

**TALES OF MURDER,
MYSTERY & SUSPENSE
VOLUME ONE.**



Will Lankstead

© Copyright Will Lankstead 2012

Dedicated to my wife and family

Rhonda, Sean and Kate.

BETE NOIRE BOOK PUBLISHERS

This edition first published 2013 by Bete -noire book publishers, Republic of Ireland

queenwulf@hotmail.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, or Author: Will Lankstead

This is a legally distributed free edition from www.obooko.com
The author's intellectual property rights are protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed or offered for sale in any form.

Tales of Murder, Mystery & Suspense

Volume 1

by

Will Lankstead

Index:

SMALL TALK	4
LITTLE JIMMY SLATER	8
THE UNDERPASS.....	15
A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY	22
NICE WORK IF YOU CAN GET IT	29
THE CUT-OFF POINT	33
SARA.....	38
'A SPECIAL KIND OF LOVE'	47

SMALL TALK

'Not a bad day for it, is it? At least the rain's held off and the sun is trying its best to come out. But, to be honest, the weather doesn't really bother me that much. Come rain or shine there's a job to be done and someone has to do it, don't they? That's what I think anyway. The weather can bother some people though; especially the ladies if it's windy if you get my meaning. Undignified, some complain. I'm surprised that it matters at this stage, but I suppose it takes all sorts! Yes, you're right! The gentlemen don't have that problem. Lucky for them I suppose. Anyway, whatever the weather it's always guaranteed to bring in a large crowd. Personally, I don't class it as at all. Not in the slightest. But then, funnily enough I am quite sensitive. I'd much rather go to a Public House with some friends for a few pints of beer! Aye, it's a big crowd today alright. Well, it's a Bank Holiday or somebody's Feast day isn't it? I always get mixed up! Apart from Christmas and Easter of course. I couldn't forget them! For some this whole thing is a kind of morbid curiosity. I don't think they have a particular opinion either way. Doesn't matter who's next. They don't care. What do I get from it? That's a difficult one. I can't really say I enjoy it. It's just a job. Not a bad wage and the hours are good. It keeps the wolf from the door, or more importantly it keeps the wife and kids happy. Well, I have got four of them; kids I mean, not wives. God bless her, one's enough! There you are, that brought a smile to your face didn't it? Things don't seem so bad now, do they? You just keep that up! You've a lovely smile. Your whole face lights up, when you smile and you've such a pretty face! I must say that one of the perks of this job is meeting people. There's always the chance of overtime, as well if there's a busy schedule. He keeps me very busy you know. He does have a reputation to live up to. Hey you lot! Stop pushing! There's plenty of room, I won't tell you again! Some people are getting crushed here at the front. I won't tell you again! Sorry about that. Some of these young buckos have no manners whatsoever! I blame the parents myself. No discipline and left to run riot. They've no respect for anyone either! You just move a bit closer to me love. I'll keep them back. Where was I? Oh yeah, I suppose in these hard times of recession you have to take whatever work you can get. There's no such thing as a secure job, is there? Take me for instance. I could be out on my ear tomorrow or in your place! What did I do before this job? Well I never for one moment thought I'd be doing this for a living; not in a million years! You can try and guess if you like. A blacksmith? No, try again. Although my Father was, Lord rest him. A herdsman? No, wrong again. One more? A Publican ?! Good God no! Although I suppose I should be, the amount of time I spend in the Pub! Do you give up? Just one more, okay? A boatsman ?! No, no no! I was a time-served Carpenter. But then I had to try my hand as a Butcher, well, a Slaughterman to be more precise. I never really liked it. All that mess, and

the poor animals seemed to know where they were going. The cries were unmerciful. Poor dumb bastards! Oh, I am sorry. Forgive me. I didn't intend to upset you. I sometimes speak before I think. Me and my big mouth! I suppose people will always eat meat, won't they? It did have a recent set back. It was suspected of being the source of all that sickness we had. I lost an Aunt and a brother to the sickness. He was only a kid. Yes, you're right! I suppose this job is a continuation of my former profession. Do you know, I never really made that connection before, but now that you mention it! I can see that now. Shall I tell you a joke? It'll cheer you up. You'll like this one! Tales of Murder, Mystery and Suspense Vol 1 It still makes me laugh every time I tell it! Well, there were these three farmers arguing over who had ownership of a cow. One Farmer says: 'I know this is my cow because I can tell by the.....' Oh here we go! Duty calls again! I'll be back as soon as I can. You just stay there. I'll make sure nobody jumps ahead of you in the queue. It wouldn't be right, would it? Bad manners and all that. We certainly don't encourage that sort of behaviour here. Politeness costs nothing does it? If there is one thing we can be proud of in this country it's good manners, isn't it? It's the mark of a civilised country. Not like some of the bloody foreigners we get through here. Bloody know-alls! They'll even try to tell you your job! What a damn cheek! Of course, I can't understand a bloody word they say, clacking on in their own tongue. It sounds like gibberish to me! What's wrong with using the King's English I say? Anyway, I'll be back as soon as I can. It won't be long now. Just this bloke and then it's your turn. Take a seat while you're waiting.

* * * * *

There now, that didn't take long did it? I told you I'd be quick! Now, where was I? Oh yes, I remember. There were these three farmers arguing about the ownership of a cow. One farmer says: 'I know it's my cow, because....' Oh, you don't want to hear the joke now? You don't feel in much of a laughing mood? No, that's alright, I understand. Don't let it bother you. No need to feel bad about it. Well, I must say, it has been very nice talking to you, it's been a pleasure. I've really enjoyed our little chat. I don't often get the chance to talk. It is always interesting to hear other peoples views and opinions on life. It's what can make the hard things in life bearable. We are all the same. All in life's struggle together and no-ones free from troubles, are they ? My Uncle Silas for example. He suffers terrible with his back, he can barely move for days sometimes especially in the cold weather. I've told him it's all those years of working out in the fields in all kinds of weather that's done it. He's a stubborn man and wouldn't wear a hat or heavy coat on the coldest of days. He's not getting any younger and will be headed for an early grave, mark my words. I've warned him but he takes no notice. I may as well keep my bloody mouth shut! He's not

going to change, not at his age. He must be nearly forty if he's a day. But, he'll have to keep working, even though he's been on his own now for a few years since his wife and son died of the fever. Even though I have a wife and kids, I often prefer my own company. I need to unwind after a day's work, so to speak. You wouldn't think that would you? My Mother always said that I was the chatterbox of the family. I could talk the leg off a table she often said. She was a good judge of human nature, and do you know, I think I inherited that from her. I can generally weigh people up within a few minutes of talking to them. Take you, for instance. You've got nice kind eyes. A bit of a romantic dreamer I'd say. Good breeding and educated. 'Education broadens the mind and heightens the soul.' Do you like that? I think I just made that up! Or maybe I've heard it somewhere. Anyway, this place is not for the likes of you! This is really strange! It feels like I've said that to you before. Maybe I have the gift of second sight. You do too?! That's amazing! Do you feel the same thing? Perhaps we have met before in another life. We best not say that too loud around some people, they may take it the wrong way. You know what some folk are like, anything to cause bloody trouble! You say that's why you've ended up here?! That's terrible! Well....., the time has come I'm afraid. I think you've handled yourself very well under the circumstances. I would like to wish you good luck, but there's no point is there? A bit sarcastic that, I should imagine. I'll just say 'Fare thee well' or 'Bon chance' as the Frenchies say. There's your name being called now, you can take my hand if it helps. Here we go, up the steps one two three. Watch you don't stumble. We don't want any accidents, do we? I'm sure it is very difficult to keep your composure, but you're doing very well.... Do you know, I don't even know your name? Elizabeth. Elizabeth Barton. That's nice. It suits you. Oh, I nearly forgot, I'm supposed to ask if you've any last request or would you like to say something to the crowds? A last sip of wine, perhaps? No, you'd like to see my face. Well, it is a bit unusual as I'm supposed to remain anonymous, but for you I'll make an exception. If they all behaved like you it'd be a lot easier. The Public Executioner lifted the black satin hood from over his face. She was surprised to see that he was quite a handsome man in his early thirties. He had pale blue eyes and a friendly smile. Not at all what she expected. She kissed him on the cheek and wiped a tear away from his eyes. "Please don't cry, " she said softly. He wondered if under very different circumstances they could have been friends or even lovers? I'm so sorry, he said. May God be with you. He had never felt any compassion towards any of them before. It wasn't his job to judge and convict them; that was for the King. But, for the first time in his job he felt genuine pity and sorrow for her. She was such a pretty young thing in the bloom of womanhood. A sweet face of innocence. Elizabeth. A young woman accused of being a traitor. Of speaking out against the King. The executioner replaced the black hood. She turned and faced the crowd. They had all been rowdy and boisterous when she first mounted the execution

platform, but now, they all fell silent. "Executioner! I pray that your axe is sharp, your blow swift and your aim is straight." Elizabeth undid the cloak that was fastened by a clasp around her neck. She let it fall gently to the floor. She tucked a few strands into the round white cap that she wore exposing her marble - white neck. The platform and wooden block had been washed down of blood with several buckets of water, after the previous condemned man's execution. She knelt before the wooden block, her fingernails gripping into the wood. She placed her chin onto the broad wooden block. The King's Executioner swiftly raised the two-handed axe above his head then brought it down quickly with great force cleanly severing her head with one blow. A great spray of blood like a bright red fountain erupted from her neck. Her now headless body convulsed with spasms from the sudden and severe violence inflicted upon it. Her head fell into the wicker basket positioned in front of the block. A loud roar went up from the watching crowd. 'You blood thirsty vultures!' the Executioner shouted. Some women screamed, others vomited. A spotty youth who was the Executioners assistant threw copious amounts of sawdust around the wooden block to soak up the blood as the lifeless body of Elizabeth Barton was dragged away. The King's Chief Executioner picked up the woman's cloak from where she'd left it and threw it into the crowd. It was pulled, grabbed and practically torn apart by the fighting, clutching hands of the old hags nearest to the execution block. The Axeman approached the next person in line up for execution that day. It was a young man charged with blasphemy against the King's religion. He was slumped at the foot of the three wooden steps leading up to the block. He had wet himself with terror. His youthful face was contorted with fear. "Please!" he sobbed. "I don't want to die! I didn't mean what I said about the King! I was drunk! Too much ale. I was foolish! You can understand that can't you? Let me go! Take someone else!" The Executioner reached down his arm and pulled the youth to his feet. He could barely stand. His whole body shook with absolute terror. 'Come on now lad', said the Axeman. 'I'll see you're alright. Think of me as a friend. Come up here next to me and we'll have a little chat. I've found it always helps to have a friendly conversation at times like these. Calms the nerves. It's not a bad day, is it? At least the rain's held off and the sun's trying it's best to come out. But, to be honest the weather doesn't bother me that much. Come rain or shine there's a job to be done and someone has to do it!

LITTLE JIMMY SLATER

Little Jimmy Slater committed his first murder a week after his thirteenth birthday. He had drowned a younger boy whilst swimming with him in the local river. He had pushed him under the water, pressing down with all his might onto the young lad's shoulders. He held him under until the bubbles stopped coming from the boy's nose and mouth and his arms and legs had ceased to kick and thrash. Little Jimmy felt the life go out of the boy's body and he liked it. In fact, he liked it a lot. It was nothing like anything he'd ever experienced before. It gave him a nice warm feeling inside, just like when he was drinking a nice hot cup of chocolate. That felt great. He didn't think anything could be better than that. But, killing Tommy Hardcastle did. It was different. He knew from that moment on, he would kill again to try and recapture that exciting exquisite moment in time. Little Jimmy had swum to the riverbank and pulled himself out of the water by using the long blades of grass. He cut his finger on one of the green blades and sucked the blood into his mouth. It tasted warm and sweet. He removed his wet swimming trunks and dried himself with the big bath towel he'd brought. He carefully rolled up the towel with the wet trunks inside just like his Mother had told him to. He was such a nice obedient boy. He ran all the way home as quickly as he could to tell his Mother all about the terrible accident. Upon reaching home he ran into the kitchen in floods of tears and was practically inconsolable. His Mother immediately called the Police and her local Doctor, who informed the hospital for an ambulance. The Doctor had to give Little Jimmy a sedative to calm him down. The police and ambulance sped off to the scene after Jimmy gave them directions. The young murderer wasn't overcome with feelings of remorse or sadness; in fact it was the complete opposite of that. He felt excitement and elation. His family, of his Mum, Dad and younger sister Amy all rallied around and gave him their comfort and support. For awhile he was the centre of attention. He loved the feeling of power and importance he felt. It was the same after he had drowned the next door neighbour's new puppy in their little girl's paddling pool. He felt anger and disappointment that it wasn't the little girl he'd killed, but the neighbour had come out into the back garden just as he was about to push her face into the water after drowning the dog. He was able to convince her stupid parents that he had saved their little girl. Little Jimmy said that she must have seen her puppy in the water and tried to save it herself but had nearly drowned in such a shallow amount of water. Her stupid parents couldn't thank him enough. Or the time around his twelfth birthday when he poisoned his sister's cat with rat poison. He loved the feeling of power and satisfaction he got watching the poor animal squirming and writhing in agony on the front lawn. It was howling like a banshee in its final death throes. The look of sheer horror on his sister's face when Dad

had to tell her was hilarious! It was her cat and she loved it. She'd named it Snuggles. What a stupid name for a cat! He hated it. It was always seeking attention, jumping up into your lap wanting to be stroked and purring contentedly. It didn't do much purring after the rat poison, did it?! Dad blamed himself. He said he must have inadvertently left the garden shed window open where the rat poison was stored. He was sure that he had closed it, but presumably that was how the cat got in. It still didn't explain why the cat would eat the poison though. His Father never thought of that; probably because he was too stupid. Stupid like the puppy, the cat, his sister Amy, and now Tommy Hardcastle! Amy was upset for weeks afterwards. Her Dad bought her a yellow canary as compensation. Another stupid animal! Little Jimmy hadn't done anything to it yet, but he was just biding his time. He would wait until she grew fonder of the bird and then he would strike. It would be much more fun! It was nearly a week had passed since the murder of Tommy Hardcastle. A Coroner had ruled that it had been a case of Accidental Death by drowning. The young lad had probably got into difficulties in the river and become entangled in the weeds on the river bed. He had not been as strong a swimmer as Jimmy. He'd tried his best to save him but unsuccessfully. There was no blame placed on Jimmy's shoulders; in fact everybody thought of him as a hero. Jimmy wasn't responsible for Tommy entering the river; in fact it should be a warning to others that it was a very dangerous thing to do. Little Jimmy Slater gave an outstanding performance as sobbing as if his heart would break, he recounted his experience of what had happened. He described in detail the whole terrible experience of how he had tried to save his young friend by diving into the river when he realised he was getting into difficulty. He had managed to grab a hold onto the young lads left foot only for it to slip out of his grip, inevitably having to concede defeat as the boy had completely sank below the surface of the water. He went on to tell the Coroner's Court how he had quickly dressed and ran home to get help. A police officer at the Inquest gave details of what he had found at the scene. Tommy Hardacre's clothes and towel were on the grassy riverbank where he'd left them. He immediately became aware of a young boy's body lying face down in the water. There were no signs of life. Once more of his colleagues arrived Constable Soames had undressed and volunteered to enter the water to retrieve the dead boy's body. The body was later identified and confirmed as being that of Tommy Hardcastle. Everyone agreed that it must have been a harrowing experience for Little Jimmy. He should in no way punish himself with feelings of guilt or any responsibility for the accident. He had in fact, shown immense bravery and fortitude for one so young. He was a hero; a shining example to others. But, who would doubt the word of the boy with angelic looks, bright blue eyes and a mop of ginger hair? He wasn't a rowdy, boisterous child but quiet, thoughtful and

polite. His Mother said that Jimmy was a great help to her around the house, even cleaning and tidying his own bedroom.

* * * * *

Little Jimmy got his name in the local newspaper along with a photograph. The headline stated that he was a hero who'd tried to save his friend from drowning. He later received several gifts donated by local shops and businesses. One gift was a brand new mountain bike. At school, a special Assembly was arranged for Tommy Hardacre's memory where all of the staff, the children and parents were invited to attend. Tommy Hardacre's Mum and Dad were there. They sat up onstage with the Headmaster, the Police and Fire Service Chiefs, plus the two Paramedics who had attended the accident scene. The Headmaster, Mr. Greebly, gave a speech about the tragic accident leading to the loss of a young life. He warned of the dangers of swimming unsupervised in lakes, rivers and ponds. He concluded his speech with a glowing testimonial to Little Jimmy's bravery. "He is a credit to the school," he beamed. Everybody applauded and then the photographer from the local newspaper, 'The Marlfield Chronicle', took a photograph of Jimmy shaking hands with the Headmaster and holding a Certificate of Bravery with a gold star he'd received. The dead boy's Mother, Vera Hardcastle gave Jimmy a big tearful hug thanking him for being such a good friend of Tommy's. Jimmy was a local celebrity. He enjoyed the accolade so much that he decided he had to kill again. Soon. He just needed to be patient and wait for the right opportunity to arise again. In the meantime, he kept his murderous urges at bay by killing several other animals, taking pride in using various methods in their disposal which included, burning, electrocution, poisoning and bludgeoning them to death. He even sneaked into the school Science Laboratory when the rest of the children were outside on a dinner break in the warm sunshine of the schoolyard. Whilst there, he connected a rubber hose from the Bunsen Burner gas pipe into the enclosed glass display cabinet where the school's collection of Gecko lizards were kept. He gassed them all! None of his stupid teachers suspected anything. His next focus of attention was the tropical fish tank. It was situated in the school entrance hall outside of the Reception Office. Jimmy deliberately sabotaged the electric air pump starving the fish of vital oxygen. The School secretary found all the fish floating on the surface of the water the next morning. A tearful Miss Costigan was consoled by her fellow staff members. She somehow felt responsible for the pump's malfunction. But, none of these killings satisfied Little Jimmy's urges to kill another human being. It didn't give him the same feelings of power and exhilaration like the murder of young Tommy Hardcastle. He must kill again. An opportunity arose several weeks later. His History teacher, Mrs. Croker, announced

that his year's history class would be making a one day trip into London to visit Westminster Abbey. The class was to visit the tombs of former Kings and Queens of England. The class was to travel down from Birmingham by coach and then travel on the London underground rail system to Westminster tube station. It was only a five minute walk from the Abbey. They hadn't been long in the Capital when Little Jimmy saw his first opportunity. A disheveled old man was making his way through the crowds of people gathered on the platform. He was hassling people for money. As he drew nearer to where Jimmy was standing with the other children the old man stepped out nearer to the platform's edge just as a train was pulling in. The crowd began to move forward in anticipation of boarding. Jimmy manoeuvred himself to be directly behind the old man. He was so close he could smell his sweat. The boy held his hand down low so no one could see. He gave the old man a strong push in the middle of his back. It didn't take too much force as the man was very drunk. He cried out in alarm as he staggered sideways, overbalanced and then fell headlong off the platform's edge underneath the train's wheels. Several women screamed as the rest of the children recoiled in horror. It was impossible for the train to stop in time, and passed over the man's body dragging him along in a shower of sparks and screeching brakes before finally coming to a halt. The air was filled with screams and shouts of alarm. But, Jimmy felt ecstatic! A woman's voice came over the station public address system requesting for people to remain calm. They were to clear the platform, leaving by the Emergency exits, or remain on the train until the Emergency Services arrived to deal with the horrific situation. The Teachers quickly herded the children off the station platform. It was agreed that the trip should be capitulated due to the trauma the children must have suffered. Jimmy was furious and felt that he'd been cheated. He didn't even get to see the results of his handiwork. He blamed Mrs. Croker for ending the trip. He never liked her anyway. He would make her pay for that! He felt sure there would have been many more opportunities to dispose of other victims in such a large city. But, she'd barged in, depriving him of any further prospects. He could have killed more than one person at a time! Oh, the annoyance of it all! It was strange that Jimmy felt such an urge to kill. He certainly didn't come from a broken home, he was neither physically, mentally or sexually abused by his Father or anyone. There appeared to be nothing in his background to explain this behaviour or personality defect. He just became overcome with the urge and desire to kill someone. He didn't see it as a weakness but as an inner strength: a gift. He'd long realised that he wasn't like other boys of his age. They liked Computer Games and football. They lived in a Fantasy World of super-heroes and Interplanetary Wars, but Little Jimmy's foes were real. Anyone he thought too stupid or annoyed him. His quarry was flesh and blood. After the old man's murder on the London Underground, he and the other kids were compensated for the

postponed trip by receiving sweets, fizzy drinks, comics and ice creams before being taken to a West End Cinema to watch the latest Harry Potter Film. Jimmy was furious as he'd done the killing, why should the others be rewarded. He was glad when three of them got sick on the coach journey home. Several months of relative inactivity followed. He swapped two X Box games to another boy in exchange for an Air Pistol. Jimmy had never wanted the games anyway, it was just his stupid Father who thought he did. An Air Pistol was much more fun. It wasn't a very powerful one but he managed to kill several starlings and sparrows with it from his bedroom window. That outlet was soon cutoff unfortunately, when one of the neighbours complained to everyone in the Close in general, that somebody had been firing an airgun as he'd found dead birds on his landscaped lawn and flower beds. No one actually pointed a finger at him, but the stupid neighbour went on about calling in the police. "There were spots of blood on my limestone chippings and ornamental stone heron." he wailed. Jimmy would have loved to put a bullet in him if he'd of had a real gun. Stupid bastard! It was the day Jimmy came home early. He should have gone to football practice but hated the game. A bunch of idiots chasing a ball around! Get a life! His Father was still out at work as a Systems Analyst or some crap. He once asked him what he actually did in his job and he said: "I analyse systems." Fair enough. His Mother was out at the shops stocking up the cupboards with more Couscous and green tea no doubt. Only his Grandmother was alone in the house. She was in her favourite armchair watching Countdown on T. V. She was a bit deaf so had the volume turned up. He came into the living room unheard and unnoticed and stood behind her armchair. He suddenly had the overwhelming desire to give her a permanent parting in her blue-rinsed bouffant head. He looked around for a weapon. On the wall hung a flamboyantly decorated combined brass thermometer and barometer. It was mounted on a shield of solid oak. Just the job! His stupid Father had bought it as a memento on their holiday in Bournemouth. Jimmy moved to lift it off its hook but suddenly, his Grandmother turned her head. "Oh, it's you Jimmy! I didn't hear you come in. What are you messing with now," she moaned. "Oh, it's nothing Gran. Just adjusting this barometer. There now. It's straight!" he said. "Would you like a cup of tea?" "I will once I've been up to the toilet again," she replied. "These water tablets have me like a dripping tap! Can you give me a hand up the stairs?" Jimmy helped her out of the armchair and led her to the foot of the stairs. It seemed to take forever as she was very slow moving and unsteady on her feet. He held onto both of her hands with his and backed up the steps one at a time. "It's probably best if you get behind me Jim, in case I fall," she said. "Nonsense Gran, I've got you, I won't let you fall! Trust me," he assured her. "Just another step and we'll be on the landing." His Grandmother gently lifted a leg to place it on the top step of the stairs. Without warning, Little Jimmy pushed her backwards and overbalancing she fell backwards with a horrified

expression on her face. She tumbled head over heels down the stairs with a scream; her head smashing off the wooden banister several times before landing with a heavy thud at the bottom of the staircase. She lay still. A trickle of blood ran from her nose. Jimmy ran quickly down the stairs and stepped over his Grandmother's inert body at the foot of the stairs. One arm was twisted at a crazy angle beneath her. He was about to check if she was dead when the sound of a doorkey turning in the front doorlock startled him. The door opened and his Mother stood there with a plastic carrier bag full of shopping in each hand. It was a fraction of a second before she registered the scene in front of her. "My God, Mum!" she screamed. She dropped the shopping bags into the hall and dashed over to her Mother's side. "What the hell has happened?!" she demanded. "She must have fallen trying to climb the stairs by herself!" Little Jimmy stuttered. "I came home early from school and found her like this." "Oh Mum, what have I told you a hundred times? Don't use the stairs on your own," his Mother cried. "Wait, she's still alive!" she added excitedly. "Quick, phone for an ambulance!" He heard his Granmother gasp and then moan. If she was able to talk he was finished. He made the call and then returned to his Grandmother's side. "Let's try and make her more comfortable," Jimmy said. "No, leave her where she is," his Mum replied, "we might do more damage. Let the Paramedics sort it out. They'll be here in a few minutes. Just hold her hand whilst I fetch a damp cloth from the kitchen to wipe the blood from her face!" Jimmy held his Grandmother's hand. Her eyes opened and she looked accusingly into his eyes as if asking 'why would he do such a thing?' She tried to speak, but luckily for him she was unable to. The ambulance duly arrived and after a quick examination the Paramedics said that they would take her to hospital. Jimmy's Mother asked him to accompany his Gran to the hospital. She would inform his Father by telephone and on the way to the hospital would pick up his sister Amy from her Majorette class. They would all meet at the hospital. Jimmy sat on the seat opposite to the trolley his Gran was lying on in the back of the ambulance as they rushed through the streets with blue lights flashing and sirens sounding. She was rushed immediately into the resuscitation room but unfortunately died there of heart failure not long after the rest of the family had arrived. Jimmy asked discreetly if his Gran had said anything before she died. The Emergency Doctor told him that he must have been on her mind at the final moments of her death as she said his name several times. "You can be assured that you were in her last thoughts, Jimmy," he said. It was exactly one week later when the family stood at the Gran's graveside. Jimmy's Mother was weeping quietly whilst comforting his sister Amy. His Father remained composed with his arm around Jimmy's shoulders. The boy stood motionless, no expression on his face but inside he was laughing. Now, he had been successful in killing his Grandmother. He was glad she was dead, the silly old fool deserved it. She'd meddled too much in the past in his life always sticking her

nose in and criticizing him to his Mother and Father. The gravediggers slowly lowered the coffin into the open graves as the Priest read the final eulogy. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust..." Each mourner took a handful of soil and sprinkled it onto the top of the coffin. Hands were then shaken and hugs, kisses and words of condolences exchanged as between friends and family. Little Jimmy found it hard not to laugh as they walked down the graveled path towards the waiting cars. No-one suspected him. He licked his lips with glee at the thought of his next victim.

THE UNDERPASS

Mary Kelly left her home at exactly 6.30 a. m. just like she did every morning. Her cleaning job at the offices of high street solicitors Baxendale and Gripe at seven o'clock. It gave her an hour and a half to clean and tidy the offices in preparations for another busy days business. The legal firm were very pleased with her standard of work and punctuality, and had employed her services for the past four years. Mary enjoyed her job and felt that at sixty-seven years of age she was still able to contribute something to society and was still a useful person. It wasn't just the little bit of extra money that she earned as a supplement to her State pension, but the fact of still feeling needed by someone. She needed to keep herself busy anyway; especially since the death of her husband. So many of her friends and family had given up on their own lives having reached the same age as herself. Several had passed away with the feeling that they were no longer needed or useful. A burden on their families; surplus to requirements in this modern age. She hated and feared the possibility that she may end her days in an Old Peoples Home. Just sitting watching daytime television all day, stuck in the same old armchair whilst waiting for death to allow her to escape the monotony. She had been happily married for over forty-seven years to the same man. Her first and only true love Michael. It seemed a lifetime of years these days with couples slipping in and out of relationships and marriages. One partnership to another, often with children to different Father's in the equation. It certainly did not happen in her day. Some of the poor kids mustn't have a clue who their real father was. It was a terrible sin and social disgrace to have a child out of wedlock. Nowadays, no-one seemed to care; even appearing on morning chat shows and blatantly bragging about the fact! Truth was it was all very different today. Kids having kids, drug and alcohol fuelled promiscuity, no respect for the elderly or any authority figures whatsoever. Todays role models were more likely to be overpaid loutish footballers or pop stars with over inflated egos as big as their pay packets. The way some of those girls dressed, or I should say half-dressed left little to the imagination. No wonder some of them got into trouble for giving out the wrong signals. It's known fact that men are just like dogs; except for her Michael ofcourse. Her late husband wasn't like that at all. He was a very decent man\; a gentleman in fact. He knew how to treat a lady. Not like some of the scumbags now! She'd not hear a bad word said about her Michael. God had taken him three years ago. No warning. No previous illness. He just dropped dead one afternoon at the fish counter in Tesco's. "I'll have two of those salmon fishcakes," he said and then 'bang!' as if he'd been shot by a sniper. A massive heart attack; probably dead before he hit the floor the hospital Doctor said. No chance of doing anything to save his life. It had been such a shock to her, seeing him lying on the

trolley in the hospital. He promised her he'd never leave her but he did. Now she was alone. So, one Monday morning she left her house at 6.30 a. m. precisely. It was a cold February morning with quite a strong breeze blowing the drizzly rain. It was the fine type of rain that seemed to soak right through your clothes. It was the beginning of a new working week. She closed the front door quietly behind her and made her way down the stone steps of her maisonette and into the small communal garden. She pulled the rusty wrought iron gate closed and turned right into Mary Street. She halted for a moment as her thoughts debated whether to return home for her umbrella. The drizzle was heavier than she first assumed. But, deciding against, she took a plastic rain hood, like a headscarf from out of her handbag. She always carried one just in case. She walked on down the length of the street before crossing the road outside of O'Rourke's butcher's shop. The blue light of an insect attractor crackled and flickered inside the white tiled shop. It cast eerie shadows on the walls and ceiling. Nearly all of the shops and houses were in darkness except for an early riser like herself. The low hum of an electric milk float passed by her, the crates of clinking milk bottles echoing in the empty street. The milkman gave her a friendly wave. She now entered Frances Street from where she could catch the number 27 bus to where she worked in Masonic Road. She decided instead to walk the rest of the way as she wanted to clear her head. Today would have been her and Michael's fiftieth wedding anniversary if Michael had lived. On she walked down Frances Street. The red bricked terraced houses on each side. She could hear the metallic clanging coming from the Railway yard as a Shunt engine moved goods wagons around. It was preparing a train load of coal ready for departure. The shrill whistle of the steam engine sounded in the early morning darkness. A postman suddenly passed her by on a bicycle. It had a whicker basket on the front containing a sack full of letters and cards. The fine rain dripped off his plastic macintosh onto the road shining wet in the orange light of the streetlamps. On the corner of Frances Street and Cyril street, the local corner shop was beginning to open for the day's business. The shopkeeper, Bob Anderson was stacking some bags of coal outside his premises. He shouted 'Good Morning!' as she passed. She heard the faint tinkle of the small doorbell as he re entered the shop. The underpass at the bottom of Cyril street ran underneath the railway lines. It was a handy shortcut for pedestrians to get to Masonic Road where her place of employment was situated. It saved the longer walk she would otherwise have to take and make her journey time much shorter. Unfortunately, it was a part of her walk that she disliked; perhaps even feared. It ran for some five hundred yards between Cyril Street and the start of warehouses in Jordan street and the Railway sidings. The underpass was illuminated by three street lamps: one at each end and one in the middle. It mostly ran in a straight line but curved slightly midway creating something of a blind spot. After exiting the underpass, situated

on the right hand side was the high brick wall some ten feet high, belonging to the backyards of the Biscuit Factory. On the left ran a wire mesh fence, beyond which was the steep grassy slope down to the double pair of railway tracks. Across the cutting was the marshalling yard. Mary had worked as a teenager and then a young woman in her job at the factory as a 'biscuit sorter'. It had been her function along with other girls to remove any broken biscuits from the constantly moving conveyor belt. These would later be bagged and sold off cheaply to members of staff. Her future husband Michael, also worked at the Biscuit Factory as a Fitter. It was his job to keep all of the machinery in good working order, including the ovens and conveyor belts. They had met at the Biscuit Factory Social Club Dance one Christmas and immediately hit it off together. It was as if they, 'd known each other for a long time. Within six months they were married which was quite a shock to both sets of parents! They were told they were far too young, and hadn't known each other long enough to make that kind of a decision. Just over three months later, she gave birth to a baby boy whom they christened Malcolm. Sadly, he never lived past his third birthday. He died from T. B. Mary was so devastated by his death that she vowed she wouldn't have anymore children. So, they had stayed together for all those years, just the two of them. Her husband was very disappointed as he really wanted a child; especially since he came from a large family in Ireland of fourteen kids! And then it had got too late to try for another baby, when the natural cycle of her child bearing age limit came into play. She had ceased to be a full woman in a true sense. In parts the underpass was strewn with discarded rubbish of all kinds in black plastic bags. There was a strong smell of urine and alcohol. The black plastic bags had been torn open most likely by dogs or rats. It's contents had spilled out onto the pavement. There was a smell of rotted cabbage and soiled baby nappies. The railway lines weren't used as much nowadays as a lot more freight went by lorry carrying containers. There used to be a passenger station, but that too had long gone. It was a similar fate which befell the Biscuit Factory, Social Club and the cinema. No more laughter, tears of joy or sadness, a drink and dance topped off with a pie and chip supper. Father Time had moved on and left her and thousands like her surplus to requirements. She had become old. When had that happened? It seemed to have sneaked up on her before she had even noticed. Her beliefs and opinions were now classed as 'old-fashioned'. She used to be so young and vibrant, a pretty young woman burning with life. She was once a member of the younger generation. A time for change, new challenges and new beginnings. But, then came the Second World War which robbed so many people not only of their lives but their dreams and ambitions. The face that reflected in her bathroom mirror looked old and wrinkled; grey hair had lost its sheen and the sparkle had gone from her eyes. Every wrinkle or blemish was a sign of pain and suffering during her life. More than laughter lines. Mary Kelly's memories

evaporated like a puddle of summer rain in hot sunshine. She had reached the underpass. She halted for a moment before entering and tried to concentrate her thoughts. It was ridiculous! There was nothing to be afraid of. Why was she getting herself into such a state over it? She could walk the long way round, she may just about make work on time. But, Mary was a stickler for good timekeeping. She was being employed to begin work at seven a. m. So, she must start at 7. a. m. She wished she'd taken the bus and regretted not doing so. That's what she did everyday, but she'd allowed her thoughts to wander over the past probably because it would have been their fiftieth wedding anniversary today. She still missed Michael so much, it hurt. She hated this part of the journey most. It wasn't too bad on bright Summer days but having to set out for work on cold, wet and windy morning when it was still dark. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. Next time, she'll definitely take the bus! She began her walk. The strong breeze was blowing through the underpass, stirring up the bags of litter even more. She entered the underpass. The journey would have been much better and easier during the later months which heralded the beginning of the brighter mornings. Her footsteps echoed off the concrete walls. The underpass was a semi-circular construction with an archway at its beginning and end. The walls were made of concrete and heavily embellished with graffiti. As she drew nearer to the centre of the underpass, the street light began to flicker and then went out completely. Mary came to an immediate standstill. She gasped with fright. The underpass was now in darkness where she stood, except for the faint glow of the street lights at each end. Slowly, she resumed her walk with an arm outstretched ahead of her like a blind man. The underpass seemed to funnel the strong breeze into her face. She found it difficult to see clearly in the murky darkness which seemed to engulf her. She thought she heard the sound of echoing footsteps coming from behind her. She looked back but could see nothing. The footsteps drew closer and then suddenly stopped. She listened intently and called out: "Hello, who's there?" But, there was no reply. She called again only louder this time. "Who's there? I know somebody's there!" The sound of footsteps behind her began again but this time at a slower pace. She was very frightened, her heart thumping in her chest. She began to walk faster but found it difficult, her breath came in short gasps. All the time the footsteps seemed to be getting closer. "Who's there? I know somebody's there. If this is your idea of a sick joke, I don't find it funny." She took another few short steps when suddenly she heard a voice behind her whisper: "Mary!" The elderly woman stood rooted to the spot. The voice said softly again: "Mary!" Her mind raced with the thoughts and images of muggers and robbers the T. V. and Newspapers reported on a daily basis. If only Michael were here, he'd show them! But, he was not. She was alone in this subway. The footsteps sounded again behind her. She cried out in alarm as she stumbled forwards, tears in her eyes as she shook with terror. Sobbing uncontrollably,

she suddenly crashed headlong into a figure coming towards her. She staggered backwards a few yards and cried out in alarm. She felt two hands upon her shoulders and a man's voice shouted loudly: "Give me your handbag!" She tried to struggle free and the young attacker took one hand from his grip on her shoulder and suddenly produced a knife. Its long thin blade glinted from the flash and flicker of the faulty street light in the middle of the underpass. Her attacker was a young man of about twenty-three. He wore a dark coloured hoody pulled forwards over his eyes. They struggled together; the young man trying to wrestle her handbag out of her grip. "Let go of the bloody bag!" he roared, "Or I'll stick this bleedin' knife into ya!" Mary put up a fight as best she could. He dragged her around by her coat collar until she lost her footing and crashed to the floor, with the young attacker dominating her. She felt the knife point cold and sharp against her throat. His eyes were wide and full of hatred. She thought that this must be her last moment in life. "Give me the bag!" he screeched again. He aimed a sharp kick into her stomach which knocked the wind out of her causing her to release her grip on the strap of her handbag. She gasped for breath as the thief grabbed the bag with his hand. The look on his face and in his eyes told her that she was about to receive a beating or even risked being stabbed. Suddenly without warning, a shadowy figure grabbed the young man from behind and seemed to throw him with such force into the concrete wall of the underpass. He crashed face first into it. He stumbled backwards in shock and surprise. He still had the sharp knife in his hand and brought it up menacingly towards his unknown assailant. Once again, he was grabbed violently by the mysterious shadowy figure who rammed his whole body against the wall like a ragdoll. He had even been lifted off his feet by the strength of Mary's defender. There was a loud sickening boney crack sound as the young mugger's head hit the wall before the rest of his body. He fell back limp and lifeless like a stringless marionette. The sharp pointed knife he'd been holding was now buried up to its hilt and sticking out of his chest! Mary slowly and warily picked herself up from the tarmac path. She fell back into the subway wall trying to gain control over body and emotions. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a ghostly, shadowy figure approach. The young thug still lay unmoving on the floor. The sound of blood gurgling in his throat. Tears of shock, fear and relief filled her eyes. Once again, she heard a thin voice say: Mary!..... Mary!" She struggled to her feet. Amazed and terrified she stood upright. But, there was no-one to be seen; only the prostrate figure of her attacker lay where it had fallen. She could tell immediately that he was dead and beyond help. It was his own fault. She had no feelings of remorse or sympathy as it could easily have been her body laying there. She snatched up her handbag and adjusted her overcoat. The faulty light bulb flickered on and off a few times and in its yellow light she thought she saw the smiling face of her husband, Michael. It slowly dissolved before her. It took several minutes for Mary to compose herself. She

must get help. It was a short time later that Mary entered the premises in Manor Road of Solicitors Baxendale and Gripe where she worked as a cleaner. The caretaker had arrived just moments before and opened up the building. "Oh, it's you," he said, "you gave me a bit of a start!" He noticed at once that she was out of breath and distressed. She pushed past him into the office foyer. "A man's been killed!" she sobbed, "And I think I did it!" Two other ladies appeared, they too were cleaners like Mary. "What's happened?" one asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost!" They were shocked by Mary's appearance and behaviour. "Maybe I have seen a ghost!" she declared. "She thinks she's killed someone," said the Caretaker. The three took Mary to the staff room where one of her colleagues made her a strong, sweet cup of tea. The Caretaker added a shot of brandy, he just happened to have a bottle of in his personal locker. Mr. Baxendale the senior partner arrived and on being informed about what had happened telephoned the police. They arrived at the Solicitors Offices within five minutes, with two police vehicles on route to the crime scene at the underpass. Mary described to a Police Detective what had happened and he received a message on his mobile phone that a body had indeed been found. The crime scene was as Mary had described it. The deceased was known to one of the police constables as a heroin addict, and had a string of offences on his record, mainly for robbery and A. B.H. The Detective said she'd probably had a lucky escape as he did have a history of violence. His name was Terry McCormack. "There won't be many police officers who will be upset about his demise," the Detective said, "It was bound to happen sooner or later. If it wasn't a stranger who did something to him, or he picked the wrong victim, it would've been one of his own: a fellow dealer. Apparently, he owed money to another dealer. A considerable amount apparently! If you don't mind me saying, no offence meant, but I never thought it would be a little old lady that eventually got the better of him. It's highly unlikely that you'll face any charges as it looks a clear case of self defence. You must be a lot stronger than you look Mary! One of our Female Liason Officers will be with you shortly after we take your statement and we've notified a Doctor to check you're okay. Or maybe you'd prefer to go to hospital instead?" "No," she said, "I don't need to go to hospital. I was just shaken up mostly! I'd just like to do my work and then go home." Mr. Baxendale stated that under the circumstances she couldn't be expected to work for that week and ofcourse she would be allowed to return home. The detective arranged for a police car to drive her home. "Try to get some rest," he said, "we'll probably need you to come down to the police station tomorrow to give us further details of how you killed him in self defence." Tales of Murder, Mystery & Suspence Vol 1 "Oh, I didn't kill him," she declared, " he came to my assistance, you see!" "Who did?"the Detective asked. "Do you mean someone came to your assistance?" " Michael did," she said matter of fact, " he saved me." "Michael?" the Detective asked puzzled. "Yes, my husband," she smiled.

“But, isn't your husband...? “ he asked. “Dead? Yes, he is. These past three years,” she replied. “As I said, he saved me!” “But, that can't be true!” he said, “ how could he?” “ I heard his footsteps, coming from behind me. He whispered my name. 'Mary ' he said. I looked around and saw his face then suddenly I was attacked from in front by that man. Michael pulled him off me and threw him against the subway wall twice. He must have fallen against the knife because Michael didn't stab him. He would never do that to anybody. He was just trying to save me. He was such a gentle man when he was alive. He must have known somehow that something was going to happen to and he came back to defend me. He promised he'd always look after me, and he did didn't he?”

* * * * *

Mary sat in the rear passenger seat of the squad car in the police station yard waiting for the two traffic officers to drive her home. The Detective stood in the doorway with the Police Doctor . “I've given her a sedative, “ the Doctor said. “It will help her get some rest. It has obviously been a traumatic experience for her, but she'll be okay.” Mary turned looking out the window of the police car. She smiled at the ghostly figure of her late husband Michael. He smiled back.

A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

John G Lattimer looked around the room nervously as he entered the Soup Dragon Chinese restaurant on Balfour Street. He glanced at his wristwatch. It was 8 p. m. on the dot. He was on time. He prided himself on being punctual. In fact, he was well known for his punctuality. You could set your clock by him. His gaze passed over the various people seated at the tables. At first, he didn't see her and his heart sank momentarily. But then he saw her. She was sitting in a booth near to the back of the restaurant. Their eyes met and standing up she gave a little wave. She was tall, blonde and very beautiful and she gave a broad smile with perfect white teeth and full red lips. A waitress disturbed his gaze: "Table for one, Sir ?" she asked. "No,... no, I'm fine thanks. I've just seen the person I've arranged to meet," he replied. He moved closer to her table. A scented candle flickered in a small glass jar. The scent of jasmine was in the air. He sat down and pulled the chair closer. "I didn't think you'd come," he said smiling. "My wife thinks I'm working late, doesn't suspect anything. It's surprising that I managed to get away!" " Yeah," she laughed, "we really must stop meeting like this!" He studied her face for a few seconds. She really was very beautiful. "I'm surprised you got here," she said, "knowing how difficult it must be for you to get way from your wife! She's so possessive!" "She's not possessive!" he scoffed, "it's just that she loves me and hates it when we're apart for too long." "Apart for too long?" she mocked. "It's a wonder she lets you out of her sight! I can almost hear her now: 'Who's that on the phone? How many girls work in your office? I bet they're all much prettier than me?!'" "She's been like that a long time " he said. "It's all down to her first husband cheating on her with a very close friend of hers. It was just a series of lies and she got badly hurt. He even had a baby with his mistress. She'd been there all through her friends pregnancy, little realising that the baby she was carrying turned out to be her own husband's. He left her for them in the end when the whole thing came out. It was a very messy divorce which completely crushed her. She even had a nervous breakdown and ended up in a psychiatric hospital for a while." "And that's where you rescued her!" she said cynically, " like a knight in shining armour riding in on a white stallion!" "Er.... not quite, " he laughed. "At that time I was working as a Patient Services Co-ordinator. The only white thing I had was my coat. It was my job to arrange aftercare backup for recently discharged patients. Helen was one of those. We met in a purely professional capacity and I had to see her three times a week, then unintentionally for the both of us..... we fell in love!" "Aw, cue the violins and the white doves!" she said sarcastically. 'Look, she's just a very sensitive, caring and loving woman, that's all!" he replied, "you don't even know her. You've never met her!" "No, I haven't, thank God! I've only ever spoken to her on the phone a few times. She's downright weird. Paranoid in fact. Asking me questions like:'

Who was I? How old was I? Was I pretty, and did I have a husband or boyfriend? She only rang to ask if you'd be working late..... again?! I wanted to tell her to sod off with all of her stupid questions! Who does she think I am, your Mother?!" "She knows perfectly well that you're the Reception Secretary for the whole Office building. A very important position co-ordinating all the different departments of the I. T. Company. You're not just beautiful, Maria. You have brains!" he laughed. "Remind me to get a reference from you, if I ever leave the Company!" she replied. He chose to ignore her last remark. She'd never leave. They were much too close and they'd struck up a great relationship between them right from the start. He could tell her anything and she him. They had something special. "I still don't understand why you never told your wife about us," she confessed, "All this bloody secrecy! You should have been straight with her from the start. Just be honest with her. It puts me in a difficult situation and I don't deserve it." "I know," he apologised, " and for that I am sorry. But, you know the way things are at home. I couldn't tell her. It would put her straight back into hospital; probably another mental breakdown. I can't do that to her! She's so possessive." "Well, she'll find out sometime won't she? Better it out in the open now instead of her discovering the truth at a later date. I think it only prolongs the agony," she said angrily. "If it was me, I'd prefer to know!" But, that's just it, isn't it? " he said. "It's not you." He regretted the way the conversation had gone. He didn't want to argue with Maria. He didn't want that. It's not what they'd come to meet for. He decided to change the subject. His wife was his problem. He would deal with it. John caught the waiter's attention and ordered two drinks: "A white wine for the lady," he said, "And a Scotch on the Rocks for me; in fact, make mine a double! So," he added, " did you manage to get it?" "Ofcourse I did," she snapped, " a double room at the Paradise Hotel for the 13th 'till the 20th of August. I got one overlooking the Bay. Are those dates ok for you?" "Perfect," he answered, "I can't wait!" The drinks duly arrived. John and Maria raised their glasses in a toast: "To our success!" he said.

* * * * *

John G Lattimer was sitting with his wife, Helen in the lounge of their home. They'd just finished dinner and were relaxing by an open fire. Helen was reading a book, another Stephen King novel she had recently purchased. John was lost in thought staring at the flames licking around a log. The only sound was the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. Suddenly, he jumped with a start when the phone rang. "I'll get it darling !" he said rising quickly out of his seat. He went into the hallway and pulled the lounge door closed behind him. "Hullo? " he said, "who is it?" "Hello John, it's me.... Maria. We need to talk!" she said. "I thought I asked you to never phone me at home!" he whispered, "what if

Helen had answered? I can't talk now she's only next door in the lounge.” “Just a minute!” Maria retorted angrily, “ we have to talk. I think she may have found out about us. She rang the office building today.” “When? I didn't receive any calls from her!” he snapped. “No, you wouldn't. She asked for me specifically. I said I'd put her call through to you, but she said it wasn't you she wanted to speak to. She asked me outright what was going on. I asked her what she meant and she said that you'd been acting secretly and suspiciously of late and that she wasn't anybody's fool!” “What did you say?!” he said softly. He didn't want his wife to hear, but before Maria could answer the lounge door opened and Helen stood there. “Who is it on the phone, John “ she asked, “Anyone I know?” “Oh no-one,” he stuttered, “ just a workmate from the office. She... er, he wants to know if I'd be interested in a round of golf tomorrow. I said I couldn't possibly as I've far too much on at work at the moment. Another time, maybe.” “You should go darling, a break from work for a day will do you good. You seem to be stressed and very tense recently. There's nothing wrong, is there?” Helen asked. “Something wrong? No, there's nothing at all!” he interjected. They stood looking at each other for what seems liked ages but was in fact just a few seconds. He still held the telephone receiver in his hand. He was smiling like an idiot, an over - emphasised expression of innocence on his face. “Well.....,”she said. “Aren't you going to answer him?” “Answer who dear ?” he replied. “Your workmate on the phone ofcourse! Isn't he waiting for your decision?” “Oh, oh yes ofcourse!” he laughed , “no, it's not important!” He hung up the telephone.

It was the next morning at work. John and Maria were in the Office building foyer. She was sat behind the reception desk, he was leaning with his elbows on it. “That was close yesterday,” he said sighing, “we were nearly caught out there!” “ I know. I've told you. I think you should just be straight with her. Be honest. She will learn the truth inevitably anyway.” Maria said annoyed. “When she rang me yesterday, she quizzed me about all kinds of things, it was uncomfortable. I don't like lying! I nearly told her myself. I thought: 'Sod it! Get it all out in the open. I'm sick of all this secrecy and cloak and dagger stuff, anyway!” “You didn't tell her though, did you?” he pleaded, “please say you didn't!” She shook her head: “No, I did not,” she said. “Your secrets safe with me!” “Look, it'll all be over soon,” he stated, “just a couple of days more. I believe I've found the right man who can do it. Ofcourse, it will come at a price. Professionalism always does. I know I can rely upon him to carry out my wishes to the letter, no questions asked. We've arranged to meet up later this afternoon when I've to pay him. Half now.... half when the job's finished. I've to give him a diagram of the layout. I don't want anything to go wrong. He'll make sure my wife finally gets what she deserves! Then it'll all be over !” Later that day, John Lattimer parked his 4x4 Jeep discreetly in a side street off the main centre of town. He had

arranged to meet someone. It was perfect in this part of the town as no-one knew him so he wouldn't be asked any awkward questions. Maria was sat in the front passenger seat next to him but they both thought it best if she waited in the car. It wouldn't take long. He left the vehicle and walked up the back street towards the building. A man stood in the open doorway. John Lattimer held out a hand. "I'm John Lattimer," he stated, "I rang you a few days ago." "Ah yes, Mr. Lattimer," he said, "please come in." Lattimer followed the man into a small room, it was in darkness except for a single angle-poise lamp which was pointed down to a glass cabinet top. "You got one then?" he enquired. "Ofcourse!" was the other man's reply. He took a black case the size of a large cigar box out from under the glass counter. "Do you still want me to finish the job?" he asked. "If you give me your address?" John Lattimer shook his head: "No," he mumbled, "I've decided I'll do it myself. Ofcourse, you'll still be paid in full. That was the original agreement. I'd rather I did the deed. She is my wife, after all. I owe her that much, I guess!" He undid the two chromed clasps on each side of the case. "I hope it's to your taste," he said softly. "It took quite a long time to get it. It's not too heavy and balances very well. Plus it's easily concealed in an inside jacket pocket. Your wife won't suspect a thing until it's too late!" "May I hold it?" Lattimer asked. "Ofcourse," came the reply. John Lattimer held the piece moving it from hand to hand. It had some weight to it but not uncomfortably so. "It can be used left or right-handed," the other man declared, "I'm sure you'll agree it's a very functionable article. A mark of craftsmanship, if I may say myself." "I'll take it," Lattimer said, "does it come with the case included?" "But ofcourse," was the immediate reply. "Will I pay you the balance by cheque now?" John Lattimer said. "Hmm, I would much rather take cash," the other man said, "you know how it is. I have to pay people my end also. Special circumstances and all that, a quick job." Lattimer paid the man the remaining half of the balance owed. "No offence," the other man said as he counted out the wad of notes, "but, I hope I never see it nor you again!" John Lattimer left the building as inconspicuously as he'd entered it. At the foot of the lane where he'd parked the 4x4, Maria was waiting for him. "Well," she smiled, "did you get it? Let's have a look." "Are you mad?" he said angrily, "not here! I thought I told you to wait for me in the car anyway. You'll blow the whole thing if we're seen together. Now quick, let's get back to the car!" It was later, that same afternoon that Helen Lattimer's phone rang. It was a friend of hers, Joanne. Well, she wasn't what Helen would class as a real friend; just someone more of an acquaintance really. She was a known busybody and local gossip, always on the lookout for some tasty titbit. "Hello Helen darling!" she oozed like treacle, "I just thought I simply must phone you to ask if you and John enjoyed yourselves at the 'Soup Dragon' restaurant in Balfour street the other day? Myself and Larry were in there when my eye just caught you leaving. It was mainly the back of your husband I saw. You've lost some weight haven't you, you

sly thing! And your hair did look blonder than usual. You simply must tell me what diet regime you're following, you looked great!" "When was this?" Helen asked confused, "In a Chinese restaurant? I don't like Chinese food." "Darling!" cooed Joanne, "don't be such a tease! You know perfectly well what day it was! I did call out but you mustn't have heard me. I was going to run after you, but Larry, you know Larry the Artist? He said to leave it as maybe you didn't want to be seen. It was John with you, wasn't it?" Helen dropped the receiver back into its cradle. Her suspicions about her husband having an affair weren't just the symptoms of a paranoid woman. Who could it be? It certainly wasn't her; perhaps a work colleague or a business client? There had to be a perfectly good explanation. But then, she had smelt perfume on his jacket collar when she was hanging it up in the wardrobe. It wasn't a brand that she used. Then the other day, when he was on the phone? All that business about a golfing trip! No-one had ever asked him before. The guilty look on his face when she came out of the lounge. It all began to add up. At work, his mobile was often switched off. He claimed it was because the Boss didn't like people taking or making calls on their cellphones. They weren't being paid to do that! She knew instinctively when he was lying to her. He had that habit of scratching behind his right ear. It was a dead giveaway. He did it every time he lied. She grew angry when she thought that he may be having an affair. Perhaps he was even contemplating murder? Why would he do that to her? Didn't they have a pretty good marriage? It was better than some. Of course, they had no children. She didn't want any anyway. She'd had a lucky escape from her first husband who cheated and left her. She would have been a single Mum trying to cope on her own. So, that was it! John blamed her for the fact that they had no children. In the early days of their relationship he'd dropped enough hints; every time a couple passed them by in the street with a little brat in a push chair, he went all soppy; he'd 'coo and aah' like an old hen! He was punishing her for not making 'happy families'. If that became known amongst family and friends, she'd be labelled frigid and selfish; plus what the news of an affair would do to her. She'd be ruined! She would be left with nothing and looking like a complete fool. She was nobody's doormat. She'd not be walked on, like something you'd wipe the shit off your shoes on! That nosy bitch Joanna would have a field day! The more she thought about it, the angrier she became. She'd teach him and his bitch in heat whoever she was a lesson they'd never forget!

"So John, is everything set for this evening?" Maria asked. "It is," he said. "I've got everything prepared." He tapped his jacket's inside pocket. "She won't be expecting this!" he laughed. "Anyway, it's only what she deserves after putting me through Hell sometimes with her suspicions and paranoia. A man can only take so much, you know before he acts irrationally!" "Aw, poor you!" Maria mocked. "Well, it'll be all over by

tonight won't it, then you've a new start. A new beginning. You'll be like a Phoenix rising from the ashes! Hey! You don't think she suspects anything do you? If she found out what we've been up to, it would ruin everything!" "Relax, I don't think she knows anything. It's too late now anyway, as tonight it's all over. The sneaking around, guarded telephone calls, the secrecy of the whole thing, it's all going to plan! She's going to get it tonight come Hell or high water! Nothing's gonna stop me!" he stated. "It's just that I'm sure I saw her car at the far end of the car park when we went out for lunch together today. A blue BMW isn't it? Licence plate NKV or something?" "Now you're being paranoid!" he laughed. At approximately 9.20 that evening, John Lattimer parked his 4x4 Jeep at the entrance to Sunningvale Close where he and his wife lived. It was a cul-de-sac of only six large detached houses with long gravel driveways. He didn't want his wife to hear him drive up. He needed it so she didn't suspect a thing. He walked slowly and purposely up the driveway. All of the curtains at the front of the house were drawn. It was perfect. The bathroom light was on as she usually took a shower around this time every evening. She said it relaxed her ready for bed. He tiptoed past the large sitting room bay window and around the side of the house. If he used his front door key she would probably hear him enter, so he decided to come in through the patio doors at the rear of the house. The night sky was very dark due to low clouds blotting out the moon. There was less chance of him being heard coming in this way. He laughed when he saw his reflection in the patio windows, and nearly dropped his keys in the darkness. He fumbled trying to get the right key into the lock. He couldn't see a damn thing! But, if he couldn't see anything then it was unlikely he'd be seen either. The lock clicked. He hoped she hadn't turned the alarm on, but he had told her that he had a late business meeting to go to, and just get some dinner for herself. As quiet as a mouse wearing slippers, he opened the patio door and entered the room. He could hear the faint murmur of conversation coming from the television in the sitting room. On near tiptoe, he silently crept towards the lounge door. It was slightly ajar. He stepped out into the hallway, passed by the foot of the stairs and stopped opposite the kitchen. His wife should still be up in the bathroom. He would wait for her in the darkness of the kitchen. He took the long black case out of his pocket. The time had come, it was now or never. All of the planning and secrecy that had gone into this one moment in time was about to pay off. His problem would be resolved. A new beginning. A fresh start. 'The look on her face is going to be priceless!' he thought. When she came down from the bathroom she would go into the sitting room and sit and watch television. She would have her back to the door and not suspect a thing. He would jump out of the darkness of the kitchen. He pushed the door open and entered the kitchen. He approached the door into the sitting room and stood waiting, the contents of the black case in his hand. Suddenly, a dark shadowy figure stepped out from behind the open kitchen door. The

long serrated edge of a bread knife flashed. Once. Twice. Three times it struck him between the shoulder blades plunging deep into his back, the blade entering up to the handle. It pierced his heart and lungs. He fell heavily like a dropped sack of potatoes onto the kitchen floor. Dead. Not even time to cry out. Helen felt for the kitchen lightswitch and turning it on she saw her husband's dead body lying prone on the tiled floor in an ever increasing pool of blood. The knife was still protruding from his back, his mouth wide open in a silent scream and his unseeing eyes wide with pain and horror. It all seemed surreal as he was dressed She could hear a gurgling sound coming from his throat. Helen noticed the small black case he held in his hand. She wiped her heavily bloodstained hands, and fingers still sticky with blood on her clothing. She knelt beside his body, took the case from his hand and opened it. A white card was inside it with the handwritten words: "To my darling wife, Helen. Happy tenth anniversary. I love you! John. " In her husband's other hand, he held the specially commissioned gold bracelet and eternity ring of diamonds and heart-shaped rubies he'd had designed for her as a one-off unique jewellery piece. Helen knelt on the blood-stained tiles with her face in her hands sobbing. She had dropped the bracelet, ring and black case on the floor. Suddenly, the telephone in the hallway rang. Helen staggered out of the kitchen. She picked up the receiver, and in very shaky voice she asked: "Hello, who is this?" "Is that Helen," a female voice enquired, "Helen Lattimer?" "It is," she responded weakly. "This is Maria, we've never met in person but have spoken on the telephone several times. I'm the Receptionist at the Office Building where your husband works. I'm just phoning to wish you a Happy Tenth Wedding Anniversary. Did you like the present he gave you? I helped him choose it. He said rubies are your favourite! It's been very hard keeping the secret from you these past few weeks! I'm sure you will enjoy the trip he's arranged for you both as well ." "Wha... what trip?" asked Helen confused. "Oh! I hope I haven't let the cat out of the bag! Me and my big mouth! He's arranged a Second Honeymoon trip to the Maldives. He told me that was where you went on your honeymoon, so being the old-fashioned romantic that I'm sure he is, he booked a week there. You'll be staying in a Five-Star hotel very near the beach and renewing your marriage vows! I'm sorry if I've said too much, but it's so romantic and I've been so excited for you both. You're very lucky to have such a loving, considerate man! Can I speak to him for just a moment, please? I won't keep him from you for too long; just enough to wish him all the best!" Helen Lattimer let the telephone drop from her grip. It swung to and fro by it's curled lead. Helen slumped onto her knees, leaning limply against the wall. "What have I done," she sobbed, "what the Hell have I done? God forgive me!" On the other end of the phone Maria was still asking: "Hello Helen, are you still there? Hello,..... Hello?"

NICE WORK IF YOU CAN GET IT

He was sat in a large black leather armchair half in sleep, half awake. He held his legs straight, supported on an old three-legged stool. His feet were crossed and his hands were held behind his head fingers interlocked. He is totally relaxed and at peace within himself. A log fire was burning brightly in a large stone hearth. It cast long flickering shadows on the bare walls and ceiling creating strange shapes. He can feel the heat from the fire scorching his feet and legs, but he was much too comfortable to move the chair away from the blazing log fire. He decided to put another log on the fire. He hated the cold and felt it through to his bones. No, he much preferred the heat. The hotter the better. In fact, he couldn't move his tired old body very much until he felt his blood coursing through his veins. He yawned loudly and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. The red and yellow flames reflected in them. All was quiet except for the ticking of a large old-fashioned brass clock on the oak beamed mantelpiece. There wasn't much happening at this time of day as usual, but it would get busier later. A large number was expected. Suddenly, he heard the sound of footsteps from behind him. The black leather armchair had a high back so he was unable to see who had entered. He was too lazy to turn his head and he was far too settled to disturb this rare moment of quietness and solitude. A stranger walked into his line of vision and crouched down warming his hands at the fire. He rubbed the palms together vigorously. "You've got a good blaze going there, haven't you?" he laughed, "I suppose you're like me and feel the cold! It's very quiet down here isn't it? Not much happening?" The Sitter adjusted his position in the leather armchair until he felt much more comfortable. "It'll get busier later," he replied, "we're expecting a large number to arrive." The Sitter lifted his legs off the stool and pushed it nearer to the other with his foot. "Sit down and get a warm by the fire," he said. "What's your name, by the way?" The other held out a hand : "It's Elwood. And you are?" "Ransley" said the Sitter. "Are you new here?" "Who me?" Elwood replied, "No, actually I've been here for quite some time. I've been up top for awhile. 'Not been in these parts for several years." "Up top, eh? It doesn't suit everyone does it. It's nice work if you can get it," Ransley declared. "But, my attitude is that you either like it or you don't. Take me for instance, I'd much rather work down here than anywhere else. You know where you stand. Your just left to get on with your work and nobody bothers you. What more do you want?" Elwood scratched behind one ear, as he said: "Ah, it's not like the old days. It's new blood they want now, not us old-timers! We all reach our sell by date don't we, when our services are no longer required? At least not as much." "Smoke ?" Ransley asked. "No thanks," Elwood replied, "the Missus made me give them up, she reckons they are bad for me! I ask you, in the line of work that I do inhaling all these bloody fumes all day, what more harm is a cigarette going to do? It

doesn't make sense!" He paused momentarily to rub his hands together in the heat of the log fire, then, clearing his throat he spat into the flames. It sizzled as the phlegm hit the hot embers. "What in Hell's name isn't bad for you, these days" he added. Ransley lit his cigarette from a burning stick which had fallen from the fire into the hearth. He inhaled deeply, then blew out a cloud of blue-grey smoke from between his lips creating a smoke ring. It slowly dissolved above their heads. Elwood sniffed the air. The smoke had a strong, pungent aroma. "Where in Hell did you get those from?!" he said coughing. "I took them off that Turkish bloke we had in here a couple of weeks back. He'd no more use for them!" laughed Ransley. He took another inhalation of the same acrid smoke and blew it out harder between his lips. Elwood wafted away the smoke with a hand. "As I was saying, it's all changed now hasn't it, 'specially since we got this new lot in. More managerial staff and less shop floor workers rules the workplace these days. Everyone's a Time and Motion man, going around with their stopwatches and bloody clipboards. It's a disgrace. We should form a Union and show we mean business!" Ransley got to his feet, his voice growing louder: "Workers unite and rise up!" he shouted. "Power to the People! That's what I say!" "Hey, you sound like a bleedin' Communist," Elwood retorted. "You're not, are you? He won't stand for that down here y'know? He's the complete opposite. He doesn't like that kind of talk at all! It's all one Leader. Number One. Numero Uno. The Big Chief. He who must be obeyed!" Ransley blew another smoke ring. "Ooh, he who must be obeyed!" Ransley mocked sarcastically, "if you want my opinion it's all self-first, self-last and self-bloody-in-between! You put in all these bloody years body and soul, for what? Not even a decent pension scheme. Just a handshake from the Boss and it's kiss my arse and don't slam the door on your way out! A friend of mine got a sundial as a retirement present! Can you believe it? The last thing we need to be reminded of is the bleedin' time! Elwood shook his head: "I disagree. The Boss has been in that job a very long time, he has his good points and bad, just like the rest of us. He has a lot on his plate but is still in that job. He must be doing something right? You need to be careful what you say. That sort of talk could get you in trouble!" He glanced around the darkened room. A silence fell between them. Finally, Elwood asked: "So, are you married then?" Ransley was standing nearer to the fire. This time he was warming his backside. "Married? Who, me?! You're having a laugh, aren't you? I never had the time, nor never met the right one I suppose. Now, don't get me wrong, I've had more than my fair share over the years, if you catch my drift. In fact, I gained myself a bit of a reputation in my younger days. Bit of a 'jack the lad' you might say. The fairer sex weren't safe when I was in my prime. Mind you, I can still give them a run for their money even now!" he boasted. "I've no regrets. But, where marriage is concerned I was always too busy with work. A whole host of other reasons. What about you?" said Ransley. "I bet you are!" "I'm happily married yes, for several years

now. We've never had a cross word or disagreement in all those years !” he boasted “Except for the business over the cigarettes” Ransley said flippantly. “ You said she made you give them up, didn't you? Doesn't sound too happy to me!” “Marriage is all about give and take, a desire to please your partner.” Elwood quoted, “A combination of two becoming one.” “Oh yeah?” Ransley fired back caustically, “so tell me, what did this flower of compromise and understanding forfeit for you then, my happy friend? I'll tell you what I'll bet: Zilch! A big fat zero. Diddly squat !” “Why are you having a go at me ?” asked Elwood? “Ah, don't mind me,” said Ransley, “ I'm just letting off steam! Don't take it personal or anything. No offence meant. It's just the way I am. Pugnacious ! Anyone knows me will tell you that!” “None taken,” nodded Elwood. He held out a hand. Ransley stood and stretched his body, his arms reaching skywards. His mouth opened in a huge noisy yawn, then he broke wind loudly. “Well,” he said, “ I really best be going. It's that time, again. Lots of things to do and people to see! They won't sort themselves, will they?” “Are you going up top this time?” asked Elwood. “No, I'll just be next door. I've been transferred to cover for another fella who's off sick. He ate something that didn't agree with him, I believe! It's only for a few days. How about you?” “Do you know, it's a funny old world! I've been asked to cover for you! Can you believe it?!” Elwood replied. Ransley laughed: “Well, who'd have thought? Good luck anyway. It'll start to get busy fairly soon. Give me a shout when you've finished your shift and we can continue our little chat!” He moved towards the door: “Hey up! You've got one coming through now!” he said, “ you lucky bugger! Mind your head!” Suddenly, there was a loud metallic rumbling sound above their heads. It grew steadily clamorous getting nearer. A large iron trap door opened in the granite ceiling above their heads. It fell downwards on two hinges swinging rhythmically to and fro like a metronome. A huge deluge of dirty, fetid water along with blood, urine, vomit, pus, bile, watery diarrhoea and other unknown or indistinguishable liquids cascaded through the open trap door and splashed onto the stone floor some fifteen feet below. Abruptly, the completely naked body of a man dropped through the trapdoor and fell heavily with a sickening thud onto his back. He was bruised and badly beaten. He tried to stand, raising his broken body. His face is twisted in agony and streaked with blood and sweat. “This one's mine!” Ransley screeched. He reached into the darkness and grabbed a long steel Trident into his claw-like hand, it's sharp talons clasp it tightly. The hard, scaly skin of his reptilian-like seaweed green body turns quickly towards the human. It's four horned head with blood red eyes looks the man up and down, savouring every moment. A long yellow forked tongue lips black lips. “Welcome to Hell!” Ransley a Demon of the Netherworld howls. The human staggered backwards in horror at the sight of the demon on his right side. Unnoticed in the darkness, the second Demon Elwood grabs his Trident out of the gloom. He circles to the left of the

human who has been cast to the depths of Hell for his Sins. "May God forgive me and help me!" he shrieks, his bloodied hands held to his face. Ransley laughs mockingly : "Your God can't help you now!" The man tries to run towards the door nearest to Ransley, a Soldier of Satan, but he is not quick enough, as in a surprisingly swift movement the Demon has stepped forward, the steel Trident raised in one hand above it's head. His clawed feet scratch noisily on the stone floor as he thrusts the Trident forwards with great force towards the naked man. It's three razor sharp prongs pierce the man easily. One through his chest, the middle one through his neck and the third prong pierces his face just below the left eye. A bright red fountain of blood sprays upwards and outwards from his wounds, spilling onto the stone floor as the carotid artery is completely severed. The human screams in agony as he falls to the floor impaled. The Trident's prongs snag on flesh and bone. The Demon Ransley, places a hard scaly foot onto the man's chest as he withdraws the Trident' torn flesh, blood and sinew spew from the three wounds. Elwood the second demon now leaps upon the twisted body of the mortally wounded man and with one vicious swipe of a claw he rips open the victim's abdomen disembowelling him. His entrails disgorge around his body. Elwood's tongue shoots out from his mouth at a phenomenol speed chameleon-like and hits the man dead centre in his half-dislodged left eye. A loud 'pop' is heard as it is plucked from its socket. The forked tongue swiftly returns to the Demon's mouth and in one swallow he gulps the eyeball down greedily. "Hmmm, I do love the blue ones best!" he laughs in ecstasy. Both of the Demons from Hell continue their attack on the human, by pulling his body apart viciously; ripping and tearing it to shreds limb from limb whilst feasting hungrily. "Like I said," Ransley laughed, " call me pugnacious!" Suddenly, several smaller spider-like creatures entered spilling through the still open trapdoor. It clanged shut behind them. Each creature had eight spindly legs which made a scratching sound as they hurried across the granite stone floor. They grabbed onto the dead man's body and dragged him into the darkest corners in the room. They could be heard chewing noisily the last remaining flesh off the bones. Elwood licked the blood off his lips as suddenly, another rumbling sound above the iron trapdoor could be heard. "Here comes another one!" shouted Elwood with glee. "It's going to be a busy night!"

THE CUT-OFF POINT

The man slowly opened his eyes. It felt like his eyelids had been glued together. He tried his best to move but could not. His body was not responding no matter how much he tried to move it. There was no sensation in his fingers or toes. His head swam sickeningly with dizziness as if the whole world was spinning and he couldn't make it stop. He wanted it to stop so he could get off. He felt more and more nauseous and thought he was going to throw up. He tried to cry out but his mouth was as dry as the desert. His tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth so he couldn't make a sound. He felt very scared. He didn't know why but he could only face directly ahead of him, no up and down or side to side movement. It felt like his head was being restrained. Where the hell was he? What was he doing here, wherever he was? He gradually managed to open his eyes for just a few seconds but the dizziness overwhelmed him once again. His stomach retched but nothing came up except a bitter taste of bile. Gradually, he began to experience a return of some feelings to his body, albeit only in a very limited way at first, but gradually little by little. It felt like he was lying on something cold, something metallic. It was a flat surface. The flesh of his shoulders and buttocks distributed the weight of his body. He was naked except for a single white sheet draped over him. He felt cold and his body began to tremble and shiver from the feelings of that coldness. He slowly spread his fingers from the open palms of his hands and cautiously proceeded to explore his immediate surroundings. He felt like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis for the very first time. He began to discern a small raised edge of steel which ran completely around the surface he was lying on, about three inches in height enclosing his body; with great difficulty he moved one of his feet, sliding it slowly from left to right. He discovered the presence of some sort of aperture, an indentation, in fact a hole in the flat surface. His mind, was still very unclear but the apparatus he was lying on appeared to be a coroner's table! A stainless steel table with a raised edge and what was most probably a drainage hole. His heart missed several beats. Where the hell was he? He must be in a hospital or at worse a Coroner's! Perhaps he'd had an accident of some sort, but he had no recollection of having been involved in one? If he was in hospital, where were the Nurses and the Doctors, even other patients? Had he had an accident and they thought he was dead. Panic began to overtake him, he tried to shout but no sound came out. He became aware of a sound he had failed to hear before or his muddled brain had not recognised. It was a regular monotone sound steadily repeating over and over like a musician's metronome. He concluded that it must be a heart monitor. He must be in a hospital. But, why on a stainless steel table and not a bed or even a trolley? Couldn't they hear his heart beating? Didn't they realise that he was still alive? This was so confusing! Suddenly, he heard the sound of a door opening,

footsteps entering and then the door closing again. The sound of a key turning in a lock. A man entered dressed in a surgical gown and mask. He wore plastic gloves and a round linen hat. The footsteps approached and he became aware that someone was standing at the top of the table by his head. He tried to speak but could not, and when he attempted to open his eyes again the sickening dizziness returned as strongly as before; even through his closed eyelids he was able to discern that a large, bright overhead light had been switched on. He still couldn't move his head and didn't realize that it was being held firmly in place by a broad leather strap across his forehead. The scalp had been peeled back and a small circular portion of his skull removed. It had been placed in a dish on a nearby table ! His brain was exposed and two electrical probe wires inserted. His brain was a pinkish-beige in colour. One probe was in the frontal lobe and the other into the Parietal lobe. His head was held firm and in position by the leather strap and a metal cage-like structure in which the back of his head was resting. "Ah Mr, Burrowes," a man's voice said. "I see you're still with us?" Burrowes opened his eyes a little, the insane spinning had eased off. "I suppose you are wondering where you are? In a hospital, perhaps? Yes, you're partly right, but this is not a hospital. You're in my Private Clinic. We'll not be disturbed here! Do forgive me, you cannot speak can you ? I was forgetting. I'm afraid I'm responsible for that. You see, I've operated on the part of your brain which allows you to speak. The Broca's area to be precise. I couldn't have you calling out attracting unwanted attention to yourself, could I? I know you can hear me Burrowes, that part of your brain remains unaffected. " He notices a teardrop forms in each eye and slips slowly down each cheek. "Yes, I suppose it must be upsetting for you and you may be wondering what the hell is happening to you? Please allow me to introduce myself: I am Frederick De Guerre; Professor Frederick De Guerre to be exact. A celebrated Neurosurgeon. You may have heard of me? No? My name doesn't ring any bells? Pity! You see, I know you are fully acquainted with my wife, Olivia De Guerre." Burrowes tried hard to clear his befuddled brain but could not. It must be the affects of the drugs this madman had used on him. "Still unclear? How annoying for you! I'll fill in the blanks, shall I? Well, you and my darling wife Olivia have been having an affair behind my back. I found out as inevitably I always do. You must understand Mr. Burrowes that my wife's constant infidelities are no concern of mine, unless their revelation could damage me both socially and professionally. I leave her to pursue her own desires. You see Mr. Burrowes you aren't the first man to fall for my wife's looks and charms, and no doubt you'll not be the last. Does that surprise you? I have to step in when things get out of hand and her 'lovers' become too involved with her. She is the proverbial bitch in heat and sometimes finds herself embroiled in a relationship that is becoming too serious. She neither wants or needs that. Unfortunately, she cannot just end a relationship like anybody else in case of

any scandal that would inevitably follow. I provide everything for her to give her a style of life that she craves and demands, all except for one thing. I require nor desire anything from a woman other than simple companionship and the pretence of being a happily married couple, acceptable in the eyes of society. Let me just say that my sexual preferences lie elsewhere. I can be prosecuted and jailed for my activities even though it is nineteen sixty three. So, I'm afraid I cannot allow you to make your affair public as you declared to her. I'd be ridiculed wouldn't I? I have my own standards and reputation to keep up. I have already destroyed your ability for speech and I've not finished yet. There is still work to be done! I'm going to operate some more on the Frontal Lobe of the brain, the Prefrontal Cortex to be exact. A part of your brain that plays a part in determining your personality. I've promised her that I will destroy your ability to speak and rob you of your personality. Oh, and I have one last gratuity for myself. A gift of my own. The 'icing on the cake' so to speak". Tears began to flow down Burrowes' face as he sobbed uncontrollably and silently. The full extent of his terrible fate overwhelmed him. He remembered, how he had met a beautiful woman at a Gala Dinner in a plush five-star hotel in London. It had been a Fundraiser for the Hospital to purchase a much needed piece of equipment. He was introduced to her by her husband and he was immediately attracted to her. She made no illusions as to what she wanted from him, and later on in a hotel linen closet she was more than willing to demonstrate her desires. She was insatiable. She gave him her phone number. It was the start of a steamy relationship. They had many more clandestine meetings in hotel rooms, parked cars, on a secluded beach; in fact anywhere they could. He had asked her about her husband and she told him that he suspected nothing, and even if he did she didn't care. But he couldn't satisfy her hunger. She was addicted, obsessed, all-consumed by her passion and need for sex. An unquenchable fire with a voracious appetite. He began to wonder if he could satisfy her rapaciousness. He suspected that she was seeing other men as well as him. Then the inevitable had happened, he began to fall in love with her. He thought that she felt the same way. He asked her to leave her husband and go away with him. He couldn't provide a rich lifestyle for her like he did, but surely it would be enough if they were both together? Didn't love conquer all? He resented the fact that there were other men in her life. He couldn't handle that, couldn't share her with anyone else. He wanted and needed her just for himself. It was bad enough that she wouldn't leave her husband and continued to share his house with him; maybe even his bed? Perhaps it was all lies she'd told him about her husband ? He was a neuro-surgeon; surely an educated intelligent and reasonable man? If he contacted her husband and told him about their affair and how much he loved her, would he understand and let her go? She was twenty five years younger than her husband. He had his wealth and his career. She told Burrowes that it

was a marriage without love or any physical contact between them. De Guerre had only entered into a marriage with her because her Father desired it. He wanted his daughter to marry someone equally wealthy as his family was. An eminent neuro-surgeon, the likes of Professor Frederick De Guerre fitted the bill perfectly. She'd had a string of young lovers all after her Father's money. None successful. The 'arrangement' suited De Guerre equally well. He was able to receive regular funding from his wealthy father in law, Sidney Hollis and keep his Private Clinic running with a rich clientele of patients willing to pay high costs for his time and expertise. He was engaged in major research on finding a cure or better control of Alzheimers and other degenerative neurological conditions and illnesses. It was a multi-million pound business he was involved in. He couldn't and wouldn't let anything jeopardise that. He was also able to conduct medical experiments. "More tears, Mr. Burrowes?" Doctor De Guerre asked sarcastically, "it's far too late for that, I'm afraid. It's much better for me to dispose of you and her lovers both past and present. Burrowes wondered if Olivia De Guerre knew he was here, or did she even care? Did it even cross her mind what her husband did to her former lovers? He remembered that it must have only been two nights ago, after he'd arranged to meet her at a local Travelstop motel. He had collected the room key from reception, opened the door and entered. Then everything went black. Somebody had slugged him from behind. A large black pit had opened up and he fell into it. Headfirst. It felt like a long way down before he hit the bottom. When he had finally regained consciousness he awoke to find himself on the stainless steel Coroner's table and unable to move. Now, the whole thing made sense. But, it was too late. "Still with us, Mr. Burrowes?" De Guerre asked. "I'll not keep you for much longer now. You'll be pleased to know I've almost completed my work. I've just got one more little job to do and then it's all over. The 'final piece de resistance ', he laughed. " My parting gift to you, I'm going to perform a penectomy on you! I think you can imagine what that is!" Joseph Burrowes tried desperately to move his body as the sheer horror of the situation overwhelmed him, but to no avail. He couldn't speak but managed to produce some whimpering and moaning sounds pleading for mercy. " Don't worry, you'll not feel a thing I assure you. I'm a very competent surgeon so you are in good hands. I have already administered a powerful drug which has the affect of rendering you in a state of near paralysis. Ofcourse, after the amputation I will stem the bleeding and stitch up the wound. It is quite a simple procedure, you know. All completed in a very short space of time I haven't lost a patient yet, you'll be pleased to know. At least none I intended to lose! Once the drugs wear off you'll be as right as rain in no time. Apart from your inability to speak and changed personality. The old Martin Burrowes will cease to exist and a different person will be in his place! Exciting isn't it?! " "Your 'donation' will add to my personal collection of my wife's former lovers," he said, with a wave of his arm

towards five glass specimen jars each containing an amputated member floating in alcohol. At least Burrowes was spared this sight. Burrowes felt a strong pressure in his groin, not painful but more of a perception that something dreadful and appalling had just happened to him! He heard the chilling sound of something being callously dropped into a kidney dish. He could make an almost certain supposition as to what it was! His heartbeat and pulse rate increased rapidly as an intense feeling of nausea and dizziness overwhelmed him. He felt like vomiting. "There now, you didn't feel a thing, did you?" De Guerre said brusquely. "It just remains to stop the bleeding and stitch the wound!" Once again, through acute shock and disbelief he felt himself diving into a deep pool of blackness which completely engulfed him like a whirlpool.

SARA

Gerry Kelly is a young boy aged eleven. He is of small fattish build, but not overly overweight. 'Big boned!' his Grandmother preferred to call it. He had hazelnut brown eyes and an unruly mop of ginger hair on the top of his head with the sides and back cut very short. He is a quiet, unassuming sensitive sort of boy. This was his first year at the Martin Luther King Secondary school and he often felt scared or lonely. It was a large school for nearly one thousand boys and girls, four storeys high and quite daunting for a new pupil straight from Junior School. It seemed as if everyone already knew each other, which was possibly true as it wasn't just a new school but a new town for Gerry. He and his Grandmother had recently moved into the area to make a new start. Gerry felt so small and insignificant. He was an intelligent boy and in Junior school his favourite subjects had been Art, History, Science and Music. He was even learning the trumpet. Gerry Kelly lives with his Grandmother as sadly both of his parents had been killed in a road traffic accident. He was an only child. She is his nearest living relative and has adopted him. He always found it hard to make friends, so often finds himself alone. He already felt isolated at school with no-one to talk to or confide in. He had only been in this school for two weeks and the bullying has started. He has been getting picked on constantly at school by some other kids who bully him. The leader of the bullies is Jamie Fenton. He has two main cronies who back him up. Carl Avers and Georgie Graham. They bully other kids for money, sweets, or even who gets to play with the football at breaktime. But, the young boy becomes their main victim. They bully him about his hair, his height, his weight, the fact that he wears spectacles, in fact anything. It's almost as if the other kids were able to sense his weakness, that he was an easy target. A prime victim for their taunts and teases. They bully him about his clothes, as his Grandmother isn't very well off and can't afford to buy him 'named' brands. They slag him off about him wearing cheaper brands with no famous trade names. He can't understand their reasoning about things like trainers or track suits; even socks and underwear being naturally better just because of some stupid label! When he asks them 'why are they better?' They just answer him back nastily with the declaration of: "They just are, that's all! Everyone knows that. Your trainers have only got one stripe on the side of them, but ours have three! So, they must be better than yours. It's pretty obvious isn't it, unless you're stupid like you are!" If Gerry continues the debate they usually followed up this 'essential' piece of information with a punch, kick or a slap just to reinforce their argument ofcourse. Sadly, it wasn't just limited to verbal abuse, but often involved physical violence. They tease him about both his parents being dead and his elderly Grannie not having too long to go. "Where will you be then eh, Smelly Kelly? They'll put you in a Home that's where! A Home for Orphans and retards!" They take

great pleasure in ridiculing him in class, at lunch and break-time and even after school. He never plays out and his Grandma who is a kind decent woman doesn't like to let him out, anyway. She is aware that some bullying is occurring but NOT the total extent of it. He never talks to her about it but just bottles it all up. He tries to minimise the extent the bullying is happening and how severe it is. The bullies make sure his face doesn't show any cuts or bruises, so they usually punch and kick him in the body. Sometimes, his Grandmother hears him crying quietly in his bed at night, but she just thinks he is obviously still very upset about the death of his Mother and Father; even though this happened when he was much younger. She didn't think that he would have many strong memories of his parents as he was just a toddler when they died. Gerry started to begin talking to himself, whispering and mumbling. She doesn't worry too much about it at first and just assumes that he is thinking out loud. But, as time goes by it becomes more prevalent and he has given a name to his imaginary friend. He calls her Sara. Lots of kids have an imaginary friend so why shouldn't he? When she asks him who he's talking to he just answers: "Oh, no-one, Gran". "Well, who's Sarah?" she asked. He didn't answer. There are some kids in school who would like to be his friend but don't, because they are scared of the backlash they know they'll get from Jamie Fenton and his cronies. The attention will probably be focused onto themselves. None of them wants that! So, they just keep their heads down and their mouths shut. Some of the teachers worry about him, but everytime he's asked he just tells them that everything is okay. He's fine and happy. He tries to ignore the harassment and just keep focused on his school work. He's obviously more intelligent than the rest of the other kids and wants to get a good education, so he can get really good job once he leaves school, or maybe even go on to University. He'd like to study History. One day on his way to the local shop for his Grandmother, he found a soft toy, blue rabbit that had been discarded and thrown in a rubbish skip was with lots of other household items and junk, outside of a row of old terraced houses that were being demolished one by one to make room for new council flats and houses. The streets, including his own are the old fashioned rows of post Second World War terraced houses; two up, two down and with an outside toilet common in this old part of town. Some had been in disrepair for a long time and should have been pulled down years ago. The Council were slowly, but methodically clearing one street at a time to make way for the new dwellings everyone is very excited about moving into. "Life will be so much better living in a house with all the modern conveniences, and I for one, will be glad to see the end of the old Victorian style rows of red brick back to back terraces with their smokey chimney pots, and stinking back alleyways where the big rats scurry about fighting over food." his Grannie had said. Her house is not yet targeted for priority demolition, but it will probably only a matter of time before she gets the order for them to move out. It was

only meant to be for a short while anyway; a 'stop gap' sort of place after their move from the Prefab dwellings she had lived in for several years. There's even a rumour that some of them will be transferred to a new Council Estate called Deerpark Meadows. The new houses there have already been built and are just awaiting tenants to fill them. His Gran said that they are built on land that used to be the old Gasworks when she was a child. It's all been cleared up now and every house has two toilets and a bathroom! Just imagine, two toilets! It must be like living in a palace or somewhere! He couldn't believe it. They all had a front and back garden completely fenced off with a parking space out front! How cool was that? His Gran didn't even have a car, [she'd never had one and probably never would], but the Council still gave her her own parking space. "There must be some very thoughtful people working for the Council!" Gerry said. His Grandmother is quite elderly and not in the best of health, but she keeps her troubles away from the boy, whether it's health or money, and likewise he doesn't tell her about the bullying. He pretends that he's lots of friends in school to her and he makes up stories about them. All good! He tells her how much he is liked and always included in their activities. But the reality is that he isn't. He's not included in their games, sports or often day to day life at school. At school swimming lessons they said that he was like a Great white whale when he came out of the changing rooms in his swimming costume. The bullies all laughed and pointed at him. He can't swim and they take great delight in ridiculing him for it. So, he had found a toy rabbit which is about the size of a teddy bear. It is quite dirty and disheveled from its stay in the skip. He looks around to make sure nobody's watching him, although there are quite large areas of cleared waste land now. But still, he doesn't want to be seen. It would only be more ammunition for the bullies. He brushes off the bits of plaster and mud that are stuck to the rabbit's body and it is damp after being out in the soft, drizzly rain. He had quickly put the soiled rabbit into his Grandmother's shopping bag. Later that day, when he got home he took the rabbit out of the bag when he's alone upstairs in his bedroom. He examined the rabbit more closely. One of its ears was partly hanging off and a brown glass eye is hanging by a single thread. Some cotton thread holds a split in the body just under the left arm. "I'll name you Sara, after my Mother," he said as he hid the bag under his bed. Suddenly, he heard the voice of his Granny calling him to come down for his tea. "I'll be back in a minute!" he says to Sara. After tea, which comprised of corned beef sandwiches and a mug of hot milk, he tells his Gran that he is going back up to his room as he has some homework to do. She smiles and thinks of him as a good boy who takes his studies seriously. "Don't work too hard, Gerry," she says. He returns to the bedroom and once again takes the rabbit out of the shopping bag. He lays on his back on his bed with the "Toy Story" quilt. He held the rabbit at arms length up above his face. "Sara!" he whispered. "My little Sara!" He fell asleep holding the rabbit in his arms and dreams of running with

the her through green meadows. The sound of a gentle tapping at his bedroom door brought him out of his happy dream. At first, he thinks it is part of his dream and cannot figure out where the sound is coming from. Then his Gran calls his name. "Gerry, are you alright. It's nine o'clock. You're not still doing your homework are you?" She taps at the door again, but this time a little harder. As his head begins to clear he sits up quickly and hides the rabbit underneath his pillow. His Grandmother opens the door gently. "Can I come in?" she asks. "Sorry Gran," he said drowsily, as he rubbed his eyes, "I must have fallen asleep." "Would you like some supper?" she enquired. "No, no thanks Gran. I'm too tired. I think I'll just go to bed", he said. "Alright, goodnight Gerry. See you in the morning, love! Goodnight!" She closed the door gently behind her. He quickly changed into his pyjamas. He took Sara rabbit from beneath the pillow and gave her a big hug. "Goodnight, Sara" he said.

* * * * *

The next day, Gerry was back in school. He wasn't long in class when the bullying began again. It started off about his dinner money, which the thugs demanded. If he refused he would be beaten, so reluctantly he had to hand over the money his Grandmother had given him for his school dinner. The usual taunts about his weight, height, wearing glasses, and being ginger-haired followed just like everyday. There was never any let up. It was constant. It wore him down like carrying a heavy weight on his back. After first break that morning, Gerry opted to sit in class as usual. There was little point in him venturing out into the playground with the other kids of his class. It would only result in more intimidation and harassment. He'd had enough already. At least he could be on his own with his new close friend Sara. He had the soft toy rabbit in his school satchel. None of the other children knew about her. He dreaded to think what would happen to him or Sara if they did. He carefully took Sara out of his satchel. He opened the desk and put Sara inside it. "There," he said, "that's much better for you, bring you out into the light. We have to stay in here because the bullies are outside in the playground. They'll be nasty to us and won't understand our friendship. They'll try to take you from me. But, I won't let them hurt you!" He hugged the rabbit affectionately. Suddenly, the school bell sounded for the children to return to their classes after break time. He didn't have time to put Sara back into his schoolbag as the class room door was already beginning to open and the other kids coming in. The next lesson was Geography class. He had Sara in his desk which has a lift-up lid on it. He sometimes lifted the lid and with his head down whispered quietly into the opening. One of the bullies noticed this and said: "Talking to yourself again, Carrot-head?" He ignored the remark and closed the desk lid

quickly. There were sounds of giggling from some of the other children. "Be quiet, and get on with your work!" the Teacher shouted. "Gerard Kelly! What are you doing with that desk? Stop fidgeting! What are you hiding in there?" He was startled and jumped with fright when she shouted. He banged the top of his head on the desk lid. The teacher walked towards his desk. "You'll have to stay hidden!" he said to Sara. "Who are you mumbling to?!" she enquired. "Show me what your hiding!" "It's nothing Miss," Gerry Kelly blurted out. "I was just talking to myself!" All of the other children laughed at him. "Smelly Kelly talks to himself!" teased Jamie Fenton. "What an idiot!" Carl Avers shouted, quickly followed by Georgie Graham who said: "Hey Miss, Is Smelly Kelly stupid or what? He's an idiot!" "Show me what's in your desk," the Geography teacher demanded. He reluctantly half-lifted the lid. "Now!" she said, "I'm waiting!" He didn't know what to do. He felt like pulling Sara out of the desk and running out of the classroom with her. "Show me what you're hiding?" the Teacher repeated, "or you'll be put on detention!" Unexpectedly, the classroom door opened and the Headmaster entered the room. "May I have a word please, Miss Carmichael? It'll only take a moment." "Certainly, Mr. Dawson," she said. They went out into the corridor. "So, what have you got in your desk, Kelly?" Georgie Graham asked. "A baby's rattle or a dummy, I'll bet!" Carl Avers sneered. "Mind your own business!" Gerry shouted angrily. "Just leave us alone!" "What's with the 'us' fatty?!" Jamie Fenton shouted as he kicked the back of Gerry Kelly's chair. "There's no 'us'. It's just you on your own, remember that!" Luckily, the classroom door opened and Miss Carmichael, the Geography teacher returned. "Right!" she said, "put away your books it's twelve o'clock, so you can all go for lunch. Leave the room quietly!" She appeared to have forgotten all about the earlier incident. Gerry deliberately lingered in the class allowing the other children and his teacher to exit the class before him. It gave him time to take Sara out of his desk and put her into his schoolbag. He headed out into the playground. All of the other kids were busy playing football, chasing each other, having pretend fights or just standing around chatting. Gerry was left on his own in a corner of the schoolyard sitting on a low brick wall. He always brings a packed lunch to school with him now since the thugs always stole his lunch money from him. Sometimes, they'll still steal his sandwiches or soft drink off him; even if it's to just throw it away. He had the schoolbag on his knee with the straps undone and he appeared to be talking into the open bag. Jamie Fenton, the bully leader noticed this and nudged his two cronies who approached unnoticed behind Gerry. "Still talking to yourself, fatty?" Fenton asked sarcastically. "You're off your ginger head, you are!" Gerry Kelly was startled by their sudden approach and he quickly shut the bag and refastened the straps. "Wotcha got in the bag, four eyes? Something interesting? Come on! Let's all have a look! Don't keep it to yourself!" the Bully Leader says. He made a grab for the bag but Gerry managed to hang onto it. A tug of war

ensued: "Leave me alone!" he wailed. One of the bully's cronies aimed a hard kick at the poor boy which caught him on the thigh. He winced with pain and almost had to let go of the schoolbag. "Kick him again, Georgie!" the Bully Leader shouted. Suddenly, a loud adult voice interrupted the attack: "Right, what's going on here?" It was the Deputy Headmaster, Mr. Peters. He was on playground supervision. He pushed the bullies away from Gerry Kelly. "Are you alright, Son?" he asked. "Are these lot causing you trouble?" He nodded his head towards the antagonists who had let go of the bag and stood sneering at Gerry. "We're just having a bit of fun with him, aren't we Georgie?" "Well, it didn't look like fun to me!" said the Deputy Head. "Now, get on your way and leave the boy alone!" He motioned for them to leave: "Go on, bugger off!" The three walked away laughing and shouting remarks. The children made their way back into the school building. Jamie Fenton came up behind Gerry Kelly and grabbed him by the school blazer collar, he whispered menacingly: "You keep your mouth shut! If you know what's good for you! No-one likes a snitch! We'll deal with you later." But, they couldn't get to him as Gerry later offered to help Miss Carlisle, the Arts and Crafts Teacher to tidy up the Art room at end of the school day. The bullying trio banged on the windows of the Classroom and made faces like idiots at him; only stopping when Miss Carlisle returned to her class to check how he was getting on. Before the bullies left, the Bully Leader Jamie Fenton mimed the words: "You're dead!" as he drew a finger across his own throat. The poor boy was terrified! He had to do something to protect himself, even though he was far outnumbered. He took a craft knife out of the toolbox and quickly concealed it in his schoolbag before Miss Carlisle noticed. The three bullies had talked to each other and discussed their next plan of attack. "I'd love to know what he has in that schoolbag of his," Georgie Graham said. "He tries to keep something secret there, and what's with all of this whispering?!" "Perhaps he's got some kind of a pet in there?" Jamie Fenton had suggested. "We need to get our hands on that bloody bag," Carl Avers declared. "We could get some of the girls to distract him, y'know flirting with him and such. He'll be too embarrassed so that while he's not looking one of the girls could take a quick look in his schoolbag!" They all agreed it was a great idea. The bullies put their plan into action. The Art teacher had left her classroom to attend a phone call at the school's Reception Office. Whilst she was away, the three girls had taken the opportunity to enter the Art room. Gerry was very uneasy at first, but managed to relax a little as it was generally just the boys who bullied him. The three girls started to 'flirt' with Gerry, distracting his attention whilst a fourth opened his desk and took a look inside his schoolbag. She quickly put the bag back and closed the desk lid. The girls had left before the teacher came back, and one of the girls told her boyfriend, Jamie Fenton, that he had nothing but a dirty scruffy, old soft toy rabbit in his schoolbag. "It's damaged and smells a bit!" she'd said. The word went around the remaining pupils. The

bullies planned to confront him after school was finished. The bullies and a few other hangers on waited to follow Gerry Kelly home. His journey took him through the park. There was a small copse of trees and a lake. Areas of long grass grew around the base of the trees. They were all quite tall, around thirty feet high and were mainly oak and horse chestnut. Finally, Gerry Kelly had appeared at the school gates. The bullies had hidden themselves around the corner away from the school's entrance. They had let him pass but he had not seen them as they all ducked down behind a wall. The bullies waited until he was a sufficient distance ahead of them before they began to follow him. They broke into a run as he was walking passed the iron park railings and managed to catch up with him just as he had reached the Main Entrance. He had heard the sound of footsteps running behind him, turned to see the three main bullies and a gang of 'hangers-on' approaching. "Hey, what's in the bag, fatty? Come on, show us what you've got, Ginger-nut!" "Leave me alone!" he shouted angrily through his tears. He tried to break into a run but unfortunately, he wasn't fast enough. The shouting, screaming and laughing mob easily manage to catch him. "Run Fatboy! Run!" shouted Carl Avers. One of the gang had thrust out an arm and grabbed the straps of the boy's school satchel pulling it violently off his shoulders. Another boy quickly unfastened the leather straps and pulled out the rabbit. "What's this you've got four eyes?!" he sneered. "Ugh! It's a smelly old toy rabbit!" He'd thrown it to another member of the gang who continued to throw it to another and so on. Gerry Kelly was frantically running around the inside of the circle they had formed, in floods of tears and demanding that they stop. Each time he managed to reach one of the bullies the soft toy rabbit was thrown to another. He had soon become so exhausted after chasing them that he had to stand in the centre of the circle, his head down and his hands upon his knees gasping for breath. "Come on Fatty! Gee up! Don't give up yet! You want this rabbit back don't you?!" shouted one of the gang. The schoolbag was thrown aside into the long grass where its contents spilled out. He then tossed the soft toy to the Bully Leader who immediately threw the rabbit some thirty feet up into a nearby Oak tree. It lodged in the 'V' of two branches and became stuck fast. "Give me back my Sara !" Gerry shouted tearfully. "Sara?" scoffed one of the bullies. "Aw, he's called it Sara! Is she your best friend, Fatty?!" "You'd better get it back for me, " Gerry demanded, "or else!" "Or else what?!" the Bully Leader had replied. " What are you gonna do about it? Run home and cry to your Grannie?!" "I'm warning you..... give it back!" shouted Gerry threateningly. "Climb up and get it yourself!" Carl Avers sneered. The rest of the group began to chant: "Get it yourself! Get it yourself!" "I can't!" sobbed Gerry Kelly, "you know I can't climb!" "Well, the dirty old thing can stay up there then!" Jamie Fenton had laughed. Some of the gang had begun to start slapping the poor boy on the back of his head. "Go on you wimp! Get up there!" Others start pushing, kicking and slapping him. They had become an unruly mob.

Gradually, under the relentless barrage of assaults Gerry began to climb up the tree. At first, he had trouble finding a secure foothold but continued nonetheless. Slowly and carefully, he climbed higher and higher until he was out of range. The gathered mob continued to urge him on. But Gerry, found himself stuck at a particularly difficult part of the tree. He nearly lost his grip, his foot slipped on a lower branch. The three girls who had arrived in the park screamed. "Watch you don't fall on us, Fatty!" one of the gang cried. One boy, Simon, who wasn't a bully but had just followed the mob through curiosity to see what was happening shouted : "Leave it Gerry, come down and I'll get it back for you!" "No you won't!" the Bully Leader snarled. He 'd stepped forward and pushed Simon over onto his back in the long grass. "You'll keep out of it if you know what's good for you!" Once again, the mob jeered and ridiculed Gerry forcing him to resume his climb. He was now about thirty feet up in the tree and very close to the rabbit. The mob had fallen silent now as most of them realized just how dangerous the situation was. Secretly, some of them wanted it to stop and even considered walking away. But, the three main bullies continued to shout abuse and threats. Gerry had climbed branch by branch until he was only fingertips away. He was standing on a stout branch and had to stretch his arm little by little until his fingertips touched one arm of the rabbit. He made a grab for it. Suddenly, he lost his footing and slipped from the branch he was standing on. He crashed heavily through smaller branches, leaves and twigs sadly losing his grip on the rabbit. There were screams from the girls and the mob had quickly scattered from beneath the tree as he had fallen. He cried out in his pain and terror. Suddenly, there was a loud sickening crack as the back of his head hit a stout branch on the way down the tree. He landed heavily onto the grass below with a thud. The breath had been knocked out of his body and he lay on his back, his eyes staring and unblinking looked skywards. It had all happened very quickly, but it seemed to unfold in slow motion before them. Simon rushed to his side and knelt down beside his twitching body. "Someone..... get an ambulance!" he cried. Jamie Fenton, unabashed said : "It was his own fault! The stupid fat idiot had chosen to climb the tree himself! Him and his stupid rabbit!" "It's your fault!" Simon had shouted, "All of you! You're all part of this!" Gerry had still lay face up on his back his body twitching. A trickle of blood had begun to run from a corner of his mouth. A strange gurgling sound emanated from his throat. Then with a final sigh, his body became still and silent. He was obviously dead. "You've killed him!" Simon said incredulously. "I can't believe it!" The group stood in a semi-circle around the dead boy's body. Behind them and unseen by them, Sara the Rabbit's soft toy body which had been laying face down in the longer grass suddenly twitched as if life itself were entering its inanimate body. Slowly the Rabbit stood upright stretching its body, a new heart beating in its chest, new breath filling new lungs and new blood coursed through its veins. The unseen glass eyes had glowed with a

bright red light like two burning embers. Slowly but surely, the rabbit's body turned to face the backs of the four boys gathered around the inert corpse of Gerry Kelly. Its eyes looked downwards and it saw the craft knife which had been spilled out of the schoolbag onto the grass. The Rabbit picked it up and held the knife in its paw, it studied the razor sharp, gleaming blade for a few seconds as it saw its own reflection. It had begun to advance silently, but purposefully towards the bullies through the long grass, the craft knife raised in its paw.

'A SPECIAL KIND OF LOVE'

Melissa Kennedy liked nothing better than to visit her Grandmother's stone white-washed cottage in Cornwall. It overlooked Anchorage Cove and a beautiful sandy beach not far from the Harbour where the little fishing boats were tied up between fishing trips. A lighthouse stood on top of the cliffs overlooking the harbour. Every Sunday, Melissa would drive from her home in Exeter down to her Grandmother's house in the small coastal village of Kensall. It was a quaint picture postcard type of place with a small terrace of houses facing the Bay, and a handful of cottages scattered like white pebbles amongst the surrounding hills. Melissa's Grandmother's cottage nestled in a dip in the hill. A very pleasant Sunday afternoon was spent watching the waves breaking on the sandy beach. Several groups of children could be seen playing in the surf and on the beach. The excited screams and shouts were carried up to where Melissa and her Gran were sitting, enjoying the warm, bright sunshine as they sat on fold-up chairs, a small picnic table between them. The table held a plate of scones with a little ceramic bowl of butter, and one of sweet, strawberry jam. A jug of clotted cream and two cups of tea in china teacups added to their afternoon picnic. Melissa watched as a boy threw a stick into the waves and his dog ran into the sea to retrieve it. Once the stick was brought out of the sea, the dog would drop it at the boy's feet waiting for him to throw it again. "It looks like they're having fun!" Melissa laughed. "Wouldn't you like to have a little dog, Gran? It would keep you company!" "No," she said, " I do agree that a dog makes a fine companion and no matter what mood or humour you're in they always come running up to you. Some people say that dogs do have some kind of an extra sense; a sixth sense if you like. They seem to know when something's wrong or whether it's a bad storm approaching, or even a death of someone close. After something very strange and mysterious happened to a member of my family, we said we would never have a dog again." Melissa was very intrigued by this statement and urged her Grandmother to explain. "Well," said her Gran, it was quite some time ago and involved my great grandfather. It happened in the late 1890's and still in the days when ships were powered only by wind and sail. My great grandfather loved the sea and ever since he'd been a young boy the sea had always held a fascination for him. He knew at an early age that his life would be dominated by the Oceans and seas of the World. He felt very different when the rolling deck of a ship was beneath his feet and the salt-sea spray in his face. When on dry land, he almost felt like he didn't fit, just like a fish out of water!" "Oh Gran!" Melissa laughed. "My great Grandfather, Alfred Widdlington, lived here in this very town of Kensall. He was unmarried and lived with his widowed sister Blythe Foster. My great grandfather was Captain on a four masted clipper ship called the 'Spirit Of Freedom'. She plied her trade between England and Valparaiso in Chile, and then onto

North America to pick up tea from the New World. The shipping routes ran from East to West through the Southern Ocean where they could make best use of the strong Westerly winds of the roaring forties. The ships and sailors often had to face very heavy and dangerous conditions especially around Cape Horn, the ships had to navigate on their return journey to Europe and the British Isles. These long voyages took my great grandfather away from his home for many months. The only other love he had in his life apart from as a brother to a sister was for his faithful dog Tara. She was a great big soppo Irish Wolfhound and she loved my great grandfather dearly. Tara was totally devoted to him, and when the Captain was home in between his long sea voyages she went everywhere with him. It is said that they were inseparable from each other. It wasn't like a Master and his faithful dog, they acted more as equals. The Captain totally understood her behaviour and communication even though obviously no words were exchanged equally between them. They seemed to know each other that well. An almost telepathic communication between them. He only needed to look into her big brown eyes to understand her thoughts, and it was indeed said, she his. Although he was the Captain of the 'Spirit Of Freedom' it just was not possible to take her onboard with him. He felt it would have been more unfair to take her than to leave her with his sister Blythe. The often extremely rough seas would be too much for her to bear. A cat was sometimes allowed on board a ship to keep down the rat population. So, on the days before he was due to set sail, although nothing was said, Tara became very insular and hardly ever came out of her bed. She wasn't eating as much as she normally did either and seemed listless and unable to settle. Then, when the final day came, he said his goodbyes to his sister Blythe and ofcourse to Tara. He didn't want his sister to come down to the quayside at the Harbour to see him off. The dog would become very fretful and upset. It would be very difficult for Blythe to control or retrain Tara even using a strong dog lead. She was a powerfully built dog and could easily have pulled his sister off her feet. It was far too dangerous if Blythe was standing at the harbours edge as she could be pulled into the sea water. My great grandfather had made the mistake of allowing Tara to accompany his sister at the start of a long sea voyage before, with disastrous results. All of the ropes that had held the ship tied securely to the harbour wall had been released and the gangways drawn up as the final act before the ship, with some sails unfurled began to gently move away from the quay. All of sudden, Tara had pulled the dog lead out of Blythe's hand and leapt off the quayside at the ship. She missed the deck and fell heavily into the water. The Captain was very distressed and it was only through the quick actions of some sailors who had frantically launched a rowboat which saved her. Tara was brought back to the quayside where she barked and whimpered as she watched her Master's ship sail further and further out of the harbour into the open sea. It was only once the ship could be seen

no more that Tara's behaviour changed and Blythe could put a collar and lead back on her and bring her home. Tara seemed to settle down a lot within a day or so and then and became a happy, playful dog. She ate and slept very well and enjoyed her walks along the sandy beach where Blythe threw a stick into the rolling waves for her to chase and bring back. She no longer seemed to pine for the Captain. But, after a period of a few months, Tara became very excited again and couldn't be placated. One day, Blythe was taking her for a walk up amongst the hillsides facing the sea. She wouldn't allow herself to be put back on her lead and refused to pay any attention to what she was being told. The dog would just stand on the cliff tops barking and whimpering loudly whilst looking out to sea. Blythe would be puzzled as nothing could be seen; no signs of sail or ship on the horizon. Tara's behaviour grew worse until suddenly she rushed past Blythe, nearly knocking her down and dashed down the hillside path barking furiously. No matter how much scolding or commands she was given she refused to obey. She continued to sit on the quayside looking out to sea as if seeing something. None of the people there could see anything on the horizon, even though it was a bright, clear day. Then after awhile, a sail was spotted on the distant horizon. The church on the hill began ringing its bell to announce the arrival. This was performed everytime a ship was entering port. It was done to notify the harbour and dock workers as the ship would need to be unloaded. Friends and family of the crew members would be happy to see the safe return of their loved ones. The dog stood up and with tongue lolling and wagging her tale furiously began to bark continuously and excitedly. Sure enough as the ship drew closer and closer, the cry went up from the gathering crowd recognized it as Captain Widdlington's ship, 'The Spirit Of Freedom'. As the ship pulled into the harbour, Captain Willmington could be seen on the poop deck. He waved to his sister Blythe and his faithful dog Tara. The Irish Wolfhound nearly shook herself to pieces as she wagged her tail furiously. She got more and more excited as he walked down the gangway. Tara broke free and rushed up the gangway where she leaped onto her Master, her weight and over-exuberance knocking him flat to the floor; her long, pink lolling tongue licked furiously at his face and hands as her large paws held him down on his shoulders. Even though the crewmen had seen this spectacle many times it never failed to amuse them and the air was filled with their laughter and cheers. He eventually managed to extricate himself from beneath the dog and made his way down the rest of the gangway. The big dog following close behind and yapping at his heels like a little puppy! The Captain and his dog would be inseparable until his next voyage when the whole extravaganza would be repeated again. It was only some two weeks later after the 'Spirit of Freedom' had set sail from the harbour. This voyage she was destined for the United States of America. The ship was not due back for at least a month or more, but Tara was becoming distressed and excitable. She would rush to the

back door of the cottage barking intensely while she repeatedly leapt up at the back door knob pestering Blythe to let her out. She couldn't let the dog out on her own so under duress she fetched the dog lead. "Come on then, Tara, I'll take you out" said Blythe resignedly. She clipped the strong dog lead onto Tara's collar and after a substantial struggle Blythe finally succeeded in opening the back door. Once outside, she managed to lock the back door and put the key in her coat pocket, despite the contentious affray. The dog continued to pull and strongly resist against Blythe's attempts to gain control of the lead. Suddenly, Tara made a huge leap for freedom and pulled the lead out of Blythe's hand. She immediately escaped from Blythe's ineffective control and quickly bolted at full speed into the back garden and leapt over the garden gate with one bound. She ran headlong towards the cliff's edge and for one horrific moment Blythe's heart missed a beat as she thought for one terrible moment the dog would leap off the cliff edge and down into the rocky waters below. It seemed at the last minute, that Tara somehow realized the danger she was in and veered away from the precipice. She ran swiftly down the grassy path towards the beach and onto the road towards the harbour. Several pedestrians had to leap out of her way as she came scampering past. She continued on causing several horse drawn carriages to swerve out of her way. Finally, she arrived at the harbour and ran to the water's edge where she began barking and whimpering as if in terrible distress and turmoil. It was a heart-breaking sight. Several people began to gather at the harbour wall to see what all the upset and commotion was about. They were shocked and saddened to see Tara in such an anguished state. A couple of harbour workers tried to approach the dog but she promptly turned on them barking, growling and snapping at the two men. It was something she'd never done before and was totally out of her usual passive character. She could be a boisterous over-exuberant dog sometimes, but she was never vicious or threatening to anyone. She'd never shown any violent tendencies. The two men had to back away as it was obvious that if they moved any closer she would undoubtedly have attacked them. They'd be hard pressed to restrain her. Tara continued to act very strangely as if greatly disturbed and anxious. She ran up and down the harbour wall agitated and barking at something out at sea. But, there was nothing to be seen, except where the sea met the sky. There were no signs of any sails. The gathering crowd of people were puzzled as to what was wrong with the her. The Captain's ship had only left a short while ago and was not due back in the harbour for at least a month or more. Blythe arrived out of breath. She was relieved to see that Tara had arrived at the Harbour and had not ran off somewhere further. "Someone will have to try and capture her!" she said, "before she hurts herself or someone." The two men said that they had tried unsuccessfully but had had to give up as she became dangerous, and they feared they'd be attacked. Blythe said that she needed to try and restrain her and take her

back home as her brother Alfred would be broken-hearted if anything happened to his dog whilst he was away at sea. Blythe would never forgive herself. The dog still had her collar on with the lead attached, if someone could grab a hold of that they might be able to catch her and bring her home. Several sailors from another smaller ship in the harbour volunteered to try and catch her. Tara was still running up and down the harbour wall plainly unsettled. The crowd of people watched with anticipation as the five sailors slowly advanced towards the dog. She would turn her attention from the sea towards them, baring her teeth and snarling. Several times they managed to nearly grab her but on each occasion she skilfully evaded them. Then after several attempts one of the sailors successfully succeeded in grabbing the lead which she had been dragging behind. A furious tug of war ensued between them as both tried to gain control. Tara suddenly ran towards the harbour's edge dragging the sailor off his feet. Her strength was too much for him she leaped off into the water six feet below. The unfortunate sailor, still holding tightly onto the lead was pulled headfirst into the water behind her. Both man and dog caused a huge splash. Many people rushed to the harbour wall's edge to try and save them. They could see Tara's head just protruding above the surface of the water. She was swimming very strongly out towards the harbour's entrance. The sailor's body broke the surface, he was gasping and choking, fighting for breath as he was half-dragged and swam behind the dog. The other sailors quickly launched a rowboat to rescue their fellow mariner. Blythe and the gathered onlookers stood waiting on the harbour wall. The rowing boat quickly caught up with the unfortunate sailor who by now had managed to release the dog lead from around his wrist. He was pulled coughing and spluttering out of the sea and into the boat. Meanwhile Tara had still continued to swim strongly and purposefully out towards the open sea. Everybody watched as the sailors in the rowing-boat tried in vain to reach her. With great horror and cries of alarm the dog disappeared beneath the waves. She surfaced again, but sank below the waves for a second and third time before finally and tragically sinking below the grey and white foam. Blythe cried out in sheer dismay. Tara was dead. She had gone. Nobody could understand why she would do such a thing. There seemed to be no sensible explanation. There hadn't been a sighting of any ship, and even then she'd never been wrong before, so why this time? It was totally bewildering. The sailors in the rowing boat continued to search the waters in and just outside of the harbour but to no avail. It was as if Neptune himself had taken her body to the deep as she was never found. Blythe made her way back home to the cottage nestling in the hills. What was she going to tell her brother when he returned home from his long voyage to America? Tara's death would break his heart. He'd know straight away that something serious had happened to her when she failed to be waiting to greet him at the Quayside. Blythe sat crying in the armchair. Tara had always been a one man dog, but she

was still very fond of her. It would never be the same without her. A week had gone by since the death of the Captain's dog. His ship the 'Spirit of Freedom' still wasn't due back in harbour for another month or so, depending on how easy a passage it had on its long journey home from America. A three masted clipper ship was spotted on the distant horizon. The church bell was rung as townspeople gathered to see what was happening. "It's the 'Spirit Of Freedom, I tell you. I'd know that four-masted big rig anywhere!" an old sailor said. "I sailed on her myself many times when I was a younger man!" There were several mumbles of disagreement from the other men. "It can't be. She's not due back anytime yet and couldn't have come from America that quick!" A woman was sent up to Blythe's cottage to inform her that they believed the 'Spirit Of Freedom' had been sighted and was on its way towards the harbour. She quickly pulled on a coat and rushed down the hillside path to arrive just as the graceful sailing ship entered the harbour. There was barely a ripple in the wake behind her. Many of the crew had climbed up the four masts using the spiders-web type rigging of strong ropes. Her many sails began to be rolled up and tied. It was indeed the 'Spirit of Freedom'. Blythe was a bag of nerves. She'd have to tell her brother that his beloved dog Tara was dead. The ship finally pulled alongside the harbour wall and sailors on board threw ropes caught by eager hands on land and secured and fastened them around bollards on the quayside. Everybody watched eagerly and with great anticipation as the gangways were lowered forming bridges between the quay and the ship. There was no sign of Captain Willington. Where was he? The Bosun began to make his way down the gangway. "Where is Captain Willington?" asked the Harbour master. "I have some very sad news," said the Bosun. He made his way over to Blythe. The Captain's sister having not heard the very short conversation between the Bosun and the harbour master burst out: "I'm afraid my brother's dog is dead. She dived out into the sea about a week ago and disappeared beneath the waves. We don't know why she did that." The Bosun, Henry Todd, took Blythe's hands in his, then looking into her eyes he said softly: "I'm afraid I'm the bringer of bad tidings too! You see Blythe, I'm so sorry that I have to inform you that your brother is dead. We encountered some very heavy weather about a week ago in mid Atlantic. We fought to save her from capsizing and sinking, as such were the size and power of the waves. Your brother Alfred Willington, our beloved Captain lost his life trying to save the lives and souls of two of our ship mates. A huge wave crashed onto the deck and swept several members of the crew off their feet. They were in danger of being swept overboard when the Captain who had been near the wheelhouse at the time saw the tragedy unfolding. He rushed onto the deck and valiantly saved two men, grabbing them just before they were swept overboard. He managed to get them to safety and went back to try and rescue a third man when another huge wave smashed onto the deck spilling tons of water onto the ship. Ironically, the wave that

washed the third man back from the brink of danger swept the Captain over the side. It was in the dark of night and the storm was so intense that the Captain could not be rescued. We couldn't even turn the ship around and go back to try and find him. The seas were much too rough and the waters icy cold so that his chance of survival was very slim. Blythe burst into tears and was comforted by other women from the coastal town. "She must have known something had happened to him and he wasn't coming back to her. She gave her life trying to find and join him," he said sadly. "He couldn't make contact with her to let her know he would never return!" "Or maybe he did come back for her" the Bosun said, " maybe he did."

Other titles by this Author you may like to read are:

'TALES OF MURDER, MYSTERY & SUSPENSE VOLUME 2'

'THE SAD TALE OF THE LAZY COCKEREL.' A story for children.

'CONVERSE' A book of poetry.

'A SELECTION OF ONE ACT PLAYS'

'CHI LIN' A Story for children set in old China.

'THE BOY WHO LOVED THE MOON & THE RAM,

THE SCORPION AND THE WOLF'. Two stories for older children.

If you enjoyed reading my book why not send me a quick message via the Feedback link on my obooko.com download page? I will be delighted to hear from you.