

Tales From The Cottage

Peter Barns

Published by Boddaert Books at Smashwords

Copyright 2012 Peter Barns

Smashwords Edition, License Notes.

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters and events portrayed are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

To all my friends

Flash Fiction

“Flash fiction is a style of fictional literature or fiction of extreme brevity. There is no widely accepted definition of the length of the category. Some self-described markets for flash fiction impose caps as low as three hundred words, while others consider stories as long as a thousand words to be flash fiction.”

Wikipedia

For this collection Boddaert Books has restricted each story to a maximum of one thousand words, including the title.

Just a Phone Call Away

Lyra Young sat on the edge of the bed, her husband's phone clutched tightly in her hand. She glanced over at Harry, then quietly stood, crossing the bedroom in bare feet to the en-suite. Sitting on the toilet seat, she stared at the phone again.

What she was about to do could change her life completely and she wasn't sure that she wanted to take that chance right now.

The bathroom seemed extra bright and she half-closed her eyes.

Her thumb trembled just millimetres from the screen. It had a blackness so deep it threatened to swallow her.

Closing her eyes, she tapped it.

* * *

Lyra sat quietly, shoulders slumped, her tears long gone. She'd cried enough over the bastard, now she had to decide what to do.

She'd suspected Harry of having an affair for some time but made herself believe his excuses for the late nights and disinterest in sex.

It had been hard enough forgiving him for his past transgressions, let alone admit to herself that he might be doing it again.

As she thought about Harry's affairs, Lyra unconsciously rubbed her left collar bone - the one he'd broken slamming her against the wall the last time she'd confronted him two years ago.

She didn't think she had the strength to go through all that again.

Leaning forward, Lyra rubbed her temples with her fingertips, knowing that she had to get away from him, if only for the sake of her child. But she knew he'd never let her - the one time she'd tried, he'd chased her down and dragged her back to the house.

She hadn't gone out for two weeks after that, too embarrassed to show her bruised face to the world.

Well she'd wanted the excitement of dating a criminal all those years ago and now she was paying for it. It was her own stupid fault really.

If she just accepted his affairs and stopped trying to change him, he wouldn't hit her.

Lyra sat back, the images of the pictures on his phone running through her mind. They made her feel sick - and the sex texts were really disgusting!

Suppose Tracey had got hold of the phone and seen them! It didn't bare thinking about.

There had to be a way - this had to end.

* * *

Lyra stood at the front door, half in, half out.

"I told you, I saw it in the car Harry."

Harry pushed passed her and Lyra winced when her shoulder caught the door post.

"Fasten your seat belt darling," Lyra said, easing herself into the driving seat and starting the car.

"Yes mummy."

Harry slammed the glove-box closed. It fell open and he slammed it again.

"It's not bloody here I'm telling you!" he growled. Without waiting for an answer he stormed back to the house.

"Think I left the garage unlocked Tracey, won't be a sec."

Lyra hopped out of the car and hurried around to the back. Making sure that her daughter wasn't watching, she bent down and placed Harry's phone on the ground.

Getting back into the car, she slid the gear-stick into reverse and waited.

After a few minutes Harry stormed out of the house, slamming the front door behind him, his face twisted in rage.

"What the fuck you done with my phone? I told you the last time what I'd —"

Spotting his phone laying behind the car, Harry hurried over, bending down to pick it up.

"Must have dropped it," he muttered.

“What’re you doing Harry?” Lyra called, slamming her foot on the accelerator as her husband’s image disappeared from the driving mirror.

The car jerked backwards, catching Harry’s head between the bumper and the solid garage door.

The engine stalled, replaced by an eerie silence.

Before Lyra could stop her, Tracey was out of the car, hands covering her mouth, eyes wide with shock as she stared at the redness dripping down the cream coloured woodwork.

Lyra gathered her daughter in her arms and hurried her into the house.

“Hush darling, hush now,” she repeated over and over, cuddling the trembling youngster.

* * *

It was two weeks since Harry had died. A terrible accident, the local paper had described it.

Tracey seemed to be coping well and Lyra had done her best to ease her through the trauma of her father’s death.

The funeral was tomorrow and Lyra had made arrangements to see Harry for one last time before the coffin was secured. She’d argued with the funeral director, who didn’t want her to view Harry, telling her that, although they had done their best, the circumstances of the accident meant that his face had been badly damaged.

Standing next to the coffin, Lyra stared down at the bruised and battered face of her husband, feeling nothing - not even the tiniest bit of remorse.

“Bye Harry,” she said, slipping his mobile down under his body. “Why don’t you take your fucking tart with you? Where you’re going, I’m sure you’ll both get on like a house on fire.”

Turning from the coffin, Lyra walked away without a backward glance.

* * *

Three months later - after all the commotion had settled down - Lyra was sitting with a glass of Merlot, wondering whether the insurance payout would be enough to treat her and Tracey to a nice holiday in San Francisco, when her phone rang.

Still leafing through the holiday brochures, she answered it, not checking to see who the caller was first.

“Hello Lying Lyra,” a voice said quietly. “Enjoying my money are you?”

Lyra threw the phone from her with a stifled scream.

Only one person had ever called her that before —

The Frog Who Would Be King

Marcyn sat beside the shimmering pool, trying to ignore the laughs and jeers being directed at him by the other frogs.

The day was hot, the sun blinding in its intensity, and he ran a trembling paw over his head, spreading what little dampness there was over his eyes.

Marcyn was incandescent with anger.

“You may laugh,” he shouted, “but it is I who’ll have the last laugh when I become King and fill in this putrid pond.”

The laughs and jeers grew louder - the frogs gathered on the lily pads rolling about, hooting with mirth, holding their fat little bellies with their fat little feet.

“You’ll see, you’ll see,” Marcyn screamed at them, turning his back and hopping off in a huff.

One of the bigger frogs laughed so loud at this, that he fell off his lily pad and into the pond with a resounding splash.

* * *

“And where might you be going, my fine fat friend?”

Marcyn jumped, turning to look at the large adder watching him from the tall grass.

“Away from those cretins back there!” he answered, eyes still bulging in anger.

“Your friends have upset you?”

Coming under the spell of the snake’s sibilant speech pattern - the long drawn out S’s tingling his ears - Marcyn stuck out a petulant lower lip.

“What do they know about becoming a King?” he asked. “All they think about is sex, sex, sex.”

“Well then, it is fortuitous indeed that we have met. For I can help you on your quest.”

While speaking, the snake had been lightly stroking Marcyn under the chin with the tip of his tail, his yellow eyes growing bigger and bigger.

“You can?” asked Marcyn, all aquiver.

“Indeed I can. Come with me my fine fat frog.”

So saying, the snake wrapped Marcyn in its tail and slid off along the path at great speed.

“But - but where are we going?”

“I’m taking you to become a King. Yes-s-s indeedy.”

* * *

As the snake carried him to his destiny, Marcyn day-dreamed about his future. He would become the most powerful frog in Mizzletop and his name would be on every creature’s lips. Ha, he’d teach those feckless frogs back at the pond to upset him like that. He would show no mercy. There would be no more laughing, and no more hurtful remarks about how ugly his spawn had been.

Born aloft by the adder, Marcyn continued his dreams of power and prosperity, in his mind’s eye burying his enemies up to their necks in the mud, then jumping up and down on their heads.

His smile was broad and egoistical.

After all, he was off to become a King.

* * *

The wizard looked down at the snake, hands on hips.

“He wants to be a King,” the snake said, waving Marcyn back and forth in his coiled tail.

“Does he indeed?”

“You said, if I brought you a frog, you wouldn’t use me in any more of your spells,” the snake continued, waving Marcyn back-and-forth again. “If you chop any more of my tail off, I won’t have any left.”

“Did I, indeed?”

“This is a frog,” said the snake, dropping Marcyn on the floor.

By now, Marcyn was so dizzy that he could barely stand up.

The Wizard bent over, studying him intently. Finally he prodded Marcyn with a gnarled finger. "It is indeed a frog," he said.

The snake hissed his agreement and slithered out the door.

"So you want to become a King?" the Wizard asked, still looming over Marcyn, his long dirty beard shedding pieces of the pie he'd eaten for lunch.

Marcyn just nodded, far too dizzy to speak.

"Well hop up here and I'll see what I can do," the Wizard said, holding out his hand.

Marcyn hopped on and was born aloft, to be placed on a scarred wooden bench top amongst a collection of glass containers and clay pots. The Wizard's hand smelt of herbs and dank forests.

Marcyn jumped when a big thick book slammed down next to him.

"Hm, now let's see," the Wizard said, running a finger down the page. "I think I have all these ingredients. Yes, I should be able to make you a King with no trouble at all."

Marcyn perked up at this information and stood eagerly by watching his new friend pouring various potions into a large iron pot. As he worked the Wizard hummed, pushing his pointy, star covered black hat back in place whenever it fell forward over his eyes.

The Wizard, lost in his work, hadn't noticed that Marcyn had crept into a nearby box for a sleep. The journey had tired him out and the Wizard was taking such a long time.

"Let's see then. What's this last item?" the Wizard muttered.

Still busy reading the instructions, the Wizard grabbed Marcyn out of the box and plucked out one of his eyes, dropping it into the pot.

"There it is then. Eye of frog. Last item. All done."

Marcyn stood still for a moment, too astonished to react. Then he shrugged and hopped his way over to the pot.

"Oh well," he thought. "It could be worse. After all, in the Land of the Blind, the one-eyed frog is King." Now all he had to do was discover where the Land of the Blind Frogs might be!

Lost Contact

Charlie waited excitedly outside the biggest set of doors he'd ever seen, his heart racing.

After weeks of Government checks he was here, on the biggest job of his career. He'd landed a contract at the UK's only Space Exploration Centre.

The blast doors opened slowly, ponderously, moving their great weight aside on greasy tracks. Charlie licked his lips, walking into the cavernous space stretching away in front of him, keeping an eye out for the parking area he'd been told was a few metres into the tunnel.

The parking area turned out to be the size of two multi-story car parks and was filled with cars.

A uniformed man waved at him. "A1 Exterminators?"

Charlie nodded and was led to a small electric buggy.

"Where are we going?" Charlie asked after they'd been driving for five minutes.

"The kitchens, we got a cockroach outbreak there, the like of which you've never seen."

* * *

In the main control room, buried at the very centre of the vast complex under the Chiltern Hills, the tension was mounting to fever-pitch.

After nearly eighteen months of hard work and constant worry, the greatest event mankind would ever experience was about to take place.

Since picking up the weak signals from Jodrell Bank, the crew stationed at SEC had worked hard to crack the signals emanating from what they discovered to be a space craft heading towards earth.

It had taken them eight long months before they'd finally been able to exchange meaningful information with the ship, and both sides, wary of giving away too much, had agreed to an exploratory meeting outside the SEC complex first.

The Grunions - the nearest approximation to what the visitors called themselves in English - had the capabilities of cloaking their craft's appearance from radar, so the SEC director put out a newsflash that it had discovered an incoming meteor, to take care of any telescopic sightings .

Now, seven months and five days from initial contact, mankind was about to have its first meeting with an alien race.

* * *

Charlie wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his overalls and wriggled his way out from under the big stainless steel cupboard.

Done, every last little sucker was either curled up in a dead ball or laying on its back, kicking its legs in its last throws of life.

Charlie smiled in satisfaction - not because he particularly enjoyed killings things, nor because he hated dictyopterous insects, but for a job well done.

He looked at his watch. Three hours.

It had taken him far longer than he'd thought it would, but the kitchen complex was huge, easily big enough to cater for a couple of hundred people. He'd have to up his charges for this one.

Shrugging the big tank onto his back, Charlie picked up his tool-bag and slipped into the electric cart, watching the line of overhead lights flash overhead as they sped their way back towards the entrance.

* * *

"We have your signal on our guidance system. Locked on."

The words issuing from the big speakers under the giant TV screen didn't sound like anything intelligible, but the large Cray computers on the floor below were flashing up the translations from the incoming vessel.

"Landing in four - three - two — Landing successful. Will disembark and make our way to the meeting point."

A thunderous explosion of clapping and shouting echoed around the big room as men and women hugged and slapped one another on the back for a job well done.

“Ladies, gentlemen —”

All heads turned to the Prime Minister, standing looking down at them from a gallery under the giant screen, a big smile plastered across his face.

“— let’s go meet our visitors, shall we?”

* * *

Charlie thanked the driver for dropping him off by his van and watched the cart disappear back into the tunnel, marvelling that two such massive pieces of metal could close so silently.

Charlie tugged open the back doors of his van with far more noise, tossing his tool bag inside.

He hesitated, standing silently for a moment, head up, nostrils flared, scenting the air like some overgrown dog.

The smell was unmistakable, but far stronger than Charlie had ever experienced before.

Jesus, it was overpowering!

Looking around Charlie gasped when he spotted six of the biggest roaches he’d ever seen.

Taken aback for a moment, he watched them heading towards a large clearing to one side of the big steel doors.

They moved fast. but Charlie moved faster, his years of training taking over as he whipped the spray nozzle from its clip, pumping the long handle that pressurised the canister.

It was over in a few seconds and the six roaches lay dead at his feet, their pungent smell stinging his eyes.

Charlie crunched one with his boot, wondering at its size. It burst open, shooting out a long splat of green, foul smelling fluid. Charlie backed off, wiping his boot in some nearby grass.

He nodded as he climbed into his van. He’d give them this extra kill at no charge.

Weird, was his last thought before driving off towards the main gates of the complex.

* * *

“This is SEC, do you read. Over?” The operator turned to his superior, a worried frown creasing his forehead. “I don’t understand it sir. One minute he was screaming about some enormous creature - the next, silence.”

“Keep trying. I’ll go and make sure we keep the Prime Minister inside for the present, just in case.”

“Hello, this is SEC calling. Respond please. Hello, this is SEC.”

Digitised Subjugation

The big machine shuddered to a halt, skewing slightly as it stopped. A small cover opened on its side and an eyebot skimmed out over the yellow encrusted terrain.

Jake manoeuvred the eyebot to the port side, viewing the mangle of twisted metal bunched on the front driving sprocket.

“Grounder One to Basecom.”

The message was instantaneous and the response just as fast, flashing between him and the base computer thousands of kilometres away.

“Basecom.”

“I’ve thrown a track.”

“Yes. I’ll send a repbot out to you.”

Jake had been a digger for ten years, but still wasn’t comfortable about his every thought and action being automatically relayed back to Basecom.

Mentally stretching his left leg, he eased the cramps. The port track trembled in reaction.

Jake wondered how long it would take the repbot to get to him.

“Five hours,” Basecom replied.

Jake visualised the eyebot back into its recess and sighed.

“Sleep break,” he thought.

“Confirmed,” Basecom responded almost before Jake had finished his thought.

Good, now if he could just —

Jake knew Basecom would now log most of his systems off for the sleep break. He sent a tentative poke of electrons towards the communications chip and a quiet snick echoed in his mind.

“Hello base?” Jake thought.

He was met with silence.

Another poke of electrons switched frequencies.

“Okay Jake?”

“We’ve got five hours. Make it four to be on the safe side.”

“Basecom took the bait then?”

“Yeah, that self-hypnosis session you did with me had them fooled. I was able to convince them that I’d thrown a track.”

“Good. The rest are ready to move when you give the okay. It’s all down to you now Jake. You’re our one hope. We have to capture Torsion and get a message back to earth about what’s happening out here.”

Jake moved his feet and the four big electric engines purred into life, the whole digger vibrating with pent-up energy. But Jake didn’t feel a thing, his liquid encased brain, safely buried deep in the guts of the digger, was cradled by rubber suspension units.

Torsion Inc. had quickly learnt that human brains were easily damaged in the big digging machines. It was a huge expense protecting them so well, but far cheaper than flying up replacements from their base on Carselius.

Jake thought his digger onto the right heading and set off, riding blind, hoping the co-ordinates he’d been given would get him where he needed to go.

Normally he’d have his eyebot out front so that he could see where he was going, but he couldn’t chance that. The small bot, controlled by a monkey’s brain, reported every sighting back to Basecom directly and the only way he could circumvent that was to overwhelm the eyebots signals with his own mental images. Something that only worked for short bursts.

As he rumbled across Gidarion, the largest of Carselius’ three moons, Jake daydreamed about his childhood - the big open spaces that he’d played in around his native village.

The thing Jake missed most was sunlight. Unlike here, where the sun rarely shone, his village had been bright and colourful, full of laughter and bustling with people.

He’d been about ten when one of the patrols had caught him. He hadn’t been worried at first, knowing that the worst that would happen was being sent to an orphanage.

Jake had a quick, inquisitive mind and the Rector of the orphanage soon spotted his potential, selling him on to a Torsion Inc. agent.

Torsion Inc., the off-world ore specialist, had spent billions of credits developing their remote mining machines, using animal brains as controllers. A quick burst of stimulation to the sexual and hunger centres of the brains kept most RMMs functioning properly. Those that didn't were destroyed.

The drive for profits eventually led Torsion Inc. to search for more efficient RMM controllers - the brains of young orphans, sold through an illegal market by unscrupulous orphanage Rectors.

Nobody missed the orphans, assuming they'd either moved on or had run away. It was a terrible, lonely life, that sent most new RMM's insane within months of their captivity.

* * *

Arriving at the co-ordinates, Jake rumbled to a stop.

This was the dangerous part because he needed to see what he was doing.

Jake squirted some more electrons along the embedded wires in his frame, hoping the sequence they'd come up with would work. If all went well the eyebot would report a series of pre-recorded events to Basecom.

Jake slid open the cover and the eyebot sped out, tumbling over and over, out of control.

"Eyebot, engage jet stabilisers," Jake thought, using Basecom's frequency signature.

The eyebot settled down, allowing Jake control of its miniature jets.

Jake began digging, pushing great mounds of yellow soil into piles around the steadily growing trench. He had little time left before Basecom rebooted his systems again.

"Have you reached it yet?"

The thought caught Jake unaware and he stopped digging.

"No."

"You haven't much time left."

"I know."

As he lowered his blade again, Jake felt it scrape something solid in the ground and sent eyebot to have a look.

Laying half-covered in the trench was a heavily reinforced cable - the power line from Torsion Inc.'s nuclear plant on the far side of the moon. If Jake managed to destroy it, Torsion Inc.'s defences would be shut down and the machines poised around the big centre would be able to start their attack.

Jake raised his blade as high as it would go, ready to strike.

"Stop!"

The thought threw Jake into confusion and he hesitated.

"You can't kill God. I won't let you. God gave me my life."

The eyebot slammed itself into Jake's blade and exploded, leaving Jake blind.

When the repbot finally arrived, it found the huge digging machine slamming its big blade into the ground, over and over, in a blind rage.

Oops-a-Daisy

As the last man on earth jumped from the thirty-first window of his office building, somewhere below him a phone rang.

Sunset

Beside a whispering stream in the clearing of an ancient forest, a small seedling struggled to put out its first shoots.

Over the seasons it thrust higher towards the canopy and the sun blazing overhead, reaching out its leaves to catch the life-giving light.

And so the seedling flourished, growing thicker and taller with every passing season.

Reaching its first ring-time, the seedling mingled its anima with its neighbour's, learning how best to place the wrinkles and furrows growing on its bark to catch the gentle breezes. By doing so the tree could sing, in the hope of attracting a passing sprite. For it is this symbiotic relationship between plant and sprite that keeps all trees growing tall, straight and true.

In its seventh ring-time the young sapling was startled when the tree that had seeded it, gave out a mighty groan. The oak crashed to the ground, tearing a gaping hole in the canopy, flooding the young sapling with a burst of light.

Moving its furrows to catch the breeze, the sapling sang a sad melody for the fallen giant, which quickly turned to one of happiness that it could now grow unrestricted.

That night, as the trees drooped their leaves, making ready for sunset, a storm formed high over the mountains, sweeping down with such force that its winds battered every living thing sheltering in the forest.

Howling and moaning, the tempest screamed around the trunks, rattling branches and tearing tender leaves from where they slept as it filled the forest with its terrifying wails. The trees bent and flexed, gripping the soil tightly with their roots.

The sapling, young and supple, and not yet aware of the danger, gloried in the storm, bending and swaying its graceful trunk, singing defiantly as the tempest shook its branches.

But then the wind gusted so hard the sapling was torn from the ground.

Buffeted across the forest floor, crashing from one hard trunk to another, its leaves were ripped away and its tender roots crushed and bruised.

Caught in the raging wind the terrified sapling could do little more than huddle into its innermost core, wondering whether the torment would ever end or if this was the last night of its short life.

The storm showed no mercy that black moon, continuing to pound the young sapling from place to place, passing it from one strong eddy to another, until the battered plant was finally driven deep into a crevasse between two rocky outcrops.

Shaken and torn, the young sapling managed to push its roots into the stony barren soil, knowing how lucky it had been to escape such fury alive.

* * *

The seasons flowed one upon another and the young sapling grew into a sturdy tree, its ring-time now fifteen.

The tree strived to reach the sunlight shining down the cleft in the rocks, yearning to feel warmth on its leaves - not just the dull reflection that reached it.

Where it was damaged by the storm, the tree's trunk had become twisted and bent, growing into a thick canker that caused it much misery.

And so the tree struggled upwards from the darkness, taking many twists and turns, until at last the very tips of its branches finally reached out into the forest above.

The bright beauty of the forest brought such a longing to the tree's heartwood that it sang a song - so mournful, so doleful - that a passing sprite, drawn by such sadness, settled onto the tips of its trembling branches.

"Why so sad?" the tree-sprite asked.

The question flowed into the tree's awareness and its leaves curled in shame. "I am not as the other trees," it answered. "I am ugly. It is good that I am hidden away down here in the deep darkness."

Settling on the canker, the sprite began replacing the twisted rotting wood with fresh new growth, using her own spirit to do so.

The sprite worked hard, driven by the tree's deep unhappiness, until after many ring times, she had completed her task.

It was the tree's fortieth-ring time and it now stood straight and tall, branches proudly reaching towards the sky, its song, strong and happy.

The tree knew it owed the sprite a debt it could never repay.

"Come sprite," it sang. "Come out and tell the forest what miracles you have done."

But the tree's entreaties were greeted with a deep silence.

The tree cast about in a frenzy, trying to find the sprite, calling to it on the wind, its song loud and half-crazed.

Finally the tree found the dying sprite lying between its roots, her energy spent, her anima holding on by the tiniest thread.

The tree sent down a sucker and gently picked her up, cradling the dimming light in its trembling branches, holding her towards the sunset that she had loved so much.

As darkness fell, the sprite was wafted away on a gentle breeze and the tree howled its guilty rage at the moon.

From that day forth the tree grew more twisted and bitter. Its anger growing stronger with each new season.

Its songs - no longer attractive - repelled the passing sprites. The crevasse quickly filled with wrinkled, twisted branches and the tree itself turned as black as the blackest night.

The tree finally died on its sixtieth ring, still young by forest standards. And now, above the crevasse, where once a bright sun had brought such beauty and happiness, hangs a twisted dark cloud.

A black tear, not yet shed.

Journey's End

What do you see when you look at me? Do you even bother to look, or am I just that old man in Room 22 in your busy life?

You come every morning, chattering away about what you did, how the kids are playing up, how worried you are about whether your husband will be laid off work . Worry, worry, worry.

What about my worries? The ones I never get the chance to talk about, because I'm just a silly old man at the end of his life, not worth the trouble of listening too?

I was young once. Just like you. I had kids and a life. Where are they now? Gone away to live somewhere else I suppose. Can't remember the last time I saw them. Last Christmas was it? Maybe the Christmas before.

And my love, Sheree. The woman I spent sixty years cherishing. What has become of her? Why did you take her from me? Snatch her from my arms in such a cruel way?

Yes, she couldn't look after herself. I know, I know. But I did a good job, didn't I? Fed her, cleaned her, cuddled her as we sat watching TV.

But you took her from me, put her in a home five miles away where I can't see her. Might as well have been five hundred. Do you even wonder how painful that was for me? How it sucked every last meaning from my life?

Sixty wonderful years. Years of sharing, closeness and warmth. Snatched away by some overpaid busybody in a floral dress and ingratiating smile.

It was a wonderful journey we had together, wasn't it Sheree? A journey filled with love and laughter. And I grew to love every part of you. Every little crease in your face, every strand of hair that flopped across your forehead.

We always liked journeys, didn't we, you and I? Portugal, China, India. Even when we got old we'd wobble our way along the top road, looking out over the sea, watching the nesting buzzards searching for food, gliding their way across the firth on the warm spring updraughts.

I always imagined it was us up there, floating over the sea, born aloft by our love.

But little by little you were taken away from me, my love. Memory by memory. Silently, as though somebody had crept into your mind and made off with you, leaving behind someone I no longer knew.

And now I have another journey ahead of me and I want to share this one with you too.

I need to feel your reassuring hand in mine this one last time. I need to look into those bright blue eyes once more and remember what a grand love we shared.

It's taken me a long time to get here. Along the corridors, down the stairs - I don't trust lifts anymore. The lights have been dimmed because it's night-time. At least that's what I tell myself, not wanting to admit my sight is not what it once was.

The door was a struggle to open, my weak, vein-marked hands no longer up to the jobs they once performed without a struggle. But the key I took from your pocket when you helped me sit up in bed to drink my tea was the right one.

Here I am, on the cusp of the greatest journey of my life, and I'm terrified of being alone when I make it.

The night is bright and crisp. The snow cleared from the drive, heaped in sparkling ridges along the sides, lighting the way to the main gate - so near, so far.

Yes its been a long, long journey, my life, with just five miles to go.

Five miles is not so far. I used to walk that every day, hand in hand with you my love.

If I just take it slowly, pull my dressing gown tighter about my shoulders —

Ancient Seas

Sea, so the legends tell us, was once a gigantic lake that grew from a single tear.

One day, during the first winter cycle, many aeons ago, Sun and Moon were fighting over who was the most pleasing to the creatures living on the planet below.

Sun claimed that, because she gave the world warmth, she was the best.

Moon argued that, because she bathed the planet in her splendid silver light, she was the most pleasing.

And so they quarrelled, back and forth, neither giving way. Until one day Sun, losing her temper and being the more powerful of the two, banished Moon to the night cycle.

Alone and unhappy, Moon cried and cried, her tears falling through the dark night skies onto the earth below. Every night when Moon rose, she would look about her lonely domain and begin to weep again.

As time passed, Moon's tears began to form a lake, which grew at a steady rate, driving all before it.

Seeing this and feeling sorry for what she had done to her friend, Sun tried to make amends.

Breaking off myriad small pieces of herself, Sun threw them into the night sky so that Moon might not feel so alone and sad. These brilliant points of light, twinkling against the deep dark background, delighted Moon so much that she finally stopped her crying.

But by now the lake of tears had become so huge that it threatened to drown all those living on the lands below.

The Prime Mover, seeing the threat to Her creatures, gathered the tears and split them into seven portions, naming them: Adriatic, Aegean, Alboran, Balearic, Black, Corsica, Ionian and Tyrrhenian, placing each in its own special location.

Having finished her work, The Prime Mover sprinkled them with salt to assuage their anger at being confined in such small spaces and left them in peace.

The seas were unhappy at being split into parts this way but could do little to rejoin their companions, although now and then - when the winds lent them strength - they would try their best, crashing against the shore-line with angry swipes.

Moon now visits the seas every night, and they are always glad to see her, bulging up, keen to be caressed by her golden essence, wanting to be at one with her once more.

But when Sun slowly slides her red fringes across the morning sky, Moon is forced to take her leave, calming the seas with soft words and gentle pats.

And this is as it should be, for if sea were ever to escape, it would wash away all the lands, and with them, all life.

A Spider's Wink

Spiderling Twenty-Four turned one of his eight eyes towards his sibling.

One-Thirty-Two sat a short distance away on the edge of the nest, untangling himself from the remains of his cocoon.

They had both hatched a few moments earlier, but Twenty-Four was the older - just.

Twenty-Four turned his attention back to the problem he was trying to solve; how many brothers and sisters he had - too many would mean a crowded nest and Twenty-Four really didn't fancy that.

He'd just reached the count of one hundred and twenty-nine when he was interrupted.

"What are you doing?"

Now he'd have to start right over. From the beginning. At one.

Twenty-Four started to count again. From the beginning. At one.

He'd reached twelve when another voice cut across his mental calculations.

"He asked what you're doing," a sultry voice said.

Twenty-Four sighed deeply, stamping four of his feet. Turning to face his tormentors he stamped the other four for good measure.

"Can't you see that I'm busy? Go away!"

Turning back to his task, Twenty-Four began again.

One, two, three —

"He's counting us," One-Thirty-Two told his companion with an authority belying his young age.

"But why would anyone do that?" was the quick response.

Unable to ignore the conversation taking place behind him, Twenty-Four gave up and walked away, still a little unsteady on his legs.

Okay, so you try walking on eight legs right after hatching and see how steady you are!

Twenty-Four stumbled across the slippery surface of the wheelie bin, the fine hairs on the ends of his eight spindly legs ensuring that he didn't fall as he groped his way over the edge and began the long trek to the ground.

Wait a minute, he thought.

Looking under his round body, Twenty-Four shook the tiny spinnerets protruding from his rear end, watching as small dollops of sticky web oozed from the tips.

Dabbing the ends of his spinnerets against the green plastic, Twenty-Four squeezed his belly and jumped.

He was half-way to the ground when a breeze slammed him against the side of the bin, halting his dizzying downwards dash. He hung like a limp bundle, twisting slowly on his thread, trying to regain his senses.

Hearing the sound of voices drifting down to him, Twenty-Four looked up, spotting a long line of spiderlings staring down at him from the edge of the bin.

There was much pushing and shoving, laughter and jeering, as they watched Twenty-Four trying to climb back up the side of the bin, constantly slipping off to dangle on the end of his thread again.

"Whoo-hoo, look at the silly spider. He can't get back up. Ha ha!"

The taunts cut deep into Twenty-Four's ego and he wondered if he'd ever manage the seemingly impossible climb.

Perhaps he should just drop down to the ground and leave the nest, he considered. No, night was coming and he'd surely die in the cold.

Looking back up, Twenty-Four could see that only one spiderling was left, the rest had disappeared. It looked like the spiderling with the sultry voice, the one who'd been talking with One-Thirty-Two earlier.

Taking a deep breath Twenty-Four started out again, his shaky legs trembling as he scrambled for a foothold.

Yes, yes — no.

"Argh!"

The fall slammed him against the side of the bin once more, almost knocking him unconscious.

Twenty-Four was on the verge of giving up.

"Eat your thread!"

The voice whipped away in the wind.

"What? Eat my what?"

"Your thread! Eat your thread!"

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

