

The Virtual Writers Group

led by Ian Clark, Thursday 6 August 2020
UPDATED WITH COMMENTS: Tuesday 11 August 2020

Present:

Jonathan Atkinson
Veronica Carolan
Ian Clark
Adele Duffield
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, 10 August.

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:

VERONICA

I append the last chapter of Audrey's story but, having read the comments from last week, I have revised that chapter and have attached this as well, should anyone care to read it.

Members' Contributions:

Read On...

Jonathan Atkinson

For George Floyd

The glory of America is killed
upon the streets of Minneapolis;
how are the innocent fallen
and the weapons of peace destroyed.

Tell it not in Detroit
nor publish it in the streets of Washington,
lest the children of the Klansmen triumph,
lest the daughters of the racist rejoice.

Remember, policemen of Minnesota,
this if nothing else:
if you attack one you attack all,
save one and it stands to your credit.

George Floyd was lovely in life
and in death was united with millions;
how are the innocent fallen
and the weapons of peace destroyed.

VERONICA

Based on the first Chapter of 2 Samuel, v19 onwards, when David hears of the death of Saul and his beloved Jonathan; these are powerful words for grievous times, just as the events of the death of George Floyd. Not so much a pastiche - the subject matter is too serious for that - but an acknowledgement of the Biblical weight of events.

ADELE

Political poem for Black Lives Matter which is an important message so we'll done for tackling this as a white middle class author when, for many, our voice is not appreciated. On the poem itself I would suggest revising the third stanza to have 'this' straight after 'Remember'. Also, in the final stanza I feel the adjective 'lovely' is really not a strong enough word - could you find another with more depth and meaning perhaps?

LESLEY

I have difficulty in going along with some of the sentiments of your poem, because I am not sure we have all the truth about George Floyd's life and the circumstance leading to his death. As usual, the media make what they will out of a 'story'. However, I believe it was wrong that his life was taken in the way it was and racist issues were brought to the fore, not necessarily in the best ways. The third verse should be an admonition to police/those who have power anywhere in the world.

Maybe you should say "how the innocent are fallen" rather than "how are the innocent fallen" which reads more like a question.

IAN

There are 101 things to say about George Floyd, but only one of them matters: he was a fellow human being. But the cops killed him casually and routinely – like stepping on a cockroach. These two poems belong well

together, because they expose how we've all been putting up for a long time with the unacceptable, by turning it into the unmentionable.

Well, the mask has been ripped away. And the real face of our society stands exposed in all its hideousness.

If we believe, as do the Nazis, the Myanmarites and the numerous US police forces, that a whole section of the population are not human beings at all but quite literally "vermin", then sooner or later we see them being exterminated like vermin. And suddenly it's no longer an option just to look away.

Then what are we going to do? Stand there and gape?

Jonathan Atkinson

Shoah

Whatever you think, do not tell me
it never happened, because it did.
National Socialism built the Third Reich
and the Third Reich built the gas chambers.
The Third Reich chartered the trains,
the Third Reich conquered its neighbours;
the Third Reich invented the problem
and then invented the answer.

If there is a master race
it should know better than that.

VERONICA

I did not know this Hebrew word for Holocaust. Again, a very serious subject, this time of mass genocide, and an element of sacrifice which had lasting repercussions and huge reaction. Devastatingly pithy: a wealth of feeling in a few lines.

ADELE

Another political poem, but much nearer to home. There is a deep felt bitterness coming through which, I know from previous writing, is still a deep wound. I wonder if your final two lines are referring to present day leaders by using 'is' and if so, to whom do you refer or is it a generalisation that we should all dwell on?

LESLEY

I had to read up what 'Shoah' meant, not knowing it is a term for The Holocaust.

This is a succinct yet encompassing poem that somehow follows the theme of racism in your first offering. I particularly like the last four lines that end the poem. Again, those in power think (thought /believe (believed) they can pull the strings.

L'chaim - 'to life'.

IAN

The poet and I are products of the Enlightenment: the public acceptance of the need to challenge embattled opinions with objective observations of the real world. But that luminous Age is at an end, and people are trying their damndest to bring a new dark age into being. An age of Nonsense On Stilts, and barefaced lies left to go unchallenged.

What are we to call this New Age? The Endarkenment?

Veronica Carolan

Chapter 5 Living with a liver

from *Audrey's World*

*This is a revised version of last fortnight's Chapter 5.
Chapter 6 follows.*

The next chapter of our lives began with a mixture of apprehension and excitement for me. Audrey was too young to know what was happening, although she knew she was going to Mountbatten ward again. Although Eddie and I had both chosen to take the opportunity to go down the living-related transplant route, it was not without danger. I had a deep peace and the trust that everything would go well. Eddie didn't. When all was said and done, I would know nothing about the operations until I came round but Eddie would have had to endure many hours of uncertainty and fear. He couldn't put the death of the mother in Germany out of his mind, and although we had the utmost trust in the skills of KC Tan, Nigel Heaton and the teams that would assist in the operating theatres, there was still the fear of the unknown.

The day of the transplant dawned. No breakfast that day, of course. I was admitted to the adult liver ward on the second floor of the hospital, and Audrey to the children's liver unit on the third floor. I can remember Eddie accompanying me to the theatre entrance, and then he had to go back and wait with Audrey until the teams were ready for her. The operating theatres were side by side. The plan was for Nigel Heaton and his team to begin my operation first, as this was a deeper procedure, then when it was certain that I was safely out of theatre, my segment of liver having been removed, KC Tan would work next door to do the actual transplant, together with Nigel Heaton. Audrey's little body was opened up again, through her Kasai scar, ready to receive the small lump of life-giving tissue. This would minimise the risk of the liver degrading between being removed, flushed with preservative and packed in ice before being transplanted into her. The left-hand lobe of my liver, being about the size of a person's hand, was just the right size for Audrey. Now the painstaking work began, not only of sewing me up again, but of the graft being sewn securely into the cavity left by the small, hard liver which had been removed, using lengths of vein cut from my left leg. This procedure was rather similar to the stripping out of a varicose vein but with healthy tissue. Thankfully, I had good circulation, and my body would soon bypass the vein that had been removed. I had been expecting a large scar – an inverted Y shape like a ban-the-bomb sign – on my stomach, but I hadn't been told about this bit, so when I eventually discovered a long scar along my left calf, and another small one above the knee, I was rather surprised. However, such was the care that the team had for me as well as Audrey, they had used a gluing technique rather than stitches or staples, so that there would be virtually no scarring. Indeed, it is hardly visible now.

The operations took ten hours. In that time, Eddie had nothing to do except kill time. Feeling totally helpless and without any control of what was happening in theatre, he walked around the John Ruskin Park next door to the hospital, but otherwise spent time resting in Mountbatten Ward. It didn't help matters when a man approached him and said, "I hear things aren't going too well." When Eddie asked him what he meant, the man said that he'd heard that I was haemorrhaging and that the surgeons couldn't stop the bleeding. Inwardly, Eddie was absolutely petrified, but he said, calmly enough, that no one had told him, and as far as he knew, everything was going to plan. When Francesca came back to the ward, Eddie asked for news and whether this was true. She was quick to reassure Eddie that things were going well and that KC was singing to himself, which was always a good sign. Some people are so insensitive!

It was about half-past six in the evening when the theatre doors opened. KC, as he was known, was beaming as he told Eddie the good news that Audrey's new bile duct was working. Reassured, Eddie could make his way to the adult liver unit, where I was awake but groggy, with a cascade of tubes coming out of my neck, and he broke the good news that the new liver and bile duct were working well. I just smiled and fell asleep.

In the meantime, Audrey was out of theatre and in paediatric intensive care. All Eddie wanted to do was cuddle her, but she was connected to so many monitors and drips that it was impossible. He could only hold her hand and talk to her, even if she couldn't hear him. Indeed, maybe she could, as it is said that patients who have been in comas have been aware of what was said during that time.

This would be a lonely and tiring time for Eddie. We have a photo of him crashed out in the play area of Mountbatten ward, on one of the bean bags. He finally made his way back to the empty flat to make something to eat and to try to sleep, with thoughts and fears still whirling round his head.

Very soon, Audrey was strong enough to breathe on her own and to return to Mountbatten. I was allowed into a wheelchair fairly soon after the operation, and Eddie would wheel me down to Mountbatten to see Audrey. Four days after the operation, Eddie arrived to find her toddling up the ward, attached to her drip, pushing a toy shopping trolley. I, however, was suffering rather dreadfully with constipation from the drugs and lack of exercise. Everything is relative, but the agony of this particular complaint and the efforts to relieve it, were not easy to manage. Eddie tells me that I was as nice as pie to everyone except him! Once out of intensive care, I was put into a room on my own. Soon the room was being filled with cards and flowers from well-wishers, not a few from the press. Eddie felt he couldn't compete with all this flora, and brought me a single red rose, which was a very special gesture of love.

Francesca was soon under pressure from KC to get me to do an interview. I was feeling so rough that Eddie revealed the tough side of his character and resisted all attempts at an interview until I was feeling better. I remember a huge bunch of flowers sent very generously from one of Anne Diamond's breakfast tv team, but Eddie steadfastly refused entry to them. A couple of days later I was a lot better so, wearing a bright pink tracksuit, which was all I could wear in my swollen state, I was taken by wheelchair to face the press with KC Tan. This was a UK first, and he was keen to spread the good news and to publicise the hospital. It was quite exciting at the time,

though quite embarrassing to watch now, as I dislike my accent (sorry, Stevenage!) and tone of voice: we still have the videos and press cuttings.

Out of the single room, I received a visit from a friend. I remember him gently reproving me at one point. My catheter was causing me pain, and I began calling for a nurse to come. The curtains were drawn round a bed on the other side of the six-bed ward, and there were a number of medical staff were attending to the patient. Someone was fighting for his life, but somehow I couldn't process this information. All I could focus on was my own pain. I remember being chastened and ashamed of thinking selfishly that my pain was just as acute and still wanting help, which wasn't available. Illness reveals the best and the worst in people at times.

I left hospital to live with Eddie in the flat, known as the half-way house, after ten days, and Audrey made such good progress that a week later she was discharged, though still needing daily visits to the ward at first. Three weeks after the transplant, on November 4th, we were able to go home, and start the process of frequent blood tests, biopsies, scans and visits to Outpatients once again.

Something must be said about blood tests. Poor Audrey's veins were so small that they often collapsed. As a baby, she was unable to express how she felt, apart from tears. Blood tests were a part of life, and for a long time, there was nothing to take away the pain of having needles poking around as a phlebotomist or nurse tried to find a good vein. The foot was the most painful site to be used, and as a last resort. Eddie remembers everyone being in tears one day, when after several unsuccessful attempts Audrey was crying "I'm sorry, daddy, I'm sorry", as though this was a punishment and that it was her fault. That was heart-rending. As she reached about four or five years of age, it would often take three or even four of us to hold her flailing arms and legs. Only when she learned to relax did the whole process become much easier, not only for her but for everyone concerned. We are thankful that Audrey never developed a phobia for either hospitals or needles. Later on, Audrey was to train as a phlebotomist to augment her student income, only to find that her certificate was no use in a hospital setting, because she had not trained on human beings, only the substitute pig skin. Very disappointing.

After Christmas with the whole family, I had to return to work. It had been decided that it was better all round for me to leave my job as Departmental Secretary at Ware, to a new Documentation department being formed in Stevenage. This was nearer home, which made a big difference, although I missed the people and the work I had been used to. Everyone who worked at Process Research at Ware was thoroughly spoilt by the three cleaning ladies, who made our coffee and would always bake a cake for birthdays and other special occasions. I would miss them. The new Research Centre in Stevenage was huge – it was easy to get lost at first – and although the facilities were much grander, I wasn't as happy there. Again, I have to emphasise how we appreciated the support given by Glaxo as Audrey journeyed to recovery. This was tested soon after starting my new role, as Audrey developed symptoms of infection and had to be taken into Mountbatten for a five-day course of IV antibiotics. This continued to happen occasionally.

Whilst at Stevenage, I remember responding to an invitation in the company newsletter, which had featured an article about the transplant earlier on, about people

who had stories to tell about Zantac, one of the company's leading drugs at the time, to take part in a promotional video for the company. I was chosen as one of these people, as I had had post-operative ulcers and found relief from this drug (there are other effective brands on the market!), and I found my way to Greenford to make this video. When I was shown the tape afterwards, I was mortified to see that every time I paused to consider an answer, my eyes swivelled up to the left. Perhaps I was too sensitive, as no one said anything at the time, and the video was still released.

In July 1994, Audrey had to attend King's for a biopsy, as she had swollen lymph nodes. She had, and still has, to take anti-rejection medication, which suppresses the immune system, so she has always been vulnerable to complications. The following day she was admitted to Mountbatten for nine days for removal of a lymph node and further tests, including a Mantoux, as it was suspected that Audrey might have latent TB. Such a test involves having a small amount of what's called PPD tuberculin injected into the forearm. If the test is positive, a hard, red lump will appear after a few days. True to form, Audrey's results were not clear, but it was decided that she would be treated as though she had it, which meant a nine month course of a red medicine called rifampicin, which was administered orally by syringe, as were the rest of the drugs Audrey had to take.

Audrey reached her second birthday in the August of 1994 and had her first birthday party. I was determined to do this properly. Instead of buying ready-made party bags, I bought miniature pots of honey and put in healthy snacks such as raisins and nuts instead of sweets. We weren't aware of nut allergies in those days. There had to be a home-made cake, of course. Audrey was very much into Postman Pat, so I made my first attempt at icing my square sponge cake with Jess, his black and white cat and a Postman Pat van, also another spherical cake made to look like a clown. I did use ready-to-roll icing, but coloured it myself. They went down a treat, but I never made another party cake again – too much like hard work!

By October 1994, there had been six living-related transplants, all involving parents, both male and female. The publicity team at King's arranged for the Sunday Express to send a reporter and journalist for a photo-shoot. The children were sat round in a semicircle whilst the parents stood behind or sat with them. Being small, I was seated in front, on the floor, with one of the other parents and the children. We had a full centre spread in the magazine, which was rather nice.

Last year, twenty-five years on, someone had the idea of recreating that picture. By now, all the children were adults, at least one with a child of their own, and through liaison with them, rather than the parents, a date was arranged. Sadly, one family couldn't be there, but the rest of us duly assembled for the photographer, as did Nigel Heaton and a transplant co-ordinator whom I didn't know. However, it was the one weekend that I wasn't at home in North Yorkshire. I had treated myself to a visit to Bristol for their first Early Music Festival – a weekend of concerts for the special price of £25. Too good to miss. The time wasn't confirmed until the Thursday for the following day. I had travelled down on the train that Thursday, so I booked an early coach from Bristol straight to Victoria, took a train to the hospital and arrived in time for the photoshoot. It was lovely to meet everyone again, as we had got to know each other at outpatient appointments or on Mountbatten.

Once everyone was assembled, the five couples, together with the medical staff who were able to be there, were asked to form the same arrangement as for the original photograph as far as possible, even with similar poses (legs splayed in front or kneeling - all right for toddlers and young knees, but we were 25 years older). It was obvious that the young publicity officer didn't really relate to the parents, whom she was too young to have met on the first occasion (she may not even have been born by then), but talked almost exclusively to the transplanted offspring and sent copies of the resulting photograph on-line to them. I was able to stay for a coffee but needed to hot-foot it back to Victoria to catch my coach back to Bristol. Having texted the Festival organiser to say I would be late, I arrived just after the start of the first concert, and crept in at an opportune moment. I'm glad I made the effort to go to London.

The next few years were relatively trouble free, with various family milestones. Audrey was old enough at three to appreciate what was happening around her. We took her to Barton Broad in July, where Eddie was one of the assistant instructors to the young people learning to sail. This was the first time we had accompanied him. We stayed in a large family tent. I remember that I slept very badly, not because the camp beds were uncomfortable, but because my post-operative gastric ulcer appeared at this inopportune time. I soon got through all Eddie's dyspepsia tablets. This was only diagnosed when we returned to Stevenage, and I was prescribed Zantac for the first time.

The young people loved having a child amongst them. While they were out sailing, Audrey loved eating with the teenagers, some of whom were unself-conscious and interested enough to engage with her. We had taken her to the paddling pool, which was a diversion for her, and sometimes Eddie took her out in a dinghy, complete with a child's life jacket which almost swamped her. But the highlight of Audrey's time there was "driving" the rescue launch on the Broad after classes. We took it to a pub at the other end of the Broad and enjoyed a quiet meal, only to be embarrassed when I discovered I had left my purse behind. The landlord was very trusting and simply said that we could pay the next time we visited. We did go back and return that same evening, though. The broads are very peaceful at dusk.

My father had reached his 80th birthday in April 1995 but died in the August. I had gone down to Speldhurst for his birthday. The small sitting room had been adapted for him as he couldn't climb stairs any more, and I remember him smiling benignly but as though from a distance. It was as though he was gradually sinking into his own contented, quiet world, and I wondered then whether he had not long to live.

My mother remembers sitting on the stairs with Audrey after the funeral, talking about what had happened. "Don't cry, Gran," said our three-year-old. "Grandad wouldn't want you be sad. Grandad has died and we're sad but it's all right."

The following month, we were interviewed by Fleur Brennan, the medical correspondent from *Readers Digest*, who was writing an article on the first living-related transplant in the UK. That was us! Her article tells of a small incident that revealed Audrey's determination. When told by her father to put down the torch that she was fiddling with rather than eating her tea, she refused, even on pain of being sent to the big table in the kitchen. Determined to have the last word, she upped with her plate of beans on toast, still carrying the torch, and went and sat on the stairs to finish her tea.

Such a fighting spirit helped to see her through more serious challenges. She didn't always get her own way, of course.

The personal side of living-related transplantation was obviously thought to hold enough human interest enough to occasion an article, which came out in April 1996. But medical research doesn't stand still. Soon it would become possible to utilise the liver's ability to regenerate to take cells called hepatocytes and transplant these instead of having to use larger pieces of the organ. This would be safer and cheaper, although there would still be the need for transplants.

Just a few days after meeting Ms Brennan, Glaxo Group Research, now Glaxo Smith Kline, were restructuring following the merger, and axed our department. My position was redundant, so I was faced with finding a new job. GSK did support us throughout that process and we received valuable financial advice. With part of my redundancy money, I invested in a starter pack as an agent for Dorling Kindersley books, which at that time did not sell their distinctive education books (glossy pages, with illustrations interspersed with short gobbets of text). I did quite well, including setting up a stall in the Glaxo Sports and Social Club, for which I bought a dark green, very long tablecloth, which I still have. The main outlet was through parties, but the income was nowhere enough to make a living, and I am not a natural saleswoman, so I looked elsewhere, as the redundancy money wouldn't last for ever. Round about this time, we took Audrey to see *Riverdance* in London. She was besotted so we bought the video. The next time we visited gran, we took the video with us. I was astounded to see her managing a good approximation of the dances. She had started ballet lessons by then and was excited to be in her very first show in Hatfield Forum just before Christmas.

I eventually got a job as Head's secretary and clerk to the governors at Cheshunt School, which was a 45 minute drive from Stevenage along the A10. In my second week our old Renault died with a dramatic clunking and loss of fluid on my way to work. That didn't go down very well with the Headmaster, as I missed that day finding a replacement and getting the car towed away.

In order to have more flexibility for attending hospital and other appointments with Audrey, Eddie had left the bus garage to be a Park Ranger. Fairlands Valley Park covered 120 acres of land bordered by woodland, with a south field which was used for shows, and a north field which had a large boating and fishing lake and a smaller, narrower lake with an island which was supposedly out of bounds to the fishermen as it was the breeding lake for both fish and wildfowl. This is where the annual fireworks took place, and it was the task of Eddie and his colleagues to set up and manage the complex display. Most of Eddie's work was patrolling the lakes and parkland as a matter of routine. However, he had been learning to sail in his spare time, and soon qualified as an RYA instructor. He also instigated Sailability at Fairlands Valley, which enabled people with disabilities to enjoy the freedom of sailing. Every year the Valley entered a team for the 24 hour race, for charity and hosted dragon boat racing. Eddie qualified as a Dragon Boat helm. All these things made his job more fulfilling. He tried to teach me but abandoned the effort when I blamed the dinghy for going round in circles!

Audrey was due to start Nursery School in September 1996. The previous month we had gone over to Dundalk to celebrate Ed's brother's sixtieth birthday and had a memorable holiday over on the west coast of Ireland, finishing in Donegal. Our last

weeked there incorporated a major festival, and we found that every B&B was full up. We needed to find somewhere to stay which would take a credit card. Travelling up the coast, we stopped at a large café set back off the road. We had something to eat and enquired as to what was available locally, as it was very rural. In response, the patron told us that if we could wait a while until he closed up, he would show us somewhere. In fact he took us to a small settlement of caravans and offered us one of these, free of charge (although I insisted on paying something). The whole promontory and beach belonged to his family, and we spent our final weekend with a beach to ourselves where Audrey could explore rock pools and slide down sandbanks. We celebrate such generosity.

The weather broke that night and we travelled to the ferry under torrential rain. When we got back Audrey soon became ill with a blockage, which meant another stay in Kings. All went well and she moved up to Reception in the April of 1997. Parents were invited to school during the day for a demonstration and introduction to the reading scheme and I asked for time off. The headteacher was loath to let me go, as he was interviewing that day (even though everything was in hand) but rather grudgingly gave me the choice. I didn't attend and regretted it, and when I was asked whether or not I had gone to Audrey's school, I realised I hadn't even been missed. This led to the decision to resign, something I did not do lightly, as it did not bode well for future requests.

Later that year, Audrey invited friends and family to her 5th birthday party in MacDonalds. They had a lovely time. Photos show her in her new hairstyle, cut very short to match Cathy's. She wasn't so happy when a doctor, on a routine visit to hospital, kept referring to her as 'he', despite Audrey telling him she wasn't a boy. Afterwards we realised that it was probably because of an idiom in his own language – everyone was 'he'. Audrey was so upset about this incident that she never had her hair cut that short again.

1998 saw the start of a new job for me, as a Personnel Assistant in Welwyn Garden City with Ratcliff Tail Lifts. Eddie reached his 50th birthday, which we celebrated as a whole family by taking him and his best friend Pascal, who is a month younger, white water rafting in Nottingham. In order to progress to the white water, people had to prove they could get back into the boat from the water. We still think Pascal was unable to do this on purpose. Eddie managed, and had a thrilling time on the watercourse.

We returned to Ireland to attend my brother's wedding in Monaghan and then drove over to County Mayo where we had hired a cottage. Eddie borrowed a dinghy from a friend, so with that on the roof rack, Eddie, Audrey, my mum and I set off to Fishguard for the ferry in a rather cramped car filled with luggage, presents and Audrey's medical paraphernalia. The cottage was beside Loch Mask, and Eddie and Audrey went fishing, coming back with a huge pike which they pretended she had caught (donated by the young man of the house, it seemed almost as long as Audrey was tall!), which I attempted to cook. . Never again. It was all bones. Whenever Eddie tried to catch fish

from the small island, he got his hook and line tangled up in the trees, which amused Audrey no end. Eddie took her there several times in the dinghy and they were fortunate enough to see a stag with full antlers swimming across the lake to the small island. A sight to remember.

Audrey was six in the August. We had bought Audrey her first grown-up bike, a spring green in colour rather than baby-pink, but it needed putting together. The night before, after she had gone to bed, Eddie managed the task, ready for Audrey to find when she got up bright and early. After Church the next day, family and friends were assembled from various places. Audrey seemed happy with the bike and accoutrements. Her friends played really well together - checkers, fish game, kitchen, computer. Thankfully the weather was kind. Ed had done the lawn so that the kids could play in the back garden. The food went down well – there wasn't much left. Molly from next door came for a second play and together they demolished Aud's room – clothes everywhere!

Easter Monday the following year was 'wobbly tooth day' – her first - which I believe meant a lot to her. She was no longer 'the baby' – small and young but a real sign that she was sharing her friends' growing up. We were at MacDonalds after swimming, and that's when we found out about the tooth. Aud phoned gran and told her (Cathy was out). Heidi rang and was told, too. Heidi gave me £1 for the tooth fairy. A real milestone. It being the Easter holidays, we tried to find different things for Audrey to do, including taking her out on the bike. She helped me make a salad, which must have inspired her, as she decided she wanted to do a collage. She went to find leaves, stones and flowers and together we sat down and she painstakingly put them together. She made some lovely Easter cards – one for dad (from both of us, at Audrey's insistence) and two for Heidi, one of which she insisted on finishing this evening and taking it down with the Easter eggs for the boys. Our next trip down to Speldhurst saw her taking gran down the garden to find flowers and things to make a 'salad', which Audrey arranged on bright blue, plastic plates. A work of art!

Chapter 6 Déjà Vu

The following year, Audrey's liver function tests showed some raised enzymes, and she was called to Kings for a DECIDA scan. This was the scan where radioactive dye was injected into Audrey and its progress measured over the course of several hours. This way, any blockage became visible. No action was taken at that point and Audrey continued at school. We were lucky enough to have a Gamelan at Stevenage Music Centre, and Audrey started to attend. The Gamelan is Indonesian and consists of a number of percussion instruments and gongs of various sizes and timbres, all with special names. The Gamelon is held with respect in Java, and everyone entering its space was required to take off their shoes. A little later on I attended with Audrey, and learned to participate, as did several other parents. It stretched the brain somewhat to remember what each instrument was called but taking turns to learn each one, together with

learning to listen to each other and being part of something creative and mesmeric was such a valuable experience. I distinctly remember having what I can only describe as a moment of pure contemplation, a holistic experience of being in the moment as I played one of the sets of keys rather like a xylophone, which had to be 'damped' with the other hand after being struck. It was only momentary but very real, and undoubtedly similar to what develops out of chanting or running, when mind and body are united and one become un-self-conscious. Our teacher, Nikhil Dally, was himself from Java and had done a year's intensive training at the Academy of Fine Arts, in Surakarta, and this quiet spoken man helped instil respect and discipline to our motley junior band. We were immensely privileged to learn with a master, as he taught Gamelan at the South Bank Centre Education Department and in various other counties.

In July 2000 the Transplant Games were held in Newcastle over three days. Audrey was signed up for the King's team, which comprised children and adults who had had transplants of various kinds. We had a short holiday in North Yorkshire beforehand, visiting places like High Force and the Beamish Open Air Museum, and at the appointed time we found the hotel where everyone was to gather. The team wore navy tracksuits with the King's logo, red T-shirts and red baseball caps. Audrey made a new friend, Hannah, who was a little younger but bigger and they have remained friends. Audrey was in the obstacle race, running and relay. She was most disappointed and cross not to make it into the final of the running, as someone obstructed her and she came fourth, but they all received medals and took part in the opening and closing parades. When the local paper heard about this, they came and interviewed Audrey in her tracksuit, t-shirt and cap, and photographed her sitting on the swing, which gave her a chance to speak for herself and to encourage people to apply for donor cards because of the shortage of organs.

We continued to travel regularly to Kings for blood tests. I remember one incident, although I'm not sure how old Audrey was at the time. She was in the Philip Isaacs Day ward for some investigation. Cathy, who lived in Dulwich at the time and was working in London, came to see Audrey during the day. When a young doctor came round to ask questions it soon became obvious that she thought Cathy – twenty years older than Audrey and twenty years younger than me – was her mother! When we put the matter straight as gently as we could, she was so embarrassed. I liked to pride myself on looking young for my age, but that was somewhat chastening, if amusing. Perfectly understandable though. She must have thought Eddie was Audrey's grandad!

Some of the liver enzymes were high and the levels continued to rise. We soon became very familiar with the significance of each enzyme. Although she wasn't particularly jaundiced at this time, the fear was that she was beginning to show signs of rejecting the transplant. Balancing the anti-rejection medication was a constant challenge and meant many blood tests. We had to try and build up Audrey's strength as she was losing weight. It is worth recording something of the regime we had to follow, bearing in mind that at six years old, she was beginning to get faddy and hated taking her medication. Of course, we had to have the willing cooperation of Aston School and Sue, our childminder, after school hours.

Friday, March 1st

9.15 Breakfast: 2 chicken dippers, pasta, beans, jelly cube, 4 squares chocolate! Water, diet Coke – and drugs: aspirin, prednisolone, sucralfed, acyclovir and nystatin.
11.00 Tacrolimus
12.00 Choc Build-up
1.00 Lunch: scrambled egg (half) and 1 chicken nugget, wheat crunchies, orange, wine gums and water; and drugs – acyclovir, sucralfed, nystatin
6.00 Cheesy potato and spring onion, wheat crunchies and orange squash.
7.30 Gingerbread

March 2nd

9.30 Breakfast: 3.5 chicken nuggets and pasta. Orange, square choc. Crisps.
10.00 meds
11.30 Tacrolimus
12.30 Chocolate Build-up
1.30 Baked potato, tuna, beans and jelly
2.00 Chocolate Build-up
6.00 French bread, cheese, salad and strawberries.
11.15 Tacrolimus.

March 3rd

Bad night – Audrey had cramp in her leg.

9.20 Medicines
10.20 Tacrolimus
12.45 Lunch
1.20 Medicines
5.20 Meds
Supper After 7.30pm
10.20 Tacrolimus

March 4th

8.20 Tacrolimus
9.20 Breakfast and meds
1.00 Lunch
1.30 Medication
5.00 Tea
5.30 Medication
7.00 Supper
7.30 Medication
8.30 Tacrolimus

Weds, March 5th

5.30 School Appointment

And so it went on. Looking back, I don't know how we did it, but we just got on with it, and Audrey was so very plucky.

At the same time, changes at Ratcliff Tail Lifts meant that redundancy was a real possibility due to re-structuring, and later that month my job was axed. As luck would have it, I found a different kind of job as a Sales Secretary with Lucent, a telecoms company. This was a real challenge but we had a very successful team. Perhaps my time as a self-employed book agent had borne fruit after all. Sadly, after a takeover, I ended up commuting to Annodata's Head Office near Rickmansworth, which put extra strain

on us. Just before I had been with this new company one year, I was “let go” and yet again, the search for a job started. I went to an agency, and as serendipity would have it, I was assigned a temping job once more at GSK in Stevenage. This was challenging, partly because the Americans were far more involved in the British operation than they had been, and the style and ethos had changed considerably since my time in the Documentation department. But, more seriously, Audrey’s health and well-being was being affected by dreadful itching which kept her – and her parents – awake at night. She would bear it on her own for as long as she could, then come in to us. I would get up and distract her by stroking her feet and reading her stories. This could be as many as three times in one night, and we were all getting worn out. I had been successful in my application to work full time at the Frythe in Welwyn. This was a beautiful place to work. The imposing, gracious house, which had belonged to Smith, Kline and French (several mergers previously), had previously been used by the Special Operations Executive during WW2. It was set in extensive grounds. The original owners had collected trees, so we worked in an arboretum to the sound of peacock. Sadly, foxes always killed the young ones. In summer I loved to sit by the carp pool, which was deceptively deep beneath the waterlilies.. I was told that they had built it to test one-man submarines.

I spent a quiet fiftieth birthday at work in January 2002. Shortly afterwards Audrey contracted another liver infection. She was admitted to Mountbatten ward for IV antibiotics and it was evident that her liver was being rejected. This is always a possibility after a transplant, which means a roller-coaster existence for medics and families alike, with drug balancing and fine tuning, being vital for good quality of life, especially in the early days after an operation. But Audrey had had her new liver for nine years. This made me feel awful, as it had been my liver and although it had kept her alive, it had also caused her considerable suffering. This I just had to accept. By then it had been discovered that my own liver was not all that it should be. I had been followed up as a matter of course, and blood tests revealed abnormal results. I was scheduled for a biopsy at the Wellington Hospital, where Professor Williams, the adult liver specialist, had his practice. Luckily nothing untoward was found, even when the process was repeated at various intervals. It was accepted that my liver was a bit strange and so I had routine local blood tests for while just to keep an eye on things.

Audrey was put on the transplant list once more as a matter of urgency and we were given a bleep for when we went home, should a suitable liver come in for her. It was always a last minute call to the anxious parents, because the condition of any organ is never known until it has been removed, and there were often raised hopes, only to be dashed. This was a new experience for us – things felt out of our control which, indeed, they were. How long would we have to wait? Parents and adult patients alike have to get to ‘their’ hospital when their bleep goes off, no matter how far away they live, even now; and because surgeons do not know how healthy a donor organ is until they receive it, there have been many devastating disappointments where a liver is no good for the potential recipient. Life can seem very cruel in those circumstances. Whatever one thinks about the change of law which deems everyone to be a potential donor unless

they opt out (subject to family agreement at the time), it is a policy designed to save lives: there have never been enough organs for transplant. Such a gift, at a very emotionally fraught time for the next of kin, can save more than one life, and in a way the donor lives on in their recipients. Eddie and I have been on the donor list for many years, as has Audrey, and I would put in a plea for people to think positively about the opportunity to give quality of life and a future to at least one unknown person.

Against all odds, we were actually in King's when we were told there was a suitable liver. Audrey had been on the list for only four days. On February 17th 2002, Audrey was wheeled down to theatre for her second transplant. In those days we were not told who the donor family was, and Audrey has never wanted to know, for her own reasons; but we will all be eternally grateful, and remain deeply sorry for their loss. All we were told was that it was a teenage boy who had died in an accident. As soon as she was old enough, Audrey chose to carry a donor card, as we do.

Thankfully, all went well. On Friday, March 1st, Audrey came home. In just six weeks she had gone from being well, to liver rejection, to transplant and back home again. It seemed almost unreal. We had met some special people in hospital - – special in their ordinariness and in the way they were coping with the illness of their children: Rani, Kalinder's mum; her whole life taken up with caring for her handicapped child. Kalinder was very ill, with complex special needs since the age of three. On top of all this, she had needed a liver transplant, and the new liver was being rejected. Would she live? No one knew, but Rani was pouring herself out for her daughter. Julie, with a stillborn child, closely followed by Darren, born with biliary atresia, who had received a transplant at about 7 months old. Julie and Paul were brave and loving parents. There was an Italian couple whose names I can't remember, with seven-months-old Michele, minute and only 500g at birth. They could speak very little English despite having sisters here, but we had begun to communicate. Danielle: eight years old, with cystic fibrosis, diabetes and now a liver transplant. How did Lynne cope with it all? How did Danielle? Yet both mother and child were cheerful and generous. What would they say about me? Always complaining how tired I was? Irritable? Would I be seen as caring? I didn't know, but I did try to forge links, to 'recognise' people, to show that they mattered. Yet my mind was so clogged up that I didn't retain much of what was said. And what of Shirley and Joseph, Carrie and her little girl, Sienna and Charlie? Of Debbie, Nick and their little girls? Of Tara's parents? The Libyan family? The two Asian people and their baby? Of Ben – always on his own? Of the Asian family gathered so anxiously? Of Ellie who died? The parade of names fades into history now, yet the scourge of liver disease still goes on. Thank God for the wonderful staff at King's and the Children's Liver Disease Foundation, which was founded by a mum whose child died after a transplant, and which has supported the families of children affected by many types of liver disease, and together with their supporters, has raised millions of pounds towards research.

Once Audrey had recovered from the operation, we decided to book a holiday somewhere hot and sunny, so we went to Malta on an all-inclusive deal. The hotel was adequate, though rather faded, and we soon discovered that safety measures were nothing like what they were in England. There was a small recreation ground opposite the hotel, and Audrey was having a swing one day and fell backwards, cracking her head

on the solid concrete. Thankfully, she was none the worse, and still managed to enjoy her holiday, the highlights for her being the karaoke and also learning to swim properly in the very deep, outdoor, salt-water pool. It was literally sink or swim, and Audrey was determined to swim.

I had stopped singing with the Hertfordshire Chorus by that time, but still met one of my fellow-altos from time to time when we visited the Lister hospital for blood tests. I remember a conversation with Adele in the corridor outside the children's wards, when she asked me if I had heard of Dreamflight, as she would like to nominate Audrey for a holiday with them. Dreamflight is a children's charity which offers a life-enhancing holiday of a lifetime for children with serious illness or disability. The children are taken to Florida for ten days, travelling on a Boeing 707 chartered by the charity. No parents or guardians were allowed but each child was given a designated carer, and dedicated medical staff. All the doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and non-medical carers give their time voluntarily. Many of the nominated children would never be able to dream of such a holiday. Audrey was one of the children chosen for the trip in 2002, just before her 10th birthday. She was becoming better-travelled than we were, neither of us having been to the States at that time.

All the parents and carers, together with the children going on the trip, were invited to an introductory get-together to break the ice, hear more about the holiday and allay any anxieties. The highlight of the day was a trip to Woburn Safari Park. Eddie volunteered to arrange and drive one of the Sovereign Bus Company private hire coaches, which was adapted for wheelchair access, and which they loaned free of charge. Accordingly, we all set out, parents, carers and children. We were not alone – along the way we were joined by a posse from the Honda Redwing Club – large, shiny, stately motorbikes and trikes, which led the cavalcade into Woburn and then stayed to give a ride to everyone who was able and willing. The weather was glorious. Eddie drove the coach all through the park to see the animals. He saw a notice advising people not to stop their cars near the hippo's. Guess what – the driver in front of the coach stopped his car to take photographs. Eddie was a First Aider, but didn't fancy a rescue attempt should the car get charged and rolled over, but all was well, thank goodness.

After the Safari, the physically able children including Audrey, were strapped into their small radio-miked helmets, waving as they set off, and even I had a go.

The eve of the Dreamflight holiday in October was the day Audrey went to visit her prospective secondary schools, which were both within walking distance of our home. I don't know how Audrey concentrated, as she was so excited about going to Florida. She had missed the appointments at Barnwell for some reason, but the headteacher kindly offered her a new slot and even showed her round personally, which impressed Audrey. He waited while she had a go on the trampoline in the sports hall. This I think, influenced her decision as to where she would like to go. Barnwell it was to be.

The next day saw everyone gathered once again, this time in a hotel at Heathrow, where the Dreamflight team threw a party to which celebrities were invited, to meet the children and to make the start of the holiday special. We remember Cliff Richard, Ant and Dec and even Charlie Dimmock from the gardening programme, who all got into the spirit of things, chatting to the children and posing for photographs. They may have even joined in the disco dancing. This was such a wonderful idea. Parents were then

encouraged to leave so that the children could settle down with their new friends and carers before the flight the following day. We were thrilled for her, all the time wondering whether she might be homesick. Perhaps one of the advantages of mixing with so many adults in hospital and of having to spend nights away from home in difficult circumstances, had prepared the children for their adventure. They had a memorable holiday in Disneyland. Each child was given a camera to record their adventure, and a dvd at the end of the holiday which had been compiled by the staff. One of the highlights of Audrey's trip was being called out to help feed Shamu, the killer whale. We still have the ensuing photograph album.

Audrey was so much better. She still had regular check-ups and blood tests, too many to enumerate. This would continue for the rest of her life. But now she was able to look forward to the next phase of her life. It was her last summer at Aston School, and she went for the customary week away with the year 6's to the Isle of Wight. Having been away from us before, Audrey was less likely to be homesick than some. During the holidays we went to Cornwall, taking one of Audrey's friends, and immediately afterwards she was off to the International Guide Camp for the first and only time, which she thoroughly enjoyed, although she couldn't take a holiday from her medication. In September 2003 she started her first year at Barnwell School.

And there we will leave Audrey to look forward to a healthy future. Audrey was leaving childhood behind, looking towards a future with its ups and downs, its joys and its sorrows, its highlights and its dips, punctuated by challenges, achievements, disappointments and hopes. May she continue to flourish.

ADELE

I like the re-modelled Chapter 5 and this dovetails with your final chapter really well. What a traumatic few years and how very brave Audrey was. You must be very proud of her, looking back on all this. I love the fact you have decided to put this in writing now and I do believe it has a worthwhile purpose, so I really hope you pursue getting it published somewhere. Equally, if you decide to keep it purely as a personal record, then I respect your reasoning. I hope, if nothing else, it has had therapeutic benefits in releasing it to the page. Thank you for sharing.

LESLEY

The update of chapter 5 is fine but there are still a few typos; something that can be addressed on a further edit.

Chapter 6 is also a very interesting read but perhaps if you are including the 'daily regimen' you need to give a brief explanation of the drugs. Many people may not be familiar with what the specific drugs are used for. If you don't want to include this in the main text (which could stilt the narrative), maybe consider adding an appendix at the end of the story?

I'm not sure the final sentence is necessary or the best way to end. Either omit it and leave us wondering what happened, if you may be considering to write a sequel, or simply tell us "She continued to flourish."

IAN

This has been an epic tale of plucky resistance to creeping despair and craven acceptance of a raw deal in the card-game of life. It has been fought out not by incredibly superhuman heroes but by perfectly credible human beings, endowed with a due complement of perfectly ordinary imperfections – if one can say such a thing. But the battleground has not been the conventional Arthurian landscape of homesteads laid-waste and the clash of magical swords, but dreary hospital wards and truly wondrous medical advances. Which makes it both original, and yet fundamentally timeless.

Ian Clark

We may be robots—but we’re liberated robots

Purves, Dale, *Brains: how they seem to work*. Prentice-Hall, 2010.

Strolling in the afternoon sunshine at Sandsend, I chanced upon a lovely fairy form sunbathing nude in the long grass. She must have spotted me coming, for as I drew closer she promptly changed into a patch of flowers.

I’m reading a book by a brain researcher called Dale Purves about how brains (according to the title) “seem to work”. Actually it’s the author’s memoirs of a career spent in many different areas of brain research: the words: *seem to work* applying as much to the theories themselves as the illusions they contrive to explain.

For example: how it is that our two eyes cooperate to furnish us with a seamless impression of watching the world through a single eye in the centre of our face? This everyday illusion has a scientific name: *cyclopean vision*.

Purves emphasises that what I see out there has little or nothing to do with what’s really out there, and everything to do with what has proved of practical help to my ancestors’ survival – if only long enough to breed. Thus, if my brain contains a detector of the naked female form, this detector is less likely to have evolved towards delivering a balanced judgement, i.e. an equal number of false positives and false negatives, and more towards erring on the side of keeping my hopes up.

In saying this, Purves is making no daring new claim. He is merely reinforcing the message of Charles Darwin. Not to say Richard Dawkins, who corrects a common misreading of Darwin: it is *genes* that survive (better) by natural selection, not *species*.

A careful reading of Darwin’s *The Origin Of Species* shows he is of much the same mind as Dawkins. And that in spite of the fact that Darwin was ignorant of *genes* as such—he was ignorant of his contemporary, Gregor Mendel, breeding genetically challenged peas in his monastic garden to demonstrate the existence of genes as discrete entities—and could only talk of inherited “traits”. These Darwin supposed to vary smoothly, like the sweetness of tea when sugar is trickled in, rather than all-or-nothing, as would occur with the optional addition of a sugar cube. Mind you, excellent experimenter and scholar as he was, Darwin mentions several puzzles concerning the way in which traits are inherited, to which genes just so happen to provide the best explanation.

There is a Yiddish saying that a *language* is a *dialect* with an army and a navy. Adapting this saying to Darwin, it’s apparent that he thinks of a *species* as just a *variety* with a pair of Latin names. He avoids saying it outright however, because he doesn’t want to upset the taxonomists any more than he has to. According to Dawkins they are a nasty lot—and no doubt they were in Darwin’s day too.

But what if it *had* been a fairy in the long grass that sunny afternoon – and she hadn’t been in such a blinking hurry to elude me? Then we might well have witnessed the genesis of a whole new scion of the Fair Folk.

I wasn’t having a brain malfunction. The mechanism was working just fine.

VERONICA

As usual, I am mentally and imaginatively challenged by Ian's writing. With Chris Firth's book being recently published, there is much faery influence about. This is amusing and instructive writing, somewhat wry in parts, leaving a lot to the imagination! Regarding the two paragraphs on Darwin and Dawkins: I had to read this several times to make sense of it. A small point, but I think I would have got the point more quickly if it were all the same paragraph.

ADELE

I hope you managed to dwell on the image for a while like the king of wishful thinking, rather than just explore the science of genetics! I'd like to think so 😊

A good read which is very entertaining.

IAN

Tut-tut!

In the words of the old song: I'm too old to sin, and too young to die.

And as for "dwelling on the image" – it evaporated before I'd got anywhere near close enough to make it out properly. That fairy must have been on a hair-trigger.

LESLEY

I found your contribution of particular interest. Having worked in neuroscience nursing for many years, during my career, and teaching a specialist course in the subject (long since retired) I found that trying to study how the brain functions was a never-ending subject. I used to tell my students "the more I learn about the brain, the less I know".

Some of you may be aware of studies on 'right brain' v 'left brain' functions and differences between males and females. Of course, science and research has progressed since 'my days', helped by the advancement of brain scans, etc.

The human brain tries to make sense of what it perceives - so, for example, I may see a face in the pattern of a cloud, or a ghostly figure in the night shadows, as you saw the fairy in the grass. They aren't really there - or are they?

Adele Duffield

Life Cycle

You grew strong within me
I wither daily, lost, alone,
I nursed you, spoon-fed you
is this a fork or a spoon?
I nurtured and guided you.
You help and provide for me.
Bed-time stories, words and images,
Pictures on doors explain what's inside,
pictures in books expand your mind.
photos with names tell me who's who.
Coloured sweets, and daily treats,
my coloured pills have daily reminders
"I'm scared of this place mummy"
I'm scared of forgetting who or where I am
so holding your hand, reassured you.
"Please hold my hand so I don't get lost"
My darling, innocent child,
Your loving worn-out mother
I'm always by your side.
needs you now, by her side.
I'm always there for you;
You're always there for me;
you, reliant on my enduring love.
me, reliant on your undying love.

VERONICA

I found this a very moving poem, describing so economically a whole lifetime of change, with young and old turned upside-down. The lay-out is essential, I think, for clarity and effect.

ADELE

This poem was written in two halves as Lesley's was that she shared at poetry group. I played about with it and decided to stitch it together line by opposite line as a concrete poem and the shape is meant to be of a human heart but the formatting goes a little awry. I'd be interested to know what you think.

LESLEY

My first interpretation of this was of a mother recalling bringing up and nurturing her child, then the tables are turned in that the mother becomes reliant on her child. Perhaps with advancing age? If I read it as intended, the first part was mother/child then it changes with the line "your loving worn-out mother", where the juxtaposition of speech becomes child/mother?

I wasn't sure of the meaning of "wither" in the second line. Was the child handicapped in some way?

On re-reading: apart from the first two lines, it could be the 'child' speaking first and the mother, now incapacitated, speaking second. I am thus a little confused and think the first two lines, or the first line if it is child/mother speaking, need some alteration.

My suggestion is to turn it around: e.g., "I grew strong with you".

An intriguing construct where one can read the first line of each couplet as one, then the second line of each couplet in their own right.

IAN

This is a pair of mirror worlds presented to us artistically as a diptych: an altarpiece on the sacrificial altar of human existence. The sheer craft that has gone into its carving and gilding has not obscured the everyday human story, especially the slow-motion tragedy of watching a loved one dying by degrees, reversing the process of childish development. I'm reminded of one of those Escher prints of tilings of light and dark beings, each sustaining their opposites, defining their boundaries and underpinning their very existence.

Lesley Pemberton

Cathy's Story

Writer's block. The muse had gone but Cathy wanted it back. Maybe it was just hiding away among the dulled brain cells. She needed some stimulation and inspiration. She needed to feel alive again, to be rid of the anaesthetising effects of lack of exercise and too many bottles of wine over too many months. Painful months since her husband had left her.

Driving along the moorland road as it rolled out towards the coast, Cathy eagerly anticipated seeing the Abbey ruins standing proud on the cliff top on the east side of Whitby. The scenery around was pleasant, the day was clear and bright. She had no urge to drive fast and she would be able to savour the view of the silhouetted structure as she drew closer.

Like a lodestar the ruined Abbey guided her towards her destination. The cottage in which she had chosen to stay was nestled in the old part of town below the cliffs. Cathy located the small alley and was able to park her car not too far away after unloading her belongings. The cottage was old and quaint and would be a comfortable base for her few days' stay. If the good weather held, as the forecast predicted, she planned to go out and about during the daytime.

It would be good to acquaint herself with the town, to people-watch, to listen to snatches of conversation. Surely she would glean something to trigger her imagination? Her new notebook would soon have its pristine pages filled with snippets; ideas that would build into a new story.

For the time that was left on the afternoon of her arrival, Cathy went out to find her bearings around the town's lower reaches on either side of the harbour. It was much busier than she had expected. Older people, coughed out of coaches; on day trips she presumed. Young couples, some with toddlers and babies, taking a break before the main holiday season. Others - mainly young people - dressed in their dramatic Goth Style, paying homage to the town's embrace of their culture.

What an eclectic mix, yet it all seemed to fit in place. Here in Whitby were extremes of old Christianity and the associations with Bram Stoker's tale of Count Dracula. Myths and legends, fact and fiction, were woven into the town's tapestry. There must be plenty here to fan the literary embers.

Armed with some information from the Tourist Office and a few provisions for breakfast the next day, Cathy returned across the swing bridge which, she noted, was over one hundred years old. People scurried along the bridge when a bell rang and men emerged from somewhere to close barriers across the roadway. Cathy joined a small crowd at one end, watching, like the groups of tourists on the other side, as the bridge separated to allow a couple of yachts through. Small sailing boats were the main traffic on the Esk now, going to and fro between the new marina and the sea.

There was already plenty to jot down in the notebook when she got back to the cottage. Before she went out again to explore the many nearby restaurants, Cathy wanted to record some of the images and thoughts and sensations she had experienced. She

knew that they could become blurred in the memory and evaporate quickly. As a butterfly, flitting off after its day's existence, the words could easily die if they weren't netted straight away.

After a satisfying meal and a short stroll back from the restaurant, Cathy made some plans for the following day. Perusing the leaflets she had picked up earlier, she added more ideas to the notebook.

She woke the next morning to find the day was pleasantly warm and bathed in sunshine. A trip to the Abbey and St Mary's Church was on the agenda. Cathy didn't feel up to climbing the 199 Steps to ascend to the Abbey ruins and decided to combine her visit to the cliff top with a tour on the open-top bus. That way she would see more of the West Side of Whitby on the opposite cliff. She could then leave the bus after it had wound its way back across the river's 'New Bridge' and up to the Abbey.

The tour guide announced they would wait for about ten minutes when the bus stopped near the end of Pier Road. From this vantage point Cathy could see the Abbey and St Mary's Church across the mouth of the River Esk. She found herself wondering why the Abbey had been built on a bleak headland, not in some sheltered valley like many Abbeys were. Was it a grandiose statement, defying the elements? A landmark for sailors returning from the sea, guiding their ships and their souls back to safe haven? A final commitment where land reaches water, commanding the people that in and between life and death they must look to God?

Cathy presumed that when the first Abbey was built in the seventh century and the current one replaced it in the thirteenth century most people would proclaim to be Christian. Not many, if any, would defy the Church to be branded as heretics. Religion had a powerful hold – perhaps, not least, because monastic lands provided work and sustenance for the poorer people. Now, like the ruins of the Abbey, people no longer had such structure in their lives.

The tour continued, divulging the attractions of West Cliff: the Whalebone Arch, next to Captain James Cook's monument, the grand Victorian hotels to the left, the newer Spa and Theatre to the right and, below that, the long stretch of Whitby Sands along which one could walk (with care to note the tides) to Sandsend.

Winding their way back to the East Side and up to Abbey Plain, Cathy alighted from the tour bus near the entrance to the Abbey which was now in the care of English Heritage. She took a quick tour of the Visitor Centre and shop, aiming to spend more time out in the spring sunshine to explore the Abbey ruins.

Outside, tiny flowers raised their heads from the neatly tended grass and the gaps between large stone blocks, in contrast to the imposing, towering edifice. There were clear views all around: the white-tipped waves out at sea, the harbour's pincer walls embracing the mouth of the river, the tumbling rooftops and the tower of St Hilda's Church on the West Side, the cliff top Abbey Plain reaching out towards the Bights and, below, the clustered old buildings clinging to the base of East Side like limpets on the hull of a large boat.

Clutching her notebook, Cathy walked around the outside of the Abbey ruins before venturing into what remained of the interior. Of course, none of it was now enclosed. The roof and windows had long since gone and there were gaps in the walls where doors would have been. Cathy tried to visualise how magnificent the large Gothic

window arches would have looked with stained glass, probably depicting scenes of saints and Biblical images. Sunlight would have cast prisms of dancing coloured light into the Abbey.

She was aware how much quieter it was here than in the town below. The few people she had encountered were mainly preoccupied with taking photographs. Some, she noted wryly, were the kind of tourists who took 'holiday snaps' of each other rather than the place they were visiting. It was one of her pet hates. They would return home and bore their relatives and friends with monotonous pictures:

'This is Barbara at Whitby Abbey.'

'This is John at Whitby Abbey.'

'Oh...look! That's both of us. We asked someone to take the photo so we could both be on it.'

But there would be no photos of the Abbey in all its glory. They might as well have stood beside a stone wall anywhere.

Thus musing, Cathy was suddenly intrigued to come across an elderly man seated by an easel, paintbrush in hand and palette of watercolours at his side. She approached him, hoping she wouldn't disturb his concentration. She peered at the paper on the easel, immediately recognising the man's talent as an artist. The man put down his paintbrush and leant back, stretching his shoulders and arms and flexing his fingers. Aware of someone behind him he turned and smiled. Cathy apologised for disturbing him but he said she wasn't, he needed a break.

They got into conversation about his artwork and about her literary aspirations. The man told her that he had taken up painting recently; it was something he had always wanted to try.

'You're never too old. It's never too late to follow your dreams,' he said.

He told her about Caedmon, the lay brother who became a revered monk at Whitby Abbey. How he was ashamed that he couldn't partake in providing songs for his fellow-workers. Then, according to the story, one night Caedmon dreamt of beautiful words in praise of God's creation and later was able to recite them. He continued to dream and produce poems and songs; his dreams became reality.

'Don't give up on your dreams. Put them into practice,' the elderly man continued. 'We may not be like Caedmon, finding perfection in the eyes of others, but we can keep nurturing our talents. Something great may come one day. Think of how many men laboured to build this Abbey, how long it must have taken to see the final structure. It's no longer used for its original purpose, it's in ruins, but it is testament to someone's dream, someone's ambition.'

Cathy had to agree with him and he gave her plenty to think about with his final words.

'If my paintings and your stories can touch the minds and hearts and souls of but a few people along the way, we have done something worthwhile.'

Cathy thanked him for his time, promising to look out for some of his paintings. Likewise, he said he would look out for her next book to read.

She left for a quiet corner of the Abbey to make some notes in her book before going on to St Mary's Church. Cathy could just make out Captain Cook's Monument above the Battery on the other side of the river. She considered how he must have had great

ambitions and dreams to set sail into unknown waters. How he brought back a wealth of information on previously uncharted lands that would influence the future.

Then, stopping at Caedmon's Cross she thought again about her conversation with the elderly artist before she descended the 199 steps to the town below.

Later that night, Cathy reviewed the notes she had made. When she fell asleep she dreamt about her new story.

It would soar into the air with the skirling of the gulls.

It would roll out to sea with the ebbing tide and the white-capped waves.

It would blow inland with the wind-driven rain.

It would tumble down the steps from the Abbey, spilling over the people in the town below and into their minds and hearts and souls.

VERONICA

You have an easy, colloquial style, Lesley. I wonder what readership you have in mind? I found the idea of elderly people, coughing out of coaches, original and somewhat 'icky' in this Covid-dominated climate: I wonder what period this is set in? I ask this partly because I don't know of more than one person managing the bridge: I thought they were automatic, but perhaps this was describing earlier days: the early '90s perhaps? (I looked up the Marina on Google) As a reader, I like to be sure that what I'm reading accords with my experience of a place unless it's obviously set in a different era. I'm sure your description of images like butterflies flitting away before they are captured, is common to most writers. I would just question your statement that "people no longer had such structure in their lives" - some people do! The statement needs qualifying, I think. Is this short story autobiographical, I wonder?

ADELE

I love the line 'coughed out of coaches'. You have painted an evocative picture and capture Whitby well. I love the ending. You almost feel yourself drift off to sleep with her. Lovely.

IAN

What a glorious excuse for a comprehensive travelogue of Whitby, framed by the quest of a novice author yearning to write a truly impactful story. Even by the end of it we aren't told whether she finally managed to get it out on paper, and we're left to wonder whether she ever will. For all that, it is peculiarly complete and satisfying.

For some stories, the real story is in the telling of it.