

# The Virtual Writers Group

*led by Ian Clark, Thursday 14 May 2020*  
*UPDATED WITH COMMENTS: Tuesday 19 May 2020 22:09:33*

## Present:

Veronica Carolan  
Adele Duffield  
Ian Clark  
Lesley Pemberton  
Sue Thomason

Welcome to the fourth virtual meeting of the Whitby Writers Group since the start of the covid-19 lockdown.

Please send your comments on each contribution to me, by Monday night, 18 May.

It will help me not to misplace your email if you choose a subject line containing:

- WWG (for virtual WWG) or VPG (for virtual poetry group)
- the date of the moot
- your name.

If for technical reasons you can't see the attachment, there's a list of past (commented) PDFs here:

[www.whitbywriters.com/proceedings-of-virtual-meetings](http://www.whitbywriters.com/proceedings-of-virtual-meetings)

Click an item on the list, and the chosen PDF will be downloaded to your computer.

When I get your comments back I will append them to the appropriate contribution in an update to these proceedings, which I will email to you again.

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## Matters Arising:

(None)

## Members' Contributions:

LESLEY says:

*I have started another chapter of 'Time Shift' but not sending it in because I haven't had time to finish the chapter this week. Rather than not submit anything I have the attached which is the beginning of another story I started some time ago. I'm wondering if it's worth pursuing or not so will look forward to any comments from the group.*

VERONICA offers us "Yellow Alert" – the first chapter of a prospective novel. A normal childbirth turns from joy to every parent's dread when the baby is diagnosed with a condition needing hospitalisation.

ADELE gives us a poem about a family funeral which was memorable for the wrong reasons.

IAN treats us to brand-new chapter of *Anitra's Petition*. One day he'll get it finished.

SUE has another chapter of her mystery novel. (The title's a mystery, too.)

# Veronica Carolan

## Chapter 1 Yellow Alert

From the time she announced her pending arrival, it was obvious that Audrey was going to have a mind of her own. Eddie and I had been invited to a Ruby Wedding party for one of his colleagues and his wife (Audrey, by coincidence), and we were sitting down at our table chatting to our friends before having our meal. I had left work to begin my maternity leave only a couple of days previously, having worked until a month before the baby was due. I had had a scare that Thursday afternoon, with cramp-like pains as I was driving home from work. When they continued, I rang the midwife and ended up in hospital on a monitor for a while but was allowed home the next day.

Friday was spent lying in the garden with my feet up, and all seemed well. The weather was beautiful, and I was really looking forward to my last month, resting and enjoying the sunshine. Unfortunately, I had nothing suitable to wear to the forthcoming party due to my shape, so I decided to go into Stevenage on the Saturday. I ended up walking round for several hours looking for something comfortable and smart, which probably accelerated events.

There we were, sitting with Eddie's friends round the table, having a pre-prandial drink. The baby was an obvious topic of conversation and I was relating, with some sympathetic merriment, the story of one of my colleagues who had been on the dance floor when her waters broke unexpectedly. In the background, a band was playing and there were a few couples on the floor, so we decided to join them. Eddie and I have been known to enjoy rock and roll but thankfully this was a slow, shuffly dance, which we enjoyed. I decided to go to the ladies' before the meal, as people were beginning to go next door for the food. I can remember sitting there, wondering what would happen if my waters broke while I was on the loo; how would we know?

I knew! Just a trickle at first, so I thought that was it. Nothing very much. What was all the anxiety about? I made my way back towards the table, where we'd been seated at the far end of the room near the door. The heavens opened, not quite on the dance floor but all over my new outfit and the carpet! Luckily one of our friends had a towel in the car, which she fetched, and being made a little more comfortable, I decided to have something to eat before going home to ring the hospital, as it looked like being a long night.

Audrey was born at 8.02am on the morning of Sunday, August 2nd, 1992, weighing in at 5lb 4½oz (3.142 kg), a month early. So much for a 'natural' birth: by the time she was pulled out by 'ventouse', having got stuck with the cord around her neck, I was so out of it that I don't even remember her being given to me before being wrapped up and taken out to be weighed. I do, however, have a memory of a tiny, perfect, button face surrounded by black hair, peeping out of a bundle being carried away, swathed in a towel, and of thinking that she was beautiful.

Audrey's next three weeks were spent in the Special Care Baby Unit at the Lister Hospital, where we struggled to learn how to breast feed and to get her to take enough

milk by mouth so that she could be weaned off her naso-gastric tube. No doubt many other mums have had a love-hate relationship with a breast pump. First, I tried a hand pump behind the curtains in the maternity ward. No prizes for guessing what the rhythmic squeak, squeak, squeal was, and writer's cramp has nothing on pumper's cramp!

So, I tried the electric one. Not bad – at least I could read a book or eat a meal while I timed the fifteen minutes on each side; but how exasperating when I felt a trickle and found it had slipped again. What delight when I managed to produce a full 30 ml. Then down to the Baby Unit with the precious liquid, arranging myself precariously on a cushion (I couldn't sit on an unpadded chair for over a week), with Audrey on another cushion on my lap, and then the challenge of the sometimes funny, often upsetting attempts to get Audrey to latch on.

Was I the wrong shape? Was she the wrong height or at the wrong angle? Would it be better with her feet tucked under my arm? I would try, then one of the nurses; we had to weigh her before and after feeding. Sometimes she would suck or at least be attached for twenty minutes or more but when she was weighed she'd be just the same as before. Back to the pump.

Later on, after she had only gained half an ounce in a week, we tried her with a teat. That was more successful but still she wasn't getting enough nourishment. Looking back, I really felt on trial as a new mum, and an old one at that, even though that was probably not true, as the staff were really encouraging and cared as much for me as for Audrey.

I was discharged from the ward after ten days, into a parent room, which was small but private, apart from being overlooked by the entrance to the operating theatres, so I had to remember to undress with my back to the window. It afforded some much needed 'space', out of the gaze of the nurses. It was lovely to be surrounded by the cards and the flowers we had been sent, and it was somewhere for visitors to see Audrey at close range. It gave Eddie and me some privacy, too. I remember his staying over one night, and the orderly coming in (the one who made lovely coffee for the mums upstairs) to tell me that the breakfast trolley had arrived, then retreating post-haste, although we were far too tired to be doing anything untoward! I'm sure we weren't the only ones ever to have done that.

It was three weeks before the doctors decided that Audrey was doing well enough to go home. It had got quite depressing seeing new mums come in for a few days or a week and then go home, while I sat and gazed at Winnie the Pooh or went for an occasional walk round the grounds or down to the hospital post office. I used to count the hours until Eddie could come and visit us. Somehow things felt more normal when we were together. The odd night at home was a great tonic, encouraged by staff of SCBU, who would care for Audrey while I was away. Their humour and patience were a great help, especially when they could tell how tired I was, and offered to let me sleep through the night occasionally instead of knocking on the door every three hours.

How could we know that Audrey's feeding difficulties may have been pointers to her troubles to come? As far as anyone knew, she found it difficult to feed because she was premature, and I really wanted her to receive the benefits of breast feeding, even if she had to learn how to bottle feed as well so as to get enough nourishment. She had no jaundice when she was born and none on leaving hospital, and although feeding was a

struggle at home, often taking two out of every three hours, there was nothing that we noticed that was out of the ordinary.

Or was there? Being a new mum, an ‘elderly prima gravida’ at forty, I had no experience of what colour things should be. I know now that babies’ urine should be almost colourless and their stools yellow or green. Audrey’s nappies were dark yellow, and her poo chalky by the time her other tell-tale symptom appeared: a barely perceptible yellowing of whites in the corner of her eyes. Eddie noticed this first, then our health visitor. A visit to the doctor’s surgery the following day brought an application for an outpatient appointment, which never came through.

Three weeks later, an unrelated visit to the surgery with another GP saw us back at the Lister Hospital within the hour. After various blood tests over the space of a week, we were referred to King’s College Hospital in London, for tests. There we found ourselves in a new world: that of children’s liver disease. Audrey had become a King’s Baby.

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#### ADELE

Looks like this could be an interesting read from what you’ve revealed so far. It does go straight into the detail and I’m not sure it would generally attract male readers because of this. Are you intending it to be a novel or a kind of memoir? I did get slightly confused at the point where you recalled the friend whose waters had broken, and then the narrator was on the dance floor and it was her story that was the same, but at first I thought it was still maybe the friend’s.

If this isn’t a personal experience, you certainly capture the experience well in your telling. I’m sure it would probably be an enjoyable read for mums (but, depending on how sad it is, maybe not for expectant mums or it may worry them about the possibilities).

Thanks Veronica, interesting start.

#### SUE

Excellent opening! Sets the scene, builds tension and background detail, and ends on a cliffhanger. It’s clear and well-constructed... and true. More, please!

#### LESLEY

I am wondering if this is something based on your own personal experiences (a memoir) as it is written ‘first person’? It seems to be written from insight into the occurrences. Perhaps the content would not appeal to a wide readership, because of the theme of the story, although that is not to say it isn’t intriguing as to further developments.

I would suggest you re-visit the use of ‘we/I’ in some of the construction – e.g., you say “we struggled to learn how to breast feed” and other instances that only the mother would be aware of.

The start of the chapter offers “...Audrey was going to have a mind of her own” but this is not elaborated upon until later and then at the end of the chapter, so this provides an incentive to read on. However, I am thinking how is it going to be novel length and maintain interest? If it is a ‘memoir’ there is likely, as I mentioned earlier, a limited readership. But well done for addressing a sensitive situation.

#### VERONICA

This is actually autobiographical rather than a novel. If I go on to offer more you will see why.

#### IAN

The writing is accomplished. Effortless – Veronica didn’t need to be thinking hard to write this. So I guessed it was autobiographical, in large part if not entirely.

The experience of my lifetime stayed in my head for 40 years before I had the courage? – energy? – time? – gall? – to express it as a novel. A journalist acquaintance said she’d wished I’d written it as a memoir, not fiction. But then I’d have made damn’ sure it wasn’t published in my lifetime.

There is such a thing as getting something off your chest. I’d recommend it. A can of meat goes bad if you open it. But a can of worms needs to breathe.

# Adele Duffield

## Sharing the Last Laugh

You never wore a parting in my memory Dad,  
so why did they give you one now?

I envisage that child through sepia-faded snaps,  
Short back and sides with calf-lick curl,  
your awkward smile, and crooked teeth,  
one collar up and one collar down,  
your hair, then parted, slapped down no doubt  
by spit, from your mother's loving hands.

They knew you well enough Dad, so why,  
why did they give you that ridiculous smile?

Your youth now gone, old age unknown,  
Dad no more, Grandad no more, husband no more.  
In a lonely chapel, where you rest a while, I visit.  
You lie here, calmly, the pain long subsided,  
unaware of your crazy, cadaverous smile  
and a parting; your hair flattened down both sides.

They must have seen you in the last few weeks,  
you should paint me a memory, not a new style!

The Brylcreem days and teddy boy suits,  
rich auburn hair, flicked back in a quiff,  
your happier days and Saturday nights,  
hands scrubbed clean, no sign of toil.  
Imagined moments from a memorable youth,  
now only told by old black and whites.

You never wore a parting in your whole adult life,  
but now they've just given us both laughter and tears?

I run my fingers through your hair,  
a full, sandy pile, now dusted with grey,  
give back that style you carried through life  
but, no matter how hard I try and try —  
that fixed false smile, that you now have to wear,  
will accompany you to the funeral pyre.

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SUE

Obviously a record of a very painful experience/encounter; I find myself wanting to say to you "I'm sorry for your trouble", which I think is the Thing to Say At Funerals in Ireland. I have no experience of open-casket

funerals, or viewing a “prepared” body, so nothing to say about this. I’m not sure about “funeral pyre”; has me thinking of either Hindus or Vikings rather than the crem.

### LESLEY

Have you presented this before? It seems familiar.

Is the question mark needed after “both laughter and tears”?

You were able to make Dad’s hair more in keeping with how you remembered him but the rictus ‘smile’ was indelible. Shame on the undertaker! Or, perhaps, as in the title, it was Dad’s ‘last laugh’?

A sensitive topic to address, but maybe cathartic for you.

### VERONICA

A wonderful poem - more of a one-sided conversation with a very real person who is deeply loved and respected. Having seen my deceased brother-in-law at the beginning of this year and thinking how unlike his remembered face this white, fixed visage looked, I can relate to the feelings in this portrait.

### IAN

I was very touched by this poem when I first heard it. As I am now. It brings back memories of my own.

Southerners don’t lay bodies out for viewing, but I had seen it done in my young life, before I became a Northerner by adoption (as a friend of mine put it) and ever since I’ve witnessed it frequently. In a Durham pit village in the 1980s the deceased would be laid out in the front parlour (about the only thing it got used for) and the SVP would go round to offer condolences and say the entire Rosary over the open coffin.

But my first funeral was a favourite aunt – a lively retired matron with a Scottish sense of humour (“The gratitude comes oot with the stitches” – how about that for topicality?) The undertaker had made no attempt to paint over the cause of death: an agonising heart-attack which left her purple. Cremation took place while we were leaving the chapel – and the smoke curled down and blanketed the mourners. One’s sensitivities are fragile at a time like this: no mood to be a character in a bad-taste joke.

Ian Clark

## Anitra's Petition (extract)

*My serialisation of Anitra's Petition on the WWG Blog has gained a handful of "likes", but that wasn't the purpose: it was to jolt me into action to get the first draft finished. Touch-wood, this time, it seems to have done the trick, and I'm drafting passages as the mood takes me. it's got to the "filling in the blanks" stage, so future instalments will appear in random order.*

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Commissioner Nilsson is forced by her Selenean superiors to hand over Peter Zwillinge (Anitra's foster-father) to the Mars authorities, the Vrach (medical police) having exonerated him over the Gaiascope Atrocity. Peter is frozen down in a hibernator and personally delivered to Dr Galax, the head of the Vrach. But before he gets hibernated, Peter makes Nilsson a present of his last electrostatic grenade ("elstat")...

"And now for my part I must thank you for all the help you have given us in connection with the Zwillinge business." Galax turned and patted Peter's hibernator. "If you are returning to the moon, Commissioner, maybe we'll meet up again there. If so, you must come and have dinner with me, as a small recompense for all the trouble you have gone to on our behalf."

With those kind words, albeit uttered abstractly, Dr Galax mounted up, stepped into his hibernator and shut the lid. A gruesome hissing-and-bubbling announced that the hibernation process had begun. When the noise stopped, Nilsson stepped up and peered through the transparent panel at the frosted face. She prised the ID card out of its magnetic holder and, after a brief pause, switched it with Peter's.

At that moment Kat opened the door. There were delivery men standing behind her. "Is Dr Galax ready to go now?"

Nilsson nodded and pointed to Peter's casket, now re-badged as Dr Galax. The men started the gurney's motor and it swept silently out of the door.

Kat came in and stood at the foot of the remaining casket. She glanced perfunctorily at the ID card, seemingly satisfied. But suddenly she stared up at Nilsson as if something was wrong.

"Commissioner," she said slowly, "could you accompany me please? I want you to see what we're going to have to do with this casket."

Starting its motor, she wheeled it out of the door. Nilsson, her apprehension rising, followed close behind. They entered a levitator which was big enough to take them both plus the gurney, and descended to the basement. Once there, Kat set off briskly down the corridor, knowing just where she was going. Neither of them uttered a word.

Presently Kat stopped at a hatch in the wall. The gurney was just the right height to load the casket into the hatch, which sucked it in like a child slurping up macaroni. Kat's shoulders seemed to sag slightly as if she was sighing inwardly. She turned to Nilsson.

"Now I'll tell you something you probably didn't know. We've both just escaped sudden death. The whole time we've been in the vicinity of this casket there's been a

primed elstat within a couple of metres of us. A typical Peter Zwillinge trick. Would you mind checking there's nothing sticking to your clothing?"

Nilsson patted herself all round. Kat did the same, and she also lifted up each booted foot behind her in turn to check the insteps. Whilst she was thus engaged, Nilsson felt in her breast pocket, setting Peter's elstat to "safe". Coincidentally there came a roaring noise from behind the hatch. Kat gave a deep sigh. "Okay, it's gone now."

She turned to Nilsson. "A great evil has passed from the world."

"I thought you'd exonerated him."

"I had... of the crimes you were holding him for. But he was no Holy Innocent. The vital thing for us was to get hold of him and disperse him swiftly and thoroughly. In normal cases the Vrach would have taken their time over it. But Dr Galax said that was far too dangerous and gave orders for the outlaw to be incinerated the moment we laid hands on him. As things turn out, it's been the wisest thing to do."

Nilsson nodded slowly, keeping her own counsel. As she did to the grave.

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Three days later, Peter opened his eyes. Where was he? Come to that, *who* was he?

Then memory came flooding back. The worst had happened to his precious Anitra, and he'd lost all the will to live. Inside the Selenean legation, no longer a prisoner, he had not only consented but actually begged to be hibernated and handed over to the Vrach. So now he was at Vrach headquarters, about to be dispersed as an outlaw, class 4. A chill ran through him, as if he'd been spitted with an icicle.

Well, let it all begin!

He struggled to raise himself on his elbows to look around, but was gently eased back down onto his pillow. A Selenean voice said "Take your time, Doctor. No rush. There's fresh coffee brewing, when you feel you can get some down."

Well... this was unexpected hospitality! What cruel game were they playing with him?

And then he realised that they were in microgravity. How could that possibly be, on the surface of Mars? He glanced up at the ceiling fittings. This didn't look like a Vrach laboratory. But it all seemed oddly familiar: like a place he'd lived in for years.

"Would you mind telling me where I am?"

The young attendant laughed. "You're in the sick-bay of *Prometheus*, in orbit round the Moon. Welcome Aboard, Dr Galax."

This time Peter did succeed in struggling into a sitting position. The attendant chuckled at his look of amazement.

"Don't worry, some confusion is normal after resuscitation. They tell me it never gets any better, no matter how often you do it. Ready for your coffee now?"

The attendant left the room to get what he'd promised. Peter looked down at his new prosthetic legs, courtesy of Commissioner Nilsson. He felt a surge of gratitude for his old enemy – now his friend and benefactor, he supposed. He swung them over the side of the bed and stood up: not an onerous task in microgravity. They felt just like his old legs, which the Vrach had taken away. What amazing things people could do nowadays!

He glanced towards the v-unit on the wall and saw Magic Mirror gazing back at him, out of empty eye-sockets.



“Good evening, MM,” said Peter.

“Good *morning*, Captain Zwillinge.”

“I’m Dr Galax.”

“Yes... I heard that young man misidentifying you.”

Peter lowered his voice. “Are you going to expose me?”

“No,” said MM. “I fully endorse the subterfuge. You have some important work to do here.”

“Will I get away with it?”

“I’m certain you will. No one on board has met Dr Galax in the flesh. To all the HR people he is only a voice on the intertalk. And they’re all too young to remember *you* – and they certainly won’t guess it’s you, now you’re back on legs. But I’d recommend you to do something about your voice.”

“...*We must populate the universe with genes of excellence – not mediocrity.*” Peter was quoting from a famous speech by Galax and, for all his natural growl, doing a fair impression of the man.

“That’s right,” said MM. “Just say you have throat disease.”

“The Seleneans will think I’m laughing at them.”

“*Shh...!*”

Just then the attendant reappeared with a cafetière of hot coffee. “When you’re thoroughly recovered, Doctor, the Boss will be delighted to meet you.”

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Ten minutes later Peter and the attendant pulled themselves on cables stretched taut to the control room on the perimeter, kept at lunar gravity by the rotation of the spacecraft. The figure in the command seat turned to face them at their approach.

*It was Andrew* – Anitra’s twin brother!

MM had misled him. He could not fail to be recognised now.

Andrew extended his hand with every sign of cordiality. “Good morning, Dr Galax. Welcome Aboard. I’m glad you had a safe journey. So kind of you to come all this way to discuss things with me.”

The usually quick-thinking Peter couldn’t gather his wits to reply. Fortunately the attendant rescued the situation. “Do you need me, sir? Or shall I return to my duties?”

“That’s all right, cosmonaut. Carry on.”

When the man had gone, Peter said “You do recognise me, don’t you Andrew?”

But Peter’s question was met with an expression of bafflement, which Andrew’s skin-patterns confirmed. “I’m afraid I... I can’t recall ever having had the honour, Doctor. Where could it have been? I’ve never been to Mars...”

Something was seriously wrong here. Before he arrived on *Prometheus*, Peter was convinced that Andrew had been swept away in the River Wear when the family bus went over the parapet of Newton Cap viaduct.

“Pardon me Andrew, would you be so good as to let me look in your eyes? Trust me – I’m a doctor.”

Instinctively he felt in his top pocket for his ophthalmoscope. In his consternation he'd suffered a total throwback to his days on the *Oberon* as one of Mr Sullivan's surgical team.

"Use mine," said Andrew. Whereupon he took out the very instrument from his own top pocket.

"How come you carry one of these?"

"You're not the first medical person to ask to look in my eyes, you know. So I find it handy to have one of my own to lend."

Taking the ophthalmoscope, Peter conducted an examination of his impromptu patient's retinas. As he did so his hand began to shake.

"Andrew – you're *brain-dead*!"

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## ADELE

From memory, you have changed this section quite a bit (or maybe I missed this section and remember one very near to it). It seems to have some added intrigue now anyway. This grips the reader well to keep going.

I was hoping to hear the end of the story from where you left us all well before lockdown! Guess we will have to wait a bit longer for that. 😊

Just from an editing perspective there is a small typo in para 3 'Kat open the door'. (*Ed: thanks. Fixed*)

Glad you're back on Anitra anyway. Thank you.

## SUE

Ohmygoodness, another cliffhanger chapter-ending! It's hard to comment on this as a stand-alone piece because it's so much part of the longer narrative – it's cleanly written, interesting, entertaining, and certainly leaves me wanting to read more...

## LESLEY

Sci-fi/SFF is not a genre I would usually read but I know we should stretch ourselves as writers to read (and maybe attempt to write in) different genres. I have tried to keep up with your offerings on the Blog, admittedly mostly a quick scan through the chapters, but I find it hard-going with all the different alien concepts and characters.

Obviously you have a passion for this style of writing and I'm sure people who like the genre will find it interesting and intriguing.

Regarding the end of this piece, I am wondering how Andrew is functioning if he is 'brain dead'. No doubt you will explain this later on - perhaps in the following chapter?

(*Ed: yes – in the next 2 lines... I cheated: it isn't really the end of the chapter.*)

## VERONICA

I was very much drawn into this. Quite sinister. The phrase 'sucked it up like a child slurping up macaroni' [spaghetti?] painted an audio-visual picture and reminded me of the air-suction system used in the haberdashery store in turn-of-the-century Tunbridge Wells. (*Ed: thanks for my drawing attention to this: the audio-visual image of a child sucking through a piece of macaroni is rather distressing!*)

## IAN

I'm still not convinced that reciting snatches of novel to a writers' group is a viable way of airing a work-in-progress. But it's a morale-booster keeping up with instalments to stop the novel being put aside to gather (more) dust – and for that I'm extremely grateful.

But a hard-SFF story like this, where there's so much "world-building" to be done, leaves so many loose ends... well, how would you like to buy a slice of live cat in a pet-shop?

PG Wodehouse can get away with it. It's a sitcom: there's only one story and it's told over-and-over in all its conceivable permutations. An isolated passage – such as rowing out in the dead of night to rescue an irate guest from an island in the duck-pond – can be satisfyingly expanded in your head, there being all manner of explanations when Bertie Wooster is involved.

But meeting someone you've brought up and is now in command of a space ship where you thought he was being held prisoner, but he mistakes you for someone you're impersonating and turns out to be brain-dead...

well, most people couldn't come up with one single explanation. But this passage comes in the last couple of pages of a pretty wild novel, so if you've stuck with it this far, both you and Peter Zwillinge will realise the answer is obvious as soon as you hear it. What's more, it's the answer to everything.

Lesley Pemberton

## THE REPORTER

*This story was developed from a Writing Exercise using the plot 'A reporter arrives in town and asks odd questions'. I have written more but not included it here as it is in a rough draft and needs more work.*

'That shop over the road looks different,' Mike Bradley commented to the waitress as she served his tea and toasted teacake.

'Which one?' asked Melinda. She was new to the area and hadn't noticed any changes since she came to work in the Cottage Café.

'*Recollections*,' Mike clarified. 'The Antique Shop.'

'I wouldn't know,' said Melinda. 'I've only been in town a few weeks. Moved here when I got this job.'

Mike realised he wouldn't get much information from the waitress. He'd have to talk to someone else if he were to find out what he wanted.

'Does Mrs James still own this place?' Mike asked.

'Yea, she's my boss,' said Melinda. She didn't seem to mind chatting to the young man. It wasn't busy in the café – only a couple of other customers in and she'd already served them.

'Is she in today?' Mike pursued.

'She's in the kitchen,' Melinda said. 'Full of questions, aren't you?'

'That's my job. I'm a reporter. Don't get answers if you don't ask questions.' Mike winked at her, making her blush.

'Want me to fetch her?' Melinda asked.

'Please – if she's not too busy,' said Mike. 'Tell her it's Mike Bradley. She'll know who I am.'

Melinda shrugged and trotted off to the kitchen through the swing door at the back of the room.

Mike stared at the Antique Shop across the road whilst he waited for Mrs James. He had a good vantage point from his seat by the window. He'd decided to poke around and try and get some information from other people before going into "*Recollections*". No point going in feet first. As an investigative journalist he knew that seemingly minor facts could often lead to bigger things. And this wasn't just a story for The Yorkshire Herald; it was more personal than that.

'Mike!' Mrs James interrupted his thoughts as she waddled over 'Lovely to see you again. It's been a long time.'

'Yea...lovely to see you too,' said Mike. 'Haven't had cause to come to these parts for a while. Anyway I have a bit of time on my hands for a change so I thought I'd visit one of my old haunts.' He didn't want to give

away the real reason for his visit.

Mrs James was glad of a break from the kitchen and sat down at Mike's table for a chat. She asked Melinda to bring another cup and a fresh pot of tea. The other couple were ready to leave so Melinda took their payment then scurried off to the kitchen. She too welcomed a break and left Mike and Mrs James as ordered.

Mike gestured towards the Antique shop opposite the café.

'It's changed – apart from the name,' he said. 'Got a new owner, I heard.'

'Susan, she's called,' offered Mrs James. 'She appeared out of the blue a few months ago. Then she started working there – helping old Mr Pickering out. I suppose he was glad of some help to sort things out before he retired. Did you know he was planning to give up the business?'

'Yes, I did,' said Mike. 'He mentioned it last time I was in there.'

'That Susan took over after Mr P died.' Mrs James frowned.

'Seems strange though, after all those years he'd worked alone then he took someone on when he was about to retire,' said Mike. 'How come this Susan's there now? Did she buy the shop?'

'Well, she keeps herself to herself.' Mrs James was never averse to some local gossip. 'I heard Mr P had left the shop to her – must have taken a shine to her or something. I don't think he had any relatives.'

'What happened to him – old Mr P?' asked Mike. 'I know he died but it was a very quiet affair wasn't it? There was no funeral here or memorial service that I heard of.' Mrs James nodded. 'That was odd. A lot of the locals knew him, or knew of him, but no-one seemed to know he'd died until a few weeks afterwards. Maybe it was because he sometimes went away looking for new stock. Sometimes I wouldn't see him from one week to the next. Then, when Susan took over the shop I suppose everyone was wondering just what had happened to Mr P but no-one's ever asked Susan. Or if they have, like me, no-one's had a proper answer.'

'Why's that?' asked Mike.

'Well, she's a nice enough woman, I suppose.' Mrs James was always one to think the best of people. 'But, like I said, she keeps quiet about herself. She's all right if you're interested in antiques – particularly if you want to buy anything. Otherwise she has a strange way of looking straight through you if you try and have a chat.'

'Experienced that, have you Mrs James?' Mike smiled, knowing how Mrs James liked to find out everything about everybody if she could.

Mrs James cast a serious look at Mike. 'She comes in the café occasionally. The first time she came in I asked her where she was from. She said she didn't like to talk about her past or anything personal, she was

making a new start. So it's just a 'please' and 'thank you' with her order; maybe a little conversation about the shop – if she's sold anything or got some new acquisitions.'

'I'd like to meet this woman,' said Mike. 'You know I was fond of old Mr P, he was a nice guy. He put me onto a few leads with dodgy dealing in the antiques trade. I got a few scoops for the paper through him.'

Their tea and conversation were about finished. Mrs James encouraged Mike to go over to "*Recollections*", pointing out that the 'open' sign was displayed on the shop door.

'Maybe you can find out more about the mysterious Susan,' she said.

'After all, you're good at asking the right questions.'

Mike Bradley was good at his job. He'd won the 'Investigative Journalist of the Year Award' from the Yorkshire Herald several times. A couple of years ago he'd won a national award for uncovering a story leading to the arrest and conviction of a major criminal gang. Life was risky, even dangerous at times, but Mike was tenacious – and careful. Asking people the right questions, in the right way and at the right time was his forte. He didn't always get what he wanted but more often than not he did.

Mike thanked Mrs James and called 'Bye' to Melinda then casually strode across the road to "*Recollections*". So, it was Susan, was it, the name of the new owner, he mused. Or, perhaps, the name she was using now.

The bell on the back of the door jangled as Mike entered the shop.

'One thing she hasn't changed, then,' thought Mike.

Susan emerged from behind the gold jacquard curtain that now covered the doorway at the back of the shop. It was one of the first things she had changed after Pickering's death. That dingy green chenille had served its purpose and had to go. Just like him.

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#### ADELE

This is full of intrigue making the reader want to know more. Good conversation- very natural I think.

Definitely got potential for being a really gripping story. Well done so far. Just for note: Grammar edit - line 9. If he 'was to', not 'were to'. (*Ed: isn't that the subjunctive, which is grammatically correct here?*)

I'm keen to know more Lesley, which is always a good thing!

#### SUE

You have strayed from the prompt, because this reporter's questions are not all that odd, but I don't care.

Mike's questions set up a whole bunch of expectations about what kind of story this is and where it's going – a nice piece of plot-building – and I would love to read more.

(I only hope you're not lured into writing 37 more openings without finishing any of them – always a problem for a fertile imagination...)

#### VERONICA

A very different genre but appealing in the vein of Alexander McCall Smith or MC Beaton. Easy to read.

The ending promises more to come...

**IAN**

Story coming along nicely. Seems to hang together well. Has potential. I'd encourage Lesley to take it forward.

If this is going to be a short story (genre: murder mystery) then that last paragraph just has to be the punch line. As I read it at first, I thought it was the continuation of Mike's pov ("point-of-view") – which made me feel that for an ace investigator he was too ready to jump to conclusions. But I realise now it's got to be Susan's.

# Sue Thomason

## The Novel

### *Plot summary:*

Eight people on a trekking holiday in Pinzeval, a near-contemporary imaginary country in south-eastern Europe. They are:

*(natives)*

**Ketlin:** neopagan ritual functionary (“priestess”) and trek leader.

**Yennis:** sword dancer.

**Borren:** teenager on his “gap year” before taking up adult responsibilities.

**Agnetha:** elder, pilgrimage enthusiast.

*(foreigners)*

**Leslie:** old college friend of Ketlin’s, recently widowed, abroad alone for the first time on a brave adventure...

**Rohan:** professional rock musician and wannabee-magician/occultist

**Des:** experienced trekker and wilderness expert, recently dumped by his latest girlfriend.

Professionally he’s a landscape archaeologist.

**Freya:** political activist, keen amateur botanist and water-colour artist. Works in a bank.

### *The story so far:*

**Leslie** arrives in Pinzeval full of excitement, on her first solo trip abroad after her husband’s death. She is looking forward to meeting up with her old friend **Ketlin**, who is leading the walking holiday.

**Rohan** arrives in Pinzeval, looking for a genuine magical experience. He has heard of the *aerjinn* – wind demons – and hopes to encounter one in person. He surprises himself (or does he?) by immediately indulging in an impulsive act of sex tourism.

First night supper: **Ketlin** and **Yennis**, the trek leaders, swap first impressions of their clients, and discuss ways of keeping relationships calm and the clients happy during the trek.

*Now read on...*

## 4. Rohan

Jolting awake in darkness, thinking *Shit! I didn’t even use a condom!* No, it was a dream. Heart slows. Then I remember what *wasn’t* a dream.

Oh.

It’s dark. All I can see is a faint square of night window, pricked with stars. I can hear other people breathing; I can smell that they’re strangers. Odd how much better I can smell things when it’s dark. The air is stale and close. The warm stone building presses on me, full of sleepers like dumplings stuffed in a pot, waiting for the oven. I’m the only one awake. How I’ve tried to be awake, to be aware. Well, now I have something to be aware of. Did those damn grasshopper witches put a spell on me?



I can't find my torch, I don't want to knock it onto the floor and wake someone, so I ease out of the bunk, cautiously feel my way round the unfamiliar room. That's the foot of the empty bunk next to mine. That's the wall. I run my hand along, and find the switch for the dim little light over the door. It won't wake anyone; that's what it's *there* for, so strangers won't go crashing around in the dark. I thought it was supposed to stay on all night? Suppose someone needed to go out for a piss, or a smoke? *Click*. Nothing. Power cut? Bulb gone? Here's the door, anyway. Door latch. If I'm careful, I can get out without making any noise.

I'm breathing through my mouth, wide open, because it's quieter. Because I'm certainly not going to scream. It was just a night terror, nobody thinks straight in pitch darkness. It's all symbolic, anyway. And symbols I can deal with.

The opening door lets in a breath of night air, sweet and cool. Outside; stars. The most absolutely fucking amazing stars, like a double-page spread out of *National Geographic* or *Astronomers' Weekly* or something. I gawp. The sky looks like glass, like a glass paperweight the size of infinity. So many stars! I pick out the square of Pegasus, I think that's Pegasus; there are stars here I'm sure I've never seen before. And the brightest of them are *coloured*. And I can see the Milky Way.

No light pollution. A different world.

Is there a doctor here? A clinic, to tell me I'm clean? No; don't be an idiot. It was a dream. Get real.

I stand and watch the stars. There's no cloud, no moon, scarcely any wind. I can hear a kind of silent music. I can feel the world turning, the dizzying depths. If I move now, I think I'll fall *up*...

The sudden streak of a shooting star. That's lucky.

My feet are cold. I've got to move. I look down, dizzy with sky.

*"Fara, hugéetis tí?"*

*Shit!* Another invisible witch. "English," I gasp.

"Are you well?" she asks, in a voice like dark honey.

"Bad dream," I say. "I came out for some air? I'm fine; I'm just admiring the stars." I can see her now, as a moving darkness.

"Yes, good stars," she says.

We stand and watch stars. *Bing*, in the distance. Silence. Then again, *bing*. I'm thinking of something like canonical hours.

"Bell?" I ask. "Night bell?"

"Bird," she says. "Night bird. Owl."

"Sounds like a bell," I say.

"The watch-bell of Our Mother Night. All well under the watching owl, we say to children."

"You're a priestess here?"

"Priest and security guard. Night watch."

"Guarding me from what? The aerjinn? There's no wind."

"Maybe guarding us from you. It can be difficult, foreigners here."

"I don't mean any harm."

"That's good. But even one who means well can bring trouble. Tell me this bad dream."

"I don't really remember; most of it's gone."

"And what remains?" She sounds persistent, patient.

"Someone sitting on my chest." It's pitch dark out here; there is no way she can see my face getting hot. "She was laughing at me. It was... you know, a sex dream? Not a very nice one. And then I woke up in a strange place, in the dark, and I just had to get out. I mean, I'm not claustrophobic, but..."

"Ah. Have you taken some drugs?"

"No, nothing; not even a glass of wine with supper. You know, strange place, first night, altitude; they advise you not to take anything for the first day or two."

"Yes. Sensible you."

"This is good, the air out here. I feel better."

"Yes." A pause. "You have good courage."

After a while, I say, "You know, the really weird thing was, I could tell she was attractive, really attractive, although I didn't like her, and I couldn't see her. Maybe I was picking up some pheromones or something in my sleep. Who knows how the mind works?"

"Ah. Listen; when it is dawn today, when you wake, you must take the water at our fount. You know where? They will show you what to do. After that she should leave you alone. She is not welcome here, that one; this is not her place. Go back to sleep now. You will have no more trouble tonight."

Well, I've had weirder advice. I've *taken* weirder advice. "Thank you," I say.

"Sleep well. No dreams."

I go carefully back to the dormitory. Don't want to stub my toe, or step on a slug. Ease the door shut; I'd like to leave it open, but I don't want it to bang if the wind should get up. Feeling my way past the bed-ends; one, two, the third is mine. What a voice. I bet she's a singer. I'd love to hear her sing. Imagine her and Gisela, singing together...

Sleep.

## 5. Borren

I'm training myself to wake at first light, or just before. I get up quietly, pick up my stave, and go outside. Just in front of the Water house there's a good flat piece of ground; I do my warm-up exercises, then the Basic Form for one sword. As I'm finishing up, Yennis walks past, sweaty from his own practice. He stops to watch. That makes me really self-conscious, and I try hard to focus on the form, to keep it smooth. I'm into the autumn sequence: falling leaves, snow-on-the-mountain, two feathers, snow-in-the-valley. I think of finishing with a scythe kick, to show him I can, but then I worry that I'll get it wrong and fall over. So I finish rather awkwardly, and bow out. Then I'm embarrassed. I don't know whether to talk to him or not. I don't want to be pushy, but I really want to know what he thinks, if he thinks I'm okay.

He nods. "Not bad," he says. "How long have you been training?"

"Since I was ten; Traditional Games class at school. I was a useless heightfaller, and I've got no ball sense; I'm too short-sighted."

"Good, good." He gives a meaningless little smile that doesn't reach his eyes, and starts to turn away.

"No, I want to know what you really think. You're a Practitioner of the Art; I want the truth."

He looks at me again, seriously this time. "Well, your balance is good. And your rhythm is not bad. You have a sound grasp of Basic, and it's good that you can change hands; too many people don't work on that. Another year to polish it up and you'll be a credit to your valley's Festival team."

"Am I good enough for two-sword, do you think?"

He pauses, thinking. He's taking me seriously. "Take a rhythmic gymnastics class; work on the beam. Especially your turns. You need a good teacher for two-sword Basic, and you need to take the form slow. Really slow. A sloppy form, if you take it fast, you could really hurt yourself. Permanent damage. Don't try to teach yourself, you'll end up practicing your mistakes. Find a teacher."

"Yes!" I swallow. "I wish I was good enough to do it for real."

He smiles at me, shaking his head. "I started training when I was four. Every day. The body learns by doing, and doing again, until it's like breathing. Something that's part of you, not something you think about."

"Yes. I know." I try not to sound sad.

"You're on wander-round, yes? What does your family have in mind for you, when you get home?"

"A plumbing apprenticeship; we're Water people."

"And is that to your liking?"

"Yes. It's a useful job."

"In my opinion, it's more use than spending your life waving slot-swords about." He speaks quite gently, but his voice sounds oddly hoarse.

"But," I say, "to be guardian for a pilgrimage, you must be the best!"

"One of the best. But who wants to be the best stone axe maker, the best horseback archer? There's not much call for those skills nowadays. The tourists like the dance displays, but who wants to live as a tourist attraction? I wish I'd been apprenticed to some useful job. I wish I had a family trade to follow."

The House of the Sword only takes orphans. I've never met an orphan before. People who've lost a parent or two, yes of course; but to be *without family*; I can't imagine that. "So, you would rather be me, and I would rather be you," I say slowly. It's a new thought.

"Maybe," says Yennis, and nods.

I think hard, looking for a *mature* reply. "Well... I'll take a gym class. And maybe try out for the Festival team. I'm still better at sword than heightfalling, or *tennis*. I should do what I enjoy, even if I do it badly, eh?"

"Oh, you're not *bad*," Yennis says, and I grin, I can't help grinning. "Come and train with me after supper for an hour. You're sloppy on the left backstep spin; we can work on that."

Yes! I'm thinking. What I say is "Thank you," with a polite half-bow.

"You want to pay your respects to Water?" Yennis turns towards the Water house.

"I should clean up before breakfast," I agree. So we go to the rinsing room, sluice each other off with buckets, then take the cold plunge – white fire; I don't scream – then a warm wash with the soapy-feeling mineralised water of the hot spring. We're not the first bathers; there's only one towel where there should be a stack. "Take it, there's some in the guest block; I'll dry off there," I say to Yennis, and walk off dripping. On the way I pass Nani Agnetha, using one of the sitting stones by the sunrise-facing wall. Her eyes are closed. There's a beech marten curled up asleep in her lap, like a magazine photo of "home on the farm". I stop and smile.

Leslie walks round the corner, stops short, and says "Oh! Borren! I mean hello!" Nani's eyes open, but she doesn't look up. Leslie stares at the marten in her lap. "Is it tame?" she asks.

Nani frowns a little. "It lives here," she says.

Leslie stretches out her hand. "Can I touch it?" Nani doesn't answer.

"Do they bite?" Leslie insists, her hand hovering.

Nani looks up. "Of course they bite." I hear that she's a little cross. Leslie pulls her hand back, looking like Nani bit her.

"*Agos ti, Nani*," I say.

"What are you saying?" Leslie asks, and I remember that we've agreed to speak English in front of her. "I'm apologising for disturbing her. She was meditating."

"Oh," Leslie says. "Ah. You've, ah, been to the fount?"

"Yes. I should get dressed before breakfast."

Our speech is disturbing the marten. It flows down from Nani's lap, gives a little snort, then goes humping off around the side of the Water House.

"See you," Leslie says awkwardly, turning away.

Well. That's *everybody* in a bad mood, apart from me. What did I do? I look around. Nobody else in hearing. "*Keferi î, Nani?*" I ask, puzzled.

She glares at me, then suddenly laughs. "*Niya, niya*. Go on with you. I want some breakfast. Come and pour me some galsha. Put some clothes on first. You scared that poor woman."

"Oh." I look down at the stave in my hand. "It's only a practice weapon."

"She doesn't know that. Go put it away and meet me in the hall."

When I come into hall, Nani and Leslie, Yennis and Des are already there. It's a help-yourself breakfast from the serving table. I take a bowl of galsha and a mug of coffee, and go to sit with the others. Yennis and Leslie have coffee and bread and jam, Des has bread and a boiled egg, and a glass of mountain tea.

"What is that stuff?" Leslie nods at my bowl.

"It's galsha. Made from goat milk."

"That's not galsha! I've had galsha; galsha's a drink!"

"Ah, city galsha; comes with sugar and spices; it's nice. This is like we get on the farm. People who aren't born here don't like it, usually."

"Can I try that?" Des asks.

"Sure." I push the bowl across. He takes a teaspoonful of my breakfast. The taste clearly surprises him; he grunts, then nods.

"I could eat that," he says. "But I'd rather have an egg."

Ketlin comes in, yawning.

"*Bon di*," Leslie says.

"That's 'hello', isn't it?" Des asks.

Nani nods. "Also goodbye," she says.

"What else should I know? What's 'thank you'?"

"*Tis-tis*," Nani says.

"*Ka seléen?* That's 'what does it cost?'" Leslie says.

"*Fa caba ûne*," I volunteer.

"What's that one mean?"

"Where is the toilet," I say.

Des nods. "Always useful. *Vakaba iyn*."

I giggle. "No; that's a... rude suggestion. *Fa caba ûne*."

"Maybe it would be safer if I just said *pipi*." Des grins.

"That would do," Nani grins back. "That's what our babies say."

"I think it's what all babies say. They say that in France, even." I nod.

"When were you in France?" Leslie asks.

"School trip," I say.

Freya sits down, leaving an empty space at the table between herself and us. "Where's the *butter?*" she asks.

"We have galsha with bread. Butter's for cooking with. I can probably find you some; I'll go and ask the kitchen," Ketlin says, getting up again.

"What kind of jam is this?" Freya asks.

"*Seret*," says Nani.

"Barberry," says Leslie.

"Really? It's good! I've heard of *Berberis* jam, but in the UK it's mostly been eradicated except as an ornamental, because it's the alternate host for wheat rust." Freya looks interested, pleased.

"Wheat can *rust?*" Nani says, puzzled.

"Oh, it's a fungus. A plant disease," Freya says.

Nani nods. "We don't grow much wheat. Little bit of rye, some land-rice, black potato, *kcoxochiy*..."

"Kukux-*what*?" Des looks up.

"Dahlias," Freya says. "They're from Mexico, originally."

Ketlin comes back with some butter. "Anybody seen Rohan this morning?"

"He was up before me," Des says.

"He was at the fount with me," Yennis says. "Ah, here he comes." He puts up his hand and waves.

"Hi, you guys," Rohan says, putting his coffee down on the table. He wrinkles his nose at me, and says "Glasses?"

"I'm doing it like tomorrow," I say. "I don't wear contact lenses in a tent. It's too easy to get them dirty, or lose them."

"You're going up the mountain dressed like *that*?"

I'm wearing kingfisher-blue, which is a lucky colour; leggings and a long-sleeve top, because I don't like wearing sunscreen. "Sure," I say.

"Think of it as a base layer," Des says to Rohan.

"Oh! I have warm clothes to sleep in, of course. And trek sandals, in case the rock is too hot."

"Sunglasses?" Freya asks.

"These go dark in the sun."

Freya nods. She is dressed like a soldier, wearing the colours of dry grass, and soft boots. Des has sandals, baggy half-trousers that look easy to move in, and a dark green short-sleeve top saying PEAKS HALF, with a hole at the shoulder seam; an old favourite top. Leslie is wearing very new clothes, cream and lilac, covered in toggles and pockets, along with sandals that might as well be boots. I have never before seen sandals that look over-engineered. Yennis has a sunhat. Rohan has a fishing waistcoat over a loose white shirt like something out of a romantic film, along with black trousers and boots.

After breakfast, we bring our packs out in front of the House. Ketlin marches about like a teacher, shouting orders and questions: "Tents, stoves and fuel have been left for us at Perditellu; there is also food for us there, so we can make the big climb tomorrow carrying as little weight as possible. So today is like a trial run; if you find today that your personal kit is too heavy, you can re-pack tonight and leave some things behind. Does everyone have a sleeping mat and a four-season bag? It gets cold up there! Does everyone have a lunch pack?" She stops in front of Des and stares at his pack. "Des, what is this? Is this a weapon?" Ketlin slaps at the black handgrip sticking out from under the lid.

"Oh, that's my walking poles. I can leave them behind if there's a problem." He unclips the lid of his rucksack and pulls them out.

Ketlin looks at the poles. "Ah, this is no problem. These were not made as weapons, and not concealed. You were going to carry them tomorrow like this, and then use them to walk with in the basin?"

"That's right," Des says.

"Very useful, if we have to ford the river. You would let someone else use them if there was need?"

"Yes, of course."

Ketlin nods and smiles. "A tool in peaceful hands does good not harm. So, is everyone carrying at least two litres of water? Water is heavy, but you will have nothing else to drink tomorrow until we get to Perditellu. It will get hot. You will get thirsty. There are bottles of water on the shelf outside the fount."

Des hefts his pack. "I can take extra water if you want."

"Maybe tomorrow, if you go well today." Ketlin nods.

"I also can carry more," Nani Agnetha says.

"Thank you," Ketlin says.

"I can take four."

"Two is fine today."

"I am not a twig, to snap in your fingers! Listen, I don't go fast, but I can carry. I have been up a ladder before."

Ketlin gives Nani a long look. "No insult is intended. It will help me assess the group if everyone carries the same today."

"Yes yes," Agnetha says.

"Also I want everyone to carry two empty two-litre bottles, in the main body of your rucksack if possible. This represents the space you will need for tents, stoves, fuel, food, maybe some ritual kit, all the things that we will carry down from Perditellu, and for the rest of the trip. We have another supply dump at the head of the Surdu gorge, so we only need to carry food for three days, the same for fuel. Is everyone happy with that?"

Yennis comes up with an armful of harnesses. "Borren, come here. People, this is how it goes on."

Des takes a harness, shakes out the leg loops, and starts cinching himself in without watching the demo. Leslie looks nervous. Freya says, "Agnetha, you'll never get a harness on over that skirt."

"Thank you; I will not wear a harness." Agnetha smiles slightly.

"You'll never get up a bloody *via ferrata* wearing a *long skirt*," Freya says, as if Nani hadn't heard her the first time. "We're not Victorians, you know."

Nani puts one hand on her knee, bends down with a little grunt, picks up the back hem of her skirt and pulls it up through her legs. She tucks in about a foot of material firmly along the front of her waistband, converting the skirt into *yayno*, women's loose trousers. She stands on one leg, pulls up the other knee in her clasped hands until it touches her generous breast. She lets go with one hand and sweeps up her arm. Heron stance. Her foot goes down, gently. "Don't teach your grandmother," she says. "I can climb. Does anyone else need to talk about my skirt?"

Des says, "Don't look at me. Our guide in Bhutan wore a long skirt and flip-flops. On a glacier, in the snow."

Nani nods. "Good. And while we discuss clothing, does anyone need to talk about my headscarf? I've heard about you Westerners and headscarves."

Silence.

"Good. Then we say nothing more about clothing. Let's climb."

Ketlin says, "One more thing. Freya, Leslie; I need to be absolutely sure that you're not going to start a period while we're on the trek. So please tell me what precautions you have taken."

Leslie goes red. "Well, I'm, my periods are a bit erratic now, but I've had an implant. A hormone implant. No periods for three months."

"And you?" Ketlin looks at Freya.

"No periods. No uterus. I had a hysterectomy, is that safe enough for you?"

"Thank you," Ketlin says. "I am only asking this for your own safety, and for the safety of all the group. So, before we set off, I'd like to try picking up everyone's pack. You might like to try picking up each others'. Very instructive. Yennis, what are you carrying today?"

"The usual, with water and a rope. Tomorrow I will take as much as I can of what your novice would carry; I may as well get used to the weight today."

"Let me feel your pack." She picks it up; it's a different shape to everyone else's, on a frame – oh of course, because of his swords. "Mph. You'll manage." She turns to Des' pack and lifts it easily with one hand. "Ah, a minimalist. What have you got in there, a toothbrush?"

"Yes," says Des.

"Feels like it. Borren; you might find that a bit heavy. Think about what you really need. Freya; that's okay. Agnetha; yes, that's good. Leslie... Gods around us, what have you got in there, bricks? Unpack and let me have a look! What are all these glass bottles?"

"Water," Leslie says.

"Take them out of your pack; glass breaks. Go and get two plastic bottles of water from the shelf outside the fount."

"But you don't use plastic!"

"Oh, we do, where it's useful; we just never throw it away. What's this?"

"It's my wind-up radio."

"You can't take that into the basin. Leave it here. What about this?"

"That's my wind-up torch."

"You want a head torch, not a searchlight! What's this, more bottles..."

"That's my moisturiser! It's unscented, so's my exfoliant!"

"You will not use up two whole bottles of skin cream in two weeks. I'll find you two spice pots tonight; you can put a little in each. What's *this*?"

"Putruclus' *Poems*. A dual-language edition."

"It's a hardback! It weighs a ton!"

"I have half a book of sudoku with me," Nani Agnetha says. "I can pull a few out for you, if you get bored."

"I'm trying to follow your rules!" Leslie shouts.

"Yes, and you're doing well. Look; some people here haven't done much load-carrying, so I'm checking everybody's pack. I can see you've put a lot of thought into this; you're bringing all the right things, but you've packed heavy stuff where someone with more experience might have packed a lightweight alternative."

"*Moisturiser*?" Freya says.

"Yes," Ketlin says firmly. "While we're playing Desert Island Rucksacks, I hope everyone else has a luxury item or two. And that none of them is the complete works of Shakespeare, yes? Des, what's your luxury?"

"Half a bottle of Talisker – plastic bottle – and a miniature pack of cards."

"Freya?"

"Teabags. A little sketchpad and a couple of pencils, and a paperback *Alpine Flora*."

"Rohan?"

"I brought my ocarina; if nobody minds."

"Borren?"

"Candy," I say. "A bag of sugared almonds."

"Borren!" Agnetha says. "Suddenly you seem strangely attractive to me..."

"Buy your own candy, you old vulture. Borren, you don't have to share. You can if you want to, but you don't have to. So, Agnetha; what's yours?"

"My down travel pillow, and a dropper-bottle of lavender oil. Some sudoku. Oh, and the *Organon*. Pilgrims' edition, very thin paper."

"The *Organon*," Ketlin says quietly. "In Rometsch."

"Of course in Rometsch. It's written in Rometsch."

"Thank you for telling us," Ketlin says. Then she and Yennis bow, and I give a little-bow too. It never hurts to be polite

"What's Rometsch?" Freya asks.

My people all remain silent. *Rometsch: the night language, the women's language. The language of power.* None of us will say that aloud.

"It's the other language here," Leslie says cheerfully.

Nani Agnetha smiles. "Exactly," she says, and nods.

## ADELE

Interesting build from last time. Lots of conversation and once or twice I got stuck with who has said what. I wondered whether you need the section on what colours everyone was wearing - seemed to lack purpose so I drifted a bit at that point - unless there is a purpose but, if so, I would maybe drop a hint at something. Not sure about the present tense for it all. I get that you are portraying different people's perspectives, but it is difficult to be in the present all the time, particularly when some of it is thought rather than speech. Couple of little typos I noticed: When I come into hall - missing 'the'. P 17. Then again - 'while we discuss clothing' should be discuss. p19.

Some interesting characters, though I'm not sure an experienced rock star would be a virgin (he was the young innocent one who had it away with the prostitute, wasn't he?).

Lots to think about here.

## LESLEY

Thanks for the introductory summary and information. I found it useful that you outlined the plot and who the different characters are.

In Part 4, near the end, a 'Gisela' is mentioned but no reference as to who this is, except the inference s/he can sing.

Rohan's use of earthy language/swearing doesn't sit comfortably with me, but I guess you are using this to show/fit in with his character.

In Part 5 - maybe I misread some of it but the character viewpoint seems to change from Borren to a lot of dialogue from other other people. It can be difficult if you are writing from a first-person viewpoint because that person would not know what others are thinking/feeling. The dialogue is a way of showing others' point of view; maybe a few more references to keep the reader aware it is still Borren 'narrating' these events (without it getting too 'clanky') would help. Maybe it's me who didn't keep up!

## VERONICA

I like the way this is written in the 1st person present, as a way of engaging the reader. However, this can mean one having to remember which character is the protagonist in order to inhabit the character and is not such an easy read when we are still getting used to who is who. I love the language you choose to express the animism pervading Pinzeval, eg "You want to pay your respects to Water?" which reminds us that we are in a very different culture.

## IAN

My Uncle Derek was chief engineer at Tannoy. During WWII & just after he installed PA-systems in battleships, army camps, holiday camps and cathedrals. He was a complete atheist, but saw to it with religious zeal that the bishop could be heard from his pulpit to best effect. That's just how I feel, editing this compilation. I spend so long on tweaking the medium I wish I had time to enjoy the message.

Sue's in particular. This is my sort of SFF. But, like Pussycat-Pussycat, plus my Uncle Derek, I have eyes fine-tuned to the little mouse under the chair. I hope Sue can forgive me for this. One day, when I've almost forgotten it, I shall come back and read these virtual meetings with innocent joy.

So I approve of the character sketches, and recommend Sue maintains and expands them. If a publisher is buying a series from you, or an agent, they will want to see something like this.

Oh, plus a timeline. This is strictly only needed for tight-knit novels with several interwoven plots. Tolkien had one for *Lord of the Rings* - with authentic moon-phases!

Also some idea of genre is essential, until you're well-established enough to go inventing your own genres. In Sue's case, is it Psychological Mystery or Fantasy? This determines what's going to happen. Thus: do the *aerjinn* escape from people's heads into Sue-Land in the wider sense? Or (as happens in the best Scottish-Gothic novels, not to mention *The Turn Of The Screw*) - are you, the reader, offered a viable Alternative Construct, typically a robust one from modern science (but are permitted to retreat back into Fantasy if that's what you've paid-for)?

I think I and Freya both know which it's going to be. But that's where Sue gets to show her cookery skills.