



The University of the Bleeding Obvious Presents:
Goldilocks and the Free Bears

By Paul Farnsworth



Goldilocks and the Free Bears

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Prologue

B.B. Woolfe stood in the darkness of his office, framed by the window as he looked out across smoke-blackened rooftops. He tucked his hands into the pockets of his lambs wool waistcoat and slowly, and for no good reason, a smile began to shape his remarkably elongated face. He watched the sunrise as if he owned it; as if he and he alone dictated when it would get up in the morning, and would issue it with the strictest of warnings if it dared to rise even so much as a minute late.

As the sky grew brighter the sun changed hue, appearing as a pink bubble bobbing on the horizon. The clouds were suddenly shot through with purple and gold, and amber shadows performed a flickering dance around the walls of Mr. Woolfe's office. He glanced at his watch then closed his eyes against the glare. In the distance he heard the gentle sound of a car engine, the roar muted to a kitten's purr by the cold morning air.

Then came a smart rap on his office door. The corners of Mr. Woolfe's mouth twitched gently, but he did not speak. A moment later the door opened and a podgy, blond-haired girl came in. She shielded her eyes and squinted at the figure framed in the window.

"Do you know what time it is?" she said, making no attempt to disguise the irritation in her voice.

“I am aware of how early it is,” Woolfe confirmed. “I don’t suppose you’ve ever seen the sun come up, have you my dear? I suspect you don’t usually get up until lunch time.”

The blond girl sighed. “If God had meant us to get up at this time in a morning,” she said, “He wouldn’t have invented nightclubs.”

Woolfe just smiled and said nothing.

“Well?” she insisted. “What is it? I’m not here for the good of my health. I got a message, somebody said you wanted to see me.”

Woolfe stroked his unusually prominent chin with the tips of his fingers. “I have a job for you my dear,” he said softly. He walked steadily across to the other side on the office, where an intricate model landscape was laid out on a table.

“A job?” the girl asked.

Woolfe ran an admiring eye over the delicately detailed complex of tiny buildings. “That’s right, my dear,” he said, and he looked up at her, his eyes sparkling. “It is a matter which I believe requires your own particular brand of expertise...”

This Seems Like A Good Place To Start

It was a morning just like any other. The buds on the trees were wet with dew, and as the gentle breeze made them bob and sway it shook the moisture free to fall as a series of tiny, sparkling showers to the warm earth. In a distant pasture newborn lambs could be heard gambolling playfully as they were loaded up in a lorry to be taken to the abattoir.

The air was alive with youth and vitality. The trees sang to the birds, the woodlands were green and fresh and lush, and everywhere was the fresh scent of spring. A little odd, perhaps, as it was autumn, but for the purposes of this story that fact is neither here nor there.

Mummy Bear leaned over the edge of a big pan of porridge and sniffed it hungrily. The steam formed a thick mist on her spectacles and she used her apron to wipe them clean.

Daddy Bear, having summoned up the strength to crawl out of bed, appeared at the foot of the stairs. He stood there for a moment, stifled a yawn, then caught sight of his reflection in the mirror and flinched.

“I look terrible,” he said.

Mummy Bear agreed. “You haven’t had a shave,” she told him.

Daddy Bear felt his chin. True, he thought, but then he had never shaved in his life. He had always

been firmly of the opinion that a grizzly bear with a bald face would look a bit silly.

“What’s for breakfast?” he asked. He sat down at the table and began to cough violently.

Mummy Bear kept her back to him as she stirred the porridge. “You really ought to give up smoking those cigars,” she advised him, with a sort of maternal glee.

Daddy Bear launched into another attack of choking, sounding not unlike someone trying to bring up his own spleen. “Oh please... cough... give... cough cough... me a break!” he managed to say in between fits of retching. Once the attack had subsided he sat back and found himself staring at his own spleen, squirming in a pool of fluid on the table before him.

“I’ve told you a hundred times,” his beloved spouse persisted, “give them up! They do you no good.”

Daddy Bear grunted and watched with unceasing fascination as his spleen quivered and jerked in front of him. “Glenda?”

“But, oh no, you won’t listen to me, will you? You come down every morning, coughing and spluttering. Do you realise the damage that smoking can do to your body?”

“Glenda, look, this may sound strange,” Daddy Bear began uneasily, not daring to take his eyes off his organ as it pulsated softly. It was odd, but he never really expected it to look like that.

“There’s cancer, and there’s heart disease...” Mrs. Bear continued.

“I’ve just coughed up my spleen.”

“...There’s coughing up your spleen. You’re not getting any younger, you have to take care of yourself.”

“I mean it Glenda,” Daddy Bear said, a note of panic in his voice. “This is serious.”

“Too right it’s serious!” said Mummy Bear. “I’m glad you’ve finally realised that.”

“But I didn’t think it was possible,” said Daddy Bear. “You can’t just cough up your spleen, can you?”

“Well,” Mummy Bear said, following a thoughtful pause. “You should have considered that before you took up smoking.”

“But I - ” The spleen slowly started to edge across to the other side of the table, leaving a wet, slimy trail behind it. “What I mean,” Daddy Bear continued, trying not to let himself be distracted by his organ’s attempts to negotiate the sugar bowl, “is, well, is it serious? What am I supposed to do about it? I’ve never brought up any major organ before.”

Mummy Bear was far too busy listening to herself to take any notice of what her husband was saying. “Just don’t say I didn’t warn you, Gordon,” she continued to lecture. “I don’t know why you smoke those foul things anyway.”

“What does a spleen do, just as a matter of interest?” Daddy Bear asked. “What’s it for? Can I live without it?”

The spleen dropped off the table, hit the floor with a squelch, then started sliding towards the door.

“Am I supposed to drop dead now, or what?” puzzled Daddy Bear. “You see, it’s not something that anyone has ever taken the time and trouble to warn me about. We never did spleens at school. We did trigonometry, but that’s not the same thing really.”

The spleen reached the door, opened it and slid outside, slamming the door shut behind it. Daddy Bear watched it wistfully.

“I don’t suppose it matters any more, it’s gone now.”

There was a pregnant pause. It gave birth to lots of little pauses, and these endured for some time. At least Daddy Bear’s coughing had stopped. “Anyway,” he said at length. “Before that unfortunate spleen incident, I seem to remember asking you what was for breakfast.”

Mummy Bear briefly turned to face him. Her spectacles were misted up again. “Porridge,” she replied crisply.

“Porridge?” Daddy Bear repeated in a low voice.

Mummy Bear nodded.

“We had porridge yesterday,” Daddy Bear said. “In fact, we had porridge the day before that as well.”

“That’s right.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Daddy Bear proceeded, “but in all the time we’ve been married I don’t believe your own brand of culinary expertise has ever managed to produce anything other than porridge. A bear can grow tired of the stuff, you know.”

“You like porridge,” Mummy Bear said.

“I don’t like porridge,” Daddy Bear told her. “I have never liked porridge. I tell you this every morning, why don’t you listen?”

Mrs. Bear set three wooden bowls down on the table. “Well it’s all we’ve got,” she said bluntly, and she sat down.

Daddy Bear sniffed his breakfast and recoiled, but he realised it would do him no good to pursue the matter. He toyed with his spoon. “Where’s Nigel?” he asked, after a disgruntled pause.

“Out,” Mummy Bear replied as she clutched her handkerchief to her nose to stifle a sneeze.

“Obviously he’s out,” Daddy Bear snapped. All their conversations seemed equally tense these days. “Obviously he’s out. Out where?”

“Out somewhere,” his wife replied with a shrug. “He’s been out all night. He’ll be back soon. That boy loves his porridge, he wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

She sneezed again, but this time she wasn't quick enough with the handkerchief and she propelled much of the contents of her right nostril into her breakfast bowl. She swapped it for Nigel's, just as the door creaked open and he walked in.

"I've just seen a spleen trying to catch a bus," he said. "Only it didn't have the right change."

On first glance Nigel was a curious sight, although if you glanced at him twice you'd realise that 'curious' was an understatement, and hastily swap it for 'freakish'. He wore an eye patch, a long frock coat decorated with numerous medals, and he never went anywhere without a dead parrot on his shoulder. The reason? He firmly believed himself to be the reincarnation of Napoleon Bonaparte - and though he would freely admit that his interpretation of the Emperor might be somewhat inaccurate, it was still a great source of sorrow for him when people failed to recognise him in the street.

Presently his feet were caked in snow and icicles hung from the tip of his nose. "Sorry I'm late," he said as he sat down. "I've been retreating from Moscow all night."

"You need some hot porridge inside you," his mother said. "Come on, eat up!"

"Oh not chuffing porridge again," Nigel muttered to his father.

"Just eat it!" Mummy Bear snapped, beginning to lose her rag.

“What’s the point?” Daddy Bear moaned. “It doesn’t take a genius to work out that the porridge is going to be too hot.”

Mummy Bear said nothing. She just glared at him as she pushed her spectacles back up the bridge of her nose with her forefinger.

“It’s always too hot, isn’t it?” Daddy Bear said.

“Dad’s right,” Nigel agreed. “It’s always too hot... And mine’s got something floating in it.”

“Very well,” Mummy Bear said. “In that case we’d better - ”

“We’d better open a tin of Spam?” Daddy Bear suggested.

“We’d better send out for a pizza?” said Nigel.

“We’d better go for a walk in the park until it cools down,” Mummy Bear said.

Daddy Bear stood up and banged his fist down on the table in what was quite an impressive display for a forty-year-old grizzly with no spleen.

“This happens every damn morning,” he said. “Has it never occurred to you that if you didn’t make it so hot in the first place, we wouldn’t need to go out for a walk?”

There was a moment’s silence. Mummy Bear returned a withering stare, and Daddy Bear duly withered.

“Oh all right, we’ll go for a walk,” he grouched.

And so it was, as chance would have it, and all things being equal, that a little later, tripping gaily through the Enchanted Forest came a girl by the

name of Goldilocks. A podgy, blond-haired girl. Skipping breezily, she sang sweet, lilting songs to herself as she went:

“Four and twenty virgins came down from Inverness, and when they went back home there were four and twenty less,” and similar refrains.

Before very long she chanced upon the three Bears’ house. “Cor!” she said. “That’s a smart little pad.” (She also had a habit of talking to herself, you understand.) Never the type to look a gift horse in the mouth, she tried the door but found it locked, so she shoved a brick through the window and climbed in.

“Mmmm yummy, porridge!” she said upon seeing the three bowls on the table, and she wasted no time in getting stuck into Daddy Bear’s breakfast.

“Strewth!” she suddenly cried, painfully. “This porridge is too hard.”

She moved on to Mummy Bear’s and tried that. “And this is too soft.”

Finally she sat before Nigel’s bowl, took a big mouthful then spat it back. “Well, this is just right,” she said as she wiped her mouth on her sleeve. “But it’s got something green and slimy floating in it. I’m not eating any of this filth.”

And she didn’t. She decided to have a bit of a sit down instead. There were three chairs lined up against the wall: a big one, a medium sized one and a blue one. She sat in the big one first.

Goldilocks and the Free Bears

“This chair is too warm,” she announced to nobody in particular. “I never like sitting in a warm chair.”

Then she tried the medium sized chair. “And this one smells of cheese.”

Finally she tried the blue chair, which was also the smallest. Following much perspiration and the ingenious use of a shoehorn she managed to squeeze her ample buttocks into the seat.

“Now that’s better. This one is just right,” she said, moments before the chair collapsed beneath her. “Bloody self-assembly rubbish,” she muttered from the midst of a pile of debris.

Suddenly she heard voices outside. There was a cracking and splintering of wood, and the door burst open. Goldilocks struggled to her feet as two policemen burst in.

“What the f - ”

“Hello, my name’s Clive, and this is my friend Duncan,” said one of the policemen, rather more politely than one would expect in the circumstances. “Is it all right if we come in?”

“I suppose so,” Goldilocks replied, somewhat bemused.

“Thank you very much Miss,” said the nice policeman. “Now then, we’ve just had a call from the three little Pigs next door. They seemed to think that someone was breaking in. This is a Neighbourhood Watch area, you know.”

“Oh yeah?” snarled Goldilocks. She jumped up and unslung a sub-machine gun from her shoulder,

which she just happened to be carrying, purely for the purposes of self-defence. These were rough times. “Well I don’t take too kindly to grasses,” she said. “And I don’t take too kindly to the law.”

“Oh dear,” Clive said, displaying only the faintest glimmer of alarm. “That’s quite an unhelpful attitude to take. I’m quite disappointed. I think you ought to put the gun down before you hurt someone.”

“Come and take it off me, pig!” Goldilocks screamed as she backed away.

“I’m afraid we’re not trained in that sort of thing, are we Duncan?”

“No, we’re not really trained in that sort of thing,” Duncan affirmed.

“It’s quite out of our league,” said Clive. “You see, we’re from the Stand Up Comedy Division, trained in one-liners and amusing wordplay. We’re in panto next month. Here, tell us what you think.” He clipped a spotty bow tie beneath his chin. “I say, I say, I say,” he said, he said, he said.

“What do you say? What do you say?” Duncan responded as he put on a trilby.

“My dog’s got no nose.”

“Your dog’s got no nose?” Duncan asked. “How does he smell?”

“Don’t be bloody stupid!” Clive shouted as he beat his partner viciously around the head with a bendy truncheon. “How can he smell if he hasn’t got a nose?”

Goldilocks shot them both. With an act like that it was the kindest thing she could have done. Then, intent on revenge, she went round to the three little Pigs' house.

"Did you bastards call the filth?" she shouted as she rapped on the front door.

"Us?" the three little Pigs chorused innocently as they leaned out of an upstairs window. "No, we wouldn't do anything like that."

"Oh yes you bloody well did," Goldilocks insisted. "Now open up and let me in."

"No!" shouted the Pigs. "If we let you in you'll shoot us."

"No I won't, promise," said Goldilocks as she lifted the safety catch on her gun.

"Yes you will," said the Pigs.

"Oh no I won't," Goldilocks assured them.

"What have you got that gun for then?" the three Pigs wanted to know.

"It's a keepsake," said Goldilocks quickly. "A present from my mother."

"We don't believe you!" shouted the three Pigs.

"Honestly!" Goldilocks replied. "I promise I won't shoot."

"Do you think we were born yesterday?" the three Pigs returned. "We've been caught out like that before. There used to be four of us."

Goldilocks sighed. "All right, all right," she admitted. "If you come out, I *will* shoot you, but only a little bit. I'll just shoot your legs. I promise I won't try to finish you off."

“Come off it!” the Pigs were quick to reply. “Pull the other one, it’s got bells on it.”

“Enough is enough!” snapped Goldilocks angrily. “If you’re not out here in ten seconds I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll *burn* your house down. I’ve got a bit more initiative than your average wolf, you know.”

No reply. She waited the full ten seconds, but still got no answer. “Right!” she hissed through gritted teeth. She sloshed petrol around the base of the house and torched it.

Summer has a sound of its own; a long wistful sigh from June to October. Then, as summer slips into autumn, the note changes, becomes sombre as the sky turns from deep blue to smoky orange.

As the three Bears wandered through the Enchanted Forest, the speckled sunlight on the forest floor pushed and prodded the leaves that had fallen there. Mummy Bear kicked her way through. Autumn was perhaps her favourite season. She loved the sobriety, the musty melancholia, and she quite forgot herself until Daddy Bear sarcastically remarked upon how wildly exciting he had always felt trees and dead leaves to be.

So they went to the park where, for some reason that wasn’t immediately apparent, Nigel placed a bag of breadcrumbs on the bench by the pond, and then threw himself at the ducks.

“I take it the idea is to feed the ducks?” Daddy Bear asked as he waded in and dragged his bedraggled son out. They stood on the grass, dripping, whereupon Daddy Bear informed him that as the ducks would doubtless be more partial to breadcrumbs than a twelve stone grizzly bear, he might be better advised to throw the breadcrumbs at the ducks rather than himself.

Nigel nodded and said that he understood, and then threw himself into the pond again.

“You’re not carrying a full load, are you son?” Daddy Bear said as Nigel stood in the middle of the pond surrounded by excited ducks. They were being entertained, even if they weren’t being fed.

“It’s the other way round, can’t you bloody understand anything?”

Nigel nodded and started throwing ducks at the bread. It was a step in the right direction, at least. This went on for about ten minutes, then Nigel ran out of ducks, and Mummy Bear suggested they all go home.

As they approached the house it was Daddy Bear who first noticed the smashed window, the open door and the smell of roasting pork in the air. He picked up a large stick and swung it threateningly above his head.

“Bloody vandals!” he roared. “Well they’re not getting away with it this time.” He handed the stick to Mummy Bear and pushed her in front of him. “Sort ‘em out Glenda.”

Mummy Bear nervously glanced back over her shoulder, then tentatively proceeded towards the doorway. "Is there anyone there?" she trilled in terror, clinging onto the stick like a drowning man clutches a life belt.

"Oh come off it!" cried Daddy Bear from behind a tree, some considerable distance from the house.

"What?" Mummy Bear asked as she twisted round. "What have I done?"

"*Is there anybody there?*" mimicked Daddy Bear in a parody of her frightened falsetto. "You don't seriously expect an answer, do you?" As if a manic, axe-wielding murderer is going to shout out, 'Yes, I'm under the stairs!' Get real woman."

Mummy Bear looked deeply dismayed. "Might not be," she said sulkily.

"Might not be what?" Daddy Bear questioned her with diminishing patience. "Please try to make sense."

"Might not be a manic, axe-wielding murderer," replied Mummy Bear smugly. "He might have shotgun."

"Well that's hardly the issue, is it?" said Daddy Bear exasperatedly. "It doesn't make him any more likely to sit down and have a conversation with you before he blows your head off. Now get in there and check the place out."

Mummy Bear did as she was told and went into the house.

There was a short pause.

There was a longer pause.

There was a pause that was about half as long as the second pause, but still slightly longer than the first.

“It’s all right,” said Mummy Bear as she came back to the doorway. “There’s no one here. Just a couple of dead policemen.”

Daddy Bear cautiously emerged from his hiding place and approached the house. “You’re sure? I hope you’ve checked thoroughly.” Nigel squeezed past him and went into the house. Emboldened by his son’s fearlessness, he followed. “Look at the mess,” he said as he stepped over the two bodies. “You’d have thought they’d have wiped their feet before they came in.”

“Who are they?” Mummy Bear asked, prodding one corpse with her toe.

“They’re policemen,” Daddy Bear said, with the easy confidence of someone who could recognise two dead policemen when he saw them.

“I know that.”

“Suicide squad,” Daddy Bear explained. “It’s shock tactics. They’re trying to intimidate us.”

Mummy Bear put her paw up to her snout and took half a step backwards. “Oh Gordon,” she said in a timid voice. “I told you that you should have paid that parking ticket.”

“No,” Daddy Bear said firmly. “I refuse to be harassed like this. That warden was wrong to give me a ticket. I wasn’t illegally parked. I don’t even have a car.”

“Oh but - ”

“Oh but nothing,” said Daddy Bear. “We’re not going to let this thing upset us. Let’s just sit down and eat our porridge - before it sets.”

And so, with the time approaching half past one, the three Bears sat down to breakfast. Daddy Bear took a big spoonful and gulped it down hungrily, then pulled a sickly face.

“Am I mistaken, or does this taste like shit?”

Mummy Bear tried hers, then licked her lips thoughtfully. “Yes, it does a bit, doesn’t it?”

Nigel wasn’t eating his porridge. His bowl had more in it than when he’d left it, so he was not unnaturally suspicious.”

“Right, we’ll forget the porridge then,” said Mummy Bear. “It’s the chairs next.”

Daddy Bear was the first to sit down. To be perfectly honest he was a bit fed up with all this chair business, but he went through the motions all the same. “Someone’s been sitting in my chair,” he said, evidently being able to glean such remarkable insights merely by being in contact with the seat.

“And someone’s been sitting in my chair,” said Mummy Bear, who apparently had a similarly gifted psychic arse.

“Well mine’s knackered,” said Nigel. “I told you not to get this cheap self-assembly rubbish.”

Daddy Bear looked wearily at his wife. “So it’s the beds next, I suppose?”

“Yep!” said Mummy Bear as she led the way upstairs to their communal bedroom.

“Bloody hell! There’s someone in my bed,” said Nigel, and he went straight to the slumbering form of Goldilocks and prodded her curiously.

“Someone’s been sleeping in my bed!” said Daddy Bear angrily.

“Yes, she’s here in my bed,” said Nigel.

“And someone’s been sleeping in my bed as well,” said Mummy Bear.

“Look, I’ve told you twice already,” said Nigel. “She’s here in my bed.”

Mummy Bear’s eyes flickered casually around the room, then came to rest on the strange young girl whom Nigel had mentioned thrice previously. “Oh look!” she said in surprise. “She’s there in Nigel’s bed.”

“Stop poking the young girl Nigel,” Daddy Bear said. “Look she’s waking up.”

And indeed she was. She sat up, rubbed her face and yawned. Then, when her muggy head cleared and her vision resolved, she saw Nigel and screamed in terror.

“Funny,” observed Mummy Bear. “Our son seems to have that effect on most people.”

“It’s all right,” Daddy Bear said comfortingly. “You’ve got nothing to be afraid of.”

“Oh I know,” said Goldilocks, regaining some of her composure. “I expect he just wants to play with me.”

“Wants to play?” Daddy Bear looked puzzled. “Don’t be freakin’ stupid. He’s a grizzly bear, for Christ’s sake, he wants to rip your head off.”

The air froze; was cleft in two by a thunderclap visitation from the open window. It was an explosion of noise: wailing sirens, pounding engines, screeching doors, slamming tyres and flashing lights. You couldn't actually hear the flashing lights, of course, but if you had looked out of the window you would certainly have seen them.

Daddy Bear rushed to the window. "What is it?" Mummy Bear asked. "What can you see?"

"I can see flashing lights," he said.

"All right in there!" boomed a deep voice, augmented by the unmistakable growl of a megaphone.

"Fine, thank you," Daddy Bear shouted back.

"Come out quietly, or we'll shoot your brains out," the megaphone continued.

Goldilocks jumped up. "It's the pigs!" she cried.

"What, from next door?" Mummy Bear asked. "But they always seemed such nice people."

"No, not the Pigs from next door - they're history. I mean the police. I'm outta here." Goldilocks opened the window and jumped out.

"Well she was a very strange young lady," Mummy Bear mused. "I wonder if we know her family at all?"

Approximately twenty police vehicles were parked in the clearing outside the Bears' house. This was a dangerous neighbourhood, a lawless pit of vice and

sleaze. The police had to be prepared for anything and so they had brought with them, amongst other things, fifty machine guns, ten grappling irons, two grenade launchers and a mobile burns unit.

Detective Inspector Lionel Crump of the Metropolitan Police Force was as vigilant as he was ambitious, yet upon his arrival at this sleepy little cottage standing in such a pleasant glade, even he was forced to concede that he may have misjudged the firepower required for the job. To correct his wildly inaccurate mistake he phoned the Ministry of Defence and requested two extra tank divisions.

They couldn't afford to take chances. On the way here they had arrested a tree for loitering.

Inspector Crump raised the megaphone to his lips once again. "All right!" he bellowed, loud enough to give rise to serious doubts over whether he really needed the megaphone at all. "We've been patient up until now, but I think you ought to know we mean business!"

Crump paused, waiting for an answer. There was nothing, only the faint murmur of the wind - but that was talking bollocks, so he ignored it.

"The house is surrounded!" Crump screamed gleefully into his gadget. He always enjoyed this aspect of police work: the empathic reasoning and measured negotiation. "Come out of there before we release the leopard!"

A further tirade of malicious threats was interrupted by a tall, pimply youth dressed in stockings and a silken doublet. He was standing by

the Sergeant's car. "Excuse me?" the youth interceded, quite amicably "Could you get your car off my foot?"

"Who the hell are you?" Crump screamed at him through the megaphone.

The youth reached out and gently pushed the megaphone aside. He then explained that his name was Prince Gorgeous, and that he was in quite a hurry as he had been on his way to meet Snow White when the Inspector had arrived and parked on him. "So if you could just move the car, I'd be terribly grateful," the Prince said. "I know this must be a dreadful bore."

"It is," said Crump.

"I'm sure you have enough troubles of your own right now," the Prince added.

"I do," Crump said.

"But if you could - if it's not too much trouble - just move the car a bit? Thank you."

Crump gave the matter absolutely no consideration at all. "No," he replied automatically.

"Ah," said Prince Gorgeous. "You see, I think my foot's broken."

Inspector Crump scowled at him impatiently. "Well, it's your own damn fault!" he snapped.

"My own fault?"

"Of course it was. You left your foot totally unguarded," Crump told him. "It was an open invitation for anyone to come along and stick their car on it."

“Oh come on!” cried the Prince melodramatically, as princes are wont to do. “Can’t you just back it up a little bit?”

“I see,” said Crump in a dangerous voice. “So I’ve got to forget about all the important police work that has to be done? I’ve got to forget about catching gangsters? Forget about chasing burglars? I’ve just got to drop everything and get my car off your foot, is that right?”

“Well... yes,” said the Prince. “If it’s not too much trouble, that is.”

Crump raised the megaphone to his lips. “Well it is too much trouble, Mr. Bloody Prince!” he boomed. “For a start, there happens to be a siege taking place. Then, add to that the fact that there simply isn’t the manpower available to go around rescuing every wretched royal that finds himself getting parked on. Thirdly, there’s a procedure involved in these sorts of things, and I’d look a right dick if I went ahead and rescued you without filling in the appropriate forms.”

Crump, having judged Prince Gorgeous to be suitably dumbstruck, returned his attention to the house, only to find the three Bears standing on the porch with their paws in the air.

“We want to come peacefully,” they chorused.

“Oh that’s just great!” said Crump, who had been looking forward to giving them a kicking. And as some small consolation for this disappointment he nicked Prince Gorgeous for obstructing the course of justice.

Some Stuff Set In A Police Station

Nigel had never been to the big city before. He stared out of the rear window of the Black Maria with naive fascination as he and his parents were whisked away to the police station. He was enthralled by the lights, the strangely garbed people, the flashing neon advertisements for cat litter; and by the flashing people, and the strange neon lights, and the enthralling neon peopled garbled cat litter. What a wonderfully confusing place this is, he thought poetically. In fact, he said it.

“What a wonderfully confusing place this is.”

“I beg your pardon?” said his father.

“Nothing,” said Nigel, and lapsed into silence.

“Oh,” Daddy Bear replied. He looked at his wife and saw the glistening lines of silent tears that smeared her face. Neither of them had ever been in trouble with the police before - except for the time when Daddy Bear had been cautioned for gobbing on a school-crossing lady. But that had been a long time ago. Now they were about to be charged with murder and arson, and Inspector Crump had said that they'd be lucky if they got off with twenty years in a vat of warm puke. Daddy Bear decided that he had to set the record straight before this went any further, so he turned to the armed guard who sat with them.

Goldilocks and the Free Bears

“Look,” he began, his voice shaking in sympathy with the motion of the van. “We didn’t murder those two policemen, you know. We just found them like that when we got home.”

Their escort remained impassive. Not a flicker of emotion showed on his face; not a shadow of expression. Then the vehicle swerved abruptly to the left, he flew across the van and cracked his head on the opposite wall. He started to groan, then the van swerved the other way and slammed him back into his seat, the breath knocked from his body.

“There’s been some terrible mistake,” Daddy Bear continued. “We were out walking at the time.”

The van braked suddenly and the policeman was smashed into the bulkhead. He was just coming to his senses as the vehicle pulled off again and rolled him along the floor. He burst through the back doors and clung desperately onto the bumper, his backside banging and scraping along the road at fifty miles an hour. With his strength ebbing he managed to haul his shattered body, taut with pain, back into the van.

Daddy Bear began to get the impression that the policeman wasn’t really listening to him. “So you see, it wasn’t our fault,” he said.

The van went over a hump-backed bridge. The policeman rebounded several times off the floor and ceiling, then...

* * *

By the time they arrived at the police station the unfortunate officer had three broken limbs, severe concussion and had lost the use of one lung. They took him straight to hospital where they pumped all the blood out of his body, boiled it up, then pumped it all back.

The Bears were taken inside where the charge of Grievous Bodily Harm was added to the list of crimes for which they had originally been arrested.

“We’re innocent!” Daddy Bear protested as a bustling congregation of officious uniforms tore him from the rest of his family. His tiny voice floated on a blue sea of disregard. Men steered him down corridors, put him in rooms, and presented him to large wooden desks driven by small, balding men with dark eyes.

“Look, what is all this?” he demanded feebly as a policeman guided his paw towards an inkpad and took his prints. “Why are we being held? Why will no one listen to me?”

“All in good time.”

“You’ll get your chance, sunshine.”

“Nothing to worry about. Just come clean and they won’t touch you.”

They left him in a dark room, thick with dust. There was only one window, a narrow fanlight over the door. Squatting in the corner were two plastic chairs, and a wooden table with bowed legs that looked as if it was about to spring.

A policeman had been left on guard by the door. He was broad and tall, and he had a face like

a bulldog. Daddy Bear had heard the others call him Gibbon. There was a stern look on his face, and it was evident that this was a person who could be relied upon to be honest, decent and to kick seven different shades of excreta out of anyone who caused him trouble.

Daddy Bear sat down and realised that he was breathing much too fast. He didn't know what he was doing here; everything was so alien, so unfamiliar. He was only a bear, for heaven's sake. He shouldn't be in a place like this; he should have been where every other bear was right at that moment - down at the launderette.

"You've got it all wrong," he murmured in a low, trembling voice. Gibbon said nothing, but the oppressive grey walls and the musty air itself seemed to answer for him: *No one can help you now.*

The door opened swiftly and caught Gibbon a sharp crack round the side of the head. Inspector Crump stood in the doorway and regarded Daddy Bear with a malicious sneer, just like the one he had seen demonstrated in a police training video. Then he stepped over the prostrate form of PC Gibbon and slowly pushed the door closed behind him.

"Right, Mr. Bear," he said. "Let's make a start, shall we?" He was carrying something under his arm. Daddy Bear watched him as he approached and set the apparatus down on the table. "This is a cassette recorder," he explained with unnecessary sarcasm. "I mention that in case you were under

the impression it was an ironing board or something.”

He giggled to himself, obviously enjoying this demonstration of his considerable wit. Daddy Bear shot him a glance of pure malice, but Crump had a hide like reinforced concrete.

“This isn’t so that we can listen to Madonna all afternoon, as perhaps you might prefer,” he continued to explain. “It’s to record our little interview. We both get a copy of the tape, you see. It’s just to make sure that nothing naughty goes on.” Crump held up a bare wire. “Unfortunately it rather interferes with my interview technique, so I’ve taken the plug off it.”

“Oh you’re good,” Daddy Bear said, trying to sound laid back. “You’re very good. Who writes your scripts for you?”

Inspector Crump flushed a little. Much of what he’d said so far had, in fact, been written in advance. “All right, Bear,” he said angrily. “Cut the crap and tell me what happened.”

“Perhaps you’d like to tell me where my wife and son are?” Daddy Bear returned sharply.

“In the cells,” Crump replied. “We’ll be interviewing them next, so your story had better match theirs.” He paused to let Daddy Bear simmer, then tried a more conciliatory approach. “I’m a reasonable man, Mr. Bear. I like to keep an open mind. I don’t make sweeping assumptions before I’ve heard both sides of the story. So just tell me precisely what happened from the time you

got up this morning to the time you viciously and brutally murdered those two innocent young policemen.”

“I’m not stupid!” retorted Daddy Bear. “I’m not saying anything until I get a solicitor.”

“Oh you don’t want to be bothered with a solicitor,” Crump said.

“I want a solicitor now!” Daddy Bear repeated emphatically.

“Fair enough,” Inspector Crump conceded. He looked over his shoulder. “Gibbon!” he barked. “Go to the pub and get hold of a solicitor for Mr. Bear.”

PC Gibbon remained on the floor. Parts of him gurgled, but otherwise he made no effort to move.

“There, satisfied?”

Daddy Bear glared back at him murderously.

“Try to understand,” Crump said. “We know you did it, the evidence is incontrovertible. Once news of this incident gets out - and it will - the public will be calling for blood. There will be moral outrage and the whole thing will have to be rushed through court just to quell the hysteria. Now make it easy for yourself and admit it, and the law will be lenient. It’s a lot easier than sleeping with the judge.”

Daddy Bear sighed wearily. “Listen,” he said. “I’ve tried to explain all this before. We didn’t kill them.”

“Oh come off it! Do you really expect me to believe that you just found them like that?”

Inspector Crump had suddenly turned very ugly - a pretty gruesome sight, as he was no oil painting to start with. "Stop wasting my time, Mr. Bear!"

"We'd just gone for a walk," Daddy Bear explained, trying to remain calm. "When we got back we -"

"Murdered two innocent and cuddly policemen," said Crump. "Let me spell it out for you, shall I? There are two facts that we know for certain. Firstly, two expired members of Her Majesty's constabulary were discovered in an abode belonging to you. I use the word 'abode' because the expression 'house' seems somewhat inappropriate for a collection of rocks held together with Plasticine. Secondly, you murdered them. These facts invite only one conclusion, namely... that you murdered them."

Daddy Bear sat with his mouth agape. "But wha - ?"

"Go on," Crump urged him, "spit it out."

"But -"

"How many words? Is it a film or a book?"

"But this is... It's just circumstantial evidence," Daddy Bear finally managed to splutter.

"Circumstantial!" Crump exclaimed. "Circumstantial!" he exclaimed a second time. "Don't come all that legal jargon with me, sonny. I've had enough of that in court."

"I know my rights!" piped up Daddy Bear with a certain degree of panic.

“Well we may as well go home if you’re not going to let us bully and coerce you,” the Inspector replied. He paced slowly around the room, giving Daddy Bear time to stew. “You’re not going to get away with this,” he sneered, and when he neared the door it opened swiftly and delivered a sharp crack to the side of his head.

“I just did that!” said PC Gibbon, just coming to his senses, so Inspector Crump smacked him in the mouth and laid him out cold again.

“A package for you sir,” said a young policeman striding confidently into the story.

Crump stared at him, realised his mistake and apologised to the comatose form of PC Gibbon. Then he rounded on the newcomer. “What do you think you’re playing at?” he hissed, and the young constable wilted. “Here I am trying to be menacing and intimidating, and you charge in like the bloody Keystone Cops.”

“Sorry sir,” he mumbled. He handed over a piece of paper and a large brown envelope, then vacated the room pretty sharpish.

Detective Inspector Crump took a minute to read through the message, and as he did so a smug grin slowly spread across his face. “Well, well, well,” he said at length to an increasingly worried looking Daddy Bear. “Well, that is interesting.”

“What?” Daddy Bear asked anxiously.

“The forensic boys have been round your place with a fine tooth comb.”

“And?”

“And they need a new comb,” said Crump. “But they also say they’ve discovered your fingerprints all over the house.”

“Yes, so what?”

“You admit it?”

“I admit my fingerprints are all over my house,” conceded Daddy Bear. “But then, as it’s *my* house it’s hardly surprising.”

“Ah, I was forgetting that,” said Crump. “All right then, how do you explain this?” From the envelope he pulled an illustrated hardback book on the anatomy of the human body.

“It’s an illustrated hardback book on the anatomy of the human body,” explained Daddy Bear. “What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s a cook book,” said Crump.

“Rubbish, I’m vegetarian,” said Daddy Bear.

“Oh, do me a favour! Who ever heard of a vegetarian bear? If you didn’t eat people what would you do in your spare time?”

“I watch television,” said Daddy Bear. “And I cycle and do crossword puzzles.”

“And I suppose you play golf at the weekends?” suggested Crump.

“Don’t be bloody stupid!” said Daddy Bear. “Who ever heard of a grizzly bear playing golf?”

“All right, that’s enough of this!” Crump roared. “You think you’re clever, but you won’t get out of this one. We have a tree outside in the car park who saw everything and is prepared to testify in court.”

“A tree?” Daddy Bear inquired.

“Yes, a tree,” Inspector Crump confirmed. “One of those big wooden things with leaves at the top, you must have seen them? Anyway, we arrested it for loitering, but now it’s turned into a grass.”

“A tree’s turned into a grass?” Daddy Bear repeated cautiously.

“That’s right,” said Crump with a self-satisfied grin.

Daddy Bear sat back in his chair, smiled, and said, “I don’t think I’ve got anything to worry about really, have I?”

“I think I’ve got this all sewn up,” said Crump to Sergeant Barrington Pinewood in the canteen. “He’s cleverer than he looks, but he knows I’ve got the measure of him.”

“Nothing can stand against the forces of law, decency and moral righteousness,” said Sergeant Pinewood. “That’s why we always get our man.”

Sergeant Pinewood was a Canadian Mountie, in Britain as part of an exchange scheme. His special duties included tree felling, always getting his man, clamping horses for parking offences, and upholding the values of decency and moral righteousness.

In return the Metropolitan Police had sent a man to Canada to look into car theft.

“Oh yes, this Bear chap has been quite cunning,” continued Crump. “Every time I accuse

him of committing the murder he says he didn't do it. Now that's what I call clever."

"Perhaps he really didn't do it?" suggested Sergeant Pinewood as he fed a Metropolitan Police sandwich to his horse. He took his horse everywhere with him. He had a very large bathroom at home in Toronto.

"Of course he did it!" snapped Crump. "When we went into the house there were bits of policeman everywhere, and apart from the Bears there was no one else there. Now, I know our officers are chosen for their aptitude and initiative, but even if we make the assumption that they had some kind of death wish, I don't think even they could have spread themselves over such a large area."

Inspector Crump took a large bite out of a Metropolitan Police jam bun. The bun squealed and jumped off the Metropolitan Police table, and made off through the Metropolitan Police doorway.

"The food in here's not fit for pigs," he muttered. Cases like this always made him miserable. In fact anything to do with the Enchanted Forest put him in a bad mood. The place was full of nutters and weirdoes. "The sooner I get these Bears put behind bars the better."

"You definitely think they perpetrated this dastardly crime?" Sergeant Pinewood quizzed him.

“The mother and father, certainly,” said Crump. “The kid I’m not so sure about. But whatever the truth of this matter is, I’ll soon winkle it out of them.”

Following and hour or two at the Duck’s Arse public house, where he had been interviewing several pints of Bradshaw’s Owd Throat Pummeller, Detective Inspector Crump returned to the interview room. Here he spent a further hour asleep on the table before Mummy Bear was brought to him.

She sat down without taking her eyes off him, anxiously kneading the hem of her cardigan in one sweaty paw. Her glasses slipped down the bridge of her nose and she pushed them back into place with a trembling forefinger.

“Okay!” Crump said suddenly. Mummy Bear was startled enough to jump about six inches off her seat. Her glasses left her face in something of a hurry and landed in front of her on the table, where they remained for the duration of the interview.

“Mrs. Bear,” Crump began. “I want you to go through the events of this morning in detail. Please take your time. Just start at the beginning and we’ll take it from there.”

“Okay,” said Mummy Bear, drawing a breath and trying to remain calm. “I got up at about eight o’clock. My husband was still in bed. He doesn’t have to be at work until four o’clock, you see. He

works the evening shift at a twenty-four hour chiropodist.”

Inspector Crump nodded patiently. He could see that Mummy Bear was nervous and he didn't want to push her. “Go on.”

“Well I got up,” Mummy Bear reiterated, “and I had a cup of coffee, and I started to make breakfast. We had porridge. We always have porridge, it's my husband's favourite. Well, it used to be but I think he's beginning to tire of it. I've often thought we should eat it differently, you know. Maybe put something in it to spice it up a little?”

“Excuse me,” Crump interrupted sweetly as he laid a gentle hand on Mrs. Bear's forearm. “But is this important?”

“Of course it's important. People need to try something different every once in a while.”

“Yes, yes,” said Crump. “Okay, but can't we just skip breakfast?”

“You can't just skip breakfast,” said Mummy Bear, beginning to sound a little more sure of herself. “It's the most important meal of the day.”

“Let's just cut the crap!” Crump suddenly shouted, seriously losing his cool.

“It's not crap!” Mummy Bear retorted. “It's true - breakfast is the most important meal of the day. And that's not just some old wives' tale - it's the opinion of some of the world's top nutritionists. I read it in a magazine.”

Inspector Crump turned away from her and struck the wall behind him. PC Gibbon, who was standing in the corner with a broken nose and his arm in a sling, cowered away like a frightened puppy.

“All right,” said Crump. “I don’t want to know about your bloody breakfast, okay?” He placed his hand palm down on the table and leaned towards her. “It’s not a subject that really interests me. To put it bluntly, I couldn’t give a damn. I couldn’t care if you had dinosaur steaks in white wine sauce for breakfast, is that clear?”

Mummy Bear was silent.

“Well? Do you understand?”

“You told me to go through the events of this morning in detail. Those were your exact words. Take a look back at page thirty-nine if you don’t believe me.”

“Yes, but I didn’t want you to tell me about your ruddy breakfast, did I?” snapped Crump.

“Well how am I supposed to know that?” Mummy Bear shouted back at him. “I’m not telepathic you know. You said I was to tell you in every detail, which is what I did, starting with breakfast. Now you can hardly expect me - ”

“SHUT UP!”

They glared at each other for a moment, then Mummy Bear finally said, “Well there’s no need to take that attitude.”

“All right, I’m sorry,” said Crump. “Can we please proceed with the interview now?”

Mummy Bear watched him warily, though without her glasses he was nothing more than a quivering blur before her cloudy eyes. “Will you promise not to get angry?”

“Yes, yes.”

“Because there’s absolutely no cause to be unreasonable about this, is there?”

“Look, I’ve said I’m sorry, haven’t I?” said Crump.

“Very well,” said Mummy Bear. “You may continue.”

Ten minutes later Inspector Crump emerged from the interview room, as pale as a wraith and still shaking. He couldn’t have looked worse if he’d just gone ten rounds with Mike Tyson. Mummy Bear was being taken away, still talking about the way in which different varieties of oats can affect the consistency of a bowl of porridge.

“I couldn’t stand any more of that,” said Crump to PC Gibbon. “The woman is evil, totally evil!”

“Did you get anything out of her sir?” asked Gibbon.

Crump shook his head. “Just the few recipes,” he said. “But we’ll find out what happened from the kid. He must have seen everything.”

“I saw everything!” said Nigel Bear.

“Right!” said Crump, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “Go on, spill the beans son.”

“Here goes!” Nigel began happily. “The Russian army were advancing en masse from our left.” He stood up and pointed to the corner of the room. “There were four thousand of them, riding yaks because they’d eaten all the horses. Well, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen four thousand Russians on yak-back but it certainly put the wind up us, I can tell you. We were hopelessly outnumbered. There were only five of us, in fact, which is about as hopelessly outnumbered as you can get. We started out with six hundred and ten thousand, but the frost got ’em.

“Anyway, I decided that our best chance was to distract them and make our getaway. Not as easy as it might appear. One of my men had a catapult, but I knew that wouldn’t work. Well I wasn’t Emperor of France for sixteen years without good reason, you know. So drawing upon all my initiative I stood up on a handy rock.”

At this point Nigel climbed onto the table and pointed to some imaginary place beyond the interview room walls.

“Look behind you! I cried, but in French. There’s a giant hamster about to eat you all! Well, a cunning ruse like that was bound to work, but to my astonishment nothing happened. They continued to charge relentlessly. They weren’t approaching all that speedily, you understand, as the yak is not a particularly speedy animal, but they were approaching nonetheless.

“It was then that I realised my mistake: I should have shouted my cunning giant hamster ruse in *Russian*! Quickly I dug out my Russian phrase book found what I was looking for next to ‘can you tell me where the nearest tourist information office is please?’ I shouted my ‘hamster’ phrase again, in Russian, and it did the trick! While they were all looking over their shoulders for the giant rodent, we beat a hasty retreat.”

The Emperor Nigel Bonaparte climbed down from the table, slightly embarrassed by his over enthusiastic performance. “And that’s how it happened,” he concluded bashfully.

Inspector Crump was frankly gob smacked. Two tiny, startled eyes stared out over his gaping mouth, his jaw hung somewhere about his knees.

“Get him out of here,” he murmured slowly, but PC Gibbon was unable to comply. He’d just taken his brain out to make sure it had been put in the right way round.

The sun was bored, and sinking listlessly through a broad blanket of wet smog as Nigel was kicked out into the street. He rolled across the road, ricocheted from a wall, then skidded down an alley assisted by something that a large Alsatian had thoughtfully left on the pavement for just such an eventuality. Ultimately, he came to rest amongst a pile of cardboard boxes sitting by the back door of a kebab shop.

“What’s all this about then?” said a young lad who appeared from inside a detergent box. “This is my home that you’ve just landed in. It may not be much, but it’s all that I’ve got.”

“I’m sorry,” said Nigel in a shaking voice. He was still in shock from his somewhat hectic journey. “Believe me, I’m not altogether happy with the situation myself. My fate was in other hands: big, hairy hands with fingers like meat hooks.”

The young man looked at him suspiciously. He was only about nineteen, wearing tatty black jeans, a pair of trainers and two jumpers to stave off the cold. “Okay then,” he said, still sounding unsure. “We’ll overlook it this time.”

As he spoke the door behind them opened and a bucket full of kebab slops was poured on top of them.

“You’re just in time for dinner,” the youth said. “Come through into the dining room. My name’s Michael Albatross, but my friends call me Scabby, because of an unusual habit I have.”

“Okay Scabby,” said Nigel.

The youth smacked him hard in the mouth. “It’s Mr. Albatross to you, bum face.”

“Ouch,” said Nigel, spitting teeth. “All right. My name’s Nigel. I’m a grizzly bear, I don’t know whether you’d noticed?”

And so they ate. Nigel told Scabby of his sad story, and his fears for his parents. Scabby told him to stop whining, and contemplated skinning

Goldilocks and the Free Bears

him to make him into an overcoat. But gradually their friendship grew and as night fell they stopped hitting each other and settled down to sleep.

Some Things You Never Knew About Custard

Nigel had nightmares that night. He dreamed of his parents rotting in a damp and filthy prison. He dreamed of their torture. Then he dreamed that they were being visited by a walrus wearing water skis, which was trying to sell them double-glazing. He tried to shoo the animal away with a rolled up newspaper. “Go away!” he cried, “Go away!” But when he opened his mouth no sound emerged. The walrus just laughed and started to tell him a joke about a haddock.

Then that dream became a little too weird for him, so his mind turned to more pleasant thoughts. He fantasised that he was in a sauna with a busload of cheerleaders. Great billows of steam swirled around the room. One of the cheerleaders slowly stood up and began to peel the towel from around her wet thighs. Nigel peered through the mist as she slowly advanced towards him. Then the steam cleared, revealing a walrus in a mackintosh and fedora. It was carrying a suitcase under its flipper, which it opened with a deft movement, then gestured to the bangles and baubles inside.

“Pretty necklace for the missus?” it asked. “Genuine nine carat gold, no rubbish. Matching bracelet and earrings?”

Nigel jumped out of the sauna and ran, and ran, and ran. He hurtled down a bright corridor that seemed to stretch into forever. Walruses on either

side reached out to him, offering to sell him sets of encyclopaedias, revolutionary new vacuum cleaners and things for shaving jumpers. Nigel screamed: a long, dreadful howl. And he ran. And he ran. And he ran.

He was woken by someone shaking his shoulder. "Leave me alone," he mumbled. "I don't want to buy a bloody time-share apartment in the Algarve."

"Come on, wake up!" Scabby urged him. "This is important, probably."

"Go away," Nigel said, still half asleep. "I'm a lettuce and I want to talk to the Queen."

"Listen, arse-wipe, when I say wake up," said Scabby as he slapped him about the face, "I *mean* wake up!"

Nigel yelped and sat upright. Scabby was still slapping his face, so Nigel reached out and stayed his hands. "I had a terrible dream."

"Oh yeah?" said Scabby as he delivered a final punch in the mouth, just to ensure that Nigel was fully conscious.

"Yes," said Nigel, spitting teeth. "There were all these walruses trying to sell me things. I wonder if it means anything?"

Scabby sat back against the wall and thought about it. "I should think it probably does," he said with half a shrug. "Dreams are an important tool in understanding the psyche. Take my Uncle Barry: for years he had the recurring nightmare that he was hacking someone to pieces with an axe. When

we took him to a psychiatrist we found out he was a latent psychopath.”

“No kidding!” said Nigel, agog. “The psychiatrist was able to tell you that, just from a dream?”

“Not exactly,” Scabby admitted. “We sort of deduced it for ourselves after he hacked the psychiatrist to pieces with an axe.”

“So what do you think my dream means?” Nigel asked.

“Well I should think that’s obvious,” Scabby said.

“Yeah?”

“It means you’re a screaming lunatic,” said Scabby. “As mad as a bucket.” He leaned over and head-butted Nigel in the face. “Are you fully awake yet?”

“Yes,” Nigel said, wiping the blood off his chin. “Thanks, I’m wide awake - you can stop hitting me now. What’s the urgency anyway?”

Scabby seemed confused for a moment, then he remembered he had been hitting Nigel for a reason, rather than just for fun. “Oh yes. Your mum and dad - what do they look like?”

Nigel had the shredded memories of his nightmare still floating through his clouded mind. He had to stop and think for a moment. “Well, Dad’s quite tall, sort of distinguished looking, rather than old. Mum has a medium build, wears glasses, sort of fidgety.”

“Sort of big and hairy and smelly?” Scabby said.

“That’s them,” said Nigel. “Why do you ask?”

“I’ve just seen them being loaded into a van outside the police station,” Scabby told him.

Nigel jumped to his feet, rushed down the alleyway and skidded to a halt at the junction with the main street. There was a police van parked opposite, its engine running. A chill wind cut through Nigel’s damp clothing and shocked him into an unpleasant state of wakefulness. Even the puffballs of smoke from the van’s exhaust seemed to shiver as they emerged.

A jostling crowd of reporters was gathered around a police spokesman, their cameras clicking, their pencils scratching and their cassette recorders making whatever noise it is that cassette recorders usually make in these circumstances.

“Well, face-ache, looks like your folks have made the headlines,” Scabby said as he joined Nigel. “Probably be on the breakfast news. You must be very proud.”

“What’s happening?” Nigel asked. “Where’s my mum and dad?”

“I told you,” said Scabby. “They’ve just put them in the van.”

“Right, I’m going to go and get them,” Nigel said determinedly, and he suddenly lunged forward.

“Oy, come back!” Scabby shouted after him. “Who do you think you are - Batman?”

His words fell on deaf ears. Nigel was already charging headlong into the massed media. “Stop!” he shouted. “Let them go, they’re my parents.”

It was a convincing argument, but surprisingly the forces of law and order failed to see his reasoning. He thrust himself deeper into the crowd, clawing his way towards the van. Then two policemen stepped into his path: two big, brawny policemen, as hard as concrete and twice as thick. The kind that even buildings are afraid of.

“Let them go!” Nigel demanded fearsomely. He lowered his head and charged at them full pelt, but the policemen stood their ground.

What happened next was purely a matter of physics. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction - so Nigel did what every other self-respecting projectile did when it met an immovable object: he bounced straight off the policemen and was thrown back into the road.

“This is bloody Newton’s fault!” he said as his arse skidded across the tarmac for the second time in as many days. He rolled over three or four times, and finally came to rest at Scabby’s feet.

“I’m very impressed,” Scabby said. “I’m not quite sure what you were trying to achieve, but it looked pretty damn spectacular from where I was standing.”

Nigel rolled around on his back, groaning. “Am I still conscious,” he muttered feebly. “Everything’s still moving.”

“I could kick your teeth in, if it would help,” Scabby suggested.

Nigel climbed shakily to his feet. “How would that help?” he asked, puzzled.

Scabby shrugged. “Dunno,” he said. “But we could give it a go.”

Nigel turned as he heard the van begin to pull away. Mournfully he watched it through narrowed eyes as it slouched down the street.

“Now we’ll never find out where they’re being taken,” he said.

“Well, there is a way we might find out where they are,” Scabby said. “Follow me.”

Nigel brightened up. “You mean you’re going to help me?” he said. “You’re actually going to help me find my parents?”

Scabby pouted thoughtfully. “Well, to be completely honest, I don’t have a totally unblemished record when it comes to helping my fellows in need but, on this occasion, yes - I will help you.”

“Thank you,” Nigel breathed. “You know, you’re the first person that’s shown any sort of civility to me since I came to this city. I shall be eternally grateful.”

Scabby nodded, then kicked Nigel as hard as he could in the bollocks. He turned and began to saunter away.

Nigel screamed and doubled up in pain. Choking back the tears, he gasped, “What was that for?”

“Karma,” Scabby called over his shoulder. “Now, are you coming, or what?”

Mr. and Mrs. Bear knew nothing of their son’s whereabouts as they were unceremoniously thrown into the van. The doors were slammed and they were cut off from the outside world. They heard voices outside, spectral voices hanging thinly in the chilly morning air. Even those sank without trace once the engine had been started.

No one had told them where they were being taken at such an ungodly hour. They sat in silence, still shaking with a mix of fear and fury. The policeman who guarded them hardly even acknowledged their presence. He was wearing a helmet, shin-pads and a cricket box - after what had happened to his colleague he was taking no chances.

A mood of morose apprehension settled over them as the van bumped along, pitching them from side to side with every pothole in the road. Daddy Bear trained his eye on the small square of daylight that had been sliced into strips by the bars of the rear window. The grey clouds of morning were dispersing to some unknown place, to wait there until dusk. The sun was just beginning to peek over their departing backs.

It was a forbidden world. Daddy Bear drew his wife closer to him and such was his mood that he wondered if he would ever see that world again.

Inside the station, Detective Inspector Crump watched from the window as the van drove away. Crump would be glad to get this matter over with as soon as possible. He didn't like bears, never had done. He knew they were entitled to their rights just like anyone else, but in his view they were a menace to the public.

He sat down at his desk. Sergeant Pinewood was sitting opposite him, and together they were catching up on some important police work.

"Your go sir," said Pinewood.

"Actually Pinewood, I think you tiddled then instead of winked," Crump said. "What's the matter, don't you have tiddlywinks in Canada?"

Sergeant Pinewood took off his head and scratched his hat. "Indeed not," he said. "I must admit that I am moderately confused by this game."

"Look Sergeant, it's perfectly simple," said Crump. "You've got to tiddle your wink into the pot. That's all there is to it."

Sergeant Pinewood frowned. "Yes, but why sir? What is the point?"

"It's a game!" Crump snapped. "It would hardly be much of a contest if the object were to leave them where they are, now would it? It's a test of skill, a test of initiative."

"Oh I see," Pinewood said, unperturbed by his superior's outburst. "Wouldn't it show much more initiative to simply pick them up and place them in the pot, rather than all this widdling and tinkering? It

would be much quicker, and we could get on with something else.”

Crump brushed the tiddlywinks off his desk with one sweep of his arm. “You have no understanding of culture,” he said spitefully. “What do you people do at home when you’re not felling trees or making documentaries about beavers?”

Pinewood shrugged. He couldn’t think of anything, which seemed to prove the Inspector’s point. There was a knock at the door and a young constable entered.

“Ah, PC Bulge,” Inspector Crump said. “I don’t suppose you fancy a game of tiddlywinks?”

“Sorry sir,” said Bulge. “There’s a woman here who’d like to see you concerning a rather delicate matter.”

The woman barged in. She was thin and scrawny, and her clothes hung limply from her shoulders. You could have picked her up by the ankles and used her as a toothpick, if you didn’t mind getting a gobful of dandruff and a smack in the face. She stepped forward, carrying a brown paper bag, which she placed on the desk. She looked at the bag pointedly, and then at Detective Inspector Crump.

Crump leaned over and peered into the bag. Inside were the remains of a deep fried budgerigar. “No thank you,” the Inspector said. “I’ve just eaten.”

“My name is Mrs. Barrel, you may remember me,” the woman announced. “I came in last Tuesday to report that my budgie had been stolen. This morning I had a phone call from someone at this station saying that it had been recovered. Now obviously I was delighted, but when I came here to collect it, this is what I was given.” She picked up the bag and rustled it in front of Crump’s face.

“We aim to please,” said Crump, wearing his customer-friendly smile.

“But look at the state of it!” Mrs. Barrel cried.

Inspector Crump adopted his most condescending tone. “Well you must remember, Mrs. Barrel, your poor budgerigar has been through something of an ordeal. He’s bound to feel a bit under the weather.”

“Under the weather! He’s been cooked. I could try giving him a couple of Beechams Powders and tucking him up in bed for the afternoon but, to be perfectly honest, I don’t think it would do him a great deal of good.”

“Has he been off his food at all?”

“Well you could say that,” she answered sarcastically.

“Perhaps he needs a friend? A little budgie companion to share his life with.”

“One thing he doesn’t need right now is a little budgie companion to share his life with. He doesn’t need anything, except maybe salt and pepper. My budgie has been roasted, and I want to know who’s responsible!” She thumped the desk,

splitting the glass top and causing all of Crump's pens to leap into the air.

Inspector Crump swallowed hard. "Please Mrs. Barrel, calm down," he implored her. "I know this must be distressing for you, but the fact of the matter is that there's a particularly vicious budgie burglar on the prowl who kidnaps budgies, deep fries them and -"

"Bullshit!" said Mrs. Barrel. "When they phoned they said my budgie was in perfect working order. I can only assume, therefore, that someone here did it."

"In that case, Mrs. Barrel," Crump said, "there is only one explanation for the unfortunate condition of your bird. Obviously it has been subjected to a series of strenuous tests carried out in our forensic laboratories. Tests, I must stress, which are highly scientific and therefore difficult for you to understand. I do assure you that your budgie has been cooked in accordance with standard police procedure."

"But it's been half eaten!" Mrs. Barrel protested.

"I personally guarantee, Mrs. Barrel, that this is all part of the routine business of detecting crime. Our lab boys are all highly trained men, and I for one would not presume to question their reasons for nibbling your beloved bird."

"But surely," Mrs. Barrel spluttered, "this can't be right? Doesn't cooking a budgie constitute a criminal offence?"

Crump gave the matter some thought. "I think it's only actually illegal on bank holidays. Pinewood, pass me that book, will you."

Sergeant Pinewood snapped to attention. "I didn't think I was supposed to say anything in this part of the scene," he said.

"You don't, you just pass me the book," Crump told him.

"Oh I see," said Pinewood as he scanned the bookshelf. "Which book is it?"

Crump pointed ambiguously. "That big book of laws."

"Oh yes: *The Big Boys' Bumper Book Of British Justice.*" Pinewood passed it down and Crump leafed through it quickly.

"Hmm, now what have we here? Parking on double yellow lines... Third degree murder... Vomiting in a public place... Gobbing on a lollipop lady... No, nothing about cooking budgies."

Her argument stifled, Mrs. Barrel left the police station, still happy that she had at least had her say and made her feelings known. Two minutes later she fell into a refuse lorry and was crushed to a pulp.

"Tragic," said Crump as he watched from his office window.

The High Street was coming to life, prodded awake by the weak rays of the sun. Mr. Geranium, the florist, was busy opening his shop. He placed

buckets full of glorious daffodils on the pavement and lovingly arranged them to catch the eye.

Mr. Rump-Steak, the butcher, placed a large, ham-shaped notice board outside his shop, detailing all the wonderful bargains he had on offer for the day.

Mr. Condom, who owned the sex shop, put a giant tit and a cardboard cut-out of a naked woman on the pavement. Not many people would walk past without noticing Mr. Condom's shop, that much was certain.

A handful of early morning office workers clumped down the street, on the way to their early morning offices. None of them seemed to notice the two figures walking in the opposite direction. They seemed to blend in so well with their surroundings, in spite of the fact that one of them was a grizzly bear with a dead parrot on his shoulder. The two of them walked on past the florist's, ignorant of his magnificent display of daffodils. They went straight past the butcher's, uninterested in his bargains. They even walked right past the sex shop, not pausing to wonder at the possible purposes of the curiously shaped rubber objects in the window.

They finally stopped outside an electrical shop and peered into its dark display window, being entertained by their own reflections. After a moment a man stepped into the window. He was short and bony, with a patchy moustache that still had some of his breakfast nestling in its bristles.

His hair, thin and tufted, was raked over to one side, and he wore one of the most hysterical suits that Nigel had ever seen. It was a dull brown check, the trousers being far too large for him, and the jacket too small.

He fixed Scabby and Nigel with an indignant stare, held it for a moment, then forgot all about them and reached down to a socket on the floor. At the flick of a switch all the television sets in the window popped into life, and the salesman slipped back into the gloomy recesses of the shop.

Nigel turned to Scabby. "Why are we here?" he asked.

"Ah, now," Scabby began. "These things in the window here, these boxes with the magic moving pictures on them - these are what we call tel-e-vi-shun sets." He pronounced the word slowly and deliberately, emphasising each syllable.

"I know what a television is!" Nigel snapped angrily. "I've read about them in books. But I still don't know why we're here?"

"We're here because the news will be on in a minute," Scabby said.

"And there might be something on about my parents!" Nigel suddenly said, the penny having finally dropped.

"Ten out of ten, Sherlock," Scabby said. "Give yourself a badge."

Nigel pressed his nose against the window, staring at the nearest TV set. It showed a petite woman with a smile that was somehow bigger than

her head. She was sitting on a sofa and appeared to be interviewing two large cushions.

“I do foresee one problem,” he said. Scabby groaned. “We can’t actually hear what’s being said.”

“We don’t *actually* need to hear,” Scabby replied. “I can lip-read.”

“Go on!” said Nigel with a grin. “Can you really?”

“I can if you stop wittering and let me concentrate,” Scabby replied testily.

“What’s she saying now then?” asked Nigel.

Scabby shrugged. “Oh something about car maintenance, I think.”

Nigel raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Oh,” he said. “So why is she holding that grapefruit?”

“Well I don’t know!” snapped Scabby.

“A friend probably gave it to her,” Nigel suggested wickedly. “It’s a keepsake. It probably holds fond memories for her.”

Scabby wheeled to face him. “I don’t have to be here, you know!” he said angrily. “All I’m trying to do is help you out, you ungrateful little prick. If all you’re going to do is make facetious comments then I won’t bother.”

“All right, all right, I’m sorry,” Nigel appeased him, then the flickering light of the TV suddenly beckoned to him. “Look, they’re on!”

A picture of Nigel’s parents hung above a newsreader’s left shoulder. The picture suddenly

changed to show a reporter standing outside the three Bears' house.

"That's our house!" cried Nigel excitedly. "Look, my house is on the telly! So, what's he saying?"

Scabby moved his mouth in mute sympathy with the reporter's, but his face was fogged with doubt. Suddenly the reporter held up a grapefruit and the steely blue light of revelation shone on Scabby's face.

"He's talking about car maintenance!"

"Oh do me a favour!" Nigel said. "I thought you could lip read?"

"I can," said Scabby hesitantly, "but he's only got one lip."

"Eh?"

"Look!" Scabby pointed to the screen, and sure enough he was right. "He hasn't got a bottom lip. And the top one's all loose and flappy, how do you expect me to read that?"

"Right, let's stop prattling about, shall we?" Nigel said, and in a sudden burst of uncharacteristic decisiveness he dragged his companion into the shop. "We'd like to buy a television set please!" he announced to an empty showroom.

"What are you doing?" Scabby hissed in an urgent whisper.

"Using my initiative," Nigel replied. "Here he comes."

The man with the moustache and the comical suit appeared from on his hands and knees behind the counter.

“We’d like to buy a television set please,” Nigel repeated.

“Well sir, you’ve come to the right place,” the odd salesman replied. “This is a television shop.”

“Hell’s teeth, there’s a stroke of luck!” said Scabby.

The salesman tried to laugh nervously, but he was already painfully aware that he had lost all hope of creating a good impression.

“Which particular set were you interested in?” he said, dribbling down his shirtfront. The strange salesman walked around the counter towards them, and his knees made a curious creaking noise as he did so.

“Oh any,” said Nigel with a shrug.

“Any?” the creepy salesman asked, and at this point he paused, like a dog sniffing the air. Nigel noticed a long, curly hair protruding from his left nostril, which kept coiling and uncoiling to the rhythm of his breathing.

“Any,” Nigel repeated.

“Well this is the model we’re trying to shift at the moment,” said the wacky salesperson, and he gestured to the set like some demented air hostess. “It’s the Hitsuki Laser 4000. It has dual programme memory search, stereophonic Dolby noise reduction facilities and a contrast randomiser chip. It goes from nought to sixty in under five

seconds, it's fully air conditioned and it has a microprocessor that automatically switches the set off if it thinks that you're watching trash."

"Mmm, yummy," said Scabby.

"Has it got an 'on' switch?" asked Nigel.

The hysterically comical salesthing looked thoughtfully at the set and scratched his head. His fingers made a loud scraping noise across his scalp and great wads of hair became lodged under his nails. After a moment of careful consideration he reached forward and pressed a button. The air was thick with suspense... They waited... Then the television crackled and - kicking and screaming - a picture was born!

The salesperson took a pace back. "Superb definition," he said admiringly.

"Great," Nigel agreed, not finding it too difficult to contain his excitement. "Can you put the other channel on?"

"The other channel?" the gut-wrenchingly laughable salesman inquired.

"My friend never watches this channel," Scabby explained.

The salesman obliged, just in time for them to catch the end of the news. A smart girl with a crooked smile and dead eyes was summing up:

"...with a large selection of fresh fruit. Mr. and Mrs. Bear are to appear at the Old Bailey today on a charge of third degree murder. Detective Inspector Lionel Crump, who led the investigation, said that he deplores the wave of 'anti-bear' hysteria that is currently sweeping the country, but he

hopes that the Bears are sentenced to be eaten alive by a very large crocodile. Those were the headlines, now back to Sue."

"Thank you Julie," said the woman with the cushions. "Well I hope we don't get murdered by any grizzly bears today," she added wittily. "Now, for those of you who missed it ten minutes earlier, here's Russell Hobs with your stars for today."

A man in a horrid, florid jumper appeared. "Well my lovelies," he said, "it's a bad day for all you Sagittarians out there. You're going to be struck down by a debilitating disease, die an agonising death and be buried in a pauper's grave."

"Oh dear, that's bad news," Scabby said. "And I thought it was going to be my lucky day today."

"Excuse me," the zany salesman started to say, but he wasn't allowed to continue.

"Never mind about your horoscope," Nigel said. "My parents are on trial for their lives."

"Yes, um - " Once again the brain-haemorrhagingly farcical salesman tried to interrupt, but was defeated.

"I have the utmost faith in British Justice," said Scabby. "If they are innocent then they've got nothing to worry about. They *are* innocent, aren't they? The evidence does seem pretty substantial."

"Evidence?" snapped Nigel. "What evidence?"

"Well, being discovered with two dead policemen at their feet, for one thing," Scabby pointed out. "Some people might consider that pretty substantial."

“Rubbish!” said Nigel. “The whole thing’s a fix. What else can it be when the main witness hasn’t even been called to give evidence?”

“Who’s that?” Scabby asked.

“Well me, obviously,” said Nigel. “My parents have been made the scapegoats to quell this wave of anti-bear hysteria that’s been sweeping the country.”

Scabby shook his head. “You’ve lost me now. What wave of anti-bear hysteria is this?”

“Excuse me,” interrupted the vomit-inducingly ludicrous salesman. He turned to Nigel and fixed him with one piercing eye, while the other was busy reading a book. “Forgive me for asking,” he said, “but are you a grizzly bear?”

“I am,” said Nigel proudly.

Nigel landed on the pavement outside with a painful crack. Scabby casually walked out of the shop and stood over him. “Oh, that wave of anti-bear hysteria!” he said.

Nigel picked himself up and brushed himself down, in that order. “I’ve made up my mind,” he said. “I shall go to the trial and appeal to the jury.”

“You’ll appeal to no one dressed like that,” Scabby said. “They won’t let you in. You’ll need a disguise.”

“A disguise,” Nigel repeated thoughtfully, and a hundred crazy plots began to tumble through his head.

4 Electric Vegetables

The Old Bailey PLC was enjoying one of its busiest days in many months. Above its austere stonework facade was a large neon sign surrounded by flashing lights:

**TONITE ONLY
THE TWO BEARS
vs.
THE ENTIRE BRITISH JUDICIAL SYSTEM
The contest to be decided by two falls or an
admission**

A plush limousine drew up from which a haughty woman emerged, wearing several dead animals around her shoulders. She looked up at the big sign, sniffed the air, realised she was in the wrong place, then got back in the car and drove off.

Nigel watched the building from across the street. He was wearing a false beard and a long overcoat - and the parrot on his shoulder wore a moustache and a cloth-cap.

“Are you sure about this?” Scabby asked him. “I mean, what are you going to do once you get in there?”

“I’m going to walk into the courtroom and reveal myself,” said Nigel.

“I don’t think they’ll be quite ready for that.”

“I’m going to tell them exactly what happened,” Nigel went on to explain. “The truth, the whole truth and all that jiggy-pokery.”

“And you think that they’ll believe you?” Scabby asked.

“They’ll have to,” said Nigel. “I’m the key witness.”

With that he crossed the road and marched up to a man who looked vaguely official. “Hello,” he announced. “My name is Rudyard Svenson and I am a cotton wool salesman from Oslo, and not a grizzly bear at all. Could you tell me where Mr. and Mrs. Bear will be appearing today?”

The official consulted a clipboard, then in a voice that sounded like it needed oiling he told him that the Bears would be in Centre Court. Nigel thanked him in Norwegian and gave him a three-month-old Polo mint, which he assured him was a valuable piece of Norwegian currency, worth approximately fifty pounds. Then he bought a punnet of strawberries and an ice cream and went into court.

“Silence in court!” bellowed Justice Frog. “Silence in court, I say!” He banged a black pudding three times on his block. “Who’s pinched my gravel?”

The courtroom was filled with a childish babble.

“Order! Order!” cried the judge.

The courtroom fell into silence, save for one man sitting in the public gallery next to Nigel, who

shouted at the top of his voice: “Egg and chips twice please!”

“Who said that?” demanded Justice Frog.

The man stood up. He was dressed in a tatty striped blazer and a straw boater, and he had a walking cane hooked over his arm. “I did, your Honour,” he said proudly. “Eric Scum, professional entertainer: available for panto, game shows and personal appearances.”

“Mr. Scum, I have served in this court for forty years,” said Justice Frog soberly - as sober as a judge, in fact. “And every day,” he continued, “for forty years, I have heard that very same joke. I therefore hold you in contempt of court and sentence you to be taken out and shot through the head at close range.”

Two policemen dragged Mr. Scum outside, screaming.

“Well that’s got us off to a good start,” said Justice Frog, rubbing his hands together. “Now, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, members of the press and of the public, I’d just like to make one thing clear. I may be a hundred and sixty but that doesn’t mean I’m a senile old fool who doesn’t know what’s hip and funky, or how to get down and get into the groove like a real hot funk machine, do I make myself clear?”

He reached behind him and switched on a cassette player, then started to rap to the beat the emerged:

*“Listen kids, my name is Frog,
I’m a real cool cat, a real top dog,
I can move like an eel and squeal like a hog,
And you’ll get down and groove with me
baby or I’ll send you to prison for an
extremely long time.”*

“Banging,” said Justice Frog, switching off the machine. “You watch, that’ll be number one this Christmas. Needs a bit of work, maybe. Right, let’s get on with it.”

A man with a glistening bald head and spangly suit appeared from nowhere and grabbed a microphone that hung from the ceiling.

“Good evening, Thang-yew, thang-yew. This is to be a nine round contest. In the blue corner, the titleholder, the entire British Judicial System! And in the red corner, the challengers: two fucking great grizzly bears!”

A big girl in a leotard walked past holding a card on which was displayed the legend: ‘Round One’.

“Now, I want a good clean fight,” said the bald man. “No holding, no punching below the belt and no last minute witnesses. Seconds away, round one!” He walked off, stage left, and locked himself in a cupboard.

Boris Karlof, acting for the prosecution, immediately stood up, though initially no one noticed, as he was only four feet tall. “As my first

witness I should like to call the defendant, Mr. Bear, to the stand.”

“Call Mr. Bear!” shouted an usher at the rear of the court.

“Call Mr. Bear!” shouted an usher outside in the corridor.

“Call Mr. Bear!” shouted an usher standing outside the building.

“Call Mr. Bear,” shouted an usher standing in the middle of a shopping centre in Coventry.

“There’s no need to shout,” said Daddy Bear, who was sitting in the front row. “I’m not deaf.” He took the stand.

“Will you please place your hand on the Bible and read from the card,” said Mr. Karlov, who was now spelt differently.

“This isn’t a Bible,” protested Daddy Bear. “It’s the 1974 Top of the Pops Christmas Annual.”

“Just read from the card,” Justice Frog boomed, doing his impression of a high-ranking and influential judge.

“All right,” Daddy Bear said, and he cleared his throat. “Dear Steve, hope the party goes well. Luv Jim.”

“Thank you Mr. Bear,” said Mr. Karloff. He paced in front of the witness box, his hands on his lapels, wondering why no one could spell his name right. “I want to take you back to the morning of the third of October.”

“Yesterday?” asked Daddy Bear.

“That is correct,” said Mr. Carlov. “I’m going to ask you a question now, and I want you to think about it very carefully before you answer... Did you kill those two policemen?”

“No!” said Daddy Bear.

“Liar!” screamed Mr. Karllof. He addressed the judge. “That concludes the case for the prosecution, your honour.”

“Your witness, Mr. Dickens,” said Justice Frog.

Charles Dickens, for the defence, stood up nervously. “Your honour,” he acknowledged with a slight bow of the head, and he tentatively approached the witness box. “You are Mr. G. Bear of 142 Elm Tree Avenue, Enchanted Forest, London, are you not?”

“We know who he is,” said Justice Frog.

“With respect sir,” began Mr. Dickens tremulously, “we haven’t yet formally established the defendant’s identity.”

“He’s a fucking grizzly bear, isn’t he?” snapped Justice Frog. “What more do you need to know? Carry on.”

Reluctantly Mr. Dickens continued. “Mr. Bear, could you tell the court where you were at approximately eleven o’clock on the morning of the third of October?”

“I was at the park,” said Daddy Bear, “fishing my son out of the pond.”

“Do you have any witnesses?”

Daddy Bear thought about it. “No I haven’t,” he said. “There was no one else there.”

“I see,” said Mr. Dickens, and he paused theatrically before going on. “Well, I put it to you, Mr. Bear, that at eleven o’clock yesterday morning you were not at the park as you claim, but were in fact at home, mutilating two cuddly policemen!”

“That’s not true!” protested Daddy Bear. “I was in the park... Just a minute, I thought you were supposed to be on my side?”

Mr. Dickens looked puzzled. “Am I?” he asked, glancing helplessly at the judge.

Justice Frog sighed as he scowled at him. “Yes Mr. Dickens,” he said wearily. “It is usual, in these circumstances, that someone speaks on behalf of the accused.”

Mr Dickens shook his head, clearly puzzled by this new development. “Your honour,” he said, “are you quite sure about this?”

“Quite sure,” said Justice Frog.

“It just seems such an odd way of going about it,” said Mr Dickens.

“Well that’s how they do it on the telly,” said Justice Frog, sounding like a man who knew his onions.

“But it’s such a pity,” Mr. Dickens said with an edge of disappointment in his voice. “I’ve got a brilliant case planned for the prosecution. What a shame. This is my first day, you see. I don’t suppose you’d let me go ahead and present my case anyway? I’ve put so much work into it.”

“Very well,” said Justice Frog. “The sooner this case is over, the sooner I can go and sit in the park and eat my Pot Noodle. Call your next witness.”

“I wish to call Detective Inspector Lionel Crump,” announced Mr. Dickens.

“Call Detective Inspector Lionel Crump!” shouted the usher at the back of the court.

“Call Detective Inspector Lionel Crump!” shouted the usher outside in the corridor.

“All right, all right!” said Inspector Crump, who was also sitting in the front row. “We’ve done that joke already.” He took the stand and placed his hand on the book. “I swear by Almighty God that the evidence I give is the truth, the whole truth, but that I may, if I feel it to be necessary, tart it up a bit so that it sounds more incriminating.”

“Inspector Crump,” Mr. Dickens began, “I wonder if you could tell the court what state Mr. and Mrs. Bear were in when you first encountered them?”

“I certainly can folks,” said Crump, playing to the public gallery. “They both smelt a bit, and Mr. Bear in particular had some sort of cruddy bits around his - ”

“No, you misunderstand,” Mr. Dickens interrupted him. “I was referring to their state of mind.”

“Oh, I see,” said Crump, grinning. “Well they were both very excited and a bit difficult, all in all. If I was looking for one word to describe their

state of mind, I think ‘murderous’ would be an awfully good choice.”

“Thank you,” said Mr. Dickens. “I believe you’ve had forensic experts examining the scene of the crime?”

“That’s right,” Crump said. “They’ve taken every stick of furniture from the Bears’ home, cut it into inch square cubes and boiled it.”

“I see.” Mr. Dickens nodded. “And what has been discovered as a result of this fascinating exercise?”

“Absolutely nothing at all,” Crump replied.

Justice Frog was becoming restless. “Hasn’t this gone on long enough?” he asked. “Surely we’ve heard enough to string to beggars up by now?”

“We haven’t called Mrs. Bear to the stand yet,” protested Mr. Dickens, who was just starting to enjoy himself. “And there’s a tree outside - ”

“No, we’ve heard all we need to,” Justice Frog insisted, and he proceeded to sum up. “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, blah, blah, blah, blah. You’ve heard all the evidence... Well that’s a bit of a fib actually, but let’s just pretend that you have. Now then, I must remind you that it is your duty to consider the facts of this case with complete impartiality, regardless of the fact that these people are the scum of the earth.”

“Wait!” The voice cracked like a pistol-shot across the spellbound courtroom. Nigel Bear was standing in the public gallery, his arms held aloft. “Wait,” he repeated. “I have something to say!”

Justice Frog squinted at him curiously. “What can a Norwegian cotton wool salesman from Oslo possibly have to say in relation to this case?”

“Aha!” said Nigel as he whipped off his ingenious disguise. “For I am not a cotton wool salesman from Oslo at all. I am Nigel Bear! and I tell you that my parents did not kill those two policemen.”

“Is that a fact?” Justice Frog humoured him, then to the usher: “Get him out of here!”

Mr. and Mrs. Bear watched forlornly as their son was dragged out. “It’s true,” Daddy Bear protested. “We’re innocent. This trial has been a sham!”

“Innocent, Mr. Bear?” scoffed Justice Frog. “I find that most unlikely. The day you are pronounced not guilty will be the day the Loch Ness Monster wins the Grand National. Now sit down and shut up.” By now Justice Frog had become very impatient indeed - in fact he had already put his coat on. “Have you reached a verdict?” he asked the jury.

The members of the jury all nodded, then each of them held up a card with a number on it.

Justice Frog read them from left to right. “Five point four, five point seven, five point six, five point seven. Oh dear, Mr. and Mrs. Bear, you haven’t got a very good score at all.” He thrust his hand deep into his coat pocket and pulled out a black handkerchief, which he placed on his head.

“I would like to sentence you to be grilled lightly, stuffed with garlic and served with vegetables,” he said. “But unfortunately I see from my *Big Boys’ Bumper Book Of British Justice* that such a form of punishment is not admissible. I therefore have no option but to inform you that you are to be taken from this court to a place of execution where you will be eaten alive by a very large crocodile.

“Thank you very much, and goodnight,” he added to thunderous applause, then rushed off before he missed the last bus.

A single baying howl sounded outside the main entrance. Within moments the cry was repeated a thousandfold as it was taken up by the eager pack of journalists waiting outside the building, hungry for a story. They pawed the ground, jostled and pushed as they competed for a place at the front of the mob. Then their quarry emerged, the air turned blood red and with manic professionalism the newsmen tore at the exposed flesh.

“Eric Stump, Daily Mail,” a man announced. “Can I ask if you’re happy with the verdict, Inspector Crump?”

“Quite happy, thank you very much,” the Inspector replied as a sprinkling of flashlights went off in his face.

“I’m not,” Daddy Bear mumbled as he and his wife bumbled blindly along. Blankets had been thrown over their heads ‘to protect them from

undue attention' so Crump had said. Mummy Bear had already walked into three walls and a tea trolley, so if this was what Crump meant by protection she dreaded when the real aggro' would start.

"Derek Fart, Sunday Express," called another reporter. "Don't you think the sentence was a little too lenient?"

"Well, obviously it's not my place to question the judge's decision," said Crump as he hustled past them. "But yes, I do feel that being eaten alive by a very large crocodile is far too good for these villains."

"Gerald Slime, Sunday Sport," another voice said. "Can we see Mrs. Bear's tits?"

Crump, ignoring the question, had almost reached the waiting van, and the reporters began to panic. Their questions started coming thick and fast.

"Jane Smug, Auto Express," shouted one. "What brand of oil does Mr. Bear use?"

"Tracy Lump, Just Seventeen. What is Mrs. Bear's favourite pop group?"

"Percy Squint, Bomb Disposal Monthly. Is it the red wire or the blue wire?"

"Bryan Willy, Angling Times. Has Mr. Bear ever held a conversation with a trout? I know I have. His name was Simon and he kept me talking for hours about thermodynamics."

"Gentlemen please," said Crump. He raised his voice above the babble. "Quiet please! I'm afraid I

can't answer any more of your questions at the moment as we have a rather pressing engagement with a large reptile. You may be interested to know that my book, *How I Single-Handedly Halved The Crime Rate In The South Of England*, will be available on Monday, published by Krap Books and priced ludicrously expensive."

"Let my parents go!" shouted a new voice defiantly. Inspector Crump looked up and saw Nigel. He had climbed up onto the bronze statue of a middle-aged man wearing a raincoat. At least he had thought it was a statue at the time. It turned out to be just a man standing very still at a bus stop.

"Power to the people!" shouted Nigel. "Viva La Grizzly! Yeah, all that stuff!"

"Oh, not you again," said Crump in a tired voice.

"It's a grizzly bear!" shouted one of the pressmen, with a shriek of alarm. "And it's loose!"

"Quick, someone kill it," shouted a woman, "before it explodes and destroys us all!"

A wave of panic passed rapidly over the assembled crowd. "Explodes?" cried one reporter. "Do bears explode?"

"Probably," replied another, wielding a microphone like a club. "Best be on the safe side and stamp its brains out before it has a chance."

The crowd advanced. Nigel found himself backed into a corner, a semi-circle of journalists tightening around him like a noose around his

neck. This was it. This was the end. Well at least he was going to die in battle, albeit a somewhat one-sided one. He closed his eyes and kissed his parrot goodbye. Then suddenly he had an idea.

“Look behind you, there’s a giant hamster about to eat you all!” he shouted in Russian.

The journalists all looked behind them and Nigel, his ‘giant hamster’ ploy having worked yet again, beat a hasty retreat.

A tired and much disheartened young bear returned to the alley behind the kebab shop as the afternoon drew to a close. Scabby was already there, standing and watching forlornly as two dustmen dismantled his home piece by piece and threw it into the back of their truck.

“They’ve been found guilty,” Nigel gasped, almost choking on his own breath.

Scabby showed little interest. “That’s my bedroom,” he said as a *Yummy Cheesy Snax* box was tossed down the gullet of the ravenous crusher. “I’d just decorated that.”

“They’re going to be eaten by a crocodile!”

The rubbish truck growled fearsomely, devoured the last of Scabby’s home, belched and drove away. “This happens every week,” Scabby said. “Just as I get the place looking right they take it away and I have to start all over again.”

“I don’t give a damn!” Nigel said angrily. “My parents are about to be eaten by a crocodile and all you can do is babble on about a few cardboard

boxes. Where I come from people at least show some concern when someone they know is about to be eaten by an eight foot reptile.”

“Well, won’t they get a chance to appeal?” Scabby asked.

“Not in this life,” said Nigel. “You should have seen the look on those people’s faces. It was like a lynch mob. No, it’s up to us now. We’ve got to do something.”

“Oh be realistic,” Scabby replied testily. “Short of going out and buying up all the crocodiles in the country there’s not a lot that either of us can do about it.” He shrugged. “Just try not to get so upset about it.”

“Don’t get upset?” said Nigel. “I know what this is - you think they’re guilty, don’t you?”

“To be honest,” Scabby said, “I neither know nor care. Ever since I met you I’ve been trying to help you out, and I haven’t received so much as a single word of thanks. So from now on you can fend for yourself, you ungrateful little prick.” He picked up a crushed matchbox, which was all that remained of his home, and left before Nigel had time to contemplate a reply.

“Well it’s good to know that I can count on your support!” Nigel shouted after him. Then, once he was well out of earshot, he added, “Dickhead!”

Nigel fell back against a wall and gradually slipped down until he was sitting on the cold pavement. The breeze was constant and cutting,

and it blew muddy sweet wrappers and cigarette packets into his face. He caught a sheet of newspaper as it glided past and stuffed it beneath his coat to keep out the chill.

The air itself was becoming dark and it screened the sun like a silk curtain obscures a flickering candle. As the cold invaded Nigel's bones a listless melancholia began to set in. His mind wandered, turning over the events of the last couple of days until his memories were confused and out of sequence. Suddenly he recalled what Scabby had said to him just before he had left, and Nigel was struck by an idea. With new vigour he jumped to his feet and headed for the High Street before the shops shut.

“Gordon?” said Mummy Bear in a timid voice. The van was in darkness, save for the narrow bands of grey sunlight that rippled along the floor.

“Gordon?” she repeated, her voice dying to a croak in her throat.

Daddy Bear put his arm around her. He breathed deeply, then spoke in a soft voice. “It's all right,” he said. “Everything is all right.”

She put her head on his chest, her face distraught. A tear slowly collected at the corner of her eye. It hung like a dewdrop, then burst and ran down the bridge of her nose. “I don't want to be eaten by a crocodile,” she said quietly.

Daddy Bear gently stroked the back of her head, but there was nothing he could say or do to make a difference.

Then the van stopped abruptly. There was a burst of shouting outside and the steel wall chimed, as if struck by a heavy object. Daddy Bear held onto his wife tightly as the two armed escorts accompanying them moved to the rear. Suddenly the doors were torn open from the outside. The guards were pulled out onto the tarmac, out of sight, and whatever fate befell them there would ever be a matter of conjecture for Daddy Bear and his wife.

Moments later two raiders wearing Balaclavas leaped into the back of the van, dragged the Bears outside and began to bustle them down a side street. Daddy Bear resisted, forcing them to stop. "Hang on, what's all this about?" he demanded. "What's going on?"

"You're being rescued, you fool!" one of them said. "If we'd known you weren't so keen on the idea we wouldn't have bothered. Now are you coming or not?"

"Sounds good to me," said Mummy Bear, and she dragged all four of them onwards.

They stopped in a small grey square that boasted a fountain full of litter and green scum, and was bordered by smoke-stifled bedsits. "Here we must part company," said one of their rescuers. They both removed their Balaclavas. One was a man, about twenty, and going prematurely bald.

The other, was a girl of about the same age, who had dark hair, cropped short save for three long pigtailed that hung down her back.

There's no particular reason why I should pay so much attention to their *coiffure*, it's just that it helps to flesh out two otherwise rather bland incidental characters.

"Who are you?" asked Daddy Bear, feeling quite disappointed that it wasn't the Lone Ranger and Tonto as he'd first suspected.

"We're members of the Animal Liberation Front," said the girl.

"Oh that's nice," Mummy Bear said. "I've always thought that it's terribly important for young people to have a hobby."

The girl gave her a shove. "Well go on then," she said. "Run to freedom! Shoo! Shoo! Go and take a dump in the park, or whatever it is that grizzly bears usually do."

The young man glanced furtively around and dug his comrade in the ribs. "Quickly, we've got to get away from here," he said. "Somebody might have seen us."

The two of them donned their Balaclavas and ran off, straight into a wall. They picked themselves up, adjusted their headgear and managed to reach the main road before they were run over by a road sweeper.

"You'd have thought they'd have given us passports and a new identity," said Daddy Bear.

“Don’t be so ungrateful,” Mummy Bear said. “They didn’t have to rescue us, you know. They could quite easily have stayed at home and watched *Friends* instead. Anyway, we’d better decide what we’re going to do next.”

Daddy Bear looked around him. The grey walls of the buildings were starting to blend in with the murky sky. Warm lights flickering in nearby windows made him feel all the more exposed. “I think our most immediate concern is to find somewhere to spend the night,” he said. “Then in the morning we’ll head north.”

“Home!” cried Mummy Bear. “Back to our son.”

“We’ll have to be very careful,” Daddy Bear said thoughtfully. “They’re bound to be watching the house.”

“Oh I do hope Nigel managed to get home okay,” said Mummy Bear. “He’s never been left on his own before.”

“I’m sure there’s no need to worry,” Daddy Bear reassured her. “I know that Nigel isn’t exactly carrying a full load, but he’s not the type to do anything really stupid.”

“I want to buy a crocodile!” announced Nigel to the shopkeeper.

“I beg your pardon?” queried the shopkeeper.

“I want to buy a crocodile,” repeated Nigel. “This is a crocodile shop, isn’t it?”

“No sir,” said the shopkeeper. “This is an egg whisk shop. We specialise in the finest, hand-tooled egg whisks made with Swiss precision... No crocodiles.”

Nigel frowned at him. “But the sign outside said *Wainwright’s Crocodiles*.”

“Does it really?” asked the shopkeeper with a puzzled expression. He walked to the front of the shop, opened the door and peered up at the sign. “Oh my word! Yes, you’re quite right,” he said. “It does say that. I must be in the wrong shop.” And he left.

Another shopkeeper appeared from the rear of the shop. “Hello sir, sorry to keep you waiting. Can I help you? My name is Mr. Wainwright.”

“I want to buy a crocodile,” said Nigel for the third time.

“Well you’ve come to the right place,” said Mr. Wainwright. “This is a crocodile shop. We specialise in the finest, hand-tooled crocodiles, made with Swiss precision.”

“Right,” said Nigel. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“Yes, Wainwright’s have been dealing in crocodiles for four hundred years. We’ve been official suppliers to the crown since Queen Victoria. In fact, to tell you the truth, we’ve got a bit of a monopoly on the market. We’re the only suppliers of crocodiles in the country. You’d be hard pushed to get one anywhere else. You’d have

to get one from Germany by mail order, and that could take months.”

“Is that a fact?” asked Nigel.

“It is indeed a fact,” said Mr. Wainwright. “I wouldn’t stoop to telling porkies sir. Here, have a look at this.” He heaved an eight foot crocodile onto the counter. “Look at the workmanship in that,” he said.

“It doesn’t appear to be moving very much,” Nigel commented.

“Well of course not,” said Mr. Wainwright. “It’s drugged.”

“Drugged?”

“That’s right,” said Mr. Wainwright, and he prodded the slumbering creature to demonstrate the fact. “After all, you don’t want a bloody great crocodile leaping on people all the time, do you? If this crocodile wasn’t drugged it would have your arm off before you could say *Maisy Wellington*.”

“*Maisy* who?” Nigel asked.

“It doesn’t matter sir, she’s just a casual acquaintance of mine,” Wainwright said. “Now, was it just the one crocodile you were wanting sir? It works out cheaper if you buy a set of six.”

“Actually I want quite a few,” said Nigel in a low voice as he glanced furtively around the shop. “If that’s possible?”

Mr. Wainwright watched him suspiciously. “Certainly,” he said guardedly. “You are over eighteen, I take it?”

“I am,” Nigel lied.

“Then there’s no problem at all sir,” Wainwright said, satisfied that all was well. “How many crocodiles would you like, exactly?”

Nigel shrugged. “How many have you got, exactly?” he asked.

“Well, as I said, we are the country’s main supplier,” Mr. Wainwright said. “And at the moment we have exactly four hundred and twelve crocodiles in stock.”

“That’s uncanny!” Nigel exclaimed. “Because I happen to want exactly four hundred and twelve crocodiles. I’ll take the lot please, Mr. Crocodile Salesperson.”

“That’s an awful lot of crocodiles,” Mr. Wainwright said.

“Well, I’m really into crocodiles,” Nigel explained. “However, I do have one teensy-weensy problem - I only have twenty pence.”

“Only twenty pence, eh?” Mr. Wainwright pondered. “Well crocodiles don’t go cheap you know.”

“I should hope they don’t,” said Nigel. “Do you think I could have them on hire purchase?” he asked.

“Four hundred crocodiles on H.P.?” Mr. Wainwright said. “You’ve got a bit of a sauce.”

Nigel fluttered his eyelashes at him, and Mr. Wainwright agreed. He placed a sheet of blank paper on the counter, pointed to the bottom of it and asked Nigel to sign. Nigel signed Mr. Wainwright’s finger. Mr. Wainwright thanked him,

then asked him to sign the paper. "Right. I'll just go and fetch your crocodiles," he said.

"Could you wrap them up for me please?" Nigel called after him. "And make it snappy!"

Ten minutes later, Nigel left the shop with a carrier bag brimming with four hundred and twelve individually wrapped crocodiles that had been made snappy. As he went out, two men entered.

"Good evening sirs," said Mr. Wainwright amiably. "You've just caught me, I was about to close for the day."

"Allow me to introduce myself," said the tall, poker-faced man with the restless hands. "I'm the Lord High Executioner, and this is my assistant, the Slightly Lower Executioner."

"Hello," said the Slightly Lower Executioner. "Pleased to meet you."

"And I am most pleased to meet you too, sirs," Wainwright said. "How may I be of assistance?"

"We would like to purchase one of your crocodiles please," the Lord High Executioner said. "You can put it on the account."

Mr. Wainwright sighed a deep, regretful sigh. "And I would dearly love to sell you one sir," he said. "Unfortunately I must disappoint you. The hairy gentleman that just left has just bought my entire stock."

The Lord High Executioner looked worried and turned to his assistant. "This would seem to present us with a bit of a problem," he said.

“A bit of a problem. Yes,” the Slightly Lower Executioner repeated.

“This is the first time anyone has been sentenced to be eaten by a crocodile in two hundred years, and we haven’t got a crocodile.”

“Yes, a bit of a problem,” said the Slightly Lower Executioner. “Couldn’t we use an alligator?” he suggested helpfully.

The Lord High Executioner shook his head. “Would that we could, my fine and upstanding colleague. But no, the judge specifically said a crocodile. Besides which, I’m a perfectionist and I will not stoop to using inferior materials.”

“A bit of a problem,” said the Slightly Lower Executioner. “No crocodiles. Bad news. We’re in the doo-doo.”

The Lord High Executioner thought for a moment, eventually realising there was only one solution. “Well, I’m afraid there’s only one thing for it,” he said, his voice heavy with disappointment. “We’ll just have to send off to Germany for one, but that could take months.”

“Doo-doo,” said the Slightly Lower Executioner, and all present agreed.

A History of Sponge in Medieval Europe

Shop fronts were dark and empty, shutters were drawn. The torrent of rush hour traffic had ebbed and dwindled to a trickle. Evening was drawing in and as the sky turned from deep orange to purple, and then to black, the party people began to emerge: people painted in bright colours and reeking of expensive perfume and aftershave. They swarmed towards the bright lights and the music; the 'in' places; the places to see and be seen.

Nigel sat on a wall and watched them for a while as they stumbled happily from one club to the next. He was in quite a happy mood himself. A carrier bag sat on the wall next to him and if you listened carefully you could just hear the gentle purr of exactly four hundred and twelve drugged crocodiles snoring their snouts off. It felt good to have done something positive, to have taken a stand, but Nigel realised that his little act of sabotage was only a temporary measure. The powers that be would soon find more crocodiles and the execution of Nigel's parents would go ahead as planned. Nigel had bought himself a little time to consider his next move - unaware that his mother and father were already at liberty.

As he watched the crowds come and go, a single figure suddenly caught his eye. He blinked and leaned forward. Across the road a podgy little girl with blond curls was weaving her way through

the drunken hoards of happy idiots. Nigel watched her as she shouted at people and pushed them aside in order to get through.

There was no doubt about it: this was most certainly the same girl they had found in Nigel's bed; the very girl who had brought them all this trouble in the first place. Nigel picked up his bag of crocodiles and set off in pursuit of her.

Phlegm's was the kind of night-club that made every effort to attract a particularly select crowd: pop stars, high-fliers, fashion icons, and anyone else who didn't mind paying six and a half quid for a glass of Pernod with an umbrella in it. A line of hopeful punters shuffled warily through the entrance while huge bouncers stood to one side, turning people away at random, thus fostering the club's reputation for exclusivity.

"Hold it there sonny," one of the bouncers said as he stopped a young man dressed in several jumpers and a dirty overcoat. "We don't need your sort in here."

"I beg your pardon?" one Michael 'Scabby' Albatross replied indignantly. He took a step back and feigned offence. The bouncer was at least six feet wide and it was necessary for Scabby to be some distance from him in order to fit him into his field of vision. "I'll have you know that I'm an eccentric millionaire."

"Oh, is that right?" the bouncer replied, clearly not believing a word.

“Too right,” said Scabby. “I’ve got my own airline, you know. And my own chain of burger bars. In fact I probably own this nightclub as well. Trouble is I own so much stuff that I find it difficult to keep track of it all.”

The bouncer grinned and cracked his knuckles. “You know, you’re the eleventh millionaire I’ve met tonight,” he said. He shook his head, and muttered, “And they say there’s a recession on.”

“Ah well, we’re on a day trip, you see,” Scabby said. “We belong to a special millionaires club. It’s very exclusive. So, how about letting me in?”

“How about I smash your stupid face off?” the bouncer countered.

Scabby looked at him uncertainly from the corner of his eye. “Is that a no?” he asked.

“That’s a no,” the bouncer confirmed, and he pushed Scabby backwards, sending him tumbling into the street.

The line started to move again. The bouncer let a few more people through before he stopped a grey-haired old man wearing a baseball cap and lycra running shorts.

“Hey what’s going down dude?” the old man asked politely.

“Are you over eighteen?” the bouncer wanted to know.

“Chill out man,” said the old guy. “I’m eighty-four, er, cat.”

“That’s all very well,” said the bouncer. “But are you over eighteen?”

“Take it easy dude,” the old man said. “All I want to do is rap with my homeboys and hang out with the posse, or something.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you for some proof of your age,” the bouncer said. “Have you got any identification on you?”

The old man handed over his bus pass. The bouncer examined it carefully. “This doesn’t look very much like you,” he said, pointing to the photo.

“I didn’t have my teeth in when it was taken,” the old boy explained.

The bouncer shook his head. “No sorry, you’re not coming in. Sling yer hook.”

The old guy trudged away disappointedly and the bouncer turned to the next person in the queue.

“Plumber!” announced Scabby, holding up a sink plunger and waving it under his nose. “Emergency drain operation.” He tried to squeeze past.

“Funny that,” the bouncer said. “We’ve also had half a dozen plumbers this evening.” The bouncer swung him around and propelled him back out into the street.

Scabby landed on his backside in the middle of the road. “That’s no way to treat a tradesman,” he mumbled.

A shadow fell over him. Scabby squinted up at the dark silhouette as it reached out towards him.

He took the outstretched paw and the figure pulled him to his feet.

“Oh,” Scabby said disappointedly once he was upright. “It’s you. I’d hoped you would have been dead by now.”

“Oh that’s nice,” Nigel said. “It’s good to see you too.”

“What are you doing here?” Scabby asked.

“I was following a girl,” said Nigel. “She went into that office block down there.”

“Following a girl, were you?” Scabby said. “You can get into a lot of trouble like that, you know. This time next year you’ll be stealing underwear from washing lines.”

“No, listen, it was the girl from our house,” said Nigel. “You know, the little fat girl that I found in my bed?”

Scabby looked down the street. “And you say she went in there?” he asked, indicating the dark office building silhouetted against the smoggy, sodium-lit sky. “That building is the headquarters Woolfe Enterprises,” he said.

“Who?”

“B.B. Woolfe,” Scabby explained. “He’s a big property developer. He owns half this borough. You must have heard of B.B. Woolfe?”

Nigel shook his head. “No,” he said. “But he sounds worthy of investigation.”

“I know somebody who used to work for him,” Scabby said. “His office is on the top floor. They say he likes to lean out of the window and gob on

people walking by in the street below.” Scabby giggled to himself. “God, I wish I could be that cool.”

“Right,” Nigel said. “You can help me break in.”

“You what?” Scabby replied.

“We’re going to break in and have a look around,” Nigel said.

“Not me matey,” said Scabby. “I’m going to have another go and trying to get into *Phlegms*.” He leaned towards Nigel and spoke in a low voice. “I’ve heard that they serve a drink in there called a ‘Bacardi Boomerang’.”

“Oh,” said Nigel, who wasn’t particularly interested. “And it’s supposed to be quite good, is it?”

“Good?” said Scabby. “It’s like getting your tackle shut in a revolving door by Kylie Minogue.”

“Ah, I see,” said Nigel, who was none the wiser. “Oh look, they’re never going to let you into that club. Come on, help me to break into Woolfe’s office.”

“You must be crazy,” said Scabby. “Or drunk. That’s it, you’ve been drinking.”

“Me?” said Nigel. “I haven’t touched a drop!”

“A likely story,” said Scabby. “Nobody who is even remotely sober would ever dream of breaking into B.B. Woolfe’s office. You must be smashed out of your tiny mind!”

Nigel stood erect and looked at him rather haughtily. When he spoke it was with exaggerated

ire. "I most certainly am not drunk!" he protested. "Look, would I be able to do this if I was drunk?"

He leapt onto a wall and carefully began to walk its length. Then, about halfway along, he missed his footing and fell into a yellow plastic bin that was hanging on a lamppost. He breathed heavily, muttered something of little consequence to himself, then climbed out.

"Well," he said as he brushed soggy cigarette ends and cold chips out of his fur. "I think that proves my point. If I was drunk I would have missed that bin entirely."

There was a certain logic to that, thought Scabby. What was plain was that Nigel wasn't going to stop pestering him. "All right, so I'll help you," he said. "I think you're as mad as a bucket, but you're obviously not going to take no for an answer."

Sneaking around the back of the building they were able to reach the fire escape. Had they known at the time that it was only fixed to the wall with three screws and a knob of chewing gum at the top they might have thought twice about it, but luckily they managed to reach the gantry outside Mr. Woolfe's office in safety. It didn't take Nigel long to prise open the window, and the two of them clambered through.

"Piece of cake," Nigel whispered as he fumbled around in the darkness. "Can you find the light switch, before one of us breaks his neck?"

“Growl, growl, growl, growl,” said a gruff voice from the darkness.

Nigel stood still. “I beg your pardon?” he asked.

“I didn’t say a word,” said Scabby.

They stood and listened, and the voice spoke again. “Woof, woof, growl, growl,” it said.

Nigel stared into the darkness. “Who’s there?” he called. As his eyes grew accustomed to the shadows, he could just make out a huddled shape and a pair of evil black eyes glinting in the light from the street lamps.

“Scabby, don’t move!” he hissed. “I think there’s a dog in here with us.”

“You bet your bottom there is,” growled the dog. “And I’m a bloody great Doberman as well, so you’d better flippin’ watch it!”

“Scabby, it’s a Doberman!” Nigel said.

“I know, I know - I heard!” Scabby replied. He bumped against the desk, reaching out and feeling for the lamp. With a sharp click he switched it on. It cast a bright circle of light onto the floor, and standing illuminated in the middle, looking pretty ferocious, was a lethal, vicious, snarling Yorkshire terrier.

Nigel suddenly found himself overwhelmed by the urge to laugh.

“What are you giggling at?” snapped the terrier, clearly offended by this reaction.

“I thought you said you were a Doberman?” chuckled Nigel.

“I am,” said the terrier. “So don’t argue with me, matey, or I’ll have your flippin’ leg off.”

“Are you sure about this?” Nigel asked him. “I always thought Dobermans were great big animals, the size of a small horse.”

“Yep, that’s me!” said the dog. “And I’m lethal, so you’d better be bloody well frightened.”

Nigel stifled his laughter and turned to look briefly at Scabby, but it was clear from his expression that he didn’t know what to make of it either.

“All right,” Nigel said thoughtfully as he turned back to the dog. “Let’s just get a couple of things straight, shall we. You - despite your claims to the contrary - appear to be a small and rather insignificant little Yorkshire terrier. I, on the other hand, am a grizzly bear with sharp claws and vicious teeth, which means I could probably knock seven bells out of you without having to be in the same room. So give me one good reason why I should be frightened?”

“Look pal,” said the dog, who was beginning to get a little annoyed. “I should be very careful what you say to me. I admit that I may not look all that terrifying, but one wrong move and your number’s up.”

Nigel just scoffed. “Go on, pull the other one!” he said.

The dog made a sudden movement, but Scabby saw what he was up to. “Get down, he’s got a gun!” he shouted, and bundled Nigel to the floor.

The bullet whistled harmlessly over their heads, ricocheted from a picture frame, glanced off a filing cabinet and shot out of the window in the direction of Heathrow Airport. From here it took the three-thirty flight to Madrid where it did a spot of shopping, picked up some souvenirs, then journeyed overland to Calais and caught the ferry back to Dover. From Dover it was able to hitchhike the rest of the way home.

Nigel and Scabby were just getting to their feet when the bullet, now wearing a sombrero, and carrying two bottles of duty free sherry and a raffia-work donkey, flew back through the window and killed the dog.

With a sigh of relief, Nigel stepped over the dog and crossed to the other side of the room. In the light of the desk lamp he had noticed the curious display laid out on a table opposite. It was a little model landscape, complete with trees and intricately detailed houses, and for some reason it seemed strangely familiar to young Nigel.

“This is where I live,” he suddenly said. “Yes, I’m sure of it! This is my neighbourhood... but my house doesn’t seem to be on it. There’s a big ugly building there instead.” He beckoned to Scabby. “Bring that lamp over here so I can seem more clearly.”

Suddenly the main light was switched on. Nigel wheeled around. There was a figure in the doorway. He was wearing a dark suit and a long

coat, and a broad brimmed felt hat cast a shadow over his face, obscuring his features.

“Is that better?” he purred in a soft, velvet voice.

Nigel was thrown into panic. “I can explain everything,” he said hurriedly. “My name is Heinrich Plankton. I am a seafood salesman from Munich. I was just passing the building when I smelt something fishy, so I - ”

“It’s Mr. Woolfe!” Scabby exclaimed.

Woolfe stepped forward. “Well, I wouldn’t want to keep you gentlemen in the dark,” he said, most charmingly. “The building you referred to is the proposed design for my latest project: The Woolfe International Refuge for Bewildered Sheep. It’s a sort of ovine health centre.”

“You want to demolish our house and build a holiday camp for sheep?” Nigel asked in a startled voice.

“Oh dear, you make it sound so sordid,” said Woolfe, “But essentially that’s the nub of the matter. I made several attempts to buy the property, but your father refused every offer I made. So, you see, my only option was to become more... *persuasive*.”

“What are you saying?” Nigel said.

“I’m saying that I needed to stir things up a little bit,” Woolfe told him.

Nigel nodded. “I see,” he said. “It was you who sent the little fat girl round.”

“My niece,” said Woolfe, nodding. “Delightful, isn’t she? She was supposed to burn the place down, but the plan went somewhat awry. She does get so excitable. Still, it hasn’t turned out too badly in the end. With your parents safely out of the way, the house will be mine.”

“Oh no it won’t,” Nigel said. “The house will become mine.”

“Not,” Woolfe said ominously, and it would have been useful at that point if he’d had some sort of dramatic backing music, “if you’re dead!”

He stepped forward, and as he did so the light fell onto his face. Nigel flinched. It was an ugly, demonic visage, covered in coarse hair. He had a long snout, a black nose shining wetly and his cheeks were stretched tightly over his pointed teeth.

“You’re a wolf!” Nigel exclaimed.

“Yes, that is my name,” Woolfe confirmed.

“Yes, but you actually are a real wolf,” said Nigel.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” replied Mr. Woolfe. “I’m a successful businessman.”

“No you’re not,” Nigel argued. “You’re a successful business*wolf*.”

“Businessman!”

“Wolf!”

“Businessman!”

“You must be a wolf,” said Nigel. “I mean, look what big eyes you’ve got.”

“All the better to read the fine print in dodgy contracts,” explained Mr. Woolfe.

“But what big ears you’ve got!”

“All the better to overhear what my staff are saying about me behind my back,” said Mr. Woolfe.

“And my, what bad breath you’ve got!”

“Well nobody’s perfect,” said Mr. Woolfe. “It proves nothing!”

“But Mr. Woolfe, what big teeth you’ve got!” Nigel said.

“All the better to rip your throat out and devour your carcass with,” said Woolfe.

“Ha, what a giveaway!” cried Nigel in triumph.

Mr. Woolfe scowled and snapped his fingers. Two hired thugs entered, both of them trying to walk through the doorway at the same time. After much jostling and struggling they eventually forced their way through, bringing the doorframe and much of the partition wall with them.

“Gentlemen,” said Mr. Woolfe. “We have intruders.”

The two thugs glanced about frantically. They always got confused when there were more than two people in the room. Mr. Woolfe whistled to them.

“I’m over here,” he said patiently, then pointed to Nigel and Scabby. “These two vandals have forced their way into my office. I want you to take them outside and teach them a lesson.”

Woolfe winked at them and the thugs signalled that they understood. They manhandled Nigel and Scabby out of the room, into the lift and then out of the building. Then they took them into an empty back street and gave them an hour of geography and an essay on economics to complete by Tuesday.

Nigel and Scabby fled the scene as quickly as they could, clutching their homework beneath their arms. Once they were far enough away they stopped to catch their breath.

“That was close,” Nigel gasped.

“Close!” said Scabby. “We’re finished, you fool. Woolfe is not the sort of person you mess with. He’ll soon have someone after us to finish the job.”

“He wouldn’t dare,” Nigel said. “We’ll go to the police.”

“And tell them what, exactly?” said Scabby. “That Woolfe framed your parents? The fact is we’ve got no evidence. Who are the police going to believe - us, or a highly influential and much respected businessman like B.B. Woolfe?”

“Well, we’ll have to think of something else,” Nigel said optimistically.

“No, *you’ll* have to think of something else,” Scabby told him. “I’m sorry, but you’ve got me into enough trouble as it is. I’ve been dumb, really dumb. I should never have got involved with you in the first place.”

He started to leave. "You can't just go!" Nigel called after him. "Not after everything we've been through together." Scabby didn't even look back. He reached the bottom of the street, turned the corner and that was the last that Nigel saw of him.

A spot of rain fell on the young bear's face and trickled down the bridge of his nose. Nigel looked up into the dark, murky sky as the rain clouds gathered, and he realised that his chief concern right now was to find shelter. He hefted his bag of crocodiles onto his shoulder and began walking. After about half a mile he decided to chance his arm by knocking on the front door of the Robinson family house and attempting to convince them that he was their long lost Uncle Frederick.

They were a little puzzled at first. As far as they could remember their long lost Uncle Frederick had never been a grizzly bear. Nigel explained that he had not been feeling well lately and the Robinsons, although initially a little dubious, gave him the benefit of the doubt and let him in.

Mrs. Robinson made up a room for him and suggested that he make use of the bathroom facilities. He declined at first, not wanting to put the family to too much trouble, but Mrs. Robinson insisted and pointed out - very politely, Nigel thought - that he stank like a sack of manure. Nigel sniffed at his fur and came to the conclusion that she was probably right.

Half a bottle of bubble bath later, Nigel slid slowly into the hot water and disappeared beneath

the frothy foam. Never had a tub full of soapy warm water felt so good. He lay back and relaxed as long slicks of dirt spread out across the surface. For a while he was able to forget his troubles. All his worries dissolved into the water along with the dust and the grime, and he became quite playful. He splashed about in the foam and played submarines with his parrot. Then he tried to see if he could get his toe wedged up the hot water tap, and managed to get his whole foot stuck up there, which he was quite pleased about.

Eventually, after topping up the bath with hot water for the fourth time, it started to lap over the sides and Nigel decided that he ought to get out. He dried himself, wrapped himself in a robe and went downstairs. The snooker on the television had been cancelled because the reigning champion had been mauled by a rhino, so the Robinsons had decided to play scrabble instead. It wasn't a game that Nigel was particularly fond of but the Robinsons persuaded him to join in nonetheless. Twenty minutes into the game he was losing dismally, then suddenly he got a lucky break.

“Ha ha!” he cried triumphantly in Mr. Robinson's ear. “I've got a seven letter word!” He began to lay the tiles down on the board, spelling it out as he did so. “L, V, I, A, S, O, L.”

Mrs. Robinson looked anxiously at her husband. “Oh I don't know about that one, do you Dennis?”

Mr. Robinson puffed a little harder on his pipe. "What is it supposed to spell?" he asked.

"Well," said Nigel as he studied the board. "It spells 'Iviasol' doesn't it?"

Great clouds of smoke emerged from the bowl of Mr. Robinson's pipe as he puffed more furiously. "And what exactly does 'Iviasol' mean?"

Nigel chewed his bottom lip as he considered his answer. "Ah, now, it's a bird, I think. Yes, a type of small green bird that lives under the ice in Norway and eats baked beans."

"Baked beans?" Mr. Robinson asked, his entire head now completely engulfed in tobacco smoke.

"Yes, they're small, orange, err... beans," Nigel said helpfully. "Surely you've heard of them?"

"And this bird eats baked beans?" Mrs. Robinson asked, a worried frown on her face as she leaned forward.

"Mostly baked beans, yes," Nigel affirmed. "Sometimes small fish or liver pâté sandwiches."

Mr. Robinson was disinclined to pursue the matter. He gave up and declared Nigel the winner. Besides, the two children, Billy and Bertie, were bored with scrabble and wanted to hear a story before they went to bed. Billy and Bertie were twins and it was often quite difficult to tell them apart, but if one was very observant one could detect slight differences. Billy, for example, was freckle faced and had a wild mop of ginger hair, whereas Bertie was forty-six year old accountant

with a moustache and an extra arm in the middle of his chest.

“Please can we have a story, Uncle Freddy?” Billy pleaded as he shunted his toy train along the floor. “Pleasey, weasey, please, Uncle Fredikins?”

“Yes, could we possibly have a story please, Frederick?” Bertie said as he looked up from his paperwork.

“No,” said Nigel.

“Oh please, Uncle Freddy-weddy?” Billy whined. “Can we have the one about Little Red Riding Hood?”

“What about the story of the Wolverhampton Chainsaw Massacre?” Nigel suggested.

Billy was quite adamant. “Red Riding Hood!” he demanded. Nigel agreed, fearing he might blow his cover if he made too much of a scene.

“Once upon a time,” he began, “there was a girl called Red Riding Hood, a curious name for a little girl, you might think, but then - ”

“Get on with it!”

“All right,” said Nigel. “Well, Little Red Riding Hood was a spoilt little bitch, who kept demanding that people tell her stories. Anyway, one day she went to Wolverhampton and was killed in a chainsaw accident.”

“Oh no she wasn’t.”

“Oh yes she was,” said Nigel. “I should know, she used to live next door to us. She was definitely killed in a chainsaw accident. It was a horrible

mess. There was a double page spread in the paper the next day.”

“Just a minute,” said Mrs. Robinson. She suddenly stood up. “Something has just occurred to me.”

“What is it?” her husband asked as he gently placed his pipe down on the coffee table.

Mrs. Robinson turned to Nigel and looked at him though narrowed eyes. “We haven’t got an Uncle Frederick.”

Nigel was kicked out into the street. Again. By now he was becoming quite accustomed to the feeling of his backside sliding across the tarmac. In fact, he thought, in many ways it was quite a pleasant way to travel, as long as you didn’t mind the friction burns. He reckoned that with a little more practice he could become quite expert at this. He came to a sudden stop when his head connected with a wall. Obviously steering was a problem.

He got up, feeling a little dizzy, and looked back to the Robinsons’ house, some hundred metres back up the road. Ah well, it had been nice while it had lasted. Now he was faced with the prospect of finding a convenient doorway to doss down in. He shivered and thought of his own bed as he looked up at the black clouds scudding over the rooftops.

Suddenly he decided that he wanted to go home. He realised that it would be dangerous: it would probably be the first place that B.B. Woolfe

Goldilocks and the Free Bears

would consider looking for him, but he found that he really didn't care anymore. He wanted to sleep in his own room; to have his own things around him. He took a moment just to get his bearings, then started to walk.

Dangley Purple Bits

Nigel woke, damp and bitterly cold, at the edge of a little clearing in the Enchanted Forest. He had journeyed northwards through the night, wending his way across the sleeping city until he had reached this glade. It had been his intention to travel on until he reached home, but at about half past midnight he had become weary and footsore. After settling down to rest for a while on a bed of moss and wet leaves, he had unwittingly fallen asleep.

He raised himself and stretched his aching body, working the cramp from his legs. Then he moved into the sunlight so that something of the cold dawn rays might warm his body. His stomach growled, startling him. The last meal he had eaten had been before the trial when he and Scabby had dined on the cruddy bits that they had collected from a dozen discarded Kentucky Fried Chicken boxes. But things would be very different now that he was on his own territory. He had learned the ways of the forest, he knew its many secrets and he was confident that he could survive in style.

He set to work. Making use of an old tree stump, two young saplings and an outboard motor, he constructed an ingenious contrivance to waylay passing carrots. The trap set, he decided to go for a walk, but as he stepped out of the tangled

undergrowth he was halted by the sight of two figures further up the path ahead of him.

“Ho there! From whence doest thou come, and what business hast thou at such an ungodly hour?” one of them called out to him.

“Come again?” shouted Nigel.

The two figures came slowly towards him. The sun was directly behind them and Nigel could make out little, except that one of them appeared to be riding a very small pony.

“’Tis but six-thirty,” called the stranger. “A time when most civil men are tight asleep in their beds. Or perchance thou flees from some wench’s bed before her husband returns to split thy goodly cranium asunder with a mighty steel axe?” The stranger laughed heartily and mightily.

“Err, no, not really,” said Nigel, somewhat confused. “Who are you?”

The newcomers were close enough now to be seen clearly. One was a knight dressed in rusty armour who sat atop a magnificent black pig, as apparently there was a shortage of horses in these parts. The other was his serf, a young boy dressed in rags who trudged uneasily by his side.

“My name sir,” proclaimed the Knight, “is Sir Jickle-Spirit. Allow me to introduce my companion, Tom.” Tom smiled weakly and lifted his hand in greeting. “I’m afraid you must excuse him,” said the Knight. “We have been at large all night slaying maidens and rescuing dragons. My

friend is new to the profession and I regret that so far he has proved unable to stand the pace.”

Sir Jickle-Spirit's pig started chewing Nigel's feet. Nigel shook himself free and stepped back a pace. “Shouldn't it be the other way round?” he asked.

“What?” Sir Jickle-Spirit asked, looking momentarily flustered. In one smooth movement he threw up his arms and fell off his pig.

“You said that you've been slaying maidens and rescuing dragons,” said Nigel. “Well shouldn't it be the other way round?”

“Believe me, if you'd seen some of the maidens that hang about with us you'd feel pretty much the same way.” The Knight paused for a moment to take in a lung full of fresh, morning air. He decided he liked it and paused again to fill the other lung. Then he tried to climb back on the pig, which was snapping viciously at his ankles. “And so, pray tell us how you came to be here, young sir?” he asked as he struggled.

“Forsooth!” Nigel began, deciding he'd better get into the spirit of the encounter. “Gadzooks and verily, and all that kind of stuff. I am journeying home, there to rest and gather strength, and plot to free my captured parents who are at this moment languishing in the dungeons of the Castle of Old Bill, awaiting execution by crocodile.”

“What ho!” cried the Knight, as the pig dug its incisors into his shinbone. “You are surely a lad of

great spirit! I wish we could stay and help, but alas, we are away to battle the evil hag Moorwaaga.”

“Who’s she then?” Nigel inquired. “Do I know her at all?”

“Ah, that is another story,” said the Knight, and having successfully remounted his pig he and his serf promptly rode off into another story.

Nigel watched him go. “Strange man,” he muttered to himself, then returned to his trap to discover that he had caught a fine crop of carrots. He ate hungrily, then set off once more towards home.

Nature thrives, even in the largest cities. In these ugly, urban sprawls it is still possible to be woken by birdsong. If one is about early enough it is not uncommon to see the odd fox scavenging amongst the dustbins of side street takeaways; and field mice and hedgehogs have moved in next door to mankind, having forsaken the fields and woodlands for concrete forests.

A single unmarked police car turned into the main road and a herd of majestic wildebeest parted to let it through. The elephants drinking at a nearby water hole looked up as the car passed, and startled giraffes shinned up telegraph poles where they would remain for the rest of the day, throwing coconuts down at terrified pedestrians.

Detective Inspector Lionel Crump looked sleepily out of the window as they were passed by

a milk float for the third time that morning. “Can’t we go any faster?” he asked Sergeant Pinewood.

Pinewood gripped the steering wheel tightly and made a point of glancing in the mirror. “To go any faster would endanger the lives of innocent civilians going about their ordinary workaday lives,” he said. “Twenty-five miles an hour is the optimum safe limit in these conditions.”

“There are no other people about, not at this time in the morning,” Crump reasoned. His stomach gurgled, embarrassingly loud in the confines of the car. Early morning starts always upset his stomach. “We’re in pursuit of dangerous criminals, remember? If they’re heading for the house, then I want to make sure I get there before them.”

“There’s really no hurry,” Pinewood reminded him. “Sergeant Trumpet and his men have had the house under surveillance since the Bears escaped.”

“Exactly,” Crump said dismally. “This is the same Sergeant Trumpet that reported his own squad car missing after forgetting where he’d parked it. I wouldn’t trust Trumpet to pick his own nose without falling in, so if it’s all the same to you I’d rather be at the house myself if and when the Bears show up.”

“Well, I’m sorry,” said Pinewood. “But I would feel uncomfortable if we drove any faster.”

Crump just grunted. He turned to look out of the rear window as another milk float zoomed past them. PC Gibbon and Pinewood’s horse were

sitting in the back seat and they both grinned back at him.

Inspector Crump turned back. "And was it absolutely necessary to bring that filthy, disease ridden creature with us?" he asked.

"As I recall," said Pinewood, "it was your idea to bring PC Gibbon."

"I meant the horse," said Crump. "Couldn't you have left it behind just this once?"

"It's a vital piece of police equipment," Pinewood said.

"Just put your foot down, all right?" Crump replied. "Or I'll send both you and your damn horse back to Canada in so many pieces that it'll take ten years to put them back together again."

Sergeant Pinewood grudgingly obeyed. The needle on the speedometer gradually crept from twenty-five to twenty-seven. The G-force was almost unbearable. Then something weird happened. Swiftly and silently an eerie green fog descended around them, almost totally obscuring the road and all the buildings that they passed.

"What the hell's that?" said Crump.

"It's an eerie green fog that's suddenly descended around us, obscuring the road and all the buildings that we pass," said PC Gibbon helpfully.

"I can see that, Gibbon," Crump replied sarcastically. "I really don't think you should open your mouth too often, just in case your brain decides to make a run for it."

“Well I hadn’t said anything for a while,” Gibbon explained defensively. “I didn’t want you to think I’d been kidnapped, or fallen into an interspatial warp matrix interface, or anything like that.”

“We’re not blessed with that sort of good fortune, Gibbon,” Crump said dryly.

The fog became thicker, until it was hardly possible to see the road at all. Sergeant Pinewood slowed to a crawl, in spite of Crump’s efforts to urge him on faster.

“We can’t go any faster,” Pinewood protested. “We might hit something.”

“I’m telling you to go faster,” Crump insisted. “That’s an order.”

And then they hit something: something rather large and metallic.

“We wouldn’t have hit that if you’d been going faster,” Inspector Crump said beneath his breath.

Crump and Pinewood got out of the car. The fog was cold and reluctant to let them through, but they shunned its fumbling advances and moved towards the strange object with which they had collided. It was vast, stretching right across the road and squatting there like a giant rugby ball. There was a faint drone of machinery coming from its innards, though in this frozen air it sounded more like a distant, mournful wail.

“It couldn’t be, could it?” Pinewood said. He reached out to touch the surface of the object:

smooth metal, which softly pulsed with an emerald green light. "Impossible," he breathed.

Crump's stomach was now even more unsettled. He looked round nervously. There was no one else around - no one, that is, except two morris dancers standing on the pavement, who were also transfixed by the strange object.

"Pinewood!" Crump hissed. "This... This is a spaceship!"

As he finished speaking there was a click, a loud hiss and a door began to open in the belly of the object. Crump's heart leapt into his mouth and he and Pinewood took a step backwards. A brilliant white light flared towards them, forcing them to look away. The glare seemed to cling to their faces for a while, then it softened and they were able to see that a ramp had been extended from the opening.

They waited silently. The fog grew denser. You could have heard a pin drop, but you wouldn't have been able to see to pick it up. Then something appeared in the opening and began to lumber down the ramp. The air suddenly heaved and rolled with the rasping sound of its laboured breathing. It walked uneasily, with a gait suggestive of some creature unfamiliar with Earth's gravity.

As it came closer they could make out more detail. It was vaguely humanoid: it had a head, a body, two arms and two legs, although they weren't necessarily in the same order. Its skin was scaly and of a mottled brown and green colour.

Lumps of it were inclined to drop off at awkward moments. Its head was large in relation to its body; its three eyes were wide and penetrating. Its nose was non-existent and its mouth was just a thin-lipped flap.

When it reached the bottom of the ramp it turned slowly and moved over to the large dent where the car had struck the side of the ship. When it spoke its voice gurgled in its throat, almost like a growl.

“Why don’t you look where you’re going?” it said. “You bloody maniac, you shouldn’t be allowed on the road.”

Crump was speechless, but only momentarily. Alien or not, he wasn’t going to let anyone speak to him like that. “You’ve got a nerve!” he said. “Do you realise you’re causing an obstruction?”

“Well that doesn’t give you the right to ram me, does it?” argued the Alien.

“Look, I don’t think you realise who you’re talking to,” said Crump, rather pompously. “I happen to be Detective Inspector Lionel Crump of the Metropolitan Police Slightly Serious Crime Squad.”

“I don’t care if you’re Lord Zog, the infamous pig swindler of Xon 4 - you’re not getting away with this,” said the Alien. “Now, if you’d kindly give me your insurance details...”

Sergeant Crump’s manner suddenly changed. After all, these incidents can count against promotion. “Well there’s no need to take the

matter that far,” he said in more reasonable tones. “I’m sure we can work something out. It’s really only a scratch.”

The Alien was livid and its ears suddenly swelled to three times their normal size, which is what happens to aliens when they’re livid. “Only a scratch!” it growled. “Look at the size of that dent! I’ve been through meteor storms and come out with smaller craters than that.”

“Oh it’ll knock out all right,” Crump assured him. “All you need is a bit of filler and a few coats of paint.”

“This is a highly technological piece of equipment,” said the Alien. “It’s not a clapped out 1978 Ford Cortina with a dodgy wing. It’ll take more than a few coats of paint to put this right, I can tell you. Do you realise how difficult it is to get a colour match for softly pulsating emerald green? The whole thing will have to be re-sprayed.”

“Well there’s no way I’m going to pay for a complete re-spray,” Crump said emphatically. “I’m more than willing to pay for the damage, but don’t try to pull a fast one on me, sunshine.”

Whilst they had been arguing, Sergeant Pinewood had been pacing ponderously around the edge of the craft, and presently he returned to them. “Excuse me sir,” he said, addressing the Alien. “I assume you’re a sir, though it is somewhat difficult to tell as you have no wobbly bits - well not in the same places that we have them anyway.”

“What is it, Sergeant?” Crump asked impatiently.

“Well I just noticed that the Alien gentleman’s road tax has expired,” said Pinewood.

“Has it really?” Crump said with a grin.

The Alien’s face suddenly fell. He picked it up and put it in his pocket. “You know, you’re right,” he said quickly. “After all, it is only a scratch. Hey, forget it, yeah? A bit of filler and a few coats of paint and no one will ever know.” He disappeared swiftly into his spaceship and took off. The two morris dancers on the pavement applauded loudly.

“Well done Pinewood,” said Crump.

“I think we should go after it,” said Pinewood.

“Don’t push your luck, Sergeant,” said Crump.

They returned to the car to find that PC Gibbon had fallen into an interspatial warp matrix interface. “It seems like our luck is in today, Pinewood,” said Crump. “Now let’s get a move on. While we’re standing here talking, the Bears could be escaping under our very noses.”

The two morris dancers watched the car speed off. Once it was out of sight they took off the big floppy hats that had previously been concealing their faces.

“That was a close one,” said Daddy Bear. “I thought they’d recognised us for a moment.”

Mummy Bear yawned and stretched. They had spent the night sleeping on a fourth storey window ledge and at first light they had hit the road. It bloody hurt as well. It’s no joke falling four floors

to land flat on your back in the middle of Oxford Street.

“Well, we can’t go home,” said Daddy Bear. “Not now.”

“But we’ve got to make sure Nigel’s all right,” Mummy Bear insisted. “He needs his mother.”

“You heard what they said: they’re going to the house,” protested Daddy Bear. “Let’s wait until the heat’s off.”

“But our son!” Mummy Bear said. “I’m going to stand by him, even if you won’t.” She started to walk down the empty street, the air still tinged green by the remnants of the strange fog. Daddy Bear watched her as the bells on her braces softly jangled. The ribbons around her knees sent out fluttering waves as she walked.

“This is insane,” he said to himself, then reflected that he had never been a serious contender in the sanity stakes himself. “What the hell?” he said, and he set off after her.

The road was clear and the sky was just beginning to lift itself out of the foggy grey of first light towards the pinky-blue that promised another fine day. In the distance was a rumble, like the sound of thunder trapped in a box. Then, over a rise in the road, came a truck. It was a long, sleek truck, its chrome glistening under the gaze of the fresh-faced sun; its jet-black paintwork almost glowing. It was an unstoppable monster; Gargantua with leather seats. Relentlessly it brought its cargo

hurtling forth: one hundred gross of Mr. Pop-Up's Liquorice Flavoured Novelty Condoms. Wouldn't it be ironic if it suddenly got a flat tyre?

Sitting at the wheel - alert, conscientious, at one with his vehicle - was Bert Phlegm. Bert Phlegm wasn't his real name, of course. That would be silly. You can't go through life with a name like Bert Phlegm, now can you? Everyone would laugh at you. People would forever be calling you 'Snotty' or 'Greeny', or something like that. They'd see your name in the phone book and ring you up to call you 'Mucus Head'. And what kind of career could you hope for with a name like that, apart from being a professional game show contestant?

No, Bert Phlegm was certainly not his real name. His real name was Sidney Anus, an epithet that has no comical connotations whatsoever.

At the moment Bert was behind schedule. Yesterday had been a bad day as far as traffic was concerned; everybody, it seemed, had wanted to go the same way as him. At least an early start this morning meant that he could make up for lost time while the roads were still empty. He hadn't encountered any traffic in the last hour, with the exception of an unmarked police car and a large, softly pulsating flying saucer that had cut him up at the last roundabout.

Even so, in spite of his good progress, he was quite phenomenally fed up. Bert was just like that. His frequent and extensive bouts of grouching were like a drug to him. More than that: it was his

joy, his sole purpose. His life's work was to pick fault with everybody and everything in existence, and nobody who knew Bert would say that it was beyond him. If he'd been sitting in heaven, dining on ambrosia with the Son of God, he would doubtless have complained that his rice pudding was too cold, and that he didn't like those sandals that Jesus was wearing.

Ahead of him he spied what appeared to be two morris dancers hitch-hiking, and he slowed down to pick them up. It wasn't that he was in any way helpful or philanthropic by nature, it was just that like all professional moaners he needed an audience.

The truck rolled to a stop, wheezing and groaning like an elephant on an exercise bike, or like Bert himself whenever he climbed up into the cab. He pushed open the passenger-side door and leaned out in a way that only lorry drivers can.

"You want a lift, do you?" he said as the two morris dancers eagerly approached. "Well you're lucky I came along: this road's deserted. I'm not surprised either. I've never seen so many potholes. I don't know whether this is supposed to be a road or an assault course. Honestly, it makes you wonder where all your road tax is going, doesn't it?"

"Yes, quite," said Daddy Bear. He stepped forward, about to climb up into the cab.

"Hold it!" said Bert. "Just a minute. You wouldn't happen to be grizzly bears, would you?"

“Us?” said Daddy Bear, trying to look innocent. “No, not us. We’re just morris dancers.”

“Are you sure?” Bert asked. “Cos I heard on the radio that them two bears had escaped. You know, them that did them murders.”

Daddy Bear bit his lip. “Yes, I’m sure,” he said. “We’re definitely morris dancers.”

“Ah yes,” said Bert. “I can see that you’re morris dancers. But are you morris dancing grizzly bears, that’s the question?”

“Oh that’s ridiculous!” Mummy Bear responded. “Who ever heard of morris dancing grizzly bears?”

“She’s got a point,” added Daddy Bear.

“I suppose so,” Bert admitted. “It’s just that you’re both so... hairy.”

“And who said that morris dancers can’t be hairy?” asked Mummy Bear. “It doesn’t go against tradition, does it?”

“Ah well,” began Bert, “when I say hairy, I mean abnormally so.”

“Who are you calling abnormal?” Daddy Bear demanded. He looked up at Bert with a bitter scowl on his face.

“No, no, let me finish,” Bert said quickly. He paused for a moment to consider his argument. “What is normal for one is abnormal for another. Being covered from head to toe in brown fur is pretty abnormal for your average morris dancer. On the other hand it’s perfectly normal for your average grizzly bear.”

“That’s as may be,” said Daddy Bear. “The fact remains that we are morris dancers and not grizzly bears.”

Bert sat back and fixed Daddy Bear with a withering stare. Daddy Bear met his eye bravely. “All right,” Bert said as he rolled his tongue thoughtfully around the capacious recesses of his mouth. “If you really are morris dancers, give us a demonstration.”

“What?” responded Daddy Bear. His crestfallen expression indicated that he was not at all taken by the idea.

“Go on,” said Bert as he leant back expectantly. “Show us some morris dancing.”

“Well I’m game,” said Mummy Bear, and Daddy Bear reluctantly agreed. He led them off by tucking one leg up behind his back and hopping round in a circle. Mummy Bear, impressed as she was by her husband’s agonising acrobatics, decided that the nature of her own participation in this event should be a little more dignified. To this end she took out a handkerchief and waved it in circles above her head. Bert put up with a whole minute of this, before calling the performance to a halt.

“And that’s it?” he asked.

“You stopped us just when we were getting to the good part,” said Mummy Bear.

“You call that morris dancing?” he asked.

“I can’t think of anything else to call it, can you?” said Mummy Bear.

“There are a couple of words that spring to mind,” said Bert. He shook his head slowly. “You’re not morris dancers at all, are you?”

“Oh yes we are!” Daddy Bear protested.

“Well if you really are morris dancers,” Bert concluded, “you must be particularly crap ones. Look, morris dancing is an art form that goes back many hundreds of years, a folk tradition handed down from generation to generation. You can’t just hop around on one leg and wave a handkerchief over your head. There’s a lot more to it than that.”

“Oh?” said Mummy Bear. “Such as?”

Bert thought for a moment. “Such as hitting each other with sticks,” he said. “Look, I’ll show you.” He climbed down from the cab and launched into an energetic and moderately impressive display of morris dancing, taking particular delight in hitting himself over the head with an imaginary stick. While he was doing this, Mummy and Daddy Bear jumped into the truck and drove off.

“Do you know what this truck is carrying?” Mummy Bear said as she took the wheel.

“What?” asked Daddy Bear as he snatched it back.

“A hundred gross of Mr. Pop-Up’s Liquorice Flavoured Novelty Condoms - wouldn’t it be ironic if we got a flat tyre?”

“Yes,” agreed Daddy Bear, but they didn’t get one.

7

PC Gibbon Meets The Fluffy Blue Towel Monster Of Ganymede Six And Finally Kills It By Tying It In A Series Of Granny Knots

Suddenly PC Gibbon met the fluffy blue towel monster of Ganymede Six. Acting swiftly, he engaged it in mortal combat and finally killed it by tying it in a series of granny knots.

Good Grief, What Was That?

Nigel pushed open the heavy front door and stood looking at the bits of boiled furniture that were strewn about the kitchen. The window was open and the breeze being drawn through made the net curtains flutter and flap. In the corner, by the dresser, the television was still switched on. With relentless fervour it continued to pump its flickering miasma of tantalising trivia into the room. Intermittent words and incomplete phrases rippled through the air. They spoke of fantastic new worlds of washing powder and baby products; worlds in which people had nothing better to do all day than stand in the street and talk to market researchers.

There had been a police cordon around the house but Nigel had slipped past them by cunningly telling them that he wasn't who they were looking for. He set his bag of crocodiles down: the drugs were wearing off and they were beginning to move about, making them more difficult to carry. He softly closed the door behind him and crossed to the television to switch it off, crunching broken crockery underfoot. He couldn't feel at home amongst this disorder. His house was unclean.

He heard the tramp of heavy boots outside. Then a short staccato cough snapped across the room like a whip crack. Nigel held his breath,

listening for further movement, then the front door began to swing open. He looked around for somewhere to hide, sighting the cupboard beneath the sink. It was cramped and uncomfortable, but as Nigel was a naturally cramped and uncomfortable person anyway he didn't find the confinement too distressing.

He drew the door closed just as the stranger entered, and waited in the darkness listening to the gentle drip, drip, drip of water from the pipes. Footsteps! He heard them clearly as they moved across the room, tap, tap, tapping on the tiled floor: left, right, left, right, left, left, left, right, right, left, left, left. Whoever it was either had a very strange walk, or eight legs.

Nigel opened the cupboard door just a little. Through the narrow crack he could see about two thirds of the room. A quarter of the room was obscured by shadow, and two eighths were behind the table. Three fifths were beneath a large purple mat and a further two ninths were filled with a horribly stinking orange foam that pulsed with a life of its own. That left twelve fifty-ninths of the room which was hiding in the pantry, two seventeenths which was on a bird watching holiday in Torquay, and a remaining third which Nigel couldn't see from where he was hiding. It was from this part that the footsteps seemed to be coming.

He was patient, and a moment later a pair of legs came into view: horrible, blotchy, pink and

swollen legs that led all the way up to a horrible, blotchy, pink and swollen little girl. It was her: Woolfe's niece. Nigel realised only too well why she was here - she was looking for him.

She appeared to be searching for clues to his whereabouts: opening drawers and cupboards at random, spilling their contents across the room. Then she spied Nigel's little cupboard beneath the sink and she approached. Nigel was just rating his chances of being able to hide behind the overflow pipe when the girl, alerted by something, suddenly darted across the kitchen and hid in the pantry.

A man entered; a man whom Nigel recognised as Inspector Lionel Crump - somebody else he'd like to shake by the throat.

"All right," he said. "It's perfectly safe." He was followed by Sergeant Pinewood.

"I'm sure I heard someone in here," said Pinewood.

"You have an overactive imagination," Crump told him. "It doesn't look like the Bears have been here yet. Still, we'd better search the place thoroughly. We might find some clue as to where they might be heading."

"Unlikely," muttered Pinewood.

"But not impossible," said Crump. "So you have a scout round outside while I search the rest of the house."

Inspector Crump disappeared upstairs. Pinewood poked his nose outside, satisfied himself that he would find nothing of note, then switched

on the television set so as not to miss his favourite programme. A bland comedian in a shiny suit danced before him on the screen.

“Hello and welcome to Spot The Cheese! Our first contestant is a professor of applied mathematics at Swansea University. You have three minutes to Spot The Cheese, starting from... Now!”

“It’s over there on the table,” said the professor of applied mathematics from Swansea University.

“Stop the clock! You’ve played this game before, haven’t you?”

“Pinewood, is that you?” Crump shouted.

Sergeant Pinewood promptly switched off the TV and hid behind the fridge. Crump appeared at the bottom of the stairs. “Hello? Pinewood? I’m sure I heard voices in here.” He scratched his head and went out through the front door.

Goldilocks emerged from the pantry, looked around keenly, then resumed her search. She was about to start sifting through the cat litter when she heard a knock at the door. She ran upstairs just as Pinewood’s horse entered.

“Hello?” it whinnied in its own inimitable horsy fashion. “Is there anybody here?” It sniffed about a bit, then went upstairs.

Sergeant Pinewood came out of hiding and was about to switch on television again when he heard a voice outside, so he jumped out of the window.

“Hello?” said a stranger’s voice. “Is there anyone home?” A moment later the Vicar came in.

He sat down at the table to wait, then suddenly he spied a familiar face, and ran and hid in the cooker. It was the Bishop of Durham, who had been hiding under the table all the time.

Events were being keenly observed outside the house. On the edge of the clearing, concealed by thick vegetation, Mummy and Daddy Bear watched every movement. Crump came out and walked around the house. Sergeant Pinewood climbed out of the window, and Crump went back in through the front door. The vicar slipped out through the front door and ran away. Sergeant Pinewood climbed back in through the window. His horse appeared on the roof. Sergeant Pinewood climbed out of the window and back in again. The Bishop of Durham let himself out through the bathroom window and slid down the drainpipe. He gathered up his dress and legged it. Crump tunnelled his way out of the house and appeared from a hole in the front lawn. He pulled himself out and gave chase to the Bishop of Durham. Pinewood climbed out of the window and followed them.

“They’re heading this way!” hissed Daddy Bear. “Stay down.”

They stomped through the grass, just yards from where the Bears lay. Firstly the Bishop of Durham, puffing and panting like a... well, like a Bishop. Then Crump and Pinewood following close behind.

“Did you see who that was?” they heard Crump ask.

“He looked a bit like a Bishop to me sir,” said Pinewood.

“Don’t be absurd,” said Crump.

“Someone’s left a lorry full of condoms there,” Pinewood was heard to say. “Wouldn’t it be ironic if it got a flat tyre?”

The Bears waited a minute or two as the voices faded, then Mummy Bear raised herself. “We can go into the house now,” she said. “They’ve all gone.” She was about to go, but Daddy Bear stopped her and pointed to the roof.

“Look at that,” he said. Mummy Bear looked. Pinewood’s horse was still on the roof, neighing and whinnying and generally expressing much concern over its inability to get back down again.

“They could be back for that horse any moment,” Daddy Bear warned her. “We’d better go, it’s far too dangerous to stay here any longer.” He took Mummy Bear’s paw and led her away, keeping his head low and glancing warily about him. Suddenly he felt himself tread in something soft and squashy. He stopped and an expression of revulsion crossed his face.

“What is it?” Mummy Bear asked.

Daddy Bear lifted his foot. Sitting beneath it - battered, a little bruised and considerably shocked - was a gnome. It wore a tall, bright red cap that flopped over at the top, a pretty green tunic and shiny black shoes with spangly buckles.

“Oh dear, I am sorry little man,” said Daddy Bear in a gentle voice as he crouched down to the little imp-like creature.

“The name’s Norman,” said the gnome, massaging his crushed shoulder.

“And what a pretty name it is too, little man,” Daddy Bear said. “Well I do hope you’re all right, Norman. I’m awfully sorry, I’m afraid I didn’t see you down there.”

“Don’t patronise me, you hairy arse!” said Norman the Gnome as he nugged him on the nose. Daddy Bear reeled, clutching his proboscis - which is another name for ‘nose’ and comes in jolly handy when you’ve used the word ‘nose’ once already.

“You’ve given me a proboscis bleed!” Daddy Bear roared, and he tried to jump on Norman. Norman saw him coming and moved out of the way, and Daddy Bear landed on a couple of sticks and a few leaves, which didn’t seem to mind being jumped on at all.

“Just because I’m shorter than you it doesn’t mean you have to talk down to me,” Norman the Gnome said, and he stood back and clenched his fists. “I can have you any day.”

“You little - ”

“And don’t call me little!” said Norman. “Or I’ll rip your ruddy spleen out.”

“You’ll have to find it first,” said Daddy Bear. “It’s probably halfway to Morocco by now. Besides, by the time I’ve finished with you, you’ll

be too concerned with the whereabouts of your own organs to worry about mine.”

“Aww, fuck off!” replied Norman the Gnome wittily.

“That’s quite enough!” Mummy Bear said. “Gordon, we don’t have time for this. The police are still wandering about here somewhere.”

Norman the Gnome froze solid. “Police? Did I hear you say police? I’m off!” A moment later he was gone.

Daddy Bear took a handkerchief from his pocket and tried to stem the flow of blood from his snout - which is yet another name for ‘nose’. (You’re certainly getting your money’s worth here. In the next chapter we’re going to do ears.)

“Come on,” he said painfully, and led the way back to the truck.

Nigel’s legs were growing numb and he tried to stretch them as best he could in the tiny space beneath the sink. He had watched everybody leave and as far as he could work out there was only himself, the little fat girl and Pinewood’s horse left in the house. Suddenly a pack of Welsh rugby supporters appeared from behind the dresser and marched out of the front door, complaining that they didn’t reckon much to the service in this hotel.

Oh. Well he hadn’t accounted for them. Now that they’d gone it left only himself, the fat girl and the horse... didn’t it?

He waited a while longer, then pushed open the cupboard door - just as the fat girl came downstairs. He pulled the door closed quickly, and she passed by and left through the front door. Nigel waited a few minutes more then slipped from his hiding place.

He sat down on the edge of the table and thought out his predicament. So, his parents were at liberty. That was a bit inconsiderate, considering the lengths he had gone to in order to forestall their execution. His problem now was how to find them? He gazed abstractly out of the window and noticed Crump's car left unattended outside.

It seemed to him that if the Inspector had any idea at all of where his parents might be, Nigel would do well to stick with him. He slid off the table and crept cautiously outside.

Through the wood panelled rooms of the Snivlington Club, down musty corridors, marched a stiffly sombre steward carrying a covered silver salver. He walked slowly, like a pallbearer, his footsteps snapping loudly against the oak block floor. From some other part of the building came low, mumbled voices, providing an aural backdrop for his stately procession.

The steward sneezed and a light fall of dust from the ceiling landed on his shoulder. He paused, looked at it disdainfully then carefully brushed it off with one white-gloved hand before proceeding.

Many pictures hung along these walls: dusty old masters, forgotten portraits. A starched general looked down from the confines of his frame as the steward passed by - an old hero of the Burma campaign. The next painting showed a thin faced man in a tall hat and a frock coat. He sported a moustache that curled upwards at the ends, threatening to put his eyes out, and he looked down with the smug, aristocratic air of someone who was completely divorced from reality.

The steward spared him a brief glance. The portrait was that of a man called Philip Fogg, and it was from this very club that he had set out in 1906 on his historic attempt to travel around the world in eighty days. He had fallen short of his target by some three years, six months and twenty days because of a baggage handlers' dispute at Gatwick airport.

Prime Ministers, famous economists, newspaper publishers, bishops - all had, at some time, enjoyed the benefits and privileges that went with membership of such an esteemed establishment. Twenty-five per cent off a season ticket for Tottenham Hotspur, to name but one.

The steward entered the billiard room where two large media executives were working out how to play snooker without their respective paunches spilling onto the baize. The steward excused himself as he passed them and left through the other door - through more rooms, more corridors, until he reached the reading room.

This was the nerve centre of the club. It was here that members would meet, chat and take a drink or two. If they were really pushed for something to do they might even read one of the freshly ironed newspapers that had been laid out for them that morning.

The steward crossed to a hirsute gentleman with a large nose, who sat behind a copy of the Financial Times. "Lord Woolfe," the steward addressed him. "There is a telephonic communication for you sir."

"A telephone call?" said B.B. Woolfe. "Very well."

The steward offered him the salver and removed the cover. It was empty. The steward didn't seem to notice for a few moments. When he finally did, he registered only the faintest surprise.

"Oh dear," he said at length. "It appears I have neglected to bring the telephone with me. If you would wait one moment sir I shall endeavour to retrieve it." He turned slowly and went off to fetch it.

'Lord' Woolfe raised his paper again. His title, it must be said, was entirely of his own invention. He found that passing himself off as a Lord made his journey through life that much more comfortable.

He broke the leg off a nearby chair and began to gnaw the meat from it hungrily. Then the steward returned with the phone and Woolfe took the receiver.

“About time too!” the tinny voice blasted out. “I’ve used fifteen quid’s worth of twenty pence pieces in this phone already!”

“Ah Goldilocks, my dear,” Woolfe crooned. “I’d recognise those dulcet tones anywhere. Have you done that little job I asked you to?”

“Not as such,” Goldilocks replied.

“Not as such?” Woolfe repeated. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means not at all,” said Goldilocks. “I’ve been to the house but the young bear’s not there.”

“Goldy, my dear,” Woolfe said. “I don’t want to hear excuses. I want you to tell me that the job’s been done. Find him, Goldy. Find the young grizzly bear. I want him *dead*.”

It Seemed Like A Good Idea At The Time

The Story So far. Daphne has offered Imelda a half share of her bingo winnings, unbeknown to Frank who has already promised the money to Carl for his 'Save The Radish' fund. Tempers are running high at number 32 after Brad reveals he cannot marry Gwen, because he is an alien from the planet Radox and he has to go back home next Tuesday to have his head replaced. There are mysterious happenings down at the youth centre and the police are called in after Margaret receives a stiff letter from the Bishop of Pontefract. Meanwhile Alec is forced to make some tough decisions about his future after an operation to remove his genital warts using high explosives goes seriously wrong.

But that's quite enough of that, time for some of this...

Faster than a speeding locomotive! Sleeker than something that's very sleek! More windswept than a chicken with a migraine! A large black truck carrying a hundred gross of Mr. Pop-Up's Licorice Flavoured Novelty Condoms powered over the horizon, thundered up the hill, ploughed down into the valley then came to a grinding halt when all of its tyres burst simultaneously.

"Well that is ironic," said Mummy Bear as they dismounted, and a small group of people standing

nearby applauded enthusiastically. “So now what?” she asked.

“We walk,” said Daddy Bear with a shrug.

“Where to?” Mummy Bear asked exasperatedly. “We can’t run forever, can we?”

“Well it’s obvious, isn’t it?” Daddy Bear replied, just a little impatient with her. “We’ve got to clear our names.”

Mummy Bear took a long swig from a bottle of tomato ketchup that she happened to have in her pocket. “And how do we do that, mastermind?” she asked as she wiped her chin on the back of her arm.

“Well I’ve got an idea. It goes back to something the judge said at the trial. It means we have to go to Scotland... But look, it’s getting late, we’d better move on.”

And so they headed north. It was well into the evening by the time they reached the charming little village of Nether Scallop. Mummy Bear had expected a bustling, close-knit community going about its everyday rural life of sheep dipping, jumble sales and cider drinking parties, but the place was dead.

It was little more than a hamlet really: about thirty or forty crumbling cottages spaced liberally along a snaking road. There was a pub, a post office and an overgrown telephone box, but sadly no major fast food retail outlets. They stood beneath the spreading boughs of an ancient oak and listened for any sign of movement. There was

only the hoarse gasping of the wind, and the soft rustling of leaves above them.

“We’ll try the pub,” said Daddy Bear. “That’s where everyone will be.”

As they approached the pub, the door was thrown open with an echoing clatter, and an old man was ejected into the road. He landed in front of them, coughed, gave a great sigh and was then sick on Daddy Bear’s feet.

The landlord stood in the doorway, filling it. Two beady, black eyes stared pitilessly out over his flabby cheeks and approximately half a dozen chins. “It’s typical, isn’t it?” he said to Daddy Bear, and as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other his gut began to quiver. Once it had been set in motion it usually took some time for it to stop. “That’s the only customer I’ve had all day, and I’ve had to throw him out.”

“Throw him out?” repeated Daddy Bear. He moved his feet from beneath the old man’s face and left him sniffing the pavement. “Why’s that?”

“Well, he’s an undesirable, isn’t he,” said the landlord, breathing heavily. “I can’t let a drunken old man like that lower the tone of a prestige establishment such as this. We don’t allow drunks in here.”

“Well, I can sympathise with that,” said Daddy Bear. “But isn’t such a strict policy rather bad for business?” he asked.

“We do uphold certain standards.” The landlord somehow managed to say this and belch

at the same time. “We don’t allow drunks. We don’t allow bikers. We don’t allow skinheads, or punk rockers or anything like that. Old ladies aren’t allowed, or amateur thespians, or members of the armed forces. Policemen, we don’t have none of them, and no politicians. We’re very strict.”

Daddy Bear peered past him into the warmly lit interior. “You don’t appear to have any customers at all,” he observed.

“We don’t allow customers,” said the landlord. “They lower the tone.”

“Well, where is everybody?” Mummy Bear asked. “The village looks deserted.”

“They’re all at home watching telly, I should imagine,” the landlord replied.

“But where are the farmers coming back from their fields?” Mummy Bear quizzed him. “Where are the woodcarvers returning home after a hard days work? Where are the mechanics, the builders, the labourers, the shopkeepers and the carpenters?”

“There are no farmers or carpenters here,” said the landlord. “Only computer programmers and estate agents. They’re the only people who can afford to live in Nether Scallop. Now, if you’ll excuse me I’ve got to lock up. I’ve just barred myself, so I’m going to sit out in the back garden in a tent.” He disappeared inside, slamming the door in their faces.

“We don’t seem to be having much luck, do we?” said Mummy Bear.

Daddy Bear took a deep breath and tried to think of something positive to say. “It could be worse,” he said, not sounding even remotely convincing. “We could...” He struggled to come up with something. “...Well... We could be very nearly run over by a gold-coloured Porsche, for instance.”

They suddenly heard the powerful roar of an approaching car.

“You know what this is going to be, don’t you?” said Mummy Bear.

Daddy Bear tried to ascertain the direction from which the sound was coming, but the buildings threw out echoes to confuse him. “Don’t be silly,” he said nervously. “Just because I mention that we could very nearly be run over by a gold-coloured Porsche, it doesn’t follow that it’s actually going to happen.”

“Doesn’t it?” Mummy Bear asked. She listened. The car was steadily drawing nearer, from the south. “Have you never heard of Murphy’s law? We seem to have been plagued by it just lately.”

“No Glenda,” said Daddy Bear. “It’s just too much of a coincidence.”

“Stranger things happen at sea,” Mummy Bear said mysteriously.

“Such as?”

“Such as being very nearly run over by a gold-coloured Porsche. That would be pretty odd if it

happened at sea. Anyway, we're bound to be run over eventually."

"Oh?" said Daddy Bear. "And how do you work that one out?"

"Well, we're standing in the middle of the road," said Mummy Bear.

Uttering an oath, Daddy Bear dragged his wife out of the road - just as a gold-coloured Porsche screamed past, very nearly running them over. It braked sharply and a moment later a man and a woman in fancy dress got out.

"Are you all right?" asked the woman. She was dressed as a large pink pig, minus the head, which she carried under her arm.

"We're fine, thank you very much," said Mummy Bear.

"My name's Melissa," said the girl. She shook her head and swept her long, bleached hair out of her face, as if she was in a shampoo commercial. "This is my husband, Rodney," she said, gesturing to her companion who was dressed from head to toe as a squirrel. "He doesn't talk much. Please excuse him if he keeps his costume on, only he doesn't like strangers looking at him."

"Oh dear, is he shy?" Mummy Bear asked.

"No, just appallingly ugly," said Melissa. "You know it's funny, and I can't help remarking on it, but I was just saying to Rodney before we saw you that, what with the sort of day we've had, I wouldn't be surprised if we nearly ran over two people dressed as morris dancing grizzly bears."

Then blow me, that's precisely what happens! Still, they say stranger things happen at sea."

"Yes," said Mummy Bear. "They do say that."

"You must be going to the same fancy dress party that we are," Melissa said. "Love the costumes, by the way. Rodney and I were going to go as pole vaulting ferrets, but the costume people let us down, so we had to make do with what we had in the wardrobe. I wish I'd have thought of morris dancing grizzly bears, that's a marvellous idea!"

Mrs. Bear waited for her husband to say something, but he declined. "Yes," she said at last. "Thank you."

"Still," Melissa said, somehow managing to breathe in between speaking. "The least we can do is give you a lift the rest of the way. Did your car break down? I imagine it did. We thought about joining the AA or something like that, didn't we Rodney? But when you've got a Porsche it's got no damn right breaking down on you."

Mummy and Daddy Bear squeezed into the car as Melissa carried on talking.

"I mean, what's the point of paying ludicrous amounts of money for something that's going to blow up as soon as you take it out for a spin? Sorry, I know I keep saying 'Porsche' but I just love that word. It sounds so rich. In fact, if you don't mind, I think I'll say it a few more times: Porsche, Porsche, Porsche, Porsche..."

* * *

Inspector Crump and Sergeant Pinewood had chased the Bishop of Durham for nearly two miles before they finally caught up with him. He claimed diplomatic immunity, kissed them both on the cheek then flagged down a motorbike and rode off. Crump and Pinewood returned to their car in time to receive the message that a lorry full of Mr. Pop-Up's Liquorice Flavoured Novelty Condoms with two unusually hairy people at the wheel had been spotted heading north. They eventually found the lorry abandoned several miles up the road and stopped to search it for clues.

"Sir, look what I've found!" said Sergeant Pinewood excitedly.

"Put it down Pinewood, you don't know where it's been," said Crump. The Inspector reached inside the cab and picked up a pair of fluffy dice with his pencil. "I want you to send these back to the station and get the lab boys to analyse them," he said, holding them out for Pinewood.

But Pinewood wasn't listening; he was just staring straight past him. Crump turned to see a man hobbling towards them, pushing a bike with an Old English Sheepdog in the saddlebag. He was wearing dirty Wellington boots that were turned over at the top and had rhubarb growing out of holes in the toes. His clothes were dirty and tattered, his teeth broken and yellow, and it was apparent from the fumes emanating from his person that he hadn't washed for some time. In

fact, Pinewood judged it to have been precisely eighteen years four months and two days.

“Good God!” said Crump as the aroma hit him.

“How do, gentlemen,” said the man.

“And good day to you, dirty old tramp person,” said Pinewood tactfully.

“I reckon as how you two is strangers around these parts,” said the man. His face was covered in evil looking warts, and he only had one eye, which was bloodshot and glared at them malevolently. “We don’t get many strangers round here.”

“You surprise me,” said Crump.

“It’s odd,” the old man continued. “You’re the second lot we’ve had today.”

“Other strangers have been here today?” Crump asked eagerly.

“They came in that there lorry what you’re so interested in,” said the strange man as his teeth dropped out and ran round excitedly in circles at his feet.

“This lorry?” said Crump. “Can you give me a description?”

“Ooh, let’s see now,” the old man said, scratching his grizzled chin. “It’s big, black and it seems to be carrying one hundred gross of Mr. Pop-Up’s Liquorice Flavoured Novelty Condoms.”

“No, not the lorry,” said Crump. “The people who were in it. Did they look like grizzly bears?”

“Well now,” said the man. “I ain’t saying they was, and I ain’t saying they wasn’t, but they was both big and hairy.”

“I see,” said Crump. “And which way did they go?” “Now then,” said the man. “I ain’t saying they went north, and I ain’t saying they went south, but they went north.”

He hobbled out of the scene, muttering something about not going out on the moors at night.

“North!” said Inspector Crump triumphantly. “Where can they be heading? Quick Sergeant, get the map from the back of the car...”

...In the back of Crump’s car, curled up behind the driver’s seat, Nigel was listening to their conversation and as Pinewood approached he panicked. There wasn’t enough time to slip away quietly, so he would just have to try and bluff his way out.

Sergeant Pinewood opened the rear door and started searching about for the map. Nigel reached out and passed it to his fumbling fingers. It was an old trick, but it always seemed to work in the movies.

“What are you doing in the back of the Inspector’s car?” asked Pinewood. He evidently didn’t watch the same movies.

“Ah well, that’s a little complicated,” said Nigel. “You see, I’m not really here at all. This whole incident is a figment of your imagination.”

Pinewood looked a little stunned. “What?” he said. “How do you mean?”

“Well, there’s no point asking me, is there?” Nigel responded. “I’m not really here, am I? You’re having a delusion.”

“Oh dear,” said Pinewood, looking worried. “This is serious.”

“It certainly is serious,” said Nigel. “What would happen if Inspector Crump knew you were imagining people?”

“I see your point,” Pinewood said. “This is a matter of some considerable concern.”

“Quite,” said Nigel. “Look, I won’t say anything about this if you don’t.”

“Thank you,” said Pinewood. “That’s very kind of you.”

Pinewood took the map and left. Nigel climbed out of the car and slipped behind a nearby bush, from where he could eavesdrop on Pinewood and Crump’s conversation.

“Now let’s see,” Crump said as he unfolded the map on the bonnet of the car. “Ah yes, north is up here, at the top of the map.”

“Astounding sir,” said Pinewood. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“Ah well, Sergeant Pinewood,” Crump said modestly, “when you’ve been involved in police work for as long as I have, you get to know these little things. You see, what we have to do now is second-guess them. If we can figure out where they’re heading we can get there before them.”

“A most astute plan of action, if I may say so sir,” Pinewood said.

“Thank-you, Sergeant Pinewood,” said Crump. “So they’re heading for the top of the map - and what is at the top of the map?”

“Your thumb, sir,” Pinewood answered.

“No, I meant what is at the top of the country, Pinewood?”

“Alaska?” Pinewood ventured.

“No, *this* country,” said Crump. “Not yours. Scotland, Pinewood. Scotland is at the top of the map. I have a hunch.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Pinewood. “Perhaps you can get some ointment for it.”

Crump wasn’t listening. He was trying to look butch and heroic like Clint Eastwood: chin jutting forward, that faraway look in his eyes. He nodded slowly and ponderously. “Do you know, Pinewood, I think I know what they’re up to. If I’m right then I think the Bears are heading into Scotland. More specifically, I think they’re making for Inverness.”

“Golly,” said Pinewood, dumbstruck.

The two of them got back in the car and sped off, and moments later Nigel emerged from the bushes. He watched with renewed purpose as the car disappeared over the brow of the hill, knowing now that whatever happened he had to find his parents before Crump did.

* * *

Mr. and Mrs. Bear's fortunes seemed to have improved considerably. Half an hour ago they had been faced with the prospect of a long walk and spending another night sleeping rough. Now here they were being driven to some posh bash at a country manor house, in a gold Porsche, no less. There would be food and drink - champagne even! If they were very crafty they might even be able to get a bed for the night.

By cleverly not interrupting the garrulous Melissa as she continued to talk at them, they learned that the party was being held by Prunella Farley-Socket - daughter of Sir Reginald Farley-Socket, who had been awarded his title in recognition of his family's remarkable contribution to inbreeding. He was also quite disgustingly rich, and as far as Mummy Bear could gather there was no particular reason for this celebration, other than to spend the vast quantities of money that were lying around the house in great wads.

When they reached the manor, standing regally amongst tall firs, the party was already well underway. The long driveway was choked with cars: Aston Martins, BMWs and long, black limousines the size of buses which were normally used to ferry fat, balding women from one side of the street to the other. There was also, looking rather conspicuous, a battered Vauxhall Viva that most probably belonged to some eccentric baronet.

The four of them were shown to a large room full of people dressed in animal costumes: everything from aardvarks to zebras, though disappointingly no one had come dressed as anything beginning with the letter 'Q'. They were approached by a large, fluffy white rabbit that wiggled when it walked, and ultimately turned out to be the hostess herself.

"Melissa!" Prunella Farley-Socket cried. "It is Melissa, isn't it?"

"Yes it's me," Melissa said from beneath her costume. "You're looking wonderful, Prunella, such a lovely costume. I must say I think the animal theme makes for an awfully good fancy dress party. It's much better than the last one where we all had to come dressed as kitchen appliances."

"Oh you're so right, Melissa," Prunella agreed. "That was an absolute disaster. I spent most of the evening in the kitchen with the dishwasher, thinking it was Lady Sybil Crotchet. And poor David still hasn't managed to remove that blender attachment from up his backside." She nodded at Melissa's husband, her rabbit ears flapping furiously. "Is that Rodney, or have you swapped him for something better?" She laughed energetically, sounding not unlike a donkey with whooping cough.

"No, it's Rodney," Melissa said regretfully. "He's still not talking yet, I'm afraid."

“Oh dear,” Prunella said to Rodney in her most patronising voice. “Are you still ugly? I must give you the address of that plastic surgeon in Zurich. He did my aunt, you know. He took her bottom lip, stretched it right over the top of her head and stapled it to the back of her neck. Now she looks twenty years younger. She’s still hideous, of course, but you can’t have everything can you?”

Melissa nodded in sombre agreement.

“Well why don’t you two go and mingle?” Prunella suggested, then she turned her attention to the Bears who had been waiting a little nervously by the door. “Sorry, I’m ignoring you, aren’t I?” she apologised. “You must think me a terrible hostess. Thing is, I haven’t seen dear old Melissa since, ooh, last Tuesday. Now don’t say a thing, I’m going to try and guess who you are.”

The Bears didn’t say a thing. They just shuffled their feet a little anxiously.

“Those are very good costumes,” Prunella said thoughtfully. “Morris dancing grizzly bears, *very* ingenious. They even smell authentic. Got it! You must be Clive and Wendy.”

“No, we’re here!” said a stoat and a tiger standing by the fireplace.

“Then you must be Derek and James?” Prunella ventured.

“Wrong again!” said a pantomime horse that had been fitted with a trunk, but wasn’t fooling anyone.

Prunella shook her head. "All right, I give up," she conceded. "Who are you?"

Daddy Bear looked at Mummy Bear. Mummy Bear looked at Prunella. "Well," she said, her voice shaking. "We're Gordon and Glenda."

"Gordon and Glenda?"

"Yes," Mummy Bear said, and by way of an explanation she merely repeated herself. "We're Gordon and Glenda."

"Oh, you must be friends of my parents!" Prunella said.

"Yes," breathed Mummy Bear.

"That's exactly what I was about to say," Daddy Bear joined in.

"Well mother and father are around here somewhere," Prunella told them. "They're both dressed as chameleons, so they may be a little difficult to find. Please help yourself to drinks and nibbles."

"Well thank you very much," said Daddy Bear. "I don't mind if I do." He found himself talking to thin air, as Prunella had already swept away and started 'mingling' on the other side of the room.

"Why do you always leave it to me to do the talking?" hissed Mummy Bear.

"You've had more practise at it than me," Daddy Bear muttered from the corner of his mouth.

"And just what do you mean by that?" Mummy Bear wanted to know.

"Nothing," Daddy Bear replied diplomatically.

Mummy Bear sighed. "Come on," she said. "Let's get out of here."

"Leave?" Daddy Bear replied. "You must be joking!"

"I don't like it here, Gordon!" she insisted. "I don't like these people. They're weird."

"Not weird, just eccentric," Daddy Bear corrected her. "The gentry are allowed to be a little unusual. It's part of their charm, their mystique."

"I still don't like it," Mummy Bear said. "They frighten me."

"Oh that's ridiculous!" said Daddy Bear. "Why on earth should they frighten you? They're very hospitable people. You're not averse to drinking their champagne, are you? Come on, let's have a bit of a mingle. We're going to draw attention to ourselves if we just stand here."

Some peculiar sixth sense drew Daddy Bear irresistibly to the table where the drinks were being served. Mummy Bear followed reluctantly behind. "They're only hospitable," she hissed over her husband's shoulder, "because they think we're friends of Sir Reginald."

"Then we'll just have to make sure they don't find out that we're not," Daddy Bear said. He accepted a glass of champagne from the butler, downed it in one gulp, then acquired another.

They were interrupted by a woman dressed as a leopard, who claimed to be something big in the city. She sidled up to them and nudged Mummy Bear's elbow. "Hello there," she said. "I'm Lucinda

and I'm really into crystal power, seafood and yellow." She held a glass of champagne in one hand, and while she was spilling this onto the carpet her other hand was busily trying to shove great wedges of cake through the snout of her costume.

"I'm pleased for you," Mummy Bear replied. "Your mother must be very proud." She turned and tugged at her husband's arm, causing him to spill his fifth glass of bubbly. "Please!" she implored. "These people are warped."

"They are not warped!" Daddy Bear said angrily as he proffered his glass to the butler for a refill. "Your problem is that you have no understanding of the higher classes. You're out of your depth, admit it. These people appreciate art and culture, and fine living - all these things are a closed book to you."

"Oh, but not to you, of course?" Mummy Bear replied sarcastically.

"One only has to have an open mind," Daddy Bear said. "Oh yes, in many ways I think I was born for this sort of a life. I could have been a nob, you know?"

"I don't doubt it," Mummy Bear muttered.

"Say there!" interrupted a large, loud, bearded man as strolled over and tugged at the fur on Daddy Bear's arm. "Marvellous costume!" he said with much admiration. "Reminds me of when I was in the States a couple of years back."

“Oh really,” Daddy Bear said, cocking his head attentively.

“We went on a bear hunt,” the loud man continued. “Ever been on a bear hunt? You should, great fun. I remember we hadn’t seen hide nor hair of the filthy beasts, but on the third day we finally cornered one.”

“That’s nice,” Daddy Bear replied uncertainly.

“Yeah, we tracked it back to its cave and smoked it out. Then we got a long sharpened pole and we rammed...”

The unnecessarily graphic description that followed made Daddy Bear feel quite ill, and he had to have another couple of drinks to calm his nerves. The strange man limped away to sicken someone else with his grizzly tale. Daddy Bear turned to his wife, obviously shaken.

“You were right,” he conceded. “These people *are* weird. Let’s go. You nip outside and hot-wire one of the cars in the driveway, and I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

“Okay,” Mummy Bear said happily. “What are you going to do?”

Daddy Bear took another glass from the butler. “I’m going to stay here a little while longer to keep an eye on this champagne.”

By the time Daddy Bear had finally managed to get through the front door he had already cracked his head on the frame three times. Suffering from the slight effects of minor concussion, and the rather

more serious consequences of extensive alcohol abuse, he wobbled outside where the fresh air made him feel even worse.

He turned round, rather too quickly, and felt the world spinning about him. Nevertheless, thanks to a combination of what remained of his powers of judgement and a northwesterly wind, he managed to maintain his balance. The butler and the doorman were both watching him from the doorway, giggling to themselves. Daddy Bear wheeled around and stuck up two fingers.

“I hope you fall into a large vat of buffalo puke!” Daddy Bear shouted.

“Oh go stuff yourself, bum face!” the butler shouted back, and he slammed the door.

Daddy Bear was shocked. That wasn’t the sort of thing he expected from the serving classes. He looked around for his wife. “Where is the silly cow?” he mumbled.

“Gordon!” she called. “Gordon, I’m over here!”

“Keep the noise down, you stupid woman!” Daddy Bear shouted at the top of his voice. “We don’t want everyone to know we’re nicking one of their cars, do we? Now, where the hell are you?”

“I’m over here!” she called back angrily, through gritted teeth.

Daddy Bear followed the sound of her voice and saw two of her. He quite fancied the one on the left, but to be on the safe side he decided to head for a point between them, then get his

bearings from there. Once he was within a few feet of her, Mummy Bear lunged forward and steered him towards the car.

“All right, all right, you mad bint! I’m not an imbecile, let me go.”

“No.”

“And why not?” Daddy Bear snapped.

“Because you’re as sloshed as a fart and you’ll fall over, that’s why,” Mummy Bear said hatefully as she tried to push him into the passenger seat.

“Hang on a minute. Is this the best you can manage?” Daddy Bear protested, finding himself being forcibly squeezed into the battered Vauxhall Viva that they had noticed earlier. “From a driveway packed with some of the most desirable and expensive cars on the planet, you pick this one. What kind of a getaway are we going to make in this?”

“It was the only one that didn’t have an alarm,” Mummy Bear hissed. “And besides, it’s inconspicuous. Now are you getting in or what?”

“All right, all right!” Daddy Bear said. “But I’m doing the driving.” He heaved himself over onto the driver’s side and started it up. Great clouds of black smoke began to billow out from underneath. Mummy Bear coughed, and quickly got in and closed the door. The silencer was shot to pieces and the noise of the engine was enough to wake the dead. Luckily the car’s rightful owner was lying smashed out of his head beneath a table, otherwise he would have been very easily alerted.

Goldilocks and the Free Bears

“Hold on tight!” Daddy Bear shouted. The wheels spun on the loose gravel and they roared off, the tail pipe sending up a great shower of sparks as it dragged along on the ground behind them.

By the time they had reached the bottom of the drive, Daddy Bear was fast asleep over the wheel and the car had come gently to a halt. Mummy Bear put him in the back seat, got behind the wheel herself and followed the road north.

10
Carburettor & Other Words

Mummy Bear woke early and stretched. She had parked the car on a grass verge on the outskirts of a small village so that she could get some sleep. Daddy Bear was still asleep in the back, snoring and occasionally producing unpleasant emissions. As a result the air in the car had become fairly stifling, so the first thing Mummy Bear did was to wind down the window.

She was just taking her second deep gulp of fresh air when something was poked through the window, striking her lightly on the nose. She looked at it curiously. It was a pension book, and attached to it was a hand. There was more: attached to the hand was an arm, and this in turn was attached to a little old lady - horn-rimmed glasses, blue rinse, the whole ensemble.

“I came early,” she said, “to beat the queue.”

Mummy Bear nodded at her and smiled uneasily. “Oh yes?” she said, and she took the pension book off her. “I don’t want to seem rude but I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about. What do you want me to do with this, dear?”

“I’ve come for my pension,” the little old lady explained.

“I’m afraid there’s been some misunderstanding,” Mummy Bear replied. “I think what you’re looking for is a post office. This isn’t a post office, it’s a 1975 Vauxhall Viva. I’m sorry to

disappoint you, but I can see how it might be an easy mistake to make.”

“Oh dear,” said the little old lady sorrowfully. “Does that mean you can’t give me my pension?”

“I’m afraid so,” Mummy Bear apologised, and she passed the pension book back through the window.

“That’s a pity,” the little old lady said. She stuffed the book back into her baggy blue handbag and pulled out her purse. “Well could you give me a book of stamps then please?”

Mummy Bear shook her head. “No, listen to me dear, I’ll try to explain. This is not a post office, all right? You can’t get stamps here.”

“A postal order then?” said the little old lady.

“No, not even a postal order.”

“What about one of those Postman Pat pencil sharpeners?”

“No! No pensions, no stamps, no postal orders, no Postman Pat pencil sharpeners. Look.” She tapped the side of the car. “No post office!”

“Well this is very strange,” the little old lady said. “Usually I just bring my pension book to a lady sitting in a post office like this one. She takes it and drives off very fast. Then she brings it back half an hour later and gives me two pounds fifty.”

“Two pounds fifty?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said the little old lady. “I know it’s not much, but I try to live on it the best I can.”

Mummy Bear paused for a moment, then spoke to her gently. "Listen love, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but I think you're being had."

"Being had?"

"Yes," said Mummy Bear. "Someone's conning you out of your pension money."

"Oh dear," the old lady said as her eyes became watery. "Oh dear me. Oh dear, dear me. How am I going to feed Sooty, my albino tomcat now?"

"Never mind love," Mummy Bear said. "Just make sure you take your pension book to a proper post office in future. In the meantime, here's twenty quid. Just make sure you spend it wisely." She handed her a twenty pound note. The little old lady thanked her kindly and then left.

Daddy Bear suddenly broke wind and woke himself up, just in time to see the old lady leave. "Who was that old hag?" he asked. "I hope you didn't give her any money."

"Don't speak about people like that," Mummy Bear chastised him.

"Oh don't worry about it," he replied. "She was just the standard stereotype, underpinning the popular myth that all old people are gullible and stupid."

But Daddy Bear was wrong. She was in fact Granny Malone, the infamous confidence trickster who regularly worked this patch.

Yes, Granny Malone! A name that struck terror into the hearts of many everyday, God-fearing folk. Wherever there was corruption, humiliation

and excruciating physical pain, there was Granny Malone!

Granny Malone! Scream with agony as she sticks her shopping trolley on your foot in the supermarket.

Granny Malone! Groan in pain as she offers you another of her home made rock cakes.

Granny Malone! Recoil in horror as she shows you the boil just above her knee that she's going to have lanced next week.

Anyway, that's enough of Granny Malone.

"Yes, that's enough of Granny Malone," agreed Daddy Bear. He sat up in his seat. "Where are we?" he asked.

"We're just outside the village of Lower Bumble," said Mummy Bear.

"Oh," Daddy Bear said, and he nodded. "I see." A moment went by and then he added, "So where's Lower Bumble, then?"

Mummy Bear shrugged. "It's about a mile up the road," she told him. "You said we were going to Scotland, so I just pointed the car north and kept going... Look, why are we going to Scotland anyway? I know you've got some kind of plan, what I don't understand is why you have to keep me in the dark about it."

Daddy Bear rolled his eyes upwards and pressed himself back in his seat. He was too tired for lengthy explanations. "The reason I haven't told you what I'm planning," he said, "is because

you'll think it's ridiculous and refuse to go along with it."

"Well that inspires a lot of confidence," Mummy Bear said. "What makes you think I'll go along with something that you're not prepared to tell me about?"

"Because it's the only chance we have of clearing our names," Daddy Bear replied wearily. "Trust me, we have to go to Scotland. To be specific, we have to go to Loch Ness. Now, can we get moving?"

"No," Mummy Bear said sulkily. "We're out of petrol."

"Out of petrol?" Daddy Bear repeated, and he stared at her as if it was somehow her fault. He bit his bottom lip, then said in a patronising voice, "Has it not occurred to you to get some more?"

"Fine," Mummy Bear replied in an equally condescending manner. "So I'll just sink a well here, shall I? I'm bound to strike oil sooner or later. All I'll need then is a small refinery."

"All right, all right," Daddy Bear replied. "We can do without the smart Alec comments, thank you very much. So just drop the Vaudeville routine and come back down to earth. All you had to do was walk to the nearest service station and get a can of petrol. Is it really that difficult?"

"Can't," Mummy Bear replied dissidently. "No money."

Daddy Bear leaned forward in his seat. "That's funny, you had at least twenty quid last night."

“Yes, well, I gave it to the nice old lady,” Mummy Bear said quietly, and she blushed.

Daddy Bear’s jaw dropped, then just flapped about uselessly. “You did what?” he asked slowly, and quite coherently considering he no longer had the use of his jaw.

“I gave it to the old lady,” Mummy Bear repeated. Then, in a desperate attempt to justify her thoughtless act of charity, she added, “Well, her pussy was going to starve.”

“Fine, fine,” Daddy Bear said, struggling to remain calm. “It’s just that if we don’t get to Scotland, we’re going to be eaten by a chuffing great crocodile, that’s all. But it doesn’t really matter, I can see how a starving kitten is much more important. Oh, you stupid woman! What the hell did you think you were playing at? I’m going to be eaten alive because of you.”

Mummy Bear clenched her teeth and pulled her coat around her. She opened the door and got out. A shiver thrilled through her as the cutting wind sliced past her ears. She started to march up the road.

“Oh fair enough,” Daddy Bear said. “Just ignore me.” He also got out of the car, and started to follow her. “I mean, you’ve got to get your priorities right, haven’t you? It would be pretty stupid of me to think that our lives meant more to you than the well-being of some flea-bitten moggy that wakes up one morning feeling a bit peckish. I

mean, is it good sense, do you think? Is it responsible?"

Mummy Bear stopped and suddenly turned on him. "Responsible?" she snapped. "And what would you know of responsibility? Were you being responsible last night, for example? Or were you just smashed out of your head?"

"Oh, so it's my fault?" Daddy Bear replied.

"You disgust me Gordon, you really do," Mummy Bear said. "I suppose you think it's clever to get as drunk as a skunk and career around shouting your mouth off? Well you showed your true colours last night, Gordon. You're an oaf, an irresponsible pig." She turned and continued walking.

"So where do you think you're going?" Daddy Bear shouted as he tried to keep up.

"I don't care," Mummy Bear called over her shoulder as she quickened her pace. "Anywhere, as long as it's away from you."

"All right, I'm sorry," Daddy Bear said. "Can we just talk about this please?"

"I've had enough, Gordon," she shouted. "Goodbye."

"Oh come on, give me a chance!" He gave up trying to follow her and just stood in the road, shouting after her. "You haven't got a hope without me. Where will you go?"

"Scotland!" she called.

"Ha! You're going the wrong way." Daddy Bear pointed to another road that led down into the

crease of a deepening valley. “That’s the way to Scotland.”

“If you say so!” the rapidly departing figure shouted back to him. “You take the low road, and I’ll take the high road, but you can bet your arse I’ll be in Scotland, before you!”

And with that she was gone.

Daddy Bear shrugged to himself, then sat down at the edge of the road, puzzling over her parting statement. Why should she want him to bet his arse? She had never been particularly fond of it before. Strange, very strange.

Mummy Bear whistled to herself as she walked. She hadn’t felt this carefree since before her wedding day. Right now she couldn’t have cared less about her husband, and for that matter she couldn’t give a damn about Nigel either. Suddenly she was wild and young and free. She could do anything. Anything! She could tear off all her clothes and run naked through the fields if she really wanted to. She didn’t want to, of course, but it was nice to have it there as an option.

She ought to have left Gordon years ago. Then again, it was all too easy to say that now. When you have a home and a family it’s not so easy to just walk out on your responsibilities. The upheavals of the past few days had changed all that, and now she was tasting freedom for the first time in many, many years.

It was therefore a great pity that she wasn't able to enjoy her liberty for a little longer, for just moments later she found herself caught up in the trailing ropes of a hot air balloon. Kicking and screaming she was carried up into the sky.

Putting all thoughts of his wife from his mind, Daddy Bear took the low road, walking most of the day without seeing a soul. The morning blossomed into a beautiful afternoon, then the afternoon starting slipping towards eventide, and Daddy Bear sat down to rest on the grass verge, mopping his brow. It was one of those final days before winter, when the sun tries to catch you out with a final blaze before becoming enshrouded in frost. Up ahead the road wobbled unsteadily between two hedgerows. Daddy Bear had been on the move all day, but he didn't seem to be getting anywhere. The scenery was constant, flat, featureless, and in all this time he hadn't been passed by a single vehicle.

Suddenly he heard a sound and stood up. Then he saw it! It was a car, steadily approaching in the distance. Daddy Bear stepped into the middle of the road, and stood blinking like a startled rabbit as the car slowed down. It stopped just a few feet in front of him and the driver leaned over and pushed open the passenger door.

He was a strange little man with a round face and a pudding-bowl haircut. He seemed almost

conical in shape, as if most of his body had sunk below his waist.

“Can I offer you a lift?” he asked.

Daddy Bear nodded eagerly. He climbed into the passenger seat and the car pulled away.

“My name’s Barbara Pott,” said the man. “I sell double glazing.”

“Barbara?” Daddy Bear queried. “That’s a bit of a strange name, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” the man replied. “It seems a pretty normal sort of name to me. There are, ooh, loads of people are called Barbara, aren’t there? There’s Barbara Streisand, for example, and there’s Barbara Cartland.”

“Yes, but they’re women,” said Daddy Bear. “Barbara is a woman’s name.”

“Is that a fact?” said the double glazing salesman thoughtfully. “You know, I think you might be right. Now I come to think of it, my name isn’t Barbara at all. No, that would be silly. My name is Mary.” He smiled, and seemed quite content to let the subject rest at that. Daddy Bear certainly had no inclination to pursue the matter.

“I sell double glazing, you know,” said Mary.

“I believe you did mention it,” said Daddy Bear as he adjusted his sticky collar. Mary had got the heating in the car turned up to the maximum and it was really quite unbearable. “It’s really quite warm in here, isn’t it Mr. Pott?” he ventured.

“Oh, call me Mary.”

“I’d rather not,” said Daddy Bear. “In fact it’s rather stifling. I was wondering if it might be possible to turn the heater down a notch or two?”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Mary

“Ah,” said Daddy Bear, and since he didn’t want to abuse Mr. Pott’s hospitality, he left it at that.

“Many people,” Mary continued, “assume that a career in double glazing must be pretty boring and unfulfilling.”

Daddy Bear nodded slowly. “And I suppose you’re going to tell me that it’s really quite fascinating and worthwhile?”

“No, I agree with the people who think it’s boring and unfulfilling,” said Mary. “Do you know we’ve bought out a new PVCu frame that can withstand temperatures in excess of four thousand degrees centigrade? They say that if your house burns down, at least your window frames remain intact. Fat lot of good that is, eh? And we actually have to tell people this. And the really astonishing thing is that most people are genuinely impressed by this insane technobabble.”

“Dreadful,” said Daddy Bear, although he wasn’t really interested.

“Oh, it’s so disheartening,” Mary whined. “We turn up on someone’s doorstep, purely on the off chance that they’ve got eight thousand quid burning a hole in their pocket and they’d like some new windows. I’ve never worked it out, but I imagine that the odds against us closing a sale must

be pretty phenomenal. It's a bit like a surgeon coming round to your house with his scalpel, just on the off chance that you need your tonsils whipping out."

"Well I don't know," said Daddy Bear. "I suppose there's always some idiot willing to part with his money on the strength of a glossy brochure and some vacuous sales talk."

"You reckon?" said Mary in a jaded voice.

"It's just a question of the salesman's skill, isn't it?" said Daddy Bear. "I imagine it's all down to subtle persuasion."

"Fair enough," Mary said. "Tell you what, when we get to the next town you can come with me. If you manage to sell anything I'll give you half my commission."

Daddy Bear's first instinct was to decline the offer, but then he thought better of it. Here he was with no money, no transport and no lodgings. His chance encounter with this tubby and unnervingly peculiar double glazing salesman could well turn out to be the stroke of good fortune he so desperately needed. He agreed.

They arrived in a small market town, barely more than a pinprick on Mary's road atlas, and they parked the car on the corner of a long street of smoky terraced houses. Mary reached over onto the back seat and picked up a folder bulging with brochures.

“Down the left hand side of the street, then back up the other side,” he said with a sigh. “I doubt whether we’ll get our feet in any doors, so it shouldn’t take long.”

The first house was a bit of a mess. The windows were all broken, the paintwork was peeling and the facade had large chunks of masonry missing from it.

Mary knocked vigorously. A moment later the door was opened by a small boy, no higher than Daddy Bear’s waist. His teeth were all broken, his skin was peeling and his face had large chunks missing from it.

“Hello little boy,” said Daddy Bear softly. “Can you go and fetch your mummy for us?”

“Me mum’s dead,” said the boy. “But me dad’s inside, watchin’ the racin’.”

“Oh I’m sorry,” said Daddy Bear.

“‘S’all right,” said the boy. “He likes watchin’ the racin’.”

“No, I meant... Look, can you go and tell your daddy that there are two gentlemen here who’d like a word with him?”

“All right then,” the boy said dutifully, and he turned back into the dark hole from which he had emerged. A minute or so later he returned.

“Me dad wants to know what y’want?” he asked.

“We wondered if your daddy might be interested in double glazing?” Daddy Bear said.

“Weather resistant PVCu - guaranteed for a lifetime,” Mary added.

“I’ll go and tell him.” Once again the boy disappeared back into the house. This time he was quicker to return.

“Me dad says you’ve got to fuck off,” he said. The boy then looked at Daddy Bear curiously, and wrinkled up his nose. “Why are you dressed as a morris dancer?” he asked. “Me dad says all morris dancers are poofs.”

Mary edged forward. “Just tell your dad that he’s missing an excellent opportunity to purchase, at relatively low cost, a remarkably durable range of PVCu windows and doors.”

The boy nodded and made to go, then checked himself. “What was that long word you used?” he asked.

“Which long word?” asked Mary.

“All of ‘em.”

“Just tell him we’re not leaving till he’s heard us out,” Daddy Bear said.

The boy went to tell his father. Daddy Bear and Mary waited patiently. They heard raised voices, then the noise of something heavy being thrown across the room. The boy reappeared. His hair was ruffled, his face was bruised and there was a coal scuttle jammed on his head.

“Me dad says you’ve got to fuck off right now or he’ll stick a pick axe through both your heads.”

“Well, that’s good enough for me,” said Daddy Bear. “Thank you very much,” he added as he dragged Mary away.

The next house had been badly pebble-dashed, probably by particularly vicious vandals. “This looks more promising,” Daddy Bear said.

“Wanna bet?” said Mary miserably. He pressed the doorbell, which made a noise like someone playing the first four bars of Bolero on a paper and comb. They heard a series of bolts being drawn back, then the door opened slightly and two bloodshot eyes peered out.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Mrs...?” Mary said.

The woman opened the door fully. She was a large pink lady who had somehow managed to stuff her body into a purple trouser suit. “Mrs. Lumps,” she answered suspiciously. “Can I help you at all?”

“Well Mrs. Lumps,” Mary began, “I represent a firm that specialises in the thermal sealing of all portals by means of the latest draught excluding laminates, utilising either PVCu or natural wood, finished by hand and guaranteed against rot for ten years.”

The woman stood up straight and stared back at him, slightly cross-eyed. “I beg your pardon?”

“I sell double glazing,” said Mary.

“Oh I see,” said Mrs. Lumps. “Most delighted to meet you.” There was a faint whiff of liquor on her breath as she reached out and shook Mary’s

hand. “Well don’t just stand there, come in and we’ll have a chat about it.”

Taken aback by this unexpected welcome, Daddy Bear and Mary exchanged glances of surprise, then followed Mr. Lumps down the narrow entrance hall.

“My husband’s rich, you know,” she said matter-of-factly as she showed them into the sitting room.

“Oh, that’s nice,” said Mary.

Mrs. Lumps indicated that Mary should sit down on an expensive, but torturously uncomfortable sofa. Then she put some newspaper on the floor for Daddy Bear to sit on.

“Tea or coffee?” she asked.

“Oh, tea please,” said Mary.

“Right, coffee it is then,” she said, and she floated into the kitchen.

“I reckon we’re onto a winner here,” said Mary excitedly. “This one’s taken the bait.”

“Well, I reckon we’re onto a nutter here,” Daddy Bear said more realistically.

There was a clatter of china as Mrs. Lumps entered with a silver tray. She set it down on the coffee table, then thrust a cup and saucer at Mary. The liquid lapped over the brim and scalded his fingers as he took hold of it.

“Milk or lemon?” she asked.

“Lemon please,” said Mary.

Mrs. Lumps dropped a whole lemon into his cup and stirred it vigorously, but it wouldn't dissolve.

"No, that's fine thank you," said Mary. He was about to take a sip when the grandfather clock in the corner suddenly chimed the hour. He jumped up and threw the contents of the cup down the front of his shirt. "Very nice," he said as he placed the empty cup down on the coffee table.

Mrs. Lumps returned to the tray for a bowl of water, which she placed in front of Daddy Bear. Then she made a grand display of sitting down in a big armchair.

"Well then," said Mary, as he mopped his shirt with a handkerchief and wrung it into his saucer. "I'm sure you're eager to hear how my company can benefit you, Mrs. Lumps. Have you any thoughts as to the sort of thing you're looking for? You may be interested to know that we're currently offering a very attractive package in simulated walnut."

"What's that you're talking about dear?" Mrs. Lumps said as she slurped her coffee through her teeth.

"Double glazing," Mary reminded her. "Remember?"

"Double glazing?" Mrs. Lumps replied in clipped tones. "Oh no, I don't want none of that."

Mary was thrown by this comment. "But I thought that's what you asked us in here for," he said. "I'm sorry, but it seems that we're wasting

your time.” He started to get up, but Mrs. Lumps laid a restraining hand on his arm.

“Oh, you don’t have to go just yet, do you,” she said gently. “I get so few visitors these days. It’s nice to have a chat now and then, don’t you think?”

“Well, yes,” Mary replied uneasily. “I suppose it is.”

“Tell me,” said Mrs. Lumps, “what are your views on the necessity for trade limitations within the EEC?”

“Well I...” Mary began, and he adopted a frown. “Look, is this relevant to anything in particular?”

“Just making conversation,” Mrs. Lumps replied. “I know, let’s play a game. How about Battleships?”

“Battleships!” said Mary.

“No, you’re right, that’s a stupid idea,” said Mrs. Lumps. “All right, something else. Cowboys and Indians!”

“That’s it,” said Mary. “I’m leaving.”

“Cops and robbers!” said Mrs. Lumps. “Hey yes, that’ll be good. My husband runs a betting shop, you know. Why don’t you two boys pretend to beat me up, then take me round there and threaten to do terrible things to me if they don’t hand over all the money?”

“What?”

“Hang on, hang on!” Daddy Bear interjected. “Are you seriously suggesting we should take you

round to your husband's shop and threaten to beat you up?"

"That's it exactly," Mrs. Lumps replied. "It'll be a bit of a giggle, won't it? Right, I'll go into the kitchen and make a start on the washing up, then you two can pounce on me when I'm not expecting it."

She picked up the tea tray and took it through to the kitchen.

"That woman is stark staring mad," said Daddy Bear as he jumped to his feet. "Come on, let's get out of here."

"No hang on a minute," Mary said. "There could be something in this."

"What?" Daddy Bear replied incredulously. "You're not seriously considering going along with this, are you? That loopy old bint's as mad as fish. She's spent twenty years sitting at home with nothing to do but watch daytime TV, and it must have addled her brain."

"This is the chance of a lifetime?" said Mary. "All right, so she may be a total fruitcake, but I don't believe in looking a gift horse in the mouth."

"I think you must be as barking as she is," Daddy Bear pointed out. "We're talking about robbery and extortion."

"Ah yes," Mary said. "But as we're acting with the full consent of Mrs. Lumps, it means the whole thing is perfectly legal."

"I don't think the police are going to see it like that," Daddy Bear said. "They're more likely to see

it as a diabolical scheme to take advantage of the insane rantings of that dribbling lunatic in the kitchen. Come on, let's try the next house and see if we have any more luck there."

"No!" Mary said firmly as he struck a heroic pose. "I'm sick of being an ordinary, everyday double-glazing salesman. I want to be dangerous and sexy! This is my chance to really be somebody for a change."

"Yoo-hoo!" Mrs. Lumps called from the kitchen. "I'm ready!"

"Right, I've decided," Mary said. "No more Mr. Nice Guy Travelling Salesperson Man. From now on it's goodbye to Mary Pott, boring double glazing salesman with a silly girl's name, and hello Mary Vicious Bastard, the hardened criminal."

He picked up his folder and threw it into the air, and as a cascade of glossy brochures rained down around him he stomped through into the kitchen. Daddy Bear gave a worried sigh and followed him.

11
I've Got One Like That

Eighteen hundred hours.

Mary and Daddy Bear waited anxiously in a stolen van parked opposite the betting shop. They hadn't really needed to steal the van at all: it would have been just as easy to use Mary's car for the job, but Mary had argued that if they weren't going to do it properly then they might as well not do it at all.

"The shop must be about empty by now," said Mary. "We'll go in."

Mrs. Lumps was in the back. She had insisted that they tie her up and then beat her mercilessly around the head with a coffee table. She obviously enjoyed this sort of thing immensely and Daddy Bear was unnerved by the way she smiled through it all.

"Ooh this is fun," she said excitedly as Daddy Bear helped her from the back of the van. She pressed a handkerchief to her nose to stem the flow of blood. "Can you kick me in the ribs again please? I really enjoyed that."

"No!" snapped Daddy Bear.

"Oh please," Mrs. Lumps pleaded.

"Mad woman," Daddy Bear muttered to himself.

"Come on!" said Mary urgently. He pulled the coffee table out of the back of the van and hefted

it onto his shoulder, then they hurried across the road and burst into the betting shop.

“All right, nobody move!” Mary roared as the door swung shut behind them. “This is a hold up! I’ve got a coffee table and I’m not afraid to use it. Hand over the dosh or we give Mrs. Lumps a good drubbing. And when we’ve finished with the coffee table we’ve got a sawn-off wardrobe out in the van, so just watch it.”

The shop was empty. There was only one cashier behind the glass partition: a rather severe, middle-aged woman. “I’m sorry,” she said, frankly unimpressed with Mary, or his furniture. “We’re closed.”

“This is a hold up,” Mary explained. “We don’t want to place a bet, we’re robbing you.”

The woman scowled at them. “Well we’re still closed,” she said sharply. “I suggest you come a little earlier next time.” The cashier smiled at Mrs. Lumps. “Hello Edwina. How are you?”

“Fine thank you, June,” Mrs. Lumps replied cordially as she coughed up blood onto the carpet. “I think I’ve got a bit of a cold coming on.”

“My Alfie’s got a terrible cold,” said the cashier. “There’s stuff pouring out of him left, right and centre. I think there’s a bug going around. Anyway, what brings you here - another kidnapping?”

“I’m afraid so,” Mrs. Lumps said. “You know how it is.”

“Yes, of course,” said the cashier. “This is the fourth time this week. You’ve just missed your

husband. He's nipped out to the stationers, but he shouldn't be long. Do you want to come and bleed in the back? I've just put the kettle on."

"Hang on! Hang on!" Mary interrupted. "We're supposed to be robbing you, remember?"

"And I've already told you, we're closed," said the cashier. "You'll have to come back tomorrow."

"Sorry boys," Mrs. Lumps apologised, and she smiled at them as they trudged outside.

"Well that's just great," Mary said as they stood dejectedly on the pavement. "My career as a criminal is over before it's begun. You know, for once in my life I thought something really exciting was happening."

"Well maybe it's not such a bad thing after all," Daddy Bear said, secretly relieved that all had not gone as planned.

"No, I'm not finished yet," Mary said determinedly. "I set out to be a criminal, and that's precisely what I'm going to do. Look over there."

Opposite them on the other side of the street Mrs Linda Globule was happily handing out leaflets to the last of the day's shoppers. Suddenly she was greatly surprised to find herself accosted by Mary Vicious Bastard, the hardened double-glazing salesman.

"All right, hand it over!" Mary bellowed. "And no funny business."

Linda smiled and handed him a leaflet. "Of course sir. There you go."

“I beg your pardon?” Mary asked, feeling a little heady. To his recollection no one had ever called him ‘sir’ before.

“Your leaflet sir,” said Linda slowly, sensing his confusion. “You know, not many people take an interest in the plight of terminally confused albino donkeys.”

“Sorry, what?”

“We’re trying to raise money to fund a rehabilitation programme for the many albino donkeys that have fallen victim to the terrible stresses and strains of everyday life.”

“Wait a minute, I’ve just stolen this from you.” Mary waved the leaflet in front of her, a little concerned that he wasn’t creating exactly the right impression. “Aren’t you going to shout for the police?” he asked.

Linda looked puzzled. “Why? The leaflets are free.”

“Free?”

“Yes, I’ve been giving them away all day.”

“Giving them away? Well where’s the fun in that?” said Mary with a note of profound disappointment in his voice.

Linda shrugged and rattled a tin under his nose. “Would you care to make a donation?” she asked.

“What?” Mary said. He frowned as he felt in his pockets. “Sorry,” he said, “I’ve only got this twenty pound note.”

Linda snatched from him and stuffed down the front of her blouse. “That’s very generous of you

sir,” she said. “I’m sure the donkeys will be very grateful.”

“Wait a minute - ” Mary started to say, but as he spoke he heard an approaching police siren, and a squad car came screeching around the corner.

“Come on,” Daddy Bear said as he grabbed Mary from behind. “I think it’s time to get away from here.”

The two of them ran off, disappearing into a side street. Linda Globule watched them as they went, a playful smile flickering at the corners of her mouth. She emptied the contents of her collecting tin into her pockets, laughing quietly to herself. Then she reached under her chin, and with the thumb and forefinger of her left hand she took hold of a small flap of loose skin. Gently she pulled and a thin sheet of latex began to detach itself from her face. Beneath the rubbery mask a wizened, leathery visage was slowly being exposed. The mask popped and crackled as it released its grip on the warts and boils that adorned her real face. For ‘Linda Globule’ was merely a cunning disguise. The mask fell to the floor and the old woman threw back her head and laughed.

Granny Malone!

Whenever fear and death stalk the streets, there, lurking in the shadows is Granny Malone!

Whenever earthquakes and catastrophes wrench nations asunder, there, revelling in the destruction, is Granny Malone!

Whenever you can't find the end on a roll of sticky tape, there, asking you to let her have a go, is Granny Malone!

Yes, Granny Malone! Pretty damn nasty, if you know what I mean.

“Stop! Stop!” Daddy Bear said. He leaned breathlessly against a wall. They were in a narrow alleyway that ran between the back gardens of two rows of houses.

Mary leaned over, hands resting on his knees, panting heavily. “Do you really think they were after us?” he asked.

“Maybe,” Daddy Bear said. “Maybe not, but it's better to be safe than sorry.”

“Yeah,” Mary said with relish. “I suppose there's a price on our heads now. The police will have put out an APB, and sent helicopters and sniffer dogs after us. We're wanted men now.”

“Yeah,” Daddy Bear sneered. “Wanted, for nearly robbing a betting shop with a coffee table.”

Mary nodded slowly. “Exactly,” he said, failing to read the sarcasm in Daddy Bear's voice. “I guess I'm a pretty dangerous criminal now.”

“Don't you mean pretty hopeless?” Daddy Bear corrected him. “Let's face it, you haven't actually done anything yet, have you? Your admittedly short career in crime has been remarkable for its stunning lack of success.”

Mary was upset by this rebuke. “I've just tried to hold up a betting shop,” he defended himself.

“It takes a pretty dangerous hoodlum to do that sort of thing.”

“You may as well have marched in there and said you were from Interflora, for all the good it did you,” Daddy Bear said. “I sort of got the impression that they weren’t taking us very seriously.”

“But I beat up the owner’s wife,” Mary boasted proudly. “Now that’s what I call vicious.”

“But she asked you to beat her up,” Daddy Bear argued. “She almost begged you. Anyway, you just held her down. I’m the one that hit her with the furniture.”

“Okay, okay,” Mary said quickly. “Just watch this then.” He picked up a stray brick that was lying nearby and lobbed it through the downstairs window of an adjacent house. “Ha, see! I’m a dangerous criminal,” he said proudly.

“No you’re not,” Daddy Bear told him. “You’re a sad, middle-aged double glazing salesman with an extremely silly first name, who is so desperate to inject some sense of danger into his otherwise pitifully drab life that he is prepared to resort to mindless vandalism.”

Mary snorted contemptuously, and would have delivered an extremely witty and cutting remark, were it not for the fact that he couldn’t think of one. “I just broke a window,” he said lamely. “That makes me a gangster.”

“Does it?” said Daddy Bear. “Well tell me, Al Capone, which window did you break?”

“What?” Mary checked the house. It was a derelict. There was no door, half the roof was missing and Mary had thrown his brick through the only window that had been left intact.

“Pretty pathetic, aren’t you?” Daddy Bear said. He heaved himself over the garden wall and began to march up to the back door of the house.

Mary followed him. “Wait for me,” he said. “What are you doing?”

The back door was unlocked. Daddy Bear pushed it ajar and went inside. “The thing is,” he said as he sniffed around the dark interior, “now that you’re a dangerous criminal you’re going to need somewhere to spend the night.”

“Here?” Mary said.

“Of course,” Daddy Bear replied as he led the way through into the passageway. In places the plaster had crumbled away; elsewhere it was only held on by strands of wallpaper. Daddy Bear ran his paw over a damp patch of brickwork. “Like you said, the police will be out looking for you. There will be an APB out on you, and sniffer dogs in helicopters.”

“I see what you mean,” Mary said.

“You have to think about the practicalities of day to day existence now,” Daddy Bear told him. “Life on the run isn’t going to be easy. Where will you sleep? What will you eat? What will you use for toilet paper? The everyday things that you take for granted are the things that you’ll miss the most.”

They went into the back room. It was against Mary's better instincts to venture any further into this dark pit, but as Daddy Bear seemed to know what he was doing Mary thought it wise to stick with him.

This room didn't seem as bad as the rest of the house. There were a couple of blankets on the floor: damp and soggy, with squadrons of bugs crawling all over them and, doubtless, further legions beneath. A number of crates and boxes provided them with makeshift furniture, scattered around the remains of a fire in the centre of the room.

There were other signs of recent habitation: empty food containers and an oil lamp, which despite being cleaned and polished every day had evidently not seen a drop of oil in ten years. Daddy Bear picked it up and examined it.

"We'll stay here for the night," he said.

"You what?" said Mary. "You must be joking."

"What were you expecting: five tennis courts and breakfast in bed in the morning?" Daddy Bear snapped. "I'm afraid that if your great ambition in life is to be a dangerous criminal, then you'll have to get used to roughing it a bit."

"It's just that I never counted on this," Mary said squeamishly. "I don't really fancy spending the night on a cold and damp floor. I might get botulism."

"You don't get botulism from being cold and damp. You get pneumonia."

“I don’t much like the sound of that either.”

“Why not?” asked Daddy Bear. “It’s better than botulism.”

Mary walked round in a broad circle, breathing deeply and staring solemnly at his feet. He stopped at what appeared to be an empty cardboard box and kicked it lazily. Three empty whisky bottles toppled over and rolled away in opposite directions. Mary waited until the last one had nudged up against the wall, then he spoke.

“Anyway, it’s obvious that someone is living here already.”

Daddy Bear nodded. “Then he’ll have the choice of either welcoming his new lodgers with open arms, or moving to other premises,” he said dispassionately. He started to go. “Stay here.”

Mary looked up, alarmed at the prospect of being left alone. “Where are you going?”

“You want to eat, don’t you?” Daddy Bear said grimly. “I won’t be long.”

The evening was rapidly drawing on. Daddy Bear had thirty-six pence in his pocket, and little hope of finding adequate sustenance for the two of them. Grizzly bears have huge appetites, and double-glazing salesmen have been known to devour whole herds of wildebeest in a single sitting. Nevertheless, Daddy Bear soon chanced upon a small corner shop, just off the main road. A dim yellow light shone from behind the fading posters that blocked the shop’s narrow windows.

Above the door, painted onto the brickwork itself, was the shadow of an ancient tobacco advertisement.

Daddy Bear smiled. He knew what to expect inside. The place would be warm and friendly. The shopkeeper would be a big, fat northern man who talked about the weather, or football, or anything that came to mind. After the things Daddy Bear had been through recently, it would be nice to be greeted by a friendly face. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had seemed pleased to see him.

The bell above the door tinkled softly as he entered. He found himself alone in the shop. Along the left hand side was a deep shelf stacked with rows of crusty bread, much of it a little too crusty. To his right was a large pyramid of baked bean tins, above which a handwritten notice informed him that baked beans were full of protein and vitamins, and happened to be on special offer that week.

An old fashioned counter spread itself along the rear wall. At one end a large slab of cheddar kept vigil with an air of majestic grandeur, despite being coated in a thick layer of dead flies. Around the room were tiers of dark shelves populated by hundreds of anonymous tins and packets.

The door behind the counter stood slightly ajar. Daddy Bear shuffled his feet and whistled softly to himself. No sign of the shopkeeper. He coughed loudly, but the shopkeeper remained conspicuous

by his absence. Ah, it reminded him of his youth, before hypermarkets and drive-thru burger bars. The world had moved at a slower pace back in those halcyon days, people took their time and were all the better for it. All the same, Daddy Bear was becoming a little impatient and he started to drum his fingers restlessly on the counter.

“Hello!” he shouted into the back. “Any chance of getting served?”

Moments later the shopkeeper finally put in an appearance, and Daddy Bear was disappointed to see that he was far removed from the jolly stereotype that he was expecting. The man appeared to be in his mid-twenties. His hair was short and slicked back with gel, his eyebrows and moustache were neatly trimmed. He was wearing what was obviously an expensive business suit, which jarred terribly with the traditional baggy brown shop coat that he wore over the top.

“Good evening sir, and welcome to our humble establishment,” he said coldly. “And how may I help you?”

“Ah well,” Daddy Bear began, “the thing is I’m not really sure what I want.”

“Not really sure, eh sir?” the shopkeeper said in a voice that was anything but friendly. “I see. So you came into this shop not really knowing if you want to buy anything, is that right? You were just passing, so you thought you’d pop in and stand around, not really wanting anything, just to annoy me?”

Daddy Bear smiled politely. "I suppose I'm being a bit of a pain?" he said, attempting to lighten the atmosphere.

"Yes you are," returned the shopkeeper bluntly.

Daddy Bear didn't know how to take this remark, so he let it pass. He scanned the shelves, trying to decipher the labels on the tins. "You see, the problem is that I haven't got much money."

"You haven't got much money?" the shopkeeper repeated.

"Yes," said Daddy Bear. "I haven't got much money, and I've got to feed two of us."

The shopkeeper thrust his hands deep into his coat pockets. "Well, I think I see your problem," he said thoughtfully. "Essentially what you're looking for is a high-fibre, high-protein foodstuff in the lower price region?"

"Yes," Daddy Bear said. "I expect I am. Have you got any tomato soup?"

"Actually, our baked beans are on offer at the moment sir," the shopkeeper was keen to point out. "I'd advise you to take advantage of this special promotion while stocks last."

"Well I quite like the idea of tomato soup, really," said Daddy Bear.

"I think you'll find that beans make a very good meal," the shopkeeper persisted. "Exceptionally good, in fact."

"Or chicken?" Daddy Bear asked. "Have you got any chicken soup? I'm quite partial to chicken soup."

“Of course, the advantage of beans at the moment is that they’re only thirty pence a tin. Just thirty pence! That’s two pence off the recommended retail price. Do you know how much that works out at per bean?”

“No,” said Daddy Bear. “Do you?”

“No, but I can work it out for you.” The shopkeeper pulled a calculator out of his pocket and began stabbing at the buttons furiously. “Now let’s see. Let’s assume there are, say, five hundred beans in a tin. So... hmm, ha! That’s divided by... hmm, yes, so add the square root of... hmm and hmm. Subtract the number you first thought of and... Oh well, I’m sure it’s a pretty impressive figure anyway.”

He tossed the calculator onto the counter.

“Do you realise,” the shopkeeper continued, “that one single bean contains one hundred and eighty-six thousand joules of energy? That’s enough to keep a herd of elephants in the Amazon going for six months.”

“There aren’t any elephants in the Amazon,” Daddy Bear said.

“Aren’t there? Oh. Okay, look at this.” The shopkeeper held up a multi-coloured bar chart. “This diagram shows the comparative nutrient contents of one baked bean set against other, higher price foodstuffs. You’ll notice that the cornflake doesn’t fare too well.”

“Actually,” Daddy Bear said, raising his voice above this insane babble, “all I want is a tin of

soup! Either chicken or tomato, I don't mind which."

The shopkeeper stopped talking and looked at him curiously. "Soup?" he asked a moment later.

"Soup," Daddy Bear reaffirmed.

"Not beans?"

"No, not beans," said Daddy Bear. "Just soup."

"We haven't got any," said the shopkeeper. "You'll have to have beans."

"What do you mean you haven't got any? There's a whole shelf full of soup over there."

"Where?"

Daddy Bear spun around and pointed. "There look. Three rows of tins. They all say 'Cream of Chicken Soup' on the labels."

The shopkeeper suddenly appeared apologetic. "Ah well," he said, "just because it says 'Chicken Soup' on the label, it doesn't necessarily follow that there's chicken soup in the tin, now does it?"

"What?" said Daddy Bear. There was an uneasy silence.

Daddy Bear looked at the shelf.

He looked at the pile of beans.

He looked at the shopkeeper.

"Look, I've had quite enough of this," he said. "Are you going to sell me any soup, or not?"

The shopkeeper stared stoically back at him, his arms folded across his chest. "No," he said.

Daddy Bear shook his head, totally perplexed. "Why?" he asked. "Why on Earth won't you sell

me a simple tin of chicken soup? Is it really too much to ask?"

The shopkeeper sighed. "You see, it's all to do with profit margins," he explained sympathetically. "I would dearly love to sell you a tin of soup, honestly I would. But I simply can't. I could elaborate on the reasons, but I fear you wouldn't understand."

"All right, I've had enough of this," said Daddy Bear. "As far as I'm concerned you can stick your soup, your beans and anything else that comes to hand where the sun don't shine."

He turned and headed for the door, but as his fingers touched the handle his empty stomach suddenly rumbled. No, he wasn't going to be beaten that easily! He turned back and stalked towards the shopkeeper.

"Okay," he said in a calm voice, "I'm listening. Explain to me why you can't sell me a tin of soup."

The shopkeeper flicked back the tails of his coat and stuck his hands in his trouser pockets. "Well, as I said, you may find it a little difficult to understand. Under normal circumstances the profit we make on a tin of soup and a tin of beans are about the same. Now, because of the current EEC bean surplus we are able to buy them at a much cheaper rate, hence the reduction in price to you, the customer. Nevertheless, at the same time we are also able to increase our profit margin, which means that in order to cover the initial outlay - "

“Shut up!” Daddy Bear shook his head as if something with sixteen legs had just crawled into his left ear. “I don’t want to hear another word of this rubbish. I haven’t eaten properly for... well, it seems like weeks. I would like a tin of chicken soup. I know I might be asking a little too much of you, but however foolish it might seem, I expect to be able to come in here and buy such an item without being lectured on the profitability of baked beans. Do I make myself clear?”

“Well I’m sorry,” the shopkeeper replied haughtily, “but the fact of the matter is that it would be commercially unviable for me to sell you a tin of soup at this current time. You see, the optimum level of soup sales in any given month is proportional to - ”

“I see, I see,” Daddy Bear interrupted. “I wonder, would it be commercially viable for me to ram this French loaf down your throat at the current time?” He picked up the aforementioned foodstuff and waved it threateningly.

The shopkeeper took a step back and said that it depended on the scale on which such an operation was carried out.

“Now look, I’m not unreasonable,” said Daddy Bear, not unreasonably. “So I’ll give you a choice: either you sell me the soup, or I stick this loaf in your orifice. Now, may I please have a tin of chicken soup?”

The shopkeeper stared back resolutely. “No,” he said, and he solemnly shook his head.

* * *

One and a half minutes later, Daddy Bear legged it from the shop with an armful of cream of chicken soup. Now he really was in trouble. What he had done to that shopkeeper had been terrible, and he shuddered when he thought about it. The poor man would never play the mouth organ again.

Racked by guilt he tore through the back streets and alleyways, finally stopping at a junction. Suddenly he realised that he was in an unfamiliar neighbourhood. In his haste to get away, he had taken a wrong turning and now he had no idea where he was.

He looked around and quickly made up his mind to go left, then two steps later he fell over a child's bike that had been left in the street. He pitched headlong to the ground and dropped the tins he was carrying. They bounced off the pavement and rolled into the gutter, which is precisely what Daddy Bear did himself a moment later.

He stood up, kicked the bike brutally, then picked up a few of the tins and ran on. He felt sure that the shopkeeper would have raised the alarm by now, and his most pressing concern was to get out of the area before the police arrived.

As it turned out the shopkeeper hadn't raised the alarm at all. This sort of thing happened to him all the time, and he just treated it as just one of the many unfortunate side effects of running a profitable business.

The house was in darkness by the time Daddy Bear found it. He trod carefully, feeling his way down the hallway. "Mary?" he called. "Are you still here?"

Ghostly candlelight flickered from the back room. He entered to find Mary huddled over a candle, and there was another man with him.

"What's going on?" Daddy Bear asked as he approached. The stranger looked up and fixed him with pale grey eyes. "Who are you?" Daddy Bear asked quietly.

The man said not a word. The candle cast eerie shadows across his face as it lit his skeletal features from below. He was a vision in black: a long canvass coat, dark jeans and a black frilly shirt. His hair was long and greasy, and he sported several days' growth of beard.

"This is Mr. Longtower," Mary said. "He lives here. Mr. Longtower, this is my friend Gordon Bear."

Longtower got to his feet, and with the four remaining teeth that he possessed he attempted to smile. "Please forgive my initial suspicion," he said cordially. "I feared you were the police. Delighted to meet you sir."

"Likewise," Daddy Bear said, as he rocked from side to side to avoid Longtower's halitosis.

"And I see you have brought provisions! Let me relieve you of those." Longtower took the tins from him and stuck them in his pockets. "I'm not too keen on chicken soup myself," he said. "I

would have preferred baked beans, but never mind. Come and warm yourself by the fire.”

“The fire?” Daddy Bear asked. He meant the candle. Daddy Bear consented and sat with his companions around the candle. There was a pause; a big hole in the world while someone thought of something to say. Daddy Bear noticed that the shadows on the wall seemed to be moving with a life of their own, so he tried not to look at them.

“Longtower is a philosopher,” said Mary.

“Lovely,” was Daddy Bear’s reply. “The world needs more philosophers.”

“I’m only really an amateur,” said Longtower modestly.

“Wonderful,” said Daddy Bear politely. “Even better.”

“Trivialities and irrelevancies plague us,” said Longtower. “Such is life. So I have dedicated myself to the contemplation of the broader aspects of existence.”

“That’s nice,” said Daddy Bear.

“I think so,” said Longtower. He took a bottle of Newcastle Brown from his pocket, prised off the top with his tooth and poured it down his throat. “So, you’re dangerous criminals?” he asked, having drained the bottle.

“Not exactly,” said Daddy Bear. “I myself am the victim of cruel circumstance. Mary here is just plain twisted.”

Longtower wasn’t listening. “Ah, the noble highwayman! For it is he who brings justice to our

land. It his he who steals from the rich that which they have already stolen from the poor.”

“No it isn’t,” Daddy Bear corrected him. “It is he who kills and maims rich and poor alike, purely to satisfy his own greed.”

“We three noble villains!” Longtower nevertheless proclaimed. “We laugh in the face of the law, and pour scorn on their feeble attempts to imprison us. Unto the common folk of this land we are heroes! And do you know why, my fine fellows?”

“Why?” Mary asked eagerly. He was hanging on to every word.

“Because,” And here Longtower paused and fixed them with his heady gaze... He paused quite a long time, in fact... No, even longer actually... He’s still pausing... I should imagine he’s just about finished pausing now... Well, this is quite a staggeringly long pause, isn’t it? He must be about finished by now... Surely he can’t -

“Because we are united!” he announced suddenly.

I’m sorry, he caught me out. I was expecting him to pause for a bit longer than that.

He stood up, his outstretched arms reaching towards the sky - or rather, towards the sagging plasterboard ceiling, which looked like it might shortly be joining the floor.

“We three brothers in crime; we three apostles of villainy, standing firm against a society which seeks to suppress us.” He began to raise his voice.

“For we are as slippery as the slimy eel, ha ha! For we are as crafty as the cunning old fox, no less! And we are as clever as,” he paused, struggling to find the words. “We are as clever as... as a water buffalo. Especially one that is particularly clever. One that can do quadratic equations and knows about geography and stuff.” His voice grew louder still. “One for all and all for one: that shall be our motto!”

“Yes, if you could just keep your voice down a bit,” Daddy Bear asked him politely.

Longtower was on a roll. He found himself launching into a fit of poetry:

“Bravely we three adventurers ride

Into trouble, against the tide.

Fighting for things that we believe in,

With little plastic boxes to keep our lunch in.”

Mary applauded. Longtower looked faintly surprised with himself. “I just made that up,” he said proudly.

“Oh please, just shut up,” Daddy Bear said slowly.

“I beg your pardon?” Longtower replied in a hurt voice.

“I said shut up!” Daddy Bear repeated. He gathered together some blankets and started to make up a bed in the corner. “I’ve had a bad day, okay? No, I’ve had a bad week. My wife’s left me, my son’s an imbecile, and everywhere I go I’m surrounded by lunatics. I’ve had about as much as

Goldilocks and the Free Bears

I can take, so the last thing I really need right now is a bleeding poet!”

Leaving his companions speechless, Daddy Bear settled down to sleep.

My Fridge Is From Mars

The stars shone brightly that night. They stabbed through the broken roof of the derelict house and fleetingly surrounded the fugitives in a cage of brilliant light. Then heavy grey clouds rolled across the night sky to seal the sleeping earth beneath a thick and foggy blanket.

In a three-storey Georgian guesthouse somewhere in Leicestershire, Lionel Crump was woken from his slumber by the sound of raindrops splattering and sizzling through the open window. He was still half asleep as he got up and closed it. Then he returned again to the foetal protection of his bed and was unconscious before his head touched the pillow.

Elsewhere, in a flimsy wooden bus shelter, Nigel snuggled deeper into his bed of leaves and damp newspaper. He had no place here amongst the dirt and litter, and the broken bottles.

He stretched and looked skyward so that the rain could gently wash the grime from his eyes. A hundred million stars stared back at him; a hundred million dew drops. Nigel watched them glimmer then vanish beneath the clouds, to reappear briefly on the other side.

He sat up, with his head tilted back so that he could see the sky. He was cold and wet, frightened and hungry - but what did these things matter? In his mind was up there amongst the stars: the pure,

untarnished starlight lying across the void like fresh snow. He was up there, amongst those infinite, empty spaces.

Slowly he reached across to his right shoulder and prised off the dead parrot that had been glued to his coat for the past eight years. He let it slip from his fingers and into the dirt. Poor Polly. Then he took hold of the eye patch that was hanging around his neck like a crucifix, and with one sharp tug he snapped the elastic. The breeze lifted it from the palm of his hand and rolled it down the road. Gradually he drifted off to sleep. He woke up a little later when the bus shelter spontaneously combusted.

The sudden warm feeling across his back made him jump up quickly, and as he desperately tried to douse the flames that were licking around his arse, he noticed a pair of headlights coming towards him. As they got closer he could see that they belonged to a largish, reddish, bus-shaped object. It soon became apparent that the reason that this object was bus-shaped (and this also went some way towards explaining why it was largish and reddish) was that it was precisely that: a large, red double-decker bus.

By a curious coincidence, its driver was also largish and reddish, though it would be a mistake to assume that he was also a bus. His name was Herbert Knuckle, and it was widely known back at the depot that he was a stickler for the rules.

The bus pulled up and Herbert disembarked in accordance with guidelines laid down in section thirty-four, subsection three of the bus company's official manual, headed:

**BUSSES, DISEMBARKATION
THEREOF (DRIVERS).**

Nigel watched him as he paced around in a tight figure of eight, looking at the ground. He scratched his bald head with his bald fingers, then stopped, nodded mysteriously to himself, then carried on for a few more circuits. He stopped again and looked Nigel straight in the eye. It was a regulation look, carried out in accordance with section twenty-three, subsection eight of the manual, headed:

**SUSPICIOUS LOOKING BEARS STANDING
NEXT TO BURNING BUS SHELTERS IN
THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, LOOKING
STRAIGHT INTO THE EYES OF.**

“Have you seen a bus shelter around here anywhere?” Herbert Knuckle asked, and his eyes narrowed.

Nigel cast a fleeting glance at the bonfire behind him. “No,” he replied.

Herbert gnashed his teeth together. Then he returned to his bus, rummaged around beneath the seat and returned with a grimy piece of paper in a clear plastic sleeve. He did these things according

to sections fifty-eight, seventeen, two hundred and twelve and eighty-two respectively.

“Going by my map,” he said, for that was what the piece of paper was, “there should be a bus stop here.”

Nigel shrugged. “Could be a mistake on the map?” he suggested.

“I s’pose so,” said Herbert. He looked at Nigel through narrowed eyes. “Did you know your arse was on fire?” he said.

Nigel shrugged and casually put himself out.

“It’s funny,” the driver continued. “I did this route yesterday, and the shelter was here then... Hang on a minute! What’s that?”

Nigel wheeled around. The glare of the fire made him squint, and he felt the fur on his face prickling in the heat. “What’s what?” he asked.

“That large yellow fiery thing,” said Herbert Knuckle.

“Oh that,” Nigel said, and he paused in the vain hope that someone would drop by and answer the question for him. No one did. “Dunno,” he finally replied. “I can’t say I’d really noticed it.”

“It looks like a burning bus shelter,” Herbert observed.

“Can’t be,” said Nigel.

“It is, I tell you,” said Herbert.

“No, never.”

“Look, I know a burning bus shelter when I see one,” Herbert insisted.

“All right,” Nigel admitted. “I agree with you that it does bear a certain similarity to a burning bus shelter. But you really shouldn’t take these things at face value, otherwise you’ll be jumping to all sorts of wrong conclusions.”

“You set fire to our bus shelter!” Herbert accused him.

Nigel reeled at the charge. “No, no,” he said, stammering a little. “It caught fire entirely of its own accord.”

“A likely story!” Herbert responded. “You have wilfully destroyed a public amenity. Do you realise the trouble you’re going to be in?”

“Honestly,” Nigel protested, “I didn’t do a thing. I think it just lost the will to live.”

“You’re a vandal!”

“No look, it’s like this,” Nigel began, then he stopped and sighed loudly. “Oh to heck with. I give up.”

As he spoke something peculiar caught his attention. He was staring at the bus parked at the side of the road, the headlights still blazing into the night. A sickly yellow light shone from each grimy window, like luminous pus. Suddenly he had noticed an old woman’s face staring out at him. He could have sworn the bus was empty when he had first seen it approach. He certainly hadn’t noticed this woman before, it was as if she had just materialised there. Now, aside from being terribly disconcerting, this also happened to be impossible. Unless, thought Nigel, she was really an alien from

the planet Mondo who had just slipped through an interspatial warp matrix interface. No, impossible, Nigel thought to himself, and he promptly abandoned this ridiculous line of thought...

...The old woman on the bus blinked out into the dirty night, looking through the spiralling patterns of filth that caked the windows. She was a very prim old lady. Her hat was perched pertly on her grey head. Her cardigan was buttoned to the neck and she sat forward in her seat, clutching her shopping bag on her knee.

She was also a very bemused old lady. Earlier that morning she had been stealthily winging her way across the clear turquoise skies of the planet Mondo, sitting astride a magnificent Grumbledragon as it took her to the supermarket to get a joint for Sunday lunch.

All of a sudden she had fallen through an interspatial warp matrix interface and had been most perplexed to find herself on the top deck of a Number 32 Shopper's Special. Deciding to make the best of a bad situation she had resolved to do her shopping at Tesco's, although she was disappointed to discover that they had no Flagwellan Spronk cutlets.

She had spent the rest of the afternoon sitting in a drab bus station, waiting for a bus to the Magellan Cluster. Eventually she had interrupted an official looking man to ask his advice. He had admitted that he had never heard of anywhere

called Mondo, so he asked her to describe the place.

“It’s a beautiful world,” she had told him. “The skies are filled with purple incense. Gold and silver Grumbledragons swirl and soar and twist between the peaks of vast ice mountains, whilst great Fumbleknurks graze peacefully in the meadows below.”

The man put her on the next bus to Gateshead.

And this was as far as she’d got, sitting on her own in this dirty double-decker. She clutched her shopping tighter, sighed wistfully and turned once more to the window and its cloudy interpretation of the night...

...Nigel turned away from the bus, blearily aware that the bus driver was trying to solicit some kind of a response from him.

“Well?” the bus driver asked.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat the question,” Nigel replied, a little irritably.

“I’m supposed to pick up passengers from this bus shelter,” Herbert Knuckle said. “I can’t very well do that if it’s on fire.”

“There aren’t any passengers,” Nigel said.

“That’s hardly the point,” said Herbert. “Just put yourself in my position for a moment.”

“My God, what an exceptionally brilliant idea!” Nigel suddenly enthused, and he slapped his forehead. The resourceful young grizzly jumped into the bus and drove off, leaving Herbert

Knuckle to frantically consult his rulebook as the taillights snaked away into the night.

Nigel found that driving a bus was child's play. He really didn't know what all the fuss was about. He skilfully negotiated a bend, demolished a telephone kiosk and two dry stone walls, then found himself on a stretch of straight, unlit road. Nothing lay on either side, save for the starlit moorland, where shadow lay upon shadow and ghosts flitted invisibly through the spaces in between.

It was a lonely road. After a while, Nigel thought he could hear voices, softly ingrained in the insistent throbbing of the engine. He also became aware of a sharp ringing in his head.

Ping. Ping. Ping. That's how it went.

He shook his head and tried to concentrate on the road. He could still hear that damn noise.

Ping. Ping. Ping. It continued in a most irritating and unpleasant fashion.

He looked in his mirror and further down the bus he saw the old woman clinging on to a handhold and stabbing the stop button repeatedly. He halted the bus, braking a little too sharply. The woman stumbled forwards, struck her head on the windscreen and slumped to the floor, moaning painfully. The automatic doors opened with a pneumatic fart and allowed a cool breeze to gently revive her. She gathered up her shopping bag, gathered up herself, thanked Nigel and disembarked.

Nigel was puzzled. There was nothing around for miles, just the empty moor. He waited, watching with fascination to see what she would do.

The old lady whistled to herself as she waited by the roadside, but the tune was stolen by the wind, which decided it was going to play it secretly somewhere else. At the edge of the vague, blank space that defined the moor, the tiny yellow lights of some filthy industrial sprawl danced beneath the stars.

Then, from the midst of that flickering light show, a new star rose above the horizon, climbing high into the air. With the sound of a great torrent of wind, it fell towards her.

The woman bent down and picked up her bags.

All of a sudden, a metal giant was descending from the heavens, a spaceship the size of an office block. Not one of those really big office blocks, just a small one. The old lady felt the hot rush of exhaust gasses as the steel beast sank onto the heath.

There was silence: a profound, unbreakable silence.

There was stillness: a deathly, deadly, impenetrable stillness.

There was a penguin: a large, mean-looking penguin in a safari suit and carrying a snooker cue.

The wind held its breath.

Then, with a warbling boom that shuddered through the ship's hull, a door opened and a metal ramp began to extend towards the ground. A

bright light lit up the moor for miles around as the hum of machinery grew louder and louder, until it came to sound like a million angels' voices. The ramp embedded itself in the soft earth, and once more there was silence.

"About time too!" the old woman muttered. She started to shuffle up the ramp, squeezing past a very bemused looking policeman covered in dragon shit, who was coming the other way.

PC Gibbon reached the bottom of the ramp and slowly turned around. From inside the ship he heard two voices: firstly the old woman, asking for a ticket to the Magellan Cluster; then the driver asking to see her pass.

The ramp retracted, the door closed and the spaceship blasted off, blowing Gibbon's hat off in the process. He looked around mournfully. His only companions were the whispering wind, and a double-decker bus waiting on the road.

Now there was a stroke of luck.

PC Gibbon was on that bus in a single bound. "I'll have an Off-Peak Young Persons Super-Saver to just around the corner please."

"One pound eighty-nine please," said Nigel as he reeled off the ticket.

Daddy Bear stepped out into the morning; into the light and the sparkling frost that coated everything. It was on mornings like this that one appreciated the simple pleasure of being alive. A morning such as this reinvigorates the soul, fills one with hope.

“Aha! This day, this brave new morn’,” Longtower the philosopher announced as he stepped from the house and winced at the fresh air. “Nature is resplendent at this time of day.”

“Is it?” Daddy Bear asked. His mood had suddenly swung from carefree optimism to glum depression.

“I think so,” Longtower said. He took a deep breath, then threw up.

“Very poetic,” Daddy Bear said as he watched it dribbling down Longtower’s chin. Daddy Bear went inside and kicked Mary to wake him up.

“What time is it?” Mary managed to mumble.

“You don’t want to know,” said Daddy Bear.

Mary climbed to his feet, then slumped against the most conveniently placed wall. “What time is it?” he asked again.

“I really don’t think that information would benefit you in any way whatsoever,” Daddy Bear warned him.

Mary was quite insistent. His stamped his foot, which is just the sort of thing that’s certain to strike fear into the heart of any seven foot grizzly bear with razor sharp claws and vicious teeth.

“All right, all right,” Daddy Bear said. “It’s six o’clock... Well it’s no good doing that. I knew you’d go to pieces if I told you. Put that hacksaw down and stop being so stupid.”

“I’ve never been up this early before,” Mary said, on the verge of tears.

“Ah yes, but you’ve never been a hardened criminal before, have you?” Daddy Bear reminded him.

This was true. Mary adopted a sly expression and his body tensed. He was a fugitive, living on his wits. His enemies could discover him at any moment, so he had to be alert. But that was just the kind of guy he was. Agile! Cunning! But above all, dangerous!

He zipped up his pyjama case and sidled over to Daddy Bear. “Okay chief, I’m ready to go. I suggest we head north, following the river. If we walk in the water we won’t leave a trail for the dogs to follow.”

Daddy Bear looked down at the sad little man. This is what a lifetime of selling double-glazing did to you.

“No, hang on, I’ve got a better idea!” Mary said. “Let’s disguise ourselves as wandering minstrels and bluff our way through roadblocks by performing interesting tricks with unusual parts of our bodies.”

“Tell you what,” Daddy Bear said. “Let’s just take the train, shall we?”

A set of worn steps led down into the lonely rural station. A single track ploughed between two platforms. Attached to a lop-sided concrete post was a timetable in a plastic case. The front of the case was cracked and the timetable flopped limply forward, sodden with dew.

Daddy Bear lifted it distastefully with his finger and tried to decipher the smudged print. "It says that the next train is at six twenty-one." He paused to study the timetable a little closer. "Well either that, or it says we've got a badger in the loft extension. On reflection I'd plump for the former."

"Pardon?" asked Mary, who hadn't been listening to a word.

"You what?" Daddy Bear asked.

"Ay?"

"I said what?"

"What?"

"Badger," said Longtower.

"Come again?" said Daddy Bear and Mary together.

Longtower wandered off down the platform and breakfasted on half a bottle of Drambuie. Mary stood and shivered in the brittle morning air, and was about to say something when Daddy Bear held up his paw.

"Do you hear that noise?" he asked.

"It wasn't me," said Mary quickly. "It must have been Longtower."

"That's not the sort of noise I was talking about," Daddy Bear said.

"Oh I see," Mary said bashfully. He listened carefully. "Yes, yes, I can hear it," he hissed. "It sounds like someone's heading this way."

What they could hear was the sound of many rapid footsteps, all falling in unison. A troop of

commuters suddenly appeared at the top of the steps. They all seemed to be dressed the same, each of them trussed up in a grey suit and carrying a little black briefcase. They walked quickly, heads down, rear ends stuck out behind them.

As one animal, the group descended the steps. Not a word was exchanged between them, not a single sign of acknowledgement. They reached the platform just as the train pulled up, and without breaking stride they infiltrated the carriages. Daddy Bear, Longtower and Mary were swept along with them, like flies trapped in amber.

The doors closed. The train pulled away. As if at some unspoken signal, each commuter whipped out a copy of the *Financial Times* and opened it out, filling the carriage with a swarm of fluttering pink wings. Again, there was not a word of dialogue between them. Not a single 'Good Morning' nor a solitary 'Lovely Weather' passed their lips. The only sounds were the rumble of the carriage over the track and the occasional rustle of many pages being turned simultaneously.

Two stations later the train slid to a stop. Newspapers were rolled up, tucked beneath arms, then the busy commuters disembarked, leaving our heroes in an empty carriage.

Longtower yawned and spread himself luxuriously over one of the seats as the train set off once more. "Ah, what a wondrous thing science is!" he exclaimed, for his own benefit entirely. "For I might climb aboard this contraption at, say,

Plymouth and step off just a few hours later in, say, Newcastle.”

“Inverness,” Daddy Bear said. “We’re going to Inverness.”

“Bah! ’Tis but a trifle,” Longtower said nonchalantly. “The gist of the point of the argument that I’m trying to get at is that I am in awe of this great achievement.”

The door at the end of the carriage suddenly slid open to admit a steward in a comical hat. He was pushing a metal trolley that groaned under the weight of a quarter of a ton of lager, fizzy drinks and dubious looking sandwiches. From the way the trolley was leaning it was obvious that most of the weight was in the sandwiches.

With some difficulty he rattled his rickety contraption down the narrow aisle and parked it on Mary’s foot. Satisfying himself that the protruding bolt behind the front nearside castor was firmly embedded in Mary’s big toe, he looked up and gave a brief smile.

“What’s all this?” asked Daddy Bear.

“This is the friendly face of modern rail transport,” muttered the steward, and he spared another grin. “So do you want anything from the bleeding trolley or not?”

“May we inquire of you as to the precise nature of the comestibles you have for trade?” Longtower asked. He poked a disgustingly filthy finger into a jam bun, extracted it and proceeded to sample the globule of jam that adhered to it.

“What’s he saying?” the steward asked Daddy Bear.

“He wants to know what you’ve got on the trolley,” Daddy Bear enlightened him.

“Oh well, there’s some cans and stuff.” The steward waved his hand uncertainly over the trolley, as though he was trying to magically transform it into a frog. “There’s some lager, but it tastes like piss. There’s some cake that’s gone a bit off, some chocolate bars... Oh you can see for yourself what there is, can’t you?”

“Hmm, what is in this sandwich?” Longtower asked, pointing to the article in question.

“Dunno,” was the steward’s fast and efficient reply.

Longtower was about to fox him with yet another dazzlingly devious conundrum, when suddenly the train shuddered violently and they heard the ear-splitting squeal of brakes. The steward was thrown forward onto the trolley where he met a painful end, impaled on a tuna fish sandwich.

Then there was a terrific crack and the train stopped dead.

Nigel had driven through the night. At about four o’clock he had been overcome by fatigue and had decided to stop for a breath of fresh air. By this time PC Gibbon had fallen asleep on the back seat, which suited Nigel fine since his presence was making him very nervous.

He had parked the bus in a lay-by on the outskirts of a little village, and then wandered out into the early morning frost. In the distance, dark clusters of houses were huddled around the silhouette of a church spire. His thoughts turned to the people wrapped up in their warm beds, blissfully unaware of him as he stalked the night, flitting back and forth this country lane.

There was a yellow glow above the village, the reflections of randomly dotted streetlights. Nearer the horizon the sky was lighter, anticipating the dawn. He had never realised before that darkness could come in so many different shades and textures.

He had stood and watched the trees swaying silently in the wind, dark shadows moving. Then the cold had seeped through to his bones and he had returned to the bus.

Feeling refreshed, he set off once more, travelling through the sunrise on his inexorable journey northwards. After some distance his weariness returned. He felt his concentration slipping... his eyes beginning to close... But he kept going regardless...

And then suddenly there was a terrific crack and the bus stopped dead.

The now stationary carriages were still swathed in the cotton wool clouds of early morning. Immaculately coiffured, clean-shaven heads were periodically poked out of windows to assess the

nature of the delay. Occasionally they were heard to say things like, “This is disgraceful, utterly disgraceful,” or, “I’m going to write to my MP about this, I really am!”

A door opened in one of the carriages. Three lonely figures jumped out onto the track and started stomping towards the front of the train. Their passage was marked by shouts of encouragement from the starched heads of their fellow travellers, no doubt under the impression that this plucky threesome were going to give the driver a piece of their minds. In truth, Daddy Bear, Mary and Longtower had simply decided that it would be quicker to get out and walk.

As they approached the engine, the reason for the delay became plain. The train had run smack into the front of a double-decker bus on a level crossing. The radiator grille of the bus was bent and one headlight was broken, but aside from that it had sustained little damage. The train, on the other hand, was a complete write-off.

As Daddy Bear and his two lunatic friends approached the scene, a heated discussion was taking place between the drivers of the respective vehicles.

“You broke my train!” bawled the train driver, tears streaming down his face.

“Oh grow up, you big nancy!” Nigel said. “You’re far too old to be playing with trains anyway.”

“Nigel!” said Daddy Bear.

The young bear spun around quickly at the sound of his father's voice. "Dad!" he said.

"Nigel!" said Daddy Bear.

"Dad!" said Nigel.

"Nigel!" said Daddy Bear again.

"Dad!" said Nigel.

"Son, you're a great disappointment to us," his father told him sternly. "Have you smashed up this nice man's train?"

"It was an accident, honest Dad," Nigel explained feebly. "It was a bit of a blind corner, and he didn't signal."

"Answer the question, Nigel," Daddy Bear said. "Did you smash up this man's train?"

"Well, yes," Nigel said. "But there's no harm done."

"No harm done!" the train driver roared. Train drivers don't roar quite as ferociously as grizzly bears, but the effect can still be fairly intimidating. "Look at it, you've trashed my train!"

"Well, it could be worse," Nigel ventured philosophically.

"Worse!" said the train driver, clearly disputing this suggestion. "How could it possibly be worse?"

"I could be sleeping with your wife as well," said Nigel with a shrug.

"Now stop this!" Daddy Bear demanded. "You're both behaving like children. I want you to shake hands and be friends."

"You what?" Nigel asked.

“Your dad’s off his chump,” said the train driver.

“Don’t talk about my father like that,” Nigel warned him.

“He’s cuckoo,” the train driver asserted. “A ruddy nutter.”

“I know that,” said Nigel, “but you don’t have to tell everyone.”

“Now I mean it,” Daddy Bear insisted. “I’m not moving from this spot until you two have made up.”

Nigel shrugged. “I suppose we’d better do as he says,” he said to the train driver.

The train driver nodded. “All right, but just for appearance’s sake.”

They shook hands firmly. The train driver even gave Nigel a little peck on the cheek, which Nigel thought was carrying the pretence a little too far.

“Now that’s better, isn’t it?” said Daddy Bear, and he bundled Nigel towards the bus.

“What was all that about?” Nigel wanted to know.

“Listen son,” his father said, “does your insurance cover train crashes?” Nigel shook his head. “So, can you afford to buy that man a new train?” Nigel shook his head again. “In that case,” his father said, “I suggest we get out of here as soon as possible.”

They reached the bus. Mary and Longtower were already aboard, pulling strange faces with their noses pressed up against the windows.

Daddy Bear was about to climb on board when his son laid a paw on his forearm. "Look, just what is going on here?" he asked. "Who are those two strange people with you? And where's Mum?"

"Really Nigel," Daddy Bear said impatiently. "We don't have time for this right now. Your mother and I had a bit of a tiff, that's all."

"Well where did she go?" Nigel asked.

Daddy Bear shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "Look, it's no good blaming me, Nigel. It was *her* that abandoned *me*."

"Okay, so what about the two weirdoes?" asked Nigel.

"One of them's a philosopher, the other's a double-glazing salesman," Daddy Bear said. "I met them a little while ago and I can't get rid of them. Now, can we please get a move on?"

Nigel stood aside and his father jogged up the steps and leapt athletically into the driver's seat. "So, how does this thing work?" he asked. "I've never driven a bus before. Always wanted to have a go though."

"It's a little complicated," Nigel said as he came and stood beside him. "First you have to twist this wotsit here, stick this bit in there, and waggle that thingy about over there. I'm not being too technical for you, am I?"

"No problem," Daddy Bear said. The engine roared and they set off.

* * *

Daddy Bear took to driving the bus much quicker than his son, and he whistled merrily to himself as they drove along. This little family reunion seemed to have lifted his spirits, and for the first time in a long while he felt a touch of optimism.

Nigel went and sprawled himself over one of the seats, hoping to catch up on some much needed sleep. Longtower, meanwhile, amused himself by extolling the virtues of bus travel to a fascinated Mary. They had travelled about ten miles when suddenly...

The mist tumbled down the valley slopes but dared not touch the water. Ripple followed ripple to the shore and burst there upon the bank, but dared not make a sound. Some ancient mystery remained at this place: something unseen, undetected. Only a slight eddy on the surface of the water marked its passage. Something was moving beneath the loch.

Daddy Bear wrenched the wheel aside. The bus skidded and swerved to a halt, slamming its handful of passengers into the seats in front of them. Nigel Bear stood up painfully.

“What was all that about?”

“Didn’t you see it?” his father replied, visibly shaken.

“I was too busy head-butting the upholstery at the time,” Nigel replied bitterly. “What exactly did I miss?”

“You must have seen it,” Daddy Bear said. “It was a strange and inexplicable paragraph.” He opened the bus doors and stepped outside, casting his eyes about the sky. “It came out of nowhere.”

“I don’t understand,” Mary said, as he and the others followed Daddy Bear out into the open.

“Ask me if I’m surprised,” said Daddy Bear.

“I’m not sure that I understand either,” said Nigel. “This is a little too weird for me. Are you seriously suggesting we were attacked by a paragraph?”

Daddy Bear nodded, keenly surveying the horizon. “That’s exactly what I’m suggesting,” he told them. “A section of the narrative has somehow broken away from the rest of this story and is floating randomly through the pages.”

“I fear your father is right,” Longtower said gravely. He put his arm around Nigel’s shoulders and breathed whisky fumes into his face. “The English language is a dangerous thing. Even a relatively small paragraph, without too many big words in it, could cause untold damage. LOOK OUT!”

The mist tumbled down the valley slopes, but dared not touch the water. Ripple followed ripple to the shore and burst there upon the bank, but dared not make a sound. Some ancient mystery remained at this place: something unseen, undetected. Only a slight eddy on the surface of the water marked its passage. Something was moving beneath the loch.

Daddy Bear ducked and Longtower roughly dragged Nigel to the ground. Mary, however, was too slow to react and the edge of the paragraph caught him right under the chin. He was carried off screaming over the horizon.

Daddy Bear got up and shook his head. "There was nothing we could have done," he said mournfully.

"We could have dragged him out of the way," said Nigel.

"No we couldn't," Daddy Bear told him.

"I feel, sir, that we could have at least warned him," Longtower said.

"No we damn well couldn't!" Daddy Bear insisted.

Nigel was keen to argue the matter. "We could have saved him if we'd -"

"Look, there was nothing we could do, okay?" said Daddy Bear, who was quite relieved to have Mary out of the way. "We just have to face it: he could be anywhere in this story by now. He might even be in a different story altogether."

Nigel pondered this notion. Now he came to think about it he felt sure there was someone fitting Mary's description in *A Tale Of Two Cities*. And wasn't there a sad double-glazing salesman with a woman's name in *Lord Of The Flies*? Well, at least he would be in a better place.

"So what now?" he asked as he shook these thoughts from his head.

“We must carry on to Scotland,” his father said. “That’s where that weird paragraph came from.”

Daddy Bear climbed back on board the bus. Just as he sat down, a hand came to rest on his shoulder. It was a big, hairy, policeman’s hand, property of one Police Constable Kevin Gibbon, who in turn was property of the Metropolitan Police Force.

“You’re not going anywhere, my son,” the aforementioned Constable Gibbon said gleefully.

“Oh yes,” said Nigel to his stunned father. “I forgot to tell you: there’s a policeman asleep on the back seat.”

13
Lviasol

By mid-morning the wreaths of clammy fog had been boiled away, but there remained something of a damp, sticky stillness in the air. The train remained undisturbed, resembling a giant snake lying dormant in the mud. Its head, the engine, had been stamped flat as if by the heel of a giant boot. The carriages that formed its body teemed with angry commuters, like the parasites that thrive on carrion.

The train driver was explaining the circumstances of the collision to Sergeant Pinewood. Pinewood nodded at various intervals to give the impression that he was listening.

“...and drove off in the bus,” said the driver. “And that’s exactly how it happened, Scout’s honour.”

“Yes,” said Pinewood. “Thank you Mr. Train Driver.”

“It’s been a pleasure,” said the driver.

Pinewood saluted him smartly, then turned his back on him. “I would just like to take this opportunity to - ”

The train driver craned over his shoulder quizzically. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yes, it’s all right sir,” Pinewood said, glancing back at him. “I was just talking to the readers... Where was I? Oh yes, hello readers. I would like to take this opportunity to let you know that I’ll

shortly be giving you the recipe for my delicious home-made tangerine layer cake, so be sure to have a pen and paper ready. Anyway, back to the plot - I think Detective Inspector Crump has discovered something interesting over there.”

“Sergeant Pinewood!” the Inspector called. “I’ve discovered something interesting over here.”

Pinewood wandered over to take a look. There was a small mound of a strange brown substance on the ground. “Hmm, most curious,” Pinewood observed. He knelt down and rubbed some between his fingers. Then he smelt it cautiously. Finally he tasted it and nodded knowingly.

“What is it?” Crump asked eagerly.

“It’s bear shit,” said Pinewood.

“Are you sure?” said Crump.

“Oh most definitely,” Sergeant Pinewood told him as he tried some more. “We get quite a lot of it back home in Canada.”

(Remember to have that pen and paper ready folks. Sergeant Pinewood’s delicious recipe is coming up soon.)

“So they definitely came this way,” Crump said ponderously. “But what were they doing here?”

“They were doing that,” Pinewood said, and he pointed to the small mound.

“But why here?” Crump persisted. “They haven’t come all this way just to take a dump. They have a plan, Pinewood. What are they up to?”

Pinewood shrugged. “The criminal mind will forever be a mystery to me sir,” he admitted.

The corner of Crump's mouth twitched gently as he smiled softly and nodded. "Ah well, that's the difference between you and I, Sergeant. Oh, you're a very able officer, I'll grant you that, but to reach my position you need to be able to talk, to think and to act like a criminal."

Pinewood nodded. "I see. Is that why there was all that fuss when they transferred you from Manchester?"

"I'll have you know that the enquiry found me innocent of all charges," Crump answered quickly. "I admit that the motivation behind my daring one-man raid on the Nat West bank may have been misunderstood by my immediate superiors, but it's the only way to understand what makes your average criminal tick. At the moment I'm tracking some particularly nasty and callous villains which is why, of late, my behaviour has been -"

"Particularly nasty and callous sir?" Pinewood completed for him.

"Exactly!" said Crump. "Now then -"

"One moment sir," Pinewood interrupted. "I have a small matter to attend to." He crossed over to a kitchen worktop that was standing on its own by the level crossing. Strapping on his apron, he picked up a mixing bowl and took a deep Canadian breath.

(Okay folks, here goes. Ready with that pen and paper?)

"The first ingredient for this traditional Canadian recipe is eight ounces of self-raising

flour. Tip the flour into a bowl, then break two eggs and separate the yolks. Throw the yolks away, you're not going to need those. In fact, you won't need the whites either so you may as well get rid of them at the same time.

"Carefully select two ornate table lamps. Skin and bone them, being mindful to extract the long, dangly green bit that runs down the centre as this is extremely poisonous, and is the property of the Church of England. Mix these well with a large lettuce that talks to you when you switch the lights off at night. Then simply decorate with walnuts and put in an oven on programme nine, designated nylon and colourfast materials only. Obviously I don't have time to do that now, so here's one I went out and bought earlier."

"When you've quite finished Sergeant, may I remind you that we have some dangerous fugitives to catch," said Inspector Crump impatiently. "We've no time to lose." He drew himself up to his full height, which was only four foot six, but then size isn't important. "I think I finally know what they're about, Pinewood," he said proudly. "They're heading for Loch Ness, I can feel it in my water. We've got them Pinewood, and this time they're not going to get away!"

Daddy Bear sat on the bottom step of the bus, thinking up unpleasant names to call his son.

"Dickhead," he said sullenly.

“You’ve already used that one,” said Nigel glumly.

PC Gibbon was pacing backwards and forwards in front of them. “Am I flippin’ brilliant, or what?” he was saying. “Forget Sherlock Holmes. Forget Inspector Morse. Miss Marple? Ha! She wouldn’t know a car chase if it gave her an egg sandwich on her birthday. When it comes to great detectives, I’m the pacesetter. Just call me Mr. Cluedo.”

“Hello Mr. Cluedo,” Daddy Bear said, his words dripping with sarcasm.

“There’ll be a commendation in this for me,” Gibbon continued. “And promotion, probably. Perhaps even a knighthood. Hell, I might even get my own TV game show. *You’re Nicked, Sonny* with PC Gibbon - how does that sound?”

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” Nigel said. “You could just let us go on a mad impulse.” He was about to add something, but his father indicated that he’d like him to remain silent by gently stuffing his fist down his throat.

“I feel you’re being a little too harsh on your son,” Longtower said. He performed a complex theatrical flourish with his left hand, before delving into the lining of his coat to retrieve a bottle of brandy that he believed was stashed there.

“Son?” Daddy Bear queried. “I no longer have a son.” To emphasise his disgust he punctuated his sentence by delivering a series of vicious cuffs to the back of Nigel’s head. “I’ll have you know that

this brain-dead tit in front of me has little more sense than a bucket of sick, and therefore cannot possibly have sprung from my loins.”

Longtower was looking very grave. He also looked a little queasy as well, but there was nothing particularly unusual in that. He had successfully identified a large bottle-shaped object in his coat and was eager to disinter his booty from the dark folds. In his haste his hand had become entwined in the lining. He staggered forwards, his arm halfway up his back, and stumbled into PC Gibbon, his sweaty nose pressed against the constable’s cheek.

“Dear fellow,” Longtower said to him, far too loudly, as he finally pulled the bottle of cheap brandy from his pocket. “Can’t you see these people are innocent?”

“No,” said Gibbon.

Longtower drew his coat around him. He held his head back, his noble chin jutting forward as a slight breeze swept back his long and unpleasantly greasy hair. “There!” he said, and a wobbling, weathered finger darted out and pointed to a public lavatory some fifty yards back down the road. “Tell me what you see?”

PC Gibbon stared at him, nonplussed. He remained silent as he watched the feverish activity of a small pink grub that lived in a modest clump of dirt beneath one of Longtower’s fingernails.

“I’ll tell you what *I* see,” Longtower continued. “I see a green and pleasant land. A land of

opportunity. A prosperous nation, where the ideals of justice are paramount!”

Gibbon looked round. All he could see was a toilet.

Longtower’s voice became dark and secretive; as soft as the purr of a sleeping tiger, and as deadly as its claws. “Do you know what else I see?”

Gibbon shook his head energetically.

“I see a family of innocent, harmless, man-eating grizzly bears,” said Longtower. “A family who want nothing more than to get on with their ordinary, everyday lives of killing and dismembering people. Now do you think it’s fair that you should be persecuting them in this fashion?”

Before Gibbon had the chance to answer, Daddy Bear stepped up and roughly pushed Longtower aside. “Now look here Porky,” he said to Gibbon. “What this inebriated buffoon is trying to tell you is that we are innocent. The trouble is we’ve never had the chance to prove it. No one’s ever listened to our side of the story.”

“Well,” Gibbon said thoughtfully. “I suppose you might have a point.”

“Exactly,” Daddy Bear said. “All I’m asking is that we’re allowed to prove our innocence. And we *can* prove it. We’re heading for Loch Ness in search of evidence that will settle this matter beyond all reasonable doubt.”

Gibbon considered his plea. He had always found it difficult to believe that Daddy Bear was

capable of the crimes with which he had been accused. Beneath all that fur and dried blood, he had an honest face. His thoughts were suddenly disturbed by the sound of a car engine. He turned towards the approaching vehicle.

“It’s the Inspector,” he said, recognising the unmarked police car. “Very well,” he said quickly. “You may continue your journey, but I’m coming with you.”

“Oh no,” said Daddy Bear. “Not a chance.”

“You have no choice,” said Gibbon. “I’m not going to let you out of my sight.”

Nigel tugged at his father’s arm. “This isn’t really the time for arguments,” he said anxiously as Crump’s car drew steadily closer. “Agree! Let him come!”

“Okay, okay. Everybody back on the bus,” Daddy Bear ordered.

Inspector Crump stopped the car and jumped out. “Well done, Gibbon,” he said, beaming. He started to walk towards the bus, and was puzzled when Gibbon ignored him and hastily followed the others onto the bus.

“Gibbon? What are you doing?”

The engine suddenly roared into life, the wheels span and the bus started to move off.

“Gibbon! No! Wait!” Crump shouted. He turned and ran back to the squad car. “Quick Pinewood,” he barked. “Arrest that bus!”

“Right away sir!” said Pinewood obediently, and he galloped off after the departing double-

decker, entirely forgetting that he had mislaid his horse some time ago.

“In the car! I meant in the car!” Crump screamed after him. “Oh to hell with it!” he muttered, then got back into the car and gunned the engine.

It was not the most sedate bus ride that Nigel had ever taken. As they reached the outskirts of a small town, they were forced to dodge and weave dangerously through the traffic. They screeched around a corner. Nigel’s knuckles turned white as he clung onto the handrail for dear life. Eventually he could bear it no more so he stuck his head under the back seat, where Gibbon and Longtower were carrying out a detailed survey of the chewing gum that had collected there.

“I can’t take any more of this,” Nigel whimpered.

“Man was not meant to travel at such speeds,” Longtower intoned. “It has been scientifically proven that travelling for prolonged periods at speeds in excess of twenty miles per hour can cause permanent damage to human physiology.”

“You don’t say?”

Longtower nodded twice, and in doing so he twice cracked his head on the underside of the seat. “The matter has been researched most thoroughly,” he said in a fragile voice. “It scrambles the internal organs and turns the larynx inside out. People end up talking backwards.”

Nigel sighed. The floor was shaking itself to pieces and he could feel himself breaking out in bruises. "You know, normally I would be one hundred per cent certain that you are talking utter shite," he said. "But the way my stomach feels right now I can almost believe you."

"I know," Daddy Bear said as he came to join them. "I feel exactly the same."

"Shouldn't you be up at the front?" Nigel asked, displaying understandable concern. "I thought you were driving?"

"What! Are you kidding?" Daddy Bear remarked. "Have you seen how fast this thing is moving? I'm staying back here with you." He squeezed himself tighter under the seat and watched Longtower carbon dating a dusty lump of petrified Wrigley's.

"Anyway, I've always felt I should spend more time with my family."

Crump's squad car raced the wrong way around a roundabout in hot pursuit. Two wheels left the ground as it careered wildly around the next corner. Crump slammed it into fourth and wrenched the wheel hard to the left. The car mounted the pavement and ploughed through a vegetable stall, scattering mangoes and pomegranates everywhere.

"Phew, that was close," Inspector Crump muttered to himself. "I nearly missed that."

Suddenly the car skidded on a stray paw-paw and went into a spin. Crump clung desperately to the wheel, fighting to stay in control. Eventually he brought the car to a sudden halt. He leaned back breathlessly in his seat and closed his eyes, his heart thumping wildly.

When he opened his eyes again he was surprised to see a tall Canadian Mountie sauntering lazily across the road in front of him, a girl on each arm. Crump quickly wound down the window.

“Pinewood! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Pinewood looked up, startled, and turned a guilty shade of scarlet. He hastily bid farewell to his newfound friends and shuffled over to the car.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Sergeant,” Crump said.

“Sorry sir,” said Pinewood as he got into the car. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“This dereliction of duty is most out of character,” Crump said, exaggerating the disappointment in his voice. “You of all people, Pinewood. It’s most distressing to find you wandering about town with two young strumpets on your arm. I thought a Mountie was always supposed to get his man?”

Pinewood shrugged. “They were the best I could do in the circumstances,” he said apologetically.

“We shall have a serious talk about this later, Pinewood,” the Inspector warned. “Meanwhile, we’ve got a bus to catch.”

He put the car in gear and pulled away.

Water held perfunctory court without that steeped effervescent variable that marks the kind of steely bait with which it would be possible to stake out a single rectangle. Never, be it neither chalk nor podule, could ever that occasion arise whereby such topological adventures would be either warranted, or indeed desirable.

One only has to listen. Step after step; echo after echo. Persons such as these would never submit to that kind of volumetric bombasticity that pervades the very mettle of some such thing or another, or indeed whatever it was that I was talking about in the first place.

The ancient Chinese had a proverb, which went something like this: the peanut, be it small and puny, need roll no faster than the turnip in order to stay in the same place. The Chinese often used to say stupid things like that.

And so it came to pass that Daddy Bear, who begat Nigel, and Longtower, son of Elijah, together with Gibbon, the upholder of the sacred laws, came to a place where the river Jordan met the Tigris and the land was muchly rich and fertile. This place Daddy Bear named *Loch Ness*, which was just as well, as that was what the locals called it too.

“Now what?” asked Nigel.

“Now we wait,” said Daddy Bear.

They waited, and Longtower took the opportunity to let them know that his feet were hurting.

“Imagine, if you will, two smoked haddock,” was how he began his rather confused metaphor. “If you were to place them in a large mangley crunching machine - one that is also particularly good at scraping and rubbing - I feel that you would then have a close approximation of the damage these cruel boots have done to my feet. If God had intended man to walk, He would have given him legs.”

It suddenly occurred to Longtower that mankind was indeed blessed with the gift of legs - two of them, in fact - and he lapsed into silence as he contemplated God’s possible motives for doing this.

“All right, so here we are at Loch Ness,” Nigel said impatiently. “What do we do now, just stand and admire the view? What exactly are we supposed to be waiting for?”

“Shush!” Daddy Bear hissed. “Look,” he said, and pointed to something up ahead. Nigel peered through the trees and bushes, squinting to catch a glimpse of whatever it was his father had seen...

“There’s nothing there,” said Nigel. “It’s just a blank empty space.”

“That blank empty space is where the stray paragraph came from,” his father explained as he scratched his backside dramatically. “Get down, it’s coming back!”

The trees shook violently and a flurry of leaves twisted through the air in response to the sudden, unexpected breeze. They watched awe-struck as the paragraph swooped low over their heads, and gently settled back into its rightful place.

The mist tumbled down the valley slopes but dared not touch the water. Ripple followed ripple to the shore and burst there upon the bank, but dared not make a sound. Some ancient mystery remained at this place: something unseen, undetected. Only a slight eddy on the surface of the water marked its passage. Something was moving beneath the loch.

A piece of driftwood by the shore stirred groggily, stood upright and revealed itself to be a sad double glazing salesman called Mary. Weary

and confused, he waded towards the bank, pulled himself out, then lay on his back on the moss.

Daddy Bear looked down at the pathetic, sorrowful creature and sighed. “You can’t say I didn’t warn you,” he said unsympathetically, then stepped over him towards the loch.

The wind slipped lithely through the trees without a sound, the only noise being the gentle slopping of the waves. For a moment the sky cleared and the golden disc of the sun was briefly reflected on the surface of the loch, before being shattered into a million glittering shards, bobbing on the water.

“So,” Nigel began, “are you ready to tell us what we’re doing here?”

“Do you remember the court scene in Chapter Four?” Daddy Bear asked. “Do you remember what the judge said?”

Nigel suddenly felt very light-headed. The world seemed to shimmer and wobble around him as he felt a flashback coming on. A face solidified from the mist and the buzzing sound it made resolved into human speech. He found himself back in the courtroom.

“*The day you are found innocent,*” Justice Frog’s voice echoed, “*is the day the Loch Ness Monster wins the Grand National.*”

Then Nigel was suddenly back in the real world: standing on the misty shoreline of Loch Ness as the sun made feeble sorties through the

clouds. “You’re going to persuade the Loch Ness Monster to enter the Grand National?”

“You’re dead right,” said Daddy Bear proudly.

“Well that settles it,” Nigel said. “Now I know for certain that you’re a stark raving nutter. Honestly I’ve never heard anything so - ”

Suddenly Nigel was interrupted by a sound from the nearby woodland.

BANG.

“What was that?” asked Daddy Bear.

BANG. BANG.

“Well, it wasn’t me,” Nigel replied.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

A nearby bush shook and erupted in a shower of foliage, like an exploding chicken.

A LOT MORE BANGING.

Well, not really like an exploding chicken.

SOME VERY LOUD BANGING THIS TIME.

Chickens don’t usually explode like that. There’s usually a lot more squawking.

SPLASH.

“Splash?” said Nigel.

They all looked out into the loch, and were perplexed to see a rapidly deflating hot air balloon frothing and bubbling as it sank beneath the water. Two soggy survivors swam ashore, one of whom Daddy Bear was delighted to recognise.

“Glenda!” he cried. “You’ve come back to me.”

Mummy Bear staggered up to him and slapped him hard across the face.

“What was that for?” protested Daddy Bear.

“That,” said Mummy Bear as she shook herself dry, “is for shooting our balloon down.” She introduced her companion, a portly man in a tweed suit, sporting a heavily waxed moustache. “This is Bertie the Belgian Balloonist. He was kind enough to give me a lift when you abandoned me.”

“Excuse me,” Daddy Bear said, “but if I remember correctly, it was you who walked off and left me. And as for shooting your wretched balloon down, how am I supposed to have done that? I haven’t got a gun, have I?”

Mummy Bear was staring past him. “No, but he has,” she said quietly. Standing just a few feet away from them was a strange man in a kilt, pointing the business end of a shotgun at them.

Honestly Vicar, I Can Explain Everything

“Och aye!” intoned the curiously kilted gentleman, Scottishly. “It’s a broad backed moonlit night, the noo, Jimmy. Och, begorra. I’m the Laird McPutty, so I am, and you’re all trespassing on my land, the noo.”

Daddy Bear tilted his head and shot him a puzzled glance. “You’re not really Scottish at all, are you?”

“Och Jimmy, Robbie Burns, wee laddie, och... No, actually I’m not. I’m from Barnsley.”

“Barnsley?” Daddy Bear repeated slowly. “Not very Scottish, is it?”

“Well no, not really,” the Laird McPutty admitted. “I won the title in a game of dominoes and I’ve not really got the hang of it yet. But that’s neither here nor there. What are you people doing on my land?”

“Well, speaking for myself,” Mummy Bear said icily, “I’m here because you shot my bleeding balloon down.”

“Ah,” said McPutty bashfully. “Yes, I’m sorry about that,” he apologised.

“Sorry! I should bloody well think you are,” Mummy Bear shrieked. “You shouldn’t be charging round with that bloody great gun anyway. You could have someone’s eye out.”

McPutty jumped and looked down at the shotgun he was holding, as if he had only just

noticed it was there. "I was out hunting," he said defensively, and lowered the gun carefully. "There's no point being a laird if you can't go out hunting once in a while."

"That's abhorrent!" Mummy Bear said, holding his eye sternly. "You're nothing but a callous, murdering swine. What gives you the right to go around shooting fluffy animals?"

"No I -" the Laird tried to interject.

"What possible harm can they have done to you?" Mummy Bear asked him. "Have you ever been beaten up by a squirrel? Has your house ever been burgled by a rabbit? No, I don't think so!"

"I was once mugged by a hedgehog," said the Laird.

"A likely story!" Mummy Bear thundered. "We're talking about taking the life of a small, defenceless creature and all you can do is give me some flannel about a hedgehog! Have you no shame?"

Daddy Bear patted her arm gently. "You're getting far too worked up about this," he said softly, but she growled at him and he backed off.

"If you'd only let me explain," said the Laird, "you'd realise that I'm not quite the monster you think I am. You see, I don't kill fluffy animals - I'm a vegetarian hunter."

"A what?" Mummy Bear asked, as her fury was suddenly deposed by stark bewilderment.

“A vegetarian hunter,” the Laird explained. “I only shoot vegetables: carrots, lettuces, tomatoes, that sort of thing.”

“A vegetarian hunter?” Mummy Bear said, and she flushed with embarrassment. “Oh I see. Well, I suppose that puts a different complexion on it. It seems I’ve misjudged you. Please forgive me for jumping to such a terrible conclusion.”

“Hang on just one moment,” Mary felt inclined to intercede. “What about all those poor vegetables?”

“Oh do be quiet!” Mummy Bear snapped.

“Turnips that will never know the joy of gambolling playfully in the meadows,” Mary expounded. “Onions cut off in the prime of life. Potatoes that will never play the mouth organ again.”

Mummy Bear frowned at him, then turned to her husband. “Who is this cretin anyway?”

Daddy Bear shrugged. “Never seen him before in my life!” he claimed.

Mummy Bear didn’t believe him. “You’ve been hanging about with some very strange people since I left you Gordon,” she said disdainfully.

Mary, meanwhile, continued his botanical litany unabated. “Cauliflowers that will never be able to play table tennis,” he appealed to them. “Tomatoes that will never go on a cheap package tour to Tenerife. And has anyone spared a thought for the poor little pomegranates?”

“That’s enough,” Mummy Bear said, and she picked Mary up and threw him in the loch. Ten seconds later the fish threw him back again.

“Well look, I’m sorry about the balloon, but it doesn’t explain why the rest of you are here,” said McPutty, persisting in his desire to be as unreasonable as possible.

“It’s a long story,” Daddy Bear failed to explain.

“I’m all ears,” said McPutty.

“Fair enough. To cut it short then, the simple fact is we’re here to find the Loch Ness Monster,” Daddy Bear told him casually.

“Are we indeed?” said Mummy Bear, to whom this was a complete revelation.

“I’m sorry, did I not mention it before?” Daddy Bear asked her.

“All you told me was that we were heading for Scotland,” Mummy Bear replied irritably. “Nobody said anything about a monster.”

“Hold on,” McPutty interjected. “Can’t you at least get your story straight?” He pointed at Longtower, who was quietly peeling a jelly baby with a Stanley knife. “You! What’s going on here?”

“Me?” Longtower looked up in surprise. “Oh, I’m only here for the fish.”

“Honestly,” Daddy Bear said, “we’re here to find the monster.”

Laird McPutty looked him up and down with a beady eye, which he kept in his top pocket expressly for such purposes. “Very well,” he said

uncertainly. "I accept what you say. But I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed."

"Well of course we are," Mummy Bear agreed. "It was a ludicrous idea all along. Excuse my husband, he's a gullible idiot. A monster indeed!"

"Gullible? Oh I wouldn't say that," said the Laird. "You've just come at a bad time, that's all. You see, Nessie's not here at the moment."

"Oh, now come on!" Mummy Bear said, with a slightly nervous laugh. "You don't seriously believe that there really *is* a monster? You poor demented fool. I suppose you're going to tell us that you've seen it skulking by the edge of the loch, smoking cigars?"

"Don't be ridiculous," McPutty replied. "Nessie gave up smoking years ago. No, around about this time of day she goes down to the Bell and Compass in the village for a swift half and a ploughman's lunch. That's where she'll be right now."

"Oh really?" Mummy Bear humoured him. "And how do you know all this?"

"Ben McQuarrie told me," responded the Laird. "He's a ploughman. Round about this time of day he goes down to the Bell and Compass in the village and gets his lunch stolen by a forty foot plesiosaur."

The Bell and Compass was a pub very much in the traditional mould. The ceiling was low and the exposed beams were adorned with horse brasses.

An open fire licked hungrily at the original seventeenth century brickwork, whilst some of the original seventeenth century customers clinked glasses and chatted about how much better it had been in the old days, when they'd had cheaper ale, highwaymen and the black death.

A few curious heads looked up as Daddy Bear and company entered.

“So how are we going to recognise this Nessie person?” Nigel asked.

Daddy Bear pointed to a large lady with flippers and a ridiculously long neck, who was occupying three tables in the corner. “I think it’s safe to assume we’ve found her,” he said. He instructed Nigel to get the drinks in, then invited himself to join Nessie, trailing his little band of sad people behind him.

“I’m sorry to bother you like this,” Daddy Bear began, pulling up a chair, “but are you the Loch Ness Monster?”

“Me?” said Nessie in surprise. Her voice was curiously high pitched for such a large lady. She shook her head and inadvertently demolished two fruit machines and a partition wall. “I think you’re mistaken, I’m a chinchilla.”

“Ha!” Mummy Bear declared triumphantly to her husband. “I told you there was no such thing as the Loch Ness Monster.”

Daddy Bear gave his wife a scowl, then turned back to Nessie. “Are you absolutely sure?” he asked earnestly.

“Positive,” said Nessie. “It’s in my book.” She produced a pocket encyclopaedia and flicked through the pages with a clumsy flipper. “Ah, here we are. *Chinchilla: large amphibious creature that smells of fish and skulks about Loch Ness, scaring the fertiliser out of people.* Well that’s me down to a T, isn’t it?”

“Let me see that!” Daddy Bear snapped, and he snatched the book from her. “It must be a printing error.”

Mummy Bear gently took the book out of his hands and gave it back to Nessie. “If she says she’s a chinchilla, then you’ll just have to take her word for it. You’ve heard it straight from the chinchilla’s mouth, so to speak.”

“Oh all right,” Daddy Bear conceded. “It doesn’t really matter what you *think* you are,” he said to Nessie. “The point is that I believe we’re in a position to help each other. Have you ever thought that there was more to life than just swimming about and munching fish?”

“I beg your pardon?” Nessie replied, a little indignantly. She leaned back and crossed her flippers. “I’ll have you know that I lead a very rich and full life. I’m really into embroidery, and some of my floral designs have won prizes.”

“But are you really fulfilling your potential?” Daddy Bear pressed her. There was a sudden sense of urgency in his voice and a strange gleam came to his eye. “You could be up there with the best of them, you know. Ask yourself, why should you settle for this drab and slightly damp existence?”

You could really achieve something with your life. You could be a contender!”

“A contender?” Nessie asked.

“That’s right,” said Daddy Bear. “In the Grand National, to be precise.”

Nessie looked unsure. “I always thought you had to be a horse to enter the Grand National?”

Daddy Bear leaned a little closer and tried, unsuccessfully, to put his arm around her huge shoulders. “Well, strictly speaking, you do,” he said confidentially. “But it so happens that in a certain light the chinchilla is practically indistinguishable from the horse.”

“Is that a fact?” said Nessie, intrigued.

“Oh yes,” Daddy Bear assured her. “The two species are quite amazingly similar.”

“Tell me more,” said Nessie. “Please, tell me more...”

It took six double brandies to finally convince Nessie that this staggeringly implausible scheme was a good idea. Nigel ended up paying for every single one. As they wobbled out into the sunlight, he counted what was left of his pocket money.

“Hey, I’ve been done!” he said. “That barmaid gave me the wrong change.”

“And since when have you been able to count?” muttered his mother.

But on this occasion Nigel was right for, unbeknown to him, Big Brenda the buxom barmaid was none other than... Granny Malone!

Yes, Granny Malone, the scourge of the seven seas! Shriek in terror as she puts your eye out with her umbrella! Howl in pain as she farts and blames it on the dog! Cry in anguish as she -

Oh to hell with it. I don't know about you, but I'm pig sick of Granny Malone.

Detective Inspector Crump and Sergeant Pinewood arrived at the loch about twenty minutes after the Bears had left. It was with particular glee that Crump discovered the tyre marks in the mud.

"They've been here, Pinewood," he said. "We're still hot on their trail. We'll search the area."

Crump decided that the best tactic would be to divide the area in two so that they could search half each. To this end he provided Sergeant Pinewood with a snorkel and a book on skin-diving so that he could search the loch, whilst he himself took care of the dry land. Accompanied by the lilting strains of Pinewood splashing about and screaming that he couldn't swim, Crump followed the tyre marks inland.

Not far from the shore Inspector Crump stopped, listening to a curious noise coming from a nearby bush: it was a shrill, shrieking melody. He stepped up and moved the branches aside to find a small potato with gunshot wounds, playing a mouth organ.

"Hello potato," said Crump.

"Hello policeman," said the potato.

“I wonder if you can help me, potato,” said Crump.

“I’ll do my best, policeman,” said the potato.

“Well tell me, have you seen three bears come this way, potato?” said Crump.

“Erm, I don’t think so,” said the potato.

“You might have seen them in a big red bus,” said Crump.

“Oh I remember now, policeman,” said the potato. “They said they were going to the Bell and Compass in the village.”

“Thank you very much, potato,” said Crump.

“Glad I could help, policeman,” said the potato, and as Crump turned to go the potato nicked his wallet.

A soggy, barnacle-encrusted Sergeant Pinewood was rising from the water as Crump returned to the shoreline. “Any luck?” Crump asked.

“Well I’ve found a number of things sir,” Pinewood told him. “Most of it’s junk. There’s a bike frame, an old tyre, and some broken bottles and stuff.”

“But are there any clues, Pinewood?”

“Not exactly sir,” Pinewood replied. “But I did find this - it’s a man who can do farmyard impressions.”

A man dressed in a kilt and sporting a long grey beard stepped out from behind him. “Chug, chug, chug, chug,” said the man.

“That’s a tractor,” said Pinewood.

“Whirr, whirr, whirr, whirr,” said the man.

“That’s a combine harvester,” said Pinewood.

“Furdly, gurdly, fishel, poop,” said the man.

“That’s a computer monitored multiple mechanical milking machine,” said Pinewood.

“In other words Sergeant, you’ve discovered precisely nothing.” Crump shook his head sorrowfully. “It’s a good job that my own keen senses and infallible instincts have not deserted me. I happen to know that our quarry left here just over twenty minutes ago, bound for a local drinking establishment.”

“Extraordinary sir,” Pinewood said, trying to sound like he was impressed. “How did you find out?”

“A potato told me,” Crump was forced to admit. “Come on, let’s go.”

Several hundred miles away, in a little clearing in the Enchanted Forest, the three Bears’ house stood empty and neglected. The front door hung open lazily. The windows flapped and banged in the breeze. There was no one around for miles - no one, that is, save for a group of scampering things on the front lawn and an impressively muscular Canadian police horse on the roof.

Marmaduke had never really liked being a horse. He was rather good at whinnying and neighing, and he was an old hand at trotting. Nevertheless, he couldn’t help feeling he would be better suited to some other vocation - a swimming instructor, perhaps, or a market researcher. The

problem was that there were very few openings for market researchers with four legs and a weakness for sugar lumps.

Still, he could always dream. If nothing else it passed the time while he was stuck on this roof. Life was pretty boring at this altitude. A little while ago a Scottish paragraph had come hurtling out of the sky and narrowly missed him, but that aside his stint of roof-sitting had been astoundingly uneventful.

“Excuse me!” he heard a voice call from down below.

He trotted carefully to the edge of the roof and peered over the guttering. “Hello?” he neighed.

A slender, piebald mare squinted up at him. “I’m sorry to bother you,” she said as she swished her tail about lazily. “I’m carrying out a survey, and I was wondering if you might answer a few questions for me?”

“Well, I, err...” Marmaduke began.

“Oh, it won’t take long,” promised the pretty mare. “I just want to ask you a few questions about New Biological Smunk.”

“The thing is I’m a bit busy at the moment,” whinnied Marmaduke. “What with having to stand on this roof and everything.”

“Surely you can answer just a couple of questions?” the mare asked, fluttering her eyelashes.

Marmaduke sighed. “I’d love to,” he said. “Honestly I would. The problem is it’s just not as

simple as that. Roof-balancing requires a lot of concentration. In fact, it's a very precise art. You have to take account of wind speed, centre of gravity, that sort of thing. There's a lot of maths involved. One lapse of concentration and before you know it your arse is heading for the ground at ten metres per second squared."

Marmaduke carefully began to sidle along the roof so that he could get a better view. Suddenly he missed his footing and pitched over the edge. It was an eloquent, albeit unwitting demonstration of his previous assertion. He found himself spread-eagled on the lawn and although he was grateful for a soft landing, it was nevertheless an acutely embarrassing position for any horse to find itself in. He blushed as the scampering things burst into fits of hysterical giggling.

A shadow fell across him and Marmaduke looked up, shielding his eyes with one hoof.

"I guess you're free now," said the mare. "You know, that was quite an impressive fall. With talent like that you ought to be on the telly."

"Why thank you," Marmaduke said charmingly.

"Do you want to be in our new advert?" the mare asked.

Suddenly Marmaduke found himself surrounded by a camera crew. Make-up people hauled him to his feet and caked him in powder. Wardrobe people dressed him up in a spangly suit and bow tie. Then someone shouted *Action!*

“We washed half this horse in ordinary washing powder,” said an alcoholic old thespian who had once been in an episode of *Minder*. “The other half we washed in New Biological Smunk. And blow me, there was no difference. It’s a rip off!”

“And cut!” bawled the director. “Lovely, lovely. You were wonderful darlings!” He strode over to Marmaduke. “You were simply fantastic lovey,” he shouted through a megaphone. “You just ooze star quality. Buckets and buckets of it darling. Stick with me kid and I’ll make you a star.”

At last! thought Marmaduke. His moment of glory had arrived. Fame! Fortune! And as many sugar lumps as he could eat!

“Police work is all about observation,” said Crump as they drove along.

“Woofy woofy, plumpsy float,” said the man who did farmyard impressions. They had decided to bring him with them, as he was more interesting than listening to the radio.

“A keen eye, Pinewood, that’s the best tool that any detective can have,” Crump continued, as a double-decker bus towing a large sea monster went past them in the opposite direction. “That’s why the criminal fraternity have never stood a chance against the forces of law and order.”

“Sir,” Pinewood interrupted, but the Inspector was in full flow.

“It’s like my old dad used to say. ‘Lionel, my boy,’ he used to say to me, ‘always remember,

there's many a stitch between a bird up the creek without a paddle.' Yes, he always used to say that... Mind you, they had to shoot him in the end."

"Sir, we've just passed the Bears going in the opposite direction," Pinewood told him. "Did you not see them? They were towing the Loch Ness Monster behind them on roller skates."

"What? No, I *didn't* see them," Crump snapped, as if it was somehow Pinewood's fault. "Honestly Sergeant, I can't be expected to notice everything. Why didn't you say something?"

"I did sir," Pinewood said in his defence, "but you were too busy not listening to me."

"Never mind," Crump said impatiently. "Which way did they go?"

"Furble, wurble, poop poop poop," said the man who did farmyard impressions.

"Right!" said Crump, and he yanked the steering wheel hard to the left. The car spun around three hundred and sixty degrees, and ended up heading in the same direction as before.

"Right again!" said Crump, and he repeated the manoeuvre, only this time he managed to end up with the car pointing the opposite way.

"Get on the radio Pinewood," Inspector Crump ordered him as he slammed his foot down. "I want a full description of the fugitives to be issued to every squad car in the area. I want plain-clothed detectives watching the airports. I want roadblocks set up between here and the ferry

ports. I want armed officers with orders to shoot to kill.”

“Yes sir,” said Pinewood. “Anything else sir?”

“Yes Pinewood,” Crump said fervently. “I want lots of whirly helicopters with thermal imaging cameras. I want three squadrons of RAF Tornados on standby. I want a nicer cleaner world to live in. I want peace in our time. I want different cultures and nations to exist side by side in harmony. And I want a new DVD player.”

“Multi-region?”

“Of course, Pinewood,” said Inspector Crump.

“I’ll see what I can do sir,” Pinewood said, and he got on the radio.

Crump gripped the wheel firmly. “This is it Pinewood!” he said. “Whatever happens, I am determined that we’re not going to lose them this time!”

Eight miles down the road, Crump and Pinewood stood by the roadside, poring over the map spread out on the bonnet.

“I think we should have turned left at that last junction,” said Pinewood.

“Oh shut up,” Crump said sulkily. “If you hadn’t made me stop so that you could take a leak, we wouldn’t have lost them.”

“Well they can’t have got far,” Pinewood reasoned. “We’ll ask around, somebody must have seen them.”

“I suppose so,” Crump sighed. “After all, a double-decker bus towing a sea monster is

conspicuous enough. Come on Sergeant.” He folded up the map and they got back in the car.

The afternoon sun beat down strongly on the diners at the Happy Break Motorway Service Station, chiefly because the building had no roof. The Happy Break Motorway Service Station was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a thriving concern. There were a number of reasons for this, but by far the largest contributing factor to its lack of success was that it was fifteen miles from the nearest motorway. Its proprietor, Ken Lungs, had bought the land ten years ago. He had hit upon the novel notion that if he built a cafe here and called it a motorway service station, someone would eventually build a motorway through it. It is with foresight like this that business empires are forged! Sadly the strategy had not yet paid off, but Ken had never given up hope.

Presently, he was slumped dejectedly behind the counter, staring over his gut at a portable TV. So engrossed was he that he barely even noticed when two policemen and a farmyard impressionist entered. Inspector Crump tried to attract his attention by slapping the counter, but by mistake he brought his hand down on a plastic ketchup container and a fountain of tomato ketchup streamed up his nostrils.

Ken Lungs brushed the dust from his apron and turned to face them. “You’ve got ketchup up your nose,” he said helpfully.

“I know,” said Crump as he blew his nose on his sleeve.

“Most people just put it on their chips,” Ken observed. “Still, each to his own. Now what can I do for you gentlemen?”

“Chuffy chuffy, glibber, spong,” said the man who did farmyard impressions.

“Have you seen three bears in a double-decker bus towing the Loch Ness Monster behind them on roller skates?” asked Inspector Crump.

Ken Lungs scratched the Inspector’s chin thoughtfully. “Oh, I’m not sure,” he said. “We get so many people through here, it’s difficult to recall.”

“Please try to remember,” Crump said as he helped himself to a large wad of banknotes from the cash till.

“Was there anything distinctive about them?” asked Ken.

“The female bear may have been wearing glasses,” Sergeant Pinewood said helpfully.

“Well why didn’t you say so before?” Ken said. “Of course, I remember now! They were in here not half an hour ago. There was a tall, smelly man with them who talked a lot about cement.”

“That sounds like them!” Crump said. “Do you know where they were heading?”

“They said they were going to Aintree for the Grand National,” Ken told them in Morse code.

“Did you hear that Pinewood?” Crump asked. “Of course, it’s so obvious. They’ve got the Loch

Ness Monster and they're going to enter the Grand National." Crump suddenly realised that Sergeant Pinewood wasn't paying him the slightest bit of attention. He was staring at Ken's television set behind the counter.

Inspector Crump waved a hand in front of his face. "Sergeant Pinewood, I'm talking to you," he said.

"My horse is on TV," Pinewood said without taking his eyes off the screen.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Crump demanded.

"I've just seen my horse on a chat show talking about its latest film," Pinewood said in a stupefied voice.

Crump grabbed hold of him by the shoulders and shook him. "Sergeant Pinewood!" he said, and he slapped him hard across the face. "We've no time for this. We're fast approaching the dramatic and unexpected climax of this story! Do you understand? We've got to get to Aintree and stop the Loch Ness Monster from winning the Grand National, otherwise the Bears will get off on a legal technicality."

"Good grief, sir!" said Pinewood, pulling himself together. "You mean there's a plot."

"There certainly is, Pinewood," said Crump. "And it's rapidly drawing to a close." He clenched and pointed theatrically in some random direction. "Come - to Aintree!" he proclaimed.

Goldilocks and the Free Bears

“Yes!” said Pinewood, adopting a similar pose.
“What you said!”

And with that, the two of them dashed out dramatically and unexpectedly.

15
The Dramatic & Unexpected Climax
Of The Story

“Well you join us here at Aintree for the Grand National, sponsored this year by the Flora Socket Patent Electric Poultry Company. So why not try a delicious Flora Socket twelve volt chicken - the bird that cooks itself.”

Whispering John Follicle twisted away from the microphone. At the back of the commentary box two men were unpacking another man from a wooden crate. John Follicle returned to the microphone.

“It seems that our guest expert, Hamilton Piles, is not yet ready for us, but as we still have a few minutes in hand before the race starts, there’s time for me to fill you in on some of the history of this great event. The Grand National was originated in 1592 by Rudyard Svenson, a medieval cotton wool salesman from Oslo. The idea first occurred to him one April afternoon after he chased a tin of Spam up a conker tree with a sharpened stick. In the early days spectators would come here once a year, dressed in their finery, to gather around the empty track and talk about the weather and the price of milk. Of course it wasn’t until much later, in 1643 in fact, that horses were finally introduced to the event, and many people feel that this development added an important element of competition to the proceedings.”

Follicle was suddenly startled as a portly gentleman wearing plaid wellies and a crash helmet leapt out of the crate behind him. "Oh, and it seems that Hamilton Piles is now ready to join us," he said, once he'd got his breath back.

"I'm afraid not John," said the man from the box. "My name is Maurice Stain. Hamilton Piles couldn't make it today as he sprained a tomato whilst working in his greenhouse this morning."

John Follicle promptly closed the microphone. "What's going on here?" he hissed. "Where's Piles?"

"I told you, he couldn't make it," said Stain. "I'm a friend of his sister. I said I'd step in for him."

"I see," said Follicle. "You *are* an expert on horse racing, I take it?"

"Well, I'm very keen on snooker," said Stain.

"It's hardly the same, is it?" Follicle snapped.

"Oh, I don't know," Stain replied breezily. "I'm sure the same basic rules apply. Anyway, I'm game if you are."

Follicle shook his head woefully, then reluctantly he opened the mike. "Okay Maurice," he said politely. "Good to have you here. Well, according to the bookies, Mr. Nuts has emerged as the clear favourite this year, despite some rather poor performances earlier in the season. What's your verdict Maurice?"

"Ah well," said Stain. "Mr. Nuts is a good horse, there's no doubting that, and he's capable of

turning on a fair bit of speed. Okay, so he's run a few bad races recently, but I think that if he keeps his head down, doesn't overstretch himself at the beginning, screws back off the cushion then goes for the pink, he should knock seven different shades of shite out of the opposition..."

It was one of the busiest Grand Nationals of the year. Some people said that it was the only Grand National of the year, and in many ways they may have been right.

Anyway, it was busy. People in odd hats strode about, pretending to be terribly knowledgeable of this sort of thing, while strange little men that smelt of horses snapped at their ankles.

"Where's mum?" Nigel asked.

"She's gone to get changed," his father said as they pushed their way through the crowds.

"I still don't see why I couldn't have been the jockey," Mary muttered to Longtower. Longtower sighed and mumbled something about margarine.

PC Gibbon nudged up against Daddy Bear and tugged his arm. "Can I have an ice cream please?" he asked politely. "Go on, please?"

"What?" Daddy Bear snapped. "No you bloody can't. The race is going to start soon."

"Oh please," Gibbon pleaded with a childlike whine, which just didn't seem right coming from a thirty-two-year-old police constable.

"Can I have one too?" asked Mary.

"Me too," said Bertie the Belgian Balloonist.

“I wouldn’t mind one either,” said Nigel.

Longtower held up his hand and suddenly froze. “You know,” he said as he rolled his eyes around his head. “I think we probably just have time to purchase these frosty comestibles before the race begins.”

“Very well,” Daddy Bear submitted, and PC Gibbon happily took his arm and started to lead him towards the nearest ice cream van.

In the dressing room the horses were putting the final touches to their make-up prior to the big race. Nessie, being somewhat larger than the others, was a little shy at first, but had soon been befriended by an aging filly called Matilda.

“Just play it cool lovey,” said Matilda as she plied her lips liberally with lipstick. “There’s no point getting all flustered. Take it at your own pace and smile at all the cameras.”

“Will that help me win the race?” asked Nessie.

“Darling, this is the Grand National - it’s got nothing to do with winning.” Matilda pouted into the mirror and brushed her eyelashes. “It’s all about media exposure, getting yourself noticed. This is your ticket to the good life. Just look at Red Rum - TV adverts, a record deal and a best selling autobiography. That could be you lovey - up there with your name in lights, instead of down here in the horse shit.”

“Oh I don’t know,” said Nessie. “I’m not sure that I’ve got what it takes to make that sort of impact.”

Matilda tucked her ears beneath a long ginger wig, then turned and ran a scornful gaze over Nessie. “You may be right,” she said witheringly. “Look love, you’ve got to make an effort. It’s no good being all frumpy and dowdy, you’ll never get anywhere like that. Put on a bit of make-up. Show a bit of leg. Flap your tail about. Sell yourself, darling.”

A race official poked his head around the door. “Five minutes to curtain,” he called.

“Listen,” Matilda said. “You’re welcome to borrow my blusher, dear.”

“I don’t think so,” Nessie said. “Thanks all the same, but I don’t think it’s really me.”

“Suit yourself love,” Matilda said briskly as she stood up. “As far as I’m concerned it just leaves the field wide open for the rest of us.”

The other horses trotted out, lipstick glowing, straw hats bobbing, sequined swimsuits glistening. Nessie stayed in the dressing room, staring at her own reflection in the mirror. Slowly, softly, a single tear trailed down her cheek. She knew that she was wrong to feel sorry for herself, but sometimes it’s all you can do. Nessie didn’t hear as Mummy Bear came into the room, and she jumped slightly as she sat next to her.

“Problems?” Mummy Bear asked gently.

“No,” said Nessie. “No, not at all.”

“Then why are you skulking in here all on your own?”

Nessie shrugged her big, heavy shoulders and fetched most of the plaster off the ceiling. “Oh I can’t win this race,” she said. “The minute I go out on the track they’ll all start laughing at me. Why should I subject myself to ridicule? It would be better if I just went back home.”

“Why should you?” Mummy Bear said. “You and I are in the same boat, girl. We’re laughed at, persecuted, just because we’re different. Now, we can either lie down and let it happen, or we can do something about it. My husband has a plan which will save me from being eaten by a crocodile, and restore your sense of self-respect at the same time. Okay, so as plans go it’s a complete turkey and it’s doomed to failure, but I’m going to give it a go!”

“Well if you put it like that,” Nessie sniffed.

“That’s the spirit!” Mummy Bear stood up and slapped Nessie on the back. “You may be as ugly as sin,” she said, “but I tell you this, we’re going to damn well win this race!”

Nessie smiled. “You know,” she said philosophically, “I think I’ve learned a valuable lesson today. I’ve learned about friendship, and about self-respect. I’ve learned that’s it’s important to love one another - but I’ve also learned that it’s important to love yourself.”

“All right,” Mummy Bear said as she pulled a sickly face. “Don’t overdo it.”

* * *

Elsewhere, Longtower was pushing a choc-ice up a drainpipe. The others just ignored him.

“I wanted a Flake in mine,” said Mary as he peered over the top of an enormous ice cream cone.

“Me too,” said Bertie the Belgian Balloonist.

“And I wanted a raspberry ripple,” said PC Gibbon. “This isn’t a raspberry ripple.”

Daddy Bear happily ignored them all and gazed lovingly at his Triple Mint Choc-Chip Sensation as it melted and dribbled down his arm. Then Nigel sharply nudged his elbow and the ice cream flew straight out of his hand, over their heads and landed on the hat of a woman some twenty metres downwind. It sat there for a while, unnoticed, then suddenly jumped down to the ground and ran off to buy a food processor - and everyone agreed that this was a strange thing for an ice cream to do.

“What did you do that for?” Daddy Bear asked his son in an understandably aggrieved manner.

“Look over there!” said Nigel. “Do you see her?”

“See who?” Daddy Bear said as he swiped his son’s ice cream and vengefully dropped it on the floor.

“It’s that girl,” Nigel said. “The fat blond tart. You know, the one we found in our house?”

Daddy Bear quickly scanned the crowd in the direction that Nigel was pointing and zeroed in on a curly mop of blond hair. At that moment the girl suddenly glanced up, and for a few seconds she

and Daddy Bear found themselves staring at each other. There was a mutual glimmer of recognition, then the blond girl started to back away.

Daddy Bear gritted his teeth and started to push his way through the crowd. "Quick!" he shouted. "After her!"

Two hundred yards from where Nigel's ice cream lay splattered in the mud, Inspector Crump's car crunched to a halt. Pinewood and the Inspector got out and surveyed the crowds.

"It shouldn't be too difficult to find them," said Crump. "Grizzly bears tend to stand out in any congregation."

A limousine pulled up beside them and a horse got out, surrounded by minders. Pinewood glanced briefly at it from the corner of his eye, then did a double take.

"It's Marmaduke!" he cried delightedly. He rushed over to his long lost horse, but one of the minders held him back.

"Sorry, Mr. Marmaduke isn't signing autographs today," the minder explained in a voice that could crush house bricks.

"But he's *my* horse," Pinewood objected.

The minder slowly shook his head. "Mr. Marmaduke has just come back from an extensive publicity tour of the Benelux countries and he'd rather just be left alone to relax and enjoy the race."

“You don’t understand, this is police business.” Pinewood took a meat paste sandwich from his breast pocket, opened it up and held it out for the minder to read.

“Well that puts a different complexion on the situation entirely,” the minder agreed. “This sandwich gives you complete authorization.” He stood aside and let Pinewood pass.

Marmaduke just turned his head away. “I’m not talking to you,” he said haughtily.

“Marmaduke, this is terrible,” Pinewood said with feeling. “I never thought fame would change you so much. Is this all the thanks I get for looking after you through those hungry years?”

“This is the thanks you get for leaving me on a rooftop in the middle of nowhere,” Marmaduke sulked.

Pinewood looked apologetic. “Yes, sorry about that,” he said. “But for the moment we shall have to put our differences aside. There is important police work to be done.”

“Sorry,” Marmaduke said, “I’m not interested. I’ve got a new career now.”

“Have you no sense of duty?” asked Pinewood, with genuine horror. “What happened to honour? What happened to your sense of responsibility?”

“Nuts to it,” said the horse. “I know which side my bread’s buttered.”

Pinewood heard Inspector Crump calling to him. “Sergeant, I’ve seen them!” he shouted. “Quick, after them!”

“You hear that?” Pinewood said. “We’ve no time to argue.”

“Listen Batman, I’ve retired from all this crime fighting lark,” the horse replied. “Can’t you get that into your thick skull?”

Pinewood fumed. This was the last straw! “Right, you’re coming, like it or not,” he said and he pulled a gun on him. At the sight of it, Marmaduke bolted.

“Quick, after him!” yelled Pinewood to no one in particular, and he set off in pursuit.

Whispering John Follicle took a quick bite from a peanut butter sandwich, which squealed in agony. He put it down and returned to the mike. “Well,” he began, swallowing hard. “The big moment is almost upon us as this year’s competitors wait anxiously at the starting gate. This, you may already know, is one of the toughest steeplechase courses in the world. There are some very tricky jumps, aren’t there Maurice?”

“What?” Maurice Stain said in surprise as he sat cross-legged on the floor, stripping down the gearbox from his Ford Cortina.

“I said there are some very tricky jumps Maurice,” Follicle repeated through clenched teeth.

“Oh, have we started?” Maurice Stain got up, wiped his oily hands under his armpits, then came over to the mike. He leaned forward, putting his elbow in Follicle’s sandwich, which howled uncontrollably.

“Yes John,” he began. “Everyone’s heard of *The Chair* and, oh, that other one. But it’s the least known jumps that are going to cause the most problems. *Smedley’s Lump*, for example, is a particularly nasty one. It looks just like an ordinary jump at first, but on the other side is a six foot pit full of sharp spikes. Another one to look out for is *Hooley’s Brook*, a water jump with a difference. It’s about six feet wide, and instead of water it’s filled with concentrated sulphuric acid.”

“Ooh nasty!” said Whispering John Follicle.

“It certainly is, John,” said Maurice Stain. “But it’s by no means the worse. That honour is saved for a jump that is simply known as *The Reckoning*, which is about halfway around the course. Basically, it’s just a man hiding behind the hedge with a loaded shotgun. That one manages to catch quite a lot of riders out, I can tell you.”

“Well I can see we’re almost ready now,” Follicle said. “In a break with tradition, a semi-automatic machine gun is being used to start the race this year, in place of the normal starting pistol. So, the horses are under starter’s orders... He fires! ...And, yes, he manages to shoot about half a dozen competitors before the police get chance to disarm him. Well there’s something we don’t see every year.

“Meanwhile the surviving horses have got off to a flying start. It’s *Beggar’s Banquet* who takes the lead, a lovely horse there, and she’s setting a cracking pace. In second place is Mr. Nuts,

followed closely by Matilda and The Loch Ness Monster. The Loch Ness Monster is something of a newcomer to the circuit, of course.”

“Extremely long neck as well,” Stain observed.

“Extremely long, Maurice,” said Whispering John Follicle. “And unless I’m very much mistaken she’s being ridden by a grizzly bear. Something of a first for the National, as far as I’m aware.”

“Well there was that bear who romped home on Charley’s Aunt in 1973,” said Stain.

“Yes, but Charley doesn’t like us talking about that,” said Follicle. “Well as the horses approach the first fence it’s over to you Maurice.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Stain. “Okay then, so in the lead is a horse, followed by another horse. But coming up on the outside is a horse with an extremely long neck, followed by another horse, with more horses close behind. Well here’s the first jump and it’s up... and over... and the mantraps seem to have taken one or two of the horses by surprise. Several of them are limping a bit but the field is still going strong as they approach the minefield. My word! A blond-haired young girl has just run out onto the track. Well, good gracious, I’m not sure what to make of this at all. A blond-haired young girl has just careered out onto the track and... no wait! There are others in pursuit. Yes, she’s being chased by two grizzly bears, a Belgian balloonist, a police constable, a drunken philosopher and a double glazing salesman with a girl’s name...”

* * *

“Come back here you poisonous little cow!” Daddy Bear shouted as pounded along the racecourse in pursuit of Goldilocks. “Come here and let me put my hands around your throat!”

Nigel was hot on his heels. He twisted to glance briefly over his shoulder and watched as Inspector Crump ducked under the barrier.

“Dad!” he screamed. “Dad, look!”

“What is it?” Daddy Bear called without looking back.

“The police are after us,” Nigel shouted. “They’re right behind us.”

“First things first, Nigel,” Daddy Bear yelled. “Let’s get this little bitch first, we’ll worry about the police later.”

“Well this is really quite extraordinary,” Maurice Stain said. “But what an exciting race it’s turning out to be. Over to you John.”

“Much appreciated Maurice,” Follicle thanked him. “So as we come up on the second jump it’s Beggar’s Banquet in the lead. Hot on her fetlocks is Matilda. The Loch Ness Monster and Mr. Nuts are now jostling for third place, but following close behind are a fat blond tart, two bears, a philosopher, a police constable, a double glazing salesman and a Belgian balloonist. Finally, bringing up the rear but gaining fast is a Detective Inspector, a police horse, a Canadian Mountie and

a man who does farmyard impressions. Over to you Maurice.”

“Many thanks,” said Stain. “And it’s back to you John.”

“Lovely,” said Follicle. “Well, a quite remarkable thing has just happened: Beggar’s Banquet has refused the next jump. She’s veered off the track, over the rail and is taking a short cut straight for the winning post, and the rest of the field are following her! Well, this is causing quite a rumpus, and the question everybody’s asking here is: is this cheating - Maurice?”

“Thank you, John,” said Stain. “As I’m sure you’re aware, this is a completely unprecedented situation. Nevertheless, I’ve just had word from race officials who say that due to an oversight there isn’t actually anything in the rule book which prohibits this tactic. Back to you John.”

“Thanks Maurice,” said Follicle. “Tension is mounting now as they approach the finish line. Beggar’s Banquet is clearly beginning to tire, and Matilda is racing up to snatch the lead. But The Loch Ness Monster seems to be putting on a bit of a spurt and is offering a serious challenge! It’s a two horse race now, not much in it at all. With the winning post almost upon them it’s going to be a photo finish and... Oh! Matilda stops to smile at the camera and The Loch Ness Monster wins by a neck! Over to you Maurice.”

“Back to you John.”

“Well there you have it,” Whispering John Follicle said as he reached out for his sandwich before it had chance to run away. “What a thrilling race it’s been. And the final placings are: The Loch Ness Monster first, Matilda Second, and a drunken philosopher in third place.”

“I came third!” Longtower shouted excitedly as he jumped up and down on the spot. “I came third! I came third! Do I get a prize?”

“Right, you’re all nicked,” said Detective Inspector Crump once he’d got his breath back. “Sergeant Pinewood! I want everyone’s name and address, even the horses’.”

PC Gibbon made his way through the general confusion towards Inspector Crump. Crump’s eyes narrowed.

“Gibbon, you traitor!” the Inspector snarled. “You turncoat! You quisling!”

“Somehow I get the impression that you’re not at all happy with me,” Gibbon said.

“You’re the last person I expected to go over to the opposition,” Crump said angrily. “You’ll hang for this constable. Or you’ll be shot. Either way, rest assured that whatever fate does befall you, it will be extremely nasty.”

“But I believe the Bears are innocent sir,” said Gibbon. “In fact, they’ve very nice people. I’ve spent some time with them now, and not once have they tried to bite my head off.”

“They said that Vlad the Impaler was nice to his mother,” was Inspector Crump’s bitter reply. “You’ve been mesmerised by these people, Gibbon. They’re dangerous. They’re vicious. The sooner they get eaten by a crocodile, the better.”

The Inspector whipped out his handcuffs and strode determinedly towards Mummy Bear as she was being helped down from the saddle. Suddenly the doors of a nearby horsebox burst open. Crump took a pace backwards in surprise as an incredibly old man leapt out wearing a long red robe and a wig. He spun around, then pointed a loaded gavel at them and said that his name was...

“Justice Frog! Guardian of law and order, dab hand with a Black and Decker strimmer and generally hip and groovy guy, even if I do say so myself.” He gestured to a tall brunette girl who stood at his side. “And this is my friend Sharon,” he said. “A remarkable woman, whose many talents include the extraordinary ability to crack open coconuts with her thighs. I just thought I’d mention that. Right, so what’s going down, man?”

“I’m about to make an arrest,” Inspector Crump said, accompanying his words with an assortment of scowls and grimaces.

Justice Frog reached out and laid a restraining hand on the Inspector’s arm. “Chill out dude,” he said. “There’s been a change of plan. The Loch Ness monster has won the Grand National, which means two things. Firstly, I’ve won a heap of cash

from Dave 'All Bets Taken, No Questions Asked' McFelon. Secondly, the Bears can go free."

"Hurrah!" shouted Nigel.

Inspector Crump's face fell. He rubbed a hand over his tired eyes. "Oh come on, is this really fair?" he asked. "I've come all this way, I've followed up every clue, I've chased these people up and down the country and now that I've caught them you're telling me that I can't arrest them. What kind of justice is that?"

It was time for Nigel to step forward dramatically. "If you must arrest someone," he announced, "then arrest her!" He pointed at Goldilocks. "She's the one responsible for the murders." Pinewood and Gibbon sprang into action. They grabbed Goldilocks and dragged her before the judge.

"Here we go then. Court in session!" bellowed Justice Frog gleefully. He banged his gavel twice against the side of the horsebox. "We have heard all the evidence," he said gravely. "Or at least, let's assume that we have. I have no option but to find you guilty of first degree murder."

"That's ridiculous!" said Goldilocks.

"All right then, second degree murder," said Justice Frog.

"She is innocent!" proclaimed a tall, dark stranger with a long nose as he stepped into the fray.

"And who might you be, tall dark stranger with a long nose?" Justice Frog demanded.

“My name is B.B. Woolfe,” the stranger said. “And I am this young girl’s uncle. I can personally vouch for her honesty.”

The assembled crowd drew a sharp intake of breath.

“I assure you that Goldilocks is a sweet and innocent child who has hardly ever killed anyone,” said Woolfe. “And even if she did kill those two policemen in cold blood, I’m sure it was only an accident.”

“They’re both in this together!” said Nigel. “They want to build a sheep refuge on the site of our house. The little fat girl was sent to burn it down, but the two policemen disturbed her, so she killed them.”

“Okay, so that puts you both in the frame,” said Justice Frog. “Any advance on third degree murder anyone?”

“Just hold it right there!” said another voice. Justice Frog sighed audibly. Duncan and Clive, the two policemen from Chapter One, suddenly jumped out of a nearby picnic hamper. “It’s all right, we’re not dead at all,” said Duncan and Clive together. “We’re specially trained stunt policemen.”

“Is anybody following any of this?” asked the judge.

“Well I’m glad that’s all sorted out then,” said Woolfe as he rubbed his hands together. “Right, well if nobody’s got any further questions, we’ll be

off. Come along Goldy, my dear.” He started to go, but Justice Frog stopped him.

“Hang on, bum face,” the judge said. “You’re not getting away with it that easily. You are hereby charged with the heinous crime of providing this story with a fucking stupid plot. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty!” Goldilocks and her uncle cried together.

“Guilty!” cried Justice Frog on his own. “I sentence you both to be trampled to death by a herd of wildebeest. Sentence to be carried out forthwith. Take them away constable.”

Mummy and Daddy Bear watched in stunned silence as the felons were taken away. At last their nightmare was over. Somehow they had to put all this behind them and try to carry on with their lives. They glanced at each other and both of them knew that whatever happened now, things could never be quite the same again.

Justice Frog slipped his gavel back into his pocket. He smiled and took two paces towards Daddy Bear. “Congratulations,” he said as he shook his paw firmly. “We must do lunch sometime.”

Then he kissed Mummy Bear, patted Nessie on the nose, and swaggered off to collect his winnings.

EPILOGUE

A Learned Judge Gives His Verdict...

“Hello, Justice Frog here: grand funkmaster and thoroughly cool dude. During my many, many years as a high court judge and part time spot-welder, I have had to preside over some terrible cases; cases involving kidnappery, murder and the gross maltreatment of small furry animals. Sadly, many of these cases were made all the more harrowing by the fact that they centred on members of my own family.

“And yet, I cannot honestly say that I’ve ever heard anything quite as remarkable as the story that has been told here. It has been a tale of great courage, incredible perseverance and staggering quantities of baked beans. But above all else, it has been a story in which justice has been done; a story, if you like, with a happy ending.

“Not that there was a happy outcome for everyone involved. Oh no. Certainly not for the villains of the piece, who met with a very nasty end. Nor was there a happy ending for the Bear family: shortly after their ordeal, Mr. and Mrs. Bear were divorced and Nigel was put into the custody of a group of train spotters. Fame and fortune didn’t last long for Marmaduke the horse, and he can now be found cleaning the toilets at King’s Cross. Mary found himself a job as a Tupperware consultant, Lionel Crump was demoted to the post of cleaning lady, and Longtower the philosopher was struck by a meteorite.

Goldilocks and the Free Bears

“But for myself, at least, there is a happy ending. I now live in the Caribbean where I’ve just been named The Grooviest Person In Jamaica for the fifth year running. Bye bye for now. Missing you already.”