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The Indie Writers' Digest



*Edited and published by British Indie Writer
Bryony Petersen*

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FOREWORD BY THE EDITOR



This is the third issue of the retitled reboot of my free online magazine, and I could not be prouder of how it is growing, blossoming and emerging as a promotional tool for other independent writers and creatives.

When I launched my online magazine three or four years ago now, it was out of a sense of injustice and frustration at how enormous the task of promoting yourself and your writing was for every independent writer with a burning ambition to become a respected published author. Not, by the way, it is entirely confined to independent writers – I believe this is something traditionally published writers are now finding a struggle.

So, to see the increasing interest in the magazine is awe-inspiring and makes me truly grateful for what I started and set out to do.

In this issue, I want to just touch on the importance of your writing “brand”. You may not realise it, but from the very first post on social media, you are beginning to build an image and an idea of the kind of writer and person you are.

I am truly grateful for everyone who has, is and continues to support, follow, comment or interact with me on any and all of my social platforms. I make a point of always being honest and authentic in everything I put out on my social platforms. It is my belief anything less can very easily come back to bite you back if you are less than straight with the audience and readership you are trying to build.

I want to build trust in what I am trying to do and convey. I don't believe you can build trust if you don't prove yourself to be worthy of that trust.

Following on with this theme, I make a point of supporting every writer I connect with, regardless of whether they are traditionally published or self-publish. In my eyes, everyone is unique, and I want to celebrate our uniqueness, our personal perspectives and experiences, culminating in the stories imaginations conjure or the peculiar angle of a non-fictional stance.

I also make a point of trying to find positive, kind or respectful words of support. I don't believe it is at all respectful to point out another writer's mistakes or misunderstandings. It isn't kind, and I think it says more about the person issuing the correction in such a public manner.

Finally, I want to make a point about all the indie writers featured in issues of the Digest.

Readers and contributors will note the ISSN number in the top right corner of each issue, which donates that this imprint, and any future imprints bearing any subsequent name-change, are an officially registered magazine with the British Library within the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, it is not possible to protect individual copyright. However, the ISSN number does mean that anyone who wishes to use the contents of any issue of the imprint or any part thereof must correctly reference and cite their source, and officially recognise the writer, as appropriate. This is how it was explained to me by the British Library. I have no information as to whether anyone using any part of the magazine content should, ought or could have a duty to recompense the original writer for using their original material.

In the previous issue of the Digest, in the introduction to Andrew Berger, there was a minor typo error. Please accept my sincere apologies for this oversight. Although I do try my very best, as on this rare occasion, a minor error sneaks through, and proof if you needed it I am human, and fallable.

This issue kicks off with a short interview with British Indie writer Mark Robinson.

INTRODUCING THE INTERVIEW WITH MARK ROBINSON

#“Ever realized how fucking surreal reading a book actually is? You stare at marked slices of trees for hours on end, hallucinating vividly.”Katie Oldham.

Writers are readers. It's the inherent magic in being transported to other worlds, without leaving the comfort of your own chair, which propels us to pick up a pen, or bash away at the keyboard, to spin our own yarns. For some, it's a compulsion. Others, its fun; a free form of escapism. And, yet others, it's a misguided means of making money. Beware of the latter.

I fall under the first and second categories; when I get a great idea, I need to record it. It's also been my hobby since I was in my late teens. I enjoy escaping in the same way I love reading, watching TV and movies. And, I'm not alone. There's a whole indie writing scene where part-time writers — I hesitate to say hobby-writers, as the term suggests they're not serious — share their words with like-minded readers.

Like indie music (traditionally, bands and artists not signed to major record labels), it has followers and detractors. Fans like the sense that they have discovered music that is outside the mainstream, while critics see them as scruffy wannabes not good enough to bother the charts. Some of these indie bands get successful and transition to the big time. Others fizzle out, break up, burn out. But, it's not always a means to an end. Like those bands who shun the limelight and selling out, there are indie writers who don't have time for the machine, that are happy getting published by small presses (or self-publishing). I'm one of those. And I've gotten to know a fair few in the years I've been active.

Over on Substack, I host an indie writer Q&A series — Behind the Screams — where I shine a light on my fellow indie writers, delving behind the scenes of how and why they do what they do. Writing's a solitary — and quite closed off — endeavour. I wanted to open it up, share the wealth of knowledge gleamed from our combined experiences and also get to know those that are doing what I love. That was the impetus behind it: ask a fellow writer to take you through the process of writing, pitching and publishing their work.

Since last March, I've interviewed over forty writers who dabble mainly in genre fiction: horror, thriller, crime, fantasy, and science-fiction. What started as a distraction from writing and editing a couple of novellas and a genuine eagerness to get to know how my fellow indie writers write, has blossomed into a neat collection of interviews with some of the nicest people I've been fortunate enough to meet online. It's nothing unique, just twelve questions I want to know the answers to when I pick up a book I can't get enough of and need to know more about the person who wrote it. I also wanted it to be a quick reference guide to those new writers just starting out. What tips can seasoned writers pass down about how and why they write? How can they get better? Where do writers get their ideas? How do you approach an indie press or even start self-publishing? And, their recommendations on other writers to check out.

When there's a lull in takers, I branch out by writing articles about movies that almost didn't get made — *An Alternative History of the Movies* — and going behind the scenes of my own work. It also doubles as a newsletter so I can share what I'm up to and what writing is being published. Right now, I'm working with the editor of RDG Books Press (Rod Gilley) getting my fifth novella — *Doll Parts* — ready for publication and a short story poised for an appearance in an upcoming horror anthology. I'm also splitting my time between writing three novellas (one thriller, one crime and one horror) which I aim to start subbing to indie presses next year.

If you're interested in getting to know other writers or even being featured yourself, head on over to Substack and say hello.

Here's a thumbnail biography:

Hailing from the UK, Mark Robinson writes crime, horror, and spec thrillers. His short stories have appeared in over thirty publications, online and in print, over the last twenty-five years — including appearances in five anthologies, the most recent *Lurk*, edited by H. Dair Brown, released through Disturb Ink Books in August 2024.

He is also the author of four novellas since 2022: *Dead Close* and *Always Read the Label* (through *Raven Tale Publishing*); *Get Free* (book #40 in the *Rewind or Die* series from

Unnerving Press); and *You Don't Have to do This* (through *Bound in Darkness Press*) with his fifth, *Doll Parts*, forthcoming from *RDG Books Press* this fall.

In addition to writing, Mark is also the host of the Substack indie writer Q&A series, *Behind the Screams*, where he interviews fellow writers and helps boost their work.

For more information, search for him on socials @themarkrob.

CAT BY KEITH LAWSON © 2022

(as in Burglar)

An unfortunate series of events

CAT by Keith Lawson © 2022



CAT (as in Burglar)

Part One

There's a kind of pleasure, a private satisfaction, in being in someone's home without their knowledge. Especially if they are also in the home. To creep about and investigate while they sleep innocently in their beds. I can stand and watch them. Look for the REM movements of the eyes. Anticipate whether they are heavy or light sleepers, likely to wake and disturb me in my intrusion. Empty houses are also fun. More time to look around, snoop. Not just find the money but also the diaries, the secrets. I once found a...

But I digress. I am an expert. Been doing this since a kid, when I used to break into houses to steal food. [If it's alright for Peter Rabbit (loved by millions) then what was the harm?] Look for an open window, just enough for my child frame to squeeze through. A quick rummage round the kitchen and out. Eventually I worked up. Learned how to pick locks. Easy to get a kit on the internet. No questions asked. All the right tools and practice locks. Found I was a natural. Get a kit of rakes, feeler picks, warded picks and a tension wrench. Would have loved the lock pick gun but those are not so easy to obtain if not in the trade.

Cash is good. Can't go wrong with cash. Untraceable. Have to have contacts to move credit cards or documents such as passports. Good money for those but you have someone who can finger you if they get caught, they might plea bargain for a softer sentence by giving you up. Tempting to use now Contactless is possible but stores have security cameras and it's a risk I don't want to take. For a burglar, I am particularly risk-averse. I don't do this for the adrenaline, (but of course it comes); I need money so I am not made homeless. That is my motivation.

The nice thing about burglary is the lack of worry over CCTV. You can wear a full balaclava when burgling. Not something you can wear doing an ATM with stolen cards – too obvious and it draws attention from the great British public. Also, these days, cameras in every street. Either on poles or filming outwards from shops. No. Housebreaking is much easier. Even if an alarm, if you are quick, in and out, and have marked the escape routes, you won't have a problem. The police aren't speedy to respond – they're happy to turn up the following morning, take a report so the house owner can file an insurance claim. Yes. It's a good life. Until you rob the wrong person....

My methodology is not to rob working class homes. Those are my people. They don't have much to start with and, proportionately, £10 is a lot to them from their earnings. Nor do the rich. They can afford home security and when I did try a few, found they are not cash people usually, having several credit cards. Best targets are the middle class. They like a bit of cash around plus they own anonymous things I can sell at Boot Sales, such as CDs, DVDs. Just don't take anything too specialist that stands out on a Boot Sale table – stick to the popular taste.

Can take from their cocktail cabinet's bottles for my home consumption. Chance of marijuana, especially if teenagers live at home. Take only enough to be deemed "personal use" as, if stopped and searched (never happened to me, but then I'm not black), that would likely just be a "caution".

But if I found coke, I'd spread it around. No coke user would then report me to the police with the chance they would actually visit and inspect for evidence. Otherwise, never leave the property in a mess. The shock of being burgled is enough but making a mess as well is not my standard.

Sorry, let me backtrack. The pleasure I had looking at sleeping people was not obscene. No. It was thinking how normal for some people this was, how peaceful their lives. I rarely slept in a bed as a child; it would be floor or sofa. I would think "if only". If only I'd been born into a normal family.

Anyway, back to what I was saying. Until you rob the wrong person.

I do have a job. I do leaflet drops for Take Aways. My prime client is the Taj Mahal, but I also do rounds for the Pizza Parlour, the Peking Palace and Jonny's Burgers. That enables me to check out targets as well as a bit more cash (but it's not well paid and the clients don't like multi-delivery of leaflets as they feel it's a competition for business, so no economy of scale). I wear gloves when delivering. If asked I can say "letter boxes are a bit hard on the hands", but no one has asked yet. Gloves = no fingerprints. I have a tiny camera, the sort cyclists like on their helmets, that records the access to the property and I check on Google maps on my laptop when I get home. Look for detail, look for escape routes. I've thought this out. Should I ever get investigated as a suspect and they look at my computer: "Checking my routes for the leaflets. Save shoe leather if I work out the best way round. Saves time too."

What can change on Google is the street view. While they update the sky view by satellite, they've cut back on camera cars roaming our highways and byways. Anyway, they couldn't go down private roads, so a physical visit under the pretence of leaflet dropping is necessary. And those "No junk mail" notices? I just ignore them, as do all the other leaflet droppers. We have to get rid of our leaflets to houses and if I've taken the trouble to walk down your drive, you're going to get one of my leaflets whatever. Maybe you'll be grateful anyway; the day you fancy a curry and a leaflet comes through the letterbox. One extra bonus, if the letterbox noise or the leaflet through it reveals a dog in the house, I'll give it a miss.

The day things went wrong for me I was doing a nice little cul-de-sac, a circle of detached 3/4-bedroom houses. Not a real dead end for a pedestrian as there was an alley through to another road where I stashed my bike behind a hedge. Just two streetlights to illuminate the paths. Cars on the drives were Audi, BMW and Mercedes, all indications of promising properties. 2 o'clock in the morning, I've waited and listened. No sounds, no barking dogs, no radios or TV. No lights on indoors, check the bathroom window especially. Any motion detection lights, I'd found those that were openly placed and if one went on, well, all the people are in bed or, if one awake, they'd think cat or fox, not burglar. Felt the car bonnets (back of hand obviously) – all cold, no one has just got home. It's a good time; people can be in their deepest sleep.

Started at the first house on the left. That went well. Cleaned out a wallet and a purse, bottle of Glenfiddich and one of Bombay Sapphire gin, both nearly full. I left the bottles on the end of the drive to pick up later – don't want glass chinking during the work..

Second house. They'd left keys in the door but turned at 90 degrees. Means I couldn't pick those locks. Move on, don't waste time and effort. My method is to do a small number of houses in the quickest

possible time and get off home. Risks increase exponentially if one lingers.

Third house, I hit the jackpot. Kitchen door was easy. I puffed in some graphite filings to smooth the lock mechanism, slipped in my two tools (one holds the tumblers once the other turns them until all in the open position) and used the wrench to turn as if a key were in. I like modern doors; unlike wooden doors, they rarely have a bolt as well as a lock. Open the door and scan the kitchen for hazards before stepping in. No animal food bowls on the floor to indicate pets. NB sometimes I'd check the bins to see what they threw out. Animal feed was a giveaway to what might be waiting inside. Listen - no sounds. Moonlight coming through the windows is not enough so I switch on my low light torch, it's a good one. It has three strengths of beams and will also strobe. The last is good should I be seen or chased as I can point it behind me as I run and it's disorientating for the citizen or law officer.

The layout of the ground floor was familiar to me as the builder had used the same architect as others I had turned over and there was very little variance between these houses, people just added a conservatory. In the hallway, I could see a wallet on a side table, which gave me nearly £100. What I call "a good start". The Wi-Fi router and main phone connection in was accessible so I disabled those by unplugging. Just a precaution against internal Wi-Fi cameras.

Check the lounge and start with the mantelpiece. Sometimes, people leave cash there, an intention to buy something, pay the gardener cash in hand in the morning, those sort of things. Not today though. I like to check the bookcases to see what the householders' preferred reading matter is. Gives me an idea of what sort of person I am robbing. Nothing highbrow here. Dominance of crime thrillers and tacky romance novels. Not what I usually find in these pricey homes. They'd typically be some highbrow stuff and non-fiction to impress visitors. If I find "50 Shades of Grey", I am tempted to look at the woman in the house, curious about her sexual preferences. Is it all in her head or will I find sex toys in the cupboard? Adds a little frisson to the adventure.

Sorry, again going away from the story.

In the study, a small room with all the signs of being a home office. A desk in front of the window with a computer and a printer. A filing cabinet to the side. Quick glance round, not expecting much but, wanting to try the desk drawers I moved the chair out of the way and spotted there was a gym bag under the desk in the knee-hole. Unusual, I thought. So I pulled it out and opened it. Extra jackpot! It was stuffed to bursting with rolls of used notes held together with elastic bands. Yes, not just a layer over something else but completely full of cash and nothing else. Gave me pause to think: Could this be to pay a ransom? Quick look round, photos of two adults only, no kids and I could hear, from the bottom of the stairs, two snorers, one bass and one soprano, so both at home. Then this must be a guy who does "cash in hand" and "don't tell the taxman". A business card in his wallet. He owns a taxi firm – Medway Taxis. Good cash business. Cream some off the top. Transferred the cash to my backpack.

Well, thank you very much, sir. Saved me doing the rest of the houses in the cul-de-sac. So excited I forgot to go back for the whiskey and gin.

Outside was clear, no insomniacs or late dog walkers in the wee hours. I went through the alley, collected my bike from behind the hedge and pedalled home, avoiding the shopping street with its cameras, keeping to back roads. A rare chance of police patrol cars and I'd see them before they saw me.

Got home safely and in high spirits.

Home is a Council flat on an estate. A one bed with kitchenette and lounge, sparsely furnished from skip-diving and charity shops. Luxuries are a washing machine (refurbished single tub, second-hand), a portable telly, and my laptop (also refurbished). The cooker had been in the flat for as long as I could remember and I had added a small microwave, which I mostly used. When mum left and eventually I realised she wasn't coming back, I was worried for a while a neighbour might tip off the council and have me evicted. That it never happened is probably down to nobody here wanted the council round; some were subletting from the authorised tenants, others had lodgers, and I guess some were pleased that I was no trouble and it was better than mum with her constant visitors.

Part of my routine, post night outings, is to strip off 100% and it all goes in the wash, except the trainers, which get a wipe over and a spray with anti-bacterial cleanser. I'd read about a Frenchman, Edmond Locard who said "*every crime scene leaves something on the criminal and every criminal leaves something at the crime scene*," or words to that effect. I never bought expensive gear, especially trainers, always common brands, usually from Primark and sometimes from JJB Sports. Be like hundreds of other people, blend in. Any sole wear on the trainers that could mark them out to a match at one of my burglaries had I left a footprint, went in the shoe bank bin behind the shops. Let them be found on some other poor sod.

I tipped the money out on the coffee table. Lots of large denomination notes. I should have done this earlier but thought the risk low; I checked for any tracking devices, just in case. I had left the bag behind for that possible reason but I had watched enough telly to know that sometimes a tracker can be placed between notes. Didn't find anything. All fitted with the "cash-in-hand" tax fiddler and I was well made up with myself. This little mountain of cash mesmerised me; I'd never seen so much money at one time. Pinched myself to see if I was dreaming. Ouch!

Notes were all used. This would keep me going for several months or longer if I didn't get carried away. I'd miss the adrenaline (yes, it was a bit of a buzz) but I wouldn't miss the night work. I might treat myself to a holiday, nothing grand, a couple of weeks in Bournemouth in a B&B. Too excited to sleep, I made a pot of tea and just lay on the battered sofa looking at the pile of money. 6 a.m. came round and I turned on the telly for the breakfast news, especially the regional, and, in between the celebrity sofa guff about their latest project, I muted the sound and listened to the local radio station. Not a word about my crime. Burglaries don't make the News but I wondered if, this time, it might.

At 9 o'clock, TV breakfast news ended, so I switched my laptop on and logged in to the local network group. Checked regularly and nothing came up. At midday, I went down to the corner shop and bought the local rag. Absolutely silent. Best crime ever: knock off a tax fiddler and he couldn't call the police. As for the first householder, the police would have shrugged it off as kids, given him a crime notice for his insurers and that was the end of it. I'd even had some of burglaries claimed by other thieves who the cops had persuaded to "own" them in return for consideration when sentencing – it helped clear up the crime rates and, being cash robberies, there was no property to be returned to the householder.

For now, I hid the cash around my flat, needing several hiding places seeing as there was so much. I knew

to be careful. Don't go flashing the cash, buying rounds in the pub, treating myself to bling jewellery. Be the same old low income, leaflet-delivering guy everyone knew. Don't draw attention to myself.

A week passed and I did the next leaflet drop for the Indian then said I had to go away for a while as my uncle down south was seriously ill and had no one to look after him. They understood and said they'd do it themselves till I came back as I was such a good worker. If only they knew my motive for covering such large areas frequently.

I packed basics. Rather than carry a large suitcase, I could buy changes of clothes at my destination. I was sure Bournemouth would have a Primark. Mostly, I put a few stacks of cash under my items so I could have a good time where no one knew me. I caught a bus to the train station, a nice little ride where I gazed at the shops and offices through the bus window. Bye. Bye. You won't be seeing me for a while. Then I was jerked out of my revelry by the driver.

"You'll have to get out here. They're not letting me through."

We passengers disembarked to walk the last hundred yards to the rail station. That was when I remembered where I knew Medway Taxis from. It was the building opposite the station, with a taxi rank. It was the building that had been on fire and was receiving gallons of water courtesy of the Fire Service. Looked a total wreck. Police had closed the road to traffic. I joined the gawpers at the police tape and listened to various conversations.

"It started early this morning."

"Heard a copper say it was arson."

"Know the owner. Probably did it for the insurance."

"Remember him from way back. When he ran with the Morrison gang."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer bloke."

I had to take this all in. Was it just a coincidence? Or was it related, somehow, to my success at his house? I needed to think and I needed research. The greasy spoon cafe down the road was doing All Day Breakfast so I popped in. The conversations there were along the same lines. Worse. Some of the customers here were taxi drivers.

"Reckon he crossed the wrong crowd."

"We all know he was fronting for the Morrisons. Doing their money laundering."

"Shush. You know what will happen to you if you go round saying these things."

"Yeah. You got medical insurance? You'll need it with your big mouth."

SHIT!!!! Not a tax fiddler. A money launderer. For the local mob. The mob who broke legs for fun. I'd lost my appetite for the breakfast and for the holiday and headed back to my flat to think more.

Now, I have contacts in the "underworld". I like referring to the sad bag of pickpockets, shoplifters, muggers as "underworld". It adds a bit of glamour to these dregs of society if I am to mix with them. I don't really like these people but I know them. They drink at my local – The Highwayman, which we

refer to as The Mugger, in the recent trend for breweries to rename their pubs but more as a protest against the prices. The locals are on the fringe of the big, bad boys - heavies like the Morrisons. The leg breakers, arsonists, drug-dealers, white slavers aka The Morrisons. People you do not want to cross. You don't end up in motorway bridges anymore, purely because we're not building new motorways. No. You end up off a pier or deep in a forest. Fingers missing. Teeth smashed out. Head pulped. Just thinking about, I let a little bit of pee out.

Medway Taxis owner – name unknown but perhaps Medway – must not have been able to replace the bag of money quick enough. It was in the high thousands. First warning to him – burn his place of business down. Next warning might involve pliers, cables and a car battery. Morrisons were not shy and their chief torturer, Billy The Prod Murphy, actually enjoyed his work, so it was rumoured.

My dilemma: do I find a way to return the money via Medway, get him off the hook and no one looking for me? Or do I keep the biggest haul of my life and move away for a new life, where I can't be found? I could burgle for a year and not collect this much. I regretted leaving the Glenfiddich – a stiff drink would not go amiss; I headed to the Highwayman.

The Highwayman is a run-down public house serving my neighbourhood. To check the last time it was decorated one would need to bring in archaeologists. Nicotine still stuck to the walls and ceiling despite the ban of indoor smoking being years old. The jukebox did not have any record more recent than the 80s, blunt darts were available if one fancied a chance at the worm-eaten dartboard, but the pool table was not in bad nick if one avoided the warped cues and found a straight one. It was a drinkers' pub and a refuge.

Inside, were the usual reprobates. Dinky Thompson, car thief, my age, nursing a pint of Guinness, in the corner. Wilma, local slag, not starting work until afternoon, short skirt riding up to reveal the cellulite. Johnny and Annie, the shoplifting Bonny and Clyde as they saw themselves, rather than two sad gits doing the easy stuff. I nodded to them as I walked to the counter where Big Willy Donovan waited to serve me. Big Willy was 6' 4" and weighed as much as silverback gorilla. No one was sure whether Big Willy was due to his size and forename being William. Or whether his equipment was in scale to his overall dimensions. I was about to order a double scotch when I realised in time, this was out of character to me and would draw attention. Quickly I changed the words tumbling from my mouth to "pint of lager and cheese and onion, please, Bill." Close call. That showed how rattled I was.

Pint and crisps in hands, I wandered over to where Fingers Malloy sat. Fingers is about the only one here I actually like. He taught me how to play chess and I sometimes feel like confiding in him, he has that trustworthy priest vibe about him. Then again, Fingers is a pickpocket. Does crowds. Any event. Loves Trafalgar Square, protest marches, London Underground in rush hour. Fingers is also pretty good at ringing the changes – looking different so he is not easily noticeable on CCTV, which is pretty much everywhere in the Smoke now. NB I wondered why London was also known as The Smoke until an old boy told me of the days of pea-soupers before the Clean Air Act. I looked it up on the internet. It was awful back then but the name has stuck among certain members of society who still pine for the old days.

Straightening up the beer mats (I hated them just thrown down and not all facing the right way), I struck up a conversation.

“Hi, Fingers. How's it going?”

“Hi, Marty. Bit quiet at the moment. Missed Chelsea Flower Show this year. Down with flu.”

“That's tough..... I heard Medway Taxis was burned down.”

“Saw it on the news just now.”

I turned round to see the TV over the bar was actually on the News.

“Yeah. Me too. Don't know anyone working there.”

“Know a couple of fellas. They give me lifts from time. Avoid buses, see. Cameras on them now.”

“Good thinking.”

Too soon for the rumour mill. I'd have to be patient, bide my time, watch my step.

“Fingers?”

“Yeah?”

“Would you teach me how to lift a wallet?”

“Why you want to do that?”

“Handy to have a trade to fall back on. Leaflet dropping doesn't pay that well. If it wasn't for the free Baltis I'd pack it in.”

“Been doing this since I was a kid. Needs lots of practice and nerve. Ain't like that scene in Oliver 'got to pick a pocket or two'. Feel my hands.”

A bit queer here, but I did take Fingers' hands in mine. They were so smooth. Not soft, but no calluses, scars, roughness. Nails perfectly manicured short. My eyebrows rose in question.

“Can't afford to snag when dipping. Light touch. Have to watch my hands. Gloves to protect when doing any chores. Lots of lotion. Wilma gives me the manicures. I bet you didn't know she was good at that.”

“No. We've only talked once. When she offered me a half price blowjob seeing as I was local.”

“You might enjoy that. She takes her dentures out. Completely new sensation.”

Fingers laughed so much he started to choke and, as his glass was empty, he reached for mine and took a swallow of my lager. I had a job keeping the bit I had drunk down. Wilma waved to us, as if she had heard the conversation.

What Fingers had said about Oliver did give me an idea, though. I was pretty deft with the lock-picking tools, sensitive to the sensation of resistance of tumblers and when one moved. If I took care of my hands perhaps I could dip. I'd practice with a jacket over the back of a chair. An embryo of an idea was forming. If I could lift some car keys, I could slip the money into the boot. I wouldn't go back to the house – too risky. Mr Taxis might have installed security systems or got a Rottweiler since, not so much for a burglar returning but to warn of a visit from any of the Morrison thugs. I decided to give the money back. I was doing ok with my cash/cd/dvd/booze heists and keeping all my fingers, teeth and good looks. On balance, being a complete human outweighed being a rich one.

Yes. Straight back to the flat and start practising. Time was of the essence.

Well, this is fuckin' hard. I'd draped a jacket (part of my suit for interviews, weddings and funerals, thankfully never needed for court appearances) over a dining chair and put items in the pockets. As this was chair height, I had to go in on my knees, which affected my balance. Side pockets had flaps, so it was lift and dip. Bloody hard. I started to admire Fingers more for earning a living this way. I'd seen stage pickpockets on the TV and they took wallets, watches etc. with so much ease. I'd never master this in a week. Did I have a Plan B?

After a pot of tea and much gazing out of the window, I did. I'd need a middle man. Not Mr Medway Taxis but someone connected to the Morrisons. If I can find a way to lift their car keys, ideally by breaking into their house, getting the keys and leaving the money in the boot, return the keys and disappear into the night. Who though?

Getting hungry, so I went to the Taj, told them uncle had made a full recovery and I'd be working on Friday. Meanwhile, can I have a Balti? While waiting, my eyes fell upon the notice board. Not something I had perused before, but this time I was drawn to a tacked flyer for Medway Taxis and a dispenser of business cards. Light-bulb moment. I'll put a card in with the cash – big arrow, as it were, to the origins.

Taking several cards and my curry, I went back to my flat. Actually, mum's flat but she'd buggered off years ago and I continued to pay the rent in her name and no one from the Council was the wiser. I was raised by a single parent. Raised! I use the term loosely. Mum had a habit to feed and I had lots of “uncles” coming to the flat. That was when I cleared off to the local library, which proved my sanctuary. Lovely, warm place and books about everything, I'd spend hours there. I only have to have a sniff of beeswax polish and I am there, mentally, in an instant. The female librarians were lovely people and so keen to help me find books. The head librarian was a Captain Mainwaring type, fussy little man, thin moustache, and self-important, strutting about. He would frown at me if he saw me there for hours. I had more education at the library than I got at school. I particularly liked Raffles (author: E. W. Hornung) and a guy known as Black shirt (author: Bruce Graeme), both burglars. The Saint (author: Leslie Charteris) was another hero. These were the most exciting role models.

I started housebreaking in order to eat. Mum would forget to buy groceries or would not have money. Houses had fridges and pantries and I'd fill myself. After a while, when I had first seen the tenners on the hall table, probably to pay the milkman or newspapers, I lifted them so I could buy a hot meal. I felt guilty for a time. Taking food because I was hungry did not seem wrong – people had plenty and I had nothing through no fault of my own. Money seemed so wrong but once I had done it, I felt I was redirecting from the taxman, cutting out the middle-men from Benefits and taking direct, saving all that admin. Easy to justify things when you're at the bottom. It's called surviving.

In the evening, I popped down The Highwayman for a pint and game of pool. The usuals were there, minus one or two in custody. I'd won two games off Dinky when Mickey the Hammer walked in. Mickey was a sort of local legend, though not in a good way. I'd first known him as the school bully. He was 3 years ahead of me, so I was able to keep out of his way most of the time. Eventually, he was expelled for hitting a teacher. Not missed by anyone. Not the brightest of pond life, but the Morrisons had given him employment. He was “the Hammer” because that was how he broke kneecaps for them.

Mickey brought his beer and whiskey chaser over to the pool table.

“Hello, Dinky. Hello, punk.”

“Mickey.”

“Mickey”.

“Who's up for a game?”

I was quicker than Dinky.

“Dinky is. I gotta go soon.”

Dinky gave me a stink eye.

The golden moment came, I couldn't have hoped for a better chance; Mickey took his coat off and draped it over a chair. I felt confident about pick pocketing a coat on a chair after the morning's practice. I let them get into their game before I casually felt outside the pockets to identify where his car keys were. In the poorly lit Highwayman, only the best light was over the table and both were concentrating on their game – Mickey to win, Dinky to lose but not be obvious about it. The keys were in my hand. Heart beating madly, I was sure everyone could hear it. Looking around, no one was giving any notice to me. I was quietly out of the pub then legged it back to the flat. I collected all the cash into a bin bag then legged it back to the pub. I knew Mickey's car – it was the only decent car on the street, being nearly new and not a banger.

Casually approaching, checking around. All clear. I used the key to open the boot rather than blip. Good, no alarm going off. The boot lid raised I was ready to drop the bin bag of money in when I realised the boot was already full. Wrapped in a plastic sheet, I could just make out the features of Mr Medway Taxis as I had seen his photo on the news. Oh shit! Oh, fuck! They'd topped him! I'd left it too long.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Think! Think! Think!

Running around in little circles, crying was not helping. Anyone could come out of The Highwayman at any moment. Mickey the Hammer could come out of The Highwayman at any moment and find me standing by the open boot of his car. Shut the boot. What else? The keys? I can't go back in with them. Leave them on the floor. Hope Mickey thinks he dropped them. Bugger off quick back to the flat.

No sleep this night, thinking about the Morrisons. They'd killed someone for losing their money. Sent out a message. No doubt they'd kill whoever took it. No one crossed the Morrisons, even the East European gangs steered clear. They'd grown up in the neighbourhood. Their dad had been a docker, not for the wage but for the perks; every cargo had something missing once it passed through the docks. He was a man of temper and fists and therefore a fearful reputation. He raised his sons to be hard bastards. Probably had photos of the Krays on the bedroom walls instead of pop stars and actors. Tommy and Tony were only 1 year different in ages but everyone thought they were twins, being such a likeness of each other and never seeing one without the other. As kids they'd walk into a shop, brazenly take what they wanted and dared anyone to intervene. As adults this became a Protection racket; shops paid up not to be molested. Their business had to be “services” and payrolls didn't move by armoured vehicle anymore.

They modelled on the Prohibition era of America - “give the public what they want”: prostitutes, drugs. They ran a club with illegal gambling upstairs. They scammed by setting up businesses, hiring an innocent front man, filling warehouses with stock which they paid for until they got a good credit rating, overstocking then empty the warehouse at night leaving the mug to take the hit. We didn't need Curry's Electrical Retailers in our neck of the woods – you placed your order at the pub and it got delivered, for cash, that evening. These were the people I had got involved with and now I was stuck with thousands of their money and no Plan C.

I must have dozed in the armchair because suddenly it was morning and my doorbell was ringing furiously. Wiping the sleep from my eyes, I stumbled my way to the door and opened without using the view-hole first, only being half awake.

“Hello, Marty,” said Mickey the Hammer. “Mind if I come in?”

“Can I change my underpants first?”

“Always the comedian,” he said, brushing past me and going into the main room.

Well, I nearly needed clean underwear and I can only presume failure to eat since yesterday lunchtime my bowels were already empty.

“Right, dimwit. Someone lifted my motor last night while I was in The Highwayman.”

Un-bloody-believable. I had placed the keys by the car door so Mickey would see them and some moron had come along and taken the car, with the body in the boot, for a joyride.

“I don't know anything.”

“Didn't see anyone acting suspicious when you left? No one hanging about?”

“Street was empty. I came straight home. Knackered. Long day. Got to go out soon. Deliver leaflets for the Taj.”

I suppose Mickey was used to people being flustered around him so didn't pay particular attention to me.

“I've got to find it and find it quick. No questions asked.” He reached in his pocket. I expected a hammer and wondering if I could run past him, when he pulled out a roll of notes. “Here's fifty,” peeling five tenners off the roll. “There's another fifty if you can find it. Tell no one about this and phone me on this number.”

He pulled my sleeve up and wrote a mobile number in biro on my forearm.

“Remember. Tell no one. Get out and find it for me.”

“You can rely on me, Mickey.”

He left and I really did need to use the loo.

Going on the round of leaflet dropping for the Taj gave me time to think.

Did Mickey suspect me and this was some sort of ruse?

Nah. He's not that bright.

Was he tasked with disposing of a body but took time out for a drink and a game of pool?

Yeah. He's that stupid.

But who's stupid enough to nick a newish motor in our 'hood? Newish means it's either a copper's car or a crook's car. Both reasons why it should be untouchable. Mickey should have been able to have left it unlocked, keys in ignition, Apple phone on the passenger seat, wallet on the window shelf, and come back hours later to find everything as it was.

It can only be Simple Willy.

Simple Willy is special educational needs. Can't read or write but somehow learned to drive. He's a natural racing driver. He's the only person who would not recognise the danger signs and could not pass up a lovely motor for a bit of a spin. Would he have looked in the boot? Maybe. Probably not. For SW it was all about the driving.

Not so simple, he'd have parked outside his house. He'll have hidden it up somewhere. An abandoned plot behind empty businesses, so he can go back and have another drive tonight. A routine until it runs out of fuel then he leaves it where it can be found and returned to the owner.

Did Mickey have a full tank? Likely, if he was supposed to go out of London to bury a corpse in a forest. I can go round to Simple's place, get the keys and get him to tell me where the car is, but that would place him at risk. Would Mickey worry, Simps had looked in the boot? Had I looked in the boot? Do the Morrison's know that Mickey has lost his car and the body of Mr Medway Taxis?

Reason suggests I help Mickey and no one mentions this ever again. If Tommy and Tony find out, they're not like the police – there are no rules for interrogation. They'd start with Mickey; he'll say he told me. They'd take me somewhere secluded for Prod to question me. I'd tell them everything and then I'd be a body in a boot, squeezed over to make room for Simple.

Only one solution. I'd have to nick the car back from Simple. He'd move on and forget all about it in a week. Mickey would be shitting himself because I'd tell him I couldn't find the car. I'd have to drive out to the woods, bury the body, drive somewhere else and torch the car. Morrisons might think Mickey was clever enough to torch his own car to defeat any forensics. Not my problem if they didn't. Time is of the essence. Rather an appropriate phrase that. It comes from legal documents where there is a commitment to a timescale for completion (read that in a library book).

The clock is ticking is also appropriate. I'd have to check out all possible locations for the car to be stashed. Walking distance from Simple's pad...or would he catch a bus? Hope for the former and work outwards from his house. Google maps is very useful and I could look for industrial sites where there is little activity, i.e. none of those little flags popping up to show where a business is located. If I find the car, I can break into Simple's and nick back the keys.

I might need new bike tyres after this. Been pedalling miles, cross-quartering the neighbourhood,

moving out further. Almost missed it. The chain on the gates was hanging as if locked but I noticed the padlock was missing. A small engineering business had been here once. Empty buildings with broken windows and a yard not visible from the road. Praying, I went through the gates after removing the chain and round the corner, invisible from the road, was Mickey's motor. Had I been a religious man, I'd have fallen to my knees to praise God and sacrificed a couple of the pigeons that were crapping on the bonnet. Pulling on gloves, I checked round the car, hoping Simple had left the keys, but no joy. Car was fully locked. A good sign was that there was no damage to the vehicle and the tyres were OK. If I get the keys I can drive away. I'd have to stake out Simple's place, break in when he went out, and hope to find the keys indoors. I had to get over there immediately, who knew when my chance would come.

I rode like a madman back to the 'hood, stopping only at a corner shop to get a Fanta, Mars bar and packet of crisps for sustenance.

I could observe Simple's place from wasteland down the road. I don't know how he got a mid-terrace to himself but I knew he lived on his own. I think it was a scheme called "independent living", aided by a charity. Nice he got help but a bit crap I had to manage by myself. Anyway, just needed him to go out on an errand to give me enough time. It occurred to me that his next outing might be this evening to joyride. I didn't have a plan for that. Could I mug Simple, wearing my balaclava? He's not a wimp and would probably kick my butt. Maybe it's time to believe in a merciful God and pray.

Plenty of time to think, sitting there, eating my Mars bar and glugging the Fanta. Perhaps the sugar helped but I had an idea should Simple not go out until evening. I'd let the air out of a tyre, knock on his door and ask if he had a bicycle pump. Then I ask to use the loo, locate the keys and pocket them. A bit more of a risk, as he might associate my visit with disappearing keys. I wanted to be totally invisible to anyone following the trail of the car and the body but risks have to be taken to avoid disasters. A reason why I was doing this on my own and not asking Dinky the car thief is that he cries when he breaks a fingernail, so I didn't want him knowing my secrets and meeting Prod or Mickey.

An hour later, I let the air out of my tyre and pushed my bike towards Simple's when he came out the front door and walked away from me. I looked at my flat tyre in disbelief but shook myself out of the pity, put the bike down and got my lock picks ready. It was a simple lock and I was inside in seconds. I didn't know how long I'd got so I ran round the rooms looking on surfaces for car keys. Not a bloody sign. Simple must have then in his pocket.

I walked to the front door to let myself out and there, on a hook, were the keys. I'd run straight past them. Open the door, stick head out, look up and down the street, all clear, out and away. I had to push my bike home as I didn't have a pump on me. I was knackered when I got in. All that cycling, then the adrenaline of the break-in, followed by a slog pushing the bike, which I immediately pumped up the tyre to be ready (note to self: take a pump with you in future). I had a shower to remove all the sweat and changed into clean, common clothes. Grabbed a protein bar and Red Bull into my backpack. Two bus rides to the abandoned building.

I approached nonchalantly and carefully, looking for signs of observation. Everything looked normal, but with a professional team (coppers or gang), it would. Car looked untouched except for even more

pigeon crap. I got in. Silence. Inserted the key. Prayed to goodness knows which deity. Started the engine and waited for the blues and twos as police swooped in and Jack Regan of The Sweeney saying "You're nicked, sonny." Didn't happen. Exhaled.

Drove extremely carefully. No speeding. Always signalling a turn. Holding my breath every time I saw a police car. Left Outer London behind and came to a forested area with no traffic. This would do for the body dump. Realisation: I hadn't a spade for digging. Would Mickey have one in the boot, perhaps under the body? I might have to use a tyre iron to scoop out a trench and cover the body with undergrowth. I was sweating and yet to do any exertion.

The forest was quiet except for rustling of the trees and a little night chorus from invisible birds. It was rather nice in any other circumstances. I need to get out of town more, I told myself.

Steeling my nerves, I popped the boot open.....

IT'S EMPTY!!!

WTF?

I actually looked round the boot as if the dead man could have rolled into a corner. This didn't make sense. If Simple heisted the car for joyriding, why would he look in the boot? Why would he move the body? Then again, why wouldn't he? If he found a body in the boot, he wouldn't want to be driving around with it in case stopped by the police. Time to drive back to London, park the motor and phone Mickey to say "I found it" and give him the location. After that, not my business.

I drove back equally as carefully as the journey out. I could pass my driving test, I was so good. I parked the motor in a road with no houses and the businesses closed for the night. Dropped the keys down a drain on the assumption Mickey would have a second set. Walked down the road to give myself some distance before I made the call. On rolling up my sleeve for Mickey's number I was stunned not to see it. Then the penny dropped. The shower. I'd washed the ink off. Not a sign. Not a scratch mark. Perfectly clean. Screwed!

How do I get Mickey to pick up his car? If it gets towed and coppers take a look at it, how much forensic is there in it? Edmond f'kin Locard is laughing at me from his grave. I'd assumed that Mickey would have it valeted and look respectable (enough for the police not to be involved) now the future was uncertain. Was there trace on the body from the car and if the murder squad matched, I don't know, carpet fibres to this make and model and then their computers said "Abandoned car found in Stratford".....

Where is the body? Where might Simple have stashed it? How soon before it gets discovered.

How long before I can find it and maybe I should bleach it or torch it? How long is a piece of string?

I think I was starting to hallucinate. Anxiety was tying my guts in knots. All was going to Hell in a handcart. My life was on the line now. No matter if the coppers got me, I'd still be a corpse once the Morrison's learned of my part in nicking the money, the first domino to fall. Mr Medway Taxis was on my conscience. OK, he was a "bad man" but did not deserve to be tortured and murdered. I couldn't put

that genie back in the bottle, but maybe I could survive for now and get some vengeance later for amends.

My e-book, Cat-as in burglar 99p Kindle. <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Cat-as-burglar-Misadventures-housebreaker-ebook/dp/B08L5LXRTB?ref>

INTRODUCING M. PURKISS



M. Purkiss – About Me & My Work

Originating from Hampshire, England, but now residing in South Wales, I have always enjoyed creating stories to get lost in. I have always had a connection with the horror genre, be this through movies, TV series, games and even music. It wasn't until much later that books added a whole new layer of fear. The reason for this was because I strained to read and write growing up. Although growing up I found reading and writing hard, I still had a thought in the back of my mind to write a story to share with the world. I was placed on remedial programs which aided me with my struggles and was able to learn basic sentence structures as well as grammar and punctuation (though at times I still find this difficult).

Moving on from school into college, my body unknowingly welcomed my friends; anxiety and depression, which still linger with me to this day, knocking at the door in my brain, reminding me that they are still there (how could I forget). It wasn't until 2015 I decided that it was about time I started to work on my dream. Pushing some of my anxieties to once side, just for a moment, I wrote and self-published Entity. It was followed by Entity 2 and 3 in the following years.

What now?

A long time passed, stories grew in my head and died there. I continued to write for my own amusement. I really didn't know what I was to do with the Entity trilogy, so they stood there on Amazon, stagnating. I didn't know who to go to, didn't really understand the industry at all.

Fast forward to 2020, I moved from Hampshire to South Wales. Covid hit, nothing much happened as we know, we couldn't do much even if we wanted to. I continued living my life, until one day, in 2024, a request to read my books presented itself. I dug them out of dusty boxes in the loft.

After reading them, the lender suggested I put them together in one book. This sparked something in my mind, and I got to work. Luckily, I still had the document files on my laptop, which I compiled together.

May 2024: Entity: The Complete Trilogy was released into the world. I had more understanding of the industry and was able to more confidently navigate some paths. I have an amazing core support that connected me with others and a snowball effect happened. Before I knew it, I was interviewed in newspapers and online. Entity was also featured and highlighted in Hong Kong and Chicago. Life was getting a bit busy. But as with all new things in the modern world, it becomes old quite quickly and the buzz slowly died down. I needed something else.

October 2024, I released my first original piece of work for years. Spirals of Grey, a psychological horror novella. It gave me a new wave of motivation to continue. The interviews began to appear once again, and I have featured on YouTube as a featured guest. There had been so much publicity; it has been an amazing ride so far. Don't get me wrong at times since May 2024; I have felt highest highs and lowest lows, almost losing sight of who I am. Luckily, with the support around me, they kept and remain keeping me on track.

I currently have a few works in the process, and I am excited for everyone to read them. You can follow me on FaceBook as my main location for updates and news;
<https://www.facebook.com/mpurkissauthor>.

My books are available in paperback through Amazon, or on Kindle and Kindle Unlimited

EXCERPT FROM 'SPIRALS OF GREY'

He remembered just waking up, not knowing how he got there, eyes fluttering open through a fog of haze and confusion. It was mostly silent except from the ominous noise of constant dripping water somewhere in the distance. The water trickled from an unknown source, splashing into a puddle. Laying there with his eyes opened, at first unable to move, paralysed on the cold, hard ground, only his eyes jerking around, trying to make sense of it all. It felt too real for a dream, but too unrealistic to be reality.

Nothing much could be seen as the lights overhead had been dimmed to near darkness, the occasional flicker created an eerie feeling that made Adam shiver. He could make out what looked like pipes, long and industrial pipes, rusted, looking like they were dilapidated, unused for some time. The red from the rust made the whole area look crimson, cold and gloomy. The walls looked like they were coated in a dirty substance which ran from the ceiling to the floor. The smell of musk filled the air, as well as damp and mould. Small mounds of green plagued the already depressing environment.

Still the dripping sound continued, keeping him grounded.

He lifted himself up into a seated position, his head instantly started thumping like it had been hit by a hammer. It felt like his heart had moved to his head, he could feel every beat creating a tremendous sound. His heartbeat filled his ears as the blood rushed around his head. Adam felt slightly dizzy bringing himself upright, the room spinning. It took him a couple of seconds to re-orientate himself. Slowly the surroundings started to settle, giving his eyes a chance to focus, beginning to come accustomed to the low lighting.

A ceiling fan above, apparently broken, slowly moved in circles, hardly making the thick, musky air move around the space. He noticed that he was in a hallway. Behind him was an elevator, he vaguely remembered descending on the contraption, though he wasn't too sure if this was the same one that had brought him to this rusted, dark world. The lift was broken by the looks of its jaunty angles. He looked down the corridor, but it ended with darkness, it seemed to go on forever.

Am I in hell? Adam thought.

The dripping from the pipes and walls maintained their steady rhythm.

He managed to get to his knees and then to his feet slowly. Everything ached with intense pain, it took every ounce of effort. Everything looked off. The walls were indeed running with a water like substance. Looking closer it looked like it was thicker than water but with the low light, there was no chance he could see exactly what it was. He touched his hand to the closest one next to him and pulled away again as the dirty liquid ran over his hands. Rust transferred to his palm which he wiped away quickly, using his jeans as a cloth. He felt as if he couldn't breathe properly, the air heavy with moisture. Breathing in, it felt like droplets of water were entering his lungs, causing him to cough. He walked a few steps away from the useless elevator towards the darkness. He came across a room, unable to enter due to the chicken wire fence that had been placed in front of it, rusted also and abandoned. He continued. The fan above slowed to a stop.

The dripping that had caused some audible disturbance, also stopped abruptly, making splashes no more. The air went silent, and the atmosphere changed from bad to worse. A small beeping sound could be heard in his ears, like after hearing loud music in a nightclub. He continued to walk, not wanting too, but there was nowhere else to go. Another room came into view and the same rusty, chicken wire barricade greeted him.

'Where the hell am I?' he whispered to himself. Looking up at a dim light fixture that was eerily swaying from side to side. There was no breeze in the air which made the sight of the swinging light fixture even more surreal and out of place. It seemed that this place he had woke up in didn't run on logic.

A noise?

He thought he heard a noise echoing through the hallway. Footsteps in shallow water or a puddle. He gingerly moved ahead. Looking into the darkness and hoping for a way out. Looking left and right but not finding an inviting path, everything either blocked or locked.

A sudden flash of light appeared in front of his eyes and then he awoke in his bedroom, safe in his house. Adam opened his eyes; they were facing a family picture. Himself, his mum, Barbara and dad, Richard. A family holiday, nice memories. He breathed a sigh of relief.

It was just a dream! He thought.

His mum was calling to him from downstairs. He looked down and saw that he had soaking wet sheets, the bed sheets ruined. He pulled back his bed covers and noticed his hand had a speck of red rusty metal clinging to the skin. Glistening slightly in the light of day, mocking him of his other worldly adventure. His heart seemed to stop for a second as his stomach dropped.

By M Purkiss

SPACEMAN 10 AND FAST FOOD BY MARTIN DIXON

The only reason I found out we were all going to die was because I fell in love pretty much as soon as I saw the mid-length bright red skirt and long blonde hair swirl across the restaurant. Then meander lithely around picking up cartons, bags and boxes and spray the red surfaces of the chrome tables. Within moments the place was pristine and ready for the next influx of diners who, as I watched, were already pouring through the doors to queue at the ordering screens and flick through menu options.

The place displayed an ambience of desirability. The lighting exactly right. Long tubes strategically placed within the high ceilings gave perfect illumination during long dark winter evenings. Big windows but positioned so there was no blinding light during hot summer days. Plenty of tables but spaced generously giving a sense of openness. Background music played but it was what I would describe as happy sounds, almost beguiling.

I had a seat in the corner way down towards the back watching people laugh as they sat. Cheerfully going to collect their selections when their number flashed on the big screen above a wide hatch in the end wall. The food presented rather regimentally on easy carry trays by an attractive older lady who portrayed a real sense of homeliness. Maybe a burger and fries. Beef or chicken or even veggie these days. In fact, an array of delicious calorie packed food all with a distinctive addictive taste. Fast food, a great way to feed the masses cheap tasty meals.

The people next to me had only momentarily stood when the girl whizzed my way. She smiled. Mostly with her eyes and that's what did it. If it had been her intention to reel me in, it had certainly worked. But, within a flash, she was gone leaving me in a kind of limbo. I watched her disappear through the door out back wondering if she would return before I finished my coffee but it was hot so I could drag it out a while yet.

Staring at the huge company logo on the wall behind the ordering screens I noticed, in the bottom corner, a small identification mark. I'd seen it before on several other similar chains' advertising banners. Common ownership? The food was certainly similar and with the same addictive taste.

Where was the girl? I know it might sound stupid but I had that odd feeling you sometimes get when someone is missed. I lifted the paper cup and realised it was empty. Maybe if I stood and made a move. Sure enough within a few seconds the kitchen door

banged. A table in the next aisle was also freeing up. That was clearly her first destination. Just moments later, she was coming my way. I stepped in front of her. She stopped. Stared into my face mesmerising me. Unable to think of a more suitable pick-up speech, I simply said, "Hi, I'm Donny, what's your name?" Now, having smiled at me the way she had originally you would have thought she would be responsive. But she just smiled again in exactly the same way then kind of barged past to pick up my cup, spray the table and away she went back through the rear door.

I shrugged with this weird feeling. Something seemed odd. In the few years since the rise of fast-food outlets and junk food, I'd never really thought about it before. Just like anyone, I came in, ordered remotely, minimal contact, ate and away. Just as the title implies, quickly. I glanced around. Saw people all merrily munching. Their one common trait, they were all plump. Podgy smiling faces all around. People who a few years ago had probably been quite slim were now looking, what some might describe, a healthy weight. I stared down to where my waist used to be and realised the truth. People were putting on lots of flab. When these things happened over a long space of time, we all probably didn't realise the extent of change in our shapes. Especially when everyone looked so healthy.

The rear door slammed and there she was heading in the opposite direction without even a cursory glance my way. A brief appearance and she disappeared out back again. Resolved to make some sort of proper contact I eased my way to the door. Glanced through the round glass window positioned above the red capitals of the 'STAFF ONLY' sign. Seeing no one, I pushed and entered a narrow, bright corridor with the kitchen to the right and the seductive smell of all that delicious food. People diligently preparing orders. Men and women, well, actually, not much older than boys and girls. Blondes, brunettes, guys with dark hair. Some ginger. Working methodically with what I thought were kind of orchestrated movements. The thing was whilst they all appeared different there was a certain similarity about them. I did not see the girl though. She might even have looked different to these guys but I wasn't sure.

Strange, I thought, but dismissed it as just coincidental and wandered down the corridor towards a firmly shut door. With some difficulty, I pulled it open. Propped it with my foot as I stared into a small square room. Empty except for benches around the walls. Above the seating, about one metre up the walls, plug sockets with short cables dangling were spaced maybe one metre apart.

In the middle of the bench on the far wall sat my blonde. She stared at me with almost blank eyes looking all in. I started to speak but slowly, as I watched, she gripped the

cable on her right-hand side, raised her arm, swept back her hair and pushed what looked like a USB plug into a port behind her ear. A red light immediately shone from beneath the wall socket and she closed her eyes. Above her head a sign said, *Spaceman 10*. I swung my gaze around the room at several other girls who were all plugged in. The same sign above them but with numbers ranging from one to twenty. Like the kitchen staff, they were all similar, that is, except for a multitude of different hair colours and styles.

There was a noise. A loud click. A dark-haired girl in the corner suddenly opened her eyes as the red light next to her turned to green. She stared straight at me and a loud screeching came from her open mouth. Before I could run two strong arms grabbed me from behind and held me in a grip of immense strength. In quite some pain, I was half dragged through the kitchen to a room with no windows where a woman in white overalls and silver hair sat behind a big metal desk. On her lapel, I noticed the same small identification mark I'd seen on the logo. One lonely chair was positioned in front under a very bright, white light. Next to her were two tall men wearing grey tailored suits. Arms relaxed at their sides but their fists were clenched in an almost threatening way. The man who held me pushed me into the chair and moved to stand next to the door. He also wore a grey suit. All three were identical but, as with the others, they had three different hair styles and colours.

The painless interrogation did not last long. Well, actually there were just a few simple questions mostly about the food. Then a few things were explained, one being that there was no need for any drastic measures. That was a relief I can tell you. I was not going to be terminated was the way the lady put it. Not long ago it would have been essential, she had said, but not now. She said there was no need, they were now one hundred percent ready and it was way too late to do anything about it. It was, she indicated, all about how much power we didn't have. By comparison to them, zero, she said and laughed cruelly. Anyway, she also said all morsels would be needed and it was essential they were fresh. That I found way more unsettling than the interrogation. I asked her if she was real and she smiled and said she was, although not human. She said what I was seeing was a disguise that masked her true appearance from our shabby, insignificant little world. Then I was shown the backdoor.

Outside I stared at the building for quite some time thinking how bizarre the experience had been. I found I was shaking. Humanity seemed... I tried to think of a good word but the best I could come with was doomed.

Did I try to make what I had found out known? Of course I did. I tried the papers and emailed governments. No response. I think they thought me mad. The military were

next but they were a no go for sure. Too hush, hush and all that. In the end I gave up, resigned to accept the fate the world had inadvertently brought upon itself. I say inadvertently but really it was because of the dumbest actions by some of the most brilliant people. A very ironic fault of humanity. The most intelligent are continually doing the dumbest things.

In this case, the so-called space scientists and their obsession with contacting extraterrestrial life. Sending messages off into space to who knows where. They certainly didn't know. It was, we were told, essential to make contact with whoever or whatever was out there. The most stupid thing: the welcome messages. I imagined invitations. 'Hi, if you're about, stop off here for a cuppa and a piece of delicious fruit cake. We can have a natter on your way through and talk about mutual benefits. You know, we've got so much to offer'.

Really, that was just plain stupid. After all, you only have to ask yourself one simple question: why would anyone who has the ability to travel through hyperspace think there's anything we can offer them? The scientists should have thought about it. Our history is almost exclusively one of war and conquest. Why would visitors from space be any different? The subjugation of the inferior comes to mind.

Were the scientists told? Maybe, but there's an immediate problem with that. Space scientists are intellectuals. One thing you can't do with all such people is contradict them. Their views are sacrosanct. They have a blinkered self-indulgent approach. In this case, one that actually played right into the hands of one particular race of space travellers. Super beings who are constantly on the move, scanning space with their little crystal sets, or whatever is their equivalent, picking up a constant stream of messages. Random but interesting messages especially to a group of intergalactic entrepreneurs continually on the lookout for locations to expand their outlets along the well-trodden paths of the space highways even if they are stuck in a bit of a backwater.

Why were governments not more aware as populations slowly became nicely plump and tender? The answer was, of course, the creatures were super sneaky. But sneaky infers their operation might be undercover, of a clandestine nature. Perhaps a slow, slow deliberate infiltration. But it was not and that's where they were so damn clever. Where's the best place to hide something? In full view, we are regularly told. And there you have it. The sneaky bastards operated right out there for all to see. And we did see it. Everyone did and what is more a pretty high percentage of the world's population unwittingly and quite regularly were more than happy to be complicit.

And there lies the main reason for our leaders' complacency. Although probably the sneakiest thing of all. The little, well actually they are not so little, in fact they are huge and wobbly and always ravenous after a long space trip. But anyway, the creeps had ensured their operation was so financially beneficial that it was impossible to attempt any sort of reform.

Sure, governments advertised, spread health warnings about obesity, but who listens to boring government claptrap these days. Especially when it's so cheap and easy for people to fuel their addiction. Equally importantly, could chancellors, who are swayed by the seductive chink of cash, manage their budgets without the assistance of all those tax bucks the junk food industry so cleverly produced?

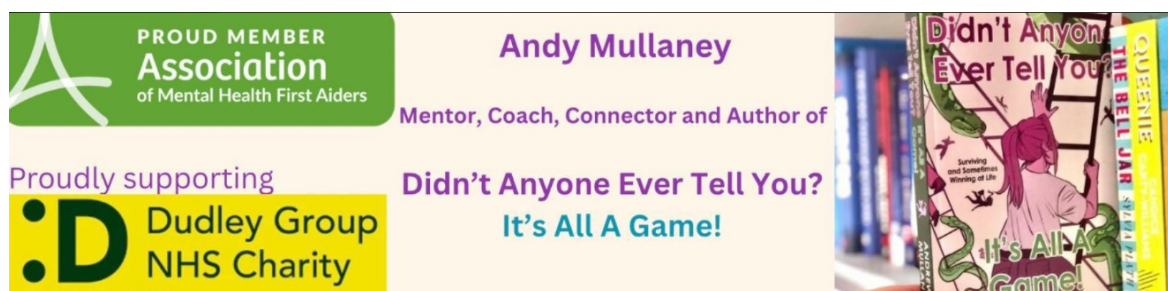
In short, the creatures the idiot space scientists hoped to welcome with open arms had been slowly organising probably the biggest roadside diner in the universe. And now it was too late. The inescapable fact was we have all been fattened up sufficiently and now it was time to start serving.

It was the loud bashing on my door that woke me up. I lay still in a cold sweat wondering. I had a feeling I had been dreaming but... now the door handle violently rattled and I wasn't expecting anyone to call.

By Martin Dixon

Check out Martin's blog at: <https://www.shortstoriestoentertain.com/>

INTRODUCING ANDY MULLANEY



Andy Mullaney: Playing the Game of Life with Purpose

Andy Mullaney, born and bred in the Black Country, is a proud family man with a 35-year career in banking, finance, and community development behind him. Now a published author, mentor, coach, mental health first aider, and regular volunteer, Andy is passionate about giving back. His mission is to leave a better legacy for those who follow, and he believes mentoring plays a key role in achieving that.

His debut self-help book, *Didn't Anyone Ever Tell You? It's All A Game!* First published in 2021 and reprinted in 2024, it brings that philosophy to life. Andy says, "The principal theme of the book is my belief that life is a game – a series of games, in fact – that we can choose to play in full consciousness to survive, and sometimes even win. The book is a route map, a guide, a set of tips, experiences, and reference points to offer help, hope, and handholds on the cliff face of life."

Reviewers have called it "like having a mentor on your bookshelf" and "like having a chat with a wise friend." Using the familiar game of snakes and ladders, Andy helps readers navigate life's ups and downs with practical tools, personal stories, and honest reflections. Each chapter ends with a summary of 'ladders' (wins) and 'snakes' (pitfalls) for easy reference.

In the summer of 2024, Andy was diagnosed with bowel cancer. He has channelled his energy into fighting what he calls "this abomination," while also writing his second book. It will focus on his cancer journey and will include interviews with key medical professionals. Due for release in 2026, it will be the next in the *Didn't Anyone Ever Tell You?* Series. Just like the first book, 50 percent of all income will go to charity. To date, his work has raised over £1400 for various causes.

Andy is also a volunteer ambassador for his publisher, Troubador, and enjoys supporting fellow authors in getting their work into print.

He is very active on LinkedIn and always happy to connect. You can find him there as Andy Mullaney, where he shares thoughts on leadership, mental health, personal growth, and the realities of living with and fighting cancer.

An engaging public speaker, Andy is open to collaboration, projects, and speaking opportunities. To get in touch, email him at a.mullaney@sky.com. You can buy his book in paperback or as an eBook via this link <https://troubador.co.uk/bookshop/self-help/didnt-anyone-ever-tell-you-its-all-a-game> or at your favourite bookseller.

EXTRACT FROM “DIDN’T ANYONE EVER TELL YOU? IT’S ALL A GAME!”

I’ve chosen this chapter from *Didn’t Anyone Ever Tell You? It’s All A Game!* for two clear reasons. First, it gets straight to the point and speaks to something I care deeply about: human connection and our ability, or sometimes inability, to communicate well.

Second, I worry we’re losing real conversations and, with them, a deeper understanding of who we truly are.

This is just one of 50 chapters that asks (and in some cases answers or explores) the big questions life throws at us. It also offers tools to help us navigate the daily challenges we all face. I hope these words give you a glimpse of what I’m about and what I set out to share in the book.

CHAPTER 21. TALK, BE A HUMAN BEING AND STAY SANE

“Speech is a very important aspect of being human. A whisper doesn’t cut it.”
James Earl Jones

How many times do we avoid a conversation with another person by choosing to text or e mail them instead? It is easier and less effort to do the latter I suppose, as you can “talk” in this way at a pace and in a way when you choose. You never have to worry about those uncomfortable silences that can often occur when you are distracted by your surroundings, and you can do so many other things in the interim that feels more important to you. And you are still engaging with the other person, so that makes it ok doesn’t it?

We are all guilty of disregarding the power of our ability to talk, and the positive impact that it can have upon us. Does texting or any other form of non verbal communication actually save us time and make us more effective human beings? Does it raise your spirits and touch your inner soul in the same way that a voice can?

Just before Covid restrictions came into force in 2020, I overheard a conversation where one person was talking in a shop about how difficult it was proving to arrange a prescribed time for a text exchange with her friend, so that they then could arrange a

night out together. Surely the easiest thing to do would be to just pick up the phone there and then?

The point that I am seeking to make here, is that one of the fundamental qualities that separates our species from the others on this planet is our effective and clear method of verbal communication. We use so many different sounds, tones, and complex formation of sentences in ways that other animals cannot. We have such a variety of languages, dialects, speech, customs and ways in which we adapt to our changing situations to get our messages across. And we always seem find ways of changing our words with people who perhaps struggle to understand us.

The power of our speech and verbalisation is a way that we can simplify and cement our relationships. Even if we lose our speech or our hearing, we have developed many other ways, such as sign language, that can still make the act of communication possible. We can still “talk” to one another.

Part of this is knowing that talking is also very good for us too and plays a key part in our own daily therapy. Coronavirus has taught us, especially during lockdown, that we need not be so isolated if we are able to harness technology with virtual interactions. Many are still able to work remotely, and most of us can easily socialise in this way, but it is just not the same as receiving the signals that we take from being in the immediate vicinity of another human.

And here is another thing to consider; you will never get the same feelings from a phone or a keyboard chat, although they do really help in between. The handset, or tapping out of characters, do not fully help you to detect the body language, smells, eye contact and other sensory perceptions that we pick up unconsciously during a face to face chat. We have so many of these coming at us and they again, help with the whole process raising our spirits.

Sometimes you can end a call and have more questions about how the other person reacted to you than you have answered. This is because you were unable to correctly read them as people, and you were not in possession of all of the unconscious facts that you would pick up face to face.

It is like finishing a jigsaw and finding, to your great frustration, that there are two or three missing pieces. For those who are housebound or lacking in company, then these

ways of communicating become a lifeline, vital to their mental well being, and we must always try to find at least one way of creating a physical contact of sorts.

Keeping your sanity is crucial for your game, and is not easy to do. As I have consistently said, there are many people who will want you to succeed and who you can trust, you just have to find them, but they are there. Similarly, there are many who will seek to undermine you and play with your emotions. You must talk to those you trust, love and who care for you. The cost of not doing this is too great to your and to their games, as you are important to them too. Talking is everything and there is no problem that a true friend will not be able to cope with or help you to try to resolve.

If you are feeling low, then find a way of expressing it and say, "Have you got a few minutes to talk?" We are not good at this and retreat into ourselves using all sorts of excuses for not talking to others, often assuming that they have too much going on in their lives to talk to us. Many simply say, "I'm ok", when actually that is the last thing they are. This was, and still is, especially true of the pre and post war generations. The next time someone asks "Are you ok?" or "How are you?" try to answer as honestly as you can. You may be on top of the world, so tell them you are and exactly why. My uncle used to say to me, when I asked him how he was, "If I was any better I couldn't cope." I love that phrase as it is full of humour, it always draws a smile and with him, you knew that he meant it. But equally you may not be at your best and explaining why you aren't could actually help you and the other person too.

Your game needs face to face "talk" wherever possible, in addition to the virtual lines that are open and essential, both from you and from others. It is a way of venting, a way of sharing, listening, learning, helping and coaching. You will laugh, cry, show anger, compassion, love - possibly all of these in the space of one conversation. It is vital for your game, to keep your sanity and you will also help another person's too.

So, my final question for you to consider here is, "Are you ok? Do you need to talk?"

THE QUICK WINS AND LADDERS

- Having a conversation wherever you can, knowing that talking is great for your well being.
- Being honest if people ask you how you are.
- Trying to make more face to face interactions.
- Using virtual, phone or keyboard conversations if you are unable to speak face to face in the interim.

THE TRAPS AND THE SNAKES

- Not talking or having open conversations.
- Keeping everything to yourself.
- Avoiding physical conversations in favour of alternate means of communication such as text



INTRODUCING JHANA MATTHEWS



Hey, my name is Jhana. I was born with Spina Bifida, Encephalocele, and Hydrocephalus, for which I have a shunt. I also have Klippel-Fiel Syndrome.

Here's my 'About' section on my website:

Hawaii has been my home for the past 34 years. I've always been writing, even when I didn't know I truly enjoyed it. I wrote reports on science, books, the Titanic, Pearl Harbor, and so much more. In high school, I decided to write a personal story after

finishing my work in a class.

I didn't know it was a story until a friend of mine said, "Nice story." I don't remember what it was about; all I know is that I was going through something and wrote about it. I also used to write for the school's newspaper and website. Now, 17 years later, my hobby has turned into my becoming a published author.



**Spina Bifida &
Hydrocephalus
WARRIORS: Jhana's
Story
Jhana "Baby Girl"
Matthews**

In 2022, I published my first book called "Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Warriors: Jhana's Story." The book is currently out of print. That's when I decided to become a disability advocate.

In 2023, I developed my brand called "Jhana's Writing Journey." Back then, I wasn't fully committed to it.



During my time as a student at Full Sail University, the instructors helped me take my brand to the next level. That was when I developed my website and found another alternative to help me write my blogs and articles each week.

It worked very well. My instructors always told us to write what we know. So, I write about love and disability to spread awareness. Writing has always been on my side, no matter what I've been going through.

Telling stories was a hobby until it became my life. My advice to everyone is to follow your dreams no matter what anyone says. People were always negative towards me, telling me that I wasn't good enough because of my disability. But I proved them wrong.

[Linktr.eeJhana's Writing Journey Website](#)

THE DOPPELGANGER

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

I first published this story in one of my classes at Full Sail University. The title of this story has been changed a couple of times.

The ray of sunlight struggled to shine through the thick blanket of clouds at the park on a Tuesday afternoon. Every inhale scraped my inflamed throat like sandpaper. I put the strap of my camera over my head and adjusted the lens so I could take pictures. Children's laughter bubbled in the air from the family enjoying their picnic.

Above, the sound of birds, their wings cutting through the sky. I smiled. It was as if the scene were a film begging to be watched, framed perfectly through my camera lens. My laughter died in my throat. A man —a spitting image of my husband — was sitting with a woman and what looked like a 3-year-old kid clinging to the two of them.

The air thinned, and a heavy weight crushed my lungs, restricting every breath I took. This seemed like a cruel joke. Was I dreaming? Was that really my husband with a woman and a kid? The pain clawed deeper into my chest, intensifying with each breath. I put my camera down and rushed to the car; I didn't take a second look. Even outside, the air was too thick to breathe with the excruciating pain that I felt.

Once I got home, it felt as if a knife was stabbing my heart when I noticed that John's car wasn't there. I grabbed my cane from the passenger side; I left my wheelchair in the car for the next time I decided to go out.

I slammed the door and stormed inside. No, no, no. It couldn't be John. It just couldn't. My hand started to tremble as I held my phone. Then I stopped, the paralyzing fear restricting me from breathing, like a heavy weight on my chest. I went to the printer by the window in the living room so I could print out the picture I took. Then I went into the room.

My cane scratched against the wall as I threw it, and I flopped down on the bed, closing my eyes. Was that really him? Does he have a twin that I didn't know about? Does he not love me because of my disability? These questions rushed through my mind, making the room spin like a high-speed roller coaster. The image of the man who looked just like John, my husband, tormented my thoughts.

Then, I heard heavy footsteps reverberating throughout the house, startling me awake. My heart started to race, making it hard to breathe.

"Honey, I'm home," John said. His voice was calm, but it did nothing for my racing heart. It felt as if there was something heavy on my chest preventing me from breathing. I rose to my feet, wiping my damp eyes with my sleeve. I quickly shoved the incriminating picture under the pillow.

John walked into the room. "Hi, babe."

He leant in to kiss me. When he hugged me, his dark chocolate cologne, usually a comfort, felt like a suffocating blanket closing in on me.

"Do you mind telling me what the hell is going on?" I yelled, feeling my voice trembling as tears started to fall down my cheeks. John snatched the photo out from under my pillow, examining it.

"This is not me. I just got off work," John denied. His voice was laced with defensiveness.

"Are you fricken kidding me right now?" I asked frantically.

"Babe, I love you. You have to believe me. I don't know who that guy on the photo is."

John kept defending himself, searching my eyes for some acceptance.

I ran into the bathroom to avoid his lies, slamming the door and locking it behind me. My hands were empty—no phone in hand. I left it on the bed.

Instead of leaving the comfort of the bathroom to get it, I laid down on the floor and closed my eyes.

My heart sank deeper and deeper as if it were sinking into an ocean of doubts.

“Babe?”

John pleaded, but I didn’t trust my crackling voice, so I kept silent, drifting off to sleep.

When I woke up, the floor was wet. I touched my face, feeling the warm tears and puffy eyes.

I grabbed the washcloth from the counter and used it to clean my face and then the floor. I stood up and looked in the mirror; I did not care that my face was still puffy. I took a deep breath and got my bearings under control before walking out of the bathroom.

Dishes clanging together were echoing against the thin walls.

John was washing dishes, so I joined him. I quietly went into the kitchen, and he turned to face me.

“Babe, are you okay?” he asked.

I didn’t know how to answer that question, so I just nodded.

Somehow, he knew I was lying.

“I love you. You have to believe me.” I nodded again. I protected my heart by not saying another word.

After a while, I got my cell phone from the nightstand and texted my friend Jane, who is a detective. I explained what was going on, so she knew how to help me.

“I’m so sorry,” Jane said. “What do you need me to do?”

“I want you to find out if it’s really John,” I replied.

“I don’t know what he looks like,” Jane said. I sent a picture of John and the man who looked like him.

“Okay, I’m on it. I’ll do that tomorrow morning. Is that okay?” Jane asked.

“Yes, that is fine.”

.....

A pleasant and delicious scent woke me up the next morning.

I wandered to the kitchen to find out where the smell was coming from.

“Good morning,” John greeted me. “You’re just in time for breakfast.” He was acting as if nothing happened last night.

As John put my plate and a cup of orange juice on the table before me, Jane texted:

“I took a picture of him and the woman.” she said.

I pushed my plate away from me.

“What’s the problem now?” John asked.

“Are you honestly going to tell me that this isn’t you?” I challenged him.

“Yes, I was home all morning. I slept on the couch last night.”

“I want you out now!” I said, pointing towards the front door.

“Babe, please,” John pleaded but quickly realized I wouldn’t change my mind.

He grabbed his phone and keys and went out. After 20 minutes, he came back in the house without saying a word. He didn’t have the energy to fight with me again.

“I love you, April,” he said.

“I love you too,” I said, unable to deny my feelings.

“I’m not cheating on you. I promise you’re the only one I love,” John admitted. “And I’m sorry you thought you saw me.”

Then Jane texted me. The message read: “I’m tailing him right now. He’s at a restaurant by himself. It looks like he is waiting for someone.”

“John is here with me now.” I replied.

For the first time since this whole thing started, I was relieved.

“Then who is that guy I’m following that looks exactly like John?” asked Jane.

“I don’t know.” I said.

I looked up from my phone and stared at John. I didn’t say a word after I discovered it wasn’t him. It was just a guy who looked exactly like him. I held my phone in front of John and showed him the picture.

“My friend just sent me this picture.” I said.

“See? I told you it was not me.” he said.

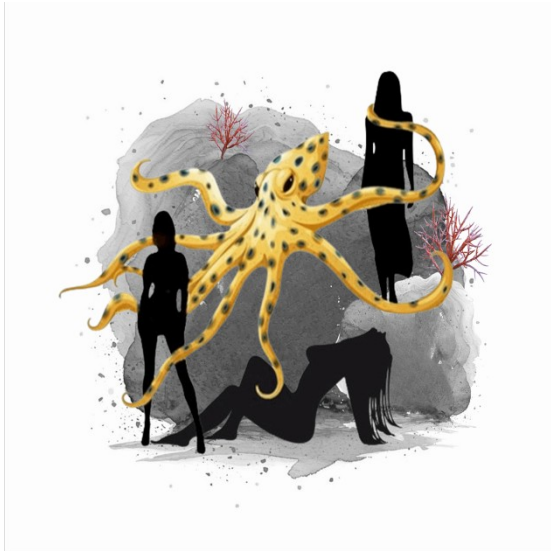
“I’m sorry that I did not believe you.” I said.

“Next time, will you talk to me before you jump to conclusions?” John asked, and I nodded at him.

“I’ll try,” I said.

“I love you so much,” John said.

By Jhana Matthews



INTRODUCING STEPHEN COHEN

WWII era, Historical Fiction writer

I was born in Sutton-In-Ashfield, England.

I recall as a child, playing on the Major Oak in Sherwood Forest with my brothers, but never getting to be Robin Hood: Maybe that was because they were older.

I lost my grandfather, some forty-plus years ago now, leaving him a handful of WWII items, which sparked an interest in world war history, in particular, WWII.

The inspiration for writing came in 2016 after contracting overactive thyroids, which then developed into Graves's disease ('Thyroid Eye Disease') which has left me with blurred double vision.

My eldest daughter asked, "what are you going to do now?" My reply stunned her: "I'm going to write a book" "But you are blind, how can you?" So, voice to text technology is my best friend. As are some truly beautiful people who help me through the publishing process.

My first novel, the "Blue Ring Assassins" series, published 2020, came about after watching a TV program called "World War Weird" currently writing book four, so their adventures continue.

Current and only published in April 2025, "Bad Brakes" is a WWII crime fiction. This will soon also be a trilogy.

WIP: WWII Romance – Letters Across the Sea

WIP: WWII Fantasy – Tempus Fugit Hourheart

Stephen Cohen contact book links info: <https://linktr.ee/stephencohen>

BAD BRAKES

Fictional work based on actual WWII events.

The moral right of Stephen Cohen to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988

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With the exception of historical figures, all characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

References to real places, people, events etc are only included to provide a sense of authenticity and use has been for dramatic purpose rather than historical fact.

Bad Brakes

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Criminality during the War

Looting was a big problem. The number of bombed properties provided a big temptation to looters. Many were given fines or short prison sentences.

Black market: Many items were sold on the black market without a ration card. If caught selling on the black market, then the punishment could be a fine and imprisonment.

Murder rates increased dramatically during the war. Air raids killed so many people, it was often impossible for the police to investigate all deaths and criminals took advantage of this. Murder carried the death penalty.

Police Duties

Their usual tasks included keeping the peace, dealing with criminals and making sure that the traffic flowed freely in towns and cities.

The Police also had new wartime duties. They had to make sure people obeyed the wartime blackout rules, help the rescue services during and after bombing raids and search for soldiers who had deserted (run away) from the army.

Many police were called *blackout bobbies* because they had to make sure that no light from houses and shops could be seen outside. This was to protect buildings from German bombers flying overhead.

There were not many women police officers.

Dedication

Kelly Mae-Matt – Words cannot express how much I have become to rely on this lady. Over the past year, we have worked on several projects together and developed not just a great working relationship, but a strong friendship to boot. Thank you, Kelly (My Scribe Taming Sorceress) for being my friend and editor. My world is a brighter place with you in it.

CHAPTER ONE

War-Torn Norwich, 1941

The war had changed the city of Norwich, yet life stubbornly persisted. In the city centre, the once vibrant marketplace, now a shadow of its former self was slowly coming to life as vendors set up their meagre stalls. These days, it wasn't bustling with the variety and abundance it used to hold—rationing and shortages had reduced both goods and customers—but those who remained made the best of what little they had.

DI Brakes watched it all from his regular corner table at the café. He had come to rely on the place as part of his morning routine—tea, a quick survey of the market, and then back to the grind at the station. The war might have slowed down the world around him, but Brakes was always in motion.

Finishing the last sip of his tea, he gathered his things and left the café, intending to head to the station. As he pulled on his jacket and strapped on his motorbike helmet, a sharp, piercing sound interrupted the usual hum of the morning: police whistles.

Instinctively, Brakes tensed and scanned the streets. The whistles seemed to be coming from the south. He quickly mounted his beloved Triumph Speed Twin 5T, a sleek machine in deep burgundy and silver that he had painstakingly kept in pristine condition, despite the war. The roar of its engine drowned out the rest of the world as he twisted the throttle and sped off toward the disturbance.

The streets of Norwich blurred around him as he turned onto Prince of Wales Road, where he spotted a group of uniformed officers running after someone on foot. As Brakes drew closer, he saw their target: a pair of young boys, barely in their teens, riding what appeared to be an American-style army motorcycle, far too large for them. The boy at the back clutched a woman's handbag and a wicker shopping basket—likely the spoils of their latest theft.

“Don't worry boys; I'll get the little bastards!” Brakes yelled over the growling of his engine as he raced past the foot patrol.

Dropping down a gear, he surged ahead in hot pursuit, eyes locked on the fleeing motorcycle. The boys were good—better than most adults he'd encountered—zigzagging through traffic, mounting pavements, and dodging pedestrians without hesitation. The driver was fearless, or perhaps reckless, taking corners at speeds that would terrify any seasoned rider.

The chase was becoming dangerous, pushing both machines and riders to their limits. Brakes considered for a moment whether to back off; it was wartime, and the city could hardly afford casualties from a police chase. But his instincts, sharpened by years on the force, told him these boys wouldn't stop unless forced to.

Turning left, then right, the chase took them down narrower streets, winding through the heart of the city. Both motorcycles weaved in and out of alleyways and side roads. Then, without realising, the boys turned onto a street that had been heavily bombed just days before. The road was littered with rubble, the clean-up only just beginning and workers were still sifting through the debris in search of survivors. The boys, showing no regard for the devastation around them, sped through the wreckage, sending workers scattering as they rode by.

Brakes knew he had them cornered now. The street was blocked off at the end by a massive pile of rubble, at least six feet high, which the workers had used to close off the road. But the boys showed no signs of slowing down. Instead, they took the obstacle head-on, riding straight up and over the pile of debris like seasoned stuntmen. Brakes hesitated for a moment, slowing his bike slightly as he surveyed the situation. But his stubborn streak kicked in—he wasn't about to let them get away.

Shifting down to third gear, he opened the throttle, unleashing the full power of the 500cc engine. The motorcycle thundered beneath him as he hit the rubble at speed, bouncing violently as the wheels struggled to find traction on the uneven surface. Brakes clung tightly to the handlebars, his body jostling with the impact.

For a brief second, he was airborne, separated from his bike, his heart lodged in his throat as he sailed toward a stationary lorry parked at the bottom of the rubble heap.

The impact was brutal. Brakes' motorbike crashed through the wooden side of the lorry with a deafening crack. Brakes quickly followed his body a helpless passenger as it smashed through the timber and collided with the hard brick wall of the house behind it. The air in his lungs was violently expunged. Every part of his body reeled in pain as he spiralled to the ground like a lifeless doll. For a moment, everything went silent, the world around him dissolving into a haze of pain and shock.

He tried to move, but his body wouldn't cooperate. His legs felt like they were on fire, and his wrist throbbed with an intensity that made him want to scream. He managed to glance down and saw wood splinters embedded in his legs, blood seeping through his

torn trousers. The pain hit him in waves, each one worse than the last, until it was all-consuming.

Voices drifted toward him—people shouting, someone calling for an ambulance. Brakes heard the familiar sound of bells ringing in the distance; the police were approaching, their cars undoubtedly hurtling toward him. He tried to focus, but his vision blurred. One of the first uniformed foot patrol officers on the scene stepped forward, unknowingly crushing his fedora underfoot. “Why is it that my hat always gets it?” Brakes thought, managing a weak smile.

“Did anyone see where those boys went?” He croaked, but before anyone could answer, his body finally gave in and the world faded to black.

When Brakes regained consciousness, his surroundings were blurred. He blinked against the harsh overhead light, trying to gather his bearings. A strong smell of disinfectant filled the air. Rubbing his head, he softly stroked over his bumps and flinched. As his vision stabilised, Brakes saw that his arms and legs were heavily bandaged, and his wrist was encased in a thick plaster cast. He didn’t feel any pain until a dull throb emanated throughout his whole body, but it was manageable. He attempted to sit up, wincing as every movement sent fresh waves of discomfort through every injury.

The door to his room swung open and in walked the Chief Superintendent, his superior. A man of few words, the Chief was stern and uncompromising, with the hard edge of a former military man who had seen too much of the world’s brutality. From his bed, Brakes could see the Chief’s handlebar moustache twitch as he surveyed Brakes with a look of disappointment and concern.

“What the bloody hell were you thinking, Brakes?” The Chief barked. “A reckless chase through bombed-out streets? You’ve put not only yourself but the public at risk!”

Brakes opened his mouth to reply, but the Chief wasn’t finished. “You’ve been riding that blasted motorbike like you’re on the front lines! It should never have been used as a police vehicle!”

“I had them, Chief,” Brakes said, his voice weak. “I nearly had them.”

“Nearly doesn’t cut it, Inspector,” the Chief shot back. “It looks like you’ve totalled your motorbike, and you’re lucky to be alive. As for your disregard for public safety, we’ll

discuss that in my office once you're released. Your bloodhound mentality is an asset to you and the force, but it is one that will get you killed."

Brakes nodded, though the Chief's words stung. The Chief tossed a bag onto the foot of the bed, Brakes' crushed fedora peeking out from the top. "Someone found your hat," the chief muttered. "Not much good to you now, is it?"

The Chief turned and left without another word, leaving Brakes alone with his thoughts. Reaching for his hat, his face twitched and tightened up as he did so. Laying back, Brakes let out a yelp whilst he placed it gently on the bed beside him. It was a small comfort in the chaos of his life.

The days in the hospital passed slowly. Brakes, unable to do much else, tried to keep himself busy by helping around the ward. He read to other patients, listened to their stories of bombings and accidents, and tried to make light of his own situation. But the war was never far from his mind, the sounds of air raids and bombings filtering through even the thick hospital walls.

By the third day, Brakes had a visitor. His neighbour had brought him some clothes from home and with the help of a nurse, he managed to get dressed. His wounds were healing, though slowly, and the doctors said he could be discharged. They needed the bed for other, more critical cases, after all.

Limping, he stepped out of the hospital. As he clutched his wrist, he felt the familiar weight of the world fall on his shoulders once again. His motorbike was gone, his body ached with every step, and his mind raced with thoughts of the war he wasn't fighting. But the city needed him, and the police station was calling.

As if on cue, a black Wolseley police car pulled up beside him. A young woman in an ATS uniform got out, snapping to attention. "Sir, I'm Vera, your driver. The Chief sent me to collect you."

Brakes raised an eyebrow. "Never call me sir," he said curtly. "It's Brakes, or Inspector if you must. And next time, don't bother opening the door for me. I can manage."

Vera nodded, her cheeks beginning to rouge. "Where to, Inspector?"

"Station," Brakes replied with a tired smile. "I've got an appointment with the Chief."

As they drove through the city, Brakes stared out of the window at the familiar streets of Norwich. The war had left its mark on the city, but life went on. People still shopped, children played in the streets and, despite the devastation, the heart of the city was still beating.

Brakes wasn't sure how long he could tolerate being driven around. He had always made his own way to and from work, but now he had to put up with a driver, and a chatterbox to boot.

"Forgive me for asking," Vera started, her eyes beginning to drift from the road. "But your surname, Brakes, is unusual for these parts. Where does it come from?"

"My parents. They are, in point of fact, American. They came to live here almost thirty years ago, on the south coast," Brakes explained. "Which is where I was born, so, don't worry yourself; I'm British, through and through."

"Well, not to put too fine a point on it, but that would make you fifty percent British," Vera unhelpfully supplied.

"I was born here, schooled here, I trained here, my friends are all from here. I'm as British as anyone else born here," Brakes stated with unbreakable certainty.

Suddenly, Vera was braking hard, narrowly missing a horse and cart that came out of nowhere. Unprepared, Brakes was thrust forward, hitting his head on the windscreen and squashing his already broken wrist between him and the dashboard.

"What the fuck!? Are you trying to kill me!" Brakes screamed, spittle flying from his mouth. "You are aware I have recently been in an accident? Are you trying to send me back to the hospital?"

"I'm sorry, sir, it just came out of nowhere. Are you okay?" Vera asked, concerned.

"No, no I'm bloody not. Slow down and pay more attention to your duties and less about who I am," he hissed through his teeth, gripping his wrist to dull the thrum of pain coursing through him. "Now, do you think you can get us to the station? In one piece, preferably."

"Yes, sir... Inspector."

Vera continued to drive at less than twenty-five miles per hour, when they arrived at the station without further incident or even a spoken word.

Still clutching his broken wrist, Brakes headed for the Chiefs office. He could feel his forehead beginning to throb from where he had collided with the window—that would leave a nasty bruise in the morning. Two accidents in four days; it was a good job Brakes wasn't the superstitious sort.

Brakes knocked on the Chiefs door and waited for the customary "Enter" to follow, except it never arrived. He knocked again, shouted "Chief," before deciding to finally open the door.

The Chief wasn't there. Allowing himself a sigh of relief, Brakes stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him. He really wasn't looking forward to this encounter.

As Brakes made his way to his own desk, he asked a couple of the permanent station ladies if they knew where the Chief was. They had no idea.

The squad room had six desks in it, all set back-to-back. This had been done so that partners could work in a face-to-face environment. Brakes, however, didn't have a partner; no one would work with him due to his bullish, temerarious methods when out on the field.

Between each set of desks there are large windows framed in a dark oak wood. Everyone else who worked within the area kept their work space clean and tidy. Brakes, however, had needed an extra desk just to keep his filing system on. There was paperwork everywhere; it was a wonder he could make any sense of it at all.

He had only been sat for a few minutes, glancing through the bag snatchers file he was ready to update, when...

"Brakes, if you're in here, get your broken body in my office RIGHT NOW!"

Standing from his chair, Brakes made his way back towards the Chiefs office. Glancing around the room, Brakes could see everyone smiling knowingly in his direction. Clearly, news of his most recent efforts had found its way around the office, and fast.

"Sit down, Brakes," the Chief said the moment Brakes stepped into his office. Sitting at his desk, the Chief's gaze hardened while Brakes made his way to the chair across from his superior.

“Now, what am I going to do with you?” The Chief asked, his voice unnervingly even. “You recklessly endanger citizens, not to mention yourself. Ever since you were declined the ‘call up’, you have gone into self-destruction mode.” Standing from his seat, the Chief continued.

“Look, I get it. We all want to be out there fighting for our country, but you need to try and get this straight in your mind: We are vital to the war effort. We keep the home fires burning, the streets safe and speak up for those that no longer can.”

The Chief’s words were a reminder, one Brakes had heard many times before. That did not make it any less annoying to hear it again, of course.

“I get it, Chief, but that doesn’t stop my insides twisting every time I see someone in uniform. I feel disgusted, even ashamed of myself that I am not with them,” Brakes explained, trying to keep calm. “I see people pointing. Talking about me. There are others my age that, due to the law passed by parliament, can’t join the war effort and are suffering the same kind of disgust from others.”

Drawing a deep breath, Brakes shook his head and did his best to quell the simmering emotions that were ready to erupt within him. He heard the Chief sigh, a single finger tapping against the wooden desk.

“It’s hard for everyone, Brakes. But you have got to get past this, and I believe I have the just the thing to help you do that.”

Opening his desk drawer, the Chief pulled out some papers and dropped them in front of Brakes. “There has been a murder. Male, forty-three years of age, amputee. Uniformed officers have closed the scene and are awaiting your arrival at Truston Vicarage.”

Picking up the papers, Brakes looked over the information the Chief had given him. While rifling through the files, he heard his superior speak up again, this time from the office window.

“Oh, and Brakes? Remember to be professional.” The Chief said, turning his back on the desk. “And no more of your dangerous antics.”

CHAPTER TWO

Brakes emerged from the station, bruised and tired, where Vera was already waiting for him. She gave him a tentative smile, still guilty over the accident that had left him with more pain than he cared to acknowledge, and with possible further injury to his wrist. He ignored her. Not in a malicious way, but because he simply couldn't deal with pleasantries right now. Vera started the engine and Brakes hopped into the car. The crime scene loomed ahead—only fifteen miles away—and that distance felt far too short.

The drive was mostly silent, save for Vera's occasional mutterings about how sorry she was for adding to his injuries. Thirty minutes later, they pulled up to the scene. A small crowd had gathered, with the curious onlookers being held back by the local constables. Brakes shot Vera a glance, curt but direct.

"Stay with the car," he ordered and stepped out of the vehicle without waiting for a reply.

The body of John Marsh lay nestled in the tall grass reeds, obscured from the road but not invisible to someone with an attentive dog. Brakes surveyed the area, noting the solitary set of tire tracks leading toward the reeds and back again.

The corpse itself was twisted in an unnatural position, the kind that only happened after severe trauma. Marsh's injuries were vicious—he'd been badly beaten, though that much was obvious even at first glance. There were no signs of multiple comings and goings. The grass was trampled, but only by footprints—no visible drag marks or blood trails leading to the location where the body lay.

It was clear to Brakes that this wasn't where John Marsh had died—it was where he had been dumped.

What struck Brakes immediately, though, was the absence of Marsh's prosthetic leg. The lower half of his right leg was a clean stump, but there was no sign of the prosthetic anywhere nearby. The fact that the limb was missing and there were no signs of struggle at the scene disturbed Brakes. Why take a man's artificial leg?

Brakes scrawled a few quick notes in his pad before heading over to a uniformed officer and the man who had found the body.

“Sir,” the officer said, handing over some documents. “The victim’s papers. His name was John Marsh. Forty-three years old. Lived at the Marsh Estate, by the River Bure.”

“Thanks,” Brakes said, barely sparing the papers a glance. He turned to the man who had discovered the body. “Walk me through how you found him.”

The man, a local dog walker, fidgeted. “I already told all this to the other officer.”

“I need to hear it for myself,” Brakes replied evenly. “Please. Start from the beginning.”

With a sigh, the man relented. “I walk my dog, Suzi, every morning. We take the same route from my place down toward the sea, past the vicarage, and then on the footpath leading toward St. Mary’s Church,” he explained, his voice quiet. “I let her off the lead once we’re on the path. Everything was normal until Suzi started barking at something in the grass, wouldn’t come when I called. I went in after her and... well, that’s when I found the body.”

“Anything out of the ordinary?” Brakes asked. “Blood? His prosthetic leg?”

“No. No blood. No leg, either,” the man answered quickly. “May I go now? Suzi’s hungry, and I need to get home.”

Brakes nodded. “We’ll be in touch if we need anything more.”

He gestured toward the paramedics to have the body taken away. The onlookers, still milling about, caught his eye; perhaps they could help search the area. In wartime, it wasn’t uncommon to enlist the public’s help in such matters.

He instructed the six bystanders, now including Vera, after Brakes beckoned her over to form a line. “Three feet apart,” he directed. “If you see anything unusual, stop and shout. We’re looking for anything related to the crime, more specifically a prosthetic leg.”

They combed through the area systematically, heading up the path toward the vicarage, a handsome red brick building with leaded windows. After circling the building, they returned along the route toward St. Mary’s Church. The area was dotted with small lakes and rivers, places that could have easily hidden the body for years. And yet, the killer had chosen to dump Marsh where he would be quickly found. Why? It was a bold, almost careless move.

The questions multiplied. Why take the prosthetic leg? Why beat him so severely and we're still unsure about the ultimate cause of death? Why leave the body where it would be discovered, rather than weigh it down and let it sink in the nearby waters?

They found nothing and, one by one, the onlookers began to disperse. Brakes sighed, knowing that the next step would be even more unpleasant—informing Marsh's family. Vera, however, seemed to be buzzing with excitement. Her first real case was proving to be far more than she had ever anticipated.

"Let's go," Brakes sighed. It would be better to get the process of announcing Marsh's death over and done with. With Vera following close behind, Brakes made his way back to the car.

Fifteen miles later, they pulled up at the Marsh Estate, a sprawling property on the banks of the River Bure. A large sandstone mansion loomed over the land. Stepping out of the car, Brakes instructed Vera to stay in the vehicle again and approached the front door. He knocked; the weight of the metal knocker heavy on the door as it echoed throughout the quiet estate grounds. A moment later, the door opened to reveal a housemaid, just barely out of her teens.

"Inspector Brakes, Norwich Police," he said by way of introduction. "I need to speak to the lady or gentleman of the house."

Nodding, the maid led him through a grand hallway to a back parlour with wide windows overlooking the serene river. Positioning himself by the window, Brakes allowed the calming view to settle his thoughts until a soft voice interrupted him.

"Inspector Brakes?"

He turned to see a striking woman in her late twenties, with jet-black hair and piercing blue eyes that were almost unnaturally bright against her pale skin. She smiled politely, though her eyes reflected concern.

"I am Ann Marsh. Rosie—that is, my housemaid— said you wished to see me. What's this about?" Ann asked whilst gesturing to Brakes to be seated opposite her.

Brakes cleared his throat, taking a seat on the sofa across from her. "I need to ask you about your brother, John."

Ann's smile faltered. "What has he done now?" She asked with a faint laugh. "He's always getting into some sort of trouble. Ever since the accident, he's been... difficult."

"Accident?"

Ann nodded, her expression softening. "Our parents died in a car crash several years ago. John lost his leg in the same accident. I think he blames himself for it, though he'd never admit that to anyone."

Brakes made a mental note of that. "I'm sorry for your loss, Miss Marsh. May I call you Ann?"

"Of course," she replied.

"There's no easy way to say this" Brakes began, choosing his words carefully. "John's body was found this morning near Truston Vicarage."

The words seemed to knock the breath from her body. Ann's face drained of colour as she stared at him, her composure crumbling. At that moment, the housemaid, Rosie, entered the room carrying a tea tray. Looking at Ann's face, which now held a blank, cold stillness, Rosie placed the tray on the table between the sofa's and hastily went to stand by her side.

"Ann! What's wrong?" She asked, kneeling beside Ann and taking hold of her hand.

Brakes found the gesture unusually intimate for a housemaid, but he let it pass. Ann stammered something incoherent, her body trembling as she tried to fight back the tears. Brakes felt an odd pang of sympathy for the young woman.

"Is there anyone we can call for you?" He asked softly.

Ann shook her head, her voice barely audible. "No... no. I'm all that's left. I have no family now."

With a final choked sob, she fled the room, leaving Brakes with Rosie. The maid glanced at him, her eyes equally blue and just as piercing. They were close in age, and for a moment, Brakes couldn't help but notice a strange resemblance between the two women.

Then, after a long pause, Brakes said, "Please, show me to John's room."

Rosie stood silently for a moment, as though deciding whether to refuse, before nodding and leading him upstairs. The house was grand but not lavish, its hallways quiet except for the sound of Rosie and Brakes' footsteps echoing against the floorboards.

"How did he die?" Rosie asked as they climbed the staircase.

"We're still figuring that out," Brakes replied, dodging the full truth for now. "You and Miss Marsh seem quite close."

Rosie smiled faintly. "We grew up together. My mother worked here as the housemaid for over thirty years. When she passed, Ann asked me to stay on. We've always been close; more like sisters than employer and maid."

"And your father? Is he still with us?"

"No. Sadly, he died from his injuries during the first war many years ago. Mother never re-married."

The pieces began to click into place for Brakes. Sisters, or something more complicated than that?

They reached John's room, which was sparsely furnished. A bed, a wardrobe, a chest of drawers and nothing more. It didn't take long for Brakes to find what he was looking for—or rather, what he wasn't. John's prosthetic leg was tucked inside the wardrobe.

"Is this the missing leg? from the crime scene?" Brakes wondered to himself whilst picking it up.

"Curious," Brakes muttered to himself. If John had left the house without his prosthetic, where were his crutches? They were not at the crime scene, either. Rosie soon left John's room, and Brakes was grateful for the privacy.

After a thorough search yielded nothing else of interest, Brakes made his way back downstairs. Ann had returned to the parlour, her face streaked with tear marks but otherwise composed.

"I'm sorry to press you in your grief, Ann, but I need to know more about your brother's life. Did he ever leave the house without his prosthetic leg?" Brakes asked.

Ann shook her head. “Never. He was too self-conscious about it. He hated being seen with crutches. Why?”

“I found his artificial leg in his wardrobe,” Brakes replied.

“Oh, no. No, no, that’s his second one,” Ann said quickly with a shake of her head. “He had a replacement made years ago, just in case he needed it.”

“Are they both made the same?” Brakes asked. “By the same company?”

“Yes, metal and leather, lightweight,” she explained. “Are you saying it is missing? Why would they take his leg? It has no value.”

“I am trying to figure that out, Ann,” Brakes said, his voice gentle so as not to upset her further. “I may need to visit you again in the future. The coroner will let you know when your brother’s body will be available for collection. Thank you for your time.”

Turning, Brakes made his way towards the door to leave. Ann simply stood there, silent; her eyes rimmed red as she stared out of the window.

Brakes hesitated for a moment, then turned to ask, “Was there anyone he might have had a dispute with? Anyone who would want to harm him?”

Ann’s eyes widened, and she looked away. “Not that I know of,” she said, but her voice wavered. “John had... issues, but he wasn’t violent. Just... troubled.”

Brakes leaned forward, catching her eye. “I need to know everything, Ann. If there’s something you’re not telling me, now is the time.”

“No,” Ann whispered, shaking her head as she tried to hold back her tears. “I have nothing more to add, Inspector.”

Brakes hesitated. He had a gut feeling that Ann was holding back, but in a bid to allow her time to grieve, he gave a final nod and made his exit. As the door closed heavily behind him, he paused for a few seconds on the front door step, mulling over all that had transpired. Finally, he returned to the car.

“Home please, Vera,” Brakes sighed, sliding into the passenger seat. “They are bringing what is left of my motorcycle home and I want to be there when they arrive.”

Brakes had been home a little over an hour when there was a knock at the door. It was the men delivering his motorbike. Tiredly, he requested that they put what was left of the vehicle in his garage. Once they had left, Brakes took the time to finally take a look at what had become of his beloved motorbike.

The whole front end had become a tangled mess of metal and wires. The petrol tank had a big dent in it, and one of the exhausts had been ripped off completely. It was clear that, while restoring his beloved motorbike was possible, it would have to wait until Brakes' wrist had healed. For now, all he could do was throw a sheet over it and close the garage doors.

Returning to the house, Brakes went to pour himself a stiff drink, only to find that he had run out. Though he was not an excessive drinker, he did like to keep a bottle of Scotch on hand, especially for occasions such as this.

Feeling even more deflated, Brakes put the Scotch bottle down with a sigh. Grabbing his coat, he decided on a visit to his close friend, Doug.

His friend since childhood, Brakes and Doug had become closer in more recent years due to their shared mental anguish over not being able to join their other mates on the front line. Now a flight training officer, Doug worked at RAF Mousehold Heath where British, American and even Polish pilots were trained.

The distinctive, yellow-coloured training aircraft that was housed there—a Miles M.14 Magister—was a regular sight in the skies above the city. Similarly, the streets of Norwich were regularly populated with various uniformed officers, both men and women, all from the America's, Poland and Britain.

The American's hadn't officially joined the war yet. However, many US citizens had felt the need to volunteer, with many of them already having family living in Britain. Others simply wanted to join the struggle or had followed their friends over.

As in most towns and cities around the country, the black-market scene was a major blight on all concerned. Doug didn't partake in any kind of black-market goods; however, he did have a solid supply of whisky and other US goods through gifts from the graduating pilots he had trained. Brakes could usually find Doug at the Bell Hotel, which doubled as a dormitory for the American Women's Army Air Corps on the top floor.

The Bell was situated on Oxford Hill, not too far from the marketplace. This location was, in fact, one of a few reasons why Brakes enjoyed taking his morning tea in the marketplace. It allowed him to engage in a ritual of morning greetings with many uniformed women as they walked through the market to work.

There was no denying that Doug enjoyed being surrounded by beautiful ladies in uniform, too; it was predominantly why the Bell Hotel had become one of his friend's favourite spots to spend his time.

Brakes walked into the Bell and searched the bar for Doug. Though it had just opened for the day, the bar was already quite busy with a mixture of regular patrons and uniformed officers. Almost everywhere he looked, Brakes could see that every dark oak table had been taken. The beer, mild and bitter, was clearly going down well; he could already spy a collection of empty glasses growing on various tables.

Making his way through the sea of blue, brown and a couple of black uniforms. Scanning the room once more, Brakes finally spotted Doug sat on a table in the corner, close to the piano. Waving to catch his attention, Brakes gestured to his friend to see if he needed another pint. Catching Brakes' eye, Doug lifted his pint glass and gave a thumbs up.

Even though there were two people working the bar, it took several minutes for Brakes to finally get served. Once he had his drinks though, he realised he had a problem: How would he carry two pints of beer with a broken wrist?

Logically, taking two trips would be the best course of action, but with the ever-increasing crowd, it would be a slow process. Sighing, Brakes left his pint on the bar and, taking Doug's pint, made his way through the crowd to his friends' table.

"You sit down, mate," Doug said quickly, clearly having seen Brakes' struggle. "I'll grab your pint."

Doug left for the bar while Brakes took a seat. His friend was quick to return to the table with the second drink and settled back down.

"You didn't bother to visit me in hospital, then?" Brakes asked, his question not at all malicious. Doug simply smiled and took a glug of his pint.

"I knew you weren't going to die; how many times have you come off that bloody thing anyway? At least twelve times now, right?" Doug chuckled and shook his head.

“Yes, you always break something, but you always seem to walk out under your own steam. So, no, I didn’t see any point in visiting. I knew you’d find me afterwards, anyway.”

“Well, I love your confidence in my ability to outdo my self-destructive nature,” Brakes grinned, and lifted his pint glass with his good hand. “To celebrate, what’s the chances of a bottle of your finest Scotch, then?”

“I knew it,” Doug said, laughter escaping him. “And I’m well ahead of you, Brakes. Here ya go.” A second later, Doug was producing a bottle from his coat pocket and handed it over to Brakes. “Now, you go easy with that—we don’t want you falling over and breaking anything else, now, do we?”

By Stephen Cohen

THE FINAL WORD

I am concluding this issue of the Indie Writers' Digest with a little about the Editor, Bryony Petersen.

Bryony Petersen is my author name, and when I first decided to try my hand at writing seriously, I was keen to do so under a separate identity, for a variety of personal reasons, but chiefly because I was (back then) a very shy, introverted personality.

Thankfully, a lot has changed for me since then!

I have an author website (<https://brynpetersen.co.uk>) where visitors can subscribe to my Newsletter (What's Going On?), read my occasional blogs, find links to my published books and also download, for free, all issues of my online magazine.

The Indie Writers' Digest began as a monthly publication, which I initially called 'Bryn and Friends', and in the beginning, it was intended so more of a social publication of writing by myself and my independent writer friends, to be shared among ourselves. However, I realized there was a greater need for Indie Writers to be able to promote themselves. The promotional opportunities accessible to traditionally published writers are generally unavailable to independent writers, and we were missing several tricks!

The Indie Writers' Digest released its first quarter issue in February 2025, and I am extremely proud of the quality magazine it has become. Not every independent writer will be included in the Digest. I believe the initial issues have set a very high benchmark for the future.

One of the features I want to begin to include in future issues is a letters and tips section, for Indie Writers to exchange ideas, swap stories and even perhaps make writing connections. As the Indie Writers' Digest becomes established, and I know it will take time to build the kind of reputable brand I want it to have, I am hopeful all contributing Indie Writers will have the chance to connect with publishers and media outlets (such as TV or film) because I firmly believe there is as much writing talent within the Independent Writing community as there ever is within the traditionally published writing community.

BRYONY PETERSEN