

The Lucky Krab
Sample Chapters
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Chapter 1

Richard Asquith dropped the torch from between his teeth in astonishment. It lay quivering on the open newspaper, casting a parabolic arc over the crossword so the clues leered up at him like an impish child on Bonfire Night. So, the old fool had been speaking sense! Egg. Wee. Boner. To the casual eye, he had seemed completely insane, like the Ancient Mariner's mad older brother. Yet now, in the midnight gloom, Richard saw that there was a story within the old man, waiting to be teased out by someone with sufficient patience.

Richard wanted to share his realisation with someone, but the only human presence in the room was a gentle snoring from under a tumble of curls on the pillow beside him. In the ghostly torchlight, Mary's face looked pale and drawn under the cascade of amber, like a limestone pebble in a drift of leaves. Her preparations for Christmas had begun in September, with no let-up until Advent's crescendo. She looked as if she would sleep until New Year.

Richard, however, couldn't sleep. Perhaps it was the alcohol, or too many mince pies. A distant clock struck twelve. Even now, he could hear his grandfather saying, 'well, Christmas is as far away now as it'll ever be.' Another old fool. But, the old man in the home; why had his obtuse ramblings suddenly crystallised in Richard's head? The answer lay on his lap. He'd been doing the cryptic crossword, muffling the left brain's thirst for sequential logic and liberating the right's creativity. It was a giddy feeling when it clicked; like defocusing the vision and suddenly seeing the leaping dolphins within a *Magic Eye* picture.

Whatever restlessness he had felt before was now doubled. He eased out of bed to go to the toilet. As he washed his hands, the questions came pouring out. Who was the old guy? What dire circumstances had led him to this mental exile? Had there been some sort of mishap in the mountains?

Richard looked in the mirror, oddly lit by the children's nightlight that assuaged the imagined horrors of the landing. The orange glow was strangely flattering, making his angular features appear tanned and relaxed. In reality, mid-winter had cast a sickly pallor over him. Too many hours in a stuffy office had turned him into a haggard scarecrow. If he looked *through* the mirror, again using the *Magic Eye* principle, he could see the old man himself staring back, his face as bleached and crumpled as a carelessly washed receipt.

He thought about how he had come to meet the old man. Like everything, it was pure chance. Except that it wasn't, he thought. It was all foreseeable; it couldn't have happened otherwise. It was, or rather, *had been*, Christmas Day. Mary had been wrestling an unwilling roast into the oven, scurrying around the house brandishing gravy boats and carving knives. He'd slipped out of the house to give her some peace. That was all scripted in their Christmas ritual. Besides, a bit of fresh air was just the thing to develop an appetite. So he had gone for a walk round the village, taking the children with him. All of that was inevitable. It *had* to be.

It was impossible to go anywhere in their village without passing the war memorial. This sandstone needle, scarred with the names of the long dead, pinned the central square forever to the past. There had been questions; hard questions. What was it for? Who were the people? Why were they all men? Why were they all young? What was it all about?

Had his answers really been so unconvincing? All that hand wringing about a lost age of sacrifice and duty? Then, in the midst of this impromptu history lesson, he had looked up and improvised a practical demonstration. Across the street, on the rusted gates of the village manor house, he'd spotted a sign proclaiming in faded, utilitarian lettering, *Crook of Lune Nursing Home*. Someone had added, *Making Geriatric Care Happen!*, underlined with a triumphant swoosh, as if old age could be marketed like expensive trainers.

He had seen then that he, too, could *make geriatric care happen*. He was equipped with the means to bring a flicker of happiness to the shattered faces in that tired-looking building. At the end of either arm, like dangling mittens, were two children; who would play the role of adorable cherubs if sufficiently bribed and coached. They could alleviate, however briefly, the wretched forgottenness that he knew lay within.

'Change of plan,' he had announced, to a chorus of complaint. It had been the vaguest and least thought out of ideas. Even at the last minute, he had wavered underneath the Doric columns that towered over the entrance. And that nurse in reception, what was her name? Trish. Yes, Trish, the epitome of unhelpfulness. She was probably no older than him, but the daily attrition of her job had weathered her features. Had she acquired that stoop from the strain of lifting her charges or was it some weird osmosis from working with the elderly?

Richard played back their arrival in his head. There she had been in the lobby, bullying a duster around the intricate carvings of a leather-topped desk. Short of hair and short of leg, but strong of arm and hearty of hip, she had flashed an

accusatory look his way, followed by a ‘Can I ‘elp?,’ as if helping was the last thing on her agenda.

He had returned his best grin. ‘You can if you’ve got some Old Folks we can visit. Merry Christmas, by the way.’

‘Yeeeesssss, but whose family are you?’

‘Nobody’s; we’re just visiting.’ Even as the words had left his mouth, the logic behind this do-gooder’s outing had sounded as fragile as crêpe paper. She had heard ‘some bliddy daft things’ in her time but he had just ‘tecken the prize.’

There had been real doubt whether she was going to admit them. When he’d asked if it was a convenient time, she had merely observed tartly that it was a free country. Then there had been the sad story of how she always worked the Christmas shift, because her dad had died at this time of year and she couldn’t bide any of ‘your’ Yuletide festivities, as if Richard had personally invented Christmas just to annoy her. The exchange had concluded with her acidly inquiring what he did for the elderly ‘the other three hundred and sixty four days.’ Her stance hadn’t softened one jot to hear that he’d been paying her wages. She had offered to show them the door, the double meaning echoing round the foyer.

God, the heat in the day room! Even now, leaning over the china-cold sink in the draughty bathroom, Richard gagged at the memory. They had frantically cast off their coats, hats and gloves, leaving them in a woolly snowdrift by the door, but even then, the swelter was greenhouse-humid. The air had been turgid with over-boiled cabbage, with overtones of disinfectant.

Richard padded back to the bedroom and crept under the still-warm cover. He could have leapt in from a trapeze, and still Mary wouldn’t have stirred. But for

Richard, the videotape of his day was still not played out. Only when he had reviewed every frame would his eyelids droop.

That bloody telly! The contrast had been set too high and the sound too low, but its flickery presence had been impossible to ignore. They had entered to find a woman with unnaturally white teeth pointing at a pack of panty liners and being relentlessly upbeat about them. Her audience wasn't exactly the target market. Two dozen drowsy figures were arranged around the walls like some human henge, erected to mark two thousand years of human experience. Yet, this was no community of wisdom reclining in an earthly paradise. The glacial progress of the pendulum clock and the palpable bodily decay soon put paid to such illusions.

Richard remembered his bonhomie evaporating in an instant. The tug of hearth and home had been strong, but having run Trish's gauntlet at the door, it had seemed too late to back out. As the children stepped into the light, a desultory ripple of recognition had circled the room, like a Mexican Wave at a funeral. Women had stirred from sleeps that had never been, uncoiling from contorted postures. From nowhere, they conjured indulgent smiles that had been little exercised since their grandchildren were small; when Richard was small, come to that.

Arthur hadn't been his first port of call. At first, the old man in the corner had seemed too sleepy or insensible to warrant conversation. In any case, demographics dictated that the women outnumbered the men many-fold. The tales he had heard were predominately of domestic stoicism. To this generation of understatement, whole wars merited only a passing reference, like '... so I didn't hear from my husband until he came back from Burma, six years later,' as if it had been a trifling inconvenience.

They had spent a long time with, what was her name?, Joyce... that was it. She was hunched in her chair, as if one of her vertebrae had been replaced with an elbow joint by some malicious plumber. Full of regret for a childless life, potential unfulfilled as 'just a lollipop lady.' She had laughed out loud at his quickfire calculation that she must have escorted over a million children across the road in her forty years in the job. A light had seemed to come on in her eyes as she'd acknowledged all those parents' gratitude afresh.

It was only as they were leaving that Arthur had shown himself. The children had started to fidget, Trish glaring as if inventing reasons to eject him on health grounds. Then Matthew had chosen that particular moment to fish a toy ambulance from his pocket and propel it across the parquet floor. As if taunting the residents with the very vehicle that would soon come to take them away, the toy sped past their toes, until a reflex stamping action trapped it under a slipper.

The owner of the slipper was balanced on the edge of his seat, stroking an invisible beard that someone had apparently stolen some time before. He was wearing a faded tee shirt that seemed suited to a man sixty years younger, and baggy shorts in the colours of a football team that Richard didn't recognise. Despite the wasting of the years, his forearms were twisted hawsers of muscle.

Even now, sitting in bed, Richard stiffened at the memory of his son, crouching to retrieve his toy from under the old man's foot. Arthur had been conducting a quiet but animated conversation with a point in space just in front of his knees. Richard had felt the familiar protective urge that gives parents a stronger kinship with the mammals on the nature documentary than with their childless friends.

None of that had bothered the boy, of course. His head cocked, a quizzical smile dimpling his cheeks, he'd regarded the recalcitrant foot as any other obstacle and had lifted it off the toy with surprising strength.

Trish must have picked up on Richard's concern, remarking, 'It's only Arthur. Harmless enough, but dun't say much.'

The caustic sneer, and the use of the third person had rankled, so he'd felt obliged to ask, 'What *do* you say, then, Arthur?'

As if using him as a ventriloquist's dummy, she had projected, 'Nowt worth 'earing. He's always on about having crabs, but he's broken 'em, as yer do. Then there's a bit about having a wee with a boner. Oh, and an egg comes into it, every so often.' This had all been rounded off with a judgmental, 'Bit touched, that bloke,' loud enough for everyone to hear. Loud enough for Arthur to hear, if he had a mind. Which, at the time, had seemed doubtful.

But now, sitting in the dark, it all made sense. Egg. Wee. Boner. To the right person, anyway. And having established that, he was ready for sleep. He flipped off the torch and settled down next to Mary's musky warmth. As the newspaper slipped unnoticed to the floor, he dreamed of church-spire mountains, and long-gone, carefree days in France.

Chapter 2

On Boxing Day morning, while Mary and the children still slept, Richard threw on some ill-matched clothes from the tottering pile on the bedroom floor and crept downstairs, pausing only to grab an old photo album from the spare room. He looked at his watch. Would the old guy be up, yet? Should he calm down and have some breakfast first? No, bugger that, he had to find out, so he grabbed the keys and slunk out, closing the front door as gently as the sticking frame would allow.

Thirty seconds later he was back, to collect something from a rucksack under the stairs. He paced off down the street, just faster than a comfortable walking speed, like a man hurrying towards a held-open door. In the darkness, he blundered and cursed into a couple of the larger puddles decorating the pavement. In a few minutes, he found himself back underneath the portal of the nursing home. The door was locked, so he rang the bell that hung from a coil of steel on the frame. The reveille echoed from the tightly curtained terrace across the street.

From inside, there came a tremendous clatter of bolts being shot and an assortment of keys being turned, as if he had knocked at the gates of a mediaeval castle. A girl's voice called, 'Hang on, Rory, you're early!' That wasn't exactly the reception he'd imagined. The shifts had rotated, so as the door finally swung open, a new face peered out, only to sag with disappointment when Richard failed to be Rory. 'Who are you?' she demanded, surreptitiously tucking a carrier bag behind her back. The subterfuge was undermined by her being too thin to hide the bag.

It would take too long to explain why he was there; hell, he wasn't even sure himself, so he said, 'I'm here to see Arthur.'

The girl stared through him, as if he had enquired after Lord Lucan. 'Oh, you mean *Arthur!*'

'Yes, I've got to see him.'

'I'm sorry, but it's not *Visiting* for another six hours.'

'Except for young Rory,' said Richard. 'It seems to be very convenient for him. Is it within the rules to be entertaining boyfriends in work time?'

She flushed pink all over, looking like a stick of rock in a shift dress. 'Arthur doesn't get visitors. I'm not sure he'll cope with company.' She cast Richard a suspicious look when it became apparent that he didn't need directions. She dropped the bag on the desk and followed him into the day room

'Neither am I, Nurse.....?'

'Holly. What's the rush, anyway?' Her hem was restricting her stride as her heels clicked across the tiles.

'I think I've worked out what he's been saying. Here he is.' Arthur was still in his pyjamas, a crumb of toast stuck in his stubble, his hair tousled like a storm-blown wheat field. Richard approached so quickly that the old man instinctively recoiled in fear. 'Morning, Arthur,' Richard began. 'Your krab broke on the Aiguille Dibona, didn't it?'

Arthur raised his gaze to meet Richard's, but his clouded eyes still showed no connection. Many people had imitated his mantra before, some in a sincere attempt to divine its meaning, but most just in mockery.

‘It’s OK,’ Richard persisted. ‘I’m a climber myself. I know that a krab is a climber’s term for a karabiner. And I’ve even climbed the Aiguille Dibona.’ There was just a twitch of recognition in the wrinkled corners of Arthur’s eyes. ‘Here. Take a look at this.’

He held the album open, showing a younger, fitter, more tanned Richard lolling in an Alpine meadow. Erupting from his shoulder was a startling caricature of a mountain, as if some clumsy pilot had crashed a Concorde on its tail. The young man in the picture looked as if he owned the world, flopped in the sun, wearing nothing but a tee-shirt across his lap. Behind the camera, unseen, was Helen, his girlfriend of the time, and only Richard knew that she had taken the picture naked, after an impromptu roll in the flowers to celebrate their climb. Only with this knowledge would you have seen that the white splodges by the hastily discarded rucksacks were a bra and knickers. To Richard, the picture recorded a moment of dazzling happiness he had never quite managed to equal.

He had misjudged the distance to hold the book, so Arthur couldn’t focus on the page. The old man retracted his head like a tortoise, and then the image snapped into his consciousness. His body convulsed as if touched by a cattle prod, and a pale, bony hand shot out, grabbing Richard’s wrist. The strength of the grip and the rope-burn mark running over the shrink-wrapped knuckles confirmed Richard’s suspicions that here was a fellow climber. Arthur stared at the picture with such intensity that he forgot to do anything else, and a trail of saliva escaped from his mouth, oozing down his chin. He swayed on the edge of his seat and chewed over this new revelation, as if this was the first glint of human understanding he had known in decades.

He coughed, then whispered, 'It were on the.....traverse, like.' He coughed again, a dry rattle that resonated the window pane. 'Voie....Des..... Savoyards.' His body slumped, as if nine words were enough to exhaust him. Even so, there was no let up in his purchase of Richard's forearm.

Richard turned triumphantly to Holly, expecting to see her features arranged in a look of contrite acceptance that this old man, long since condemned as senile, was in fact perfectly sane. Instead, he saw her horrified certainty that Richard was just as deranged.

Richard tried to look rational. 'You see, Holly, when Arthur here was talking about a *krab*, it was nothing to do with scuttling seafood. A *krab* is short for *karabiner*, a loop of metal with a hinged gate that climbers use to clip on to a rope, a bit like a chain link that comes undone. Here; I brought one from home.' He dug with his free hand, reaching awkwardly into his far side pocket. He brandished it like the decisive exhibit in a courtroom, but still Holly's face was blank.

'Arthur here had an accident; a climbing accident,' he went on. 'I can't tell you when, yet, but I know where. That stuff he has been saying over the years about 'Egg, Wee and Boner' is actually 'Aiguille Dibona'. It's a rock peak in the French Alps. Here, see for yourself.' He tilted the picture upwards as well as he could, his wrist still clamped by Arthur's hand. 'The Voie Des Savoyards is a hard route on the south face. If you look carefully, you can see the line, up this ramp, then a big traverse left under that overhang, then up this wall to the top.'

Seeing that he might as well have shown her a map of the moon, he turned back to Arthur. 'You can leave us to it now,' he said over his shoulder. Holly muttered something none too festive and teetered off to tend to one of the other

residents. Richard squatted down by the old man's chair, still hand-cuffed to him.

'So, how long ago did this happen?'

The old man coughed and thought, and coughed again. 'Your age', he said at last. 'No; maybe younger. My.... krab broke, see. It was on the Voie....Des.....Savoyards.'

'I know,' said Richard, 'why did it break?'

The old man hoisted his face, and shocked Richard with the lifelessness of his eyes, deep set in skeletal sockets. A look of bewilderment clambered between the fissures of Arthur's face as he assembled his thoughts. He released Richard's aching wrist, now circled with four white bracelets, and let the album flop onto his lap.

'Millie.... slipped,' he said at last. 'Wasn't her fault. Definitely. It was still.....early, mind. Y'know....early in the season. There were still these.....smears of ice hidden in the shadows under yon overhang, see. She took a swing. Off the traverse. A hell of a swing, mind. I thought.... I could hold her but my.... lucky krab just came undone.'

'So the gate sprang open?'

'Nah, that wasn't it. The fooking thing.... unravelled like ...' He sifted for the right words among the verbal chaff. '....like a liquorice bootlace,' he said at last.

'Who was Millie?'

'Fiancée. We were....gannin' to get wed, see. When we got.... back to Enger-land.'

'Did Millie die in the fall?'

Arthur's gaze was focussed on some unseen horror, six feet in front of him and six decades behind. The way he slumped in his chair could have been a nod, but the conversation seemed to have exhausted him, even at this early hour.

Richard scanned around the room for help or inspiration, but Holly had vanished and the other residents just stared at him. Despite himself, he heard his voice go up a decibel, like a *Brit* addressing a foreigner abroad. 'OK, Arthur, I'm *not* going to push you, all right? But I *will* listen to your story when you want to tell it. Here, you can hang on to the picture for a bit, to see if it jogs your memory some more. Whatever you do, *don't* lose it, OK?' There was no response. He made his excuses and sidled out of the room.

As he entered the dark hallway, he saw Holly being bear hugged by a man with no neck. Seeing Richard, she oozed from his grip and wriggled her dress straight. 'OK, love, I'll come by your Mum's at the end of my shift.'

The man, whom Richard took to be Rory, grunted his satisfaction with this arrangement and left with Holly's carrier bag tucked inside his jacket.

Richard also left, after persuading Holly to jot down his 'phone number, just in case Arthur wanted to talk. He kept pace with Rory's swagger for a couple of minutes, until the young man ducked down the narrow ginnel to the housing estate by the railway. Richard took a totally different turn, into the close.

Rachel and Matthew were up when Richard unlocked the front door and barged it open where it had stuck in the wet. Resplendent in dressing gowns and furry animal slippers, they grazed among the new toys littering the living room floor. Mary was in the kitchen, already showered and dressed. 'What have you been up to?' she asked. 'What happened to my morning cuppa?'

‘Yeah, sorry about that. I just popped back to the nursing home. We met this weird bloke yesterday. No one seems to understand him, but it turns out he was a climber in his youth, whenever that was. He was involved in some fatal accident in the Alps; he watched his fiancée fall to her death. It’s left the poor bugger’s mind completely scrambled.’

‘Uh-huh,’ said Mary, bustling between dishwasher and toaster. ‘Are you still on for the Lakes?’

Richard nodded and stuffed some cagoules into a rucksack, helping himself to a breakfast of Christmas leftovers.

‘Anyway,’ Mary smirked, ‘after your dismal performance as coffee wallah, it’s your turn to marshal the kids.’

Richard bundled the children into some warm clothes, then the car. Everyone else seemed to be still sleeping off yesterday’s brandy butter, so only a few lumbering trucks competed for space on the motorway as their car thundered over Shap and swung onto the high road to Keswick.

Yesterday’s drizzle had been replaced by dazzling, rain-washed sunshine, like the smile of a girl drying her eyes. The car nosed along the empty lanes that wove through the wispy woods at the foot of Derwentwater. The car park was deserted apart from a solitary chaffinch, hopping around with a hungry ‘Spink! Spink!’ as if asking what had happened to all the crumb-dropping picnickers. They would be along later.

The dead bracken steamed rust-brown in the sunshine as they trooped up the tiny, well-worn ridge of Catbells. The children attacked the slope with random

enthusiasm, alternately racing and dawdling, or running back down, complaining they were tired. Richard and Mary trailed, discussing the year ahead.

'I'm turning into Robo-Job-seeker the minute Matthew starts school in September,' panted Mary. 'I shall pester every employer in Lancashire until they admit defeat and hire me. In fact you have permission to shoot me if I'm not in work by Easter.'

'Uh-huh, so what's it going to be?'

'Don't mind. Anything, just so long as it's creative, to dust off the grey matter. I'm *convinced* there's a tad left, even after eight years of mopping faces and tidying toys. I blame you for talking me into it. I don't know; when I was a girl, I was determined not to be a stay-at-home housewife and turn into my mother.'

'Ah yes, the tragedy of all women, according to Oscar Wilde.'

'Yeah, well I'm not sure that old Queen was an authority on women. Anyway, the big question is; what has motherhood qualified me for?'

'Dunno. Mosey on down the Job Centre and see if they have any adverts for hostage negotiators or cat-herds. Of course, if they can't help, *I'll* take you on.' He raised his voice, 'Rachel, give Matthew a hand on the rock-step, will you?'

Mary stopped on top of a small grassy platform; a well-worn viewpoint for ruminating sheep. 'Get real. Your dreaminess would drive me completely bonkers, and we'd be in the divorce courts in days. No, I need to branch out on my own. I don't know how, but I'm already counting the days!'

Richard hummed the first bars of a song, until Mary recognised it as Toploader's *Poor Misguided Fool*. 'Your memories of work are seen through a Vaseline smeared lens. You will learn, my sweet, the Awful Truth, a secret known to

millions, that working for a living is crap. You stay-at-home mums always imagine that careers are exciting, but it's ten per cent frustration and ninety per cent tedium. I've been gritting my teeth these last six weeks, enduring the long haul to Christmas, and I'm dreading going back on the second. Sometimes I think if I have to design another chair, I'll vomit blood.'

'You enjoyed the *Scabbard* project, didn't you?'

'Well, yeah, that was *OK*, But it doesn't really *move* me any more. It used to give me a real buzz, you know, blowing the customers' balls off when we unveiled the prototypes. But that one...I don't know...I quite enjoyed putting it together, but when it was done, it was just another chair. The other thing is; Mike's getting more and more like a boss and less like a partner.'

'Come on, Richard, what do you expect? The poor guy's got a lot on his plate. You've got yourself positioned nicely, you only have to be Mr Creative. Mike's got to keep the customers sweet, pay the suppliers, run the office, manage the staff....need I go on?'

'I know, I know, I'm being a miserable sod,' he sulked. 'And I've not forgotten the help you've been giving of late. Hands in the air, you were cock-on about changing the upholstery on the *Saracen* to blue velour.' He paused, becoming more animated. 'I wish you'd been there to see the look on their Sales Director's face when we showed him the mock-up. Anyone would've thought we'd shown him the throne of Tutankhamen!'

Mary arched an eyebrow. 'And this from a man who says the buzz is gone?'

Richard laughed. ‘All right, all right, maybe it’s not so bad. I just need this holiday. Anyway, we should be talking about *your* future, not mine. Can’t you just become an international jewellery magnate?’

‘No, that’s a definite no-no. It’s fine as a hobby and for cheap family presents, but it’s not a viable business model. The High Street guys are selling stuff far cheaper than I can source the materials; I can’t compete with that kind of buying power.’

‘But your designs knock spots off that mass market tat! That dragonfly brooch you did for Mum should be in an art gallery.’

‘That’s sweet of you, but that brooch wouldn’t even pay our petrol for today. Come on, those nippers are getting out of sight. Race you to the top.’

They gasped up the final rocky tor to find Rachel and Matthew playing hide and seek with their toys among the scattered outcrops. There was not the slightest breeze, and the unseasonable sunshine allowed them to sprawl on the summit without troubling the rucksacks for cagoules. Amongst the neighbouring hills, Robinson and Hindscarth were most striking, towering over the head of the Newlands valley. On the eastern horizon, the first snow of the winter had dusted the top of Helvellyn.

As they admired the view and guzzled chocolate, an incongruous bleeping and vibration from the phone in Richard’s top pocket shattered the tranquillity. ‘Oh hell, this is probably Mike, mithering me about something I forgot to do last week. Hello, Richard Asquith. Oh Hi, Holly..... I see, I see. No, it’s no bother. I promised I’d see him if he wanted to talk, and I *will* In fact, I could call in tonight.’

Mary threw him a quizzical look. ‘Your parents are coming tonight,’ she mouthed.

‘Ah, sorry Holly. Could we make that Tuesday morning?’ he corrected. ‘I think Arthur is a bit brighter first thing, anyway.’

There was a pause. Fifty miles away, he could sense Holly twirling her fingers in the coil of telephone wire. ‘Yeah, whatever,’ she said.



Once his parents had left, Richard visited Arthur every morning, before the children were up, piecing together the story of an accident over half a century past. With each visit, Arthur was slightly more cogent, as if the act of remembrance was lubricating areas of his brain long since seized from disuse.

On New Year’s Eve, Richard collared Trish by the drooping Christmas tree, half its needles dropped from the heat. ‘Is *Arthur* on any medication at the moment?’

Trish screwed up her eyes and raised her face to the ceiling, like a squinting sun-worshipper. ‘Arthur? Don’t tell me.... he has green and blue at lunchtime, then red and white at night.’ She flashed him a buck-toothed smile, the first he’d seen, pleased to have remembered the prescription.

‘I see, and what do they do?’

Trish led him through the oak-panelled doors into the lobby, which doubled as a large, draughty office. She rummaged in the desk. ‘I think they keep ‘im calm. Holly takes care of the drugs, but she’s on nights at the mo.’ She opened a pink folder, nodding sagely. ‘Yes, he’s quite heavily sedated, actually. He came with a

history of delusion, according to Holly's notes. He's been here as long as I can remember.'

'Has he got any family?'

'Arthur? No. When I first started, before I had all the enthusiasm beaten out of me, I had all sorts of ideas about helping folk as well, so I tried looking for rellies in the Newcastle 'phone book. As I recall, there was only the one *Thumb*, so I rang it on the off-chance. Some Geordie woman answered and said she'd never heard of Arthur. Said she didn't have a small son called Tom, either.'

Richard looked at her, agog. 'No, you wouldn't have had any luck there. For a start, his accent is Durham, not Tyneside, and what's more, his name is *not* Arthur Thumb.'

'What makes you so sure?'

Richard goggled at her. 'Are you winding me up? It's a joke name!' She still looked at him bemusedly. 'It's meant to sound like *Half a Thumb*' he explained. 'You must have noticed he's a bit lacking in digits on his left hand. For all you know his real name could be Benjamin Ramsbottom.'

'You could be right,' she shrugged. 'All we do is make 'em comfy. He's always been Arthur to us.'

Richard sighed and pressed on. 'Is there any mention of his real name in there?'

Trish flicked idly through a few of the papers. 'No, it just says *Arthur* on all these. The proper records are kept in the filing cabinet in the manager's office. Pam's off an' all, today. It is New Year's Eve, you know.'

‘Yes. I know.’ Richard leaned forward over the desk and flashed her the most winning smile at his disposal. ‘Look, Trish, I know this is a lot to ask, but what would it take to try him without the sedatives? I’ve been speaking to *Arthur* most days this week, and I think there’s a lot going on with that guy. He just needs to get his head clear and talk to someone who’s had similar experiences. And, while you’re at it, can you let him grow his beard back?’

‘Beard?’ she said, focussing on the only request she could imagine fulfilling. ‘What makes you so sure he had beard?’

‘He was a climber,’ said Richard ‘Like me. It goes with the territory. Anyway, have you not noticed how he strokes his chin as if he misses having one? Just trust me on this, Trish; he’d be happier. And it will be less work for you, Holly and Pam.’

Trish squirmed with unease, way outside her comfort zone. Her job consisted of maintaining a sedated control over the elderly, not arguing with persuasive young men. ‘You’ve a nerve, I’ll say that. We can maybe stop the shaving, but there’s no way on God’s earth Holly will agree to drop the drugs.’

Richard ratcheted up the smile another notch. ‘Not even if *Arthur* made a New Year’s resolution to kick the habit.’

She smoothed down some imaginary creases in her pinafore. ‘What’s your connection with Mr Thumb? You’d have to be immediate family to be making requests like that.’

Richard tried to think of a good answer. ‘I’m just a...friend,’ he said. He made a show of searching his pockets. ‘Damn, I’ve left my specs in the day room.’ Trish overlooked the fact that she’d never seen him in glasses and stuffed the files

back in the drawer while he pushed back through the oak doors into the hothouse beyond.

Arthur's chin was on his chest, his whole head looking ready to toboggan down to his lap. Richard crouched down next to him and whispered. 'Spit out the pills when the nurses look away. They're just to make you easier to handle, but they're making you sleepier than you need be.' The old man showed no response, so Richard pocketed the non-existent glasses and left.

Chapter 3

To Richard, one of the major benefits of having a holiday was having time to clear away some junk from the house, including the baby clothes, prams and pushchairs that cluttered the house and garage. He liked every aspect of this purging; the sudden airiness of having fewer possessions to worry about, the endless possibilities offered by the liberated space, and the cringing gratitude of the post-menopausal women in the charity shop.

The reverse side of the commercial coin wasn't long in showing, though. On a cold January morning, when the snowy hills were beckoning, Mary announced her intention to visit a place she called 'The Sales' to see what was happening.

'No mystery there,' said Richard. 'I've been there, and I can save you the trouble. You'll have to go to some godforsaken, noisy city centre, where it will take half an hour to park. Then you will have to elbow your way through a sea of overcoats, into these congested buildings called *shops*. Once inside, you'll find *Things*, and the people in the shops will want *you* to take them off *their* hands. Then the *Things* will clutter our house again. Oh, and the shop people will want you to pay for the privilege. So you'll come home poorer, wearier, and with more tat. You go, love, and I'll stay here with the kids. For days, if necessary.'

'No, Richard, you're not getting out of it that easily. We need a new guest bed. That old sofa bed is completely shot; your dad was saying it gave his back gyp last week. I've seen some quite nice ones on special offer at Quernmore Soft Furnishings and I want your opinion.'

Richard blanched. ‘Oh no, not my opinion. Anything but that. Take my liver and pancreas; chop off my fingers, but leave me my opinion! Anyway, what do they mean by *special offer*?’

Mary had played this game before. ‘It means, dimwit, that they’re cheaper than they were last week.’

‘Or, in other words, they were more expensive last week, but they couldn’t sell any and so this week they’ve had to drop the price.’

Mary fixed him with her sternest schoolmarm glare. ‘Richard. Get your head out of the clouds and get in the car,’ she said.

‘Yes, boss,’ he cringed. ‘Before I do, though, take a look at this. It says here, that a team of scientists has created an artificial alimentary canal. You put food in at the top, and it gets squeezed through tubes and treated with enzymes, just like in the human body.’

‘That strikes me as a typically male achievement,’ said Mary. ‘Woman makes babies, and babies turn food into energy, love and the mystery of consciousness. Man tries to compete with a machine, but it just turns food into shit. Then Man calls it a breakthrough.’

‘An interesting thesis,’ he said. ‘I think you should write, expressing those views, to the leader of the research. Quite nice looking, if this picture is anything to go by. Goes by the name of Dr. Judith Bentham.’

‘Don’t be a smart-arse, Richard. There’s nothing that annoys me more.’

‘Not even torture and genocide?’

She threw him a raised eyebrow. ‘OK, I admit they piss me off a bit, too.’

‘Right, I’ll put the word out amongst the world’s tyrants and oppressors that Mary Hellewell is annoyed with them, and they’re to stop what they’re doing at once.’



With a bit of judicious quibbling over the shade, firmness and cost of the sofas on display, Richard managed to keep the influx of consumer durables down to a pair of candlesticks. Mary squeezed these next to the others on the mantelpiece, which now resembled a gothic altar.

Richard kept wondering how Arthur was getting on, but couldn’t get to the home for several days, as the furniture market was going through one of its mad phases, with more work than they could handle. In fact, it was the home that phoned him. Come to that, it wasn’t a phone call, so much as a summons.

‘Mr Asquith? Pam Colgan; Manager; Crook o’ Lune. Can yer come and see me at yer earliest convenience?’

‘OK... I can probably get away next Thursday.’

‘At yer *earliest* convenience, if yer please’

‘Right, I’ll drop in tonight, then.’

‘See yer at eight sharp.’



The last time Richard had felt like this was when he had reported to the Headmaster’s office for showing a precocious interest in the contents of Amy Watson’s trainer bra. Holly led him into Pam’s office and shut the door behind them.

Richard proffered a hand and then quickly lowered it to pat the desk when she refused to take it. Pam, her generous jowls beef-red, straddled a Queen Anne chair with creaking legs. With Holly next to her, they looked like a couple from a seaside postcard.

‘Sit down. I’m Pam. Now, I’ve ‘eard some very serious allegations about you tellin’ Arthur not to tek ‘is medicine. Did you know what he was on?’

Richard smoothed down his hair and gave a slight cough. ‘I sort of gathered he was on tranquillisers.’

‘Aye, but that wasn’t all, Mr Asquith. Some of ‘em were to clear ‘is chest condition, weren’t they Holly?’

Holly nodded vigorously. ‘That’s right. The first we knew about it, he had one of his breathing attacks. I gave him some decongestant and he cleared up right away. That’s when I found all the pills in the bin.’

Pam took over the game of ‘bad cop, worse cop’. ‘Even without the decongestants, Arthur could ‘ave ‘ad serious side-effects coming off tranquillisers. You might even have endangered my staff, if ‘e’d ‘ad a nasty turn!’

Richard slumped in his seat. ‘There’s no point denying it. I gave him the idea. Although, let’s be clear, it was ultimately *his* decision to carry it out.’

Pam fixed him with a glare. ‘Arthur’s not competent to make decisions like that.’

‘Isn’t he?’

Pam ignored the question. ‘What the hell made you do such a thing, anyway?’

Richard twisted the wedding ring around his finger. 'Look, I'm sorry, I just wanted to... slip him a file in a cake, so to speak.'

'Yer what?'

Richard paused. The right words evaded him. 'A file in a cake. You know. To escape the prison he's made in his own head. I just look at him and I see myself in fifty years. I know we've only one thing in common, but... I'm sorry; I didn't know he was on anything more than sedatives.' He looked at Pam, expecting a reaction, but she was as impassive as a stone Buddha. 'Anyway, aren't we missing the point here? Without doping, is his head any clearer?'

Pam started to bluster, so Holly came to her rescue. 'Do you realise, we could probably prosecute you for interfering in the administering of a patient's drugs.'

Richard's cheeks tensed. 'So are you saying it's a criminal offence if drugs intended for a patient actually end up elsewhere?'

The young nurse bristled like a cat in the rain, her cheeks scarlet. 'I'm not saying we *will* bring charges; I'm just saying we *could*. Just don't go meddling in things you don't understand, all right?'

Richard nodded. 'I wonder if we can return to my question; *is* his head any clearer?' He scanned the two faces. 'OK, I'll answer myself. You found the pills in the bin, so you put the thumbscrews on Arthur. The fact that he's grassed on me suggests he's picking up. I think that's a pretty good patient outcome, don't you? Can I see him?'

'No,' said Pam. 'You're not welcome at my home any more. Please leave.'

(End of sample chapters)