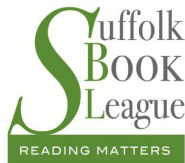


The Suffolk Book League presents

New Beginnings

Five short stories from new authors

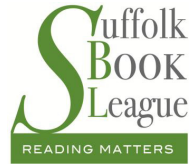


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2012 is the 30th anniversary of the Suffolk Book League

The Suffolk Book League (SBL) was founded in 1982 and has introduced a varied programme of novelists, historians, poets, journalists, biographers, MPs and social commentators to speak in Suffolk. Past speakers have included Hilary Mantel, Brian Keenan, Deborah Moggach, Alexander McCall Smith, Julie Myerson, Doris Lessing, Francis Wheen, PD James, Louis de Bernieres, Sarah Waters and David Starkey.

The Suffolk Book League events calendar also includes study days, trips to places of literary interest, quizzes and joint meetings with local literary festivals.

The SBL is a registered charity (number 296783), the aim of which is to promote, encourage, foster or strengthen by all and every suitable means the habit of reading and the wider and more general distribution of books, by and among all people. We are involved in various community projects such as Got to Read, Summer Reads, Schools Mastermind Competition, World Book Day/Night, supporting one-to-one reading with young offenders at Warren Heath Prison, Short Story Competitions and hosting book launches for local writers such as the recent "Girl Reading" by Katie Ward.

We also publish a quarterly journal for our members, Book Talk, and enthusiastically support the bi-annual New Angle Literary Prize.

Membership: 01473 236149 General Enquiries: 01473 250949

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FOREWORD

Short stories are becoming popular again.

The BBC National Short Story Award has become a regular event; and, closer to home, the Ipswich Arts Festival has recently been running another competition on the theme of Recovery. Established novelists have been publishing anthologies of short stories on both sides of the Atlantic and Radio 4's Book Programme recently devoted a whole edition to the genre.

The Suffolk Book League was, therefore, confident that it was in tune with the prevailing mood when it organised its own short story competition in 2010. We were optimistic that there was an untapped desire on the part of aspiring writers to take on this most challenging art form. For it is often said that to write a good short story is actually harder than writing a novel.

We persuaded the late Bernardine Freud to choose the winner and runner up from a short list we selected for her. She was enthusiastic about all the stories we sent her and commented on their very different themes and styles. Within these few pages you will find humour, sadness, suspense and surprise.

Congratulations to Nicola Green who won the competition with her finely controlled story, 'Glimmer'. See if you can identify the inspired aside which Bernardine particularly admired. Congratulations also to the runner-up Jane Bailey for 'A Mark of Independence', whose humour and humanity we all enjoyed very much.

The other three stories in this collection – and many of those which did not make the final list – had their champions at the shortlisting session. There is, after all, an inevitable subjective element to any such exercise. We all liked the stories we short-listed.

Bernardine Freud met the writers of all the stories collected here. Her generous help and support to writers in Suffolk, both published and unpublished, was very much appreciated by everyone who knew her. She had agreed to write the introduction to these stories but it was not to be. Instead, we dedicate this foreword to her memory.

BRIAN MORRON
ISLA CLOUGH
JOHN ELLISON

MAY 2012

Glimmer

by Nikki McDonagh

The world will not end because I close my eyes. The sun will still shine, so too the stars. Yet the darkness behind my drooped lids tells me otherwise. I see a macrocosm made up of swirling silhouettes and geometric shapes, that aren't strange to me at all. This is where I live now, in blackness. There is peace in this non-colour. A stillness that demands quiet. This is what I need if I am to receive their call.

Even though my eyes are closed and my breath is short and shallow, I see and hear it all. Sometimes it's too much and I take a break. Let my mind wander down a quieter path. But I always get lost and end up back to the time of noise and trouble. They, not "them," must sift through all this debris and find me out.

Starting to stick to the sheets.

Things used to be different. I'd get messages roughly once a month. When I was younger. Seemed to coincide with the full moon, or a new one. I forget which. Anyway, all I'm saying is that I didn't have to do anything special. They just came. I expect it was because my mind was less cluttered.

I remember how I was. A fervent, articulate being full of fear, full of rage. Full of crap really. I used to stop total strangers and tell them the things I heard. I would sit next to the oldies on the bus and explain the mysteries of life, death and world religion. As told to me by the thrumming of the universe. I wouldn't let them get off until I'd finished. Then one day the police got on and took me down to the station. They wanted to charge me with unruly behaviour and disrupting the peace; but it wouldn't hold up in court. All I got was a really good telling off.

But then, I was only twelve.

I stopped for a while and concentrated on winning chess tournaments. May as well have written 'nerd' on my forehead. Of course I was bullied. I

gave as good as I got though. With a little help from my friends in space. No, not aliens. Gamma rays from Venus that went straight into my brain. They gave me a superhuman power in the form of a near fatal sneer. All I had to do was to give someone my Medusa look and-Bang! They backed away, scared as anything. By the time I left school I was practically a freak.

My parents were worried about me. I say 'parents,' but they weren't my real ones. I'm adopted, naturally. I was found in a plastic bag inside a dustbin. Dried blood and faeces stuck to my newborn flesh. Dumped by some teenage girl, too scared to say that she had given birth to a premature baby. Or so the story goes. It's a pack of lies of course. You see- I fell from the sky. A shooting star that transmogrified when it hit the Earth's atmosphere. They looked at me in a sad way when I told them this, and took me to see one of many doctors.

Those quacks gave me pills to stop the voices I heard. The facts they said weren't true. The tablets worked and everyone was happy, except for me. I missed them. They gave me a purpose. I enjoyed listening to the things they said, no matter how absurd they seemed. So I stopped taking the pills and started writing. Home made leaflets that I would distribute in the street. When that didn't work, I used the wonders of the Internet. I got over two thousands hits on the first day. After a week they shut me down and I spent a month in some white painted room drugged up to the eyeballs. Propped up in a chair next to some other poor dribbling sod.

I resisted their rehabilitation.

I did not want their hands upon me. Their stink was vile. It smelt of insincerity and smugness, all rolled into one. A truly unpleasant odour that left a nasty taste in my mouth. I vomited each time they touched me. Which made it worse of course, since more of them come along and stripped and hosed me down. I liked the water. It washed away the smell. It cleansed and stung at the same time. I tingled all over and that felt good. If only they could have left me to dry in my own time. I was not going to catch my death of cold, or come down with something nasty.

I just wanted to be left alone to let the noise filter in.

When I was by myself, information came to me in dribs and drabs. In the form of coded data. It was hard to decipher at times and I had to become at one with the atoms, the nuclei of matter. Not easy I can tell you. It helped when I removed all of my clothing. Plus, it really pissed off the doctors and nurses. Not as much as when I wrote that other essay. Oh, I wasn't stupid enough to put pen to paper. No I was subtler, more creative in getting my message across. I let my writing flow. From my fingers, from my toes, from my urine on occasions. But they washed it all away, even the stuff I smeared on the walls, and that was really good shit too. They put a nappy on me. Once or twice, they strapped my arms down at night.

That was when I decided to play them at their own game.

It didn't take much. I just gave them the answers they wanted to hear. Promised faithfully to take my medication and to stop writing about the truth. Or, 'those scare mongering essays about the end of the world,' as they put it. Whatever, I said, and took a vow of silence. When I got back to my room, I flushed all the pills away. That was the best day of my life.

Went sort of down hill after that.

They'd managed to mess with my head, and the damage was done. I could no longer hear my friends from the glittering stars speak to me. I became prone to periods of gloom and frustration. It was only a matter of time before I got hurt. Not my fault. Totally an accident, I swear. I was only trying to get closer. To reach out to the light, to the gentle noise that promised so much. I thought I could get back home. Back to the place I descended from, not the dustbin. I didn't do it again.

I changed.

The room I am in now is too bright. The walls are painted a sickly green they say is soothing. It is not. I tried to tell them. I also tried to tell them that I shouldn't live amongst humans anymore. I overheard them say that

I wasn't one.

They keep me still by attaching various tubes into my veins and down my throat. Probably up my arse as well. They talk to me, but the young one, the one about my own age, with the golden ring in her nose; stays silent. She sits with me and holds my hand. She turned my bed to face the window and opened the blinds. Today she hummed a tune that made me think of the sea.

I shed a tear and she smiled.

Sometimes I want to tell her the truth. When I feel her skin on mine, but then I realise it would do no good. What will be will be. I am merely the messenger. A shame they will not listen. Or perhaps they do but pretend not to understand. Yes, that's it. They are afraid of me, so make out that I am an incomprehensible, babbling brain dead imbecile. I'll show them.

I don't even blink anymore.

I have shut down all communications with them. I do not want to hear their boring conversations. Their noise just gets in the way. I have blocked them out. I need my hearing to be tuned into the faint pulses of the ancient stars. I must wait for a message. A secret they are going to tell me. I tried to touch them once, but I fell from an open window onto the bonnet of a car.

At last, they have switched off the light. Now I can come into my own. Now I can see the stars, cock my ear to the blue-black sky, and take in a breath of infinity.

A Mark of Independence

by Jane Bailey

There wasn't a cloud in the sky as the coach arrived at the seafront and drew up by the pier. George, along with fellow members of the over sixties art club, stayed in his seat, keeping out of the way of the noisy families struggling to control their children; letting all the other day trippers get off before climbing carefully down the steps, mindful of his dodgy knee. Then he stood and breathed in the sea air, the pungent smell of salt and seaweed filling his nostrils. He'd forgotten the way the sea gave you a sense of freedom, made you feel that anything was possible.

"Come on George, no time to waste, we've got work to do." Jean, organised as usual, was handing out sketchpads and advising on the best spots to go to. When he'd first met Jean he'd had his doubts about her. She'd seemed rather bossy and he'd feared that yet again he would spend his time trying not to offend, agreeing to things he didn't want to do in order to keep the peace. But to his relief she and her husband Martin, who were the hub of the over sixties art club, turned out to be relaxed and fun to be with. He'd joined the club a few months ago badgered into it by his daughter, who'd thought it a respectable way for him to occupy his time. The morning passed in a flurry of sketching and when the group met up for lunch there was much admiring of work.

"Right, time for shopping," said Jean, and her husband Martin looked frantically at George.

"Maybe we could wait for you, over there," Martin said, pointing to a wooden bench shaded by the overhanging branches of a large oak tree.

Jean looked amused.

"Don't you want to stretch your legs?" She asked, but the men were already heading off as fast as they could.

Sitting on the wooden bench with their backs to the seafront, they listened to the squalls of the seagulls and dozed for a while. Opening his eyes, George found himself staring at the tattoo parlour on the other side

of the road. It would have been easy to miss. Sandwiched between the bright café windows and gift shops with their wares spilling out on racks across the pavements. Polished shells and sickly pink I love Margate rock vying for attention with collapsible chairs and plastic beach toys. The parlour, with its black peeling door and darkened window was a strange contrast.

Martin, opening his eyes, followed George's gaze.

"Fancy having one done do you?" he said.

George turned slightly, his head to one side.

"Would it be so outrageous?"

"Well I can't say it's ever appealed to me," Martin said. "And I didn't have you down as the type. Not sure what your Cynthia would have to say about it either."

George sighed. He'd been widowed a year ago, and his daughter Cynthia who lived in the next village had decided to take over where her mother had left off. She was in and out of the house constantly.

"There's fish pie in the oven, Dad, the timer will beep when it's ready, and there's a homemade steak and kidney pie in the fridge for tomorrow, Mum's recipe so I know you'll like it."

"You don't need to bother love," he'd said, several times now, "I can manage, I quite like doing a bit of cooking." But his comments were brushed aside.

"Don't be daft Dad. I've changed your bed and I'll take your dirty washing with me, you could do with some new socks you know. Buy a darker colour next time, yellow's a bit common."

And then there was his social life. "I've enrolled you in the over sixties art class at the Village hall Dad, they're a nice crowd I'm told, and I've got you a couple of books from the library, those detective stories Mum always used to get for you." You mean the ones I never liked he wanted to say, but didn't.

She'd been right about the art class though, they were a nice crowd. And

when they'd suggested an outing to the seaside he'd felt excited for the first time in a long while. Cynthia hadn't been keen on the idea, "A coach trip to Margate. Mum wouldn't have approved," she'd said and wrinkled her nose in a gesture so familiar it had taken his breath away, "You get all sorts at the seaside, and what if it rains and you get soaked and catch pneumonia?" But he'd surprised himself as well as her and here he was.

George watched as the door of the tattoo parlour opened and a young lad with spiky hair came out, looking slightly taken aback.

"I guess you're right, I'm not the type," George said.

"Not the type for what?"

Martin and George swung round to see Jean, who'd returned from her shopping trip, accompanied by Ellen and Barbara, and various shopping bags. The women leant on the back of the bench to get their breath back, and George and Martin rose to their feet to let them sit down.

"George is feeling rebellious. He's thinking of having a tattoo." Martin informed the women.

George blushed. "I just like the idea of knowing I've done something different, something that maybe not everyone would approve of, just for once. It could be quite discreet – a small but defiant gesture."

"Well if you feel like that why haven't you done it?"

"It's just a silly fantasy" he said, "Anyway, look at the place. It's dark and seedy; it's not for the likes of me."

"Let's all do it," Jean said.

Martin stared at his wife. "Tell me you're not serious please."

"But why, why would you do that?" George looked at Jean who had risen carefully from the bench and was rubbing her hip.

"Don't ask me George. Too many questions and I'll change my mind." She looked at the others. "Are you in?" The women looked at each other and started nodding their heads and laughing.

"I can't wait to see my daughter-in-law's face," said Ellen.

"You don't need to tell her," said Jean

"But then what would be the point?" Ellen said, grinning broadly.

The parlour was everything they'd feared. The walls were painted in deep purple. There were what appeared to be skulls resting on a black cloth covered table, and a strange perfumed aroma floated around them.

If the tattooist was surprised to find his waiting room filled with giggling pensioners he didn't let on. He made them sign disclaimers and gave them books of designs to look at. Jean and Ellen were much taken with elaborate emblems of roses and hearts in a variety of colours, and there was some debate about which part of their anatomy to expose.

"I don't want to put a damper on this," said Martin, "But may I remind you that we only have an hour and a half before the coach leaves and there are five of us to do – though I'm happy to back down if it would help."

When George got home he found a message from Cynthia waiting for him on the answer phone,

'Hi Dad, I waited at the house till 7pm but they said the coach had been held up. Apparently some crazy women had gone and got tattoos done and the coach had to keep stopping so they could get off and rub cream on their sore parts. Honestly some people shouldn't be let out. Hope you and your art group weren't too put out by it all. I warned you about these trips. Anyway there's a casserole in the fridge which just needs microwaving and then I suggest you get an early night.'

George thought of Jean and Ellen getting on and off the coach, unable to sit for long, laughing and telling everyone how one had to suffer for one's art. He patted his shoulder gingerly. The stinging was almost gone. A small but defiant gesture. There'll be no stopping me now, he thought. And then he went upstairs for an early night. The casserole would do for tomorrow.

Sand

By Katie Gooch

Even when I became a grown woman he was a big man. When I was a child he was a giant, with fists blunt as Oxo tins. When one came down upon the table, my mother's china would leap and whisper like a nervous audience. Not that as a girl he ever gave me cause to fear those fists. I knew the gentleness and precision of his scorched digits.

DoDo was a furnaceman at Beatson's. He'd to ensure the fire never went out. The furnace only cooled for the two weeks in August when the works closed for the holiday and every man-jack de-camped to Scarborough, to walk the prom and argue in the public houses with the same men they argued with of a Saturday night back in Rotherham. Not that DoDo ever went to the public houses, either in Scarborough or at home. DoDo was temperance, and a Methodist, and the stench of stale ale would not wear well of a Sunday morning from the lectern. My DoDo wore the darkest, cleanest Sunday suit, and as he delivered his readings or preached there were never the pinching shadows I saw in the faces of my friends' fathers.

But even in his Sunday suit his hands betrayed the work-a-day man he was. His skin was thick as the leather apron he wore at the furnace, puckered purple in places where he had been fire-kissed over the years. Those brutal caresses were worst upon his fingers and the backs of his hairy hands, but I knew, when he was bared of his shirt in only his vest, that the heat had pecked holes in his hide all the way up to his elbows. DoDo never sweated a blister, 'nature's medicine', and the magnetism of the man had nothing to do with his looks.

My DoDo's battle-ugly hands were part of God's blessings to him (my Mother and I were also listed in God's blessings to him) and with God's hands he made things. He wrote out the parish records in his pristine copper-plate with a thin pen and black church ink. He could write like a monk in either half-boiled fist, having been forced to shun his sinister inclinations at school. He could knit and sew and play the organ in church or the up-right piano in the drawing room, somehow making the un-

tuned keys sing along with his heart-bruising bass.

The things he made that I loved most were brittle and hard and cool and the brown of medicine bottles. But they were beautiful. They were beautiful because they came from that flesh-nibbling fire.

DoDo often worked the late shift on a Sunday. I'd take him his supper; a wedge of cold meat from dinner between two slices of stale bread. Mother's baking day was Monday, by Sunday DoDo would always joke, you'd slice a piece and it'd stand of its own volition without the support of the rest of the loaf. I hated the stiff stuff; I'd always soak it in my milk at the Sunday tea table. But DoDo liked his bread stale, he had a big mouth and white, well cared for teeth that made little job of the meal. And he'd have an apple, if it was the season, and cheese and a handful of my Mother's ginger nuts, which were certainly the better for a week's sitting.

And after I'd watched him eat, and sweat, he'd have a little joke with me and swing me up over his shoulder and hold me high near the furnace door so close I could feel the hungry heat of it. I would squeal, and DoDo never knew how scared I was of the furnace, and I could never explain the fear I had of the beast that had taken so many blistering bites out of my big, strong DoDo's body. DoDo never understood childlike fears as if he was born the size he was. He seemed so comfortable in his own skin, as if he'd worn it for centuries.

And sometimes, after the game, he'd make one of his special gifts. He could only do it on Sundays when he was the only man in the work room. He'd have planned it, because the gob was already hot in the furnace. And he'd lift it on the end of a long pipe and he'd twist the white hot liquid, thick like dough, against the cool marble worktop. When he'd manipulated the stuff, soft and edible it seemed, he'd put his lips to the pipe and with little scorched wood paddles and just his stale-bread breath, he'd blow me a gift.

He made me small animals; pigs, cats, swans. He called them the Gobbets. And I watched my clever DoDo making something from nothing but air

and liquid sand. I was not afraid of the heat of the molten glass, or its mother furnace, my DoDo's skin was thick enough for both of us.

And later in the week he'd bring the Gobbet home, cooled in the cold chamber, and slipped into his pocket. It always seemed a miracle to me that the soft, malleable stuff on the end of his pipe became the cool, fine solid in my hands. DoDo taught me it was not a true solid at all, it was really still a liquid that flowed very slowly, and that it would take millions of years for my Gobbets to lose their features. But once he showed me the windows in an old church, they were thicker at the bottom than the tops, their particles were still flowing. And for a long time I thought of its particles like the particles of sand from which they were made and wondered about them blowing like the sand on the beach at Scarborough.

My Gobbets sat on my chest of drawers. From time to time I played with them; holding them in my small palms, taking pleasure in their brittle solidity, the danger beneath the surface that would be their shards if broken.

One morning I found a small stain on the sheet and my summer nightdress, my Mother helped me change and wash the linen in the scullery. And she must have told my Father. He never swung me up by the furnace again or made me gifts of glass. He never gave me lessons gazing on church windows; the lessons then, it seemed, I must see and learn myself. And one Sunday I came home from the rhetoric of his sermon and found his Gobbets were nothing but sand; the flux from which they came.

Taking His Name

by Matthew Robertson

He was a tall, confident man, well built and upright, with short dark hair and a neat moustache. He walked briskly in the bright sunshine, while the other pedestrians moved naturally out of his path. Most of them were shoppers, following seemingly random routes between their ports of call. He on the other hand had important business to attend to at a small office in the centre of town.

On reaching his destination, he raised a hand towards the door, and was momentarily taken aback as it swung open automatically before him. For an instant he felt an uncharacteristic doubt about whether he was in the right place, but he swiftly brushed this aside and stepped confidently in.

Looking around the office, he was annoyed to see that the four desks were all occupied, and indeed that there were three other people like himself waiting for service. He cursed under his breath, and was about to join the queue when he noticed that the office was in fact L-shaped, not rectangular as he had at first supposed. Moving purposefully past the waiting customers and the occupied desks, he turned the corner at the end, and there, out of sight of the door, was a fifth, free, desk.

He was struck by the appearance of the young man sitting there. Thin and pale, with dark worried eyes, he was in the middle of an animated conversation on the telephone. Looking up, the young man paused for a moment and gestured our man to sit down. With a brief glance back to the queue, he occupied the waiting chair. The young man slowly wrapped up his conversation, all the while holding him in an unnerving stare, and eventually put down the phone.

Without taking his eyes off his client, the young man remained silent for a few seconds, as if assessing what to do. Then he appeared to come to a decision, and picking up his pen he said briskly:

“Right. First of all can I have your name please?”

The stare, the silence, and the suddenness of the question had unsettled our man, who was accustomed to controlling the direction of his business meetings. After a moment's pause, he reluctantly gave his name. The young man seemed to relax immediately, and continued with some more questions.

After about fifteen minutes the matter was concluded. With the minimum of formalities, our man rose to his feet and made his way out of the office, which he was beginning to find oppressive and claustrophobic. However he did not feel much better outside. The sunlight now seemed harsh and glaring, and the dust and fumes irritated his throat.

He slowly retraced his steps towards his flat. The pavement now seemed more crowded than ever, and people no longer appeared willing to move out of his way. At the same time he was worried about the transaction he had just concluded. All the conditions that he had had in mind before the meeting had been satisfied, and no unexpected obstacle had emerged, and yet he could not shake off the nagging feeling that some loose end had not been satisfactorily tied. His head was aching, and he wondered whether he was coming down with a summer cold.

Finally he reached his flat, and fumbled in his jacket pocket for his key. As he did so, his eyes skimmed over the smart blue door, the shiny brasswork, the bell with his name underneath. At least, his name should have been visible underneath, but there was condensation inside the plastic and it was not legible. And as his eyes came to rest on the bell, the awful truth about what was wrong hit him. His name! He had given his name to the young man behind the desk, and the young man had not given it back.

After a moment of total confusion he gathered himself and hurried back to the office. All the way there he replayed in his mind the conversation he had had with the young man, starting with the giving of his name, then proceeding straight to the details of the matter without retrieving the name. He cursed himself for his carelessness. He cursed himself for not

having noted the young man's name.

On reaching the office he cursed again, this time out loud. The windows were dark and the door locked. The opening times were clearly displayed on the door: Mon - Fri 9.00 - 5.30. He didn't really need to check his watch but did so anyway. It confirmed that he was marginally too late, and also reminded him that it was Friday. For a few moments he hovered ineffectually by the entrance, and peered in through the glass, but it was immediately clear that the place was empty.

The walk back to his flat was worse than ever. There were fewer people now, but the sun was in his eyes and his head was pounding. When he finally made it home, he paused for a moment in the welcome gloom of the hallway, then flopped down onto his bed without bothering to remove his coat or shoes.

He spent a fitful night, with short periods of sleep interspersed with vain attempts to settle himself down by reading or walking around the flat. By morning his whole body was aching, and his head spun every time he stood up. Finally he went back to bed and stayed there.

The weekend passed infinitely slowly, but at last Monday morning came. He felt no better, but he forced himself to get up and eat a little breakfast. Then he staggered out of the door and set off for the third time towards the office.

The food and the cool air revived his spirits slightly, and by the time he reached the office he was almost optimistic about being able to get the problem sorted fairly quickly. He was still five minutes early, and he waited impatiently while the people inside busied themselves around their desks without looking at the door. At last, on the stroke of nine, the door was unlocked.

Once inside, his optimism rapidly evaporated. The four desks were laid out as before, but when he reached the corner he stopped in confusion. The foot of the L was much shallower than he remembered, little more than an alcove. It contained only a printer and a photocopier. In desperation

he turned to the woman on the nearest desk.

She was friendly and clearly eager to help, but she appeared confused by what he was asking. No, there had never been a desk in the alcove. No, there had only ever been four desks. No, the young man he described didn't sound at all like any of her colleagues. He mumbled an apology and left as she tried tactfully to suggest that he might be in the wrong office.

Once outside, he looked uncertainly up and down the street. Normally he knew what he was doing. He made plans and carried them out. Standing there with no idea what he should do next was an unfamiliar and disquieting feeling. The aches and the dizziness were worse than ever. Finally he did the only thing he could think of, which was to head for home.

It had started to drizzle, and the air was unseasonably cold. All around him, people with grim faces and hunched shoulders pushed past him. He almost tripped over the legs of an old man begging in a doorway. But a few yards further on he paused, as the glimmer of an idea came into his head. He fished out his wallet and checked inside, then took out a ten pound note. He turned towards the beggar. His heart was pounding as he squatted down before the old man.

At first the old man seemed confused by what he was being asked to do, and then reluctant to comply. But the prospect of having a tenner to add to the few coins in his cap proved overwhelming, and he pocketed it greedily as our man jumped to his feet and almost ran back to his flat.

As he turned the key once more in the lock, he glanced again at the name tag under the bell. The condensation was gone, and he was already beginning to feel at home with the new name displayed there. He stepped inside, closed the door behind him, and leant back against it with a broad smile on his face.

A report the following week from the local evening paper:

“The police are seeking information concerning a body found yesterday in a disused office block. It is believed to be that of a vagrant who has been seen in the area in recent weeks. A police spokesman said: ‘We would like to find out whether he has any family, but we have very little to go on. At the moment we don’t even have his name.’”

Regret

by Peter Winder

You know, I could've done something great. I could've been a success. Done something that people noticed. Got in the papers.

I mean, I'm happy enough most of the time. I got Nicki and the kids; Kayleigh one weekend and Wayne the other. It'd be better if sometimes I could have'em both at once, but their Mums won't hear of it.

Tina says that Sarah is common and that her kids are thick and her guy is only a bus driver. I think that she's put up to it by her man, Darren. I think Darren don't like Dwayne, not 'cause he's a bus driver, but 'cause he's black. I don't mind Dwayne. He's a bit of a laugh.

Anyway even if Tina would agree to let me have both kids, Sarah wouldn't. She says Tina's a slut and Darren's a crook. Well Tina has been about a bit and she still dresses like a teenager. But at least she can still wriggle into them little skirts she wears. I think it's probably that that gets up Sarah's nose. Sarah's let herself go a bit.

Usually I have a good time with whichever of the kids. We go to the zoo and the seaside and the pictures and football. That's funny though, when Wayne was born, I thought, "We'll be able to go to football together when he's older," but he ain't that keen and Kayleigh, a girl, really loves it. She knows all the player's names and understands the league and the cup.

Sometimes I have to buy 'em something. Like, when I'm picking Wayne up, Sarah might say, "He's nearly out of them shoes, but he'll have to make do. They're the only ones he's got." I get the message and take him to a shoe shop. I usually have to put things on the plastic and pay later. A lot later. I buy 'em books as well. I want 'em to do well at school, not like me. I should'a sorted myself out long ago. Dosh. That's what it's all about. I've never got enough. I don't do too bad with this business, but there's no

future in it. You can't rush or you'll have someone complaining that you skimmed their windows. And you might fall off the ladder, although I've always been good at climbing. There's no way you can make big money. You can clean just so many windows in a day and that's it. It keeps me fit, but God knows how long I can go on with it. I missed my chance. I could have been driving round in a Ferrari now, instead of a white van with a roof rack.

Nicki says I oughta get a steady job and then we could get a mortgage and a house like ordinary people; like the people she works with. She's a nice girl, but she don't know the size of it. She thinks that I was a bit of lad before she knew me and then I settled down to be a hard-working window cleaner. The truth is that the missing years were spent banged up in prison and that sort of thing hangs round your neck forever more. Twice lately I've been pulled in by the old bill.

The last time the D.S. said, "There's been a burglary in a house on your window cleaning round. It's obvious that you cased it while you was doing their windows and then came back later and turned the house over. With your form, there's no way you can get off. What else have you done?"

They kept on at me. Threatening me. Offering me deals. Leaving me sitting in a cold cell for hours. But there's one thing I learnt in prison; most people get locked up by opening their mouths. So I kept mine shut. In the end they had to let me go.

I didn't learn a lot inside. They offer you classes and most guys go because of the boredom. I tried it, but it reminded me too much of school. I hated school. In some prisons you could do training in metal work or woodwork or things like that. I could see it wasn't much good. You'd do the training and then when you get out no one wants you whatever you can do. The only thing I did was gardening, cause it got you out of those awful buildings.

I made wrong decisions. That was it, as I was getting going I made wrong decisions. I had this job delivering things. I'd get to see inside lots of warehouses and places like that. I'd see who'd got valuable things and

what sort of locks and alarms they had. Well I'd talk about it in the pub with my mates. We were all into nicking things, and so we'd organise to do one of these warehouses. To break in. It was OK for a while, but then the police questioned me and I got the sack. The boss couldn't prove anything, but he sacked me anyway.

I got another job, but it wasn't any good. So me and a mate started doing houses. People ask for it. They leave windows and doors unlocked. They have cash in jars in the kitchen, in drawers with their undies, wads of notes in suit pockets. It was easy. We did it most weekends. It paid well. Lots of money, lots of drink, a motor, plenty of girls; I thought it would go on forever. I was stupid. Doing it so much and so often I was bound to come unstuck sooner or later. I just didn't think. If only I had taken a few minutes to think clearly I wouldn't be here today with me ladder and bucket.

This tubby guy that I knew slightly, I'll call him Mac, he bought me a pint one night and said that a colleague of his was putting together a team for some interesting work. He said he couldn't tell me details, but that it would be well paid. Was I interested? I said I would have to think about it. Well I'd seen this guy around for quite a while and he never had any money. He wore cheapo clothes and drove a clapped out Ford. He didn't look like a winner and he was suggesting that I team up with a load of blokes I didn't know, to do something "interesting" that he couldn't explain. It was all a bit too chancy.

Mac came back the next day and I said "No thanks". He didn't argue. The following week the cops picked me up and I got put away. When I was inside I heard that a gang had gone into a bullion warehouse waving shooters and had got away with millions and that Mac had bought himself a house in the South of Spain.

If only I'd said yes that could've been me.