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CONTENTS

From The Editors

An Interview With a Devilish Fiction Writer

TheDeer Meets Rachel Green

Come in Number Five

by Dave Cryer

Touring

by Ray Succre

Somewhat Less Than Thirty Pieces

by Jonathan Pinnock

Drink

by David Romanda

Three Variations on the Enigma of Freedom

by Marilyn Francis

Subterraneans

by Su Laws Baccino

North of Superior

by Bob Smith

Not Vandal, Survivor

by Mandy Pannett

The Party

by Mark Tomlinson

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From The Editors

Out back of our shed, there's a woodsy valley. A private highway for squirrels, moose, deer and raccoons. We rarely go down there. Instead, we stand at the top of the hill, look down, and imagine the conversations that happen at night while we're sleeping.

“Evenin', Bucky.”

“Howzitgoin', Squiffy?”

“Up and down. Those kids of mine are driving me nuts. They won't listen, ya know?”

“I hear ya. Well, gotta run. Stay safe, okay?”

Yeah. Animals don't really talk to each other in words. But it's fun to imagine.

What's even more enjoyable is reading stuff that human writers come up with. That's why Issue One of *TheRightEyedDeer* features a selection of short stories and poems from nine authors who live in the UK, Canada and Japan. Nine great reads to kick off 2009. You'll meet a quiet boy, a weary traveller, Judas and a goth chick, a life model under glass, not-so-familiar characters in the subway, a drink, a slug, a myth, and a married man who tries really hard to live up to his obligations.

There's also an enlightening interview between Rachel Green, author of *An Ungodly Child*, and *TheDeer*. He's now considering taking up the study of kobudo, if only to impress that little doe he spotted in the woods last night.

Grab your favourite libation and settle in for a good read. We hope you enjoy the inaugural issue of *TheRightEyedDeer*.



Happy New Year 2009!

from

Henge Hog

Doug Pugh

Donna Gagnon Pugh

An Interview with a Devilish Fiction Writer



Rachel Green is a 40-something writer from the hills of Derbyshire in England. She lives with her two female partners, their two kids and their two dogs. She was the regional winner of the Undiscovered Authors 2007 competition and her book *An Ungodly Child*, which is about Jasfoup (with a bit about Harold as well), is available here: <http://tinyurl.com/5rxve6>

When she's not writing, Rachel can usually be found learning how to hurt people in interesting ways, or else discussing philosophy with her partners.

TheRightEyedDeer caught up with Rachel at St. Twinings' Tea Shop in Laverstone, UK. TheDeer had lots of questions and kept a decent distance between himself and the Japanese sword.

DEER: *Who are Jafoup and Harold? And can you tell us about the first time you met them?*

RACHEL: I met Harold first, in a dingy little second-hand shop in a prompt from the LiveJournal community 'Musemuggers' in 2003. I wrote a short story about him taking a holiday in the past – 12th Century England – by means of tricking a demon into the travel. When I first came across him, Harold was a combination of Harold Steptoe and Lionel Rossiter's 'Rigsby'. Jafoup was a traditional, rather stupid demon. It was a one-off story and I left it to go to other themes but about a month later another prompt encouraged me to return to Harold and his friend the demon Jafoup and write another story, and another. Jafoup developed into the erudite dilettante he is now, and dragged Harold up-market with him.

DEER: *That Japanese sword you brought in here ... what's the fascination?*

RACHEL: I used to be in a group of rapier combat enthusiasts but, after a disagreement with the wife of the sub-instructor, was thrown out. Looking for a new weapon, I took up the study of kobudo – the art of Japanese weapons – many examples of which adorn my walls (between the bookcases). One of those weapons is the katana (the study of which is iai-jutsu), and I found I loved the weapon even more than the rapier. The one you've seen is an antique hand-made sword I had imported, though I use a modern one for practice.

DEER: *I've heard that you write copious quantities of words every day. How did that start? And how many DO you put down on an average day?*

RACHEL: I write as much as I need to. Every day I start with three poems: a cinquain, a haiku and a tanka. I keep up three blogs so I also write 100-500 words for JASFouP's Diary and another 100-250 words for Laverstone Tales. Add in a poem and a picture post for the Dogs Bite blog and a 'what I did today' for my personal blog. If I'm writing a novel I'll also write 2,000 words of that. It started by my taking on too many online writers' forums and writing huge amounts for those. I've dropped it to about six forums now, two of them poetry ones.

DEER: *Philosophy, huh? What's the most difficult philosophical conundrum you've come up against in a conversation?*

RACHEL: The eternal question of religion. The household hides when secular pairs come to the door, for I generally know far more about the bible than they do and will generally lead them away from their 'safe place' into Leviticus 18:22: the anti-gay clause. If they agree with that, I'll ask them about tattoos (19:28) and shaving (21:5) and move on from there.

Actually, I find door-to-door religion useful. When I was writing my pro-Lucifer version of Genesis (*Mourning Light*) I had the Jehovah's Witnesses searching for material for me. Not that I told them why.

DEER: *Have you ever been given any useful writing advice? If so, what was it and who was smart enough to give it to you?*

RACHEL: I used to have a terrible problem with 'its' and 'it's'. After someone patiently pointed out all the incorrect ones in one of my 2,000 word stories, I went away and read several grammar books.

Probably the best advice I've been given, though, was from Terry Pratchett, who said that to be a writer one must write at least 400 words every single day. Sage advice.

To keep up with Rachel, Harold and JASFouP, please visit:

www.leatherdyke.co.uk

<http://leatherdykeuk.blogspot.com/>

<http://jASFouP.blogspot.com/>

Come in Number Five

by Dave Cryer

He was always such a quiet boy. Always. Never put his hand up in class. Just smiled or nodded or shook his head if asked a question. Dropped off by his mum and picked up by his dad.

But Harry Plain soaked it all in. He did well. Sixth Form, University, PhD. A quiet life thus far, but a successful one. His books were best sellers.

He wrote his books in the mornings, breakfasting at seven, a brisk half-hour walk at seven-thirty, then at his desk by eight with a cup of Typhoo and two crunched Rennies. He wrote – or at least turned up for work at his desk – from eight until twelve each day. The writing would come. And if it didn't, he would stare at the screen until it did. He didn't allow himself to leave the desk. At twelve he had a sandwich and a cup of tea.

The mornings had always been the same while his mum and dad had been alive and he didn't plan on changing anything now. It was a recipe for success. Four hours of hard graft every day equalled enough money for a comfortable life. What more does any man want than a comfortable life?

Four hours' work. That's one more than Virginia Woolf, he often thought to himself. He didn't know this for a fact, it was just something that he'd heard, that she used to write for three hours every day and then stop. Maybe she didn't stop some days, maybe she would carry on, maybe the source of the anecdotal evidence had got it completely wrong.

The difference between Harry Plain and Virginia Woolf was one hour's work, but also that Harry would always stop. He would never carry on past twelve. Twelve was lunch and the afternoon was his own. The afternoon was always different.

Mornings, always the same. Afternoons always, always different.

Today's sandwich was camembert and pineapple jam. Yesterday had been plain cheddar. Tomorrow might be Double Gloucester and Marmite, but who knows, it could be anything. It wouldn't be the same, that was for sure.

That was a good sandwich, he thought. It worked remarkably well despite the dangerous combination. Even the pineapple jam had been a risk, the new flavour practically leaping off the Sainsbury's shelf at him, but to pair it up with a ripe camembert would hoist the eyebrows of a hardened cavalier, he thought.

What to wear on a sunny late September day, he pondered, as he paused in front of the hall mirror, running his tongue around his teeth as a bit of a pre-clean before brushing them. His greying hair needed a cut. Perhaps he'd pay a visit to Frankie Fingers. Maybe he should get Frankie to put a bit of colour back into it. This wasn't something that he'd ever considered before and it surprised him that he was considering it now. He'd always thought that hair made younger always threw the age of the face into stark contrast. He didn't want to be like Wiggy Stardust who ran Nite Owls.

No. Going darker was something he'd have to think very seriously about.

That pineapple jam had left stringy bits between his teeth. He might have to floss. This was something his dentist had told him to do every six months for the past who knows how many years. He would always nod at the latest incumbent sports car driver. He did buy some floss years ago – pulled it out and looked at it, but couldn't bear to use it. It was still on the shelf in the bathroom.

There was a light in his eyes in the mirror. He smiled at himself. His latest dentist was a bit of a corker.

Fillings, polish me up, he thought. His smile was broad now. He closed his eyes and thought momentarily of a crisp, white tunic.

No chance, added a small head voice, chastising his wicked wanderings. I'm too old, he thought.

Sod it, he thought, I'll go as I am.

He went up to his study and whisked a few items into his rucksack. I'll gather at pace today, he thought, see if I end up with everything I need without all the dithering and shilly-shallying: book, newspaper, notebook, pen, spare pen, digital DAB radio, digital camera, cagoule, pack of Wotsits, half a pack of Extra Strong Mints left over from the last trip outside – and his crowbar; always his crowbar. Now go, go, go, he thought, and he was out the door and walking down the street and he didn't go back to check that the door was locked.

Living on the edge. He smiled.

"Morning Harry," said his neighbour, Old Skoggs.

Harry nodded.

Nobody knew why Old Skoggs was called Old Skoggs. He was called that when Harry was young; and this was when Old Skoggs wasn't even old, just older than the local kids. He was probably seventyish now and he'd been dying for forty-odd years. Everyone always knew that Old Skoggs was dying. He walked up and down the street all day long, telling everyone about it. It's the throat, he'd tell you, even if he'd told you a dozen times before. And if you ever talked about Old Skoggs to anyone, you'd always say, He's dying, you know, it's his throat. And anyone you ever told that to would say, Yes, I know. Old Skoggs knew everyone's name and he always said 'Morning' even if it was evening.

Harry walked down the hill. It was easier that way. He went slowly and he looked at all the windows to his left. He looked at all the passing cars to his right. So many good-looking women in cars, he thought. On their own. Going who knows where. One of them, one day, would be right for him. They often looked at him. If they looked, he smiled and more often than not, they'd smile back, no matter what age. Forty would be a good age, thought Harry. I'd take that, no problem. Thirty-five, thirty, now that would be heaven. Twenty-five, though – no, that would be a mistake.

No more mistakes, thought Harry.

His parents came into his mind, sitting on the sofa, shaking their heads inside his head – he hadn't checked their room. When he left the house, he would always check their room, make sure everything was still in place. It always was – who would touch it? – but he always liked to check it all the same and he hadn't checked it today. He gritted his teeth, thought about returning home, then checked himself – it didn't matter – it was something different. And afternoons were for something different, it was OK.

When he got to the inset horseshoe of benches by the park, he sat down and he cast his eyes towards the children's playground. He smiled. Swinging up and down, going round and round, scuttling like hamsters, squealing like unoiled bicycles; mothers grinning, smoking, chatting. Peaceful. Hopeful.

An old woman sat down opposite him, puffing and panting for a full minute. She had put her shopping bag down at the end of the bench near to the pavement. It was away from her feet and away from her hands which now rested in her lap. Her oversized brown purse was sitting on top of a small loaf of Nimble Wholemeal in her bag. Steal me, it shouted.

Harry gave her a smile.

"Near killed myself, I have," she said to Harry once she'd gathered enough breath to speak. "Lovely

weather, though. For the time of year. Awful summer. I knew I shouldn't have put this big coat on."

Harry smiled, his eyes connecting with hers. I bet she was a beauty once, he thought. She reached out and dragged her bag closer in to her feet. Harry smiled again, rose from his bench, nodded to her, then pressed on into town.

He went to the Art Gallery. There was a lovely young woman sitting reading in one of the rooms. Henry Miller. Well, that was a surprise. Or maybe not. Harry couldn't decide. She was early thirties, round glasses and a flat face. Her fingers were thin and you could see her wrist bones, but the rest of her figure was full enough. Good proportions thought Harry as he pretended to study a watercolour of some Italian landscape. Her lips were pursed as she read. Her eyes raced over the lines and she whisked to the next double-spread three times while Harry hovered. She never looked up at him.

Exquisite, thought Harry. Prettier than any of these. A white lily in a scent-free chasm. He blinked heavily and moved on to the next painting, his rucksack clunking against his back as he shifted.

Some of the paintings were worth pausing over, but many of them did nothing for Harry and he slipped by them with hardly a glance. Some pictures he'd seen time and time again on previous visits. One room seemed to be rotated regularly and here you could get the shock of the new, but Harry's favourite section was just outside the café where you would get the blast of the old, paintings that had been there forever, but that Harry never tired of looking at. An old and cracked portrait of a monk was his absolute favourite. Steeped in darkness, the face picked up only slivers of light and the eyes drilled deep inside you. Maybe this was good curating, all the best ones near the café. Or maybe just chance.

Harry pointed to where it said Americano on the café menu. It was the nearest you could get to an ordinary coffee.

"Medium or large?" said the girl. She was a new one.

Harry nodded. How on earth you could have a Medium one when there was no Small one to be had was something he had never quite fathomed.

"Large is it?" she said.

Harry nodded. It would do.

"Anything else?"

He shook his head. Not from you, he thought.

"Take a seat," she said. "I'll bring it over."

Take it where? he thought as he moved off from the counter. He felt his shoulders shake slightly with the mirth it caused him.

He sat there and tried to read his paper, but there were two young lads, students he presumed, pontificating about various works of art. They seemed to know very little, but say it in an increasingly loud and competitive way. They needed their heads knocking together, thought Harry. They were either friends or more than friends, he thought. One of them could happily stove the other's head in, he thought. It was a battle raging at the next table and Harry's pool of peace was being systematically collaterally damaged.

They really needed bringing down a peg or two.

Boys! he thought.

When they got up to leave, Harry followed. They strode towards the tiny lift and Harry picked up his pace to make sure he wouldn't get left behind. In the lift, they still jabbered and pecked at each other, chins high,

Adam's apples joggling for supremacy. Harry's rucksack clunked as he allowed it to drop to the floor. He bent, unzipped it and swiftly reached inside. You were supposed to shut up in lifts, no matter how short the ride.

He plucked out his radio, switched it on and tried to untangle the earphones so that he could shut off their noise, but the lift reached the ground floor before he managed it.

The doors opened and the boys stepped out. One of them turned and said over his shoulder, "You stink, you old bastard," and the other one laughed.

You shouldn't say that if you're an Art student, thought Harry.

They were gone. He put the radio back in his rucksack.

Out on the steps of the Art Gallery, Harry paused. His rucksack clunked on the floor. He looked in various directions. The church with its tall spire. The railway station. The busy through road.

And then he saw the car park with its five layers of concrete parapets, the roofs of cars peeping over the edge of each storey – multi-coloured sweet wrappers in huge grey trays.

He nodded and set off. The stairwell of the car park smelt of piss and his shoe-scrape echoed as he rose to the top floor. There were quite a few cars on the roof of the car park, but no car drivers.

Harry could see the hills on the far side, but the town side would be better anyway and it was nearer. The parapet came up to his chest and he rested his elbows on it. He'd never seen this view before and for five good minutes he drank it in.

As the sixth minute ticked in, he spoke to the world: "That's it Harry, my old boy, your time is up. Come in Number Five."

Then Harry Plain pulled down his elbows, picked up his rucksack, turned and went home.

Always such a quiet boy. And still quiet half a century on. Sometimes the quiet ones are just plain quiet.

Dave Cryer taught English and Drama for 16 years and now delivers school workshops involving children's fiction, drama and creative writing. He works from his base in Huddersfield, but comes alive in Keswick. He writes poetry, prose and plays and can be found at: <http://www.davecryer.co.uk>

Touring

by Ray Succre

Down brambles, dried leaves,
side of a horse trail
near the highway to the town
of Bandon, Oregon.
Stomach turned in, rotted
on quince and heavyberries,
bloodstream soured, a
pulmonary marinade of
gooseberry oil, coffees, and small,
craft sweets in cheeses.

Ordered a gaunt
stew of breakfast steakfat and
lingonberry skins.
The eyes rolled back
and, like a camera,
shutter-saw the settling noises,
wound and made an exposure,
lens-watching the keel scuff.

Then,
the tongue fell out and dripped
in toll of the hour,
sick.

Ray Succre currently lives on the southern Oregon coast with his wife and son. He has been published in *Aesthetica*, *BlazeVOX*, and *Pank*, as well as in numerous others across as many countries. His novel *Tatterdemalion* (Cauliay Publishing) was recently released in print and is available most places. He tries hard.

Visit Ray online:

<http://raysuccre.blogspot.com>

Somewhat Less Than Thirty Pieces

by Jonathan Pinnock

“I have to say that I’m more than a little disappointed,” announces Mr Fisher, testily.

Ooh, he won’t like that. It’s a triple whammy. Opening with dialogue, followed by the use of a redundant speech tag. And a bloody adverb. Mind you, I’ve never really got what it is that is so wrong with adverbs. Surely the big deal writers use them all the time? How did they get away with something like “Truly, Madly, Deeply”?

Actually, how *did* they get away with something like “Truly, Madly, Deeply”?

Oh, let’s try again.

Mr Fisher puts his jacket on the back of his chair and eyes us all with a certain amount of contempt.

“I have to say that I’m more than a little disappointed,” he says. “I don’t have to come here, you know: there are a thousand and one other things I’d rather be doing on a wet Tuesday evening in November. If you can’t be bothered to do the work I set, it’s not worth bothering to turn up to this class. As I’ve said many, many times before, you’re not going to get anywhere at all without a proper level of commitment.” He heaves a sigh and shrugs his shoulders in an unnecessarily theatrical manner. “But, as I say – it’s up to you.”

A classic passive-aggressive little tantrum from Mr Fisher, there, and I think I have caught it rather well, even if I say so myself. But he hasn’t finished.

“So, then. Betrayal. Not a particularly difficult thing to write about, is it?” His eyes range over the room, as we mumble our negative responses. I am half expecting a pantomimic “I didn’t quite hear you, what did you say?” from him, but he’s not in a mood for playing games.

“So why is it that out of all of you in this class,” he says, “I have so far received just one single piece of work on the subject? Is it really that hard to come up with something? Consider this: man has been stabbing his fellow man in the back since the dawn of time. The act of betrayal is so deeply ingrained in Western culture, you could almost make a case for saying that the history of Western culture is the history of betrayal. After all, betrayal lies at the heart of the Christian *mythos*. Think about it. Who is the most famous betrayer of all time?”

Someone (not me) mutters “Judas”. Mr Fisher smiles at last. He has got a response. Ditzzy Jemima on the other side of the room is looking terribly pleased with herself. I’m guessing now that (1) she is the proud author of the only piece to have been submitted and that (2) she has written it about Judas. My reason for guess #1 is that she has been frantically shagging Mr Fisher for the last couple of months and will do almost anything to please him. My reason for guess #2 is that she is terminally shallow. Actually, that has a lot to do with guess #1 as well, now I come to think about it.

“So, then, consider Judas,” says Mr Fisher. “Is it still possible to write an original story about Mr Iscariot? Can any of you come up with an original angle?”

“Mrs Iscariot!” shouts one of the bikers at the back. They do a nice line in horror, combined with gratuitously graphic sex. There is, however, a surprising level of lyricism discernible in their work. If you look very, very hard.

Mr Fisher ignores him. Evidently the question was rhetorical. “Perhaps we could add another twist to the tale, so that Peter in fact betrays Judas by tricking him into betraying Jesus ...”

Ditzzy Jemima is smiling so much her head looks like it may well split in two along its equator.

“... and we could almost make a convincing case for that. Here’s Peter, the pushy upstart who’s after Big J’s job – indeed, he will soon deny him three times – and there’s poor old Judas, the patsy ...”

Ditzy Jemima is almost bouncing up and down in her seat now. I shake my head sadly. This is not going to end well.

“... but to propose such a jejune conceit would be to descend to the level of a particularly dense GCSE English class, I’m afraid.”

Ditzy Jemima is staring at Mr Fisher in disbelief. He raises his eyebrows at her, shrugs, and – good Lord! – flashes a sneaky little grin over to where Quiet Barbara in the corner is sitting. Quiet Barbara is beaming all over her face. What are those two up to, then?

Suddenly, at nearly 800 words in, I am sensing a whole new layer to the story. I glance at the Goth chick at the desk next to mine, with a slight tilt of the head as if to say “Did you see that?” She nods back in a dreamy Goth sort of way. I have no idea who she is, or what she writes about. She just drifts into the class, lurks in the shadows for a couple of hours and then drifts out again¹.

“So, then,” says Mr Fisher, as Ditzy Jemima runs crying out of the room, “In the absence of any other work to discuss, we shall spend the rest of the class writing the piece on betrayal that we failed to write in the previous week. Any questions? Good.” Mr Fisher immediately goes over to Quiet Barbara’s desk and begins an earnest, whispered conversation. All the time, she gazes up in awe at him, playing with her hair. Wonder if he’s got his leg over yet? If not, it won’t be long until he does.

After a while, he pats her gently on her shoulder and goes over to Mad Olive in the corner. Mad Olive is a poet. I don’t think I need to say any more, do I? He briefly studies Mad Olive’s work in progress with a sympathetic, yet baffled, eye, and moves off shaking his head from side to side. He pauses to have a quick word with the bikers, who are both scribbling away furiously and clearly not interested in discussing anything. Mr Fisher is slightly afraid of the bikers. I suspect he is afraid of all men. Within these four walls, as the sole published author, he is the alpha male, however weedy and hopeless he may otherwise be as a human being. However, you can tell that there is still bubbling under the surface a small but significant echo of the inadequacy he feels as soon as he steps outside the door.

He is standing behind me now.

“Ah,” says Mr Fisher. “So we’re off on another post-modern kick, are we?”

As he peers over my shoulder, trying to make out what I am writing, I manoeuvre myself so that he can read as little as possible of it. I want to finish this before he has a chance to criticise it. Eventually, he abandons the over-the-shoulder point of view and comes round in front of me, and is now attempting to read it upside down.

After ploughing through nearly 1200 words of it, his mind starts to drift off into a little world of its own,

¹ Actually, this isn’t strictly true. It turns out that her name is Krystal, and she is writing a long and complex novel about the love between vampires and zombies. In the pub afterwards, over a Guinness with a rum and black chaser, she tells me that the plot of her novel hinges on a doomed affair between a beautiful female vampire and a hunky macho zombie who can never touch for fear of destroying each other. Inevitably, in the grand finale of the book, they share a night of desperate, passionate sex, following which they die horribly in each others arms. Or something like that. Whatever, I take this shared intimacy as the green light to make my move on Krystal, which – pleasingly – is not rebuffed, and we enjoy a similar night of passion ourselves, although with a less tragic outcome. Like all Goths I’ve known, she is a serious and considerate lover, with some interesting piercings to boot. She is, however, extremely pissed off to find out that she has ended up as a mere footnote to my story, and flatly refuses to see me again afterwards.

where he is cupping Quiet Barbara's firm breasts in his hands, as she moans to him: yes, yes, yes ... but his reverie is rudely interrupted by the realisation of an egregious point of view switch. He tuts to himself before reading on.

"I take it that you've asked everyone in the room's permission if you can include them in your work?" he says. "I wouldn't want you to be betraying any confidences." He looks around to emphasise the point. I wonder briefly if it's worth trying to highlight the fact that I have just uncovered another layer of betrayal, but it's pretty weak, to be honest.

Anyway, this is why I have changed his name to Mr Fisher. I was tempted for a few seconds to change it to something like Mr Weasel or Mr Gitface, but that would just be too easy. "Mr Fisher" is neutral. "Mr Fisher" carries no baggage. Mr Fisher is also still staring at my work.

"This really won't do. Having a writer as the main character is such a cliché. And what's with all the footnotes?² What is the bloody point of the piece, for God's sake?"

"I'm examining the concept of betrayal from a number of different angles," I say.

"To what end? What light are you hoping to bring to bear on the subject?" Mr Fisher is clearly not impressed.

"Maybe I'm trying to show that betrayal is indeed as ubiquitous as you suggested earlier," I say.

"Yes, but simply putting your argument into direct speech isn't going to turn it from a tiresome polemic into a piece of fiction, I'm afraid. And it rather turns any chance of 'Show' into 'Tell', doesn't it?"

Oh God, show and tell. That's all we need now. "I suppose it does," I say.

"I might even go so far as to say that it's a betrayal of all you stand for as a writer. Well, I would if I felt that you'd come up with anything worthwhile since you've been in this class."

This isn't entirely fair. A couple of weeks back, I came up with a rather clumsy metaphor for sexual inadequacy involving a broken coffee machine that he rather liked. But he seems to have forgotten that little triumph. Then his face brightens slightly.

"But maybe ... just maybe ... it might be possible to rescue it. If you can come up with a really original framing device. Although God knows what you're going to have to come up with to save this one." He pauses. "I do like the opening, though," he says, before moving on to talk to the mystery Goth on my right³.

A framing device? What on earth does he mean by that? If it's what I think he means, we're not doing that until next month. Ah, it's hopeless. I might as well tear the whole thing up and start again. I'm not even happy with the title. Should it be "Somewhat Less than Thirty Pieces" or "Somewhat Fewer Than Thirty Pieces"? The answer is the former if I am referring to the amount of silver paid to Judas, but the latter if I am referring to the number of pieces on "Betrayal" written for my evening class. Sometimes I wonder if I am trying too hard to be clever.

The vision fades, and Judas looks up.

"I'm still not sure that I really understand what it means," he says.

² I assert that there is nothing wrong with a good footnote (ask Krystal). Consider the work of Flann O'Brien or – more recently – Susanna Clarke, for example. If the truth were to be told, I think it's more a case of Mr Fisher having trouble with the small print and being too vain to wear reading glasses. Actually, come to think of it, maybe it's not a good idea to mention footnotes to Krystal. She's still a bit sore about that.

³ Yes, I know she's called Krystal. But she's still not speaking to me. The bitch.

“Me neither, me old china,” says Jesus. “But what I think it’s saying – apart from the obvious point that 2000 years from now, literature is going to be in severe danger of disappearing up its own fundament – is that betrayal is part of our genetic makeup. It’s what we do.”

“So?”

“Chances are, you’re probably going to betray me at some point anyway. So, if I were you, I’d take the thirty pieces of silver on offer and go ahead. I won’t mind. Really. It’s kind of part of the plan.”

“But ... my Lord, I can’t ...”

“Oh, go on, you know you can. Look, if you feel bad about it afterwards, have a bit of chocolate to cheer you up. That’s what I always say, isn’t it? And thirty pieces’ll get you a really nice Easter egg.”

Well, Christ knows if that’s the kind of thing Mr Fisher’s looking for. Anyway, time’s up, so it hardly matters. I hand the piece in to him and he acknowledges it with a grunt that tells me that he’s not going to waste too much time on it. As I’m packing the rest of my stuff away, I happen to catch the eye of the Goth chick, and she gives me a translucent, Gothic smile. “Fancy a drink?” I say.

Jonathan Pinnock was born in Bedfordshire, England, and, despite having so far visited over forty other countries, has failed to relocate any further away than the next-door county of Hertfordshire. He is married with two children, several cats and a 1961 Ami Continental jukebox. His work has won several prizes, shortlistings and longlistings, and he has been published in such diverse publications as *Smokebox*, *Every Day Fiction* and *Necrotic Tissue*. His unimaginatively-titled yet moderately interesting website may be found at www.jonathanpinnock.com.

Drink

by David Romanda

drink
of
the dusk

it pierces
through those man made walls

drink of the winter tree's talon

David Romanda, Canadian, dwells in Takamatsu City, Japan. He has published a few miniature poems in a scrappy college newspaper. Oh, you might consider him a crybaby-nihilist type.

Three Variations on the Enigma of Freedom

by Marilyn Francis

When Mack first asked me I was a bit dubious. I thought it must be an elaborate leg-pull. I mean, he's pulled a few stunts in the past. Remember the exhibition at the Grunge Gallery in Whitechapel? The red-tops were in a right froth about his *BarbieWorld*. But, as Mack explained, his ten Tesco trolleys stuffed with headless Barbie dolls wasn't a piss-take, it was a critique of gender and consumerism; an exploration of the relations of power. Can't say I was convinced, but it got the media fizzing alright.

The *Guardian* arts page did a piece entitled, 'Conceptual Bullshit?' I read it. I think they said it was a work of postmodern irony. The red-tops screamed 'Disgusting' and 'They call this art, but we're the b*****s that pay!' *The Sun* ran a really fired-up piece accusing Mack of being, 'stark raving mad'. Germaine Greer and Tom Paulin had a bit of a spat over it on that late-night arts thing on BBC2, but I couldn't work out what they were on about anyway.

So you can understand why I was in two minds about doing it. Still, I needed the money, and he was paying very well indeed. When he told me I'd have to do it bollock-naked I was a bit surprised, but then the penny dropped, and I realised that I was the obvious choice.

That's how I first met him, McKendrick Browne, at Goldsmiths, when I was a life model, and he was mostly out of his head on various substances. They were about to chuck him out due to 'failure to progress'. We became mates, and I like to think I was a bit of a steadying influence. As it happens they didn't chuck him out in the end, and that probably turned out to be a good thing - for Goldsmiths anyway. He went on to be a Young British Artist. Even got invited to one of Tony's Cool Britannia bashes at Number 10 in 1997. Nowadays, whatever he does makes mega-bucks. Anyway, after a bit of argy-bargy, I said I'd do it. And that's how I've ended up inside Mack's three-sided, wall-to-ceiling glass construction in the Regent's Park Inner Circle Gallery. He calls it *The Enigma of Freedom*. It's an impressive piece of engineering all right. No doubt about that. There are no seams or joins, no doors or gaps. No obvious ways in or out. He says the idea is that I *am* the construction same as an insect larva is its cocoon. It's like *I've* spun the glass around myself. It's special glass, fairly opaque on the outside so that visitors have to look hard to see me, but transparent on my side. I can see them clearly.

Mack has worked out this carefully planned programme that I'm supposed to stick to. There are three phases, and I keep them up for a precise length of time. I don't have to be completely still, but I must only move in ways that are consistent with the pose. It's all been stage-managed down to the smallest detail. I start off 'sleeping' then, I move on to the next position which is 'sitting'. I've been doing it a bit like Rodin's *Thinker* except that I've started to do this careful examination of my fingernails. The final pose has me standing centre stage. It's more difficult than you'd think, but I pride myself on my professionalism.

You can tell how far Mack's come since *BarbieWorld*. I mean, this Inner Circle Exhibition is prestigious stuff, all the paparazzi turned up for the opening. It got even more attention than the time Tilda Swinton slept in a glass box at the Serpentine for eight hours a day.

I've been finding it quite relaxing in a peculiar kind of way. I spend my time watching the crowds and thinking about stuff. For instance, have you ever noticed the way that people carry on in art galleries? One of the first things I clocked was the mincey, slidey way that the punters move around. Look at them. Slyly eyeing each other up. Checking reactions. Like they're all worried they'll be the only one not to get the punch-line to the joke.

Most of them start by doing a circuit, then they move closer and peer through the glass. It was then I noticed that instead of trying to see me, what most of them were doing was checking out their own reflections in the glass. Maybe they need to reassure themselves in some way. I reckon it's because they can't get rid of the notion that I'm not so much an art object as a freak show, and it worries them. What puzzles me is, who's *really* the freak?

Talking of freaks, I was just sitting here thinking about this place I went to in Blackpool years ago. I was there for some stag do. You know the kind of thing? Wandering around pissed in purple glitter stetsons and Trudie-the-schoolgirl caps and pigtails. All the bubblegum machines full of crotchless knickers. You get the picture? Anyway, I got bored with eyeing up the hen parties, and wandered off on my own. I found this place, the Believe It Or Not Odditorium. The geezer on the door was so deep in his crossword he could hardly be bothered to look at me. I had the place to myself. Inside was a mess of two-headed lambs, tribal mutilations, torture implements and, who'd have thought it, a waxwork model of a 1930s circus performer. The sign said, he could put a golf ball, tennis ball and a pool ball in his mouth and whistle *Rule Britannia* all at the same time. On the walls there was a collection of photos: Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man; Chang and Eng, the Siamese twins. I can't remember the others now, but they were all freaks who'd been exhibited in sideshows at one time or another. Makes you think.

Funny what goes on in your mind when you've got time on your hands. Don't know why, but I keep going back to it. Mind, I don't think it's got anything to do with my work for Mack. He's been quite clear on that point. He says there's no parallel. What I am is a serious work of art. An investigation into the parameters of freedom. An enquiry into the paradigm of power. An exploration of the aesthetic gaze. All that. Might be a load of crap for all I know.

Something else I've been thinking about, since I've been banged-up in here, is zoos. I know the Regent's Park one well. One time I used to live near enough to hear the lions cough at night. Well, that's what I used to tell everyone anyway. You'll laugh, but I've been thinking a lot about Guy the gorilla. You won't believe it, but I had a thing about Guy way back in the seventies. We sort of had a special relationship, me and him, and I used to visit the zoo just so I could sit outside his cage and watch him watching me. Funny, now I think of it, his cage was made of glass as well. Anyway, after a time it got so I didn't notice the glass barrier between us. I felt that we were brothers. He knew me and I knew him. No need for words. We had a common consciousness.

One day I was there watching him pretend to concentrate really hard on his fingernails, like he was turning over in his mind whether he might get a manicure. He did this for a long time and a crowd gathered. It was quite hypnotic in a way, and I think we were all mesmerised thinking how he was, in so many ways like us. How much he reminded us of our uncles or grandads. Then, out of the blue, just as he'd got us lulled into feeling all warm and family-like, he moved, fast as a striking cobra, and smashed his whole weight against the glass. For a few panicky seconds we all froze, hearts pounding. Then we laughed, a bit too loudly, pretending it was all a bit of a joke, and that we hadn't forgotten which of us was inside the cage and which of us was outside. Then, after looking at us for a bit longer than was comfortable, he slowly turned his back and sauntered off into his private sleeping quarters where we couldn't see him. Show over.

After that I stopped going to the zoo. Couldn't face it somehow. Someone told me that when he was in an ordinary cage with bars, before they built the fancy glass one, Guy would catch any small birds that flew in. He would spend ages carefully examining them before letting them go. He never hurt them, just looked at them for a while then watched them fly away through the bars. I bet he missed the birds after they put him in the new

glass cage. And now I'm wondering what was in his mind when he charged at the crowd on the other side of the glass. It's really getting to me. Was he testing the strength of the glass? Was he just having a laugh? Or what?

I've noticed myself doing some of the things that Guy used to. I've started to adapt my positions so that they're more like I remember his. Sometimes I catch myself pretending I *am* him, spending hours looking at my fingers, watching them watching me until I don't know who is on which side of the glass.

I'm on day three now, and I've noticed a bit of a change in myself. Not quite so relaxed. A bit on edge. Not like I'm getting bored, more like I'm waiting to be called in to the dentist's or something. I've stopped noticing the punters, and my thoughts have got stuck into the same three grooves, and they go round and round and round, like a three-track LP. Except they don't stop.

First I've been trying to make sense of all this stuff Mack said about me being an art work, a performance piece. That I'm like a human larva in a spun glass cocoon. That I'm a metaphor for freedom and change.

Then the pictures of the freaks on the wall of the Odditorium start to swim in front of my eyes; all live curiosities exhibited in fairground sideshows waiting for the punters to roll up, roll up and pay up. I've been imagining an uncanny resemblance between Mack and P.T. Barnum, and I've never even *seen* a picture of P.T.

And then I start to think about Guy.

It's like a mental game of pass-the-parcel and I'm wondering when the music will stop and if it does where it will stop and what'll be inside the wrapping. I'm still musing on all this when I notice some random faces staring at me through the glass. An unusual thing. Like I said, mostly they give a quick embarrassed once-over to whatever shadowy shape they can see through the glass then un-focus and concentrate on their own reflections. Not today. This lot are fascinated. Maybe the quality of light on the glass is different and they can see me more clearly. Maybe I'm looking different, I certainly feel different. I'm doing the 'sitting' thing, and I can see them all quite clearly. So, I start to watch them watching me and this goes on until its time to move into the next position. It's hypnotic.

Next thing I know I've stood up really slowly, turned to face the people, then I've run. Fast. Straight at the glass panel and I don't stop until I'm on the other side and the three-track LP in my head grinds to a stop. I stand naked and perfectly still for a few seconds while the shower of glass settles. No one is saying a word. I look at them all for a while then turn my back on them and walk towards the far wall where there's a door so cleverly fitted no one but me can see it. I open it and walk through. Show over.

You might think after that I'd have got a right kicking from Mack for spoiling his show, but no, he says I was brilliant. He says I was a visual cataclysm, the metamorphosis of freedom, the resurrection of the common man. He says we've not only pushed the boundaries of performance art, we've demolished them. Me? I think he talks a right load of crap.

Marilyn Francis has mostly been a writer of things about British cinema (unpublished) and disgusted-Tunbridge-Wells letters to the *Guardian Saturday Review*, and the *London Review of Books*. However, since completing a couple of Open University writing courses, she's taken to writing poems and short stories, some of which have been published in Earlyworks Press anthologies. A book of her poetry is due to be published by Circaidy Gregory Press in spring 2009.

Subterraneans

by Su Laws Baccino

At the ticket barrier I pass a tall man
he's wearing a cape and top hat
he has a terrible grin, a wall of black teeth.
I press on. Curling rust cuts into my palm
I hold tight on the swaying staircase
that twists and bores into London's
bowels: unclean awaiting evacuation.
I side step the first curve: there's a woman
with blond hair but no face - her features
are completely smooth.

Nuts and bolts fight to hold the spirals steady,
torrential rain falls forming puddles
then falls faster, passes me as I move down
to the bottom and the murk. I weave my way
on fractured flagstones, through boxes heaped
on old platforms, amongst comatose bodies:
mumbling, snoring, shivering, moaning
in the dank - the sad dismal hub of threatened
homeless people. I avoid the Black Nun as she steps
through today's dying embers, down onto dead
rails, on her way back to the Central Line.

Large arrows and 'This way up' greet me -
I'm home. Large drops of greasy wet fall dead
on cardboard under discarded decorator's plastic,
which, despite the relentless icy draught,
is still; further down the track a lone door
bangs open, slams shut.

I push my way in, curl up, foetal, on dry
polystyrene warmth, listening to the sounds
of this cardboard city: children's cries, mothers'
screams - leftovers from the war. Phantom footfalls
approach down the tunnel, abruptly end; sometimes
slope past me never to return. I thank God
for drink and drugs. I wonder how long
before power wields its big stick moving us on -
yet again. There's an oppressive feeling tonight.

Su Laws Baccino was born in Suffolk, UK, and as a child lived in Luxembourg, Stockholm and London. Later, she worked and lived in Italy. She is now happily retired in Aldeburgh with her two poodles and elderly cat, surrounded by collected clutter that reflects both the serious and sunny side of her character; and where she is fast becoming a musing recluse. Her poetry and prose have been published in anthologies and online. Su has two published collections, *Just Su* and *More Su*. Her first novel, *Birthrights*, is due to be published in 2009. When not writing, Su turns to art.

North Of Superior

by Bob Smith

I was there when the legend started, so I know the truth.

It was the kind of place you drink your beer straight from the bottle 'cause the glasses look clean but you aren't really sure.

I was working for the summer on a track maintenance crew on the CPR main line north of Lake Superior. Scenic country if you're into that kind of thing, but towns are few and far between. Every Monday morning, an engine pulled our little work train from whatever town we were at for the weekend to a siding somewhere in the middle of nowhere and dumped us for the week. One box car with tools, one flat car with ties, four bunk cars, and a sidecar, one of those little putt-putt jobs for getting us back and forth to the place we were working. Then Saturday, the engine returned to haul us to a different town for a Saturday night out and Sunday to recover. Then we started over again somewhere else Monday.

I don't know how the regular guys stood it. It was hard enough for me and the other two students. But at least for us it was only for a couple of months and we liked to read or something. The other guys though, it was from when the frost went out of the ground in April to freeze-up in December. And all of them could read a paycheque, but beyond that I have my doubts.

Nothing to drink. That was an immediate goodbye trip back to town on the sidecar. Two different times that happened. I figured the foreman got to be foreman by being a little smarter and outlasting everybody else. Probably pulled every trick in the book in his day, or at least saw them, so why those guys thought they could put one over on him is beyond me.

His name was Leroy Lachapelle. He had a wife and kid back in Schreiber but we were always too far away for him to get home for our day off.

The rest of us hit the hotel in whatever town we got taken to. Our crew was always first in, last out. I think the workies had a couple of bottles stashed somewhere and kept drinking after closing time, but I'm not positive. Us students never got invited. But their Sunday hangovers were worse than ours, and you'd think it would be the other way around. We were kids, and they had a lot more practice than us.

Once, Tony the cook told us Leroy went after any job that came up in Schreiber. You would never guess he was fed up with his job by how serious he took it. But he was. At least the travelling bit.

One Saturday, just after the engine came to tow us to the next town, he marched into our bunkie where we were reading the mail it brought us. He had a letter in his hand and said, "We're celebrating tonight. I'm coming with you boys and I'm buying. I got a job in Schreiber. I get to sleep with my wife every night."

The Maniwassi was the only hotel in the little mining town where we ended up. When we hit the hotel, there were the usual pictures of strippers painted on the windows, but they were covered in heavy screen. Inside. I've seen that kind of screen before, but always outside so no one could break in. Never to protect the windows from the inside. The floor was cheap linoleum, which isn't unusual, but it sloped to the middle and there was a drain there like you find in basement floors. I figure every once in awhile they just hosed the place down and let it drain.

Leroy didn't care though. He sat down at the end of a long table and said, "Pull up a chair boys. Let's get this show on the road." But when we tried to move the chairs, we found out they were bolted to the floor so you

couldn't move them. Or pick one up to throw if you felt so inclined. The table waiter came over and I was surprised how scrawny he was. Then I saw the guy behind the bar. He had muscles on his muscles. With tattoos, and not butterflies and flowers either.

"Drop a tray," said Leroy, but Tony said he'd rather drink bottle beer. All the other guys agreed, but asked Leroy if that was okay. Bottle beer is more expensive than pitchers of draft. Stronger too. "Sure," said Leroy. "We're celebrating tonight. Bottle beer it is."

Leroy always had lots of cash for emergencies, which is good 'cause beer parlours don't take cheques or let anyone run a tab. He kept putting bills on the waiter's tray each round. The waiter made change right there on the tray and Leroy would take it, leaving a tip. Remember this was back in the day when money went a lot further. Even for beer.

Anyway, the place gradually filled up and got rowdier, but nowhere was as noisy as our table. You can imagine what kind of shape we were in by about 11:00. Leroy was farthest gone. I don't know what he usually did Saturday nights, but it wasn't drink. Even us students held it better. But he was a happy drunk. Just got slower and clumsier as the night went on.

As he got slower, the place got busier and the waiter got faster. When Leroy ran out of small bills, he put a fifty on the tray, and the waiter counted out the change as usual. Leroy always took his change, then put it in his wallet, leaving the tip on the tray. This time, he got it backwards. Before he picked up his change, he tried to get his wallet out of his back pocket, but his hands weren't working very good by that time. The waiter probably thought Leroy was past realizing how much the change was, and started to pick it up like it was a tip. Leroy's hands were stuck in his pockets looking for the wallet when he saw the hand taking his money. The only thing he had free was his mouth, so he bit. Hard.

The waiter said, "By Christ, I'm bleeding." Then he screamed. A piercing scream, not the kind of thing you expect to hear in a hotel bar in a hard-rock town. The big guy behind the bar jumped over it and grabbed Leroy. He twisted his hands in his shirt and slammed him down on the table. Someone yelled, "Here come the cops," and I realized why the town cop shop was right across the street from the hotel.

Somebody opened a back door I didn't even know was there, and there was a stampede. Behind the hotel was the bush - told you it was a small town - and I ended up hiding with two locals. When it looked like the cops weren't coming after us, I asked why they were hiding. I was underage, but they weren't. One said speeding tickets, the other said alimony.

The next summer when I worked in the switch-yard office in North Bay, I heard the story of the night Leroy Lachapelle bit the waiter at the Maniwassi Hotel. Only Leroy bit two fingers off the waiter's hand and it took two monster-size bartenders to hold him down. I wasn't about to say that was an exaggeration and I knew 'cause I was there. You don't mess with myths.

Bob Smith says "what better initials for a writer of fiction than BS?" Originally from Northern Ontario in Canada (the location of this tale), he now lives farther south, though in a place where the landscape, people and culture are very similar to what he grew up with. He is a long-time teacher of adults with complex learning problems and interesting lives (interesting as in the Chinese curse 'May you live in interesting times'), a rich source of characters and ideas.

Descriptions and excerpts of his other writings are at <http://www.ingoldsbysbooks.com> click on 'Titles'.

Not Vandal, Survivor

by Mandy Pannett

Slug in my garden, how does it feel to be classed as a joke,
described as a snail who's behind with the rent, reneged
on the mortgage, his house
re-possessed?

In rituals of sex are you female? Do you get yourself locked in your mate's
genitalia, pollarding his virtue by severing his twist?
How do you cope
with a name

that is hideous, sounding like *ugly, sluggard* or *bog*? Look at you
lost on that path by the gate, prey to the starling or
thrush who must relish
the taste

of your slime. A miniature Dracula, fazed by the light, you crave
the dampness of earth. With only one foot it's a troublesome
route with a shortage
of cracks.

There are thousands of you in the tunnels – veterans of subways and grooves.
An absconder from Colditz you surface near berries or beans.
You are no locust
consuming

a harvest – content with the roots of potato or beet, you're a black
sack of garbage, droppings of seagull and dog. As pest
you inspire the revulsion
of men.

Hunted down with the aid of a torch or the moon, poisoned by pellets
or drowned in a beer – not in Malmsey like Clarence – you only
desire small weeds
or a seedling.

Mollusc, it's midnight, there's rain in the air, flex your antennae,
sense lettuce, the dark and the damp, ascend through the earth up to
leaves and wetness
of green.

Mandy Pannett, originally from London, now lives in West Sussex where she is a creative writing tutor. She also supports several local writing groups and runs an Arts Cafe in Ditchling in East Sussex. Her first poetry collection 'Boy's Story' was issued, with original music, as a CD. Two further collections have been published by Oversteps Books -- 'Bee Purple' and 'Frost Hollow'. Her work has been widely published in small press magazines and online and some of her work is currently being translated into German and Romanian as part of the poetry tREnd translation project. She is currently working on a new collection and on a novel.

The Party

by Mark Tomlinson

Anthony dropped his briefcase, sighed loudly and flopped onto the sofa.

'What a day.'

Penelope looked up from her magazine. 'Where is it?'

'Where's what?'

'You're joking, aren't you? You did get one.'

'What are you going on about?'

'Your costume.'

Anthony groaned.

'You didn't, did you? You are impossible.'

'I forgot all about it, Pen. I've had a pig of a day.'

'I reminded you twice last night.'

'I'm sorry. It just went out of my head. Anyway, it isn't the end of the world.'

'You'll just have to get one tomorrow, then.' Penelope tossed her magazine on to the coffee table and stalked out of the room.

'There's no way I'm going into town on a Saturday! Stupid idea. A fancy dress party. We're not kids.'

Anthony dragged himself off the couch and went to see what Penelope was up to in the kitchen. She was standing at the Aga brutalising a pot of chilli with a wooden spoon.

He looked over her shoulder. 'That smells good.'

'Don't change the subject. You know how important this party is.'

'God, Pen. It's not a bloody Royal garden party. It's Brenda and Tom's housewarming. You don't even like Brenda.'

Penelope turned on him, wooden spoon in hand. 'That is the point. That woman is forever sniping and dropping snide remarks about everybody. She had Angela in tears at the barbeque last summer.'

'Am I missing something? If she's such a bitch why do you want to go to her sodding party so badly?'

'I've lost weight, I look fabulous in my costume and I intend to rub Brenda's snout in just how good I do look. Obviously, I would prefer to do it in a designer dress but this is the only chance I'm going to get.'

A blob of chilli dripped onto Anthony's tie. He watched it slip down the fabric. When he looked up, Penelope was still glaring at him.

'So. You are going to get a costume,' she whispered menacingly. 'You've ruined that tie.'

Anthony backed away and got himself a beer out of the fridge. 'I could always make one.'

'What?'

'You could help. You're good at that sort of thing. Remember that lovely shepherd outfit you did for Josh's nativity play last year?'

'If you think I'm going to let you out in a cut down bathrobe and a tea towel you are sadly mistaken.'

Penelope crossed to the cupboard and took out a pack of tortillas.

Anthony took a long swig of beer, his mind racing as he tried to think of something he could use.

'What about those old chamois leathers in the car? I could make them into a loincloth and go as Tarzan.'

He struck a bodybuilder's pose.

Penelope split the wrapper of the flatbreads with a long sharp knife. She turned a Gorgon-like gaze on him.

'You will go into town tomorrow and you will hire a costume or I will emasculate you here and now. The subject is closed.' She flashed an icy smile.

Anthony knew when he was beaten.

'I'll do the rice,' he said.

Anthony watched the crowds surge past the exit of the multi-storey car park. Where did they all come from? What was the attraction? Were there secret shops giving stuff away that he knew nothing about? He slipped into the stream of humanity and headed in the direction of Bold Street. He liked to think of it as the artist's quarter because of the number of ethnic supermarkets and second hand shops up there, the black clad legions of Goths and student types who thronged the place. There was also, if he remembered right, a fancy dress shop, too. It took an age to negotiate the high street and by the time Anthony finally got to the shop he was angry and irritated almost beyond endurance. The prospect of choosing a fancy dress costume held all the appeal of root canal work. He stopped outside the shop and peered into the grimy window. There was a selection of plastic breasts, inflatable sheep and a sad looking mannequin dressed as a dominatrix. He shuddered and opened the door. The shop was long and thin, the walls on both sides lined with tawdry plastic swords and fright masks. Halfway along the right hand wall was a small counter behind which sat a bored looking youth listening to football on a crackling, static-haunted transistor radio.

'I'm looking for a costume.'

The youth nodded. 'Good job you came in here instead of the butchers then, isn't it?'

'Is this all you've got?'

The youth shook his head. 'Nah, this is all for Stag and Hen parties and that sort of crap. There's proper gear upstairs.' He jerked a thumb at a curtained-off doorway just past the counter.

'In my size?'

'What size are you, fancy dress costume wise?'

'I'll just go and look, shall I?'

'Prob'ly best.'

Anthony climbed the narrow stairs to the first floor. It smelled of damp and the steps creaked appallingly. At the top of the stairs there was a beaded curtain with a hand written sign above the doorway which said 'Costumes Within'. He swept the curtain aside and entered. On a good day, he supposed that the long rails groaned with costumes. This was not a good day. Anthony walked between two rails. He picked up a plastic wrapped costume with a 'Zorro' label attached to the hanger. He held it against his body. The cloak barely reached his waist and there wasn't a sword. He put it back and walked on. He examined and rejected Spiderman (far too small), The Hulk (stank of body odour), and a stained collection of ochre rags marked as 'The Mummy' which looked as if they had actually been wrapped around a dead Pharaoh. He glanced at his watch. It was already 3:30. An image of Penelope wielding the paring knife popped into his head and a cold hand of despair closed around his stomach. Then his questing fingers found another hanger. He pulled the costume out. The label was new. The costume inside the plastic wrapping looked bright and clean. He sniffed it tentatively and it

even smelled freshly laundered. All the required parts seemed to be there. He nodded.

'Sorted,' he muttered and almost skipped down the treacherous stairs to the counter. The youth looked up.

'You found one then?'

'Yep, how much?'

'It's 25 for the hire and a 30 pound refundable deposit.'

Anthony held the costume aloft. 'What? Why a deposit? Why would I keep this?'

The youth shrugged. 'You never know, do you? Anyway, it's the rules.'

Anthony sighed. 'Bloody robbery.' Mumbling, he dug out his wallet. And then his mobile chirped.

Fumbling, he managed to get the wallet free and laid the costume on the counter so that he could reach his phone. A tinny version of the theme from 'The Good, The Bad and The Ugly' filled the shop as he pulled out his phone.

The youth grinned. 'You're in demand today, aren't you?'

Anthony looked at the phone's screen ... 'Penelope Calling'. He sighed.

'Hello, Pen.'

'Have you got a costume?'

'Yes.'

'Really?'

'Yes, Pen. I'm paying for it right now.'

'I won't keep you, then. You hurry up and get back. We need to be ready and out by eight at the latest.'
She rang off.

'That's 55 pounds, please.'

Exasperated, Anthony thrust the phone back into his pocket and opened his wallet. The transaction complete, the youth helped Anthony manhandle the bulky costume into a huge black plastic bag. He even walked to the door and opened it for him. 'Enjoy yourself!' he said, far too cheerily. Anthony rejoined the flow of human traffic and steeled himself for the return journey.

When he got home, Anthony ran straight upstairs to the bedroom and threw the costume onto the bed and started to get changed.

'Is that you, Anthony?'

'No. It's the local axe murderer.'

'Where's your costume?'

'Up here.'

'What is it?'

'A surprise.'

'Give me a clue.'

Anthony bent down, grabbed the costume's hat and gave it a hearty shake..

'What was that?'

'A clue.'

Penelope opened the bedroom door. She was dressed in her costume.

Anthony stared for a minute. 'You look ... fantastic.'

'Thank you, kind sir.' She curtsied.

'I'm not sure that Anne Boleyn curtsied to people.'

'I'm not surprised, if her corset was anything like this one.' Penelope tugged at her pinched-in waist. Her impressive embonpoint jiggled attractively.

The dress was an orangey brown silk with a shimmering pattern in the cloth. There was complicated embroidery up the front of the bodice and down the skirts and a puff of something white and silky peeped out beneath her elevated breasts. Her hair had been elaborately styled and she wore a headdress studded with pearls. She was quite simply breathtaking. For the first time in his life, Anthony understood why Henry VIII had taken on the Pope. He knelt before his wife and swept his arm across his chest in a courtly gesture, the effect only slightly marred by the fact that he was dressed only in boxer shorts and Homer Simpson socks.

'My lady,' he breathed, gazing up at her.

Penelope's face flushed and she flapped her hands at him. 'You idiot! Get up and take a shower.'

Anthony jumped to his feet and dashed into the bathroom. He was about to step into the shower when Anne Boleyn let out a shriek.

'Anthony!'

Grabbing a towel, he hurried out. 'What's up?'

Penelope stood by the bed, holding an oversized red foam shoe in one hand and a large blue foam pointed hat in the other. 'It has a bell.'

'Yes.'

'Noddy.'

'Yeah?'

'Noddy.' Penelope paused for a rather long time. 'You think Anne Boleyn and Noddy make a good couple, do you?'

'Nobody is going to be looking at me tonight. I could turn up wearing absolutely anything at all. With you dressed like that, with you looking so ... so perfect, it doesn't matter about *anyone* else.'

Penelope took a deep breath and opened her mouth to say something. Then she closed her mouth, smiled and nodded. 'Just get ready then, you sexy little pixie.'

'Actually, Noddy's a brownie not a pixie.' Anthony let the towel drop to the floor. 'And not so much of the little either!'

Despite everything, Anthony found himself really looking forward to the party. He kept glancing at Penelope in the seat next to him as he drove. She was intent on wowing Brenda, and Anthony couldn't help but get caught up in her quiet excitement. They giggled like schoolchildren every time he worked the clutch or the brake with the huge red Noddy feet. He parked the car outside Tom and Brenda's place at 8:30. Anthony helped Penelope to smooth and arrange the full skirt and adjust her headdress as she got out of the car.

'How do I look?' she whispered.

Anthony took her hands in his and leaned in to kiss her cheek, being ever so careful not to mar the perfect makeup. 'Like a queen!'

They walked up the path together. Behind the window blinds, shapes moved and the soft strains of Beverley Craven drifted out. Anthony squeezed Penelope's hand and stepped forward to ring the doorbell. He

jingled his hat and bowed his head. He heard the door open and looked up.

Tom stood there dressed in a nice Ralph Lauren Polo shirt and chinos. His mouth fell open. 'Tony, mate,' he said. 'Didn't you get my text? I texted everyone. There's been a change of plan.'

Behind him, Brenda appeared wearing a pretty Donna Karan number.

'Penny,' she said. 'Don't you look a *picture*?'

Mark Tomlinson is a 49 year old father of four from Merseyside, UK. He has always written but just lately he has learned to finish things off and, consequently, has had a small measure of success. Encouraged by this he is working on improving his writing. He thinks writing is the most fun you can have with your clothes on although he admits that he hasn't tried much else.

Calling All Fools

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