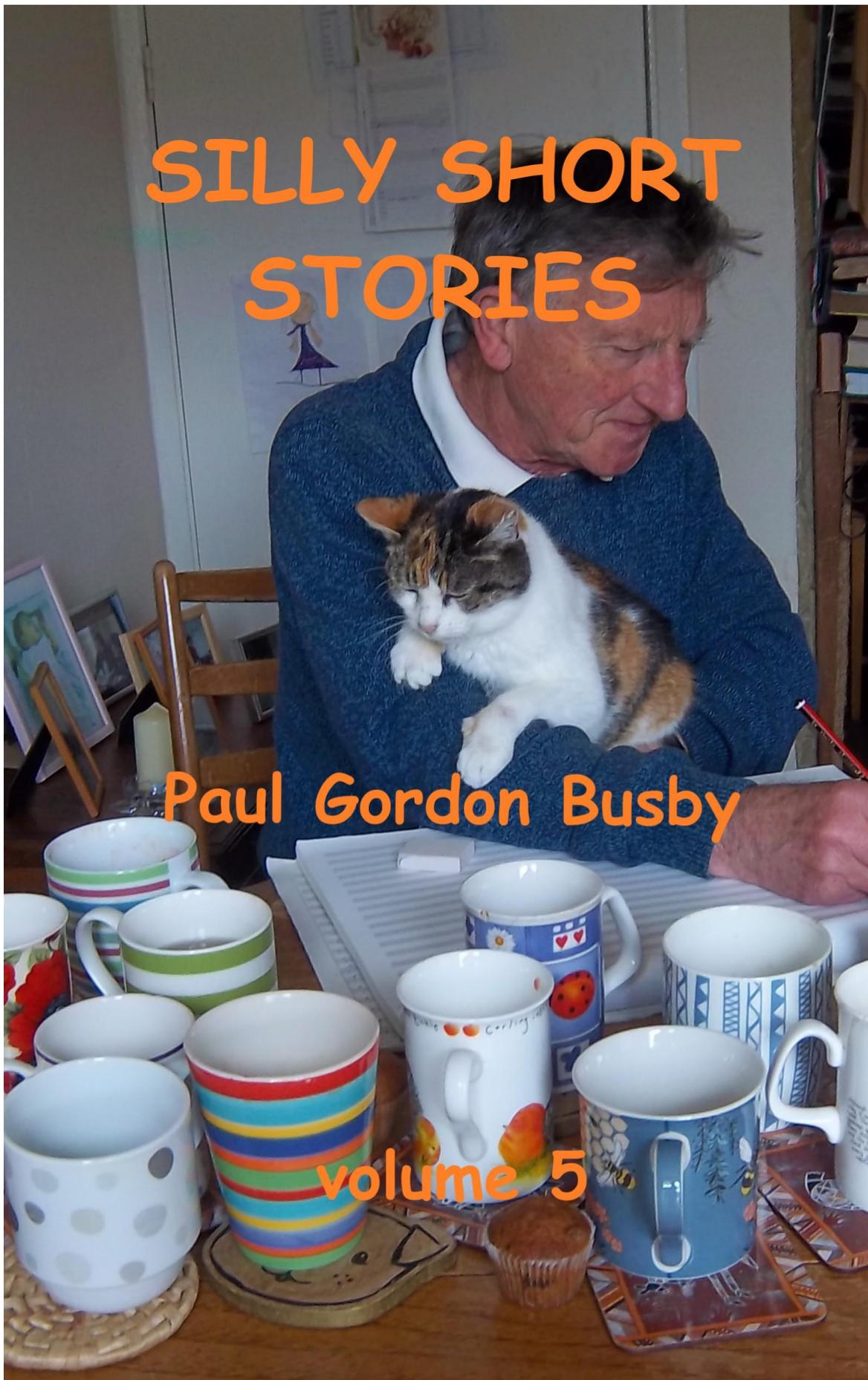


SILLY SHORT STORIES

Paul Gordon Busby

volume 5



Silly short stories

Volume 5

by

Paul Busby

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Contents

ALTER EGO GOES AWOL

THE LONDON TO BRIGHTON MOBILITY-SCOOTER RACE

THE SPIRIT MAKES A MOVE

THE REALLY PROFESSIONAL ART OF WRITING MUSIC

THE SUPERMARKET CARPARK

ALIENATION IN AN ALIEN NATION

A BLACKBIRD SINGS, WITH SUB-TITLES

AIRPORT HOLIDAY

THE SECRET LIVES OF SNAILS

A HAPPY ENDING FOR EVERYONE

ALTER EGO GOES AWOL

“Hi! Long time no shee!” said Eric. “Howsh thingsh with you.”

Sean looked none too happy. “I hate this time of year,” he said. “All these days with overcast skies make me very depressed and I don’t go out much.”

It was a cold February day. The sun was trying hard to make an appearance from behind some dark clouds and occasionally succeeded for a few moments, as it had just done.

“Me too,” said Eric. “Can’t wait for Shpring-time sho we can have some proper shunsine.”

Eric was very conscious of words with an ‘sh’ in them and to prevent lipping over them, he pronounced them like an ‘s’.

“I look forward to shummer,” Sean said. “when the shun sines conshtantly – thatsh my favourite sheashon.”

He found Eric’s speech impediment to be addictive. But after all, his preoccupation was to imitate people, or rather, a single person. Eric could well understand this, as it was his mission in life too.

“What do you find to do in the eveningsh?” asked Eric.

“I stay in most of the time,” replied Sean, taking control of himself. “The master is too busy watching TV to notice when I’m about.”

“That must be very dishtreshing for you,” said Eric. “No wonder you look like a sadow of your normal shelf.”

“It’ll pass. I’ll be out and about again when the weather improves. But I must be off now. See you.”

“Hope to shee you shometime shoon.”

“And you. Bye.”

At that moment the clouds covered up the sun again, and for good measure it started to rain.

True enough, Sean could hardly wait for the good weather to arrive. But when it did, the enjoyment soon began to wane. At first, he loved the lighter daylight hours, particularly dawn and dusk when he appeared so tall with his master by his side, or more usually, behind him. In the midday sun, he assumed a darker hue but tended to shrink noticeably. All part and parcel of being a shadow, he thought.

What got to him, though, was his total lack of independence: when the master raises his arm, I have to raise mine; when he lifts his leg up, I have to lift up mine; I can’t seem to do anything for myself, he thought. Or perhaps I’ve never tried. I’ll have a word with Eric to see what he thinks.

When he got the opportunity, he asked Eric about it. Eric lived in a nearby cave which was frequently visited by people.

“When people say or shout things, like “Hello”, it’s my bounden duty to copy them as best as I can. That’s what they expect from an echo. It all gets pretty boring, believe you me,” said Eric. “But one day, when someone shouted: “How are you?” I shouted back: “Not too bad, thanks, and you?”

“And what happened?” enquired Sean.

“Nothing,” said Eric disappointedly. The person just thought someone else was in the cave, out of their sight. You sometimes just can’t win.”

Sean spent an agonising few days meekly following what his master was doing. Then one day, he summed up courage and refused to comply. His master was holding out both arms horizontally as if he was about to fly. Sean kept his arms close to his side. The master did not notice anything unusual. His mind was on other things. When he jumped up, Sean stooped down. And when his master broke into a run, Sean stayed put. Still no reaction.

Freedom, thought Sean. At last I have gained some freedom.

The following day was beautifully sunny without a cloud in the sky. The master took a long walk, but Sean did not make an appearance. When his master sat down on a bench, Sean decided that was the moment he was going to exercise, and threw himself into it. The master gazed at the antics of his shadow with disbelief and turned round in his seat to see what was going on behind him. No-one else was about. There was no wind and the trees and bushes around him were totally still. This is uncanny, he thought.

The same thing happened the next day which prompted the master to go to his optician to check his eyesight. There was nothing wrong with it.

Sean was revelling in his antics and wilfully disobeyed his master over the course of the next week, by which time his master was getting convinced that he ought to go and see a psychiatrist.

The psychiatrist had never heard of a case like this before. To test it for himself, he turned out all the lights in his room, drew the curtains, and shone a torch at his patient. Sean behaved himself and stretched out in the manner that what was expected of him.

“I see nothing untoward,” the psychiatrist said. “It must all be in your head.” And with that he saw the master to the door.

The master was very glum as he walked home, accompanied by Sean who was skipping and dancing. This was observed by an elderly couple he passed, as well as a young woman taking a dog for a walk and a male cyclist, all of whom stopped in their tracks to watch this strange spectacle.

Very soon, news about it reached the local newspaper who sent a reporter to do an interview in the garden. Sean chose to stay out of sight as he did not want to show off. The reporter did notice, however, that the master did not seem to cast any shadow, even though she herself did. The headlines in the paper’s next edition read: ‘Without a Shadow of Doubt’ and it went on to try and explain it in pseudo-scientific terms.

Having played truant once, Sean thought he might as well make the most of it and take a holiday. That night, he took himself off to Paris although the master was obviously kept in the dark about this. In the morning he saw the long shadow cast by the Eiffel Tower and took pity on it. It never goes anywhere or does anything special, he thought. At least I get to do some exercise.

He mingled with the crowds and made his way to the Arc de Triomphe without drawing attention to himself. Another poor shadow, he thought, looking at it. Never gets to move. What a boring existence!

From here he set off for the Sacré Coeur cathedral and stopped off at the Parc Monceau for a rest in the shade. He was entranced by the reflection of the curved colonnade in the waters of the lake, which rippled in the breeze. Now that's better, he mused, I wouldn't mind a bit of gentle rippling – it must be very relaxing on a hot day. Mind you, I would object to having all these ducks in the water disturbing me when I'm trying to get some sleep.

On making his way towards it, his eye caught the attention of a young French lady whose shadow was very alluring. He spoke to Marie, as that is what her shadow was called, and they made a deal. He would stand in for her for a few minutes while she nipped off to get a quick drink. They swapped profiles and he delighted in his newly adopted persona – that of a very shapely young French lady. He was glad when Marie returned, however, as he was getting some admiring looks from some shadows of young men near to him.

That evening he returned home to see how his master was coping without him. Apart from receiving some notoriety for being somewhat lacking in presence, he was managing very well. In fact, he was enjoying the attention he was receiving, which made a change for him.

Sean therefore saw this as an opportunity to start up a protest movement for independence for all shadows. He went to the gym and saw some shadow boxing, but was disappointed in only seeing one macho shadow who was too much enjoying his experience to be interested in the cause. He considered getting in touch with Cliff Richard, but his band was away on tour. And he contacted members of the Shadow Cabinet, but again, none of them were interested. Others he approached felt there was something decidedly shady about the whole thing and did not want anything to do with it.

He tried calling a public meeting to address other shadows, but none of them could turn up without their flesh and blood counterparts. It was all very disappointing for him, so he went back to see his friend Eric to consult him about it.

“Itsh a great idea. But it'll never take off,” Eric told him. “You shee, itsh against the rulesh of nature. We are shimplly not meant to be independent. In my shpare time, I shtudy Hinduishm, which tellsh you that we all have a shpecial role to play and we musht adhere to that. Call me a fatalisht, if you like, but I can't shee any future in independence for sadows.”

“Oh sit,” said Sean, forgetting himself. “You’re shaying that I’ll have to call it all off.”

“Afraid sho,” said Eric.

Sean went back home feeling dejected. He found his master was not at all well. The hospital had discovered a shadow on one of his lungs. Sean felt very sorry for him, but also felt his place had been usurped by another. He would fight this intruder and stay and look after his master. His dreams of independence now appeared to be naïve. He would accompany his master wherever he went; do whatever he did; suffer alongside him. On reflection, he thought, I should have stayed true to my master but I erred and have learned my lesson. I’ll never again stray away.

When they both passed away, other shadows looked back on his final years as a shining example of how to behave. It is rumoured that he turned down a knight-hood but did accept one award which he was very proud of: Companion of Honour. A shadow could wish for nothing better.

THE LONDON TO BRIGHTON MOBILITY SCOOTER RACE

Montgomery unexpectedly bumped into Winston one day in the street, or to be more exact on the pavement. Not literally, because both of them were on their mobility scooters. Both had been born in the 1940s and had been named after prominent people admired by their parents,

In the early 1960s they had both been involved in the mods and rockers scene, coming under the rockers category and had met each other for the first time on the seafront in Brighton on the south coast of England. They spent some time reminiscing about the past, while oblivious to the fact that they were completely blocking the pavement to pedestrians.

“I don’t know about you, said Montgomery, “but I get pretty fed up with toddling around Tottenham in amongst all the pedestrians. Slows you right down.”

“It certainly does,” replied Winston. “I might not be able to get around as easily as I did in the good old days, but I haven’t lost my youthful streak when I used to race against other motorbikes and pip them to the post.”

“Talking of which, it takes ages to get to the post box nowadays, but I know what you mean. I still have the same urge too, as well as other sudden urges, but that’s another matter.”

By the end of their lengthy conversation they had made plans for a race, nothing less than a London to Brighton Mobility Scooter Race. But first of all, they had a lot of planning to do to enable it to happen: contacting the police for special permission to allow them to hold it on the main roads; organising stops along the way; publicising the race; and setting up a committee which would see to all the other bits and bobs.

The committee was formed of Winston - chairman, Montgomery - secretary, Stanley - treasurer, and other members were Neville, Beryl, Marie, and Joseph. It was agreed that the race would be open to anyone who had to use a mobility scooter. There would be no fighting allowed between users, irrespective of whether they were formerly mods or rockers. And they imposed an upper limit to the cost of the scooters, otherwise the more expensive ones would have an unfair advantage.

Joseph suggested that anyone who disobeyed these stipulations should be sent to the Gulag Archipelago, or failing that to a holiday camp in Clacton as punishment. This was overruled by Neville who happened to like the holiday camp in Clacton, even though it had closed a long time ago. They settled instead upon a nudist colony in Grimsby. Following this suggestion, Joseph was commandeered to make the teas and Vera was co-opted on to the committee in his place.

The police were at first reluctant to grant permission for the race to take place. But pressure was exerted upon them by the newly-formed, powerful National Association of Mobility Scooterers, who pointed out the bad publicity that would arise if permission was not granted, and they relented.

The race was set for a day in June, when hopefully it would not be too hot or too cold. There was a lot of arguing about the date though, as some of the competitors would always find it too hot or too cold. There was simply no answer to that.

It would start outside the Houses of Parliament in London and go through Brixton, Croydon, Redhill, Salfords, Gatwick Airport, Crawley, Hickstead, and Pyecombe, ending up in front of Brighton Pier for reasons of nostalgia. The choice of the Houses of Parliament as the starting point was deemed useful in order to attract the attention of MPs, who might therefore be willing to increase

the state pension if they actually witnessed some genuine senior citizens without having to visit the House of Lords.

The main problem would be battery-charging. Most mobility scooters have a limited range of under 35 miles, much less than this in many cases. It would be necessary, therefore, to include places to charge the batteries. The overall distance between Westminster in London to Brighton pier is about 64 miles, but allowing for people getting lost and making detours on the way, 70 miles would be a better figure.

That would mean two stopping places to recharge, each of which would take up to 10 hours to fully charge up. That was not an ideal situation, it was agreed. The solution that was found was for there to be a supply of fully-charged batteries at each stop which could be swapped over for the exhausted batteries. This could be done quite speedily by the 'Pensioners in the Pits', or PPs for short, who would enjoy being given something useful to do which would remind them of their youth.

Competitors were instructed on what they would have to bring with them: mobility badges, maps, spectacles, hot-water bottles, fans, toilet paper, umbrellas, medications, photographs of their grandchildren, and their wills. Other items were at their own discretion.

There was a massive take-up of people interested in participating in the race. Very few were under the age of 70, as they were not able to remember the mods and rockers and could not identify with them. They therefore could not see the point of the race. Those who had been former mods and rockers, on the other hand, were very enthusiastic and made all kinds of modifications to their vehicles in preparation.

As it was a real race, speed was of the essence. Some mobility scooters can only manage about 4 miles per hour which is far too slow and it would take them at least 16 hours to complete. It would therefore be necessary to take pyjamas, dressing gown and slippers and a change of underclothes.

Consequently, various ways of increasing this speed were devised. Some people fitted solar panels and wind turbines to their scooters attached to the battery; others, used hairdryers facing to the rear to give extra thrust; still others who had been used to cycling added some foot-pedals as an additional source of power. All of them saw the need to free-wheel down hills which brought the speed up to 70 miles per hour on some hills – this more than compensated for going up hills, as everyone knows you go down to Brighton from London, not up.

The day of the race arrived and nearly a hundred competitors turned up outside the Houses of Parliament. The Prime Minister waved a flag and they were off. Winston went into the lead. He had not been able to find anyone to look after his dog and brought it along in the basket, which was a tight squeeze as it was a St Bernard.

He was soon challenged by Neville. As he suffered from toilet troubles, he had replaced the seat with a commode. This was the only scooter which had a power-assisted flush, which ensured that no-one else followed him too closely. Winston saw off the challenge for as long as he could, dreading the thought of Neville overtaking him. But having reduced visibility with the dog in the basket in front of him, he took a wrong turning early on and ended up in a rubbish dump.

Neville took the lead for many miles and would have continued, but the call of nature caused him to slow down to help his concentration.

Montgomery, who was behind him, saw his chance, opened up his umbrella and put his foot down. For many miles they were neck and neck until the nuts holding Neville's commode began to work

loose and finally came undone when the sudden surge of power for the flush made him shoot into the nearby bushes while the scooter carried on without him.

To avoid anyone cutting in front of him, Montgomery had added a battering ram to his vehicle which made it look rather like a tank. But it served its purpose and kept the road free ahead of him.

Behind him, Joseph, who had a great liking for James Bond films, had fixed what looked like guns to his front mudguard. They were in fact only water-pistols, as Montgomery found out when from time to time, he received a volley of water on his seat. Montgomery got really annoyed with this and to pay him back, he unleashed an open bottle of washing-up liquid onto the road behind him. He had brought it along by mistake, thinking it was a fizzy drink. This caused Joseph's scooter to skid and come to rest against a tree, leaving Montgomery well clear of the rest of the field when they entered the assigned stopping place at Redhill.

While a team of pensioners changed over his battery, he sat down in an armchair, had a cup of tea and took a short nap. It was meant to be short, but he overslept and when he awoke other contestants had already come and gone. He realised then how sensible some of the others had been in putting a thermos flask in their basket, or in some cases a bottle of whisky to wash down their pills.

The lead was now taken by Vera, dressed in her leather jacket and mini-skirt and motor-cycle boots, singing along to some heavy rock music on an LP playing on the record-player in her basket. She was just ahead of Stanley on his three-wheeler. Not far behind him was Emmeline who insisted on riding on the wrong side of the road, but without incident as the whole road had been barred from other traffic.

Following them was Edward on a very regal-looking scooter pulling a trailer in which his carers were seated, although he was subsequently disqualified from the race for breaking the law as his trailer did not have rear lights or the full complement of wheels.

As it was now afternoon, some competitors switched on their portable televisions that were fixed to the wingmirrors. They could not go without missing their favourite quiz shows which tended to make them fall asleep. This might have ended up as a disaster for them, had it not been for their snooze alarms, consisting of knitting needles which instantly prodded them to wake up when they started to snore.

The next stop was Gatwick Airport, chosen because it had a large number of toilets, and coffee bars where competitors could grab something to eat while their batteries were changed. Unfortunately, no-one had informed the authorities at the airport about the race. As usual, it was heaving with people who were alarmed by the sight of a long stream of unruly mobility scooters racing up and down the premises, knocking over suitcases, terrorising the young children and causing havoc all round.

Finding the Pit Pensioners was a real problem, as anyone knows who wants to find the right place to go to at Gatwick. It was eventually discovered in the North Terminal and the posse of scooter riders had to travel on the shuttle train to get there, leaving no room for anyone else.

Having done everything that was necessary, the competitors were stumped as to how to leave the airport as many of them had never been there before. The obvious place to go, they reckoned, was to Departures and they shot off at speed past the officials at the gate and through customs into the departure hall with terrified staff not knowing exactly what to do. This sort of thing had never happened before.

They had no clue which gate to go to in order to leave the airport and went to them all en masse. During the confusion this was causing, the officials had devised a plan to get rid of them by diverting

them to the Arrivals section, the customs and immigration officers standing by without any interference, just glad to see the back of them. It should be noted that many of the riders got away with duty-free bottles of alcohol and cigarettes in the process.

The trip between Gatwick and Brighton was a long haul, which served to eliminate several scooters whose batteries could not cope with this distance. This narrowed the field considerably. The delay in the airport also meant that people who had been lagging behind had a chance to catch up.

The lead was now taken by Beryl, not so much a mod or rocker as a mocker. Behind her came Montgomery who now felt he could dispose of his battering ram as it was no longer really necessary although it had come in very useful.

Not far behind him was Marie, who had used radio-activity to power her scooter. But it was her undoing too and she was soon overcome and overtaken by Winston who had found his way out of the rubbish dump and put on a spurt of speed to make his way up the field. He did not believe in surrendering, whatever the odds and had gone without food, relying entirely upon a cigar to keep his adrenaline up.

With Brighton in sight, Montgomery passed Beryl, as did Winston. The race was now between the two men. They arrived at the pier at exactly the same time and were declared joint winners, which meant they had to share a joint between them.

To celebrate, they went off for a drink together. One had a mug of Horlicks and the other a cup of Ovaltine.

“That was fun,” said Montgomery. “We must do it again sometime.”

Winston agreed.

What neither of them had considered, however, was what to do next in the immediate future. They had not arranged accommodation in Brighton for the night and had only one option left. They would have to retrace their steps to get back to London. It would be a long night for them, but it had been worth it, even though their nightly carers who found them both absent from home, thought differently.

In case you were wondering, then, that is how the Annual Mobility Scooter London to Brighton Race originated. The fact that it has had to be cancelled every year since because of wet weather is immaterial. It has nearly happened again. And one day it certainly will.

THE SPIRIT MAKES A MOVE

“If you don’t stop this affair with that woman, I’ll come back and haunt you when I’ve gone,” Mary said threateningly to her husband, Jake, whilst waving her finger at him.

He did not reply and had left the room before she had even finished what she was saying.

Things had not been going well with their marriage for some time, ever since she took up DIY to save money on repair bills. She turned her hand to everything, but most of the time had not a clue about how to do them correctly. Instead she relied upon tutorials she found on the internet which made everything look so easy. So very easy. Even a baby could do them. But not, perhaps, a 56-year old woman.

Jake admitted he was hopeless at all these things. He could not even turn off the water supply, let alone fix a leaking tap, or stop the toilet from overflowing. His dismal attempts at mending a broken shelf with glue instead of using screws were only matched by his disastrous endeavours to paint the kitchen without first removing all the pots and pans, which he felt could benefit from a bit of paint. When it came to doing jobs involving electricity, he was totally at a loss. Bulbs fell out of overhead lights; sparks flew out of power sockets; and the radio, television set and music-centre ceased to work after he had fiddled with them.

His wife complained about the cost of having these things seen to by professionals and chided him for not being very manly. She took it upon herself to fix things herself, and to get out of the way, he absented himself by going to the bowling green on a regular basis. This led to an affair with a lady bowler who gave him some coaching on the green and laterally on her lawn.

Mary suspected he was having an affair with the woman, as bowling matches are not usually played when it gets dark outside. He insisted that with their spare hands they each held a torch, but his wife did not believe him as he had broken the only torch in the house and probably in the woman’s house too.

One day while trying to wallpaper the bathroom ceiling she found out that she was allergic to the smell of the paste. When Jake returned home, he found her lying on the floor. She was taken to hospital and passed away the same evening, only days after she had threatened her husband.

She took to being in heaven very well. All the repairs were promptly done by the right people. The celestial gowns never needed the hems stitching up; the harps never went out of tune; and the odd squeak in the Pearly Gates was oiled immediately by a former garage mechanic who had worked for the Queen. No-one even had to turn to YouTube to find out how to do things.

She had not forgotten what she had said to her husband, however, and made some enquiries about who to see for a tutorial on haunting. She also felt like a break away from spending every day,

all day, singing hymn tunes. Permission to be excused from the hymns was granted as she had sung in her church choir for the last forty years.

She was advised to go to the Spirit Renewal Section, to see Saint Mildred.

"Is this still in heaven or the other place?" she enquired when being given directions.

"Somewhere in between," the answer came back. "It's in heaven, half-way down the firmament. Not far."

"Thanks God," she said. "I'm not up to my best today."

She knocked on the door marked *Haunting Department*. Saint Mildred opened the door for her and told her to take a seat.

"You'll first have to fill in a form in triplicate. You get one copy, the Holy Spirit gets another, and I keep hold of one on behalf of my superiors. We'll go through it now. Christian name?"

"Mary"

"Date of Rebirth (that's since you've been here, if you haven't guessed already)"

"That's a difficult one – I've lost track of time. It feels like it must be...two days ago?"

"Were you conscious of the Son rising again?"

"No."

"Then it must be earlier on today."

"What religion are you?"

"Christian. Anglican to be exact."

"That's a relief. We're running short of incense and candles at present. Country?"

"England – Yorkshire."

"Ah, that's God's own country. He will be pleased. Now, who do you want to haunt?"

"My husband, I mean former husband."

"OK, you are Mary, so don't tell me. He's called Joseph."

"Jake, actually."

"Mary and Jake – doesn't sound right, somehow. Is that why you want to haunt him?"

"No, it's because he was having an affair with a lady from the bowls' club."

"Then you have a perfectly good reason to haunt him. They dress up in white clothes to play bowls. Surely, they know that white is the colour of innocence. What a hypocrite! He needs to be given the full treatment. Finally, have you got a haunting melody lined up?"

"What on earth for?"

“It’ll go round and round in his head and drive him crazy.”

“Do you mean even more crazy? There’s an old song called *Ghost of a chance*. Failing that, any soul music would do, or something from Phil Spector, or should that be Spectre? “

“Excellent choice. We’ll get started straight away.”

Mary asked about the cost and was told they did not deal with money in heaven. For payment purposes, though, she would have to do the odd jobs, such as dusting the clouds, and washing up the nectar glasses, and if anyone strayed too far from what is permitted, they would have to stoke the fires down below for a while – a hellish job, but someone has to do it as the residents there are too lazy or bloody-minded to do it.

To start with, Mary thought that she would take the cheapest option and show up at her old house as a white spirit, nothing fancy, just the odd gliding about in the middle of the night would do. She donned the appropriate robes and descended from heaven into her old house. She went from room to room passing silently through the walls. She noticed several things she would like to be doing. There was a heap of dirty dishes in the sink. It took a lot of self-control for her to not turn on the hot water tap. But she resisted it. There were clothes lying about all over the floor. I’ll just pick these up and put them away in the drawers, she thought. But changed her mind. Why should I run around after him now after having spent a life-time doing so, she reasoned with herself.

She went upstairs into the bedroom. Jake was sound asleep in bed. She observed him for a short while and then drifted through the wall into the bathroom. The sink was stained and the bath was filthy. No change there. Then she noticed the toilet seat had been left up. She felt a sudden surge of anger hit her and could not help herself from putting it down. The noise this created awoke Jake who got out of bed and went into the bathroom to see what the sound was. Mary did not hang about. She was a novice at this sort of thing and left the house before Jake had time to see her. Jake scratched his head and went back to bed, thinking it must have been the wind. He was asleep again in minutes.

“You’ve had a good look around, you say. I think you should now try another option,” Saint Mildred commented on being told about it. “Something to draw attention to yourself.”

The following evening Mary returned to her old house. She had been practising moaning for hours beforehand: not the usual moaning that she was accustomed to do, but a more prolonged soulful moan like the sound that an owl makes.

The ghostly sounds woke up Jake who put the noise down to the birds and went around his house making sure all the windows were closed. “Sounded like an owl,” he said to himself. “A bit odd in the middle of Manchester, but all sorts of strange things happen these days.” With that he tumbled into bed and fell back to sleep.

Mary took out the chains she had carried down with her in a heavenly bag and dragged them along the floor making a loud clattering noise. Jake slept through it. In his dreams he was back at work in the foundry. He remembered the young lass who worked in the office. The louder the

clanging got, the more vivid his memory became and nothing would have woken him from his slumber. In disgust at being totally ignored, Mary left the house and returned to her new abode.

“I think you need the more expensive package,” remarked St Mildred on being told about Mary’s experience. “For just a little bit extra, we can give your appearance added lustre which will give you a glowing appearance. We can also lend you some highly experience poltergeists who are expertly trained at opening drawers, throwing pottery on to the floor and trashing a whole room.”

Mary thought about this. Jake was quite capable of trashing the whole house by himself. In fact, since she had left, it was quite a tip. The poltergeists may not be needed. But she would not say no to a more appealing appearance without having the trouble of doing it all herself.

When Mary went back to the house the next evening, Jake was not at home. This was a great pity as all her plans seemed to be thwarted. Then she had a brilliant wheeze. Instead of making the house even more dishevelled, she would tidy it up. That would register with Jake and leave him puzzled, if not slightly alarmed.

She set about tidying the house. The carpet was vacuumed; the dirty clothes were washed and put away; the bathroom was immaculately cleaned; the bed was made; and all the half-opened drawers were closed. In a moment of pure vindictiveness, she also made sure to snip out the crotches of all of his trousers before hanging them up. That will show him, she thought.

She had just finished when Jake arrived home. He was taken aback by the state of things and could not understand what had happened. Pleased with her work, Mary did a lap of honour, drifting throughout the different rooms and glowing proudly but without giving away her identity.

Jake was visibly shaken by the apparition and telephoned the vicar to come immediately and do an exorcism. The vicar grumbled at this as he had only just got into bed, but felt that he had to do his duty. Mary dispensed with her ghostly appearance and stood invisibly beside the bookcase.

“Who are you?” intoned the vicar, holding a candle in one hand and a crucifix in the other.

(It was felt that the electric light might frighten away the spirit.)

“It’s Mary,” she said in her new soulful voice which, being a vicar, he recognised straight away.

“Why haven’t you been to choir practice lately?” he asked her.

“I’ve been rather indisposed,” she replied, “but I’ve been there in spirit.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I don’t like to say this but would you mind leaving this house and stop tormenting this poor man.”

“Trust men to take the side of other men,” she moaned, sounding distinctly less heavenly than before. “What are you going to do about...” and she pointed at her former husband, but being invisible it was a useless gesture. “What about the affair he is having with his fancy lady?”

The vicar turned to her husband.

“Is this true?” he said. “Who is this woman?”

“I think she must be referring to Miss Gableforth.”

“But she is the churchwarden. By the way, how good is she at playing bowls?”

“Excellent. She’s the star player. Taught me a few things.”

“I think you had better keep your bowls to yourself in future. And I shall be having a word with the churchwarden.”

Mary was satisfied with this turn of events and disappeared. The vicar went home to catch up on his disturbed night’s sleep. And Jake flaked out in his armchair. He had a heart attack not long afterwards and passed away in the ambulance.

Back in heavenell, Saint Mildred was being told about the evening’s proceedings.

“I’m afraid we cannot help you any more, now you’ve been exorcised. But you have your bill to pay. You have not behaved yourself quite as impeccably as I would have wished, so you will have to stoke the fires down below for a short time. Then you can regain your place upstairs.”

Mary took her leave and reported to the chief stoker. Standing right next to him was a figure she recognised: her former husband.

“This fireplace doesn’t seem to work very well,” he said to her. “I’d like to fix it but haven’t got the right tools.”

“I suppose I’ll have to do it,” said Mary.

“No you won’t. That’s the whole idea of it,” butted in the chief stoker. “Jake, you’ll have to do without any tools. And Mary – you can return to your heavenly abode. This is no place for a person like you.”

That was the last Mary saw of Jake. Miss Gableforth joined Jake not long afterwards. It did not take long before their white bowling clothes were blackened by the smoke from the fire. Both of them were assigned to stoking the flames. They always wanted to be together and now they would be, for ever more.

THE REALLY PROFESSIONAL ART OF WRITING MUSIC

Writing music is really quite simple if you know how to set about it. Here are a few tips on how it is done. It applies to both classical music and jazz.*

Let's start with the traditional method. You will need a few things to get you started. A flat surface like a table, desk, wall or floorboard is helpful. Music written on a fluffy carpet is not ideal, basically because it produces fluffy music which everyone hates: it gives them piles. Likewise, writing on a lawn is very difficult, even if it is mowed just beforehand. A bowling green might be a little easier, but try not to pick a spot where you will be knocked unconscious by one of the bowls.

On this flat surface you will need to put a sheet of manuscript paper. The paper has lots of parallel lines drawn on it going from left to right. This might resemble a contemporary painting you will find in a trendy art gallery, along with a title describing it as something like: *Prolific Parallel Paths to a Future Nirvana, as Propheisied by Nietzsche in his Discourse on Ecstasy*. The only difference lies in the cost: the manuscript paper is a million times less expensive than the artwork, so go for the cheaper option.

The object is to put a series of dots all over this piece of paper to make it look pretty. You can use either a biro or pencil to do this. The problem with using a biro, or pen if you prefer, is that there is no delete button on the paper and if you make a mistake you will have to start all over again on another piece of paper. Unless you are in the business of selling manuscript paper, this can get very tedious and expensive.

Better still is to use a pencil and have an eraser handy. In England these are called rubbers. For any Americans reading this, having a rubber on hand, or elsewhere, may give you added inspiration, but it is not an essential part of writing music. Or perhaps it is! Think of an eraser as a delete button but requiring a bit more energy to do what it is designed to do.

A ruler is also required. It doesn't matter if this is a reigning monarch, president or dictator, a ruler will help. Some manuscript paper will already have lines drawn down the page to show you where the bar ends or begins. If the paper does not have pre-drawn bar lines, you will have to rely upon your ruler to do it. In America, bars are often called measures. Why use an eight-letter word instead of a four-letter one? It explains why American books on music theory are many pages longer than English ones.

If you are writing at a table or desk, a chair is handy. You can write standing up if you wish, but this can get tiring if you want to write a symphony. Standing up to write may be the preferred method if you are writing a ballet as you will be able to perform the dance steps at the same time. If you are writing at a piano, you will already be sitting on a stool. Standing on the stool to write is only possible if you have very long arms.

These days many composers prefer to write music with a computer instead of using manuscript paper. If you choose to do this, do remember not to use a fountain pen on the computer screen as it can be messy having to clean the screen afterwards.

The next essential thing you will need is a mug of coffee or cup or tea if you prefer. Place the mug or cup in your hand while staring at the blank paper/screen. This is necessary in order to get you in the right frame of mind. Anyone who has heard some really dreadful music knows that the composer must have forgotten to do this.

You will notice that the coffee will soon disappear or get cold. What you need to do now is to find a biscuit and pour yourself another one. Some composers spend hours repeating this step without ever writing a single note. Others like to interrupt the process by getting up and kicking the wall a few times and burying their head in their hands. How this helps is unknown.

It may help focus the mind if you have a bit of a plan before starting to write. What instrument are you writing for? To get started you should write the name of the instrument next to the clef (5 lines bracketed together) on the left-hand side in English, Italian, German, French, Swahili and so on. After this draw a picture of the instrument in the right margin. Violins are easier to draw than harpsichords, so it is no wonder that a lot of music has been written for string quartets.

On the top of the page, you should put the title, sub-title, sub-sub title and sub-sub-sub title, plus an explanation of why you have called it that. Also, add your name there, plus your nom de plume, and what relationship you are to Johann Sebastian Bach to impress people. The bottom of the page can be used as a to-do list: change key for the second theme; oboe solo at the end of the canon section; buy more cat food; take out the dustbin; etc.

The paper will now be getting full up on all sides, except where the lines, or rather staves, occur. This is when you ask yourself – what kind of piece of music am I going to write. Will it be fast, slow or somewhere in between? That gives you just three options. Count the number of empty mugs, divide by three and round up or down to the nearest whole-number, one to three.

More tricky than this, is picking what key to choose. Unfortunately, there are lots of them – twelve major and twelve minor ones. Only masochists choose the difficult keys, so exclude them straight away. If you insist on a hard one, be prepared for any musicians you might meet in the supermarket who will shout “Sadist” at you. To choose a key, remember that string players are the most intelligent, or so they say. How sharp they are, determines the number of sharps you should give them in the key signature. Similarly, for brass and woodwind players, choose how dense they are by how many flats you give them. Avoid the key of C as people will accuse you of being an amateur.

Be aware that there are many people who play transposing instruments. This arises from an ancient typo. It should have read trainspotting. These musicians would far prefer to be jotting down the numbers and types of locomotives than playing your music. While some of the more fortunate musicians’ instruments will be in a nice easy key, others may be put in more difficult ones. This is why they prefer trainspotting.

Perhaps the answer to finding which key to use is to write nothing but twelve-tone music. Then no-one knows what key they think they may be playing in or if they are even playing the right notes.

Next, you have to decide what kind of biscuit you want before turning your attention to the time signature. Usually, common time (4/4) will do unless the players resent being thought of as being common by implication. As a simple guide, put most waltzes in 3/4 - this applies to any music which sounds remotely Austrian. Use 6/8 for tunes which you can’t decide whether you really want it with a two or three beat feel – let the musicians decide for you. Anything Balkan should be in big prime numbers such as 41/16. This makes it easier for them to dance to.

You may notice after a while that there are all kinds of notes – short ones, long ones, or ones in between. These have different names in America to those in England to prove that we don't really speak the same language. Some of them have only a few tails on, some a lot of tails which may be joined up to similar ones for company. As said before, string players are smarter than any others, so to prevent patronising them, give them notes with a lot of tails, which means they usually have to be played fast. They get bored otherwise. Flute players like to think of themselves as intelligent as violinists. To prevent any ill-feeling, give them notes with lots of tails too. Tuba players, on the other hand, hate rushing about, so keep to long notes for them. It helps with their arthritis.

The final decision you have to make is what style you want for your music. Do you want to write 18th or early 19th century classical music? If you do, cutting and pasting the odd bar from the works of classical composers is the easiest way of creating a new piece. If you insist on writing cutting-edge modern music, be prepared for it not to be performed until next century or the one after.

Now that you have confronted all the choices you have to make, it is definitely time to have another coffee before you start putting notes on paper or on the screen. Think to yourself: am I really cut out to be a composer; am I good enough; shouldn't I have stuck to book-keeping? This will help.

For those who persevere regardless, you now have no option but to start writing. If you are from Iran, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia you have to write from right to left. This makes it more interesting when it is played from left to right. If you are from China and are used to calligraphy, you may write in vertical lines from top to bottom. Japanese composers will write in blocks of nine squares.

Being able to write a tune is a useful but not really necessary. Many classical composers found this difficult and could only write a single phrase and then play around with it for the rest of the piece. Music critics love this, but pan any composers who can actually write memorable tunes. The secret of writing a good tune is to listen to what a tone-deaf bricklayer is whistling and transcribe that.

Once you've got the tune down, you need to find something for everyone else to do, otherwise they may sneak off and go for a drink. This involves harmony – tell them very politely and discretely that they will get a chance to play soon, so try not to take offence. No-one wants a stropky trumpet player swearing over a quiet piccolo solo. Players who are not playing should be given rests – comfortable armchairs, soft drinks and a chance for them to listen to their favourite sports matches on their headphones.

Regarding rhythm, the best advice is to forget about it. Whatever you write will be played differently, except when you devise something that is really not quite right, when it will be played perfectly.

All that leaves are the fiddly bits, things like dynamics, and which chairs they want to sit in. Dynamics are easy to cope with. If the music goes up, increase the volume. If it goes down, decrease it. Nothing else matters.

There are two final observations I've discovered. Firstly, you may have spent the whole day drinking copious cups of coffee but writing absolutely nothing. You nip out to the post box and suddenly you hear a whole new symphony in your head in the utmost detail. You hurry home and by the time you are ready to jot it down, it has completely disappeared. This same experience can also happen at night around about 3.15am. Your head is full of the most wonderful original sounds and you just lie there luxuriating in it for a long while. You sneak out of bed, being careful not to wake anyone else, and avoid tripping over the cat, and prepare things so you can write it all down, by which time it has vanished, leaving you without any music and without the rest of the night's sleep.

The other thing that can happen is when you are at least three quarters of your way through a complicated piece and break off for lunch. After eating, you find it hard to concentrate with a half-digested sandwich still churning around in your stomach. You therefore try to recreate your ideas of where the music is going in order to continue in the same vein by going back a few bars and reading what you have already written. That doesn't do it, so you go back a bit further without success. In the end you start from the very beginning and finally know clearly what must come next. As soon as you write the very first note, you are told that it is dinner time – come immediately while it is hot or it might spoil. This sort of thing can occur several times before you get to finish the piece. By which time you are totally fed-up with it and discard it. Never mind. It saves you having to put up with criticism if the piece had ever seen the light of day.

Things are not much different to this in the jazz field. Writing for a big band is pretty well exactly the same, except for different harmonies, rhythms, and melodies and certain different instruments. The only real difference about it is that you have to consider that a lot of what will go on is totally beyond your control. That may be wonderful to know, but it can be nerve-wracking if it fails to fall apart. You have to plan for the unexpected to happen and if it doesn't, it's all been a waste of your time.

The nice thing about it, though, is that you don't have to write so much down. You can have pages and pages of almost blank manuscript, save for the soloist and rhythm section who are all playing off the same hymn sheet. Even when everyone is playing, you don't have to write it all down. Just give them a chord sequence and let them get on with it. Compare that with an orchestra playing a symphony where every single note is written down beforehand. I know which I prefer. But laziness appeals to me.

Well, I hope this has inspired you to write your own music, now you know how it should be properly done. Are you ready? Then put the kettle on. It's time to start.

**For anyone interested in jazz, go to www.scorechanges.com*

THE SUPERMARKET CAR PARK

Bill hated parking his car at the supermarket at the best of times. The only thing he hated more was un-parking his car after he had done his shopping.

As a mechanical engineer before he retired, he was used to precision and demanded it of his younger work-mates.

“You can’t expect anything to work at its optimum level unless everything fits perfectly,” he would often tell them. And this principle had guided his whole life. Thorough to the point of being neurotic, he was obsessed with the minutest of details.

His wife was only too aware of this character trait and went along with it as far as she could. But there were certain things which could not come up to his expectations and she left them up to him to do: driving, was one; shopping was another. Sadly, with age he himself could not match his own standard of perfectionism, and at 67 he was beginning to become dodderly. But it did not stop him from doing things which he had always done.

His definition of the best of times meant dry weather conditions with light overcast cloud without the sun or shade interfering with his vision. With regard to the supermarket carpark, it referred to those times when there were lots of empty spaces, preferably three in a row so that he could choose the middle slot and park there quite easily, with the distance between his car and the white line being completely equal all round. Unfortunately, these conditions were rarely met, unless he chose to get to the shop five minutes before it shut, which left him with not enough time to buy everything.

As he was driving to the supermarket one day, he remembered the time when he had done a near perfect job of parking his small car, and after doing his shopping he returned to it. He had no difficulty in opening up the rear door to stow things away and realised that he must have forgotten to lock the car. This did not perturb him. Who would want to steal an old yellow jalopy like mine, he thought? Just then he noticed another shopping-bag already inside the car which he did not recognise as one of his. A packet of chocolate digestive biscuits was protruding from the full bag which was odd, as he only ever bought plain digestives. He shut the door and walked round to the driver’s door, put his seat-belt on and started up the car. A sudden cough coming from the passenger side made him look round. He was astonished to see a tiny elderly lady sitting there, not someone that he knew or had ever seen before. She too was astonished.

“You’re not my husband?” she said. “Who are you? Get out of my car immediately!”

“This is my car,” he said. “I always check the number before I get in. What is the number of your car?”

“How should I know?” she argued. “My husband is the one who drives. And what have you done to my husband? I expect you have mugged him. I shall call the police. Help!”

He tried to reason with her but it was of no use. A quarter of an hour later there was a tap on the passenger-side window and a small elderly gentleman stood there, beckoning to his wife.

She turned in her seat to face the window.

“Help! Help!” she said to him, trembling as she spoke. “This man is trying to steal our car and to kidnap me. You’ll have to wrestle him to the ground before he drives off. Quick!”

“Our car is over there,” her husband told her calmly, and pointed to an identical car a few rows away.

He opened the door for her and she got out, not sure whether to believe her husband or not. She hurriedly retrieved her shopping bag and went off with him without a word of apology or acknowledgement that she had made an error.

This incident upset Bill, even though all was resolved very soon, but he felt partly responsible for it. Was this the first sign of dementia – forgetting to lock his car door? He worried about this all the way home. What could he do about it? Maybe leave a note on his car seat to remind him to lock the car when he got out of it? Or would that in itself be something that only people with dementia do? And if anyone else saw the note, wouldn’t they assume that he must have it? Probably. Best to forget it, and certainly not mention it to the wife.

He had a much worse experience sometime later. It was a rainy winters’ day and visibility was not good. There were few spaces available and all of them looked awkward to get into. He did a circuit of the carpark to see if there were any easier ones but did not come across any, by which time all of the spaces, bar one, were now taken. A large van and a huge SUV were on either side of the space with their wheels touching the white lines between which he had to park. To manoeuvre into here would require the utmost precision.

Summoning up all his concentration he turned the wheels towards the gap. It was no good. He had misjudged it. He would have to reverse and get in a better position to attempt it. While he was blocking the lane and before he could go forward, several shoppers with their trolleys saw the opportunity to pass in front of his car. Finally, he was able to make a move and as soon as he went, more people with shopping trolleys went by behind him. He was still not going to make it and had no option but to reverse out again once the people had passed. Cars in the lane hooted their horns at him and he was becoming quite flustered. More people ambled by in front of him in both directions, taking an age to go by. When they had eventually all gone, he drove forward again and had to suddenly brake as a young lad thought he could risk getting through the gap between the adjacent cars before he got there. He braked suddenly. More cars sounded their horns and a queue of people lined up in front and behind to get by. His foot touched the accelerator too hard and his front bumper ran into the side of the van. A number of people came up to see what was going on, adding to his extreme discomfort.

He had no choice but to reverse out again, and as he did so he ran straight into a line of trolleys being pushed along behind his car, scattering them widely and uncontrollably. The disturbance made him panic and his reaction was to shoot forward into a fully-laden trolley, making all the groceries spill out on to the ground. He could not stop the car before he had run over most of the assorted cans, boxes, and frozen food packets, before coming to rest with a bang against the side of the SUV.

A big crowd was now assembled watching the proceedings and there was a tailback of cars and vans unable to move in the lane, the drivers all sounding their horns. The owner of the dented van and badly damaged SUV appeared and remonstrated with him outside his car, pounding on the roof to vent their anger. He locked the car doors from the inside and sat there in silence with his eyes shut and heart pounding.

After a long while, he saw he could make his escape, as the van and the SUV had left and the crowd dispersed. That was not the end of this episode as the owners of these vehicles had taken down

his car's registration number and his insurance company was claimed against for the damages he had caused. The woman whose shopping he had run over also threatened to sue him and he had to pay her a large sum in recompense. Needless to say, this put him off driving to the supermarket for many months and he had to either walk or catch a lift there when a neighbour or friend was going. This worked well until there was a time when no-one was around to help out during the summer holidays, and he once again had to drive there, dreading the very thought of it.

Desmond was a choreographer who had an obsession with wanting to win the prestigious arts award – the Charlatan Prize, which was open for avantgarde entries with a conceptual approach. He had submitted several videos of dance routines, featuring naked dancers, horses and pigs but without success. The judges wanted something out of the ordinary and they were not interested in anything too mundane, as they believed so much art to be.

It was while he was watching a news-clip of traffic taken from a police helicopter, showing them moving along a motorway, including many slip-roads and roundabouts that were choc-a-bloc with moving vehicles, that he had his brainwave. He would make a video of traffic too, but without recourse to a helicopter he would have to find somewhere high-up to film a “ballet dance”, performed by a troupe of cars. The ideal place to film it from was the roof of a supermarket. The cars could enter the carpark and perform a number of set routines which he could set to music later. To the sound-track he could add the noise of car engines and their horns to give the music a distinct atmosphere of its own.

He advertised in the local press for drivers interested in taking part and settled on ten, being a nice round number. Before they could “perform” for real with their cars, he held rehearsals in a large hall to go through the movements. Chairs laid out between each participant would represent parked cars. The “drivers” were instructed not to sit in the chairs although it was very tempting to do so. Not everyone obeyed and some even had a cigarette sitting on a “parked car”. They were reprimanded for this and had to display a “parking fine” on their chests.

To prevent the drivers bumping into one another, he got them to raise their arms to indicate which direction they were going in; flapping their arms up and down would show they were going to stop.

This all sounded very good, but one driver caused mayhem when he had to scratch an itch on his right ear. No-one understood what this hand-signal meant and the person behind ran into him. Seeing one person having a scratch seemed to cause others to scratch some part of their anatomy. There was instant mayhem as bodies collided with each other and fell to the ground. Someone volunteered to be an ambulance as he was good at yodelling. Another wanted to be a policeman, which was not surprising as he really was one. There was a delay while the accident was cleared up and it was deemed a suitable time to break for refreshments.

Desmond used the time to tell the drivers how they would know what to do and when. As they could not read from a script whilst driving, they would have to follow the lead “car”, to know what moves to make. The choreographer's partner was a passenger in this car and he would have a script and would inform the driver about all the routines.

To make it clear to the others who these two people were, they were asked to put their arms around each other. When the two men refused point blank to do this, a compromise was worked out: they could simply hold hands. There was no other option.

The rest of the rehearsal went very well. Apart from one moment when one of the participants inadvertently passed wind, which the others interpreted as him sounding his horn, which made all the

others angrily “sound their horns” back in a similar fashion. The choreographer liked this as he thought this was a realistic representation of road rage. This showed they were all getting into their parts well.

The appointed day coincided with the very day that Bill had chosen to come to the supermarket again. He had no difficulty in parking his rather-battered, little, yellow car and had entered the store to do his shopping. In the meantime, Desmond had arrived and had climbed up onto the roof of the supermarket to setup his video-camera.

When Bill emerged from the shop, he put his shopping bags into his car, took his trolley to the collection point, walked back, unlocked his door, got in and started up the engine. At that moment he noticed a number of other cars entering the car park and filling up the vacant spaces near him. Desmond was fully prepared by now and started to shoot the video.

As Bill began reversing out, so did ten others, including cars on both sides of him. He knew he would have to wait until the lane was clear and drove back into his space. On seeing that, the other cars also went back in. He hesitated for a moment and then judged that this was the time to make a move again. He reversed out. The other cars did so too, but this time it was one followed quickly by another in an undulating wave. He drove forward again, as did the other cars. He reversed a few yards. So did the others. He went forward. So did they.

Trying to outpace them in his next attempt to leave, he moved quickly and managed to reverse the car all the way into the lane at right angles to how he had parked. But was unable to move forwards because the other cars in front of his had done the same.

Several cars ahead of his, another small yellow car then started to move forwards a short distance. The drivers of the other cars now paid attention to this other car, which was almost identical to his own, and they immediately copied what it was doing. He felt it wise to follow suit. The yellow car in the front of the queue then reversed back into the parking space it had vacated and the others did the same, starting from the car at the tail end of the line, so Bill still could not make his escape and had to do as the others had done.

While this was going on shoppers were making their way between the cars with their trolleys and finding it hard to reach their own vehicles. This, however, did not seem to put off the other drivers. Desmond also welcomed this added ingredient as it provided a touch of realism to the whole thing.

The yellow car in the front now drove out and turned around several times in the widened area in front of the shop. Its hazard lights were on and its windscreen wipers moving. It then returned to its bay. One by one the remaining cars did the same which took a long time before everyone had finished. Bill did not realise why, but he also did this manoeuvre. It somehow seemed wrong not to do so.

For a time, he was mesmerised by what was happening, but when he came to his senses, he seized his chance to get away again, helped by the presence of a line of shoppers blocking off the cars that were parked between him and the entrance to the supermarket. The other cars immediately followed him to the exit. But the choreographer had made sure to block off the way-out until he had finished filming, so with Bill in the lead, the procession of cars had to come back to their original spaces.

It was now time for the pas de deux. The yellow car down a short distance from his drove out to the front of the lane and stopped. Someone quickly placed a ramp from the cars roof to the ground and then a much smaller car drove up the ramp and came to stop on the yellow car’s roof. The yellow

car then did a full 360-degree turn one way and then the other. The smaller car then drove down off the ramp and flashed its headlights at the headlights of the larger car. The drivers of the other cars acknowledged this display by flashing their headlights and sounding their horns.

This was followed by a lap of honour as all the cars did another circuit. Bill did likewise, but on this occasion, he managed to get through the exit by ramming down a barrier. He was immediately stopped by a police-car. The policeman promptly got out and arrested him for being the ringleader in the disturbance of the peace at the car park. While he was being apprehended, the cars involved in the dance sequence passed him and disappeared home.

Desmond was very pleased with the footage he had obtained and sent it off to the producers of the arts award as his entry. The judges had no hesitation in awarding it first prize, although some pointed out that one yellow car had rather let-down the presentation. The overwhelming result, though, was that the choreographer had come out on top and he was given a massive cash prize and soon became a household name.

Bill was confronted with a heavy fine from the police and was scolded by his wife for being late back from doing the shopping.

He has now completely given up this chore. His wife does it instead. She told him she has had no problems at all in doing it, and everyone recognises the little yellow car and waves to her. She has consequently made a lot of new friends.

Bill, on the other hand, stays home all the time now and has taken up a new hobby: making wooden models of motor cars, which, when completed, he stamps hard on. It gives him a lot of pleasure. Next year he is planning to make a video of him stamping on the cars and will submit it to the arts awards to be judged. Who knows? He may even win it. Much depends upon the perfect conditions on the day he does the video. An overcast sky may not really be good for filming the video, but at least he won't have to worry about the traffic.

ALIENATION IN AN ALIEN NATION

Fvd reached out to his second-in-command, Bjd and signalled that he was very pleased with the way things were going. They were observing the world beneath them. At the present they were travelling around in a cumulus cloud, along with several others from the planet Mjdr̄t in the Ntwpqd galaxy, millions of extremely light years away from the Milky Way.

To find their way here to this planet, they had to leave the Tgxfnx constellation on the Gvz Aerial Highway, turn left at the Htbvp galaxy flyover, go straight on when the lights changed at the Zwqp Asteroid Belt and take the third turning at the Planet Jcpq roundabout. From there on, it was all downhill to where they had got to now, floating in the cloud above Mvwl, as they called the Earth. At least, this is what their alien satnav had told them to do. In fact, they found it easier to come here directly, relying entirely upon their inbred sense of direction.

In their language, as you will guessed by now, there were only consonants so that everyone could understand each other better without any variations in the way vowels are pronounced.

“The creatures of this strange world beneath us, so-called humans and animals, have not realised yet that everything is going to plan,” signalled Fvd.”

“How is that?” enquired Bjd, the second in command.

“In the beginning, well over four million years ago when we first came here, we sowed the seeds of greed and selfishness in the first life-forms. It was the creation of multi-cellular beings which was the beginning of their downfall. While one cell was being good and behaving itself, the other one was up to all sorts of mischief. Multiply that many times over as the cells increased in number and the end-result was the creation of the human being, a deeply-flawed creature, if there ever was one. This impulse we planted in them eventually made them grow more inventive, often in a devious way, and the power of destruction caused by this has resulted in what you see below.”

“You are referring to the search for more and more luxury, pleasure and extravagant living-styles?” queried Bjd, who had graduated in sociology from his university on the planet Mjdr̄t.

“Exactly. The combustion engine led on to the production of cars and airplanes which pump out carbon dioxide and other pollutants into the atmosphere. The desire for more mechanisation and comfort has been responsible for humans digging up their own planet to obtain minerals, and fossil fuels to burn. Did you know the world down there was once twice the size of Jupiter but it’s been shrinking with all the mining that’s taking place? In a hundred years’ time at this rate it will be about the size of a tennis ball?”

“What’s a tennis ball?”

“It’s a ball that players knock over a net until they become millionaires. Anyway, as I was saying, there is also a world population of close to 8 billion people constantly breathing out carbon dioxide and that is without taking into account the methane in the farts coming from their livestock and other animals. All bad news for them but good news for us. From our point of view, everything is going just as planned.”

“But surely they can do something about it?”

“Not really. They may think they have freewill, but that is an illusion. With the instinct we have embedded in them, the most dominant ones gain power over others. Some of them may try to resist that and we allow them, knowing that they could not possibly overcome those with ultimate power. You could say that they are trumped by this. (Card games were very popular on Mjdrd.) Soon this world will be ours.”

“And then we can have a game of tennis ourselves.”

“If you insist.”

This was the last planet in the Milky Way that the aliens had visited. Life on all the others had successfully, from their point of view, been destroyed. Now it was the turn of the Earth. They could not help smiling at this, although only other aliens would recognise this as a smile.

Contrary to how aliens are usually depicted, these were very tiny beings, microscopic in fact, made up of just one cell and only visible to humans through a nano-lens microscope, not that that had ever been done. But what they lacked in size they made up for in other ways, most notably, their planning, cunning foresight and ability to exert control over other worlds.

In appearance they resembled a combination of a neuron and an amoeba. In the centre of their body was a nucleus containing their DNA (a blueprint for their Dastardly Naughty Antics), together with various organelles. One organelle, the mitochondria, provided them with energy. Another one was responsible for home-entertainment, mainly short excerpts from toccatas and fugues.

Surrounding the nucleus was a grainy liquid called cytoplasm within a flexible membrane. From time to time various pseudopods would develop from this membrane, similar to the tentacles of octopuses. At the ends of these pseudopods were synapses which resembled the sprinklers of watering-cans, used to convey messages to other aliens. Thus, they did not speak as such but communicated by touchy-feely means. The message was then transmitted by chemicals: sweet-tasting ones for good news and sour ones for bad news. Most were obviously sweet and sour – an innovation that they had picked up from Chinese aliens on their own planet.

The pseudopods were also useful for encircling bacteria which were then ingested for food. Another purpose of the pseudopods was to help them get about for short distances. For longer distances they created a supply of helium which made them airborne. This was made possible by their other-worldly genes.

Where the aliens differed from neurons and amoebae in particular, was in their visual ability. Each of them had an eye closely connected to their nucleus. This all-seeing eye had developed over millions of years and enabled them to see long-distances and close-up without the need for spectacles, although some were reputed to wear contact lenses.

To reproduce, they had to have sex with themselves. It saved a lot of evolution and a good many arguments by there not being male and female beings. On the other hand, after sex they separated and went their own ways, which is rather strange as there were no differences between them.

“Let’s take a closer look at the world to see where we can settle down sometime in the future,” signalled Fvd to the other aliens.

They expelled the helium from their vacuoles and floated down to earth. They landed up in an island in the South Pacific. The beaches were completely covered by debris, mainly plastic in the form of bottles, bags, food wrappers, toys, household implements, computers, mobile phones and discarded fishing lines and nets, amongst other things.

“This must be the soil we’ve heard so much about,” exclaimed Bjd. “But I don’t see any plants growing out of it. Just the remains of sea-birds – hundreds of them. Let’s get out of here. We’ll never find any tasty bacteria to eat in this place.”

They took off and the wind took them down to Antarctica. Huge ice-shelves were collapsing into the sea around them, calving off massive icebergs and filling the air with the sound of thunder.

“This is far too noisy for me,” Fvd indicated. “We’ll try up in the Arctic instead.”

This was odd as he did not have any ears, but he could certainly feel the vibrations.

They arrived in Eastern Canada, expecting to see a pristine icy wilderness, instead of which the sea shore was covered in oil from a spillage and sea-birds were coated in the heavy black sludge.

“I don’t think human beings like sea-birds.” Bjd commented.

An exhausted, painfully-thin polar bear floated past them on some sea-ice without a hope of finding anything to eat.

“Or polar bears,” added Fvd.

“You’re right. I understand that hundreds of species of animals and plants are becoming extinct here. There won’t be any left soon,” Bjd stated*.

They took themselves off to Australia next, expecting some nice sunshine. When they got there, there were forest fires blazing away in every direction.

“Far too hot for me,” Bjd panted. “England may be a bit milder.”

Indeed it was - very much so. But the area they landed up in was totally flooded.

“This water is no good for me,” Fvd told him. “I get terrible arthritis in my pseudopods.”

Off they went again, this time to the West Indies, but an enormous hurricane was laying waste to many of the islands. The same was happening in South East Asia with a massive tropical cyclone.

“I’ve always fancied Brazil,” Bjd stated, “ever since I learned how to dance the samba. Hopefully, we could find a cool spot in amongst the trees.”

But the part of the Amazon Basin they ended up in was devoid of trees. They had been cleared for soya beans to be planted and instead of birdsong they had to put up with the sound of chain saws which were not so melodic, except to other chain saws.

In Africa they happened across the Ebola disease, plagues of locusts and drought. In the Middle East, the temperature was unbearable, and in some places too dangerous because of the ongoing wars. In the Ukraine the soil was contaminated by radioactivity. And in Russia, President Putin was still president.

“We haven’t tried any inhabited areas yet,” remarked Fvd. “There should be plenty of food available for us in a big city.”

They flew off to the Eastern coast of the USA and landed up in Washington DC. This was better, they felt. There was a lot of discarded food and a ready supply of bacteria. One day they could come back here when the inhabitants have disappeared. That should not be too long to wait.

By now, Fvd was feeling frisky. It must have been the effect of seeing all the other single-celled creatures in the nation’s capital.

“Do you mind if I just disappear behind this building and have sex with myself?” he asked the others.

“Certainly. Carry on. Don’t mind us,” Bjd replied. The aliens did not believe in beating round the bush in these matters.

A few seconds later Fvd returned with his twin. Yet there was something different about it. It had not one eye, but two. The other aliens stared in disbelief.

“If I’m not mistaken you have created a multi-cellular clone,” gasped Bjd, “with one eye in each cell. You know what this means...”

While he was speaking, the creature with the dual cell was uncontrollably expanding, adding new cells exponentially. Two of the pseudopods were turning into arms, two more were turning into legs and a distinct orange head was forming with a mass of hair on top.

“Jtr ngl sdf grt cfw,” signalled Bjd.

“I didn’t understand that,” said the new creature using an aperture which was rapidly turning into a mouth.

“Lkq xpgw lczpb,” Bjd tried to make him understand.

“Whatever you’re saying, it’s not a language I know,” said the being. “You will have to be deported.”

The aliens did not hang around any longer but zoomed upwards to look for a passing asteroid to take them back to their own planet.

“Life may be dying out on that planet and it may be facing destruction, but we will not be returning there,” Bjd announced to the other aliens. “We will have to find a new planet in a new galaxy in a new constellation. Anywhere but back there.”

The others clapped their pseudopods in agreement. And off they went to find one.

*To find out more, see <https://www.worldwildlife.org>

A BLACKBIRD SINGS, WITH SUB-TITLES

March 21st *According to my calendar, it's the first day of Spring today. Tradition has it that I have to start singing. But it's damn cold and raining and I don't feel like it. So there! I'll wait until tomorrow.*

March 22nd *Not much better today, at least the rain has stopped for a while. The wind is still too strong – not worth it. I'll just strain my voice. I'll go back to sleep again.*

March 23rd *Blooming heck. I'm frozen. I suppose I ought to give it a try or the song-police will report me. Not looking forward to this. It's cold enough to freeze my beak.*

"Hello, hello, hell! "

I can feel the cold air go right down to my gullet. Must try again.

"Hello ladies. I'm here to welcome you to my lovely tree. Just come on over and see me."

Lovely tree, that's a misnomer. A few twigs and some bare branches – hardly inviting!

"Is there anyone there?"

Not a sound. Not a single twitter. I may as well give up for the day.

March 24th *Not quite as cold today but it's a bit foggy. I'll have to include some directions so the ladies know where I am.*

"Hello again. I'm at the top of the oak tree, third tree from the left past the broken fence at number four. Love to see you here."

Well, that's a waste of time really. All the young ladies have got satnavs nowadays and they wouldn't know an oak tree from a telegraph pole unless it's written down for them.

"Hello, hello"

No response. Might as well give up today.

March 25th "Good morning, ladies. What a lovely morning! Do drop by and say hello."

Was that a twitter I heard, or is someone trying to tweet me. I hope it's not him again.

"Hello, I'm over here. Come and join me. Come on. Come... "

Oh, it's no use, I might as well sing to myself.

March 26th "Morning again. It's blackbody here. Don't be shy."

(Better promote myself, I suppose.)

"I'm eighteen months old. Good flight record and won a prize in worm-finding. Any takers? "

I think I heard a reply then very faint but it definitely sounded as if she might be a bit interested.

"Come a little closer and share my branch. No? Maybe tomorrow?"

March 27th "I'm back. And it's a lovely day today isn't it. I'm getting very lonely over here. Why not come over and keep me company. I'm black with a lovely yellow beak. My hobbies are, let me see, pulling worms out of the ground, smashing snails on the ground and doing poos in the rhubarb patch."

Ah I heard a reply. What did she say? You just want me for my body. What does she think I am, a hen?

"You strike me as a very intelligent lady blackbird with good taste."

Oh no, she's flown off.

March 28th "Are there any ladies out there that would like help in finding some nice food?"

Maybe I should rephrase that – I'm told it sounds patronising.

"Perhaps we could go shopping tomorrow and get some tasty food. I'm told that number six throws out some nice left-over food."

Definitely got a reply then, no two. That's more like it. I'll fly over to number six and meet them there.

March 29th *Well one of them wasn't interested, but the other one hung around. This is more like it. She's next door now...*

"Hello! What's your name? Blackbirda, that's a lovely name. Have you been in Sycamore Crescent for long? Really? You were born here. That's a coincidence, so was I. Do you remember the slugs at number three? Oh dear, look out! There's a cat coming down the lawn. Better fly. See you tomorrow."

March 30th "Hello again. No, I'm not afraid of cats. I just don't want you to come to any harm. I must say, you fly so elegantly. Not like the other ladies. Look, I've just found a bit of bread. Would you like to share it with me? Oh, I see. You are on a diet. Maybe some other time."

March 31st "Nice to see you again. I was thinking that we could perhaps share the same tree. I know it's a bit forward of me, but there aren't too many of them in this neighbourhood, are there. Ok, whenever you're ready. In the meantime, have a look at this."

Ah hah! The old trick of running around and bowing my head provocatively will probably work. Turns them all on.

April 1st *That other male blackbird is in the area again. I think he's got designs on her too. I'd better scare him off.*

"Hey buster. I've got a black belt in bird-judo. I can carry four live worms in my beak at the same time and the man who lives at this house has got a Mercedes Benz. Hop it."

That doesn't seem to have done the trick. I'll simply have to chase him away.

"Go on. Buzz off, you wretched turdus! I saw her first. Anyway, I've got a shiner bill than you."

He's scarpered now.

April 2nd "So you've decided you're going to move here. That's wonderful. You want me to build a nest? Oh, I see. You want to do it yourself. Now that we are officially a pair, I'll do as you say."

April 3rd *I didn't realise what hard work it is building a nest. She's done fifteen trips this morning picking up twigs and it's still not enough.*

April 4th *Been given instructions to get some cut grass for the lining. Not so easy. The people in this area haven't mowed their lawns yet. Not sure what I'll do. Maybe I should leave it to her. While she's doing that, I'll have a word, or rather song, with the people who live here so they'll be sure to put some food out. Works every time.*

April 5th *She's looking very broody today, for some reason. Keeps sitting in the nest with a glazed look on her face. I wonder why.*

April 6th *I thought she'd got us some eggs for breakfast until I realised. They're our eggs. I'm going to be a father. Better sing something about it – it's how we inform the social media.*

April 7th *She's refusing to budge so it's up to me to fetch some take-aways. Fortunately, she likes the same sort of things as me.*

April 8th – 18th *No change. Can't think of anything to sing about at the moment as I'm too knackered finding enough food for both of us.*

April 19th *The eggs have begun hatching. This is something I must make a song and dance about.*

"Hey everyone. We are now parents. We've got three boys and two girls. Mother and chicks are doing well. Can you just keep the noise down – we're not getting much sleep these days."

April 20th *We're both exhausted. I didn't realise kids demanded so much food. Dad, the little one said the other day, I'm fed up with worms. Can't I have some bread crumbs today? I told him they weren't very nutritious. But he wouldn't listen.*

May 8th *Got so fed up with waiting on the youngster all the time we kicked them out. They did manage to flutter before hitting the ground and none of them got hurt, thank goodness. Since then, they keep following me about. Everywhere I go, they come to. Gets a bit embarrassing at times when I want to have a pooh. They feel they all have to do it. The Mercedes Benz will need a good washing.*

"Here, son, this is the way you get hold of a snail. Watch me!"

June 1st *Finally I've got some freedom. The youngsters have all gone off and I can concentrate on my diary again.*

June 2nd *Oh no. She's gone all broody again and is doing a lot of housework tidying up the nest. Here we go again.*

"Bye for now. Bye."

AIRPORT HOLIDAY

The Chief Executive of the Airport Authority was extremely worried. With the cancellation of all flights from the airport, revenue had reached rock bottom. All staff, including shop workers and restaurant employees would have to be laid off permanently unless someone could come up with a plan. That seemed very unlikely in the present circumstances.

He stated his concerns at an emergency meeting of the board members and asked if anyone had any suggestions what they could do about it. There was a long silence and then a woman's voice quietly piped up:

"I have an idea, if you would like to hear it."

It was the lady who had brought the cups of tea in. She was standing beside her trolley in her catering uniform, looking very apprehensive about speaking up.

"Do go ahead, Molly," said the CEO. "No-one else has come up with anything."

"Well, I was thinking that we could pretend to fly people somewhere, but stay on the ground. Do you know what I mean? Coming to the airport here is all part and parcel of people's holiday which they look forward to, even though they complain about all the hassle afterwards. They rather enjoy it in a funny kind of way and it gives them stories to tell their friends when they go home afterwards. We all know people who say things like: "If you thought that was bad, we had to queue up at the check-out for five hours and then take off all our clothes going through the security check'. It's a kind of one-upmanship."

"I know exactly what you mean," said the CEO, "I had to wait six hours once and all my family had to take off their clothes. But what exactly do you mean by pretending to fly people somewhere?"

"Well, everything is done as per normal. People have to check-in, go through passport control and luggage-check and then go to the departure lounge and to their right gate. We get them on to a plane and it taxis around for a long time until it gets to the runway. Then it zooms down it, but instead of taking off, it pretends to do so, but really stays on the ground all the time. Then, after a couple of hours it pretends to land and the plane goes to one of the arrival gates. As far as the passengers know, they think they're abroad. Then, we put them on a coach and give them some crumby accommodation for a week, and then everything happens in reverse."

Most of the board members thought that this was ludicrous, but not the Chief Executive who thought there was great potential in the idea. It was either this or nothing. After the meeting he got together with the tea-lady and they worked out some of the finer points. There was no time to lose.

A fortnight later, the first passengers – all young men and women - arrived for what they thought was a chartered flight to Ibiza. Everything seemed normal. There were long queues at the check-ins - just to make it seem realistic. The only difference people noticed was that this appeared to be the

only plane that was going to take off. It made them feel rather privileged. On the flight information screens, other (fictitious) planes were either cancelled or delayed or had already taken off.

The bars were all open as normal and did a roaring trade, helped by the copious supply of free and cut-price drinks. The passengers could get served straight away and find chairs and benches to spread out in with no difficulty at all.

When it was time to go through the passport checks, they noticed quite a few other people around. Staff members had been drafted in to act like passengers to make it all seem normal. The officials at the security checks made sure to appear as rigorous as possible, and hand baggage was deliberately scrutinised very closely. People had to parade around without their shoes, belts, jackets and trousers - in the case of one man, as their belongings passed along the conveyor belt. A few body searches were carried out by the officials, which were immensely enjoyed by the other passengers who stood around to watch them. No-one suspected anything wrong.

In the departure lounge, more cheap drinks were available. They did not have to have them, but it was all duty-free, so they could not resist. Needless to say, they were all the worse for wear by the time they had to shuffle off to their departure gate. Here, they had to wait quite a long time, as is usually the case, but the staff provided them with a glass of Champagne each, compliments of the airline, ironically called *British Virgins*.

Boarding was not without difficulties. This was mainly to do with many people having trouble reading the seat numbers on their tickets and trying to sit in the same one. A few others attempted to sit in the overhead luggage racks. The airline stewards were quite used to this sort of thing and coped magnificently.

The plane eventually left its allotted boarding area and the pilot did a tour of all the taxiways to help install a sense of stupor in the passengers. When the plane reached the runway, it held its position for a long time, waiting for non-existent planes to take off. Finally, the engines started to roar as the aircraft started to move and gathered speed.

The cabin crew had been instructed to pull the blinds down over the windows before take-off with the excuse that otherwise they would interfere with the plane's electronics. By this time, the passengers were deeply engrossed in their mobile phones and in the screens at the back of the seats in front, or were snoozing nonchalantly. They had all flown dozens of times before and knew the routine. The only thing that concerned them was when the drinks trolley would be coming around.

After the sudden burst of speed, the pilot raised the nose of the plane a few degrees before slowly lowering it and carefully manoeuvring the plane onto another runway. He then cut the engines and imperceptibly reduced speed until it came to a halt away from all the buildings. At this point, ground staff covered the ground with foam until it resembled clouds, viewed from the windows of the plane. The cabin crew informed people they could now undo their seat belts and open the blinds on their windows. The drinks trolley went around, followed in due course by the trays of food. A few male passengers who had been looking at the airline brochure asked if they could join the Mile-High Club, which they had mistaken for the Frequent Fliers bumf.

The pilot and co-pilot put their feet up and had a nap for a couple of hours and thanked their lucky stars they were not part of the cabin crew.

They now got the plane moving along the runway very slowly. The passengers were instructed to pull the blinds down again and to fasten their seat belts. To make it look authentic, the pilot made the plane judder a bit as if it was landing until he stopped it further along the runway away from all

the foam. The cabin crew told everyone they could open the blinds and undo their seat belts and prepare to disembark.

The passengers had not been in this area before and it was all new to them. On some of the derelict buildings here, airport staff had hung up signs in Spanish, including the words: *Bienvenido a Ibiza (Welcome to Ibiza)*.

In one building, a fake arrivals desk had been set up and the suitcases were carried in and placed on the floor, as it was pointed out that the normal conveyer belt was broken.

From here, the passengers boarded a bus which would take them to their hotel, they were told. In fact, it was another fairly derelict building next to an open-air water tank. The “hotel” was staffed by Spanish workers from one of the real hotels at the airport and it all seemed very genuine.

Around the water tank, which was disguised as a swimming pool, although it was usually used as a cattle trough, recliners had been placed which were soon taken by many of the passengers. It was fortunate that the weather was good – it turned out to be a prolonged hot dry spell, whereas in Ibiza itself the temperature was much lower.

That evening, the “hotel” put on a disco. It alternated with Karaoke on other evenings. The bar in the corner of the room, equipped from the airport’s main bars, remained busy the whole time.

What happened after the bar closed in the early hours of the morning is not known, but there were few complaints.

At the end of a week, the holiday makers were put back on the coach and taken to the departure lounge of the converted cow shed before boarding the plane for the trip home. This consisted of an exact repeat of the outward journey, but in reverse.

It seems that everyone enjoyed their holiday and many favourable comments were made. “Such a smooth flight – didn’t feel any bumps at all, at least on the plane,” wrote one person. “Hotel Banga Bang is a knock-out,” another wrote.

The airport authority was very pleased with how things had gone. Disregarding the free drinks, they had made a fortune from accommodation fees and saved a fortune from not having to use very much fuel for the plane.

They decided that they would try it again, but this time with more than one plane. They could just about manage two, although it would take a bit of work in doing up old farm buildings to make them look like foreign hotels. This would not be much of a problem, though, as many of the airport staff had nothing else to do. One so-called destination would again be Ibiza, the other one would be Prague, which is a favourite destination for many hen parties and stag dos.

The building selected to become the original airport in Prague was an old barn. It was just necessary to get rid of the bales of hay and heaps of manure. Signs with *Prague* (for English visitors) and *Praha* (for Czech citizens) were displayed prominently. To add a note of levity and show what a fun place it was, someone had created another sign, reading *Praha-ha-ha*.

The “hotel” in Prague was a disused garage next to an old public house, which was used as a venue for the parties. Signs were erected in Czech in these buildings to make them appear

authentic and Czech beer was laid on in abundance, along with some attractive Czech waitresses who had not yet left England. Rather than have a “swimming pool” as in “Ibiza”, the attraction here would be the authentic ‘Czech’ bar in the pub.

A third plane was scheduled to depart for Cairo. It had been chartered by a group of senior citizens in a U3A (University of the Third Age) class in Devon whose subject-matter was archaeology. To get around this conundrum, the Chief Executive had selected Glasgow to represent the Egyptian city. He swore there must be some old pyramids there. Maybe they had not been discovered yet.

The cabin crew for this plane were told to keep the blinds drawn as soon as they had left the airport until they arrived in Glasgow city centre. It was “to avoid anyone getting sunstroke”.

As the motorways were very quiet on the day in question, the plane had no difficulty in going by road. Members of the group could not understand the locals as none of them professed to speak Egyptian. Some of them were disappointed not to see any pyramids but they were told that the pyramids are quite a distance from the city centre in Cairo, not to mention Glasgow. However, they did enjoy seeing what traditional Egyptian life was like and bought lots of souvenirs back home, even though they were upset that they all seemed to be made in Scotland. That is until someone pointed out to them that the cultural artefacts of Egypt and Glasgow have much in common. The someone in question was the CEO of the airport.

With regard to the other two plane “journeys”, things did not go so well. For some unknown reason, possibly various members of staff who had been helping themselves to some of the free drinks, the planes ended up going to the wrong destination. The passengers who thought they were going to the hen and stag parties in Prague arrived in “Ibiza” instead and had to sit around the “swimming pool” in their best clothes.

They soon got over that and made amends by taking most of them off and they got to enjoy the disco, karaoke and the bar, but would have preferred the Czech beer to the Spanish wine which airport staff had taken to the building.

Things were different with the party who thought they were going to Ibiza but ended up in “Prague”. There was no swimming pool to swim in or lounge about, for a start. The garage had the distinct smell of the oil from a sump about it. This was officially put down to being water from a nearby spa, but no-one believed that. Even in their inebriated state they could still tell the difference between diesel oil and mineral water.

Some of the young women had not packed any clothes apart from bikinis for the poolside in Ibiza. They had no choice but to wear them, or the bottom half of them, in the converted garage, much to the surprise of the former garage owner who turned up one day. It was hard to get rid of him after that but he was allowed to stay provided he did not speak.

Although the passengers on both planes did realise that something had gone seriously amiss, they could not put their fingers on what exactly it was...that is, except for one person. This was a Czech girl who happened to be the future bride. She was dismayed to find she was not in Prague as she had hoped she would be, as that is where her fiancé was waiting for her. There was no sign of him anywhere here.

The “hotel” very strangely had Spanish notices everywhere and she sensed something was wrong. She refused point blank to swim in the cattle trough or to sunbathe in the recliners like everyone else. The other people in her hen party began to think she was a spoil-sport and was no fun at all and they had nothing more to do with her.

She was the only one, too, who had bought just a one-way ticket so she could get married in Prague. One evening she made her way to the nearest road and hitchhiked to the nearest town, which was Crawley, from where she returned to her accommodation in England.

The fuss she made about what had happened to her was printed in the local newspaper and the airport knew the game was up. They paid her thousands of pounds in compensation. Word soon got round to the other passengers on the other flights who also demanded compensation. The airport had to close down permanently.

In its place a theme park opened in which passengers would board planes destined for Ibiza and Prague but which everyone knew were not really the places they were called but were situated in odd corners of the airfield. This caught on in a big way. People could have all the 'pleasures' of catching a plane at what looked like an airport, and go on a magic mystery tour without having to have an up-to-date passport or foreign money and never leaving the country.

The airport authority, now renamed the airport theme park, was now in business again. All the staff kept their jobs and money started to roll in. No planes took off or landed here from abroad. But in the prevailing climate this suited the public, or a section of it, very well. A new beginning. A new venture. A new scam. The future of the country was looking up. What more could one ask?

THE SECRET LIVES OF SNAILS

As I was walking into town the other day I was overtaken by a snail. Either I was walking exceptionally slowly, or the snail had been imbibing some high energy drinks.

Hello," I said. "You look as if you are in dreadful hurry. Are you trying to catch the last post?"

"No," came the reply. "Haven't you heard that we have our own mail service?"

"Then what's the big hurry?"

"I'm in training."

"What for?"

"The athletics tournament, of course! But you won't have heard of it."

"How come?"

"We've only advertised it on our own mail service. It may be slow, but it's more secure."

"If it's so important to you, why haven't I seen you here before?"

"I couldn't sleep today. And I needed to do some last-minute training."

"When do you usually train, may I ask?"

"At night time. It's much cooler then and there are no humans about to get in the way."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"That's alright. You can't help being so slow."

"That's what my wife always says...about everything I do."

"You should be a snail, or rather gastropod - we never get married."

"Do you live in sin, as they used to say?"

"No, we live in your back garden most of the time. Well, come to think of it, it's pretty similar."

"Look. I may only be a homo sapiens, but I don't like any insulting comments about my back garden."

"Then why don't you grow more stuff we enjoy eating, like your neighbour does?"

"I'd like you to know that my rhododendrons are much envied by all my friends."

"And if you grew some nice lettuce, they would be much appreciated by all my friends."

"OK, I'll think about it. Now tell me more about this athletic tournament."

"It's our local team competing against a team from Europe."

"Is that why you have a Union Jack painted on your shell?"

"Do you like it?"

“No, to be honest. It makes you look garish. But if it helps identify you when you are running, I’m sure it will help.”

“It definitely will. But I won’t need identifying much as I shall be in the lead, sure as my name is Boris.”

“A snail called Boris? That sounds weird.”

“Not half as weird as...never mind. But if you were to say a gastropod mollusc called Boris, I would not be offended.”

“OK, I’ll remember that. Tell me more about the European team.”

“They are all refugees from France, Spain and Portugal.”

“Refugees?”

“Didn’t you know that in those countries they eat snails. That is why they have taken refuge over here. They are currently in hiding under the rhubarb leaves in the allotment.”

“I’ve been told about snails in the allotment causing a lot of trouble. I didn’t know they were European. I thought they were just normal snails.”

“They are normal snails. Just like you and me, well... me. Even over here in this country they face great danger from things like slug pellets and birds. All they want is to live safely and have enough to eat.”

“So, you think we should grow things especially for snails to eat? That’s ridiculous!”

“Then why do you grow things just for humans to eat, plus growing things for animals to eat so you can then eat the animals.”

I had had enough of being lectured about veganism by a snail, and besides, I was having an awful job in trying to keep up with the snail. Nevertheless, I still had a lot to ask him, but he was a long way ahead of me.

“If you want to know more about the athletics tournament, go to the allotment at dusk tonight. That’s when it will take place,” he shouted back at me.

“I’ll do that,” I replied and sat down on a wall to have a rest.

Knowing when dusk starts is a tricky one, and I found that as I was a little early, I had to perch myself on a compost heap and await the arrival of the competitors. Luckily, it was a moonlight night, so I was able to see the whole proceedings very well. The organisers had cleared a plot of all vegetation (mainly lettuce), around which the spectators, mainly slugs who were not competing, could watch.

The home team entered the arena first. The snails, like Boris, mostly had the Union Jack flag painted on their shells, yet there were a few with the English flag – the cross of St George – instead.

Apart from the snails, there were caterpillars, worms, beetles, centipedes and millipedes, with each species competing in different events. Like the snails, those in the local team were also adorned with the national flag.

The refugee team then made their entrance; none of them had any insignia painted on them as it was clear which side they were on.

Before the start, the cheerleaders from both sides performed a song and waved their pompoms. The English ones were crickets – it couldn't be anything else - while the Refugees were grasshoppers.

The first event was the sprint. Owing to the short length of the plot the distance had to be cut short, with the English team insisting it should be 10 yards, the Europeans, 10 metres. A compromise was agreed by the referees after an argument between the two team-leaders, Boris and Michel about it.

This initial race was slow and slimy and was won by Michel, the French snail, in spite of the onlookers chanting Yum Yum and licking their lips. Boris complained loudly that his afternoon's training had been interrupted by a human being which got him the sympathy of the rest of the English team.

However, Boris got into his stride in the marathon which came next, thanks to the slippery slime that was now covering the pitch. To make up the length, the competitors had to turn round at the end of the lap and go back again. Boris won it comfortably as these instructions were not given to the opposing team.

He was not successful in the hurdles which followed this, however.

"Snails are simply not meant to jump over hurdles," he stated defensively. "It is not in our nature."

It was entirely different, though, for caterpillars who competed in the high jump which followed this. In truth they did not actually jump but climbed up the pole and then down again. This was deemed allowable for some reason. No-one had foreseen that caterpillars do not tend to jump.

The worms came into their own in the long jump, which they interpreted as burying underground and coming up to the surface a distance away: not exactly a jump either, but an optical illusion as the attention of the judge, a frog, was caught by something else happening between the start and the finish.

I apologised for the disruption I had caused by blowing my nose at that time, and the field got ready for the next event: a miniature sports-car race for the beetles. The home team won this as they had had a lot more experience at beetle drives than the other team.

All this left just the final game of football between the English centipedes versus the European millipedes. Although the centipedes were much faster on their feet, the millipedes had many more legs with which to kick the ball. With the score standing at 109-all at the end of time, the game was declared a draw.

The closing ceremony with everyone in the arena singing their hearts out was suddenly disturbed by the sight of a fox bearing down on them. All creatures dived for cover and the games came to an abrupt end.

It had been an enlightening experience for me and I had a lot more respect for non-humans after that.

The next day as I was walking into town, I came across Boris, the snail. He was moving so slowly I could hardly recognise him.

“What on earth is the matter?” I asked him.

“It’s reality,” he said. “I’ve caught a bad bout of reality.”

He was not exactly sluggish, as he still had his shell. But he looked really dejected.

“I had dreams of being a super-snail and opening a Facebook page. But then when I woke up this morning, I knew it was just a dream. I’ll have to go back to my old snail-self and be resigned to that.”

I took pity on him. “If it’s any help, I’ll plant some lettuce for you,” I said.

And to this day I always sow some lettuce seeds each year in my neighbour’s garden. He doesn’t know about it, but I’m sure he appreciates seeing a nice healthy big snail munching on the lettuce leaves before it moves on to his other plants. He even feeds the snail with little pellets to supplement its diet. If that isn’t thoughtful, I don’t know what is.

A HAPPY ENDING FOR EVERYONE

“Hello,” said the woman, not unattractive, he thought, somewhere in her mid-20s, an intellectual judging by the glasses and the intense look on her face, and with just a hint of a frown. He detected a half-smile on her face as she glanced towards him. This was a guarded look as if to say “Don’t mess with me”. He certainly had no intention of doing so, being a respectable married man, 54 years of age, a bell-ringer and a town councillor.

Why did she say “hello” to me, he pondered? Isn’t that rather casual, maybe even forward, considering she doesn’t even know me.

He could not help but notice that she was wearing a white T-shirt with the words: *I’m not wearing a bra today* written on it in big black letters*. What message is that trying to send? Should I even have read it? Or would she have been offended if I hadn’t? But to read it I had to look down, and she would be conscious that I was staring at her chest. What a dilemma! To be honest, though, she did not look as if she really needed to wear a bra – she looked completely flat. Maybe it’s a man or a trans-person. All of these possibilities are possible. How could he respond and show that he was being polite, but not transphobic, homophobic, or a sex mania? How could he prevent her from thinking he was being over-friendly, not friendly enough, detached but not hostile? Life was so difficult these days.

He wondered how he should return the greeting. Saying “hello” back was not what she would expect a man, well into his middle-age to say. And a “hello” does sometimes come across as being flirtatious and frivolous, whereas she might expect a more measured response to show he respects her for being a female human being and not a child or a sex object. Finally, he made a decision, hoping he would not regret it.

“Good morning,” he said and their eyes met briefly.

That is very formal, she thought. Maybe I was too casual in my greeting to him. I wonder what he means by good morning. The sun is shining but there is a bit of a cool breeze. It may be good, but it could be a better morning. Or perhaps he is referring to how life has been for him this morning. He might have had a particularly good breakfast, and his cat may not have woken him up during the night, or he may have won a prize draw.

Thereagain, he may be being moralistic – have a good morning, in other words. Don’t do anything wicked or unethical. If I have had a good moral morning, would he mind if I had an immoral afternoon? That’s probably what he expects me to have. Maybe I should have slapped his face! You can’t trust older men. They might appear very virtuous but they are all lecherous, given the chance. I rather regret saying hello to him in the first place, now I come to think of it.

All the same, he looks quite well-groomed – a nice clean shirt on and there are no unsightly creases in his trousers. That’s something I always notice. Tells you a lot about what men have been up to. I wonder if he noticed me looking at his trousers. It was only a quick glance but he may have seen. If he propositions me, it will be partly my own fault.

I need to get away from him now as quickly as I can. I’ll try and cross over the road and walk on the other side. I can always cross back again when he has gone. That’s what I’ll do.

Over lunch his wife asked him about his trip to the library.

"See anyone you know," she asked.

"No, but a young lady said hello to me."

She tried to appear relaxed about it, but she was really thinking: a young lady. Hmm! A young lady who said "hello", the young madam. I wonder how often this happens and he doesn't tell me about it. When young women say "hello" to a man it usually means something. Surely, she doesn't have designs on a 54-year old estate agent with balding hair and a pot-belly. I noticed he put on his freshly-ironed trousers today. Maybe it wasn't just a chance meeting. A young lady indeed.

"Was she attractive?" she asked, trying not to appear too inquisitive, but she was very curious to know.

"Depends what you mean by attractive," he said, trying to buy time while he thought what to say to change the subject. He had hoped this tack would go into a general discussion on what 'attractive' means.

"Well, was she good-looking, is what I'm asking?" She had foiled his attempt to generalise about the meaning of attraction. This was an art-form which she was highly skilled in, and her husband knew it only too well.

"She had the usual facial features that people have: two eyes, two ears, nose, mouth, teeth, eyelashes, hair." That should satisfy her, he hoped, but she quickly came back: "What colour eyes?"

When they were courting a long time ago, he had once told his wife she had beautiful green eyes, something she had always remembered, especially now that her eyes were often blood-shot and the sparkling spring green had faded and dulled.

"Oh, I don't know. She was wearing glasses."

"And what colour was her hair?"

"I really can't remember. I think it must have been brown and tied up in a bun."

"I think you mean a bun. Why can't you remember such a simple thing as the colour of her hair?"

Now that she was attacking his mental prowess he was clearly on the defensive. Men don't always notice the same things as women do, he reasoned with himself.

"I only had a fleeting glance at her as we passed and I was distracted by her..."

He immediately regretted what he had started to say and wondered how he could get out of this.

"Her what?"

He could have kicked himself. How can I get out of that one, he thought to himself? He decided to take the bull by the horns.

"Her T-shirt."

"Do you mean what was under her T-shirt, to be more precise?"

This was on dangerous territory now, he realised. He had to be very careful.

"I don't think there was much under it at all."

He suddenly realised that what he had said could be interpreted in different ways.

"You mean she may not have been wearing a bra."

His wife had visions of a very shapely young lady flaunting herself and even trying to initiate a conversation with her husband.

"She was definitely not wearing one because it said that on her T-shirt."

"The young hussy!"

"But she was as flat as a pancake."

"I have to remind you that *my* pancakes are not flat and have never been so."

Was she still talking about her pancakes, he wondered to himself?

"It sounds like you had a good look, then."

"I simply read the message and it was obvious. It might just as easily have been a man."

At the word "man", his wife was taken aback. He is surely not a closet...Surely, she would have known after thirty-three years of marriage. She was stumped for words and looked at him in a new light. Perhaps he had a secret life she knew nothing about. It could be a fellow bell-ringer or the mayor. In a way she hoped it was the mayor rather than just another one of the town councillors. She dropped the subject and the rest of the meal was in silence.

When the young woman got back from doing her shopping her boyfriend was getting ready to make their lunch.

"How was your trip to the shops?" he asked her.

"Fine. But it took longer than I'd anticipated."

"Why was that?"

"Well, there was this man I came across who was a bit creepy and I had to cross the road to make my escape."

The real reason she was late was that she had spent a long time in the shoe-shop.

"In which way was he creepy?" Her boyfriend was unsure of what she meant.

"Oh, you know. He just was."

He didn't know, but didn't want to admit it.

"Was it a young man?" He wished he had been there to come to her defence.

"Far from it. An old guy. They are worse than the young ones." This was rather a generalisation, she knew, but wanted to voice her opinion to someone who would agree with her.

“Did he say anything to you?”

“He said something or other, I wasn’t really listening. I just wanted to get away from him.”

If her boyfriend ever saw the man, he would give him a good seeing-to.

“I’ll say one thing, though. He had nice trousers.”

Her boyfriend’s ears picked up. “You noticed his trousers?”

“They were nicely pressed, I must say. Like yours when I do them.”

This was a bit of a white lie. Her boyfriend wore jeans nearly all the time, although she had once, and only once, said she would press a pair of his trousers for him when he had to go to a wedding.

To her boyfriend, what she was saying was that she had been looking at other men’s legs and that worried him. Weren’t his good enough for her?

“Did the man know you were looking at his legs, I mean, trousers?”

“Oh no, he was too busy looking at my chest...”

She thought about what she had just said and qualified it by adding: “...my T-shirt, I mean.”

Her boyfriend had not noticed what she had been wearing when she went out, and now he saw it and nearly flipped.

“Isn’t that a bit provocative?” he said angrily to her.

“No, it’s just a tease. I like to see what reaction I get from men.”

The reaction she got from her boyfriend was not what she expected. He stormed out of the flat.

The older man’s wife was chatting with her best friend over a coffee in town.

“Do you think my husband is attracted to other men?” she asked her.

“I wouldn’t have thought so. Perhaps I should ask my husband. They both play golf and often play together. He would have mentioned it to me if he was.”

“Well, what about women? Do you think he fancies other women?”

“Not that I know about, but I’m pretty sure he doesn’t fancy me.”

“That’s a relief,”

“Oh, so you don’t think I can attract other men if I want to?”

“No, I don’t mean that. I’m sure you could quite easily.”

She knew only too well that her friend was very over-weight and her dress-sense was dreadful. On top of which, she often suffered from body odour and bad breath. But her hair always looked nice. But that was due to her hairdresser rather than to her own efforts.

“You managed it once. You could do it again if necessary,” she added comfortingly. “And there are plenty of men out there who like women who are...like you.”

This was all very tactful of her, she had to admit to herself. Never once did she let on that she was having an affair with her friend’s husband. And she doubted whether her friend would really be too upset by it, anyway.

Her friend was glad that their meeting had come to an end. She had nearly let the cat out of the bag and told her she was having an affair with her husband. It was the little bells he attached to his legs which attracted her to him in the first place, which is why he called himself a bell-ringer. He had not been inside a church for years.

The attraction of her to him was in the acres of flesh which she possessed. It gave him a sense of adventure – like scaling Mount Everest, not like his wife who was more like the Sahara.

After leaving the flat, the young woman’s boyfriend went to see his mother.

“I’m worried about you-know-who,” he said to her.

“You don’t mean...”

“Yes, of course. She’s taken to going out into town with messages on her T-shirt.”

“Messages, dear. What messages?”

“I don’t know how to put this, Mum, but they draw attention to her attributes, or rather lack of them.”

“She needs feeding up, that girl. Plenty of milk. Plenty. She needs to bathe in it. Every single day.”

“I’m not so worried about what she’s got or hasn’t got. It’s the words on her T-shirt I’m concerned about.”

“It sounds to me that she feels neglected. Make a fuss of her. Buy her lots of boxes of chocolates. And don’t forget the milk – whole milk works best. Trust your mother.”

The estate agent’s wife was still angry with her husband when she got home from seeing her friend. She tried to do some housework, but in her mind she was plotting what to do. In a sudden flash of inspiration, it came to her.

She waited until her husband had gone to work and then she went over to the pile of ironing which she had been doing earlier. On top lay one of his white shirts. She picked up a black ink marker and wrote a message on the back of it. He would never notice it – he only looks at the front when he is putting it on, she said to herself. She put the shirt in the drawer he kept them in, and celebrated by having a coffee with a bit of added cognac thrown in.

The young woman's annoyance at her boyfriend storming out of their flat stayed with her when he was out visiting his mother. She looked for an opportunity to get back at him. He could not tell her what she could do or could not do. She was a grown mature woman.

To visit his mother, he had put on a nice shirt and taken off his vest which he habitually wore everywhere. His girlfriend saw it draped over a chair and suddenly knew what had to be done. She would write something on the back of it. Just a little pithy message would do, but it would serve him right.

The following day, the estate agent wanted to visit the library again to see if the book he had wanted was in. His wife had no objection to this. She rather fancied going with him. It had been a long time since she had been to the library herself and wanted to look up books on golf, a new hobby of hers. Her husband was not aware of this, but did not say anything. He didn't dare to.

A few streets away, the young woman said to her boyfriend that she needed to go shopping again. In case she might meet the old man again, her boyfriend told her he would go with her, provided she did not wear the T-shirt she had been wearing. She agreed to this without any complaints, which he found a bit odd, but he was glad about it.

All four of them met up beside a busy bus stop. A reporter and photographer from the local press were there, putting together an article on local transport issues.

The young woman and the wife introduced each other straight away and got on very well. They left the men by the bus stop and went off for a quick visit to the shoe shop. The two men stood side by side as they watched them go.

Laughter erupted from the people at the bus stop and the press photographer took a photo of them. They could not understand what was going on. But everyone else could. On the back of the young man's vest, the message read: *I'm not wearing underpants today* was visible to all, while the message: *I'm not wearing underpants today either, but I am wearing a bra* appeared on the back of the man's shirt alongside.

Neither of the men realised why they were the subject of derision until they saw the local newspaper later that week. At first, they were embarrassed and very annoyed. But the more they looked at the photograph the more they came to the conclusion that they were made for each other.

Not long afterwards they moved in with each other. The man's wife went off with her best friend's husband. And the young woman went to live with the shoe shop manager, who happened to be the husband of the obese woman friend of the wife of the estate agent, if you follow. The large lady herself was not left out of things. She joined the two men in their house as a companion to both. After all, there was more than enough for both of them to share, thanks to the daily baths she took in milk, whole milk, that is.

There is no moral to this story, just an immoral one. It pays to advertise. You never know what will happen if you do. Good luck!

*I saw this on a woman's T-shirt in a supermarket when I was collecting money for a charity.