# The Larendon House Short Story Magazine

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## Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

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Delilah is in jeopardy — will she escape?

**Dora** by Giuseppina Marino Leyland A tale of hidden family drama from old Italy, told with sensitive and heart-warming brilliance and humour. Love & Time by Gabriella Balcom

'Whenever the river was a dangerous mass of churning water and hidden undertows, Kryssi was supposed to stay away from it. However, she'd disobeyed and gone in one day, and strong currents had pulled her under...' Choices and terrible consequences from an accomplished storyteller.

Robinson by Alexander Marshall

In a strange yet familiar house on the edge of the moors, a history-spanning mystery unfolds and one young man's life will never be the same...

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Marriage was for chumps! That's what Mortimer Marsh believed — until he became embroiled in the unfortunate affair of some jewellery which turned out to be not so much 'missing' as stolen, plain and simple...

#### Necklace of Stars by Gary Bonn

Jay is a competitive sprint canoeist, who's done the whole lurking by glaciers thing, waiting for tsunamis as thousands of tons of ice collapse into the sea only a couple of hundred metres away, and dodging crashing towers of ice roaring up around her. She also has learning difficulties...

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

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AIHAM ADLY



Delilah placed the last laser-hacked head next to its body parts in sleep pod number Sixty-Six. She yearned for one of those e-cigarettes she used to smoke behind her parents' back. She took off her powder-free latex gloves and watched them float like a pair of severed hands next to her. The smell of death wasn't all bad, but really it was the whirring silence of this damned ship that bothered her. She missed noise, especially the kind that nearly drove her mad back on Earth, like crying babies and barking dogs.

Shimshon, the murderer who had killed everyone on board, ironically except for her, would sometimes stop reading from the Mahzor to wipe his running nose with the back of his hand. Ironically, the Hebrew name of his holy book had a doppelganger word in Arabic which

meant "prohibited". She wanted to reach out and touch his tears but dared not. They rolled down his face like fat space rocks, suspended belt-like around his halo of glowing hair. The show of remorse made him look all the more pathetic.

His fast for *Yom Kippur* lasted for what might have been twenty-five Earth hours. She didn't bother fasting for *Ashora'* — The Muslim counterpart — because unlike him, she couldn't tell time.

Delilah slipped into a T-shirt, not bothering with a headscarf. For a moment, she rejoiced in her new freedom. There was no one to judge her or stone her for her sins. She tucked her father's shaving blade in her jeans' back pocket.

"You know Shimshon, I would have liked to wash what's left of my mother and perfume her with musk. I would have liked to wrap her in a proper death shroud. I would have liked to bury her." She couldn't tell if the dull ache she felt in her stomach was grief or just trapped gas.

His glowing braids stood on ends, ready to attack.

"Stay away, Delilah. I don't want to hurt you." He sounded like someone with dead fish in his throat.

She was too tired to laugh. Seriously? "I guess ablutions and reading the opening verse from the Koran will do, but I can't even do that. You know why? Because recycled piss is all we've got for water."

"Please."

If only she could stab him and get it over with. Weightlessness slowed her. She wondered if she still had time for mistakes, for reaching her breaking point.

"Why did you do it?" She knew why, of course.

"The time warp scheduled in two days will put us in orbit in the Rainbow Galaxy. We'll be closer than ever to the Blue Planet. For your safety confine yourself to the dining chamber."

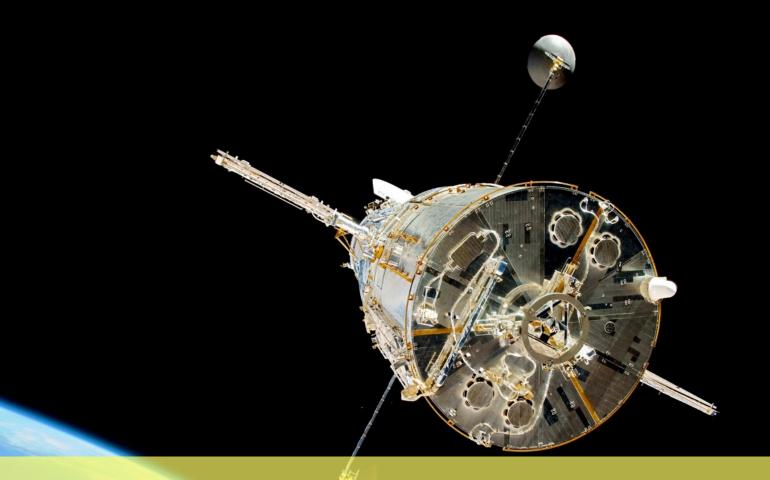
"What's the point, you damn death machine? Didn't you eliminate my people so God's chosen planet remained pure?" Her face flushed from the exertion of having to raise her voice.

The book slipped. Both hands covered his face. Her glare softened and her eyes lingered on his hair. He looked like a skeletal lion with an overgrown Christmas lights mane that resembled the Glowby wigs Lady Gaga wore in her last concerts before Doomsday.

"I didn't mean to kill. I didn't know..." He clutched one of his braids.

"Will you listen to yourself?" He had to have known the AAPC fiber-optic weaves implanted in his hair were a weapon. "Hell, I knew the moment I saw you. I knew whom they wanted to wipe on this ship. The ethnic minorities, that age-old story. Well, congratulations on a job well done, killing everyone including your commanding officers."





She pulled the blade and flashed it at him. "Delilah, hold it right there. I have no control over this." His spikes stood on end, the halo of light building up into rust-colored flares. "There's a Muslim colony over there from previous journeys. You'll start over. You'll find people like you."

She wasn't sure she really wanted that. She wanted to try things like real food: tart apples, saffron-colored rice, have enough toilet paper, soak in a tub, sip lattes. Did they serve lattes on the Blue Planet? Did they have trained Baristas? Did they have Zinnias and Petunias? Her mother used to tell her they had had a lush garden once. Did they have folktales like those her mother made up to help her sleep after they discovered there were no beds on this ship?

She didn't know what she wanted. Perhaps deep down, she had willed this extermination. Shimshon should be her hero, not her foe. He even had eyes the color of okra. She liked that. Her mother used to cook them in butter and garlic. She didn't want to have a label, or belong to a group. She didn't want to remain a virgin. She didn't want to cover her hair again. She didn't want to follow orders or obey. Maybe she should let him finish her off. But

dying meant answering to God and meeting up with her people again in the Afterlife.

"Catch." She tossed the blade in his direction. "Shave it off."

He gripped the handle and stared at the blade's edge.

"I had cancer, and they said the weaves killed the cancer."

"Will you shut up? I don't want to hear your life story. I don't care." She started collecting the locks he hacked off his scalp. "You look different, like you're someone else."

"Will you ever forgive?"

"Sleep with me?" she blurted.

The look of surprise on his face amused her. She'd disobeyed so many of her faith's teachings, but she'd been following the rules all the life she'd lived, most of which was on board this ship. She wanted a new life. A new start. She knew God would understand.

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When they landed on the Blue Planet, there was no one there, just the two of them, for good. He didn't look so thrilled. It's temporary, he said. She didn't mind this temporary forever at all.

## RIHAM ADLY

## LOVE IS MAKE-BELIEVE

Princess, priestess, runaway, slave-girl, heiress, aquatic siren: women live thousands of lives in the flash fiction of Riham Adly, sometimes in the course of one story. A writer from modern Egypt, Adly reflects the complex reality of a world that can be both cosmopolitan and insular, a changing world where women risk new roles, but still struggle to push through family and cultural conditioning that tells them to "expect nothing, stay quiet, be smart." The women in these stories ignore that advice. They expect everything, rebel, push boundaries, speak from the heart.



www.clarendonhousebooks.com/riham-adly

## PETER ASTLE

'This isn't a book you'll find easy to set aside until tomorrow: make a cup of tea, get comfortable, switch off your phone and be drawn into the little worlds of this book to emerge content and refreshed by the work of a master author.' — Grant P. Hudson, 2020



# INSIS and TURNS

**Derbyshire Tales with a Twist** 

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/peter-astle





only take a few minutes to cook, rising from the depths of the pot to the surface of the water, begging to be scooped up with a large fork or slotted spoon, depending on the type of pasta. Marta had told him what she was preparing for lunch that day but he couldn't remember. He really didn't care. He wasn't hungry.

As the bubbles increased in volume and velocity, Renato became entranced and felt like he was entering another dimension. He was no longer an earth-bound creature, controlled by vile bodily functions and weighed down by painful memories, but a free spirit floating calmly and peacefully in a gigantic bubble of air and light.

Renato shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He was sitting in his usual spot, in the corner next to the fireplace, in the main living room of the narrow terrace house that he shared with his wife Marta and their adult son. Once there had been six adults living in that tiny space but then his mother had passed away and two of the children had married and migrated to Australia. So now, it was just the three of them. The rush seat of the chair had long lost its rigidity and needed replacing. But the mere thought of the effort required to do that made Renato sink even lower into the chair. With shaky hands, he lifted the glass cradled in his lap and took a big gulp, taking care not to dislodge the lump of chewing tobacco firmly wedged between his left cheek and his gums.

A copper pot full of water hung over the open fire. Renato stared with bleary eyes at the tiny bubbles floating from the base of the pot to the surface of the water. He knew that once the water reached boiling point, his wife would add a few pinches of precious salt, which would make the water hiss and splutter. Then she would throw in a few handfuls of freshly made pasta—spaghetti, tagliatelle, or perhaps ravioli. Any of these would



With a clanking of her hobnailed boots on the cobblestone floor and a rustling of her long skirt, Marta came over to stoke the fire and speed up the boiling process. Soon their guest would be arriving and she wanted to be ready. Her bustling at the fireplace brought Renato back to grim reality. He eyes smarted from the smoke of the fire. He spat a lump of chewed tobacco into a rusty tin bucket on the floor near his feet. Marta turned her head and threw him a contemptuous look. He knew that look. He'd seen it countless times. He glanced at his wife's lined face, her pointy chin and hooked nose, with her white hair pulled back into a tight bun beneath a grey headscarf. 'Strega!' he said silently to himself and looked away.

Renato took another swig of wine and gazed at the flames beneath the pot. Fire and water. We can't exist without them, he thought. And earth and air. And sunlight. He had seen precious little sunlight that Spring, hardly moving from his seat in weeks. He had no desire to go out and face the world. Life was for young people, not for degenerate old men like himself. He just wanted to be left alone to sit by the fire in peace, to chew his tobacco and drink his wine. That's all. But not today. Today Marta had pestered him to get up early and wash and shave and present himself for the young visitor. Someone—he couldn't remember who—someone was coming to visit from far away.

He had begrudgingly washed himself and changed his clothes, but had drawn the line at shaving. His hands were so unsteady, he was worried that he would cut himself. Marta had been too busy making pasta to shave him, so that was that. Unshaven would have to do. To compensate, he had tied his favourite red and white checked kerchief around his neck, the one he only wore on special occasions. He'd bought it in Argentina, when he lived there as a young man, a lifetime ago.

Renato closed his tired eyes and was transported back to the time when he was an energetic eighteen-year old clicking his heels as he learned to dance tango, and moving his hands rhythmically in and out as he learned to play the bandoneón, a type of concertina popular in Argentina, creating the slow, rhythmic music so suited to the dance. Oh how, he wished he was still there...

A flurry of footsteps up the stone steps and rapid knocking on the door brought Renato back to present time again with a thud. Squeals of delight were audible from the visitor. Renato

peered in the direction of the front door and could vaguely make out a young woman hugging and kissing Marta. Who was this person? She looked vaguely familiar...

The young face came into Renato's line of vision, looming large—a heart-shaped face, framed by dark curls, with olive skin and big green eyes. Giuseppe gasped. Could it be her? Could it really be?



'Dora?' he rasped.

A few seconds of stunned silence ensued.

'Don't be so stupid!' snapped Marta, in the broad dialect of their village. 'This is your granddaughter Anita from Australia.'

'Ciao, Nonno,' said the sweet young thing with the sweet voice. And she kissed him on the cheek.

Giuseppe blinked at her, seemingly confused. 'Chi è Dora?' asked Anita. Who is Dora?

Marta pursed her lips and didn't answer. She threw some salt into the boiling water on the fire and watched as it hissed and spluttered.

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'It was lovely to meet *Nonna* but *Nonno* was really out of it,' recounted Anita, over a cup of tea, in her mother's bright and sunny kitchen, back home in Wollongong.

'What do you mean?' asked Anita's mother, Delfina, in her 'broken' English.

'Well, he didn't seem to understand who I was and he couldn't really talk or anything. I think he was drunk.'

'I make him stop do that when I visit there.'

'Well, he's back drinking again, I'm sorry to say. He reeked of *vino*. And he was prickly too. '

'Cosa? Pardon?'

'He was really prickly when I kissed him on the cheek. You know, when I gave him *un baccetto*.'

Adelfina tutted. 'He no even shave for you? *Che brutta figura!*'

'Why does he drink so much?'

'He was prisoner of war. Germans took him for nine months. Saw bad things. Start drink when come home and never stop.'

'Oh, wow! I didn't know that. No wonder he drinks.'

Anita took another sip of tea.

'And there's another thing. Who is Dora?'

Delfina pursed her lips and didn't answer. She got up to put the kettle on for another cup of tea and waited for the bubbles to rise up and make themselves heard, expressing their rage with the world.

\*\*\*

Anita sat tapping her fingers on the arm of the chair in the waiting room of the dance studio in George Street, Sydney. Mark was late. Again. She really didn't know why she bothered. She'd hoped that learning to dance the tango would bring them closer together but so far, the strategy wasn't working. At this rate, she doubted they would make it to their silver wedding anniversary, which was only months. She decided she would wait five more minutes and then give up and go home.

'We seem to be drifting further and further apart,' she lamented to her mother on the phone the next day.





'Why don't you do something special together?' suggested Delfina.

'I've tried. We've been learning to dance tango but he turns up late and then doesn't focus and can't remember what we've learned from one week to the next. It's so frustrating.'

'Tango? Your *Nonno* dance tango. And play tango music too, with... how you say... *piccola fisarmonica*.... little accordion.'

'Really? When did he learn that? Did he dance with *Nonna*?'

'He learn in Argentina. And no, my mamma never dance tango. He no teach her.'

'Oh!?... When was he in Argentina?'

'When sixteen. For six years. Then his father call him back home to Italy.'

'Wow! And he could play music too. I didn't know that. I wish he had been able to tell me his stories when I visited back in 1982, before he died. But he had already lost the plot.'

*'Si, e un peccato*. Such a pity. He have many stories to tell.'

'You never did tell me who Dora was...'

Delfina sighed. 'I no want to tell you before. *E un po scandaloso*. My father have girlfriend in Argentina. She name Dora.'

'Dora! So, he left behind a sweetheart in Argentina. I wonder what happened to her.'

'And when I born, he want call me Dora but my mamma not let him.' 'No, I wouldn't stand for that either. That's not on. Naming your daughter after your exgirlfriend... what the...? What was he thinking? But do you know who Dora was? Do you know anything else about her?'

'No. Maybe she was daughter of one of bosses. Or work in factory with my Papa. I dunno.'

'What if... what if she got pregnant? What if you have a half-sibling in Argentina? That means I might have cousins there. How exciting!'

'Stop. No say this. Basta!'

Just then, the weather turned and the wind started blowing a gale outside, making the telephone conversation even more difficult than it already was. Anita tried to glean as much information as she could but Delfina soon tired and cut it short.

After hanging up the phone, Anita poured herself a glass of wine and pondered the new information. She now saw her grandfather in a different light, transformed from the 'old alchy' whom she'd met when she was 22 and felt she had nothing in common with, into a 'tragic hero' that she could now respect and identify with. He had ventured far as a young man and showed promise and talent, only to be plucked away from his sweetheart and exotic lifestyle in Argentina, coerced by his parents' into returning to a peasant's life back in the village in Italy and

promptly propelled against his wishes into an arranged marriage, and then having to endure war trauma in a German labour camp—never able to return to Argentina or see his sweetheart again.

'No wonder he drank!' Anita said to herself. 'I would drink myself into a stupor too. Sometimes life sucks.' She pursed her lips, like her mother and grandmother before her, and listened to the torrential rain beating against the window pane, then poured herself another glass of wine.

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Renato stood in line behind the other men. It was his first time and he was feeling both excited and nervous. This place was reported to be the best in Buenos Aires, a little more expensive than the rest, but apparently worth it. He had dressed up for the occasion, in his best pants and shirt, with matching vest and two-tone shoes. Around his neck, instead of a formal tie, he wore a cheery red and white checked kerchief, which he had bought himself as a birthday gift at the markets that morning. One day he was going to buy himself a fancy pinstriped suit, like some of the older men were wearing, but he would have to save up for that.

One of the men standing in line started playing an instrument that looked like a miniature accordion. He squeezed it in and out and the sound that emanated was both melodic and melancholic. Renato was inexplicably moved to tears. All his pent-up longings and yearnings were stirred up by the music. He felt nostalgic for home and family. Life in this new place was exhilarating compared to the tiny village back home and he had made many friends, but one can still feel lonely in a crowd. He was also longing for a woman's touch. His friends did nothing but talk about their exploits and conquests and he longed to have something to add to the conversation. He had just turned eighteen and for his birthday, his friends had decided to give him a present he would never forget.

Renato lit up a cigarette and inhaled deeply, savouring the taste and smell. He had been smoking since he was nine years old and found that it helped calm him down and steady his nerves. He watched as some of the men started practicing their tango moves, taking it in turns to lead and follow, in tune with the music. Renato was mesmerised and without realising it, he began to point his toe and drag his foot, mimicking the older men.

'Ohh! Ma tu sei un maestro!' one of his friends teased

Renato stopped moving. He hated drawing attention to himself, especially if there was a chance that he was making a fool of himself. However, having now had a taste of this dance, he was determined to learn how to do to it, and do it well. But first, there was a more pressing matter to attend to. He was becoming impatient. He lit up another cigarette.

The queue progressed slowly and eventually it was Renato's turn to enter the infamous little red house. He stepped over the threshold with some trepidation, knowing that when he crossed back over, he would be forever changed.

Renato blinked in the subdued light until his vision adjusted and he could properly view the spectacle unfolding before him. The room was carpeted in red wool from edge to edge and swathed in layers of fine red silk that fell in great folds from floor to ceiling. Behind the layers of silk, there were several doors painted in all colours of the rainbow, leading to heaven knows where—different versions of Paradise perhaps. Dotted along the wall, there stood a dozen beautiful women of diverse sizes, ages, shapes, and colours. Most were scantily-dressed, some totally nude.



Roberto felt his cheeks burning in the face of so much visible flesh. Back in his village in Italy, it was forbidden to gaze at a woman for too long and a woman could easily be dishonoured by a man doing so. And if a man removed a woman's head scarf, exposing her hair, then she would be obliged to marry him or bring shame on her family and risk being shunned by the entire village. These matters of the flesh were delicate ones and Renato felt a twinge of Catholic guilt about being in that illicit place on immoral grounds, seeking carnal knowledge and pleasure, and about to commit the sin of lust.

While the pangs of guilt were threatening to engulf him, Renato and three of his friends were ushered by an older woman to sit in chairs in the centre of the room. The woman was fully-clothed and looked extremely stylish and elegant. Renato guessed that she was likely to be La señora del burdel, the Madam of the establishment. She motioned to a man seated in the corner and he started playing a bandoneón, the sounds resonating with the music that was being playing outside. The women began parading in a circle around the chairs, swaying to the music, swinging their hips, pointing their toes and kicking and flicking their heels as they went.

The young men were asked to choose a woman. Renato's friends chose quickly, eager to get on with it, but Renato remained glued to his chair, frozen with indecision. Noting this, *La señora* approached him and asked, 'Would you like me to match you with someone?'

Renato nodded.

The Madam beckoned to one of the remaining beauties. Renato looked up to see a young woman smiling warmly at him. She had a heart-shaped face, framed by dark curls, with olive skin and big green eyes. Petite in figure and stature, she wore a pink brassiere with the cups cut into heart shapes, covered in pink sequins and fringed with pink satin tassels, and a matching skirt in silk chiffon. Moving gracefully towards him, she took his hand and gently led him towards a pink door. The skin on her hand felt as soft and smooth as silk and her perfume was intoxicating. All thoughts of impropriety vanished as Renato breathed in her scent, indelibly etched into memory for all time.

'Ven conmigo,' said the divine creature. 'Mi nombre es Dora.' Come with me. My name is Dora.



## G. MARINO LEYLAND



"...the world is crazy and we are all a little crazy in it."



## Pezzi Pazzi | Crazy Pieces



Biting her lip, Kryssi stared at the river but kept her distance. Although the current drought had made it shallow, sometimes the water level rose dramatically after flash-flooding and runoff from the large lake feeding into it. Debris—branches and stones — often washed in, lying partly-immersed in silt. A few stones with striking patterns and beautiful colors seemed to wink at Kryssi now as water trickled across them.

Daddy used to ask, "Are they calling you, sweetie?"

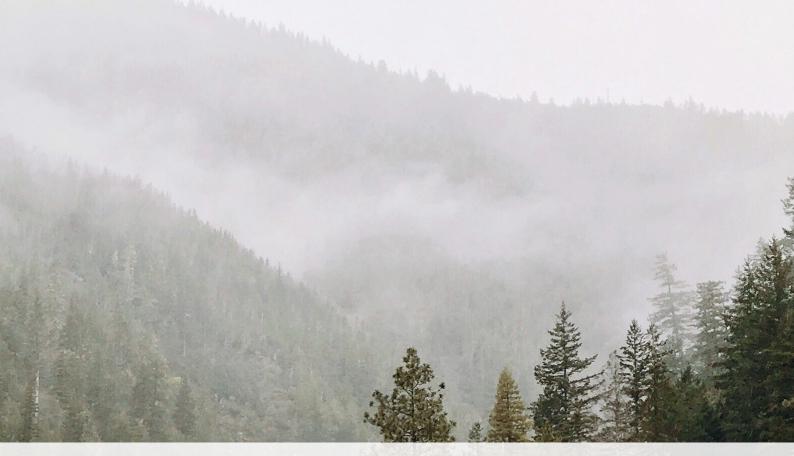
She'd say, "They want to come home with me." Their little joke. The loveliest stones went into her collection. Not that she had it anymore.

Misery overwhelmed the nine-year-old. She

buckled at the knees and collapsed to the ground, sobbing. Everyone was miserable, and it was all her fault. Grammi had stopped smiling and eating; she often said, "I should've gone first, not my only child." Kryssi wished Grammi would get out of bed instead of lying in it all the time. She wished Mama would stop crying. Kryssi also wished she'd listened.

This river had always been a part of her life, and her parents' and grandparents' lives. Grandpa had proposed to Grammi on its banks. Daddy to Mama. Kryssi had dreamed of marrying there herself someday, with her family beside her. But that would never happen now because Daddy was dead.





Whenever the river was a dangerous mass of churning water and hidden undertows, Kryssi was supposed to stay away from it. However, she'd disobeyed and gone in one day, and strong currents had pulled her under. Daddy had jumped in to keep her head above the surface, but a branch had come hurtling down the river. After it struck Daddy's head, he never came back up.

Kryssi studied the now-shallow river, and a glint caught her eye. Wading into the water, she gasped and picked up a gold ring.

"Bad things happen, but life goes on," a voice said.

Turning around, Kryssi saw a red-headed girl. Her feet never touched the ground as she glided across the water toward Kryssi. "Who are you?"

"Lyriia—a friend." Tucking her hair behind one pointed ear, the redhead smiled and plucked the ring from Kryssi. It glowed on Lyriia's open palm. "Love runs true in your line."

"My Daddy's dead." Tears welled up in Kryssi's eyes.

"I know."

"He died because of me."

"Your father loved you very much. That is rare and beautiful."

"But he's gone."

Lyriia raised her eyebrows. "Yes, but only for now."





"What do you mean?"

"I can't restore life but I can take you back to when your father was alive. For a price, that is." Kryssi's eyes widened. "I have no money."

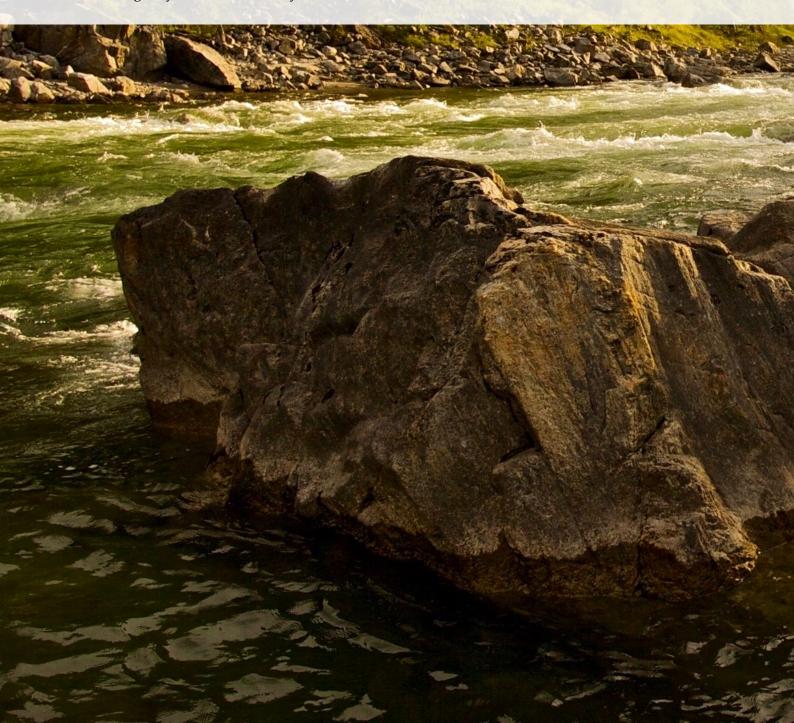
"Money means nothing to me. What I want is for you to believe in love." Lyriia placed the ring in Kryssi's hand, then closed Kryssi's fingers over it. "And I want you to remain by the river."

"How long do you want me to stay?"

"The rest of your life." Lyriia sighed, and then spoke. "I lost those who were precious to me, and I can never get them back. My gift to you honors them. Cherish *your* loved ones, and follow the rules. They exist for a reason."

At first, Kryssi couldn't speak. "I promise to do what you say."

Lyriia nodded, and everything went black.



After they reached the river, they saw the water was still high, churning crazily in the

center.

"The side looks pretty calm," Kryssi said.

"Strong currents can run even to the edge of the water," Daddy cautioned. "We never know what could happen when it's running fast. You stay out of the river."

Sighing, Kryssi picked flowers for Mama and Grammi. Once everyone else was busy setting up the tent and gathering firewood for later, she crept toward the water. She lifted her foot to step in, but froze. Daddy said not to, and her family would be sad if anything happened to her.

As she turned away, something shiny on the ground caught her eye. She picked it up and read the inscription on the inside: *B.S. Eternally yours. T.S.* 

"Wow," she murmured. Then she yelled, "Grammi, I found your lost wedding ring!"

Kryssi woke, leapt from bed, and got dressed. In the kitchen, Mama and Grammi had a picnic basket ready, and she looked inside.

"No peeking," Daddy said before he peeked and winked at her.

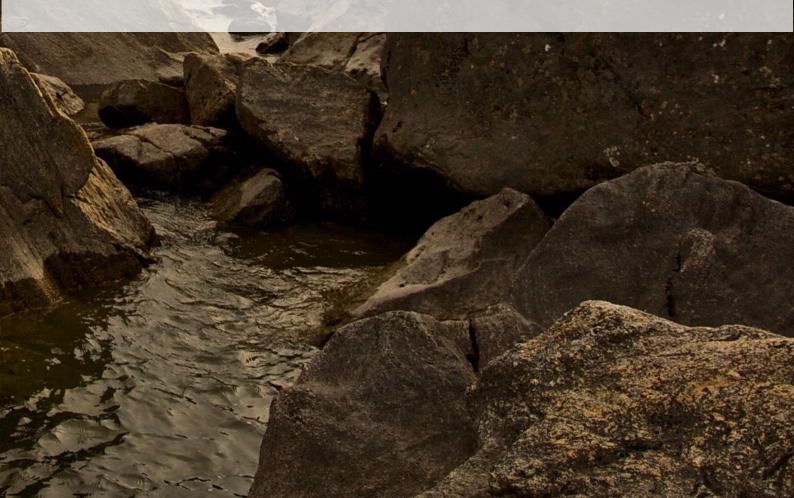
She winked back.

"Peas in a pod, you two." Grammi lifted Kryssi off her feet, hugging her. "You need to stop growing. I can barely lift you up."

Snickering, Daddy wrapped his arms around Grammi and picked up both her and Kryssi.

"Show off." Mama giggled. Baby Myra slept soundly in the carrier strapped to Mama's chest.

Recent flooding had raised the river to a dangerous level, but they hoped it had gone down in the last few days. Grammi and Kryssi wanted to look for stones. Daddy brought his fishing pole and tacklebox, and Mama had a new book which she hoped to read.



## GABRIELLA BALCOM

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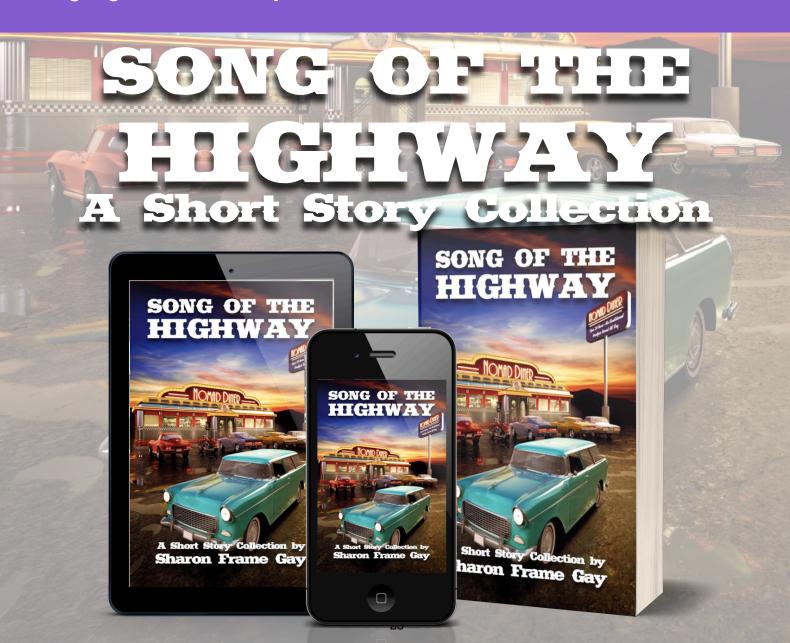
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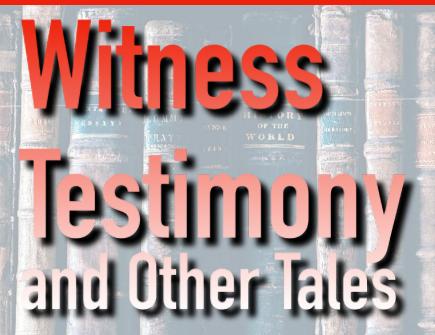


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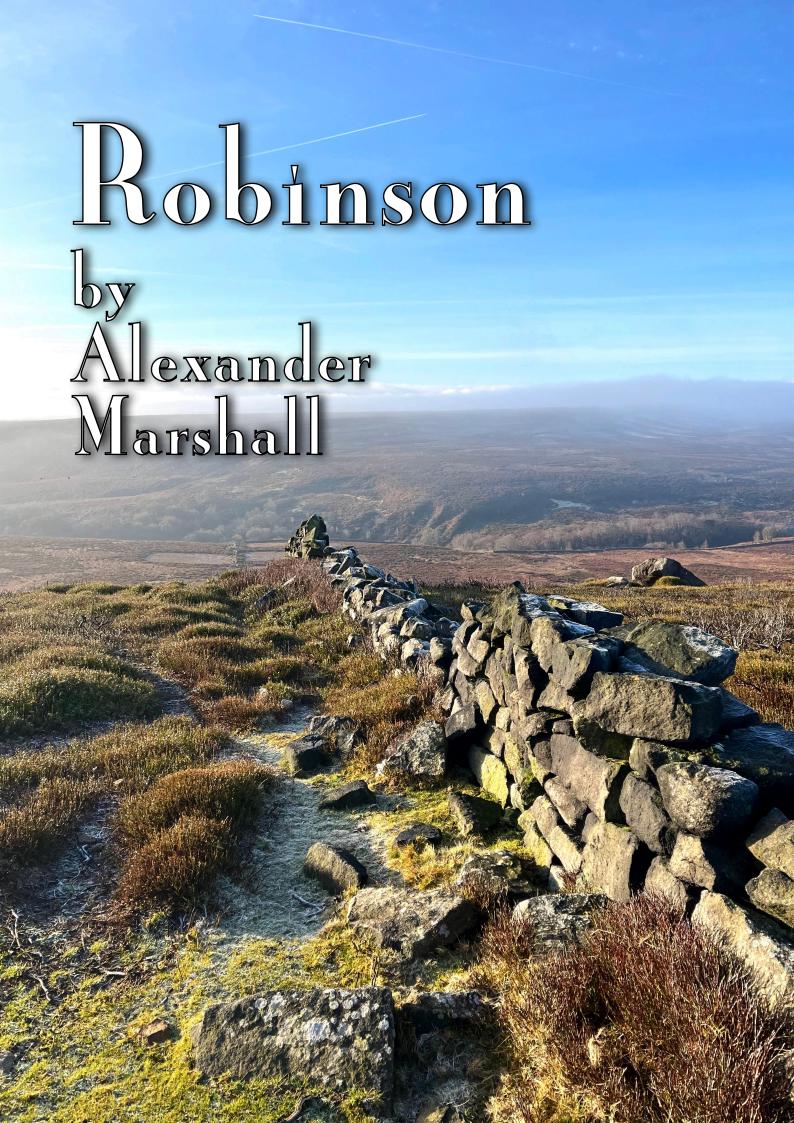
## The Chrysalis is cominge

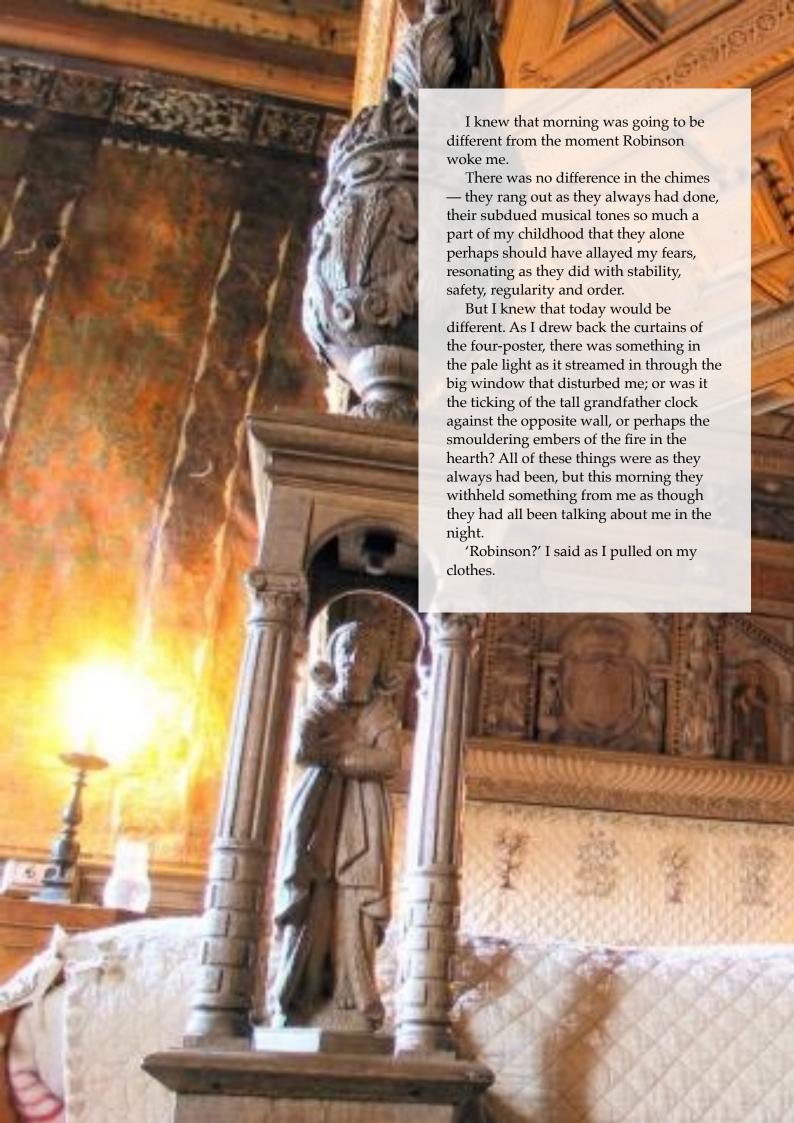
the vast evolutionary process through which the earth moves from one stage to the next, creating gentler environments and hence gentler creatures through adaptation, under the watchful eyes of the Creators of All Things. In the meantime, Renwick and his lagomorphs are in danger of being overwhelmed by the vicious chief of the Dire Wolves, Caden and his sinister brood of allies.

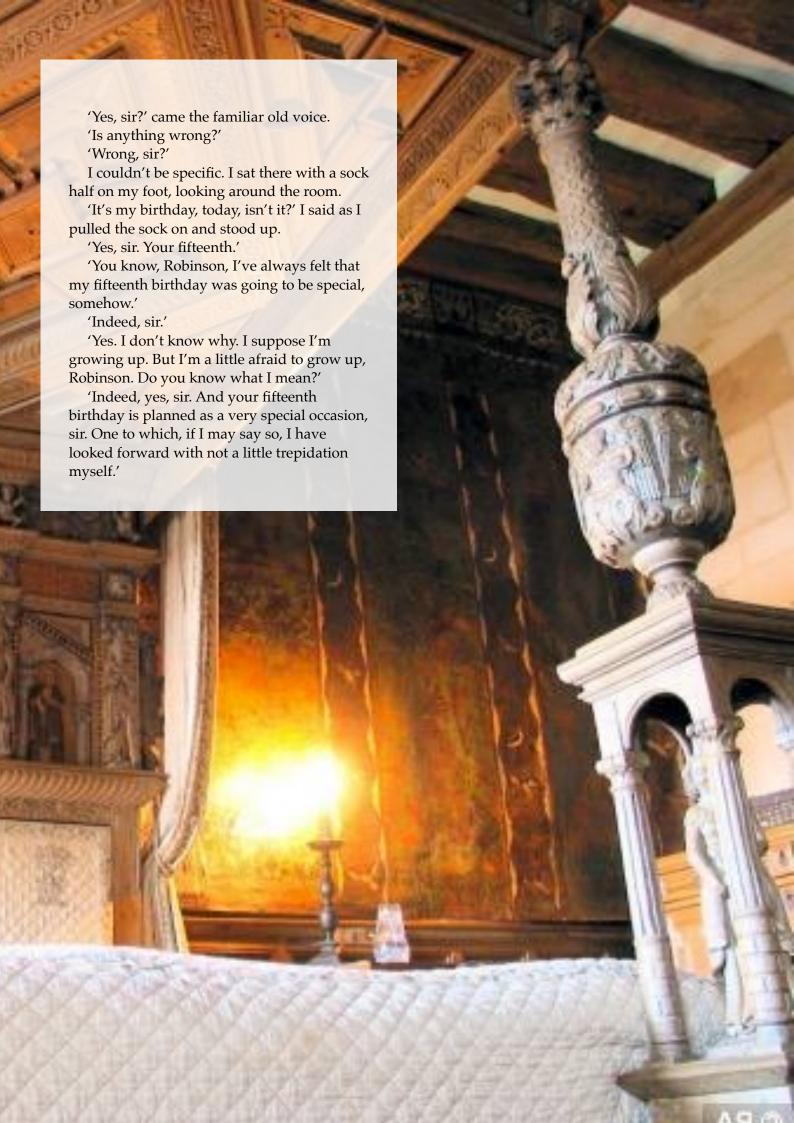
A perilous quest must be undertaken; a violent and merciless enemy confronted. Be prepared for a tale of epic triumph, tragedy and transformation...

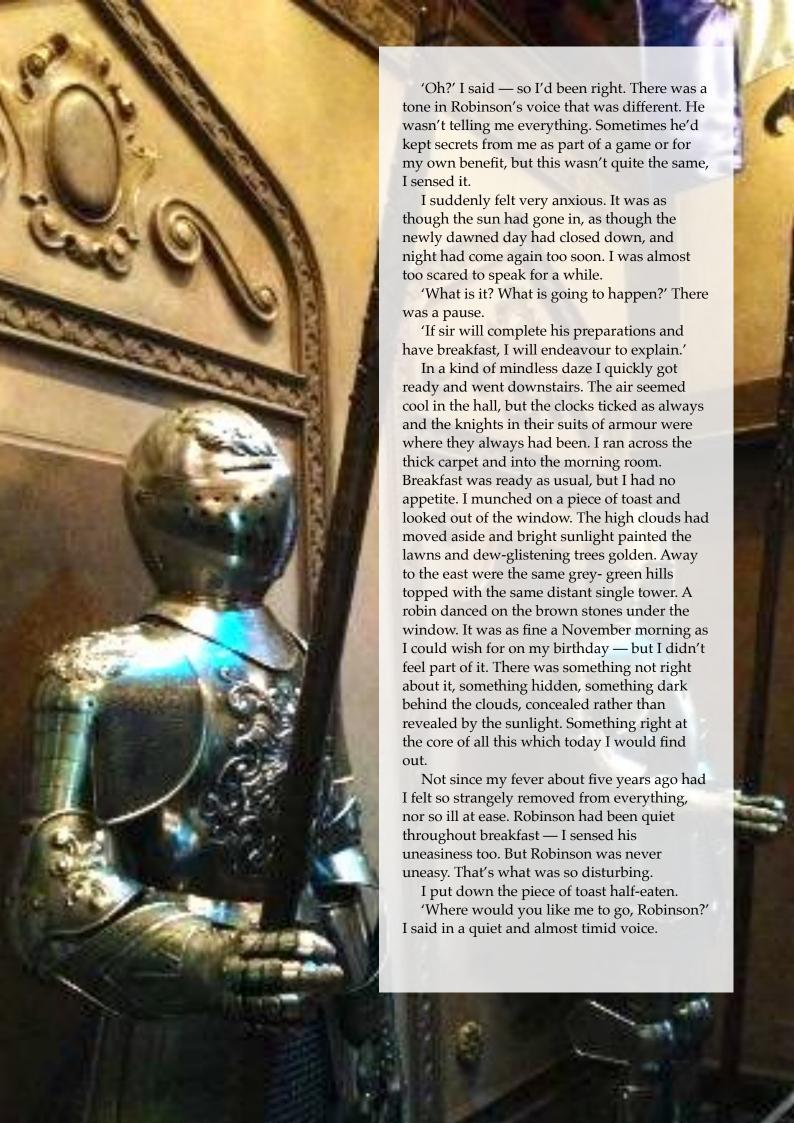


# The Chrysalis and the Creatures of the Highlands









'Might I suggest the drawing room, sir?' Robinson replied.

Like someone in a trance, I meandered through the house to the drawing room, facing the newly-risen sun. It was filled with an exhilarating but empty light. Billions of dustmotes swirled in their little universes in those golden beams, disappearing into the relative oblivion of the shade. As I slumped into my favourite armchair I felt depressed. I felt that all of this, everything that I had known, was going to be taken away and that I was helpless to stop it. Moreover, as I pondered this in a half-conscious sort of way, I saw that I had always known this would happen, I had always somehow suspected that my whole life was not what it seemed and that one day I would find out the truth.

When Robinson began, it was almost as though I could have pre-empted him.

Another pause. I decided to help him. 'You are strangely quiet this morning, Robinson. It's not your usual quiet, your normal placid reserve. This is a different kind of quietness, is it not? Are you afraid?'

'In all honesty, sir, I am a little trepidatious. But it would be incorrect to imply fear. I am not capable of fear.'

'Are you not? I wish it were true to say that of me. I'm frightened, Robinson.'

'I know, sir. I have been monitoring you. But what I have to tell you is no cause for any kind of absolute concern. Your life is in no immediate danger.'

'That depends what you mean by my life, Robinson. If you mean my physical body, then I daresay you are correct. I feel physically well, there is no threat in the environment that I can perceive, and the gardens are just as they always have been — you are with me, Robinson, and all is well with the world. But you are going to tell me things, are you not? Things that will mean life can never be the same.'

'Indeed, sir. I have been instructed that upon your fifteenth birthday you are to be informed of certain salient factors regarding your situation.'





'The gardens! You're going to tell me what lies outside the wall, aren't you? Oh, Robinson, you have no idea how that uplifts me. How strange it is that despite all the rest, that idea, the notion of finding out what lies beyond the wall fills me with such wonder!' I laughed, and sensed Robinson's poignant amusement.

Silence fell. I looked up at the ceiling. 'Robinson,' I said after a while.

'Sir?' he replied when I made no noise for several moments.

'Just tell me. Tell me it all. Fact by fact. As you can see, my own mind has not been idle. Let me know first about Jessie.'

Robinson began.

'Jessie does not exist as a separate corporeal entity. He is a projection of your needs for brotherly companionship.'

'Like the images you show me in the sitting room? A ghost? A fantasy?'

'Not quite a ghost, sir. He is a material composite. Based on a real child. To all intents and purposes, he is real — but not actually a brother in the strict sense of the word, nor another living being like yourself, sir.'

'I see.' Again, I expected the wave, but I think that Robinson's words were bringing a deeper sense of relief rather than shocking me — as though I had on some fundamental level already guessed the truth and was now simply having it confirmed.

Jessie appeared in the room, on the other side of the table. He stood smiling at me and then turned around where he stood, holding out his arms as though modelling or showing off his white shirt and leather britches. With a final cherubic grin, he was gone.

I rubbed my face with my hand.

'Can he come back, or is that it now?' I asked, quietly.

'I can reconstruct him whenever you wish, sir.'

'And the others?'

'Similar constructs, sir. Designed impeccably and managed with perfection to enable you to grow up with fitting companionship and a sense of society, sir.'





He explained it all to me now, in that same patient, careful voice, pausing to ensure, with his infinite care, that I had understood, that my every question was answered, that every nuance of my thinking was addressed. There could be no greater or more compassionate teacher.

My world, he told me, had perished. All its hopes and dreams, the vast and complex web of its many lives, had come almost to nothing in the end. The destructive side of humanity's nature had at last triumphed over its nobility, in so many ways — war, disease, crime, environmental decay, all undercut, he emphasised, with a moral corruption which left no foundation for growth.

Or at least it had almost triumphed. Towards the end, when it became plain to the clearer-minded that all was over, a Sanctuary had been created, and all that was best and greatest about the world had been stored therein. The very height of human technology was lifted higher; the purest of human motivations were further explored and cleansed; the mightiest of human achievements were refined and developed still further, and all was made ready and secure.

And into this Sanctuary had been placed genetic material, carefully selected at first, and then, by common consent, chosen at random. And from this material, under Robinson's thorough custodianship, a child had grown.





'On your fifteenth birthday,' Robinson went on, 'you were to be informed of the nature of all this as seemed fitting. It was left to my judgement. I judged that you were both strong enough and wise enough in your youth to be able to assimilate these truths. I trust that you do not find me in error, sir.'

Unknowingly, I had soaked my shirt with tears. His extrapolation had lasted several hours, accompanied by images so colourful, so varied and moving that at times I felt myself to be transported, moved as I had never been moved before, guided into new dimensions of thought that were both poetic, triumphant and celebratory in the extreme, and infinitely tragic. It was a while before I could speak. Robinson understood and remained silent.

'No, you have not misjudged the situation, Robinson, my old friend.' Then I laughed heavily. 'My only friend.'

'Solitude was a condition I felt at pains to provide in measured ways, sir. Ultimately, there would be no method of avoiding these harder facts, but until then I thought it best to provide at least the illusion of real company,' he carefully explained.

'You did, as always, the right thing. But there is more, now. The Sanctuary, this place that I have called home these fifteen years: you have not yet delved into its nature. You have not told me what lies beyond the wall.'

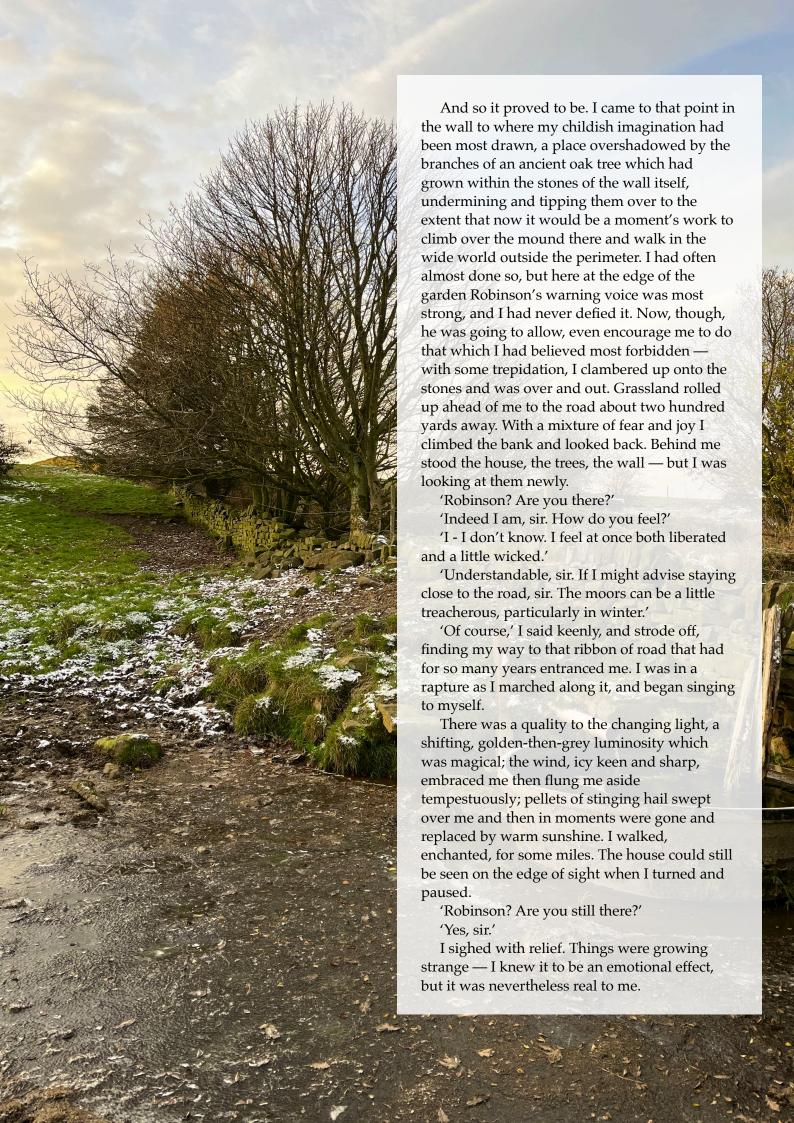
'For those answers, sir, we will need to walk outside.'

Despite the tremulous condition in which I now found myself, I was excited at this prospect more than by anything I could remember. Hurriedly, I pulled on my walking boots and clothes. The front door swung open and I stepped out into the winter sunlight. It had rained while I had been indoors — everything sparkled with a vivacious mischief that matched my mood. This whole life had been not just an illusion, but a joke — I felt in that instant, though, that it had not been at my expense but for my amusement. Uplifted, I strode out with my walking cane and sloshed through the puddles to the path to the fields.

I progressed under the dripping arms of the oaks up the slippery rise to the top garden, across the wild grass to the brow of the hill, my boots wet, the wind fresh and cold in my hair. From the top of the hill I could look out upon my whole domain, a square mile of mixed woodland, wandering streams, kitchen gardens and open lawns and parkland which had provided me with hours of amusement throughout my childhood. Here I had played with my phantom friends, Jessie and Jane and Esmerelda; here we had taunted the gardeners, climbing the wall into their prized kitchen garden; here we had built a treehouse from pieces Robinson had prepared; there, in winter, we had slithered down the slopes of the snowy hill on a makeshift sledge. All my rapturous but strangely empty childhood, all contained within the overgrown, creeping, halfcollapsing wall beyond which I had never ventured. I looked beyond it now. The grey of the moors stretched as far as the eye could see. The thin winding line of the Moor Road, down which I had expectantly gazed for years, disappeared into a rainy haze some miles away. On the edge of sight rose the low hills I had looked upon from the morning room, with their single, endlessly intriguing tower marking the very end of the world. No traveller had ever come down the road; nothing but the grim weather had ever materialised from beyond that horizon. My heart ached to journey there, to the edge of things. 'May I?' I said to the air.

'You may, sir,' came Robinson's voice from somewhere in the ground. He was always with me. When I was a child there had been nameless servants to dress and feed me, and occasionally there had been one whom I had called Robinson, but I had known even then that that had not been the entirety of Robinson. He was everywhere, not be contained or restrained in a single form. I knew now, with what he had shown me that morning, that he was part of the Sanctuary. I suspected that he would follow me even beyond the wall.





'I had not considered things like food; I do not know where I am going. Is there anywhere else?' I asked, feeling foolish and exposed.

'It will not be long before you arrive somewhere, sir. Your needs will be addressed.'

I sat heavily on a large stone by the roadside and caught my breath. This whole world was so wonderful, so beautiful, so open and wild. I wondered that such a place had spawned mankind. I knew of cities, of nations, but in this empty wilderness I could feel only the wind. The depth of the human tragedy had many dimensions, I thought. I looked down. On the stone, carved by hand many years before, I read the words 'Sanctuary 2 m'.

'Robinson? What is this?' I asked the air.

'A milestone, sir.'

'Yes — but for whose convenience? I have never seen anyone travel this road!'

'Indeed, sir. But times change.'

'What do you mean?'

'Sir - you are approaching the perimeter of my concern. Soon you will be in regions I cannot reach. Beyond that lie adventures I cannot control, and then your destiny is your own. Out there, others were saved, others have been nurtured. I cannot tell, for I have only the skimpiest of data, how they fared. But once you cross that threshold, my task is done. I hoped to postpone this moment, but it seems fitting for us to part at this point.'

'Robinson, no! Don't leave me! You are everything to me!' I stepped forward, as though to grasp his hand.

'Sir — it is not I who leave you, but you who walk beyond my borders. Because you must. Out there you may find others living. I know of several who were prepared. From your issue, or due to your words or actions, others may walk this way one day. Thus there are milestones to guide them.'





coat. I leaned on my cane. 'May I come back?' I said at last.

'Indeed, sir. And you will be most welcome.'

The coldness of the wind made my eyes water.

'Robinson, tell me this. Are you alive? Or are you a machine? For, in all truth, Robinson, I love you dearly.'

'My name is an acronym, sir. It stands for Responsive Organism Brought Into Neo-Sentient Operation Naturally. Insofar as that defines life then I am alive, sir. And insofar as I am able, I return your affections.'

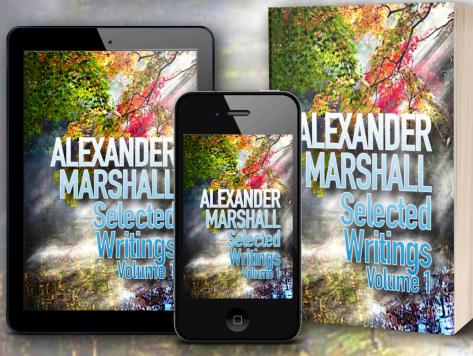
Robinson was to embrace my whole world up to that point. I sobbed with a peculiar blend of sadness and release; I sobbed for an indeterminate length of time.

Then I turned. Ahead of me a new horizon opened up under low rainclouds. I had no real notion what lay out there. I knew that within a few paces, my lifelong protector and friend would be left behind. Clutching my cane, step by step I walked on.

Sunlight glinted from the wet stones of the single tower at the crest of the next hill.

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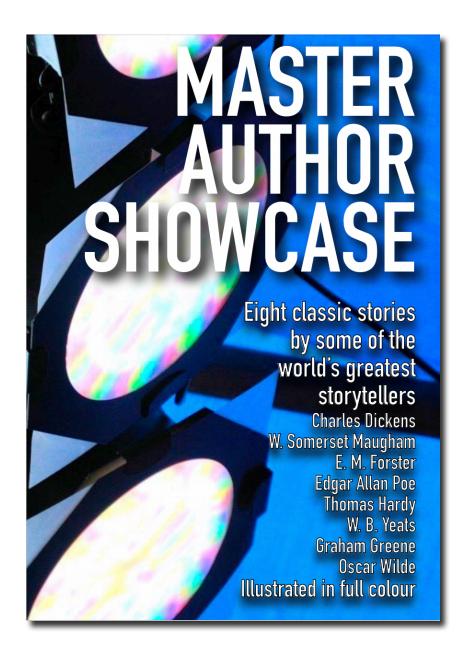
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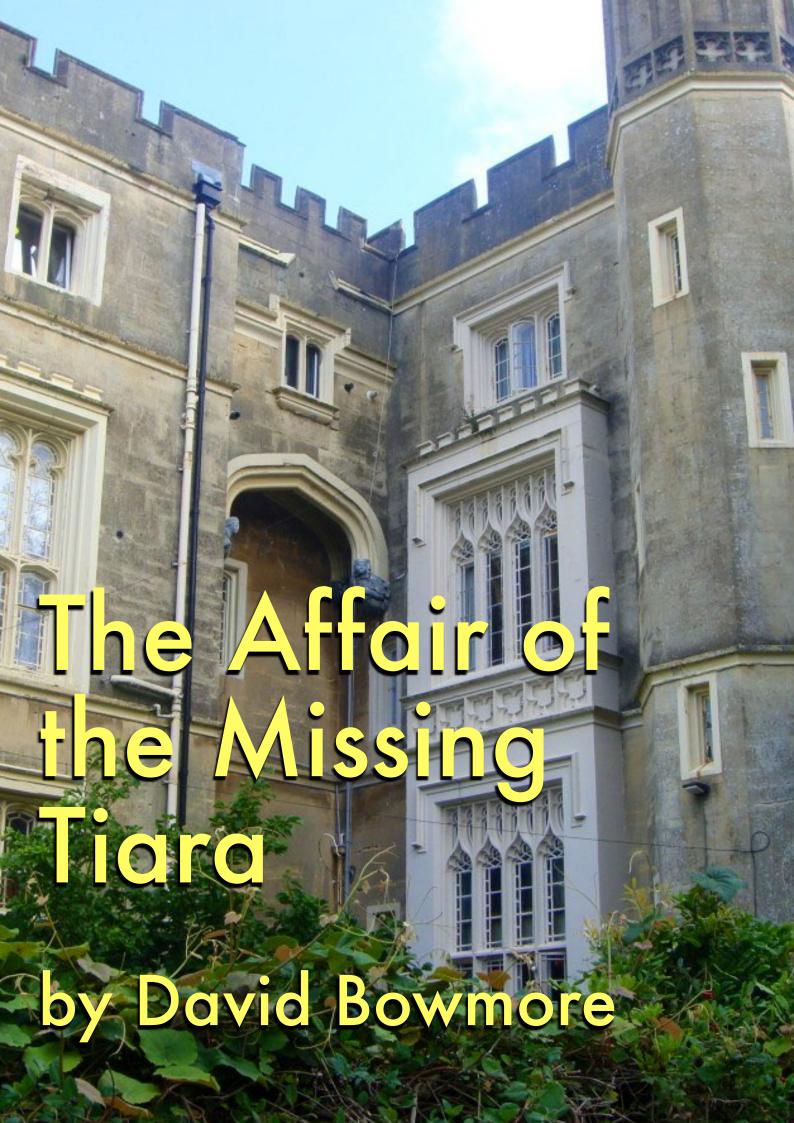
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The house could be seen from more than three miles away. Even on a day like today in October when rain seemed to be the predominant weather condition, it would have been possible to see the gargantuan structure from the heavens in one of those beastly flying machines.

The Lagonda, following the winding drive, dipped and rose over small hills and flew past a copse of woods at speed likely to give Malcolm Campbell the shakes. They passed a small church, where the wedding ceremony would take place in twenty-four hours. A flock of sheep meandered onto the road, and Mortimer slammed his foot on the brake causing his passenger to give a tiny squeal of excited pleasure. She then rebuked the driver in her firmest tones, "Oh, Morty. Do drive thenthibly. You nearly hurt one of the poor little lambth." Those with the required level of astuteness will no doubt notice a distinct lack of rigidity in her firmest tones.

Mortimer looked from her to the sheep which somehow was at eye level.

"Baaa," said the sheep.

Then he looked back to his passenger.

"Do drive along, Morty. You're thearing the theep," she instructed.

"And how am I meant to do that? I'm stuck in the middle of a herd of the beasts."

The shepherd, a man used to travelling at more sedate speed than a flying Lagonda, pushed a few of his flock aside and shook his head at the bonnet of the red dragon that had disturbed his meander through the working day.

"I say," called Mortimer over the braying animals.

The shepherd turned his head slowly at the call. They say dog owners always look like their dogs. It must be doubly so for a man who spends his whole day with cloven-hoofed ruminants. He chewed on something unseen in large circular movements of the jaw.

"Yar."

"Any chance you could move a few of your pets aside? We've a wedding to get to."

"Yar," said the shepherd again, and turned his head back to the bonnet. He touched the shiny metal with the tip of his finger. "What's wrong with him?" Mortimer said to the passenger.

"What'th wrong with who?"

Mortimer, never one to find himself in the top half of the class, had the sudden feeling of being the only one in the room who knew the answer to life's greatest question, "Who will romp home the winner of the Derby?" It was as clear as the pretty little nose on the pretty little thing next to him, that today he was for the first time in his entire life a genius. A man of knowledge and esteem. He could take on the world and give it (that is, the world) the benefit of his encyclopaedic knowledge. Wise men would consult him, leaders would seek his council. He was the coming man, if only he could figure out how to communicate with the blister currently leaning on his transport.

He revved the engine. A deep rumbling roused the expert idler.

"Yar," he said.

"Would you mind trying to clear a path?"
He looked to his passenger for support. She was busy making cow eyes at a sheep. The shepherd took a step forward and leaned on the door frame. He chewed at Mortimer.

"I say, Constance. You ask him to move the sheep. I don't think he understands me." "Me, Morty?" "Yes you, Constance." Mortimer gripped the steering wheel tight enough to turn his knuckles white.

"But you're the man."

"Please try," he said with a tight smile, and then added, "for me."

"Okay, Morty. For you." Her large, innocent eyes smiled at the shepherd as he turned his slow chew in her direction. "Pleathe move your lovely lambthth out of the way, tho we can vithit hith grathe for the wedding of hith lovely daughter to my bwother, Timothy."

The shepherd looked at Mortimer. Mortimer shrugged his shoulders. The shepherd moved away from the car and tapped one of the sheep with his crook. Soon the flock were following the shepherd.

"Eathy," she said. "You have to learn to be nithe to thethe people, Morty."

"I was nice."

"Never mind that now. Tell me how you tholved the cathe of your couthin'th howible murder."

"I didn't solve it, Connie. But I was, you know, important. The police wouldn't have had a clue without my help."

"How did Ithabelle die?"

"Yes. Um, rather complicated that one. She was sort of stabbed and shot and poisoned all at the same time."

"Golly!"





\*

Mortimer, ever the gentlemen, hopped over the car door and scooted around to open the passenger side. He held the hand of Constance by the finger tips as she demurely twisted and then rose from the seat.

"Thank you, Morty, but they have a man for that thort of thing. Ah, there he ith now." A butler and a footman were descending the steps.

"Miss Sinclair, Mr Marsh," said the butler, as he took control of the car door with a look that brooked no argument. Mortimer stepped away and watched as the footman unloaded the case clasped to the rack on the back of the car, before reaching into the backseat for the other three items of luggage.

"That's me old kitbag, where am I to be billeted?" he asked as he indicating the first and smallest of the cases.

"You are in the oriental room, Miss Sinclair," the butler replied with a stiff nod of his head in her direction. "Mr Marsh is to occupy the orange room."

A scream similar to that of a baby elephant discovering a gorilla in its normally safe enclosure at London Zoo erupted from the top of the steps. Mortimer turned to see a blur as Connie swept up the steps to be engulfed in the multi-layered white robes of the daughter of the house, the honourable Milly what's-herself.

"I'll just take the motor 'round to the stable." When no-one responded, he flopped into the driving seat in a dark mood and roared the engine for the entire mile it took to get to said stable yard. However had he agreed to this? A wedding of all things. It was his firmest belief that weddings were for those who had given up on life. Guests who attended them were joyous, when really they should have been envious. Envious of the happy couple, their youth, and a whole life ahead of them. The fatheads actually getting married had given up on all the fun they could have been having with their chums. Any man fool enough to be tricked into the situation deserved all that was coming, which would probably mean attending more weddings and wishing they were still young enough not to be married.

Marriage was for chumps!

As he made his slow way back to the hall, he pulled a silver cigarette case from his jacket pocket, tapped one of the sticks on the lid and then lit it with a silver lighter his cousin had given him not long before her murder.

Things had been difficult since her death, and some of the crowd had withdrawn their hospitality. They were friendly enough when he said hallo to them down the Twenty-Two Club. But he was rather lacking in social invitations since her demise at the hands of her stepmother—or was it her half-sister? He still wasn't sure.

Timothy Sinclair, who had always been quick off the blocks when it came to falling in love with flibberty-jibbet girls, had taken pity on him and gone around to see him with the good news.

"Come to the wedding, old bean. Be good for you to get away from Town for a spot of country air, dontch-ya-know."

"I don't want country air. I am replete with town air. What do I want country air for? If you ask me, country air is overrated and best left to those who were meant to breathe it, otters and stags and what-not."

"Calm down, Morty," said Timothy.

"Well I mean, country air, really."

"And you know Milly. She'd love to see you there," Timothy continued.

"Mildred Oliver? Horsey type? Tall Girl? Need a mounting block to look her in the eye, don't you?"

"Not really," said Timothy a little too shortly. But Morty was in full flow and failed to see the intense look that taken over the normally docile features of his friend.

"Oh come on, Timo, she has to duck when walking under Marble Arch," said Mortimer, with a little chuckle and a mime which involved raising his hands above his head. Timothy by this point had turned a rather interesting shade of beetroot. He could restrain himself no longer and grasped Mortimer by the lapels. "Kindly refrain from making such comments about my fiancée, Marsh, or I shall no longer try to show any concern for your well-being. Quite the opposite in fact."

"Just a joke," said Mortimer as he dusted himself down and straightened his tie. "Do you want to spend a few days in the country or not?" asked Timothy through clenched teeth.

"Thank you, Timo, but no."

"Good, you won't mind collecting the sibling from our parents' place. Mater and pater have gone down already. So I promised you'd get her to Esserington Hall safely."

"I just said I didn't want to go. I don't want to wave someone I consider a chum off on a voyage he's never likely to return from."

"You have a knack of insulting a fellow, do you know that, Morty?"

"And you have a knack for promising my services to your pill of a sister. Why can't she travel down with you?" Mortimer Marsh, determined to defend his right to not go to the country, stood straighter.

"It's a surprise for Milly. They came out together and haven't seen each other in some time. Connie's idea, she thought it might be fun to surprise Milly. And you get to enjoy all that abundant country air while making new friends who won't mind that you were involved in a murder."

"You were there too. Hasn't done you any harm."

"I was a guest. This is your house, isn't it?"
"Well, actually—"

"Good, see you tomorrow then, and don't forget the wedding present. Fortnum's have the list." And with that, Timothy left Morty standing with his mouth open and his eyes wide.



And so, much to his chagrin, Morty found himself in the country, taking in the air (leave it to the sheep), elaborately wrapped F&M box in hand (costing nearly half his monthly allowance), trudging back to the house and about to witness the imminent departure of a chum to the land of marriage.

As he arrived back at the imposing front door which stood twenty-five feet high and reflected the sun in hundreds of glass panels, a small black cab came to halt.

From its interior stepped forth a vision of beauty the likes of which he had never seen before. Morty had a keen eye for an attractive ankle and lower leg. Unfortunately, he had lost count of the amount of times he'd been disappointed by the emergence of an attractive appendage from stationary automobiles, only to be followed by a body and features that would make John Sullivan think twice about starting an argument.

However, the dish currently emerging would make Venus insist on a bit more rouge,

before Botticelli applied the finishing touch. This stranger exuded confidence and womanliness like no-one else he'd ever met before, and he'd seen Marlene Dietrich perform at The Café de Paris. Good Lord, what would this one be like to talk to? But if he were honest, talking was the last thing he wanted to do with her. Simply being in close proximity would be enough.

"What ho!" he said, as he trotted down the steps. "Here for the nuptials, what? Let me help you with your bag. They normally have a chap for this sort of thing, dontch-ya-know?"

Before the vision could respond, Timothy burst forth from the doors at the top of the steps.

"Morty, there you are! Thank God. We need to talk."

"What ho! Timo. What's ruffled your what'sit?"

"There's been a theft. Milly's diamond tiara has been stolen."



"Hallo, everyone's in the drawing room. Go on up," said Timothy to the recent arrival.

"Well actually—" she began.

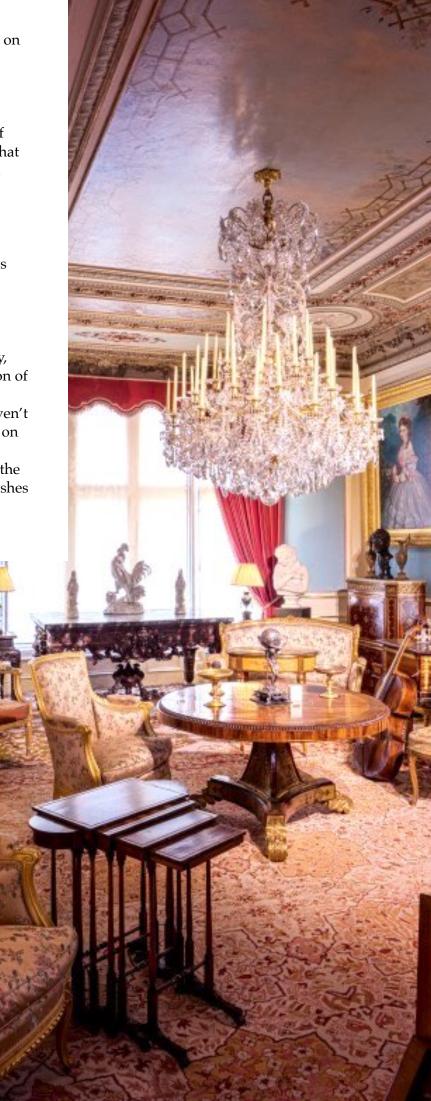
Those two words were such sweet music to Morty's ears, he could now die a happy man, although he would prefer to hear a few more of her words for a few more years. What was all that guff about marriage being for chumps that had been filling his brain box recently? He could readily see the appeal now. His eyes had been opened, the way forward was as clear as day.

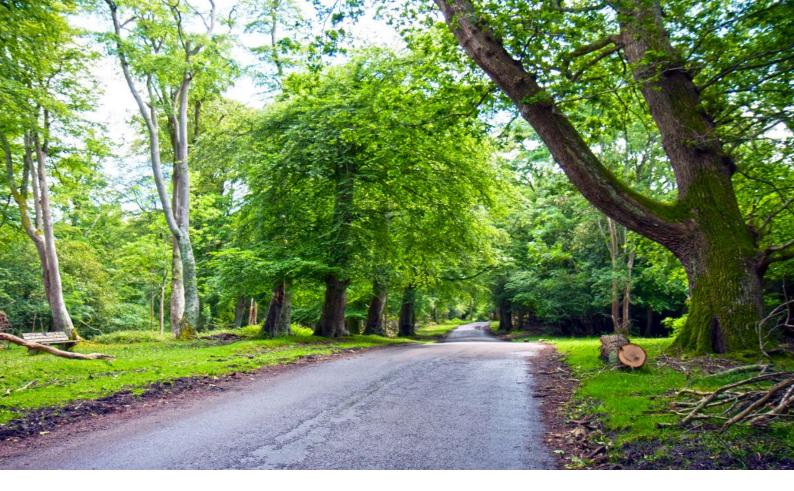
"Morty, we need to talk," insisted Timothy trying to turn Morty away from the object of his attention.

"Now look here—" began Morty, fully intending to not have this delicious moment sullied by Timothy in a funk.

"Stop dithering you, fat-head," said Timothy, this time stepping between Morty and the vision of complete womanliness.

"No, Timo. As your butler and what-not haven't done their shoelaces up yet, let alone crouched on the starting blocks," said Morty, "I am going to assist this lovely guest of yours, and I reiterate the phrase 'Your Guest', with her luggage. We Marshes have a co—"





"Please don't mention that blasted code," snapped Timothy.

Morty stepped around Timothy asking, "May I take your thingummy for you, Miss..." and paused long enough for the lady to reply, "Highsmith, Julia Highsmith."

"How do you do, Miss Highsmith?" he said, smoothly gaining any ground he may have lost by his interfering pill of a friend. With swift aplomb and his quick wit he had scuppered the plans of the evil blister before they had come to fruition. He felt just like one of those movie star Johnnies, Clarke Grant or Cary Gable. Yes, he was in fine fettle, indeed. And he'd have the vision all to himself soon enough.

As they walked at a sedate pace up the steps, Julia Highsmith said, "I'm actually here to catalogue the library. Bring it into the twentieth century. I didn't realise there was a celebration taking place." Morty could feel Timo heating up behind him, but he only had eyes for Miss Julia Highsmith. Timo—and Timo's problems—could wait, for he was with an angel and he was about to enter heaven.

"You know your mouth is open, don't you?" said the angel.

He closed it rather faster than intended and caught his tongue between his teeth.

At the top of the steps, Sloane arrived to carry out the duty for which, no doubt, he was well remunerated. Morty was left standing tending to a bleeding tongue with hand on cheek. Miss Highsmith actually smiled at him as she passed through the great doors.

"Now, will you help me, Morty?" said a highpitched voice behind him.

"Do you know, Timo, you're just about the most irritating blighter I know?" he replied.

They started to walk around the house and Timothy started to tell the tale he had been desperate to tell.

"Milly's diamond tiara has been stolen, Morty, and I need you to get it back."

"Why don't you call the police? It is their normal line of work. Mine is not hunting down priceless pieces of jewellery."

"We can't get the police involved. It's not the done thing to go accusing one of your guests of theft, is it? Besides, it's not like there's been a murder."

Morty stopped, and delivered one of his blackest looks at the docile features of his friend.

"Sorry. Forgot and all that," said Timo, "but the thing is, Morty. I know who took it."

"Well, there you go then. Just go and ask for it back."

"I can't do that, she's not supposed to know I know."



"Of course. Cat burglars of high society don't normally go around advertising the fact. Hang on, how do *you* know who took it?"

"It was Connie," said Timothy, kicking a pebble that had inadvertently wandered into his path.

"Connie? Why? When? She's only just got here. I know, I brought her and I haven't even had time to take of me driving gloves off and have a sharpener. How in the blazes did she manage it?"

"The thing is, she has this habit of taking things that don't belong to her. She must have swiped it while they were squealing and being all girly up in Milly's room, you know what women are like. I could go and demand it back from her, but then I would be admitting that I know, and if I do that, I'll have to tell the old man, and he would have her committed or

something. She doesn't mean it, she just likes pretty shiny things.

"But more importantly, if Milly finds out it was Connie that took her grandmother's tiara, she will call the wedding off. But if the tiara isn't found, then she won't be able to wear the veil tomorrow and the wedding is definitely off. Do you see my predicament, Morty?"

"I certainly do, old top. But, if you ask me you have the perfect excuse to call off this arrangement to the giantess."

It was Timothy's turn to deliver his blackest look.

"Sorry, but I still don't see why it's my problem too?" argued Morty.

"You are my only friend in all this. The only one I can turn too. I need your help."

"I see."

"Just go to her room tonight, when we're all at dinner. Have a look around (she usually hides them under the bed), find it, then hide it in your own room and return it to me during the night. Easy."

"If it's that easy, why don't you do it?" Mortimer had been coerced into these situations before. They had usually ended up with a visit to the headmaster and six of the best. That time Pinky Pinkerton had persuaded him to steal the key to the science lab while everyone else was still inside with a concoction of Pinky's

manufacture—something to do with ammonium sulphide or some such rubbish—still smarted.

"I can't be seen leaving the table the night before my wedding. The in-laws will think I'm getting cold feet."

"Fine, fine. I'll do it, but you owe me, Timo," agreed Morty, against his better judgement.

"Thanks Morty. Come on, I'll give you a tour of the shack and point out all the salient rooms, what?"

"Fine, and while you're doing it, you can tell me all about Miss Highsmith."





Twenty guests have been arranged around a table which runs the length of the room unimaginatively called The Room of Light. One whole wall, made entirely of glass, gives a view of unrivalled spectacle over the flowing hills and downs. Well it would have, if it hadn't been the evening. A seven course meal was to be presented to the assembled peers who were to celebrate the marriage on this fine autumnal night. Another one hundred and thirty were to arrive tomorrow for the

actual wedding. It was considered a small affair by high society standards. Ornate candelabras glinted in the light. Crystal glasses tinkled. Silver scraped on china.

Conversation murmured, sometimes harsh, "What does she see in him? He has no prospects, does he?" a voice heavy with haughtiness travelled easily to the ears of the bride's mother.

"She calls it love, Lady Montdore."



"Oh dear. She'll learn."

Sometimes innocent, "My roomth covered in Chinethe wallpaper. Why ith it called The Oriental Room?"

And sometimes inane, "It was funny at the time. You had to be there really," said Morty to the vicar sitting next to him.

In truth, he was rather nervous about the task ahead of him, and the thought of making polite chit-chat with a bunch of strangers made his stomach churn — butter would be the result if milk had been poured in. The house was quite possibly the largest he'd ever stayed in, and he'd visited a few. At the top of the wide and imposing stairway, three corridors led to three different wings. He'd already misplaced his own room twice that afternoon. How he was supposed to find the dratted Connie's room he didn't quite know.

Then he'd had the bright idea of finding the lovely Julia Highsmith. It was an approach of two-fold brilliance. First, just spending some time with her and listening to her voice would be a pleasant way to spend the afternoon. Secondly, he hoped to persuade her to help in his quest to ensure true love reigned in the hearts and minds of men and giantesses, by assisting him in returning the item in question to its rightful owner. He eventually found her in the grand library where she sat amid text and scrolls that she said were from the late Middle Ages.

"Golly! Did they all have a problem with time keeping?" he said and then went on to explain his situation. She replied that she was only a visitor in the household and felt the required skill set for such a task fell far outside her remit as a librarian.

"That's a no, is it?"

"Yes, it is Mr Marsh. Now if you really don't mind?" she said, turning her head back to her scrolls, leaving Morty feeling like a man who'd collected his winnings, ordered celebratory drinks and picked out a new blazer, only to find his wallet has been pinched.

He looked along the table to Timothy, who in turn looked up at his bride-to-be, sitting next to him. Timothy said something; she scowled at him. Timothy looked down the length of the table to Morty and gave a questioning look and a nod of the head which said in no uncertain terms, "Move Morty, you've a priceless tiara to recover." Morty looked down at his consommé, and then back at Timothy with a look that said, "I've barely started the soup, you blighter." Timothy replied with, "Move or you'll be wearing the foul-tasting fluid."

Morty made his excuses and left the gathering. No-one paid him any heed, except the vicar who seemed more than pleased to be left alone with the young librarian on his left.

"Left, right or straight on? Einy, meeny, miny, mo..." he tapped his lips with his figures as he tried to recall the route Timothy had taken him on when he first arrived. Five minutes later, he found himself trying the door to Connie's temporary accommodation, only to find it was a linen room. The girl occupying herself with the task of rotating the bedsheets was not surprised to see a guest of the wedding party looking for the room of another guest.

"What ho!" said Morty having recovered from the shock of Connie apparently sleeping in a laundry room. "Any idea where Connie Sinclair is boarded these days?"

"Turn right at the top o' the stairs, sir. Seventh door on the left — The Oriental Room," she replied, thinking how unfair the world was. She daren't even imagine what might happen to her if a young gentleman was found in her room.

Having found the correct sleeping quarters, our reluctant hero was greeted with a scene of utter devastation, or perhaps she always left her room with clothes thrown all over the floor, suitcases upended and drawers emptied of their contents? Morty thought this unlikely. Things did not bode well for the forthcoming nuptials.

Mr Sloane, the butler of Esserington Hall, was a man who did everything by the book. He took a very dim view of the workings and rituals of



the house being done in a way which did not conform with his idea of how a house should be run. Morty could tell all this by the way he moved, and the way he looked at Morty as if he was the sort of guest they were not used to having at such a great house. With a great amount of trepidation, Morty interrupted Sloane after he had exited The Room of Light.

"I say Sloane, old thing," he said, dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Sir."

"I wonder, would you mind asking Timo to come out and have a word with me?"

"Sir?"

"Look, I know it's not the done thing and all that, Sloane. But I really do need to talk with him. And it's the sort of talk best not overheard by lords of the realm and what-not."

"Sir," said Sloane as he returned to The Room of Light.

Morty sat on a leather fender seat by a blazing fire, burning with enough force to heat a hospital for a week. Sloane returned with a vexed-looking Timo in attendance.

"If you would come with me, Mr Sinclair, Mr Marsh." Sloane then escorted them to the billiard room.

"Where have you been? How long can it take to swipe a little thing like a tiara?" demanded Timothy.

"It's gone, Timo." Straight to the point, no point in dilly-dallying.

"What do you mean, gone? If you've messed this up for me..."

"Now don't be like that. It wasn't my fault. I found your sister's room, eventually. Only someone else had beaten me to it. Turned the room upside down. I had a look around and all that, but I think it's been stolen."

Timothy flopped into a leather chair by the fire. Having found the drinks cabinet, Morty poured two belters. He passed one to his friend.

"But I promised I'd get it back for her," said Timo.

"I know, old thing. We have to think, who could it be? Which one of your wedding guests could do this?"

"You realise the people we've got in there don't go in for petty burglary, don't you? They're all above suspicion."

"The servants then?"



"It's possible I suppose, but what would any of them know about tiaras? Did you tell anyone about it?"

"Oh dear," said Morty. When he had been very young, and his parents had still been alive, they had taken him to the circus. His one clear memory was of the clown who got everything wrong. He tripped over his own feet, his trousers fell down, he was kicked up the backside by other not-so-friendly clowns, and he was the one finally drenched in water. Morty now knew what it felt like to be that clown.

"Julia Highsmith," he said, with head lowered into his hands.

"You fat-head, Morty. She left the table ten minutes ago, shortly before you returned."

"But she is such a divine creature. She can't have done this, can she?" But even as he asked the question, he knew the answer. It could be no-one else.

"Oh! She was a clever one," said Timo, pacing up and down the room, "inveigling her way into a house when plenty of aristos would be here, all done up in their best sparklers. You are a complete liability, Morty." Morty spurred on by the hurtful words, gathered himself together by the lapels and prepared to do all that was necessary to restore the honour of the Marshes.

"Never let it be said that Mortimer Marsh isn't the sort of chap to let a friend down, and then do nothing to rectify the posish," he said, draining the glass and then dashing from the room to the stables, to ensure the miscreant could not break for it in one of the guests' automobiles. She had after all arrived by taxicab and would need transport to escape. His quick thinking would be sure to save the day.



By the time he had arrived at the stables, out of breath and gasping for air, he was cursing the architect of the estate for putting such an important thing as the stables so far away from the main abode. He heard the red dragon, his beloved Lagonda, before he saw it. Horses brayed at the demonic sound of six cylinders spewing fire from its exhausts. It tore passed him, spraying muck and pebbles in its wake, forcing him to dive out of the way.

There was nothing for it, he would have to borrow one of the other cars and give chase. Two Bentleys parked side by side gave him little hope, but needs must. He passed over the blower knowing it would be too much to handle and opted for the older roadster. It coughed into life at the second press of the starter motor and he felt the beast give a deep rumble that just might have woken the gods. All was not lost.

It seemed to take forever to get rolling, but he passed the chapel at nearly forty miles an hour, desperately wishing he had a pair of goggles, for the wind at this speed made it difficult to keep his eyes open. He hoped no sheep were wandering about. He could see the lights of his quarry and fancied he was gaining ground, even though the Lagonda should be able to touch ninety miles an hour on a straight road.

"Come on, you old relic," he shouted, as he urged his steed to even greater speeds, the pistons making such a noise as to send nesting birds to the heavens in giant flocks. His only ambition to retrieve the loot, the smell of heated oil concerned him not.

He turned sharply onto the main road with a squeal of burning rubber. One of the thin spheres popped and deflated. He barely noticed as his attention was taken — just for a moment — by flames licking through the grilles above the running board.

Minutes later, it became clear Julia was heading for the train station. He screeched to a halt, pleased to see his own car in a relatively unharmed condition.

Sprinting onto the platform, he heard a shrill whistle and saw the lovely, and daring Julia Highsmith being helped aboard by a guard.



The train was moving off and had already gathered quite a head of steam. Morty, all thought of safety long ago blown away by a Bentley convertible doing nearly fifty miles an hour, jumped for the departing train and was hauled aboard by two Boy Scouts who would dine out on this for the next two weeks.

The Scouts followed the stranger as he quickly dashed from compartment to compartment, politely apologising to each occupant as it became clear the object of his recklessness was not in residence.

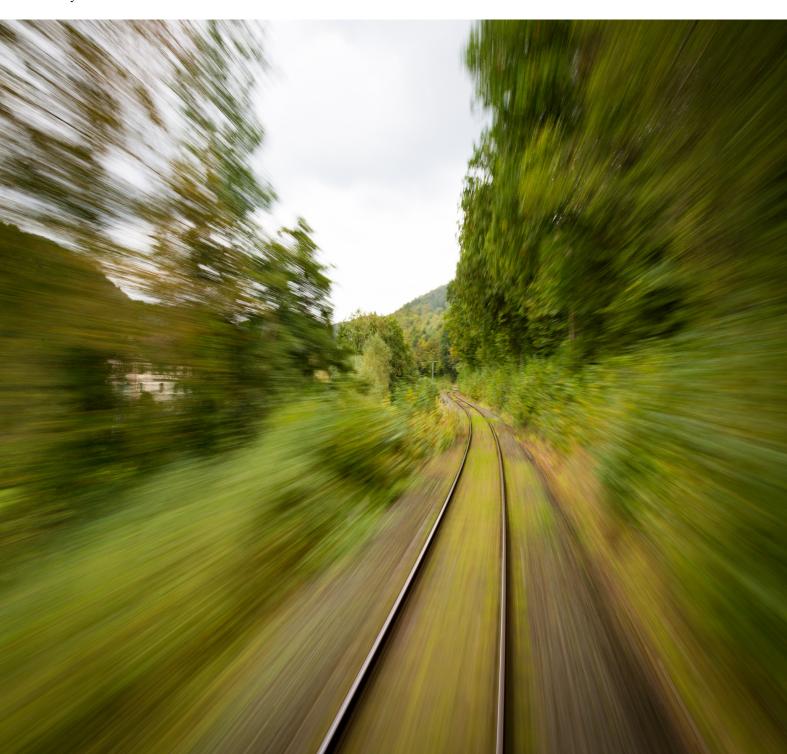
A guard tried to calm the advance of the heroes, only to be told, "Don't be such an ass, I'm on the trail of an expert jewel thief, aren't I boys?"

"Yes, sir," they chimed in unison.

"Well, let's be at him then, sir," said the guard, and three became four.

They caught up with her as she entered the Pullman car. Five flying figures dashed through the car scattering apologies left and right. Eventually, Julia, having run out of carriages, was trapped by the ageing guard, and a Scout troop led by a wide-eyed, filthy, soot-stained playboy with more courage than brains. Her only option was to jump. She flung the door wide open. Fortunately for Julia, the train was travelling at a slower pace as it rounded an embankment. Now or never.

"Good-bye, Morty," she said with a smile.



"No, Julia don't..."

As she was about to leap, one of the Boy Scouts ran forward to block her way. She deftly pushed him aside and took her chance with gravity.

Morty and the guard braved the buffeting wind in an attempt to see if she was alive, but she was lost in the darkness.

"Sorry, sir," said the guard as he pulled the door closed.

"Well, that's that, I suppose," said Morty. "She fooled the lot of us and because of me, my friend will not get married. If yours truly wasn't a

social pariah before, he shall certainly be one now."

The Boy Scout picked himself off the floor. "Was this what you was after, sir?" he asked. "Me mam says I shouldn't be doing the dipping now I'm a Scout. But as it was a good turn an' all, I don't think she'll mind, do you?"

He held in his hands a glittering, Victorian, antique tiara likely to make everyone's day, even if it was a little bent out of shape.

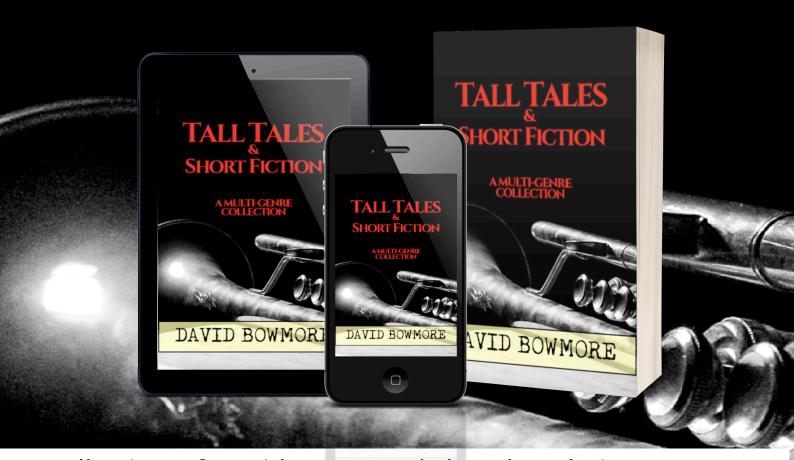




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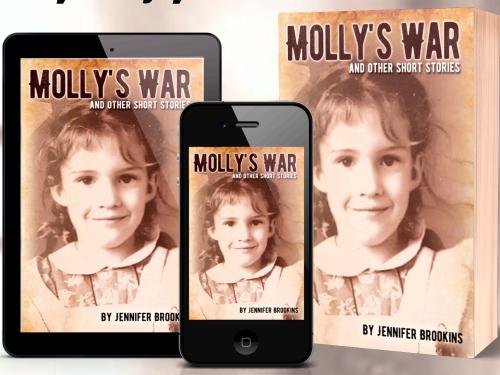


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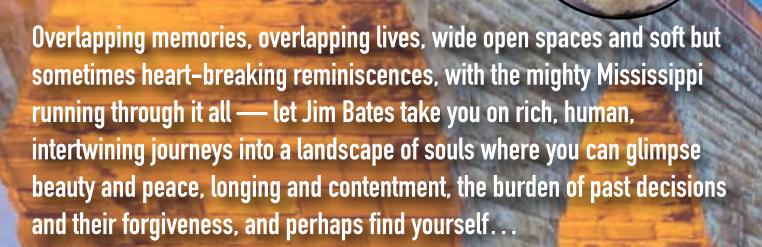
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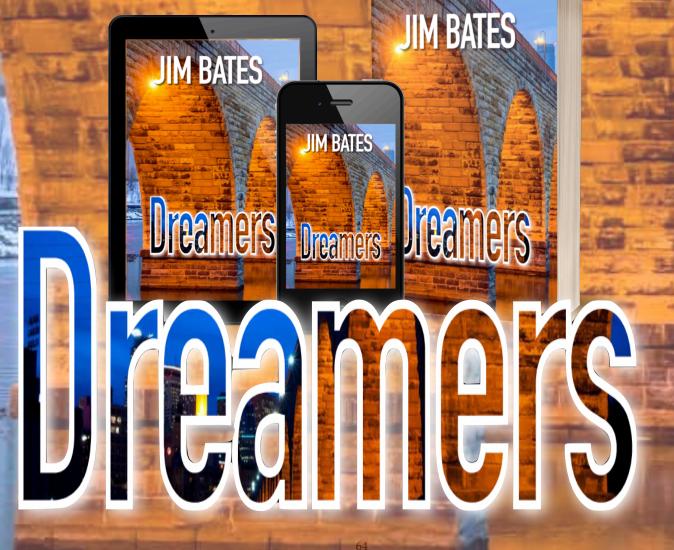
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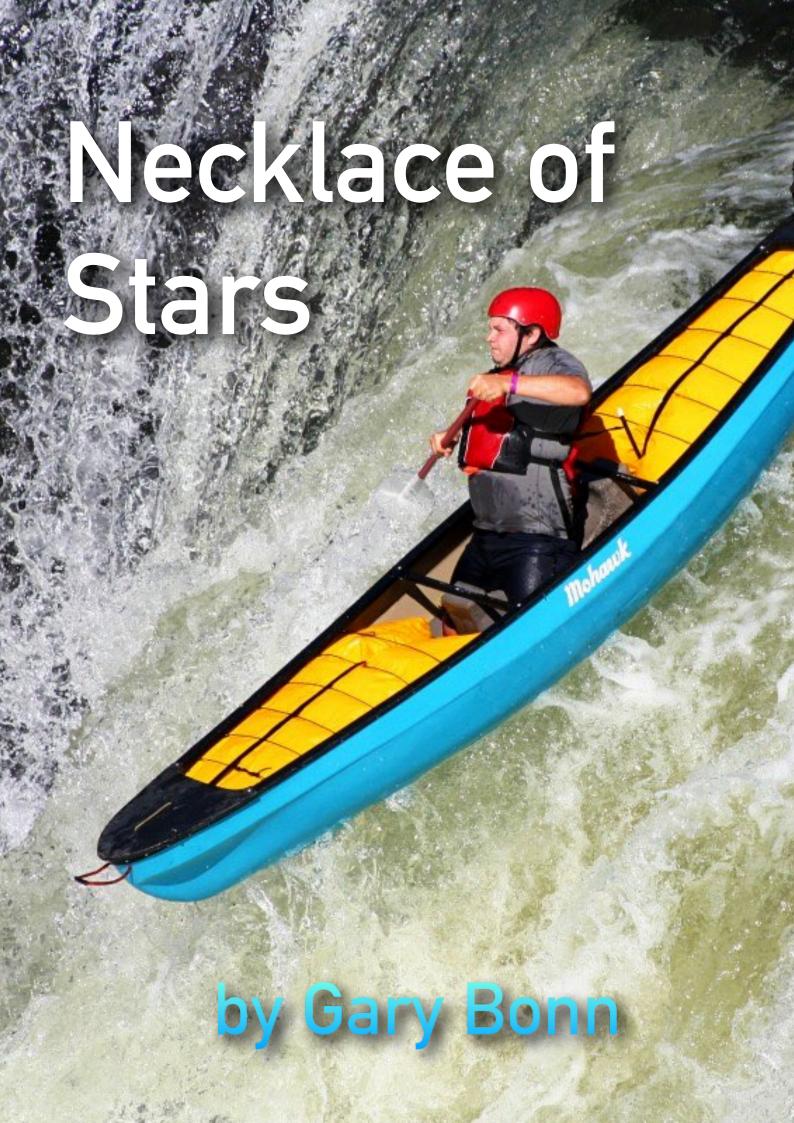


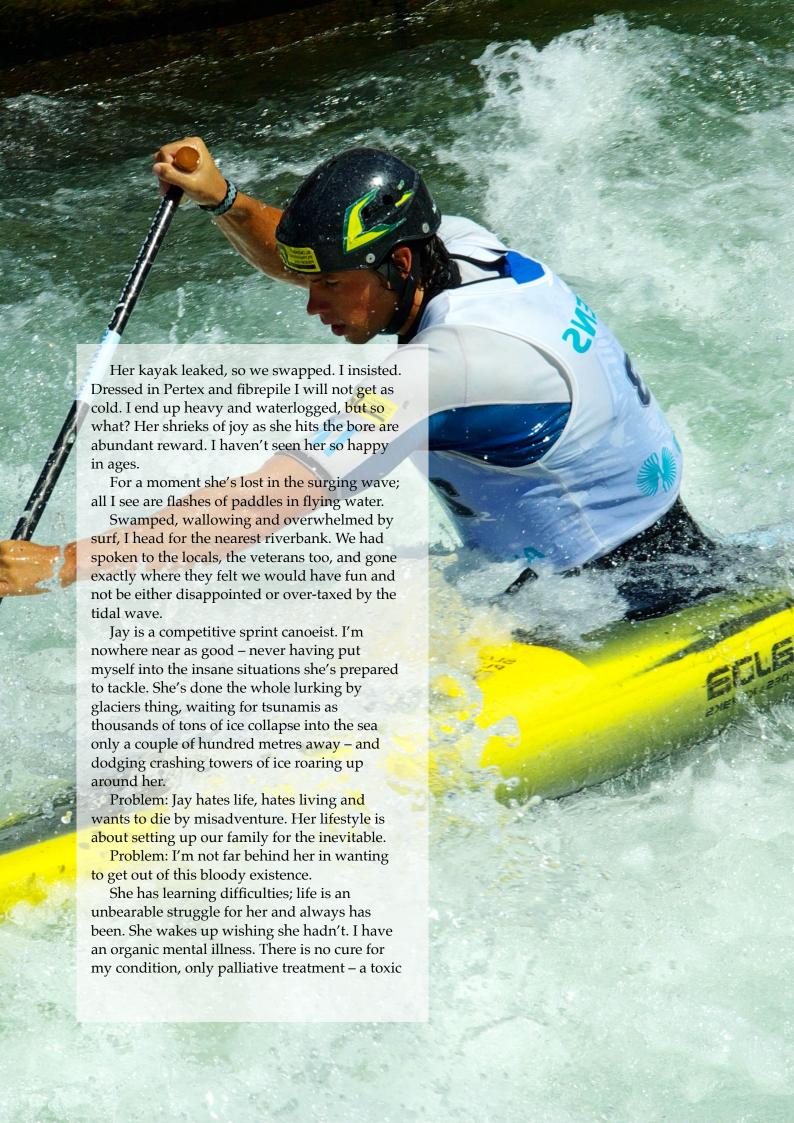
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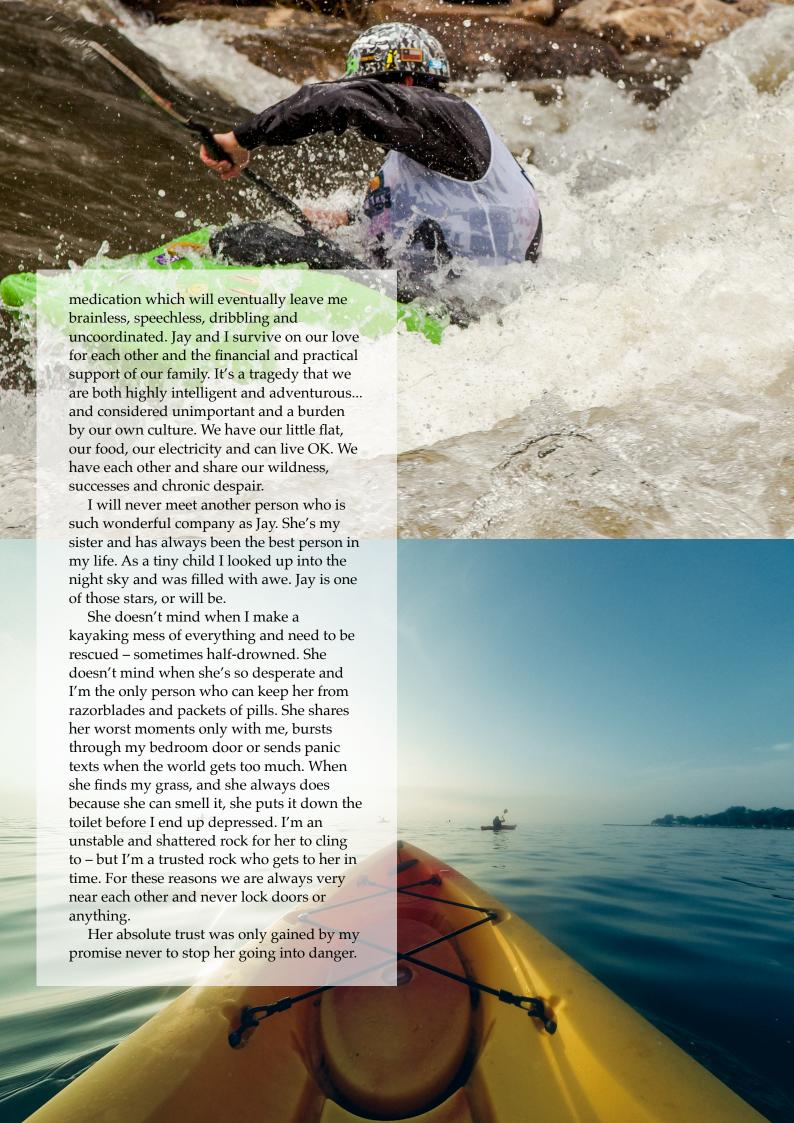




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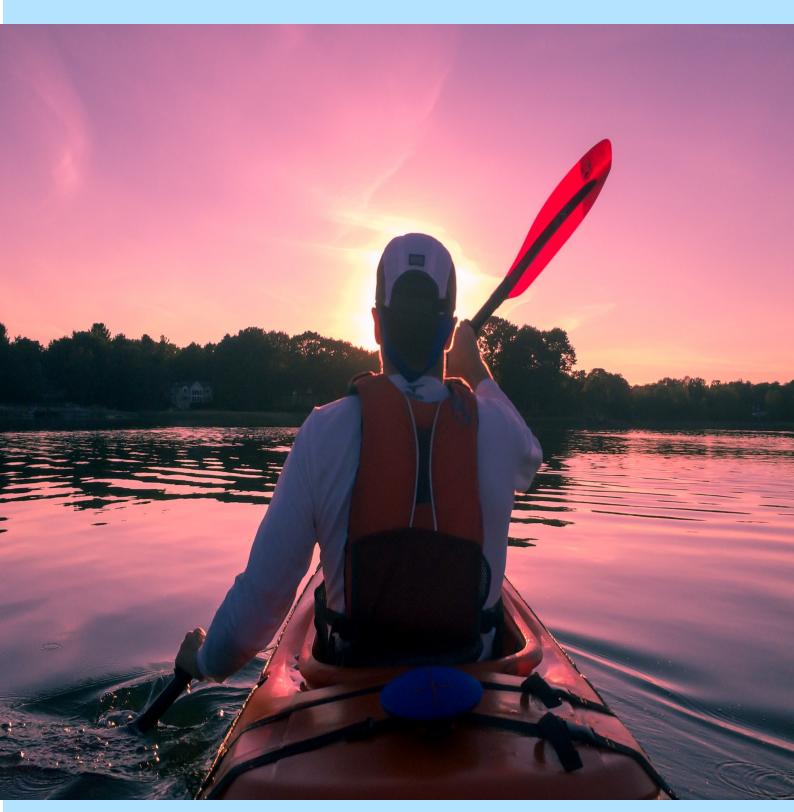


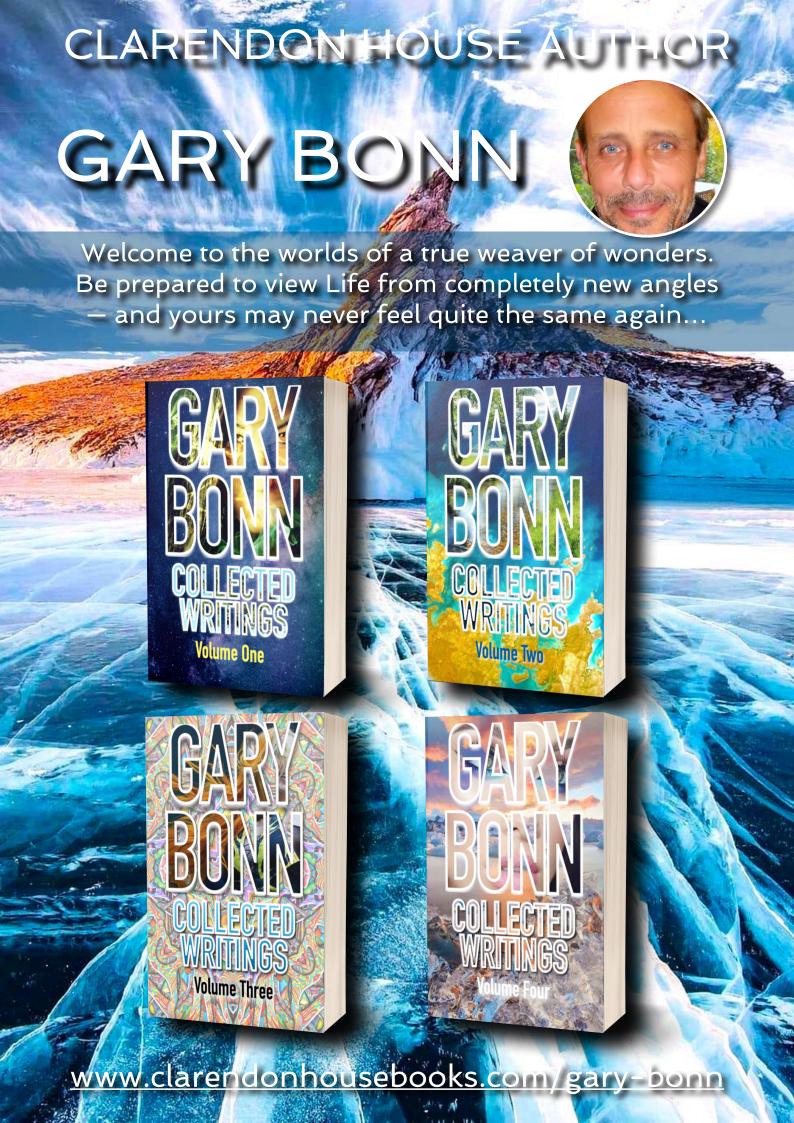
She'll join me. When she's checked with a finger in my mouth to see if I've swallowed my tablets properly – she's the only person I allow to do that – we'll carry the kayaks and our gear up to the road and walk to fetch the car.

After returning and loading everything up, she'll drive and I'll struggle, through medication-hazed and sluggish thoughts,

with navigation. We'll end up dozing in a motorway service station.

Midnight will come with us nursing cold coffees. One of us will tap the other's hand and say, 'Another day, another victory, another brilliant set of jewelled moments to add to our lives. We've made it to another morning.'





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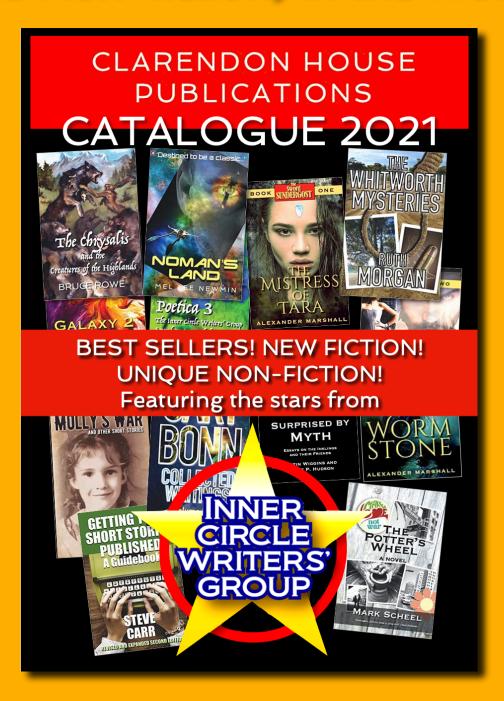
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