

The Virtual Writers Group

led by Ian Clark, Thursday 30 April 2020
UPDATED WITH COMMENTS: Wednesday 6 May 2020

Present:

Adele Duffield
Ian Clark
Lesley Pemberton
Sue Thomason

Welcome to the third virtual meeting of the Whitby Writers Group since the start of the covid-19 lockdown. We're gaining experience, and the format seems to work. But, as Adele put it to me today, not as good as a face-to-face meeting. We can only look forward to having those later this year.

Please send your comments on each contribution to me, by Monday night, 4 May. It will help me a lot if you choose a subject line for the email containing:

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

You can add your name too, but Gmail shows it to me anyway, so it's redundant.

Example:

WWG 30 Apr 2020

This PDF comes to you attached to an email with a good-enough subject line, so why not just open the email again and press **Reply**?

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

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. It will have the title:

WWG_30_Apr_2020[COMMENTED].pdf

Matters Arising:

Veronica sends apologies, feeling she can't produce a piece for this week. I think that means we can look forward to one in a fortnight's time.

I'm serialising **Anitra's Petition** on the WWG website, and this has attracted followers. If you've forgotten how it goes, then you can look back to the posting on 15 April 2020 and go on from there. But the real reason I'm doing it is to force myself to get it finished when the present draft runs out (which will give me some pieces to contribute to the Virtual WWG Moot.)

Members' Contributions:

Let's start with Adele's contribution. She's opted to take advantage of the fact that we seem to have run out of men lately, so she can talk about girlie things without the old codgers sitting there in

blank perplexity. As Chairman / ~person / ~thing, I don't count – or at least I'll put my father's kilt on, and maybe my gender incompatibility won't be noticed. Anyway, here goes...

Adele Duffield

Menopausal Moments of Madness

Ladies Wot Lunch, well actually breakfast, and it's lovely to see them all again; me and my beautiful friends with all our baggage and woes, we laugh and cry and, of course, nearly wet ourselves, recalling moments of happiness, sadness, stupidity and madness!

So often the conversation turns to age and menopause and how we writhe in despair of ourselves thinking we're alone in what we feel, or don't feel, and how our bodies seem to have lost their magic, the spark of life and inner turmoil of love and slipperiness in sexual juices that flowed within, without and welcomed him willingly between our thighs. Yet now, instead, we'd rather have a cup of tea or read a book, or take a walk and just, be. When sexy thoughts come flooding in, though less frequently the ever before, we question, 'Do I love him still?', or has our love changed and what does he think of me? Do I turn him on still? I can't imagine so, with another stone or two wrapping kindly round my middle since this bloody mid-life curse has fallen upon me.

We talk of sex and reveal, one by one, how a dry vagina is fixed with those lubricating gels and spontaneity still survives, at least for one side, while the other is desperately trying to marry the feelings in her head with the lack of wetness between her legs. Is this fake or really love? 'Why don't my lady love juices flow no more?' As if it's not enough that we're struck down by the bloody curse at twelve or so, and monthly pains control our mood, and estragon flows freely through our veins, twisting our decisions and warping our desires, losing our virginity whether it was right or wrong that time. Headlong from this, we balance decisions of family planning and lurch from one pill to another, gain weight, lose weight, get angry, get hurt. Continual messing with our hormones and working our way through as best we can, to keep a pretty smile and look demure, while every month we feel like shite! Oh, that's right. Bring on the smear tests to train us for future humiliation, legs open wide and probing inside. Prepared still further for more to come. That curse of blood that turns into flesh and bone, and a bloody big head, carried and endured with love and tears and cramps and pain, burning and tearing to leave the womb, through stitches or stretches, our bodies are ruined, but wait, we still have to return to that which we were before, or risk losing love and desire from our men, not so keen to stand by us now we love our children more than it appears we do them. Misunderstood, or post-natal depression, demands on our flesh, we're broken, rejecting the men.

So, you hear tales of tight fanny and nubile delights, men-talk, and with turmoil you cry inside, knowing you'll never bring back the early model again. Twisted wombs and fallopian tubes, we grow fibroids and have issues they'll never know. What did we do to deserve our strife, young girl, to lover and eventually wife? Worried with pains and endoscopy ops, more scars and intrusions, while decisions are made. Removing the womb could cure a lot, so a hysterectomy's next to sort out the slop. Three months of no lifting or strenuous work, but the hundreds of stitches take their toll on you; sagging fanny, rebuilding stretched muscles to control what's inside, and another great scar from side to side. Yey, no more periods and no more pain, but they omit to tell you of those

other joys you'll gain. The menopause pixies turn up over-night. Take your drive, your energy and even your mind. Hot sweats left behind to burden your days, and nights. Deep breaths out, deep breaths in. Covers on, covers off, clammy bodies peeled like an onion skin. You learn to layer so you have plenty of options, the kids think you're a freak going out in winter in vest tops, or just pj bottoms and, of course, your flip flops, cos it's frosty underfoot, but you need the cool air on your glistening skin, damp with another one of your bloody hot sweats, overwhelmed by simply drinking the last mouthful of tea, or actually, just, nothing at all! Getting out of bed in the middle of another sleepless night to walk on the ice-cold tiles of the bathroom floor and wipe down your back and sweaty cleavage. Returning to normal, whatever that is, you go back to your bed hopeful of sleep which does not come easy between your own self-destruction and this menopausal disruption. And after all that, he wonders why you can't get up, just like him, feeling fresh the next morning!

You cry at the least little thing and have emotions hanging in threads and tatters all round you. Hating your figure, your face, being jealous of the young things that look like you used to, firm buttocks, fresh faces, no grey hairs, and a waist. What the hell do you do with an unkempt grey minge anyway? Perhaps it's just best to keep hidden away, out of sight, out of mind, or maybe I'll try a Brazilian or full wax some day!

There's sage oil and homeopathy or maybe HRT, but the risks are too great – at least for me. We all agree that we'd regret it too much if we missed out on grandkids 'cos we'd been too selfish. You might get fed up and consult with the doctor, but the side effects sound worse than problem itself. No, the best treatment is chats with like-minded friends who help you through crap, and bring you from Hell and all the way back. Why should being a woman be such a disability, 'you're just being weak, get over yourself' I say, and give myself a slap. There are people in this world with real stuff to worry about, while I'm spending time fretting about sweating (and dry vaginas, and mood-swings, no libido, losing my mind and my body – STOP!). Embarrassed and guilty for being so selfish, I decide to get through it with natural endurance. My earth-mother side prevails. Good diet, lots of water, daily exercise, mindfulness. It's weak to give in, become a slave to potions, so I stay positive, meet up with friends to keep myself sane. We eat and chat and drink and laugh, go for a walk and discuss weight, our flaws, this and that. Turns out we're the same, never alone. We laugh about sex and our weak pelvic floors which, often, nearly give, but for legs crossed, and praise that we've just been to the loo before going out. Our crotches that struggle to muster up juices, make us laugh at men's jokes about times they had with frigid huns, whose whizzers turned out to be dry as nun's!

We help each other by sharing our woes, telling tales of madness we each reveal. Filling our lives with daftness and smiles, will not keep us down that's for sure. Our minds may be going, our bodies have gone, but we've got each other which keeps women strong.

JENNY

Enjoyed Adele's piece about this taboo subject, a well written piece about the final slap of "the curse of Eve". The rhymes hidden in it, give a lightness of touch and it ends on a positive upbeat note. It makes you question why there is so little written on the subject historically, if you Google "history of menopause," the same

few phrases are repeated over and over, there is really hardly any information about how this was coped with over the last 3,000 years!

SUE

Many phrases in this piece have such a strong rhythm, and either rhyme or near-rhyme, that I wonder whether it's going to end up as a poem (or possibly prose poem). Examples:

- happiness, sadness, / stupidity and madness
- Yet now, instead, we'd rather have a cup of tea / or read a book, or take a walk and just, be
- burning and tearing to leave the womb, / through stitches or stretches, our bodies are ruined
- What did we do to deserve our strife, / young girl, to lover and eventually wife?
- Removing the womb could cure a lot, / so a hysterectomy's next to sort out the slop
- rebuilding stretched muscles to control what's inside, / and another great scar from side to side
- Yey, no more periods and no more pain, / but they omit to tell you of those other joys you'll gain.

However the rhythm keeps petering out, and rhyme-y bits are interspersed with sentences that I read as just prose, so I don't really know whether this was an intended effect or not.

I like the informal, conversational voice, but I got quite confused about point of view. "It's lovely to see them all again" is probably first person omniscient, which smoothly mutates into first person plural "me and my beautiful friends... we". Then there's an alternation between individual and group: "Do I love him... has our love changed ... I can't imagine ... we talk..." which is fine, because that's what groups are like; attention flutters between awareness of an individual who's talking, and awareness of the social cohesion and support of the group. But para. 3 starts in second person: "you hear tales ... you cry inside", and I am not sure who is being addressed. Then there is a real confusion of voice: "we ... have issues they'll never know" (unspecified they) and even a lapse into the nonattributed passive "decisions are made" (by who?). Further into this section I ended up feeling lectured at by the "you" voice and wanting to argue back: "You cry at the least little thing" – no I don't! And then I felt lectured at by the "we" voice as well! "We all agree that we'd regret it too much if we missed out on grandkids" – no, I'm perfectly happy at the moment without grandkids (or kids, which are a bit of a necessary precondition for grandkids). By this point in the piece I don't feel part of the group who are being spoken for; I'm so far removed from its experience that I have taken a step back; I am definitely not one of you/we/us, this is not my experience, and the piece doesn't leave me any space to have a different experience in, so I feel a bit annoyed.

And that is my real problem with this piece. Voicing some women's experience is great, but I felt this piece is starting to assume that one woman's experience is all women's experience. And I don't think it is. The experiences voiced in this piece are nothing like my experience of menopause, for example. I think the piece would work better for me if the piece stuck with "we", strongly identified as a group of friends – or even "I", voicing one woman's experience. I think that would make it easier for me to empathise with experiences very different from my own.

I am quite horrified to read a woman's voice saying "Why should being a woman be such a disability". I haven't fully unpicked this for myself yet, but I think I'm horrified because I think this statement buys into the view that only men are normal. I disagree.

I don't want to be unsympathetic to this piece, and I think in many ways it's a very vivid piece of writing.

LESLEY

The woes of being a woman!

I didn't have any babies of my own but can sympathise with your description, having done midwifery training. That (midwifery) would have been enough to put me off even if I hadn't already decided motherhood was not for me.

A couple of 'typos' (?) near the beginning: "When sexy thoughts come flooding in, though less frequently the ever before..." – the should be than.

"estragon" should be oestrogen (or estrogen – US spelling).

This reads like a poem in some parts. I don't know if you intended it but many sentences/parts of sentences rhyme, e.g., "What did we do to deserve our strife, young girl, to lover and eventually wife?"

Maybe needs a bit of 'polishing', re-editing?

Somewhat elegiac but with touches of humour. Well done for tackling what, for many, is a sensitive or embarrassing (or even taboo) subject.

BTW I look forward to seeing Ian in his kilt!

IAN

(Recuses himself on gender grounds, kilt notwithstanding.)

Captive Kite

You toss
 weave twist
swoop *spiral*
 climb
and *twirl*
slashing the air with tireless energy
shaking in scorn your simple scarlet sail
swishing contemptuously your yellow tail.

Chanced to see you from my skylight window
Strained to peer round chimney pots and tiles
to watch you frolicking in wild delight
sporting your colours in the fading light.

What fool was flying you so close to roofs?
But you are always there, at any hour.
The moonlight gleams upon your nightly dance
and dawn is welcomed by your sunny prance.

It gradually began to dawn on me
You weren't the hobby of some wilful child
denied the freedom to seek open spaces
with precious toy, to put it through its paces.

Did you break loose upon some windy scarp
released to fly away to the horizon?
More apt to tumble down, where branch and thorn
would clutch you, cruelly tangled, pierced and torn.

But Providence ordained a gentler fate:
a sloping roof to lie on when no breeze
a steady grip upon your reckless cord
which never tires, or wavers, or gets bored.

Or did some immature, impatient hand
send you aloft, above forbidden roofs
to snag your string, so you became the thrall
of chimney, brick and slate, and gable wall?

But as I envy your untrammelled glee
I can't determine if your present state
is one of endless, joyous liberation
or an interminable captivation.

ADELE

In general I really like this poem- you certainly describe it like a bird and could easily be mistaken until you reveal the reality. A couple of little things: a) I find 'Contemptuously' a bit lumpy and doesn't match the free flowing rhythm (end of verse 1).

b) 7th verse - I suggest losing the 'and' to just say - from chimney, brick, slate and gable wall?' - seems more rhythmic and less clunky.

c) last line - how do you feel about adding the word 'else' - 'or else an interminable captivation' - again it just seems to fit better with the metre.

Really good image though, thank you for sharing.

JENNY

Beautifully written story within this poem, of the bird's apparent freedom and the observer's anxieties for its future. The rhyme scheme worked well to emphasise this, starting with open free verse and finishing each verse with tighter couplets.

SUE

What an interesting observation/idea; a kite being flown by a house rather than a child! The broken first line wonderfully copies the motion of the kite, and the reveal/development of verses 2 – 7 is engaging. The paradox of the last verse is fascinating... Really enjoyed this. Wouldn't change a word.

LESLEY

Watching the kite, observing its colours and movements, is an evocative description in your poem. What else can I say, except what you encapsulated at the end:

"...I can't determine if your present state is one of endless, joyous liberation or an interminable captivation."

Are we, like the snagged kite, free or enslaved?

IAN

Thank you for noticing the rhyming scheme, Jenny. Now I'll spoil the effect by admitting it happened by chance. When crafting a poem I usually leave the rhymes till last, until my brain is back in a jingly mood, or I fire up the rhyming dictionary (<https://www.rhymezone.com/>).

Rhyming the last couplet of each verse was easy, but not the remainder. Then I noticed that the scheme offered a practical metaphor for the kite itself (...the toy, not the bird) – unconstrained at the top, but tethered at the bottom.

The opening line... I've said elsewhere I'm not a big fan of typography in the service of poetry. But I thought I'd get away with it here. If I ever read it out loud I will wave my arms about.

Sue and Lesley draw attention to the last couplet. To me it evokes a dog on a lead. Some dogs view the lead as permission to throw themselves around in total abandon, i.e. as *liberation*... from the duty to behave themselves. When the dog is nearly as big as its owner, this is comical to watch.

Adele faults me on scansion. I've emulated Shakespearian blank verse throughout (iambic pentameters):

*The quality of Mercy is not strained:
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.*

It's a natural rhythm for the English language, and so it's not hard to keep up. But you *must* keep it up, otherwise a break stands out as a fracture. You can use a break for histrionic effect (and Shakespeare does), but I don't think it works in the last line of verse 7:

*to snag your string, so you became the thrall
of chimney, brick and slate, and gable wall?*

to turn it into...

*to snag your string, so you became the thrall
of chimney, **brick, slate**, and gable wall?*

But I do admit the poem's concluding couplet scans clumsily, which muddies the clarity of the epigram. Each line begins and ends with unstressed syllables, so the couplet mumbles on a bit:

*is one of endless, joyous liberation
or an interminable captivation.*

This replacement couplet scans better, and gains drama from the crisper final words on each line:

*is one of endless, joyous liberty
or never-ending sour captivity?*

not to say using words with the correct meaning at this juncture. So thanks for pointing it out.

Lesley Pemberton

Some members of the group asked for more of the story about Gwen and King Arthur. I have written a short piece for the beginning/back story but I'm not sure this will grab people's interest, nor how to make it longer as a first chapter to keep it interesting.

I could incorporate the incident about the white dog, where Gwen goes back in time, with the time she visited Tintagel as a schoolgirl. She had a very fleeting glimpse of the past on that first visit. Then I could make some changes as to how she entered her longer 'time shift' in the further chapter that I presented a few weeks ago.

Any comments/suggestions welcome.

TIME SHIFT

The warp and weft of time are woven into a tapestry, but only a few chosen ones see the links in the details. What is past, what is present, what is yet to come.

THE PRESENT

'Owain, come and look at this.'

'What?' He strolled over to his wife, Gwen, who was sitting looking at her laptop.

'It's a photo of the new bridge at Tintagel. You can now walk across to the island and see more of the ruined castle. Shall we go?' Gwen's question was more like a statement.

'You and your legends again. You have such a vivid imagination.'

Owain was teasing her but in an indulgent way. He was fully aware of Gwen's interest in history, legends and myths and perfectly happy for her to read and research things.

'I know it isn't of such interest to you,' Gwen said, 'but I've been looking at a lot of information recently about King Arthur.'

'Sooo?' Owain elongated his questioning word.

Gwen proceeded to elaborate. She'd been to Tintagel Castle many years previously; a holiday with a school friend and her friend's parents. That was the start of her interest in the stories about *King Arthur And The Knights Of The Round Table*. Recently she decided to find out more about the legends and myths. Was King Arthur a real person? Was Tintagel his home? What about all the associated stories?

'You know,' said Gwen (although Owain didn't know but was about to find out), 'there's some evidence being put forward now that Arthur was not a medieval King, but lived before that time – maybe around the 5th Century. He was a Chief who united many tribes and earned the title of King. Perhaps the stories are based on the exploits of several Chiefs, not just on one man. Perhaps he was at Tintagel but it was an earlier settlement than the Castle ruins that can be seen now. There have been some archeological digs reinforcing that possibility.'

'Well, what are you proposing?' Owain asked.

'I'd really love to go to Cornwall again – to see the castle at Tintagel. We could go for our holidays later this year and...' Gwen added, 'you could go surfing if the weather and tides are right.'

Owain perked up. 'Hey! That would be great. I haven't been surfing since before we got married.'

Always having a bit of give and take resulted in a happy marriage. Gwen and Owain could indulge in their individual interests and there would be other things to do and places to visit in Cornwall. It was agreed; their next holiday was about to be planned.

ADELE

I do think you need to extend the back story more as we need to decide as readers what we make of both her and her fella. At the moment, there is not enough show and too much tell by the narrator. Maybe you could elongate this section by agreeing a planning night that both have to do a bit of prep for. Gwen comes up with a calculated itinerary or something while Owain has only looked at tides, surfing life and stuff like that. They couldn't maybe get into a debate about it which could demonstrate their characters a bit to the reader.

I get the impression at the minute that Owain might be a bit in control, like he would agree to go if it hadn't been for the surfing, and she seems to have to please him. The final paragraph is too succinct and like an authorial sermon about marriage - are you suggesting to the reader that their marriage might not be in a good place?

Lots to think about, but with a lead in like this, you definitely get a better picture of your protagonist and so I believe it does need developing and would be beneficial to your book.

JENNY

This works so well to give the reader the necessary background historical information and an insight into Gwen's present day relationship with her husband. It doesn't greatly draw the reader in, but I don't think that matters, because of Leslie's particular story telling style, ie. you are waiting to see what happens, as in a saga, where you wouldn't expect "thrills and spills" in the first few lines.

Gwen seems to be very happy with her young, hunky surfboarder husband. Will this be problematic in the plot? Will she be able to love King Arthur and enjoy the diversions of Lancelot without yearning for her present day life? Or is that going to be part of the story?

Can't wait to find out!

SUE

OH GOODY! I'm so pleased you have written this; given Gwen a present-day context and the beginnings of a fully-rounded character... I was very bothered that she arrived at Arthur's court as rather a blank, and we don't really get a lot of information about what she is thinking and feeling in those early Arthurian scenes (this is not surprising; she is stunned, doesn't really know whether she is dreaming or hallucinating or what) so if readers can go into those early Arthurian scenes having already met Gwen, already liking her, it will be easier to stay with her through this sequence. And you have given yourself some interesting plot points to untangle; if Gwen is married in the present, how will she feel about being asked to bigamously marry Arthur in the past? Or will she regard her liaison with Arthur as an extramarital affair? Or will she remain chaste with him? Or what??

Yes, I would include Gwen's schoolgirl experience at Tintagel as an early scene - but I wouldn't do it as a prologue. Maybe something like this: on day 1 of their Cornish holiday, Gwen and Owain look round their (hotel room/rented cottage/campsite/whatever) and say "ooh, this is lovely" and Gwen says "and tomorrow we can visit Tintagel" and Owain says "not me; I'll be on the beach", and Gwen says "oh; was hoping you'd come with me" and Owain says "Why? You know I'm not that interested in castles" and Gwen says "well, not sure I've ever told you this before, but something a bit weird happened when I was there before..." Insert schoolgirl experience, Gwen telling it to Owain. And then you can have him react either sympathetically or unsympathetically, and develop their relationship and both their characters thereby...

I know you don't want to spend a huge amount of time with Gwen in the present, but I think it would work well if you had a first chapter of maybe 3000 - 4000 words, at the end of which Gwen arrives at Arthur's court in the past. I'd keep the white dog transition as adult-Gwen timeshifts to Arthur's court... and... just an idea... Welsh King Arthur (in the Mabinogion) has a dog, who is white with red ears (so probably a fairy/supernatural dog, and who is called Cafall (pronounced, roughly, Cavatl) - could the white dog in the present actually be Arthur's dog? Or look identical to Arthur's dog? Which raises the question: who sent Arthur's dog into the present to fetch Gwen back in time - and why?

Something else I would personally be interested in adding to Gwen's character - what really stood out for me in her early Arthur's-court experiences was the magnificent dress, and Gwen's reaction to it. She is someone for whom clothes are important. So I'd like to see clothes being important to her in the present time - maybe she

would love to dress up but can't afford to, maybe she has some specific professional connection with, or interest in, fashion or costume, maybe she has actually seen her "Arthur" dress somewhere in the present – a shop window, on a museum dummy, on stage? That dress feels really significant in that scene – so you can give it more significance somewhere else, maybe?

But this is your story, not mine, so feel totally free to ignore everything I've said if it doesn't feel interesting or helpful...

IAN

I don't have much to add to what the others have already written. But don't go altering it just yet. Leave it as a placeholder. As you develop the characters of the protagonists, these might reflect back pointedly on Owain himself and his relationship with Gwen, which you can draw out and buff-up when you come to rewrite it. Might Owain turn out to be a poor substitute for Arthur, or Sir Lancelot – or even Sir Gawain? Maybe Gwen won't fancy coming back to the present day?

Sue Thomason

Plot summary

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

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 from college (and Pinzeval native) Ketlin, who is leading the walking holiday Leslie has signed up for.

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.

Now read on...

3. Yennis

At supper they're noisy. They're always noisy on the first night. Ketlin and me have both been given places on the High Table tonight, to honour the pilgrimage. I'm sitting with my back to the wall, looking out over the diners. Ketlin sits opposite me, with her back to the world. She smiles at me, and shouts above the clamour, in English, "You want to practice your English?"

"Niya, amb' orâa. Let's talk about the foreigners while we have the chance."

Ketlin pulls a face. She leans across the table, drops her voice, and says, still in English, "Foreigners later; first I want to talk about the boy. Will he be trouble for you?"

I switch to English. "Who, Borren? I think not."

"He's in love with the sword dance."

I shrug. "He is sixteen. This is common at his age."

"Is he in love with you?"

"Surely not! I hope not. He, ah, would be fun for sex, but I don't want him to hurt his feelings." I smile. "He's a nice boy. I like him. I will be kind to him."

"Don't be too kind." Ket pulls a face.

"I will take care. I think he is okay. His head may be full of air, but his feet know the earth." I take a mouthful of rosti, watching the foreigners, who are sitting together, playing with their unfamiliar eating tools. The kitchen has given us a formal four-course meal – savoury bean soup; venison with red jelly, acorn crackers, dahlia rosti and sallet trays; maslin with curds; and sweet bean soup -- so we each have a four-utensil place setting: spoon, tongs, scissors and skewer. One of the tourists picks up a chunk of venison with his vegetable tongs. The woman sitting next to him taps his arm to get his attention, then shows him how to use the skewer instead.

"He's looking someone to worship, that boy," Ket says sourly.

I turn back to Ket. "Not me. I am no god; not even a hero. All I know is sword dancing."

"He was watching you practice."

I shrug again. "He can watch. It is not a secret. And perhaps you will have trouble also. What about the Nani?"

"What about her? Pilgrimage is a pleasant hobby for those with no other responsibilities. There are plenty like her."

"*That* one is not a Nani with 'no responsibilities'. There's something strange about her. Is she from a dark temple?"

Ketlin shakes her head. "No; don't be melodramatic. Look at her beads; she's a regular pilgrim. What worries me is whether she's fit to climb."

"We will find out tomorrow. I hope so. She will not be happy if you don't take her, and keeping Nani happy is a good idea."

Ketlin nods.

"So, tell me about the foreign woman who tells me that she knows you."

"*Amba gonossi dé*. She thinks she knows me," Ket says switching to Falsh. "She thinks she knows a lot."

"*Enessi ti*. She's an enthusiast," I say, matching language. "That could be dangerous."

"I don't think she will make trouble." Ketlin frowns.

"Will she try to undermine your leadership? On the basis of old friendship?"

"Oh, no no. She's been trained not to challenge leaders. What about the rest of them? You brought them up from the station..."

"*Amba*; Des has a good deal of experience. He's been trekking in Greenland and Bhutan. I heard him say 'It's beautiful here, but I wouldn't call this wild'."

"So." Ket looks thoughtful. "If he loves the wild places, and he doesn't think Val is wild, why has he come here?"

"Ornaliy isn't tame." I touch the sword-hilt over my left shoulder.

"No, but the brochure doesn't make it sound *wild*."

"Des told me he booked this trip because he thought his girlfriend would enjoy it."

"Girlfriend? What girlfriend?"

"The girlfriend he no longer has. He booked the trip before they parted. She cancelled; he didn't."

"Oh. He's the older man, yes? He looks like old jerky."

"He's made of old jerky, I think. The young man, Rohan; he's a bit of a wide-eyes. Crystals and auras."

"Oh, no; not another one?"

"I think so. And he's wearing a Grasshopper pin."

"Really?" Ket looks angry. "Doesn't he know that Iyestri is not welcome in this House?" Then her frown smooths out, and she says "He doesn't know, does he? He's a foreigner, he can't intend insult. Speak to him, please; it will come better from a man. So the fair-haired woman, she's the late booking?"

"Yes. Her name is Freya She's an amateur botanist; here to see the flowers."

"Easy to keep her happy, then."

I look out over the eating hall again. The foreigners are together at one end of the table for unaligned guests; a ragbag of those with allegiances to small gods, non-believers, and tourists. Borren's down with the novices, waving his hands around; they're

talking fussball, I think. Nani Agnetha is at the table of Dématri, looking resentful that she hasn't been given a place of honour. Typical small-farm Nani style; boss cow of a herd of three. So.

"Did you pick up a weather forecast for tomorrow?" I ask.

"Hot. Thunder later. We'll need an early start."

I nod. "So; no big risk of aerjinn this side of the mountain?"

"No worse than normal. Why are you worried?"

"Aerjinn are my job to worry about. I'll leave the rest of the worrying to you."

Ket nods. "Usual practice; we go tomorrow as if we were setting out for the basin. Kit check, full water load, we'll start up the gorge so they get some practice with chains and ladders. I want them in full sun for a couple of hours. They need to find out what that's like. Oh yes, and we have no novice with us this trip. My novice broke her wrist ten days ago."

"*Aiya*; what happened?"

Ket pulls a face. "Shopping in Vizh; she tripped on a step."

"Unlucky her. That could happen to anyone."

Ket snorts. "It wouldn't happen to you."

"Four tents then. What do you think; men together, women together, Borren with the Nani, you with me?"

"That would be simplest," Ket nods. "But when is life simple? The Nani may want to tent with me, and I won't make trouble by refusing her. Borren maybe not with you. Which of the other men would you prefer?"

"Des might have to prove that he's tougher than me. Rohan might start fishing for secret knowledge. Tent me with Freya; botany's safe."

Ket raises an eyebrow. "The foreigner men won't be jealous? You know how they are."

"They've both tried catching her eye already. It's not to be caught. Maybe you should worry about your friend Leslie."

"She is not my friend. Maybe I should tent you with her."

"Oh, thanks!"

The sweet bean soup arrives, and in honour to the Unborn, we eat in silence. After that, we bow out of the meal, and file off the dais to wash our hands. Ket's booked a lecture room for our after-meal "introductory talk". The four foreigners are waiting there for us when we arrive. It's after sunset, so I switch on the light.

"Hey, I didn't think you had electricity here?" That's Rohan the wide-eyes. "Micro-hydro," I say. It's the same word in English. "We don't have neon, no bright lights outside, but we're not, ah, we have *technology*."

Borren comes in with the Nani. "*Va 'stia i, Nani*." He bows her to the speaker's chair. "*Preta rouzhabo di?*"

"No, thank you," she says in English, and smiles at the group. "We will not hide words; we have eaten together. Now we are friends."

"Yessâam. I will speak English." Borren smiles.

“Is everyone happy that we use English as the common language for our group?” Ketlin looks around. The foreigners clearly expected nothing else. The last class held here must have been small; there are only three benches pulled up to form a rough triangle, with the speaker’s chair at the apex. We sit on the benches, except for Ket, who stands in the centre with her back to the Nani.

“So, welcome to our visitors,” Ketlin says. “I’m Ketlin, your group leader; this is Yennis my assistant.” She points at me. “Any problems you have over the next ten days, please bring them to us. Those of you who booked through Jornada Tours will have realised from the trip notes that this is not quite a usual holiday. I’m a Wind sister. I am making a pilgrimage to present offerings to one of the wind-keeps in Ornaliy. An offering sister is traditionally accompanied by a sword dancer; that’s Yennis here. His sworn task is to keep me safe; his secondary task is to protect any pilgrims who travel with me; that’s you. So Yennis is our safety officer. If he tells you to do something, please do it. He will give a dance demonstration tomorrow. This is part of your safety training, so please turn up and watch. If he has to dance in the basin, stay in a tight group behind him. We’ll show you tomorrow.”

“Can we take photographs?” Des asks.

“Tomorrow, yes; but no cameras in the basin. Tomorrow is training day; we’ll go up the Sildu gorge. This will get you used to moving on a via ferrata; we’ll do some climbing and some traversing. Please pack your rucksacks as if you were setting off for the big trek; Yennis and me will check them over before we leave. We should be back by two or three o’clock tomorrow afternoon. We’ll need an early start.”

“Thought we were going to the Altafirini plateau on Day One?” says Freya.

“The weather forecast is giving thunderstorms for tomorrow afternoon,” Ketlin says. “The Altafirini is high-risk for lightning strike; so it’s not a good place for us to go tomorrow.”

“Oh come on; how big a risk is it?”

“It’s a high enough risk that I don’t want to be on the plateau tomorrow afternoon.”

Freya scowls. “The Altafirini is only two hours from here. We could be up there by ten in the morning, earlier, maybe. I want to see the ghost lilies. We could be back down by noon.”

“Well, we have two free days at the end of the trip. Many people like to visit the hot springs, and the Arkagou Dématriy in Vizh, but I’d be happy to take you up to the Altafirini then, weather permitting,” Ketlin is smiling.

“That’s nearly two weeks away. The lilies are flowering *now*. The brochure said we’d go to the Altafirini on Day One.”

“The brochure was wrong,” Ketlin says, still smiling.

“I accept your decision,” Nani Agnetha says unexpectedly. “The flowers will be there for us to see another day, or not. We will take the day that comes to us.” And she inclines her head to Ketlin. Well, that’s one problem solved.

“I was nearly struck by lightning once,” Rohan says. “And I don’t want to do that again. It hit a building across the road from me. It sounded like the sky being ripped apart, I mean *ripped*, like, you know, the fabric of the universe tearing. Next thing I knew, I was down on the pavement, like *prostrated*.” He sounds oddly pleased by his brush with

danger. I suppose a near-miss is something to celebrate – although maybe not right in front of the deity concerned.

“It’s an objective danger,” Des says. “I respect that.”

“Isn’t... I mean, climbing an iron ladder in a thunderstorm, will that be safe?”

That’s Leslie.

Ketlin nods. “I aim to keep the group safe, and this is why I have chosen a different route. The Sildu gorge is where we train our novices. Even on the technical sections, we’re never far from an easy escape. Summer storms are quite normal here, they follow a pattern. The morning starts fine, the cloud builds up, and the storm will break, if it comes, late afternoon or evening. We’ll be down by then.”

“What about Monday, when we do the big climb? What if it thunders then?”

“Well, after a storm we normally have good weather for a few days. And the morning after a storm is often cooler, so that would be good for our big climb.”

“Just a minute, ah, Ketlin?” Des raises a hand.

“Kutlun. You should say Kutlun,” Leslie mutters.

Agnetha chuckles, and I say, “You’re very polite, mâam. What you say is correct, but most people are not so formal nowadays.”

Leslie’s face flushes. “I shouldn’t say it like that?”

Agnetha smiles. “You sound like an extract from the book of behavioural examples we had in school.”

Leslie looks at me. “Is she right?”

I shrug. “I didn’t go to school. But we all just say Ketlin.”

“Ketlin,” Leslie says, trying it out. Ketlin smiles and nods.

“I wanted to ask,” Des continues. “You’ve mentioned storms. And fifteen hundred metres is a quite big climb. What about other risks? Rockfall, for instance?”

“Unlikely, but not impossible. The rock is sound, it’s a well-used route. Your biggest risk would probably be from another member of the party dropping something on your head, so we ask the group to keep close together on the ladders. Most of the route is not so steep; footpath, or rock-cut steps, so essentially walking in a very spectacular situation.”

“Exposure?”

“Spectacular, as I said. There are two ladder sections, iron rungs bolted into the rock, with a steel cable running alongside that we clip into for protection. We use the standard two-tether protection system, so that you’re always attached to the safety cable; I’ll show everyone how to manage that tomorrow. Has anyone here been on a via ferrata before?”

“I’ve done *Go Ape*,” Rohan says.

“I’ve done some scrambling, and some low-to-middle grade trad rock-climbing,” Des says, smiling. “No via ferrata, though.”

“We have sit-harnesses for everyone, and Jornada require us to offer you helmets, although some people don’t like them. You can try them out tomorrow; if you decide not to use them on Monday, please be aware that this may invalidate your travel insurance. We’ll leave the climbing kit at the Perditellu refuge on Monday night, so we don’t have to carry it round the basin. Our novices will bring it down; at this time of year, someone packs a load up to Perditellu most days.”

Des frowns. "Not fond of helmets. Do you wear one?"

"No."

"What about aerjinn? Are they dangerous?"

"Of course, but we hope not to meet one. If we do, that's what Yennis is here for."

"And if we do meet one, what happens?"

"There could be danger from flying rocks and debris. There are stories of people being picked up and thrown. Maybe pressure-change effects, eardrum damage and so on. But encounters with aerjinn are usually peaceful, these days. We have never had a pilgrim killed."

"There's no medevac from the basin, right?"

"That's right. We don't want helicopters going in there. That kind of disturbance might well trigger an attack."

"Superstition," Freya mutters.

"It's no superstition. Aerjinn exist." Ketlin sounds patient. "We have hundreds of eyewitness accounts, a few photographs, and one short piece of silent film."

"Sure." Freya scowls. "But they're not *demons* that need *placating*. It's a natural phenomenon. We should be studying it. There's a perfectly rational explanation, one that doesn't involve anything *supernatural*." She spits out the final word.

Ketlin smiles. "There are *several* perfectly rational explanations."

"But you think they're demons," Freya says.

"Actually, I don't," Ketlin says.

"Then why do you do all this ritual stuff?"

"Because it works," Ketlin says patiently. "There is a story about a pre-literate tribe who perform an elaborate wound-healing ritual; chants, drums, herbs. A visiting anthropologist writes it down, and a doctor back at her home university points out that part of the ritual makes penicillin. Much of what we do may have no effect. But some of what we do is effective; we know this. And the last time someone tried to alter the aerjinn rituals, a village was destroyed. That was in the 1940s, a bunch of fascist occultists. Their ritual killed them. Unfortunately, it killed a couple of hundred other people as well. Our novices visit the site as part of their training programme. It's..." Ketlin shakes her head. "*Don't* underestimate the aerjinn. But we probably won't meet one. Don't lose sleep over it."

"About like polar bears," Des says.

Ketlin smiles. "Something like that, yes."

"Bears?" Freya says. "There are *bears* up here? Lonely Planet said there were bears in that park in the middle of town, wandering free; there was a warning about not feeding them."

"They don't often eat people." Ketlin says, grinning.

"They're safer than dogs," Leslie says. "That might be why there are no dogs in Skandripol."

"There were sniffer dogs at the airport." Rohan says.

"Those were wolves," Leslie says.

"Wolves!" Rohan yelps.

"Wolves don't eat people, either." Des says.

Freya glares at Des. "What other wild animals do you have round here?" she asks.

Ketlin shrugs. "A few lynxes. They are protected; we really need them for deer and goat control. They don't eat people either. You won't see one. And I should remind you that we have an early start tomorrow. I hope you all have a comfortable night."

People get up. "Who has a torch?" Agnetha says, looking at me.

I shake my head. "I have to practice," I say.

"You dance in the dark?" Freya asks.

"Yes," I say. "For when I must."

"You practice every day?" Des asks. I nod.

As people leave, I put a hand on Rohan's shoulder, and say quietly, "Rohan, a word? I see you're wearing a grasshopper pin."

He looks down. "Some, ah, a priestess gave it to me. It's a good luck charm?"

"It's more like showing which team you support. We have a lot of gods here; sometimes it's polite not to take sides in public. You should take it off for formal meals."

"She told me to keep it on."

"If it matters that much to you, pin it where other people can't see it, inside your clothing somewhere."

He stares at me, then says, "Right."

I go to practice, and he goes off to sleep.

ADELE

I know it's not really important at this stage of writing, but I noticed a typo- you 'don't want him to hurt his feelings' - cut the 'him'.

Story is picking up now for me. I'm getting the sense of an adventure ahead and also some impending doom since you mention to potential issues on safety. Good character building - I'm getting the picture nicely of some of the group so that is working well and I want to know more. I'm a little in the dark about the relationship between Ketlin and Yannis - am guessing what's gone before, so that's good to keep the mystery and makes me wonder where (if anywhere) that's going to go.

Intriguing little details have kept my interest better in this chapter, than the first one did, which just seemed a bit weird, and the second was just a bit too sexual to have the depth that the story now seems to be taking.

Leaves me wanting more.

JENNY

This works brilliantly to sum up the characters so far, a good ploy with a quite large cast of characters mainly with unfamiliar names. The reader can stand with them in the dining hall, look at them all and also get an intriguing query into what is going to happen next. Rockfalls, lightening strikes, slips on that treacherous rockface ladder, attacks from wild animals or a step into the complete unknown with those aerjinns?

LESLEY

I found this third part of the story more interesting than the first two parts.

Although narrated by 'Yennis' it gives more insight into what is going on and introduces other characters to us. Your introductory comments were helpful as well.

I'm more intrigued now about what the plot development will be and the 'input/fate' of the various people.

IAN

Ah – what tour guides actually think of their feckless charges! All seasoned (or soured) with a sprinkling of bad religion ("bad" in the moral sense, not how it's alluded to here, which is good). Plus the feeling that this is no playgroup picnic: the going will get rough, and there are wild things about – some of them supernatural.

I feel that you have at last written yourself into the novel, in the sense of getting into your stride. This is not to disparage the other passages, which will improve with a bit of context. I wonder if this might make a good opening chapter? Just offered as a suggestion: there may be technical reasons why this won't work.