

It was a chance conversation between myself and Nicola Marshall from West Lindsey District Council in Gainsborough Market Place on a scorching summer Saturday in 2023, that sparked my involvement in WordFest - it was a Literary Event, and Nicola planned to develop the Festival further for 2024. I was excited, and immediately offered to lead a series of writing workshops aimed to stimulate and equip new writers.

I am delighted to present to you this collection of short stories written by eight participants of the 'Writing is Fun' course held at the excellent Gainsborough Library, on six Saturday mornings between April and May 2024. I congratulate the writers for their enthusiasm and commitment during those six weeks and for their remarkable success to write and complete a short story.

Gill Blow, Writer and Playwright



Price: Free

Gainsborough Voices

by WordFest Writers

Gainsborough



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INTRODUCTIONS

Councillor Stephen Bunney, Chairman of West Lindsey District Council

I am delighted to introduce this collection of new short stories which have been written as part of Gainsborough WordFest. Gainsborough WordFest was supported by West Lindsey District Council through the UK Government's Shared Prosperity Funding. The inspiration for the festival programme came very much from Gainsborough people themselves in making their 'Gainsborough Voices' heard. The writing workshop took place in early summer 2024 and this anthology was launched as part of the WordFest Literature Village market in September. I think it shows just how much creativity and talent there is across our communities, and I look forward to WordFest continuing to reach out and celebrate more of our talented communities across the District.

Gill Blow, Writer and Playwright

It was a chance conversation between myself and Nicola Marshall from West Lindsey District Council in Gainsborough Market Place on a scorching summer Saturday in 2023, that sparked my involvement in WordFest - it was a Literary Event, and Nicola planned to develop the Festival further for 2024. I was excited, and immediately offered to lead a series of writing workshops aimed to stimulate and equip new writers. I am delighted to present to you this collection of short stories written by eight participants of the 'Writing is Fun' course held at the excellent Gainsborough Library, on six Saturday mornings between April and May 2024. I congratulate the writers for their enthusiasm and commitment during those six weeks and for their remarkable success to write and complete a short story. The Writing Group and myself really appreciate the support from WLDC in the production of the book which is a testimony to what can be achieved. The most significant outcome is that the Group will continue to meet and support each other and invite new people to join them to grow the fascinating world of writing in Gainsborough.

A Day at The Coast

Sue Ball

Laura walked along the beach sandals in hand, she felt the sand between her toes, and the breeze against her cheeks. The pier was behind her, and she was heading towards the harbour and the old town.

She had done this walk many times with Daniel, holding hands and talking. The Punch and Judy man was giving a show from his colourful canvas theatre. The older members of the audience sat in deck chairs, whilst the children sat on blankets on the sand. You could hear the squeals of delight as Mr Punch set about the Policeman and the other members of the puppet cast. Smiling to herself Laura carried on along the beach.

Suddenly she was aware of the smell of food, it was wafting her way from the promenade, this made her hungry, so she put on her sandals and climbed the wooden steps to the road, and joined the throng of people, and awaiting shops and restaurants. Laura had considered a take-a-way but decided against it due to the number of sea birds awaiting a free lunch. She chose a small quiet café away from the front. The café was not fancy, but it was inviting, it was painted white, like a number of the buildings around her, and it had chintz curtains and window boxes displaying summer blooms, and a blackboard showing a varied menu. Laura decided it must be fish, fresh from the boats in the harbour. Laura had to lower her head to get through the door, it was so bright outside, she had to adjust her eyes on entering. Then she spotted a small table in the window and took a seat. The table was covered in a bright yellow, slightly sticky wipeable cloth, decorated with large white daisies. On the table was

a bottle of vinegar, and a container of salt, there was also a cylindrical pot holding two sets of cutlery and paper napkins. A young woman came over to Laura's table she had pink spiky hair and tattoos, and without even glancing at Laura said "yeah, what do you want, oh and the plaiice is off" Laura chose cod and chips and mushy peas, and as the café was licenced a glass of white wine.

Whilst Laura waited for her meal to arrive, she watched holiday makers pass the window. Young mums struggling to push pushchairs up the cobbled incline toward the lighthouse, to take the sea views, and that of the pretty harbour, where small boats bobbed up and down on the incoming tide. Then a short sharp shower sent people scurrying into the surrounding shops for shelter.

When the food arrived, it reminded Laura of holidays at the coast with her parents. They always had fish and chip lunches in cafes, very much like this one, when bread and butter and a pot of tea were a must. Sadly, both her parents had passed away when she was relatively young, and since Daniel had left her, she had been quite lonely.

Only three short years ago Laura was in a loving relationship with a wonderful man, this part of the coast was their favourite and they would spend hours on the beach and around the harbour through the summer months. If work would allow, they would stay the weekend in a B&B, preferably with a sea view. Their relationship deepened and they became inseparable. After six months they decided to move in together, it was fun looking for their first home. They were both in their thirties and had flats to sell so on paper, at least, they could afford a sizable mortgage.

Initially Laura felt that Daniel was reluctant to give up his bachelor pad but finding the perfect house he agreed to put his flat on the market. Initially all was well, but Laura began to think they had over stretched themselves, and Daniel still hadn't found a buyer for his flat, and they

were struggling financially.

Nevertheless, Laura loved her home (a new build) and she took it upon herself to put her stamp on it. Fortunately, there was no real DIY to do as Daniel was not a hands-on type of person.

The garden was a blank canvas, Laura enjoyed creating flower beds of perennial plants such as lupins and delphiniums. However she needed the help of professionals for the bigger landscaping jobs, she had to be careful with the budget, but she got the basics done. She could now dabble in her now developing garden which she had had laid to grass, apart from an area of patio leading from the French windows. Here she had planters set with multi coloured pansies.

In his favour Daniel was a great cook. He invented some great recipes as well as the classics, with desserts to die for.

He had his collection of gadgets which Laura used at her peril, especially his Japanese knives. She was allowed to stack the dishwasher. Laura was quite happy with this arrangement, a cook she was not.

The couple got along as they complemented each other, and Laura loved Daniel. Then they found themselves picking up extra hours at work to cover the mortgage payments, time stolen from their weekends together. Daniel, especially, was unhappy with how the house was draining their income and he couldn't afford to go out with the lads. This annoyed Laura, he was thirty-five not eighteen, it was time he grew up. Nevertheless, they hung on to the idea that things would improve. But then the arguments started, and the atmosphere became toxic, there was no romance any more just resentment.

Then one evening, following a fantastic meal, Laura felt that there was something wrong. Daniel was very quiet, but she knew he

was going to make a speech. 'It's not you, he said 'It's me, I've met someone at work'. Laura was shocked but not surprised; she had seen this coming for some time. Daniel was gone within a couple of days. Luckily, he still had his flat in the city. Laura was devastated, but she was also aware that she was going to lose her beautiful home. Laura would remain in the house until it sold. The ironic thing was that they both needed to pay the mortgage. The house went straight onto the market. Reluctantly Laura had the job of showing prospective buyers around the property. She had to put up with unfavourable comments, criticising her choice in décor and soft furnishings. Didn't they understand she was desperately unhappy. She felt like saying how dare you disrespect my home, go away. But they did go away, and no second visits. After almost a year the house sold, Laura felt that everything was now definite, their relationship was over, and there was no need to contact each other anymore.

So, another year on here she was clearing her plate, and although she would love a dessert, she resisted. Yes, another year on, Laura bought herself a little flat, not far from where she was today, just a bit further up the coast, and she was happy but longed for someone to share her life with, and today had a date. She had had her hair cut into a bob and coloured to hide any stray greys. She was wearing a calf length dress, in her favourite shade of blue. She still had time in hand, so she decided to take a look around the shops, mainly little independent shops which she liked selling souvenirs and colourful sticks of rock. She bought herself a new hat and some expensive looking sunglasses. She looked at herself in the shop window, not bad. Then Laura walked towards the harbour, their meeting place. She could see her date standing by the harbour wall, she stood for a moment, did she really want to do this? Then he turned and saw her, Daniel walked towards her, and they embraced. It felt so real but then Laura had always loved him.

Skipping Again

Elizabeth Crow

Goodness me, that felt so good, being back in the county I grew up in. I stepped onto the platform from the early train. Just one small case was all I had to show for the life I'd led for the last fifteen years. Its wheels clicking as I pulled it along. I found it a reassuring rhythm accompanying my return. I was home.

I wondered if anyone else felt my joy, could they tell I was so happy? I was back, but no one noticed. How could they? It was as if I was gliding along, a little higher, a little better than all these others. I stopped myself and thought come on Liz, who are you kidding? You must stop pretending now, you can't keep this pretence up for ever. I knew that my two best friends, once I got around to contacting them, would know there was something different about this visit, coming too soon after my last. I sighed; they'd have to know eventually because this visit wouldn't end. I wasn't going to return.

Smiling on seeing a little girl skipping along at the side of her parents, I felt a sadness suddenly. A sadness I wasn't expecting. My thoughts brought my parents to me. Lovely memories of my happy childhood. I loved to skip and then I smiled on remembering my last attempt at skipping! When did my bones become so heavy?

Most of this throng of people who'd travelled on the same train were tourists. Only really noticing now as I joined the long queue for a taxi. I hadn't paid attention on the journey as I was far too busy watching the beautiful countryside speed past. You would never think to match blue and green in an outfit, blue and green should never be seen my Mum used to say. I chuckled to myself, remembering Mum. I miss all her funny little ways. Yes, blues and greens in every shade,

all happily cohabiting in our glorious country. I suddenly felt a little out of place. My expensive dress and jacket a little too formal. I felt as if eyes were on my stocking seams. Normally loving the feel of the silk on my skin, I wished I was wearing normal tights. The silk irritated me. I'd be found out soon enough, but my two wonderful friends would know instantly if I were missing the stockings they always admired so. You always look so well turned out they'd say. They'd soon know I'd been completely turned out, inside out!

Near the taxi queue was a burger van and the smell of those onions made my tummy rumble. Suddenly realising it had been quite a while since I'd eaten, I thought of my possible options for an early lunch. How would the girls react to a sudden, late invite to join me for food in our favourite café? How was I going to tell them? I settled into the back seat of the cab and told the driver my destination. I sighed, home, please take me home.

Acacia Lane welcomed me with dappled sunlight, even more pretty than I remembered. I stood at the drive end where the taxi had left me and took some deep breaths. Just for a moment I was a child again and I could hear Mum calling me in for lunch. Opening my eyes from my little reverie I proceeded up to the house. Our lovely family home had been rented out since Dad died. Mum had passed a few years earlier. On hearing that our long-term tenants were moving away, my getaway plan had started to form. This was my chance.

The key in the lock sounded so familiar and with tingly excitement I stepped into the hall. There was a smell of polish mixed with the delicious scent of the multi-coloured sweet peas that sat in Mum's best cut glass vase on the hall table. How kind of Mrs. Parkin to leave such a welcome for me. Dear Mrs Parkin had cleaned for my parents for years and became a real friend to us all. She'd done an amazing job of preparing the house for my arrival. I popped my case upstairs into my old bedroom and I studied my face in the bathroom mirror as I washed my hands. I washed and washed, as if it were

helping to clear away the past fifteen years. The water was warm, and the soap bubbles quietly popped and crackled in the colours of the sweet peas. Iridescent and mesmerizing.

I rang Karen first and then Jane and to my great relief my friends were free for lunch. They were excitedly puzzled to hear that I was in town again. They'd both asked 'what are you doing back here so soon? Where are you staying?' I'd assured them all would be revealed over lunch at the café. All our announcements, new jobs, new fellas, new life plans, every single one had been discussed and applauded by us three at Poppy's Café. I was going to enjoy the short walk there and enroute I would decide the best way to break the news. I wasn't however, going to enjoy revealing the real details of what had appeared to be a charmed existence.

The walk to Poppy's was, as expected, a real tonic. It was clear to me now how to tell the girls; my steps became quicker and once more I felt as though I was gliding along. It was a beautiful day and now that I'd changed into a summer dress, the sun seemed to caress any bare flesh. I felt delightfully free already.

How lucky, our favourite table in the café was available. I sat by the window and sighed. It was a sigh of relief, as I was in one of my happy places. So familiar, so comforting. The wonderful smells of the meals intermingled with coffee, whose machine whooshed away, reassuringly loud. I was still enjoying the caress of the sun through the window and Jenny, the proprietor, smiled and waved from behind her busy counter. She smiled and waved again, this time to Karen and Jane, who were approaching with hasty excitement.

My story seemed to spill out, freeing me from its burden so easily and the feeling was amazing. How silly I'd been to keep all this pain bottled up. My two dear friends couldn't believe what they were hearing, and I felt they were a little cross that I hadn't shared my problems fully over the years. I'd kept things hidden away behind

a false façade. Never again. We all cried. We all laughed. Lunch was delicious and we all felt as one once more. Life was going to be amazing from now on. Single life for me, happy and free. Free from these damn stockings too, again the girls were incredulous. From now on I was going to wear what I wanted!

We arranged to meet again the next day, and they hurried off to continue with their family and work commitments. I stayed a while longer, looking out at the seemingly happy people in the brightness of the park outside. The sun made the grass greener and the amazing variety of colours in the flower beds even more stunning. Groups of adults and children, single strollers, some with dogs, all passing by before me. I love people watching.

I said goodbye to Jenny, and I stepped outside into the warm air, full of happy chatter, dog barks and children's laughter. I stopped! My gaze became transfixed on an approaching figure. Suddenly, no one else existed, all went completely quiet. I knew that gait, that cheeky grin. Now I could see his twinkling eyes.' I can't believe it 'he said, 'I've just bumped into Karen and Jane, and they told me you were here. I'm back in town too, keeping an eye on Mum. She's doing really well considering her age.' He always was such a caring man I thought.

Now the sky seemed even bluer, the bird song prettier and the people around us became visible again. 'Welcome home Liz' he said. I suddenly felt lighter, and do you know, I was going to try skipping again. I really was home.

Supergrass

Sarah Garden

All was dark. There was a dull humming in his ears. The air inside was stifling.

Beads of sweat dripped from Charlie Logan's brow and trickled down his shirt collar causing him to shiver. It was hot inside, but this was the sweat of intense, absolute terror. Charlie lay there on hard, wooden boards. There was no luxury of silk or satin, soft and enveloping that usually lined a coffin of such sturdy oak. He had clawed wildly at the heavy lid above him and had fought hard whilst he was being pinned down and forced into the box.

A sudden sharp punch to his stomach had momentarily winded him, enabling his captors to slam down the coffin lid with an almighty thud! He could hear loud hammering around him as nails were beaten into place thwarting his escape. Eventually running out of energy, Charlie lay there. He had been given time to ponder his actions about why he was there in his present situation and the mistake he had made as the snarling voice in the dark had suggested to him.

Now Charlie was not a bad man, he was just easily led. He could be persuaded with the promise of cash and lots of it that a venture however crooked was a good idea. After all every man had his price and had to make a living. This time though he was out of his depth, in fact he was drowning and his present predicament of being trapped was testament to it.

It had all begun late one evening and Charlie was going home

after a night out with his mates, Stan Evans, Benny and Robbie McDowd at the local pub. After some heavy drinking and some dominoes, they parted ways, saying their goodbyes loudly and slightly slurred. Charlie weaved a little as he walked, but the cold night air was sobering as it pierced through his grey suit jacket.

Stan, Robbie and Benny had gone different ways and Charlie was alone. He wasn't afraid as this was his local stomping ground, and it made him feel at ease. He turned a corner down a dimly lit alleyway, a short cut to his home, when hands grabbed at him. He felt a sharp pain in his temple. It was as if he was spinning down a long, dark hole. Then all was pitch black. There was nothing.

It had happened so quickly. He didn't even have a chance to get a punch in to defend himself. When he came to, he was heavily bound to a hard, wooden chair, a bright light shone directly into his eyes, blinding him. He was unable to make out much in the darkness, only shadows, outlines of several large set individuals. Excruciating pain wracked his body.

'Well, Logan do you know why you're here?' A voice rasped. Charlie shook his head.

His mouth tasted of blood, metallic and sticky. He tried to answer through feelings of immense pain but all he could mutter was a strange gurgling sound as blood gushed into his throat, making it difficult to breathe, impossible to talk. He felt sick to the pit of his stomach. He knew what he was missing. An action taken so no one could hear the screams. Charlie could not reply. He realised this was the penalty for being a grass, a police informant.

'It's come to my attention that information has been passed on which has had severe consequences on our operations. You provided that information and now to our detriment our ventures have had to

temporarily cease and move elsewhere'. The voice growled.

'Now you know the error of your ways you can have as much time as you want to contemplate your actions'. It added.

With that Charlie felt another painful blow to the back of his head and once again all was dark. When he finally came around, it was still dark. It felt confined. Was there an escape route? Nothing came to mind. He was trapped. His head throbbed.

Suddenly there was a rattling sound on the wood above him. Terror struck at his very soul. He could only imagine that he was being buried alive and earth was being shovelled onto the coffin.

Time was running out as the air was growing sparse. His lungs felt like they were going to explode as he gasped. He frantically began to claw at the wood. He could feel warm rivulets of stickiness running down his hands. His fingernails broke, several sheared off causing an intense pain in his fingers.

He stopped as he realised he was using up precious air. He wanted as many valuable moments as he could muster before his time in the casket ended. He remembered his childhood, not with affection, but with regret. An aggressive father, a mouse of a mother, several failed marriages and a couple of kids who no longer paid him any attention and a few stints in the clink that had not served him well. On the last stretch he was released early on the proviso that he worked as an informant to the local police. Charlie valued his freedom above all. He disliked nothing more than being caged up in prison. He was not always careful enough. He made mistakes leading to his arrest.

He had been asked to infiltrate a gang who were notorious in the area for kidnap, extortion and modern-day slavery. It had been

difficult to get a man on the inside from the force, so the decision had been made to put someone known in the criminal world into their fold. Charlie had been their choice.

He relished the challenge offered to him in return for his freedom as he had a grudge against several gang members who had double crossed him in a deal regarding some stolen goods. This would be his revenge. He realised that his life had not amounted to much as he looked back, but it was his life. He was not proud. Now he was paying the price and was confined this time to a much smaller space than a prison cell.

It was all over he thought to himself. He shuddered and gasped as he took several more breaths as the air grew thin.

Then all went black. All was still.

I rode with Jesús

Frank Goacher

The beach stinks. There's no other word for it. Some people get all romantic about beaches. They go on about the salty tang in the air, and the cry of the seagulls, and fish'n'chips wrapped in newspaper back when they used to do that, and ice cream and yadda yadda yadda.

This beach just stinks. It stinks of fish guts. Correction, it stinks of fish guts that the seagulls have puked up. There are no vans selling overpriced ice creams to loved up idiots, no gaudy trinkets retailing at £5.99, no crane games, no fairgrounds, hook a duck or those Belgian waffles with the fudge sauce and crushed nuts.

There is a seagull. It's floating dead in the water. I watch it for a while because there's bugger all else to do. I'm trying to work out if it's bobbing like that 'cause of the waves, or if something in there's eating it. Probably the waves. The water around here's so polluted the fish could walk on it, and they could walk on it on account of swimming in polluted water so much they've mutated, and now they're going to come up on land to claim benefits.

Maybe I'm being too subtle here. The beach is a shit hole. No tourists come here, no dog walkers, no donkey rides, no teenagers looking for a good place to drink and screw, no Pamela Anderson in her red swimsuit. No one. Nada. Zip.

It's perfect for our purposes.

'Yo, Manny! Stop staring at the bird and do something useful!'

I don't need to look 'round to know who just yelled at me. Frederickson – the guy's Texan accent is as broad as his arse. Everything about the guy is big. Big body, big personality, big mouth, carries a big-ass shotgun and a machete out on show. He knows how to use all that shit too, you gotta respect him for that at least. He just makes it hard by being so... So Frederickson.

'Like what?' I call back. 'We're stuck here 'til the other shipment gets here!'

'I dunno, check the cargo or something!'

I sigh theatrically and glance pointedly at Pierre. Pierre's the leader, Frederickson only thinks he is. It was his contacts that put us all together, put the cargo together and got us this job in the first place. He's lounging against a couple of rocks using his backpack as a pillow, looks unconcerned about the world, until you realize he's staring straight at the only road in or out of this place.

Pierre notices me glancing at him, and waves vaguely at the trucks. It's annoying he'll take Frederickson's side, but I get it. Frederickson's useful, for all he's a loudmouth. I'm useful too, but this is my last job on Pierre's crew. I know his little secret, you see.

I get up and wave a middle finger at Frederickson. Can't have him thinking he's won, after all. First truck's easy enough to check, packets are all intact, still secure on their pallets, and arranged by size. Second truck's not so easy. I look in. The cargo looks back at me. Don't get attached, I tell myself. Most of them will be dead soon. I check they're all still alive in there and close the truck up again. I shake my head.

I've fought all over the world, me. I fought in Afghanistan. I fought for Russia against Ukraine, then for Ukraine against Russia.

Never done anything like this, not 'til I met Pierre. You wouldn't think it to look at the guy. He's tall, not obviously muscular, going bald on top, wears fussy little glasses. Guy looks like a bank clerk. Guy ain't no bank clerk. He's corruption made flesh.

He's corrupted me all right, otherwise I wouldn't be here. Calenia, tiny African country. I'd forgive you if you hadn't even heard of it. They're at war with Zaneb, a slightly tinier African country you probably haven't heard of. OK, OK, I lie. I'd probably be here but fighting for whichever country was paying more. But Pierre sees other opportunities. The army's mostly out at the East, and there's money to be made in countries like this, when the army's otherwise occupied.

I glance at Frederickson and Jesús, the fourth guy on our team, and I wonder if they've been corrupted yet. I've known Frederickson for a long time, mostly by reputation. He'd do almost anything for a quick buck. Can't begrudge that in our line of work. Jesús is different. Quiet. I don't know what that guy's thinking. Don't know if he's thinking.

'It is time we are moving,' Pierre says suddenly. His long legs uncross and he unfolds himself into a standing position.

'The other truck's not here yet,' Frederickson protests.

'It is getting late, the Calenian army will be starting a sweeping soon. We move, Ulrich knows not to come too late. He will be turned back across border.'

Frederickson frowns at him. Pierre just looks back mildly, then nods towards the trucks.

'Come, you be driving. We take live cargo. Drive careful, it is worth much more.'

I can't help but smile and shake my head as I get into the

driver's seat of the other truck. Pierre's bad English is all a show, as fake as his glasses. I wonder if Frederickson's noticed this yet?

Jesús climbs in next to me and buckles up like a little schoolboy.

'I am glad to be on this truck,' he comments as I key the ignition. It fires on the third attempt, the lousy piece'a shit. 'The smell of the other one...'

'I know what you mean,' I mutter. 'The cargo's nervous, and you know what happens when the cargo gets nervous.'

He just grins and waves a hand in front of his nose.

That's pretty much the only conversation I get out of the guy. Maybe that's just as well. The roads around here are almost as bad as the ones back home. If the packets in the back of our truck split we'll be lucky to have any goods to sell.

I don't really know where we're going. Only Pierre knows, so I follow along behind his truck. Eventually we wind up in a valley. I can see our contacts are there already. I size them up as I get out the truck. Big men, but not fighters, I decide. The guy on the right is holding a length of branch like a club. He tries anything, I'll have it round his throat, no problem. Only the sack the middle one holds is of any interest.

The middle guy says something in Calenian. I slap Jesús' arm.

'You're up,' I say. 'Earn your keep.'

The conversation's hard to follow, with Jesús translating both ways. Pierre dips his head after the opening pleasantries.

'Very well. The merchandise, gentlemen.'

I'm up first. I grab one of the packages out of my truck. Pierre

slips Frederickson's machete from its sheath and gently pierces my package with the tip. A few grains of rice spill out.

'We have more rice,' he tells the man through Jesús. 'We have flour, salt, canned fruit and vegetables, dried herbs and spices. Frederickson, open the other truck.'

Frederickson obliges, and leads some of the live cargo out.

'We have sheeps,' Pierre says. 'We know Calenian army does not come to this valley. You keep them here, be careful, they will give you milk, wool and meat. Now. Our payment.'

The man on the left nods to the man in the middle. He holds the sack open for Pierre's inspection. He rummages around a little, the contents clicking and rustling like dice. He pulls out a small ruby and peers at it critically.

'This is less than we agreed,' Pierre says at once. Frederickson takes his cue and leads the sheep back onto the truck.

'Wait!' the man in the middle implores through Jesús. 'We have little food, we are forced to work in the mines! Even with the war security is tight, this is all we could steal!'

'I am hearing your problems, but seeing less money than we agreed,' Pierre says mildly. He looks up to the sky as if deep in thought. 'Still less is better than none. Take the food and the sheeps. But next time we come back, there will be double this,' he indicates the sack of rubies. 'If not, maybe we take aid in conventional route, no? Maybe the army will let you have some.' He grins at the man. 'Come, Manny. We unload other truck.'

It was all I could do not to laugh through the entire conversation. Pierre might talk tough, but I know his secret. He would have accepted half the payment, and his show of ruthlessness was for Frederickson

and Jesús, who hadn't yet cottoned on to his act. After all, they're in this for the money, not for the warm fuzzy feelings, or the good Karma. How would Frederickson feel, I wonder, when he saw the next payment was lower still? Would he sign on again, corrupted into selflessness as I had been?

Corrupted as I was, I had to say something.

'You can't keep doing this,' I say as we unload food. 'The Calenian army might be shit, but they'll catch you one day.'

'I know.'

'They'll shoot you,' I tell him.

He shrugs. 'I know that, too. But for today these people have food, they will survive a little longer. If one life can save a hundred, the world is richer, don't you think?'

I shake my head. I'm no good at philosophy.

'You won't come with me on the next trip?' Pierre asks.

'I can't, not since I figured out your tough guy act. One day I'll burst out laughing, then the whole jig's up.'

He smiles. 'I understand. But for now, you can help unload.'

I can help unload. And then we'll sneak back across the border, and I think I'll go home to Eastbourne for a while. Eat some fish'n'chips, buy some overpriced shit, and maybe get one of those Belgian waffles with the fudge sauce and crushed nuts.

Memories

Harry Hannam

In this modern age when it seems that technology is wanting to control our lives, each one of us can accurately recall experiences we have had. Our facility to recall scenes, smells, taste, and feelings, matches any memory provided by a computer - however big it may be.

Some of these experiences we may prefer to lock out of our minds, but nevertheless, we are able to retrieve them at the drop of a hat; recalling them generates anxiety, sadness, and sometimes horror to us - they are best confined to the dustbin. However, these nasty memories are outweighed by an abundance of happy ones.

The Warmth of Family

My earliest memories are of the love and care that my mother and my sister gave me. In later years my sister claimed, with some justification, that my mother had spoilt me. Be that as it may, I fondly remember that as a very young child my mother lifted me onto the kitchen sink and washed me from top to toe with one hand, whilst the other wrapped me close to her. Her rather large bosom was a good pillow for my head.

Since we lived a few minutes' walk from the Primary school both my sister and I attended, she walked me home each lunch time. Holding me tightly by the hand she patiently allowed me to show my independence by trying to roll my glass marble in the gutter. She held my hand until the day she died.

Works of Art

My memories of the works I have been privileged to have seen are fixed in my head. On my first trip to Windsor, I visited the museum in which the Royal collection of Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical drawings is housed - more valuable than the Crown Jewels which are closely guarded in the Tower of London. Each drawing reveals the genius of da Vinci – breathtaking, beautiful, and magnetic.

Within a museum in Jerusalem are the gruesome and chilling remnants of the pestilence which blighted Europe and beyond - the Holocaust. Plodding around the exhibits I was soon engulfed in a cloud of despair and depression and then suddenly my eyes alighted on a glass cabinet containing the Dead Sea Scrolls. Dating from a time before the birth of Christ Jesus. They are breathtaking, beautiful - clear, bold, and in immaculate Hebrew script - they appear to have recently been written on a parchment as white as driven snow.

It was with a large measure of anticipation that I scrambled up the marble steps of Oxford's Ashmolean Museum, entering the foyer, a light brighter than the midday sun hit me - two violins, brightly polished, glowing in hand crafted woods - housed in a large glass cabinet. Two violins, the work of an international renowned master craftsman, Stradivarius. Wonders of Nature.

Guy the Gorilla

I had the good fortune to see Guy, a Westland lowland gorilla at London Zoo. This grand and majestic primate had a fearsome appearance, but he was a gentle soul. Weighing some 520 lb (236kg), he was 5ft 4in tall. Seated behind a thick glass screen he ignored the animations of those visitors who were intent on teasing him, He ate his food in a graceful manner, taking great care to examine everything before eating it.

Apparently when wild birds flew into his cage, he gently held them in his hands and gently examined them, taking care not to harm them in anyway. Sadly, he died whilst having the dental treatment he needed because the sweets which foolish visitors gave him rotted his teeth.

A Lonely Grasshopper

It was whilst walking Spike, my dog - along the beaten track across which the Red Arrows (the RAF flying team) regularly flew, that a little girl excitedly drew her parents' attention to the grasshopper cupped in her hands.

Having never ever seen one at close quarters I hurried to see the captured insect. It was a magnificent creature. Dressed in a livery of a shiny pale green edged with a light golden band, it was streamlined and elegant shaped, like a tiny aerodynamic very expensive racing car.

I gave very little thought to the fact that as locusts they can destroy fields of valuable crops. On the plus side, however, they are a food source for many people who live in far flung countries. Not forgetting, of course, that at times John the Baptist once survived on a diet of locusts and honey.

Tropical Fish in the Red Sea

On my two visits to the Red Sea, I was taken aback by the breathtaking sight of the tropical fish swimming in the shallow waters just a few feet away from the shore. Shoals of these fish, of all sizes, shapes, all having electrifying colouring, provide a display more satisfying than the conglomeration of flashing neon signs that attract crowds of people to the hubs of many capital cities. Never have I seen such a mind-blowing display of natural beauty.

Some Memories of Arab Hospitality I Have Enjoyed

Brunch in a Mud Hut

My survey team and I had been busy all morning establishing signposts to show contractors the proposed route of a very long canal, which was to travel through a very dry and undulating landscape. We were all very thirsty and wanting a morning tea break. As we approached a settlement of small round mud huts one of the team invited me and my I interpreter (a Coptic Christian) to visit his mud hut for some refreshment. I happily accepted his invitation.

We were led into his home where he lived with his wife, his grandma, and his dog. As I entered the hut I saw his grandma, covered from head to toe in a flowing black garment. She was squatting on the dirt floor, smoking a large black pipe, and occasionally spitting the tobacco drains on the floor. She was isolated and remained in isolation. His wife, a young woman, without any communication at all, brought a tray of small glasses containing steaming hot, very sweet milk less tea.

As we sat in a semi-circular pattern on some sort of matting, I looked around me to discover that the wall surfaces were completely bare save for a part of a former package of washing powder- this scrap of cardboard was the only wall decoration. There were no internal partitions which marked sleeping, living and dining areas. Of course, I did not ask any questions.

In Arab households it is customary for women of the household not to be introduced to male visitors.

After I had managed to drink the very, very hot chi, I indicated that we should return to our work. My suggestion was met by some resistance - I was told that a meal had been prepared for me. Ten

to fifteen minutes later the young woman returned carrying a very large platter on which was a large dish of hot rice mixed with a very generous amount of chicken. We three men ate the food with our fingers, enjoying every mouthful. A meal fit for a King, provided by a poor and humble family.

A Morning Cuppa

Idling away my Saturday day - off, I visited a cluster of shops which a small Arab community used. To my complete surprise I discovered that one of these down at heel establishments stocked very expensive cigarettes such as would be stocked in the environs of London's Ritz Hotel. I bought a small tin of them and then wandered into a bare, arid, and dismal field in which a few tufts of grass grew among the scattered lumps of rock. Then just a few yards (or metres if you prefer) away, a herd of healthy-looking goats were busily foraging for something to eat.

A very young barefooted lad ran to me and gave a warm greeting with his palms together held towards his mouth. Words had no use for either of us, for his smile and his twinkling eye spoke volumes. With his hands cupped to his mouth I realized he was offering me a drink. I nodded my head to signal Yes; he immediately returned to his goats, held one, and milked him collecting the warm, fresh, and very nourishing liquid in his cupped hands. The milk he offered me was a token of his pleasure at meeting me.

Suddenly he discovered that one of his goats had wandered from the others and was climbing a small outcrop of rock at the top of which some long grass was growing. In a flash, the young goat herder had loaded a small round stone into a woven sling and having swirled it very vigorously expertly aimed the stone to hit the ground very near where the wayward goat was munching away. He, the goat immediately returned to the others.

What I had witnessed seemed to bring alive the Biblical story of how David slew the giant Goliath. That sling the Arab lad had used is now in my treasure box, the money I gave the young goat herder had happily surprised him.

A Walk in The Woods

June Jarman

It's so very calm, quiet and beautiful, except for the birds singing which is also serene. No cars revving up, horns beeping, general chatter, kids squealing -just peace. I love the woods where I walk my two dogs Zac who is an apricot colour and has wavy hair and Tilly who is black except for a blaze of white down her chest and has very tight curls. They are both cockapoos. We walk every morning and evening, come rain or shine. Spring has arrived, my favourite season. I can see the different shades of green in the trees and the bright green of the ferns as they push their way up through the earth. No flowers here but all the different shades of green more than make up for the lack of other colours. The path is strewn with small branches, twigs, leaves, pine needles and small pinecones with the outer layers eaten leaving only the centre core. This is evidence of squirrels around,

It is early evening and I'm taking the dogs for a quick walk before going out for the evening. I have been to the hairdressers and had my long auburn hair put up in curls, my green eyes go very well with the dress I have bought especially for tonight. The dogs always run up ahead and then wait for me to catch up, I round the bend expecting them to be stood with ears pricked up with an expression on their faces which says, hurry up Lucy. But they are not there, I call their names but not a sound except for the birds. Then I hear footsteps behind me, no time to turn around before I feel a sack being placed over my eyes. I start screaming and shouting for help, but I am grabbed, and tape is placed over my mouth and the sack pulled down over my head. It is rough and has bits of straw in it which make me want to sneeze. I start to kick out and flail my arms about wildly trying to catch my assailants. I am terrified who would want to capture

me and what have they done with my dogs? I hope someone will be walking in the woods, but I know from experience there can be half a dozen cars in the car park, and you can walk around and not meet a soul. But no-one is about as I am roughly grabbed, and my arms pulled tightly behind my back and tied. I am marched and dragged along struggling all the way, I feel physically sick and my heart is pounding so fast, I am so scared of what might happen to me. They could rape me, kill me, rape me and then kill me. My mind is buzzing with horrible thoughts.

We suddenly stop and they tie my feet together before I am lifted up and laid down, they don't say a word to me. I hear a car start up and the slamming of a door, no! no! I realise I am in a car boot. I feel terrible, my heart is pounding so loud I cannot think. I feel so nauseous and struggle to breathe. I have to stop panicking and try to calm down and think, if I could remember the turns - left, right then a straight for a while left again oh this is no good I can't remember anymore turns and I haven't a clue where I am.

I then remember I once saw a programme on TV called 'How to keep Yourself Safe'. In that a woman was put in a car boot and she kicked at the rear light and broke it and was able to put her hand through the hole and try to attract attention to her plight. Guess it would work if there were people around and it was still light. This gave me a little hope until I remembered I was trussed up like a chicken. Think girl, I can hear the men talk but it was muffled so what they are saying is no help to me. We travel for what I think is about 15 minutes. I still feel queasy, and I want the toilet. What a state to be in, I think it would be funny if it wasn't so serious. The guys are still talking but it's muffled, we travel on, oh where are we? I have lost all sense of time, direction or where we could possibly be.

I am flung to one side as we take a sharp right and start to slow down, I have a feeling deep in my gut that we are arriving at our destination. I pray to God to save me and promise to be good if he

does. Thoughts and memories of my family and friends whizz around in my brain and then the car stops. I think I am going to throw up as I hear the boot lid being lifted and I am taken out of the car and stood up. My legs feel like jelly as the ties are taken from around my feet and hands. The adrenaline is now pumping, it's fight or flight time but I must stay calm until I'm free so I can see my surroundings and what they might offer me as a way of escape. So I stand helpless whilst they take the tape from my mouth and I take a gasp of air. Then the sack is lifted from my head. The light blinds me for a second and then I see them - all my friends who are smiling and shouting "Happy Birthday Lucy" as Zac and Tilly run up to me for a fuss. At least my abductors had the sense to catch and arrange for someone else to bring my dogs here. I freeze on the spot then I see my boyfriend approaching me with a big grin on his face and saying "got you" "I know you like a good joke, this time it's on you". "JOKE" I shout "I am absolutely terrified and a lot of other things you wouldn't understand you idiot." I walk over to him, slap him across the face and say you are now my ex!!!". No-one moves or says anything. It is surreal. I look around at all my friends and spot Paul, he once told me that he volunteered one evening a month with the Samaritans so I thought as he was that caring, I would be safe with him. So I asked if he'd give me a lift home.

When we get to my flat tears are running down my face and Paul said "I cannot leave you alone after what has just happened to you, so can I come in and get you a drink, coffee, glass of wine or something stronger." I am relieved not to be on my own after what has just happened to me. I look at Paul and notice he has dimples in his cheeks which I find quite sexy. His hair is black and slightly wavy and he has the darkest brown eyes. I decide he is an all round good looker and I very much like what I see. He asks if I wanted him to call my mum for me but I said "no thank you" as I knew my Mum and Dad were out for the evening. Paul is already being thoughtful, kind, gentle, much nicer than my ex. had ever been. And I need someone right now who is all of these things. So he stays.

Vengeful Spirits

Daniel McKnight

Arthur always hated nights like these.

He would have much rather been home under the comfort of his bedsheets fast asleep, but the moment he saw the specially-marked envelope that had landed at his father's door that morning, he knew sleep was not going to come to him tonight, or at least, by will alone. If not that, this early-December cold spell would certainly help. Even then, Arthur held back a yawn and once again made his way into the cemetery.

In a way, it was Arthur's fault for wanting to help out however he could; he just didn't anticipate this being a part of assisting the running of his father's bookstore. But, the moment Prohibition had become law across the country, old George Sawyer only saw another business opportunity, even if it was under the guise of covertly helping the community despite his friends' warnings. Normally, it would have been him on these runs like it had been from the start, but ever since George had fallen ill, it was up to Arthur now, whether he liked it or not.

He had been walking through the cemetery for a few minutes longer than he maybe should have, and Arthur took another look at the note. It wasn't the same letter as the one that had appeared that morning, rather one his mother had copied from. She was never specific as to why he couldn't just take the original, only that her copy "wouldn't arouse suspicion"... though suspicion from whom she wouldn't say. And if anyone else were to read it, would they even be able to decipher what was written down?

After reading the letter one more time, Arthur eventually found a headstone matching the name; the grave seemed to have been freshly dug, which was already a good sign, even if the headstone stated that its occupant had passed decades prior. Arthur took one more look around and made sure he was all alone before setting down his lantern, driving his shovel in the freshly-tilled dirt.

It was a gruelling couple of hours, but eventually the thud of wood on iron rang out. Arthur quickly cleared the surrounding dirt and dragged the chest to the surface. Given the rattling coming from inside, it was easy to tell what it held, though he felt it necessary to open it away just to check. Taking his shovel to the side, he pried the chest open, cursing that it hadn't even been nailed shut again this time — definitely something to mention, but not right now. All that said, he wasn't sure if he was disappointed that he wasn't staring at a corpse right now. Instead, the only thing staring back at him were dozens of bottles, each filled with whatever spirits his father's supplier felt worthy of delivering. Closing the lid back over its contents, Arthur slowly dragged the chest back, with only the moon overhead for light, taking care to stop every so often to clear any tracks being made.

Stopping at the entrance, Arthur took one final glance around. Of course, no sane man would be around at this early an hour, but that did little to ease his nerves. At the very least, he had parked his father's car right outside, even if it meant a longer drive back. It was now just a simple matter of opening the car's back door and placing the chest on the seat, covering it with rags to hide it from any onlookers. Arthur climbed into the driver's seat and was barely a second from putting the key in the ignition before he heard a loud metallic click from the passenger seat.

'It's rude to steal from the dead, you know.'

Smell Him Fast Beneath the Hot, Vintage Woman

Rachael Pugsley

The fridge stands in the corner of the kitchen, a huge behemoth of a thing. Loved by mum and hated by dad. The kids adore it as it produces endless supplies of cold water and ice, so perfect for summer drinks and winter cocktails.

Matt – or dad, hates it because it symbolically took the place of his beloved Rayburn which has now been relegated to the big scrapheap in the back yard. Oil being too expensive to use to heat a house, they had gas put in and now revelled in the novelty of hot radiators for the first time. Matt still yearns for the slow heat given out by the old stove and takes out his frustration on the fridge.

Grace – or mum, loves it, as it is huge. It can hold all the extra food for Christmas or family parties and still have space left over. Plus, keep enough bottles of pop and alcohol cool to ensure the whole tribe are happy. But what she really loves about it, is the fact it is silver, metallic and magnetic.

One door and one side have been taken over with magnets from holidays past, Australia produced loads of these, and Grace will agree she got a bit carried away in Sydney. She has also collected other quirky little numbers. A set of miniature cacti, the zodiac constellations, days of the week. She bought Matt some retro ones to make him happy, Opal Fruits, Milky Bar, Marathon but as they are stuck on the fridge and not on the Rayburn, they haven't done the trick.

The best magnets are on the second door though. These are a packet of magnetic poetry words. When the kids are home, these are shuffled around the door like scrabble tiles and sentences are left for each other to read and admire. Many make no sense at all. Some are rude and the kids hope Grandma doesn't get too close to stand reading them when she comes around. Some sentences make you laugh.

The one that has stayed on longest though is 'smell him fast beneath the hot, vintage woman'. This never seems to be removed or swapped around. No one can remember who wrote it, but it is there for now. A constant in the swirling maelstrom of poetic scuttlebutt.

The fridge talks to itself throughout the day and night. Mumbling away in a variety of gurgles and squeaks, trying to get its voice heard above the general hubbub of kitchen life. If anyone dares to leave one of its marvellously bedecked doors open, the fridge starts to yell in an alarming manner, until you kindly close the door again.

It does this constantly, apart from this morning. It was silent in the kitchen. Matt sat as usual, hunched in his chair, reading the paper. Grace walked into the kitchen to nothing. Not a murmur, not a burble to be heard.

'Are we having a power cut?' Grace spoke to Matt's bent torso.

Matt just shrugged and didn't answer which worried Grace more than an answer would. She opened the fridge, no light. No noise and no light, means no power. She checked the microwave, this worked, so it wasn't the fuse box.

'Matt, have you done something to the fridge?'

'Why would you think it was me?'

‘So something has happened to the fridge?’

Matt grunted and walked out of the room. Grace was extremely worried now. What had he done? She checked the switch, this seemed to be OK. She started to pull the fridge away from the wall, then she could see it. A knife stuck into the cooling pipes at the back, like a blade through the ribs, and the electric cable had been cut, a gash to the throat.

Her fridge was no more. It was now a huge, silent, silver cupboard, covered in bling. Useless and obsolete. Grace thought about her and Matt, their marriage was in the same state.

She sat and looked at the lifeless box.

‘I am so sorry’ she spoke quietly, more to herself than the fridge. ‘I should have watched and listened to him, instead I think I took him for granted, imagined he would come around to my way of thinking, fall for your charms. Instead, he was like a simmering pot, waiting to boil over. Then you got caught in the outpouring. Now you have been hurt and it is my fault’.

Grace left the kitchen to find Matt, they had a lot invested in their marriage, she didn’t want to lose him. She hoped he still felt that way about her. They really need to work at their relationship. They had managed to lose the poetry, lose the spontaneity. Grace felt she needed to talk it out with him. It needed some serious work from this hot, vintage woman to make their partnership sing again. Time to get started.

BIOGRAPHIES

Sue Ball

Sue lives in Gainsborough. She likes to read, both fiction and non-fiction. The group gave her an opportunity to try her hand at writing. As she is now retired from work, the group has helped her with this new interest, and to meet with likeminded people.

Elizabeth Crow

Having loved writing at secondary school in the mid-seventies and promising her English teacher she would continue to write, life got in the way. Liz worked in the family business until its sale in 2018 but continues with her Pianoforte teaching. Thanks to the W.L.D.C. Writing Course and their truly inspiring tutor, Gill Blow, Liz’s lost passion for writing has returned.

Sarah Garden

Sarah lives in Gainsborough. She likes to write children’s stories and art as a hobby. Inspiration arrives in the night with her two German shepherds, Freya and Freddie for company. Sarah has found the writing course has encouraged her to develop writing skills and illustrate her stories.

Frank Goacher

Frank mostly lives in the strange, strange world inside his own mind. That mind is currently located in Scunthorpe, where he works at the local hospital.

When not doing that, he has a wife and two children to keep amused, and sometimes finds time to read, write, game and do a bit of cooking. Sometimes.

Harry Hannam

Harry's thirst for knowledge is never quenched. The years spent in the Construction Industry, including the time spent helping warring parties settle their differences are past. Now, happily settled in Gainsborough, surrounded by kind and warm people, a host of stories await his pen. N.B. The staff of Gainsborough Library merit praise.

June Jarman

June lives in Morton and has always had a yearn to write, but with four sons she never found time until her retirement from her Support Worker role. She finds early morning is the best time for her to write. After living in Hong Kong for three years she has lots of memories to inspire her.

Daniel McKnight

Daniel has lived around Lincolnshire all his life. He is an avid reader of fantasy and science fiction — he always has a book out from the library! With several story ideas in his head, he's been wanting to write his own book for a while and feels that WordFest has given him the kick to actually start work on his first.

Rachael Pugsley

Rachael has worked full time since leaving college and has never had any 'spare' time until recently. Joining the writing group has opened up her world, it used to be just reading. Now she is having a go at creating something herself and loving it!

Gill Blow

Gill has lived in and close to Gainsborough all her life. She is an award-winning short story writer, broadcast on Radio 4 and published in literary magazines. Gill adapted several stories for the stage and set up the theatre group The Workhouse Players who have performed them in and around Gainsborough. She has recently published her collection of short stories 'Ladies of the Soil'.
