

Strange Times;
Wacky Anecdotes
By
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Hi, I'm John,

Over the past year I made a series of posts on my blog to relate incidents from my life so far.

Encouraged by the interest that they aroused, I decided to compile them into a free ebook to reach even more readers and this, then, is the result of my efforts.

So, as I value my reputation of getting straight to the point, I'll let you begin without further ado.....and, who knows, you might even have time to visit my website.

I hope you enjoy the ride.

Love to you all,

John.

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A Pretty Face Is All You Need

It happened when I was nine years old. High up in the Himalayan mountains on a day out trekking. The memory still fills me with guilt and shame.

Although I can now rationalise what happened---and, of course, I was only a kid at the time---it makes little difference. I suppose it was just another mystery of nature that we will never fathom.

We had hired a couple of pack ponies and, when I got tired of walking, my parents allowed me to ride one of them. I was rather skinny, so my weight made little difference to the load they were already carrying---a carpet, lunch, a foam mattress (my dad liked a nap), some warm clothes, a fishing rod.

While my parents walked on ahead, my pony minder, the guy whose pony we had hired, made conversation with me. He talked about his miserable life, the children he had lost to disease. The struggle to find food, the wet winters, the icy cold, the draughty little hut in which his family huddled to survive the best they could. I felt really sorry for him and suitably ashamed of my own life which was luxurious by comparison. He said his wife was losing her sight and needed to make a trip to the doctor, but it was too expensive. So could I perhaps persuade my parents to give him a few extra rupees at the end of the trip? I know, I know, maybe he was taking me for a sucker. Did it matter? Not a bit. Just one look at his matchstick-limbed body, torn clothes and sunken cheeks made me feel for him---he needed the extra cash, if only to make his life a little more tolerable for a fleeting moment in time. Was that too much to ask? Of course I said yes, I would speak to my dad. I certainly would.

A while later, when we stopped, he helped me down from the pony. The cap he was wearing slipped off and into sight came his bare head. It was covered in sores. Horrible, livid eruptions. I stared at the revolting sight, shivering with horror.

At 9 years old I was not able to hide the disgust that jumped to my face. He caught my look and hurriedly pulled his cap back on, as if covering up some dreadful sin. We didn't talk much after that.

The trek ended. We were back at our well-equipped tourist bungalow. Our beaming cook appeared, anxious to serve us a delicious hot dinner. My father paid the pony-men. Whatever had been agreed. I looked away, aware of the supplicating look from the man who had almost become a friend. I turned my back on him forever. He had let me down. He was ugly. I couldn't stand him, the awfulness that lay beneath his tattered cotton cap.

Hard though it is to admit, that is the way that nature has programmed us. Appearances count. They count one heck of a lot, actually. There are loads of really good singers out there who never make it because they are not good looking. Then there are loads who cannot sing but easily make it to no. 1 in the charts. I've never seen a handsome beggar. Ugly politicians never make it right to the top. Even the baddy in a film has to have an evil beauty.. We judge people by their looks, like it or not. So, I say bring on the Botox, the cosmetic surgery, the prosthetic enhancements, the make-up that even men wear nowadays. For where would we be without them! Ugly people don't seem suited to survive, you see. So one day evolution will rid us of them. Or maybe they'll still be there underneath everything that

they've had done to themselves, only we'll never know it. Unless you're a towering genius or a millionaire, your looks will determine exactly how far you will get in life.

What sad, sad human beings we are! How I still hate myself for letting down that pony-man. May God forgive me!

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Death Goes To School

In my last blogpost I tried to illustrate how the mention of death is so unwelcome as to instantly unsettle the equilibrium of human interaction. The very whiff of it produces a primal gut reaction with which the rational mind struggles to cope. This week I again want to reach into my past to prove the point.

Mr Ostler was a teacher whom we 13/14 -year-olds heartily despised. He wasn't fair. He enjoyed meting out punishment too much. He took no trouble to disguise the fact that he had the lowest opinion of us, and that is hardly the way to win friends and influence teenagers, now, is it!

So why was he like that? Hard to say. Maybe it had something to do with him being five foot nothing and feeling intimidated by us towering over him. Or that his wife left him for a younger man. Or that he boasted about his connections in high places.....he had a photo of himself with the prime minister. What's so great about that? All you have to do is turn up at the opening of a new supermarket while the future PM is still an MP. There will be no minders around. Simply slip to the front, get next to the guy, and have a friend quickly snap you and voila.....but I digress!

Mr Ostler had a 4 inch long wooden rod that he held hidden in his fist. If there was a group of maybe four or five of us standing chatting in the playing field, this man would spring from nowhere, and, keeping his hand at waist height, he would prod us painfully, saying, "break it up. I know what you are up to. Enough of your bad mouthing (jab to the left) your teachers (jab to the right). You think you're great because your parents are important people (jab! jab!). Let me tell you, you're nothing here. Nothing!"

It hurt like heck. It was all we could do not to take a swing at him. But I think the unfairness of it all hurt even more. Bloodshot eyes. Spittle flying. Hoarse throated through constant shouting. Red faced and overweight. A truly disgusting spectacle. Funny thing is, the headmaster thought Mr Ostler was very good at his job. That it was he who single-handedly maintained iron discipline in an all boys school.

Okay, imagine the worst sergeant major you have ever seen caricatured, bullying and tormenting the new recruits, and you'll be looking at what Mr Ostler was all about.

His detentions were legendary, lasting 2 to 3 hours after school. Well, he had no home life so what did he care about getting home to chill out! And the creepy lectures he'd give us during those detentions, about foul thoughts, self abuse and its catastrophic physical consequences (all medically untrue--- what an ignorant man!), cold showers, the depravity of modern society, the obscene media imagery--- well, he more or less hated the whole world, this sad man did, and we had to sit and listen to him.

As they say, what goes around, comes around. Sooner or later, if you tempt fate for long enough, it catches up with you to level the score. And so it happened with Mr Ostler. Quite dramatically and very suddenly.

One morning the bell rang and we made our way into the hall for assembly. At once many of us detected a frisson of unrest among our teachers. Something had happened, but what was it? We did not have long to find out. A grim faced headmaster mounted the dais and collected his weighty thoughts as he adjusted the microphone over the lectern.

"This morning.....ahem....I have just received a phone call with some very sad news indeed. I am very sorry to inform you all that Mr Ostler passed away in the early hours, of a sudden heart attack whilst at home. This has come as a great shock to us all. He was a much valued and admired member of our staff and will be sadly missed.....(no there were no sniggers or smothered smiles from any of us. We, too, were shocked by the suddenness of it. Besides, we were far more decent guys than Mr Ostler had ever given us credit for being).....so, before we go any further, I would like you all to bow your heads and join me in prayer for our dear departed Mr Ostler....."

A collective rustle all around the hall as we composed ourselves, hands crossed in front, heads down, still taking in the news. Complete silence.....but not for long!

A plaintive cry at the main doorway. Heads jerking up, swinging around, everyone's eyes popping with disbelief. "I tell you, I'm here. I'm alive. I'm not dead. I never was dead," shrieked Mr Ostler in frustration as his squat figure stood there, silhouetted in the doorway against the clean morning sunlight.....and suddenly a rumble started from one end of the hall and swept, like an ocean wave, right across the expanse of the entire assembly. Laughter. Wave after wave of it. A nervous release from the tension? The ridiculous sight of Mr Ostler protesting his claim to life? Whatever it was, it rocked that assembly hall for a good few minutes while the headmaster, looking baffled and very displeased, made his way to the back of the hall, took Mr Ostler's arm firmly, and led him away to his office. The deputy head took his place and dismissed us as quickly as he could. Everyone seemed keen to be gone from the hall. That scene. The unpleasantness of death. The complete humiliation of Mr Ostler.

Well, despite extensive investigation no one ever found out which of us boys had, at dawn, crept into Mr Ostler's front garden and slashed the tires of his moped. Just as no one found out who had telephoned the school to say they were a member of Mr Ostler's family and had some very bad news. And Mr Ostler was late to school because he thought it wouldn't matter just this once, seeing as he wasn't familiar with bus timetables.

And now here's the really strange bit.

The whole affair seemed to affect Mr Ostler in some very profound way. Don't ask me what went on in his tiny mind. I don't know, and I doubt anyone else did. But he changed. He left us more or less alone, unless we had really done something bad. He became comparatively subdued. Frequently withdrawn. Diminished in some subtle aspect. He also became very religious, and started spending all his spare time doing good works for the church instead of haranguing us during detention--- which was fine by us. Yes, it could be said that death had a sobering effect on Mr Ostler.

As time went by, our attitude changed. Some of us even got to like him. After all, he had proved that he was human like all the rest of us. Death had seen to that!

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Epiphany at a Roadside Diner

It happened on my way to spending the weekend at a friend's house.

It was still too early to wake him up, so I stopped, a few miles away, to have breakfast at a diner just off the road.

The place was empty and I ordered coffee and sunny side up eggs on fried bread (I know, not healthy, but I like it). The lady behind the counter was middle-aged, about average in build with a detached air about her. It was as if she was physically there, but mentally elsewhere at a place that interested her far more, judging by the occasional glint in her sad eyes. Unfailingly polite, though, making a big attempt to smile cheerfully as she placed my breakfast on the counter. She intrigued me, with her 'inhabiting another plane' air of cool but polite reserve. I remember thinking that none of any nastiness from her daily customers would impact on her at all; they would be no more than shadows on a screen. Good for her, I found myself thinking. And that's because I'm one of those people who heartily dislikes customer interface in any line of work.

I glanced across and saw she had been doodling on a paper napkin. She had drawn a large door with a big handle. The door was half open, and outside was a swirling mass of flying birds, the sun, moon, trees and flowers, a rainbow-like arc. But inside the door was a carpet, a table lamp, ordinary objects in an ordinary room. She caught me looking, and quickly screwed up the napkin with a guilty air.

'Nice artwork,' I murmured, to put her at ease.

'It....it's nothing.'

She said it in a way that made me think it was far from being nothing.

'What we draw absent-mindedly shows a lot about our inner thoughts,' I added. Maybe I was trying to get her to talk a bit more? It's not something I usually try to do with strangers, but I was still curious about her. She didn't reply, and there was a dreamy sort of half smile on her face as she tidied away my breakfast dishes. I paid and was getting ready to leave. No sense in pestering people. It wasn't good manners, however curious I was about her. Then, just as I got up, she turned and said,

'It's where I go---you know, when I'm not busy.'

She glanced around nervously even though there was no one else around. I settled back on my stool and put on the kindest face I could.

'And where would that be?'

'Oh, it's just a place. An open place next to a wood not far from here. At the edge are some tall bushes, and if you go through them you.....' she stopped, looking confused and breathing heavily, not meeting my eyes.

'There is nothing wrong with that,' I soothed. 'It's nice to have somewhere you can be alone.'

She brightened up even more.

'But I'm not alone. I'm never alone there.' Her vagueness had been replaced by a barely controlled excitement. She was now truly alive, a vibrant presence in the small diner. 'Joey is there. He's always there. I can hear him.'

Hoping she wouldn't notice, I measured the distance to the exit in case I needed to leave in a hurry.

'Joey is with you? Is he a friend?'

'Friend?' She seemed confused. 'Joey? No, Joey is my son. My little baby.'

'Er..... right.'

I nodded encouragingly, waiting for more, reassured that the wide and heavy diner-counter was between us.

'You must think I'm mad,' she burst out.

'No, no....never,' I lied quickly.

With what seemed a huge effort she controlled herself, taking long and deep breaths and sitting herself down. A little of her former sadness had returned.

'It was some 10 years ago. Alfie---that's my older son, had taken Joey for a walk. Joey was only four. It was a warm day. Alfie lay down under a tree in the wood--somehow he managed to doze off. He swears it was only for a few seconds. When he opened his eyes Joey was gone. We never found him.'

She fell silent, staring down at her hands where she had crumpled one corner of her dress into a soggy mess. There had to be more. I had to know.

'He couldn't have just disappeared,' I prompted gently.

'Didn't I mention....at the edge of the wood there were some bushes. Beyond them there was the....highway.' She spoke the word reluctantly. 'But Joey would never go there, we'd taught him to stay clear of roads.'

'Ah....'

That's what Joey had been taught, only he clearly hadn't learned. It was obvious that he had wandered onto the highway and been kidnapped or something. No one ever just disappears off the face of the earth. There was just one problem; try convincing the diner lady about that!

She looked up calmly and met my eyes.

'You can think whatever you want, but whenever I stand by those bushes---even now---if I stand for long enough I can hear Joey calling out to me. And I always call back, 'I'm here, my baby. Momma's waiting for you. I'll wait for you for always.' You know, Mr.....'

'Call me John.'

'..... John. I'm Sally. Have you heard of these time-slip places? Like in that Stargate film on TV? That's what's happened. Joey's slipped through one of those time-slip doors and the poor love can't get back. One day he will....it stands to reason, doesn't it, John? If the time slip door can open once, it can open again, can't it?'

'No reason why it couldn't,' I replied hastily, amazed at myself for going along

with her fantasy. This had to stop. The poor woman was deluded. It wasn't right for her to torment herself like this.

'Um...Sally....has anyone else ever stood there and heard Joey calling out?'

I had to take it slowly. Sally shrugged.

'Can't say for sure. The newspapers talked to me. Folk came from all over. Most of them couldn't hear anything. But a few....a few did. And....'

By now Sally was slowly deflating---there's no other word to describe it better--back to her former self. Sad. Detached.

'.....the newspapers said they must have been just as kooky as I was. The world is full of oddballs like that, they said. After a while they left me alone....but I still go there. I sometimes take a picnic and lay it out in the shade of the bushes. I know that one day Joey will walk right back through again, and he'll sit down and join me. I always make sure I have his favourite peanut butter and jelly sandwiches....'

Sally trailed off. I knew I was losing her again. I was like the others. I didn't believe her. I was never going to be part of her world. It had been a mistake for her to think so. We were back where we had started, the distance increasing into a yawning gulf between us every second.

I got up to leave. She didn't bother to look up. She knew what I now thought of her. There was nothing I could give her.

'Must go.' I pasted a false grin on my face. 'Nice talking to you Sally.'

I edged sideways to the door. She didn't reply or even look up.

Outside, the sun was shining. It was a beautiful morning. I thought of my friend waiting for me and the fun filled weekend he had promised---fishing, some pheasant shooting, a ride in his new boat. It was great to be alive. Sure, it was tough for Sally, but I didn't belong in her world.

I got into my car and started the engine. And then I switched it off. I couldn't get Sally out of my mind and I felt ashamed of myself. All sorts of philosophical musings began crowding my brain. I thought of the way life throws bad stuff at us. The few moments of happiness that we must fight to achieve. How we are all too often buffeted by fate, hurled about like rag dolls, left shattered and bruised to struggle to our feet and start over again. All for what? It all seemed so pointless, yet here I was, perhaps able to show a brave woman like Sally that there might be a point to it after all! And what had I done? Why, I had turned my back on her and walked away, confident of my sanity and my grasp on reason and reality, no way prepared to believe a word she said.

Like all the others. That's what Sally had said.

I couldn't do it. I just couldn't. I had to put things right. I had the power to do it, because I had just remembered something....

With a new spring in my step I turned around and marched straight back into the diner. Sally was sitting exactly where I had left her. She looked up with glazed eyes.

'Sally, I was wrong. I just remembered---you know, when I got outside. I read this piece in a newspaper a while back---one of these true encounter things; there were witnesses, you see.....

And I sat back down on the stool I had vacated minutes earlier and told Sally, the diner lady, all about a similar case where long after a mysterious disappearance people could hear the voice of the person who had vanished. And at that moment, as I sat telling Sally about it, I swear I believed every word of it with all my heart.

Well, what more is there to say? The effect on Sally was a wonderful sight to behold. At first she was suspicious of me, then she got carried away by my

enthusiasm. After all, she herself wanted to believe it so much.

When I had finished she got up and came around the counter to give me a great hug. I was no longer frightened of her any more, and I hugged her back. Sally smelled of newly cut grass, fresh summer air and dandelions.

'Bye, Sally,' I said gruffly, and headed out again before she saw the tears in my eyes.

We all have our own ways of coping. This was Sally's way. Who did I think I was, Mr Hotshot Writer with his superior education and reason.

Hah!

Why, I was nothing in front of people like Sally, who had the strength to survive such a terrible event in their lives. It had been my privilege to admit this to her!

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Gaby The Go-getter

I like strong and clever women. Their company is stimulating. I can sit enthralled by them for hours. They make me feel alive, they rivet my senses.

Some men are different. They feel threatened by such women. This is the main reason why my friend Gaby, successful in just about everything imaginable, still remained bereft of a love in her life.

Me? Sadly, no. So powerful a lady is Gabby that even I am not man enough to handle her. So that is why we have always been just friends. Yes, good friends since school, even though nowadays we don't meet up for a coffee as often as we used to. Why? Well, I think it all goes back to one fateful afternoon when we met at a cafe for our once a month rendezvous.....

The cafe was unusually crowded. Perhaps it was the good weather. Gaby was already there, spotting me instantly and waving even as she conveyed a large mug of frothy cappuccino to her lovely lips. I waved back.

To reserve a place for me, Gabby had placed her handbag on the next chair. I only vaguely registered the fact that it was unfastened. Even less did I notice the anonymous, shifty-eyed guy on a nearby stool.

A serial entrepreneur, Gaby owned a whole string of businesses--- and even the cafe we were in. Which is why I hadn't had to pay for the gigantic cafe-latte that I carried over to Gaby's table. Don't get me wrong, I'm no freeloader, but Alberto, the manager, had told his staff never to accept payment from me (no doubt on Gaby's instructions).

As usual, Gaby and I exchanged chaste kisses on the cheek, and, as usual, I looked across at Alberto and winked a greeting across to where he sat at his vantage point next to the cash register. Beaming from ear to ear, Alberto winked back. It was a ritual.

Finally Gaby moved her handbag so I could sit on the chair. She placed the handbag on the ground next to her own chair. The little guy on the stool hadn't moved after catching my eye and now he looked hurriedly away. He was small, wiry and muscular with a crappy earring in one ear, wearing a dirty T-shirt with cut-off sleeves, and faded jeans torn at the knee. A loser. Some small-time punk. I dismissed him from my mind.

Gabby was in her usual irrepressibly high spirits, immediately launching into a description of the psychological tactics she had used to clinch yet another lucrative business deal. I listened, genuinely interested, because she could bring wit and fun to even the most boring subject---and the way she had negotiated this deal was anything but boring. Time flew---I don't know how long, as I never cared about the time when I was with Gaby. And then suddenly she glanced aside---then glanced again. Her expression changed. 'Hey--- it's been moved,' she muttered.

With one swift movement she had retrieved her handbag off the floor. She began rummaging in it. 'My purse----it's gone!' She looked up and around. I was already scanning the sea of faces before us when I saw the Mr Nobody who had been sitting close to us at the counter---he was heading unhurriedly but purposefully towards the exit. Gaby saw him a heartbeat later. 'I bet it's him.....' she whispered. 'I've got another cell-phone---he doesn't know that--- watch carefully, John, here we go now.....'

I was used to Gaby's mind moving at lightning speed. Thank goodness my own mind is only marginally slower, so I had no trouble grasping what was going on; in the purse that Mr Nobody had taken from Gaby's handbag was a cell-phone. But there was a second-cell phone in her handbag, and in a flash she had dialled the number of the cell-phone lying within her stolen purse. It's musically warbling ring-tone drifted over the heads of the other patrons in the cafe. Mr Nobody hadn't been expecting this. His step faltered. He looked around wildly, clamped one hand to his waist (yes, the wretch had a stuffed Gaby,'s purse down the front waistband of his tatty jeans)--- and began running.

'Stop him--- he's stolen my purse,' bawled Gaby, on her feet and pointing towards the man as he scurried away.

Now, he might have made it out if he had kept his head. But the ringing cell-phone had frazzled his brain. This cafe had electric sliding doors to keep their air conditioning in, and he had forgotten that it is no use running full tilt at electric sliding doors--- the sensors will not hurry for you, they will take their time, which is why Mr Thief ran smack into the glass doors before they could even begin to slide open.

Stunned, he fell to the ground. Alberto and two waiters piled on top of him. Gaby smiled. 'Gotcha,' she whispered to no one in particular. 'Call the cops--- I'm pressing charges,' she added loudly as she strolled through the surrounding coffee tables. Admiring heads turned at the snap of authority in the tone of this glamorous, sharply dressed lady. Taking her time, she approached the little thief. He had been hauled to his feet and was held securely. Gaby reached forward and in one fluid movement extracted her purse from the man's waistband. He was beaten, the misery of defeat quite obviously a frequent visitor to his face. Perspiration shone on his forehead as he stood drenched in shame. By now I had caught up with Gaby, anxious for her safety in case anything physical happened--- although I'm sure she could have looked after herself just fine.

'Thought you could get away, did you?' she said conversationally to the thief. He hung his head, a surly looking specimen, devoid of all dignity. He glanced upwards at Gaby and then quickly away.....and in that instant something passed

between them. Something that even as a writer I find it hard to find the proper words to describe. Yes, there was the expected surly defiance, the pathetic challenge, the jeering acceptance, even some reluctant admiration, all that---and something more. Something primal, full of hopeless longing, all wrapped up in a wretched abasement at the feet of a greater God.

There was a flash of response in Gaby's eyes, so fast that I almost missed it. But it was there. She leaned close to him.

'You'll be really sorry by the time I'm finished with you,' she told him with a slight tremor in her voice. Oddly enough, the little thief seemed to relax at these words.

Well, two cops appeared and took the guy away. Gaby promised to follow them soon and file a formal charge at the police station. We tried to get back to our coffees and normal conversation, but too much had happened.

The next time we met for coffee was two months later. Gaby had been too busy. I noticed a change in her. She seemed---well, to put it simply, she seemed happy. Not that she hadn't been happy before---her life had been one merry-go-round of successes, so what had she got to be unhappy about, right? Wrong. This was a different kind of happiness. And what she had to say quite startled me, to put it mildly.

'John, do you remember Lou, the man who stole my purse? Well, I dropped the charges. Decided he would be more used to me that way. I've let him move in with me. He stays home--- my maids are gone, he does the housework--- he needs to be kept busy, see. And he's a pretty good cook, believe it or not.' She turned and gave me a dazzling smile. 'And, you know, he's not bad at looking after a girl. I've grown quite fond of him--- but he knows his place.'

I finally found my voice.

'But Gaby, hey, the man is a thief. He's no good. He'll steal from you again....' I stuttered.

'No, the cops know him, I know him, he's got nowhere to hide. Besides he's got it made, living with me.'

'But....but he's still a no good thief....'

Gaby frowned.

'I think that was partly my fault.'" She turned to give me a sly wink. 'If I'm going to be careless enough to place my open handbag where he can reach into it, with my purse right on top in full view, mind, well, he was bound to be tempted, see.'

I was aghast. I felt my jaw drop.

'Gaby, you don't mean it was a setup, you----'

Gaby's bubbly laughter cut me off.

'Oh, come on, John. You know me well enough by now to know I always get what I want,' she sang gaily.

Well, each to his or her own, I suppose. And why not. I'm pretty sure Gaby and Lou will be happy together for quite a while yet. And what's wrong with that? Why nothing! Nothing whatsoever! So there!

I do miss not seeing her so often, though. Still....

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In Your Dreams, Man!

In my waking world I am a slave to rules, routine, and tiresome responsibilities. The people are stuck up and boring, so anxious to make the right impression. My surroundings are wishy-washy shades of grey. No, give me my dream world any time.

In my dream world I'm on a well-lit movie set, vibrant with colour. Anything is possible, everything is just waiting to happen. The freedom is breathtaking. The people can be unpleasant, downright weird, or just plain defective--but never boring. And I ask myself, now who in their sane mind would rather live in their waking world?

When I was 13 my dad took me bear-hunting in the Himalayas. We climbed to 14,000 feet and trudged through old snow in the middle of summer. My dad had a .375 Magnum Winchester rifle that went off like a cannon, but we never shot any bears. I'm glad about that.

In the night we slept in an empty shepherd's hut. At that height the sky is crystal clear, the stars a dense carpet of pulsing pin-prick lights. Everywhere it's almost as bright as a football stadium. Forget the moon. You hardly notice it.

While my dad snored in his sleeping bag I lay reading about how Sherlock Holmes set about attacking The Speckled Band with nothing but a thin, wooden cane. But so magical was the night that after a while I put my book aside and simply gazed up at the dazzling, swirling, canopy of stars. It's unbelievable how many satellites were wandering past. I began imagining that one of them was a 1957 Cadillac Eldorado, just about the most beautiful car in the world, cruising sedately along a diamond-strewn highway.

But in the end even this sublime moment couldn't keep me away from my dream world.

Besides, I was really tired. So my eyelids drooped shut and I dreamed, as always, of faraway places and fantastic goings-on; fierce creatures in dense jungles, tank brigades swooping across rolling battle-plains (you'd be amazed at how fast a modern tank can go!). Of riding a 1200cc Yamaha bike with my babe sitting behind. When I accelerated powerfully she clutched me tight and gasped and squealed in my ear. Then I was deep sea fishing with blisters blooming on my hands as I wrestled, Ernest Hemingway style, with a giant marlin at the end of a heavy-gauge fishing line. Hang gliding over war-torn mountains where bearded outlaws fired up at me, their spent bullets only reaching far enough to clink harmlessly off the aluminium struts of my glider...

I couldn't believe it when morning came and our guides spoilt it all by shaking us awake with steaming mugs of tea. I'd been having such fun! My dad smiled sleepily and pointed at the horizon. Ice cream mountain-tops were turning to pink sugar confections under a honey-gold sun. It was my turn to gasp (I try not to squeal too often!), because I had never seen anything so mind-blowingly lovely.

On the way back down we breakfasted off cherry trees and later we caught trout from a mountain stream. They tasted fantastic after we'd tossed them in flour and fried them in butter.

Yes, this was the only time in my life when my waking world managed to be every bit as good as my dream world. I'll never forget it...if only there were more moments like that then I wouldn't get tired of my waking world so often.

Sometimes in my dreams I can fly. Yes, fly, simply by climbing an invisible staircase and just sort of, well, taking off from the top. Once, half awake, I got up from bed and stubbed my toe when I tried to climb. It really hurt!

I find anything is preferable to the disappointing reality of my waking world – – but I can only sleep so much. So what about when I'm not sleepy any more? Well, I have this marvellous companion called a lapdog. Lapdog? Sorry, laptop, which has far more interesting worlds nestling within its cute little 14 inch face than all the spreading vistas of human struggle outside my front door. Hey, listen, it might not be for everyone, my kind of life. Or even good for everyone. I think I can handle it, though; my books, my sheets of lined, A4 paper for writing stories...stories that just keep tumbling around inside my brain. A warm kettle and a nearby bed are everything else I need.

And to anyone who says to me, hey, get a life, man! I say, thank you very much, I already have one. And you, man?

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Life Is Such A Fragile Thing

Yes, and I think that if we really appreciated just how fragile it was, then we would spend less time being bad and more time being good to one another. One minute you're here, and the next minute you are...well...nowhere. It's over. Nothing. El Blotto.

It just so happens that now and again we are given a wake-up call when something truly awful happens. Jolted back into cold reality. We do not like it. Death is bad news. We treat it as if it doesn't exist. And one day, bang! We are face to face with it. And we flounder breathlessly, helplessly, like live fish cast onto a river bank.

And it can happen any time, and as human beings we understandably shy away from this fact, because constant reminders of it would drive us insane.

So prepare yourselves for one such startling, life changing encounter with death that I am now going to tell you about. But don't worry, I'll be gentle with you. I promise.

Some years ago I worked at an exclusive girls' boarding school. It was run by a good and honest God-fearing staff of women teachers and house mistresses. Every summer there were many events, trips and outings, functions and fetes. Extra hands were needed to supervise these enjoyable occasions, so university students from overseas were often invited over. They were given board and lodging and enough money to go and see the tourist attractions, so everyone was happy. We all liked them, and meeting anyone from foreign lands is always stimulating.

One summer we invited over a half dozen of these girl students, in their late teens. They came from various parts of the USA and Canada. Lovely girls, full of the joys of life and living it to the full, as is right and proper. They worked hard, assisting staff with the summer events and looking after our boarders. In the evening they would return to their lodgings a mile away, a big, multi-bedroomed house owned by

the school, and, rather unimaginatively called The Lodge.

One weekend these girls from abroad planned a little private event of their own, a small party at the lodge. A bit of music. Some dancing. Nothing that would disturb the neighbours. They were responsible, grown-up young ladies who had been working hard and they deserved time to chill out.

So after work that evening, to save time, they asked if I could drop them to their lodgings in the school bus. A short journey, but very enjoyable. They were looking forward to the little party, confiding to me that they had met a couple of lads in town whom they had invited as a means of livening up the proceedings. It seemed reasonable. They lived with each other day and night and needed a couple of fresh faces around.

As we drove along, I remember one of the girls, Jeanette, seeing a banner for a local amateur production of Oklahoma, and she began singing "O-o-o-o-aklahoma, where the wind comes sweepin' down the plains!" Another girl, Ruby, was worried that they might not have enough bottles of white wine. A lot of laughter and giggles, asking if I would join them, and getting a regretful 'no thanks' as I didn't think it would be appropriate.

Exotic little songbirds, brimming over with excitement and loving life, eyes sparkling, rosy cheeked and smiling. I was captivated, my spirits lifting after a long and tiring day, even in that short mile to The Lodge.

When we were there, they got off the school bus just as Matt and David arrived, the two local lads they'd invited.

Now these two guys---well, they seemed kind of okay, but I wasn't too sure. You didn't notice anything if you just glanced at them. But if your glance lingered it was impossible to deny something vaguely furtive and worrying taking place behind their eyes. As if they were going over some secret agenda. I said "hi", and then looked away, frowning. The girls didn't notice and thanked me amid peals of laughter, now that the party could get started.

I drove away, still on a high after sharing a mile in the school bus with a group of girls who had made me happy to be alive. But still, I remember a vague unease deep down in my heart. Matt and David. Surely the girls could handle just two guys. They outnumbered them at least two to one!

I parked the school bus and went straight to bed.

It was a warm night, and I had trouble getting to sleep. Besides, I was still uneasy. Then, around 6am all hell broke loose.

A woman was screaming outside. Always on call for any emergency, I was into my clothes and out the door in under 2 minutes.

Miss Prendergast, one of our cooks, had stumbled out of her car down the driveway. She was on the ground, seemingly unaware of the gravel digging painfully into her hands and knees, her face a terrified mask of anguish.

I reached her just as the headmistress appeared.

'They're dead,' gasped Miss Prendergast. 'Lying out the front of the lodge.....call the police...please...help!'

She was hysterical, collapsing in a heap and sobbing in huge convulsions. I looked at the headmistress. We both knew we wouldn't get any sense out of Miss Prendergast. With shaking fingers the headmistress pulled her cell-phone from her dressing gown pocket and called the police.

I stumbled to the grass and sat down heavily, my mind numb with grief. What had happened? Those poor girls. I should have stayed with them, gone to that party. I knew those two guys hadn't looked right and I had ignored my gut feelings and

done nothing. It was something I was going to have to live with for the rest of my life.

'John.... John....'

The headmistress seemed to be calling me from a long distance away. I looked up in a daze. I had no idea how much time had come by. The headmistress was staring at me. She knew I'd dropped the girls off the previous evening, and now she wanted some answers.

House staff were pouring out into the early morning light. Pale oval faces were peering through the bedroom windows. I struggled to my feet just as two police cars, blue lights flashing, pulled up. Two grim faced officers got out. One of them nodded.

'We got 'em,' he said. I just stood frozen while the headmistress talked in low tones to the two policemen as the staff crowded around to listen.

The minutes ticked by. I still couldn't move. It was all my fault. I should never have left them. Now, what was going on? The staff were looking....not shocked any more. But angry. Miss Prendergast was still curled up in a tightly heaving ball on the driveway. Who were they angry with? Me? I had to know. I walked towards them. A couple of faces turned towards me---and then swung away.

The headmistress looked around. 'Ah... John. There you are....feeling better?'

Then she began talking to me as the officers studied my tense demeanour with curiosity. Gradually my stiff limbs relaxed---and I, too, began to look angry.

Well, I'm glad to say Miss Prendergast had got it wrong, but it wasn't her fault. Driving past the lodge that morning, she had seen two sprawled and lifeless bodies, one draped over a handrail and another lying headfirst down some steps. Mark and David, the local lads whom I hadn't liked the look of the night before. After drinking all the white wine they had started misbehaving so much, coming on to the girls and being generally obnoxious, that in the end they had been ejected from The Lodge by their hosts. So drunk that they couldn't make it anywhere, they had simply passed out outside.

Sadly those really nice girls whom I had come to like were packed off home in disgrace. Too much fuss had been created. It wasn't good for the image of the school. "Dead" people in the driveway of school property---whatever next!

Oh, the newspapers didn't get hold of it. Everything was hushed up. Many of the parents of the boarders were very important people.

It might have turned into something of a joke in the end---but for the fact that death had been brought into the picture. No one had been prepared for that. It couldn't be forgiven. Somebody had to pay.

I drove the girls to the airport in the school bus the next day for their journey home. It was a far cry from the jolly time we had all had on the drive to the party.

Death. No one likes it. Go away, death. You're not welcome.

Well, I did promise I'd be gentle with you, didn't I.....

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Love Works Best On A Desert Island

Her name? That's private. Let's call her Kimberly. A party at a friend's house. Suddenly there she was, sitting right next to me. I couldn't speak. Was she beautiful? I'm not sure. It's a word that means different things to different people. What I was sure about was that her face would haunt me forever. I was in love instantly. Utterly, hopelessly. I couldn't take my eyes off her. In her face lay all my answers. It was like a homecoming, providing refuge, nurture and rejuvenation.

Then she turned and looked at me. I was a skeleton, the flesh stripped from my bones by some scorching, nuclear wind.

She spoke. It was something fairly banal. My wits lay scattered, the blood hammering in my brain, powering my eyes to drink in her image. You only ever meet someone like that once in a lifetime. I was excited and afraid. It was as if I'd been down on my luck and had found a suitcase, not knowing if it contained either a million bucks or a bomb to blow my head off. And there lay the problem.....

Anyway, I don't know what reply I finally managed. Something garbled. But here's the thing-----she heard my words differently. She knew exactly what I really wanted to say and, to my swooning joy, she let me glimpse an answer in the depths of her eyes.

Friends jostled around us. The spell was broken. I lost sight of her. I hated everyone for being there. I wanted to push my way past and find her. But great fear was washing over me. It was as if I had caught a whiff of nitro-glycerin from the still-closed suitcase I was holding. So I put the wretched thing down and my thoughts went like this.....

Now you might not agree, but it is so easy for even the most solid relationship to slip away. It's this world we have fashioned, there are too many distractions. Too much temptation, conflict, and disappointment. Sadly, the demands of modern society are too many. Yeah, yeah, I know. I haven't forgotten; and people can change! Well, of course they can, but I honestly believe that true love can survive even that. No, the problem was that what had sparked between me and Kimberly was just too damn downright dangerous. Forget the suitcase, I'd left that behind---it now felt like someone was pressing an unknown, experimental, heavy gauge weapon into my hands which I had not been trained to use. A weapon to be used against the rest of the world, and maybe, if it came to that, on Kimberly. Forget afraid. Forget frightened. I was terrified.

Now, if we had both been the only ones on a remote desert island with endless days and nights of sea and sand, I'm sure it could have worked. No weapons needed there, end of story. The trouble was, I did not know of any handy desert island.

Kimberly had now completely disappeared in the crowd. I tried to find her, but couldn't. I was crushed. How could she leave me like this? And then I saw her.

She was at the door, leaving the party. I had to stop her. I lurched forward, but her eyes stopped me like a gentle hand to my chest. The tiniest sideways shake of her head. I knew what she was saying; its best this way. Don't follow. This is too big. It will annihilate us and maybe others too. So be sensible, even though love is never so. We can't let it happen, not here in this world. And, since you don't know of any handy desert island to whisk me away to, well.....

And she was gone. I did not follow. I knew she was right, that she was much wiser than me.

Some years later I learned she had married a B-movie actor. Someone maybe like David Carradine, Dennis Hopper or Bruce Campbell, but not nearly so talented

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