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Foreword

Looking for new writers to enjoy? You've come to the right place. In these pages, you'll find a variety of short stories, ranging from women's fiction and romance, through murder mystery, to children's stories. We hope you'll enjoy these brief tasters of the kind of stories we love to write.

We're a group of authors living in the South West of England, published in a mix of arenas, including Woman's Weekly, People's Friend, My Weekly Pocket Novels, Amazon, Cloudberry, The Wild Rose Press, and independently.

We like to get together, exchange ideas, drink coffee, and eat cake. One day we dreamed up the idea of putting together a Mosaic of short stories for you to enjoy when you put your feet up for a well-earned break. We've made sure the stories are all different from each other, and none contains graphic violence, explicit sex or obscene language.

The stories in this collection are tasters, giving you a flavour of our stories. At the end of each one, you'll find some information on the author, a biography and sometimes a link to help you discover more of our writing.

We'd love you to visit our websites and say hello. As writers, we work alone, spending hours in our fictional worlds, so there's nothing we like more than coming back to the real world and talking to our readers.

Meanwhile, make your favourite drink, settle into a comfy chair and enjoy the stories we've written for you...

If Only by Patricia Fawcett

Sorry and all that but I am the original wet blanket. I hate parties. I am no good at small talk and I hate the false smiles, the brittle laughs, chatting about nothing with strangers, the fiddly food, trying to eat a sausage roll with a glass balanced in the other hand.

And this woman was looking at me with one of those smiles fastened on her mouth.

"Don't I know you?" she asked, peering at me through fashionably-framed spectacles. She was wearing a cream silk dress, a real eye-catcher. Her blonde hair was in a modern shaggy style looking as if it had been cut with a child's blunt scissors although it had no doubt cost a small fortune.

"I don't think so," I said even though I recognised her at once. I was in no mood for a chat but she had taken me by surprise and I couldn't be rude and ignore her. I may be shy by nature but I pride myself on being polite.

"Good heavens, it's Pete Brammall, isn't it?" Her smile took a jolt as the memory snapped in and embarrassment took over. "June. June Woods. I was June Farrell of course back in those days."

She talked as if it was the last century which, come to think of it, it was.

I gave her no encouragement, waiting for her to go because we had nothing to say to each other. Not now, not after all these years.

We were kids together at primary school although it wasn't until we were in the sixth form at the comprehensive that we became good friends. We did the same subjects, went around in a cheerful group. We were competitive and we all achieved terrific grades.

She was in no mood to go, standing there looking at me, cheeks pink. "Haven't seen you since we started at university," she said awkwardly. "Funny isn't it how you lose touch? But my parents moved south just after I went to Oxford and after that there was no reason to come back up here." She ploughed on as I said nothing, cheeks growing pinker by the minute. "I'm just visiting for a few days with my husband and children. I never expected to bump into anybody I knew. So, you're still living up here then?"

"I've been away but I've come back." There was no need to explain further. No explanations were necessary.

Curiosity took over. "How was it? Oxford?" I asked, wanting her to go but at the same time wanting to know something about her.

"Fine. I got a 2:1. What about you? Edinburgh, wasn't it?"

"You have a good memory," I said and wondered if she had. I wondered if she remembered that night, that last night before we all went our separate ways. A sixth form celebration and the two of us ended up together, under some coats in a bedroom in a giggling sexy conspiracy. It took us both by surprise, the sheer exuberance and delight of it all. Just now, looking at her, I recalled it as vividly as if it were yesterday and not eighteen years ago.

The next day we were all off, scattered like a dandelion clock, and I got caught up in a new life and I imagined she did the same. I did try to ring her once but even as somebody went to get her to answer the communal phone I lost my nerve and hung up. I've always been a bit of a dead loss with the ladies.

I forgot her after that.

Or at least I tried.

"I met Jason as soon as I got there and it all happened very quickly and we got married in our first year. I have never regretted that," she said, moving her hand so that I clocked the wedding band and the flash of a diamond ring. "Jason runs a recruitment agency now," she went on, rushing her words. "Well, several as a matter of fact and we live in Surrey. Beautiful spot."

"Nice. You've done well," I muttered and she flushed again and would not look me in the eye, carrying on with her potted history, all about her successful husband, her three smashing kids, the house and the cars and the holidays.

"Great." I said, amused that she needed to make the point.

"You look just the same, Pete," she said, stopping in her animated tracks as she caught my expression. "Just the same."

But she looked different.

Eighteen years on she was sophisticated and eons older. And in her eyes I thought I detected a sadness, an emptiness. Or maybe that was just wishful thinking because it was well and truly over for the two of us. She had put on weight, quite prettily so, but I was too much of a gentleman to say that.

"You look just the same too," I said instead. "The same blue eyes. I've never seen eyes quite that colour," I carried on, wishing I hadn't said that, embarrassed myself now. "I used to think they were coloured contacts maybe."

"I know. You needed some convincing."

She laughed and I managed a smile.

"Nice to see you anyway," I said, trying to make it easier for her. "I'm OK in case you're wondering. I got a First in History by the way but with one thing and another it's been..."

For a few painful seconds there was silence.

"You didn't marry, Pete?"

"No. I never met Miss Right."

I saw a chap heading purposefully towards us. He was a big bald-headed confident guy wearing an expensive suit. This just had to be Jason of the recruitment agency.

"Oh, there's my husband and the children," she said confirming it, now completely flustered. "I was supposed to meet them in the car park. Look, this is the least I can do."

She fished in her bag and pulled out a twenty quid note. "Don't you dare," I said quietly, leaning towards her and smelling her perfume, that same perfume, the one that had haunted me all these years. It brought it all back in an instant.

"Sorry." She stuffed the note back in her bag, smiling faintly now as her family neared.

Predictably, she did not introduce me but was whisked away. June and her husband and three children. A little girl, a boy of about twelve and a nearly grown-up girl who must be the big sister. A bit gangly but a lovely looking girl.

From my corner pitch on the busy street I watched them disappearing into the crowd

of shoppers.

There was something I couldn't quite pin down about that older girl. It may have been the loose-limbed way she walked or the way she hung her head slightly to one side. She reminded me so much of my sister.

And then I knew.

I knew why there had been no further communication.

I wondered if Jason knew the child was not his.

It knocked me for six. For a moment, I could not breathe properly. It was as if my heart pushed up to my head and started to pound up there. The emotion that had stuck in my chest for so long was shaken and stirred and I felt tears welling up and pricking my eyes. I thought back to the nearly phone call. If only I had waited until she came to the phone she might have told me.

It was a full minute, sixty long seconds, before I collected myself together.

Back to work.

"Big Issue!" I yelled, blinking furiously. "Get this week's Big Issue!"

About Patricia Fawcett...

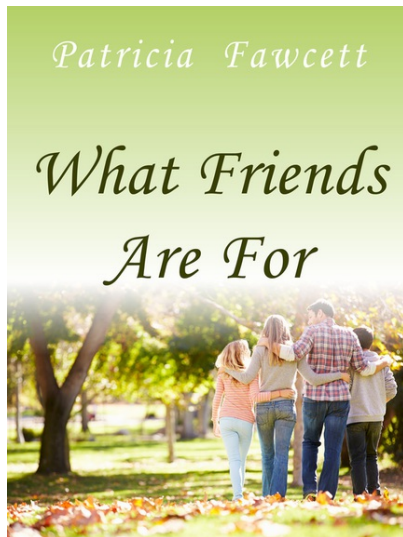


Patricia has been writing for 30 years. Born and brought up in the north of England, she has lived in various parts of the north (both east and west of the Pennines) before moving to Devon in 2004 to be nearer her family and also because she loves the area. Patricia loves walking on Dartmoor and is a volunteer at a National Trust property, Buckland Abbey, where she enjoys soaking up the atmosphere and meeting the visitors.

Her first published work was a children's novel followed by romance novellas before she began writing longer fiction for the women's market. Her novels are centred on the family where she loves to explore the differing personalities within a family and how that sometimes leads to conflict and problems. She likes to give her characters a fairly free rein and does not plan too

much but always has an overall view of what the story is going to be about.

Her short stories are sometimes darker and she still has not cracked the murder/mystery genre but is working on that.



Her latest novel 'What Friends Are For' is published as an e-book by Cloudberry Fiction at Lusciousbooks, available on Amazon.

Elaine, Toni and Zoe of Long Lane in Morecambe Bay have become friends through a babysitting circle. Despite their different personalities, they are drawn to each other in the hope of finding support amidst increasing family pressures. As each is faced by their respective family problems, each family being under strain, their friendship is put to a test. What are friends really for – and can their friendship survive?

Follow Patricia's blog on her [Website](#)

Unconditional by Holly Rye

I've never seen the chapel look so alive. Bright June sunlight slants through stained glass, littering tired flagstones and smiling faces with dazzling splashes of colour. White roses and the palest of pink peonies breathe life into the archaic mahogany pews they adorn, nestling among vibrant green foliage and sprays of gypsophila. The pipe organ has been tuned for the first time in decades in honour of today's event, and even Mrs Pinkham appears to have gained a new lease of life as she offers up an uncharacteristically enthusiastic rendition of Pachelbel's Canon in D Major. Today, everything seems bigger, bolder, luminous, as if the universe knows that all its power must be harnessed to make this momentous occasion everything it deserves to be. I've never felt an atmosphere charged with such effervescent energy, overflowing with love and bright-eyed anticipation.

I scan the seated crowd. Everyone is so familiar to me that I can identify them by the backs of their heads. Your family, my family, friends and loved ones are all gathered to celebrate this great love story. Your mother spots me standing at the back of the chapel. She digs your father in the ribs with her elbow and points towards me. The excited chattering that fills the room fades to silence as everyone peers in my direction, hoping to get their first glimpse of the bride.

You haven't seen me yet. I feel your hesitation as your brother speaks quietly into your ear, alerting you to my presence. You turn and your gaze locks with mine. I see the flames that burn inside me reflected in your eyes. I smile so wide my cheeks hurt and begin my torturously slow walk towards you; my love, my saviour, my everything. I float gracefully in ivory chiffon, clutching my own small posy of pale pink peonies and white roses.

When did I fall in love with you? I don't know. I don't remember not loving you. I loved you before I knew you although, of course, I didn't realise it back then. But even then, when times were dark, when I couldn't see a way out, I knew I needed to keep going, for you. I knew I needed to stay strong and make it through, for you. I knew that one day we would find each other. My boss says I am dangerously optimistic; that my optimism will be my undoing. I think he's wrong. What he calls dangerous optimism, I call hope. I call it faith. I call it trust. If it weren't for that belief I wouldn't be here now, sharing this moment with you.

On the day I needed you most, you were there. I was lost. My little sister, my best friend, was fighting for her life. I walked, fast but without purpose, around the lake in the park behind the hospital. I couldn't erase the image of her twisted body, lying in the road, from my mind. Then you appeared. Even on that strange first day of knowing you, you did not disappoint. You never do. You landed in my life and changed it forever. You changed me forever. You lifted me up. You pushed me beyond myself and showed me who I really am, in the way that only you can.

Do you remember that cold, January day? Do you remember what you asked me?

"Tell me your name."

"Elizabeth. Elizabeth Murphy."

"And what do you yearn for, Elizabeth Murphy?" Your eyes held a hint of amusement as you studied my face, waiting for my response.

The cold breeze lifted a lock of your dark hair from your forehead, and your scent, like cinnamon and apples at Christmastime, drifted my way. For a second I forgot the pain. In that instant, the slow burning ember of desire deep and low inside me transformed into something far more urgent. What I yearned for at that moment was you; for your lips to meet mine, and your hands to explore my body as confidently as your gaze had a few minutes earlier.

You knew it. I knew you knew it. But I wouldn't say it.

"A miracle," I whispered instead. I looked away from you and focused on the ducks gathered at the edge of the lake, watching as they squabbled over the stale bread being thrown in their direction by a little blonde-haired girl and her father.

"It's your lucky day, Elizabeth Murphy."

Hooking one strong finger under my chin you lifted my face and kissed me. Your hand caressed my cheek and it was warm, in spite of the bitter cold. You tasted as fresh as the air around us.

With that one simple kiss, you took me. I was yours; completely and irrevocably. With every kiss thereafter, you saved me. In your bed you healed me and moulded me and showed me my beauty. Reflected in your heart I could truly see myself and what I was worth.

For six years you were mine, as much as I was yours. For six years we were us. For six years, every day was my lucky day.

When it was time for you to go I stood back and watched you soar. I mended my broken heart in secret because taking your freedom would have hurt me more.

And that is why I have to let you go again today. As I finish my walk down the aisle and step to the side, you smile. I see the joy on your face as you look past me into the eyes of your beautiful bride. It hurts, but only for a moment. I love you. I love you more than anything in the world. I live to see you happy, and you are happy today. I follow your gaze with my own and my breath catches in my throat. She is so beautiful. Your bride. My baby sister.

One day it will be our turn. I will wait for you. I will be there to pick up the pieces when your world falls apart, in the same way you did for me. Until then my love, be free.

Holly is a passionate new writer who thinks too much and, consequently, finds herself channelling her overactive imagination into the creation of works of fiction on a regular basis. She explores life with insatiable curiosity, and believes that no dark corner should be left uninvestigated. As such, Holly enjoys reading gritty, emotional, and sometimes dark stories that ask tough questions, and her own writing often reflects this interest.

Find out more from Holly's [Website](#)

Star Rising by Sheila Daglish

Old Joe nearly trod on the star. Stooping, he peered closer, eyes popping. Daft old fool! "Course it ain't!" he chided. But sure as he was stood there...

Starlight quivered in the pale torch beam as he stretched a cautious hand towards its white heat. His gnarled fingers brushed the smooth surface. Nothing but cold; cold as the frost-spangled road beneath his feet. Joe stood and wondered. On a crisp, clear night he'd seen shooting stars skim the peaks back home in Montana, even a falling star or two... But just as a rainbow guarded its secret beginning and end, so had the stars. Till now, anyhow.

He jerked away guiltily as Kathy's voice shrilled from the house, across the shaven grass and the flowerbeds that'd never seen a weed. Then he relaxed. She'd never spot him out here in the shadows. Better dim the light a bit though, wait a while, and then he'd have another look at the star.

Kathy was a good daughter. She'd done her best when Joe had been left on his own. It'd happened so suddenly. One minute life was going on the way it always had, and then...

He sighed. Couldn't believe this was going to be his world from now on. No peace for a man amongst these slabs of buildings, all set out in square concrete streets. Even his boots didn't have mud on 'em any more.

"You know it's for the best, Dad!" Kathy had persuaded him in the warm kitchen back home amongst the foothills. "Now Mum's gone, you'll be better off with Howard and me. Anyway, I can't keep rushing to and fro across the States to make sure you're alright."

Before Joe could grasp what was happening, he'd been whisked away from the grey stone cottage only a few yards from clear waters that bubbled their way to the stretch where ever since he was a boy he'd go to catch a good-sized salmon for supper. He and Connie had lived there all their married years. Hard times they'd been, but filled with contentment. Longingly he remembered her stew simmering on the smoke-blackened range, the warmth of her body beside him in the huge old bed while, outside, soft breezes and night creatures rustled the leaves.

Leaves rustled beside him now, jerking him back to the present. His nerves tingled in anticipation, his eyes strained down towards the star on the ground, while his fingers itched to switch on the torch again. Kathy'd never believe what he'd found!

She'd done well for herself had their daughter. She'd come a long way from helping out in Bill Watson's general store, where she'd caught the eye of a passing traveller, his smart truck loaded with new hardware. It wasn't long before Howard, as tough and hard as the stuff he sold, had come that way again. And when he left, he took Kathy with him.

Joe sighed. Yes, she'd done well. All the way here yesterday, once they'd left the crowded airport, she'd chattered on about her fitted carpets, the theatres, fine shops, and the evenings out with equally fine friends. He'd kept his eyes shut even though it was a bright, sunny day when they landed.

"Look Dad!" That's what she called him now, not "Pa" like all the time she was growing up. As they reached the outskirts of the town where she lived she'd pointed to the scarred hillside.

"That's why we had to come the long way round," she told him. "They're cutting across the old road, to build a new four-lane highway.

Joe's eyes had wandered up to the ridge of the hill where giant bulldozers were hacking the ground, easy as slicing a hunk of Connie's cheese. All he wanted was to go home. Why couldn't they leave him be?

Today he'd felt old, out-of-place and lonely.

"Fresh air?" Kathy had snorted tonight, in her new, ladylike way. "Oh well, if you must. But you'd better take a torch. The streetlights are out of action till they finish the roadworks.

Streetlights—huh! What did you want with them things, after a lifetime of picking your way by moon and stars? He'd looked up at the black velvet sky. Not many stars up there tonight. Reckon most of them are shining way back home, over the cottage, he thought despondently. Can't say I blame 'em! What was that rhyme Connie used to sing when Kathy was little?

"Twinkle, twinkle little star... Up above the world so high, like a diamond..."

Was Connie up there? Joe blinked away a tear. He felt closer to her out here in the cold night air.

Quietness everywhere. It was safe to shine the torch.

Joe looked down again. Had it gone? His heart sank. No, the star was still there, helpless, like a tiny bird tumbled from its nest. He gazed up at the sky to see where it had fallen from. The sheer blackness above, impassive as ever, looked no different. Here and there hung a star—calm, indifferent to the fate of one of its sisters.

The torch flickered. Misty yellow beams shimmered another star close by... and another... Joe couldn't believe his eyes. Shaking with excitement, panting a little, he followed the sparkling pathway slowly up the winding road towards the crest of the hill.

God was in his heaven all right, he exulted. Leading him straight to Connie...

Next morning, workmen found the old man. Crumpled, he lay below the sharp ridge they'd cut through the old road to make way for the motorway.

They lifted his lifeless body gently.

The bleak grey day tempted not a glimmer from the streamer of glass cats-eyes that buttoned the centre of the road.

About Sheila Darglish...

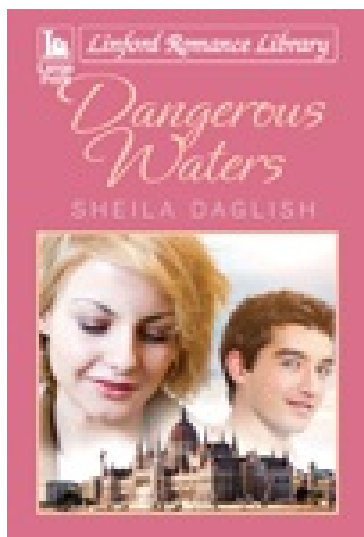


Family life has to come first but, whenever possible, I sit down and write!

For years, as a member of the Romantic Novelists' Association I've made friends, received enormous support and great advice.

I've always loved Mary Stewart's earlier stories of mystery, danger and romance, with fast-moving plots set in vividly described locations. These have influenced my own books, published as pocket novels for My Weekly and, previously, Hale Rainbow Romances, the latter also produced by Cloudberry as e-books. In 2017 I plan to publish another e-book, an historical novel set in 19th century Canada, but containing the same ingredients.

My latest Linford Romance Library story, 'Dangerous Waters', is now available in Large Print from Ulverscroft Publishing.



On holiday in the enchanting Hungarian village of Szentendre, schoolteacher Cassandra Sutherland meets handsome local artist Matthias Benedek, and soon both are swept up in a romance as dreamy as the moon on the Danube. But Matt is hiding secrets from Cass, and she is determined never to love another man like her late fiance, whose knack for getting into

dangerous situations was the ruin of them both. Can love conquer all once it's time for Cass to return home to London?

Visit Sheila's [Website](#)

The Head Teacher by Lucy Harper

"Tessssssaaaa!!!"

Uh-oh. Shouting at this time of the morning? Not good. Not good at all. I grabbed my pad and pen and scampered into the menopausal lion's den.

"You called, Miss James?" I smiled my "zippedy-doo-dah, ain't it a great day" smile, wracking my brains as to what could possibly have set her off this time. The aforementioned lion was perched on her throne, arms folded, lips pursed and a deep crease across the bridge of her nose from the "I am not amused" glower aimed straight at me. I was in trouble, again, but what on earth for? I eyed the chair in front of her desk but remained on my feet.

"Is-there-something-you-want-to-tell-me?"

She enunciated every word as if I was five year old from Miss Preston's class with the I.Q of a gnat.

"Well?"

"Ummm, your hair looks lovely today..."

"No..."

"And your shoes are gorgeous too, so very black and shiny. They're what my niece, Shania, lovely girl, would call bitchin' cool. I really don't know how you get them like that. Why, you must be able to see your face in them."

Aha, the glower slipped a notch to irritated confusion with maybe a tinge of frustration. I was making progress.

"Thank you, I think, but it's not why I called you in here. What—"

If flattery failed as a means of deflection, I liked to quickly follow it with a bit of cheekiness to throw someone off their stride. The trick was to keep talking.

"Ooooh, it isn't that you asked me to remind you of my appraisal date and because I'm such a fab-u-lous assistant, I'm in line for a big, fat pay rise?"

"Absolutely not! What—"

"Shame because I've been making notes as things occur to me and I have some suggestions which I think you might find very useful. In fact—"

Oh no. The lioness stood up and leaned on the desk, the glower back in full wrinkled force with two dark brown, indignant eyebrows almost touching now, resembling a rather toxic looking caterpillar. Note to self—must get tweezers for my secret santa 'cos boy does she need them.

"Miss Armitage. Tessa. What was in my office before playground duty and is now missing upon my return?"

Hmmmmmm, "Is this a quiz?"

"No!" The caterpillar gave a slight nod at the desk that separated us. There was hardly anything on it to be honest. Most things were arranged in OCD order with everything lined up

and in its place, kind of like Miss James. She was always neat and tidy, dressed in beige or grey with a proverbial cardigan (fully buttoned up at all times of course) to soften the no nonsense look, and her brownish, black hair worn in a tight bun at the back of her head. In the six months I'd worked for her, I'd never seen one hair out of place. Looking at it alone was enough to give me a headache.

She waited. I eyed her desk and mentally catalogued what I'd done over the past half an hour.

"Oookay. Well your post is gone because I've opened it, date stamped it and it's in priority order out on my desk all ready for you. The files you asked me to archive a little while ago—" Two months but who was counting, "are also on my desk and will be filed shortly. I did pop your coffee cup in the dishwasher because I know what a stickler for cleanliness you are. Other than that..."

She shook her head and I squinted to see if one hair had dared to make a run for it. Nope. She must add starch to her hair spray. I have to admit that this guessing game was getting a tad boring now.

"Can you give me a clue?"

She gave an emphatic nod to the right hand corner of her desk and then I knew, my heart sinking to my Jimmy Choo knock-offs. What had possessed me? What had made me think she wouldn't notice?

"How do you know it was me?" Knowing my luck, this was where she would tell me she had a secret camera in her office, probably in the photo of her fat, tabby cat, Sir Percival whose frozen, imperious gaze always made me poke my tongue out at it when Miss James wasn't around.

"Opportunity, motive and evidence."

What? I bet she'd been watching another one of those 'crime' series box sets again.

"And here's me thinking you were just a Head Teacher, Sherlock." She was in no mood for jokes. I started to take minute baby steps backwards.

"Well, my dear Watson, let's examine the scene shall we? First, opportunity and I'd appreciate it if you would stay exactly where you are."

Whoops. Busted.

"I have been gone from my office," she continued, "for precisely thirty one minutes and in that time, my door was closed and locked. Very few people have the pass code. All the other staff were outside supervising playtime but you remained inside."

"Yes, but someone..." Could break in through the ceiling and kill me now before she did if her murderous death stare was anything to go by.

"Second. Motive. Your little addictions—weaknesses if you will—are well known to me but I believed that out of respect for my position at the helm of this ship, you would exert a smidgeon of restraint during working hours."

"Look, Miss James. Louisa. It wasn't..."

"And finally, the irrefutable evidence. You, Miss Armitage, have chocolate on your upper lip and cream smudged on your chin which leads me to conclude that it was you who consumed the éclair I was saving for my elevenses! Now what do have to say for yourself?"

"Umm, if it helps, I have a Freddo in my bag you can have?"

About Lucy Harper...

Lucy Harper was born in London and grew up in Kent. Married with two grown up children, she moved to Devon in 2003 for sandy beaches and change of pace.

At the age of six, Lucy was on a family holiday in Germany when her father discovered she couldn't read. He then spent an hour every afternoon, sat in the guest house's dining room with her, until she could. A few decades or so later, she's still an unashamed bookworm who adores books and never leaves home without one. When her husband periodically asks her if she has enough books yet, she always answers 'There's no such thing as enough'.

Lucy has now branched out in to writing stories of her own and has written a number of short stories whilst working to complete a full-length novel. Despite working part time as a Finance Manager she remains more fascinated by how a collection of words, when read, can paint such vivid pictures in the imagination than she does by numbers!

The Fish and Chip Murder: An Exham on Sea Short Story by Frances Evesham

"Have you heard?" Mandy's cheeks glowed under a layer of white face-powder. Libby Forest looked up from tempering chocolate and peeled off her protective gloves. She raised an eyebrow at her lodger and apprentice, Exham on Sea's resident Goth. "More gossip, Mandy? Didn't we agree to lead a quiet life for a while?"

"You'll want to hear this, Mrs F. Sam's dead."

Libby frowned. "Sam? Is that..."

"Sam Jenkins at the fish and chip shop, of course." Libby raised an eyebrow. Sam had tried to ban her dog, Bear, from within fifty yards of the shop. The man had claimed, amid a barrage of expletives, that the huge Carpathian sheepdog frightened customers away.

"What happened?"

"Someone clonked Sam on the head with a frying pan. His assistant found him this morning, flat on the floor with his face in a bowl of batter." Mandy screwed up her nose, making a silver nose-ring jiggle. "What a thought. Gross."

Libby blinked, trying to block the vision from her mind. "At least it's nothing to do with our chocolates." When poison had killed two cyclists, Libby's food and the bakery where she worked had been suspected. "I'm sure the police have everything in hand. We don't need to get involved."

Her apprentice snorted. "Famous last words."

Mandy was right. Just as Libby put the finishing swirls on a batch of freshly made truffles, the doorbell rang. Bear, in temporary residence at Libby's cottage while his owner was away, careered through the hall, barking with sufficient force to set the cups in the kitchen rattling.

"All right, settle down, Bear." Libby edged past the animal to open the door.

A thin, timid looking woman hesitated half on, half off the doorstep. Her lank hair, shapeless coat and scuffed shoes shared a depressing shade of brown. "Mrs Forest?"

"That's me. Can I help?"

The visitor bit her lip. "I—I heard you solve problems. A sort of detective?"

Libby, touched by the cross-hatched worry lines on the woman's woebegone face, opened the door wider, shooed Bear to his basket in the back, and led the way to the small sitting room.

The woman mumbled, "My neighbour told me you saved the bakery after that poison business." Her faded brown eyes pleaded. "I need you to help my son. It's the police, you see. They've taken my Todd away, but he's a good man, he is. He never did nothing. Nothing."

They've got it all wrong."

Butterflies of excitement stirred in Libby's stomach. A new mystery! "You'd better start at the beginning. What's Todd supposed to have done?"

The woman stared into the distance, her lips moving, twisting a ragged handkerchief between nervous fingers. "Sam. It's about Sam."

Mandy arrived, juggling a tray with coffee mugs and a plate of flapjacks. Libby stirred milk into her coffee. "Sam at the chip shop? I heard about the attack. Is Todd involved?" The woman shook her head. Libby tried again. "Look, Mrs—er..."

"Jenkins." Libby began to understand. "You're Sam's wife?"

"Ex-wife. He was a bad lot, was Sam. Got what was coming to him. It's Todd I'm worried about."

"You'd better explain."

Several flapjacks later, after much prompting, Mrs Jenkins finished her story. She'd divorced Sam many years ago. Libby hid a smile. If she'd been married to Sam, she would have divorced him, too. Before the marriage ended, Mr and Mrs Jenkins managed to produce Todd, their son. Long grown up, he lived nearby with a wife and daughter and worked in the chip shop with his father.

Today, Todd had been arrested and charged with his father's murder. Libby offered her visitor another flapjack. "Why do the police think he's the killer?"

"Because of the will. Sam left the chip shop to Todd." She leaned close to Libby, whispering. "My son's not too bright. He's a lovely lad, but not what they call streetwise. When the police came, Todd didn't have the sense to keep his mouth shut. He said he was glad his dad was dead because now he could run the business properly."

Libby sometimes saw Todd in the shop. A cuddly koala of a man, he offered bits of fish to Bear when Sam wasn't around. He'd left school with no qualifications but plenty of friends, enough to keep the chip shop afloat when the summer visitors vanished in winter. To Libby's knowledge, Todd never told lies, but a policeman or lawyer would run rings round him with clever questions.

Libby tried, but failed, to imagine good-natured, foolish Todd hitting his father over the head with a frying pan so he could inherit the chip shop. She rubbed her hands together. No time to waste. She'd prove Todd innocent if it was humanly possible.

Libby picked her way through Todd's overgrown front garden, sidled past an untidy heap of logs blocking the path, and tapped on the peeling paint of the door.

Todd's wife, a short, overweight blond with two inches of black roots showing in her hair, leaned against the wall. Rolls of fat distorted a tight pink t-shirt while a pair of black leggings sagged round her knees. She was panting with the exertion of opening the door. "Well?"

Libby smiled. "I came to see if I could help Todd."

The bottle blonde's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Libby decided not to mention Todd's mother. What wife wanted a mother-in-law to interfere? "I sometimes see Todd in town. He's kind to Bear and I'd like to help him if I can."

The blonde shrugged. "Don't see what you can do. If Todd done his dad in, that's the end

of it." She showed no sign of regret, either for her husband, accused of murder, or his father. Libby sighed. Sam Jenkins, unloved in life, would not be missed, but he had a right to justice.

Running feet clattered on the stairs and a young girl appeared. About twelve years old, Libby guessed. She looked closer at the child's tiny face and huge eyes, recognising a faint similarity to her grandmother, the emaciated Mrs Jenkins. The girl's eyes flashed green. "Mum, you know Dad wouldn't hurt a fly. It wasn't him that killed Grandad. It can't have been."

"Who was it then, Miss Clever? One of your school friends? The man in the moon? Who are you going to accuse?"

The girl's red-rimmed eyes looked sore. She, at least, had cried. Was it for her grandfather, or, more likely, for her father, the gentle giant, Todd? "Dunno."

"See." The blonde jerked her head sideways, indicating her daughter. "Kaylee don't want it to be true. Like her dad, she is, in a world of her own." She pointed at the door. "Get on down the shops, now. We need more beans, or it'll just be toast for tea tonight."

Kaylee rode away on a rusty, ancient bike while the blonde flopped onto a torn vinyl sofa. "Todd's dad said if he was late for work one more time, he'd rewrite the will. That must be why Todd did it."

She wiped her nose on a sleeve. "I should have kept him home. He wanted to watch the football, but it was an EastEnders special. You know, the one where they found the baby's father? Me and Kaylee were dying to watch it, so Todd said he'd go to the pub. I expect he went round the shop instead and quarrelled with his dad." She sniffed and dabbed suspiciously dry eyes with a crumpled tissue. "Don't know what we'll do when Todd's in prison. I'll have to run the chip shop alone."

Libby left, no nearer to clearing Todd's name. If the man's own wife thought he murdered his father, it was going to be almost impossible to prove he was innocent.

Mandy's music spilled from Libby's front door. Siouxsie and the Banshees. Libby groaned. It was time Mandy grew out of this Goth phase. Still, today was Thursday. Every Tuesday and Thursday Mandy visited The Dark Side, a club frequented by the tiny band of Somerset Goths. Libby had met most of them at one time or another, when Mandy brought them to the cottage to tweak make-up and swap jewellery.

As Libby curled up in a chair, glass of wine in hand, planning to think about the chip shop murder, Mandy popped her head round the door. She'd back-combed her black hair into a haystack, ringed both eyes with kohl and outlined her lips in lurid purple. Forestalling any comment, she announced, "I'm off to the club."

Libby frowned as an image tugged at her memory. Tiny features and big eyes...

She choked on a mouthful of wine. "Wait a sec, Mandy," she spluttered. "Does Kaylee Jenkins go to your club?"

Mandy leaned against the wall. "Well, yes, but her dad doesn't like it. She's not old enough." Kaylee probably used a fake ID, along with half the underage teenagers in town. "She was at the club on Tuesday, though," Mandy murmured, retreating. "Her dad had a fight with her mum and drove off in a huff to pick up a load of firewood. Kaylee's mum was watching the telly, so Kaylee sneaked out to the club."

Cogs whirled in Libby's head as Mandy retreated towards the front door, and she called,

"Come back." Mandy sidled in as Libby rubbed her nose, deep in thought. "Say that again. Kaylee was at the club on Tuesday?" Mandy hesitated, shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other. Libby laughed. "Don't worry. Kaylee's not in trouble, but I'm just wondering why her mother pretended they watched television together?"

As the final pieces of the puzzle fell into place, Libby dumped her wine glass on the table, jumped up, grabbed Mandy's arm and dragged her, protesting, out of the house, Bear trotting behind.

Revvng up the engine on her little Citroen, Libby sped back to the blonde's house and hammered on the door until it opened.

"All right, all right, no need to knock the house down." The blonde examined Libby from head to toe, her lip curling. "You again, is it? What do you want this time?"

"I want a confession." She glanced back at the car. Mandy, a mobile phone glued to one ear, gave a thumbs-up sign. Bear poked his head out of the car's window, his tongue out, panting.

The blonde's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, confession? Todd's in the police station already. He won't be coming back."

"And that's where you're wrong. I haven't come for Todd. He's got an alibi. He picked up a load of wood from a farm, last night." Libby pointed to the log pile by the door. "It won't take long to find the farmer, and he'll back up Todd's story."

The woman shrugged. "So what?"

"You told me you were here with your daughter, but she was at The Dark Side club the night Sam died. You were alone."

"So what if I was?" Colour drained from the blonde's face.

Libby said, "You pretended your daughter was here. It gave you an alibi for the evening while you visited the chip shop to kill Sam."

The woman tossed her head. "You can't prove nothing. Why would I want to kill Todd's old man?"

"For the shop. It's a thriving business, worth a fortune. You knew Todd would inherit one day, but you couldn't wait. You cooked up a plan to kill Sam and lay the blame on Todd. You thought you'd get the shop while Todd went to gaol."

Anger flashed in Todd's wife's eyes. Libby's nerves tingled, but she carried on talking. "The law doesn't work like that, I'm afraid. If Todd was convicted, he'd lose any claim to his victim's shop and it wouldn't come to you. You killed Sam for nothing."

The blonde clenched her fists. "Why, you..."

Her eyes flashed as she lurched forward, ready to strike.

Libby whistled, as loud as she could and Mandy threw open the car door. Bear leaped out and thundered up the path, howling like a wolf.

The blonde screamed and staggered back, but Libby jammed one foot in the door, held Bear by his collar and shouted. "You stay still, or I'll let the dog go."

The blonde froze, terror disfiguring her face.

Seconds later, in a cacophony of sirens and flashing lights, a police car squealed to a halt outside the house. Libby pointed to the vehicle. "Mandy called the police. You'll have to explain yourself to them."

The blonde subsided, defeated, on the floor.

Libby led a reluctant Bear back to the Citroen as Mandy, still clutching the mobile phone, cheered. Libby started the engine. "Come on, Mandy, let's get you to the club. For once,

you'll be first with the gossip."

About Frances Evesham...

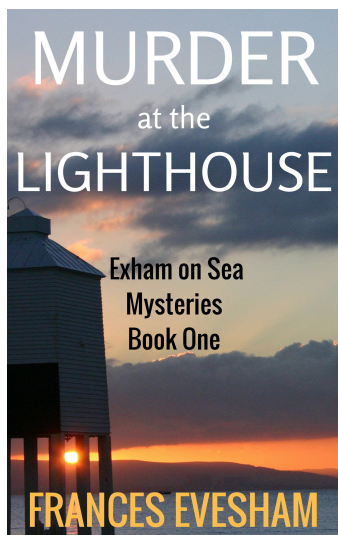


One day, Frances Evesham walked on a beach in peaceful Somerset and came upon a unique nine-legged Victorian lighthouse. Her first cozy crime story, *Murder at the Lighthouse*, was born.

Now, she writes mystery stories: the Exham on Sea contemporary murder mystery series set in a small Somerset seaside town, and the Thatcham Hall Mysteries, 19th Century historical mystery romances set in Victorian England.

She collects poison recipes and cooks with a glass of wine in one hand and a bunch of chillies in the other, her head full of ingenious ways to dispatch her victims-in fiction, of course.

Murder at the Lighthouse is the first Exham on Sea Mystery, available from Amazon.



What would you do if you found a body under a lighthouse?

The body on the beach throws Libby Forest's new life into turmoil. Everyone in town knows the dead woman under the lighthouse, but no one seems to care how or why she died. Only Libby believes someone murdered the ageing rock-star.

A woman talks to Libby. Then she, too, dies...

Amateur female sleuth Libby Forest arrives in the small town after years in a disastrous marriage, determined to build a new life making cakes and chocolates in Exham on Sea. She joins forces with the attractive but secretive Max Ramshore and risks the wrath of the townspeople as she pieces together the jigsaw to solve the mystery of Susie Bennett's death.

Visit Frances's [WEBSITE](#) to download a free Exham on Sea Kitchen Cheat Sheet and be among the first to hear about new stories and offers.

Table for One by Sheila Daglish

Provençal rain creeps down my collar, shrinks my tee-shirt and soaks my trainers as I thread through the crowded market. Stallholders shrug philosophical shoulders and cover their stalls unless lucky enough to be sheltered under one of the huge red and yellow canopies. This southern part of France is always beautiful but even its greatest admirers must sometimes bow to the reality of chilling mistral or sudden storm.

Time for lunch, I decide, especially as it's early and there will be empty tables.

This place looks fine, tucked down a narrow street, not far from the main boulevard, and is deserted so I can take my pick of where to sit.

At random I order something from a friendly waitress in shaggy jumper and skin-tight jeans. For the moment the meaning of 'laitue' escapes me – but a small pichet of vin rose will help me not to care.

The restaurant is small and cellar-like. The door is open wide to disperse the smell of ancient stone. Orange rug-wool covers simple but effective lampshades which cast light on the cane tables and chairs, the vases of anemones and freesias on each table.

"Etes vous presse?" asks the waitress. I stare uncomprehendingly until O'Level French comes to my rescue and I assure her that I've beaucoup de temps. There's no need to hurry at all, especially now I've discovered their washroom. The door doesn't fit too well, she warns. No matter – I'll prop it shut with my foot.

Laitue is a mountain of salad, it seems. Curly lettuce – or are they dandelion leaves – diced ham, potato and cheese, olives, haricot beans, tomato, are topped with hot egg and decorated with walnuts.

The restaurant, more a bistro really, is filling up now. I hope someone closes the door soon because I'm frozen.

Thank goodness, the young couple who have just entered pushed it shut, but the air still feels cold in here, probably because I'm so wet.

A chunky, black-bearded young man sits at the next table. Grey-suited, briefcase on floor, he's clearly no newcomer to the art of shovelling straggles of dandelion into his mouth. After eating an identical salad to mine, in double-quick time, he asks for dessert, almost certainly that interminable crème caramel which rears its head on every French menu. I've ordered marquise au chocolat and wonder what it will turn out to be.

He's soon gone, permanently one hopes—and not just to wedge his foot against the toilet door—because two women have installed themselves at his table. Both are beanstick thin – they must come here often. Yes, there he goes! I can see him through the window, on his way back to work, no doubt.

Something in the kitchen is being fried and something else is being stirred. The growing hum of conversation is cheering and tries to defeat the Arctic temperature. Smoke haze is filling

the air, giving an illusion of warmth: hot fugs are so much more comfortable than cold fugs.

Where I shall go after lunch? I'd be happy to sit in the square by the Cathedral and watch the world go by, but the sun refuses to take off its coat. I could go to the Tapestry Museum, but tapestries leave me cold. Oh dear, there's that word again!

Here's my dessert at last, nearly visible, all quarter-inch of it on a thick white plate. Dark brown, it's designed not to detain me long. Nice though, like chocolate fudge.

I'm so glad to be in Aix-en-Provence again. Is this why I feel good, or is it my daily dose of ginseng?

"Un café, s'il vous plait." It will wash down the chocolate fudge, although I enjoyed its sticky mystery. The vin rose is going to my head. I ought to get used to lunchtime wine or stick to water.

Suddenly the sun is casting the shadow of my hand across the page of my notepad and turning the anemones to royal purple and the freesias to the gold of Egyptian kings. I wish it would reach under the table and dry out the bottom of my jeans. The rapid clearing of rain-grey skies is bringing to life serried lines of sunshine on the cane tabletop and I've sketched the falling shades of the nearest anemone. My legs ache. Hope this isn't turning to rheumatic fever.

An aging Bob Dylan is playing in the background. No, it's an even more ancient Donovan, still trying to 'Catch the Wind'. The snapdragons on the windowsills are plastic. Still, it doesn't matter if you remember the flowers on the table are real. The couple across the room are snuggling together over the coffee they decided in place of dessert. At least he is; she seems a bit coy.

Soon the tracery of creeper on the wall outside will turn to something beautiful. But I shan't be here to see it. My time is all packed up in boxes, each labelled with one day of the week. This box, labelled Friday, is nearly empty because I've eaten, drunk and sheltered from the lunchtime rain. All that remains is to ask for l'addition and go. Reluctantly, I move towards the door. The waitress watches me go. We smile at each other.

"Yes, I've enjoyed my lunch, thank you. Au revoir mademoiselle."

I slip a tip into her hand. "Have a nice day."

More by Sheila Darglish...

For a story set in Provence, you might enjoy 'Hidden Truths' published as an e-book by Cloudberry Fiction at Lusciousbooks and available from Amazon.

MOSAIC



*Two Tales of Loss by Mary Gaul**Gaspard*

It was quieter now. The customers, who ten minutes ago had clamoured before the counters demanding service, had responded to the summons of the boisterous notes of the Overture and streamed back into the auditorium. As the house-lights dimmed the door was closed and a refined hush settled upon the remaining patrons who prepared to relax in the now partially-deserted bar of the Folies Bergere.

Stationed at the far end of the room, Gaspard could watch the girl unobserved as she worked with hasty efficiency, clearing the glasses from the counter and piling them in a precarious pyramid onto a tray. In the diminished gaslight he could not see her face clearly but her movements betrayed her expression. She would not be smiling. He knew very well that she rarely smiled. Her brow, slightly furrowed, would provide an impression of concentration and when her busyness ceased, the glasses washed, dried and polished, she would stand still and detached, her hands resting upon the cool marble of the counter while her eyes would stare into some private vacancy inhabited by her thoughts.

Having ordered a cognac from the waiter who served at his small table-for-one, Gaspard awaited its arrival and then stretched out his legs comfortably, allowing his attention to play upon the object of his obsession.

He would stay for one hour only. It was a discipline he always observed. He was a fool of course to spend his evenings in such a way—and he was an old fool. But if his age attracted derision for his foolishness, to the gentler mind it must also excuse it.

The yells of the Can-Can dancers that could be heard echoing from the auditorium bore no enticement for him. Their energy and frothy entertainment fell on the stony ground of his indifference. The heyday in his blood was long since tamed so that total contentment attended him as he sat absorbed in his study of the young barmaid.

He had no wish to meet her, to speak to her, no wish even to know her name. He did not regard her as beautiful. Simple beauty alone would not have stirred him. But she had a face that for him could launch a thousand fantasies. It was enough to sit and watch and imagine what might have been, the world outside having no part in his undertaking.

Time there was when his response to this obsession would have been simple. He would have painted her and having captured for himself an indelible memory on canvas, the creative urge in him would have been satisfied. But not now. Not now...

As if to remind himself of the capricious nature of life's gifts, he withdrew his hands from under the table and with slow precision and in turn encouraged the fingers of both to encircle the glass of cognac. The tools of his trade as an artist had become transformed into two crippled claws, hideous to behold and useless. The instruments that could replicate nature with

strokes of a brush were gone. The Lord had given, and the Lord had taken away. But in his heart he was still an artist. Pictures that he could no longer create he saw in his mind, and all centred on the unsuspecting muse who earned her living by filling glasses for the pleasure-seeking patrons of the Folies Bergere. Watching her move as she worked, the twist of her head, the light changing her expression or the sheen upon her hair altering its colour, presented a thousand paintings to be committed to memory.

For how long he would come and construct this gallery of imagined works, he had no idea. For what man knows the length of his future. But of one thing he was certain. Even when the game was over and imagination had been sapped to its dregs, for as long as she was here and for as long as he retained the ability of movement, he would come.

Peering deep into his glass Gaspard raised his arms gently so that the golden liquid swirled within its circular confines. Slowly he lifted his head, his eyes still fixed upon the young barmaid, and raised the drink to his mouth, his lips moving in a silent toast in which he pledged his constancy.

Ennui? Eventual apathy? No. They presented no threat. For he was quite persuaded that, if he were obliged to look at that face for the duration of eternity, he would never tire of it.

Lia

For a third time within a minute Leo dowsed the nib of his pen with ink and slowly scratched at the blank paper as if coaxing from it the words he was seeking, but they remained elusive. He stared down, studying the dilatory strokes of his pen, screwing up his eyes as if hoping to decipher some meaning. He leaned back in the chair. Was it his imagination or had they formed an unmistakable 'L'. 'L' for Lia.

Lia was not her name. That is to say it was not the name she had received at the font, but it was the name he had given her as something only they had shared, and they had shared so much it was inconceivable that she should remain ignorant of the closure of his life. Yet, what could he write? 'Lia, my soul's breath, I must leave you. Within six months I shall be no more...' But he had already left her—eleven years ago.

It had been a new venture, to work as a tutor, and returning homeless from several years abroad, to obtain a position that also provided a roof seemed a godsend. But what God had actually sent him was Lia.

Outside, a fragile morning sunlight was already brightening the sky so that the lamp that had been his companion for most of the night could be extinguished. He sat forward again to replace the pen in the stand and spreading his hand over the paper he crushed it into a ball, admitting to himself that it was not lack of inspiration that caused his inaction, it was his conscience that had stirred to remind him of his promise. At their parting it had been agreed that neither would attempt to contact the other in any way, and they had sworn on their love to be true to this pledge. He would not break it but nor could he depart from this world without, for just a few hours, visiting again the place where Lia had been found and lost.

As he tossed the discarded paper into the fireplace to rest among the ashes, a narrow carpet of light spread across the floor of the study, only to be partially obliterated by the shadow of a woman. Leo did not turn round. He knew well enough it would be Constance come to check that he had not defied the doctors' prognosis and dropped dead before his time.

"I saw the light beneath the door, Leo—I thought perhaps you were unwell."

"No, no, Connie, I am not unwell," he responded gently, adding casually but not within her hearing, "I am simply dying."

"Is there anything I can get you, a drink, a shawl for your shoulders? It is none too warm in here." A little shudder and she hugged herself as if to endorse her claim.

Turning in his chair to face her Leo sought to pacify her concerns with a weak smile. "Thank you kindly but I need nothing." He continued to look at her while wondering how it was that nature had dealt so parsimoniously with any living creature. Everything about Constance was tinged with a paltriness unrecognisable in creation, from the pallor of her skin, the dullness of her blue eyes, the fineness of her straight mouse-coloured hair, to her thin unfeminine body and a personality that had thwarted development over the entire forty years of her life.

When he had first arrived in the town, unsettled and still walking through the early, arid years without Lia, he had been offered employment by the headmaster of a boys' school. Remembering her belief that education was the most precious acquisition for any child, he felt that in some way acceptance of the post included Lia in his life and kept her closer to his heart. Constance was the headmaster's niece who unashamedly craved the status of marriage. Her desire had been within his gift and he had given it with an indifference that he acknowledged was morally reprehensible. Yet Constance appeared to be content. In their seven years together she had been what would be considered a good wife, adhering to her marriage vows in accordance with her own interpretation of them, running his house with a routine efficiency that was as dull and predictable as the woman herself.

On a short breath of determination Leo delivered his intention. "I shall be out all day tomorrow, Constance. You need not wait up for me, I shall be late back and I shall come to no harm." His firm conclusion did not invite argument.

"But you cannot miss dinner, Leo. Have you forgotten? Harriet Caudwell and her brother Philip are coming. I did tell you, dear." Her voice betrayed nothing but her cheeks had flushed slightly as she tried to rein in her annoyance, a trait she had developed since the delivery of his death sentence.

"Yes, yes, I had forgotten, I am sorry." Leo's apology was uttered in a voice that contained little regret at the oversight, but he did add, "In that case I shall of course be with you in time to eat." Not, he could have added, that he felt his presence would be missed. It was clear to him already that, having wallowed in her widowhood for the obligatory term, Constance would encourage Philip Caudwell to become his successor, and Leo, in all honesty, could only hope that the chosen one found more comfort in his shoes as Constance's husband than he himself had ever done.

The four hour journey to Mellingham had been more tiring than he had anticipated. He stood still as the train chuffed away from the station, the steam clearing to reveal the well-remembered platform from which he had boarded the train that was to separate him from Lia forever. As he walked, he wondered about the wisdom of yielding to a compulsion to return to this place of memories. Would anyone recognise in him—a middle-aged man, bearded and with grey hair walking with the aid of a cane—the young man who, more than a decade earlier, had been engaged as tutor to the squire's children and left suddenly just two years later?

Arriving at the green he stopped to regain his breath, his eyes drawn to a building just beyond the pond on the far side. He stared and he smiled. She had done it then. Lia had built their school. The school they had planned together. A school for village children in which he

would teach when his tutelage of her children was no longer required. They had said that every pupil they would regard as their love-child, born of their dreams. "For what is life without the illumination of learning?" Lia had asked with that earnest enthusiasm that had fired all her actions.

Moving on, he raised his coat collar against the unexpected breeze that was chilly despite the brightness of the day, and was grateful when he reached the church. There was now a weariness about him that obliged him to rest. Where better than in a quiet chapel?

On entering he looked about the familiar structure. It was deserted, as he had hoped. He walked a little way down the middle aisle and seated himself in one of the pews. From here he had an unobstructed view of the seating reserved solely for the Squire and his family, and behind that an area for the estate's staff. That was his place. He was not a religious man but the hours passed there every Sunday were for him the perfect start to the week. He could watch Lia upholding her position as the squire's lady, knowing she was just as conscious, as was he, of the few feet that separated them. Today was Saturday. Would she actually sit in that pew tomorrow when he would be gone and never know that he had been there?

He relaxed, wading through memories and fighting the subsequent emotion. Most clearly he remembered that final Sunday before his departure. They had talked of their future and both acknowledged that they had none. The daily closeness imposed by their need to consult on the children's activities was becoming an unsustainable torment. Lia was above all a mother and even her love for him could not justify breaking the hearts of her family and inviting scandal into the lives of her boys. If hearts were to be broken it had to be theirs. Had she decided otherwise, she would not have been his Lia.

Their agreement to part and the rules to be observed thereafter were accepted. His going was planned at a time when the Squire was away and was explained to the household by Leo's false claim that illness in his family demanded his immediate return to them. They were neither of them naturally devious but better to be fabricators of falsehood than adulterers, which is where their feelings would surely have led them, only to have withered under a crushing guilt.

Shifting a little in the pew, Leo turned slightly to look at the opposite wall where the sun's frail beams were combining with the stained-glass windows to coat it in a colourful tapestry. It was then that he noticed the plaque, whiter than any of the others that clung to the ancient stones, with the gold lettering of the inscription shining with the gleam of newness. He moved along the pew the better to make out the wording.

"Cecilia Dorothea Marie ... beloved wife of ... " His gaze travelled down to the last line, his attention hovering on the date. Dead. Lia had been dead for a whole year and he had not known it. He had lived through twelve months and four seasons that she had not seen, and he had not known it.

His body felt numbed. Paralysed by shock and disbelief he sat staring at the words that formed the dreadful message, blurred by the stagnant tears that stood in his eyes. Yet, as the time passed, the awfulness of the revelation diminished. In a strange way Lia was becoming closer to him, more so than she had ever been since their parting. She was no longer somebody's wife or mother, shackled by her sense of duty, and after so many years of separation only six months stood between them. Six months—the time that once seemed so short now represented itself as endless.

The weight of his greatcoat became suddenly oppressive, distressing his breathing and causing sweat to lodge around his collar. Purposefully he began to take deep, controlled breaths

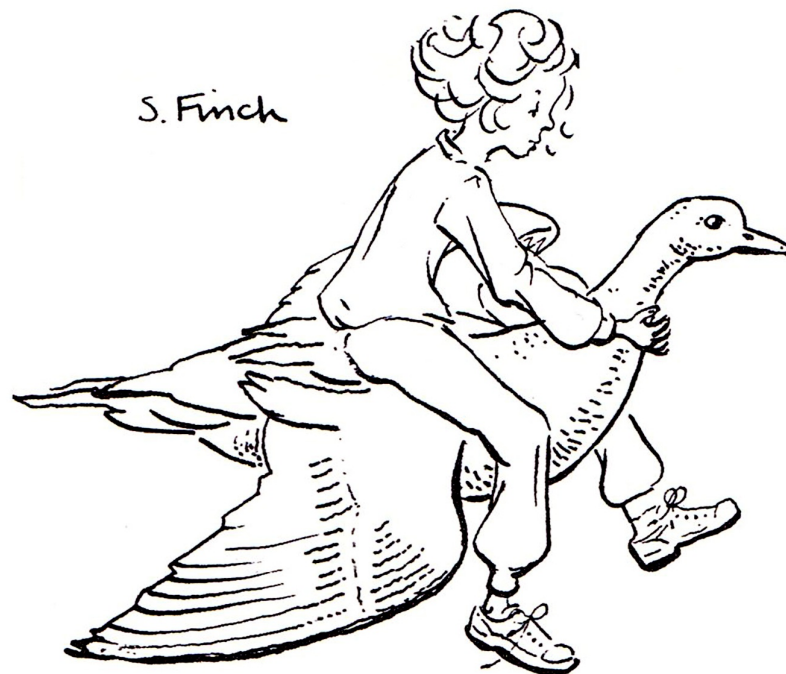
and to think of what lay ahead. Illness and then death and then?... He had given little thought to the hereafter or 'life on the other side', call it what you will. Whatever the mysteries of what it held, paradise or oblivion, he would shortly be sharing them with Lia. And if any form of awareness was retained in that unpredictable state called death, he would find her, and thereafter they would explore the 'undiscovered country' together, and that for him would be Paradise.

When Leo entered the dining room his wife and her guests were seated at table but the meal had not yet been served. Constance stared at her husband, her thin lips separating in an expression of disbelief as, with some newly-found energy, he strode across the room and clasped Philip Caudwell by the hand, shaking it vigorously while apologising for his lateness. Having treated Harriet to the warmest of greetings he crossed to where Constance was sitting to kiss her airily on the cheek. Having checked that his guests' glasses were filled he sat down, shook open his napkin and dropped it onto his lap. He suddenly found himself possessed of the heartiest of appetites.

About Mary Gaul...

Mary Gaul lives and works on her family farm in Devonshire's Exe Valley where, in her limited free time, she likes to combine her enjoyment of writing with her love of history. To date, she has written four historical novels, all set against a French background, one Regency and two in the Victorian era. Her other general interests are reflected in her membership of the Jane Austen Society, the Huguenot Society and her local U3A.

The Goose Prince by Anne Holman



Far away, in a small kingdom, there once lived a handsome young prince. He was blessed with a happy nature and enjoyed life but was inclined to be irresponsible.

One day his father, the king, said to him, "My boy, when I die, you will be king."

The prince looked unconcerned and smiled at his father.

"This is no laughing matter," the king continued, "so take that grin off your face. Your subjects will expect you to rule wisely - and to produce an heir to the throne."

The king eyed his son thoughtfully through his gold rimmed spectacles as the prince remained silent. "When I was your age," the king went on, "I was already married and had a family. May I suggest you start now by finding yourself a suitable bride, one who will knock a

little sense into you?"

The king then pressed the intercom and spoke to his royal secretary, "Send me my Magician."

Turning to the prince the king said, "I intend to send you off on a quest to find a girl to marry and I am sending the court magician with you, to make sure you make a wise choice."

So the very next morning the prince set off on his motorbike with the magician riding pillion.

It was a glorious summer day and the sun shone as they sped along the roads, brrr-brrr-brrr. They sped past cottages and farms, flew over bridges and hills, purred alongside the river bank until eventually, they reached the glistening sea.

"Great!" exclaimed the prince whipping off his crash helmet, "I just feel like a swim."

The prince ran down to the sandy beach where he stripped off his clothes and raced into the oncoming waves with whoops of delight. Splash - splash - splash! The prince even tried to splash the magician who'd followed him down to the water's edge.

"Come out, come out!" yelled the magician from a safe distance. "You won't find a bride in the sea."

The prince took no notice.

The magician began to lose his temper as the prince ignored him and continued to swim around the bay.

The purple-faced magician saw the prince swimming further into the sea and bellowed, "You . . . you young GOOSE!"

Now, as the magician happened to be waving his magic wand at that very moment, the prince was immediately turned into a giant brownish-grey feathered goose, complete with a bright orange bill, and pink legs.

The poor prince was alarmed. "Honk, honk, honk!" was all he could say.

However, he found he could swim exceedingly well so he swam until he reached a rock, scrambled up onto it, then sat down wondering what he should do. Turning to look towards the beach, he saw to his horror the magician had returned to the motorbike and was riding away - leaving the goose prince to his fate.

"Well it serves me right, I suppose," the prince thought, shaking his feathers, "but what on earth am I going to do now?"

As he sat considering this question he realised he now had wings and started to flap them. He was a little scared at first but a few moments later he felt himself lift into the sky. He'd often wished he could fly & found it delightfully easy to glide and dip. He even enjoyed chasing some seagulls as his confidence grew.

It was not until the sun went in that he felt hungry and a little worried. "I'd better fly back to the palace and get the magician to change me back again," he thought.

So the goose prince flew off southwards, because that was where he thought his father's palace was, but discovered it was much, much further away than he had imagined. Soon he began to feel very tired. Flap - flap - flap. His wings grew heavier and heavier and he knew he must stop to rest. Below him was a grassy field so the goose prince swooped down, and after grazing for a while, he put his head under his wing and was soon fast asleep.

Morning came and as the goose prince awoke he saw a girl jogging towards him along

the footpath across the field. She was slightly built and looked attractive in a pale blue track suit and pink trainers. Her fair curly hair bobbed up and down as she approached the huge goose. Jog-jog-jog.

"Oh, you poor bird!" the girl cried, slightly out of breath. "Have you been injured?" Her sweet-natured face looked at him concerned.

Remembering his manners, the goose prince stood intending to say, "I'm fine, thank you," but all the girl heard was a loud, "Honk - honk - honk."

Unfortunately the noise frightened the girl and she turned and started to jog back down the path away from him. The goose prince was bitterly disappointed to see her go off and decided to follow her.

Seeing the large goose squawking and flapping its wings behind her made the girl run faster than ever. She tore out of the field, across a lane and through an orchard, with the goose prince running after her as best he could.

It was lucky he was just able to see her disappear into a thatched cottage.

Much out of breath, he waddled up to the cottage. He managed to lift the gate latch with his bill, and going down the crazy paved path, he sank down in front of the kitchen door. He neglected to see a flower planter which toppled over with a clatter and smashed.

"What's that awful noise?" he heard a sour woman's voice shrill from inside the cottage. "Go and find out what it is, Rose-Anna."

The kitchen door opened and the girl in the blue track suit exclaimed, "My goodness, it's the goose I saw in the field this morning!"

Not wishing to scare the girl again, the goose prince did not try to speak. He stood still and looked at her with pleading eyes, tilting his head on one side he blinked gently up at her.

Rose-Anna had a kind heart and thought that the bird may have followed her hoping she would give him something to eat. "I'll find you a few crusts," she whispered.

"What are you doing girl?" The harsh voice sounded again and the goose prince saw Rose-Anna roughly pushed aside. A shriek came from the bony, suited woman who appeared in the doorway. Her unfriendly, creased face told the goose prince that he was not welcome. He had barely time to turn and waddle away before the harridan had grabbed a broom and leapt after him trying to strike him as he cried, "Hiss-hiss-hiss!"

She would have hurt him had she not caught her high heel in the crazy paving and fell, thump - thump - thump. Her glasses skidded along the path towards the frightened goose.

"Are you alright?" enquired Rose-Anna, coming to help her complaining step-mother get up.

Meanwhile, the goose prince had carefully picked up the step-mother's glasses in his bill and offered them back to her, but the nasty woman accused him of trying to steal her glasses. So he dropped them immediately, waddled quickly away and hid behind the garage.

From the safety of his hiding-place the goose prince heard the stepmother threaten to punish Rose-Anna. Soon after he heard her come out of the cottage front door, enter the garage and start her car engine. With a grate of gears she backed the car out of the garage and was soon screeching down the lane in a cloud of fumes. Peep-peep-peep, she sounded the horn savagely expecting other drivers, pedestrians and even a herd of cows returning from milking, to get out of her way.

In the quietness that followed the goose prince thought, "I've got Rose-Anna into

trouble." It was the first time in his life that he felt responsible and knew it was his duty to help the girl.

Round - round - round the cottage he waddled. It was all shut up. Even the windows were closed despite the sunny day. He stood and listened. Could he hear a faint sob? He went to the kitchen window and by stretching up his long neck he could just see inside and, as he had guessed, saw Rose-Anna crying her heart out. He tapped on the window, tap - tap - tap.

Rose-Anna looked up and her tear-stained face broke into a smile as she saw the goose at the window.

"Goosie, goosie, goosie!" she exclaimed in delight as she ran to the kitchen door to let him in.

It seemed a cheerless place to the goose prince. There was a huge pile of washing up in the sink waiting to be done, and an even greater heap of dirty clothes in and falling out of a clothes basket. Then the goose prince noticed a piece of paper on the kitchen table which listed jobs to be done:

Wash up. Do the washing. Make the beds. Clean the bathroom and lavatory. Polish the brass. Peel the potatoes and carrots . . .

The list went on and on. The goose prince realised that the girl had been left at home to do all these jobs while the wicked step-mother had gone out to enjoy herself.

The goose prince realised he would not be able to help her with the work, but thought Rose-Anna deserved a break in the fresh air and sunshine, so gently taking some of the material of her track suit pants in his bill, he pulled her towards the door.

At first she was alarmed, but then the girl understood why the goose was pulling at her clothes and said, "Dear Goosie, do you want me to come outside into the garden? Well I'd love to - but I mustn't stay out for long, otherwise my step-mother will beat me for not doing all the jobs she has set me to do."

Out into the warm sunshine they went and sat down on the grass amidst the daisies and the yellow buttercups.

"Oh goosie," said Rose-Anna, "I would love to keep you as a pet but I fear my step-mother might put you in the oven for dinner."

"Honk - honk - honk!"

"It was not always like this for me," the girl explained, "Before my parents died I was happy here."

Looking around the goose prince could see that the garden had once been well looked after - free from all the weeds that now entangled it.

Rosa-Anna explained, "After my Mum died my father married again. My step-mother was once a beauty queen - but she is not a nice person, as my poor father soon found out. He died of grief soon after."

The goose prince noticed how sad she looked and waddling up to her, wanted to put his wing around her, to comfort her, but was unable to. He didn't want to leave her.

For the first time in his life he felt the need to be responsible and to think how he might take an interest in the people of his father's kingdom and help those in need.

A peep-peep-peep sounded in the distance and Rose-Anna sprang up in alarm, her face paling. "Oh No! My step-mother is coming back and I haven't done any of the jobs she told me to do!" she cried in terror.

As the wicked step-mother's car squealed into the drive, Rose-Anna made as if to dart

back into the kitchen but the goose prince acted quickly. He moved in front of her so that she tripped up and fell onto his back. Summoning all his strength, the goose prince spread his wings, flap - flap - flap. Running faster and faster around the garden he lifted up into the air with Rose-Anna clinging to his neck.

Up-up-up into the air they flew, safely away from the wicked step-mother who looked up at them in the sky and shook her fist at them. It was just as well they couldn't hear what she was screaming at them.

Rose-Anna managed to clamber into a more comfortable position on the goose's back as they soared through the air.

Although she wasn't a very heavy girl, the goose prince was thankful to see the palace come into view below so he could glide down and land on one of the royal lawns.

The royal magician, meanwhile, had been on tenterhooks. He'd been fearful courtiers might wonder what he'd done with their young prince - and terrified the king might ask him.

Imagine his relief when he looked out of a turret window and saw the giant goose prince circling the palace lawn about to land, and what was it he carried on his back?

He chuckled. "A pretty girl I do believe. Well-well-well, the prince is not such a goose after all!"

Grabbing his wand, the magician waved it as he darted down the turret steps, and turned the goose back into the prince.

Safely on the ground, Rose-Anna found the goose had gone. By her side stood a handsome young prince she immediately fell in love with. And the prince, thankful to be his normal self with the enchantment gone, was thrilled to be able to ask Rose-Anna to marry him.

The king was delighted with the prince's choice of bride - so pleased he gave the magician a pay rise.

The prince and sweet Rose-Anna were married soon after and went off on their honeymoon on the prince's motorbike. The magician followed the royal pair driving a silver Rolls Royce laden with all their luggage and wedding presents.

They were very - very - very happy.

About Anne Holman...

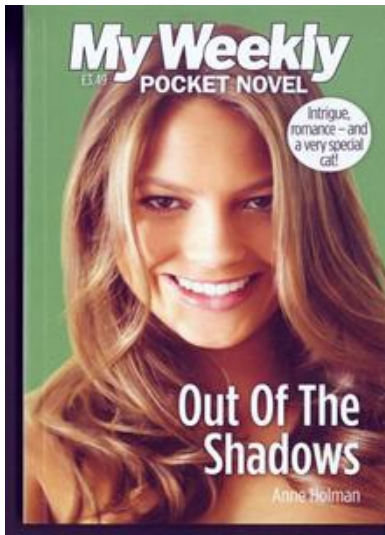


Anne Holman is the pen name of Sheila Anne Holman Finch.

She was born in Peterborough in 1934 and moved to many schools during and after WW2. Art colleges, and an American University education, provided her with varied experiences.

Teaching Art and Art History, she married Roy Finch. They enjoyed living in rural Devon, walking their dogs. He died in 2015.

A member of the Romantic Novelists' Association, she has written mainly historical romantic fiction novels and novellas. Her 25th novel, *Out of the Shadows*, is published by DC Thompson.



Anne Holman's stories, widely available in public libraries, include:

Sail Away to Love

Her Heart's Desire

Flying to Heaven

Finding Love

Hidden Love

Secret Love

Captured Love

The Longman Girl

The Owner of Thorpe Hall
The Captain's Messenger
Belle of the Ball
Cassie's Favour
The Golden Dolly
A New Life for Rosemary
Vera's Victory
Vera's Valour
Vera's Venture
The Mantua Maker's Beau
The Treasure Seekers
In Her Shoes
The Art of Love

Come the First of July by Patricia Fawcett

Geoff had no idea how he was going to get out of this without Penny asking for a divorce. She was easily upset when her driving was criticised and to refuse to travel with her to work this month when it was her turn to drive was just asking for trouble.

It was a damned fool idea in the first place but it was something Penny had introduced when she passed her driving test at the seventh attempt.

"We'll do month about," she said cheerfully. "It will give you a break, darling, and you can just sit back and relax on the way in."

He normally gritted his teeth and suffered her driving but today was the first of June and Penny was dynamite in traffic. It would be an accident, bound to be, and she would escape unscathed of course whereas he would cop it.

"I think I'll walk to work this month," he said. "About time I got some exercise. A brisk walk will do me good."

"Brisk walk?" She looked gorgeous as usual, her blonde hair caught up in the way he liked, but she was frowning as she stood there with her coat on, jangling the car keys. "What are you talking about, Geoff? You never walk anywhere and it's raining. You'll get soaked."

"What's a bit of rain?" He smiled, kissed her and waved her off feeling guilty.

Once she was gone, he picked up the kitchen calendar and stared at it. How would he get through this month? Thirty long days and nights. And every damned moment filled with anxiety wondering when the hell it would happen. It would be torture.

He walked to the office and Penny was right for even with his golf umbrella, he got soaked. What did it matter he told himself as he steamed dry, he was still alive wasn't he? And the whole purpose of this month was to remain alive. He had contemplated taking the whole month off, going to somewhere remote where nothing could possibly happen. Somewhere where there were no cars to knock him down, no murderers lurking in dark alleys, no tragic accidents at all. But was there such a heavenly place? In any case, he could not afford to take a month off.

He was a born worrier which was why he dare not tell Penny what was on his mind. She would just laugh and tell him he was being ridiculous and then she would go on and on about his family and what nut cases they were with their superstitious ways.

At his desk in the bank the day dragged. He worked through his lunch hour, safe, reflecting that if there was a robbery with shooters being waved around, he would be OK here in the back office. Despite this, he was irritable and jumpy, uncharacteristically snapping at his assistant and nearly reducing her to tears which meant an awkward apology.

"Fancy a lift home, Geoff?" He looked up, refusing the kind offer with a smile. Simon's driving verged on insane, far worse than his wife's. There was no point asking for it so he walked home through another downpour avoiding any quick scuttles across busy roads, waiting angelically for the green man to appear at traffic lights before he moved an inch.

Penny fussed him when he got in; quite nice really, running a hot bath for him although she did point out with a wifely smile that it was his own fault.

It took him all evening to warm up but at least he could cross today off the calendar with only another twenty nine to go. There was so much that could happen for it was destined to be an accident. It could not therefore be death by natural causes, not when it said tragically on the tombstone and in any case, despite his lack of exercise, he was in tip-top shape. The doctor who had recently given him an MOT had told him that he ought to live to be a hundred congratulating him on the fact that he had given up smoking, as had his dearest Penny.

So, what were the possible options? Gas explosion? No gas. Electrocution? He would be very careful with the mile long cable of the electric mower although with rain promised for the rest of the month that would put pay to that. It might be something bizarre such as a snakebite. Oh come off it, think straight. Trouble at the bank was still the best bet but he had invented a file resuscitation job that would last the entire month. Thank heavens he was senior and nobody would quibble about that.

Mid month came and went and it was all boringly ordinary but he still could not relax. Sometimes he wondered if he was being plain stupid. The trouble was his mother had always been uncannily accurate in her predictions. They came to have their tea cups read, hushed voices in the parlour and it was drummed into him as a little boy that he must never interrupt. He never had but he had taken to listening at the door.

One day, doing just that, he happened to overhear his parents talking. "Such an odd thing, Edward," his mother said. "It was quite distinct. There I was in the churchyard looking down at dear Geoffrey's gravestone. It was black with cream lettering. Very elegant. Tragically, it said, Geoffrey Parnell aged 44 years."

His father laughed. "Morbid you are," he said and then, as curiosity overcame him, "What else did it say?"

"The date was fuzzy. The something of June 2015. Can you imagine it being the twenty-first century? The thing is, Edward, he will be 44 then, won't he? Imagine our little Geoffrey 44." She laughed too, a worried kind of laugh though. "For goodness sake, don't mention this to him. You know what he's like for worrying. He's such a sensitive little soul."

He had forgotten all about that overheard conversation until recently something had reminded him. If only his mother had been wrong sometimes but her reputation remained intact until her death.

The month tripped along. It was the wettest and wildest June since records began and didn't he know it. His daily arrival at the bank, dripping wet because his umbrella was worse than useless in the wind, attracted a few glances from the staff who must be wondering what the hell he was up to but he did not care. In fact, were it not for the wind and rain he was beginning to enjoy the daily trek.

The 29th arrived at last and there was just one day to go. Slowly the menace was lifting and he was beginning to relax although he still was not taking any chances. He arranged to have the last day off work intending to spend it in bed where nothing could possibly happen. He managed to convince Penny he had a tummy bug.

"No wonder, you idiot," she said showing precious little sympathy but smiling all the same. "The number of times you've been soaked to the skin this month!"

"Let's go to New York in July," he said impulsively. "A long weekend. You've always wanted to go there, haven't you?"

"My goodness, you are pushing the boat out, darling. That sounds wonderful."

He shrugged off the expense. Come the first of July, he would promise his Penny the moon.

The day dragged. And by the time evening arrived he convinced himself that he had been a fool and that nothing was going to happen unless a burglar sneaked in before midnight and hit him over the head. He could turn out to have a paper-thin skull and one blow in the wrong place could kill him.

Penny was going out that evening with some friends from work and he waved her off knowing full well that she was suspicious of the tummy bug excuse. At least she had looked at him a little oddly when he surprised her in the room upstairs she used as her home office; a comfortable little room with its desk and old easy chair. It was her space and he respected that and rarely entered it. The room smelled of one of those awful air fresheners and he sniffed the air with a frown before following her out. It said Sea Breeze on the can but it didn't smell quite like that.

As usual there was a moment's panic before Penny left. This time she had mislaid her handbag and he found it in the living room. It was one of those bulky handbags with numerous pockets and she was forever losing something that was stuck in one of them; her mobile phone, her reading glasses, her lipstick.

Her cigarettes! As he handed her the bag he caught a glimpse of the packet, irritated and disappointed but deciding that it would be wise not to say anything just now when she was ready for the off. So, she was secretly smoking, was she, doing it in her study and he should have noticed but he was so damned preoccupied this month. Ah well, he would tackle that little problem gently tomorrow, try a bit of persuasion or even bribery. She wouldn't be able to smoke on the flight to New York.

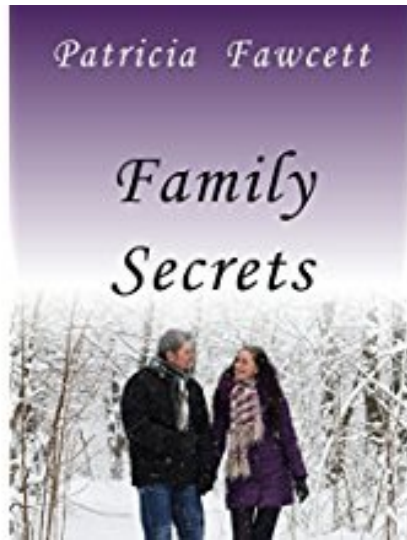
He settled down in the living room when she was gone, feet up, in a much happier frame of mind. Nothing, short of the house being struck by lightning, could happen now and it was a balmy evening so there was no danger of that. Tomorrow, with the prospect of a long happy life ahead of him, he was going to start on a series of jobs that had long needed doing; a list a mile long. Some he would leave to the professionals but he would sort out that door that wouldn't shut properly, that annoying tap in the kitchen, those uneven patio slabs and that bloody smoke alarm that Penny was always going on about.

He closed his eyes and almost immediately he was asleep.

Upstairs in Penny's study behind the closed door, the fire was taking hold, smoke billowing now from the easy chair, the one with the comfortable foam-filled cushions for, in her haste when Geoff had surprised her this evening Penny had stuffed her cigarette down the side of the chair.

And it was not quite out.

More by Patricia Fawcett...



Josie's family has always kept secrets. When she was younger, her mother was obsessed with what other people thought of the family and so anything that was even potentially shameful was expertly hidden from other people. Josie has been trying to keep her past tightly there – in the past – and concentrate on her life with Ray, her husband of twenty years. However, when Josie and Ray's son introduces them to his new girlfriend – the daughter of Josie's ex-flame – Josie's past is suddenly back to haunt her...

Available from Amazon.

How Bear Came to Somerset by Frances Evesham

Exham on Sea's longest serving town councillor, Eric Thomson, could hardly find Romania on a map. Why would he want to? It was somewhere on the other side of the world and he knew nothing about it. He had enough to do, what with his farm's declining profits and the need for help to manage his sheep out on the Somerset Levels. He was getting old, and walking the fields was almost too much for him.

One morning his wife, Regina, visited the dentist. She shook with terror as she waited for the summons to the black, leather chair. Butterflies swooped and dived in her stomach, and to calm herself she turned to one of the glossy magazines piled on the table in the middle of the room.

Dramatic photographs of green, luscious Romanian countryside entranced her, washing away every trace of fear and filling her with a sudden yearning for travel. The landscape of picturesque villages beneath dramatic mountains looked untouched by the march of progress.

Regina begged Eric to book a trip to the Carpathian Mountains. "We're getting old. If we don't go now, we never will."

He protested. It was far too expensive. "And, how can I leave the farm? Who'll look after it? Holidays are for slackers." He'd used the same excuse for the past thirty years and it had always been successful before.

This time, things were different. The quality of Eric's evening meals took a turn for the worse. Lamb chops and beef disappeared from the menu. A new book about Romania appeared on his bedside table. Worst of all, his wife stopped smiling.

One day, Eric caught a glimpse of her weary, lined face as she polished their old sideboard. The sorrow in her eyes reminded him of that dreadful day, years ago, when the doctor told them they could never have children.

What could he do? He longed to help Regina fulfill her dream. He pored over his bank accounts, desperately depleted by the low price of milk. The farm was barely ticking over. There was no money for a foreign trip. Eric couldn't sleep.

He shared his worry with Jim, a cider producer, his old friend and fellow councillor. Jim had an idea. Exham on Sea must find a Romanian town and become its twin.

The council took a little convincing. They thought France or Germany would be an easier, more accessible option for twinning than Romania, that distant, unfamiliar, Eastern European country, but Jim talked them round. Most of the councillors had been to school with his nephews and nieces and they treated the wrinkled, indomitable old farmer with awe, remembering his fearsome temper when they'd scrumped apples from his orchards.

Eric and Regina officiated proudly at the twinning ceremony in Romania. Eric had saved hard, forgoing his Sunday glass of scotch, and the small grant from the town council was enough to allow them to make the trip. They lodged for a week with Grigor, a young farmer, and his family in Chiscau village, their sheep grazing freely on the surrounding hills.

One morning, as the sun shone, Eric and Regina borrowed an aging, ramshackle lorry from their host and set off to visit the heart of the Apusini Nature Park.

Home to a variety of caves, the area was utterly unspoilt. The lorry lurched and rocked along barely-made tracks, climbing the hillside until the ground became too rough to continue. Using a map supplied by Grigor, Eric and Regina left the lorry to take a walk up the hillside, searching for a cave Regina had read about. Eric's map-reading skills were poor. He'd never needed them in Somerset, for he knew every inch of the area.

Hot and tired, their aging bones aching, they finally found the Bear Cave, where bears had lived for thousands of years. They ducked their heads and entered, to find a magical world of stalactites and stalagmites. It took their breath away.

Stunned by such beauty, Eric and his wife sat and gazed, mouths open. Time passed, but they struggled to tear themselves away until the rumbling of Eric's stomach reminded them it was time for dinner.

The rattles and clanks of the ancient lorry grew louder as they negotiated fast-flowing streams and rocky slopes. Eric pretended not to hear his wife's increasingly sharp exclamations. "What's that noise?" she cried. "It wasn't making such a racket this morning."

She was right. With a screech, the vehicle lurched, wrenched the steering wheel from Eric's grasp, and ground to a halt. The engine gave a despairing cough and died. Regina said, "I told you something was wrong."

Eric jumped down from the lorry and tried his mobile phone. There was no signal. "We'd better start walking."

He looked at the map, twisting and turning it, wishing it made more sense to him. He couldn't get his bearings from the surroundings; no farms or houses, just hills, sheep and forest as far as he could see, and no way to tell one tree from another.

Two hours of walking later, his wife sank on to a rock and flatly refused to budge. "I've got blisters on my blisters," she announced, "and I shall stay here until we're rescued."

Eric gazed across the deserted landscape. His own legs ached. He was too old for this. "No one's going to rescue us, here."

"Nonsense. Of course they will."

They waited. Dusk fell, and the sounds of sheep gave way to the distant coo of wood pigeons settling for the night in a nearby forest. Eric checked the phone once more. Still no signal. How would they get back to the farm before nightfall? What if they walked in the wrong direction and became even more lost? Maybe he should leave his wife to rest and try to find the way back to the farm to fetch help. Questions buzzed round his head, but he knew he couldn't abandon his wife here, alone; there may still be bears in the area. Somerset seemed a very long way away.

The slow creep of anxiety restricted Eric's throat and he coughed.

"Eric. What's that? Is it a wolf?" Regina was on her feet.

"Of course not." But there were wolves in the forest, weren't there? Eric forced his aching legs to move. "We've got to go on."

His wife clutched his arm. "Eric." She was shaking. "Look, over there."

Eric's gaze followed her pointing finger. A huge beast headed in their direction, travelling fast, its mouth wide. Time slowed to a crawl. Eric knew he was going to die. Those vicious wolf teeth would tear out his throat with one bite. He clenched his fists. At least he'd put up a fight. He stepped forward to shield Regina, bracing himself for the attack, both eyes tight shut.

A great weight hit his legs and he fell, heavily, knowing it was all over.

Nothing happened.

Eric opened his eyes.

Mouth agape in a canine grin, a shaggy dog circled the pair. Eric stumbled to his feet. "Why, it's just a dog, although it's a big one." He began to laugh. "He's rounding us up. Come on. We'll see where he wants us to go."

He started walking, his wife clinging on one arm. The dog led the way, stopping to turning at intervals, waiting for the humans to catch up. When they rested, catching their breath, he circled them once more, then led them on further.

Suddenly, he stopped, head high, and barked. An answering whistle split the air and Grigor stepped out from the evening gloom, his weather-beaten face creased in worry.

Eric wished he'd taken the trouble to learn a little of the language. "We're so pleased to see you," he said in English. Regina said nothing. She was far too busy hugging the huge dog to speak.

Next morning, Nicoletta, Grigor's wife, led the English couple to one of the farm's outhouses. She halted, one finger to her lips, pushed the door ajar, and nodded towards the basket in the corner. Eric's rescuer stood by a basket, large brown eyes warm with pride as he guarded a smaller sheepdog and three round, wriggling bundles of fur.

Regina gasped. "Puppies," she whispered.

Nicoletta held up a finger. "For you. One."

Eric shook his head. "Oh no," he said. "Those dogs will grow far too big for Somerset."

His wife's lips were set in the determined expression Eric recognised only too well. His heart sank.

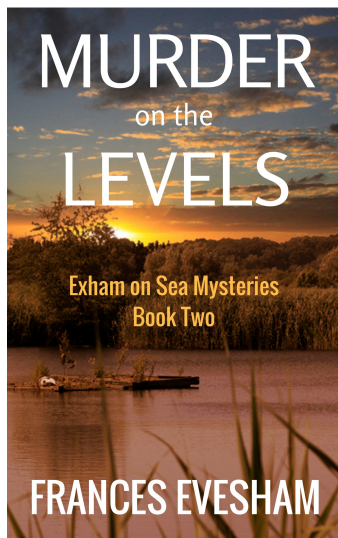
"He can walk as much as he likes on the Levels," Regina pointed out, "and he'll help with the sheep."

"He'll be expensive to feed."

Regina's eyes sparkled with tears, and Eric groaned. They'd never know what it was like to see grandchildren on their farm. Perhaps a puppy was just what they needed. In any case, he couldn't resist the hope in his wife's face.

"We'll call him Bear," he said, giving in. "Like the cave."

More by Frances Evesham...



When a picnic in the tranquil English countryside ends in disaster and the death of two cyclists, the Exham on Sea bakery has to close. Even Libby starts to believe she could be to blame.

Then, as she unravels the mystery of the poisoned cyclists, helped by the giant Carpathian sheepdog called Bear and an aloof marmalade cat, she uncovers disturbing clues to her own family's past.

Available from Amazon.

*Morgan's Girl by Sheila Daglish**British Columbia, Canada, 1880s*

The forest closed around Morgan as he slipped noiselessly beneath the cover of giant redwoods. For once in his life he'd almost been tempted to stay. Tempted by the warmth of Bel's arms, but more by the warmth of her affection. He'd needed that last night, despite knowing he was dicing with danger. She wasn't the experienced sort of woman he usually went for. The others all knew the rules of the game. But with Bel he'd had to be careful. He couldn't afford mistakes in that direction, and wouldn't want to bring trouble upon her for all the gold in Canada. Not that most people would think of having a youngster as 'trouble', but for himself, Morgan O'Neill, there'd always been a need to travel light.

Noiseless, too, Bel closed the door behind him. A reminiscent smile played around her lips, although her dark blue eyes were serious. How she'd wanted him to stay! But you could never trap a free spirit like Morgan and, since the brawl that ended with him killing Chuck Flanagan's weasly son, he'd needed to keep non-stop on the move. Flanagan would stay on his tracks until it was over. That was for sure!

The smile faltered, and then strengthened a fraction as she splayed both hands across her stomach. She'd told Morgan, every time he turned up, that it was safe to make love, but it was a lie. He was the only man she'd met, or who was likely to come her way, that she'd want as father for her boy. Their son would have Morgan's lust for life coursing through his veins, the same unruly black curls, the deep-set black eyes and wiry frame. Everyone would like him but they'd be wary, too, knowing that his lazy drawl and deceptively easy manner hid a man who'd set light in an instant—especially when he came up against wrong—just like his Pa always did.

That was where Morgan had landed in trouble. There was a heap of money around, fresh from lucky strikes when they'd been found. The Gold Rush was its name, the start of a devilish hunt that was killing, and would kill more men in their hundreds, even as it fuelled gambling saloons and filled beer barrels to overflowing. Bel had never been inside a saloon but she'd heard plenty of tales and had seen trail-hardened prospectors throw themselves in through the swing doors, and hours later be thrown back out, to land sprawling on the mud-baked sidewalks that'd sprung up in each new shanty-town.

Her mother's boarding house was doing well because rumours of great veins of gold and handfuls of nuggets, with always the dream of finding one as big as their fist, brought men, even families, through Jasper Valley. There was so much coming and going, so much talk of riches beyond belief, so many hopes. Morgan was one of those who'd searched for gold and, finding some—not much—had straightaway lost it on the tables. Dice, cards, betting on weights, betting on the age of a fellow's grandmother—anything would do so long as it fuelled the excitement of the day or, more often, the night.

There were girls in the saloons, of course. She'd heard whispers that Morgan's sister owned a certain place in Granville, a log-town of forest and waterways. Miles from here, it mushroomed up when a never-ending stream of emigrants from across the world began docking in the harbour. Straightaway, they took out leases, planning a new life in this land that had always belonged to the Indians, where they and the buffalo herds once roamed freely.

Frank Clarke, Bel's father had been one of the incomers. He'd done well, lucky in knowing stable life back home, and deciding to open a livery stable in this valley between frosted mountain ranges. But then Frank got too near a moose, ten days short of his thirtieth birthday.

That left Bel's Ma to cope. The daughter of well-bred, but minor, gentry, Elizabeth had travelled from England with Frank, deaf to her parents' pleas to wait a while until he'd a chance to settle. After her husband's early death, she sold the livery premises, knowing she didn't stand much chance of success with it, a woman alone in a man's world. Instead, she scraped enough money to set up a boarding house with six year old Bel, using the pittance she'd salvaged from the stables, and the household knowledge she'd learnt from her mother's well-run home.

It hadn't been so bad. Bel had helped Elizabeth from an early age, her mother glad to have someone share the work and responsibility. Eventually, with Elizabeth following her husband to a too-early grave, for the last few months Bel had run the place alone.

Clicking the door quietly shut, Bel glanced through the square window. There was no sign of Morgan, of course. He'd melted into the shadows. Would he be back? She hoped so. But, even then, he wouldn't stay. Unless Flanagan was dead or gave up his vow to avenge his son? No. Morgan would always feel trapped and only a stupid woman would try to cage him. Again, she touched the grey homespun gown that covered her stomach. Instinct told Bel that she still kept one small part of Morgan. She'd do her best to keep his son beside her – and safe.

Vancouver, the new name for Granville.

The maid looked respectable, conceded Georgie, and the exterior of the house well maintained, with crisp lace curtains at the windows. She was not so impressed with its location near the waterfront, however, nor with the seamen and hawkers who idled along the sidewalk, talking, smoking and watching her with knowing eyes as she walked up the wide steps to the metal-studded front door.

The maid was waiting, eyebrows raised. She looked Georgie up and down.

"Mrs. Hamilton I daresay you'll be wanting."

"Mrs. Hamilton?" The name meant nothing to Georgie. "No, I would like to see Mrs. Dolly Beckett."

The brows went even higher and the maid's expression changed to intense curiosity as her eyes travelled slowly from the top of Georgie's neat straw hat to the tip of serviceable brown boots which peeped from the hem of her green travelling suit.

"I'll see if she's home. You'd better come inside." She ushered Georgie into a well-appointed sitting room and, after one more assessing glance, disappeared.

Ten minutes passed before the door opened and a woman entered. She appeared to be about fifty, although tell-tale lines beside her eyes hinted that a few extra years had passed since

then. There could not have been greater contrast between her and the lodging-house keepers Georgie had left behind in Jasper Valley. The proprietor of this establishment sported artfully-arranged golden hair, presumably the latest mode, her purple silk dress rustled as she moved and a long pearl necklace was looped around her throat. Seeing Georgie's slim frame and, curling beneath the straw hat, thick dark hair silhouetted in the full brightness of the window, she stopped dead. Then shaking her head a little, as though to dispel a half-forgotten vision, she spoke as Georgie turned towards her.

"The girl said you asked for me, love. But these days our business manager is Mrs. Hamilton. I took a back seat more'n ten years ago."

Georgie noticed Dolly's grand manner and the way in which she emphasised the high-class nature of the establishment. She wondered slightly at the shadow that passed across the older woman's face as she met Georgie's deepset dark eyes.

"No, there is no mistake," she told Dolly quietly. "You are someone I have travelled a long way to meet. It was a promise I made my mother before she died." Her voice was husky, her smile wavered for the length of a heartbeat as she went on. "Years ago, your brother was shot through the heart by a man called Chuck Flanagan."

Dolly's whisper came through strangled breath, but Georgie didn't need to hear her question. "Your brother was Morgan O'Neill. My father."

More by Sheila Darglish...

This begins the sequel to 'Secret Waters', which is an historical romance shortly to be published as an e-book.

Beggars Cannot be Choosers by Lucy Harper

At first I had taken no notice of him. And why would I?

I'd popped in to Mr Warkowski's, looked with longing at my old friends superking menthol and with continued reluctance, bought a pack of sugar free gum instead. I swear by the time the nicotine cravings stop I'll probably have stronger jaws than a Pitbull. I'd sacrificed my remaining pleasurable vice, parting company with my five-ish, okay ten, a day habit for two reasons:

One, I'd found the dress to end all dresses and I had to possess it. It was perfect for the party tonight; classy but with the right hint of sluttish-ness I was aiming for. It was also a designer label and a bit pricier than I would like but everyone needs to treat themselves once in a while don't they?

Oh, and two, my best friend Kelly who was having a cheeky coffee before work, overheard Jamie saying he couldn't bear to go out with girls who smoked and later, my name was mentioned in the same sentence as the word shame. I never thought for one second he knew I existed.

If you only knew how many of my latest fantasies had been all about Jamie since I'd clocked him on the beach at Croyde earlier this summer. He'd been wearing Quicksilver blue and white shorts, all golden skinned, totally ripped with a chest I had itched to run my hands over. Who knew that that body lurked under the conservative suits he usually favoured?

Anyway, it was when I left Mr Warkowski's with my usual, "See ya, Mr K," that I first noticed him. Or rather I smelled him, a nose assaulting scent of bad personal hygiene coupled with the musty odour of decay.

"Spare any change please? Spare any change?" This was not said quietly or with any resignation, but almost sung and with a touch of something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

I looked at him then and he stared straight back at me with eyes of a surprisingly piercing blue. Urgh, he was so disgusting, sat on a bit of battered cardboard placed slightly in the alleyway between Mr K's and Nell's Nail Bar. Matted hair of some nondescript brown colour, an unkempt beard shot with grey and littered with specks of who knew what? The clothes were filthy, all stained and grimy and I recoiled with absolute revulsion. "Can you spare me any change Miss?"

It was said almost as a challenge and I realised what his voice was edged with: defiance. The tone said 'ignore me if you dare' and what with the laser-like stare, it unnerved me. I couldn't wait to get away from him. I reached in to my jacket pocket, pulled out some loose change and holding my breath, bent down and dropped it in to the once-white polystyrene box sat in front of him. I moved away quickly, my thoughts turning back to the dress, tonight and whether I could drum up the courage to speak to Jamie.

"One pound sixteen? One pound sixteen! ONE-POUND-SIXTEEN".

I don't know at what exact point I became aware all was not well in my morning stroll through the High Street to work. It might have been when words like 'stuck up, 'selfish' or 'uncaring' were said loud enough to penetrate my thoughts, or when I realised people were stood watching my progress with looks on their faces varying from curiosity & fascination to downright disgust or embarrassment.

"Look at you! Look at you in your flash clothes and silly shoes, with no thoughts in your pretty little head about anyone else..."

Oh no. He, the beggar, was behind me, following my every step, words intermittently being shouted at my back, his voice unnaturally loud in the quiet before shops started opening for the day. I kept my head down, hunched further in to my jacket and began to walk faster, hoping he'd get bored and go back to his grubby patch of cardboard. Why me? Why today?

"Typical! Typical of a girl like you. Empty-headed, selfish, blind to the plight of others..."

This was so unfair. Four years ago he would have had a point. I had money, a bedroom bursting with clothes, shoes and the many other possessions any young woman dreamt of owning. I had friends, or thought I did, and had not a care in the world. I did what I liked, when I liked, rarely thought of others. Now, I lived with my Nan in her little two-bed terraced council house she'd rented for the past forty years, and shared a room with my hormonal thirteen year old sister.

"Expecting everything to come to you..."

I almost laughed. Almost. I pursed my lips, sinking my teeth in to the soft flesh to stop any sound escaping. I had very few expectations in life now. I'd learnt the hard way to face my problems because running away solved nothing. Anything worth having had to be earned and often, the most valuable things of all could not be bought.

"Thinking you have the whole world in your dainty, painted fingers..."

I snorted then. I couldn't help it. My whole world consisted of trying to keep my teenage sister in line, in school, without my killing her, whilst covertly taking care of my nan whose quiet life had been invaded. She'd felt my father's absence and the resulting revelations just as hard as we had. But none of that was anything compared to what my mother had endured. She'd lost her husband, her home, friends and what little pride she had left dealing with the multitude of creditors and crippling debts my father had left behind. Thankfully, she had one special talent, the voice of an angel, which she used to great effect, singing wherever she could, dancing to the Receiver's tune.

"Nothing to say, eh? Nothing to say for yourself...?"

Enough was enough. This had to end and right now. Oh no. No, no, no, no, no. Out of the corner of my eye there was a frowning Jamie shaped figure looking straight at us. What a sight we must be. Me scurrying along trying to be invisible, hotly dogged by a vociferous tramp with an axe to grind. Inwardly I sighed. What was one more lost dream? With resignation I stopped and turned towards my pursuer.

"You are a..." I opened my mouth and...

I didn't see him move but suddenly he was there. Jamie. Inserted between us. For several moments my view was obscured by his suit-clad back. He raised his hand inches from the beggar's face.

"Stop! Stop this right now! How dare you!" He was furious, a quivering tower of outrage I could feel coming off him in waves. "Who do you think you are, following this girl and

shouting at her? You have no right—"

"I have every right. One pound sixteen is all she could spare after—"

I peered round Jamie's back and those startling blue eyes locked with my own. The defiance was no longer evident but had been replaced with disappointment and something else. Sorrow? I slid from behind him and moved to stand at Jamie's side.

"As far as I'm concerned it's one pound sixteen more than you deserve," Jamie said, pulling his phone out of his pocket and palming it with a finger poised above it. "You have thirty seconds to turn around and walk away before I call the police. The choice is yours."

One, two, three seconds passed. Those bluest of blue eyes held my own and then I understood. The shock was followed swiftly by a terrible sadness; I could feel my shoulders sag with the weight of it. With an almost imperceptible shake of his head, the beggar scowled at Jamie, turned on his heel and began to walk back the way we'd come. I watched him leave and wanted to cry.

"Are you okay?" Jamie asked. He put his arm round me. "You're shaking! Come on, let's get you a coffee." He started to lead me towards the café. "You can't go in to work like this. You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Thank you." I whispered, tearing my gaze away from the retreating figure.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow I would scour the town and find the beggar. For despite everything he was still my Father.

The School Run by Patricia Fawcett

I stand holding Jessica's hand just inside the school gates a little to one side because, just three weeks in, I am not yet part of the group. It is June, glorious June, and we are in the middle of a heat-wave and, after our initial delight, we English, true to form, are starting to grumble about the temperature.

I cannot imagine what time some of these women get up in order to look like they do. Off to one side, I feel I am definitely letting the side down. We were late getting up and I grabbed the first thing that came to hand; yesterday's shorts – yesterdays in all senses – and a T-shirt that's seen better days.

I catch a few despairing glances, try a smile but it fails to raise an answering one. It wouldn't hurt, would it, for just one of them to crack a smile of welcome. I listen in to snatches of conversation and grip Jessica's hand. I feel for her, my little five year old, and wish for the hundredth time that we had stayed put in our old familiar town. She had friends there and so did we, friends we have left behind and we all of us have to start over again but that's the price we have to pay as a family for the promotion.

"I've got the job." I can still hear the excited voice over the phone. It must have been a tough call at the final interview, the short list narrowed down to three.

"That's great news darling." I tried to be enthusiastic but all the negative thoughts pushed to the back of my mind rose up. I knew I was being pathetic but I liked it where we used to live and I was not looking forward to starting over.

"It's double the salary. We can look for something really nice over there."

"I know. That will be great."

"Don't tell me you still have doubts?"

"No, of course not."

"Don't worry about your job. They're crying out for qualified nurses everywhere, aren't they, and with your experience there won't be a problem."

Leaning against the railings, I sigh and adjust Jessica's little pleated skirt and the red tie she is so proud to wear and feel a lump in my throat as I see her face crumpling as a bell sounds and the children start to run to their lines.

"Come on, sweetheart." She attaches herself to my leg and awkwardly I walk her to the line, give her a quick kiss and step away. The least fuss the better and I wave as she looks back at me, just about controlling her emotions although the bottom lip is all a quiver.

"Poor little soul. It's awful isn't it?" I turn round to catch a sympathetic glance from a woman doing the same as me. I've noticed her before, several times, but I am a bit shy and I am

cautious about making the first friendly move. "It's heartbreaking to see them upset," she goes on. "You just want to take them back home, don't you?"

I nod. Smile. And to my relief she smiles back. Yes. I feel like thumping the air for it is the first real smile I've had from anybody in this playground. She has messy blonde hair and she looks as knackered as I feel and just about as unfashionable at that. No make-up and scruffy jeans and, joy of joys, there is a patch of something that looks like baby sick on the shoulder of her billowing blouse, the sort of garment that hides a thousand figure faults. I feel an instant welcome rapport of a fellow conspirator as I suss the irritated look she shoots at the other mums, one of them in particular immaculately turned out with full make-up at this hour of the morning.

"Hi there. I'm Rachel's mummy," she says and I am beginning to realize now that all of us have that sort of label attached. We are not real people at all in this playground but an appendage to the little people in our charge. "And Jessica's yours, isn't she?"

I nod proudly because with her gorgeous red curls Jessica takes some beating although I would say that, wouldn't I? We introduce ourselves properly then, our grown-up names. She is Lizzie and she hates it.

"We all hate our names," I offer a grimace of sympathy. "You never think when you pick a name that you are lumbering that child forever and a day with it and then before you know it, it gets abbreviated. We swore we would never shorten it to Jess but other people have started to do it."

"I know. Rachel gets Rach. Can you believe that?"

One of the mummies calls out a very loud goodbye to her Perdita – surely not? – and at that I find myself exchanging a bemused glance with my new friend.

The disappearance of the last of the line is the signal for a rapid adult dispersal and, as the cars zoom off, we breathe a sigh of relief.

"You live on Bardon Close, don't you?" Lizzie says as we set off on foot. "I live at the bottom end of Bardon Road."

"Right." I feel I should apologize for living where we do in the posh little Close off her road guessing that she will live in one of the terraced houses nearer town. As we are heading in the same direction, we set off together.

She pauses a minute to attend to her baby in the pushchair. It is wearing neutral clothes; the baby blanket is white so wisely I don't hazard a guess as to the sex. Like its mum, the baby has a chubby face and a thatch of messy hair. "Your Jessica seems to be settling in," she says as we set off again.

"Do you think so?" I am desperate to agree with her. "I hope so. You can't help feeling guilty can you? You move them away from everything they know and just drop them somewhere strange and expect it all to be fine."

We wait to cross a road, the one that runs beside the park and then she turns into the park saying that it's a short cut.

"I haven't had time to explore properly," I tell her as she pushes on, the baby making irritable pre-waking-up noises.

"He's a rotten sleeper," she says with a rueful smile. "I haven't had a decent night since he was born. And being on my own doesn't help."

Ah. A single mum. Maybe that explains the dishevelled look and maybe that's why she took pity on me. Maybe she doesn't have many friends amongst the other mums. She's a bit of a scruff and I'm the new kid on the block.

At least it looks now as if I have an ally in Lizzie.

"I do have a partner," she explains hastily. "But he works abroad so he's away for weeks at a stretch. What about you?"

"I'm not working at the moment. I'm a nurse. I'm taking a break just now because we think it's a good idea to wait a while until we get Jessica settled in."

"What does your partner do?"

"Hospital doctor," I tell her, keeping it brief for people tend to react oddly when you talk about heart surgery. It sounds glamorous for one when it's anything but especially now with litigation hovering round every corner.

"Really? That must be tough. I'd be useless at anything in that line. I faint at the sight of blood."

We are at the top end of Bordon Road now and slow our pace.

"He's a smashing little fellow," I say as the baby opens his eyes and lets out an indignant yell. "What's his name?"

"Henry."

I don't say that Henry was one of the names we chose if Jessica had been a boy. Maybe next time, if there is a next time that is. I'm keen to start work again and so we are not sure when we are going to be ready to fit another baby into

the schedule. Talking about schedules when a baby is involved sounds awful but our lives are plotted out carefully and we don't allow for mistakes or Plan B's.

"Dave's been away for three months," Lizzie says as we reach the row of terraced houses. "It's lonely. The problem is when he gets back we have to start all over again and then before we know it he's going back. It's driving me mad. I don't know how long we can carry on and I'm so sorry. I have no idea why I'm telling you this."

Unexpectedly tears flood into her eyes and she blinks furiously but it's too late because I've noticed anyway.

"Hey," I say gently. "We all have our problems. I'm desperate to get back to work for some adult conversation if nothing else."

"Fancy coming in for a coffee?"

I point to the child who is getting himself into a right old state.

"No problem. I'll feed him and then pop him down. He'll go off again. I hope you don't mind me saying this but I've noticed you before at the school gates, noticed the way everybody ignores you and I've felt sorry for you. They can be a bit cliquey and they don't like newcomers. They're a right snooty bunch." She rushes on, her cheeks reddening. "It's just a coffee and a bit of a chat, that's all."

"Sorry but I'm a bit pushed for time," I tell her. "Got a load of ironing to do," I add with an apologetic smile.

"This is mine," Lizzie says stopping at the door. "Bye then. See you at three thirty no doubt."

"OK. Can I give you a hand?"

"Thanks. These things are built like tanks." I help her get the pushchair through the door into the hall. It has an untidy look about it and I think about our house which I'm managing to keep pretty pristine but that's because I've nothing else to do but fiddle around all day.

"Perhaps another time for the coffee?" Lizzie says, reaching into the pushchair to retrieve the baby. "Sometime when you haven't a load of ironing to do."

We laugh but it's suddenly become a bit awkward.

I reckon we understand each other perfectly. An overture followed by a hasty retreat and it won't affect our future friendship for we will both make sure of that.

*

It will never happen. I love my beautiful talented wife and there is no way I am risking losing her and Jessica. Life is not easy just now but it will get better as she gets to grips with the new job and I get myself back to the job I love. I vow to remain friendly to lonely Lizzie but to keep it strictly to playground encounters only – absolutely no coffee. In fact, I'll introduce the two of them when I get the chance just to underline things if they in fact need underlining. I have a feeling that Lizzie is regretting asking me for coffee. Maybe it was perfectly innocent but there was just a frisson there that made me think otherwise.

It makes me smile though as I walk back home. Did that really happen? Have I just been propositioned or is it all in my mind? I suspect that if I had accepted her invitation for coffee, she would have done a hasty back-track, remembered something terribly important she suddenly had to do.

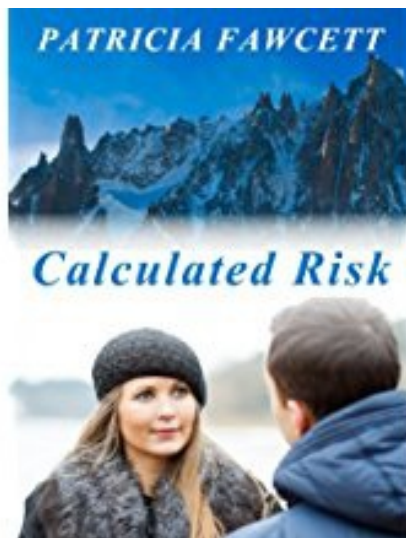
I think longingly of my wife who is not only brilliant at her job but a real stunner too with her red curly hair and the most amazing blue eyes that our daughter has inherited. Nevertheless this little encounter has done wonders for my ego to know that, in the whole wide world, at least two women fancy me. Being an at-home dad is a bit demoralising in some ways although we both recognize how important it is just now for me to hold the fort. So this encounter with Lizzie has given my waning confidence a real boost.

I might be knocking on forty and nobody could ever mistake me for Brad Pitt but my goodness, I've still got it whatever it is.

And I know that, when next we meet this afternoon, we will smile and pretend nothing has happened.

Nothing at all.

More by Patricia Fawcett...



Catti, an artist still coming to terms with a major trauma in her life, arrives late to a house viewing. She's been dreaming of buying this childhood home of hers for years and has finally saved up enough money to do so. She soon finds out that Adam, an irresistibly charming man whose past doesn't seem to let go of him, is also after the house and determined to turn it into a hotel.

Despite the rivalry, Catti finds herself attracted to Adam. Can the two compromise over the house and find happiness? Or will their past lives ruin the chance of a future together?

Available from Amazon.

Tandy and the Homeless Maggot by Sheila Daglish

A Bedtime Story

Tandy, the little grey donkey, trotted happily through meadows dotted with bright summer flowers. Her mother had sent her to buy a present for Grandma's birthday. Now, Tandy was on her way home from Goblin Village, with a large and beautiful carrot which hung around her neck, inside a little basket.

"Oi! What do you think you're doing?" an angry voice shouted as Tandy bent to sniff a shiny gold dandelion.

Tandy looked around. Nobody! Puzzled, she walked on.

"Put my house down!" Suddenly a curly green maggot popped his head out of the carrot.

Tandy stopped, amazed. "Your house? You live in this carrot?"

"Of course!" snapped the maggot. "I only moved in yesterday!"

Tandy didn't know what to do. The carrot was so big, she'd spent all her mother's money and Grandma would soon be arriving, anyway.

"Perhaps we can find you a different home," she suggested.

"I don't want a different home!" shouted the maggot, scarlet with rage.

"Well," said Tandy, "Perhaps my mother can think of something."

The maggot grumbled all the way to the field where Tandy lived.

"What a lovely carrot! Grandma will be so pleased." Mrs. Donkey was delighted. But when Tandy introduced the maggot and explained the problem, her face clouded. "There's no time to buy anything else before Grandma arrives." She frowned. "I don't think Mr. Maggot has found a very safe home anyway!"

"What do you mean?" bristled the maggot.

"Why, if Old Man Hare catches sight of such a beautiful carrot, he'll crunch it with two snaps of his huge white teeth!"

The maggot turned pale with fright. "Oh! What is to become of me? Homeless! A poor, wandering maggot!"

Tandy had been thinking. Suddenly her ears twitched with excitement.

"I've an idea," she said. "Grey Beetle told me he wants to move and live near his cousin. Let's see if his house is empty."

The maggot still looked grumpy but he wriggled onto Tandy's head and perched himself between her long, furry ears. They set off.

The little donkey stopped at the edge of Paddocks Wood. In the shelter of a hawthorn bush rested the old pumpkin that the Weston children who lived nearby had lit with a candle on Halloween night. A notice beside it said 'House to Let'.

The maggot's nose turned up in disgust. "It's not very smart," he complained. "In fact, it's

downright scruffy!"

"The Rabbit boys will polish it bright yellow with their tails," promised Tandy, although she was getting tired of such a bad-tempered fellow. "It's very juicy inside ... much more juicy than that carrot."

The maggot still looked unhappy.

"You'll be so grand in a great yellow mansion" coaxed Tandy. "Everyone will envy you."

The maggot brightened at last. "You're right!" he exclaimed. "It's much better than an ordinary carrot. I can hold a party for all my friends!" He leaned his green chin on one hand, eyes dreamy. "Imagine their faces when they open their invitations. 'You are invited to a party by Albert Maggot of Pumpkin Mansion'." He puffed with pride. "Thank you, Tandy!"

More by Sheila Darglish...



Lacey is between jobs and decides to help her uncle and aunt to turn an old Devonian manor into a hotel. Shortly after her arrival she becomes fascinated by the local workmen's stories about the manor: tales of pirates, treasures, ghosts and secrets.

The history of the manor is not, however, the only thing that intrigues Lacey. A neighbour with a gruff manner seems to be involved in nocturnal dealings that raise her suspicions. Yet, she is not immune to his rugged good looks and soon finds herself falling for him...

Available from Amazon.