

**CHAPEL ARTS
WRITING GROUP**

**BUXTON FESTIVAL FRINGE
PERFORMANCES**

JULY 2022

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THURSDAY 7TH JULY

7.30-9.00 p.m.

Re-Connected

Pete Stelling

Early March this year we had a new multifuel burner fitted. Nothing special about that, you may say. No. However, the TV at one end of the room furthest from the telephone connection had a long wire that was buried under the hearth.

My good lady wife decided on a change-around and the TV was put nearer to the telephone connection. We needed a shorter wire.

So it began...

Lorraine rings BT, our internet provider, on the 17th March. 'Hello. Can we get a shorter wire for our router?'

BT: 'Computer says No. We will send an engineer.'

Paul, my brother-in-law, to the rescue with a shorter wire on the 18th of March. Connects TV to router from telephone socket; all is good.

18th March, **BT:** 'There's a fault on your line. We will send a home engineer from Burnley, 2pm please be in.' 4.30pm, young man arrives. 'Apologies, I got diverted to a line fault elsewhere that had priority.' Gets out his little gizmos and plugs and unplugs this and that. 'Sorry, your line speed is too slow. I can't fix it but BT will send a man who can.'

I must mention here that slow speed or not, we were perfectly well connected without any issues. We had all the Apps, YouTube, and other connections we needed.

13th April, Giles arrives. 'The problem is you will need to swap cabinets from 15 to 17.'

Calls BT and explains, first to a lady who doesn't know what he's talking about, then to a man who does.

Man: 'We have to swap you over to another cabinet; this will happen tomorrow (14th) and you will be off until re-connected.'

This is Easter weekend, the 15th until the 18th.

19th March: Nothing happens. Text to BT.

BT: 'You will be re connected by 4.30pm.'

20th March: Text to BT.

BT: Talk to a man in Ireland, Co Wexford: 'You will be re-connected by 6.30pm.'

21st: Text to BT.

BT: Another fairy story from another operator in Liverpool.

This continues until 27th April. I contact another internet provider. Fifteen minutes later, BT ring back. Oh dear, what have I done? 'We can't fix the fault unless you cancel the other provider.'

Three days later I have managed to cancel the other provider.

Follow up call from BT: 'We are working on it.' Follow up call booked for the 6th May.

9th May, BT ring: follow up call booked for the 11th.

11th: Zack from Leicester calls. 'You will be re connected soon.'

12th May: Router turns from flashing orange to blue. Three figure sum paid in compensation.

Re-connected!

BT: You will be off until the 19th.

A Physical Reconnection

Paula Hobdey

They borrowed from another farmer
A pedigree bull – a Friesian.
While they held it, she stroked its nose.
They were friendly, within reason.

The bull held court in the farmer's fields
Far from the house, dairy or shippon.
She rarely gave it a thought –
Getting jobs done was her mission.

Then 'Quick! Hurry!' her husband shouted
As she washed up in the dairy,
'Tie up the cows in their stalls, right now -
Vet's arrived so I'm too busy.'

Checking the cows, the vet was, she knew;
Some were going to knacker's yard.
She liked these gentle animals.
Farming at times is mindful hard.

Into the shippon she rushed in panic.
Seeking corn, the cows milled about.
Sort them she must, but – Oh, horror,
The bull was there! She gave a shout.

Her husband hadn't mentioned the bull.
Run with heifers, he'd said it would,
But now it was among the cows.
Wary, she kept as calm as she could.

The bull eyed her with suspicion
While the cows went into their stalls.
Her heart went into remission -
She was wearing her red overalls!

'Flap yer 'ands!' her husband yelled out.
'Send 'im into that stall near thee.'
Well, she flapped and she flapped, but the
Bull didn't turn: just stared at she.

The light shone on the ring in his nose
As he lowered it purposely.

Looking into his eyes she realise
Move she must, and *instantly!*

As fast as her legs would go she ran.
Left she went and into a stall.
But the bull was faster and raised her up
Aloft, just like a tennis ball!

Up she soared. Over top rail she flew.
Into feeding passage she dropped,
Landing on the bales stacked there.
Surprised! Shocked! Her breath near stopped!

While the bull calmly munched on hay,
She struggled up to hear a shout:
'Th'art a turd! Just look at yer 'ands!
You frit that bull waving them about!'

Red gloves she wore for washing up,
Bright and coloured like a sunrise.
She'd had no time to remove them
'Cos of HIS demanding cries!

He was laughing now at her plight
As he patted and tied up the bull.
'Never mind the herd!' she thought.
'It's men I'd like to cull!'

Reconnect Words

Ann Orett

Where are the words?

I know I'm not the sharpest pencil in the box.

Words were not my thing;

They danced and played on the page within my head,

Camouflaged with images,

Costumed Elizabethans, coastal topography, medieval castles, churches, Egyptians, hills -

Who wouldn't want to be in my head?

Words are sneaky. Simple words are worse; let's start with *bed*.

The middle letter 'e' fairly stable; however, the beginning and end - well that was anyone's guess. Which of these letters start and end it - b, p, q, d? A dilemma I had every time until someone mentioned that the word looks like a bed.

And why does *eny* start with an 'a'?

Dictionaries are useless. How can you use a dictionary if you don't know the first letter of a word? Even if you do, that means several minutes reading the 'a's until you find the next letter halfway through the alphabet.

I suspect you don't realise how long it takes to use a dictionary for every word in a sentence, never mind a paragraph – or a page...

Thank God for spellcheckers, although they often give you the wrong word or offer a list, which is hit and miss especially if you choose the wrong one and then the whole concept is ~~array~~ awry.

On the plus side, you develop strategies:

- Ask the teacher. I soon learnt it wasn't worth it – you are labelled as needy or thick and more often than not they tell you to use a dictionary... no spellcheckers then.
- Copy the person's work who sits next to you. Although you soon realise they have even less idea about the concept you are writing about than you do, but they can spell it perfectly.
- Put the word in context - have you any chocolate?
- You doodle in your 'Ruff book', draw pictures of ladybirds in Brontë style clothes with a random 'Ruff'. My friend was into cubism, so she had a whole load of cubist faces peering over her notes.
- You practise cursive writing with your granddad's fountain pen.
- You practise reading out loud with your mum, three pages a day. I came to hate Wind in the Willows and my mum. It lasted what seemed like months and I included all the illustrations I could in my three pages. The pages dwindled to two and then one. We

never did get to the end together. Guess what was the first book we read at senior school...

- At school you do just enough to avoid detentions or being shouted at.
- You ache for hooks. First book I read under the bedclothes from cover to cover, Jane Eyre; swiftly followed by any Agatha Christie from the library or from 'the list'. This was a list of 48 authors curated by Mrs Mulroy. I started with the four that were the school house names: R.L. Stevenson (Kidnapped), R. Kipling (Rikki Tikki Tavi), A.A. Milne (Winnie the Pooh) and J.M. Barry (Peter Pan).
- You develop a thick skin especially on your legs from the 'pink medicine', a pink day-glow twelve inch ruler, which was applied regularly when I was the last child standing in the weekly spelling test or multiplication tests; quite often, then...
- I took consolation in the fact that I aced sport, especially shinty, and music, art and even algebra. My egotistical inner self shouted and danced around 'cos I beat all the 'good boys' and everyone except Carol Windsor. She was brilliant at everything except sport, art and music - and having a friend. Second in algebra! What a coup!
- I made rules. Those three pages came in handy – Ulysses three pages, War and Peace three pages, loved The Hobbit, three pages each of the four books in the Lord of the Rings. Ahh, the names! Too many different ones for the same person. I have since amended this rule to One Chapter, although I reverted to three pages with 'The Thinking Eye' Klee.
- Win things. I was taught French and German. I even won a school poetry reading competition in French – good accent – Northern dialect apparently; couldn't write it though or hold down a conversation without trying to find the object of my supposed sentence or draw it to illustrate my meaning.
- Imagine a deli counter in a mega-supermarket in France. I needed garlic sausage. I promised a friend I'd get him one; I remembered *So-see-son*, but not French for garlic; nor was there a vegetable in sight for what seemed like miles. A hunt for the garlic ensued. To be fair, I achieved my mission. He got his whole garlic sausage and I didn't mind the French shouting - it went straight over my head.
- You cultivate friendships, play, have fun, help.
- You enjoy school, and I did.

- I read to my boys. I could do brilliant voices, until *Her-me-own* from Harry Potter. We all thought that's what she was called! Then we saw the film; it took us a while to work out who she was.

With the foundations laid with both Englishes and Maths O level I chose my A levels: Physics, Art and Geography. I was going to be an architect. No, you can't do Physics; it's not in that group. No amount of pleading would get me the options I wanted. They were chiselled in stone. I was never going to be Leonardo Da Vinci, then, either. It took me a while to get over it. Instead, I had to do English. My strategies were being very hard pressed now and I could find fewer and fewer ways to get the information to stay in my head. Straightforward in Geography: I could draw accurate graphs, illustrations of topological and geographical information, and concepts – well-labelled, of course; essays were mostly drawings and extended notes. It got me a pass. Just.

Desdemona was a thorn in my side. My English teacher gave back our Othello essays: 'and someone spelt Desdemona ten incorrect ways'. I think it was an exaggeration as there are only nine letters in 'Desdemona'. I focussed on my creative side.

I loved the Shakespeare plays, learned selected monologues by rote, had the stage set, costumes, actions, faces in my head and I was transported. Loved playing a part, changing the voices for different roles. Loved the concept of the 'Chink', an observer, a way in, a connection.

An actor, maybe? I could morph into most characters, I could do a range of voices, I understood the plays and themes. I got the story. I couldn't remember the words – well not in the right order, anyway - which screwed the prompter and other actors completely. I could not hold a whole play in my head. There would be mistakes, a lot of mistakes, but I was convincing.

Put words to a tune and I'd remember it for ever, even if some of the words were incorrect. I can't sight-read so professional singing was out; well, that's what they told me at the interview for the Hallé choir.

So I drew, painted, printed, photographed, sewed, knitted, welded, threw pots, made glass in a glasshouse, cast and turned plaster, made jewellery, until my skills became second nature and exciting, exploring, making it perfect, whatever it was; and then I showed others how to do it for thirty-plus years.

'I have drunk and seen the spider' (Winter's Tale). I never finished my Master's; I couldn't find the time to do all the reading and writing required and run a department and then a faculty. *Ergo*, the Ph.D. was beyond my strategies. I remember using this phrase to a governor who walking behind me on the stairs after an interview, implying that by using Shakespearian type quotations I was not deputy head material. I don't know where in my head my quotation came from, but it seemed appropriate as it shut him up.

Strategies were my anchor. I couldn't have done it without them. Then I took early retirement.

I tried not to use strategies any more. I found them restricting, exacting, and some of them were downright OCD; but that led me to limbo. I did nothing, I was totally anxious, pissed off, and nothing got done. It was my disabled grandson who helped me review my mental wellbeing. We connected on a level I never thought possible, then I combined it with my dad's dementia – we had a brilliant time. Everything was new, looked at from at least three different angles and explored in minutiae. We didn't use words much; my grandson is non-verbal and my dad couldn't remember the right ones, but in each case I could see where they were coming from, what was exciting or upsetting, and we wobbled creatively along.

So now I am reconnecting with miles and miles of neurological connections, bright, chaotic images, exciting, creative, disorienting, sieve-like, colourful and divergently linked.

I have reconnected with my non-typical mind, exploring its workings and finding that words are there, tangled with masses of other things.

I'm fishing them out.

It's taking some time.

The New Abnormal

Stephanie Billen

After everything that's happened, we are not sure how to be.
Our four walls now are falling,
The world beyond is calling.

Can you reach into the past and become who you once were?
Is it time now to be freer
Lest we simply disappear?

Or should we recognise that things have changed?
Count the cost,
The friends we've lost...

And why is it I ever thought that *I* would stay the same?
I won the game; I was not ill
But time it never did stand still

It did its thing and now I'm slower.
My body does not quite behave,
My chastened mind is not so brave.

More than this, the Earth's moved on;
The planet cries 'Enough's enough!'
Can we afford to call its bluff?

My vision's blurring,
New thoughts stirring...

What is it we want to save from how we used to live?
Is it fine to go and celebrate?
Or is this party far too late?

For now I'm making modest plans
I do my best to do no harm,
The changing seasons offer balm...

Will I reach into the future? I am frightened by the risks.
I can only seize the present,
Feel relief that life is 'pleasant',

And any time that I want more, I ask myself another question:

The cliché is that life's for living,
But how long can it go on giving?

Reconnecting with the Greek Life

Simone Hubbard

I so desperately wanted a holiday to a Greek island. I needed to reconnect to that rich Greek tapestry that had helped me write my first book *Under a Greek Spell*. For the last twenty-six months lives across the world have been put on hold. They were the lucky ones; the unlucky ones had their lives cut short by Covid 19.

The Covid thing had started to unravel at the beginning of March 2020. The news footage was showing worrying signs that something was not quite right. Italy seemed to be ahead of the rest of Europe in telling us to take heed. Unfortunately, by the time enough notice was taken, it was too late. Covid 19 was about to sweep the world and become a pandemic.

My weekly programme of hobbies and interests came to a halt on the 20th March when the UK government started a lockdown. This was the stuff you'd watch on a sci-fi movie. No unnecessary interaction with other people, essential journeys only and whole new list of guidelines to adhere to. Overnight, everything just stopped. There were lockdowns across most of the world and eerie images of deserted towns and cities were broadcast in the media. These were a sharp contrast to the images we saw in the hospitals. The situation was spiralling out of control as doctors fought to understand the virus and beds were taken up with people struggling to breathe and other complications.

The realisation that life wasn't going to be normal any time soon was dawning on people across the globe. In the UK, key workers could continue to work, but for others the term *furloughed* became another new word. It was closely followed by *Zoom*.

In the space of about two weeks it transpired that all my activities could be done at home online, and Zoom was propelled into the spotlight. We discovered that other family members and pets could turn up at the most inopportune moments on the screen. I had my personal trainer's dog's bottom pointing at the camera one week, and my cat wandering across the screen wondering where my personal trainer's voice was coming from. Not to mention delivery drivers ringing doorbells, and phones ringing and pinging. That would happen without fail in the middle of recordings.

After a couple of weeks, most were familiar with the mute button and had found the backdrop feature, even if it was palm trees waving on a beach. One of my most entertaining Zoom meetings was choir practice. It was an opportunity to have a nosey at around eighty homes each week. On watching our recordings back I realised that someone had built in oak bookcases like mine. And I wondered if anyone ever noticed that I'd changed what I was wearing during one recording or if they spotted Chris waving through the glass door. Despite the choir director muting everyone, we'd always have someone who'd inadvertently unmuted themselves - treating us to a solo, a bit of TV sound in the background, or worse still a private conversation.

My favourite Zoom moment was covered on the ITV news was when a judge in America was trying to convince the other people on the Zoom meeting that he wasn't a cat. Apparently his

grandchildren had been playing with the filters, much to the amusement of the ITV news crew. That must have been a slow news day.

Already these memories seem totally absurd. There will many pieces of writing telling stories of Covid-19. At the moment we have been lulled into feeling a bit safer as vaccinations have been discovered and rolled out across the globe. For me it was now or never to book a holiday abroad.

The airport bit was very stressful as we waited in long queues at check-in and security, but as I relaxed on a sun lounger I was so glad that a holiday to a Greek island had finally happened; Corfu, to be precise. Yes, there was sunshine at home, but not with the gentle waves of the sea lapping the shore. Across the bay were the snow-capped mountains of Albania. The colourful terraced hotel gardens were behind with their subtle fragrances of honeysuckle, jasmine, and lavender wafting on the gentle sea breeze. Each bar was adorned with pretty pots of herbs for the cocktails and food with the scent of basil overpowering the others.

It has been a difficult two years and, yes, Chris and I have been lucky and enjoyed many holidays in the UK, but our first holiday abroad - especially this one to a Greek island - was the final piece of my pre-Covid life. I was finally reconnecting with travelling abroad.

Reconnecting with my Childhood

Pauline Cartledge

During lockdown we had a long time to think and I found myself reconnecting with my childhood. This is a piece which resulted from some of those recollections.

Homemade

Rubber buttoned liberty bodice and vest, Mum-knitted woolly jumper, plaid kilt and knee socks warmed me against the damp, chilly, November morning. A tummy full of porridge, wrapped in my own world, head bent, eyes searching, I was on my way to Spring Bank Infants, consumed by my collecting.

A steady face-wetting fine rain fell, as I paddled down the purple-indigo stained gutters, eyes straining for precious additions to my collection. My brand new red mac, with hood, buckled belt and wellies to match, kept me dry as my previous homemade coats had never done. I spied another one, picked it from the gritty gutter, and awkwardly manoeuvring my cold wet fingers, eased it into my stiff pocket. The heap was growing and I was excited. Dad would be so pleased with me.

Startled, I was suddenly on my bottom in the streaming gutter. Tears sprang as I struggled to my feet. Looking myself up and down I strained to see the back of my new red mac and my heart sank at the sight of a dark, dirty wet stain. I cried and rubbed, rubbed to no avail, and now struck by the urgency to get to school, I continued disconsolately.

Head down, past the prefabs and Methodist Chapel, I headed towards Hyde Bank. I could see my teacher, Miss Waterhouse, coming towards me.

‘Oh dear, Pauline. What’s the matter?’ her comforting, warm brown velvet voice asked, as she examined the ugly stain. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll sort it out when we get to school. No, don’t rub it.’

At school she took my mac telling me not to worry, it was going to be all right.

BUT I HAD RUBBED IT!

Playtime and I knocked on the door of Miss Dunn’s room where the teachers took their break.

‘No, it isn’t ready yet, but it will be by the end of the day. It has to dry and then I’ll brush it.’

An anxious day passed slowly but at home time Miss Waterhouse eased me into my warm red mac. It felt lovely, but then I caught sight of the light greyish shadow stain down the back and I realised my new red mac would never look new again.

There was no scolding that afternoon, and after tea I emptied the contents of my pockets on to the table where Dad was arranging things ready. He praised my avid collecting, which, added to his, gave us a lot to work with that evening.

The coal fire blazed, the Ovaltinies sang out of the radio, and Dad and I sat close, engrossed in building our matchstick log cabin. That Christmas, after many happy hours, it sat under our

Christmas Tree, a fairy light inside, a roof from my BAKO building set covered in cotton wool, windows of Lucozade yellow cellophane and a snowy garden with Santa, sleigh and reindeer waiting.

Pleasure-filled, bringer of close contentment and warm satisfaction, our homemade log cabin was magical.

Brand new isn't always the best.

A Heartfelt Reconnection

Paula Hobdey

I was shopping with a friend in Macclesfield
When I became so tired that I had to yield
To my heart and rest on every seat.

I didn't want to make a fuss
But go to the doctor I felt I must.
At home, I phoned the surgery, and soon
Got an appointment for that afternoon.

So we sat and waited 'til they called my name.
I was tested, but no comment came
from the nurse except, 'Doctor will call you.'

'Don't go home. Stay here,' the doctor said.
'You are going to a hospital bed.'
An ambulance was coming – for me!

Soon it arrived, and with a wheelchair too.
'What a fuss,' I thought. 'Surely they knew
I'm only tired.'
I sat upright on the bed inside,
Puzzled but enjoying the ride.

My friend followed in his car,
He saw the lights go on, the siren too,
But to increase his speed meant a fine, he knew.
And inside it, I might be dead.

Well, I don't remember anything except the dreams I had:
Driving myself in a car I was, around Derbyshire villages, so pretty they are.
Then I found some Golden Gates, huge and shiny
But locked so tight I couldn't get through. What to do?

I turned around and drove myself back.
Then I was in bed again, but the nurse ignored me,
So I BIT her arm to get her attention, and later she told me
To my consternation that it was the SURGEON whom I bit
While he was struggling to restart MY heart!

Well, die I apparently did, as they told my friend

(Waiting patiently) to get my family to the hospital in case they failed in their efforts to help me LIVE. But live I did.

When I awoke, I looked around at all the folk.

‘You are looking at me as if I’d come back from the dead,’ I said.

‘You have!’ they chorused, and we thanked the NHS.

It is glorious!

The Web Generation

Julie Harratt

It was the darkness and silence that I noticed most. I had never seen such an abundance of stars in the night sky. In the silence I heard the rustle and scratching of creatures that scurry about in the darkness. A powercut after months of lockdown was to say the least frustrating. I'd come to rely on Zoom and the internet as the only way to keep connected. There was nothing I could do, so I relished the challenge of finding food I could cook on the one burner of a camping stove; (a relic of an adventurous youth recovered from the orderly spare room with a bonus extra bottle of butane).

Filling the now technology-free hours was a challenge at first. Communication and exchanges were limited to speaking to and engaging with real people. Well, at least the 'Boris - next slide please' had said we could meet with people in small groups. Hopefully this was still the rule as with no power we had no idea what was going on in the world.

Reading was still an option that filled a bit of time. My Kindle expired after a day, but I still had a few real books to revisit as backup. It did take some time before I stopped tapping the side of the page expecting it to move on, eventually realising that a bit more manual activity was needed to turn the page physically.

I chatted with a neighbour, Ronnie, who I'd previously nodded to a few times as he shuffled along with his two ancient terriers. He always appeared so dull. But being in no rush to get back for a Zoom call or check my Facebook, I learnt that he had fought in the Falklands and travelled the world; so he knew how to live off-grid. His stories of the conflict were inspiring. I couldn't go away and Google it, so I was eager to engage with him and continue to hear his narrative of the loss and comradeship experienced in another fruitless war.

After a couple of days, me, Ronnie, and a rather attractive neighbour I'd not noticed before, decided to join forces and combine camping stoves to cook a more appetising meal. There is only so much soup and beans a person can tolerate. It was a tasty meal of sausage and mash washed down with an excellent white wine. Ronnie had an extensive knowledge of wine regions and it amused him to drink what he called enemy wines. So, this one from Argentina was just the ticket.

The attractive neighbour, Alice, was a joy, both witty and intelligent. I don't know why I'd not noticed her before. As it turned out, before the lockdown had enforced home-working, we discovered we'd left most days at about the same time for work in the city. But then I had tended to use my commute to catch up with Facebook or swiping left on tinder, despairing at the lack of suitable matches for a mid-week date.

I had never slept so well. I'm not sure if it was the darkness, the silence, or the total absence of any blue light-emitting technology. So, when I woke to the sound of speakers declaring our imminent reconnection to the national grid after a three-day outage from storm damage, I reflected: being able to connect with and talk to anyone in the world without leaving the sofa is all well and good. However, the lockdown and power cut had made me appreciate the joy of connecting with people on my own doorstep, enjoying their characters and sharing their experiences: a reconnection to the real world.

The Broken Chain

Ann Orett

I once worked in the city
with sockets wires and plugs,
a head set and a smiley face
and a lot of lights that buzzed.
I had a list of people's names
stuck upon the board,
but 'Not the names of people here'
would soon be the retort.

Only Connect.

I love that game...

if I could only remember *names*.

What do these words have in common?
Restore: Revive: Revamp: Refresh.
Now, some of you will be trying
to work out what the link is...
A number without the district code,
like I was given today,
a sleepless reawakening
or rubbernecking a war.

Pointless.

I like that game too...

If only I could remember...

Did you work out the link?
No?
Neither did I.
Let's Reconnect in a Thesaurus.
I have a soldering iron.

Elizabeth

Stephanie Billen

When Elizabeth read the message again she could find nothing in it to raise alarm bells. He had started following her on Instagram about a month ago. Seeing his name had made her feel a bodily reaction, like a mini electric shock, her skin tingling. It was as if he had reached out and touched her.

There was not much to go on from his posts. Mainly restaurant shots. He clearly liked his food. She thought back to the man she had lusted after at university, glossy brown hair, broad chested, softish chin. Could he have run to fat? He could be wondering the same thing about her of course. It was a long time ago. She did a mental tally. Gosh, thirty years! She had bumped into him once since then, in the British Museum reading room a few years after they had both left. She had been doing some research for a friend - an early attempt at freelancing. He was reading something about Anglo-Saxon runes. She wasn't sure if he had ever left academia. He certainly hadn't by then.

'So where are you living now then?' he'd asked in that voice he had, cultured, slightly husky.

'Acton, sort of between East Acton and North Acton tubes near the A40.'

She remembered how his face had fallen.

'Oh dear Liz, we'll have to get you out of there!'

It was probably at that moment he had lost some of his gloss. She had felt defensive. She was allowed to say that Acton was a dump, but he wasn't. Besides, she'd make her own choices, thank you very much.

'Well actually it's very handy. Good transport links,' she'd said at the time, later wishing she hadn't bristled so easily.

A lot had happened since then. Marriage. Children. Divorce... She was glad he hadn't messaged her when she was going through all that. Who knows how she might have behaved? She was in a better place now, thank God. Nice penthouse flat in the centre of Newcastle. Complete career change; she was actually selling things as an artist. With the children grown up, this felt like her time. So why on earth was she feeling like this, her legs turning to jelly at a simple, civil message on Instagram? He'd seen she was in Craster for the weekend - an artist's paradise, after all - and was telling her that coincidentally he was there too, on holiday with his daughter in a self-catering cottage on the coast towards Howick. Probably that really expensive one. No mention of a wife. She felt relieved that the coincidences hadn't escalated. At least she wasn't going to bump into him where she was, minding her own business at the humble Cottage Inn.

He'd suggested meeting for lunch at The Jolly Fisherman. The gastro pub was quite a tempting prospect. She'd been there once before with her brother and actually cried at the sticky deliciousness of their hot chocolate pudding. She re-read the message for the umpteenth time. She couldn't help thinking there was an element of him summoning her. He'd named the day, the time. Today, in fact. He'd only messaged her an hour ago. Not much

time to think about it. But then, both of them were only there for a limited time. Time was short in so many ways. She felt it more and more these days. If you want to do something, for God's sake do it.

She sighed and gestured to the waiter at the Cottage Inn for another coffee. Breakfast was becoming a somewhat lingering affair. She should be out there painting while the light was so good. What was it about Tristram that always did this to her? The minute she'd first met him at university her knees had buckled and she'd felt that electric charge, the hairs on her arms all standing on end. They'd kissed - once - after a long conversation about Chaucer in the student bar, but she'd felt it was a pity kiss on his part. Soon after that she'd heard, second hand from a mutual friend, that Tristram was too busy 'working for a first' to get involved with her or anybody else. There was a time when she would have leapt at an invitation from him, a second chance. What was so confusing now was that although a large part of her brain was telling her not to go, her body seemed not to have received that memo. She uncrossed her legs, aware of feeling hot again. Probably just the coffee. How awful if she had an actual hot flush in front of Tristram.

Her phone pinged. My God, it was him again.

'Lizzie - just realised. You probably don't have transport, do you? Where are you? I'll pick you up. And don't worry about money. My treat entirely. 12.45. What do you say?'

She threw her head back. 'Huh!' she said, out loud.

The lad approaching with her coffee looked taken aback. 'Everything all right?'

She looked him in the eye and smiled. 'Sorry, that wasn't directed at you. I'm just being pestered by a rather annoying blast from my past who seems to think I'm quite incapable and as poor as a church mouse!'

The waiter smiled nervously and put her coffee down hastily, spilling some in the saucer. She dabbed at it with a napkin, not irritated; not by him, anyway, poor nervous lad. It was nice not to be like that herself any more.

She picked up her phone: 'Tristram', she began typing. 'How nice to hear from you! I'm afraid I will be out painting all day so The Jolly Fish isn't going to work for me - or not at lunchtime. How about I buy you a beer early evening, 6pm? It will have to be a short one I'm afraid. Other commitments!' She paused, thinking happily about the *The Succession* box set she'd brought up to binge on in her room. What else? She resumed her message: 'Oh and Tristram, it's Elizabeth now. I go by the name 'Elizabeth'. I guess it just took me rather longer than most to find out who I really am.'

A Dream

Sarah Lionheart

My disappearance was on the news.

I need to find a way to get help; I need to escape. They have taken my phone. I am never allowed to be on my own and certainly not alone in a public place. I can't get a letter out, or any kind of message. This has gone on for several months.

By now, one part of my mind is grateful for the kindness of the group leader, who is highly revered and can be exceptionally generous, giving me food from his plate, praising my personal qualities, making me feel valued and loved... but he also creeps into my room late at night whilst I am sleeping. I wake to find him on top of me. He's heavy.

We are all attending a talk he's giving so I'm driving a senior disciple there. At the service station my passenger/guard swaps cars and I find myself driving on my own. I should speed off and screech to a halt beside a police station, a shopping arcade, a random stranger. But what do I do? I drive. I follow the cavalcade. I am late getting on to a roundabout; the others speed off and I don't see which turn they take. I pull over, distressed at losing them, unsure what to do.

Part of my brain is trying to tell me that this is my chance, this is how I will get away. But my fear of getting into trouble for being late is drowning out my *'ping-ping-run-away-now'* signals. My body is charged with adrenalin. There's a gloopy fog in my head. Somewhere deep inside me, a part of my personality I've scarcely known for several months is telling me to write a text, quickly: 'There is a phone in the glove compartment - remember all the cars have one'.

My fingers stumble over the keys.

'Phone someone, phone the police!' insists that distant part of me.

I can't. I can hardly text. I'm fighting against an avalanche of feelings including panic and a desperation to be reunited with the group. I look around. People are strolling by. I could step out of the car, announce who I am and tell them to phone the police.

Goodness, what a ridiculous idea! Our teacher would be outraged.

The battle is on.

My fingers are typing words rising from far beneath my group-indoctrinated self: 'Please help me, I am held against my will, but my will has been broken, please get me to a police station or safety before they come back and find me. This is my location...' but I can't type the location. I can't get my head to work my fingers, and...

'Type the bloody location!'

Sweat dribbles down my sides under my shirt. The guilt is horrible: how could I betray him like this? Typing furiously, I reason that I can always not send it. I don't even know to whom I could send it.

There's a sudden knock at my window and one of the seconds-in-command is standing there. I open the door and feign relief, hiding the phone in my skirt pocket.

'I lost you,' I tell him, 'you all sped off at that last roundabout.'

Genuine tears drizzle down my face whilst I'm ushered into his back seat. I hide their phone on the floor, pushing it under the seat with my foot.

At the talk, I find myself with our teacher. He hugs me and expresses his concern about having lost me.

'I was so upset,' I whisper to him. 'I feared I wouldn't make your talk. It was awful.'

He hugs me tight and it feels both comforting and terrifying. Then someone hands him the phone, saying 'She was typing this message'.

He reads it and I am like a small child, knowing I have done something very bad; ashamed, caught out, aware I shall be punished.

'I shall deal with you when we get back.'

That usually loving voice is sharp with disappointment and it hurts me in the middle of my chest. I have let him down. I was about to betray him. I feel sick. The punishment, whatever it may be, will bring relief by taking away some of my nausea and heaviness. Yes, I deserve it. I will feel better after it. In a while I will feel okay again. I am glad that he cares about me so much.

Whilst I listen to him giving his talk I think, 'I am lucky to know him'.

Reconnecting with Caravan Holidays

Anne Cawthorn

SCENE

Ethel and Fred, an elderly couple, are seated around their kitchen table, having a cup of coffee with their neighbour Doris.

Narrator

Doris, Ethel, and Fred are elderly neighbours, who meet up each morning for a chat over a cuppa. Doris has been a widow since her Bert died a few years ago and Ethel lives with her long-suffering husband, Fred. Lockdown has ended, so life is beginning to get back to normal.

Ethel: Isn't it nice to be able to meet up again since Boris said we could?

Doris: Well, I'm not so sure really, I quite liked slipping through the hedge during lockdown to avoid people seeing me. (*Grinning*) It added a bit of excitement to my dull life.

Fred: But weren't you worried that nousey parker across the road would dob you in to the police?

Ethel: And they would come round and fine you?

Doris: Oh no. I quite fancied a dishy young policeman coming round to give me a warning about my behaviour. It would have brightened up my day. I'd have definitely invited him in for a cup of tea and some banana bread. You never know, he might have stayed for a little chat.

Ethel: You are a caution, Doris! (*All laugh*)

Doris: (*Sits back*) Well, you two, what made you come back early from your holiday? I noticed you backing the caravan up the drive late last night. How did it go? Any adventures?

Fred: You could say that. We had rather more than we'd have liked. (*Sitting back sighing*)

Doris: (*Sits forward, excited.*) Oh, do tell me, I'm all ears!

Fred: Well, the first night went OK. We stayed over in Cheltenham to break the journey and the next morning we set off bright and early to travel down to Devon.

Ethel: That was the best bit. But we hadn't gone far when the car slowed down and we limped into the nearest service station.

Fred: Yes, it went into cruise mode and crawled along the M4 at forty miles an hour. I put my hazard warning lights on and the silly buggers in the cars overtaking us kept telling us that we had our hazard warning lights on. I ask you!

Doris: I bet they saw two old codgers towing a caravan and assumed you'd set them off by mistake!

Fred: I don't mind telling you, I was relieved when we made it to the service station. My first job was to ring the AA.

Doris: How long did it take them to come?

Fred: Oh, not long. The good news was they found the problem straight away. The bad news was that there was a five-hour wait to be towed away.

Doris: What did you do for the five hours, Ethel?

Ethel: Oh, I was OK, really, as I'd hatched a cunning plan. It was a sunny day, so I got my deck chair out of the caravan and put it on a grass verge. Then I went into Waitrose for supplies. I bought a Sunday Times, two Magnums, and two cans of gin and tonic; so I was fine sitting there, taking in the sun.

Fred: It was like she was settling in for a siege.

Doris: So did you have to wait five hours?

Fred: Oh yes. It was ten o'clock when we arrived at the campsite. We caused quite a stir as we rolled up with the car and caravan on the back of a pick-up truck.

Doris: Was the rest of the week OK?

Ethel: Apart from paying a fortune to get the car mended, all was going well; that was, until I had a prawn curry at an Indian restaurant. Big mistake. (*Shakes her head*)

Doris: How come?

Fred: Well, it gave her the shish kebabs. She was running backwards and forwards to the toilet all night!

Ethel: (*Cross*) You don't need to go on about it, Fred, you're lucky you haven't got my guts.

Fred: I don't think you've got any guts left with what you brought up that night.

Doris: Oh God, that must have been awful, Ethel, especially on a campsite with communal toilets.

Fred: If you think that was bad, you should have been in the caravan. It smelt like a cowshed at mucking-out time.

Ethel: That's enough, Fred, you're getting crude! Well, you can imagine I wanted to come home. You need to have your own bed and toilet on these occasions.

Doris: Oh, I agree, Ethel. So what did you do?

Fred: Well, she hatched her second cunning plan of the week!

Ethel: I felt so ill I needed to lie down. So we decided I would hide in the back of the caravan whilst Fred drove home. We rigged the bed up with pillows and Fred tucked the quilt in to stop me falling out. He pulled the blinds down so no one could see me.

Doris: Isn't that illegal?

Fred: Yes, but needs must. We hoped to get away with it (*looks across at Ethel*), and we would have if Ethel hadn't pulled one of her little stunts! Because whilst I was buying fuel at the service station, she nearly ended up getting me arrested.

Doris: Is this true, Ethel? (*Ethel nods*) Tell me more! I'm all ears!

Ethel: Well, I'd managed to sleep until the car stopped for petrol, and that woke me up. It also woke my bowels up and I got the urge to go to the toilet again. So, rather than stinking the caravan out, I decided to nip into the service station toilet. (*Pause*) Just in time, mind you. But when I came out, the silly bugger had driven away.

Doris: That must have been awful.

Ethel: It was. I'd only got my nighty and slippers on, because with feeling so ill, I couldn't be bothered to get dressed!

Doris: You must have looked a caution (*Laughs and turns to Fred*). Fred, why didn't you look in the caravan at Ethel before you set off? It's not like you.

Fred: (*Looks worried*) Well, I was in a rush to set off. If we'd been caught with Ethel in the back of the caravan I wasn't sure of the consequences

Ethel: (*Irate*) Consequences, Fred! I'll tell you about the consequences! I had to go into the service station and tell them my husband had driven off in the car and caravan, leaving me stranded. (*Turns to Doris*) Picture the scene, Doris – everybody was staring at me as though I was mad.

Doris: (*Doris and Fred are laughing*) So what happened?

Ethel: Well, at first I thought they were ringing somebody to help. That was until a police car rolled up and two burly officers got out announcing they'd come to escort me back to my nursing home. Nursing home! I ask you!

Doris: Didn't you protest, Ethel? It's not like you to be compliant!

Ethel: I certainly did, but don't forget I was standing there unwashed, with wild hair, dressed in my nighty and slippers, looking the image of someone who HAD escaped from a Home for the Bewildered. Not a convincing sight.

Doris: What happened then?

Ethel: Well, they didn't believe me, of course. So they bundled me into the back of their car and five minutes later we were pulling up outside a very posh nursing home.

Doris: Did you know anything about this, Fred?

Fred: No, not at the time. I was busy driving up the M5, going as fast as I could to get Ethel home.

Doris: So what happened at the nursing home, Ethel?

Ethel: Well, despite protesting, I was escorted to Matron's office. I knew straight away she didn't think I was one of her residents. As she looked me up and down, she announced in a very posh voice:

‘No, she *definitely* isn’t one of mine!’

Doris: Obviously not posh enough.

Fred: Well, you have to admit you looked pretty wild, Ethel. (*Ethel nods in agreement*).

Ethel: As luck would have it, I managed to convince Matron that I wasn't mad, even though I must have looked it. So she persuaded the police to ring Fred so he could confirm who I was. I added that he would think I was still in the back of the caravan.

Doris: Did they say anything about you being in the back of the caravan?

Ethel: Oh yes, but I blamed it on Fred. I told a porky, saying that he wouldn't let me go in the car because I smelt too much. (*Folds arms across her chest*) I was determined to get my own back on him for leaving me stranded. (*Grinning*)

Doris: I guess he was thinking about the smelly farts that come with the shish kebabs.

Ethel: Exactly. Anyway, after I had given the police the car number and described the make, I think they finally began to realise that I wasn't the village idiot and there might be some truth in my version of events.

Doris: Can you imagine them telling their colleagues back at the station? You can picture them saying something like, ‘You’ll never believe what happened to us this morning, lads!’ (*All three of them laugh*) So how did they find Fred?

Ethel: Well, they radioed the motorway police, who pulled Fred over. When they asked if he had missed anything, Fred said ‘No’. Daft bugger that he is.

Fred: They then added, ‘Not even your wife?’ and that's when the penny dropped, and I realised that something must have happened to Ethel.

Doris: So what did you do?

Fred: Well, I knew I had to face the music. And that wasn't just from the police.

Doris: I don't have to ask who was the scariest, the police or Ethel! (*Fred nods and laughs*)

Fred: When Ethel arrived with the policemen, they insisted that I drove her home in the car this time. They said they wouldn't press charges on this occasion, BUT if it happened again we would both be in big trouble.

Doris: Serious stuff, then.

Ethel: I assured them it would never happen again. I'd had enough excitement to last me a lifetime.

Doris: Well I never. If you told someone what happened, they'd never believe you. At least you two have had a bit of an adventure now we're out and about after Covid.

Fred: I can do without that kind of adventure.

Doris: But you have to admit it makes a great story.

Ethel: Looking back on it, it did put a bit colour into our boring life, which I agree has been missing over the last two years.

Fred: I can't wait to tell the family about it.

Ethel: Don't you dare, Fred! *(All three laugh)*

SUNDAY 17TH JULY

2.00-3.30 p.m.

Missing the Pointer

Mark Henderson

When I can't find my book,
My keys, my spectacles, my pen,
My cricket bat, my phone,
She always tells me
I don't *LOOK* hard enough.

My dog is called 'Missing'.
Two nights ago he ran away. Again.
I guessed which way he'd have gone
Because ever since he swallowed the magnet
He's only pointed north.
Two hours yelling his name
Into the darkness: '*Missing! Missing!*'
He didn't come.
'You don't look *HARD* enough,' she said.

So I shaved my head,
Had my nostrils pierced,
Got a tattoo.
Still couldn't find my dog, though.

Then came news:
Missing was on the Underground
Having taken a crash course in trumpet playing.
Went from Barking to Tooting in fifteen minutes,
Started busking,
Made a fortune from commuters.
I fastened his lead and pocketed his takings.
No one questioned me:
Hard as nails now.

Reconnecting to Springtime & William Wordsworth

Simone Hubbard

Bird song fills the warm spring air
The wooden seat I choose to grace
Springtime fills my heart with happiness
Then I reflect what happened at this place

The ruins of Easby Abbey stand before me
A reminder of a brutal past
Surrounding trees have stood the test of time
Silent witnesses to violent acts

Spring flowers burst open with vibrant hues
The pretty pink ribes bush attracting a bee
As we hover precariously close to climate disaster
I pray surely we'll save the planet - won't we?

The robin waits patiently for a stray crumb
His thoughts I do not know
But his bobbing about and merry song
Make me think he's full of joy not woe

Budding trees are coming to life
They've survived the storms this time
But if we carry on with our neglect
Killing the planet will be our crime

Yellow celandine stand out against the blue skies
Then the tranquility is broken by a roar
Fighter jets just training today
A reminder that we still have to be prepared for war

Reconnecting with Forebears

Sarah Lionheart

Dolphins echolocate. They can tell if a woman swimming with them is pregnant because humans are mostly salt and water and dolphins have to see through salty water all the time. That might seem amazing to us. But what if we have senses we don't know about? Suppose we can home in on places where our genetic ancestors once lived, feel at ease with names that our long-ago forebears were called, just as we now know that trauma is transmitted genetically through several generations. Perhaps we have historical reconnecting genomes, inbuilt, that we are not consciously aware of. Perhaps they pull us to jobs, hobbies, likes, dislikes, places, names, tendencies, that our long-ago relatives have passed on to us down a long lineage. Who was a singer, as I am? No one I know in my family can hold a note. The estimated one percent of the population who are truly tone deaf all seem to reside on my family tree; and then there's me, the lone canary. My father's mother, Peggy, was a Tillers Girl, performing as the Sunshine Girls in London. Maybe I take after her. At least we know she could hold the beat.

My own children, born in Oxford, now both have homes in Yorkshire, that county above all counties beloved of my proud Yorkshire father and of me. I adore Polish pottery and recently discovered that thirty-seven percent of my genes are Eastern European. We moved to Whaley Bridge twenty-three years ago, only to discover eventually that my husband's five-times-great-grandfather came from just up our road. The churches and memorials are littered with his old family name. My husband knew nothing about this when we moved from Oxford.

But the best tale I have on this topic is the true story of my friend Victoria:

'When my great Aunt Janet was ninety-seven I met her for the first time. This was about a quarter of a century ago, when I felt my life was still ahead of me.

'Tell me about my father's family,' I asked Janet.

'Well now, your daddy's great grandmother and her sister left a small village in England 140 years ago and travelled to Canada and then to America.'

'What was its name, this small village?' I asked.

Great Aunt Janet fiddled with her tea cup for a moment, remembering.

'Ah, now, it was a tiny place called Morchard Bishop. Yes, quite small; a church, not much else.'

Excitedly, I phoned my sister, who had moved to England with her English husband.

'Guess what?' I said, and the story began to tumble out.

My sister asked me where those two ancestors of ours had lived in England. I repeated the name of the village. There was a stunned silence. My sister said that if she opened her kitchen curtains she could see Morchard Bishop in the near distance.

Without any knowledge of our father's ancestors, my sister had moved from Minneapolis, Minnesota, with her husband and children, to a house a few minutes away from that same village, Morchard Bishop in Devon.

And without knowing the names of the two sisters who had left Morchard Bishop 140 years ago, my sister called her two daughters Faith and Phoebe; the names of those two sisters who were our ancestors.'

Reconnecting with our relatives

Mark Henderson

My friend Kate, a retired nurse, had undergone extensive surgery. After a long convalescence she began to recover her habitual energy, thanks in no small measure to her positive attitude. Determined now to live life to the full, she decided to travel to Rwanda to see mountain gorillas in their natural habitat.

Trained Rwandan guides take foreign visitors to view those wonderful animals. The guides are also charged with the challenging task of protecting gorillas against poachers. Even today, poachers find markets for parts of murdered gorillas, particularly the hands, which are stuffed and sold as ornaments.

‘It must be confusing for the gorillas,’ said Kate, ‘that some humans care for them and try to look after them while other humans are out to slaughter them for profit. The poor animals can’t have any way of distinguishing one lot of our species from the other!’

She and a dozen other visitors were led up a track through the rain forest to a site where the guides knew gorillas could be found. They were some distance from the top when a troupe of gorillas led by a big silverback came up the track behind them. They stood aside to let the animals pass and then followed them. Shortly afterwards, the silverback sent his females and young forward up the track and then sat down at the side, surveying the humans.

‘It’s all right, he’s not being aggressive,’ said one of the guides. ‘Walk past on the other side of the track and look at your feet. Don’t look at him; he might take it amiss.’

Kate and the others followed the advice, passed the silverback and continued up the track. Two minutes later the silverback overtook them and caught up with his troupe. Thereafter, the humans had the pleasure of watching those glorious animals for two hours, feeding and grooming each other, playing together and displaying what could only be described as love towards each other.

On the way back down the track as the afternoon ended, the guides stopped at the point where the silverback had sat during their ascent. ‘Wait a minute,’ they said. They searched in the undergrowth for three or four minutes and unearthed a poachers’ trap a few yards from the track. The silverback had recognised the group of human visitors as harmless and benign. He’d decided that they, like his own troupe, needed to be protected from poachers. Contrary to Kate’s assumption, he *had* been able to distinguish one lot of humans from another.

If a gorilla can hold out the hand of friendship to humans in such a way, if he can grasp the connection between his own species and his close relatives, *Homo sapiens*, it would be shameful indeed if *Homo sapiens* couldn’t reciprocate in kind. We had the same ancestors a few million years ago.

Freedom

Stephanie Billen

He bathed in their warmth,
Transfixed in the lights.
The audience cheer
Rose to deafening heights,

When he finally bowed
They clapped all the more
And after the show
They thronged the stage door.

'That was crazy!' they said.
'You were good, really good!'
He lapped up their praises,
More than he should.

Arms came around him.
He felt the air change.
The sudden embraces
Made him feel strange.

Someone came nearer.
'Could you use one of these?'
But the fag pack was taken,
Instantly seized.

'That's enough now!
Leave him alone.'
And both wrists were taken,
Squeezed to the bone.

'Back to the cell, mate.
You've had your fame now.'
His freedom was gone
When he took his last bow.

The crowd looked on shocked
As they dragged him away.
'He murdered a man...'
He heard someone say.

Yes he murdered a man,
Crushed his neck with a rope.
Every day he remembered,
Felt stripped of all hope.

A lifetime in prison
Was all that he knew.
Treated like scum
By each cynical screw.

But on that prison stage,
Acting a part
Felt like being released.
Something new. A fresh start.

He bathed in their warmth
In his narrow cell bed.
The freedom remained;
It was locked in his head.

George and PTSD

Sarah Lionheart

George is a large male orangutan. The Bornean word means ‘forest person’. He is 97% human in his DNA, or you could say I am 97% orangutang. Anyway, we are very close genetically. He has opposing thumbs on his feet, which I envy. He also has the deepest thick ginger red hair, which is glorious and is akin to the mantle and cloak of a king.

And George should be a king. He is twice my weight but about my height of one and a half meters. His arms are twice as long as mine. His kind could live happily in rainforests if we hadn’t destroyed them. He knows how to find the best fruit, swing from tree branches without falling, make himself a home from woven leaves each night and even make a roof when it is raining. He is thoughtful and kind and unfortunately has Complex PTSD, as you or I would if we were locked in a small cage for twenty years. His cage had been so small that he couldn’t even turn around properly in it. He’d been given cigarettes to smoke as a party trick and become addicted. It was to entertain the guests of his captor, an eminent Malaysian lawyer, who kept him as a status symbol. George only became free when he nearly bit his captor’s fingers off. I’m surprised he hadn’t done so sooner.

I met George when he had been rescued, but as he had been held captive since birth he was never going to be able to be released into the wild. He was terrified of humans and would frantically try to hide if one came near, and then attack them if they were close.

One day I was resting, cleaning out his cage. I sat side on to the cage, far enough away to be out of reach of his long arms. I could see that out of the corner of his eye he had spied the enrichment activity I’d made him: a frozen plastic bottle of mango juice. It would take him a while to open the cap, then even longer to scoop out the frozen juice one finger scoop at a time. It was going to entertain him for some hours. He lolloped over to it and picked it up and then sat down to work it out. As long as I didn’t look towards him, he was just about okay with me nearby. While I was cleaning out his cage he had been released into a neighbouring cage. From there he watched me sweep poo, swill and disinfect. He was possibly quite grateful that I did this and left treats for him to find, hidden around his cage. When I’d volunteered to come for a working month to the rainforest in Borneo, I’d had no idea how much shit I would shovel. Naively, I had envisaged bathtime with adorable baby orangutans.

For the month that I worked at this rescue centre I was often working around George. I observed that he had nightmares, crying out in distress in his sleep, and that he rocked himself when upset. I saw him flee to a covered den in his cage when random visitors came by and gawped at him. One day my bracelet had fallen off and he passed it to me through the cage, leaving it on the ground for me to pick up as I went by. I gave him a sack and he loved to put it on his head when there wasn’t any shade or use it as an umbrella. Another day I got some bubble liquid and blew bubbles into his cage, without looking at him. He gently caught them between his thumb and forefinger and inspected them. I tried to think of more ways to brighten up his life. I wrapped fruits and nuts into hessian sacks and sewed them up as tightly as I could and then left them in the corner of branches or high up on the metalwork of his

cage. At first he would grab them and disappear to unwrap them in private, but after a while he would unwrap them so that I could see and even, very occasionally, offer some to me.

I saw that he was quite locked into his trauma and realised I had been fortunate to have been able to talk and express my own. Yet he, like me, craved touch. I made a sack 'teddy' that looked a little like a baby orangutan and passed it through to him. The first one he rather predictably tore into tiny pieces. The second he took three days to destroy. The third lasted a week. The fourth he began to cuddle up with.

Some days he liked to have a page of a newspaper and he pretended to read it even though it was clearly upside down. When cleaning his cage one morning, I was tired and forgot to keep the hosepipe well away from the bars of his interim cage. He grabbed it and pulled it. A full tug of war ensued. I had no hope of winning as he was at least four times stronger than me. I shouted out and the head keeper came just in time to see the last bit of hose disappear into the cage.

'Can't you just move him into his clean cage and then go in and get the hosepipe?' I asked innocently.

'He won't let it go,' he replied. 'He knows he will get treats if he hands it back and he won't hand it back until he gets a treat.'

So I threw a treat into the cage. George bit off just one inch of hosepipe and threw it back at me. The whole process cost me one hosepipe, quite a lot of my time and a very large amount of treats.

When I flew home from Borneo, I discovered that I'd become much more forgiving towards my own PTSD. I also put more effort into thinking of things that might make me happy and am even more grateful to those who've tried to help me. George lifted his hand as I left and blew me a raspberry. I am trying to live my life as he would have wanted me to, with more freedom and the ability to grasp fun when it comes my way.

Dear George. May I, with my flaws, be as noble as you.

Spark Out

Caroline Vallance

Tried to look on the positive side
But feel the earth has opened wide.
I couldn't cope
Let things slide.
Please reconnect my supply.

My current budget's out of control.
I'm isolated, on the dole.
Just keeping static
Is my goal.
Please reconnect my supply.

Resistance is futile, that I know.
So I'll just go with the flow.
Light me up,
Make me glow.
Please reconnect my supply.

Negative comments pass me by.
I'm insulated, don't know why.
Say your piece,
I won't cry.
Please reconnect my supply.

No energy, no life, no spark.
Sick of sitting in the dark.
Life's no walk
In the park.
Please reconnect my supply.

A lightbulb moment! The phone I'll use.
Customer support, they can't re-fuse.
After all, nothing
Left to lose.
Please reconnect my supply.

And they did!
Buzzing.

Reconnecting with the Piano

Simone Hubbard

It was July 1999 when I received a phone call in the staffroom at work from my husband Martin.

‘There’s an envelope here that looks like your results. Do you want me to open it?’ he asked cautiously.

I couldn’t believe they’d come so quickly. What would I do if I’d failed my Grade 6 piano exam, again?

Martin would say I was just wasting my time and money and I should just play for my own enjoyment. But I wanted to complete the journey that had started so long ago when I was about seven. I enjoyed playing the piano in the smoke room in my parents’ pub. I seemed to have the ability to hear a tune and be able to play it back, so my parents decided that some proper lessons seemed like the logical step to take.

My mum took me to the first lesson, which was a short drive away to Mr Dally in Whitehough. I was nervous and even more so when I spotted Mr Dally’s piano. It was very posh and had a lid. It was a stark contrast to the piano at the pub; a rather battered, nicotine-stained and out of tune upright piano. Then there was the missing hammer for the right hand A, and the glued replacement hammer from an unused note further down the piano didn’t sound at all good.

I was soon in my stride, though, and at home I was driving everyone mad with my piano practice, especially my early morning sessions when everyone else was asleep. I loved playing the piano and particularly liked the uniformity of the scales, which was even more annoying for those who were subjected to hearing me practise. I didn’t like it, though, when other people played the piano, especially my younger sister and brother, so I etched *This peano belongs to Simone* into the wood, with a dart. To make matters worse I’d even spelt piano incorrectly. My parents hit the roof and hoped that no one from the brewery spotted the etching on the piano.

That aside, and considering the overall dreadful condition of the piano, I was actually quite good, so Mr Dally decided I was competent enough to be entered into the London College of Music, Grade 1 exam in December 1980. I religiously practised my pieces by Burgmuller, Mozart and Lloyd Webber - and the scales of course. I was excited because the exam was in Manchester, which meant a trip on the train and a day off school. I was well prepared and the exam went smoothly, which was reflected in the result that arrived a week later. I’d received a first class pass with good scores for my pieces and unsurprisingly 9/10 for the scales!

I studied Grades 2-5 over the following years with Mr Dally, who would observe the lesson quietly whilst smoking his cigarettes by the fire. My dad was the designated driver and he was quite happy to wait during the half hour lesson - in the Oddfellows pub next door. The highlight was an honours pass for Grade 3. I’d absolutely loved the pieces by Bertini, Bach and Tchaikowsky and had a perfect score for the scales. I’d also redeemed myself with the

sight reading and was given a score of 7/10. We put that down to realising I needed to wear glasses!

The low point had been studying for the Grade 5 theory exam, which was required before Grades 6-8 could be entered. I'd spent the first part of the year revising and sitting my 'O' levels and by the time I sat the Grade 5 theory exam I was working full time at the TSB bank. I was also sitting the Grade 5 practical exam, and practice was limited to after work and weekends. Sometimes the pub would be open, so I'd close the smoke room door and practise quietly. The hard work paid off and I passed both exams.

So with the Grade 5 theory under my belt I could now get on with Grade 6. Sometimes it was difficult to choose pieces from the limited list that would suit a student, but I loved all the pieces I'd chosen. The exam date came round and now I was seventeen I was more than capable of getting myself to the exam. I caught the train and soon had my head buried in a theory book doing some last minute swatting up.

At Grade 6 the exam required more knowledge of composers and music in general. As the train terminated at Manchester I knew I could relax, and I watched various stops drift by as I periodically looked up to check where I was. To my horror, when Manchester Piccadilly was the station name drifting by, I immediately panicked. I shoved the book in my bag and realised I'd have to get off at the next stop. All sorts of scenarios were going through my mind. I didn't know that the next stop (Oxford Road) was only moments away and actually nearer the venue.

As the train stopped minutes later, I quickly got off and pulled a map of the city centre out of my bag. I actually navigated my way to the venue and was on time, but the panic had set in. My seventeen-year-old self couldn't possibly tell the woman checking me in that I'd got myself in a right state and ask for some time to compose myself. I was shaking and couldn't stop, which of course didn't bode well for a piano exam. I managed to fumble my way through the scales but completely lost my nerve for the rest of the exam. I knew I'd blown it, and a week later the results confirmed I'd failed miserably.

To make matters worse, that was the last date when those pieces could be used, so I was gutted. My attempt at trying to learn three new pieces of music for the following summer ended in another failure. By now, alongside working full time, I would also be attending Stockport College two evenings a week studying for banking exams. I'd also got engaged in 1988 and Martin and I bought our first house. We couldn't afford a piano, and in any case there was no room for a piano, so I had to draw a line under the whole thing.

We got married in 1989. I really missed playing the piano, and Martin bought me a keyboard for Christmas. The keys were more or less full size and it had dozens of instruments to experiment with, but my heart just wasn't in it so I didn't really play it much and it gathered dust. For now the piano playing was on hold; or in musical terms, *fermata*.

In summer 1997 I was called to do jury service at Derby. I looked into various ways of getting off the hook but unfortunately none of my lame excuses were valid so off I went.

My first morning on jury service was an eye opener. It seemed to consist of not doing an awful lot. I'd been hyped up and ready to sit on a jury and see justice done but it was just the opposite. As the morning faded away, the person looking after our group announced that we'd break for lunch and requested that everyone be back in two hours, when there would be a review about what happening for the remainder of the day.

We all went our separate ways and I wandered off to eat my sandwiches in a park. That took all of ten minutes, so then I decided to have a look round the shops. I stumbled across a music shop with electric pianos in the window. Martin and I had moved to a bigger house the year before and I could imagine one of these modern pianos fitting nicely into the dining room. Curiosity got the better of me and before I knew it I was in the shop.

Of course a music shop didn't exactly lend itself to me blending into a crowd, so I was forced into confessing why I'd wandered in. The sales assistant wasted no time in showing me what the different electric pianos could do and how amazing they sounded, not to mention the full-sized weighted keys that made it feel like playing a real piano. I was hooked and couldn't believe how good the pianos were. Then the price was mentioned. They started at about £1000, which was a lot of money, so my excitement was curtailed somewhat. I walked back to the court rooms thinking I'd better start saving up.

When I mentioned it to Martin later he was less than enthusiastic, as the keyboard had been barely touched. So the piano idea was parked yet again.

A few weeks later my pay slip arrived and showed a full month's pay. I queried it because I'd been paid expenses for doing the jury service and thought the bank would reduce my pay accordingly. Payroll insisted it was right. I was delighted because it was two thirds of the piano funds. I ignored Martin's protests about it collecting dust. The hunt for a piano was on and I went to Forsyth's music shop in Manchester. I was armed with music that I could play, so I could get a feel for the different pianos and not just hear the sales assistant's well-rehearsed repertoire. The Yamaha won: a beautiful modern black Clavinova upright piano, with full-sized weighted keys and a full-sized keyboard that would never go out of tune - oh and a headphone socket. Perfect.

When it was delivered, Martin insisted it should collect dust in the spare room, which I was annoyed about. I wasted no time proving to him that this piano would be played. I was finally reconnecting to my passion of playing the piano. Despite my initial decision to play for leisure, it wasn't long before I was finding a prospective music teacher. I found Steve, a young and enthusiastic teacher who lived on Church Lane in Chapel. This time round it was Martin waiting in the Roebuck pub enjoying a pint while I was having a lesson. It wasn't long before Steve convinced me to look at restarting the grades. After telling him about the Grade 6 fiasco, he decided that a good starting point would be to retake Grade 5 to build up my confidence.

I'd passed it once so there was no reason why I couldn't pass it again; one step back to hopefully move a step forward. In December 1998 I was entered into the exams, which were now held at Cheetham's school of music. It was a trip on the train, but this time I kept

my eyes peeled and noted each train stop. I was a bag of nerves the whole day, but I just scraped a pass, so it was now a full-on challenge to face the dreaded Grade 6.

Steve entered me into the exam in July 1999. By this time I'd discovered Bach's rescue remedy, which was quite apt given the reason why I needed to calm down. I entered the exam room with steady hands this time, which was a huge bonus. The pieces were enjoyable to play and I felt the exam had gone quite well. Surely I'd pass this time. But there would be the agonising week-long wait for the results.

Martin was waiting for an answer ...

'So am I opening this envelope or do you want to leave it until you get home?'

'Go on then, put me out of my misery,' I replied hesitantly

...

'Ok, here goes.'

I could hear the envelope being torn open at the other end of the phone.

'Well, you got 10/15 for the scales, oh dear then 5/10 for sight reading, but 17/20 for your Shield piece, 16/20 for Albeniz and ...

'For goodness sake, have I passed or not?'

'Yes, you've passed, in fact you've got a merit. Well done. It looks like I was wrong.'

'Oh my God, I can't believe I've actually passed it! Right, this calls for a celebration, and maybe now my piano can be promoted and moved into the dining room.'

'I'll think about it,' Martin replied, laughing.

A few weeks later the piano had indeed moved to the dining room and I started to learn my Grade 7 pieces for the next part of my piano journey.

Reconnecting hands

Mark Henderson

Sue had done only a couple of six-month HO posts before she went to work for a year in Kwa-Zulu. This was during the South African Apartheid era. Kwa-Zulu had one hospital serving a population of six million; and of the eleven doctors, five had been laid low by various subtropical diseases. As you'd expect, Sue didn't get much sleep.

In some cultures, people resolve their differences by hitting each other with either fists or blunt instruments, or stabbing each other, or shooting each other. In Kwa-Zulu they use machetes. Sue, who'd had very little experience of surgery since medical school, was confronted one evening with an elderly woman whose hands had both been severed, almost completely, at the wrists. The challenge was to stitch them back together so they'd work normally.

Not a straightforward operation. In fact, a very difficult operation. Hands are complicated. Sue had to reconnect blood vessels, realign severed nerves, stitch tendons together, pin bones - and keep a distressed patient reassured throughout. The haemorrhaging had been stopped with tourniquets before admission, but it was obvious that time was of the essence. Sue was close to panicking. Where to start? What should be aligned first? How should the numerous branches of arteries and veins be sutured together? How was she to know which severed tendon should join to which? She needed help.

She phoned a senior consultant surgeon in Durban and explained the problem. The surgeon, a distinguished white man in that racially segregated country, stayed on the line for more than an hour, guiding Sue through the necessary operation step by step so that a black woman's right hand could be rejoined to her forearm and made to work again. Only a *little* more than an hour; very quick for such a complicated and delicate surgical procedure. Thanks to that wonderfully efficient consultant and Sue's skilled attention to every detail, the job was done.

'I was holding the phone receiver with one hand and repairing all the damage with the other,' she told me. 'It was hairy! I couldn't have done it without that guy's help.'

Then she had to deal with the left hand, following the same step by step repair process she'd followed for the right. Although she wasn't holding the phone this time, it took a lot more than an hour. But she did it. The old woman went home with a fully functional right hand and an almost fully functional left hand, though she had to retrain her brain in one respect: when she tried to bend her middle finger she bent her ring finger, and vice versa, because Sue had cross-wired two of the relevant tendons.

Thanks to Sue's determination, and brilliant guidance from Durban, a woman's severed hands had been reconnected to her arms and they functioned again. And - who knows? - perhaps that compassionate surgery by white doctors on a black patient contributed a little to turning the tide against Apartheid.