

SILLY SHORT STORIES

POLITE
Speed
check
area

THIS IS A

NEIGHBOURHOOD
WATCH
AREA

Paul Gordon Busby

volume 2

Silly short stories

Volume 2

by

Paul Busby

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MISS ANDRY'S TALE

Sandra was absolutely mortified. In an idle moment before getting stuck into writing her weekly column for the newspaper she had looked up the name she was Christened with, Alexandra, although she had been known as Sandra all of her life. The website gave the meaning as *defender of men*. “Men,” she screamed. “It’s women who need defending from men.” Her anger turned her fat face bright red. “Men – they’re all misogynistic monsters!” she went on, “We don’t need them!”

To be truthful, in appearance she was more manly than any man. She wore no make-up and had had a buzz-cut hairstyle done with a razor. She was not exactly thin at 15 stone (210 pounds) but was very proud of her weight which she liked to flaunt whenever possible. Then there were the grungy clothes she wore which were designed to make men look in the opposite direction, something they always did.

She was not a lesbian, but did feel part of the sisterhood, which to her meant all other men-hating women.

Her newspaper column, in which she proclaimed loudly the superiority of women over men, had a devoted following, and the editor approved of it because of the publicity the provocative articles attracted. All good for sales.

The day after this incident, she fell victim to the final straw, or rather clutch of straws. For the first thing, a man had complimented her in the street on her looks. He was no beauty himself, but he seemed to mean it, or his power of sarcasm was not very well-developed. She only just resisted the temptation to slap his face. Then, a man had opened the door to her office for her. She told him very firmly that she was quite capable of opening doors herself. Finally, on the tube home, a man had offered her his seat. As she was not pregnant or had a disability, she regarded this as rank patronising and told him so in no uncertain terms which entertained the other passengers in the carriage.

When she arrived home, she had come to the conclusion that she badly needed a holiday and scoured the internet for suitable places to go.

It was already the middle of September, and she had not had a break away for some time. She settled upon Italy as she loved Italian food, particularly if the chef was a woman. Honing in on the

country, she eliminated most of the big cities as she did not want to do much walking around admiring the antiquities. Instead, the town of Positano on the Amalfi coast appealed to her because, in a picture of it, there was an obese woman (probably a tourist but no matter), and she felt she could mingle in there without any difficulty. She booked a hotel and made a start on her packing so she could be there the following week.

She flew to Sorrento and then caught a bus to Amalfi. On the bus, several much older men offered her their seats, but she did not respond as she did not speak any Italian, luckily for them. At the hotel a porter offered to carry her luggage and opened the door for her – all very annoying she felt. And then on leaving the hotel dining room, a cheeky waiter had pinched her bottom. She would have protested very loudly, but there was a tight throng of people around her, and she could not tell exactly who had done it. This was not a good start to her holiday.

The weather was in the mid-20s, lovely and warm without being oppressive, and she enjoyed spending a few days wandering around the streets and having drinks in the open-air bars. On the negative side, however, she seemed to attract a lot more bottom-pinching wherever she went and was getting extremely fed up with it. Mind you, there was an awful lot of bottom to pinch.

To try and prevent it, she wrote out a note and translated it into Italian using a phrase book and pinned the note to her back:

Per favour, no pizzicarmi il sedere

(Please do no pinch my bottom)

It worked. No-one pinched it again. They slapped it instead. Indeed, the note indicated to Italian men that it was bottom-slapping season.

To get some peace and quiet away from it all, she set off one afternoon to a local beach which at this time of year would be quite secluded. It did involve a bit of a long walk at just over two and a half miles, but this did not trouble her if she could get away from being molested.

It was quite a dangerous walk as she had to constantly avoid all the traffic passing her at high speed on this narrow windy road.

It was also a hot day, and she was drenched in sweat by the time she had arrived at the gap in the fence on the main road leading down to the beach.

From the opening in the guardrail down to the beach, there was a steep footpath amongst fragrant myrtle and euphorbia bushes, before encountering some wilder patches of vegetation. Approaching a small fishing village at the bottom, there was a small iron staircase to go down

which led to jagged rocks and a wide pebbly beach.

In spite of stumbling a few times and pausing occasionally to rest, Sandra managed to find her way down, and as soon as she reached the beach she flopped down and promptly fell asleep.

How long she lay there she cannot recall, but it must have been for some time. The air coming off the sea, combined with the smell from the various shrubs and the lapping of the water, made it very soporific. As there was simply no need to do anything other than relax, she felt no urgency in doing anything else. But all this time the sun was sinking lower, and before she really knew it, the sun had set. She did not want to risk the uphill climb in the dark so resigned herself to staying on the beach overnight. She had taken a snack with her and was glad to tuck into it before curling up to go to sleep again.

When she awoke the next morning, the sun was beginning to rise again. She felt something was rather strange. She looked down at her feet but they were no longer there. What she saw resembled a big fish's tail with scales which enveloped the whole of her lower body as far as her waist. She had turned into a mermaid. Her jeans and trainers had slid off and were lying beside the tail. "Oh my God!" she shrieked. "I have become a mer-woman." (The word maid was far too demeaning.)

But there was an urgency now to do something which she had not needed to do until this point. She had to do something about it quickly, so after some deliberating, took off her top and stowed it with her jeans and shoes so it would not get wet and then edged her way slowly towards the sea. In places, she could roll over and over; elsewhere she had to crawl using her tail and elbows. Finally, she made it into the sea. What relief! Somehow, she had been drawn to the sea, like a deep-rooted instinct. Once in the sea, though, her awkwardness disappeared, and she was able to swim gracefully about which she had never been able to do before.

She was enjoying this new sensation when her eye caught the attention of a dolphin swimming nearby. There seemed to be a mutual attraction. The dolphin came over to her and tried to communicate. She did not know a word of Dolphin language, but sensed that it meant her no harm. As it was quite long and large, she assumed that it was a male. After a while it swam off.

Sandra swam to a nearby rock and had a rest – she was not used to using a tail and found it hard work. She was beginning to feel quite hungry by now and had no idea what to do about it. A short time later she spotted the dolphin again with something in his mouth. It was a fish which he presented her with. She had eaten sushi in a Japanese restaurant in London, but that was her only experience of eating uncooked fish. Surprisingly the fish given to her by the dolphin tasted very

good, whatever it was.

She then had a nap for several hours and was woken by the snout of the dolphin bearing her another fish to eat. She and the dolphin swam around for a while for the food to go down before nightfall. The dolphin disappeared again, and Sandra found a comfortable place to go to sleep.

This happened for several days running. Her swimming became much more skilled and in the process she lost a lot of weight. Then one day, the dolphin came up to her without bearing her any gifts and pressed himself against her. Judging by what she felt between them, she guessed instantly what the purpose of it all was. Funnily enough, she did not mind too much as she had fallen head over heels, or rather tail in love with the dolphin. When he had finished, he made off. The next day she saw the dolphin courting a female dolphin. He completely ignored Sandra who was filled with sharp pangs of jealousy. "Bloody dolphins," she cried. "They're all the same. Two-timers. I'm sick of them all."

At that very moment her tail melted away and her legs reappeared. With a great deal of effort, she swam to the shore and retrieved her clothing, which were now very baggy on her. She picked up a fish she had been eating and found it revolting. "I must get out of here," she said and made for the path back up to the main road. It was hard-going but she got to the top feeling completely done in. A passing car stopped, and a man offered her a lift back to Positano which she gratefully accepted. Back at the hotel, the chief waiter welcomed her back and commented on how well she looked, while observing that she had lost a lot of weight. She accepted his compliments with a smile, and did not even mind when he helped her into her chair in the dining room.

The flight back to London was eased by conversation with some very pleasant men sitting beside her. She had never enjoyed a flight so much in her life.

The following week she reported back to work in the newspaper office. The column she wrote for the paper that week was most unlike her previous ones and was in wholesome praise of men! But her unexpected condemnation of male dolphins surprised everyone. The editor was not pleased and neither were her adoring fans. In short, she was given the sack at the end of the week. The only consolation was that a man opened the door of the office for her as she left. This led to a dinner engagement and in a short space of time, they got married. The only dilemma the newly-weds faced was what to do with the baby female dolphin she gave birth to some months later. They decided to offer it for adoption by the local dolphinarium. Unlike the other dolphins which jump through hoops above a swimming pool, this particular dolphin had a different trick: it wrote

newspaper columns about mermaids on a floating laptop whilst giving a solo rendition of “O solo mio.” No-one knows how it learned these skills, that is, with the exception of Sandra.

POLITE NOTICES

No-one expected the Polite Party to win the election. The opposition had warned the public repeatedly that if this party came into power, it would turn the country into a Polite State. But the public did not listen to them. They had become fed up with all the mud-slinging, the dishing of dirt and the lies, false promises and deceit of the former government and wanted things to change.

At the first cabinet meeting of the newly-elected government, the Prime Minister outlined the new approach. Britain was known for its politeness, he said. “We may have colonised a lot of other countries and killed a few million here and a few million there and enslaved many people to boot, but when it comes to knowing how to use a knife and fork in the way it should be done, no other countries can compete. But there are no orders written down on the tablecloth about how to eat. In a similar way, an American child hardly able to stand up by himself instinctively knows how to cram a massive cheeseburger into his mouth, using just his bare hands. Similarly, everyone knows you should queue for a bus, but there are no written instructions at the bus stop telling people to do it. Likewise, standing at a bar waiting to be served everyone patiently waits their turn without any notices to that effect. It all comes perfectly naturally.

“Having said that, there now seems to be a proliferation of signs everywhere, ordering people what to do or not to do. Do people really want to be ordered about the whole time? I doubt it. I would therefore like you to discuss this in your relevant departments, if you will, to find ways that we can produce a kinder and more polite society without having to boss people around. Thank you.”

The Department of Transport had a lot to chew on when it came to their meeting. The secretary of state began by saying: “The poor driver is constantly being told to *Slow down; Give way; Stop; Merge; Wait here for red light to change;* and being informed that they cannot park or wait in a lot of places, and have to keep clear of others. It’s a wonder a driver can concentrate on driving at all. If a driver is not going at the right speed, he will be caught out by a speed camera. And if he is doing as he is told, he will most likely be honked at by other drivers, or flashed by their headlights, or tailgated.

“So, let’s first of all change these orders into polite requests. I would suggest the following:

Slow down, please. If you don't mind, please give way. It's in your best interests to stop. When there is a possibility, please merge with other traffic...and do be careful. If the lights show red, I'm afraid that you will have to stop – sorry for this inconvenience.”

Those present, thought these proposals would be much more polite, but they would require much larger notices to accommodate the extra words. In the interests of good manners, people would accept that, it was felt.

“With regard to the *No parking* and *No waiting* signs you see now, we could simply insert the word *sorry* beforehand,” someone suggested. “As for the *Keep clear* signs, we should add *if it is at all possible* to it. There are times when you simply have to park in these places, such as when you feel the call of nature, or when the queen is passing by.”

“True,” another person commented. “But what do we do about the intolerant drivers who are behind you.”

“I think the only way to address this problem is by releasing a bag of nails on to the road as you drive off. Of course, you would want to warn them first by getting people in the back seat of your car to hold up a notice - a very polite notice, naturally.”

“Excellent idea!” someone said.

“Hopefully, these new signs will have a psychological impact upon drivers who will welcome not being ordered about so much. But I still think we need some reinforcement,” said the Minister. “Children learn most of their behaviour from their mothers. I would suggest then that a short distance from the original sign there should be another sign, showing a photograph of a typical strict motherly figure with the words: *What did I say*; or *I told you...* A short distance away from that there could be yet another sign with the words *Wait till your father comes home* with a photo of an annoyed-looking father-figure, holding a cane in the air.

“For those who have done what they are requested to do, a final sign could read *Thank you, it's very much appreciated*. For those who have disobeyed, there may have to be pictures of a mother and father with big frowns on their faces with the words *We're both very disappointed in you.*”

The new signs produced a lot of work for sign-painters, photographers and highway workers. The net result was that people tended to drive a lot slower in order to read the signs. but not necessarily more carefully, it has to be added.

It was not just drivers who, it was found, were bombarded with orders. The government gave the task of doing something about this to local councils.

“There certainly are a lot of no-nos,” said the chairman of one council. “*No ball games* and *No pets*. Those are obviously addressed to sex maniacs. It seems like we will have to provide places to play with their balls and to pet. *Keep off the grass* probably addresses drug-users. We will simply have to hand out drugs to people. *Keep dogs on leads* – to be honest, the leads are more dangerous than the dogs, usually. *Clean up after your dog*. That’s not so easy to do if you’re holding its lead with one hand and a cat goes by. We’ll just have to provide bigger bins so that the whole dog can fit in them. *No fly-tipping*. Has anyone you know ever tipped a fly, not as easy as tipping a waitress, I would think. OK, in future we just don’t even think of tipping flies. Does anyone know of any other signs?”

“How about *Stick no bills*? That strikes me as ridiculous. You don’t want everyone to see how much you paid for something by sticking it up somewhere for everyone to see,” someone said.

“Maybe it’s for ducks,” someone else answered.

“That makes sense,” the first person said. It seems to be related to *Don’t feed the birds*. If you give them treacle tart, their beaks or bills may get stuck.”

“We must make sure then that people do not do this. We’ll make up a new sign: *Please do not feed the birds any treacle tart*. That should do it,” said the chairman. “Meeting adjourned.”

Churches throughout the country were also alerted about the new policies. In sermons everywhere, vicars and priests announced that the ten commandments were to be revised. *Thou shalt not commit adultery* now became: *Thou shouldn’t really commit adultery without your wife’s/husband’s permission and without a consent form from the other party*. *Thou shalt not kill* became: *Thou shouldn’t kill anyone unless it is by accident, or your government tells you to do so*. For vegetarians and vegans, it was added that: *thou shalt not kill any animals either, unless they were willing to be killed in the first place*. To *Thou shalt not steal*, the words: *unless it fell off the back of a lorry, governor*. And to *Thou shalt not commit false witness against thy neighbour* (i.e. Don’t lie) was added: *unless thou art a politician*, as this is permitted in a democracy.

Regarding coveting your neighbour’s wife, depended upon who your neighbour is. Only a few people might be tempted to do this and there already is a saying, which may not actually be found in the bible which says: *Thou shalt not shitteth upon thine own backyard* (or a video of it might be posted to a porn site). This is a strong deterrent.

In shops and pubs, other signs were amended too. *Pay at desk* was altered to *Please will you pay at the desk*. *No smoking* was changed to *Smoking is allowed outside, if you really, really have*

to. *And don't blame us if you catch pneumonia.* And the signs *push* and *pull* were replaced by graphics, which tended to look identical. But it was the thought behind it.

It was found that hotels and houses were riddled with signs which had to be changed. This was accomplished for most of them by merely adding the word 'please', for instance: *Please close the door; Please switch off lights; Please leave the toilet seat down; and Please don't slam the door.* The only one which required a few more words was the sign: *Do not disturb* which was changed to: *Nudge, nudge, wink, wink, please do not disturb...*

To make up for this, more positive notices started appearing. *Thank you for not spitting; Thank you for not taking advantage of the chambermaid; Thank you for cleaning the toilet and putting bleach down it and opening all the windows;* to name but a few.

Surgeries, dentists and hospitals were not left off the hook either. Doctors were instructed to ask patients to: *Please Say 'Aah';* and to: *Please Breathe in* (or out) without sounding like a sergeant-major; dentists had to ask patients to: *Please open wide – I'm talking about your mouth!* And pregnant women were urged, in as polite way as possible, to: *Push, when you are quite ready. Remember, one small step for mankind. One giant leap for womankind.* This was very important so that the new-born child should learn about good manners from the start of life.

The Prime Minister was encouraged by the progress that was being made on all these fronts. At a meeting with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, he had to ring the queen. "*Bear with me,*" answered a young woman, as she went off to find her.

"That means that she has her teddy bear on her lap, I presume," said the Chancellor.

"You're wrong there, if you don't mind me saying so," said the Prime Minister. "*Bare with me* means that she is taking off her clothes and wants me to do the same thing. The trouble is that when it takes a long time before they speak again it can get quite chilly and I have to put my clothes back on again."

"Maybe a teddy bear might help in that instance," said the Chancellor.

"All this is beside the point, though," the Prime Minister went on. "In future she should say: *If you don't mind, would you kindly bare with me.* It adds something to the request, don't you think?"

The new signs were introduced everywhere and for a short time the public was grateful for not being hectored so much. After a while, though, it was reported that even with additional courtesy words, the orders were no longer having an effect. It all depended upon how it was said or read. *PLEASE DO NOT PARK HERE* can sound just as threatening as *No Parking.* And in those

instances where a lot of polite expressions were added to a sign, for instance: *Please forgive me if you take it the wrong way, but would you mind awfully not treading on the grass. Thank you so much;* could sound very sarcastic to many people and get their backs up.

It was therefore decided to scrap all the new signs and stick to the old ones. Car accidents were immediately reduced, open spaces became less congested, shops did better business and church services became noticeably shorter. There was also a massive increase in the rate that children were born and the midwives even had time now to have a coffee afterwards.

It was reluctantly acknowledged that the public actually welcomed being ordered about. Life was simpler that way and people had more time to think...and to disobey the orders if they chose to. Therein lay the secret of true happiness.

SANTA HAS HIS COME-DOWNANCE

Mother Christmas was sounding forth: "Whiskers," which is how she addressed her husband, "it's time you found something useful to do with all your spare time", she said. "You only work one day a year, and the rest of the time you just mooch around up here leaving me to do all the housework."

"That's not true," replied her husband. "I have the reindeer to look after, I have tons of correspondence to see to. And I have lots and lots of presents to get hold of before the day itself."

"Yes, but that still leaves months when you're not doing anything but loll about."

"I'm not lolling about. I'm preserving my figure. If I were to exercise more, I would lose weight and not look so jolly anymore."

"You can still be jolly without being grossly over-weight. A man of your age has to be careful. It's not as if you can call a doctor in this area. You must try and slim down, even a bit. It won't make your ho, ho, ho disappear. In fact, it might increase it to a ho, ho, ho, ho."

"Maybe you're right. Perhaps I should get a part-time job somehow, somewhere."

Mother Christmas was pleased to hear him say that, although he had not actually said he would help her out more. Life was getting more difficult, what with the rising temperature which was playing havoc with her fridge and reducing the amount of frozen food she could lay her hands on. The ice-bricks in their house were also starting to crack and she was worried that they would eventually thaw.

Santa made a list of the things he was good at: reading lists, making inventories, obtaining and packing the necessary items, keeping the reindeer well-fed and fit, circumnavigating the globe, climbing down chimneys, manning the grottos and ho-ing. He never had to worry about his red uniform, which his wife carefully washed and ironed and hung up until it was time to wear it again. He divided these skills into four categories and scoured the advertisements in the North Pole Times for any opportunities. Unfortunately, there were no job vacancies in this newspaper, only news about missing polar bears, personal ads from walruses and information about ships stuck in the ice.

To find any vacancies, Santa had to extend his search area. In thinking about getting goods

ready to dispatch, he immediately thought about applying to Amazon, based in Seattle in the state of Washington. "I am fully experienced in these matters," he wrote in his application letter.

He caught a lift down there from a passing reindeer and presented himself for work. All morning on his first day he occupied himself putting items into numerous sacks, which he had brought with him. The sacks began to take up more and more room in the car park and came to the attention of his boss who wanted to know what he was doing. He explained that when there were enough of them, he would load them on his sleigh and deliver them.

"That will take far too long," his boss said. "People expect things to be delivered fast, often the next day."

Santa attempted to explain to him that he could cope with that, but it made little impression. Sad to say, he was himself sacked soon afterwards and had to return home.

The next skill was about looking after his reindeer. He applied to a herdsman in Lapland in Finland and travelled there the next day.

"I am very familiar with reindeer and sleighs," he told the herdsman. The first thing he did was to inspect each one of the deer.

"What are you looking for?" he was asked.

"I'm looking for a reindeer with a red nose," he answered. "You can't get about at night without one - they are infra-red you know."

The herdsman looked at him quizzically and left him to it. When he returned, he was amazed to see Santa trying to lift the reindeer off the ground.

"I've tried for hours to get them to fly but they don't want to. How do you get them into the air?" he asked the herdsman.

"They don't fly, they run," he stated. And that was the end of Santa's short stay in Lapland.

"Well, I can always see about chimneys," he announced to his wife.

"What do you think you can do with chimneys?" she asked.

"Well I can climb down them with a sack on my back."

"Is there any demand for that sort of thing?"

"I'll have to find out."

He looked for a place where he could demonstrate his prowess in going down chimneys. There were still plenty of chimneys in Germany, but the job of chimney-sweep, which is what Santa imagined he could do, was very competitive and restrictive. He arrived at a town called Schornstein

and made his way up to the roof of a house. He was promptly chased away by another chimney sweep who told him that all the chimneys in that area were reserved for him. He wandered around until he came across some other chimneys. Finding a nice wide one he lowered himself in and started to brush away at the sides as he descended. He continued this going lower and lower but was concerned that he did not come across any open fireplaces where he could make his exit so had to climb up again to the very top.

News of this stranger climbing into a chimney annoyed the local inhabitants. He was not wearing the right clothes for a proper chimney sweep – black jacket and trousers and a black top hat – so he aroused a lot of suspicion and was chased out of town.

Back he went to the North Pole and had a day off which he needed in order to clean his clothes before his wife saw them. Then he looked up the last category on his list – manning grottos. He had heard that there were plenty of these in Britain, so he headed first for The Wookey Hole Caves in Somerset. But it was too damp and smelled strongly of something called cheese, which was new to him.

He then travelled on to somewhere called The Cave of the Black Spring in Swansea and dressed in his Christmas costume sat down awaiting the arrival of any children. The only people he encountered were professional cavers who, to put it mildly, were very surprised to see him there. He mumbled an excuse and left.

His third visit was to Reigate where a cave system runs beneath the town. This looked more promising to him. He decamped and put his sack of toys and sweets beside him. It was not long before a family came up to him.

“Hello children,” he said jollily. “I’m Santa Claus.”

“But it’s the 21st of July,” said the father. “Are you late or early?”

“No, I’m just bringing good cheer to you, whatever the date. Now children, come and sit on Santa’s lap and tell me what you want and I’ll give it to you. Ho, ho, ho.”

The mother looked horrified.

“Oh, let me, Mommy,” pleaded the little 4-year old Arabella and quickly went up to Santa. “I want a boyfriend who looks like Jake from the Whazza pop group.”

“And I want a thermo-nuclear bomb,” joined in her 6-year old brother, Charles, who had run forward to sit on Santa’s other knee.

“I’m going to call the police,” said the father. “If you know what’s good for you, you’d better

disappear quick and never come back here again... which is precisely what Santa did.

Feeling very disconsolate, Santa went back to his home in the North Pole. His wife felt sorry for him and felt that maybe after all it was better for him to stay around there rather than causing trouble elsewhere. He had lost a bit of weight and needed feeding up a bit, but then he might just come in useful. His wife had found a job, marketing ice lollies to other countries, and someone was needed to distribute them for her. But before he could start that job, she put him to work mending the cracks in the ice which had developed around their home – a never-ending job, but it would help to occupy his mind until the arrival of Christmas.

THE RIGHT DATE

Professor Michael Catnip had a problem with his computer – the calendar had disappeared and he had no idea what the date was.

Not that numbers confused him as he was a professor of pure mathematics at the University. But there were numbers and there were numbers, and those numbers which did not form part of a whole beautiful pattern were anathema to him. He did know the day of the week. It was definitely Wednesday, or perhaps Thursday. He was at home and had left his diary at work so had to take a guess at it. What usually happened on a Wednesday – he lectured in the morning and gave tutorials in the afternoon. But the same happened on a Thursday.

Out of desperation he wrote *What is the right date?* in the search engine of the browser on his computer. There were several websites that came up which told him correctly, but for some reason his eye kept being drawn to a website called *The Right Date for You*. He was about to disregard it, but out of curiosity he clicked on it and found his interest was aroused.

He had never married, never even had a girlfriend, and he wondered what it would be like to share his life with a woman. The thought disturbed him as he was used to living alone. But the more he contemplated it, the more he was gradually taken up with the idea.

There would be someone always there to scramble his eggs, to vacuum clean his carpet, and tidy the place up. Maybe he should just hire a cook or a cleaner. And yet it would really be quite nice to tell someone about the equations he was working on, his progress in solving intractable mathematical puzzles, and his discovery of yet more exciting prime numbers.

At the university, the lecturers were mostly men and those that were women did not appeal to him in the slightest. He would not choose a student as it would be too much like taking his work home. At the age of 54 he was certainly not looking for love. Emotions were for other people, he believed. Sex, of course, was out of the question. He knew the theory of it but the application of it like the application of maths to real world problems, did not interest him. All the same he did hanker after having a woman about the home, more than he had ever considered for reasons he had never contemplated before.

On the website he was asked to fill out a profile and to submit a recent photo of himself. He did

not want to be seen as being a boring old intellectual who would not attract anyone, except another boring old intellectual of the opposite sex. He therefore entered his name as Mike, which had a more down-to-earth sound to it. He took a few years off his age, well ten actually, and listed his interests as music, without being at all specific (he loved the mathematical patterns of Bach and Schoenberg but nothing in-between or after), dancing (by which he meant the Bolshoi Ballet), and art (particularly Leonardo da Vinci, who had drawn the illustrations for the Divina Proportione by Luca Pacioli - the 15th century Italian monk who lived with him). He later substituted the word “pictures” for art as it did not seem so high-brow. As an afterthought, he also put that he liked doing puzzles.

The other personal details about him were easy to fill out, but when it came to listing his profession he was stumped. Professor conjures up such a stereotypical image of an absent-minded professor that he would have to write something else. In the end he plumped for teacher, which in effect is what he was.

As for the photo, he managed to unearth the only one of himself without a blackboard behind him, covered in lengthy equations. He had no idea how to upload it so asked his next-door neighbour to do it for him. The photo was taken when he was in his thirties, which to him seemed recent.

Having finished giving a description of himself, although even he could not say it actually resembled him, he submitted all the information and turned off his computer for the night.

At almost exactly the same time, Karen Dumby was filling in her own profile on the website. It was a coincidence that they both lived in the same city, but so did many other people. Karen worked as a shop assistant in a ladies' clothes shop. She had not done too well in her school examinations and had to take this job which she had now done for twenty-five years. She was quite clever in a practical sense and could judge women's sizes accurately without having to measure them, and word got around that she was good at her job because of this.

To her despair, though, the only people she came into contact with were other women, with the exception of the odd embarrassed-looking husband who tagged along silently with his wife. In her youth, she had had a number of boyfriends when she did a part-time job in a fish and chip shop, and some of her encounters were on the steamy side. But when the chippie had to close, she lost

out on the free fish which she got as a perk and on the supply of hungry men who often complimented her on her perfume. She wore a lot to counter the smell of frying, so either the men were allured by her scent or by the sizzling fat.

Working in the dress shop became more and more tedious to her being in a company of just women, and she longed to meet a nice man who would take her out. She had put up with this situation for a long time. When a new bossy woman manager took over, her frustrations boiled over, and she felt that now was the time to find someone who could fall for her. She would be willing to cook for him (she was highly experienced at fish dishes, well, fried fish), and she would not even mind doing the housework which was better than dusting off the mannequins in the shop when there were no customers around.

When she had happened upon this dating website, she was really gung-ho. “I must change my name,” she said to herself. “It sounds so common. Let me see, instead of Karen I could use the name... Carina. As for Dumby, that has always made me feel as if I am fat and I’m not, except when I look in the mirror in the bedroom. The mirrors at work show that I am quite slim.” (They made all the customers feel the same way.) “How about Dumble or Dumber or Dumbar? Yes, that’s it. Carina Dumbar. I like it.”

She then set about jotting down her hobbies – watching films, going to music concerts (definitely not gigs as that sounded too plebeian), dancing (she remembered going to the disco regularly when she was younger) and doing puzzles (she loved word-search in particular).

A photo of her in an ill-fitting bikini when she was in her teens – her first choice – was discarded and she chose instead a photo from just five years ago, taken in the shop. She was now blond and not mousy but doubted whether a man would notice the difference. She carefully cropped the picture so that the customer standing next to her was no longer there since the customer was much better looking. For her occupation, she wrote fashion designer as it was true in a way – she helped other ladies choose which clothes to wear together, and that is how she interpreted the word “designer”. She was full of hope when she had completed the form and checked her email almost immediately to see if she had received any responses.

After a few weeks, which seemed like months to both Mike and Carina, they did find each other on the website. There was a lot of dithering and dallying before Mike summoned up enough

courage to invite her to dinner. She wanted to accept at once, but felt that would seem too eager, so she took her time in replying that if she was not too busy, she might be able to make it. Mike did a probability assessment on whether she would turn up and came to the conclusion that she would as he had probably won her over with his profile.

The restaurant, quite a posh one, but not overwhelmingly so – was crowded on the appointed day. The waiter ushered Mike to the table and then rushed off to serve other customers. Ten minutes later, Carina arrived and had to wait another five minutes until the waiter was available. She could not recognise Mike anywhere in the room and thought she had been shown up. She was about to leave when he spotted her and asked the waiter to bring her over to the table. For several moments they both stared at each other not believing what they were seeing. As they were both feeling extremely hungry by now and wishing to make the best of a bad job, they stayed put and thought what to say to each other.

“You must be Mick,” she started.

“Mike,” he chipped in.

“Sorry, I mean Mike. How nice to see you! Have you been waiting long?”

“No, maybe about 22 minutes and 17 seconds,” he was about to say and corrected himself. “No not long at all. And you must be Cortina.”

“Corina,” she quickly corrected him. “It’s very nice here, isn’t it.”

She was most impressed with the dinner jackets that the waiters wore and the array of cutlery and different glasses lined up at her place setting.

Mike nodded. He admired her necklace made up of tiny colourful glass fishes and her fish brooch.

“You must really like fish,” he said.

“Oh yes,” she replied. “They remind me of my past.” She did not elaborate on this and he was left feeling puzzled.

“Let’s hope there are plenty more fish in the sea,” he said, attempting to make a joke. She did not catch on.

“I’m sure there are,” she said rather tartly. She was staring at his jacket and tie. “It’s amazing how well black ties go with almost anything,” she commented. Even purple jackets, she almost said.

At that point the waiter came with a couple of menus and asked them what they would like to

drink. Corina thought hard about it and chose a diet coke. To make it easy, Mike said he would have the same thing. “With ice and lemon?” asked the waiter. “No just the drink will do,” Corina replied. Mike went along with that too, as he said that he never knew what to do with the ice and lemon anyway. If you’re not careful when you cut the lemon, the juice squirts everywhere. The waiter took this to mean just plain coke and disappeared.

The pianist had just started up and was playing some suitable eating and drinking music, designed more to hide the diners’ assorted belches and farts than be of much musical interest.

“You know”, said Mike after a period of silence. “There are 88 notes on a piano, and there are some very high and very low notes which he never plays. I think we are being short-changed.” Corina agreed with him and they asked a passing waiter to point this out to the pianist.

He looked across at them with a “why does this always happen to me” look on his face and spoke to the waiter. Back came the waiter to their table and told them that the pianist had said that he would play all of the notes at some time during the evening. If they had any requests, he would be happy to play them.

Mike fumbled in his jacket pocket for an odd bit of paper and asked Corina to jot down on it what piece of music she would like to be played. She wrote down You Can Do Better by the pop-group, the Fryer Boys. Underneath this Mike wrote Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor.

The waiter took this up to the pianist who looked at the note and sighed deeply.

“I don’t know how he knows what number to play next,” observed Corina.

“I’m sure it’s all random,” said Mike. “Or perhaps there is a secret mathematical formula.”

Corina nodded, wondering what he meant.

The waiter returned with a bottle of coke in a silver ice-bucket. He poured a small drop into Mike’s wineglass for him to taste and as there were no objections, he then poured both of their glasses up.

“Have you decided what you would like for appetisers?” he asked.

Corina chose the melon cocktail – she liked the sound of it.

Mike played safe and chose the tomato soup as he was used to eating this and it posed no problems.

They both commented on the names of the various appetisers, most of which were written in French which neither of them could speak.

Shortly afterwards the appetisers arrived and they both tucked in.

“You wrote that you like the pictures. What was the last one you saw?” asked Corina.

“The Mona Lisa,” Mike replied.

“Who’s in it?”

“I think it’s Lisa del Giocondo, but I wouldn’t swear to it.”

“I’ve not heard of her. Has she been in others?”

“No, I think that’s the only one. “

“What’s it about then?”

“Well, it’s just her with a half-smile on her face.”

“Goodness, sounds very boring. Have you ever seen Pi?”

“I see it all the time. Where would we be without it. It goes back a long time.”

“Yes, it came out in 1998 if I’m right.”

“I thought it went back to the ancient Egyptians.”

“It must be older than I thought then.”

There was a long pause while they finished off their respective appetisers. The waiter then took their orders for the main course.

“The lady would like the cod fillets with finely-chipped potatoes and freshly minted peas and I will have the spaghetti Bolognese, please,” Mike said to the waiter.

“And would you like some wine to go with it?” the waiter asked.

“What would you suggest?” asked Corina.

“Well most people have a red with red meat and a white with chicken or fish.”

“In that case we’d better have a rosé,” came the reply.

When the waiter had gone Mike said how impressed he was with Corina’s logic.

“I’ve always been good at that sort of thing,” said Corina. “Perhaps I should have been a mathematician.”

“Why, that’s a coincidence,” said Mike. “I teach maths.”

“So, you must be really good at adding up and subtracting,” said Corina.

“I try,” said Mike modestly.

“But can you do long division and multiplication? My brother’s a carpenter and he’s good at that.”

“I could never do that sort of thing. I’m really into pure maths, like the Divine Proportion.”

He looked at her to see if she understood. She misinterpreted his look and took that he was

referring to her divine proportion. Well, she hadn't got a bad body, but she wouldn't call it divine...but if he thinks it is, that's fine with her.

"So, you like things that are pure?" she asked him coyly. Fortunately, he doesn't know about my past, she thought.

"There is so much beauty in things like the golden triangle, for instance," he said. *
He is trying to be suggestive - she was convinced of this and did not know how to respond.

Her embarrassment was cut short by the arrival of the waiter with their food, followed by the wine waiter. This time he did not bother about giving a taster of the wine to either of them and just filled up their glasses. Corina was very pleased with her meal but Mike regretted he had ordered the spaghetti. How was he supposed to eat it? He tried twirling it round with his fork but it did not behave as he wished it would.

Shovelling it into his mouth resulted in strands of it hanging down out of control, some of which landed on the tablecloth. He gave up the idea of trying to talk whilst doing this manoeuvre but tried to divert Corina's attention by pointing to the pianist. She had no trouble until she found a stray fishbone that got caught in her throat. She tried to cough it out but it refused to come. The coughing did however make her knock the table which made some of her wine spill on to the table. By the time both of them had finished their main course the tablecloth was looking the worse for wear.

For dessert, Mike ordered tiramisu and Corina, sticky toffee pudding. This raised their spirits and Mike asked Corina about her job.

She told him about the multitude of variations she had to cope with when a customer wanted a certain look. For example, her blouse might be cream and shoes brown. What colour skirt would go with that? Mike guessed pink. Women's clothes were all pink as far as he knew.

And what about a coat to go over it? Mike suggested an angora woollen anorak with matching gloves and scarf and hat.

She soon came to the conclusion that he was not cut out to do her job. In her excitement of it all, her large hand gestures knocked over the sticky toffee pudding and produced a brown sticky mess on the cloth. She tried scooping it back into the bowl, but it did not seem to taste so good afterwards.

Mike had read somewhere that a man should share his dessert with the person he was with. He remembered this when he had nearly finished eating his tiramisu and belatedly handed her his fork

with the last bit on it. She politely refused but thought it was a kind offer even though it revolted her.

They finished off with a cup of coffee each during which Corina asked Mike about his love of dancing.

“How long have you been dancing?” she asked.

“I don’t actually dance myself,” he said. “I just like to watch others doing it.”

She thought this was odd.

“Don’t you want to join in?”

“No, they wouldn’t allow me.”

“It’s easy – all you have to do if you see two girls dancing is to join in with them.”

“I don’t know the steps,” he replied.

“You just make them up as you go along.”

“Oh, is that the way it’s done. I always thought you needed a choreographer.”

“No way – you just jump up and down and fling your arms about. I’m sure you could do it.”

Mike smiled but he did not see himself joining in with a performance by the Bolshoi Ballet, but perhaps he would do it sometime in the future.

Time was up and the waiter brought the bill. Mike had read that these days you have to go 50/50. She had been under the impression that as he asked her out, he would be paying. They ended up squabbling over it and some unpleasant words were said. The final settlement resulted in a 95/05 proportion in her favour and she would leave a tip. She only had 50p but the waiters were pleased – pleased to see them go.

By mutual consent they agreed not to go out again. This was a big relief to both of them. But it did not kill off their interest in finding a partner. They went back to the website and changed all their details. Mike put that he was a professor of mathematics at the university and wrote down all his interests more to the point with an up to date photograph. Corina wrote that she worked in a ladies' clothes shop and specified her hobbies in much more accurate terms along with a recent photograph of herself. They also reverted to their real names.

I know what you are expecting me to say happened next – that they got in touch with each other and had dinner together, again.

No, it did not happen. He got hitched up with a 21-year old woman who just adored cleaning and cooking and listening to his mathematical theories, unlikely as this might seem. And she got

together with a former customer of the fish and chip shop who she had once gone out with.

True, they did end up living next door to each other but it would be pure fiction to believe that they then had an affair with each other.

That would be too far-fetched in a short story like this. If this were a full-length novel it might well have happened, but it isn't. Sorry about that.

** A golden triangle is an isosceles triangle in which the duplicated side is in the golden ratio to the base side.*

Two quantities are in the golden ratio if their ratio is the same as the ratio of their sum to the larger of the two quantity.

THE SIDE-EFFECTS OF WENDY'S JAM

For Wendy, it all started in summer. It was a hot year and the fruit in the garden ripened early. She had never done it before, but to use up the fruit she decided to make some jam. She had several kinds of fruit lined up on the work-top: plums, strawberries, raspberries, gooseberries, and black and red currants. Maybe she had underestimated how long it would take, but at least she had made all the preparations for it in the morning – washing the fruit, sterilising the jam jars, finding enough pots and pans, and getting together other ingredients she would need – sugar, pectin, wax discs, lids, rubber bands, labels and waterproof pens. She had four hotplates on her cooker and was planning to use all of them.

Her husband was away all day so she had an early lunch, opened the windows and put the fruit, sugar and pectin into the saucepans on the stove and turned up the heat. Soon, the pulpy mixtures in the saucepans began to boil and the room filled with steam. Stirring them one by one she began to feel quite tired after a while and let them simmer away while she sat down and had a deserving cup of coffee.

She then noticed she was not alone. Through the windows had come a number of flies and wasps which flew in zigzags around the small kitchen. Drawn by the smell of some of the sugary fruit emanating from Wendy, where she had spilled some of it on her pinafore, they circled around her head like kamikaze pilots. With her right hand holding her cup up to her lips, she swatted her left hand back and forth to try and get rid of the pesky insects. This made her coffee break longer than expected and she could not get as much done as expected.

The following day she carried on from where she had left off. There were still a lot of fruit to deal with, in fact, knowing she was going to be making jam, the neighbours had given her some of their excess fruit. Her experience of the previous day occurred again when she stopped for a coffee. There were flies and wasps everywhere. She felt like saying to them: “If you like jam so much, why don’t you make it for me?”

Closing the window did not seem to help as it just locked the flies and wasps inside. Opening the door to the garden made matters worse, as all of their families and friends came to join them. All of this meant she had to spend the next day making jam, and the next day after that, until finally

it was all done. How many of the insects landed up in the jam is another story but at least it gave it added protein.

Even after the jam-making was all over, the problem with the flies and wasps continued for several more days until they seemed to discover that the now elusive sugary fruit was no longer on offer and one by one, they departed.

Sadly for Wendy, though, a habit had developed which she could not stop. Each time she sat down for a drink, she felt she had to swat the air around her with her left hand. This was annoying for her and after a few days she made an appointment to see her doctor about it. She explained it to him, and to see for himself he made her a cup of coffee himself. This was an unusual thing to do, but it was an unusual case. Sure enough, as soon as she lifted the cup to her lips, she started swatting the air with her left hand.

The doctor told her that this was indeed rather an unusual condition and on consulting his computer could not find any precedent. He had to invent a medical term for it – *Drinkyswatus* – and gave her a few suggestions on what she might do to relieve the problem. She could either tie her left hand down while she drank with her right hand, or she could try drinking with her left hand.

When she arrived home again, she found some string and tried to tie her left hand to the table leg. This was easier said than done, as tying a knot requires two hands free. She gave it up as a bad job and thought of the next best thing, simply to put her hand in the pocket of her slacks and force herself to keep it there while drinking. It did work but required a lot of conscious effort.

The following day she went out to a café for a drink. She had neglected the fact that there was not a pocket on the left-hand side of her coat and so had to stretch her arm over to the right. Instead of locating her own coat pocket, however, she plunged her hand straight into the trouser pocket of a man who was sitting next to her. The man was startled, even though he rather enjoyed it. This drew the attention of his wife who was sitting on his other side who immediately slapped Wendy's face and for good measure gave her husband a good slap too. While this was very embarrassing for Wendy, it did have the effect of making her left hand relax, and she finished off her drink with no added exertions.

She recanted what had happened to her husband and pleaded with him to kindly slap her face before she had a drink in future. Her husband declined, knowing what a rumpus it would cause, particularly as he was a magistrate. His mother willingly volunteered to do it for him, and for the

next few days she would arrive when summoned and slap her daughter-in-law's face, thereby permitting her to have a drink with no mishap. This state of affairs came to an end when the mother-in-law went on holiday. No-one else could be found to take on the task and her old habit returned.

She then remembered the doctor's second piece of advice which was to drink with the left hand. Her first attempts were pretty disastrous. Her left arm had got accustomed to swatting and now with a full cup of coffee in her left hand it resulted in some nasty hot flushes for her.

But as soon as she trained the left arm to do as it was told and to stop moving once it had reached her lips, her right arm flung up and started swatting around her. Inevitably this resulted in more spillages and more wet carpets.

"I might as well revert to my original situation," she told her husband and did so. You would have thought that her experiences would have put her off drinking, but it did the opposite as it felt like a challenge for her. He made her a nice cup of tea and immediately her left hand shot up, accompanied now by the right foot kicking upwards. "Oh God," she sighed. "It's catching." The underneath of the table grazed her right knee, while the sudden movement of her left hand shooting up made her lose her balance, and she fell off her chair with the tea spilled over the table. "Perhaps I should tie my right leg to the chair leg," she said, grimacing in pain on the floor.

This was going to be quite a procedure now – right leg tied to the chair leg, left hand wedged into the left-hand pocket of her slacks with her cup in her right hand. In theory that should have worked, but that was forgetting her left leg which did not like being left out of all the fun.

It took a few days before it had made up its mind what to do, and then it joined in by stamping the left foot continuously on the ground.

This served to dislodge her left hand from its pocket and sent it into the air to swat once again.

At home, all this became the normal procedure after each meal and at mid-morning and mid-afternoon. You can get used to anything after a time, it is said. But when people ask you out for dinner, or you are having a meal out, it can be quite disturbing for other people. This is England, though, and out of politeness most people just ignored her, coming to the conclusion that it was a serious health disorder. It was however most off-putting to Wendy, and she therefore made another appointment to see her GP.

"What seems to be the trouble?" he asked her.

"It's my drinking problem," she said.

"Haven't you kicked the habit yet?" he enquired. "Have you thought of going to Alcoholics

Anonymous?”

“No, I haven’t had an alcoholic drink for years,” she said. “It comes on every time I have a cuppa.”

“Oh, you mean a coffee or tea...”

He could hardly finish the sentence before she started moving her arms and legs. Her right hand, even without a cup in it, was imitating the left hand now.

“How do I get you to stop,” he asked.

“No idea, it’s never come on like this before. “

She continued to writhe for several minutes until the doctor managed to restrain her arms and legs and tie her down on the couch.

The receptionist brought him a cup of coffee which he drank in front of her, while consulting his computer for any information on how to remedy the situation. A thought flashed through his mind. Maybe it’s the caffeine that is doing it. He finished his coffee, watched enviously by Wendy, and wrote out a prescription. By now her movements were subsiding and he was able to release her from the couch.

The pharmacist refused to fill out the prescription. “You can take care of that yourself,” he told her.

She looked down at the piece of paper – it read: *Take a glass of water every hour. Do not drink any tea, coffee, or coke or eat any chocolate.*

Within days her symptoms had completely disappeared. She was also advised to exercise more, which she did when she need to flush out the water, which was very often.

“Now that is all over and done with my life can get back to normal,” she told her husband with a sigh of relief. “I see we’ve finished off all the jam I made for us, and I felt obliged to give some to the neighbours too. I need to make us some more.”

She made all the necessary preparations and was underway when a solitary fly came in through the open window. This was followed by a wasp and then a bee, before being joined by a mass of flies, wasps and bees. With so much steam blocking her line of vision she did not notice them until she sat down to have a drink – a glass of water. The insects followed her over to her chair and circled around her. Her left arm went up and began to swat at them...

Over the next few months the whole sorry tale repeated itself. Of course, the doctor was stumped again. Out of desperation he injected her with insect repellent. I’m happy to say that to

this day the problem has not recurred. She is even able to drink tea and coffee again and to eat chocolate. But all the fruit bushes in her garden have not pollinated. Nor have they in the whole neighbourhood which she frequents.

No-one knows why. They are obviously happy to see Wendy back to her normal self again, but really miss the lovely jam she used to make.

TEA-LOGY

As there was nothing worth watching on the television, Jack and Jackie sat in their armchairs, gazing into space. After a while, Jack spoke.

“Ere”, he said (he could never remember his wife’s name), “I read that God created man on the sixth day and had to have a rest the following day.”

“No wonder,” said Jackie. “Men can be very tiring.”

“That means that it must have been on the weekend. He probably wanted to get all his creating malarkey all over and done with so he could visit his in-laws on the Sunday like we do.”

“Do you think they also lived in Bognar Regis?”

“Probably. Thereagain, it may have been somewhere warmer.”

“Do you mean like hell. That’s the only other place he could go.”

“Maybe. Anywhere must be warmer than hanging about on a cloud in all weathers.”

“Too right, although I’ve never done it myself.”

There was a pause and then he said:

“Do you think he meant to finish creating man on the following Monday but forgot about it?”

“What did he forget about?”

“Well, we haven’t got wings like the angels have. That would save us a bomb on air fares. And we haven’t got halos either. They probably work like your own personal TV aerial. You could take your TV with you when you go out and get great reception anywhere.”

“I don’t think angels watch much TV. Too busy standing around beside new-born children and heralding away all the time.”

“I think he didn’t give us things like wings ‘cause he gave those to the birds. Don’t know who got the halos. Come to think of it, that may be why we say halo when we meet someone so they don’t feel too self-conscious for not having one.”

“I thought that was hello.”

“Same thing really. Depends where you come from.”

They sat in silence for a while. Then Jackie said. "Maybe we don't have wings and halos because, it's said, he made us 'in his own image', and in all the pictures I've seen of him he doesn't have them either."

"Well I wonder how he gets about without wings. He's supposed to be everywhere. He's probably making the tea in the kitchen for us right now."

"I hope he remembers I only have one teaspoon of sugar."

"I'm sure he will. He's supposed to have a good memory...except forgetting to give us wings and a halo."

Jackie thought for a moment and then said:

"If he made human beings in his own image, he must have a bosom, or rather she must."

"I've never seen any paintings of God with tits."

"No need to be vulgar."

"I don't have any, and being a man I'm the splitting image of God."

"I wouldn't say a splitting image, unless God is bald with a pot-belly. Ok, let's compromise. Perhaps she's only got one. It's probably in the middle, but now I think of it, I don't think they make bras with just one cup."

"They don't wear bras in heaven. That's why I like the idea of going there."

"You should be so lucky! From what I've been told all they wear up there is heavenly raiments."

"What in heaven's name are they?"

"I imagine they're a bit like long, fluffy bathrobes. All the women up there probably have to knit them."

"D'you think they wear holy jeans too?"

"They'd have to."

"What do the men do then?"

"There aren't any men in heaven!"

"Of course, there are! What about Gandhi?"

"He's in Indian heaven."

"What's that like?"

"I expect all the Indians sit around on clouds eating curry all day long."

"Oh yes, we saw that in a Bollywood movie. Doesn't the curry have... erm, an effect upon them?"

“Yes, it’s supposed to purify them inside.”

“That’s not the effect it had on me when I had a Vindaloo the other day.”

“You’re just not used to being purified. Not like us women. That’s why we go to heaven.”

“Look, there must be men in Heaven. What about Nelson Mandela?”

“He’d be in African heaven.”

“Don’t tell me – that’s where they do nothing but play drums all day long.”

“That’s only what drummers get to do. Other people would do other things.”

“Well I’m talking about English heaven - pints of beer, cricket and the Queen waving to everyone.”

“Doesn’t sound much like heaven to me, besides which, I thought there was only one heaven.”

There was an awkward silence and then Jack said.

“I know one man who’d be in heaven.”

“Who’s that?”

“Charlie Smartbottom.”

“Do you mean the chap who used to help frogs cross the road? He used to have a lollipop sign and would hop along from one side to another with them.”

“That’s him. He got frightened by a very big frog one day and jumped straight into a drainage ditch. Bless his soul! Never seen again.”

“Didn’t he used to work in a ladies’ shoe shop. He liked it so much he used to wear high heels around town himself.”

“I just thought he was a really tall man. But wearing high heels wouldn’t stop him going to heaven. Most of the angels wear them I expect, “

“But they don’t have to walk in them – they just float about looking...well, angelic.”

“How does that make you look?”

“You look pure as if you’ve never had to go to the loo in your life.”

“I think you mean ‘constipated’, rather than ‘angelic’.”

Jackie went into the kitchen to see how well God was progressing making a cup of tea, found

he had forgotten to do it and made one herself. She brought the cups in and sat down again.

“He’s supposed to be omnipotent but couldn’t even turn the kettle on. What does ‘omnipotent’ mean anyway?” she said.

“‘Potent’ means how much alcohol is in your beer. I’ll have to look up ‘omni’.”

Jack opened the dictionary and said that it means ‘all’ or ‘for all’.

“So an ‘omnibus’, for instance, must mean it stops at all the stops. If you wanted to go from here to heaven by bus, it would stop at the betting shop, the tobacconist, the laundromat, the pub and so on till you get to the pearly gates,” he told her.

Jackie commented: “So ‘omni’ plus ‘potent’, in other words ‘omnipotent’, must mean that God provides alcohol for everyone.”

“That’s why they have communion wine in church, I presume.”

“If they sit about drinking wine or the holy spirit, whatever kind they have up there, they’d have to go to the loo a lot and I’ve never heard of a heavenly toilet.”

“They don’t need them. Whenever it rains, they’re relieving themselves.”

“And when it thunders?”

“That must be the curries.”

They thought about that.

“Shame about poor old St Peter, isn’t it,” said Jackie.

“One minute he’s a biblical celebrity. The next, he’s just like a glorified doorman.”

“I’m sure he likes the job or he would have retired by now.”

“I don’t know what the age is that you can retire in heaven.”

“No idea. And what do you do then? Sit at home by the fire all day long?”

“I don’t think it would be by a fire, unless he gets the sack through admitting the wrong sort of people into heaven.”

“He must be really bored with it all by now. I wonder why they haven’t replaced him with an automatic gate-opener with traffic lights.”

“All the best workmen are probably in the other place.”

“Well at least they could have a waiting room with a coffee machine and announcements when the gates would be opening.”

“But I expect there would be no toilets, the coffee would be cold and you could never understand the announcements, just like our local station.”

“There would also probably be a long wait too.”

“Sounds like purgatory. I guess it would be.”

He then got up and said:

“Well, talking about the pearly gates reminds me that I’ve got to lock the back door. “

“And I must get to bed now. I mustn’t be up late. I’m taking the service tomorrow at St Luke’s.”

“I’ll only be a few minutes. You’ll find the sermon I wrote for you is on the table in the kitchen.”

“You wrote it? I thought it must have been...Oh, never mind.”

THE WHO-DIDN'T-DO-IT MYSTERY

Dr Norman Hatchetman stood on the platform in Victoria Station, going over his speech in his head while waiting for the train. He had travelled up from Hastings and just had enough time to grab a sandwich and coffee before catching the train to Clapham Junction, where he could get off and catch the next train home. This might seem an odd way to do it, when he could have stayed on the same one. But what he wanted was to be in a packed train for just a few minutes which would give him enough time to carry out his plan before getting off. So that he would not be recognised by anyone who knew him, he had travelled to London. It seemed over-complicated, and the ticket did cost more doing it this way, but it was worth it.

As a senior lecturer in psychology at the university, he wanted to try out an idea he had been ruminating about for some time but had kept to himself, so that he could write up the results later in a learned publication. He did not want any of his colleagues attempting to do the same thing before he had had a chance to do it.

It was a busy time of day, and queuing up behind a horde of people trying to get on the train, he found that there were no seats left by the time he got inside. This was not such a bad thing, he thought, as he took up a position beside the door, in full view of the whole carriage. He had dressed for the occasion in jeans, trainers and a black hoodie, almost identical to many other passengers, except that on the back and front of his hoodie were the words: *Listen to me!* written in large letters in white.

The train left, and when it became quiet on board as people opened their newspapers and paid attention to their mobile phones and laptops, he very ostentatiously took out his own phone and held it up tight against his ear.

“Hi Frank,” he said in a hushed voice which still reverberated through the carriage. “How are things with you...great.” He paused for a dramatic moment and then continued. “Well, the deeds all done. Had some problems in getting the legs off and had to get rid of the feet. Disposed of those separately...What’s that? ...No, they came off quite easily. Same as the arms. Put the hands in a couple of shopping bags...Yeah, those are the ones...It wasn’t easy getting the head off...Yeah, I know you told me it would be and it was quite messy. Took ages to clean up the place

afterwards...just soap and water...OK a lot of soap and water, you're right. That left just the torso. Didn't realise they weighed so much...Yeah, I remember you saying so...All nicely packed away now though...Don't worry, no-one will find out... Thanks for the help. Give my regards to the missus... See you later."

He put the phone back in his pocket and looked around. No-one had paid any attention to him. No-one looked as if they had even heard him speak and more to the point, absolutely no-one else knew that his phone was not even switched on. The whole purpose of this experiment was to gauge people's reactions, and he felt disappointed that there had been none at all.

The train pulled into Clapham Junction a few minutes later and he got off, went to the toilet where he took off his hoodie, put it in his carrier bag and then returned to the platform to catch the next train home.

He spent the next day resting up. There would be plenty of time to write up the experiment. For the moment he just wanted to forget about it. Giving lectures was his thing, not play acting, but he had to admit that he thought he had sounded pretty authentic.

Meanwhile throughout the region, the police were being bombarded with text messages and phone calls from the public about what they had heard on the train. The messages were relayed to a police station in central London, and a major incident was declared. Inspector Simon Malgrove called a meeting with other officers shortly afterwards.

"It looks like we have a serious murder investigation on our hands," he said. "Someone somewhere has been knocked off."

"An easy one then," commented one officer.

"What our job is is to find who did it, where he did it, and where the body is, except that the body is in different pieces so they could be anywhere. Let's start with finding the murderer."

"What have we got to go on so far?" someone asked.

"He, and I'm pretty sure it is a 'he' - you can't always tell these days - was wearing trainers, jeans and a black hoodie and travelled on the 5pm Victoria train to Clapham Junction three days ago. According to CCTV cameras at the station, someone of that description entered the Gents' toilets around about 5.10pm. It appears that he did not come out again. I have checked with the cleaning lady in case he entered a cubicle and had a heart attack and died on the toilet seat, but she

assures me that there was no-one dressed like that when she was in there last.”

“Perhaps he tunnelled out?” another person said.

“I think that is highly unlikely – you’ve been watching Colditz too many times.”

“Maybe he broke the wall down and went into the Disabled or Ladies’ toilet?”

“What could he break down the wall with? No, I think it more likely that he escaped unnoticed and either went into Clapham or caught another train.”

“But there are scores of trains that leave Clapham – he could have gone anywhere,” someone said.

“True, so we must concentrate on trying to find him in Clapham.”

“Any details on his appearance, otherwise?” a person asked.

“Judging by the reports we have had, he is somewhere between 5’8” and 6’ tall, with one woman claiming he was about 6’7”. He is slim, average or portly – reports differ. And he walks quickly, or with a limp or with a zimmer-frame. You can’t rely upon what eye-witnesses say. He does not have a recognisable accent, most people said, but a Polish woman thought he might be from Somerset. It would appear that he is probably middle-class, middle-aged and white.”

“Well that certainly rules out a few people,” someone remarked caustically.

“What I’d like you all to do then is to go to Clapham and arrest anyone who fits that description. We’ll meet again here tomorrow.”

Inspector Malgrove was eager to nail this and would do whatever it took in order to get promotion...Superintendent, Commissioner, Mayor of London, Prime Minister – he had them all in his sights.

At the meeting the next day, there was much consternation amongst the police officers. They had taken in several hundred men for questioning plus a couple of women, most of whom they had encountered on Clapham Common, who had to admit that they did not have any alibis regarding their whereabouts on the day in question. The police station had since been contacted by a number of women reporting that their husbands were missing.

Inspector Malgrove was not satisfied and told his officers to widen the search to Wandsworth Common, as many of the men did not look like murderers, as they are pictured in the tabloid press.

“I think that today we must move on to the next stage which is to find the body, or rather parts of it. Let’s start with the head. What does a severed head remind you of?” he asked.

“A football, a bowling ball, or maybe a rugby ball?” someone replied.

“I’m not sure about a rugby ball, but you may be right – there are some odd-shaped heads about. Now what do you do if you want to get a head?”

“You go to Eton or Oxford or Cambridge,” said one person.

“Excellent. So I want some of you to go to Oxford and Cambridge Universities and scour the grounds, and the rest of you to pay a visit to the headmaster of Eton College and dig up the playing fields.”

A couple of days later when they met up again, the Inspector asked them if they had found anything. To his surprise, his men had discovered a total of five severed heads. He got the lab to take their DNA and put them in his office for safe keeping.

“Now we have two arms and two hands to find,” he stated. “Where can you find a supply of arms?”

“Presumably in an arsenal,” someone piped-up. “Right. Go to the Arsenal football ground and dig up their pitch.”

“But it’s a Saturday today and they will be playing Everton,” objected one officer, a football fan himself.

“OK, if you feel strongly about it, wait till they have finished their game and then do it.”

“With regard to the hands, which are not attached, you may have to use your imagination.”

The next day the manager of Arsenal was fuming and had visited the police to object strongly about what had been done. He was pacified with some tear gas and was sent packing. The dig had unearthed three arms, albeit dressed differently, so they all felt it had not been a wasted effort. DNA samples were taken and the arms were placed alongside the heads.

Those police officers who were hunting for the hands had indeed been very imaginative. Remembering the expression ‘All Hands On Deck’ some of the officers had gone on board some naval ships and had come back with an assorted collection of hands, which were then added to the heads and arms. Another officer had gone to the theatre, as he had taken to heart the line in ‘The Importance of being Earnest’ when Lady Bracknell says “A Handbag?” At this point he leapt up on stage to examine it for himself and had indeed found a hand inside the bag.

The entire cast were hauled in for questioning. And there was another officer who had been to

a hospital and discovered a hand packed in ice which was being transplanted on to an anaesthetized patient. As soon as the patient had regained consciousness, he and the surgeons were arrested as they did not have a clue where the donor hand had come from.

Meanwhile back in Hastings, Dr Hatchetman had caught the flu and was laid up in bed, being totally unaware of all these developments. The search for him had now encompassed much of South London with hundreds more arrests. They were beginning to run out of enough space in the jails to incarcerate people.

“What comes to mind when I say the word ‘legs’?” asked Inspector Malgrove to the assembled police officers the next day.

“Legs 11 – bingo,” replied an elderly police sergeant.

“Very good. And is there any address with number eleven in it which might give us a clue?”

“11 Downing Street,” shouted one of the officers.

“Well done. There must be some reason why ‘leg’ and the number ‘eleven’ are connected. I want a few of you to visit that address and search for any legs – they must be severed; I don’t want a whole body. If you find any, arrest the occupant.”

Sure enough, a collection of legs of various shapes and sizes were found at that address and the occupant was detained.

Again, DNA from the legs was taken and they were assembled with the other body parts in the office.

The feet were much harder to locate.

“What are feet?” asked the Inspector.

“They are simply leg-ends,” said an officer who prided himself on being able to do cryptic crosswords in the Times newspaper.

“And where would you find out about leg-ends, or should we say, legends?”

“In a library, I expect.”

“Well done. Go to the British Library and have a search for some unattached feet. “

They did this and came back with an amazing amount of them, although many of these were

prehistoric.

By this time, the national newspapers were giving full coverage to the crime. Dr Hatchetman was getting alarmed by what he had started and did not have a clue what he should do about it. He was alarmed to read that the search for him was now taking in the whole of London.

“All we have left now is the torso,” the Inspector said to his officers.

“What exactly is a torso?” asked a new police recruit.

“It’s part of the body without the head and without any limbs. Some call it the trunk. Ah ha! Maybe it’s hidden in a trunk or even a trunk on a trunk road.”

“Perhaps they will all be in bathing trunks,” suggested someone.

The Inspector dismissed this and then went on: “All of this is too much of a coincidence to ignore. This fiendish murderer would not hesitate to leave the torso on such a road. I wonder which trunk road we should try...What about the Dartford Tunnel. That is officially called a trunk road – the A282. There is the east tunnel and the west tunnel and also the Dartford Bridge, or to be more correct, the Queen Elizabeth II Bridge. We should examine them all.”

In a convoy the police vans drove off to the Dartford-Thurrock Crossing the next day. They erected police barricades and placed traffic cones alongside the roads turning them into single carriageways. The immediate effect of this was to create a long tailback for miles and miles along the M25. The first torso they turned up in a trunk took hours to find – it had been discarded in some grass on the approaches to the tunnels. Then more came to light there and in the shallow water beneath the bridge, bringing the total to seven in all by the end of the day.

They packed them into the vans and drove back to London with them. They stacked them in the Inspector’s office with the other parts and next day DNA tests were done on them.

The result of the DNA tests on all the body parts came through in a couple of days. It showed quite clearly that none of the DNA of each part married up with any other part. This was unwelcome news to the Inspector. Either the murderer was a well-travelled serial killer, or there were a lot of serial killers out there. The newspapers made a big splash about the news. The headlines in one read: *The dismembering of corpses has become a national pastime.*

The matter was raised in parliament and the Prime Minister said that we should all be proud of

something which the country excels in. The Home Secretary made a speech, in which she said that all dismembered migrants should be sent back to their countries of origin. As for all the people who had been detained, they were set free except the occupant of 11 Downing Street who had admitted guilt, if it progressed his parliamentary career.

Dr Norman Hatchetman had finally made up his mind on what to do and took himself off to the local police station, where he admitted that it was he who had sparked the whole thing of as part of a psychological experiment to study people's reactions. He was arrested and charged with wasting police time, and being an accessory to the digging up of playing fields in Eton, Oxford and Cambridge; the destruction of the Arsenal's football ground; the embarrassment of the Chancellor of the Exchequer; the ruination of parts of the British Library; the closure of a theatre in the West End; the arrest of several ships' companies; the disruption caused to surgery at a hospital; and the disturbance to many businesses caused by the traffic jams on the M25.

He spent several years in jail for these crimes and never did get to write up his experiment. After being released he gave up lecturing at university and became a toilet cleaner in the Clapham Junction railway station. He never regretted changing his job. There were no deadlines, no papers to write, no unruly students, and if there was a big stink about anything, he knew precisely what to do about it. Open all the windows and clean up the mess with soap and water...OK, a lot of soap and water.

Note for readers who are not British – 11 Downing Street is the home of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

A WORLD APART

It was with great surprise that Reginald and Miranda Fortescue ascended into heaven, or rather, the heavens on October 5th 1864. Everything went dark around them, and they blacked out within a few minutes. This was their very first and only journey into space.

Reginald was an employee with the British East India Tea Company based in Calcutta, as it was then called. He was a minor official whose task was to see that tea exported from the Darjeeling tea gardens reached Calcutta without a hitch. He was not responsible for the whole journey but just the last stretch, to ensure that none of the tea chests were pilfered en route. The previous day they had gone to Kushtia, just over 100 miles away to the North East on the recently-opened Eastern Bengal Railway line. He had taken Miranda his wife with him, as she spoke fluent Bengali, owing to her mother being Indian, although Miranda herself had never lived in or even visited the country beforehand.

They spent the night in accommodation in Kushtia, provided by the company. Reginald was finding the heat unbearable and slept that night with the window of their room wide open. Coming directly from London where you could hardly see any stars, he took great pleasure in admiring the night sky from his bed. He had a keen interest in astronomy and imagined what it must be like to explore space and fly to other planets. His wife was more down-to-earth and was worried about the mosquitos which had entered the room, and she had quickly shut the window, leaving her husband to continue to dream about his fantasies.

The next day he thought it might be wise to blend in with the locals so as not to draw attention to themselves, so for the train journey to Calcutta they both donned Indian dress, she in a voluminous sari, and he in a Kurta - a long embroidered shirt - and a dhoti - the traditional men's baggy lower garment. They had never worn such things before, and it was all rather hit and miss.

It was a particularly hot and humid day, and rather than sit in the stifling train compartment, they found a place on the roof to sit. Unusually, none of the Indian passengers that day were up there too. It was almost as if they knew something which Reginald and his wife did not know. To

be fair to the Fortiscues, they had only arrived in India a short time beforehand and were still busy learning the social and cultural ropes. It may have seemed a good idea when they set off to sit on the roof. But they regretted it soon enough when a stiff wind blew up, by which time the train was underway, and it was too late to do anything about it.

The wind got stronger and stronger and was accompanied by the start of rain which soon came down in torrents. The train was moving very fast, the driver wanting to make headway before the impending storm would slow their progress. All of a sudden, the train came to an abrupt halt when the driver spotted that the railway lines in front were submerged in water. This upset the balance of Reginald and Miranda, and they were violently thrown forward. The strong wind billowed their loose-fitting garments which became unravelled and blew them up into the air. Instinctively Miranda grabbed at Reginald's hand, and as she did so part of her sari got caught up in his dhoti so they faced the onslaught of the rapidly-growing cyclone together.

Having passed out fairly soon after being lifted up, they were oblivious to the fact that they were near the centre of the storm, and as they started to spin in anti-clockwise circles around the eye, they gradually were forced out into the mass of revolving clouds. Around and around they were hurled until with a final flourish they were released and were catapulted outwards away from the cyclone in a southerly direction.

When Miranda came to, she was surprised to find they were lying on a white sandy beach, beside the rough churning sea. She shook Reginald and for a while they just lay there, wondering how they had got there. After thinking about it, he told her he knew what must have happened – they had been thrown into orbit and landed on another planet. Miranda smiled sweetly at him but did not believe a word of it.

Apart from some minor bruising and being quite dazed, they were unharmed.

“So, what do we do now?” asked Miranda.

“Well, let's have a look round and then we can have a nice cup of tea,” replied Reginald.

“I don't think they drink tea on other planets,” said Miranda softly.

They got to their feet and walked along the sand from where they had landed. In one area they found the remains of some wooden crates which had been cast ashore by the storm, but thought nothing more of it. Then, after a couple of hours they spotted some footprints in the sand.

“Aliens!” declared Reginald.

Miranda observed the footprints and saw beside them a handkerchief. It was a very distinct handkerchief with the initials R.F sewn in one corner.

“Look, those are your initials,” she said to her husband. “Have you still got your handkerchief in your pocket?”

Reginald put his hand in his pocket and could not find his handkerchief. It must be his on the ground. He picked it up.

“We’ve obviously gone all the way round. This must be an island. Let’s see what we can find inland,” Miranda said in an animated tone of voice.

They were glad to get away from the blazing hot sun and the sand flies and were grateful for the protection that their Indian clothes gave them. Behind the white sandy beach lay an unbroken line of palm-trees, mangroves and dense vegetation, in fact, the very epitome of a tropical rain forest. Taking shade under the leaves of the first tree, Reginald called out: “Good afternoon. Is there anyone there?”

No sounds could be heard from the immediate area apart from the dripping of water from the tips of leaves high above them.

No human or alien voices responded to his call. Venturing further in, they became aware of the bothersome mosquitos and fierce-looking ants on the branches of trees. It was hard-going and not at all pleasant.

The sun was now starting to get lower in the sky, and in the forest, it had become quite dark.

“Where are we going to spend the night?” said Miranda, getting plainly agitated.

“Not here, for sure,” Reginald replied. In spite of his stiff upper lip his anxiety was beginning to show. “Let’s go back to the beach. I feel safer there.”

It took a long while before they found their way back to a stretch of beach. Both of them were beginning to feel hungry, but their overwhelming tiredness seemed to take precedence, and as soon as they lay down, they fell fast asleep. In the wee hours of the morning, Reginald felt the call of nature. Should he go to the trees or to the sea? If he were back in Chelsea, what would be the accepted thing to do? In the circumstances he was in, there was no definitive answer to that. The strong urge to go made him decide to go to the nearest place, which happened to be the sea.

The storm had now passed and it was a beautiful, clear moonlit night. He looked up at the moon. That must be the Earth, he thought to himself. It was not as he expected it would look like from space, but no-one knew what it would look like at that time. He did his business and wandered back to where his wife was lying. His mind was now active, and he could not get back to sleep again. I wonder what planet we are on, he thought. All he could remember was that Mars was supposed to be red, and Saturn had rings around it. That ruled those two out. He was a bit vague about the other planets. It is probably Venus or maybe Neptune, or maybe Neptus or Ventune or even Urinus...He fell asleep ruminating over this and was awoken by his wife early the next morning.

“I’m starving,” she said. “Let’s see what we can find to eat.”

They walked along the sand towards the sea and at the water’s edge saw a number of dead fish, washed ashore by the storm. Reginald was reluctant to have them to eat, as this was the spot where he had relieved himself during the night, and he assumed that he had somehow poisoned them. But he did not object to them if they were thoroughly washed before eating. Obviously, they could not eat them raw – they would have to be cooked, and therefore they had to light a fire. There was plenty of wood in the forest, but no way to light it. He tried to remember how as a boy he had lit fires, but could not remember. Miranda came to the rescue by fishing out the cosmetic mirror in her make-up bag, which she had placed in a fold of her sari, and used it to focus the sun’s rays upon a small branch taken from the forest until flames appeared. She placed one of the fish on a thick leaf and retrieved the fish just as the fire was about to catch the leaf alight. There were lots of fish left over which they placed on a pile on the beach for other meals. The fish went down well, but Reginald complained that there were no chips to go with it.

“Chips will have to wait until we can find some potatoes. In the meantime, I think you ought to think about erecting some sort of shelter,” Miranda told him. Reginald was not the most practical of men. His stint in the boy scouts had not covered building shelters on other planets. But he did remember coming across the wooden crates. At least it was a start. Using some large leaves and accessible thin branches from the forest, they erected a small hut on the beach. Not exactly “they”, it was Miranda who did most of it, but Reginald did make a small cupboard from the crates to put their shoes in. There were still open spaces left in the construction, so they used their Indian clothes to fill in the gaps. For clothing they would have to make use of palm fronds, which Miranda could stitch together.

The construction of the hut necessitated several trips into the forest. On the last occasion when Miranda was looking for something to use as a doormat, they heard a strange sound. It was a clucking sound from near at hand. They kept quiet and within minutes several hens and a cockerel passed by close to them. Miranda guessed straight away that they had come from the wooden crates which had been washed overboard from a boat in the storm. But Reginald, who had been brought up in the heart of London and had never seen a hen, became very alarmed.

“These must be the aliens,” he stated. “We are on the planet Urinus and so they must be Urinians.”

He approached one of them: “We come in peace,” he said solemnly. “I am called Reginald Fortescue and this is my wife, Miranda. May I ask what your name is?”

The hen looked at him with its head on one side and clucked.

“How do you do, Cluck,” he said. “Her Majesty, Queen Victoria, will be delighted that you have made our acquaintance.”

“Cluck cluck,” the hen went and scuttled away.

While this conversation was going on, Miranda had found the place where the hens had been laying their eggs and had retrieved some.

“Tomorrow,” she told Reginald, “We shall have some fried eggs for breakfast.”

“What, with no bacon?” Reginald retorted.

Miranda soon worked out that they could obtain fresh water from strategically-placed palm leaves under large trees to catch any rainfall or condensation, so poached eggs were also now on the menu. Coconut milk from coconuts, which had fallen to the ground, provided them with additional liquid refreshments. One essential missing ingredient, a supply of tea leaves, could not be found, which irked Reginald.

Neither of them knew anything about which plants in the forest could be used for food or drink, so they did not experiment in case they all turned out to be toxic.

In spite of this handicap, however, their life assumed a degree of sophistication. Reginald envisaged that in time their shelter might become a large city, and so he named their hut, Albert. Her majesty would be very pleased that on the planet Urinus, there is a hut named after the Royal Consort, he felt.

It was not long after this that the Fortescues decided to start a family. In keeping with the times, they limited it to just twelve children, and more huts were built nearby. The poultry also increased in number and any dead hens were consumed on special days – birthdays and the founding of the settlement, provided any hens conveniently died on these days.

Readers with a moral conscience should read no further as I have to say that in time, a new generation emerged as a result of some discrete incestuous relationships. The number of new shelters grew even more, and a school and church were built in the heart of the burgeoning town. Reginald, being the most senior man there, assumed the role of head school-teacher and minister of the church. He taught and preached to everyone that Urinus was a god-fearing planet which revolved around the Earth and that one day, some of their number might return to the original home in a mission of peace.

When Miranda died in giving birth to her thirteenth child, there was no-one left who did not believe they were on a distant planet. Reginald died not long afterwards, and more generations were produced as time went by. The words of their founding father were venerated and became almost a new religion.

The opportunity for a peace mission to Earth occurred by accident one day. A ship was sailing not too far from the island, and a crew member spotted something unusual. The island, which was in the far north of the Andaman Islands, had always been categorised as being uninhabited, but there were definitely signs of life on it. This was very strange and needed to be investigated. The ship sent a boat to the shore, and the inhabitants drew lots to see who would go back with the crewmen to the ship.

With the two lottery winners on board, the ship sailed to Calcutta, now in the 21st century renamed Kolkata. The crew gave them some clothes, in place of the hand-stitched leaves they were wearing. When the ship docked, James and Anita from the island disembarked with the crew and were taken to the city centre. In their minds, this was all still part of the planet Urinus. What they had not reckoned on was that they needed money and official documents, as their mission was to travel to the Earth and visit London, where their ancestors had come from.

They had no choice but to live on the streets, but their attempts at begging for money were hopeless. It was unheard of to see two people with European blood appealing for money in this

way. Lack of food, except for what they could scrounge or find in refuse bags, persuaded them to find jobs, however menial to do until they could muster up enough money to travel to London.

Anita joined several other women in picking over scraps of textiles for recycling in a junkyard, although they did resent her being there at first. In time though they were more accepting of her as she turned out to be very good at suggesting what could be done with all kinds of discarded useless articles.

James was given the opportunity to carry passengers on a rickshaw, which he pulled through the busy streets risking life and limb with every trip. The other rickshaw-wallahs had bet him that he could not do it, but he willingly gave it a try. It was possibly the sight of a white person pulling a rickshaw which attracted a lot of attention and which made his business grow.

It was very hard on both of them as they were not used to such manual labour and long hours, but they persevered, and after a few weeks they found an abandoned shack to live in in the slums, which was a step up for them. They were often homesick for the island but had pledged that they would visit the planet Earth on behalf of the other residents on Urinus.

Even with two jobs, they could never be able to afford the air fares to London and wondered how they could acquire more money.

The answer was staring them in the face. One day James said to Anita: "Why don't we set up a travel business in our spare time to get tourists to visit the island. We could persuade the skippers of local boats which go to the Andaman Islands to call in there."

Anita thought it was a brilliant idea.

"When the tourists visit, they could stay in beach huts like the one we used to live in," James continued. "But first we must tell our plans to our family back there so they can get prepared."

They wrote their plans down in a letter and got the captain of a boat to deliver it for them. In due course, they had word back that the people back home were all too willing to cooperate and were ready to receive the first tourists. They splashed out on getting some leaflets printed, and James handed these to each of his rickshaw customers. Business was slow at first, and there were a lot of complaints from the tourists, but it was a learning process and gradually got more streamlined. Mostly it attracted people who wanted to rough it for the experience it offered, and word soon spread around.

Unfortunately, the whole enterprise ground to a halt when a tourist, who had been swimming, got eaten by a shark, after being stung by a jellyfish. But by this time, James and Anita had amassed

enough money for the airfares. They had also applied for the right documentation which enabled them to travel, something which required paying a lot of bungs to different officials along the line.

On the appointed day, Anita sat in the rickshaw and James took her to Kolkata airport.

“I don’t suppose I’ll need it on the plane,” James said, “but if I can get them to put it in the cargo-hold, we can use it when we get to London.”

His wish was not granted, and he had to leave it in the carpark instead.

As they took their seats in the plane Anita commented: “This is a lot easier than it must have been for great-grandad and great-grandma.”

James nodded.

Just then the plane started taxiing to the runway, and after a few minutes it suddenly accelerated and took off. Both James and Anita were petrified as the plane climbed upwards at a sharp angle. The roar of the engines and the buzzing in their ears assured them they were well on the way to another planet. The plane levelled out as they rose above the clouds. Then the clouds disappeared, and they could see the sun setting on the horizon. Not long after that, the light faded outside, and they knew they were in deep space. This was all so overwhelming to them that they fell asleep and did not wake up until the plane prepared to land at Dubai airport.

“Is this London?” James asked an airport official.

“No this is Dubai. You have to catch another plane to get there,” he replied.

“It must be another planet on the way to Earth,” James told Anita. All the people they saw in traditional Arab dress looked very different from what they were used to on Urinus. Why were some of the women almost completely covered up in black garments and the men in white robes, he wondered. It must be so they can tell the difference between the sexes, he concluded. We never had that problem on Urinus - far from it and he winked at her.

There were still a few hours before the next plane was due to leave, so they had a sit-down in an airport bar. There were strange machines spitting out brown liquid which people were drinking.

“I don’t think we ought to drink that – it looks as if it has got mud in it. Pity we didn’t bring some coconuts with us so we could have a drink,” said Anita.

They made their way to the gate for their next plane, puzzled that they never actually saw a gate. At least this time they knew what to expect when the plane took off and soared into the

heavens. Instantly they fell asleep again, only waking up when they landed at Heathrow airport.

“Are we finally on planet Earth,” James asked the customs official.

“So, what have you been taking?” the man replied, and called a colleague of his to come.

“We come from Urinis and want to see the land of our ancestors,” Anita chipped in.

The two officials looked at each other.

“Can we breathe the air here without masks?” James asked. “And where can we find the palm trees – I need to have a drink.”

“It sounds as if you have had a few already,” the other official commented.

“I need to go into the woods for a pee,” said Anita, urgently.

“You’ll have to use the toilets like everyone else,” the first official told her.

“Where can I change into my palm fronds?” asked James. He had seen drawings of his great grandfather wearing them, and he had originally come from London, so they must be what they wear here.

“We’ll find a little room for you,” said the second official, menacingly. “If you don’t mind sharing it with someone else.”

They escorted the two into a room and were told to sit down at a table. A man in a dark uniform, who told them he was a police officer, then proceeded to question them.

“So, what is this place called Urinis?” he began.

“It’s another planet a bit of a distance from the planet they call Dubai,” said James.

“And where exactly is it?”

“It’s just below Kolkata. We come from an island on Urinis, with white sandy beaches and lots of palm trees.”

“Ah, we’re getting somewhere.”

“Where are your parents from?”

“They’re from Uranis, just like my grand-parents. My great grandfather arrived there when he and my great grandmother did a space journey.”

“A space journey? Where from?”

“Kushtia.”

“Is that on Urinis or on Earth?”

“It’s on Earth. They went through space and landed up in Albert, as it is now.”

“What was it at that time?”

“It didn’t exist.”

“And what may I ask did your great grandfather do in Kushtia, wherever that is?”

“He travelled with a lot of tea.”

“You mean in a flask?”

“No, in a train. He was sitting on the roof at the time.”

“Well, why have you come to London?”

“To see where he came from originally.”

“And what was his name?”

“Fortescue, Reginald Fortescue. His wife was Miranda Fortescue.”

“How odd,” said the police officer. “There are Fortescues in my family too. If I remember right, there was one of my ancestors whose brother went to Calcutta. Strange chap, he was. Always looking up at the sky at night.”

“That must be him. So, we must be...related.”

“Well, that’s quite a coincidence.” He paused. “I never did like the sound of him. I’m afraid we can’t allow you to enter the country. We’ll provide overnight accommodation for you – a nice room with a bar, actually quite a few bars, over the window. And then we’ll put you on a plane back home, at no cost to yourself.”

“But we came to see London.”

“You’ve seen it. This is London, or rather one of the London airports.”

And with that he escorted the pair into a police cell.

“This must be what the inside of a house looks like on Earth,” said Anita. “I don’t like it. I wish we were back in Urinis.”

“Me too,” replied James. “But it sounds like we soon will be.”

Meanwhile the police officer who was looking through their very meagre luggage came across a leaflet promoting tourism on the island.

“That sounds pretty good. I think I’ll book up for our summer holidays there,” he told his wife later that evening.

James and Anita travelled back to Kolkata the next day, and then boarded a boat for the island, where they related their experiences to everyone. No-one else ever wanted to visit planet Earth after listening to what they had to say.

Months later, the police officer and his wife appeared on the island. They were welcomed with

open arms before being taken to their accommodation – an old hut on the beach with a leaky roof and a window covered over with wooden bars on which huge ants had taken up residence. They only stayed the one night and turned down the offer of raw egg and coconut milk for breakfast. They were never seen again.

It was all a far different world from what they were used to.

FILLY-POWER

“What shall we call her,” Becky said to Andrew, her husband.

“She’s a filly, so how about Delphia,” he answered immediately.

“Why Delphia?” she asked, sounding quite puzzled.

“Oh, never mind,” he said. “What do people in the Shetland Isles say they are?”

“Shetland Islanders, I suppose, or maybe Shetlanders.” She replied.

“Well, Shetlander is too long. We could shorten it to Shetly. Mmm, that’s a bit of a mouthful.”

“Can’t say Shetty - sounds too much like something else. But what about Shelly, or should that be spelled Shelley.”

“Are you expecting me to say to her – “Hail to thee, blithe spirit...”

“...Bird she never wert, that's for certain. She’s our little pony.”

“OK, what about Sherry then – that’s easier to say, and we won’t feel obliged to read her poetry in our spare moments.”

“I wasn’t expecting to do that anyway. But it’s not a bad name. I think it would be cuter to spell it SHERI. If we stuck with Sherry, you would feel like you needed a drop of it every time we see her.”

“True, but Sheri sounds rather like Cherie, and she’s definitely not a French pony. Let’s stick to Sheri.”

‘Sheri’ it was then, Sheri the Shetland Pony. They had only just acquired her, and she now had free reign in a small field, near to their rented cottage near Grassington in the Yorkshire Dales. This was only on a temporary basis, as Becky and Andrew were here for only a few months, doing an archaeological project for Reading University. They had not meant to buy a pony, but when they saw the appealing 40 inch (102cm) high, chestnut-coloured pony in a livestock sale, they could not resist her. Moving her to her new home was not a problem as the seller arranged the transport for them. Sheri took one look at the field and instantly set off to explore it. Once they saw she seemed content with her new surroundings, Becky and Andrew went back to their lodgings as they had pressing work to do.

Although Sheri was very quiet and good-natured when human beings were around, she could

be impatient and restless when there was no-one there to make a fuss of her. After a few weeks of trying out the grass in different parts of the field, she decided she liked it best beside the hedge, where there was more protection from the wind. On the other side of the hedge there was a minor road, which was used by very few cars. One day, though, a man on horseback came by in no particular hurry.

Sheri had never seen a horse and was memorised by it. The horse, a beautiful black stallion, had such long legs and such curvy buttocks she could not resist staring at it until it had gone. Compared to her own short stumpy legs, he was a god. She felt very inadequate and was overcome by a feeling of low esteem. She had no romantic or lustful thoughts in her head. It was purely the difference between her own physique and that of the stallion which struck her and made her lacklustered and moody. Becky noticed it the next time she visited her. Maybe she is home-sick for her old field, she thought. Or maybe she is lonely? We'll see what we can do about that when we go home.

Andrew and Becky's work up in Yorkshire was soon coming to an end, and they were preparing to return to their home in Berkshire. They had already planned where Sheri was to go. There was a nice big field outside town which was also used by two male ponies, which they thought would help her to regain her usual cheerful self. They had first to obtain a horse-box to take her there – a horse-box with a low window which she could see out of, otherwise she might get restless on the journey. Finding such a vehicle proved difficult, and in the end, they had to make some modifications to an existing one, based on the height of the pony. Andrew also had to take a special driving test and get a special license in order to attach the horse-box to his car, but they felt it was well worth the effort and expense.

They set off southwards down the M1 and on to the M25, driving in a westerly direction around London. Becky was getting very worried about the effect the fast driving might be having on Sheri. She thought that other roads besides motorways would be less stressful, and so they headed for Windsor on the M4 and then took the A332, which would join up with the A329 towards their home, near Bracknell. The A332 (The Windsor Road) ran beside the Ascot racecourse, and along this stretch of road they came across a long tail-back. At one point where they had to stop for some time, they passed a closed gate which led across the racecourse. Here the thick hedges between the road and the course no longer obscured their view, and they could see a race taking place. Andrew

and Becky were blasé about the races, but it utterly transfixed Sheri.

Granted she had seen that man riding slowly along on horseback back in Yorkshire, but to see a number of sleek horses galloping along was a new experience for her. She took note of the slim build and athletic bodies of the horses and the taunt figures of the riders and became very depressed, comparing them to her own body. By the time the car and horsebox reached the new field, which was to be her future home, she could hardly stumble down the steps to the gate. Of course, Becky assumed that the journey had taken its toll on the pony and within a short time, she would be back to normal. But it did not happen.

Sheri mooched around the field and hardly ate any grass for days on end. She wanted to be slender like the racehorses. She also felt ashamed of her rugged fur which hung down in strands from her squat body, instead of being like the smooth glossy coat of the horses she admired. She would spend hours rubbing herself against the trees and bushes trying to get rid of the unsightly loose hair.

The other two occupants of the field – two male Shetland ponies – could not understand her strange behaviour and just ignored her. After a week she confided in one of them, whose name was Ed, that she longed to look as sleek as the racehorses, and what she wanted, what she really, really wanted to do was to run around with someone on her back. But she had been discriminated against, because she was a Shetland pony, and that would never happen. She was also angry that people called her a filly, which is something she hated. I'm a young female pony, she complained to him.

Since they had completed their fieldwork, Andrew and Becky had some time off and concentrated all their efforts on trying to start a family, at least that was their story. They were successful, and Becky gave birth to a baby girl who they called Georgia, but became shortened in time to George. She wore one pink sock and one blue one, a pink top, and blue trousers, which was changed every week to a blue top, and pink trousers. The poor child was not so much transgender as mixed-gender.

On the child's fifth birthday, her parents invited two other children round for a party and then, for lack of anything else to do at home, they came to the field to see the ponies.

"Let's have some races," said Andrew. Becky was less keen on the idea, but felt that being only Shetland ponies, they would not go very fast, so it should be safe enough.

Andrew rustled up some saddles and George was placed on Sheri's back, and the other children on the backs of Ed and Fred – the other male pony.

Off they went at terrific speed, much to the consternation of Becky. At the end of the first lap of the field, the two male ponies were in front. The second lap saw Sheri ahead of Fred and on the third lap she had comfortably overtaken both male ponies and crossed the finishing line way ahead of them. This was a momentous occasion for Sheri. She had beaten both males – an inspiring example of filly-power.

No-one knew whether the look on Sheri's face and her subsequent behaviour related to her successful achievement, or whether it was pure disdain for the male ponies, but life for her was never the same again.

Ed and Fred were distraught by losing the race and behaved rather badly, one of them did a poo on Becky's shoe, while the other threw off his saddle and chewed it up. Typical, you might say. But it was always expected of the foals that they would come first: they were expected to be athletic when they clearly were not. Ed's favourite pastime was to admire the ladybirds. Fred chose to eat nothing but pink flowers in the grass.

They always had had low self-esteem but instead of showing it by starving themselves, they behaved badly. As for their self-image with regard to racehorses, they knew they were simply not in the same league and were resigned to the fact.

A week later, a fierce storm blew up and a lot of heavy branches fell on to the Ascot racecourse. There were no bulldozers available, so other means had to be found to drag the debris away. The racehorses in the area were not strong enough, and besides their owners would not allow them to do that sort of work. A shire horse was brought in, but he found it hard-going and did not accomplish much. In desperation, a race course official approached Andrew to see if the ponies could help. All three Shetland ponies were brought to the course, and in no time at all, they had pulled the branches away to where they could be kept before being disposed of.

The ponies returned to their field in triumph. None of them anymore had any self-doubts. They radiated happiness and were sweet-tempered to anyone who visited them. Bearing in mind that a Shetland pony is a type of horse, the expression 'horses for courses' seemed very appropriate in the circumstances.

So that's the end of this story. But before you go would you promise me one thing. The next

time you see some Shetland ponies, tell them the story of Sheri. They will be happy to hear it...unless they tell it to you first.

In Wikipedia it says that 'For its size, the Shetland is the strongest of all horse and pony breeds. It can pull twice its own weight under circumstances where a draft/draught horse can only pull approximately half its own weight.'

GRASS, GAS 'N' ASS

“As soon as I’ve done the last verge in town, the grass needs to be cut on the first one again.” Said Thomas Dick to his friend, Harold, at the bar in the Green Lion pub. “It’s worse than painting the Fifth Rail Bridge.” This was deliberate exaggeration, not plain ignorance. He knew perfectly well it was the Third Rail Bridge that people referred to.

The council had reduced the work-force for cutting the verges down from five to one - just himself. In the cutting season, this increased his workload considerably. But the lack of funds which the council had to conjure with meant that the grass could only be cut twice a year now. There was even talk that soon they would dispense with his services too, as volunteers had been found who could do the work. Things were looking grim for Tom.

Half-way through his final cut for the year, he had a surprise. He had won the National Lottery prize for £2 million. He could not believe his luck and spent the next few days off-work, planning how he would spend the money. One thing for certain, though, was that he would not inform his employers about his winnings.

He decided straight away that he would jack in his job. He had had enough of it. What he would like to do was to indulge himself in a life-long dream of his, namely to write a musical, like his idols: Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Charlie Brownsauce – a plumber in the same town who had written a song, which had been performed by the local drama society the previous year.

It should be said that Tom had no musical training, and his only experience of what could possibly pass as making music was his singing to himself, as he went about his work. Hardly anyone heard him and if anyone did so, they would interrupt his renditions by talking about the weather, and how quickly the grass and the weeds were growing. Granted, people did shut their windows when he came their way, but that was so they would not hear the sound of the lawnmower, they told him.

At his leaving-do, the chairman of the council gave him, what he described as, a ‘Cut-Grass’ decanter, with the words:

To Tom. Thanks for your 28-years-service inscribed on it. Below this was some verse:

No verges left unmown

In this tidy little town

“That’s from one of Wordsworth’s lesser-known poems,” the chairman said to him with a straight-face.

“Yes,” said Tom. “I remember reading it in school.”

“You can always flog the thing if you’re short of cash,” said the clerk to the council. But Tom did not hear him as he had already made his departure. He flung the decanter in the nearest waste-bin on his way home, muttering to himself: “Wordsworth, my foot. That’s Chaucer. It comes from The Grasse-Cutter’s Tale, if I’m not mistaken.”

A few days later he met up with his chum, Harry, again and told him of his good fortune, and his plans for writing a musical. Harry, whose job was to dig holes in the road for the gas board, had a reputation for having a way with words. Whenever he stubbed his toe on a stone or had some other mishap, he would ask people to cover their ears before letting loose a torrent of expletives, which lasted for many minutes. A man with such vivid imagination is just what I could do with, thought Tom. He could write the lyrics to my music, and together we could write the story-line. Tom offered to pay him generously for doing this, and Harry simply could not refuse the offer.

For several weeks they laboured over the plot and often felt they would never finish putting one together. When someone informed Harry that the plot of a musical or even an opera is not that important, as people only went to the theatre to hear the songs, see the dancing, and admire the costumes, they no longer worried about the plot and turned their attention to the musical side of things.

As it stood, the plot went as follows.

The headmaster of a public-school falls in love with a very assertive female minister for education in the government. He invites her to visit his school. Almost immediately, he ushers her into his study and tells her he has been a very naughty boy and bends over a chair for her to cane him. Just as she raises the cane in the air, she looks out of the window and spots a very handsome man cutting the lawn. She is filled with lust. The gardener goes off to get the trimmers and nearly trips over an extremely good-looking fellow, who was digging holes in the road for the gas board. Again, she is filled with lust. None of this stops her from caning the headmaster, and she does so with extra vigour. He is clearly enjoying the experience. The lady cannot decide who she wants – the gardener or the gasman. She devises a task for them to perform, and the winner will be the one

she chooses. The task is a simple one: to work out a new exam syllabus for the nation's schools. The gardener's syllabus involves nothing much more than cutting the country's grass, while the gasman's syllabus is centred on digging holes for new gas-pipes on the country's roads. She is not satisfied with either of these plans and returns to parliament, feeling frustrated. At the next election she loses her seat and opens a café in Margate. The headmaster retires from teaching and is hired to do the washing-up in the café. Meanwhile the gardener wins a seat in parliament and becomes a minister of education in the government, while the gasman becomes the headmaster of a public school. One day the former gardener and the former gasman both find themselves in the café. Suddenly, there is a smell of gas coming from a leaky gas pipe. They try to seal it with grass clippings, but it is too late and there is an explosion. All that survives is the headmaster's cane which assumes a life of its own and conducts the audience in a final sing-song.

The first song would obviously have to be a duet sung by the headmaster and the lady government minister. Harry suggested the title: 'You'll be cool and drool when you see my school'. The next one would be on the lines of 'I deserve a really good caning and you're the woman to do it'. Then there would be two solo numbers by the gardener ('Let me see you mown') and the gasman ('Diggin' around'), and so on and so on. The final sing-song could be a happy little number called something like: 'Cheer up: we all have to go sometime'.

Over the months that followed, Harry wrote all the lyrics, and then Tom took them away and thought up some tunes for them. He could not notate the music himself so he made a recording of himself singing them into his smart phone and took it along to a piano teacher for her to notate and to add harmonies.

The piano teacher listened to the first one and it quickly dawned on her that Tom was tone-deaf. She could not grasp what keys the songs were in – they seemed to change constantly. She could not even fathom out what the time signatures were. And she could not discover the true intervals between successive notes. She was stumped.

"I'm afraid I have to tell you something," she said to Tom. "You are completely tone-deaf. I cannot help you at all."

Tom thought about it for a moment and said, "There are people without legs who run races. Similarly, I may have a bit of a disability in musical ways, but that won't stop me. And any attempt to do so would be against my basic human rights."

Nevertheless, she told him again that she was unable to do what he wanted, and she gave him the address of a professional arranger. They agreed to meet and Tom played the recordings to him. Initially he refused point-blank. But as he had little work on at the moment and bills to pay, he said he would see what he could do. The only solution he found was to use a lot of highly complicated chords to harmonise the strange angular tunes.

A few weeks later, Tom revisited him and the arranger played the harmonised versions of the tunes he had worked on. Tom was not impressed.

“What are all those funny chords?” he said. “This is not one of those weird jazz gigs you know. This is a family musical.”

“There’s no other way I could harmonise your songs,” stated the arranger.

Tom did not believe him: “How can people go home whistling these tunes with all those strange chords going on!” he said.

“They did in the 1930s,” said the arranger.

“That was last century stuff. What I want is wall-to-wall triads, or whatever they’re called, and not too many minor ones. People go to the theatre to enjoy themselves, not to be miserable.”

The arranger redid everything, substituting basic triad chords for the ones he had used before. They had no relation whatever to the melodies and clashed the whole way through. But when Tom heard the songs now, he was delighted, so much so that he gave him the task of orchestrating them.

With this in hand, Tom felt it was time to book the local theatre and hire the actors/singers and a choreographer. Many of the actors who turned up for the audition gave up when confronted by the music they had to sing. A few stayed when they realised that being tone-deaf, Tom did not know if the songs were being sung rightly or wrongly. They still complained like billy-oh, and they were not happy bunnies.

The rehearsal pianist was also grumpy the whole time. She made a point of playing everything wrong to show her contempt for the music. Tom threatened not to pay her because of her uncooperative attitude. After that, she did make an effort in trying to play things right but found it virtually impossible and it pained her to do so.

By now, the choreographer had heard about the problems in the theatre and decided not to participate. The task fell to Tom.

One of the numbers was a dance routine in which the headmaster gets caned by the MP plus an

array of other characters to give them something to do on stage. There were not enough canes to go around, so half of the dancers were given whips. To help cushion the blows, the headmaster was given a pair of leather trousers to wear. The music to accompany this was appropriately called 'The Whippin'-proof Song'.

To find a suitable actor who could play the role of the headmaster, the post had been advertised as being suitable for an S&M-experienced person. Unfortunately, the advert had the initials the wrong way around, and a floor manager from Marks and Spencers applied for the job.

He was not too happy to be caned and whipped by half a dozen people for a period of ten minutes but was assured that the leather trousers would help. However, the next time the scene was rehearsed, Tom instructed him to take down his trousers to make it more realistic. He spent the next fortnight in bed.

The furore that this created persuaded Tom to hand over the task of choreography to Harry. Harry had no dance experience. It is not really necessary for gasmen, at least most of the time. However, Harry had been along to a cardiac exercise class. He had confused cardiac with Cadillac. He had recently bought an old second-hand one and wanted to know how to look after it.

Harry's task was to put together a dance sequence for the grass-cutter and the gasman vying for the MP's attention. He got the man playing the gardener to jump on a mini-trampoline while opening and shutting some shears. The man playing the gasman had to mime digging a hole over the trap-door with his shovel, while leaping up and down on some steps. The woman playing the MP at the same time had to haul a 5kg weight above her head, while riding an exercise bike. The rest of the cast were required to run around them with their arms going round and round to create a sense of movement.

It proved to be more exciting than planned when some of the male dancers ran too close to the shears. The howls this produced made the gasman fall off his steps into the trap-door. The shock of seeing this, caused the MP to drop the weight on her foot, which in turn caused her to fall off the bike, where she was trampled on by the dancers, who did not know when they should stop. But at least the music kept going for another five minutes before anyone else noticed. A few refinements were made to this sequence before the actual performance, and several new actors had to be found to replace those who had been maimed.

Having rehearsed all the songs and dances they got a director in to help, and hired a small orchestra. Publicity through social media and more traditional methods was wide-spread and

deemed to be highly effective. Huge posters were put up in shop windows and on billboards in the town, advertising the show, now named *Grass, Gas 'n' Ass - a musical for all the family*, written by Tom Dick and Harry.

Ticket sales were phenomenal as there were no other shows taking place at this time in town. The seats all sold out and some people had to sit in the aisles, not strictly permissible but no-one bothered. A good many of the seats were occupied by S&M enthusiasts, but the rest of them were held by other people, including several vicars, school-teachers and magistrates in disguise and a lot of young children.

The show itself went very well, by which I mean, no-one was actually killed, but the hospital had to deal with several assorted casualties, but that was to be expected. The critics raved about the show. A music critic from a national newspaper said it was like 'Schoenberg playing Heavy Metal'. Other critics praised it for avoiding the usual clichés – 'Nothing like this has ever been seen before,' raved a theatrical critic.

Even in the local newspaper the reporter had said how much he had enjoyed counting up the injured. 'Like a world war,' he observed gleefully, 'but without the black-outs'. If the truth were to be known, the critics really thought it was awful, but rather than be judged as being out-of-touch with current trends, they fell over backwards to heap praise on it.

An agent from London, who happened to be in the audience, promptly informed a renowned theatre manager about the new show, and it was booked to be performed in the West End. There were television interviews with the leading actors and write-ups in newspapers and magazines of the people behind the show – Tom and Harry.

The show has been running now for over thirty years in the West End theatre and a film version is about to be made of it.

Tom and Harry have made a fortune out of it and have bought expensive houses in the South of France. The success of the show has led to a multitude of similar shows being put on in London and elsewhere. Nothing now can stop the momentum.

Isn't it nice to hear of a tale from rags to riches for a change! Sadly for the arranger, things have been different. He has not made any further money from it since the original performance, and his reputation as a serious composer has been totally ruined by being associated with the show. There

was talk that there might be a follow-up to the show, but he has totally refused to be involved. The rehearsal pianist and many of the members of the orchestra who played in the first performance have now given up music. The memory of it still haunts them. There is a rumour going around that the council might require a few people once again to mow the verges, and the gas board is looking for new workmen. There is still hope, then, for the unemployed musicians to find new work, albeit in a different field.

This, then, is the future for music in Britain. We can embrace it, or be left behind. Maybe that is not such a bad idea. What else is there to do?

Note: I'm sure there are many grass cutters and gasmen who are very talented in music and I do not mean to discredit them. But these characters were not.