You know it would be better for all concerned if you relocated."

"It's where I grew up, it's my home," she said, adamantly resolute in her desire to return home.

"We can't let the people know what you are involved in you do understand?" said the suit in a smooth voice.

"Of course I understand," she replied, hurt by what she perceived as a condescending attitude.

The following day a car pulled into the village, it was unfamiliar and something about it made it seem out of place. The driver got out, he was smart in a suit, his silver reflective shades gave the slightly plumper lady a spooky feeling, she was carefully watching from behind the curtain.

The man walked around to the boot, opened it and removed two cases. He walked over to Mrs Richardson's house went in and twenty minutes later left. The vehicle pulled away with an uncanny smoothness making hardly any noise.

The plumper lady made sure it had gone from sight before rushing around to her neighbour.

"Let me in," she said, slightly out of breath.

"Why what's up?" said her neighbour, who was in the kitchen preparing some food.

"There is something going on again over at Mrs Richardson's," said the plumper lady with great concern.

"No?" her neighbour expressed surprise, putting a bowl down on the table.

"Yes, there was another one of those strange men," she said, describing in detail what she had just witnessed. They decided to call the Inspector, who surprised them with his attitude.

"It was like he did not care?" said the plumper lady rather taken aback.

"Maybe they have some secret undercover surveillance thing going on like on the tele," said the neighbour as she stirred the cake mix.

"I don't care what they have we don't want drug dealers in our village, thank you very much," said the plumper lady, put out by the situation.

"We will have to go the county police HQ."

They did just that and after being transferred several times, met with a similar response.

"Thank you for letting us know we will make a note of it. What kind of response is that? It's no wonder the country is in such a state, I don't know why we pay taxes."

"We do more policing than the police," said the sympathetic neighbour.

"This is just too much," said the plumper woman, now wound up.

"What shall we do?" said the neighbour.

"It is obvious that man is using Mrs Richardson's to store drugs," said the plumper lady.

"The suitcases?" said the neighbour, cracking an egg on the side of the bowl and emptying its contents into the mix.

"Exactly," said the plumper lady, "We will have to go to the news papers, at least they seem to investigate these things."

"I can't see the Echo doing much, they only seem interested photos of the councillors doing things for the community," said the neighbour, adding some sugar to her growing concoction.

"Wasting our money on stupid things, look at that statue they put up in town," said the Plumper lady, as she opened one of the cupboards.

"I know over ten thousand pounds," she said.

"It's not even art," said the plumper lady in a sarcastic tone as she took

hold of a large tin. She put the tin down on the table and proceeded to open it. "We have to contact the national press."

"I agree," said the neighbour, adding a drop of water.

The plumper lady picked out a bourbon, and started eating it. As she spoke a crumb made an escape bid falling to the floor, "People power that is what is needed."

Two men sat in a tidy free zone, the editor sat his back against the wall, feet on the only remaining un-built-up desk area. The reporter flipped through his notes.

"So what do you think, that village does seem to have a lot going on, look at the last few months," said the Editor, hoping for an exclusive follow-up.

"I checked the women's story with the local plod, they seem pretty clueless. Then went to the county level, they said the woman who owned the house had been living with her son after some misunderstandings." He flipped through some more notes.

"That the Richardson woman?" said the editor.

"Yes her," said the reporter

"Misunderstandings," he laughed thinking about the Bishops response his housekeepers hospitalization.

"Well the plod said it was just her son returning some of her things prior to her return," said the reporter looking up from his notes.

"So no den of iniquity, and no story," sighed the Editor.

"Nop," said the reporter.

Back in the village the two ladies were deep in conversation after a phone call had stirred them into action.

"That was never her son, we are being fobbed off," said the plumper lady.

"Do you think so?" said her more cautious neighbour.

"Yes, there is big money in drugs, I bet there is corruption at work and it goes all the way to the top," she said certain of it.

"I must say things do seem to get worse and the authorities don't seem to do much?" she said wondering.

"We will have to take over," said the plumper lady.

"Won't that be dangerous?" said the neighbour, worried by the thoughts of the tough nasties that they might be about to confront.

"Do you want the people of this village turned into junkies?" snapped the

plumper lady.

The two of them sat over tea and biscuits working on their modus operandi. Sitting in the neighbours front room the plumper lady heard a car, she could tell it was slowing down by the noise of the engine.

"What is it?" said the neighbour.

The plumper lady had moved to the window taking up a discreet position.

"It's that environmentalist chap, the one who charges all that money."

"He's been away a long time," she remarked.

"You stay here and keep an eye on me," said the plumper lady, "I'm going in."

"This is exciting," said the neighbour, "I'm your backup."

The plumper lady waddled off at high speed keen to get a good look at the car and its owner. Dave had got back at midday, the sun was shining which gave him the energy to unload. His mind was focused on the next mission. One of his neighbours walked by, she was a rather jolly looking lady her friendly round face glowed with a warm radiance and her flowery dress so fitted the village scene.

"Hello," said the plumper lady, "Where have you been?" She had a nosey demeanour and was eager for any information. She wanted to see if he might be involved in all the shenanigans.

"Just had a camping trip up north," said Dave.

"Camping?" she said slightly shocked, "Couldn't you afford a proper holiday then?"

"No afraid not we had so many costs with all the hassle over Half Penny Woods, could only afford to pitch a tent," he said, pleased with the answer.

"Oh," she replied, "So where did you go?" Her appetite was far from satisfied. Dave was on one hand tired and feeling the need to unload and crash out, but on the other he wanted her to know all about the vacation. It was over half an hour before she finally wandered off back to her home. He was knackered the long drive back had sapped all his strength. After a quick snack he lay sprawled on the bed, his eyes looking over to the window, sunlight filtering in through the drawn curtains. His eyelids automatically shutting, a few yawns and while he struggled to think on things he drifted into sleep.

It was mid morning the following day when he was startled by a loud banging. There was someone at the door, he moved in what felt like slow motion, shouting "I'm just coming." He struggled to put on his trousers

while trying to move nearer the bedroom door. Down the stairs he went half focused on doing up the shirt buttons, his feet sock less in open sandals. Pulling open the door he was surprised to see two policemen. They asked to come in, he directed them into the lounge, luggage was still piled on the floor and souvenir bags scattered around, over in one corner a baby Cyclops piece of technology was tethered by its umbilical cord to a mother like alien.

"We just have a few questions," said the Sergeant. He was following up the information received by the local neighbourhood watch. Those two ladies did not miss a trick, with them around CCTV was redundant. In some ways Dave was glad to be half asleep, he was no good at lying and it gave him a kind of hazy mind, muddling the fiction of the trip with reality. It was some time before they finally left, they never said what it was about or if he had satisfied their curiosity.

Back in the Police Station, the Sergeant sat with the Inspector.

"So where was he?"

"Camping up in Scotland, nice scenery," said the Sergeant thinking back.

"He had some good photos."

"Do you think we need to do further checks?" said the Inspector, who was still bugged by the Flask.

"The young constable took a look at the dates on the images, we don't see how he could have taken or got that many pictures without actually going there. They were definitely holiday snaps, he also seemed to be very knowledgeable on the places he visited. Some of which I've been myself. No sir we think he's genuine."

The Inspector, sat staring out of his office window.

"Anything else sir?" said the Sergeant.

The Inspector swivelled on his chair, put his hands on the desk and leaned backwards. There was a long moment, "Not on this, but it's that damn Flask it's worrying me."

The sergeant could see that the Inspectors usual enthusiasm and focus was being distracted. He knew only too well what worrying about the future could do to people. His late wife had been a compulsive worrier. One day she had been vacuuming the stairs but her mind was elsewhere, worrying as usual about some other thing that may happen, may go wrong, may be bad or what ever. It had been a sad day when he had arrived home, he did not like to think about it. This event had made him quite determined to always think about the task in hand, evenings sitting in a safe arm chair that was the time to think about the next day,

and plan to avoid problems rather than all those what if worries. "You go back and get on with your other work," continued the Inspector, "It's not your problem." The sergeant left the room, again the Inspector swivelled around to look out of the window, as though from somewhere in the sky or that large oak, an inspiration would emerge. The Inspectors tenacious loyalty had served him well and earned him the respect and trust of many both in the force and the local community. Now it was fighting with his other great devotion that of seeing justice done. He kept rolling things around and around in his mind, what if it was a hoax, what if he dragged his friends through the mud for a hoax, what if it was genuine, why would the Major and Mr Brown have lied under oath, what if those two lads had been put away on an injustice, the ramifications sent his head into a state of despair. He felt the need to know the outcome of each of the possible choices he was contemplating, it was the uncertainty that made him so anxious and kept him stalling, hoping that it would all blow over like a passing black cloud. That Archaeologist, why was he being so persistent?, would the man give up? The Inspector thought of the flask, should he try and loose it?, should he send it up the chain of command and let them deal with it?, what would they do to his friends?, was it better for him to deal with it?, should he tell the Major? The Inspectors mind felt like a small boat adrift in a storm, he clasped his hands and in prayer asked the Lord for guidance.

## **Twin Support**

Dave had held off visiting Monica for as long as he could but he need someone to talk to. He wandered into the lounge and slumped down on the sofa.

"Shit I've really ballsed up," said Dave angry with himself.

"Why Dave?" said Monica, she could see something was bugging him.

"The flask it wasn't there I should of handed it in when I got it," he said forcefully.

"And you know they would have said it was a hoax. You said yourself those three were in each others pockets," she tried to console him.

"I know you're probably right, it's just such a mess, Sharon's still with the shrink and Jeremy and Tom are still in the shit." He felt so helpless and for his remaining friends from the group and he could see no solution.

Monica gave him a hug, she looked into his eyes, they were sad.

"You need a break," she said.

"How can I?" he replied feeling so inadequate.

"If you get away from here maybe it will help clear your head maybe we can think of something, sitting around here moping is not helping anyone," she said.

"Maybe, maybe," he said without any enthusiasm.

It took some time even for Monica with her obvious charms to persuade Dave. There are times in everyone's life when they are faced with a mountain that seems impossible to climb, the brain can be just as much an obstacle to the challenge as any lack of resources.

Jimmy and Mavis travelled much lighter than usual on their migration south to find their Morris Minor. Jimmy liked trains those with character, steam and smoke.

"This train is lovely and posh," said Mavis.

"I give the French their due they have a nice railway system," replied Jimmy admiring the countryside whiz by.

The little old Morris Minor had at first drawn no attention. It was hardly a joy riders power trip. In time the locals down the side street had begun to ask which neighbour it belonged to, when it appeared that no one owned it, they wondered if it was a tourist but after several months they doubted it.

It was a sunny day, and a flat bed truck turned up.

"What is going on?" shouted an old man from his garden.

"We ave to move this vehicle, it looks like it as been abandoned."

"Non, Monsieur, leave the poor little car alone." The old man did not have a car and this little chap had become his friend.

"What are they doing Henri," said a young woman.

"They want to move the car, it is doing no arm and I like it," he said with great concern.

"Please you are upsetting Henri, e likes this little car," said the woman with all her charm.

"Sorry we have orders from the council," said the truck driver.

"So do you ave any other orders that you can obey first?" said the woman using her infallible secret weapon. It is little understood why the flutter of a woman's eyelids can do this but evolution in its wisdom has developed a very sympathetic male response.

The older of the two men thought for a moment, rubbing his right hand over a fine crop of stubble. "Ah oui, come on we can do this one later," said the truck driver.

"Ok you're the boss," said the younger man. his eyes on the young woman with a grin.

The truck left and the little car stayed put. The young woman gave her grandfather a peck on the cheek and wandered off up the long street. How did she do that though Henri, 'when ever I need help she just appears.' "Women such amazing creatures little car," he said talking to his four wheeled friend.

They had travelled on the high speed train as near as they could get to the small coastal town where their car was parked. Now they were in a provincial station where things were a tad confusing for them.

"Er Mavis are you sure this is the right train?" said Jimmy.

"Yes dear," she said reassuringly. Mavis was determined not to go through the same conversation they had had about the boat. She had told Jimmy later that she had known it was the wrong boat as soon as they had reached the open sea. He had then reacted to this but arguing with Mavis was not a good idea.

Later that day after many stops the two of them wandered along the streets like two old people lost on their way back from the shops. The cases were similar to a shopping trolley and you could imagine them down any high street.

"What were it called Mavis?"

"I think it were Sud Rue but I cant be sure," she replied. Neither of them really needed a British passport let alone biometrics, it was like they had an virtual neon sign pointing at them saying Warning British Citizen abroad approach with caution. In the small print it reads, may go off in any direction without warning, you may be subjected to slow loud sounds and attempts to do mime. Newer models should be given alcohol in small quantities to avoid disappointment.

"It's here Mavis," said Jimmy hurtling off down the road. Mavis wobbled along trying to keep pace, she was puffing well like one of his favourite steam trains.

"Who are you Monsieur?" said old Henri.

"What mate?" said Jimmy, turning from his beloved car to see the old

Frenchman leaning over the gate.

"English?" said Henri, eyeing up the stranger.

"Oh, yes mate ME ENGLISH," said Jimmy, hoping to be understood.

"Yours?" said Henri trying to recall some English.

"YES MINE," said Jimmy slowly.

"Very nice," said Henri, he did not think much of modern cars.

"IS VERY GOOD CAR," said Jimmy getting louder.

"There's," Mavis panted heavily, "No need to shout dear."

"You have to speak so as they can understand what we are saying my love," said Jimmy reassuring her.

Before long a crowd had gathered and having told the story of how it got there and what happened to them a celebration was called for. Henri was a character who drew love from all quarters, and it was not long before some tables had been arranged near the Morris Minor. Wine, cheese, bread and many other delicacies had been assembled and Henri's new friends were in the thick of it. Henri found his English coming back to him, he had worked in England for an engineering firm up in Newcastle. Jimmy was in his element, for hours they were discussing industrial heritage while Mavis kept the rest of the street laughing at her tales of their adventures, particularly funny were her assumptions about them and their culture.

The Morris Minor was having a bit of a struggle, the hill was rather steep. It suddenly lurched then started to roll backwards, the engine roaring but no forward traction.

"Oh heck Mavis I think the clutch has gone," as he said this his foot went hard on the brake.

"What about down there love?" said Mavis pointing to a down hill track.

"If I can back it round slow like, then we might just make it, I don't fancy going all the way back down that hill." Jimmy was a skilled driver, he managed to get it rolling down a gently sloping track that followed along the side of the hill. The car bumped along, he was frightened to brake because he did not know if it would start rolling again with all the holes in the road.

Eventually the track came to an end. In front of them was a villa, surrounded by high walls and enveloped with a cool screen of trees.

"This looks posh love," said Mavis.

"I'll go and see if anyone is home maybe we can use their phone," he said getting out of the car. He pressed the buzzer by the entry phone.

"Oui?" said the voice.

"ENGLISH, OUR CAR BROKEN, WE USE PHONE PLEASE?" he said in his best accent.

"One moment," came the reply.

"What is it?" said Monica.

"You're not going to believe this, I think it's that couple who went off to Egypt in the wrong boat," said Dave.

"Oh no!" send them away.

"Their car's broken down," he looked sympathetic to their cause.

"Tell them you are just a caretaker, do your French accent, let them use the mobile," she said.

"Ok," said Dave.

Dave went out to the people in the car. Explained that he had called the local garage.

"I only caretaker, no one home," he said in a French dialect new to France.

"Ok cheers mate, your English very good," said Jimmy.

"I speak lot of tourists, yes," he nodded.

"Oh yes we understand, Thank you said Mavis."

"I must go to house am work very busy yes, you ok now?" said Dave.

"WE OK NOW THANK YOU," said Jimmy.

The man went back into the villa.

"Well, decent sort Mavis these French are alright once you get to know them."

"Yes dear, and he seemed keen to work, not like some of those other foreigners."

"You did not wait with them?" said Monica.

"I told them I had work to do," said Dave grinning.

"And what work would that be?" said Monica in a rather naughty voice.

"Someone has to take care of the twins, I would not be a gentleman if I left it all to the woman," said Dave in an equally naughty tone.

"You are such a kind thoughtful man," said Monica as he sat back down

beside her.

End

**Titles by the author:**

<i>Title</i>	<i>ISBN</i>
ICE	978-1-84728-845-5
Breakfast	978-1-84728-724-3
For Woods	978-1-84728-723-6

