
MARIA
By R.S.Howell

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Introduction

This tale involves a young girl called Maria and her friends. In a way it is a sad story, but there are smiles here and there. Those of you who may go on to read the Ann Stories will find a much happier outcome for Maria. But... I’m not saying any more than that. Why run when you have no idea where you are heading? Especially when you can calmly saunter and enjoy the scenery. Maybe even have time to find a helpful tour guide on the way.

Neither are many of the characters in this story the type of people you might expect to bump into on Espe’s high street on a Saturday morning. Or any morning; not unless you have the inner vision of an Altius.

A Much-Needed Saunter Through Espe

The rarest of summers blessed the old, dusty, crusty, comfortably insular, and historically damp, ancient town of Espe. The glorious, non-stop weather mostly soothed the old, the young, the carefree and the utterly spoilt, especially those young Sapiens, but not all. Neither was the sun cheering or blinding many of the Altius, the strange indigenous inhabitants of Espe. Or, as the Altius's ancient tongue refers to the town. 'The weird and wonderful settlement of long-haired, wise-arsed poets.' They, as they did many things, were taking the weather in their often happily moribund saunters around the town and of course, in their rhymes.

The clear skies and scorching sun, relieved by the occasional soft breeze, was mostly a gift to body and heart, although it melted the patience of some. The heat even frightened a few. Especially one young Altius girl who loved the light and warmth but feared the sun's damaging rays. Quibbling over what to wear to protect herself from them, she wittered and twittered for so long, she had yet to embrace her gang waiting impatiently for her downstairs. Let alone sit with them to consider the all-important dare they planned for that day.

To the amusement of her parent-come-sister Sheila, young Maria fretted in her bedroom as she tried on and discarded various outfits. While she picked through her dresses, no sleeves! And jeans. Too hot! And started on an impressive array of skirts, which set her sister tutting good naturedly, "Cucumbers and turnips! Will you ever get dressed," where the bedroom pink curtains fluttered gently as if agreeing. Beyond the flutter, the town's early risers in various states of almost complete undress were, in some cases unpicking footwear sticking to the pavements, or bravely wandering the furnace-like streets in search of somewhere cool. Some, using the plain tongue enforced upon the town by

Norman invaders, a deed that still sets many an Altius shuddering nearly a thousand years later, praised the sun, “It’s lovely.” A few, as expected, moaned “It’s too bloody hot! Will this blimming sun never stop?” but they still made sure to enjoy the burn. Something extra to moan about later when their skin blisters and peels.

Such plain, boring, contradictory comments were sure to set certain Altius tongues a-wagging as they gathered in reverence on a circle of grass marking the centre of the once-circular Market Square.

Far back in those ashen days before prehistory kicked off, the square, the town’s spiritual heart accommodated a huge stone circle. Although, unlike Stonehenge, its inferior, younger, smaller, upstart cousin, there were no capping trillions. Too much like hard work for nothing, the original inhabitants decided. And almost impossible to climb up to sit on. And what for? Just to stare out. Why do that, when we can stand here or sit over in Fred’s café, sipping that pee, he calls mammoth beer? Besides, we voted for an open plan look, didn’t we?

Sadly, in this present age, the circle is even more open plan than their forebears ever intended. Now, one solitary but giant monolith commands the centre of the daisy-flecked grass. The Normans, the town’s vile and only invaders, tried to remove it along with the others. When the stone repelled their efforts, a Norman sneered drunkenly, or so the town’s secret history records.

“Just leave it there. It’ll taunt those indigenous idiots every day and remind them that we took their town. We destroyed their hearts. Their culture. Their lives! Let it stand as a reminder that we own them, body and soul.”

Surrounded by blossom trees, planted in memory of its fallen companions, the single monolith stands as a poignant reminder of grander, freer times. Proudly

belonging to the earth's bedrock, the stone guards the town's ancient centre, the place where Altius gather to imbibe the earth's magic that passes through it. Or as a meeting place before nipping over to visit the more modern but still ancient incarnation of Fred's Café.

On that sun-filled morning, one lounger zinging with the stone's magical vibes heard a passer-by sigh floating in upon the still air, "It's lovely". Deeply offended by the boring content, he waxed in his thick Altius brogue.

"Might the town soon collapse in a heap of dust?"

Another Altius equally stirred, butted in to continue the soliloquy.

"And be swept away by winter's returning, strong, sea-enraged winds in a frenzied gusting lust."

That could not be left uncontested or unmolested. So, on the poets went.

"Or will the dust of our toil be buried by the snow storms rushing over the creeping marshes and rough downs, as it seeks to throttle the lown?"

Another piped up and intoned in a poet's, seemingly always moribund mood.

"Aye, and on the wind shalll blow. Bashing its mindless, salt-filled will-o'-the-wisp head against the sheer-faced, spiky, deeply fissured, demonic Metamorphic cave-riddled hills skulking at Dragon's Bed.

"Nice one," someone muttered before adding.

“Yes, those dark spires born from the devil’s desires that stare so hostilely down on the back end of our wonderful town.”

So, there, as the local Sapiens press reported later that day, you have some of the views concerning the unprecedented weather currently burning up Espe. As well as encouraging various states of eye-popping undress.

“And please,” the Espean News printed. “Let’s have no more letters about scanty clothing. The subject is growing as thin as old Mrs Prendergast’s tie-dyed, halter-neck top, which many of you have written in to complain about!”

To the merriment of the mischief-making letter writers, the subject was also mentioned in a safety poster. Hanging beside the clocking in mechanism in one of the mayor’s many foul factories, it urged. Remember, ladies, you’re working with machines! Don’t be a slack Alice. (Crossed out by a wit and changed to read Old Mrs Prendergast) Keep all your loose ends safely tucked in!

Another more serious-minded wit had scribbled on the wall next to the poster: Remember, slaves, the mayor don’t pay no compensation.

Where another scribbler, possibly a pedantic Altius, wrote beneath it, but your double negative suggests she does.

The two things everyone agreed on were: it was unbelievably hot and Old Mrs Prendergast’s halter-neck top was indeed a sight to make unwary eyes water.

A Much-Needed Saunter Through Espe: Part 2

During the day, clouds with a want to dot the robin's egg blue sky were burnt off without trace, much like the insidious tell-tale trails of high-flying jets. Yeah, ice crystals they may be, the Altius tut knowingly. But those crystals are infused with jet fumes and pooh and who knows what other horribly doing do do's!

As sweaty minutes melted by, besides encouraging some tempers to grow dangerously combustive, the sun encouraged happiness, worry, impatience and sadly, a few to die. It even nudged the waffy to wonder. Has that big bomb finally been dropped, and are we now enjoying the promised delights of heaven everlasting? But if we are, then why is that devil of a mayor still with us?

The long evenings were thankfully cooler. The quietly shrinking, plinking pavements cease to burn the feet of those in thin-soled shoes, while the not so distant incoming tide sucks in clouds behind it. Then a stirring breeze kindly guides them on to Espe. Locals noting the change, venture out to dance in the welcome rain or take part in the town's fanatically supported sport of skittles. Often, both are enjoyed together by the Altius and Sapiens alike. They play by lamplight in their many right-enshrined alleyways, known locally as skittleways. They as an enshrined right run between houses both old and modern. Much to the mayor's disgust.

"If we flatten the town and ban the skittleways, we'll be able to rebuild with twice as many houses, which means more taxes for the council and more profit for my firms."

While she covets and schemes, the local Altius and Sapiens lubricated by flagons of home-made cider, cheer, jeer and laugh, invariably at the mayor's expense. Through the sultry evenings their ribald sounds happily compete with the clack of wooden balls against skilfully carved skittles. While those town folks make merry, flowers in well-tended gardens, watered by the evening's light rainfall, bloom without thought of end. Gladly, they give the air their competing perfumes until the acrid aroma of spilt cider takes over. Or one of the mayor's factories belches more stinking, harmful chemicals into the air to offend noses and biologically so much more.

But not yet. It is still mid-time in mid-morning and the sun was just warming up with the promise of more intense heat to follow.

But not strictly so for The Alternative Living Emporium. That grand wonder, like Fred's Café, was another of Espe's ancient landmarks whose roots are firmly embedded in the murky greys of pre-prehistory.

In this present dark age, The Emporium dominates a large part of The Old High Street, where rumours suggest it straddles dimensions. In its earthbound guise, it marks the demarcation line between old Espe and various new phrases, started in Victorian times and continued after the town was redesigned during WWII. Built more often of brick, those unwanted interlopers fight with each other to ring the old, wooden-framed, brick inlaid, buildings. In turn, they hustle the older, quaintly thatched, wooden, fire-risky homes. Squeezed hard by all the other buildings they, in turn, crowd the defiant single Monolith at the town's old centre.

While Altius’s gathered at the stone in throes of prose with hearts beating fondly for their mark of defiance, The Emporium waited patiently to be wreathed in a beautiful but giggly sense of autumn.

Maria. A Dare Is A Foot

Part 1

To the momentary alarm of a usually happy and mischievous young girl fastidiously dressing in autumnal-coloured clothes she so carefully, and at length, had picked out for the day, Radio Espe's aspiring Australian DJ gleefully announced.

"All you Sheila's out there, get your cossies and thongs on, it's promising to be another ripper. And don't forget the sun factor! And for those of you in the old parts of town, remember, be on your toes and near a hose."

The warning, although lightly delivered, was well meant. Instead of offering comfort on cold days, fire was a constant worry for those living in the town's ancient sector. The timber-framed houses, or the much older, ancient wooden constructions, were certainly of an age to crinkle, wrinkle and shrivel into dust. Or worse still, burn up in a sudden spark-filled gust. But to the surprise of a few, the town was achieving the very opposite. From out of the threat of fire and ash, an endless parade of skimpy costumes adorning the old, who should know better - Mrs Prendergast - through to the far too young, who ought to be more careful, suggested a sense of renewal. In this once-every-100-years summer, smooth, raw pink skin or grizzled, crinkled brown was the go to fashion around this spire-less, tower-block-less dusty, fusty old town.

I ain't going about like that, the young girl rebelled with a frown that marred her otherwise mischievous face. Had she spotted the sour expression in her long mirror, she might well have freaked out. "It don't match me outfit." Luckily for her friends waiting downstairs, she was too busy debating, the orange skirt or the brown one, to notice and therefore feel compelled to alter her choice yet again.

Also waiting for her beyond the bedroom window, although more patiently, was the gentle buzz of fat, happy insects, fanned by the gentle flit of butterfly wings. Not to forget, the thrilling, cheering, spiralling, sweet birdsong, the likes of which have not been heard for many years, either in Espe or elsewhere. Even the neglected roses that usually struggle to bloom in the Town Square were pink of face and enjoying a second flush. Some were saying, they look set for a third innings and everyone agreed the summer was unexpected and splendid. A well-informed citizen recently suggested over a cup of the town's finest tea, served in Fred's Café, or better known by some as the Altius's second meeting place, or the first during the bitterly cold, long winter months.

"Fred, it's like nature is sensing its dying and is determined to go out spectacularly."

"Aye. It could well be that," Fred replied sagely. "Or it might be dust from active volcanoes and the smoke from all those fires in the Amazonian forests combining to cap the atmosphere. Or we might just be having a blooming good summer, for once," he laughed, while swiftly clearing a table.

Carrying the dirty cups out to the kitchen, he wondered. While I'm here, should I make more ice lollies to give to the old, the kids and the homeless? Only to tut.

"In this shocking, uncaring age, we could all be homeless soon. Especially if the town burns down. Now wouldn't that serve the mayor's plans well to rebuild Espe her way?"

As a leading Altius boasting a lineage back to those pre-prehistoric days before Sapiens arose to cause disarray, Fred was more than capable of looking beneath

the mayor's lid. Yes, that Norman-hearted cow will do anything to earn a quick quid, including setting fire to this part of town.

"But may heaven forbid!" He muttered and with such deep sincerity that the tone would have disturbed any non-Altius within hearing. But not the Altius. Along with Fred, they know of a certain someone who hails from a place far beyond the normal regions of what Sapiens call space. When not flouncing about there, she lives on the outskirts of Espe and can be seen occasionally brightening the High Street or gracing The Alternative Living Emporium. Although, she is rarely seen by Sapiens in the special way that the Altius see her.

"Since when have Sapiens ever seen the truth of anything, even when it's under their blimming nose?" Is often observed around the town.

To Fred's deep disappointment, that certain someone, as gifted as she was, had yet to make the mayor despair, disappear, or publicly admit she's a disgrace. But it is on the Angel's list, he understands. Along with millions of other things that need seeing too, if the planet, her jewel, her child, is ever to return to its original natural beauty.

For the record, the much older, ethereal miss does not speak in rhyme as the Altius like to do. She finds it hard and has no time to grapple with such torsional binds, especially when she has the musical poetry of heaven, her first home, rippling through her mind. Plus there are other binds she has to contend with, males urging she grants them a generous kiss with her gorgeous lips. No, she will have none of that malarkey, although a flirtatious gleam might strike her startling sapphire-blue eyes when teasing those she likes and entrusts with her secret. With her golden-pink skin and white-blonde hair, most consider her

beautiful beyond compare. Some Sapiens after she rebuts their unwanted molestations, also say and sneeringly so, she's a heartbreaker and sexless. Neither, for those attuned to ethereal behaviour, can she be everywhere at once. But she can be anywhere, either as a human or an Angel, or infuriatingly just up and disappear mid-sentence. Most of all, to Fred's disappointment, she is not able to do anything about the heatwave.

"And why should I, Fred? It's gorgeous!" She replied to his request with a sweet smile before showing him her petite, golden sandals. "I can wear these and they set off my yellow dress beautifully, don't you think?"

So, in this politically correct, manically mad, confused, inwardly spirally, blame-riddled, failing new millennium, this summer of summer baked the town while drying out some of the more sourly damp inhabitants. And of course, scaring the autumnal child.

Part 2

To the mayor of this ancient town, the various reminders of its pre-Norman existence were as repugnant as boils erupting on her otherwise sucked, tucked, plucked and well-polished derrière. But not so to a gang of young girls flowing with fanciful imaginations, as led by the one destined to bring a sense of autumn into The Emporium. To them, the Monolith marks where the first Aliens landed. While the venerable Emporium is the Alien's portal.

"But these aliens are friendly, ain't they? They're not the innards-sucking kind we've seen in films." Asked hopefully by many of the town's younger children.

"No," The adults in Fred's Café or elsewhere sagely reply. "Those horrible little things incubate in the mayor's office. When they grow up, they'll infest the council, not you. But then again, they will infest you, just not directly."

So, while a few early rising Altius swapped muses at the Monolith about the sky, why is it blue and not red white, or yellow, the young autumn child continued fussing over her attire. But that was nothing new. Neither were her worries about her small gang's careless love of the sun. Or the gangs' chosen dare for the day, exploring the caves snaking beneath Fred's Café. No, the worry that darkened her day before it properly started was all over her favourite autumn-yellow-leaf-coloured trainers.

What if they get scuffed in the caves?

Those eight simple, unspoken words were fraught with meaning. Her sister would have understood had she known of their existence. But then neither did she know about the day's planned dare or indeed, about any of the gang's dares.

Maria's solemn, my trainers were Mama's last gift to me, brought another frown to her otherwise bright face. Suddenly, she stopped dressing and sat carefully down on her neatly smoothed duvet. Yeah… her frown deepened to say… before cancer took Mama away last year, just like it did me Dada. Leaving me here with blimming bossy Sis.

Usually, after such a thought, a fond smile might twitch her lips, revealing the love she had for her sister, but not on that sad anniversary morning.

While the words were silent, her frown loudly called to Sheila, her sister. She understood the expression only too well. Some days she wore the very same one. I'll not let the miseries take my Maria, she vowed as her eyes dwelt on her fun-loving eight-year-old sister's heart-shaped face. As always, a tender smile lit her face as she traced the sprinkling of freckles orbiting her little, ski-slope nose. She's so pale, Sheila fussed. Whether she likes it or not, she needs to feel the sun. And have fun with her friends and bring some colour back into her cheeks.

"Come on," Sheila goaded, while wrapping her arm around Maria's shoulders. "I'm not going to be the one to tell your friends waiting for you downstairs to leave. Especially as you, miss fussy," cajoled with a loving squeeze, "have kept them waiting for half an hour already."

"You do know what today is, dun't ya?" Maria said sadly.

"Yes I do, and I miss her too. But remember Maria, Mama loved to see us both smiling and happy. And she would have had you dressed and out of that front door in less than ten minutes." She teased and laughed while tickling Maria until she swapped the frown for a smile and then, glory be, giggly laughter.

“Yes, in ten minutes,” Sheila joked, “instead of the hour you’ve taken to get dressed and you’re still not ready.”

Part 3

Fearing the sun's rays on this blistering day, Maria chose a beige cardigan, to cover her arms after fussily making sure it coordinated with her russet-brown t-shirt with pale orange skirt. Being of a modest length, the skirt hem touched the little half-moon scars adorning the middle of her dimpled knees. They, in turn, like a pair of shy smiles, will shortly hover obediently above where her long, soft cotton socks will end. Once she decides on a pair.

"You're gonna faint in this heat, wearing all that." Shelia nagged. "Bare your arms and legs and enjoy the sun, like your mates do."

"I ain't gonna go bare-limbed, Sis, cos I don't want no silly little boys teasing me about me skinny arms or legs." She retorted in her distinctive Espean brogue, which flowed and twanged and ringed with disapproval. Boys can be silly, so why give 'em an excuse? After picking a pair of socks, delicately dotted with adorable little pink and red hearts and bows, she closed the neatly arranged drawer, turned then hotly asserted.

"An you know, we redheads feel the cold more, dun't we?"

Smirking at her finicky sister, Sheila noted a certain tone in the child's voice, suggesting she was holding something back. Caves can be cold, can't they? Before Sheila could pounce and wring the omission out of her, Maria declared in a whisper that resonated between them as loudly as any shout might.

"An we catch cancer easily, too, dun't we, right? Just fink of poor Mama and Dada! Both were redheads, like us."

“I’m sure there’s no connection, Maria,” Sheila suggested soothingly. “If anything, it’s caused by the air or our food.”

What she kept to herself was the belief that the cancers were caused by the mayor’s factories. Why inflame Maria more? She’s taking too long to get ready as it is. She thought, watching Maria fussing before her long, highly polished, dressing mirror.

Happy that the sock tops were level and the patterns straight, Maria headed down the stairs. At the front door, ignoring her friend’s playful teasing, “Come on, you fussy slow coach,” Maria neatly tied the laces of her pride and joy. The scuff-less and spotless autumnal-light-yellow-leaf-coloured trainers.

As always, the mischievous sparkles waiting to glisten like jewels in those unforgettable eyes will, when they spark up, both match and enhance her fastidiously chosen ensemble.

They also held a deep secret. One she was unaware of. Although in time as secrets must do, it will reveal itself and go on to change her life, forever.

Part 4

“Jody, did you get the Café keys?” Maria asked eagerly after they rounded the corner at the far end of the road, and she could finally stop waving to her watchful sister.

“Yeah. And dad didn’t notice. He was too busy larking about with me mum. You know what he’s like on his day off.” Jody replied, with a fond smile for her parents.

“He wants to do everything he can’t do during the week and all at once,” she laughed. “Fishing, roasting dinners, knitting me mum a good yarn to keep her love warm and all that silly stuff. I left them dancing in the front room,” she laughed again. “So, he won’t be looking for the keys, not today!”

In excited flits, skips and the odd tease, they headed off towards Market Square. Then, on to Fred’s Café to explore the secret caves snaking through the metamorphic gneisses beneath. Suddenly, as they approached the first of three skittleways, their shortcuts to Market Square, Dotty-don’t-call-me-spotty, threw a massive strop.

“Hold on, you lot,” she said, suddenly stopping. “I know we’ve talked about nothing else all week, but I don’t get it, she moaned. “’Ow, will we get about in those caves with only that silly little map of yourn, Freda.”

“Don’t call me, Freda,” Jody rounded on her hotly. “You know I don’t like it. That’s the traditional family name for me, innit, so I’ve gotta ’ave it, but I don’t ’ave to wear it, do I? Now then, what’s up with me map?”

“What’s up with it!” Dotty complained, swelling with righteousness. “There’s nowt on it, except those two little lines for doors and the squiggly bits you reckon are stairs.”

“There’s nowt more on the map, Dotty…,” Jody said crushingly. “Cos we ain’t explored the caves yet, ’ave we, silly. Till we do, we don’t know what it looks like, do we? So ’ow can I draw what we don’t know!”

While the rest of the gang tittered and twittered, Jody smirked and explained.

“The plan, if you remember, was for us to explore like those Druids did in their coracles that we learned about in school. You know, the ones who ended up in America instead of Bognor. We’ll fill the map in as we go along, right?

“But ’ow can we see to write things if it’s dark down there?” Dotty huffed.

“I’ve told ya, already, silly,” Jody retorted. “Me dad’s put some lights down there, so it ain’t so dark naw. But we’ll need torches wid us, cos there’s more tunnels. And how else can we be daring explorers if we don’t have torches?”

Turning to the gang, she asked. “So, who’s ready to dib up for batteries like we discussed?”

It was Sunday, a full day since pocket money. Potless, the gang shuffled guiltily.

“We’ll have to do next week’s dare, instead.” Maria suggested quickly before more arguments could break out. “We’ll go and explore the Alien’s Emporium. It’s always open on a Sunday. And getting in, don’t need keys or batteries, just a bit of nerve.”

Instead of cheering Yeah, let's go, Jody fretted and looked down at the ground.

While the gang had never seen the lights that glow on and off inside The Emporium at night, they knew the rumours. To their fertile imaginations the lights and the aliens were as real as their feet. As were the tales telling of haggard women going inside, only to leave later in the day looking smarter and happier. In new alien bodies, some say!

"And the alien spells keep it all looking nice," Little Gail suggested.

Sally, an occasional member of the gang they picked up on the way, favoured the idea that, "The Emporium straddles dimensions and the inside ain't in this world but in another."

"Yeah," Maria added. "And it spins around in the night so the door on the other side comes 'ere."

Catching on to the idea, Priti suggested excitedly. "I get it! That's why time don't touch it. And that's why it's always tidy and the door changes colour but we don't see 'em paint it."

"You've got it, Priti," Maria said. "They paint it on the other side."

"I don't know about this Alien's Emporium," Jody suddenly blurted. "I knows the Café well. Dun't I." She explained. "I help me dad out often enough, and he's no alien. Although he does say strange things, sometimes." She admitted with a smile. "But going into the Emporium is something else."

“All you have to do is ’ave a quick neb inside, then nab something to show they’re aliens, or call us in to join ya,” Dotty said as scathingly as an eight-year-old could without poking out a tongue afterwards.

“But how will I let you know it’s alright to come in?” Jody worried.

“Just open the door,” Sally suggested brightly. “And yell, come in, or summit. If it ain’t all right, we’ll know, cos you won’t yell, will ya, or come running out.” She laughed.

While the gang blithely nodded along and ignored the prospects of Jody getting nabbed, Gail, the youngest member of the gang, suggested nervously.

“When we go in, I’ll keep guard by the door, shall I?”

The others smiled. Any danger will come from the inside and not through the door. And if it did, then how would she stop it anyway? But she was the gang’s ‘littl un,’ so they forgave her.

“Yeah, you do that for us, Gail,” they all agreed.

With the new plan in place, they wove through the skittleways and emerged in Market Square. A series of cheery waves saw them pass the Monolith and through the square’s little fenced flower garden and out the other side. Ignoring the Café on the corner, they wove through the ancient streets with their wooden houses and buckets of water ready on the doorsteps, either to douse the roof thatch or quench lazily discarded cigarette ends. After wending through several long, narrow streets full of shadows and humid air, they finally popped out onto the High Street. Turning right, their excitement bubbled and nearly came to a boil as they headed towards a door on the other side. Clustering together, they

sized up The Emporium’s dark windows and the door’s old-fashioned bottle-glass panes.

Part 5

“You know that door’s older than the Town?” Priti, the gang’s self-appointed historian, reminded them.

“Yeah, I reckon it is, too,” Maria agreed.

Not to be outdone, Dotty piped up. “It’s older, maybe, than your dad’s Café, Jody. It might even be older than the caves.”

“Is it older than my Ginny?” Gail asked, wide-eyed.

“Oh yes, it’s much older than your guinea pig,” Maria explained with a smile.

“Cor,” Gail uttered in awe, “that’s old, cos I’ve had her for three years.” Then, to the gang’s delight, she produced a packet of warm, tangy chews from her dress pocket. Once Jody, the gang’s provisions manager, helped to dib them out, they mostly fell silent, chewing and studying the Emporium’s magic door.

“See, it’s black today,” Priti remarked. “But it can be yellow, or sky blue. It was green, a few months back, but, strangely, it’s never been white. I don’t know why that is.”

“Maybe white hurts the alien’s eyes. Or they can’t see the colour white,” Sally suggested.

“Yeah, maybe it’s like those things I trip over,” Dotty added. “They’re there, but I don’t see ’em. Mum’s always telling me, Pick your feet up. But ’ow can I pick me feet up high enough to step over summit if I can’t see it?”

It was left to little Gail to heap more worry onto Jody's growing unease. "Will there be things inside that only the aliens can see? Like cages?" Then she added thoughtfully, "Me Ginny don't like hers."

Nobody cared to voice the threat. Yeah, and the aliens will nab ya and lock you inside it, just like Gail's guinea pig. It was there in the air, though, and Jody's nose twitched as it caught the awful tang. As for the gang, instead of dulling their excitement, it added an extra thrill. After all, what is a dare if there ain't a scare?

While the gang nicely thrummed and couldn't wait to send in their sacrifice, Jody desperately wanted to run off. It was still her turn to lead a dare, and she wished it wasn't. But a dare is a dare, and Dotty was the only gang member who ever cheated on one, and she did not want to be another Dotty. And how can I cheat? The gang will be watching? She thought, as she chewed and stared at the door worriedly and far too hard. Suddenly, her vision blurred, and the black door morphed into the forbidding mouth of the scary monster's caves up at Dragon's Bed. No one goes in there! Except for the mayor! She has to get her evil powers from somewhere, dun't she rumbled through her mind. Only to pull up a vision of her dad once telling her not to enter the Emporium till she was older and able to look after herself. Suddenly, feeling as desperate as water about to be sucked down a plughole to end up who knows where, Jody flipped and blurted the unthinkable.

"I can't do it. I can't go in there. I can't."

But Jody never runs from a dare - unless we being chased! Wittered internally throughout the shocked, speechless gang. Concern for her bestest friend also

pulsed through Maria's vivid green eyes, making their glitter even more visible in the strong sunlight.

Embarrassed, Jody turned the colour of her favourite ladybird duvet while her pleading cornflower blue eyes bore into Maria's to shout, Help me. Dad'll kill me if I go in there alone!

Dotty rose above her shock to declare, "Coward!"

"If I get nabbed," Jody grumbled, "There'll have me dad's keys and he'll lather us all blue; he will."

Fear of a lathering, whatever that was, shut Dotty up long enough for Maria to think up a way to save her best friend from further teasing. But then miraculously, the answer came to her.

"But Jody, your dare was cancelled," Maria announced to her friend's eternal gratitude. "The Emporium was my dare for next week, remember? So I get to go in first, not you."

"So I go into Mrs Gudpa's next week, then?" Gail asked, still confused about the dare Maria explained to her at breaktime in school on Friday. Go into The Indian Haberdashery store and ask Mrs Gudpa for a vindaloo curry that don't smell like a pair of rotten feet.

"Yes, Gail," Maria smiled. "And we'll do the Café another Sunday. Right Gang? Now let's go and do this dare."

With agreeing nods added to Jody's much relieved one, the young gang of stars waiting to bless the sky smiled at passersby, then slipped across the road to where The Emporium lies.

Little Gail stared up at the old building and suddenly came over all shy until Maria's whisper sent the feeling by.

"I'll do me blimming best to poke around for alien stuff to prove they're there and nab it. If I can. Hopefully, widout getting caught."

Together, they approached the slightly wonky door of the mystical alien's lair and stood as one to stare again.

"But be ready to bundle in an drag me out in case it all goes flipping wrong."

"Then wot?" Dotty wondered while little Gail's eyes rounded fearfully.

"We leg it and quick, like always!" Maria giggled, not caring to consider what happens if the aliens do nab her.

Unknowingly, her words were overheard. Two, almost transparent, wise, but occasionally childish, life forms inside The Emporium tittered, wittered and smiled.

Ignoring a big flash of worry pulling at her, Maria embraced a rush of excited tingles while discreetly hitching up her slightly too-big knickers. Can't have 'em' falling down on me - they seem to be doing that a lot lately. Reaching out for the door, she hardly touched it, yet it opened to her. Not all the way, mind, just enough to make her pause and tingle; the aliens are waiting for me, I bet. But a dares a dare… Even one starting with a little gulp and then a thought. But

this door's magicked by Aliens, innit it. An if they ain't got no hands like us, they'll need it to open easy… Won't they?

But then she froze when she felt, rather than heard, soft music coming from somewhere. It reminded her of a track her sister played a lot. It's like the one that Hayley Westenra sings… I think… What is it…? Ah, yeah, Gabriel's Obe. As if the naming gave the music life, chords started entwining with other chords. Magical sounds arose, stretched out, then faded slowly, allowing new chords to take their place. It's like waterfalls and choirs singing together. When she then added, and stars being born, too, her skin prickled as if warning her she was being watched by an unseen presence. Before she could panic, new soothing chords twinkled into being and calmed her. Then it was her eyes turn to express wonder. They watered with joy when two long, gorgeous harmonising notes twirled together before dancing away to join the universe? Maybe? But this music ain't coming in me ears, she realised with a start. It's too faint. With the gang's whispers blotting things out, I wouldn't hear it, yet I can. It's gotta be in me head, it's gotta be. Unless it's the cells in me body singing? Blimming heck, can they do that? Not wanting to ask the gang if they heard the music in case they called her a silly dilly, she gently pushed the door open further. As always, ready to skit at the touch of an ill breeze, or this time, a whiff of a smelly alien's nasty breath, she stepped forward. Passing through the door and into the Alien's portal, as the gang thought it, a bell loudly tinkled and broke the spell.

"So much for me blimming sneaky entrance!" She tutted. But then the door closed behind her, blocking out the world as she knew it and the gangs' encouraging whispers, "Go on Maria… Go in…"

Part 6

The only light inside The Emporium was coming through the several rows of thick, bottle glass in the door. Sunlight also made it in through the main window although the piles of goods displayed in the bay reduced the light to nothing more than a shadowy glow. She ought to have panicked but the music playing inside her head was calming. As her eyes roved left and right to scan the murky interior, the Emporium's twilight grew lighter and the music faded out.

"Wow!" She uttered before stopping astonished. As if her exclamation was a trigger, The Emporium, like a giant movie screen, suddenly blinked into life. Things unseen burst into a clamour of vivid colours. Stepping cautiously forward again, more goodies emerged from the twilight to fill her disbelieving eyes.

"Blooming carrots and broomsticks," she uttered as masses of shelves stacked with books and who knows what else jumped out from where shadows once roamed. They were followed by bright posters of all sizes, hanging here, there and everywhere, calling, Look at me. An how awesome's that, she thought admiringly. They've even stuck posters on the blimming ceiling; that's clever, that is. And neat, too, she thought, noting with pleasure how they were equally spaced.

As for magic, her rapidly beating heart declared in answer to her tingling. It's here, I can feel it. But it's nice magic, I fink. Not that horrid toad-turning stuff we said it might be. Well, I hope it is, anyway, suggested her next few hesitant steps.

Part 7

Maria’s charming little ski-slope nose twitched, as The Emporium’s vibrant, rich aromal air, nicely heavy with the whiff of musty old books stirred. Yeah. I can smell the magic, too. She enthused.

Before those smells could settle into the familiar and become ignored, stacks of new books threw their aroma in with piles of essays, pamphlets and newspapers. Not to be left out, magazines sent greetings, along with ribbons and rolls of brown and colourful tissue along with zany wrapping paper. And many other things she instantly loved the smell of, although their placement and the stacks were a little untidy for her fussy eyes to dwell on for too long.

But hey, it’s an Emporium innit!

Those wonderful odours were scintillated further by scented-coloured candles. Lots of ’em. Flipping masses, in all shapes and sizes! It’s blimming brill; it is! She noted with amazement. But then, vases of dried herbs and gardening implements, a display of football boots and slippers with cute animal heads, caught her eye! And her smiles. Spotting little bottles of aromatic oils or potions, her imagination flared. Bet they’re made from dried lizards or something like that! Then her glittering green eyes were drawn to buckets of fresh and dried flowers and rows of body sprays and ointments.

Do aliens smell so flipping bad that they have to use lots of smelly stuff to hide it?

Then all manner of prettily bottled things emerged from the shadowy edges. Just like the posters, they begged for attention. Or to be sniffed at, or even ooo’ed and ahhh’ed over by her, for once, still, but pursed lips.

As those glistening eyes roved along the endless shelves in this Emporium of women's rights, she very nearly fell into hysterics.

There's flipping karate outfits there. Look… her excitement urged. There… she told it, in case of doubt. See, next to piles of blimming embroidery stuff and knitting things. Wow! And lady's knickers by the looks of it, and climbing gear, I think...? And flipping ballet shoes. And tutus and DIY tools and blimming camping gear and exercise balls. And whatever those things in boxes in that little glass cupboard, 'For you dis…cern…ing ladies'… are.

There was so much to take in, and none of it looked bad or dangerous. There's nowhere to hide alien spaceships. She thought. And no cocoons hanging from the ceiling. Or no cages with humans locked inside, either. I'd see their prisoners, wouldn't I even if I don't see the cage?

There was nothing alien to be seen anywhere! That's disappointing, her lips pursed. But there's so much more to see; it's all making me head swim. It's like that time Jody blindfolded me; she smirked. And spun me around a zillion times to make me giddy and see how far I'd walk before falling over. Or in dilly Dotty's case, being sick all over my sister's flowers.

"Ha!" The autumn child muttered as she pushed the memory aside with a smile to wonder, What naw? And what can I snatch that ain't really stealing to prove I was here? Instead of pretending, like Dotty blimming did on her last dare. An she's got the flipping nerve to call my Jody a blimming coward. The little moo!

Catty, maybe? But expressed with a fond, impish smile for her friends.

Unbeknownst to Maria, her smile as it blossomed cast delicate glimmers into the Emporium's deeper shadows, encouraging a soundless murmur to arise.

“Now there’s a child who could never be angry with Dotty, or with any of her gang or even anyone for long.”

In that way, a transparent presence hovering in the shadows took the young, daring, fussily neat autumnal child to her heart. Then, with a sparkling smile of her own, Maria became part of one of her mainly well-meant but occasionally badly planned schemes.

“Well… That’s to be expected…” The presence is known to tut when teased about certain failures. “…humans can be moody and unpredictable. It is they who spoil my plans.”

But not so this rare human child. I can tell she’s special.

Then, as the presence looked deeper into the child’s essence, she noted with an uneasy catch of mood something odd in the child’s aura. That shouldn’t be there! Regaining her bright beat she recast her hasty plan. She’ll make me a good novice in a not-too-distant human future.

Part 8

Strong, but slow, deliberate breaths stilled Maria's fluttering heart while her beloved yellow-leafed-colour trainers moved her through the Emporium's zany paraphernalia. Her surprised eyes and faithful feet headed to a group of colourful posters, urging her, both silently and loudly, 'Come! Read our messages'.

Little then was she aware as her eyes floated on a sea of women's wishes, outrages, and environmental pleas, along with a few God-Help-Us-Do's that The Emporium was not an Aliens liar. It was an Angels. Neither was she aware that Ann, the first of The Firstborn Angels and the starter of, the meddler in and the ender of many tales, awaited her. Although not in the way of an aggrieved person with a stern stare, but as a friend with a devastating smile and a heart that cared.

When Ann stepped out seemingly from nowhere, Maria gasped, jumped while her heart thumped.

"Hello there," Ann said, welcomingly, with the well masked mischievous smirk of a child scaring a friend and trying to act innocent.

The lady's voice was so softly spoken and the speaker so floaty and graceful that Maria, for once, did not pee herself, even a little, in her fright. Soil free, she stared open-mouthed at the most beautiful person she had ever seen. But far greater than that, as that extra gasp she inadvertently added to the end of her already extended one, rapidly noted ahead of her conscious mind. The alien's blimming glowing. Or as Maria's awe put it when, eventually, it caught her instincts up… Blimming crew cuts and blisters, she's flipping shining!

All of that was thought with the astonished wonder of a child fearlessly facing the fantastic. Not a frightening fantastic, an enchanting one. Maria’s twitches along with her gleaming, startled green eyes encouraged Ann to step closer with an even larger, ‘cor blimey’ smile. As it struck Maria, she felt its warmth and suddenly more loved than ever. Which was a fair feat for a child much loved already.

“I’m known as Ann.” The glowing apparition purred. “And I believe you are, Maria?”

Part 9

Almost immediately, the autumn child decided not to share this moment with her friends. They'll fink I've gone blimming mad or summit. I'm sure of it. And yet, she so wanted to tell, or most likely, yell. Guess wot you lot, she knows me blimming name. Then, as if picking out a part of her future to test-drive in the present, Maria ended the thought with - but they'll call me a liar. Or Dotty will tease me about it forever. But before her astonished eyes could blink her thoughts away, a shade of her ferly entrancement suddenly spoke up in her mind.

"Not all humans…" The voice said softly and so melodiously that it reminded Maria of the music she heard standing at the door. An actual, real, live cor blimey was about to erupt when her confusion swallowed it whole as she realised. It ain't my voice. Or is it? That was as high as her reasoning climbed. New words arrived to join the first, and she just knew it was not her inner voice. Caught in the wonder of the moment, she stared at Ann's mouth, trying to see if she was speaking like a ventriloquist does, but she spotted no tell-tale signs of moving lips or a jiggling adam's apple. Uncertain how to react, Maria fidgeted but otherwise listened, if that's how you give ear to a voice that ain't yours and it's inside ya head. Or so her eerie prickling suggested.

"… Can see the likes of me the way you are doing, child." The gentle voice revealed.

Those words floated softly down like autumn leaves to settle with the others in her mind. Together, they blessed her fertile mind, encouraging a sense of mysticism to take root and bloom. Instead of rebelling or yelling, get out, she fell to a-spelling that created a strange welling. One, she did not understand, but

in her clever gut, she felt its sense, its truism. Intellect is one thing, but it's not everything, and it's not what it seems, either. Your cells, those things, humans prod, prick and cut into, quietly know the truth of everything. Trust in their tingles and silent messages, and they'll guide you through your day. But before Maria could grapple with that strange, but compellingly obvious idea, more words arrived.

"Treasure your gift of special sight and keep it close." The voice explained. "Don't cheapen it with idle gossip. If you can do that, then I promise, not only will it serve you well, it will stay with you."

As those words nuzzled that new, welcoming part of Maria's mind, the rest of it whirled with a delighted but confusing mix of fright, happiness and awe. As for her yellow-leaf-coloured trainers? Her feet were not so keen on staying, yet, they did not turn to flee either. Not even when the Emporium's bell tinkled and Jody whispered.

"She's been nabbed, but she looks all right."

Followed by more light tinkles when Jody backed out and the door quietly closed behind her. The fact that Maria did not flee with her friend earned her yet another gorgeous smile and an extended hand.

"Come and meet my friend and helper, Amy. You'll like her, Maria, and I know she will like you."

Part 10

Somewhere deep inside, Maria knew she ought to refuse, but she was so wrapped in a sense of wonder that she willingly allowed herself to be led over to a pair of long, shimmering, blue curtains. Parting them, Ann smiled. “It’s OK, Maria, it’s safe to go through.”

In The Emporium’s cluttered back room, a beautiful lady, although the very opposite in looks to Ann, stepped forward to greet her. Unlike Ann, with her long, white-blonde hair and eyes of sparkling blue, the woman had short black hair and rich, conker brown eyes that seemed to hold all the universe’s secrets within them.

“I’m Amy,” she said, gracefully extending a slim hand.

Instinctively noting the perfectly manicured fingers, Maria clasped it without thinking. The instant they touched, tingles ran up Maria’s arm. Surprised by the sensation, she gasped and almost pulled her hand back. But then the nice tingles settled in her mind like happy children ready for story time.

Maria’s reaction set lights dancing in Amy’s eyes, but it was Amy’s zany attire that caught Maria’s own eyes the most. The bright embroidery on her pink dungarees nicely clashed with a chest bursting with tin and plastic badges. Like the store posters, they all loudly proclaimed her belief in, and support for, feminine rights, and her need to right environmental wrongs. Unlike Ann’s light summer dress and cute gold sandals, which oozed gentleness, Amy’s strikingly blue, high-legged air-boots announced; This lady’s a warrior. Maria immediately fell in awe of her.

In that back room at that moment, it would be hard for anyone else looking in to pick out whose eyes were shining the most. Beacons all, they met in friendly thrapple, where the outcome was mutual admiration and love. Maria loved her sister dearly, but standing there, she felt like she had come home without realising she has wandered about like a lost soul ever since her mama died. As Ann promised, Amy instantly adored Maria enough to give her a rare and special treat.

“Come,” she said kindly, taking Maria’s arm. “You must see my little oasis.”

With so much love in Amy’s words, Maria happily allowed herself to be steered to where sunlight played sweetly on the stained glass window of a bright yellow door.

“This is my little piece of heaven, on earth, my bric-a-brac yard,” Amy said proudly as she opened the door and ushered Maria through.

What struck Maria’s eyes and heart was beyond amazing.

As for her ears, not a sound reached the yard from the streets beyond. It’s like another world, Maria sighed. A place where no human sounds reach. There’s no cars. No drills. No second-hand music. Nothing but a sense of peace. She so wanted to yell out to her friends waiting outside. Look at it! It’s blimming great! Look at the colours. It’s blimming fantastic. It’s like I’m standing where rainbows are born. But she doubted her friends would hear. For this, indeed, was another world. No wonder they say The Emporium straddles dimensions.

“Yes, it is wonderful,” Amy smiled, as she felt the meanings behind the child’s gasps.

“And I never allow human males to tread here, either” She explained.

But Maria had no care to explore the comment, and Amy did not care to encourage her to. Doing so will mean she will have to learn life-changing things, some of which might break her caring heart.

Happily innocent of man’s wickedness, the bric-a-brac yard captivated Maria in a way she had never been before. As her wonder-filled eyes ranged across the yard, she instantly fell in love with every beautiful, zany sculpture, and there were many.

“I make them from human cast-offs,” Amy informed her.

But then Maria spotted mosaics and colourful paths running like rivers of glass between flowering plants. There were so many brilliant things to see that her eyes and hands could hardly decide which to explore first. Helpfully, her feet took charge, where their autumn-yellow-leaf colour blended in so well.

The little winding, crushed-coloured-glass paths led to brightly painted pots filled to the brim with flowering plants. Or they ended at little metal or carved statues, or weird-shaped tables and hidden seats. At Amy’s urging she tried them all out before dashing off to find the next one. Hampering her joyful steps were lots of bright metal wire enamelled flowers, dotted singularly or bunched with exotic real ones. They all simply begged to be examined. Especially a realistic baby deer peeking over swathes of tall plants, rising majestically above a sea of brightly painted butterfly sculptures. So many, and they all captured her heart and eyes.

Peering closely at a beautiful red, black and white butterfly, Maria jumped when suddenly it fluttered delicately around her head before flitting away to explore

real flowers. It’s all so blimming cool, she thought, even after Amy, with laughter nearly as musical as Ann’s, explained.

“The sculpture didn’t come alive, Maria, that was a real red admiral butterfly.”

With so much to see and so many how’d-you-blimming-do-it-all questions begging to be asked, Maria did not care. Real or not, it’s all beautiful and it’ll take me a blimming week to describe it to the gang. But it was what she found in the bric-a-brac yard, rather than seeing, that made her open her heart to let in the idea, I’m lucky, but many ain’t.

Part 11

While they sat together on Amy's favourite upcycled bright blue bench, talking about this and that, Maria quietly decided, which the Angels of course could not help but pick up on and take to heart. The poor and abused people and the planet need our help. I want to help Ann and Amy do that.

"And so you shall, my little novice," Ann said as she walked the Emporium-struck child through the store a little later. Then laughed ringingly and musically when Maria blurted.

"How'd you know I fort that?"

"It's my way to know such things," Ann replied with another gorgeous smile that invoked Maria's silent sigh.

"And I have a distinct feeling that sometime in the future, you and I are going to march forward together and change many things. And for the better too… As you and your friends hope when you gather in your gang's shed to plan your little dares."

Maria was so shocked that Ann knew about the gang, the shed, and the dares; all she could muster was a silent but strong, Blimming 'eck.

Then Ann's smile spread as a tease rose ready for release while the shine in hers eyes started pulsing in time with the bells tinkles as she opened the store's door for Maria.

"… Including those living with the attitude; they really don't want to know. Right?" Ann smirked.

Maria was beyond awestruck. She's quoting from the poster I nabbed off the wall when they weren't looking. How did she know I took it?

"But you children want to know," Ann continued happily teasing Maria. "And I agree with your gang's resolution. Adults are going to destroy the planet before you children get a chance to enjoy it for yourselves."

Guilt and astonishment flared brighter in Maria's gem-like eyes when Ann then remarked.

"See you again soon, Maria. And do be sure to give my love to your little gang, who I suspect are waiting for you around the corner. And don't be so hard on Dotty; she's having a rough time at home and she needs your gang. You help her to feel wanted and to be who she wants to be. But I cannot say anymore than that, Maria."

Maria instantly thought, I bet her brothers are bullying her a lot and her dad, probably, but like Ann did, she tried to keep her thoughts to herself.

An impossible feat when Angels are around.

Yes, Ann thought fondly. Maria does have second sight. She just needs to learn to trust it and to listen to what it tells her.

"You're right," rippled into Maria's mind, then down her legs and into her toes. Those words quickly gave way to, "If Dotty's a bit sharp with you all now and then, forgive her. She's just trying to feel part of your ideas, but she hasn't learned yet how to express herself properly with people who care for her. Help her, Maria."

Returning to Human speech, Ann said. “And do tell Dotty, I agree with her mother. Too many sweets are bad. And for you too.” She added with another smile.

Ann’s parting words sent Maria back to a gang meeting where Dotty chipped in to inform them.

“Yeah, this environment thing is making it hard to score money for sweets without getting a flipping lecture first! Mum nags me whenever I ask for money to buy them. Sugar’s bad for your health, your teeth and the planet,” she says, “ cos they have to cut down loads more forests to grow it!”

At the time, Dotty’s remark sent multiple shivers and twitters and witters running through the gang. We all knew it was true, but none of us bothered to tell her, Maria realised. And we should have done that, shouldn’t we?

Those recalled sweet induced shivers were nothing compared to the ones that ran through Maria as she skipped along the High Street to find her friends.

Watching her, Ann smiled as Amy’s ribbing rippled into her mind. “Hark at you lecturing her about sugar, miss sweet-toothed Angel!” Then the pair fell to laughing as they felt Maria’s wonder and, in their Angel’s way, they understood her sudden gasp.

“Just how the flipping hell did she know what Dotty said! And about the gang! How!”

Maria was still lost in wonder when she stumbled on the gang waiting for her a little way down the next turning, just as Ann predicted.

She’s flipping magic; she is, Maria decided while the gang squealed, “What happened, what happened. Tell us, tell us.”

Happily, for Maria, the telling was to take a whole afternoon. As for the memory of her visit with Ann and Amy? Thanks to Maria’s caring heart and that certain horrible something the Angels noticed in Maria’s aura; their friendship was destined to last for a lot longer than an afternoon.

Part 12

“What a lovely sing-song voice, she ‘ad,” Maria sighed wistfully when the gang clustered around her eagerly for news. Dotty, as always, was caught between her natural disbelief of anything she has not seen for herself and wondering if Ann might be an Alien Princess.

“Shush, Dotty…” the gang scolded raggedly, but kindly, “let Maria tell it.”

“Her voice was so gorgeous it set me twinging like one of them tuning fork things. It did.”

Then, recalling Ann’s advice, rather than brushing off Dotty’s interruption, Maria acknowledged it. “As for Ann being an alien princess, Dotty, you could be right. Good call.” She added with a smile, and Dotty rewarded her with a shy one.

“All I know for sure is I ain’t never seen such a beautiful smile.” Maria continued. “I almost fell into its warmth; I did. And nor have I seen eyes so flipping blue. They looked right into ya and all the way through… and then out again.” She said with a slight blush, as she wondered; Wot if they fink I’m lying?

But none of the gang did. Maria’s vivid eyes often grabbed them in exactly the same way.

“… An it weren’t in a horrid way either. I pinky swear to it. An I had no feelings of adieu to you, or rescue me do either, just a sense of her love for me and you. Honest, it’s true.” She sighed again, wishing she were back there. “What a wonderful place the Emporium is.”

Then, in case an adult overheard and accused her of being silly, like her sister does, she whispered.

“And what we’ve all heard is true. There is magic there, I felt it. Something, I dunno what, maybe the walls were watching me, whatever it was, I was led to posters saying you gotta help women and children and the planet. I saw loads of books about it too, and my eyes were turned to read their titles. And there were lots of wonderful home-made knick-knack things as well. But I don’t know what they were, or did.” She reflected ruefully, recalling the ‘For discerning ladies only’ label.

“But hey, they were all blimming cute looking, whatever.” She added wistfully.

“And they had poems and songs written on the walls as well. But I ain’t never heard any of ’em, like,” She revealed.

“But the words were for us girls, really they were.”

“Ere…” She said, suddenly recalling the small poster she nabbed off the Emporium’s wall.

Pulling the crumpled paper out of her skirt pocket, she smoothed her trophy out the best she could before declaring smugly. “See, Dotty.” Then she caught her tongue - oops.

“See, gang, proof that I’m not lying. An it weren’t the best poem there,” she explained, “but it was the easiest to nab. I’ll read a bit to ya if you like.”

“It says at the top, new words to the tune: I really don’t want to know, performed by Elvis Presley and 106 others. That’s a lot of people, innit, whoever they are. I guess they’re singers or summit.” Maria suggested.

“Anyway, it says here these words were submitted to The Emporium’s writing competition by Mrs Prendergast of the Parish of St. Agnes - as was, before the blasted mayor changed things.” Maria, read quickly.

“I don’t know what that means, but what matters is the poem.”

Sensing Maria’s seriousness, the gang shuffled up closer.

“It’s called, We don’t want to know,” like I said.

“Are you ready?”

The gang nodded yes. In her best poetry voice that won her a prize in school, an embarrassing moment she tried not to recall as she started to recite the words. But in the way of such moments, it was there in the gangs’ smirks as they listened. Little Gail very nearly blurted out, Don’t wet yourself, Maria, until Jody’s admonishing nudge set her mouth right.

Oh, how many tonnes,
Of waste will it take,
Before the oceans don’t flow
How many - yes, how many
We wonder - hum huh

When we really, don’t want…
We don’t want to know.

Oh, how many of our genes,
Are defiled,
Because of chemical soup
How many - yes, how many
We wonder - hum huh
When we really, don’t want…
We don’t want to know.

Oh, how many will watch children?
Dying of cancerous growths
How many - yes, how many
We wonder - hum huh
When we really, don’t want…
We don’t want to know.

“See!” Maria declared smugly and amazingly, still dry when she finished.

“It’s about us humans, an the planet, right? And yeah, they might be aliens like others say, but those words, and loads more like it, tell me they care about us children and women. And our planet, too, and that’s good enough for me. So, I like ’em!” She ended defiantly, in case her friends objected. Amazingly, for once, no one did. Not even Dotty, who could usually find something to pick on.

Gail, denied her chance to tease Maria earlier, was not so shy to step up.

“Wot’s chemical soup?” She asked with a blush, which no one ragged her over, not even Dotty. They were all wondering about it, too, but did not want to look foolish by asking.

“I fink,” Maria suggested hesitantly, after a nifty bit of considering, which was not easy to do with a gang expecting her to come up an answer quickly.

“It’s where they put lots of chemicals into tinned food. It’s so we eat it instead of them having to bury it. It’s cheaper for businesses, innit. We get rid of their junk for ’em. But it ain’t good for us, is it? It’s like me Sis says, we ’ave to watch wot we eat.”

“I’m gonna be sick,” Dotty said weakly.

“Not on me blimming shoes you ain’t,” Maria moaned, stepping quickly out of Dotty’s vomiting range, which was enviably and truly impressive.

Part 13

Amazingly too, there were no objecting voices or fidgets when Maria suggested, “We ought to help Ann and Amy with their work.”

“Ann reckons,” Maria continued, happy that the gang were onboard. “We children see things far better than adults. We view our world without bias and hate, and that lets us see things more clearly.

The gang knew enough about the world’s woes not to criticise her boasts about The Emporium. Haven’t we talked about it all in Maria’s mums shed? How the rivers are going green and gungy and fish and other things are dying. And whales are landing on beaches, cos they’ve ‘ad enough of swimming about in all the poo and plastic that’s in the sea. Not one of them cared to dispute Maria’s idea concerning chemical soup, either, so they listened and looked into her strongly glittering eyes where their zealous spell mesmerised then . But then what was new about that?

“There’s lots more poems and stuff like that,” Maria explained. “Help women… help children…” she recited brightly. “Stop slavery… Save the forests… Save the planet… Recycle, recycle and recycle, then blimming recycle some more,” she giggled.

“And guess what,” she said, lowering her voice into another conspiratorial whisper. “Ann reckons we kids should have the vote. If she gets her way, we will, cos she said, we care about stuff and the adults don’t. She reckons we think with our hearts and not with our wallets or wants - whatever she meant by that - but she finks it’s important for the planet.”

As much as she loved her friends, she never revealed everything about her visit to The Emporium. Not even to Jody, her closest and bestest pinkie swear confidant in so many mischievous deeds and spells. But to the gang's amazement, she did reveal, "Being with Ann and Amy was more exciting than finding me yellow pumps in that shop."

Instantly, the gang knew whatever she saw or Ann and Amy said or did must have been fantastic, for Maria's trainers meant more to her than anything.

Part 14

Later in the day, Ann and Amy sat in the bric-a-brac yard watching the sun dip while sipping, in Ann's opinion, Amy's sour lemonade. It so puckered her sugar-loving lips that she had to gift hers to the soil. I don't know how Maria managed to drink it! Amy needs reminding that lemons and sugar are deserving companions in lemonade and should never, ever, be separated. But later, young Maria is waiting to be discussed.

"She's plucky for an eight-year-old. But I was not surprised." Ann started to explain. "It's my guess she possesses Altius blood…"

Only for Amy to tease, "You and your pet Altius."

"… Well," Ann purred defensively. "They were the first, cleverest and kindest of all the human families, and they loved this planet very much. And all was well here, too, until the war-loving, criminal-minded Sapiens arose to kill them and many others who got in their way. You know the stories well enough, Amy. So, how can I not admire the Altius? And I'm as sure as can be that Altius blood is pumping through that child's huge, caring heart. "

"She is very caring, I grant you," Amy demurred.

"You didn't hear her talking about her heart, did you?" Ann laughed. "You were in the kitchen, Amy… getting… that… lemonade…"

With a mischievous smile and in the way she did so well, Ann imitated Maria's voice and mannerisms.

“Me sister says I have a big heart, stuffed into me skinny frame. And I says back to her, Ann, when she does, so what if I’m skinny? It’s who I am, innit. And I ain’t ashamed of it like. I ain’t Ann. I like it, cos I can see me heart beating sometimes and I knows I’m alive. But Jody, ‘oose’ me bestie, can’t do that. An it makes her so flipping cross; it does. Bless her… But she’s great, though.”

“And the bright little girl…” Ann paused as her thoughts took a fond turn. “… with her hair that’s like a reverse-flowing Faraday cage. Sparkles fly from the supercharged, highly polished mane. It cannot help but repel misery. And as for her magnetic spirit,” Ann purred. “That cannot help but attract happiness and joy. Anyway,” she laughed, “then she read those words embroidered on the butt of your overalls, Amy!”

Building up to a mock scold, Ann looked heavenwards like humans do, before laughing. “And heaven help me, I can’t decide. Should I applaud you or tell you off for that motto!”

“If you think ‘Look Up! My Brains are better’ is rude, then just wait till you see the pair I’m working on now,” Amy laughed back.

“Well…, you make sure to keep it clean,” Ann admonished with a smile. Only to laugh as she corrected herself.

“I was referring to the slogan, not your butt! Now let’s get back to Maria. I really do like her. Her young heart is true, and I think we’ll definitely see her again.”

Only to snort deprecatingly, “Silly me! Of course, we’ll see her again. We’re Angels. I was meaning here, in Espe.”

Only for a bad feeling as sour as Amy's lemonade to strike her as she recalled Maria's damaged aura. In the way of Angel's who are good friends with certain gifts, Amy picked up on it.

"Storms come, Ann, and even you cannot stop them. All we can do is deal with the mess that's left afterwards."

"You're right, as always, Amy," Ann agreed sadly.

"In the meantime, I'll make Maria a pair of embroidered dungarees, as she seemed to like mine so much."

"But no slogans on the butt, Amy," Ann admonished. "We mustn't encourage pervs to stare there."

"Don't worry, silly. I'll only embroider the bib and legs. I'm sure she'll be happy enough with that."

"If you're so keen to make people happy, Amy," Ann ribbed, "why won't you put sugar in your lemonade?"

"Because, Ann," Amy retorted. "Spoonfuls of sugar are not friends of medicine, but the cause of the pain for many, as you know. And just because you're an Angel who can zip off home and instantly be renewed doesn't mean you should encourage humans to gorge the stuff, especially children."

"Point taken Amy…" Ann agreed, then immediately dismissed it. What is life without a bit of sugar now and then?

Part 15

Amy, like Ann, was quite taken with the charming girl. But what she saw in Maria's deeper layers troubled her even more than it did Ann. But then, as a once-human, it will, she reasoned. It's my old healer self butting in rudely. Only to snuffle and scoff.

"Not rudely, but warningly."

Years of experience, some of it bitter, empowered the scoff. Seldom did she reveal her life before her Angel-hood, but John, a fellow Angel and her good friend, knew all about it.

Indeed, it was John, while walking the earth in soul form with Ann, who had begged Ann to catch Amy's soul when medieval monks set her body to the flames. Afterwards, Ann and John discovered the monks were purging their sins of her rape and to rid the world of her knowledge of plants and healing.

"If it were not for those monks, I could have stopped this plague from killing so many more." She spat, while rising from the ashes of her pyre, with a soul set on revenge.

But under Ann's tutelage, she learned that law and education were the right weapons to use. Today, Amy breathes the fire of women's rights, lit and stoked by the monk's attitudes which John patiently listens too. Their ignorance and power-mad mentality ruin civilisations; it affect governments and religions alike, as well as those new emperors, the businesses. Especially the global ones.

As she sat on her favourite bench, Amy tutted sarcastically. "It's the needs and wants, both philosophical and financial, of a few that are likely encouraging so

many humans and animals to die horribly. And plants and trees too," she added as an afterthought. "For they suffer as well. And maybe their punishment is even worse; they have no voice and no easy way to fight back."

Then, without thinking, she uttered the slogan of The Organisation, Ann set up many centuries ago to save abused children and women and in recent years, the planet too.

"We're Fighting Back."

Still dwelling on Maria's fate, her chant lacked its usual invigorating sparkle which caused Amy to sigh. "Indirectly, that awful sickness is affecting us Angels, too. And maybe the multiverse." She mused, envisioning the increasing number of black holes appearing in its delicate skin. Maybe Humanity's toxicity is leaking from the atmosphere and eating into the very fabric of all things. Only to imagine, John, her special Angel friend, although he's yet to admit it, or to show it, laughing at the very idea, and in his soft Saxon brogue, calling it ridiculous. Maybe it is, and maybe it isn't, she thought. Time will tell. But if it's true, what a humongous tell it will turn out to be. And what of heaven, should time ever decide to tell it that way? Will Heaven be spared the plague? Or will humanity's ways put an end to eternity as well? She wondered with a shudder.

And our beloved Espe is no different to the rest of the world, even though we Angels are here, she mused. Look at the antics of the town's current Mayor. When she can't cut a public service any more, she abolishes it and replaces it with one of her many companies, or a friend's business. Then the service gets worse and more expensive for the people, and more profitable for shareholders.

As she sat in her beloved yard watching butterflies flit between flowers, she finished the last of the lemonade and grinned. If you're there picking at my

thoughts, Ann, please note. I drank it without shuddering. And when it comes to the perils of sugar, you ought to know better. She grinned again. But I'll teach you yet, Ann, I will!

The sun was slowly sinking to reappear elsewhere when she spotted a small cloud hovering at the corner of the horizon. A forerunner to darker, uglier ones, both in the sky and in my mind. Whether I like it or not, she admitted, there's a distinct one-in-two chance we will never see Maria here, or on this earth again… ever. The likes of the emperors and the mayor's antics may well have caused what is incubating inside you, Maria. But can caring humans complain about the system? No. All they can do is vote in more of the same wickedness because the ways of money won't be denied.

"Oh, Maria," she sighed as she sent her heartfelt wishes through the ether.

"I like you, Maria. You have a wonderful, unselfish spirit. I would dearly love to see you stay and help us out."

But there again, Amy wondered. Will Maria want to come back? Good ideas are soonest forgotten in the joy of an exciting new film, book, or toy. Or even the delights of discovering a new friend, girl or boy, she smiled. Or one of those young people declaring themselves to be a cauliflower or a cat, she smirked. Many other distractions might stop you from visiting us. The ideas of which set her shuddering. As cheerful as she tried to be, her heart was heavy for Maria. Already verging on the maudlin, she thought about Maria's parents and her sister, Sheila. Their plight made her want to scream in a very un-Angel-like way; Will you ever be free of pain, Sheila? And so many other humans, too, when there's no need for it? It's always the innocent who get hurt, isn't it? She

mused, only to tut and smile when Ann's voice naughtily butted into her private thoughts.

"I agree with you, Amy," Ann purred. "And yes, we're fighting back. Humans will learn, and we will win! And as for Maria, we'll do what we can for her; have no fear. As you know, I also saw the hints of that horrible thing you spotted in her. But as for the clouds circling your thoughts at the moment, well…" She laughed ringingly in her gloriously uplifting way, which mopped up Amy's depression.

"I'm working on the solution, although at the moment I freely admit, The Father is being stubborn, nay, squeamish about certain ideas of mine. But we'll get there, especially with you and your wonderful army of enlightened women both here and in Heaven onside. I can promise you that!

"But what you need now is a good dollop of raspberry ice cream. I'll be bringing some over shortly and a large box of Fred's delicious pastries. They'll soon sweeten the lemonade and your mood."

How can I refuse? Amy thought with another smile as she stood up to go into the Emporium's kitchen to set bowls and side plates ready for what promised to be a much-needed girls' night. Yes, it'll be a needed shot of sweetness.

Maria. Section 2: Mike, aka Monkey Man.

Part 16

Bullied along by time, a clear but chilly February day of blood-red roses, chocolates, and love was disappearing far too quickly for many hopeful hearts.

That was not so for spindly eighteen-year-old homeless Mike. He sat slumped on the pavement of the cold street he was dumped on, like so much garbage over a year ago. There he festers with a broken spirit. The product of hate that stained his character, even as a baby, while blighting his time in council care and throughout his school days.

With deep sadness, a knowing voice originating from far beyond the ether had recently suggested to her friends and lieutenants, Amy and John. “This mission is taking far too long.”

“It’s a shame, he can’t see how to help himself, John reported. ”Apart from us three, no humans are bothering to help him. Although, as we know, they’re certainly bothered by him and the other homeless.“

“They see the ghost of their own fall in the future,” Amy suggested, “and they flee from it. Or on occasions, in their fear, or in confusion they beat the homeless up.”

“Yes, and Mike, as the homeless do,” John add to Amy’s point, “is retreating inwards. It is getting harder to persuade him to look around him at what we three know could be out there waiting for him.”

“I feel for Mike,” Ann confessed. “Like the authorities, we’re letting him down. Remember what Mike is suffering. Or the man-boy, as you describe him, John,” She laughed. “His depressed subatomic particles are the product of an awful

rape on Valentine's Day. They are his inheritance from a fourteen-year-old mother who understandably loathed Chaucer's dream and sadly, him, too. Although, I know," Ann revealed, "that subconsciously he yearns for such things and to be part of a family. Yet he is blind to people and love, impervious to chocolate hugs, mute to silk's sensuality and anosmic toward roses. But I believe the poor boy deserves to experience the joy that comes with those symbols. And you know me… he will embrace and enjoy them. And soon, team! Now let's get going and get him going."

Part 16b

Unaware of those secret voices flowing within the wind, Mike languished in clothes woven and stained from the fibres of the stigmatising paperwork he once believed was locked away to yellow and hopefully turn to dust in the children's home. While trying to escape from a life on the streets he learned that paperwork is never forgotten and is given more importance than the person it details. Its substance also lives in the eyes and fires sighs. It is never forgotten.

Crippled by depression, an unwanted birthmark of an unwanted birth, he rests against the far-left bike bar, one of several, planted outside Mrs Prendergast's Post Office on Espe's Old High Street. From his spot on Mother Earth, the wind catches and batters his body while waywardly scattering his seeds of hope and longing. Gnawed at by bone-chilling hunger, his presence loiters, as unwelcome to passing lunch-timers as food poisoning in a land blighted by famine.

Tucking in his legs and feet, lest passersby deliberately kick him, he waits for his only friend, John, who, as usual, is late. In the invisible world of the homeless, no one heard him grumble. "When he gets here, he'll smile and say sorry. But there won't be anything left in the market worth picking through. And there won't be any decent bananas left either." He moaned, while patting his trouser pocket, making sure the one pound coin that rolled by his feet that morning as he waited to cross the road was still there. Hopefully, I'll be able to buy us a banana each.

Shrugging despondently, he hunched and tried to fend off the penetrating cold. It's all hopeless, everything is hopeless, he shivered. I should move about and go scavenging but that takes energy, and right now I'm out of it. Yeah, and cunning. John says I don't have any. And he's right, I'm too honest. I've

accepted I'm homeless but my stomach has yet to used to the idea, he sighed. If only it wouldn't nag so. The only way to get food, is to steal it. And that's plain wrong. Yet is it wrong to want to survive? Are we meant to stave? I can't keep relying on John either. Although, he thought admiringly, the stuff he finds or wheedles from the stallholders is legendary. They'll chase us homeless away, but not John, for some reason. I guess to them, he's a true gentleman of the road, while they see the rest of us as scroungers. Then a rare grin tugged his mouth as he recalled the father of his only friend as a child. He always had food for an amenable tramp.

"He's one of the old school," he remembered his friend's father explaining. "He lives with the creatures and plants that share his journeys. In his way, he's a gentleman who takes but also gives. He'll cut the grass or wash the car. Then off he'll go, but not before giving his word to return in a month when the grass needs another cut. And he keeps it."

I could cut grass, but what with? And if I do, I'll take away another's job and get beaten up again, probably, he thought bitterly. No one wants us poor homeless to rise and compete for their places, yet they scorn us and demand we get a job. Yeah, OK, give me yours then! He thought testily. As for my word, I gave that to John when I promised to wait. What else can I do anyway but sit in this foetal pose and scream in silent street-talk prose? 'I hate this time of day.'

A fidgety shift of legs and a scowl suggested. No, not hate. I loathe it. The tightening hug of his bony knees sent another subconscious, semaphoric message into that ever-expanding plane inhabited by a growing army of the ignored. I wish I wasn't born. With that feeling beating him down, he lowered his head, as if in shame for his circumstances and in disgust for the system that keeps him fixed to his spot. To get a job, I need ID and an address. I can't get an

address because that takes money and ID. And when did I last snag a bed in the hostel? I refuse to queue for a night's bed the moment they let us out in the morning, like the old-timers do. Rebelliously, he thought, when did I last sit on sparkling white porcelain and pull up clean underwear afterwards?

On he maudled until he mused. The one thing we street people share with the homed is our hatred for the mayor. Homelessness is increasing. Kids get thrown out of their homes because parents can't afford to keep them. The old-timers lose theirs because the rents, rates and bills are wickedly high. There's nowhere for them to go but down. And what does the mayor do when faced with her policy failings? She shouts, spitefully.

"They contribute nothing."

To make sure we can't contribute unless she profits from it, she shuts down the hostels and the care homes and then sweeps us all away, leaving us to nurse our disillusionments in the gutter. In her way, she has even robbed our happier memories of those times before the streets claimed us. It's like some of the elderly say, happier times are too painful to recall, so it's best we forget the old ways and concentrate on surviving.

"And don't I know it," Mike cursed, as his thoughts drifted in a certain direction; some memories are best left undisturbed.

Shaking his head in annoyance while happy about the memory trying to bully its way into his mind, he tried weakly to dispel it. But it was too late. Like a genie popped out of her bottle, a cheeky young girl with long red hair invaded his mind. Instantly, the magic of her oh, so compelling, dancing and singing, green eyes caught him in their spell. Once again, as she did before, she pulled his drifting raft back to a safe shore.

“Zoo-girl,” he murmured fondly from within his deeply embedded frosty hoar. “And I’m the Monkey Man you rescued and brought back to life with your dares and sparkling, freely given smiles. And bananas,” he grinned. “Many bananas for your Monkey Man down at the bike bars.”

Only to laugh fleetingly, “And a toothbrush and toothpaste!”

His depression, having momentarily ceded the ground, was not to be denied its hold and returning savagely to battered him for his impertinence. You will not let me go again, Mike! Then it pulled him down onto a lower level of his personal hell. Zoo-girl gave me hope and then she disappeared. Gone! Back to the dream she came from. So, here I sit as I never existed to you, alone, voiceless and purposeless.

Overcome by hunger and wrapped in the chill of a cold despondency, Mike tried to push the memory aside with a shrug. The feeling of emptiness after hopes are extinguished is far worse than never having any. Falling into a deeper, darker thunk, he never noticed the lunch-timer’s careless treads coming closer to claim the pavement, all.

Determined to make Mike more miserable than ever, the cold air’s raw gaping maw chewed away at him, while gleefully sending out an urge. Come on lunch-timers, help me expunge this spot of that hapless bum? Come on, be honest, he makes you feel uncomfortable. So let’s move him on! Come on, help me hide his frightening longing. Help me muzzle his lonely song. Help me to stop him breathing your air. Help me move him onto his death.

Maria. Section 3: Zoo-girl.

Part 17

While the chilling breeze squeezed Mike hard, Zoo-girl fretted.

Jammed into a pushchair for a much younger body, her dreams, hopes and memories clashed yet again, sparking a compelling need to find her Monkey Man before it was too late.

Unlike Mike, she possessed a strong belief in the ethereal and a willingness to pray to the Great Conductor, as she once heard someone address the Father and liked the idea. Neither was she shy about asking for help. Carefully, lest her sister, as she pushed the pram from the hospital, that weary, adult-minded young girl in a voice greater than a murmur, but not as loud as a whisper, gave the air her heart's prayer.

"Great conductor, please help me find what I've lost." She pleaded, while her spirit pushed against the ether's thin skin.

"It's like I told ya, Conductor. I let me Monkey Man down and I need to put that right before, you know… Futures are at stake. So please help me find him."

Desperate to break into the ether, Maria prayed and yearned, while her heart's wish pushed hard against its skin. Just as she has tried to do for so many frustrating months. There's got to be a secret entrance, or summit that'll 'elp me heart's wish run off to find me Monkey Man. I've got to break in, I've got to! 'Ow else will flipping Monkey Man know me wish if I can't send it to him? But it ain't blimming happening, is it? Her spirit moaned. But I felt him there somewhere for a bit. I did. But naw he's flipping gone. Again!

Summing her ailing strength, she tried once more. “Please ’elp me, Great Conductor. I know he’s there, somewhere, I can feel him, or I did. So help me get back wot I’ve lost.” She pleaded.

“But don’t let Sis know you’re ’elping, cos she’ll throw a royal fit, she will. An please give me love to me Mama an Dada. Thank you. Oh, yeah, and say hello to Jesus and all me grandparents I ain’t met.”

Then, as a well-meaning afterthought, she added. “An me ginger cat Thomas, wherever that rascal is.”

Part 18

Time, robotically, cold-heartedly, turned, notched, gouged, then shovelled up more of Zoo-girl's weakening essence. Then, just as uncaring as a tide jostling tiny stones on a beachhead, an indiscernible flick saw yet another second thrown onto a growing heap of her past. Then, as emotionless as it started, time turned to dig out more.

Hating every displaced second, Zoo-girl blenched. "Time, don't you blimming dare join my past and future together and leave me with nothing to spare; not yet."

Desperately wanting to lie back and rest, but refusing to waste precious breaths, she nudged tiredness aside to focus on Mike, her misplaced Monkey Man.

"An I ain't no blimming goldfish in a bowl, either." She protested with a shake of the demoralising, imprisoning pram, which an illness she neither wanted nor asked for trapped her in. More regrets for the wasted effort, saw her pat the pram gently.

"Sorry, it's not your fault. It ain't you I'm hating. It's me blimming weakness. It's stopping me getting up and finding him. Now I've gotta use a blimming heart's wish. But to send it out, I've got to break into the ether. I'm trying, I am, but it still ain't working!"

"Come on, Conductor!" This cheeky nine-year-old urged, as she sought the ether's thin skin, hoping to puncture it. Yeah, them me wish can climb in and find him and drag him to me. Then we'll see what happens. Right Conductor?

"Come on, 'elp me break in, will ya," she pleaded for the hundredth time.

On her spirit pushed, until “Eh…?” And a “What?” Spluttered.

“Something’s moving! It’s the skin, innit! I’ve found it!”

Then, wonderfully, her head spun, not all the way around, but inside and giddily as she felt the fabric of all things shift beneath her spirit’s hand.

“No way!” Whispered jubilantly. “After all these blimming months!”

Excited, intrigued and hopeful beyond all known dreams, her spirit gathered and pushed harder still. Suddenly, a sensation of skin tightening and stretching sent her spirit soaring and pushing harder, taking the fabric to its very limit.

Then… “Blimming Tuesday and cornflakes! It’s popped!”

She had no time to waste on cheers. Or to compare the delicious feeling to squeezing a pimple. Not today! She was too excited and expectant. Clutching the pram’s sides, the brave girl prepared herself to face the rush of a cold wind. Or, as she fleetingly thought, it might strip the flesh off me bones. But it won’t be hard cos there ain’t much on ’em.

Fortunately, no wind blew and neither did a vortex suck her up. Well, it could’ve! Suggested the echoes of a teacher explaining that space is a vacuum. Grateful not to be sucked out of the pram like a speck of unwanted dust, she summoned her wish. Go on, go into the hole and find Monkey Man, her spirit goaded. Nothing happened. All she succeeded in doing was wasting more precious seconds, and yes, admittedly, enjoying the ripples of warm shivers and tingles that had arisen. But then a confused, “Eh?” caused a whole new batch of cold shivers to arise and chill her to the bone. There’s summit ghostly pulling, or is it pushing at me blimming chest?

“It’s me soul! It’s trying to get out,” she muttered, first amazed, then scared. “Blinking ’eck! This is it.” She gasped. “I’m gonna die in this blimming pram.”

Her throat was rapidly tuning to yell, “Goodbye, Sis, I love ya. And I’ll give Mama and Dada your love,” when something inside popped. The sensation set a host of new tingles rushing about her skin like ants around spilt juice. Unlike the last batch of shivers, these reached the ghostly roots of her spectacular red hair and down to the toes, warming in her favourite beige cotton socks.

A startled, pleased, “I’m still alive” hung on her excited breath as she felt her heart’s wish clambering from her chest. Then glory be, silently, it dived through the hole and galloped off into the ether.

It’s done! At last! Zoo-girl grinned, imagining her wish rushing, ducking and dodging through and around fibrillar tangles of colourful dancing pleas. Lying back on her pillow, satisfied but tired, her eyes closed, only to shoot wide open to underscore a suddenly huffed, “Ay!”

“There might be one waiting for me, from Monkey Man!” Yipped with a sitting jump.

In that unguarded moment, she almost rammed her head against the pram’s hood. No fear of pain from that, she knew, having hit it a few times already, but less certain about her sister’s reaction. She’ll demand to know, What’s up! And blimming Sheila can spot lies, or me evasions, before I even say ’em! Momentarily safe from a quizzing, Maria sighed, “I need to look at those pleas, dun’t I, somehow?”

There’ll be zillions, I bet, she decided with a sinking heart. But it would be great if me heart’s wish could find it, except there ain’t time, is there? Disappointed,

the child refused to moan, as some adults might. Curse you, Lord, for letting time's sands fall through the holes in me thinning existence, denying me the joy of this moment. No, the kind-hearted child neither spoke nor thought such horrid things. But how could a much softer version not find a place to lie in her tired sigh?

"I wish me blimming body didn't pull against me so much."

Other than acknowledging that well-worn issue, this single-minded, mostly slow-to-temper, once red-headed girl refused to play either anger's or time's tiring games. Dismissing them, she concentrated on her hopes for Mike. As those thoughts did on many tiring, low days, they invigorated her.

"I'll deal with this flipping body once I've recaptured blimming Monkey Man." She muttered far too loudly.

A dangerous mistake to make when a pair of sharply attuned, radar-like, ears are flapping merely inches away. She'd better not 'ave 'eard. She'll throw a blimming fit if she guesses what I'm up to.

As if sentient and gifted with foresight, the hood's net curtain that shielded her from the world's cruel gaze, fluttered in warning. I think she did hear.

Sure enough, the pram abruptly stopped. With barely time for the curtain to issue three, light flutters, she's coming, a shadowy hand fell across it, blotting out the speckled light.

"Now I'm for it," Maria gulped, unsure which she feared the most. Having to try and lie about her mission to find Monkey Man, or owning up and enduring

days, or even weeks, of nagging! But instead of the curtain pulling open, her sister's soft tut struck the air.

"We don't want gawpers staring at you, do we? Or car fumes irritating your poorly chest," Sheila murmured, while carefully tucking the net back into place.

"Yeah, Sis," Zoo-girl naughtily croaked, with a weak cough to hopefully to distract her. Happily, her ruse worked.

"I need you off this stinking street," Sheila suddenly panicked, "and into the supermarket, then home."

With that, the pram rocked a little as Sheila released the brake. Then the large, hooded, antiquated beast, as Zoo-girl thought it, recommenced its assisted journey towards the supermarket.

Ha! Zoo-girl's spirit rallied with horns and trumpets which then played, got away with it! A softer, me wish is getting delivered, gave rise to another blaring Ha! I'm gonna recapture Monkey Man. And blimming 'eck to the cost. All that rippled through her mind softly, with a harmonising soprano's hum before percussion grumbled. Cos' there's always a blimming cost. Ain't Ann and Amy at The Emporium taught me that much! Every new mobile phone or washing machine kills our planet a bit more. And all it wants to do is give us its love but what do we do in blimming thanks? We suck out her guts and kick her hard!

"The poor blimming thing." Murmured as tenderly as a harp's longing chord.

The softly delivered words belied a passionate want to leap out of the pram and rush off to help adult wrongs. The regrets that bubbled to the surface for not being able to help out were nearly as great as the ones she harboured for losing

Mike. But Ann and Amy will cope, she thought fondly, but not me Monkey Man. We need each other, him and I. And I hope he gets the wish, and he finds me. He must find me, she thought wearily, he must.

Hidden to her spirit's eye, Mike's was clearly visible to a certain entity watching the pram's progress. While another entity with beautiful, white-blond hair was aware that all Maria's wish needed was a nudge to waft it across the road. Then a second one to see it onto the very place where illness forced her future novice to discard him.

As if replying to those entities, after all, she is Altius… Maria guiltily murmured. "Yeah, I left him in the garden, like an unwanted rag doll and then let him rot."

Determined to bring him in from the cold, her spirit yipped. "But I can put that right, can't I, when he finds me? He'll just need a blimming good wash, won't he? But then he always did. Didn't he?" She burbled happily.

Her well-meant sniggers blessed the air at the precise moment the discreetly nudged heart's wish found the dim cave in which Monkey Man's mind loitered.

Not for long!

With the sudden oomph of an exploding firework factory, a dazzling display of "Kerpow, zap, splats, your Zoo-girl's back," burst into life.

Startled and shaken, the maudlin dam he had so carefully erected to keep back the past burst wide open, releasing an unstoppable tsunami of subverted memories and emotions. Just as Zoo-girl, with a large dollop of certitude, has

prayed and hoped would happen for most, of what for her, has been a very difficult year.

Part 19

A memory, still waiting to return to its deep store from where Monkey-man, aka Mike, accidentally summoned it earlier, immediately flashed up. Teasing his chapped lips into a half-smile he envisioned Zoo-girl running along the High Street with her long, bright, rust-red hair flaying about her shoulders. Those moments then merged with other mad dashes, light butterfly flits and skippy skits he saw her spread about the town.

As her heart's wish delved deeper inside his musty mind, out came the echoing memories of her many bubbly, "Can't stop! I'm blimming late again."

They turned into musical laughter whenever she threw a packet of crisps or a wrapped sandwich at his feet. Then off she'd run to catch her bus before it pulled away. The image of her school bus stirred a shy smirk. She was always late in the mornings. How many times did I stand in front of that bus to stop it pulling away so she could jump on? But always with a "Thank you Monkey Man" and laughter flowing from her lips as she boarded.

The smirk widened into a rare smile when the heart's wish found the traces of their first encounter and encouraged the memories to rise and take a bow. Once again, he relived the time she ran past him, as always with long red hair flying behind her. One morning she stopped. Paused and giggled. Then shuffled backwards as if to retrieve something she dropped. Her head tilted and she aimed those vivid green eyes at me. Yeah, she appraised me, like I was a specimen she intended to add to a collection. Which indeed, I was, he smirked.

His reaction at the time, she's too young to bother with me, felt less harsh the second time around as it eased into his mind's fore. Then the minx crouched

and shoved her ‘blimming’ face - he smiled - no, her inquisitive, bright face right into mine.

Did our noses touch? He wondered.

Mine would have been dirty. Hers, delightfully freckled. And yes, that cheeky cocking of her head sent her red hair flowing like a silky river down the side of her face and across her shoulder. This! She! Is dangerous! He recalled think and flinching and wanting to look away, to get away. She’ll get me beaten! But those sparkling, mesmeric green eyes pinned me there, didn’t they, while her too-sweet smile widened mischievously. That flipping little imp let loose a well-aimed, spit-filled raspberry, right in my face, and then cheekily dropped a banana at my feet.

“For you, Monkey Man.”

She laughed and skipped off in a stream of giggles to board her bus. Yeah, that was the very moment when my name was born; he grinned with a happy tut.

“Cheeky, yes, but I miss her calling me that.”

More memories jostled for attention. Her winks and waves through the bus window; yes, I miss those too. She gave me hope, didn’t she? If she can notice me, then maybe others will. Yeah, her happy nods and smiles and waves went on for days. His quiet laughter stirred the memory of their next face-to-face encounter. Em. Having test-driven me, her new homeless friend, I guess she found me satisfactory because a few morning on she stopped.

“I’ve decided to adopt ya as a sort of black sheep brother.”

A few days later, she followed that up with a giggly, “Time to clean your cage, Monkey Man.”

Yeah, with a half-used tube of toothpaste, a toothbrush - slightly worn - and a small piece of soap!

“And these are for you too,” she said, tossing the first of many to come packets of crisps and sandwiches at my feet. The day after, she dropped a pink flannel - still wet, he smiled, and that half roll of toilet tissue.

“Just in case you need them, Monkey Man.”

All that and more flashed through his giddy, almost euphoric mind. Then, to cap the moment, another heart’s wish arrived and splattered his grey spirit with the rare but beautiful colours of happiness.

“Wake up! Wake Up! I’m here! I’ve come back. I’ve things to do, but I need ya help. Come on, Monkey Man! Answer me!”

Part 19b

At The Organisation's offices, Ann was fully aware of Zoo-girl's wish. Knowing the child, she expected it of her. Indeed, her Angel's ability to speak into minds both encouraged and helped it along. Nevertheless, that did not stop her worrying for Mike. Maria, as well-meaning as your intentions are, she thought. I can't help thinking that you may well end up burdening your Monkey Man in a way he'll never forget. Or be able to bear.

"But you'll help Mike, John, if he needs council." Ann sent via mind-talk.

Almost instantly, her words rippled into John's mind as he watched the old-fashioned large pram Zoo-girl was trapped in navigating the door of the express supermarket. It was just along from where he hovered as a tiny rainbow dot above the i in the tailor's shop sign, across the road from Mike.

"I've looked after him for nigh on a year," John sent back. "I'll not let him down now. Especially since they're so close!" Then he smiled as he swallowed back one of Zoo-girl's favoured 'blimmings' to exclaim more fittingly, "At last."

With little idea why Ann was so keen to see Zoo-girl and her Monkey Man reunited, he shrugged happily; a mission is a mission. Although it's a frustrating one. So many things have got in their way. Cancelled hospital appointments. Hospital stays. The weather. Sheila's smothering and fears for her little lamb. But mainly Mike's inability to see or become involved with important things going on around him. But then he's not an Altius, like Ann's Paul was, John reasoned as he recalled a similar mission. Mike is of the Sapiens, and since when do they see the truth of anything? Not even when it's dancing before their

eyes. If only I could say. Mike, listen! I’m an Angel. This is what you have to do!

Sensing a cloud of doubt amassing to smother Mike’s brief flare of joy, Don’t be a fool. Stop thinking about her. Move on.” John quipped.

“You know it won’t be me, Ann, who fails him but that stubborn man-boy letting himself down… again.”

Maria. Section 4: Reunited.

Part 20

Reeling from the first, sudden burst of Zoo-girl's unmistakable Espean twang, a new message, "Come on, Monkey Man! Find me!" stormed his defences to prod his spirit into yelling. She's close! The message's intrinsic sense of urgency then forced him onto his feet. Eagerly, and worriedly, he searched the immediate passersby and the seething, weaving crowd; those frantic, lunchtime-endowed, bustling on the other side of the street.

Almost willing to look anywhere for a flash of long, burnished rust-red hair, those roving eyes flitted over the Tailor's Shop and he smiled. Earlier, while waiting at the kerb, a £1 coin rolled then stopped by his feet, to then lie unclaimed. Not for long. For a poor man-boy, that was the best omen ever. Now, the treasure itched in his pocket to be converted into cheap, bruised bananas from the market - his first food for days. One for him and one for John, should he turn up. But then, from between the swarming grey, blue and black lunch timers' uniforms, a head of coppery hair signalled loudly.

"It's her!" He muttered, astonished that the words in his head had spoken truly. Zoo-girls back!

The blue-black crowd, imitating the perfect synchronisation of starlings' autumn murmuration, swirled together, coiled and parted to leave a disappointing strangler. It's not her. An almost sentient sense of, don't you dare give up looking, crinkled the air about his ears, clearing the way for another burst of Kerpow! Zap! Splats, Zoo-girl's Voice and Face are back. This time, the words included a sweet dose of infectious giggles. They pulled and bounced about him in the way of a puppy begging to play. Or, in his case, encouraging eager eyes to look again. Almost immediately, they lit upon a young woman, or

rather a teenager, struggling to manoeuvre a large pram through the crowd. His lonely, abandoned child's heart flipped and longed. She has the same auburn hair as Zoo-girl. She looks like her, except older. No! Yes! Tired, maybe? A gasp, unwilling to wait out that debate, smothered the abstract quandary before it could muster wind and fly.

"That can't be Zoo-girl! It can't be! If it is, then a far too young child has had a child!"

Looking again, he blurted. "No… That's plain wrong! Obscene even!" But yet? However, time refused to cease shovelling to spare him seconds to ponder or wander in outrage.

"I'm here, Monkey Man, find me," whammed him hard.

A panicking, where, where, where, sent him searching for red hair. Nope. There's just that teenager with the pram, and she ain't doing too well with it. Spotting several shopping bags slung from her wrists and even more groceries squeezed onto a rack underneath, he smirked.

"As loaded as a logger's elephant."

Intrigued, he followed her progress. A faint smile rose as she passed the Tailor, so lucky for him that morning. But not for her! Shopping, as if spooked by a poltergeist, suddenly leapt out of the rack to roll about the pavement like drunken wasps. Rather you than me, he thought, watching her awkwardly stop the pram in the middle of the crowded pavement. If they could, they'd be blasting their horns irritably, he thought, watching pedestrians step over the spillage and surge around her. Disentangling her wrists from the bags, she

placed them down and started scooping up the errant tins. Only for more to come tumbling out.

“Crikey, they’re heading for the road. No one’s helping her!” He blurted as she frantically collected them up before, as he felt, those constantly flowing, never-caring-to-stop wheels driven by caged, enraged, impatience coldly crushes them.

If anything, people are moaning, he thought angrily. She needs help, but I can’t, he decided, with a cowardly, sinking heart. I’m homeless. She’ll take one look at me and scream. Or worse, he thought, instinctively shielding his crutch.

John, from his place above the Tailor’s sign, snorted. “It’s me who might kick you in the crutch if you don’t get over there. Your destiny is playing before you. Go and embrace it, Mike. If you’re half the man I believe you are, you’ll make good use of that £1 coin I rolled your way this morning. And yes, I know you’re hungry, but different forms of hunger exist. Which I’m guessing you’ll find out soon enough if you go to her.”

“Honestly, Father,” John hastily apologised. “I’ve not interfered with anyone’s free will. I’ve simply given a nudge here and there and encouraged the odd tin or four to fall and a coin to roll. That’s all.”

“Now stop gawping and go over there, Mike, before I get told off. Be her hero. Help her.”

To Mike’s amusement, several packets, more tins, and bananas tumbled comically from the pram’s rack. But instead of being goaded into helping, as John wanted, Mike smiled as items inside the bags joined the fun. Tins and packets rolled or fell onto the pavement. As funny as it seemed, it was painful to

watch and frightening. The woman's flustered juggling pushed aside all thoughts of food and John. Another banana fell, twinging his memory into serving up an image of Zoo-girl throwing him one as she ran by. Then the sight of the haves and homed swerving or stepping over the spilling groceries while shooting her dirty looks sent the vision packing. Glad not to be part of that selfish world, he murmured, "You bloody oafs."

"And you're stupid and stubborn!" John laughed. "Stop thinking, dunderhead! Go and help!"

Mike yearned to help, but his lifetime of nurtured doubt had a stronger hold. If I go, I'll scare her? Or will she scare me?

"Oh, my giddy aunt angel!" John muttered, catching his friend's indecision. "Just go! Take a step. Make a move, your move. Whatever! Just get thy backside over there!"

Yet still, Mike hesitated.

"Oh, Father, kick him for me, will you!" John wanted to screech, regardless of knowing that such a sound arriving via mind-talk can frighten and hurt!

Timely as always, Ann inadvertently spared her father the unnecessary pain and John a kindly meant, but firmly delivered ear-bashing. Before the screech could leave his mind, he sensed Ann driving towards him. Hearing the honking horn of her new, blue, electric people carrier. John smiled knowingly, as the ethereal paradox, she, his boss, who could, somehow, speed through slowly moving traffic, steadily approached.

“Those are no ordinary toots either,” John murmured, feeling her will, wants and needs woven within the sound-waves aimed at Mike.

“She’ll get him moving, for sure,” he grinned.

The doctored waves jolted Mike as they struck. Or rather, fully awakened his sense of impending doom, encouraging him to focus on the teenager and not on the shopping. As Ann intended. Something else she took care to weave into the waves soundly smacked Mike’s awareness into declaring. I know her! Doesn’t she live this side? In one of the estates? The realisation stirred that sense of doom to swell importantly.

“She’s going to try and cross while dropping the shopping. It’ll be chaos.”

Then it happened. Zoo-girl’s true name giggled its way up to the fore of his mind, along with a slightly cockeyed revelation.

“She’s Maria’s Mother!” He exclaimed. Even then, not a single toe or eyelash twitched.

John was about to scream himself senseless when he felt Ann approaching again from the opposite direction. How has she managed that so quickly with all this traffic? He wondered, not for the first time either. But then Ann’s urgent parps, louder than the previous ones, parted the air. This time, as she drove by, her sapphire-blue eyes connected with Mike’s, while her worldly smile briefly enwrapped him and stirred a compulsion.

Suddenly, as if kicked by a strong mule, Mike lurched into the road.

“Thank you, Ann.” John sent, smiling as he watched Mike gather his balance and, with the skill of a dribbling footballer, swerve through the traffic.

“I’ve done my bit.” Ann mind-talked. “Now, you make sure all goes well between them. Their meeting must happen, both for them and you, John. You don’t want your Amy upset enough to drop-kick you for failing her, do you?” She added with musical laughter.

“That’ll keep John on point,” she grinned. And yes, my Paul, well nagged. I’m enjoying this new car. It doesn’t scream at me when I put my foot down, like the last one did. So that’ll stop you, my darling Paul, from criticising my driving. She smiled smugly. Then her eyes lit up when she spotted Mike in the silly rear-view mirror, the thing Paul berates her for not using enough.

Well caught, that Mike!

Then she laughed. “The silly man just bowed… bowed as he handed over his trophy to Sheila.”

“The jumping shopping was a nice touch, John, well done,” Ann sent, still laughing, happy to know that her plan was finally coming together.

In that precise turn of Time’s psychotic toil, things were not panning out quite as happily for Mike. If anything, the encounter was going the way he feared. That is, if the hand hovering protectively over a certain region was anything to go by.

Part 21

The future cause of Ann’s smile, Mike, the victim of and servant to, subverted dreams, adopted an exaggerated, sweeping bow, and presented his redhead with a slightly dented can of beans.

“These are yours, Mam,” declared with his best, closed-mouth smile. A self-conscious manner he adopted to hide less-than-clean teeth. Only to flinch when her breath caught.

Do I stink that much? Was it my grin? My scruffy clothes? Split trainers?

Her hazel-green flecked and, in a certain light, almost golden eyes, narrowed angrily as she snatched the offering from his hand to thrust it bad-temperedly into a bag.

On another, happier occasion, those golden flecks dancing in her eyes might have begged for Mike’s attention; a lover’s exploration, or an artist’s appreciation, but not then. On the High Street, in that second, they were the merest tips of angry flames flaring from deep inner turmoil. Her subconscious rebellion held that sharp intake of breath in and nursed it bitterly. People like this man-boy are freely wandering about while I have to push a pram. Or they’re running factories. Polluting streams and reservoirs, the air and land. Just look at the mayor’s businesses! How much pollution do they pump out every day?

All those angsts and more mingled with that sharply taken breath. As it swirled bitterly inside her lungs, the extracted oxygen and exhaust fumes and who knows what else fed her angst. Look at how the wicked mayor pollutes the marshes! And what happens to her, nothing? And she’s still doing it! And what does she care that her factories killed our Dad for sure, and most likely our

Mum? Now my poor sister is suffering and close to dying. What do the conspiring doctors say? Nothing true! It's probably genetic or caused by a bad diet, exposure to smoking or a lack of exercise. Lack of blooming exercise! My butt! She's a bloody nine-year-old who never walked anywhere when she could run and skip!

The odds that the environment caused it are less than 3%! Yeah, right! They know they're telling lies. Worse still, they smile while suggesting it. My cherub don't deserve this. She don't…! She don't. This freeloader and the no-gooders are the ones who deserve it. But do they get it? No, they don't. It's my little angel who catches the lot.

Her long-held breath finally exhaled in a plume of; it's not bloody fair! It's not.

Instinctively, Mike felt her loathing and anger.

"Hey, I'm cool." He said, holding up his hands defensively while smartly stepping back. "I was trying to help. But I'll go…, I'll go…"

"Don't you dare leave now, Mike!" John muttered, where it joined another, aghast, issuing.

"Don't you flipping dare leave me, Monkey Man!" Unlike the owner of the first, who simply glared, the second whisperer shook the pram a little. But the effort passed unnoticed.

"I just wanted to help you and your child…" Mike blathered, with another backwards step. Only to hear a snort, followed by a short burst of derisive giggles. They hardly registered when an affronted, "I ain't 'er blimming child," stopped a third backwards step, dead.

Mike’s world view blurred as he realised, Zoo-girl’s in the pram! Then his senses imploded, spun, knotted and in the loudest silence ever, they converged and screamed… Why…!

Part 22

Whatever else his spirit yearned to shout, spluttered into a gulp. The teenager's hard frown softened as her eyes looked down at the pram, then back up at him. Instead of regaining its hard composure, a loving here we go lit her eyes, and her lips twitched as if about to break into a smile.

Before either could move, speak, or the smile develop further, a faint, slightly croaky voice left the pram. "It's alright, Sis; he's my Monkey Man, he's OK. I promise. Don't send him away."

Without allowing time to unload its shovel, all manner of emotions unravelled inside Mike, creating one heck of a startled split second. Then they reconfigured into a Halloween party sign, with dripping blood-red letters, shrieking, "It is her!"

Frantic to know the truth, Mike yanked open the hood's curtain. A combustive and stricken 'It is,' his eyes pricked with tears. Fortunately, an instinctive biting of his bottom lip prevented a horrified; Oh, my dear God, escaping. But it was there in his eyes as he stared at a Miss Jersey potato head. Instead of her amazing hair, an amazing, jauntily sat, multi-coloured bobble hat commanded her white dome. Maria's vivid green, 'catch you in their glance' eyes, were the same. Well, nearly. Without the competing long, rust-red tresses, they glimmered like jewels in a setting of pasty skin. While more obvious than he recalled, their inner sparkle was not as bright, but otherwise, it was Zoo-girl. For a second, he saw the ghostly strands of red hair lying on the pillow where her head rested. Instantly, regretting, 'Miss Jersey potato head,' every cell in his body quivered as he imagined her horror as her beloved hair fell out, clump by tearful clump. Oh, you poor, poor thing, he cried inside. What an injustice, his

cells, his mind and soul screamed in a rare unity. That triggered his connected and disconnected selves' fury for life's abysmal cruelties. The feelings combined and took life, and pulsed strongly, atomically and spiritually out of him in fierce waves.

Maria's eyes lit up a little when the charged particles of outrage, along with his softer, caring emotions, washed over her. After soaring away to touch Sheila and, for some reason, John, those feelings reached Ann. Having wangled the car into an impossible parking space, she strode purposefully along the other side of the High Street towards them.

Sensing her approach, John wondered again, what is she up to? Her actions and wants are usually an open book. Even when it comes to matters concerning her, my Paul. But not now, he reasoned. She's shut her mind off to me, he grumbled, to Amy.

"In the hundreds of years I've worked for her, Ann has never done that," John moaned to Amy via mind-talk. The mystery deepened further when Amy suggested, "I've no idea either." It was not quite a lie. She had a very good idea, but she had no wish to reveal what little she knew. Maria deserves her privacy, although that is not what she said to John.

"I've got to go. John. I've a women's defence class to teach. Bye."

What is it about this young child that has Ann and now Amy acting so strangely? He wondered after Amy's obvious dismissal. Or could it be, Mike? Or, Sheila, maybe?

Not for a moment did he consider that Ann was also on a mission. Hers involved the trio's futures, and as a bonus, his and Amy's too. Anything to

bring that pair of reluctant lovers together. Or should that be, Ann grinned as the naughty breeze tugged at the hem of her favourite sky-blue summer dress. Bringing both pairs of reluctant lovers together as requested by my delightful, soon-to-be, young novice. And quite rightly too, Maria, she smiled before mind-talking.

“I’m on my way, Maria. See you shortly.”

Part 23

Wreathed in pleasant thoughts of her my Paul, Ann’s floating but sure steps slowed as she approached Espe’s tawdry, exotic lingerie store.

Coming alongside, a naughty, half smile blessed her lips as a sudden tease urged her to write in the window’s dust. 'Herein lies the beginning of so many possibilities. If only you knew'.

But that sort of caper belongs to Amy, her admonishing tut suggested. I’m merely a Firstborn Angel in a sky-blue summer dress, out for a stroll on a fine day. And who knows where my steps might lead?

And didn’t they once lead me to this very spot and My Paul? She grinned. But today it’ll be Maria I come across. But I mustn’t arrive too early... or even at all, if Mike fails to connect with them as he ought to.

Part 24

Mike desperately wanted to rip the pasty, hairless impostor out of the pram and beat it for inhabiting his friend. Luckily, her enfeebled but haunting humour saved him from emotional meltdown.

“What’s up then, Monkey Man?”

How the heck do I answer that?

For a few unbearable seconds, he stared while she stared just as earnestly back. Then her piercing, crystalline green eyes began to sparkle a little in the way he remembered as she feasted on his emotions. In the shadows of that demeaning pram, unnaturally caging the once voluble bird of paradise, her eyes glistened intermittently. As if powered by a loosely wired heart they flickered with her inner rhythm to transmit a silent plea. I want to live. Oh, help me live, Monkey Man. Help me escape from this prison and live a little more.

Something else, unreadable but disturbingly deep, lurked within those pleading eyes. Whatever it was, it twisted and unsettled Mike’s core, sending him to the cold, hard unforgiving floor. For a split second, he thought as he picked himself up, the pavement matches my hatred for Zoo-girl’s illness.

Her awaiting grin teased you stupid thing when he pulled the net back and the spell that threw him disappeared. Happily he noted that his tumble had added power to her spirit, encouraging the green eyes to glimmer brightly, Monkey Man is still my friend. He cares for me. I knew it. I knew it. So many other things fired in that brief but glorious flare, but she had no wish to dwell on the past. It was time to enjoy the present and maybe more of her future, however short.

Of all the things he might have said, he whispered lamely.

“So that’s where you’ve been hiding all this time.”

That brought a weakly smiled, “You missed me then, Monkey Man?”

“Of course, who else teases like you?”

“If you missed me, Monkey Man, then why didn’t you swing along the bike bars and come looking for me…?”

“I didn’t know you needed finding.” He whispered and turned away, hoping she wouldn’t catch the screaming of his fastly breaking heart.

Part 25

So much sadness and joy lay in their light jibes that Sheila struggled to keep herself together and not cry. Not because of Maria's illness, for they both knew that is what it is, but for how Maria's friends have reacted. Stay aways, all, Sheila's tortured heart groaned. The only person who seems to care for my lamb is this homeless man-boy, who I don't even know, or know how Maria met him. Here he is bringing her joy, and not a single one of her friends has visited her. Or phoned or written since she became ill. They've not even sent a simple card. Nothing, at all, to show they care. That includes Jody, her best friend. Or so she was. I suppose they can't deal with cancer. But if only they could see the pain they've caused her and had to hear her cry, "Why ain't me friends coming to see me?" Now, here's Mike with his simple, deeply touching and honest words. If he wasn't homeless, she knew she might well grab him and kiss his unwashed cheeks. Thank you.

While Sheila's tears swelled, Maria's heart-shaped achromatic face broke into a slow smile. To Mike's joy and Sheila's relief, it did not stop until it reached her slightly pointy pixie ears. An amusing fact Mike stored away for future teases. Once it settled, the smile sprinkled more glitter into her reviving eyes and spirit.

Kneeling before the pram and witnessing his friend blossoming from a closed, dull and pale, dejected rosebud into a glimmering, slightly flushed flower was the most spiritually uplifting experience of his life. Willingly, he let the growing twinkles draw him in. Seconds later, he was happily enslaved, hanging there awaiting her words, ready to respond to her needs. Always.

Instead of issuing commands, her thin, white, dainty hand slipped from beneath the blanket to rest in his, where like a knight of yore, he silently pledged his life

and soul to her duty. In her quick, clever way, she read his unspoken oath while feeling his silently offered undying devotion.

“Thank you,” she said simply and quietly. “I accept your service, my Monkey Man.”

Then her hand disappeared beneath the blanket once more, and her head, surrounded by the memory of her once luxuriant hair, lolled wearily on the pillow. Given a chance, she would never complain again about brushing her hair. Not ever.

Other than her eyes following Mike’s every twitch, she lay still. Even then, she found a game to play. When he blinked, she blinked. When he turned his head slightly, her eyes followed. It was nearly impossible to break the connection. Her enigmatic smile ensnared him. Not only was her gaze haunting, it also wallpapered his heart with new feelings. She was not just his Zoo-girl now, but a sister, one who needed protection and a large sprinkling of magic to heal her.

Is it possible?

Is It?

Part 26

“I’ll be back,” was simply said, while Mike’s heart yelled, sorry, I need to break this spell, just for a moment. It hurts me to do so. And I won’t do it again, I promise. For I’m your knight, ready and willing to join your fight.

“So don’t you dare go anywhere.”

Only for Mike to smile at her derisive snort, “Yeah! As if!”

So young…, so wise, or should that be so sharp!

As subtly as he could, he asked her sister - How could I believe she was Zoo-girl’s mother? She’s barely my age. “What’s her prognosis?”

Her returning grimace conveyed a thousand sad words with each, cutting him deeply. His returning gasp was uttered just as silently. Nevertheless, it still managed to declare itself loudly using the uncluttered sounding board of his startled face.

It did not go missed.

The thin strip of air separating them suddenly ignited with emotions. Mike had no conscious clue about such feelings, but Sheila did. She was an old hand at helping others cope with her sorrow. Say something they won’t expect was her usual response to their embarrassed fidgets. Or their murmured, “I’m sorry.” Or the more rarely asked, “How do you cope?”

“Oh. I go to see young Jerry at the butcher’s quite a bit.” She has quipped a few times to alleviate the tension.

That bizarre comment opens the door to numerous light-hearted ripostes. He tells good jokes… We share a bottle… He supplies me with pills… He gives a good pedicure… Or her favourite, yet unsaid - we have wild sex on the butcher's cutting block and roll about in chicken innards afterwards. Endless possibilities! With each happily pointing away from sorrow. But with Mike, she chose the honest approach.

"I'm not coping well. She has leukaemia." She whispered, waggling her hand left and right. "Her chances are fifty-fifty. And I'm Sheila by the way."

"And I'm…"

"…Yes, I know who you are. You're Monkey Man," she cut in.

The way it left her breath, to join her raised eyebrows and widened eyes, made it as cheeky as Zoo-girl does. They're certainly sisters; he smirked as her natural mischievous glints knocked his sadness to one side, enough to allow him to explain.

"I was going to say, it's Mike, but I like the way you say Monkey Man."

Immediately, a faint protesting "Oi" issued from inside the pram. "That's my blimming name for him, so you keep your flipping paws off it, Sis." Said with an indignant shake of the pram.

They did not need to see Maria's smile. The sense of it flooded through the net curtain to frolic freely with their own rising ones. Then sadness, borne from the knowledge, Maria's happiness was a rare thing descended to dim Sheila's. Holding back tears, but with a voice hindered by them, she confided in a gush

of words that surprised them both. But not the happy little minx whose ears were flapping like bunting caught by a fair breeze.

“There’s so much cancer about,” Sheila explained. “Only a few years ago, one in eight might get it; now they say, the odds are one in two. Oh, what’s been done to this world.” She sighed. “And when will the odds turn to one in one, I wonder? When Mike!” She pleaded. “When!”

Without giving him a chance to answer, not that he had one ready, she admitted. “Some days I’m so tired. Her continuous treatment and aftercare are expensive. And it’s just like I read someone say in an interview recently.”

“I’m very, very ill. It’s terminal. I’m very tired all the time because cancer is a full-time job: CT scans, MRIs, laboratory blood work, medical visits, chemotherapy, infectious disease control doctors, and so on. If you’re lazy, you need not apply for cancer.”

“Frankly, Mike,” she confessed. “I’m in a mucking fuddle. I really am. I can’t buy the things she needs, and I can’t work to get the money to buy them. It’s so hard. She needs full-time care, but I can’t do it all. I can’t. I really don’t know what to do, Mike. I don’t…” she lamented, as close to breaking down in public as she has ever been.

The sadness and hurt in her words twisted Mike’s empty guts, tilted his heart and put pressure on his lungs. In every sense of the word, she turned his inner being into an unaligned tourbillon. He struggled to right his frame, to correct an askew escapement and readjust the inner timepiece so it might tick right again. Except unintentionally, Sheila was not about to let that happen.

“Just buying her decent, healthy food is a struggle.” Where a twinkling tear was wiped away, as she said dejectedly.

“Just to be able to buy my precious lamb a treat now and then is all I ask. And bless her, she needs everything and yet she asks for nothing.”

Wiping another tear away, she whispered in a broken voice. “And guess what…, my little lamb gets exactly what she asks for…, nothing.”

She made every effort not to cry, despite knowing that crying was much more than shedding tears; instead, her body rocked in a turmoil of grief and pain. Had she not suddenly clutched the pram’s handle, Mike guessed she might well have crumpled, as if her feet were dissolving in an acid puddle created out of her watery bitterness. Even with the pram’s support, she staggered slightly, where his once hesitant hand shot forward to catch her by the elbow. Her returning, weak, but genuine smile touched his heart, and he instantly connected to their lives. Now, he was their battered tome, sandwiched between matched but subtly differing bookends. A trio of components, each reliant on the other, yet separate too.

Caught firmly in their drama, the cogs of Mike’s voice snagged. Without even considering who he was and knowing he could hardly help himself, he blurted.

“I’d like to help you both.”

The emotion behind his offer echoed loudly inside her, and she did not reject him, or think; he’s just a homeless bum.

“Could we start a fund, maybe?” He suggested. “Some local businesses might care to help?”

“If what I’ve read is true, they probably caused her cancer,” Sheila sniped.

Then let’s make them pay for it. His gut yearned to scream.

Then, almost as strongly and in the same way as Maria’s pleading eyes floored him earlier, a sudden glimmer of hope caught him off guard. But unlike Sheila, he did not stagger. Instead, the old, hesitant Mike finally disappeared, to be replaced with a burgeoning need to help. Without properly considering his next words, they welled up and shot from his mouth.

“Let’s get the fund started now, shall we?” He offered sincerely while rummaging in the left-hand trouser pocket. The only one without a hole that contained his treasured £1 coin.

To Sheila, those caring words struck the air with the joyful alacrity of pealing church bells. Dizzily, she thought, just a few moments ago, I was dismissing him as unworthy, yet here he is, giving me a profound lesson. Those who have the least are the ones willing to do or give the most.

Part 27

Again, he pulled the net aside, and there she was, smiling. And not just with her mouth, but with those oh-so-bright green eyes. Now that Mike was on side, they freely glistened with her spirit's wish to gambol in sunlight. To dance in the rain. Roll joyously around in fresh, settled snow. Oh, to be able to do those things without worrying, Sis, or getting told off. But now me Monkey Man's here to help me.

"I'm still here, waiting…" she said with mock impatience peppered with the ghost of swallowed giggles. "…and you took your time flirting…"

Lightly released giggles - at last.

"…with me Sis."

Another beautiful, weakly sent, smattering of giggles blessed the air. When her eyes lit up even more, he tried desperately not to be caught in their spell. His words were coming close to tumbling into the land of nonsensical as it was. Ignoring the minx's teasing, he focused on the splattering of delicate freckles on her slightly upturned, ski-slope button nose. Concentrating on joining the dots, he pulled out the treasured £1 coin that fuelled his dreams of food earlier. Now it meant so much more, and who needs food anyway?

"I want to make you a gift…" he said tenderly, but haltingly with pricking eyes and a heart too scared to name her illness. Why grant it a domain where it should never be?

Catching his hesitation, her eyes glimmered more, while her little nose twitched. Come on, Mike, you can say it. I don't mind. I know what I have. It's me who blimming bears it.

Eased by her spell, his words began to sort themselves out until they were ready to flow clearly and proudly. Almost in an enchanted whisper, he said.

"… Let me be the first to donate to the Save Our Maria from Cancer fund."

Her spidery hand slipped out from the blanket, and he solemnly placed the coin into her expectant palm. As he gently folded her cold fingers around it, her eyes blinked with understanding and twinkled with the joy of holding this homeless man's treasure.

To her, it felt as warm in her palm as the heart of the man gifting it. She might be ill, but she was not stupid. She knew exactly what the gesture cost him and what it would cost him and her should she refuse to take it. Instantly, it became their talisman, where her inner warmth soaked into the coin to join his.

"Thank you," was all she said.

But it was all he needed to hear to dispel Mike's darkening clouds and allow the sun to shine. "Now, let's get you started on your journey home. Are you ready to be whizzed along?"

"You bet, Monkey Man," she replied chirpily. "But don't go breaking the blimming eggs or she'll kill ya. An I reckon she's put them in here with me so I can hatch them, the silly moo…"

“Oi, you,” Sheila quipped, laughing. Not because of the cheek, but the uplifting way she said it. It was so good to hear a little of her lamb’s bounce return to her voice after having lost it during so many hospital visits. Along with much of my own, she realised, sadly. Her silently mouthed heartfelt, May God bless you, Mike, was more sincerely felt than this lonely homeless man-boy could, or has, ever know.

I think we have a connection. At last, John thought happily. As did Ann when she sensed her novice’s joy. And long may it last, she thought as she slowed her pace along the High Street to make sure to arrive at the right time.

Part 28

Sheila had no will or want to resist when Mike took the bags.

“Thank you for your gift. It means such a lot to us both, Mike.” She said coyly, gently touching his arm and finally righting his tilted tourbillon.

For a few meaningful seconds, they gazed at each other. The spring on his unwound emotional clock nicely tightened in time with her slowly, shyly, blossoming smile. Unsure how to react to the first genuine smile he has ever received, he hastily turned to the bags and started repacking them. Sheila, equally confused, wondered, have I offended him, as she tackled the shopping squeezed onto the pram’s rack. Once all was safe, Maria was padded out with kitchen and toilet rolls. Then, to her indignation, Sheila added a packet of streaky bacon, a box of bran cereal and a carton of milk.

“Great! Why don’t you just sling me out and make me crawl home? The blimming shopping’s worth more than me anyway, innit?” She moaned good-naturedly.

“Shut up, nagging,” Mike laughed. “Anyway, it’s for your own good. The paper rolls will soften the blows if we crash.”

“OK, clever,” she ragged, tilting her ski-slope nose up at him mockingly. “What’s the bacon, bran and milk for?”

“They go with the eggs. They’ll give you something to eat while you wait to be rescued. Got it? Now, are you ready?”

“Huh,” she snorted derisively, but with a lightness that was smile-inducing. “And this better be good, I can tell ya.”

Yeah, Mike thought as they stepped up to the kerb, let’s hope it is.

His thoughts were a little pessimistic about a good outcome, but his heart zinged happily. In part, due to Sheila’s freely given smile, but mainly because of the cheerful bounce in Maria’s voice. Suddenly and for him, bizarrely, he remembered The Father and felt a connection, as if he was close or he knew him - or her. Wreathed in a new feeling of oneness, he silently vowed.

“I’ll do all I can to keep her bounce coming, I promise.”

However, he did not intentionally mean physical bounces. None too carefully, he dropped the front wheels down the high kerb first. As he wangled the back wheels down, the sudden drop shifted the passenger to stir her giggled, “Oi.” The sound made him as giddy as a happy reveller after a few pints.

Sheila was less impressed, but she kept smiling. My lamb was not bashed about too badly. Not yet anyway, but now for the traffic.

To the honking jeers and exaggerated braking of cars, they made it safely across the road, then Mike nearly blew it. Tipping the pram too far back at the receiving kerb, he rattled Maria about and shook out another spasm of delightful giggles. More erupted when he erred way too close to tipping the overloaded pram on its side. With laughter all around, Sheila rushed to the rescue. Eventually, between them, they made safe shore where, standing together on the pavement and with mutual ‘phews’, they took stock.

“Thanks for the help…” Sheila laughed, “…I think…” She added with more laughter.

Relaxed and happy, it rang with Sheila’s own brand of tinkling bounce. Wonderfully, she followed it with a tease.

“I don’t believe we could have managed without you.”

“Yeah, sure,” he replied sheepishly, grinning down at his holed trainers. Only to laugh when Maria’s strongly insistent and indignantly amused voice demanded.

“Will someone get this blimming shopping off me flipping face?”

Part 29

With their treasure rescued from the errant shopping, their treasure - what a wonderful feeling for an abandoned, homeless person to have - Mike straightened up.

“Well, I guess this is where we part? But if you need me, I’ll be here, 8 till late…” He smiled, pointing to the bike racks.

“…Unless that is, you need a hand getting this little baggage home?”

Another “Oi” fled the pram, followed by a light flutter of giggles. Frolicking away on the breeze, their joyful sounds heralded a turning point in his life.

“Let him help, Sis. He needs practice and needs to know where to come to push me out every day. Right, Monkey Man.”

Smiling, Mike bent his knees, ready to look into the pram to tease her, but a tall woman in a sky-blue dress and flowing white-blonde hair stopped him. Floating gracefully over, she crouched beside him.

“Hello, my little novice,” Ann said brightly, pulling the curtain out of the way to extend her hand for Maria to take. Maria's eyes sparkled with delight as Ann’s gentle, musical voice played to the audience’s hearts.

“It’s alright, I know her, Monkey Man.”

Taking the hint, he politely stepped away.

“You’re missed,” Ann said. “And Amy sends her love. But you may know that already. If not, I’ll make sure you do,” she suggested mysteriously, although not so to Maria.

Such was the musicality of Ann’s voice and a beautiful presence, oozing love and peace, instead of asking, who are you, Sheila, with Mike standing close by, listened. Or they tried to, for few human words escaped the pram.

From the depths of the hood, Maria’s green, twinkling, inquisitive eyes flared as they met the sparkling, vivid blue of Ann’s. While they silently communed, their eyes sparkled and glittered like a joyful meeting of tropical seas and clear skies.

After a few minutes, quietly and satisfied, Ann said happily.

“You’ll do me very well, Maria. And we’ll see each other again soon, I’m sure. But for now, take care and remember, we’re thinking of you.”

Standing up, she held Mike and Sheila in a deeply, otherworldly, innards-scrunching smile for a moment. As if pleased by what she saw, she nodded, turned and walked calmly, but rapidly away.

“Well, I’ll be…” Mike muttered, amazed.

Sheila, more worried than Mike about the woman, rushed to the pram to comfort Maria. “Are you OK?”

“Wow,” was Maria’s response to the enlivening and enlightening encounter and the change that had come over her.

Busily fussing and tucking her sister in and straightening the bobble hat Maria insisted on wearing, Sheila missed the faraway look on her face.

Mike noted it and that, strangely, she seemed to be slightly glowing in the shadowy interior. Catching his startled look, Maria cheekily winked, and it was his turn to utter.

“Wow.”

Sheila saw it. Suddenly scared, he’s got some sort a hold on my sister, she ordered with a cold glare. “Leave her!”

“Look,” he said defensively. “I’ll only help if you’re comfortable with the idea. I’m not one of them… pervs.”

“You can’t be too careful.” She snapped.

“No, you can’t. And it’s a shame such people ruin society.”

With the air partially cleared, Sheila showed her wise and non-judgemental head and heart.

“Maybe they are, maybe they aren’t. Maybe they’re a political ploy to keep us indoors. A writer’s fictional beast. And maybe you are and maybe you aren’t,” she replied candidly.

“Who knows the truth of such things? Who can we trust to tell us properly about anything? How often do the newspapers and police lie? The courts? Governments, industry and yes, the doctors!” She added sarcastically.

“But I agree, the perception is they are, and they, or you, will not ruin my sister.”

Not to be denied her Monkey Man, Maria protested. “He’s alright, Sis, he is. He could have hurt me anytime, but he never has. He stopped boys bullying me, and he used to hold up the bus so I could get on it. I trust him! Sis, I do!” Then, cleverly, she played her trump card. “And anyway, he’s the only friend I’ve got, so you can’t send him away.”

Behind her words was the knowledge that Ann trusted him. And if Ann does, then so do I. Wisely, she thought. Now ain’t the time to reveal why; it’ll freak Sis out and might scare Monkey Man away.

To Maria’s relief and Mike’s, Sheila gave in, with a sigh. “OK. We’ll see how it goes, right? So, for now, Mike, yes, you can walk us home.”

Part 30

However, she was not about to let him push ‘her Maria’ along the crowded street; who knows what damage he’ll do, to her or others? After passing him the bags, they strode along in companionable silence. Even Maria was quiet, although the air was definitely speaking to Mike. Now and then, liking what he saw and felt about Sheila, he grabbed a sneaky peek.

She knew exactly what he was up to. In a way, it was a relief; his eyes are for me, not Maria! To her surprise, she then realised she was happy for him to look and her attitude softened. Well, why not? It’s been a while since anyone has done that to me. And if I have a mind, with a bit of care, he might scrub up OK.

Reaching a road leading down to an estate behind the High Street, Sheila pointed to a house at the bottom of the long hill.

“We live down there, the end one in that group of five by the green, the one with the yellow door and a skittleway at the side.”

Suddenly, the pram shook and Maria scolded indignantly, “Don’t send him off yet, Sis. He ain’t blimming whizzed me, like he promised.”

Nodding to Mike, Sheila grinned and whispered, “I guess you’ve been summoned.”

Eagerly, swapping the bags for the pram, Mike yipped, “OK, let’s go,” and he treated Maria to her promised fast whizz down the long incline to their house. It was so silly fast they were still chuckling about it when Sheila eventually caught up.

“OK, then,” Mike said reluctantly, but knowing it was the right thing to do. “I’ll leave you to sort yourselves out.”

“See you tomorrow, Monkey Man,” Maria said. “But help yourself to a banana before you go; you’ve blimming earned it.”

“Thank you,” he smiled, breaking a much-needed banana off a hand. “And you can bet you’ll see me tomorrow.” He added, with a light pat to the hood.

Cautiously, Sheila suggested as she rummaged in her pocket for the house keys. “If the weather’s good and Maria’s up to it, we’ll look out for you at the bike bars around lunchtime.”

“I’ll be up to it, Monkey Man.” Maria boasted. “You won’t escape me that easy. Not this time.”

Somehow, he just knew, God willing as they say, that she will be there. If not tomorrow, then the next day, or the day after. She will come, and he, her trained and now loyal Monkey Man, will be waiting for his Zoo-girl-keeper.

But now the banana was calling, and he needed to talk to John.

Reluctantly turning away from a pang the closing door caused him, Mike set off up the hill, wreathed in a new sense of purpose.

Hovering close by in soul form, Ann thought as she watched him go. Get used to that feeling, Mike and use it well. They’ll need you, especially Sheila.

Maria. Section 5: Plans are made.

Part 31

An hour or so later, contrite after a meeting with Amy, John joined his friend at the bike bars.

“And it’s about time…”, Mike ragged with a smile, smug enough to suggest he had a lot to tell. “… You kept me waiting.”

John wanted to say; blame the delay on the hospital waiting lists, cancelled appointments, your hesitancy and poor inner sight! But it’s done now and he’s on track. At last.

Instead, he apologised, “Yeah, I’m sorry mate. I got held up at the Tailors.”

“What?”

“It’s a long story,” John explained straight-faced with lips that yearned to curl into a smile and confess all. But he knew better. He might not be able to die again, but if he revealed Ann’s meddling she would certainly give it a try.

At least I understand why she’s is so interested in Mike now, he thought as he looked at his friend’s smile. Although there’s more to this than love, he decided still stinging from Amy’s scold. He had sought her advice about how Mike might set up and run a fund for Maria, instead she snapped.

“You need to understand romance, John, for Mike's sake. He’s on a journey to find it. Unlike you!”

Genuinely alarmed, he stupidly barked. “What! With Maria!”

“No, you fool. Sheila! How could you even think, Maria? You’ve read his heart and heard his pleas, like Ann and I have.”

Other than the unwanted lesson in love, their time together was well spent.

“I have a stack of ideas for fundraising which I'll sketch out while you meet with him.” Amy explained, making him release she knew more about the mission than he did.

“I'll have them ready for when you bring him by later,” she explained. “And if your pet human asks the right questions the door to my advice will open, as you know.”

“But what if he doesn’t ask, you know what he's like.” He protested, and on hindsight, foolishly. “He cannot express those things he feels in his heart.”

“Then he’s like you, isn’t he, John!”

Still sore at her, John thought, well, at least Amy’s legal knowledge will guide Mike should he ask about starting a fund for Maria. And let’s hope he does for his sake and mine. Taking a leaf out of Ann’s handbook on evasiveness and gentle manipulation, as well as Amy’s, he smirked, and shrugged off Mike’s question. It’s time to get Mike talking, not me. And let’s see where we go from there.

“By the look on your face,” John said, “you have a story that promises to be far more interesting than mine.”

Part 32

John settled in to listen to Mike talk about his encounter with Maria and Sheila, although he already knew the story, and Ann and Amy's expected outcome. But the notion of free will must be observed. Accordingly, he nodded along as Mike vented angrily about cancer and how Sheila believed it was increasing.

"What are we humans doing wrong, John? Is it in the air? Genetics? Our food? What's causing this epidemic?"

"I've no idea, mate," John murmured, truthfully.

"What gets me, John, is that no one seems to be shouting about it like they would if it were a deadly virus, like COVID. Yet cancer is killing lots of people. What's being covered up, John?"

When John just shrugged, "I don't know," Mike vented.

"Do governments know why cancer's rising but have decided it's better to turn their backs on the causes, and people like poor Maria for the sake of profit or something, maybe?"

"I can't say what it is, because I don't know," John confessed. "But I do agree it needs looking into. But for now, Mike, for Maria's sake and Sheila's…" he added slyly. "…it's time we got you into a hostel and under a shower. Then it's off to a charity shop to get you some new clobber."

"Don't worry about the money," he added when Mike muttered, "What with?"

“I had a bit of luck, Mike,” he said, patting his pocket; the one Amy had thoughtfully filled with cash from her till. (“Don’t forget the receipts - like you usually do!”)

“Then we’ll follow that up with a burger or two. And we’ll talk some more. Come on, let’s get you embracing your new life before you become a fixture on the streets.”

There were no objections from Mike.

Happily, he fell in beside John, where the prospect of a burger lifted his heavy steps.

You’ll do my friend, John thought, as they headed not for the hostel but the charity shop. It was nearer and made more sense; clothes first. Although for certain, Mike, he thought as they walked along, will need more nudges to get him going properly. I hope after his shower and shave, he’ll have bundles of questions. But not, how did we get into the hostel so easily and early! Certain things are best left unexplained.

Later that evening, with Mike newly showered, clothed and fed, John decided to test Mike’s mettle.

“I know your heart is in the right place, but let’s be honest, Mike,” he goaded. “The best you could do was give Maria a coin you found on the street. I really can’t see how you’re going to be able to help her more than that.”

Mike’s head dropped, and he fell silent.

Has our racehorse fallen already? John wondered a few minutes later.

But then Mike looked John squarely in the eyes. “A pound John is a ten missing its nought. Right?” he said.

“Just like ten is a hundred missing a nought. So all I have to do is go out and find a fistful of noughts. And John, haven’t I found plenty of noughts in my life? This fund will get going, you can trust me on that, my friend.”

A few moments later, he murmured. “Because John, it has to.”

Section 6. Maria: Introducing Jody

Part 33

The next morning, scrubbed and feeling spruce in his new, second-hand clobber, Mike clutched several large, empty jars and headed straight for Fred's Café.

"I'm sure Fred will take one," Amy suggested the previous day, when Mike met her to plan the campaign. "Anything to do with a sick child, and Fred will be on board. Get him behind you, and things will start to roll."

Out back in the Café's kitchen, a little well-scrubbed and fairly happy young Jody was sat up at Fred's favourite chopping block enjoying her morning feed. Egg on toast, crispy bacon, mushrooms, and rounds of fresh toast thickly spread with lashings of butter and marmalade. To finish it all off and waiting ready, was a large chunk of cheese and a pint of cold milk. It was a rare treat and she was enjoying every delicious mouthful.

The only blot on the landscape was school, or, truthfully, a school without her best friend Maria in it. As she chomped away, she reflected on her morning's luck. Earlier, a white-blonde-haired woman, Ann, she thought her name was, called to ask for her mum's help with a neighbour in need.

Her mum's, "Sorry, but you'll have to fend for yourself today," saw a more than happy child bundled into the car and dropped off at her dad's Café.

"Yeah, right, that's going to be hard," Jody moaned, climbing out of the car full of smiles.

Just as Jody was ticking into rashers of her Dad's best thick cut, home cured bacon, Mike walked into the Café.

"Can I put this jar on your counter?" he asked as Fred sauntered out from the kitchen, beaming as always with good-natured bonhomie.

“It’s a collection jar for a special little girl with cancer who needs our help,” Mike explained to Fred’s enquiring look. “You won’t have to trust me with the money, either,” he added hastily. “Give it to Amy in The Emporium; she’s managing a fund we’ve set up for the child.”

“Sure,” Fred replied, “put it there, next to the till. But it needs a little prompt, by it, doesn’t it? It’ll let customers know what I’m encouraging them to contribute to. Tell me about the child and I’ll write the note and stick it on for you.”

Amy was right, Mike thought happily, as Fred leant on the counter and settled in to listen. As the tale unfolded, Fred realised with a sinking heart that he knew the little girl, Maria. She was a good friend of my Jody’s before, sadly, they lost touch.

“But didn’t she move away?” Fred wondered, “Leastwise that’s what we all heard.”

“Oh no,” Mike protested. “She’s still here and suffering. The way she’s being treated by the authorities mortifies me, Fred. And Sheila, her sister, says she might even, you know…”

To Fred’s dismay, Mike then said exactly what he hoped he wouldn’t.

“…die… Fred.”

“I hope my Jody didn’t hear that,” Fred sighed heavily, as he thought of Jody eating her breakfast in the Café kitchen.

“Go on with your story, Mike, but keep your voice down. I don’t want my daughter to hear this, not yet anyway. Jody and Maria were good friends once. I’d rather tell her about Maria later, when she comes home from school.”

“Sorry,” Mike said, lowering his voice.

“It’s not your fault, lad. You weren’t to know she’s here this morning.” Fred said kindly. “Now then, tell me more about Maria.”

More than willing to oblige, Mike explained.

“To keep her comfortable and you never know, get her well again; she needs stuff, equipment, and carers. Sheila, her sister, can’t cope on her own, that’s for sure. If I’m any judge of exhaustion and despondency, and I think I am Fred, I’d say she’s worn out. If Maria is to die, which I pray to God, she doesn’t, then at the very least she deserves to enjoy what time she has left.”

“She does that,” Fred agreed. “All children do. We ought to have special camps and places they can go to for a break, like they do in America. Maybe we can send her over there?” Fred mused.

“That’ll take a lot of money, Fred. And they have none. And they have things they need at home first. The poor mite’s being lugged around in a battered old pram Sheila bought from a charity shop. They don’t have a wheelchair because,” Mike explained sarcastically, “apparently, there aren’t any available.”

“It’s scandalous, Fred.” He added bitterly.

“It is, and Sheila’s barely an adult herself, if I remember rightly,” Fred agreed.

“She’s the same age as me, and she’s looking after a very sick girl on her own and without help or extra money. What is it with this balance book mentality our country has slipped into? Why has it stopped caring?”

On that particular point, Fred felt it best to keep his own counsel – I run a business after all, be it a small one. There’s merit in balancing things and not just trays, but then again, there are limits, he reasoned. Profit shouldn’t be the only motive for everything.

Nodding sagely, Fred quipped. “For some, it’s a way to live, Mike, but it’s not ‘the only way’ to live. Or even the proper way to live. Work should be a contribution towards society, not the only reason for a society.”

“You’re right, Fred,” Mike agreed. “They see someone like Maria who has little prospect of earning the country future dollars and decide, there’s little point in helping her. She’ll never repay society, right? That angers me; it really does. Maybe I’m wrong about that, but the way I see it, businesses helped by politicians looking the other way have caused a rise in cancer. Chemicals spewed into the air and tossed onto the land and lakes and seas. Petrochemical pollutions! Additives! E-numbers! And God knows what else. Or so Sheila suggests, and I think she’s right. Stir it all together and you’ve got biological chaos.”

Agreeing wholeheartedly, and pleased to see the younger generation riled, Fred nodded sagely again. “Who truly knows or understands politicians’ bias or their motives, Mike? Money and wealth are usually at the heart of what drives them, but not money for the masses. I said much the same thing the other evening to my darling Freda when one of those political broadcasts came on to try and brainwash us into believing their nonsense. The only truth to be found in

politicians, my love, I said, is the fact that they are naturally biased and they have no truth in them. They're scoundrels. The lot of them are nothing but self-serving, shallow-minded fools who have nowt better to do than 'flabbergate'."

"Wow," Mike laughed. "Amy was right, you are the chap to help us, or rather help Maria."

"I'll do what I can for her, Mike, and for sure, we need to go out and bat for this little girl. To hell with politicians and sod politics."

"Thank you, Fred."

"Think nothing of it, lad. Politicians might not care, but people like you and me do. Here you are homeless, with nowt to your name but the holes in your shoes, but still you're trying to help someone else. I can tell you, once the market traders know about Maria, they'll be angry, too, and they'll want to help, as I do."

Then he laughed. "My Jody will send me to hell if I don't do what I can to help Maria. And why wouldn't I want to help her, Mike? Maria's a lovely lass and she deserves better. Come to that, all children deserve better. So, I'll be glad to tap the traders when they come in for their breakfast later. They'll make sure your fund gets a good start. Now then, tell me about the ideas you have."

He asked, genuinely and proud for the homeless man-boy who has found a cause. A good cause! And why shouldn't he be allowed to have one and all those other unfortunates like him too. It'll be the making of him, Fred thought kindly as he poured them both a cup of the Café finest tea.

Part 34

Jody, having licked her fingers clean of marmalade, she was about to start on the cheese when her happy little world was suddenly spun out of control. Instead of scolding herself, that serves you right for earwigging your dad's conversation, she threw down the cheese and rushed to the kitchen door to listen.

English was not her strongest subject, and she would freely admit to not understanding the word mortified, which a man just used. But she instantly became the living embodiment of it when she realised. I did hear it right. They're discussing Maria. Maria!

When she heard the word die, her heart boomed so hard that her jaw dropped open. Without shouting, Bye Dad, I'm off, she snatched up her school bag and dashed out of the Café's back door. In her angst and anger, she left it swinging wide open, to the delight of a pack of ever-hungry cats.

In a whirl of strong, hard, pumping legs and oblivious to everything but her need to vent, she thundered up Market Square. Turning right at the end, she raced along the High Street towards her school to seek out Beaky, the master and to bring him down.

Never has she been so angry.

Ann, in her resplendent soul-form, smiled as she watched Jody thunder by. Whispering, "Go on, Jody, put those wrongs to right," Ann returned to 'the neighbour in need.' For once, happy that one of her plans was working out right.

As if hearing Ann, Jody spat, “I will put this right! I’ll tell that Beaky, I will. He shouldn’t have told us Maria had moved away and wouldn’t be attending school anymore, not when she’s still ’ere.”

At the time, the news broke Jody’s heart. Every day since, she has missed her friend dearly and waited like an expectant lover for a letter to fall on the doormat. But none ever came, and now she knew why!

It was that ‘bloody, ‘orrid, Beaky keeping us apart.’ He’s the one to blame.

With a heart fit to burst, each of her thundered steps worked the pavement hard and honed her anger until it was sharp enough to cut her school in two.

’Beaky’s to blame,’ her steps rang. Where the more she thought about it, the greater her sense of lividity grew. Within minutes, the young, strong, rhino-come-trainee-pugilist was scaling the peaks of absolute rage.

“How dare he lie to me!”

“How dare he keep me away from me bestest friend!”

“How dare the school do it! How dare they. How dare they all?”

Just to make sure her rants were suitably aired, she added a few more into her chant.

“How dare they! How dare they! HOW DARE THEY!” She screamed as she passed through the school gates.

Finally reaching fever pitch, to the consternation and a censorious “Oh My” from a passing teacher, she yelled.

“THE BLOODY BAR****DS!”

Part 35

While the little avenging heart flew like a foul-tempered hurricane about to set off Armageddon, Fred dropped £20 into the jar. Then, changing his mind, he added another to keep the first note company.

“Oh, sod it,” he laughed, dropping a third in. “The poor mite deserves it.”

“Thanks,” Mike said, humbled, “Now I’ll go and see what else I can do.”

“Not until you’ve had your breakfast, lad,” Fred chirped kindly. “You’re going to need your strength.”

“I’d love breakfast, but I can’t pay,” Mike said honestly.

“Don’t worry,” Fred smiled. “This is on me, and tomorrow’s too and as many as you need until we get this girl sorted. Is that understood?”

In the way of connecting events, as Mike tucked into bacon, scrambled eggs, twice-fried chips, beans and browned mushrooms, all served with lashings of tea and toast, Jody’s school assembly started.

Unlike the other children sitting obediently on the floor, Jody stood as resolute as a lump of granite abandoned in the middle of the hall. Seething and staring at the stage, she quivered, come on, you, Beaky. Come and face me!

Part 36

With his cape billowing behind him, the Master strode importantly onto the stage, fully expecting to deliver his morning address quickly and sternly. Afterwards, a wave of his hand would set the children clambering up noisily to sing the school song before sitting again. Only to have to get up and pray and sit down; then up again to sing another silly song. The children will follow the pattern mindlessly, as he and the school system demand. But not on this day.

One little bundle of hot indignation refused to take part in the normal way. When her chums stood, she planned to sit. When they sat, she intended to stand defiantly. Except, it did not go the way she hoped. Jody was spotted immediately.

“Why are you not sitting, child?” the Master asked gruffly. “Explain yourself.”

The little storm, channelling the spirit of her far-distant relative, Boadicea, thundered defiantly, “I ain’t sitting… cos you’re stinky…”

As her forebear once faced the Romans with hands on hips and head held fearlessly high, this modern-day incarnation adopted her stance and screamed.

“…you stinky lied to us, you did!” Delivered with threatening shakes of her little, tightly clenched, white-knuckled fists.

The left was shook first, followed swiftly by the right, and both were punctuated by a hard stamp of her left foot. Like witches shrieking at the height of Halloween, her loud, red-faced defiance flew through the air, stirring up a mess of mayhem and a Mexican wave of gasps. Quiet in pitch, but loud in horror, they resounded up and down the hall. The gasps were followed by a silence so

thick it could have been sliced and served for dinner. Not a cough, or a fidget, nor a sneeze, or an accidental trump was squeezed. With the child's temper nicely building to full flight, nothing would stop her from giving it fair air. Which she did with aplomb. Not only was her spleen vented, she, as they say, ripped the blasted thing out, stuffed it with a brick and hurled the bloody package right into old man Beaky's livid face.

"You lied to us!" She screamed.

All eyes were on Jody as her tiny feet marked her words with hard stamps. So hard indeed that she hurt her hip. But she never let on. Not Jody. No way. She was on a mission, and she intended to see it through, as Ann knew she would.

"You lied to us, you did," she screamed even louder, where her temper insisted; stamp the floor, hard again.

"Get her up here, now!" the Master demanded sternly as he glowered vengefully down at the truculent child.

"Now, I said!"

Astonished by Jody's unusual behaviour, not a single teacher stirred. The child is not given to fantasy. What does she mean by liar? What does she know? Transfixed, they watched her shake her fists again at the Master. Then, like the rest of the school, they gasped when she shouted.

"Why don't you come and get me, I dare ya, you flipping liar, Beaky?"

Part 37

The art teacher, less shocked than the other members of staff, watched proudly as the courageous powerhouse rampaged through the morning's boring assembly. It is wonderful, she thought, while fearing the child might hurt herself. Not for one second did she give a rat's fig about Jody calling the Master a stinky liar. She has come pretty close to calling him that a few times herself, and worse. But this is a comprehensive school built cheaply in the sixties, so who knows how sound the building is. The worked up healthily built, little fizzling warrior might stamp so hard she'll go through the floor, she feared. Worried Jody might injure herself; she jumped up and tried to grab one of Jody's arms, but missed. She was about to try again, but paused. Actually, am I allowed to grab this child?

With the art teacher crippled by worries of protocol, Jody, with the alacrity of a flea escaping a gym bag, easily skipped away from the teacher's kindly meant lunge. From her new position, she yelled with full lungs and stout heart.

"An hear this, Beaky. Me bestest friend Maria is dying, and you said… you said… you said…"

Her quivering rage caught her tongue but she quickly loosened it to yell.

"…she moved away from here, you stinky smelly liar. But she didn't move… did she...!"

Another bout of Mexican gasps acknowledged her shrill announcement, which she duly noted and used.

“No… see… She didn’t move, did she? She’s still here see, an she has cancer, she does. My friend is on her own at home dying, an you Beaky are letting her do it cos you didn’t tell us, did ya? You murderer! You murderer! You murderer!”

By then her face was beetroot red. It would have appalled her had she known, for she truly hated the stuff. As for her screams, they were trying to scream screams of their own. Even the Art teacher utterly shocked by Jody’s accusation stopped trying to calm her down. Instead, her own impressive temper reared. Inside, she echoed Jody’s earlier thoughts that he indeed was an unfathered thing.

But Jody was not done yet.

“But I tell you this beaky, she ain’t gonna die, not widout me by her side she ain’t. She ain’t… she ain’t…” She screamed. “Cos I won’t let her see. So stuff that, bloody stinky, stinky Beaky!”

That burst of hot ire was not delivered with stamped feet or shaken fists. Instead, she jumped up and down, hard - landing solidly on two resolute feet. The vibrations were felt by her friends and enemies alike. The sensations stirred their feelings, causing their invisible, but strongly felt, indignations to rise and meet the child’s temper, imbuing it with more strength. As for the pitch of her screeches, they were passing through the range of acceptable decibels. Ears and nerves began shuddering as if a thousand callous fingernails were scraping across a blackboard. In silent aghast, the Master stood wreathed in echoes of past peaceful and obedient assemblies, while the teachers watched, visibly cowered. Some of the meeker staff even trembled before her grit.

“You’re a stinky, stinky, Beaky, Beaky liar! You should be caned; you should.”

With Beaky suitably cowered, the little miss-atomic-bomb, as some teachers were admiringly calling her, turned her attention to her school chums. They had shrewdly edged away to give her more room to work in. Returning to her hand-on-hip stance, she waggled a stern finger before their startled faces. Doggedly and as determined as a fledgling Churchill, she urged in a voice that only grew stronger and louder with each shouted ‘Oose’; or thereafter, various versions of it.

“Oose going to help our Maria!” She demanded rousingly, while fiercely scanning the faces of her dumbfounded chums.

“Oose gonna join me an save our Maria. Cos I ain’t gonna let her die. So, Ooosse of ya ‘ere…” she shouted again, “…is gonna help.”

Then marking her next oooose with a soundly stamped foot, she thundered, “Ignore blimming Beaky, come on, speak up. Ooossse wid me!”

Part 38

Suddenly everybody, excluding the Master, wanted to help. In a tormented billowing sweep of black cape that had lost all authority, the Master thundered from the hall. With the assembly over, a million and one hands shot into the air. Notably, the highest waving pair belonged to the art teacher. Hers waggled like a demented semaphore message spelling, pick me, pick me. Although every few waves or so one hand disappeared to dry her wet eyes.

Absolute chaos descended as the children thronged around Jody cheering and yelling “I’ll ’elp. I’ll ’elp.”

The rapidly formed ‘Save Maria from Cancer’ war council immediately requisitioned the hall. Huddles formed, plans hatched, and the campaign marched forward.

Within minutes, tables were set up and stacked with paint pots, tubs of glitter, glue, brushes, pencils, markers and the odd half-eaten sandwich. Rolls of material oinked from dusty corners and forgotten cupboards magically appeared. On the transformation went until the hall resembled a magic art workshop, where everyone was welcome and all got stuck in.

Helped by the Music Teacher, the Art Teacher while the English Teacher expertly wielding the scissors, patterns were cut and pinned together. Occasionally they became pinned to jumpers, or their too-keen little fingers and the back of a skirt, just for a giggle. Wonderfully, how it happened no one cared, but amid all the glorious chaos, a production line appeared. Although it was not manned by children, oh, no!

Paint, glue and glitter bespattered pixies and fairies ran the line. Very soon this fairyland of wonder was creating the most amazing, audacious collection of ‘cancer caps’.

While they worked (yeah right!) they sang, chuckled, laughed, played tag and painted each other. Sometimes they even managed to create a cancer cap. Generally, they had the bestest of times ever, because this was for their friend, Maria.

At some point in the middle of it all, someone pulled a cell phone from a pocket and made a call home. Shortly, a couple of interested parents arrived with boxes of old Xmas decorations. With their help and the addition of battery packs, a few cancer caps were garlanded with fully working fairy lights and tinkling bells. As brilliant as they were, glitter and fluorescent colours reigned supreme.

More calls home saw parents arrive armed with supplies. Word about Maria’s plight and Jody’s plucky stance - she deserves a medal - spread amongst the parents.

Despite the chaos and kind words, Jody’s thoughts dwelt on those dreadful ones she inadvertently eavesdropped.

‘Maria might die.’

There’s no way, no way ever, not ever will that happen to me bestest friend. Not ever, not ever, she told her breaking heart. She even adopted Maria’s distinct brogue and added with a smile, “The little cow ad blimming well better not die… or I’ll flipping well kill ’er meself. I will.”

Part 39

One glaring question as obvious as an elephant frying eggs in a kitchen came up, which many of the children felt, but did not ask. Why should they? But some parents wondered about it, as did the teachers in the staff room later that day.

“Why are so many children and adults getting cancer?”

Not everyone saw things that way. The father of Celia, in class B, and Dolcy in class C, was a manufacturer. The children grew up believing strongly in the power of capitalism and the benefits of materialism, regardless of what it meant to the environment or other people.

“I don’t know what the fuss is. We’re all gonna die, ain’t we?” Celia suggested to Dolcy as they nibbled their sandwiches together at lunchtime.

“As long as I can get me new bike and an iPad first, I don’t care much then. Unless they have them up in heaven, then it don’t matter, does it?”

After a moment’s reflection, she decided, “But that poor Maria ain’t got anything, so I guess it’s up to us to help her.”

“Do you think she might like me old CD player?” Dolcy wondered.

“Yeah, I’m sure she will. But then she’s poor; she might not know what it is. But on the other hand, it gets rid of it and Dad will get you a new one. So, yeah, maybe you should let her have it.”

The more compassionate view was that Maria was not the first child in the school to be inflicted with cancer. With sinking hearts they knew there would be many more. But their questions then, like so many other people's before and since, were destined to strike the deaf ears and hardened hearts of officialdom.

But still, they wondered as tried to appease their breaking hearts.

"What has changed in us?"

"Or to us?"

"What's causing this to happen?"

"What's created this fear we now live under that one in two of us will get cancer? If it's not me, it must be you."

"What's to blame...?"

Some of the braver or outraged voices even wondered.

"… When will the odds of getting cancer go to one in one...?"

Maria. Section 7: Saving Maria.

Part 40

“It’s worth staying up all night!” Jody countered her parent’s tired pleas when they caught her working away in her bedroom.

“But Jody, dear, it’s one o’clock… in the morning.”

“These posters are the start of my campaign to ‘Save Maria from Cancer’,” she explained. “So no, Dad, no, Mum,” she stated firmly, “I won’t stop. I won’t. Cos I’m saving me friend. And if you really care…”

Then, with a twinkle in her eyes, she added an ace to her otherwise weak hand. “…about her and me…, you’ll stop nagging and help.”

After moving Jody’s printing works down to the kitchen table, that is exactly what they did for the remainder of the night. This was Fred’s family so what might have been a chore for some was not so for them. An hour in, he chuckled.

“We can’t be getting faint now, can we?”

Soon, they were digging into layers of golden syrup pancakes served with scoops of ice cream and steaming mugs of sweet, silky, hot chocolate. Some of which accidentally made it onto the posters.

“They’re all ruined, Mum.” Jody fired off tiredly.

“Oh, don’t worry, dear, Freda, her Mum laughed. The splatters and the mug rings add a nice touch of authenticity. I think.”

“They do,” Fred offered, placing a comforting arm around Jody’s overwrought shoulders.

“Think of them this way.” He suggested with a squeeze and a soft smile that Freda knew contained his relief that at least their Jody was fit and well. Which she shared of course, just as she did Jody’s heartbreak for Maria.

“Think of those marks as your signature and the signs of our love for Maria.”

Early the next morning, an overwrought package of sleep-deprived, slightly dangerous sweating stick of dynamite arrived at the school clutching sheaves of posters in her sore, marker pen-stained fingers. But what did it matter? She was on a mission to save her Maria. And so, splatters and all, the posters began to appear around the school, mainly on the classroom doors. They won’t be missed there, she thought while her stubby fingers worked a the fiddly roll of tape. Expertly biting pieces off, she carefully fixed them on the corners before sticking up a poster.

After hanging one on the caretaker’s door she thought, good, I’m nearly done. Catching the sound of cheery voices and the footsteps of the early arrivals heading to the hall for their breakfast, she rushed up to the Master’s door with just two pristine posters left.

“I gave wicked Beaky the clean ones cos, I didn’t want him to have any with our love on.” She confided later to her Mum.

The first poster she stuck up, without splatters, was similar to all the others. But she created the second one especially for him. After carefully fixing it beneath the first, she stepped back to admire her handiwork.

“Erm.” She noted, “They’re a little crooked, but it don’t matter. He’ll see it.”

Then she laughed before skipping away to the toilets to hide.

“It’ll be alright, cos he leans when he walks. It’ll be easier for him to read ‘em, won’t it?”

Part 41

As was his habit, the Master, be-gowned, be-frowned and be-wreathed in pompous importance, strode with belligerent swagger and beady, all-seeing eyes through his hallowed school. Except on this day, the bold swagger turned into a few, 'what the!' steps. They were followed by a long pause. Then a few more steps onto the next classroom and a further pause as he took in another 'Save Maria From Cancer' poster.

With keen teacher eyes, he duly noted the splatters, where, to the surprise of the ghosts of pupils' past, he slowly smiled. Of even greater surprise, the smile was free of wickedness. He even tentatively touched one of the marks to test if it was sticky. It was! And what his eyes had wondered, his tongue then confirmed. Golden syrup! Immediately, he reasoned, this must be Jody's work.

Those ghosts of the past might well have issued another collective gasp had they noted his choice of words.

Jody's work.

Not Jody's the culprit, as once he would have growled.

With a look suggesting a decision had been reached, he forewent the daily routine of checking the lights in each classroom and that pieces of chalk were placed ready on the ledge beneath the blackboards. Instead, he thundered off to his office, which loitered ominously at the far end of the school, only to be met by two more posters and a flustered school secretary. She had also just arrived via the school's back entrance.

With a silent contemptuous snort, he noticed her. Peering over his imitation tortoise shell glasses, his unkind gaze lingered on her fidgets and twitches as she wittered before him.

"I meant to take those horrid posters down before you arrived, Sir, I did, but you're earlier than usual."

“For good reason,” he growled, while slowly and disdainfully turning away from her disgusting fawning, to focus on the brightly coloured posters.

After deciding, 'Jody's been busy for a change'. There were three further important things he noted with a concerned, a wry and then an amused smile.

They were crooked - she would have needed to struggle and stretch to put that one up there.

The top poster, Jody’s 'Help Save Maria From Cancer' rallying call, was full of flowers and hearts and balloons and streamers, much like all the others placed around the school. Except this version was blessedly free of splatters. That earned her diligence a nod of approval.

The second, lower-placed poster grabbed his attention and earned his admiration for its gutsy impudence and its poignant and erudite but simple execution. The poster consisted of large, bold, nearly straight, felt-tip lettering. Neatly worded (for a change) in one colour, red, it shouted.

‘And that means you too, Beaky!’

The short message contained not only a capital B, which was delightful enough, but also a wisely used exclamation mark and a comma. To his delight,

expressed as a silent, praise be, they were all grouped in the same sentence and in the right place. A feat she has never achieved before. His scholarly sense of satisfaction showed itself in a widening grin as he declared silently, but with pride. Well done, Jody. You are finally mastering the art of English.

Astonished by Jody's industry and upset about the need for it, the Master studied her posters. Yes, well done, Jody, he thought again. But what a pity it has taken a certain wicked act to get you there. And what an epic day this promises to be. Reaching a decision he turned to focus his bowing and scraping secretary. With a stern glare at his Brutus, or should that be Judas, he barked.

"You will leave them up there. Furthermore, you will make sure the others, which I strongly suspect have appeared on every door in the school, stay exactly where they are."

Part 42

Glowering darkly at her, he knew his secretary had sold out the happiness of the children and an orderly school for a moment of lazy administration. Leastwise, he hoped it was lazy and not spiteful! But everyone knew about her disapproval of Maria's mischievous moments. Revenge could well have been her motive, he considered as she bobbed nervously before him. It was the same decision he reached the previous evening after searching through the files for Maria's address and phone number.

In the file, he discovered a heartbreaking letter from Sheila, Maria's sister. She explained her doubt that Maria would ever be able to attend school again. Shocked, he read on. She is severely ill with cancer, and it is most likely terminal. My sister is in hospital at the moment, Sheila explained. She has asked for her love to be sent to all her friends. That, Sheila noted, is really important to Maria. So, could you please read this out in assembly? It will save me so many letters and phone calls that I can ill afford to make, or have time for at this moment. Thank you.

His address to the assembly, as furnished by his Judas, was woefully misleading, politely considered or more likely, wickedly misleading.

"Maria has moved away, and she will no longer be attending this school."

That was it! Not a word of truth, he thought as he glared at the secretary's tight, styled, dyed blond hair. The similarity to Margaret Thatcher's hair caused him to think that blasted woman would probably have used the same callous approach as this wicked secretary of mine. Anything to have her way! But look at the stress and mess the woman's made. Or should that be the pair of wicked women have caused? He thought, peering at her over his tortoise-shell glasses.

"… Once you have checked the posters," he snapped at the blanching secretary, "you and I will have words! While you're gone, think about this. It is my prerogative to decide what is and what is not right for this school and for the pupils to know. Now get off." He ordered dismissively with a hand yearning to administer the cane to his secretary's comfortable, chair-shaped rump.

"And don't you dare dawdle!" he shouted as she scurried off.

To the beat of her hurrying footsteps, he thought, as he settled behind what suddenly felt like a desk shrunken through the searing heat of wicked betrayal. 'What… A… B**ch!'

On the wings of his silent vent, his heart went out to the children, but more specifically to Jody and Maria. Or as he occasionally thought of the pair, twins from different parents and, admittedly, not always nicely. Mischief was never too far from their hearts or hands, he smirked. A few times, he even thought of them as twins from hell. Only to smile slowly as he recalled the moment when Maria wet his shoes. And the second time, when she and Jody flooded the ground floor toilets. It was an accident, Sir, honest. (Yes, right!)

Not the first time, it wasn't, he smirked. I'd called Maria up to the stage and in her fright, she royally wet herself and the stage, along with my suede shoes! Maybe I should have explained why I called her up instead of trying to surprise her with a prize, he grinned ruefully. It might have saved her the embarrassment and my good shoes. Hmm. Maybe I ought to think like that more often. That led to another decision, which partially included what he hoped would turn out to be a suitable punishment for his spiteful secretary. But now, he decided as he stood up, it's time to put the nightmare of yesterday's assembly to sleep.

Striding towards the hall, as he smiled at Jody’s poster, he experienced an epiphany. I’ve never agreed with protesting. They are too disorderly and disruptive. People should accept how things are and not question. That has worked for me, well enough. But I have to admit, without Jody’s brave stance, we would never know about Maria. Or my secretary’s wickedness. Maybe, protests are not such a bad thing, after all.

Part 43

Having embraced the campaign, he then subverted the need for an orderly assembly as he strode onto the school stage.

Instead of neat rows of obedient children squatting on the floor ready to stand up and sit down at his whim, there was a chaos of bodies. Some children were squeezed under the cancer cap production tables. Others bunched against the walls. Or cramped together by the fire doors, which was a strict school no-no. A few scamps were even hiding beneath the teacher's chairs. Trying, but failing to suppress a smile, he declared loudly.

"This is to be 'A working for Maria day'."

The children hooted and whooped while teachers cheered, grinned and wildly applauded. Some would have waved balloons too, if they had any, but those delights were late in arriving.

With a genuine, paternal smile (another first), he added.

"And I don't want to hear of anyone moaning or slacking off. And now, if the young girl doesn't mind, I think a few words from the leader of the campaign would do well to stir us up. And by the way, Jody, good posters," he said with a smile.

Along with everyone else, he applauded loudly as she made her embarrassed way onto the stage. With the ghost of his ruined suede shoes still haunting his mind, he quickly stepped backwards while she settled dead centre in a nervous fluster.

In her opening few words, the campaign's strong byline was born.

"The authorities are pigs," she declared strongly.

"They ain't helping our Maria, they ain't. So, we have to do it, dun't we? We're all going to help her. Aren't we?" She declared loudly with determined hands placed on stalwart hips as she peered down at her happily faced, fidgety, 'Save Maria from Cancer' army.

"Remember…" she declared in pure Churchillian tones. "The authorities are pigs, but we ain't and we won't be!" Then, with her fist pumping, she solemnly declared.

"Let's go save our Maria!"

The hall, as expected, erupted in raggedy but rousing and varied alliterations of "Yeah, let's save Maria" as she climbed from the stage to rejoin the army, who looked forward to another day of fun.

More surprising was the Master's reaction.

He followed Jody down from the stage and up to the first production trestle. Discarding his beloved cape, he grabbed an apron and asked while attempting to knot the short ties. "Jody, what do you want me to do?"

Fortunately for the army, he did not stay long enough to put a dampener on their fun. Just long enough to nicely stress the secretary out, as she rightly deserved and for his beloved cape to disappear. While some children feigned innocently, "We ain't seen it, Sir," others, with help from the Art Teacher, pinned paper

patterns onto the material. That’ll serve him right, she smirked while the Music Teacher gleefully administered the scissors.

Part 44

Jody's campaign was not contained by the school fence. Or its gates. Like hot, multi-coloured candy, the battle to save Maria oozed from the school to nicely smother the town.

On the afternoon of the second news-breaking day, as some called the revelation, the campaigner with her army of helpers plastered the town with posters. Hardly an inch below their average four-foot-six-inch eyeline was spared. Their artwork appeared everywhere and no one had the heart to remove it. The teachers handled the off-licenses, while the children took care of the sweetshops. Gotta stock up on provisions, ain't we?

All was going well until an unfortunate setback occasioned a lover's spat. Jody was prevented from making an advert she planned to show at the local cinema because, Bud, her sweetheart, was banned from using his parent's video camera.

"Jody, I only shot…" he confessed, then whispered in her ear exactly what he had. Jody caught between wanting to laugh and tell him off, maturely decided. "It's best we don't talk about that again."

However, that did not prevent her from sharing his naughtiness with Maria's old gang.

Despite the setback with the camera, before the school day ended, the children's efforts aroused an army of helpful citizens. They began forming ranks around the town ready to be called upon. While they waited and gossiped, many happily chorused variations of the campaign's byline.

"The authorities are pigs for not helping that poor girl."

With no dissenting voices heard, the authorities became fair game for any discontented hounds to chase. The byline also found its way to the doorsteps of many homes and was taken in. But there was still much to do before Jody would happily declare to Dotty and the rest of the little gang.

“Let’s gather the army and go save our Maria.”

Maria. Section 8: Fireworks over Espe.

Part 45

The posters set the townsfolk grumbling about the so-called caring government misusing NHS funds. The Council office's main switchboard exploded with callers accusing them of being callous. Gangs of stressed people besieged local charities and buried the staff beneath a deluge of zany demands.

Emma, aged 4, added a bit of needed, light relief when she called the council offices to tell them.

"That Maria needs a dolly that cries and pees realistically." Then at her mother's urging, she called back to add, "Oh, and don't forget the nappies."

Without any idea that the town was stirring on their behalf, Sheila and Maria were unprepared for the whoosh that was to flush them out of self-isolation. The first trickle, came one evening, when their phone jingled.

"Maria, it's you old Master," Sheila whispered.

After pleasantries were exchanged, the Master explained, contritely. "I am sorry, but your letter was never read out. My secretary decided without reference to me; if the girl was so ill, why encourage people to go around and bother her? It's better to leave things be and let her get on with it."

"How thoughtless and wicked," Sheila fumed and the Master agreed.

"She will be punished," he said before ending the call.

Now we know why your friends stayed away. Sheila explained. They were told we had moved. And let's be honest we have kept ourselves isolated. Our door

bell might be ringing madly soon, she laughed and hoped for Maria's sake that was true.

To Sheila's amazement, at 7 a.m. on the morning of the third breaking news day, the doorbell did start ringing madly. People started calling around to see how they could help. By the afternoon Sheila was wondering if gypsies had scratched a lucky charm on the door. The visitors' kind offers of help carried Sheila and Maria off to a golden beach blessedly free of litter and oil, and with colourful shells, a beach barbecue, an ice cream booth and a safe area for Maria to paddle in.

Meetings were held in Sheila's tiny lounge, and help rotas agreed. The first change major change saw Maria's bed carted downstairs and a snug bedroom created for her in the dining room. Until then, she either struggled up the stairs or collapsed on the sofa, exhausted. In true BBC DIY SOS fashion, volunteer builders began converting a deep cupboard in the hallway into a shower and toilet. It was all so overwhelming and wonderful, and every cheerful volunteer carefully wiped their feet on the 'Thank you' doormat. Sheila lost count of the times she put the kettle on, or stored casseroles in the fridge and freezer.

"I need carers to help me cope with all these volunteers," She laughed giddily. Bemused, Maria sat in the lounge, revelling in the genuine love and affection. It was clear that Mike and Jody were behind it all. Although from the number of times Jody's name came up, it was obvious she was the ringleader. Maria could hardly believe it.

"We've not heard from anyone for months, and now all this."

That morning, Mike earned himself a gold star, too. Smiling like a puppy who had found the cream, he and John delivered three overflowing collection jars. Mike had dotted even more about the town, and they were all nicely filling up. Close to happy hysteria, Maria made sure to give her lucky £1 coin an extra special rub. When Sheila caught her, Maria smirked.

“Got to make sure these people don’t wonder: are we at the right house? And leave.”

“Better give it an extra rub from me, too,” Sheila laughed.

Part 46

As for Jody. On that first night of the breaking news days, she was too busy producing posters to sleep. The second night, she tossed and turned, overexcited. Soon, she thrummed, I'll see Maria. But she was fretful too and struggled to visualise a world without her friend blessing it. I won't allow that. I won't. I won't. She murmured over and over as she thrashed about in her red, Formula One car-shaped bed.

By breakfast time on that third morning, Jody was buzzing giddily like a fly caught in a light fitting. There's so much to do yet before I can stand before Maria with me hand on me heart and say.

"Don't worry, you ain't gonna die, Maria. Cos we're 'ere to save ya."

While she fretted and fussed, in certain circles, some where smiling and suggesting, hang in there Jody, good usually finds good in the end. A few astute others, including Freda, laughed, "Clumsily struck matches, welded by eager, or over tired, young fingers, will for sure, set fire to boxes of fireworks."

Freda, and Fred, could hardly wait to see the outcome.

Part 47

Shortly after lunch on the third breaking news day, a dangerously excited roman candle firework, which, when lit, will explode and spell the name Jody arrived in Maria's street. Accompanied by a possession of sparkling firecrackers and safety monitors, happily burdened with boxes of gifts, they crowded into her little front garden. As one, they swarmed towards the yellow front door.

From out of the excited babble, Jody stepped forward and merrily rat-tat tatted the brass knocker. But then, impatiently, she rattled the letter box and rang the bell while the children's massed, but not synchronised voices, chorused in shrill, raggedy yells.

"Maria, Maria. We're here. We're here. Open the door. Open the door."

The teachers had warned them that Maria might not have any hair. But telling and seeing are not the same. When Maria, supported by Sheila, shyly opened the door, to Jody's consternation, an epic episode of shocked and flustered gasps escaped the children's lips. A few of the younger ones instantly burst into tears and had to be comforted by an equally tearful art teacher.

I'm sorry about that lot, Maria, Jody said, as she struggled to keep her own shock in check. But this is Maria, still my friend just without her treasured hair. But tiredness took Jody over and to shame, she too burst into tears.

"It's alright," Maria said. "You can call me potato head if you like, I don't mind. And just think, I don't have to brush it hundreds of times anymore."

Then she too broke down and cried. "Look at you all. And look at me, we're crying and we ain't even said hello."

One of the children had an idea and suddenly recovered. “We can paint hair on your head and do it in blue, if you want!”

That made another laugh. “Naw, let’s paint flowers on it!”

“I think you need this,” Jody laughed through her tears. Whipping off Maria’s bobble hat, she placed one of their many zany Cancer caps on her head.

“All of us made these for ya,” she said proudly before crying again. “It suits ya, too” she blubbered. “Don’t it? She asked the army.

“It does,” chorused many replies, where the sound of their voices sent shock scuttling away and it acted like a trigger. Heavenly hell broke out as screams and hugs were exchanged in a dizzy vortex of absolute joyfulness. And that was just while the tear-damp army partied on the doorstep.

Inside the small house, within minutes, cancer caps and glitter, ribbons and balloons were strewn everywhere. Joyous chaos abounded as forty children and safety monitors rushed here and there, inside and out. Their combined shrilling, trilling, happy shrieks, squeals, and yells rang through the streets, calling to the caring; come and join us.

In the space of half an hour, a neighbour with an attitude if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em, set up a music system on the green. Then, as if borne upon the magical wings, tables in all manner of sizes and yes, shapes appeared on the communal grass outside. They were followed by colourful plastic tablecloths swiftly weighted down with plates of sandwiches and little sausages. Cheese sticks joined them and slices of pizza and all sorts of gorgeous gooey goodness courtesy of Fred’s Cafe and the local WI branch.

That was merely the beginning.

Jugs of juice joined the plates, as did heaps of crisps and biscuits donated by local shops. Home-made and store-bought trifles competed for space along with cream éclairs, rock cakes, jam-filled scones, jellies, bowls of fruit salad and who knows what else. Larders around the town were gladly emptied.

More plates arrived, piled high with scrumminess. The possession seemed endless.

“The combined e-numbers here could easily floor a large herd of elephants,” some parents laughed.

But not this bunch. If any were inadvertently floored, they simply got up and started all over again. The mites simply fizzled more brightly as they danced and screamed joyously, without a single wish, or thought for an end. More food arrived, which was stacked beneath the tables away from the gay melee of stomping feet. Bunting and balloons appeared as if magicked from the wands of wizards. Within the hour, balloons and streamers graced every reachable branch, gate and fence up and down the street. Any leftovers were tied to car aerials and so the reunion turned into a glorious street party like no other.

Party 48

The volunteer caterers were already feeding two hundred, with more smiling children arriving by the minute in their dancing shoes. The party grew and grew and was destined to go on long into the evening. It was wonderful and Maria already looked better. Along with her smiles, splotches of colour appeared on her cheeks.

But that's probably the colours leeching from the outlandish cancer caps, Sheila thought and smiled. Whatever the reason, it's good to see her happy.

"This cap was made by Clarissa (aged 8 of class 3)", Maria declared as she read the tag. "It's a blimming work of manic art, it is," she laughed as she tried it on.

"It is too," the art teacher said, nattering with Sheila. "If the purpose of art is to arouse emotions, then that thing is a wonderful multi-coloured absurdity. Clarissa would not be stopped. She insisted on covering her blessed abstraction with little Christmas trees, fairies and snowmen. Then to make sure it really zinged, she added tiny baubles, snow-covered bells and twinkling lights."

As Maria discovered.

"OMG, it lights up!" she giggled, as she found the switch. When the lights started flashing, she laughed so hard that Sheila had to rush her off to recover in the still-under-construction loo.

Right in the middle of the glorious chaos, the local press arrived (after a phone call from a repentant secretary). Once the newspaper hit the streets the next day, further waves of indignant citizens took to the phones and hassled just about everyone they considered able to supply a wheelchair.

Even the butcher's shop received half a dozen calls. Funnily enough, they were not wasted. That wonderful, rosy-cheeked, cheerful man not only split pigs and gut chickens alongside Jerry, his apprentice but in his spare moments, he enjoyed cryptic crosswords and needlepoint. But his greatest love, other than a shop full of customers, was solving conundrums, or turning difficult problems on their heads. Such as hunting down a wheelchair that did not want to be found.

"Didn't we have a customer who used a wheelchair and didn't he die recently, Jerry?"

After looking through pages of sad obituaries for two hours, he recognised the name of the deceased customer.

"He won't be needing his wheelchair anymore," he uttered sadly. "And we've lost our sale of a half a pound of liver - well wrapped and a pound of chipolatas, lad. But looking on the bright side, our loss could be Maria's gain."

The wheelchair was duly located, acquired, collected, repaired and resprayed a glittery pink by the local bicycle shop. All free of charge. To make it extra nice for a young girl, it was bedecked with ribbons and balloons and a horn. To the utter relief of every hospital and council switchboard for a hundred-mile radius, it was then delivered to a very happy little girl.

After it arrived, she appointed Mike as her dedicated chauffeur, on call, gladly, day and night. Although for a while, Sheila loitered discreetly in the shadows.

Well, you never know, do you?

On weekends, Sheila stepped down from tending to Maria to allow Jody to step up. While the trio created wonderful, noisy and happy havoc whizzing along the High Street, Sheila did not miss the fact that, at times, Jody was more mature than Mike. She was more mindful too, of making sure her friend properly rested after their jaunts.

“She ain’t going to die on me!” Sheila heard Jody sternly scolding Mike with her now famous waggled finger.

“She ain’t. So you just watch what you do wid’ her.”

Part 49

On Maria's good days and when it was warm outside, the pair, or trio, could be found whizzing along the high street at breakneck speed.

Their laughter was not the only sound they threw out as they raced along. With the urgency of a ship about to sail into the path of a yacht race, Maria, or Jody as she ran alongside, merrily blasted warning shots from the chair's horn.

Getting into the spirit of adventure and mischief, another helper gifted Maria with a much louder air horn, but Sheila shrewdly banned it.

"If you sound that thing off," she scolded, "instead of getting out of your way, people will throw themselves on the floor for fear of an invasion."

During warmer days, the blaring horn and races along the High Street were swapped for the rattle, clank and tinkle of collection buckets. Jody and Maria's army began popping up everywhere with 'Save Maria' buckets. As did John and his homeless friends. Amazingly, daily, Maria began showing small signs of improvement. Wearing her outlandish cancer caps and over-the-top hand-decorated overalls, courtesy of Amy, her cheery banter with John and Mike enlivened the collection line. Add to that Jody's, impish cancer-cap-wearing army – although with long hair they looked more like giggly pirates in training, people smiled – and the whole thing turned into an event.

Ann made the odd appearance in the evening line-up, along with Sheila, where they nattered like old friends. Even Fred added his café banter to the fun choir now and then. The Police were represented, as well as the fire brigade, the ambulance service and even the local taxi firm sent helpers. Everyone involved was hand-picked for their cheer and humour. The lines quickly became an

occasion, a farce, a comedy, a riot of monkeys, but never a drama. People came from afar just to see them. How could money not pour in, or the TV cameras and reporters, which they did in droves?

After the story was broadcast nationwide, hordes of tourists with the relaxed hearts of holidaymakers out for a spot of banter and fun descended on the town. Maria's cause became a local industry, intent on selling the idea of love, compassion and hope.

Particularly enchanting and heart-warming was the army of homeless people who earned money for the cause by running errands. Some cleaned gutters, others polished lawns, or collected sacks of litter (some of it theirs!) Fences and sheds were painted. Not always expertly and not always without spills or runs, but hey, their hearts were there. Several fitter youngsters dug allotments and washed windows. The cameras simply loved them all. Soon, locals were bringing them pots of stew, sandwiches, cakes and bottles of water. A few cans of beer appeared now and then too, presented with a whispered, "Don't tell my husband. They were his."

Lots of other useful things like clothing arrived. Best of all, the homeless began to be accepted by the townspeople. Where a few, as a result of their hard work and enthusiasm, began picking up regular casual work.

Part 50

Just as time never truly stands still, fate ebbs, flows and changes. Sometimes the tide is clement and helpful. At other times, it is destructive. But it is never better than when a good cause stirs it. On a well-intentioned swell, fate swirled around town and whooshed a young, timid, homeless girl into the heart of the campaign and right at Ann and Amy's feet.

"She's just sixteen years old," Amy noted with disgust for the circumstances that left a girl discarded on the street like a bag of garbage to rot.

"She has a good heart, but by the looks of it, her confidence has been beaten out of her. I've seen her skulking about town as nervous as a kitten falling into an eagle's nest. But I've never been able to approach her. As soon as she sees me she runs and hides."

"Can you blame her for being worried?" Ann sighed, knowing too well the bad future that awaits a vulnerable girl. Especially a homeless one if they are not helped.

"My name is Fe-Fe-Fe-licity," she revealed timidly, when Amy and Ann encouraged her into the Emporium. "I, I, I'll da, da, do wh, what I ca, ca, can, ta, ta, to, ha, ha, help."

I believe you will, child, Ann replied, taking Felicity under her wing. With Ann and Amy beside her, no one dared take the 'mm-mm-mickey' out of her st-st-st-stutter. Instead, they looked at her heart and returned the smiles that came readily as she worked tirelessly for Maria's cause. Liking her honesty and bubbly yet gutsy personality, Ann and Amy quickly dusted her down. After that, she was whisked off the streets, tidied up and provided with a beautiful

room in a nice house. Once settled, they found her a place as a nursery assistant and booked her onto a two-day-a-week college course to learn childcare. In time, Ann discovered that throughout her young life, she endured mental cruelty and beatings. Those hindered her speech and her ability to express herself without ridicule or sensing impatience. But her young heart spoke truly, where Ann heard her silent prayers. With Amy and Ann's support, Fe-Fe-Fe-licity learnt to say her name clearly and with pride. As would the army of children who will pass through her capable, caring hands. She would never forget a single one of them. When her charges moved on to fulfil their special journeys, they carried the blessing of her care with them. Along with the understanding that, at her hands, she imbued their childhood with the true spirit of her name: 'good fortune and happiness.'

Over coffee one day, Amy will say as they discuss Felicity. "Ann, I truly love recycling. It is so satisfying to take a damaged reject, make it whole and watch it fulfil a new purpose."

So many other wonderful sub-stories were linked to Maria's cause. If listed, they would fill volumes. But more fantastically, some of the most hardened cynics began to believe that when good has a free hand, hope grows stronger. Especially those close to Maria.

Maria. Section 9: A Pixie and Flowers.

Part 51

Within twenty minutes of Jody's school breaking up for the summer holidays, Freda dropped her off at Maria's. See you at the end of the holidays, she laughed.

To no one's surprise, as Jody handed over a box of her dad's delicious pastries she announced. "I'm moving in." Within minutes she had pumped up a blow-up bed, fetched a duvet from a cupboard and from then on, she never left her friend's side. Unless it was to shift up to make room for another of their gang.

With Maria's care taken off her hands, Sheila had more time for Mike. To Maria's joy, she heard Sheila whisper. "Mike, if you promise to behave yourself, you can sleep on the sofa occasionally and I think you've earned the right to come and go as you like."

Happily, Maria noticed their shy glances, which increased as the days went by. When their hands accidentally touched Maria gleefully nudged Jody's ribs or arm.

"See, I told ya it would work."

As the sultry days unfurled into a glorious summer, this impromptu family grew closer than most others ever do. Before long, Jody's poor arm was a mass of bruises, but she did not mind. It meant her bestest friend was still alive.

"This is a loving home, isn't it, Mike?" Sheila sighed one evening as they sat together in the garden watching the stars pass by, the same ones she wished on so fervently for Maria's recovery.

“With all the helpers popping in and out and bless them, tripping over what feels like an army of happy-faced sticky children, how can our Maria not heal and blossom?”

Caught in the spell of the moment and stirred by a longing to be part of a family, Mike whispered, “She will.”

But moonlight casts not only love, it throws long shadows. Fighting an urge to squeeze her hand to comfort himself as much as Sheila, he quietly prayed, “She must heal, she must.”

Doctors began talking positively about Maria’s future, where once they sent her home to die. Toward the end of a flower-filled summer brimming with fun, frolics and parties, Maria’s colour began to return and yes… So did her hair. That miracle was welcomed by all. It wasn’t brush-able, but as far as Jody was concerned that was a minor detail. A ritual was born. Each morning, she brushed Maria’s scalp with a soft dolly’s brush.

“It won’t grow any blimming quicker if you do that.” Maria laughed.

But Jody knew differently. Its growth was the barometer she used to gauge her friend’s recovery, where another millimetre spurt raised her hopes ever higher. Sheila and Mike thought along similar lines, although they were more discreet. Nevertheless, they measured its growth just as eagerly as Jody.

A few other things were measured quietly in that household. Sheila and Mike clearly had feelings for each other. For Maria’s sake, they were not acted on, but love hovered in the air awaiting exploration. Its presence added joy to each day, and their humming happiness passed onto Maria, who knew that the Conductor

was granting her wish. It also cheered Jody because it gave her bestest friend another reason to live.

In that long, hot summer, it truly was a happily expectant household.

The summer nights began to draw in a little, but the collection lines were still active.

John’s banter was as good as any recital. It was often said by broadly smiling visitors that he could charm a watch off a giver’s wrist. Whether that was true or not, he managed to gather a large collection of female admirers. Along with a few game fellows. The bulk of the admiration was for Maria’s bravery, her heart and yes, for her looks too. Who could forget her vivid green eyes? As for her natural charm, that proved a winner every time.

Jody received her fair share of praise, too. Encouraged by it, she grew as a person and when at the end of summer, she entered her new ‘big school’ she did so with head high and with no trace of fear. Although she dearly yearned for Maria to be at her side.

“But she will be by Christmas.” Or so Jody asked The Father one night, before tagging a softly delivered demand onto the end of it.

“Won’t she!”

Part 52

“Well, kid,” Mike chirped one day as summer was ending, allowing autumn to creep slowly in.

“Where do you want me to push you out today? Fred’s? Amy’s? Or how about the park?”

“Let’s stay outside,” Maria suggested quietly. “We can go and feed the ducks. Look…, see,” she said impishly, pulling out half a loaf from the depths of the wheelchair.

“I nabbed some bread from home to give them.”

“Have you been hatching that?”

“That’s not all I’ve been hatching, Mike.” She replied with sibylline impishness.

“Really? So, what other horseplay are you planning?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know, Monkey Man?”

“You’re not going to tell me then.”

“No, I’m not!”

Before he could quiz her further, she changed the subject.

“Let’s go see the ducks, they’re waiting for us.”

“You’re not wearing one of your caps today.”

“They make me itch sometimes. Besides, I like feeling the breeze. I can’t do much stuck in this blimming chair, but at least I can do that,” she said with a bright smile.

“Especially as me blimming Sheila…” said, with another smile and acknowledged with one “…ain’t hovering around ready to tell me off!”

“I might, though,” he said softly.

“No, you won’t, Monkey Man! Remember you made a promise to serve me,” she teased. “So, I’m asking you not to tell her.”

Only then to take him right back to when they first met. With a delightful giggle, she threatened, “Or there’ll be no more bananas for you at the bike bars…”

“I’ll push you right to the edge of the pond then, shall I? And I promise to do my best to remember not to put the brake on.”

“Getting wet won’t bother me,” she laughed. “It might be fun watching you explain yourself to Sheila and Jody! I might even push me ’sen’ in and tell them you did it!”

“You wouldn’t!”

“Wouldn’t I?” She grinned.

It felt so good to have the old Maria back. Smiling, he watched her throw pieces of bread to the ducks. That moment by the glimmering pond, beneath a wizened, autumn-dressed oak tree and the low-lying sun hinting at her once

luscious auburn tint, was almost too magical to bear. In the low, bright light, she glowed in the way she had after Ann looked into her pram. You're as beautifully fragile as those leaves teased from the branches and twirling about you, like cheeky spirits are sprinkling you with exotic confetti, he thought. He could not help but fall in brotherly love with her again. She was so elfin and regal, calm and contented and laughed freely at the ducks squabbling, bobbing moodily bottoms up whenever they missed a piece of bread.

"You know," he said, breaking the spell that bound his breath. "With your spiky hair and pixie face and ears," he grinned, "You remind me of Audrey Hepburn a bit. You know who I mean. The lady in Breakfast at Tiffany's. That film we watched the other week."

"Yeah, I do. I read up about her afterwards," Maria confessed. "She had cancer like me and died."

"Yes, she did." Mike agreed, "It's true. But she was a lot older than you are, so don't fret."

"No, I won't, Monkey Man, I promise. And nor must you."

"I'm not," he replied, "because you're doing so well."

"It's because of you and your £1 coin, Mike," she replied mysteriously. "See," she said, pulling out a clear plastic case from her pocket. "I carry it with me everywhere. Widout it, I wouldn't be here, would I? So, thank you, Mike, for being my spirit brother and for giving me the bestest summer ever."

"And without you, I wouldn't be here, either," Mike replied. "So, thank you, too."

They watched the ducks for a little longer. Then she turned and asked. “You do like my Sheila, dun’t ya.”

“Running about after you so much, I haven’t had time to think about it.” He replied, embarrassed and hoping that would be the end of it. But Maria would not be fobbed off.

“She’s a good cook, is my Sheila.”

“Unlike you,” he laughed.

“What do ya mean by that?” She scolded mockingly.

“That sandwich you made for me the other day was appalling.”

“Yeah, I thought peanut butter and ketchup would be nice,” she said defensively. “But Sheila cooks alright, dun’t she?” Maria insisted.

“I guess she does,” Mike replied, wondering where Maria was leading him.

“You need to make sure to find out,” she said curiously before returning to tease the ducks.

Part 53

Mike watched her pale, pinkish skin glimmering like iridescent pearls in the low autumn light, while she laughed at the duck's silly antics.

It's hard to believe she's still ill. But she tires easily, he thought, noting a little strain showing under her eyes, shimmering like the water. It was hard to tell if it was a wash of soft tears or joy. But as usual, their sheer vividness captivated him, but then suddenly she shivered a little.

"Ready for home then?"

"Yes, Monkey Man." She quietly agreed, turning a tired face towards him.

"You can push me home now if you like. I'm ready for me afternoon snooze. But on the way, can we stop at the florists, cos I want me Sis to receive some flowers in the post."

Then, finding the strength to take a dig at Mike, she perked up enough to nag.

"Because you blimming well ain't send her any yet, have ya'. So, I'll just have to flipping do it for you, won't I!"

When they reached the house, he reminded her. "Don't forget, I'll be busy tomorrow until lunchtime. But afterwards, I'll push you out again if you're up to it."

She tutted and gave him her inquisitive 'Do please explain yourself' look.

"You don't give up, do you?" he laughed.

“And you mustn’t either, ever, Monkey Man.” She said, suddenly turning serious.

“And thank you for all you have done for me and Sis. It means a lot, you know.”

“And so it should,” he teased as he leant forward to give her a peck on the cheek.

“You be good now, see you tomorrow.”

“I love you, Mike,” she whispered as he wheeled her into her bedroom, “I really do.”

“And I, you, my pixie. And now my flower girl, too,” he replied softly as he helped her out of the chair and saw her onto the bed. “And just so you know. You’re the sister I wish I always had and the daughter I hope to have one day. But we’re getting maudlin; you know, I’d rather see you smile.”

“I know. And I will… soon,” she muttered, stifling a yawn.

“See ya, Monkey Man.”

“You bet.”

Part 54

That night, with her favourite ‘Mermaid’ patterned pillows propping up her back, Maria closed her book with a smile. “I love happy endings,” she sighed. “And I’m glad I could finish it.”

Without thinking about the next book she might read, as was her habit, she placed it squarely down so the edges matched the lines of her bedside cabinet. Opening its top drawer, she pulled out a packet of pink writing paper. As always, when she used it, the prize from school made her shudder a little at the memory of the presentation ceremony. Blimming Beaky scared me and made me wet myself on stage in front of the whole flipping school, ran through her mind. Recalling the Master’s startled face and his rapid backwards step when her wee splashed his shoes, she chuckled. “Serves him blimming right too!”

Smiling and full of love for her bestest friend and spirit sister, Jody, she wrote her a short note. It’s time my Jody knew what she means to me. Then she wrote a second to her beautiful sister. Following that, she wrote one to her hero, Mike. In them all, she expressed those special feelings inside her, which she found hard to say. Afterwards, she propped the letters against the bedside lamp, ready for the morning.

Full of wonderful expectations and in the hopes of invoking even more luck, she kissed and rubbed her careworn £1 coin. Feeling blessed, she clutched her treasure tightly in the way she did every night for fear of becoming parted from it. Then she sent a special thank you to Mike and Sheila before tiredly closing her eyes on yet another wonderful day.

“It was a good one, thank you, Conductor,” she whispered sleepily into her pillows.

“And thank you for letting me live it. And for letting me see the love growing between me Sis and Monkey Man, although they’re pretty slow about it. Thank you anyway, Conductor. And please let Ann know I’m ready for her visit now.”

Part 55

“The sun’s trying to shine again,” Sheila offered brightly, while opening the curtains in Maria’s bedroom the following morning.

“See…” she said as the light flooded in to chase the night’s shadows away. “Maybe Mike can take you out again. I did tell him we might meet up later.”

Maria neither stirred nor turned over to moan, Oh, Sis, it’s way too early. Or squint at her through tired eyes before slipping under the covers to grab a few more minutes' sleep. She just lay there, with a ghostly sense of long auburn hair splaying across her mermaid-patterned pillows and a beatific smile on her restful, heart-shaped face.

Shelia smirked as she eased the lucky £1 coin out of Maria’s half-opened hand to place it ready for her on the bedside cabinet. There’ll be hell to pay if she wakes up and can’t find it! Then she spotted Maria’s favourite embroidered page marker she bought at The Emporium, lying tidily, dead centre on top of the book she had obviously finished. Her eyes then roved to the three pink envelopes propped neatly against the bedside lamp. Their edges were perfectly aligned. And I bet they’re in strict alphabetical order, too. She smirked. There’ll be Jody’s first. Then, she felt sure there’ll be one for Mike and then one for me. She wanted to look and see, and maybe sneakily read her note, but other than smirking, she left everything orderly and in place, as things always are and must be for my Maria.

But then concern took her over. Maria hasn’t stirred. She always does when I open the curtain to let the sunlight in. Sitting down softly on the bed, she spotted Maria’s best pen lying without its lid behind the book. That was a thing Maria could never tolerate, not even when in pain.

“Lids and pens need each other, like we blimming do, Sis,” Maria once quipped after Sheila scolded her for making her search the floor for a missing lid. The dry tip of the lidless pen loudly said what her heart already sensed but refused to tell her brain.

My darling Maria has gone.

Gone.

Part 56

What she could not know then was that Maria's parting smile blessed her face at a very tidy, 3.33.33am when her human self said goodbye to her spirit.

She was not alone. Ann accompanied her on her next journey, as she promised her new novice she would on that day they met on the high street. And many other times to assure her when her voice blessed Maria's troubled dreams or her depressed moments.

The doctor suggested Maria's passing was peaceful, but he could not speak for her arrival in heaven. That was riotously noisy and disruptive and full of; it's not fair. And I hate you all. In a full-blown, flowing tantrum, she took a leaf right out of Jody's book. With her metaphorical hands placed on metaphorical hips, she screamed for all she was worth.

"God, you're a stinky, stinky liar. This is meant to be a better place, and it ain't. You're a liar, liar, liar."

Her gloriously courageous, heaven-rattling spat was all over something to do with a lucky £1 coin she had to leave behind.

But weavers of tales in that other, wonderful world, filled with so many great storytellers, will tell that story so much better. One can only imagine their likes squabbling over whose is best. Anyway, with luck, maybe, one day, and suitably embellished, the tale will manage to make its way down to us here.

Or maybe a new, once-human, Secondary Angel, if she behaves herself, might be allowed to bring it with her?

Who knows? Maybe she already has.

Maria. Section 10: A Tidy End - As Maria Would Wish.

Part 57

In the early hours of the morning, before birds gladly announce the dawning, a sense of Maria's combusting spirit broke into Mike's dreams. He put it down to worry and turned back over. But the dream lingered to haunt him all morning and kept him company at the bike rack as he waited for Sheila and Maria. He was still wondering about the dream and what it meant when he spotted Sheila walking with leaden steps.

Suddenly, he knew what his dream was trying to tell him.

"Nooo!" He groaned. With a second screamed, "Nooo!" His knees buckled. The third, dizzily swooning, almost silent "Nooo" stripped him of all strength and pitched him forward onto the pavement.

As if returning to the moment he was rejected at birth, for a few desolate, wildly thumping heartbeats, his soul called silently for a mother who never was. Until his voice found enough traction to hurl into the air another, even longer, agonised, tortuous scream, borne from misery. The keening for his end, and an end to all, rent the heavily polluted air, turning it cold enough to freeze the hearts of all who caught his torment.

Including Sheila's.

Overwhelmed by her own grief, the additional weight of his, sent her staggering to a lamppost. Too broken and too weak to move to help him, she clung to it and stared helplessly as he fell face down on the pavement. With a heart still breaking for Maria and now for Mike, she cried as he twitched in agony.

Beyond caring about anything, he never connected with Sheila's pain. Of all things that might have flipped through his mind, he dazedly recalled an ant that in loneliness he once befriended on this very spot. Only to groan. The ant, and Maria, are gone… Gone… But I'm not… it should have been me… For what am I? Who am I? I'm nothing but a mistake and always have been. But Maria was everything… to so many. Withering, he shrivelled and instinctively rolled into a foetal curl, from where he ululated as piteously as a wolf gutted by a Moose's antlers, then tossed away to die in the slow, cold, vampiric sucking kiss of soulless snow.

Far too slow for Mike's liking.

It should have been me… was his last conscious thought before all colours died and everything turned two-dimensional.

Part 58

Frightened, but too broken to return to an empty home and too scared to reach out to Mike, Sheila clung to the lamppost. Bizarrely, as her heart wept blood for her lamenting, screeching mermaid-siren-man, the way he was lying reminded her of a story. She read it to Maria when she was younger. When she was alive.

A mermaid awoke to find her once graceful friends floating on the surface with glazed eyes and their tails and gills still - poisoned by dumped chemicals. Without the smile on her face, the memory usually stirred, Sheila relived the moment when Maria instantly burst into tears. She cried so hard that she was compelled to rush out and buy Maria mermaid-patterned bedding. Across time, she heard herself saying.

“See, Maria, the mermaid’s world is still alive. I promise you.”

It was the first and only time she ever lied to her sister.

Now there lies Mike, like a whale fleeing toxic seas, only to land on oil-streaked sand riddled with litter. With his head and hands hanging over the kerb, she imagined he was floundering just like that poor mermaid. When he suddenly screeched and shuddered violently, she groaned.

“Can my heart break any more?”

We’ve lost Zoo-girl. But I’m here, Mike. Her heart pulled as he kicked out, as if angry at a body refusing his pleas to die. Making her way over to his side, she thought, he wants oblivion. But you can’t have it! I need you here, with me. Gently, she tried teasing him upright, but he was as heavy and unyielding, as if already dead. Dead as my sister! She gulped, and her pain joined with his.

All morning, she tried to be strong. To be an adult. To handle the loss for herself and Mike. But the prospect of having to break the news to him had dulled her movements as she crept around Maria's bed, quietly and carefully, as if not to awaken her.

Awaken her! If only!

That long, too long moment crippled her, but she held on. She had too. Waiting for the doctor to arrive to proclaim what she already knew, she vowed, I'll not wash her sheets and pillowcases. I'll wrap them in tissue and silk to preserve her scent. She finally broke down when the doctor left. Scent is all I have left of Maria's presence. I don't even have hair I can collect up and keep and smell and feel now and then. My lamb will never smile again. Never giggle inanely, or tease, frown or wear a silly, lit-up cancer cap. Nor wear a hospital gown, to which she felt Maria's replying quip, small mercies, Sis.

But as Sheila sat beside Mike, she had neither the wit nor the will to search for humour. As she lightly touched his arm, their woes mingled and they wept the heavy, non-stop, pitiful tears of the damned.

Not a single passer-by cared to hear their pain. Instead, they scowled, vagabonds mad on drink or drugs. Just bloody wastrels blocking the gutter, fit only to be moaned at or cursed. Some even clipped Mike with the back of a heel as they stepped over him. So, what, they're only street scum.

Part 59

Eventually, Mike struggled upright. Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, their first truly intimate touch went unnoticed. Heavy, soporific rain started falling, to give their misery form. The gutter quickly filled. ‘Fall into me, let me wash you away,’ the water called in passing as the road rapidly flooded.

They both felt its pull.

Every passing leaf bore Maria’s smiling face, and Sheila sent pieces of her shattered heart to spin and float along with them.

While Sheila followed their course, Mike, as if suddenly hearing his name, struggled up. With somnolent, resolute but broken movements, he silently turned and walked away as if to seek the mermaid’s desolate realm. Two steps became three. Then four, five and ten. Thunder rolled and lightning crashed. A second loud crack shook Sheila from her all-consuming grief, and she screamed after him.

“Mike, please don’t leave, I beg you, I couldn’t stand it if you did.”

He paused, but did not turn - he had a mermaid to meet. Overhead, thunder rolled relentlessly while its angry lightning whiplashed the road close by. A sulphuric tang, as bitter as his sorrow and as rancid as death, filled Mike’s nostrils and mouth. Heaving, he sank to his knees and dry heaved, his mouth opening and closing like the last gasps of the mermaid’s beloved sea friends. But unlike them, his shrieks were not silent.

From out of the storm, a hand lightly touched his shoulder. It dwelt there briefly, then Sheila shook him gently.

“Look at me, Mike, come back to me, Monkey Man. Don’t leave me here alone.”

But desolation’s narcissism enjoys keeping secrets. It had no wish to turn Mike’s head and reveal the ugly self it had forced upon his face.

Besides, Mike’s heart knew his eyes would fall upon the unbearable. In Sheila’s face, he would see Maria, his rescuer and, at times, teacher, and, of course, first friend.

Just as Ann predicted, it was all too soon for him to bear their unnerving similarity.

Part 60

Gently, Sheila tried to turn his face towards her. But his bitter tears had turned him to stone. Desperate for Mike to look at her, feel her there, and hold her, she crumpled beside him and tried easing her hand under his arm. Like his face, it too was as solid as stone, and it refused to let her in.

Determined, she wangled her fingers beneath it and pushed until the arm gave a little. Snuggling up, she eased her hand in further. The last, thrust dislodged his hand, to reveal a face as grey and wretched as a corpse.

Is that how I appear to him? No wonder he can't look at me.

Hope sank. My darling Maria is dead and Mike is lost. I wonder, is that my fate, too, after the rain has flushed away the months of distraught happiness and joyful hope? Maybe the storm will flush us both away and dump us somewhere far and leave us wandering like petrified street people for the rest of our lives. Until eventually, we, too, lie down and die. And why not? What does it matter how we live? Just so long as I lay with this man I love. I love, she realised with a start.

Along with the revelation, an impulse, like a ghostly kiss to her lips, urged, Slip your hand inside your pocket, Sis. Gloriously, her fingers lightly brushed Maria's lucky coin; the talisman for her sister's hopes, the regift she promised Maria's spirit to make to Mike. As if awaiting her, the coin slipped comfortably into her palm and instantly warmed her spirit in the way it always did, Maria.

Pulling out the coin as it glowed in the half-light like polished gold, she blinked. What!

Instead of the Queen's head, Maria's watery face smiled at her. Frantically, she swiped away her tears and rubbed the rain off the coin for a clearer look. Only to be disappointed. The Queen was back on her throne.

"Here, Mike," she said, nudging him. "Please take back your coin. I know our lamb wanted you to have it."

Other than the skin creasing beneath his eyes, Mike didn't move. At least he's noticed me, she thought with hope, just not enough to pull him back. Not yet.

"Mike, hear me, please. When I found her this morning, she…" But then her voice broke, and more tears fell.

Desperate to tell Mike about that morning, she swallowed, took a deep breath to send a silent prayer.

"Oh, Father, please help me through this, please."

Magically, her panic stilled. Whether it was the Father's calming hand comforting her or hope coming to her aid, she found her voice.

"I'm sure our lamb was trying to take this coin with her to heaven. I believe she wanted a part of you with her, forever, Mike. You must have this back. It was her treasure. The thing that gave her hope. Now it's yours again. Please accept it with her love and mine."

Without a word or a glance, he took the talisman and clutched it reverently, hoping that a lingering trace of Maria's warm spirit might pass into him. His eyes closed, and for a blessed moment, he was so close to Zoo-girl it hurt. The memory of her glistening eyes with their unreadable message when he first

knelt to present the coin came flooding back. Shocked, he realised the depths in her eyes he swam in back then was her foreknowledge of this very day. He groaned beneath the irony that they weren't caring for her; she was caring for them. He so needed this keepsake, but was suddenly scared that owning it would constantly remind him of another failure. And what if I lose it? Or spend it by mistake?

Reluctantly, he returned the coin to Sheila, "Here, you keep it safe; it belongs to you, too."

"No, Mike, it's yours."

The protest was weak. Like Mike, she yearned to hold it close to her heart forever. But how could she leave him with nothing?

Caught in an impasse, their wants and woes squabbled silently in the slowing rain. Ghostly memories rose and roamed between them, but as far as their thoughts wandered, they both returned to one giant, unanswerable question.

What now?

Which begged a second.

What's the point of going on?

Part 61

Mike’s tears fell again, and Sheila’s swiftly followed. Without thinking, they fell into a comforting hug. After that initial, shy touch, they clung to each other desperately, almost frantically. The loose traces of Maria’s interfering spirit roaming close by had little to do but be happy. Of its own accord, the hug evolved into a lover’s embrace. Lips touched as delicately as a butterfly testing a flower’s nectar. Finding the taste sweet, their lips joined for longer. As they squeezed each other, Maria’s smiling face jumped into their minds, sending their spirits singing with joy as they felt her settle into their hearts. As they looked into each other’s eyes, it hardly needed words to express the joy of knowing their treasure will dwell inside them forever.

Suddenly, as the rain finally petered out, a memory flashed up of a younger Maria urging her to try out a scary ride at an amusement park.

“Just go for it, Sis. You know you want to.”

She did then, and she wanted Mike now.

As she brushed Mike’s wet fringe away from his swollen eyes, she remembered her thoughts about him when they pushed Maria home together for the first time. I reckon he’ll scrub up all right, she decided.

“Well, Mike, I know you want the coin because of what it means to you. The memories associated with it mean a lot to me, too. So, I guess the only option open to us is for you to move in with me. That way we can share it, can’t we? I’ll take Maria’s old bedroom and you can have mine.”

With her heart declared, she smiled softly like a mother does to her child. It was the first smile of the day. Suddenly, she was taken with the notion that she was glad her hard-to-find smile finally blossomed for him. Her words, when they came, matched her soft smile.

“And I hope we will share this forever, Mike.”

Sheila’s eyebrows rose quizzically when Mike mumbled softly, almost privately, two simple words.

“A family…” Before falling silent again.

Torn between heartbreak for Maria and utter joy at Sheila’s proposal, Mike fell silent. How can I say yes when I know it’s her grief speaking?

Is he going to accept? The air thrummed, but then Maria’s voice burst into his mind.

“This is my gift to you, Monkey Man. It’s what I always hoped would happen. Please accept it with all my love.”

To Sheila’s relief, he suddenly smiled.

Across the road, hidden in the shadows of the Tailor’s doorway, John watched them walk slowly away, hand in hand.

“Happy destiny, Mike,” he whispered after them. “You deserve it.”

I agree. Ann smiled, satisfied as she left her hiding place on the High Street to head to her heavenly home to deal with her truculent new novice. You pair do deserve it.

Maria. Section 11 – A Tidy Ending for Maria

Part 62 A Tidy Ending for Maria

Christmas came and went. Spring was just beginning to show its pretty face. John, as he did most days, entered the Fred Café to order breakfast. “My usual, please,” he said to Jody, who was helping out for the morning, as she did most Saturdays since Maria’s passing. “And how are you getting by?” He asked kindly.

Hearing his voice, Fred came flapping out from the steamy kitchen. “Here,” he said, pulling a thick envelope from under the counter. “This came for you today.”

Smiling at the address, Mr John, Double Eggs & Double Chips, c/o Fred’s Café, John quickly opened it. Inside he found a short letter from Mike and Sheila explaining they were away helping to get a friend’s Bed and Breakfast in Blackpool ready for the summer. Come and join us for the season as our guest and here’s a £100 for your fare.

“Well, will you go?” Fred asked. “It’s a bit windy there like, but it’s not too bad otherwise.”

“Maybe,” John murmured doubtfully, folding the money up, knowing he could find a better use for it. Besides, what Angel has need to catch a train to see his friends! Before he tucked the money away, he looked thoughtfully at the notes for a moment and then back at Fred.

“It’s a funny thing, Fred, you know. When we started Maria’s campaign, Mike told me that all a £1 needs is a simple nought added to make it £10. And look what happened after that.”

“I didn’t doubt his ambition or intentions when it came to Maria,” Fred replied smoothly. “He was a gooden, that one, and a good heart can achieve a lot. While a slippery one needs watching, ay John...?”

John laughed and tried his best to shrug innocently.

“… Right?” Fred added with a glint that would rival Sheila’s later that day when she whispered to Mike, ‘I have some news for you…’

“That’ll be £3.20 for the breakfast, John, now that you’re in funds,” Fred demanded with a smile. “Unless you’d rather come out back and scrub my morning’s pots.”

Part 63 Tying the Knots.

Jody was devastated by Maria’s death. But she smiled about it too. Maria’s last letter to her friend reminded Jody of a promise she made during the summer. I’ll blimming well come back. That cheered Jody no end, although from time to time she wondered, why is Maria taking so long about it? Her thoughts were not too different to Ann’s mischievous, novice.

Through their campaigning, Mike’s donation of £1 turned into many thousands. Sheila felt too guilty to spend any of it, other than to buy a few things to make life a little better for her sister. Virtually untouched, donations flooded in after Maria’s passing.

On the day of Maria’s funeral, the grass square in front of the house was graced by the most amazing bouquets. In volume and beauty, they easily rivalled those of a well-known princess. By the time Sheila and Mike left for Blackpool, the fund amounted to millions of pounds and was still, steadily rising. With Amy’s help, an investment account was opened and a charity they started a charity called Maria’s Smile.

To this day, Mike and Sheila, and a younger Maria run it with Jody’s help. All it takes to become a member is a genuinely given smile and a willingness to help those in need. Sadly, there are many, for cancer is wicked in both deed and greed.

As for Maria, she will never be forgotten. But those tales have yet to find their time. So, as Maria would undoubtedly say if she was still here.

"Here's hoping for a blimming happy ending for you all."