

PUSH HANDS

by

Michael Graeme

FREE eBooks EDITION

* * * * *

Published by:

Michael Graeme on Smashwords

Copyright © 2008 by Michael Graeme

This version fully revised December 2016

Copyright notice:

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

Dedication

In appreciation of all the Carolines,
for what they have taught me about life, about love and about myself.

* * * * *

Push Hands

In the Chinese Martial Art of Tai Chi, "Push Hands" is a form of sparring taught to beginners in order they might develop a sense of awareness of both their own centre and the centre of their partner.

For more advanced students it becomes a form of self defence, while for masters, and certain sensitive individuals, it can be appreciated as a highly expressive artform.

* * * * *

CHAPTER 1

Philip Markham stood on the factory receiving bay, waiting for a truck to arrive. It was going up for five and it didn't look like it was coming. He sheltered under the awning as a fine drizzle drifted down. The world was soaked and grey and cold. He was in his shirt-sleeves, his back and underarms damp, but not from the rain. He was hot: sweaty-hot, and it felt good to be out in the cool, out of the office and away from the computer and its never-ending pile of e-mails.

He sweated easily these days, felt tired and old, though he'd only just turned 45. He was worried there might be something wrong with him, some mysterious ailment gnawing at his insides, but then he'd felt like this for the better part of a decade now and he was still alive, still stumbling on in the same old way, so there couldn't be that much wrong with him, could there?

The factory was crumbly and filthy, a left over from the war years, a higgledy-piggledy pile of decaying red brick and flaking paint. The other buildings that had grown up round about seemed brighter by comparison, but were somehow faceless and dead. They were newer, obviously, and Phil wondered what they did, what they made, if anything - for he was just waking up to the fact that no one in England actually made anything any more. Perhaps the buildings just stored things then or they were call-centres for insurance companies or travel agents.

Beyond these other buildings, rising all around in the murky distance, the town of Middleton sprawled messily, an ugly assortment of merged suburbs, dirty brick and concrete, barbed wire, security cameras and about a hundred thousand assorted lives. He was feeling very small today, feeling the self important weight of all those lives pressing down upon him, squeezing him,

squeezing him under or out,... somewhere.

Between the long abandoned chimneys of the old Atlas mill, he caught a glimpse of the moors, flat capped under a ton of greasy, iron grey cloud. A bad day for walking, he thought. Indeed it was a bad day for just about anything.

He checked his watch, anxious now - not that the truck wasn't going to come, but more that it would, and he'd have to stay after-hours to deal with it. He had an appointment that evening and didn't want to have to cancel it because it had taken him months to pluck up the courage to go in the first place.

He listened inside his head to see if the irritating sound was still there. He could hear an air conditioning unit whirring away on one of the modern buildings next door, and there was a gentle wind blowing, raising a sigh from the rooftops, and somewhere above all that was the rasping whistle of his tinnitus. There was no escaping it, and apparently no cure either, or so the weary old doctor had told him at the surgery - that he'd just have to get used to it.

The doctor had also handed him a questionnaire to fill out, apparently in order to see if he was depressed - like one of those stupid magazine pseudo-psychology quiz things. It was all rubbish of course: he wasn't depressed - but the questionnaire disagreed, and quick as a flash the doctor was writing him out a prescription for antidepressants.

"But I'm not depressed."

"Well, apparently, you are, Mr Markham."

"But doesn't everyone feel like something's missing from their lives?"

"Possibly, I can't say, but there's no need for it. Just take these pills and you'll feel like a new person. I've been on them for years."

"But it's my ear I'm struggling with, Doctor."

"Well, the tablets will make you feel less depressed about it."

"What?"

Phil had checked the pills out on the Internet. Sure enough, it sounded like they'd calm his middle aged angst, fill the hole in his soul with a kind of fluffy padding, but they might also make him impotent, something the doctor had obviously forgotten to mention. That was neither here nor there,

of course, since Sally no longer required much from him in that department any more, but the pills might also stop him from sleeping - another little thing the doctor had forgotten to mention. He supposed that could have been sorted out by more pills, but of greater concern to him was the drinking. He couldn't take the pills and drink, you see? And if he didn't get his half bottle of wine with whisky chaser to finish off the day, well, he reckoned he'd really have something to be depressed about.

The breeze changed direction and blew the drizzle into his face. He didn't move, but savoured the exquisite coolness of it.

"I am not depressed," he said, then looked around, embarrassed in case anyone had overheard. But the shop-floor had gone home ages ago and there was only Caroline in the office, her door closed, head bent over her computer. She couldn't hear him, and like all the Carolines before her, she probably couldn't see him either - not even if he'd been standing right in front of her.

Caroline's real name was Sandra and she made his heart ache deliciously. Indeed she was one of the few things in his life right now that reminded him he was actually alive. Thirtyish, blonde, and shapely, she was too young for him of course, even if he'd been stupid enough to begin an affair, which he hoped he wasn't, and always supposing she'd be interested, which he doubted. Indeed, he doubted she even knew his name, even though they'd worked under the same roof for years. That was the trouble with Carolines, he thought: they planted in your head the insane notion they were in love with you, but when it came down to it, they couldn't even remember your name.

Five o'clock.

Phil sighed. No truck. He'd have to get on to the suppliers in the morning to see where his parts had gone. But for now he was committed to his course, and turned away from the receiving bay like a man facing execution. He walked slowly past the office window and waved.

"Night Sandra," he called.

Maybe he hadn't called loudly enough because she didn't hear him and remained bent over her computer. He saw images of sand and sea reflected in her big, round spectacles and guessed she was browsing the holiday web sites. Maybe that's what he needed - a holiday. But there were certain things you couldn't escape, like the tinnitus, things you just ended up taking with you, wherever you went.

CHAPTER 2

Doctor Lin operated out of an old terraced house in a run-down back-street of Middleton. There was a hairdressers on one side and a dodgy looking car accessory shop on the other. The Tai Chi symbol in the window looked out of place, a whispered and worthless platitude amid the overwhelming decay of decades of neglect. Phil ran his eye over the list of ailments that might apparently be cured: Sport's injuries he understood, but whatever were Man/Woman problems?

He was dismayed to discover that Dr Lin was, in fact, a woman - white coated and clean looking - a Chinese lady with medium length black hair, dark eyes and perfect white teeth. Her complexion was clear and youthful, but he couldn't guess her age; she might have been thirty, or fifty. He caught his breath and hoped Caroline wasn't playing tricks on him here: he desperately needed Dr Lin not to be another Caroline.

He took a deep breath and explained about the tinnitus. She listened patiently, nodding now and then, although he suspected she was only getting every other word. Doctor Lin understood "tinnitus", but looking at the overheated and sweaty man before her, she knew a ringing ear was the least of his problems. He seemed keen to blow it all out, to talk and talk, his mind a rats nest of confused thoughts and though a lot of it was indeed unintelligible to her beginner's English, she knew it was good for him to talk, so she listened with her head tilted, sympathetically to one side.

When he'd finished, she asked him simple questions about his family history - who had died of what? Diabetes? Heart problems? Arthritis? Grim stuff really and Phil was struggling to catch some of her words because her accent was difficult to follow. She asked him to stick out his tongue and then checked the pulse on both wrists, noticing the way he flinched as she moved in to touch him.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm a little jumpy."

"Bowels all right?"

"Em,... yes."

"Sexual relation?"

"Em,.. normal," he replied, noting as he did so the slight inflection that inadvertently implied vagueness. Normal for what? A middle aged man who'd been married to the same woman for twenty years? Perhaps no sexual relations at all was normal at that stage of life. "Yes, quite normal,.. I suppose." Is that what Man/Woman problems were, he wondered? Well, so far as he knew the only cure for that was to have sex with someone else once in a while - but that was just

too complicated and dangerous, and any other less radical cure struck him as being hopelessly optimistic.

"Appetite all right?"

"Yes."

The sweat was beginning to drip down from his hairline now. He was conscious of it, and embarrassed.

"Warm outside?" enquired Dr. Lin.

"No,... it's turned quite cool really. So, em,... what do you think? Can you help?"

She thought for a while. The man was outwardly calm, but that was his Englishness, his stiff upper lip, she supposed, while inside he was positively incandescent. There was a year's work here, but she surmised he wouldn't have the patience for it. Everyone wanted a quick fix. Some Aspirins, antibiotics, antidepressants, then on with job.

"Help? Yes. You have too much heat, Mr Markham. Must cool you down. Qi also is very weak."

"Qi?"

"Energy, Mr Markham. Feel tired all the time?"

"Well,... yes."

"Break out sweating for no reason?"

"Often, yes."

"Feel dizzy sometimes? In a crowd maybe?"

"Yes,... yes,..."

"Ear ringing because kidney energy low."

"My kidneys? Is that serious?"

"Serious if you don't cool down. Nourish Qi."

Dr Lin smiled. "We take some herbs to begin. But ringing ear is stubborn problem. It will take time. First thing is balance, Mr Markham. Then ear will stop ringing,... maybe."

"Only maybe?"

"Late nights, Mr Markham?"

"Em,..." yes, he was thinking - every night, late, holding back tomorrow. Wine, whiskey, hangover, then up in the small hours relieving the pressure in his bladder. He hoped she wouldn't ask him about the drinking. "Some late nights, yes. I really should do better, I know."

"Alcohol?"

Damn! "A little,..."

She smiled again. "Hmm. Take these herbs. Come back, same time next week?"

"Okay."

"Twenty five pounds please."

"Eh? Oh,... of course."

Phil drove home through the rain, a dull ache between his eyes which he supposed was a symptom of the tensions of the day, and also the lingering remains of last night's cheap wine.

"I will do better," he said, forcing himself past the off-licence. It didn't matter, he'd plenty of whisky at home - maybe two or three glasses tonight. At least he wouldn't appear like so much of an alcoholic to the man behind the counter - he could at least say to himself now that he wasn't in there every night. But the man in the off-licence doesn't care - I mean why should he? I'm paying his bloody wages.

That's how Phil felt about Dr Lin, too. He wasn't used to dipping into his wallet after a visit to the doctor. And all he'd got for his money was a couple of boxes of herbs with unintelligible names and a lot of guff about Qi and Kidney Energy.

CHAPTER 3

He was home a little later than usual and sensed the resentment of his absence in the fact that the door was locked, the key in the lock on the inside, so he couldn't get his own key in and had to knock like a stranger, then wait with the rain dripping down his neck. Alas, he thought, this was normal. Sally came slowly, opened the door with an abrasive sigh and, without looking at him,

turned back into the hall as if she'd been called away from something far more important. His tea was in the oven, a scalding hot plate containing a shrivelled mess of cabbage, potatoes and cottage pie. He hid his disappointment, knowing he should be grateful Sally had bothered to make his tea at all.

She'd known he was going to be late. He'd arranged it all, told her he wouldn't be home for tea, *better not to make any Sal, I'll fix something up later*. But Sally didn't like him making a mess in the kitchen of an evening - even though he always cleaned it up afterwards - it was just a thing she had about the lingering of unwashed pots. He'd been through all this before, and though neither he nor Sally were particularly argumentative, she was easily wound up by such things as lingering pots, and it made him feel knotted up inside when she got upset. So he took his revoltingly overdone tea and ate it alone while Sally sat comatose in front of the T.V. and watched Soaps.

The children were quick to register he was home and began hovering around while he ate, which he hated because it always gave him indigestion. He might have been grateful for their company, but their presence was rarely a delight any more, and more likely just a prelude to nagging for something. They seemed subdued tonight though and he sensed they'd already had a telling off over something.

Elspeth, at eight years, had begun her apprenticeship in the life-skills of emotional manipulation and was sniffing as if upset, while waving her grubby homework sheet. Phil would be expected to do it for her - the blasted question of the week, he supposed.

"What is the highest capital city in the world?" or "Who were the Aztecs?"

He'd learned a lot of useless information from Elspeth's homeworks, while it seemed all Elspeth had learned was how to get others to do stuff for her.

With Marty, at 12, it was usually mathematics. Phil would sort him out later. Marty had begun to nag less, and now hid himself away more, much to Phil's disappointment. He didn't want to have a distant relationship with his son, but it seemed Marty felt otherwise. It was easy to see why - Elspeth was just that much better at monopolising his attention.

Sally called through to remind him, during the adverts, that he'd still not changed the light-bulb in the hall. It was true - it had needed changing for days now, but the lights were quite low down and Sally could easily reach them without standing on a stool or anything. It was only a matter of unscrewing one bulb and screwing in another. But they'd been through this as well: Sally did enough. She worked full time and it was sufficient that she sorted out the washing and most of the

cooking as well. Phil would have done these things, but he worked longer hours, so it was true that Sally had the brunt of it, being home first, sorting out the kids and everything, during the week. He promised to change the light-bulb, then felt a sudden stabbing pain in his guts, a burning indigestion settling in already.

As he washed up, he heard the T.V. blaring out the theme tune from the next soap in the evening's line-up. Sally was still comatose in front of it. There was yet another soap to come after that and, after that, some appalling reality T.V. show. For an intelligent woman, he thought, she didn't half watch some crap.

He smiled as he changed the light-bulb, remembering when he'd bought a copy of Tomb Buster to play on Marty's Gamestation: he liked computer games, liked computers, liked the Internet, but Sally had caught him manipulating Tomb Buster's handsomely endowed heroine Sara Short through a fiendishly difficult tomb, and had feigned disgust at his apparent childishness.

"What you're doing's rubbish," she'd said, a corner of her lip curled in contempt. "Aren't you getting too old for stuff like that?"

Phil was surprised - he supposed it was a bit childish, but it was also entertaining, relaxing - okay it was a time waster, but by the same token so was a game of chess, to say nothing of sitting in front of the television all night watching soaps that were about as representative of real life as an episode of the Teletubbies. He didn't see the difference and wished he'd said so at the time, except you don't do you? And Sally was his wife - you didn't pick fights with your wife - and you sort of trusted that she didn't want to pick fights with you. Okay, there was a lot of needling, but she was just tired all the time. She needed him to understand where she was coming from, but sadly he didn't, and he supposed he was doing a bad job of pretending that he did.

He came into the lounge wearing another painted smile, and asked if she wanted a coffee. She nodded in response. He looked at her slumped there, bound up in the nonsense that was being enacted on the T.V.. It seemed to him the soaps always involved a lot of shouting and childish behaviour, a lot of nastiness, a lot of infidelity. His life wasn't like that. Perhaps Sally would have preferred it if it was. She'd recently turned forty, and though she wasn't quite the slender stick of a thing he'd married, he still found her attractive and lived for her smile, lived for her touch - though that didn't happen very often these days. The smiles were few and if they touched at all it was him touching her, and that didn't feel anywhere near as good as her touching him.

What is the diameter of the earth, daddy?

Phil knew what he was supposed to do. He was supposed to encourage Elspeth to look it up. "Now, I wonder where we might be able to find out about that?" he asked her.

Elspeth sighed and gave him a disappointed look. "On the Internet," she said, not one to be caught out so easily. "Try Wikipedia."

"Well,... yes,... but,... I really think,... Have you looked in the encyclopaedia? Or perhaps an astronomy book? We have a good one in the cupboard."

However, the determining factor in all of this was usually more how tired he and Sally were. It was now after eight. The kids had been home since three thirty and done nothing except muck about, while Phil's feet had yet to touch the ground - and he guessed they probably wouldn't that evening.

The astronomy book had been a favourite of his as a child, quite basic, but the diameter of the earth was well within its scope. However, Elspeth's eyes had glazed over long before Phil turned to the right page. And the problem with books of course was that you had to physically copy out the information: write down: "The earth's diameter is,...." Whereas with the Internet you could just cut and paste the required sentence into a blank document, then print it off.

"But what if the information is wrong, Elspeth?" he cautioned. "We must be careful of our sources on the Internet, and do some cross checking."

"But your book might be wrong, too."

"I suppose it might, but one takes it on trust that the information was checked before the book was published. On the Internet, anyone can publish anything, but it doesn't mean it's true."

Phil was getting very tired though and was tempted just to print the bloody thing off like she wanted him to. His guts were on fire and he suddenly remembered he'd not moved his bowels yet. The problem with that was Sally would be wanting a bath at eight thirty, the kids needing baths straight after, and they'd all pull a face if he sullied the air for them. He really wished there was another option but there wasn't, though it still made him feel mean and guilty, made him wonder if his bathroom odours were worse than anyone else's, and if he shouldn't perhaps be going to the doctor about that as well!

"Hi Marty, how's it going?"

Marty was by now glued to his Gamestation, his attention gripped, mid race in the rancid, airless gloom of his bedroom. He responded with a grunt and Phil sensed at once he was intruding.

"Any homework, mate?"

Inwardly he grimaced at his approach - could one ever really be mates with one's children? He wanted to think so, but sometimes he wondered - your mates went their own way, lived their own lives and you respected them for it. Your children were different though, needed discipline now and then, needed keeping on the right track. Marty shrugged, his eyes not moving from the screen.

"Is that yes or no?"

Marty sighed impatiently and snapped the game onto pause. "Not tonight. Mrs Walsh is away. Innit? We had a crappy stand in."

"Language, Marty!"

"What?"

Crappy was no longer considered bad language, apparently. "And what's this "innit"? Whatever does that mean?"

Oh, shut up Phil, you sound just like your father!

Marty sighed again, "Sorry," he said, but there was a sneer in it, and Phil felt his guts twist once more. Should he stamp on that, or would that be too sensitive, too extreme? He let it go, but wondered if it was the right thing to do. It didn't seem so long ago he was holding Marty in his arms, an unbelievably tiny baby, all sticky and sleepy, his heart seared by a shockingly intense love. And now he sensed the bonds fraying, sensed that inwardly his son was laughing at him, that his son found him ridiculously old fashioned or un-cool, or whatever the vernacular was these days.

"No homework then," said Phil, just to confirm it. Then he left Marty to his game and closed the bedroom door. As he turned away, he heard the squeal of brakes and the crunch of metal as Marty's virtual street racer was involved in a virtual pile up.

"Oh,.. BOLLOCKS!"

Phil bit his tongue; he was too tired to remonstrate and anyway perhaps "bollocks" was no longer considered rude in the modern world either. Trevor, Phil's father in-law, used it all the time, and he was a retired Bank manager, whom Phil might have expected to know better.

Feeling the malodorous wind leaking out of him now, he slipped into the bathroom, sealed himself in, locked the door and settled down to do what he had to do. There was a time, pre-children, pre-

marriage when the bathroom had provided a guarantee of privacy and quiet, but nowadays there was nothing like sitting on the toilet for making one of the kids come banging on the door, desperate for a wee.

Sure enough within moments, Marty was outside hopping from one foot to the next.

"You'll have to wait," said Phil, his patience thinning. But even kids of Marty's age tended to hold on until they were seconds away from wetting themselves - too busy with other stuff to waste time emptying their bladders until they definitely had to - so he knew Marty wasn't faking. Marty continued to hop and, with a groan, Phil decided to leave things half finished, so to speak, or he'd have Marty mimicking his bathroom noises as well just to hurry him along. Marty rushed in as Phil came out and feigned choking on the air. Phil felt humiliated, humiliated by his son, and his stomach gave another twist in protest.

The final soap of the evening was still running. No point in settling into the lounge, then. Sally would not tolerate interruptions during the soaps. It was still drizzling a little, and the light was fading, but he could feel himself growing hot, stifled, enclosed, and he had to cool down, so he put on an old jacket and hat, then headed out to the garden. It was too wet to mow of course, but he could perhaps move a hoe around the borders.

The shed was stuffed with the kids bikes and a massive football-cum-pool table that he'd held out against for months, before finally capitulating under a merciless onslaught of nagging and whining. They'd played with it for a week or so, then Sally had got fed up with it in the house, so it had been slung into the cabin, as he'd known it would. It made it a nightmare to get his mower out and he swore the next time he snagged himself on it, he'd saw the bloody legs off and take it to the tip. They'd not touched the damned thing for ages now - "because mummy won't let us have it in the house!" And Sally wouldn't let Phil dump it, because it had cost a lot of money, and the kids were too idle to fetch it from the shed each time and set the damned thing up. So basically, it was in the way, and he couldn't do anything about it.

Phil looked at the solid wall of detritus in the cabin, at the football-cum-pool table sitting there like some giant four legged creature, sneering at him, and he felt his guts twist some more. He was ludicrously sensitive about the cabin, and had once tried to keep it fastidiously tidy, his tools neatly stored, a bit of old carpet on the floor. And sometimes, of a summer evening, he'd even sat in a deck-chair among the dust and cobwebs, with a book, or just thinking. It had been his sanctuary and he'd resisted the kids bikes for ages, preferring to have them in the garage, until Sally's Mini Cooper got scratched, and then it was goodbye to Phil's tidy little sanctuary. No one understood that these

things mattered to him. Indeed what mattered to Phil was of no consequence at all, and it had been like that for so long he'd even begun to believe it himself.

When he was a kid, his father had kept a border collie that had liked to sit at the top of the stairs. It was easy to step around it or over it, but it seemed the dog was always in the way and wouldn't do a damned thing Phil told it to. Then his dad had taught not to squeeze around the dog but make it get up and move, so it knew its place, or next thing, said his dad, it would be growling at you to get out of its way. Phil guessed that's what they were doing with the kids - that before she was much older Elspeth would be telling him off for not doing her homework on time, and telling Sal off for not washing her clothes properly.

Having given up on the cabin, Phil now harboured the dream of a little Summer house - there was just room at the bottom of the garden. He could even sleep in there, he thought - during his less rational moments - I mean Sally would never countenance that, even though she'd no use for him in bed any more. It puzzled him: he wasn't needed much for anything really, but if he wasn't around she pulled a face. He had to sleep with her, so long as he didn't wake her when he came to bed, so long as he lay corpse-still, didn't snore, kept to his side of the bed, and of course, kept his hands to himself! It was more the appearance of the thing, he supposed. If he'd purposely avoided sleeping with her - even once in a blue moon, it would mean he didn't love her enough. The fact that he might actually *not* love Sally any more was something he did not allow himself to explore.

Sally didn't want a Summer House - they were expensive and she saw no point in them. Instead, she wanted to extend the bedroom out over the garage, so she could have an en-suite bathroom that Phil struggled to see the need for, since the bathroom was directly across the hall anyway from the bedroom. It might stop the kids interrupting his bowel movements he supposed, except Sally had always made it plain the en-suite would be her private domain. He'd be allowed to urinate in it, she'd said, but not the "other" and the kids wouldn't be allowed in at all - not even to clean their teeth, since even that apparently innocuous activity sometimes resulted in globs of toothpaste hanging from the ceiling.

No, there was something about an en-suite that was obviously more than merely the sum of its sanitary-ware. It was a selling point, Trevor had said, and Trevor knew the market, and Phil had to agree most modern houses had them these days. Still, a Summer House would have been nice. One day.

The soil was wet and heavy. He was wasting his time persevering with it, but carried on doggedly for half an hour, just for the solitude it afforded him. Then Sally called out from the conservatory

door. The soaps must have finished, he thought, and there was apparently no reality TV show to entertain her further that evening.

"You never talk to me," she was complaining, straight off. "You just do your own thing and ignore me completely. I don't know why you bother coming home at all!"

Phil glanced at his watch - she'd be off to bed in another half an hour. "You were watching telly." he said, but that was an argument that never washed.

"Well, I'm not watching it now."

"Okay, fancy a cup of tea?"

"No. It'll keep me awake. Has Marty done his homework?"

"He says he hasn't got any."

"Are you sure? You know what he's like."

Phil was thinking that if Marty chose to lie to him, that was up to Marty. That if he didn't do his homework, that was up to Marty as well. He wasn't going to carry the lad around all his life.

"I don't know," said Phil. Was he sure? No, he was never sure where his kids were concerned. Yes, they both lied to him whenever they thought they could get away with it and no, he would never trust either of them to tell the truth. Sally scowled and Phil wondered what it must have been like to be so sick of life to make you scowl at it like that. He didn't feel that way, surely? All right, things were tiring, confusing, difficult as hell, but he was still looking for a way through while Sally appeared to have given up and the weight of it had crushed the breath from her. Or was it his fault? Was it living with him that had made her so miserable?

"Do you have to wear that hat?" she asked.

"Eh?"

"You do know they laugh at you wearing that."

"What? Who? The kids?"

"The whole street. My dad says,..."

"It's raining," explained Phil, not particularly interested in what Trevor had to say on the subject of

his hat, though he could imagine. And if anyone was laughing at him, it would be Trevor - Trevor, who'd never forgiven him for catching Trevor unawares and marrying his daughter.

"And those ear muffs you wear."

"Ear muffs?" This was a new one, thought Phil. "You mean my ear defenders. But I only wear them when I'm mowing."

"Well they make you look stupid!"

There was no smile; Sally's mood was really sour tonight.

"But the mower's noisy. It aggravates my ears. Makes them ring louder."

She sniffed. "You and your ears. How much did that acupuncture cost?"

Ah, now we're getting to it, thought Phil. "Em, twenty quid," he said, instinctively lowering the cost a fraction to take the sting out of it. The wife correction factor, he called it. He didn't have the nerve to tell Sally he'd not actually had any acupuncture, but come away with just a handful of herbs instead.

"Twenty pounds!" She was appalled. "I hope it worked."

"Well not yet. I have to go back,... em,... maybe a few times."

"That's what *you* think. We can't afford to go throwing money away on stuff like that."

She was unusually argumentative, he thought. Indeed she seemed close to losing her temper, which wasn't like her at all.

"Sally, the tinnitus is really upsetting me. If I go for a few months it's no more than what it costs us for a few weeks shopping. And if it gets rid of it it'll be worth it."

"Doctor Jackson told you it was incurable, that you should just get used to it. I agree with him. Get used to it."

Phil's guts were really burning now, the acid rising. "Jackson's an idiot," he said. "I went in with a ringing ear and came out with a prescription for antidepressants."

"And if you'd bothered to take them, you wouldn't be so grumpy now."

"Grumpy? I'm not grumpy."

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

