



SOME LONG
SHORT STORIES

or should that be

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Paul Gordon Busby

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by

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Dedicated to the Fatoorechi Family

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CHANGING SIDES

Marvin knew that he was disabled, but he tried to keep it hidden from other people. The only clue lay in his hair parting which was on the right side. But these days, people have all kinds of different hairstyles and no-one suspects anything – a case of hair un-apparent.

As far as Marvin was concerned, his parting on the right was not a matter of style as much as comfort and convenience. It reflected the fact that he was left-handed. This used to bother him and cause him a lot of embarrassment when he was younger and had to fit in with conventional ways of doing things. He had usually managed to carry things off, even though it had not been easy for him. At times it had been almost impossible, so he had kept himself to himself most of the time and avoided social gatherings.

For a long time now, he had got used to doing things his own way. His job, as a marketing manager of a company, gave him an office to himself. He took his own lunch to work and ate it at his desk so he only rarely came into contact with other people. He was unmarried and lived by himself in a house in which he had made various modifications to fit in with his left-handedness. Most of the time, then, his disability – as he thought of it – never troubled him.

Out of the blue, one day, his boss asked him to represent the company at a trade fair in another town. This could result in a boost in sales and he was the most obvious choice of person who could attend it. Marvin was far from happy about going but felt he had no choice in the matter.

On the day in question, he got up early and made himself a packed lunch and set off in his car. Usually, he caught the bus to work and hardly ever used his car. However, there were no bus services at the right time to get to his destination so going by car was a necessity.

The journey would take at least three hours, maybe longer, depending upon the traffic. As luck would have it, the roads that day were clogged up with vehicles and he found himself stuck behind a heavy lorry most of the way. Being on a busy two-lane road, there was simply no opportunity to pass the lorry and he had to put up with trailing the lorry almost the entire journey. This would not have been a big problem, but the lorry, which was carrying a load of scrap metal, periodically dropped small items onto the road whenever it went over a bump in the road. Marvin kept a good distance between his car and the lorry, but was aware of occasional pings when things fell off and bounced in the road, striking the front of his car. He was not overly concerned over this. It was an old car which already had several scratches and dents in it, just as long as nothing damaged the windscreen. Fortunately, nothing did.

When he had been thinking of buying a car, he did not know whether to go for a right-hand drive, like the other cars in the country, or plump for a left-hand one. Cars with right-hand drive were better suited to British roads where you drive on the left. On a trial run of one such car, he found it most unsettling as he couldn't help but look in his left-hand wing mirror before overtaking. This very nearly caused a few accidents.

He settled for a left-hand drive instead, even though that meant poor visibility of the road ahead beyond any vehicle in front, unless he hugged the far left-hand side of the road and put up with all the potholes and slow-moving cyclists in his path. Or rather, it was the cyclists who had to put up with him. Sitting on the left side of his car, it was much easier for him to turn around in his seat to

look over his right shoulder to see what was behind him before overtaking. He still couldn't resist looking in his left wing-mirror, which was useful to check that no bicycles or pedestrians were overtaking him on his off-side at the time.

Arriving a little late at the venue, he parked his car and rushed into the building, leaving his packed lunch in the car. This would have pleased the other guests as the sandwiches he had made contained a number of pickled onions that smelled to highest heaven.

The morning sessions went well and he made a lot of new contacts and heard about several new products which occupied his thoughts as he tucked into his sandwiches in the car during the lunch break. The afternoon sessions were not so stimulating and he found himself dozing off at times. The proceedings finally came to an end and he was quite relieved by the time he got back to his car, ready to drive home again.

The smell of pickled onions still filled the air, but it was not as strong as before. Yet there was another smell which he was now aware of and it seemed to be coming from the engine. He got out and opened the hood and saw that one of the rubber hoses had a gaping hole in it and there was a pool of water on the ground directly underneath. A sharp piece of metal lay nearby which he realised must have come from the lorry which he had been following. There was no way in which he could drive home with the car in this condition.

While he was examining the damage, another person who had been at the same session came by. He told him that the local garage was now closed for the evening but he was sure the car could be repaired the next day. He happened to live close-by and kindly offered to put Marvin up for the night. The offer was gratefully received. The man, who was called Daniel and was a complete stranger to Marvin, telephoned his wife and then they got in his car and drove to his house.

In the driveway, they were greeted by Daniel's wife, Philippa, obviously a very efficient, easy-going woman who was clearly not fazed by anything. This was in stark contrast to Marvin who had been on the verge of panicking and was still feeling rather ill at ease.

Phillipa insisted upon Marvin having a meal with them. Marvin initially felt like not taking them up on the kind offer, but the worry had made him feel extremely hungry and on persuasion he accepted.

It had been a long time since he had had a meal with anyone else, and instead of drawing attention to his left-handedness (he regarded this as being something to be ashamed about, stemming from the teasing he had endured at school many years ago) he decided to accept and try to eat the "normal" way.

There was soup for starters. No-one realises how much care and precision is needed in holding a spoon full of soup with the "wrong" hand, while attempting small talk with strangers at the same time. Most of the soup ended up back in his bowl while some of it landed on his serviette. The croutons he managed to capture in his spoon caused a splash as they fell back into his bowl and pools of soup started to accumulate on the table-cloth around his place-setting. Marvin was very apologetic about this, but his hosts did not appear upset by it.

The main course – sausages, roast potatoes, peas and carrots - was a big challenge to Marvin. He was only too well aware that he did not fare well with this. Attempting to spear slippery sausages

and the hard skin of roast potatoes, not to mention the elusive peas and curvy carrots with a fork proved disastrous as they rapidly flew off his plate in all directions, lubricated by gravy and a thin layer of slithery onions. He then had to use his knife as a bat to strike out at the pieces of food that were shooting up from his plate. More often than not, though, he would miss them or send them flying with added impetus in the opposite direction.

By this time, Marvin could not control his trembling hands and he wisely declined the sweet course - blackberry and apple pie in custard. On second thoughts, he was worried about offending the lady of the house who had baked the pie, and relented. As you can guess, this added some artistic additional colours – deep purple and bright yellow - to the table-cloth.

He fared better with a cup of coffee which followed. At least, the drips from his cup ended up on his shirt and tie rather than on the tablecloth, but he was able to wipe them off with his handkerchief which he then had no choice but to put back into his pocket.

Following dinner, he went straight to the guest room and fell asleep as soon as he stretched out on the bed. In the middle of the night when he was still half-asleep, he got out of bed to answer the call of nature. It was pitch black, and instead of opening the door to his room he ended up in a cupboard. The cupboard happened to be in the same position in relation to his bed as the bathroom was in his own bedroom and he did not hesitate in emptying his bladder. It was only in the morning that he discovered that what he had thought was the toilet was in fact a pair of wellington boots.

Fortunately for him, breakfast was quite rudimentary – a couple of pieces of toast and a glass of orange juice. He was very thankful that the toast had already been cut into several pieces and covered with marmalade, and he had no difficulty in eating it. He might have worried about drinking the orange juice but his hosts had very thoughtfully provided a straw for him. He also noted that the tablecloth had been replaced by newspapers and in his napkin-ring was a towel in place of a serviette.

Saying goodbye to Philippa, Daniel and Marvin drove to a garage and it arranged for repairs to be made to his car during the morning. Marvin thanked Daniel very much for his assistance and hospitality and then he settled down on a chair in the garage until his car was ready. As often is the case, the repair took longer than anticipated as the garage did not have the right hose on hand and had to obtain a new one from a stockist. By the time his car had been fixed it was late afternoon, and being winter-time it was beginning to get dark.

Marvin was glad to finally get away at 6pm. Normally at this time he would be having some dinner, but in view of his experience the night before, he chose not to find a restaurant that was open but to go straight home.

Being the evening rush-hour, traffic was heavy for quite a time but then eased off and he made good time. He was able to put his foot down until he came up against a slow-moving caravan. He saw the road ahead was clear and began to overtake it. But instead of overtaking it on the right he instinctively moved towards the left and found himself in a field, where the gate had been left open. The car quickly ground to a halt in the muddy field. It took Marvin several hours to get the car out of the field and back on to the road.

A few hundred yards down the road was a roundabout. Being very tired by now he had difficulty in following the norm and went around it the wrong way. Everything that is done clockwise, he felt it only natural to do anti-clockwise, or counter-clockwise, if you prefer. And vice versa.

Unfortunately for him, a police car was going around the roundabout coming in his direction. He swerved his car to avoid hitting it and the police officers in their car made him pull over and issued him with a traffic summons. They let him continue on his way but told him he would have to appear in court in the near future.

He arrived home as dawn was breaking. It had been a disastrous couple of days and he resolved never to go to another trade fair, if he could help it, even though he knew his boss would have the final say.

It wasn't until Marvin had written a report on the trade fair and had recovered physically from his ordeal that he wrote to Daniel and Philippa to thank them for their hospitality and much-needed assistance.

A couple of months later he wrote to them again, inviting them to spend a few days with him. Daniel was very adamant that he didn't want to go but Philippa thought it was only polite to accept the invitation. Although it had been down to her to clean up the mess afterwards, she was used to doing that, but not on such a grand scale.

Her best table-cloth had been permanently stained, but she had never really liked it that much - it had been a present from Daniel's mother, with whom she did not really get on. On looking back, she thought the whole thing had been quite hilarious and certainly a change from the boring evenings she had to put up with when work colleagues had come to dinner with them. They compromised and agreed they would take up Marvin's invitation but only for an overnight stay, no longer.

A week later, they set off for Marvin's house. On their arrival, he put his left arm out to shake hands with Daniel who put out his right hand. The two hands collided into each other in mid-air, both of them jarring their fingers in the process. Marvin then went to embrace Philippa to give her a kiss on the cheek, as he believed that this is what people tend to do a lot nowadays. She sensed that this is what he was intending to do. Marvin tilted his head to the left and Philippa tilted hers to the right and they struck each other on the forehead which dazed them both.

Marvin told Daniel he could put his car in his garage as his own one was being serviced. Daniel went to open the door and twisted the handle to the left but it did not budge. After ten minutes he gave up trying and parked his car in the road. It did not occur to him to turn the handle to the right instead. Meanwhile Marvin had escorted Philippa to the front door which he had left unlocked. She was somewhat surprised that it opened on the left side, something which confused Daniel when he reached the door and was unable to open it until Marvin let him in.

While Marvin was putting the finishing touches to the dinner, he put a record on the gramophone – an old model which he had rebuilt himself. Daniel wandered over to it to have a better look. There was something unusual to it which he could not work out at first. The music certainly did sound quite strange. Then it struck him. The turntable was turning anticlockwise and the record was playing backwards. Even so, it was not a particularly bad sound, better than a lot of present-day songs, but they had to agree it was still a little unusual.

Marvin had already laid the table. There was to be no starter but the main course would be especially large to make up for this. Forks were placed on the left side of the tablemats and there were no knives. The explanation for this, as Marvin explained, was that Spaghetti Bolognese was the main course. He had been to Italy several times and had always attempted to eat it as Italians do

with just a fork. He demonstrated how it should be done and his guests felt obliged to imitate this. However, this is hard enough to do if you are not Italian. But to do it by twisting the spaghetti round and round with the fork in your left hand is far from easy. Bread rolls were placed on the right side of the table mats beside the serviettes, and at times both of the guests, who were sitting side by side – Philippa on the left, Daniel on the right - found themselves eating the same roll.

Philippa thought all of this was quite fun but Daniel found it a big challenge, especially since Marvin replenished his plate with fresh spaghetti after every other mouthful. It seemed like a mountain to climb for him, which was accompanied by a number of avalanches, as he misjudged how much he could actually get in his mouth. As with all avalanches, the additional spaghetti and sauce did not always fall where expected.

His wife fared better, but even she had to admit that each strand of spaghetti seemed like a mile-long. Her fingers soon started to ache with all the twirling and she resorted to just shovelling in what she could, however unladylike it might appear to be. It goes without saying that Marvin acquitted himself well – he had been practicing for a week beforehand and his left-handed skills were well honed anyway.

Finally, the guests conceded defeat and moved on to the dessert course. To give the meal a complete Italian flavour, Marvin had prepared a large tiramisu which he had divided into portions.

Daniel and Philippa's eyes opened wide when Marvin brought the dessert plates in from the kitchen. They were given fresh forks to eat with and Daniel chose to hold his with his right hand. Philippa was now used to holding a fork in her left hand and carried on doing so. There should not have been any problems with this, except that since Marvin was very fond of cream, he had added a little bit extra, ok, quite a lot extra, to the recipe. As he had no cocoa powder to sprinkle on the top, he used a of thin slab of chocolate instead.

As soon as Daniel put his fork on the right side of his tiramisu and pressed down on the top to break off a piece to eat, a shower of cream shot out of the other side striking Philippa full in the face.

She had not yet begun to eat her own one and thought that Daniel had done it deliberately. They had been having an argument in the car before they had arrived and she was still feeling irritated about that. She wiped the cream off her face with her serviette, the same one which Daniel had assumed was his and he had used it not long before to wipe the remains of the Spaghetti Bolognese off his face.

With barely-concealed annoyance, she thrust down with her fork on the left corner of her tiramisu. Immediately, a shower of double cream, mascarpone cheese and flakes of chocolate seemed to explode from her dish, landing squarely on her husband's face. Marvin watched what was happening with amazement. He tried to make light of it by making a joke about couples sharing their desserts, but they were not amused, although they put on a show of laughing at his joke before they went off to tidy themselves up while the coffee was percolating.

Philippa got to the bathroom first and took a look in the mirror over the wash basin. She was horrified. Her face was a mess, but it shouldn't take long to wash it off and put on some fresh make-up. She went to turn on the hot tap. It refused to move. She grabbed a towel and wrapped it around the tap. It still would not move. She tried the cold tap. That one also refused to budge. I suppose I'll have to use the shower, she said to herself.

She removed her shoes and stood in the bath, leaning forward so that just her face was under the shower head. Using both hands she tried to turn on both taps. But they too would not move. She would have to get closer to the taps. In this position, her whole body was directly under the shower head. To prevent any splashes getting onto her clothes, she thought it best to take everything off. Then she put one hand on top of the other and tried to force the hot tap to come on. But it was in vain.

But in removing the hand on top, she inadvertently nudged the tap a tiny bit in the opposite direction. A few drops of water landed on her head. Ah, she thought, I should have turned them the other way, and she twisted the tap until it was fully on. Her sense of relief was cut short by the sudden torrent of cold water which descended upon her. She shrieked. Her immediate reaction was to turn the tap off again, and by instinct she tried to twist the tap in the normal clockwise direction. But this was the way she had just turned it and the tap was fully on. After a few agonisingly cold moments it dawned on her that she would have to turn it the other way.

That done, she stood shivering in the shower looking desperately for a towel. All she could see was a small hand-towel, no larger than a handkerchief. She had left the towel she had brought with her in her bag which was on the bed in the bedroom, beside the towel which Marvin had provided for her to use. The only thing she could think of doing was to use the hand-towel until it got dripping wet and then wring it out and do a bit more. This was taking ages.

Then she had an idea. She could use an item of clothing to dry herself off. It would better be her underwear, she thought, as then she could put on her outer clothing to get as far as the bedroom where she could put on some dry clothes.

It was the first time in her life that she had used her brassiere to dry her hair and she had to chuckle at that. She left it on top of her head to catch the drips while she wiped down the rest of her body with her underpants. This did not prove to be a total success and damp patches appeared on her clothing when she put them on again. She didn't bother about doing up all the buttons on her blouse as the bedroom was just a short distance away. She would just have to make a dash for it. What she forgot, though, was that her bra was still balancing on top of her head as she made her exit, carrying her shoes in one hand and her wet underpants in the other.

As soon as she stepped out of the door, she ran into Marvin who was on his way to their room with a couple of cups of coffee. The sudden appearance of the dishevelled Philippa in the corridor caused him to drop the cups. She was so startled that she gave a little jump and in so doing, her bra fell off her head and landed on the tray that Marvin was carrying. The noises were heard by Daniel who came out to see what was going on. He was shocked to observe his wife carrying her wet pants in her hand, together with Marvin who was carrying her bra on a tea-tray.

"I thought you were only going to wash your face," he snapped. "It seems you've been doing much more than that."

He could have looked menacing had it not been for the fact that his face was still covered in cream, cheese and chocolate which looked as if it was now baked on. He looked like a native of some remote tribe who was about to participate in an initiation ceremony.

She ignored him. If he's going to be like that, I certainly won't tell him that the taps are mixed up and you have to turn them on and off the opposite way to normal, she thought. He will soon find out for himself. He entered the bathroom and she went into the bedroom, while Marvin retrieved the cups and returned to the kitchen to percolate some more coffee.

It was only a few minutes later that screams of pain emanated from the bathroom. Daniel had soon cottoned on to the fact that the taps had to be turned the other way. But he did not realise that the hot tap was where the cold tap usually is, and vice versa. He had filled the basin with water and cupping his hands together had splashed what he thought was cold water on his face. But it turned out to be scolding hot water. He reached for the hand-towel and buried his face in it, which was when he found out that it was soaking wet with cold water.

In agony, he stormed out of the bathroom and into the bedroom.

"That's it!" he yelled at Philippa. "We're going home, right now."

"But it's only a quarter to four," she said, glancing at the clock on the dressing-table.

"That's ridiculous," he retorted. "We left home at four o'clock."

Sure enough the minute hand of the clock was in the quarter-to position and the hour-hand was in the four o'clock position, although it was one of those clocks which do not have any numerals marked on it.

"Are you sure we left at four o'clock?" Philippa said.

"Definitely. We had meant to leave at three thirty but you were late as usual."

This led to a bit of an argument between them. Sometime later, Daniel glanced at the clock again and it now said the time was twenty-five to four. He could not believe it. He stared at the clock for several minutes and noticed that time was going backwards. Meanwhile, Philippa, who was sitting on the bed putting on some fresh lipstick saw the reflection of the clock in her make-up mirror. It all made sense to her now, at nearly half-past eight as she saw the time was in her mirror. Everything in Marvin's house is opposite to normal - the record player, the taps, the clock. Marvin's left-handedness extended as far as swapping clockwise motion for anticlockwise motion. Whatever else would they discover.

At that moment there was a tap on the door.

"I've brought you another cup of coffee," called out Marvin.

"That's kind of you," said Philippa and went to the door. Sure enough, the door handle had to turn upwards to open.

"I hope you don't mind, but I only have left-handed cups and spoons," said Marvin, putting the cups down on the bedside table and closing the door behind him as he left them.

Philippa and Daniel looked at each other.

"Left-handed cups?" Daniel said. They looked pretty normal to him.

"Left-handed spoons?" said Philippa. "I didn't know there were such things."

They both observed the cups and spoons curiously.

"I wonder if the saucers are also left-handed," Daniel said.

"That's silly..." said Philippa. "...but you never know."

The spoons and the crockery looked normal to them, but looks can be deceptive.

Daniel picked up the saucer with his left hand. Something did not feel right. He put it down again.

Philippa picked up her saucer, but with her right hand. It felt awkward to her but she had been assured it was the right thing to do if she was going to hold the handle of the cup with her left hand. She tried raising the cup to her lips. It was not easy for her to do and she spilled most of the coffee on the carpet.

Daniel picked up his saucer with his right hand and grasped the spoon in his left hand. He put it into the bowl of sugar cubes and tried to lever out one of them. It proved to be elusive and he had to chase it around the bowl as it came into contact with the other lumps of sugar. Finally, he managed to capture it and plonk it into his cup. The cuff of the left arm of his shirt also landed up in his cup. He instantly pulled back his left arm, but the sudden movement knocked the cup out of the saucer and it fell to the floor.

“By the way,” came a voice from outside the room. “I was only joking about the spoons and the cups being left-handed.”

They did not appreciate the joke, as they were on their knees cleaning up the spills.

“I think we had better go home straight away before there are any more catastrophes,” said Daniel.

For once, Philippa agreed whole-heartedly with him.

Marvin was very upset that they were not spending the night with him. He had done his best to be hospitable. He blamed himself for the problems. He was not used to putting up guests and decided never to do it again.

Daniel and Philippa returned home. After a few weeks, Philippa was able to look back at it and have a good laugh. It was something to tell her friends. Daniel felt differently and vowed never to accept an offer of an overnight stay from anyone else, particularly a relative stranger.

All of this was not a complete catastrophe as far as Marvin is concerned. He started marketing a number of left-handed items for people with this condition: cameras, serrated knives, scissors, hand drills, screws, telephones, and so on. There was certainly a market for these things, so he turned his attention to other things - computer mice with the right and left buttons reversed and computer keyboards with the letters and numbers the other way around - thus, QWERTY... was replaced with POIUYTREWQ on the top line.

He then became more adventurous and went into musical instruments. It was easy enough with swapping over guitar strings as well as other stringed instruments. But it was a lot harder modifying the keyboards of pianos. Instead of changing the way they looked, the mechanism was altered so that from middle C which remained unchanged, the notes got higher going down the keyboard, while those on the right became lower. This proved to be a great success amongst eccentrics who had lots of money to splash around on things they never use. But it did not take on with other people, the main reason being that no music had ever been written for such an instrument.

After a successful start at this new venture, sales began to decline as left-handed people only make up a small proportion of the population. It was time to try another tack. His solution was a stroke of genius. He started to promote certain goods with the label - “For left- and right-handed people.” The sale of steering wheels, buckets and picture frames just leaped off the shelves, as did tables, chairs and book cases. In gardening circles, his advertising of left- and right-handed watering-cans,

compost bins and spades was only exceeded by the spring bulbs, shrubs and trees which were labelled in this way.

The public soon no longer wanted items which were not specified according to this criterion and sales soared. Marvin eventually retired a rich and happy man.

His brand of marketing has endured. If you do not find "For left- and right-handed people" stated on any goods in question, you should complain bitterly about it and even write to your Member of Parliament to report it, as companies are now legally compelled to inform customers about this.

There is, however, one exception to this new mandatory labelling stipulation. Cups, saucers and spoons are totally exempt.

It goes without saying that Daniel and Philippa no longer possess any cups and saucers. Their experience has had a profound effect upon them. Instead, they have invested in straws, on which it states that they can be used by people who are left- or right-handed. As regards to spoons, they no longer use them. And knives and forks have been banned in their house. All food has to be eaten by hand - the right hand. It is interesting to note that they don't eat any English or Italian meals any more either. It is now only Indian food that they eat and serve to dinner guests as they have found it more convenient to eat by hand.

Who knows? There is a remote possibility that this might catch on with other people. Somewhere.

LIONEL

Lionel Mayhew was sitting in his armchair indulging in his favourite pastime: reminiscing. Back in his younger days he was renowned for his amazing strength. At the age of 21, he had won a tug-of-war competition single-handedly against 3 other men, all of them over six feet tall and all champions in their own right. OK, they were the winners of dominos, chess and whist matches, but even together they could not stand their ground against him. They never lived down this ignominious defeat and none of them ever won any of their respective matches again, in spite of training at the gym for weeks beforehand.

At 25, he picked up a fully-grown horse and carried it half way around a field. It would have been the whole way, but the horse objected to being treated like this and passed wind, followed by a heavy downpour which landed upon Lionel's right foot. This caught him by surprise and made him drop the horse abruptly, but not before a photographer had captured the precise moment for the local newspaper.

At 28, he was called upon to pull a combine harvester out of the mud when all of its wheels got stuck in some deep ruts following several day's heavy rainfall. He remembered clearly that he had to make a run for it when it came free to prevent being shredded and re-emerging as a bale of hay, albeit fortified with additional vitamins.

At 31, he had to hold up a wall which was in danger of collapsing when a house was nearly demolished by a land-slip. This was the only wall left standing and the owner of the house was anxious that if it fell down, a picture of her dearly departed dog might come adrift. He nearly prevented this from happening, but after several hours he felt the need to wipe his nose, with the result that when he reached for his handkerchief the picture went smashing to the ground. Amazingly, the wall remained standing up when he let go, although it did wobble about for quite a while.

His reputation as a man of strength earned him the nickname of The Lion. There were some, though, who did not believe the stories about him and preferred to call him Lyin' Ole Mayhew, but all the same, they did whatever they could to prevent annoying him in case it led to a fist fight. And Lionel was not one to suffer fools gladly.

It was not just his detractors who were in danger of being injured by Lionel. Several people who shook his hand came away with bruised knuckles and one person ended up in hospital with a couple of broken fingerbones. The trouble was that when he got excited or stressed, his grip got more intense and he simply did not know his own strength.

One of the cups he was awarded for winning a wrestling match became so misshapen after he took hold of it that it could not stand up by itself. The following year he was again awarded a cup, this time for winning a boxing tournament, and the very same thing happened. At least, two odd-shaped cups make it look as if they were deliberately made this way, he said to himself. It should be added that his opponents in the wrestling and boxing matches were also not able to stand up by themselves afterwards either, but they had entered the competitions of their own free will, so they could not really complain about it.

In his mid-30s he had a nasty accident which had a lasting effect upon him. He was a passenger on a coach which got caught in a heavy traffic so that the journey time between stops increased significantly. He had been drinking heavily and was on his way home when he felt the urge to relieve

himself. The coach-driver, who had not had a drop to drink, seemed oblivious to the need for some of the passengers to have a comfort stop and he kept going regardless, even though the coach made very little headway.

Lionel crossed his legs and tried to think about guinea pigs or bald-headed eagles, or indeed anything to take his mind off it, but to no avail. "Get a grip of yourself!" he murmured to himself repeatedly, much to the consternation of some of the elderly ladies sitting near him.

When the coach eventually stopped at a suitable location, he leapt out and found there was a queue to the loo which increased his frustration and added to the agony he was going through. Finally, he reached the head of the queue and rushed inside, knowing that at last he could take the matter in hand. He did so rather too enthusiastically, with the result that it was not just his sports trophies which were completely squeezed out of shape. He was lucky that things still seemed to work...but it needs to be said that he never dared to wear shorts again.

Lionel was not always such a strong man. Indeed, in his childhood years, he was regarded as a bit of a wimp. This did not please him and he set himself a rigorous training regime to build up his strength. He spent hours a day doing gymnastics until he was banned from the premises for breaking the equipment. His attempts at weight-lifting paid off though and he ended up lifting the heaviest weights with people sitting on either side of the connecting bar.

He was not overly concerned with things like cycling or running - it was his arm muscles which he concentrated upon building up, as he had his heart set upon being a motor mechanic. In those days, there were no such things as hydraulic lifts or power-assisted tools. Sheer strength was what was needed in repairing vehicles, and doing tasks involving this gave him a lot of satisfaction.

Being such a he-man, he caught the attention of Beryl, who worked in the accounts department of the garage. She was a very feminine sort of girl, all 16 stone, that is 224 lbs of her. Her weight was unduly concentrated upon her hind quarters, and to attempt to disguise this formidable asset she wore skin-tight jeans, which only served to highlight this feature all the more so.

She played violin in the local 'orchestra', consisting of herself, a harmonica player and a barrel organist - the leader of the orchestra. He had a drinking problem and the speed at which he turned the organ handle depended upon how much he had imbibed beforehand. Nevertheless, they were very popular in the area and much sought after for local dances.

Her other passion in life was knitting. She made sure though to hide her knitting needles away when she was not using them to prevent them from being manhandled by Lionel, who at one time had mistaken them for large nails.

In their case, opposites did attract and it was not long before they tied the knot and bought a house with five acres of land around it which were mainly used for growing fruit and vegetables. While he did all the hard physical labour at home - the gardening, house repairs and building work, including the construction of a conservatory and a shed - she was responsible for the cooking, cleaning and other housework. This arrangement suited them fine, although today, the roles would probably be reversed.

For many years, things went along in this vein. He built a shed and needing a larger one, he built an extension to it, and then another, followed by another storey and then another. He then built another shed and did the same to that one. In the meantime, she knitted a covering for the fingerboard of her violin - it started off as a short glove but ended up as a long sock - as their house was not that warm and she liked to play her violin every evening (there was nothing else to do since Lionel had had his unfortunate accident.) Being somewhat addicted to knitting, she made numerous woollen sheets, shirts, shorts and chemises and even some elasticated cosies for her husband's bulging biceps.

This kept both of them occupied till they were well into their late 50s when Lionel started to get painful twinges in his hands. The doctor put it down to repetitive strain injury and told him to lay off his shed-building for a while until it cleared up. He did as he was instructed and put all his efforts into repairing vehicles and digging the ground.

The pain did not go away as expected and on visiting the doctor he was informed that he might have arthritis in his wrists and his hands. He could stand the pain, he told Beryl, although this was not true as well she knew. What was more of a problem was that he no longer seemed to possess as much strength as he used to have and his grip was much weaker.

What convinced him that things had irreversibly changed for the worse was one evening when he and his wife thought they would go ten-pin bowling. He picked up the ball and howled in agony, causing him to drop it. "Only joking," he told the couple they were playing with. For the rest of the evening, Beryl did all the bowling and defeated their friends. Lionel made excuses that he was merely being chivalrous. His friends thought this was rather out of character but did not say anything.

Going back home, Beryl did the driving and told him that as he had more time to spare now, he could lend her a hand doing some of the housework, to which he reluctantly agreed.

It was then that Lionel realised just how difficult it was to open things. The tops of jars and pots of jam and honey seemed to need a vice and a wrench to open. The same applied to bottles of all description, some of which you had to prize off the lid with a knife, some required a corkscrew, and some had indents which had to be squeezed while simultaneously pulling off or unscrewing the lid. Invariably, there were no instructions given on how to open the various containers. Then there were those items which had to be opened (if you could) to reveal a membrane which had to be taken off before attaching the lid again in order to use, provided you had not lost interest by this time.

Tins proved to present other difficulties in opening. Some had a little metal ring that had to be pulled to open. But the amount of strength needed to open them used up more calories than the food or drink itself provided. Tins of corned beef had a little key to fit onto a short tab and then you had to unscrew it, that is, if you could find the tab hidden somewhere under the wrapper which was firmly, very firmly, glued onto the tin.

Other tins needed a tin-opener which would work for the first little bit before grinding to a halt, so that a new puncture had to be made somewhere else to start again, and so on. The lid of the tin would then require a knife to try and open up at least part of the lid - a process which often led to

cuts on the fingers caused by the sharp edges of the lid or the rim. This then called for opening a bottle or tube of antiseptic if you could, and trying to take the covering off a sticking plaster, which by now would be soaked in blood. Pools of blood on the mat or carpet which could leave a stain would have to stay there until you could open something to clean it up, by which time they had become permanent.

Plastic packaging also presented problems as the plastic used was almost impenetrable by scissors or a knife. Some cardboard and plastic packaging needed to be virtually demolished before extracting the item itself, only to discover that in so doing, the instructions on how to use it were printed on the fragments of the packaging itself, so that it had to be glued together to find out how to use it.

Medicines often posed insurmountable problems as they were packed into "child-proof" containers.

"These things ought to be relabelled as 'adult-proof' or at least 'elderly adult-proof'. I'm sure children would have no difficulty in opening these things," said Lionel in desperation one day.

Other items, which apparently could be toxic or poisonous if swallowed or spilled on the skin, were also simply impossible for him to open. That was maybe just as well as the antidotes to these chemicals could not be opened either. The only alternative was to use water from the tap, and even turning the tap on and off was getting beyond him.

The whole experience was a nightmare for Lionel. Fortunately help was at hand from Beryl. Her right-hand was not much use in these tasks. But her left hand - the one she used in fingering the notes on her violin - was a tower of strength.

For jobs requiring two hands, they co-operated and achieved the near-impossible with both of them applying both of their hands to whatever it was they were trying to open. He had the job of holding it steady, aided by her right hand, while her left hand had to unscrew, pull, push, squeeze, jab, puncture, or attack with something sharp - sometimes all of these things and at the same time. This presented few problems for large items, but smaller things, like tubes of toothpaste, they got in each other's way and some of his fingers were nearly forcibly dismembered by accident.

The most disastrous incident that occurred was in trying to take the lid off a tube of superglue which had been used once before. But in the process of putting the lid back on afterwards it had managed to superglue itself back onto the tube. After attempting for hours to get the lid off, Beryl had the idea of jamming the lid into the side of a door and then closing the door almost shut to hold it while all their effort went into trying to unscrew the tube. The tube did not budge for a long time until all of a sudden it gave way and out shot the superglue in a spurt, coating their hands with it and bonding Lionel and Beryl together.

After attempting to pull, jerk, twist and yank their hands free of each other and not succeeding, Lionel let out a deep sigh and said in exasperation:

"Looks like we'll going to have to stick together for life."

Beryl didn't know whether to feel offended by this remark or whether to agree with what he had said.

"We badly need to separate," she said in exasperation. Her bladder was informing her of that.

Holding hands with someone is nice, but not when it goes on and on and you just can't let go.

They washed their hands in soap and water together; poured nail-polish remover over their fingers; sprinkled mountains of salt and deep pools of vinegar on the table and thrust their hands into it; tried to use a file, a hack-saw and a piece of sandpaper to see if any of those would work, but all to no avail.

"It's no good," moaned Beryl. "I just have to go."

"Me too," said Lionel, well, he had to go with her anyway.

They both agreed to shut their eyes and tried not to think of what their hands were up to. They were so exhausted by this time that they went to bed and fell asleep instantly.

At some point in her sleep, Beryl turned over onto her side away from Lionel. Without waking, he automatically turned over at the same time. There was a loud SNAP and they were free of each other. But freedom comes at a price and they both woke up with extremely sore hands where they had been joined together.

Beryl soon recovered from the experience, aided no doubt by her prodigious knitting and violin-playing, which helped her physically and mentally. But Lionel merely went back to his existing condition, which was painful at the best of times and quite debilitating.

The number of tasks that Lionel could now do became very limited. At work, he was given low-skilled light-weight jobs which was understandable, but he did feel humiliated by it. At home, he could still manage to dig the garden, but nothing which required physical strength in his hands, such as sawing branches off trees or pruning. And in the home, he helped out as much as possible but the more demanding things in terms of manual dexterity fell to Beryl to do.

After a short while, he became an expert in loading the washing machine, vacuuming the carpets and washing the floor, which he accomplished by tying cleaning cloths under his shoes. However, most aspects of cooking, including making jam and dealing with fruit remained her preserve. In fact, he was banned from the kitchen when he failed to turn the kettle off, not noticing the steam all around him as he attempted to stir the contents of several pans. He ended up with lumps of gravy, scrambled egg and semolina all over the walls.

Beryl meantime proved herself highly proficient in the garden. Finally, she understood why it was essential to build a third floor for the fourth garden shed on their plot in order to get away from all the spiders, and she set about it as if she had been born a manual labourer.

This burst of physical activity soon took its toll upon her and she fell victim to 'Builder's Bum' - a painful condition which makes sitting down almost impossible and is only alleviated by wearing one's jeans very low down on the buttocks to avoid them coming into contact with one's undergarments - something to do with the washing powder used for cleaning them, it is said.

Her condition rapidly spread to her legs and torso and the only relief she felt was to go round dressed in nothing but a bikini, which for a 73-year-old severely overweight lady did create some embarrassment one evening when they invited the neighbours around for dinner and an informal recital of her playing her violin - a transcription for solo violin of Wagner's Ring Cycle.

It wasn't long before she was confined to bed, minus her hand-knitted sheets, blankets, and duvet and minus even her bikini. The mattress still bothered her so she resorted to lying on the wooden floor instead which she found was more comfortable.

Of course, Lionel did all he could to help her and found ways of using his feet to open tins, jars and bottles and, without her approval or knowledge, to prepare food. (She assumed that the neighbours had brought it in for them in gratitude, no doubt, for the lovely violin recital she had performed for their benefit.)

Alas, she passed away some months later during a cold spell of weather, having fallen victim to hypothermia. For all his attempts, Lionel had found it difficult to light a fire with his feet as he kept burning his toes in the process. Beryl had hunger pangs when she smelled the meat that she thought he was roasting, which reminded her of pig's trotters. But she did not live to see how close this was to the real thing.

Left on his own, Lionel was now doubly-disabled with arthritis in his hands and badly burnt toes. He rang all his friends to help, but remembering him as the strong man - The Lion - they thought he was pulling their leg. Little did they realise that he now did not have the strength to pull anyone's legs, or arms, or anything else belonging to them.

The more people he contacted, the angrier he became as no-one came forward to offer him any help at all. Even the neighbours who had been treated to the violin concert given by his wife could not be of any assistance as they had moved a long way away since that very evening.

His anger did however give him a spurt of adrenalin and for the first time in years he felt a bit of strength come back to his hands. If only he had a tin of something to eat in the house, he would have had no difficulty in opening it, he believed. But therein lay the problem. There were no tins left in the house, nor even any packaged food. All that was left were a couple of green potatoes. Obviously, he could not peel them or cut them into pieces so the only other option was to bake them just as they were.

He did not bother to wash them but put them straight into the oven. He turned on the gas and took a match out of the box. As he held the match tightly in his hand it snapped into pieces. This did not happen to the second match, but in removing it from the box, its head fell off. The final match remained intact as he struggled to strike it against the side of the matchbox. As anyone knows, this requires a quick movement, but his wrists were not capable of moving his hand fast enough to get the match to ignite, however much he tried.

At that moment the gas ran out. Apart from making him feel woozy, he was otherwise unaffected by inhaling it, except that it might have upset his critical judgement, as he decided to eat the potatoes raw. The odd patches of soil that were left on them were like an added garnish, but he could have done without the odd pebbles which were embedded in the soil.

It was hard-going and took a lot of effort to chew. It tasted revolting, yet he consoled himself in the thought that if he didn't eat anything he might become ill. As it was, he became ill through eating the raw potatoes and suffered dreadful vomiting and diarrhoea afterwards and did not sleep at all that night. In addition to his existing frailty, it was all he could take.

A couple of days later, a man from the gas board came to his house in person to apologise for the interruption to the gas supply. He had telephoned several times but not had an answer. He saw a body lying on the floor of the kitchen and called for an ambulance. From the hospital they took him straightaway to the funeral directors, and as there was not a lot of business at the time, they arranged for his burial the very next day.

The only people present to see him off were his old neighbours who were visiting town at the time and got wind of his funeral. The coffin was lowered into the ground which had been hastily prepared by the grave-digger who resented having to come to work when he thought he had the day off. As a result, it was very lopsided as he had forgotten to bring his spirit level with him. Just as the minister said a final prayer over the grave there was a knocking sound. The funeral was adjourned while some tools were found to take the lid off the coffin.

Lying awkwardly inside, Lionel was hopping mad about the bumpy ride down into the grave he had experienced. His annoyance had been enough to wake him up and given him another dose of adrenaline which was enough to let him bang his fist on the lid.

He was immediately taken to hospital again and after treatment was discharged into a care home where he lived happily to the age of 101. He spent most of his time in an armchair, reminiscing. His final wish was that he should be cremated, not buried, and that the person responsible for lighting the fire in the crematorium should not have arthritis. Oh, and yes, Lionel made a point of saying - he would prefer it if he was actually dead when it happens.