

The Virtual Writers Group

led by Ian Clark, Thursday 25 June 2020
UPDATED WITH COMMENTS: Wednesday 1 July 2020

Present:

Veronica Carolan
Adele Duffield
Ian Clark
Lesley Pemberton

Welcome to a new virtual meeting of the Whitby Writers Group.

Please send your comments on each contribution to me, by Monday night, 29 June.
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

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.

Matters Arising

SUE

I am going to take a temporary break from being active in the Writers Group -- I intend to be back in September, if not before. Best wishes.

ADELE

Hope we get the chance soon to have a return to a physical meeting if we can keep to a socially acceptable distance when La Rosa re-opens.

IAN

Is there anything socially acceptable about Social Distancing? – I wonder. Still – this serves me as a reminder to get in touch with La Rosa and enquire about their plans for re-opening, and for our use of the tea room.

Shall I tell Helen we've been meeting up for love-ins, so we're all in the same "bubble"? 🐾💧😇

Veronica Carolan

Chapter 4 Countdown

from *Audrey's World*

Audrey thrived. She put on weight and looked healthy. The Kasai had been performed in October 1991. Our best Christmas present that year arrived early – Audrey's first package of solid, green poo! She was, of course, dependent on the special medicine she was given. The only trouble was, she hated it, and mealtimes became a battleground. I, however, was not on the front line for much of the time. Finances being tight, I reluctantly decided to return to full time work after four months

Until this point, I had been on maternity leave from Glaxo. I had been working in Ware as a departmental secretary, and was to return on 4th January, 1993 to a department in Stevenage, and I needed to find child care. I am grateful that Glaxo as a company worked hard to support their staff. At that time, there was a subsidised scheme in place for finding child minders who had been vetted and approved by the contracted company.

Coincidentally, I was put in touch with a lady in Aston. Through my Church connections in the village, I found I knew the first person suggested to me. Denise was an established child minder, and it turned out that she had an assistant, who was just starting out on her own. I didn't know either of them well, but I had visited Sue and Nick after the birth of their daughter some time previously. Rebecca had been born with a cleft palate and hare lip and had needed corrective surgery. She was to continue to have reconstructive dental and oral surgery over many years. Sue was looking for her first client and I needed a child minder who didn't mind looking after a baby who had feeding difficulties and was on regular medication and a special diet. Sue was just the person. She had an unflappable personality, and Rebecca had a rapport with this tiny child who had been in and out of hospital. Nick, somewhat older than Sue, had retired and gave his full support to Sue in her new venture.

It was years later when I discovered just how hard it had been for Sue, trying to get Audrey to feed. Progestamil was lemon yellow and supposed to taste of orange. It came as a crystalline powder which swelled up when diluted with water, and needed to be spoon fed. Audrey wanted none of it. Medication had to be given by syringe, which was marginally easier.

She certainly had a mind of her own. The following incident is firmly rooted in our family history, at least in my mind. In February, our dog Kiwi began to seem unwell. She was panting and didn't seem herself at all. After a while, Eddie realised that she was in labour – we hadn't even known she was pregnant! A visit to the vet confirmed what Eddie already knew – that she was fine and would shortly give birth. Five beautiful puppies emerged, three mink-gold, one black and one dark grey. Kiwi was something of a mongrel but was definitely shaggy enough to be part English sheepdog, golden with overtones of grey. We had no idea what the father was – we weren't even aware that she'd had the opportunity!

We used to feed the pups in the kitchen near the door into the living room. Water was given in an old Pyrex pudding dish, which was fine until Audrey found it. This was where we discovered she had a sense of fun and a decidedly naughty streak. Somewhat unwisely, we had chosen carpet tiles for the kitchen. Audrey decided it would be a really good game to upend the water dish, not once but several times. We have a photo which just captures Audrey after the last time, with a wicked gleam in her eye and a wide smile. She knew exactly what she was doing.

We found homes for four puppies, and Sue and Nick decided they would have the one with the rougher, grey coat. They called him Storm. Thankfully, he didn't live up to his name but was a gentle companion in their home.

By May of that year, it was evident that the Kasai had not been enough to halt the progression of the biliary atresia. The name itself means an absence of an opening, ie the bile duct, but the liver had been cirrhotic, so King's initiated the conversation we had been hoping not to have, the need for a liver transplant. Although they had a high success rate, so much depended on a child reaching the operation. At the time, the only chance such children – and adults – had was to receive a suitable organ from a person who had died. Not all organs were suitable for children, let alone babies, and there was a long wait for those on the transplant list.

What would it involve? Eddie and I sat with some of the transplant team, which included one of the consultants, Jeanette (the Nurse Specialist) and the Transplant Coordinator, Francesca, who had been allotted to us. These amazing people, who knew all their patients and families by name, were there for us all the way through the process and beyond, answering questions, allaying anxieties and generally supporting us, and we got to know each other well over the next few months. We were introduced to the literature supplied by the Children's Liver Disease Foundation, whose contribution to education and research regarding all kinds of liver disease, was so vital. The team explained that because the bile salts had had nowhere to go, they had built up in Audrey's tiny liver and were causing scar tissue. This is what is known as cirrhosis. There is no cure once this stage is reached. However, the liver is a remarkable organ, very complex, with many functions, most of which we are unaware of. It is also the only internal organ able to regenerate itself. It is possible to remove all but a small part of the liver, and any healthy tissue will regenerate until its cells have reached its natural size. This is amazing. When we heard that the liver could grow again, I immediately said, "Well, if the liver can regenerate, why can't she have a bit of mine?" I will never forget Jeanette's response. "It's funny you should say that". She explained that transplants from live donors had already taken place in the United States and a few European countries but that the procedure had not yet been sanctioned by the British Government. Talks were ongoing with the Department of Health to that end.

As it was not yet possible to think about either of us donating to Audrey, she continued to be monitored in regular visits and blood tests. It wasn't yet necessary for Audrey to go on the transplant list. In May, background talks came to fruition and funding was finally given for six living-related transplant operations to take place at King's College Hospital. We were in the right place at the right time, but as this was a completely new scenario, everything had to be done to ensure the safety of both the patient and the donor. We were made aware of the risks from the outset, as a mother in

Germany had recently lost her life in becoming a donor. First of all, either Eddie or I had to be proved compatible. We were both willing to be the donor, as was Cathy, Eddie's younger daughter, who had no dependents, but it had to be one of us as the closest genetic match. The next stage was a round of physical tests and scans to determine which of us was a better match, and an interview with a psychiatrist to make sure that we were resilient enough to cope with the process and whatever the outcome might be. It would be a demanding role as bystander and carer, both during and after the operations, and a transplant would be just the beginning of a new journey to health, whilst tied by an invisible cord to the Paediatric Liver department at King's College hospital.

On 18th June 1993 we were introduced to KC Tan, the surgeon who was to perform Audrey's life-saving operation. He headed up a much larger team, including anaesthetists, nurses, other surgeons and of course the transplant co-ordinator, Fran. The children's team had to work hand in glove with the adult transplant team. Tests in July proved my liver to be the more suitable for Audrey, so after more invasive tests such as a biopsy and an angiogram, I met Dr Williams, the consultant in charge of my operation, which would take place in a separate operating theatre on a different floor. Although I hadn't appreciated it at first, the donor operation was even more complex than the transplant would be, as the surgeons had to move other innards aside in order to get behind the liver and remove the segment, about as big as an adult palm, that would be replumbed into Audrey, once her damaged liver had been removed. Timing was crucial, and much planning and coordination would be necessary. I signed the consent form on 6th July, when Audrey was admitted for transplant assessment. She was almost a year old and still only weighed just over 7.1kg. The date for the first living-related transplant in the UK was set for October 16th, 1993, but Audrey's liver was failing fast, and we knew that if a suitable organ became available before then, she would be considered for that liver rather than wait for the set date. It is a sad fact that there are never enough donated organs, particularly for children. A suitable adult liver could be cut to size, but heart-rending though it most definitely would be for the parents, a small liver from a child would be a life-saver for a baby. This is one of the situations where the transplant coordinators played such a crucial role in counselling and encouraging parents in such dreadfully painful situations. Thankfully, over the years, research by hepatologists has meant that live donations have been superseded by the use of transplanted hepatocytes, which are liver cells, reducing risk to life and saving a great deal of money.

In the meantime, Audrey was meeting her own milestones. We had arranged to have her Christened in Aston church on Sunday, 3rd August, the day after her first birthday. She wasn't yet walking but could crawl like lightning. A couple of weeks before her birthday, I poured myself a mug of tea and put it on the coffee table. Audrey was amusing herself on the other side of the living room. I looked up just as she tipped the hot liquid over herself. How she had crossed the room so rapidly I will never know. Thankfully, Eddie was home and quickly caught her up and got her into the kitchen, ran the cold tap over her chest, and we covered her with a wet, cold tea towel before dashing up to the Lister Hospital. His quick thinking saved her from shock and scarring, but she was kept in under observation for a couple of days and was still swathed in bandages on

her birthday and for her Christening. It didn't cramp her sense of adventure, though. On 5th September she took her first steps with her 'brick trolley', and by the 28th she was trying to climb the stairs and was feeding herself with a spoon. It was comforting to know that she was reaching milestones even though, at thirteen months she only weighed 7.5 kg and looked frail and yellow.

Things were all set for Audrey's transplant. We travelled down to London on 15th October. We had been allocated one of the flats owned by King's College Hospital in one of the nearby streets, which would give Eddie a base and somewhere for us to go while under post-operative care. Somewhat apprehensive about what was to happen, we were taken to the flat and shown round by Avis, the hospital social worker, who gave us the key and left us to settle in. We were joined by Cathy, who kindly went shopping for some provisions. She cooked us a meal that evening. What did we have? Liver and onions! Cathy was teased about this for a long time afterwards, as she had been oblivious to the irony before it was mentioned. That evening was to be the last 'normal' family gathering for some time to come.

LESLEY

Your account continues to be absorbing to read and I like the way you 'mix' the drama around Audrey, Eddie and yourself with some everyday occurrences.

Did you keep a diary of events? If not, your memory is very good – but I suppose traumatic situations can be recalled in detail (or sometimes suppressed if too painful).

ADELE

I am gripped by your story telling despite the difficulty you must have endured to experience it all.

When you mention the memorable event - I was assuming you meant with Audrey and yet it seemed to be the dog having puppies (or was it the tipping up of the dog bowl by Audrey) - the build up suggested something more groundbreaking than it seems to have been (or have I missed the point somehow). If it was the transplant you are referring to, then I think the reader either needs a reminder that this is the event or it needs to be nearer the first mention of it.

Some lovely inserts among the trauma, like the brick trolley walking which provides a nice picture or normality and then the fun with liver and onions. These make it real and personal and touch the reader really well.

Hope you keep going- this is so good Veronica.

IAN

This is a real adventure story (not meaning to belittle it) – a real-life one, of course. I'm hooked: completely caught-up in the tale. Even if I were not personally acquainted with you, I'd be eager to hear more. The final sentence of this installment evokes a sense of dread. Plus, I'm slightly ashamed to say, of horrid fascination for what's in store. A feeling heightened by the black joke the family has just innocently played on itself.

Adele Duffield

Advice to my 12-year-old self

Don't doubt your own beauty,
but those turquoise culottes are a big mistake.
Don't fall prey to false flattery,
it will only hurt you.
Be yourself, don't try to be someone else.
You don't have to say 'yes' just to be liked,
you will regret it.
Don't drop geography as a subject choice,
you will regret it.
Talk to your parents, they are not another species.
Just because you got some average grades
you are not average,
believe me.
You really don't want to start your periods yet,
believe me.
You don't need to look like Princess Di,
she will have her day.
Swearing isn't cool and doesn't make you look older,
believe me.
Ditch that friend you look up to,
she won't stay popular for long, you don't need her,
believe me.
Be patient, enjoy being young,
you are an adult a long time.
Don't try to deceive your parents,
they know you more than you think.
Keep being you,
you will turn out just fine,
believe me.

VERONICA

Something different this week, but still personal. The style is reminiscent of *Desiderata*: words of wisdom for life from the particular to the general. I'm a little older than you, Adele, but I can relate to this, as I made a lot of these mistake; only you will know the significance of each detail. Maybe I should try writing a note to my 40 year-old self!

LESLEY

I like these two vignettes of your younger days.

Good advice on the brink of becoming a teenager. I know you're younger than I am but it probably applied to you as well - we were children then. It seems sad to me that many children today are encouraged/brainwashed into trying to grow up too soon. To quote from near the end of your 'advice':

Be patient, enjoy being young, | | you are an adult a long time.

IAN

Advice from the old to the young – even if it’s to the memory of one’s younger self – carries the expectation of triteness and boredom. But this is not at all boring – and it’s certainly not trite, though its clipped homespun turn-of-phrase could be a device to suggest flippancy – the dismissiveness of youth that knows-it-all.

So much water has gone under this particular bridge. But the timely mention of turquoise culottes is a call to order: it makes us sit up and pay attention.

A tiny, tiny quibble (...since this is a masterclass): *Swearing [...] doesn’t make you look older*. Shouldn’t that be “sound older”? Or is this a deliberate reverse-evocation of: *don’t look at me in that tone-of-voice!*?

I was only 5 for Heaven's sake!

She taught us how to knit one pearl one
Size 7 needles, plastic, pink, I think.
The task; to knit a pencil case,
in infant class, while only 5 or 6.
Then to line it, sew it together,
add a zip, 7 inches long, I think.

Miss Calvert, probably 40, looked 90
in thick, plaid skirts, flat shoes, like men's.
Matching kiss curls on her brow,
can't imagine she ever kissed, somehow.
Stick thin, yellow teeth and a smoker's cough,
probably, I smelled it on her breath, I think.

My knitting was too slack, so she pulled it all out.
Pamela's was too tight, so she pulled it all out.
"Start again and get it right, or I'll rap your knuckles
with the edge of my ruler", and she did, I think.
I never did produce a pencil case fit for purpose.
Hated knitting and sewing ever since.

VERONICA

If this is a real person, she comes across to me as a bit of a caricature. I'm sorry if this was true to life - what a gorgon! This poem is impressionistic but doesn't quite hang together for me. I'm not sure what purpose, if any, is served by 'I think', as you use it sporadically. Were you just trying to get the picture onto paper?

LESLEY

How well we remember some of our schoolteachers who made lasting impressions on us. The memory of Miss Calvert is not good; she didn't have much patience with her young charges did she? A contrast to Ian's memory of 'Cookie'.

I like the small touch of humour: *Matching kiss curls on her brow, | | can't imagine she ever kissed, somehow.*

IAN

What a harpy! But we all remember the sort. At least, I do.

Adele must have gone to school decades after I did, and I was under the illusion that teaching in infant and junior school had improved over the years. Postwar a lot of unsuitable people washed up in the ranks of junior school teachers. They practised their profession – if one can grace their activities with that term – with little training and less oversight, in a general atmosphere of public surliness and prim intolerance. I'm talking about the South of England: it might have all been sweetness and light up North. Though I don't believe that for a moment.

Ian Clark

A posthumous letter to a revered schoolmaster

This open letter to the leading hero of my youth has lain unpublished on my hard-drive for over 20 years. Sunday 28 June will be the anniversary of his death in 1998, so it's time to let it see the light of day at last.

Dear Cookie,

Excuse me using your schoolboy nickname, but I mean it as a term of honour. We boys used to give the masters nicknames, typically cruel and unforgiving ones when we felt they deserved them. The fact that yours was a benign one (and in universal currency at Hastings Grammar School, even among the teachers) shows something of the high regard in which you were held. Many will remember you sitting at your desk wincing with the migraine that commonly afflicted you – but it never stopped you from giving an excellent lesson, nor from handling our clumsy questions with exemplary patience.

I was a Johnny-come-lately to your school, arriving in the sixth form. I'd spent my adolescence in a not-frightfully good boarding school, in which I was a fair-sized fish in a very small pool. By their mediocre standards I shone. Nevertheless my performance there in Mathematics was never illustrious and the headmaster nearly came to blows with my father over allowing me to go for the Sciences – he wanted to steer me into Classics. In those days (the late 1950s) it was the time of C.P. Snow's Two Cultures, and you had to choose one or the other.

If anyone was cut out for one rather than the other it was me. At eleven I had the distinction of getting end-of-year results of 100% in English and 0% (sic!) in Mathematics. I needed two bites of the mathematical cherry to get acceptable GCEs in the subject – for it was a shibboleth for admission to a good university (the other was Latin, I seem to recall). But when I arrived at Hastings Grammar School for my second bite, I knew Mathematics was going to be my subject.

I read once that 95% of Mathematics teachers in England and Wales have no recognised qualification in the subject at any level. Just imagine the outcry if that were the case for Spanish or French. Be that as it may, you were the first and only real mathematician I met during my entire schooldays. And not just because you'd graduated from St Catharine's College, Oxford, in the actual subject. You weren't vain about it, and used half-jokingly to hold up The Metal Box Company as a worthy goal of our youthful aspirations – if it was money we were after.

But Mathematics, if it is not congenital, is something to be caught by infection. You certainly infected me. After exposure to a mere year of your classes, I went on to gain double honours in Mathematics and Physics and, if that wasn't enough to cure the shame, a PhD in Pure Mathematics. I know who must take the credit for that. You.

We were aware that your wife wrote books. Nobody we knew had actually read any of them, so we all assumed it was just a harmless pastime for the stay-at-home wife of a provincial schoolmaster. It wasn't until years later that she burst upon the scene – and South Tyneside would proclaim in vast billboards erected on its borders: 'You are entering Catherine Cookson Country'. We'd have been amazed.

When your wife died, I saw your picture in the paper (how little you'd changed in 40 years, I thought) and read your reminiscences of Dame Catherine Cookson, OBE; in particular of how you had first met in her Hastings boarding house. I was going to write and tell you all this. It's one of the regrets of my life that I didn't. I'm only reminded of it by the sight of an article entitled 'Will Of The Week', which states that you left over £20 million – being the royalties her books had earned. But it also mentioned in passing that you had survived your wife by a paltry 17 days; dying of a broken heart, say friends. So unless I had hurried up, my letter would never have reached you.

Sole owner of twenty million quid! – I can almost hear you saying it in your soft Cockney tones. Enough to have bought The Metal Box Company outright, and donated it to the nation as a shrine to Mathematics! But you just blew away like a dry leaf, as if you were nothing but an insignificant postscript to your wife's lustrous life.

But the fact that you're dead and gone is not going to stop me from writing my letter. Husbands of famous women are notorious for vanishing in their partners' shade. Far more so than wives of famous men, it often seems. Both amount to no more in the world's eye than the great man or woman's pet dog. Except a dog can't be interviewed by the press for reminiscences when they die.

I don't know whether to be ashamed of admitting this or not – I still haven't read one of your wife's books. I've been meaning to for years, but I suppose I'm confusing my motives in this regard. It is you, Tom Cookson – you yourself – who are one of the Dekans in my firmament.

Bless you, wherever you suppose you are now.

Ian Clark.

VERONICA

Is synchronicity at work here, in the coming together of the anniversary of Cookie's death and Adele's choice of writing? It is a happy coincidence, in any case. The person of Cookie is made present to us, partly by the fact that it is a letter addressed to him and therefore very personal, but partly because what you choose to describe (his perseverance and quality of teaching despite migraines, the results you achieved in a year) conveys his qualities. The letter is very instructive to the reader, too. You wear your own distinctions (and failure) lightly in order to highlight Cookie. The details are interesting (I knew someone who worked at Metal Box, and I used to pass it on the train into Charing Cross); I too, have never read a Catherine Cookson (or maybe once many years ago), but I know she writes a good story, hence the tv scripts. A worthy obituary!

LESLEY

Firstly, a typo in the title? Should be 'posthumous'. (*Ed: thank you. Corrected in-place.*)

I like how you don't reveal the real name of 'Cookie' until near the end. It didn't click with me even when you said his wife 'wrote books'.

I may have read some of her books and seen some adaptations made into TV films or series, but not an avid fan. She was (is) an extremely popular author, though.

Anyway, your piece is really about Tom Cookson and how he influenced your life. He must have been an incredible man but, from what you say, he was unassuming, humble and patient. He didn't even bask in the glory of his wife's illustrious career.

It is a shame you never sent a letter to him before he died. He would have been justly proud of your achievements and probably wouldn't have taken all the credit.

I remember keeping in touch with my Headmaster from (what was then known as) Junior School. He was also the Form Teacher for 'Junior 4', the last class before we moved on to Secondary education. At school he was always very supportive and encouraging, especially if a pupil showed aptitude. When I went on to Grammar School, I used to see him sometimes and we would have a chat. It was probably when he was leaving for the day, because I lived directly across the road from the Junior School. He was always interested in how I was getting on. Mr Roberts was a Welshman and when he retired he returned to Wales. We corresponded thereafter until he died.

ADELE

I'm so pleased you found and resurrected this to share with us. It is such a lovely story and an unexpected turn with Catherine Cookson coming into play, and this gives it a wider interest than a reader might expect initially.

Thank you.

Lesley Pemberton

IL LAGO

Mi scusi. Parla inglese...per favore?

My Italian pronunciation wasn't good and I had only the very basics of the language but I did my best to get the attention of the three young men sitting by the fountain. They were talking loudly to each other and gesticulating. Italians have this way of seeming to be arguing when they are just in normal conversation. Their banter and laughter stopped when they looked up. My friend, Brenda, was holding onto me, hopping along after spraining her ankle on the walk downhill, just before we reached the piazza.

That was the reason for approaching the first people we saw, to try and get some help. We knew we wouldn't be able to walk back – at least, Brenda wouldn't and we didn't relish the thought of having to wait, goodness knows how long, for a taxi.

One of the young men got to his feet.

'Si, signorina. We all speak a little English,' he said.

He motioned to his friends, saying something in Italian which must have been to help Brenda to sit down. They assisted her onto the low wall that circled the fountain.

'Thank you... grazie...' I said, adding, *'I'm sorry I do not speak Italian; only a few words.'* The one who had responded to me nodded, the thick black curls of his longish hair framing his rather handsome face.

'OK. Your friend is hurt. You need help?'

The last part could be interpreted as a question or a statement.

He seemed to think it was best to talk to me. Brenda was looking pale and by now could only manage a few small whimpers of pain. Then he took hold of my hand and kissed the back of it, in that courteous Latin way.

'I am Claudio; Fabio and Leon, my friends.' He pointed to his two companions who were now trying to position Brenda sideways on the wall to put her injured foot into the cool water of the fountain's pool.

'I'm Julie,' I replied. *'My friend is Brenda.'*

We got through the story of what had happened and how Brenda and I needed help to get back uphill to our hotel in the main part of the small town. Claudio confirmed that there was no taxi in the piazza, nor, indeed, in the small lakeside town, but said not to worry.

'Look,' he said, *'we have transport.'*

Claudio waved his arm towards three gleaming Lambrettas parked nearby.

Fabio removed the bandana which had been tied around his head, swished it in the water, wrung it out and gently bandaged it around Brenda's swollen ankle.

'I'm a doctor,' he said, winking at Brenda.

'Not yet,' countered Leon. *'You are studying at medical school.'*

The three young men laughed, punching each other on the shoulder in a playful way.

'Come,' urged Claudio. *'We shall return these bellissime signorinas to their hotel.'*

Fabio and Leon lifted Brenda onto the pillion seat of Fabio's scooter and Claudio invited me onto his Lambretta. Leon pouted his lower lip, feigning to sulk.

‘So,’ he said, ‘I ride shotgun. No beautiful young lady to hold tight onto me.’

The boys took us back to Hotel di Lago. A short ride but welcome up the steep hill. Fabio and Leon helped Brenda inside, almost carrying her but to preserve her dignity she insisted on hopping between their supporting arms. We all agreed that the ankle injury was a sprain but would seek further help if needed.

Despite her pain, Brenda had perked up a little with the attention of three nice young men. We were all about the same age, I guessed, in our early twenties. Thus began a friendship for the rest of our holiday; we gelled like a group of equals. The boys offered to take us out (as friends) to various places on their Lambrettas. It was welcome whilst Brenda couldn’t walk very well. Neither of us wanted to be confined to the hotel.

When the holiday ended, we all promised to write to each other: Julie (me) a nurse, Brenda (a teacher), Claudio (a prospective architect), Fabio (at medical school) and Leon (undertaking an art course at university).

In those days of the early 1970s there were no mobile phones, no computers/email/social networking sites. Communication was by written letters. Eventually it fizzled out. We all took different routes in life and stopped communicating with each other – not by choice, just by circumstance. But over the years I sometimes remembered those young men who had helped Brenda and me and who had become our friends. Where were they now? How had their lives unfolded?

About 40 years later I decided to go to Lago di Garda again. This time on my own after my husband had died some years previously. I could afford to stay in the Grand Hotel by the lakeside. The small town had changed a little. There was a small shopping centre and a few bars and cafes around the piazza, which hadn’t been there when Brenda and I had stayed before. The character of the place hadn’t been spoiled; fortunately no ugly high rise buildings.

After settling in to the hotel, the next day was pleasantly warm and I strolled a short way along the promenade to one of the small cafes. The fountain was as I remembered, in the centre of the piazza. A small car park nearby sported the ever popular Lambrettas and a few cars. One was a gleaming olive green open-top sports car with cream leather interior.

I ordered a *caffè con panna* – indulgent to have coffee with cream but I was on holiday – and sat back to people-watch.

to be continued

VERONICA

You write such a variety of tales, Lesley, I wondered if this was another story but you write vividly, and towards the end you make it clear that this is one of your own experiences.. The first paragraph sets the whole scene very succinctly. Who owned the olive green, open-top sports car, I wonder?

LESLEY

I started to write this in the not-too-distant past and will finish the story for your further comments. I was thinking it may be the kind of thing to submit to a Women’s Magazine. It is difficult to get published because some use their own ‘favoured authors’ but there are a few possibilities. It’s the kind of ‘bit of romance/no sex or violence’ that they usually like, and will need the added ‘happy ending’ or favourable resolution. I note I wrote

‘grazi’ which should be ‘grazie’. (Ed: I’ve supplied the correction in-place. Possibly these collections may be treasured as keepsakes, and this is the version to keep.)

IAN

I confess to adding the adding the postscript *to be continued* without prior consultation, meaning to indicate it wasn’t meant to be a complete story. But also in the hope that Lesley would indeed continue it in our next. I’m itching to know what happens.

This proves that Lesley has mastered the technique of suspense – the “cliffhanger” – notwithstanding that everything seems beautifully quiet and peaceful for the moment.

ADELE

There’s lots to like about this story and you keep us intrigued as to what might happen next. It’s got love story written all over it with a bit of Shirley Valentine mixed in. Great stuff and I want to know more.