

**An Introduction to my Creative Writing**  
**By Julia Eversham**

*Our tutor, Philip, invited us to select a picture, I chose a black glove on a staircase. He then handed us two playing cards, explaining what each one meant. Mine represented death and love. We were asked to include these three things in a piece of writing. I chose to set mine in a setting familiar to me, the local church.*

**The Black Glove**

The last chords of The Lord's my Shepherd echoed round the church as the congregation sat down on the hard, wooden pews. Karen gazed down at her hands and twisted the plain gold band on her wedding finger. Hands that should have been encased in black gloves but when she had opened her bag, only one solitary glove was lying amongst the detritus, tucked in by her silver make up bag.

Her son, Roger, made his way up to the lectern, his face a controlled mask, his eyes pools which could so easily brim over with tears. He looked into the mass of people, the work colleagues, the friends and extended family members all come to pay their respects to his father. Karen listened to his words of praise: "An altruistic man, a pillar of Thames Rotary Club, selfless...his speeches punctuated with humorous anecdotes..." Her eyes came to rest on the central stained-glass window above the altar. Jesus, surrounded by his disciples at The Last Supper. How many pieces of silver was it Judas had betrayed Christ for? Twenty or was it thirty?

Father Andrew rose from seat, placed his hand on Roger's shoulder and escorted him back to his pew. He seemed to sigh as he continued with the next part of the service and followed the pine coffin down the aisle.

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace...earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life."

The words washed over her in dark waves, threatening to drown her. Her son grasped her arm to steady her. She clutched the order of service, the photo of her husband with his Rotary Club chain of office lay hidden against her black jacket. They slowly emerged into the bright sunshine and watched as the coffin was placed into the waiting hearse.

Father Andrew strode up the winding path to the vicarage, inserted the key into the heavy wooden front door and opened it. He stood in the hallway, lying on the bottom stair was one solitary black glove. He shut his eyes and pictured her, thinking of the last time he had caressed her. Her dark hair framing her flawless face, her lips so inviting ...always so inviting...tempting him. The words of The Lord's Prayer sprang to mind ...'lead me not into temptation.' Hanging his head in shame, he walked into the sitting room and reached for the whisky bottle.

--oOo--

**Ghost Story**

*At a recent meeting, our group looked at examples of Ghost Stories and Philip explained the main features of what makes an effective tale. Our homework was to write our own, it took me some while to decide on the content but I finally decided to base the story around a woman killing a young deer on a remote country road.*

## Standing in The Shadows

The overhanging trees cast shadows like witches' fingers as I drove along the country road. Autumn had almost stripped them bare. My destination- my new boss Mike's house, nestled in a quiet hamlet in Hampshire. Suddenly, whilst rounding the bend, the car swerved on the wet leaves. I heard a sickening thud. I slammed on the brakes, tentatively I opened the door and peered at the shape in front of my old VW's bonnet. A young fawn lay on the glistening tarmac, its fur seeping blood, its doleful eyes wide open – no longer seeing anything. My pounding heart was the only sound breaking the silence, until I became aware of a distant thrum, which I couldn't quite identify. From the shadows appeared a rather ancient motorcycle. A young man, dressed in army uniform, clambered off and stared at the dead body.

"Happens sometimes round here. These young ones just bolt out of the undergrowth. I'm sure it was instantaneous, it wouldn't have suffered," he added reassuringly. He tugged at the creature's legs and dragged it onto the grass verge. Brushing his hands on his khaki trousers, he turned towards me and smiled, his tawny brown eyes sparkled in the gloaming. Feeling incredibly grateful, I thanked him and climbed back in the car.

A few miles down the road, I found the cottage belonging to my boss. I parked up by the gate, ran my fingers through my hair attempting to make myself look less dishevelled and walked up the path. I was looking forward to dinner and a relaxing evening. Mike smiled genially and ushered me in. Jayne, his wife, led me into a cosy sitting room, inviting me to sit on a floral covered sofa. It was surely a Laura Ashley print, in keeping with the décor. I accepted a small glass of Merlot and gazed round, admiring my surroundings. The fire crackled, the scent of pine logs permeated the air and conversation flowed easily. I quickly warmed to Jayne. My eyes followed her as she picked up a photo of a young man in army uniform, a captain's stripe on his shoulder. A candle danced shadows on her face and her eyes momentarily reflected some fleeting sadness.

"My son, James," she explained. "Sadly, we lost him in the evacuation at Dunkirk. Regrettably we had no body to bury. It's strange, when I wander through the churchyard I sometimes sense his presence. It's as though his spirit is waiting to be laid to rest."

I took the silver frame in my hands and felt a shiver creep down my spine. Surely it couldn't be that same young man who had stopped to help me earlier – but it was. I was convinced; the shy smile, the dark eyebrows and fine bone structure seemed to be imprinted on my mind, despite the briefness of the encounter.

The clock ticked and time past. A delicious meal had been served and we talked excitedly about the expansion of the antiques emporium Mike owned. The latest sales, the Cloisonné vase and the rare set of nineteenth century Hickory golf clubs. Eleven o'clock chimed and I stood up to leave. Mike helped me on with my navy linen jacket. I thanked them politely for their hospitality and walked down the pathway. As I reached my car, I fumbled around in my pocket for my keys and opened the driver's door. My old faithful startled easily and I pulled out onto the road. A wave of guilt washed over me when I drove down through the wooded copse where the accident had happened. Images of fur matted with blood and a tangle of broken limbs danced in front of my eyes. I slowed the car and carefully took the bend. HE was standing there in a pool of moonlight, dressed in that distinctive khaki uniform by the side of the road. My boss' son who had been shot as he waded into the waves, shot as he grasped hold of the side of a fisherman's boat. I had imagined his lifeless body in the shallow waters as Jayne spoke about his untimely death. He stood in the shadows, that slight smile on his face and I wished I could give him permission to rest but I somehow suspected he wanted to

watch from the side lines. Perhaps, one day, when his parents left this world, he would feel able to follow on.

--oOo--

## **Autobiography**

*My husband and I had great fun completing a treasure hunt during Lockdown and I decided to share this with members of the group and I also emailed it to some of my friends.*

### **The Treasure Hunt**

Extracting my grandsons from their bedrooms to go for a walk during Lockdown, was like prising an enormous tree root from dry ground. However, their mother was desperate to get them out for some exercise. Perhaps a treasure hunt would entice them from their lairs, twenty clues between their house and ours, and their favourite treats (plus the inevitable £10 note) would be waiting on the doorstep in a decorated box. Clues were solved and treats eaten.

On the way home they compiled one for us, with the stipulation that each clue was to be read only when we set off. What number house in Loxwood has Narniaesque type pillars, name two types of flowers in the garden of 24 Instow Rd, find two types of waterfowl round the lake .....and eventually we arrived at the bridge. The wooden bridge where we used to play The Three Billy Goats Gruff game. We stopped to read clue number ten :- walk along the gravel path, climb over a fence and burgle a house. We laughed out loud but, literally within minutes, a youth community police officer walked by. I explained what we were doing and asked if I could take a photo of him. This I sent to the family with the following message: sorry, Grandad won't be with me, he has been arrested! And so we continued on our way, ignoring the instruction to find a stranger and push them in the lake. After all we must adhere to the social distancing rule. Our prize- my favourite black and red wine gums and some scrumptious cake baked by Noah, our 12 year old grandson. But in reality, the best part was the entertainment of taking part !

## Contributions from Brenda Martin

*Early in the year, Philip gave us a list of suggested topics for 'five-minute fiction', which is intended to get you writing when inspiration is lacking. I chose to do something along autobiographical lines...*

### THE GIFT

It was pink, I'll give them that. Practically fluorescent, in fact. Not quite what I had in mind.

I could just see them planning it. My mother would have been assigned to finding out what I wanted for Christmas and duly reported back to my aunt that the object of my fervent desire was a pink jumper. So far, so good. But – and I should have realised this – in our family, asking for something to wear meant it would be home-produced, as no-one ever bought anything from a shop if they could help it. Skirts, dresses, shirts, knitted swimsuits, you name it, the women of my family could conjure up anything from fabric, wool or paper bags if necessary, and it wouldn't have entered their minds to just go out and buy one.

So there it was: hand-knitted with love in double crepe, scratchy, round-necked and oh so pink. It barely reached past my waist and I hated it. What was she thinking? Could she not read my mind, or at least anticipate my wishes by observing the latest teenage fashions? Where was the trendy polo-neck and the fine, baby pink, fluffy yarn that stretched softly down over the hips to elongate and flatter the silhouette?

Oh well, at least I only got the one. My brother once mentioned in passing that he'd enjoyed a lone Black Magic chocolate, and henceforth he got a box of the stuff every year for the next thirty years.

Christmas, eh?

--oOo--

*Another topic that interested me in this most uncertain of years was '**Something that Hasn't Happened Yet**'...*

The hospital hasn't rung yet. How much longer can he possibly last? He's been on that ventilator for three weeks with no improvement and when they rang yesterday and said I'd best prepare myself for the worst I could hardly contain myself! The tight old bastard's going have to give up his worldly goods at last!

Funny to think he's my father. The only thing we have in common is a bit of asthma – thanks, Dad – but it doesn't usually bother me much. Even funnier, I'm nearly forty and it took me this long to figure out the way to get some cash out of him is not to ask!

Best thing I ever did was coming home four months ago. Not that I had much choice with Dirty Larry on my tail. He's not going to wait for his money much longer and dear Papa was my only chance of getting hold of it. My investment in a decent suit and a haircut paid off – appearances were always important to Dad and convinced him I'd changed my ways. So impressed was he, he even made a new will in my favour – I couldn't believe how easy it was, but then, I still had the problem of how to actually get my hands on the dosh.

Thank the Lord for coronavirus, that's all I can say, though I'd have preferred not to be cooped up with the old man for so long before he took ill and got carted off to hospital. Surely today's the day?

I've got to get hold of the money soon and then I can pay Larry off and disappear. Or maybe I'll just disappear.

God, I wish they'd ring, I'm worn out with the stress of waiting. All those paracetamol haven't touched this headache either; I'll take a couple more if I can be bothered to get out of this chair. Seems like too much effort, somehow, when I'm coughing my lungs up.

It's the phone! At last. Yes, it's the hospital. Yes. No. No. You're joking. He can't be. Off the ventilator? Going to make a full recovery? Oh God. Oh God. Oh, yes, very good news.

Shit. The old bugger's done it again. Where's my sodding inhaler? I can hardly breathe. Where the hell is it...?

--oOo--

### **Travel writing**

*A discussion of this topic evoked fond memories of a recent trip to Botswana. This is the start of the piece I wrote:*

## **SAFARI**

White settlers long ago hijacked this lovely Swahili word meaning 'journey', applying it to big-game hunts and other travel into the East African wilderness. Today it has spread across the whole continent and beyond, but now its meaning has been diluted to indicate a tourist holiday to view wildlife where, generally, the only shooting is done by cameras.

On trips such as these, the last thing you expect to be troubled by is zips. And yet, zips played a large part in my life in Botswana. The tent allocated to me was full-height; I walked upright across the textile 'verandah' and in through the front door. This door was secured by no fewer than three zips – one running top to bottom and two across the bottom, one from either side; all three met in the middle and you left any one of them unfastened at your peril. Leave the tiniest gap and who knew what might fly, crawl or slither inside? So any passage through the front door involved opening and closing six zips, though you could just get away with four, with planning.

Inside the tent was a double bed and two neat bedside tables – this was a luxury tour after all - and at the back, opposite the front door, was the back door and another three zips, leading out to the private ablutions area which was cordoned off from the great outdoors by a few bits of tent fabric. In one corner was the bucket shower, replenished with warm water by the camp personnel at helpful points during the day, and in another a toilet seat was arranged over a hole in the ground. Everything you need, really.

I soon found that any trip to the loo in the middle of the night was fraught with difficulty. First I had to find my head torch in pitch blackness and switch it on. Struggling out of my nice warm bed into the freezing air was not pleasant and a fleece needed to be found very quickly before I tackled the zips. Open the door – zip zip zip, step through, close door – zip, zip, zip, make sure nothing is lurking between me and the loo or, indeed, inside it, and finally relax.

Sitting there in the dark of the African bush, surrounded only by fragile screens and with the twinkling Milky Way for a ceiling, is an experience everyone should have. The peace, the connection with nature, even the anticipation – I found myself longing for a repeat of the experience of someone on a previous trip who, on her way to her shower, was surprised by a bull elephant

popping his head over the partition and slurping up a trunkful of water from the shower bucket. The elephant was equally surprised, it seems, as he was unprepared for the water being hot. The animal streaked off to the nearby river, trumpeting loudly, to cool down his trunk. But I was not so lucky, and soon the zips had to be negotiated again to get back to the warmth of my lumpy bed.

And then there were the early starts in the morning. We were woken before sunrise by the staff who filled our foldable wash-hand basins on the verandah out front, so out we fumbled – zip zip zip, and back – zip zip zip, to have a quick wash. Then perhaps a loo trip – more zips – and back inside to dress. Forgot to do your teeth? - back out to the veranda (zips x 6); left something you need for the truck on the shelves in the bathroom? Go and pick it up (more zips), etc, etc. You are starting to get the picture.

By the time you reached the campfire for a bowl of steaming porridge you were starting to feel like going back to bed again, but after a final visit to the bathroom with all the zips that entailed, you eventually hit the road...

--oOo--

*We all have secrets and we keep them to ourselves for different reasons. Sometimes they lead us to tell lies. I found it interesting to explore the sorts of secrets different people have and the lies they tell others.*

## **Secrets and Lies**

‘Eat up, Charlie,’ said Mum, ‘it’s your favourite.’

*Oh no it isn’t*, I thought, and slunk further down my chair, pushing the fish fingers around with my fork. I wish I’d never told her I love them; I only did it to cheer her up. She’d been standing at the stove, cooking them for my tea with tears running down her cheeks, and I just couldn’t tell her I’d rather have chicken nuggets.

Now she gave me fish fingers for tea nearly every day, as though she couldn’t think of anything else, and I was fed up with them.

‘Sit up straight and eat!’ snapped Mum. ‘Now!’

I wriggled forward, stabbed a whole fish finger with my fork and nibbled a bit off the end. ‘Will Dad be home soon?’ I asked, to distract her.

‘Who knows?’ Mum’s voice was sharp. What did that even mean?

Her phone buzzed and she got a funny look on her face. She snatched up the phone and hurried out, saying, ‘Now Charlie, I want to see that plate empty when I get back.’

I looked around for somewhere to stash the fish fingers. The cat’s bowl, maybe? But Minnie was out hunting mice and wouldn’t be back for hours. I could tip them in the bread bin and get rid of them later, but Mum might find them first. I’d just decided to stuff them in with my gym kit for now when the back door opened and Dad walked in. He looked really tired.

‘Hi, Charlie. Mum around?’

'She's on the phone. In the hall.' I watched his face carefully; he'd been a bit odd about Mum spending so much time on the phone lately. Now he pressed his lips together in a thin line and screwed up his eyes; I didn't like it when he looked like that.

Mum swept back into the kitchen in a much better mood. 'Charlie, have you finished—? Oh. *You're* back. Not working late tonight?'

'Evidently not.' Dad sounded angry and I wondered if I'd done something wrong. 'Who were you speaking to?'

'No one. A friend.'

Dad took his jacket off and slung it towards a chair; it missed and slithered to the floor but he didn't notice. 'Which one?'

'No one you know,' said Mum, turning away. 'Anyway, I'm going out now so you can watch Charlie this evening.'

Dad said nothing and watched her go while I tried to remember the last time he'd played with me. We heard the front door slam and his shoulders seemed to droop. He gave me a sad smile and said, 'Listen, Charlie, I might have to go out shortly, too. You don't mind, do you? You can go next door and play with Alex, though; you like him, don't you?'

I couldn't meet Dad's eyes. *Alex is a bully*, I thought. *I hate him, and I hate you and I hate Mum.*

Most of all, though, I hated fish fingers.

## DILEMMA by Ann Arthur

My name is Patricia Bailey. That's how it started, - my name. The letter was amongst several, mostly charities or advertising, but this was hand written. I only ever get hand written letters, or cards mostly, at Christmas or my birthday.

Miss Patricia Bailey, 28 Fortune way, South Petherton, Somerset. No postcode. The post mark was Leeds.

I'm not Miss. Bailey is my married name. Bit it was the right address.

Dear Miss Bailey, My name is Thomas Richardson. I'm hoping that you are the same Miss Bailey that I knew and fell in love with, forty years ago in Taunton. You may remember walking with me in the countryside, or going to the pictures at the Odeon. In particular, I hope you remember a beautiful day in July that we spent in Lyme Regis. I am a widower now and would love to renew our friendship.

Please let me know if you are the Patricia Bailey of my memories. If not I apologise for this intrusion,

Yours faithfully, Thomas Richardson.

It was a lovely letter and I felt strangely moved as I read it. But it wasn't me. I had a never known a Thomas Richardson, and had only moved to Somerset three years before after my husband died.

I read it several times over the next few days, and mulled over how I should respond. I thought to show it to my daughter but held back for some reason. It was my little bit of mystery and I didn't want to share it. I thought about the real Patricia Bailey and how she would probably never hear from Thomas Richardson. I thought about Thomas, and how disappointed he was going to be on learning that I was not the love of his life. It must have taken some courage to write the letter in the first place. Supposing he had found the right person and she had responded by saying that she remembered him, but wanted no contact with him. All these thoughts swirled round and round in my head. It was a full week later before I replied.

Dear Thomas, it was really lovely to hear from you after all this time, for yes, I am the Patricia Bailey whom you courted all those years ago. I have thought about you many times over the years and it would be good to keep in touch. I love receiving letters. I get so few nowadays, so I am happy for you to write again and let me know about yourself and your life over the years. Best wishes, Patricia.

I was going to tell him that I had been married and widowed and had three children, but realised that he would wonder why my surname was still Bailey. I'll bring it in at a later date. Make a joke of it, - how I married a man also called Bailey, so that I could remember who I was.

It all seemed so innocent at first. I enjoyed receiving his letters and it was clear that he really enjoyed mine. I told myself that I was helping him to come to terms with his wife's death, and bringing some nostalgic joy into his life. He had no children or close family, just one or two nephews and nieces who rarely visited. We wrote weekly. I saved Sunday evenings to sit down and indulge in my fantasy life with Thomas. Having started with a lie, it didn't seem wrong to continue in the same vein. It was almost like writing a story, - a story of my life in letters to this man whom I had never seen, but whom I grew to know and like as our letters continued. I didn't waver completely from my

own life. I told him that I had been married (explaining the surname). My husband was now dead, but I had one daughter.

All this was true. But I did exaggerate a little as to my own life and work. I took my lead from him. 'Had I completed the Arts degree I was studying all those years ago?' Somehow my job as a cleaner for South West Water, - albeit going on to start my own cleaning company - didn't really fit the bill, so I invented a job as curator of a local Art Gallery, where I even had a few of my own paintings displayed. He was very interested in this, saying he would love to visit this gallery, and see my paintings and maybe buy one. Unfortunately though, he had not been so well of late, and felt that Somerset was a bit too far to travel. Could I send a photo or did I have a website that he could look at?

I had to ask my daughter what a website was, and then explain to Thomas, that the gallery did not have a website. Thomas was retired but had worked in the computer industry and although he admitted that he was not very computer savvy now, he still had friends in the trade and immediately offered to assist with setting up a website for the gallery. He was sure that it would help the gallery's difficult financial position that I had mentioned to him. This was in case he did decide to make the journey down and I could say that the gallery had unfortunately folded.

Thomas had been married for 45 years before his wife died - two years ago. He had built up his own data processing company, and had retired just before his wife's death. Their lack of children had distressed them both and I sensed it had an effect on their life together. He didn't say much about his marriage but there didn't seem to have been much joy in it. He told me he had worked all hours to build up his business, and gave the impression that he regretted that he hadn't given more time to his marriage.

I didn't take pleasure in my deceptions, but although I was aware that others might disapprove of my role in this epistolary relationship, my motives were no more than to bring a bit of excitement or nostalgia to both our lives. But of course, I got myself into a 'tangled web'.

The main problem was that he kept wanting us to meet. He was sure that he would recognise me immediately he saw me, despite the intervening years. I was equally sure that he wouldn't.

Then there was the issue of photographs. He had sent me a recent one of himself, plus an old one of him and 'me' taken at Lyme Regis. I made a point after this, of visiting Lyme Regis, to make sure that I knew the geography of the town, the main points of interest, so that I could respond as accurately as I could to his memory of our being there. Sometimes he talked about art and mentioned galleries that we had visited. I picked up a few books on the subject so that I could respond in kind.

I studied his photos. There was a definite likeness between the young and old Thomas. The young woman, dressed in the mode of the 70s, was slim, dark haired. I was also dark haired and could find a photo of similar guise, but I had a round, chubby face. Hers was one of those perfect faces, with high cheekbones and beautiful dimpled smile. I was also overweight even in my teens, - well fat to be honest. She had one of those slim, serene builds. Then again, I was 5'2". This woman looked almost as tall as Thomas, and I presumed he wasn't 5'3" or 4. I managed to persuade Thomas that meeting might not be a good idea. We each had our memories that we held dear, and it would be a shame if meeting up diminished these.

And so it continued. I really looked forward to my weekly letter, to hear about the exploits of Bonzo, his dog, or the Day Centre, or Thomas' friends and neighbours. In return I told him about my family, grandchildren, outings etc. I even told him that I had returned to Lyme Regis on a 'nostalgic' visit.

We continued our correspondence for several years. Then it stopped. As suddenly as it had started. Just no more letters. I continued to write for a few weeks, asking if he was ill, or had been away, but nothing.

I got a letter from Platt & Platt, solicitors.

Dear Mrs Bailey, it is with regret that I have to inform you that Mr Thomas Richardson, whom I believe was known to you, died on 2nd February.

Mr Richardson had no close relatives, and left a will leaving the bulk of his considerable estate to the British Arts Council. However, he specifically requested that £50,000 goes to The Welcome Arts Centre, in Yeovil. We have made an extensive search for this Centre but, so far, have not been able to locate it. I understand that you were previously the curator of the centre and I am therefore, requesting that you forward me the location of The Welcome Centre, so that we can fulfil Mr Richardson's wishes.

In addition Mr Richardson requested that £5,000 be given to yourself, whom he described as the love of his youth and the comfort of his final years.

I look forward to hearing from you. Yours sincerely, John Platt.

Oh, help! £50,000 for an art gallery that doesn't exist, and £5,000 for an imposter. I've never felt such panic. And Thomas. Oh Thomas, I will miss you, but what have you done. I buried my head in my hands, and for a few days in the sand, but after a further letter from Platt & Platt, a week later, I realised that I would have to do something. At times I could see the funny side of it, but mostly what I felt was panic. I wondered if impersonating someone was a criminal offence. I might go to jail.

My daughter came with me to Leeds. Once she had stopped laughing, and admonishing me for being a naughty girl, we decided on the the only thing we could. We went by train. The journey was interminable. I went over and over in my head what I was going to say to Mr Platt. To say I was nervous would be to completely understate the case.

Mr Platt was older than I had imagined.

'Mrs Bailey, how good to see you. I got your message to say that you were coming and came into the office specially. I don't usually work on Tuesdays. I think I have a cheque for you here, and of course I'm hoping that you can tell me about the Welcome Centre Art Gallery.'

Oh God. I looked at my daughter.

'I think you have a bit of explaining to do Mum.' She reached over and took my hand.

Mr Platt sat listening stoney faced as I went through my story. I was abject in my apologies and kept trying to explain my reasons, and how I had only wanted to be friends with Thomas. I didn't want his money.

When I'd finished, he smiled and pulled open a drawer of his desk, took out a letter and handed it to me. 'I have this for you Mrs Bailey. I think it will explain things. I'll leave you and your daughter to read it while I go and make us a cup of tea.'

Dearest Patty,

You had me fooled at first I'll admit. It was the fourth or fifth letter before I began to be suspicious. Your reluctance to send a photo or talk on the phone made me wonder, but it was when you referred to Edward Burne-Jones as an impressionist that I was sure. My Patty would never have made this mistake. So I made further enquiries and found out that there was no Welcome Centre in Yeovil, nor ever had been.

I should have been angry, but I wasn't. By this time I had got to know you from your letters and really enjoyed receiving them. And it made me smile that you decided to respond to my first letter in the way that you did. When I learnt that I was dying I changed my will. I explained the circumstances to my solicitor, who is a friend, and instructed him to act on the Will as it is written.

You and I have been corresponding for several years now and I can honestly say that I look forward to your letters more than anything else now - though Bonzo comes a close second. You have lightened my last few years enormously and I cannot thank you enough.

I hope you will excuse my deception in the same way that I excused yours. Please also accept the £5000 which I leave to you as my close friend. I have instructed Mr Platt to give the £50,000 to Taunton Museum and Art Gallery. I hope that you will visit sometimes and maybe think of me.

Yours affectionately, Thomas.

I have Bonzo now. When I'd finally managed to stop the tears of relief, of sadness, and of love, I found out that he was in a kennels. They were trying to find a home for him but he was an old dog, so they weren't hopeful. He is a lovely companion.

*One of our number is Chinese although she has lived in the UK for a long time. We were all absolutely fascinated to hear her reminiscences of growing up in a very different culture from ours ...*

## **My Early Childhood In The Countryside**

**By Min Xiong**

Whenever I recall my early school days, the first thing that comes to my mind is my parents frequently moving home from one place to another, resulting me and my siblings attending quite a few schools. For me, I attended three schools in five years of my primary education.

In the early 70s, China was still at the height of the Cultural Revolution (CR). My dad had already been disgraced and fell overnight from being one of the top ranking prefecture officials to become a Rightist, under the so-called Anti-Rightist Campaign Movement in the late 50s. To make things worse, during the CR, as both my parents were regarded as intellectuals, they were labelled as “Smelly Old Ninth Blacks”. They were thus condemned to be reformed through labouring in the rural parts of China, along with their children.

Although I was born in a city and we were townies, my childhood memories were mainly associated with living with my parents and moving from one village (called a People's Commune in those days) to another, depending on where my dad's labour camp was near. Luckily for us, my mum was a medical doctor by profession. She was allowed to work in the commune hospital and assigned living quarters as our home.

The first village we lived in prior to my school days was called Hong Men, but I was too young to have any sensible recollections of the life there.

No villages had any kindergarten or childcare facility. We were left at home with my paternal grandma to start with then some peasant woman kept an eye on us younger ones. When we were a bit older, we were left most of the time to look after each other. All of us three (my elder sister and my younger brother) were sent to a school as early as any school would accept us. I think we all started our school life two or three years ahead of the qualified age.

The first school I attended was XuTian Primary School. Sadly, when I went back to visit the village many years later, that school was already in ruins and the big mansion which used to belong to a local landlord prior to the communists taking over and where we shared with many families, was left derelict. I don't recall very much of what I learned except learning Mandarin with phonetic pronunciation, but I have vivid memories of being fascinated by some striking posters on our school walls of a then super popular Chinese modern revolutionary ballet called Red Detachment of Women. Maybe that's why my first dream in life was to be a great dancer or an actress! I did have my first time school stage appearance, as the first year pupil rep, to recite some passages from Chairman Mao's Little Red Book. Apparently my Mandarin was better than other country lads and lasses.

The second year at my primary school was a very happy time for everyone in the family. My mum was selected to further her medical study in the city hospital where she used to work. We all went back to our home town, a small city in the Southeast of China. We were united with my maternal grandma and my elder brother who was living with her then. The school we attended was much bigger, more modern and richer than the village one. We had lots of fun times there and made loads of new friends. But time flies and we were very sad when we were told our family had to move on to yet another village. But this was very happy news for my parents! My dad, for the first time, was allowed to get out of the labour

camp and work on a new fishery! It was great that also for the first time, the whole family would be able to stay under one same roof!

Dragon Lake Commune, was where we moved to next. We lived in a house purposely built for my father's working unit, right uphill at the north side of Dragon Lake village. The front of the house overlooked the beautiful paddy field and the green hills opposite. There were springs and ponds scattered among the fields. It was a hot summer's day when we arrived after a long slow journey hitchhiking and riding in the back of a lorry. Dad's colleagues seemed very friendly. We had such a great welcome from them and I still remember tasting the delicious fresh water chestnuts and water caltrops for the first time in my life. This was a remote mountainous region of China and only one road passed the village in the west-to-east direction. The peasants here did not seem to care much about the politics or CR or that we were a "Smelly Old Ninth Blacks" family. We were given some allotment too for growing our own vegetables on which we kids all helped. Quite often, some peasant family would offer us cooked local food, partly thanks to my mum's good reputation as a doctor in great demand.

My first day of the school started badly though. I had my only physical fight in my life with a peasant girl in my class. The school term had already started and the class was full. She was a tiny girl just like me, but for some reason, I was to sit next to her at the last row of desks in the classroom. Maybe she didn't like kids from the cities, maybe she knew I was the daughter of the Blacks. She must have said something to mock me in front of the class, I can't remember now how it started but we ended up fighting. She had those beautiful and shining long black plaits which may have disadvantaged her in the fight. I don't know who won that fight except we ended up as the best of friends since!

She was quite often barefooted coming to school, and hurried away after school to the fields, helping her family with some farm work, or she went to cut and fetch the firewood in the hills. Her house was the first country dwelling I visited and I spent lots of happy times with her. I loved eating roasted sweet potatoes with her. Such a delicacy for me then! I still have the image of that basket with cooked sweet potatoes hanging on a hook right in the middle of their living room, to avoid rats I suppose. Nobody had heard of fridges then! No TVs either. In fact, virtually no worldly goods or similar possessions. Mind you there was not a lot to buy in the village either and there was only one general store in the village. Anyway, my sibling and I had zero pocket money in those days and we didn't have any toys except for two chess sets and a pack of playing cards but we did have lots of fun playing chess games and card games!

I was already a book worm and having exhausted my parents' limited collection and as there was no library whatsoever there, I became very good at scanning comic books in the general store pretending to buy one and quickly finishing reading it, I returned it as if I had lost interest in the book. I was keen on doing small errands for my parents' adult friends, as long as they allowed me to borrow their books. I became also famously known to my school friends for being a "toilet book raider"!

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the literary culture was devastated. The so called "feudal capitalism", also known as feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism, actually covered China traditional culture, western culture, and socialist culture in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as well. Almost all these books were called "poisonous weeds". Many such older publications which were deemed to be unsuitable to read were ransacked from peoples' homes and doomed for confiscation. In the countryside, many folks were illiterate and the books were saved for peoples' back rooms as free toilet papers. It was a very exciting discovery for me! Whenever I visited my school friends, I would go to their family back room searching for any books or portions of books left to read. There were lots of Chinese classic romance stories about gifted scholars and beautiful ladies falling in love in the Tang or Qing dynasties and other historical fictions. Although I did not understand fully the political climate then, I did know I was not supposed to read them if I was to be a good Chairman Mao kid. But I found lots of those

books very interesting and I was very proud of myself that I managed to teach myself to read the Chinese full characters which weren't taught anymore since the 1950s.

If I was good at reading and had other academic achievements which were not regarded as important in those days anyway; or good on the school stage for every school termly performance; I was a laughing stock when it came to other school curriculum.

I remember my first school outing to cut some firewood for the school teachers. I could hardly walk back home empty handed let alone carry the firewood in bamboo sacks back! We seemed to walk for miles and all in an uphill direction. I didn't know how to use a hatchet, nor a shoulder pole, or to sort chopped firewood into a bamboo sack. Even when all these were done for me, I was too exhausted to carry the firewood back to school. Some friend kindly carried it back, saying it was such a small bundle and it hardly made any difference anyway. When it was weighed in school, my bundle came at the bottom of the "school hero" list at 5kg only! But I was only seven years old then ...

Planting tangerine trees was another humiliation for me. I ended up singing some Peking Opera songs to my tree-planting partner as he did all the hard work, still ahead of allocated time! ... In fact, any revolutionary labouring activities organised by my school, involving planting rice, weeding the paddy field or picking up ears of rice following the harvesters, or digging up the paddy field, despite my heart full of revolutionary goodwill, I was doomed to be the weak city sleeker!

Despite how they now appear as days of hardship, as a child I did not feel they were, or envy some city kids. When I look back, I still love those days of my childhood and remember those sincere and kind hearted country folks and friends with fondness in my heart.

The beautiful unspoiled countryside, surrounded by great mountains; the river where we caught shrimps and fishes and washed our laundry; the streams where we picked up river snails and mussels to add to my mum's cooking; the fields where we picked mushrooms and bamboo shoots; the hills where we got used to climb and went to cut firewood regularly while picking up wild berries on our way there; the young cowherd on the backs of water buffalos passing our house to the fields; the thrill and excitement of watching an open air movie in the village square once a month ...

Sometimes I wonder what became my best childhood friend QiuXia (Autumn Cloud)? I imagine she is a sweet grandma now and still lives locally to Dragon Lake, looking after some grandchildren of hers. I wonder whether she still remembers me? I wonder whether she will be telling her grandchildren stories about an early childhood friend ...

*Min also introduced us to the concept of 'haiku' which, traditionally, is a Japanese poem consisting of 17 syllables in three short lines that do not rhyme. Min herself wrote some lovely Christmassy ones:*



Gentle snow falling  
A white Christmas dream comes true  
Footsteps lead to home

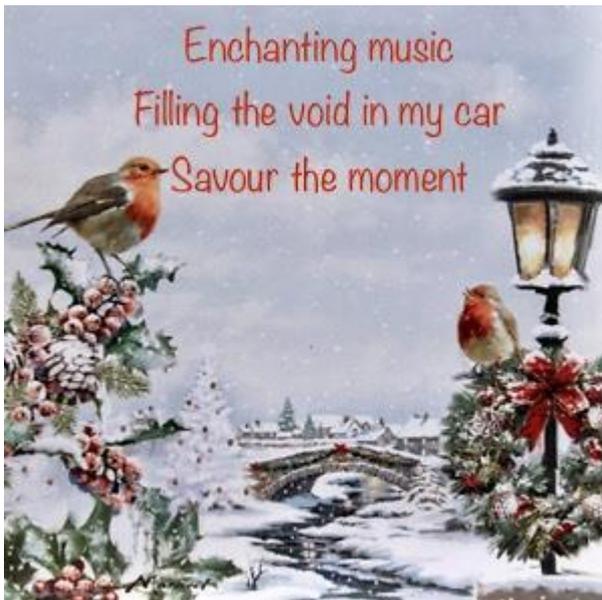


The bright Christmas lights  
Sparkling before my tired eyes  
Long for your arrival

Lovers bide their time  
Yonder comes the santa sleigh  
Tryst not far away



Enchanting music  
Filling the void in my car  
Savour the moment



*Mark Hodgson has worked on a number of different pieces featuring up-to-date issues.*

## **Lady gambler**

*A little scene on our modern gambling addiction epidemic.*

Mike is watching the TV in the living room.

TV: "and then he covers the whole thing with cream" says the TV comedian.

Canned laughter erupts from and TV audience

Mike sniggers at the TV comedians joke.

Julie looks at her smartphone laying on the table.

Then Julie shuffles around in the background feigning some task in the small kitchen area of their small apartment.

She looks at the phone again.

Then she inches toward it.

She looks at Mike, he is engrossed in the TV program.

Her fingers, long painted nails tap lightly on the kitchen table, her hand is no more than 12 inches from the phone.

She looks at Mike again, yes he's definitely focused on the TV.

A quick swipe and she has the phone and has stealthily moved back further into the kitchen area away from Mike's peripheral vision.

Her thick eye lashes flicker as she looks from the smartphone screen to checking that Mike is still looking at the TV.

She types on her passcode then hits the icon for the Bet4U gambling app.

Place a bet, casino, roulette spins, 14 black, £5, spin.

A picture of a roulette wheel spinning whirls in front of her eyes then up comes a message "More credit required!"

She is sweating.

She is ever so slightly shaking.

Add more credit, select card.

It has to be the joint bank card as there is no money in her account.

Enter the three digit number from the back of the card, she knows it off by heart.

Card declined.

"Mike, shall I order your mum's birthday flowers"

"I'll use the joint account ok?"

Mike shouts back "No I'll pick some up at the garage"

Julie looks tense, then thinks of something.

"Aw Mike, there awful from the garage, let me get her some nice ones, I'll use the joint card?"

"No, your joint card won't work, I stopped it remember, after your last little episode remember?"

"Mike, do you have to keep bringing that up?"

"Let me have your card then?"

Mike shuffles around in the pocket of his jeans and pulls out his bank card.

Julie comes forward to take the card from his hand and as she is getting closer he changes his mind.

"No, i'll just get some flowers from the garage on my way home tomorrow"

"Oh, for god's sake Mike"

"Well give me some money for the shop then, we need milk"

Mike opens his wallet again and starts to fumble about.

Julie is over to him in a second and whips a twenty pound note from his wallet.

"Hey"

"I'll get you a couple of cans while I'm out eh"

Julie gets her coat on and is out into the cold evening air. She heads off to the parade of shops. There's the chicken shop, the dry cleaners, A closed down bank, the betting shop and the seven eleven convenience store.

Julie stands outside the betting shop, she knows that she shouldn't go in. She's tense, worried, she dithers a moment but then pushes the door to the betting shop and goes in.

"Can you split this please?" she says to the cashier "Ten and two fives".

Julie puts one five pound note into the machine and starts to press buttons.

Within a few seconds she is up to £7 pounds, £9 pounds but then back down to £4 then £3 then the last spin and it's gone.

"Damn"

She takes the next five pound note out and is about to put it into the gambling machine, then changes her mind.

She takes out the ten pound note and is about to put it into the machine.

A strong arm grabs her wrist before the machine can swallow the tenner.

"You stupid bitch"

"I'm sorry Mike, I just thought I'd, It was just a small bet and I'm up"

"How can you be up?"

"Well I will be, I know the sequence, It always pays big straight after...".

Mike is frog marching his wife out of the betting shop.

Some gamblers are sniggering, others look shocked, one man doesn't even notice the couple as he's so engrossed in his own game.

Mike stops by the cashier "See this lady, Julie Saunders, put her on your list of gamblers that you don't allow in your shop".

"But we need to have"

"Do you need me to show you the debits from our account? Do you?"

"No"

"So she is barred, yeah?"

"Yes, sir".

Mike and Julie leave the betting shop, her head is down and she is moving on her own accord as fast as she can, embarrassed at the scene that has been made but more annoyed from having her bet cut short.

Outside the shop she is in floods of tears.

"You didn't have to do that Mike" she shouts and cries at him.

"I did" he shouts back.

"I did have to" he repeats but much more calmly.

=====

## Royalty

*In the business lounge before a flight to Amsterdam, around the time that Harry and Megan decided to leave the royal family.*

*This was written before Coronavirus when the biggest news was climate change and well, Harry and Megan.*

Just like Harry and Megan, I am leaving the ranks of senior royalty.

Well it's not me that's the royalty it's my wife, she is the one that had all the business flights to get the silver card

The silver card that gets her and her manservant, yours truly, into the British Airway Executive airport lounge.

Not that I haven't done my part for global warming, to cause it not to help prevent it.

I have had numerous business trips across the continents but not enough to get me free access to the salubrious executive lounge.

That was back then, nowadays we feel guilty about flying, even though this flight just nips across the channel.

How many times will I have to walk to the shops instead of drive to offset the carbon from this little flight?

Back to the luxury of the airport lounge, endless tables, easy chairs, eat as much as you like hot and cold buffet and free booze. I will say that last one again, a free bar, music to the ears of a working-class lad.

Working-class hmm, better check those credentials a bit more carefully.

As we ate breakfast I read, when I say read I mean I looked at the pictures of the large glossy magazines.

The Tattler, that one's easy, even I have heard of it a fashion/society mag, nice glossy pics of famous people I don't know, Fashion I didn't know was fashion and trends I didn't know were trends.

Next a large size thick paper arty architectural mag. I'm not even convinced that it is an industry mag. This edition had vineyards with fancy modernist buildings. Art, photography, architecture, yes this held my attention for the time it took me to turn the page.

Evo; a magazine on high performance cars. I consider myself a petrol head, oh no, come the glorious day comrade Greta will have me shot, after Jeramy Clarkson of course but this car magazine was too much higher than high performance even for me.

Tired from the brief but furious leaf turning I left the large glossy's behind.

I slipped the serious stuff, the Economist and The Week magazine into my bag for later digestion, yeah right.

The banquet, the free bar, we were quite refrained, some fruit, some coffee and a bacon sandwich but I left the free bar alone, well it's January and although i'm not doing dry January it's more refrained.

Our next flight? Her Highness, my wife, loses her silver status very soon and we will be downgraded to dining in the airport Wetherspoons with Harry and Megan. I wonder what lager Harry drinks?

=====

## 5000 tins of beans and 2000 shotgun rounds

*Written at the just before lockdown when people had started to horde food and toilet roll.*

They are called 'Preppers'. Who are? These are the guys, I bet that they are always guys, perhaps with their poor spouses or partners in tow. These are the guys who stock up on food and other provisions and then wait for Armageddon.

I looked them up on the internet and they are called Preppers.

So what do you stock up on in preparation for Armageddon? Or in our case CoronavirusGeddon, hmm I think that Coronageddon sounds better.

My daughter sent a WhatsApp message saying that all the bleach had gone from the supermarket shelf and sent a picture to prove it.

"That's OK" I said as your mum always has ten bottles strategically stored throughout the house. Not because of Coronavirus but because we always have ten bottles of bleach in the house.

OK, so bleach is not a problem, so what do we need to stock up on?

When I tried to think of this myself tins of beans sprang to mind so back to the always reliable internet.

Scrolling down the web page of [www.happypreppers.com](http://www.happypreppers.com), genuine, I did not make this web site up, was powdered milk, well that took me back to the seventies.

Powdered scrambled egg, wow, powdered egg sounds like something from the Second World War.

I'm sure tins of beans were there as well as a host of other things.

The shotgun cartridges? I don't own a shotgun or any sort of gun, that was just there for my image of American preppers armed to the teeth.

There are British preppers too

5th Aug 2017 BBC article. Meet the man who advises preppers on what to buy.

29 Nov 2012 Daily Mail Inside Britain's Armageddon houses.

But what about today's hoarding?

Why are we buying out all the toilet rolls in the shops?

What should we be buying for our two weeks of self exile or if the country goes into lockdown?

Surely it's good wholesome food that keeps and maybe protein and vitamins?

=====

*That's all folks! Hope you enjoyed reading our work!*