

A Chiltern

U3A

**10th Anniversary
presentation**

Pandora's Box

Samples of work of the Chiltern U3A Writing for Fun Group

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INTRODUCTION

The first of the two hour Writing for Fun monthly meetings took place on 26th September 2007. The format settled into writings prepared on a single subject jointly agreed which were read out aloud by the author to the group at the subsequent meeting. This formula has stood the test of time and remains the precept today.

It was decided that nine people was the optimum number of members that could be accommodated to allow everybody time to read their work and for other members to comment.

Pieces have been written on a wide range of topics from pet hates to pleasures, regrets, meetings, journeys and disasters to name but a few. These topics have elicited stories about a captive escaping torture by biting on a cyanide pill, a spy exchange at Checkpoint Charlie, Second World War childhood experiences, learning Scottish dancing to avoid playing the dreaded game of hockey, Débutantes parties at the Dorchester in white tie and tails, a visit to the twin towers, a nostalgic steam train journey, a clever story about the journey of a magazine and children's stories.

On one occasion the members rose to the challenge of creating a story in exactly 50 words which elicited a saucy piece about giving up smoking, an endearing piece about a lost ear ring and a story inspired by Adam and Eve. These are presented in this booklet. The Bible inspired another longer story, this time a modern version of the Three Wise Men.

In an exercise to write an imaginary letter we learnt about the emotions of a victim of a mugging when writing a letter to the thief, suggestions to the Minister of Transport, information about collecting picture postcards offered to the convenor of Antique Collections, the infidelities of politicians written to a newspaper and a plea for more realistic sermons written to a vicar. A free choice project brought forth a biography of the jazz musician Jelly Roll Morton and another, 'The joys of tending an allotment'.

A profound poem entitled 'Food of the Soul' was reproduced in the May 2008 Chiltern U3A Newsletter as was 'What the U3A means to me' which appeared in the May 2009 issue.

In addition to the joys of writing and the satisfaction of reading out their work the group has experienced a strong bond of mutual support and friendship. Members have chosen some of their work here which we hope you will enjoy reading.

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RELENTLESS RAIN

by Christine Allen

The relentless rain had begun to fall in the early hours of that Monday morning at the beginning of March, incessant with no apparent pause; the strong easterly wind blowing it against the windows with such force as to disturb and awaken the residents of that Lincolnshire village; a village set on the edge of the infinite flat fenland; a village once small and compact but now sprawling with small houses and bungalows, the latter of which were mainly occupied by the elderly, many emanating from the more affluent areas of the country, bought to release some capital to augment their meagre pensions and thereby enhance their halcyon days which were now spent so far from family and friends in these bleak, flat lands. Many of the houses were occupied by young commuters and families desperately trying to keep abreast of their financial commitments in an already depressed area where the minimum wage was often the norm.

These, together with the original villagers provided the social structure of the village and it was for some residents that the daily bus service to Peterborough provided a lifeline to their dreary existence: for example the original villagers, some too poor to have their own transport, the unemployed youngsters desperately seeking scarce work and the elderly clutching their precious bus passes.

At 9.30 in the morning the bus would arrive and there would always be a small array of inhabitants to greet it.

On that particular Monday morning only four of them stood bravely huddled in the wet, draughty bus shelter, others being deterred by the ceaseless rain. One, a callow youth of about 18 years of age called Jamie, kept glancing anxiously at his watch. It was now after 9.30 and he had an important appointment in town.

Julie, a tall, attractive young woman in her mid-twenties, was also looking equally worried and concerned as she clutched a small overnight bag, her long blonde hair hanging in wet tendrils around her face.

'Should be here soon ducks,' Joe, the old man beside her commented in a broad Lincolnshire bawl, 'Don't use this bus much meself but I've got a dentist appointment and me daughter can't take me.' Julie smiled wanly at Joe who had been born and bred in the village. He had married a local girl but she had died some years ago.

Nora, the remaining occupant in the bus shelter also glanced at her watch,

'I catch this bus most Mondays and it's nearly always on time.' She was an attractive but sad faced lady in her late seventies.

'Haven't seen you around,' Joe addressed her, 'Newcomer eh?'

'I've only been here a year,' she volunteered, 'My husband and I moved from London to a bungalow. A new start for our retirement but he died suddenly only two months after we arrived here.' Nora amazed herself at divulging this amount of information to a stranger as she was normally a reserved person with no family, few friends and now a widow. Her weekly bus trip helped her to forget her loneliness

'Hard for you ducks,' Joe commiserated.

Suddenly a police car drew up by the rain splattered verge and the officer jumped out, 'Sorry folks, if you're waiting for the bus, you'd best go back home. The dyke's overflowed further up the road. The river's breached and there's flooding all the way to Peterborough. Everything's at a standstill. There's nothing coming through.' Having imparted this bad news, he brushed some of the rain off his uniform, returned to his car and sped off to the next emergency.

For Jamie, his dreams crumbled, the interview at last for a job, the promise of work in London shattered. He hardly noticed the rain as he started walking dejectedly towards his parent's small, council house. There was only one course open to him now, they wouldn't like it but he was going to do it, no matter what.

Julie walked resolutely away towards her little starter home on the estate which she had financed with a small legacy and her job as a P.A. in a large company in Peterborough made it possible to obtain the necessary mortgage. Like Jamie she seemed oblivious to the rain still falling in torrents. As she turned into her drive her mind was in a turmoil. Suddenly her mobile phone rang. Sheltering in her porch, she saw it was a message from her boss.

'Hi Julie. Hope you're O.K. I've checked with the clinic. They're expecting you. Everything's set up. Glad you've finally realised it's the only thing you can do for both our sakes. It's for the best. I'll collect you this evening.' Julie deleted the message and went indoors.

Nora pulled her umbrella from her bag and started to trudge back to her lonely bungalow. She then noticed Joe also walking her way,

'Here share my umbrella,' she said, 'You're getting soaked.'

'Well that's an invitation.' he impishly replied moving alongside her. As they reached the fork in the road, Joe did not turn towards his home and Nora was quite startled when she found herself inviting him home for a coffee.

One year later, in early March the clouds hung low over the fen lands but they allowed a small shaft of sunlight to fall on the village High Street. A cortège was making its way slowly to the church. People stopped to pay their respect to the union flag wrapped over the coffin of the young soldier who had just been killed on his first mission in Afghanistan.

A young mother with long blonde hair, golden in the sunshine, stood watching, protectively holding her precious little baby son towards her as if shielding him from the tragedy before her eyes.

On the other side of the road, an elderly couple sadly watched the scene, hand in hand.

'Who was he, Joe?'

'Young Jamie Smith, joined up less than a year ago.'

'It's not fair.' Nora commented as she wiped away a tear. As she raised her hand the shaft of sun caught the gold of her new wedding ring.

The relentless rain on that fateful day about a year ago had decreed that the stormy weather conceived life changing consequences : A birth, a wedding and a funeral.

THE MEETING

by Ian Bullock

Ever since his wife had died four years ago Alan had lead a quiet, almost reclusive life. Any holidays he had taken were those for singles and he was about to set off for another similar one. He preferred to visit historic cities and towns rather than seaside resorts. This time the destination was Tuscany, where, although he had been there several times before, he could always find something new and interesting.

He arrived at Gatwick airport in plenty of time for his flight and all the tedious procedures that precede any journey by air. There was the usual long queue at the check-in desks and he resigned himself to a long wait. As he shuffled forward he noticed, a couple of groups ahead, what appeared to him to be a slightly familiar face, though rather older than he remembered. The once fair hair was now flecked with grey but the features had to be....? He found he was staring rather rudely at the middle-aged woman, who looked up for a moment and their eyes met, the same grey eye he had known over thirty years ago.

Yes it had to be Kate, the girl he had grown very fond of when they were students together. She appeared to be on her own. Might she be on the same tour as he? He looked down at the label on her case and saw that it had been issued by the same travel company as his. Eventually they reached the desk and went through the check-in procedure. He tried to read the name on the luggage label but it fell awkwardly out of his vision. She looked up again and there was a spark of recognition and a slight smile crossed her lips. That confirmed it. It was Kate, now middle-aged but still an attractive woman and yes she was on her own.

Having checked-in he decided to speak to her, afterall she could only tell him to get lost, or something similar. He approached her and said,

'It is Kate Murrey, isn't it?' She turned and looked at him.

'Alan, after all this time, what are you doing here?' A silly question but it broke the ice.

'I'm on the Tuscany tour, how about you?'

'So am I,' she replied.

'When we've been through security let's go and have a cup of coffee,' said Alan.

They started to catch up on thirty years of their lives. Kate had achieved a good degree and proceeded on to a successful business career. Alan was surprised to hear that she had never married. She had made it clear to Alan that she had no desire to marry him and so they drifted apart. Alan later married Jill who bore him a son and a daughter, now grown up.

The time came to board the aircraft. They managed to get seats together, thanks to a co-operative passenger who was happy to have a window seat originally allocated to Alan. The flight to Florence passed very quickly as Kate was truly interested in Alan's life story, showing great sympathy over the loss of his wife. She told Alan that she regularly booked single holidays but she was wondering how get out of the rut.

They collected their luggage at Florence airport and boarded the tour bus to take them to their hotel.

'See you at dinner,' said Alan as they parted and made their way to their rooms. Alan took extra care dressing for dinner and arriving in the dining room early, seized a table for two waving to Kate as she entered the room. Kate was happy to join him. After the meal they adjourned to the bar and enjoyed a nightcap together.

Next day they set out on the first excursion. Alan noticed that Kate sat closer to him than he expected. It reminded him of how they would sit close together during their lectures at university. When they arrived at Lucca, Alan felt emboldened to offer Kate an unnecessary hand off the coach. She held it longer than she needed to and took it again when Alan offered his hand as they climbed up on to the city walls. Neither commented but it was becoming obvious that the old chemistry between them was reasserting itself.

They spent the next two or three days in each other's company, rather ignoring the rest of the group. Alan just happened to mention that there was a double and a single bed in his room and Kate's hold on his arm tightened. It was what she longed to hear.

'I'm in a noisy room over the kitchen', she said. They agreed, not unusual for single rooms.

'Why not share a superior room with me', he asked Kate.

'I thought you would never ask', she replied with rather unseemly haste. She moved her things to Alan's room after dinner and they watched a film on television until bedtime when they slept in separate beds. It had been a long day!

The next night Alan suggested that they share the double bed. He knew that if he had made a misjudgement that would be the end of their newly found friendship. Kate smiled.

'I would like that,' Alan's heart thumped against his chest. They shyly made preparations for bed and were shortly under the covers in each other's arms. They spent much of the night in a way that they had never had as students.

The following morning, the last of their holiday, they took the flight home. As they parted at Gatwick airport, Alan asked,

'Can we meet again soon?'

'The sooner, the better.', Kate replied. A time and place was arranged. During this first date, at a restaurant with candle lit tables, Alan asked,

'Would you change your mind about marrying me?'

'Try me.' she answered with an impish smile. And it came to pass that they were married later that year. The days of singles holidays were over.

THE BIG BEASTY

by Trevor Cook

The climb had gone well – the views from the summit more than making up for the problems before. Now a thousand feet down from the top, Ray's heart was all warmth. He had long wanted to climb this beasty – now he had and what a feeling of humility this always gave him. He had never subscribed to the idea of men conquering mountains – mountains had existed for thousands of years and would be here a long time after he had gone. He reckoned, given a normal life span, just one sixteenth an inch of this fellow's surface might have been worn away by then. How could man ever conquer a mountain!

'Scree ahead Ray,' called one of his mates, 'Not long now.' They had decided to return by the south side of the mountain with a trek down the long ridge to Horizon Valley and then down some steep scree and through the forest to the main track back. It would take about half an hour from the scree to reach the main track, another hour's rough slog and then Mrs Dowman's tea and sandwiches. His eyes twinkled – could *that* lady make sandwiches!

'Bear right Fred – down the bank and on to the scree. Spread out a bit the rest of you, we can run it four or fives.' That was Big Tom, the leader, calling and in answer Ray made some space between himself and his next companion. He marched to the end of the grassy bank and lazily jumped down.

He landed awkwardly with feet splayed and head forward and realised immediately the distance had been greater than he had thought. With his head forward though, he had already commenced running.

'Oh hell,' he thought – he was starting a scree run off balance. He tried to get his head up and back but to no avail and he was running too fast now to "bottom it". Between the heavy jiggling up and down it struck him that he was also slightly off course.

The view down Horizon Valley was never as indistinct as it was today – with the hills and the long trough of water shaking about like jelly. Though he could not know it and though no one could tell him, in the last twenty-five seconds Ray had accelerated to forty miles per hour. Ray knew he was out of control but there was no panic – he knew as long as he could keep throwing out his legs he would keep going. His eyes were watering madly as they tried hard not to be dragged from their sockets. To Ray it was no longer himself, it was some other poor devil and it was just like watching a Chaplin movie – everything jerky and jumping up and down. Suddenly a calm came on the scene as hill turned over the lake, then stood sideways and then went through the act again.

To the horror of his pals, Ray had run out of scree. He had careered towards the distant ridge and beyond was a sheer drop. Ray was now somersaulting into the drop. Big Tom had already barked orders to the summit party and also tried shouting to the support party some way down below them, but there was nothing immediately they could do for Ray.

By the third somersault, or was it the fourth? Ray was just gasping for air and crazily wondering what the hell happened next. With a tremendous *whoosh* as his body hit the rocks, Ray felt his arms involuntary fling out sideways at the same time as his forward motion propelled him into the air again flinging him over in a giant cartwheel. Crashing into some scree for the second time, he felt a quick sensation of pain but then it was gone.

Had he but realised it, so were his finger nails – some clean off, some torn right back, bleeding and ragged. This second crash put severe cuts in his head. By the time he hit again, his momentum had been checked and he slid almost languidly and stupidly seventy-five yards across yet more scree and was jerked to a halt by a huge boulder. The slide ripped most of the skin from his face and hands and tore the knees out of his breeches.

Dazed almost stupid, but still conscious, Ray's one thought was to tell the others he was alright. He grabbed the boulder, rolling about as he did so, and felt a hot veil run through his hair, down his neck, on to his face and drop on the rock in front of him. It was blood, his blood and there was lots of it. He knew then it was bad. *The others – the others*. He struggled to get to his feet, the urge to live overcoming his rescue training for as he put weight on his feet both the main bones in each leg pierced through his skin. He fell down and rolled over. The agony of pain, which had not been present at first because of shock, now came searing in.

Big Tom was there first – settling him, calming him, wrapping something around him. Several others had already set off at a great pace for help.

Ray looked at Big Tom and whispered,

'It's not true when you fall that you go faster and faster and black out – you don't,' The crazy awesome way Ray said it shook even Big Tom.

'Lie still lad. Help is on it's way. Anything you want?' Ray said he would like a fag. Big Tom and the others knew he didn't smoke.

'Aye lad, here you are'. He put a cigarette to Ray's lips. Its body turned scarlet as Ray drew on it. Big Tom winced as he saw it.

'How's the pain?' he asked.

'I ache a bit,' came the classic understatement. 'Tom, all the time it was happening – it wasn't me. I just wanted it to stop because some other chap looked as though he was in trouble but it wasn't me. I didn't think of Mum or Dad – it wasn't really me it was happening to.'

'Hush lad,' said Big Tom.

Ray lie there a while and then croaked, 'It was a good chunk of mountain, Tom. A great climb – a bloody good climb - it's taken me all the way to heaven.'

Even as Big Tom reached for the blood-soaked fallen head he knew. He wanted Ray's last gasp to be true. He sat with his dead friend on the mountain. He sat and prayed.

JESSICA'S RED SHOES

by Sandra Empson

Jessica had a new pair of shoes. Not only were they red and shiny but they had a small heel as well. She was so excited. Whenever she went shopping for new shoes she always ended up with boring black lace-ups for school but today her mummy said she could choose any pair of shoes in the shop.

Jessica had difficulty in choosing between the red, shiny pair with a small heel or a silver pair with a T-bar, again with a small heel, but when the assistant whispered to her that the red shoes were magic shoes she knew she simply had to have them.

When she returned home she ran upstairs to her bedroom to try them on. In her long mirror she practised walking just like mummy, her back straight, her tummy tucked in and her head held high. She felt very grown up indeed and could not wait to show her best friend, Ellie, her wonderful new, red shoes.

The very next day Jessica had Ellie for a sleepover and showed her special friend her new shoes. Ellie was desperate to try them on and walked up the garden path in them pretending she was a famous model. They had so much fun that evening playing shoe shops one minute and dressing up the next, all with the help of Jessica's new red shoes. The day's excitement made them sleep soundly that night.

After breakfast the following morning Jessica and Ellie ran out into the garden and scrambled for the swings, Jessica on one and Ellie on the other. They both agreed to see who could swing the highest. Jessica pushed her legs forward strongly and folded them tightly at the knees as the swing raced backwards and forwards, all the time admiring her new shoes. She was definitely going higher than Ellie. In fact in she was going so high that Ellie began shouting at her,

'Be careful Jessica, you will go over the bar soon.....Jessica, you're going too high, you will have an accident....Oh Jessica , what are you doing?'

Jessica couldn't believe what was happening to her. She was swinging so high and the higher she went the smaller Ellie became. It was then that she spotted her red shoes again and remembered what the shop assistant had whispered, that her new shoes were magic shoes.

She reached such an amazing height on her swing that her red shoes finally touched a frothy, white cloud high in the sky. Jessica was forced to let go of her swing as her feet propelled her forward. Flying through the air, she landed on something that felt like a soft mass of cotton wool and bubbles and she began bouncing on it in the same way as if she was on her garden trampoline. It was a while before she stopped bouncing.

Dazed, Jessica wondered what had happened to her. Apprehensively she crawled along to the edge of the cloud and gently peered over the wall of white froth. She could not see her friend but she could see her house although it was no bigger than one of the houses in her Monopoly game. Suddenly she became very frightened and started to cry. Jessica continued to cry for quite a few minutes until she heard a voice,

'You are giving me a headache,' it growled in the manner of a tired old man. Jessica lifted her head, fumbled for the tissue in her pocket and blew her nose. She could see no one. She started to cry again but this time she sobbed so loudly that it hurt. The voice shouted at her so loud that she jumped.

'Be quiet you stupid girl. How on earth am I going to help you if you won't stop crying. I need some peace and quiet to think.' Jessica couldn't believe her ears. Where was this gruff, angry voice coming from? Through her snuffles Jessica managed to ask a question,

'I don't understand. I can hear you but I can't see you. How can you hear and see me?'

'Because you are sitting on me, that's why,' said the cloud. 'Surely you have seen my face when you have peered up at the sky from your garden? Sometimes I have a smile on my face, sometimes not and sometimes when there is a big storm I can look very angry indeed, like I am now. But today you cannot see my face because you are on my back and you won't be able to see my face until we get you down from here. Now be quiet Jessica, if you please.'

After some time Jessica started to hear some rumblings. She saw sunshine. She felt rain. Suddenly a bright light appeared. So bright that she had to shield her eyes from the glare. When she opened them a beautiful rainbow appeared in front of her reaching down to her garden. The voice, now soft and caring, told her to climb on to the rainbow and slide down it until she reached the ground, returning her back to her dear home. As she climbed on to the rainbow she heard the cloud whisper, telling her to hold on tight and make sure she placed the red shoes firmly against the rainbow for a smooth, safe, magical journey. As she began gliding back to earth she was sure she heard the cloud saying,

'Don't forget to come and see me again, Jessica.'

Ellie saw the rainbow but she could not see Jessica but Jessica could see Ellie coming into view, getting bigger and bigger as she neared her home. Jessica jumped off the rainbow on to the ground and the rainbow faded away. Ellie spotted Jessica walking up the garden path.

'Where have you been?'

'I've bounced on a cloud and slid down a rainbow.'

'And I have walked on the moon,' chided Ellie.

Jessica just smiled at her friend's quick reply. If only Ellie had worn her red magic shoes she may indeed have reached the moon. Now that's a thought, mused Jessica.

BRIEF ENCOUNTER

by Brian Hammond

Twenty cars screeched to a halt at Friedrichstrasse at the junction of Zimmerstrasse and Mauerstrasse which was the approach to the Glienicke Bridge that joins Berlin to Potsdam. During the 'Cold War' the western approach to the bridge was known to the Americans as 'Checkpoint Charlie'. Some American personnel and one man dressed in a trench coat and fur hat alighted from the foremost car. Without speaking they walked over and stood by one of the windows of the shed where cars and personnel were checked and where the senior military officer was in direct telephone communication with the White House.

Across the roadway Cafe Adler, a viewing point right by the checkpoint, where people sat drinking coffee watching the comings and goings, some passing the time before going to work, some out of idle curiosity and some with a more sinister purpose. The man in the trench coat and fur hat looked up to the three storey building on the left and then over to the red and white barrier hung across the entrance to the bridge where he saw the sign telling you in English, German and French that you were leaving the American Sector.

Everybody was waiting. The man dug his hands deep into his pockets of his trench coat to protect them from the bitter cold. A pre-arranged signal was sounded at both ends of the bridge. The man was directed towards the barrier which was raised as he approached. He walked purposely away from his guards on to the bridge which was a web of faded green steel and iron. He was calm and totally in control of his emotions, elated that once again the Russians had scored over the Western Allies. Over on the Potsdam side of the bridge the mist was lingering but here on the Berlin side the sun was rising to reveal the wooded banks of the river and the medieval castle nestling among the trees. As he walked forward he could see the white line painted across the roadway at the centre of the bridge which denoted the boundary between the American and Russian controlled territories. Approaching the middle of the bridge there was no sign of anyone near the white line and for the first time he experienced a chill of doubt. He slowed his step peering into the mist ahead. The form of a man began to appear. He straighten his body and quickened his pace again. The outline of the approaching man became clear as he too quickened his step.

At the sound of the whistle a man on the other end of the bridge has begun taking slow measured steps across across it. His hands were trembling. Freedom was within reach at the other end of the bridge, but would he reach it? He could not yet see even the middle of the bridge for the cold, damp, early mist that he had seen swirling over the city of Potsdam and was now coming up from the dark waters of the Havel River below. He narrowed his eyes in an attempt to see if there was the promised figure of a man ahead or was this just another cruel trick that his captors were playing on him. For two years he had endured the solitary confinement of a cell where there was only enough room to walk between a bed and a bucket of water, the only concession to some sanitation. Deprived of sleep and then interrogated for twenty hours at a time, it left a man exhausted, broken and hopeless. They had made promises before, only to dash them as a means to increase his suffering. How could he trust the hardened men of the Starsi, the Soviet secret police. Being dragged from his cell, he was expecting another grilling but instead he was told that the Russian leader, Khrushchev, was showing the Americans an act of goodwill by releasing him early; but at no stage could he allow himself to believe he was being given back his freedom. Was it all going to end with the rattle of a machine gun with bullets piecing his body between the shoulder blades and the Starsi claiming that he was resisting arrest following an escape attempt.

Wedged in the back seat of one of five black German sedan cars between two uniformed military guards, he had been driven at speed across East Berlin to the Glienicke Bridge, the Bridge of Spies. He was roughly manhandled out of the car and marched over to the approach to the bridge. He gazed at the zig-zag barriers and up at the menacing watchtower. He was surrounded by men wearing their rather absurdly large military caps and bearing hand held Kalashnikov machine guns. He shivered as he stood while everyone was waiting for the precise, pre-arranged signal. In the same way that the senior American military officer was in direct contact with the White House in Washington, a high command Russian officer was similarly in contact with the Kremlin in Moscow.

Apart from the gulls swirling and calling above it was eerily quiet until this silence was broken by the whistles sounded from each end of the bridge. He was shoved in the back on to the bridge and he began walking into the mist. It was about twenty metres to the centre white line.

The two men met right on the centre white line and past each other with hardly a glance at each other. This brief meeting in 1962 demonstrated nothing of the dramas of the forthcoming events that were to be recorded in the annals of the Cold War. This was the only meeting between the pilot of the American U2 spy plane, Captain Francis Gary Powers and the senior Russian officer, Colonel Rudolf Ivanovich Abel who had served five years of a thirty year sentence in an American jail for spying for Russia in the United States. Eisenhower and Khrushchev had jointly agreed their exchange without either side ever conceding their man was a spy.

EAVESDROPPING

by Moira Hummerstone

The 2.30pm train had just arrived at Totnes station and the elderly, grey haired lady entered an almost empty carriage. Her daughter helped her on with her luggage and waved as the train pulled away. She settled comfortably into her window seat, facing the engine, and enjoyed the somewhat soporific atmosphere within the carriage as the train gathered speed smoothly and silently gliding along the track. This is what travel should be like she thought. Quiet, relaxed and with time to think over the happy days of her short holiday in Devon..

She could hear a young couple a few seats ahead chatting quietly, companionably. Apart from that, silence reigned – how different from the rattling old trains of a few years ago. A slight clatter disturbed the peaceful afternoon as the buffet attendant arrived with his trolley. She bought a nice cup of tea and a scone and jam – how civilised to be enjoying her afternoon tea whilst gazing out at the delightful view of the tide coming in as they travelled along by the sea wall at Dawlish.

When the train pulled into Exeter, she could see a small crowd of passengers waiting on the platform. Even so, the carriage was by no means full, just comfortable but just before they left Exeter *it* started:

'Camilla, it's Annabelle. Hi... Yes, I'm on the London train now.' The elderly lady jumped: startled. Was someone speaking to her? She looked around.

'Oh!, it was fine... Yes, he was there on time... No, No problems.' Mobile phones: why can't people live without talking incessantly on the beastly things?

'Err, yes, *two* actually... Honestly... Yes *two*, we couldn't believe it!' Loud laughter ensued. 'Look, I'll pop in on you on my way home... Thanks sweetie. 'Bye.' Why, oh why hadn't she booked a seat in the quiet carriage – no mobiles allowed?

'...Hi Ros, it's Annabelle... Yes, I'm on my way back now... the deed is done. Yes, everything is fine... Absolutely... Well, there were two.' More squeals of laughter. 'You should have seen Julian's face: he was *ashen*... It's a bit daunting still... yeah... yeah... yeah... great... thanks. Love you. 'Bye.'

Elderly Lady felt annoyed and embarrassed that events in this stranger's life were being forced upon her. She was eavesdropping and there was nothing she could do about it.

'Hello Jodie.' *Oh, here we go again.*

'... It's me... Oh I'm great... Well just a bit shattered... No nothing wrong... Well there are two.' *We're off again; now it's getting intriguing.* Elderly Lady thought, *two of what?*

'... Are you there Jodes? ... Not nearly as amazed as me and Julian. In fact, his face was *ASHEN*... yeah, a bit scary... yeah, thanks darling. See you at Clarissa's and Freddie's party. Love you.'

Were the other occupants of the carriage being drawn into this drama or was it just her? The chap across the aisle *looked* fast asleep.

'Hi Hen darling... Yes, it's me.' *Why does she shout?*

'... Well a slight change of plan... No, nothing drastic. There's going to be two... No, it's not a joke, truly. Me and Julian are going to have twins!'

Oh! So that's what it's all about. Should we all jump to our feet and give her a standing ovation?

'...Hold on Hen, don't get hysterical!' More laughter. 'Julian's face was *ashen* when they told us...No, he's gone to a business meeting... Yes, it's OK, you can let them all know...Thank you, Henny darling. 'Bye.'

Elderly Lady supposed the girl was entitled to be excited after *that* news but does she have to broadcast it at full volume? *Oh good! She's standing up.* Elderly Lady peered along the aisle and caught a glimpse of the back of Annabelle. She looked very slim and elegant as she disappeared in the direction of the buffet bar. She wondered why Annabelle had travelled all the way to Exeter for her scan. She had given the impression that she lived in London. *Perhaps* they were “relocating”, as they say on TV or *perhaps* they had two homes and *perhaps* they didn't want children to be brought up in the pollution of London. Elderly Lady stopped herself abruptly. *For goodness sake stop!* It was of no interest to her what-so-ever, nevertheless...?

Suddenly another voice, this time a man's, brought her back to earth.

'Oh hi Sarah. I'm on my way back. Is there much in my in-tray?' Elderly Lady looked around and behind the empty seat beside her saw a middle-aged businessman sitting across the gangway. He had his laptop open and a mobile phone to his ear.

'Get the whole file out, will you. Thanks Sarah.' Clickety, clickety, click, his computer was now going at full pelt and somehow he took another incoming call.

What is happening to my world? thought Elderly Lady as Highly Computer Literate Business Executive continued with his workload. The sliding door from the next carriage opened and Elderly Lady had the chance to see the front view of Annabelle: tummy as flat as a pancake – but not for much longer, my dear, Elderly Lady thinks. Annabelle returns to her seat and settles down to what Elderly Lady hopes will be a silent snack. No chance; a loud jangling ring tone sounds and Annabelle answers.

'Oh hello Robin, how kind...Have you been talking to Hen?... I thought as much...A great surprise...Julian's OK now but but his face was ashen when...oh! Hen told you...no, he's at a meeting... not till late tonight...he'll call you tomorrow...Yes, drinky-poops all round! 'Byee!'

Oh no! Elderly Lady could imagine what was going to happen now. All those bosom friends she had 'phoned earlier would be spreading the news to the rest of their “in” set and one by one they will ring her back.

And that's just what happened. One particular friend is worth mentioning: Kate, who had obviously either been to medical school or she had just done a first-aid course for the Stock Exchange. She had the knowledge and asked appropriate questions, one of which received the reply loud and clear from Annabelle,

'No, Kate, they are not identical twins. They are two separate eggs and two separate placentas.' Now surely the whole carriage would jump to their feet and join in shouting, 'TOO MUCH INFORMATION!' but no, the man across the way was still asleep, Highly Computer Literate Business Executive still clickety-clicked and was still talking on his mobile to Sarah. Annabelle was still receiving congratulatory calls when the train arrived at Reading, Elderly Lady's destination.

Elderly Lady felt quite exhausted but as she prepared to leave the carriage she was very tempted to wish the pregnant Annabelle a short and happy labour. Her son was waiting for her at the barrier and looked very startled when, with a glazed expression, she greeted him with the comment, 'I've come to the conclusion eavesdropping is not what it used to be!'

REGRET

by Sheila Mathers

The long journey from the South is nearly over and as we approach junction 36 of the M6 Motorway the familiar feelings of anticipation and excitement take over. We shall continue our journey westward, while the busy road which brought us North continues on its restless, noisy journey to Penrith, Carlisle and the Scottish Border.

We travel through Windermere and Ambleside, finally reaching our destination, the little hamlet of Grange near Keswick. This year is special as my husband has a goal to achieve. It is fifty years almost to the day since he and his brother as young men climbed Scarfell Pike. He is here to do it again.

Early next morning, on the anniversary of his childhood introduction and subsequent love of the mountains and lakes, my husband drove to Seathwaite to attempt and hopefully accomplish his goal. It is a beautiful day in mid May and I am spending the day in Grange, a delightful and charming collection of pretty houses and cottages sitting on the edge of a river banked both sides by trees. Their branches are waving gently in the soft wind and the early summer leaves glinting pure green in the sunlight.

The river at Grange is spanned by an ancient grey stone double humpback bridge. The river is shallow and wide and the water divides into two channels. Children are having fun playing and splashing in the water. Some early tourists are sitting in the garden of a cafeteria, its lawn sloping down to touch the flowing water. And all around me; the mountains. It was a little heaven on earth.

In the early evening an exhausted but jubilant husband returned: goal achieved: a special day for both of us.

One year later and back at the lakes I decide to visit an art gallery, just to browse. The gallery is old and the floors uneven. The rooms flow from one to the other up steps and under low doorways until one small room appears overwhelmed by a large fireplace. Hanging above is a stunning original oil painting of the double humpback bridge at Grange. The longing to buy was overwhelming but after long soul searching my conscience lead me to walk sadly away. What a mistake I made. To this day I have regretted giving in to reason. How much I wish that I had given in to temptation and let my heart rule my head. To have owned that painting would have been a memory of that very special day

UPPER CLASS

By Howard Sledmere

It is widely held, among those who know about such things, that there is a resurgence of interest in suède shoes for men. Hardly surprising, they are uniquely elegant and refined. Indeed, a self interested shoe tycoon went further recently when he exclaimed,

'Give me a man who wears suède shoes and you give me a gentleman.' I agree, I wear them myself. To understand this renaissance better it would be helpful to know some history of this genre.

Suède, as its name implies, originated in Sweden, a country you would hardly associate with this warm and caressing skin. Yet it seems that, in bygone years, our Scandinavian cousins, having pole-axed a reindeer, made luxurious gauntlets from its skin, the fur on the inside, the suède exposed to the Arctic elements. Then the French got in on the act – They always know a good thing when they see it. Gants de suède became de rigueur in the Paris saloons – et voilà a new fashion was born.

When suède migrated from hand to foot, it is difficult to ascertain, even the Leather Institute is equivocal. But today, if you venture into any respectable art gallery, you might see pictures of swashbuckling Cavaliers sporting knee-length boots of this leather: was *this* the toehold of the fashion? Had a Carolean fop ordered a one off-pair to quicken the pulse of this doxy and unknowingly started a new fashion?

'Strap me vitals, Cedric, simply *must* have a pair of those!' Or was the motivation less romantic and more military? After all, the sun would be less likely to glint upon these jobs than on highly polished leather; less chance of being picked off by a beady-eyed Roundhead marksman. Aux choix.

But it was in the 1920's and 30's that the style really caught on, the toffs showing the way. Then there was a clearly defined class system, the 'great unwashed' having little inclination to ponce about in suèdes. Something far more durable was the order of the day for them; sturdy boots, the soles encrusted with Blakey's Cruds. So that is what a crud is! Fast on the heels of the first suèdes, tramped a bewildering variety of styles, the colours of which spanned the autumnal spectrum from chocolate through to light brown. There were plain uppers, brogues, semi brogues and the inimitable Chukka bootie, a massive affair, sporting a three quarter inch crepe sole, elevating the wearer into the ethos of the Range Rover of today.

One can only lament the demise of this particular style, with its Colonial connections. Could it be though, that in an earlier atelier in a remote Victorian suburb of Northampton, a dedicated group of craftsmen, wearing half lenses and green eyeshields is, to this day, turning out individually-numbered pairs to be despatched to retired army colonels clustered around Sidmouth. Deep, almost painful research, unearthed the tradition of this imperial bootie. It seems that, in India, exotic cavalry groups were formed under the leadership of bewhiskered worthies who lent their names to these cadres: Skinner's, Hodgson's and Probyn's horse, to name but three. To say that they were sartorially stylish would be an understatement.

Close your eyes (*after* you have read this of course) and imagine how they looked; this description from between the wars is first hand. An army cap with the stiffening removed, to give what American pilots used to describe as 'a 100 mission crush', a long riding coat of Aertex-type material, bleached, beige corduroys (mail order from the Army and Navy Stores), an old school silk scarf (God, weren't you my fag at Wellington, Withers?) and yes, you have guessed it, underpinning the lot, mammoth chukka boots from Huttons of Northampton.

You can open your eyes now, *mon lecteur*, and pitch forward to 1939 when some of the most confident in this great nation of our flew to the colours. They were the suède shoe wearers who knew that, come what may, however long the conflict, they alone would emerge unscathed. Those who joined up, cocooned their 'treasures' in copies of *The Times* and set off to do battle, reluctantly exchanging them for ammunition boots. Some were lucky enough though to be sent to the Western Desert, acknowledged now to be the last theatre of war, where the combatants evinced some semblance of honour and manners.

Predictably our fellows acquired suède desert boots, cobbled up by tarbooshed fellahin in Cairo. They wore them in those uncharted, sandy wastes, providing them not only with the ideal footwear for local conditions, but a comfortable umbilicus to home. One remarkable incident, absolutely true, was when an officer out on night patrol, stumbled into a Gurkha trench.

'Why didn't you kill me?!' he ejaculated.

'I felt your boots, sir,' came the reply. The first recorded incident of suèdes having saved a man's life.

They were coveted by the enemy too. An Italian general was captured in bed with his mistress, wearing only a pair of our boots and one of those ridiculous caps with a tassel. He was offered the option of taking the boots into captivity or his lady friend: he chose the former. One Cockney infantryman was heard to observe:

'That bleeder's got his priorities wrong!' I would go along with that. Now had Rommel drawn the winning ticket in the lottery of life and been born a Briton, he would certainly have worn desert boots. Maybe he had a pair secreted away: afterall he pinched his goggles from an English officer. Now *that* was ungentlemanly.

When our lads returned, the Afrika Corps having called it Ein Tag, they shocked their love ones, who were waiting at the bottom of the gangplank at Southampton with eyes closed and arms outstretched, as many discovered, when they opened their eyes, that the object of their passions had lit out for home, only to be discovered later, caressing their de-cocooned suèdes with a wire brush. Yet despite this macho military image, between the wars, suèdes had acquired something of a reputation for being the standard footwear of the limp-wristed. The comment was :

'Smart yes, but a bit pansy.' That they were not described as 'gay' is the one saving grace; we still used the word properly then. But to put the lie to this criticism once and for all, one has only to study the pre-war world of divorce. There were no 'quickies' for the incompatible then as the infidelity of a partner had to be firmly established before a court would consider a decree nisi. In the case of the lady, she had to be witnessed 'in flagrante delicto' in an hotel room, a situation often contrived and someone had to stand in as a surrogate adulterer. There were agencies which employed Einsatzkommandos of be-suèded shock troops prepared to carry out these onerous tasks. 'Two o'clock at the Strand Palace Hotel, Wilfred. Wear your stag skins. You won't get your oats, but good luck anyway. Don't let the agency down.'

The long suffering shoe also attracted, and still does, the sobriquet, 'brothel keeper'. At what existential moment did *this* expression insinuate itself into our vocabulary? It remains to this day. Perhaps a chappie was glimpsed entering a 'maison de tolerance' wearing suèdes, thus tarring the whole genre with the same wire brush. But why 'creepers'? Surely this is not a word one would associate with a gentleman in pursuit of legitimate relaxation. Maybe a clue can be found among the scions who, traditionally, were sent to Paris by enlightened fathers to learn 'the ways of the world'. Their origins would be identified immediately by Madame as she peered, quizzically, through the Judas window.

'Écoutez mes cocottes, encore un Anglaise. Je sais bien, parcequ'il porte les rampeurs de bordelle' or words to that effect. I was only awarded a credit in French. In the background would be heard the rustle of fur boas as the decks were cleared for action. This scenario is rare these days having been supplanted by a voucher to visit a massage parlour: tant pis.

In the twilight years of post-war adjustment to civilian life, a new breed of shops appeared, Surplus Stores, whose mission it was to sell the unwanted detritus of war (a friend of mine mistakenly bought a bozooka believing it to be an oboe). Sometimes it was possible to purchase desert boots, and one would see veterans of El Alamein and Tobruk pressing their noses against the windows of these emporia. Amongst the paraphernalia of bomber blousons, ghastly, itchy khaki trousers and demented water bottles, they might espy a pair of these doughty boots, instantly to be swept up in a wave of nostalgic euphoria.

Those years were difficult ones for the clothes-conscious; choice was limited, factories were switching frenetically from military to mufty and clothing coupons imposed further restrictions. But this caused little concern for the suède wearer, for even the doubtful quality of his demob suit, when underpinned by a pair of his pre-war arsenal, gave him that Burlington Arcade look.

In the late 40's the Teddy Boy, in all his Brylcreemed splendour, opened up new vistas, the class mould having been broken for ever. From beneath drainpipe trousers, giant suèdes emerged, with soles so thick, that youth was a pre-requisite to wearing them: they weighed a ton. Anyone over forty would have been hard pressed to lift his feet from the ground, let alone to perform the jitterbug. Presley's rendition of 'Blue Suède Shoes' gave the skin a further boost but there was a hiccup when jeans appeared; suèdes were not in sympathy with the Wild West. Trainers came in, a hideous style even to this day (neither shoe nor plimsoll) and suèdes were nudged further into the wings.

Sadly too, we saw our own shoe industry begin to atrophy under the pressure from cheap foreign competition, compounded by Anglo-Saxon marketing lethargy. There are still bastions of course, some of the world's finest shoes are produced in the UK. If one trawls down any High Street it is *just* possible to espy a pair of good suèdes tucked away in the back row of the chorus.

Last week, joy of joys, I saw, amazingly, a pair in pole position on display in a privately-owned shop. I went in and asked to see them and the proprietor served me personally. Lovingly peeling back the tissue paper in the box, he took one shoe out and balanced it in the palm of his hand; souls met. I bought them – I did not even ask the price; how dare I!

Yes suèdes are on the way back. Just so long as they can be worn with anything, even pyjamas; just so long as they can be paraded scuffed or virginal, then there must be a place in the sun for such admirable shoes in this cold, hard world. They are not merely shoes, they are pals. Ask anyone who owns a pair. Had Chairman Mao worn them on the Long March, he would have done it in half the time.

A CANCELLED FLIGHT

by Neil Young

It was over thirty years ago that a cancelled flight prompted a series of events that I will never forget. The car was ready. Three of us were taking some new products to the Frankfurt Spring Fair. We had collected literature from the printers and were in possession of all our necessary documentation. Arriving in good time at Southend Airport for the Silver City car ferry service at the start of what was now an annual event for us, we were flying to Ostend to enable us to visit our agents in Brussels before continuing our journey in readiness for a day's preparation of our stand in the music section of the Fair. After that it would be a tiring five days at the exhibition. We had been unable to book an hotel in Frankfurt itself and we would have to travel daily to and from Russlesheim, which meant a twelve hour day for us.

Our start could have hardly been worse. At the end of a still, clear February day, our pilot at Southend Airport, having spoken to Air Traffic Control at Ostend, decided that he was not prepared to risk a landing in the reported fog there. We were told to disembark, which meant that we had to drive with all possible speed to Dover to catch a ferry for the sea crossing to Ostend. We achieved this in spite of the time taken to replace our air shipment paperwork with sea shipment documentation. A topical, current business slogan exhorted; 'Export and be happy'. Lucky for them no one was stupid enough to say this to us!

We arrived at our hotel in Brussels in time for a quick wash and brush up before meeting our agents; good friends of long standing who gave every assistance in an attempt to smooth our journey on to Russelsheim. However we still managed to miss our autobahn exit causing us further delay in retracing our way. Eventually we arrived at our hotel, exhausted and irritable.

Next day we arrived at the Show in the late afternoon, extremely traumatised. The reason for which will soon become apparent. The Show had started in the morning. The hectic time setting up our stand in our effort to lose as little as possible of the remaining time did little to help. Our trauma was caused while motoring to the Show. We found ourselves inexplicably, possibly our tiredness accounted for a lack of concentration, motoring down on the wrong side of the autobahn. Traffic was coming towards us. Looming up in front was a large, articulated lorry.

'This is it. We're dead,' were the thoughts that entered my head. I could see the driver struggling and wrenching the steering wheel in his effort to avoid us. Suddenly the articulated section of the lorry swung around in a ninety degrees arc on to the hard shoulder. This slowed down the lorry dramatically so that the impact on our car was greatly reduced. Miraculously we suffered only cuts and bruises. The car was a write-off.

Over the thirty years that have passed since that near death experience, little does the pilot of the Silver City aircraft know of the consequences of his decision then to abort the flight to Ostend and yet what if he had attempted the flight and it had ended in disaster? The pilot might have saved our lives by his decision. The lorry driver certainly saved our lives by his actions. We might not be still enjoying these thirty years or more.

STORIES OF 50 WORDS

A FEARFUL JOURNEY by Christine Allen

Fear, trepidation, anticipation – the dreaded day has dawned and I make that fateful journey. The room is full of such solemn souls. I try hard to smile, they only glower back. My turn at last – a jab, a rinse, a final wrench - molar's gone. No more pain – what joy!

THE FINAL ACT by Ian Bullock

The pain in his head had become unbearable. David decided to put an end to it all . He had few living relatives and they all agreed with the action he had proposed. As the injection started to take effect he sank into painless oblivion. He was at peace at last.

NAUGHTY, NAUGHTY by Trevor Cook

He held her roughly, stripping off her outer wrap before flicking up her top and removing all covering. Naked and exposed. He brashly grabbed what he wanted - his lips fastening on to the object of his desire and sucked deeply and deliciously. Again he had failed to give up smoking!

HIDE AND SEEK by Sandra Empson

Coming, ready or not. The house was excitedly still. I crept upstairs; that is where they would be, for sure, huddled in the wardrobe. I heard whispered mutterings, then excited squeals as the floorboards creaked beneath me. I pounced! As ever they screamed, 'How did you know where we were?'

TREACHERY by Brian Hammond

He was so lonely. He yearned to have a lover. Toiling naked under the sun; exhausted after working his land, he lie down to sleep. Later, awaking, he spied a naked woman. Without shame they embraced. They would have lived happy ever after had it not been for the serpent.

DISASTER by Moira Hummerstone

My world has collapsed. All is lost; the discovery was made at midnight. What have I done? I slept badly, reliving yesterday's events. It is 7am – I wander into my sunlit garden. Everything sparkles: what's this? Oh thank God! I've found it; my granddaughter's precious gift: one Christmas cracker earring.

AT THE EDGE by Sheila Mathers

The cliff path was dusty as it wound upwards from the shingle beach. No rain had fallen and the sky was blue. Reaching my destination, my thoughts in turmoil as I contemplated that final step over the edge but life held me in it's arms and I retraced my steps

TO SET BEFORE A KING by Neil Young

Successful response to a 'Daily Telegraph' advertisement: a four-day train journey; an overnight ferry crossing; walking to our hotel; promises duly fulfilled of cocktail parties with the Royal Navy and the acting Vice Consul culminating with our performance before the King plus entourage. The 1961 Corfu Cricket Week begins.

