



Newts – a freebee read from Clive La Pensée. Please respect standard copyright rules.

NEWTs

© Clive La Pensée - September 2017

"They'll be grilled like lobsters!"

Maurice looked up and shielded his eyes against the sun. He waited for his quarry to respond. The silence was terrifying. Maurice once again felt the pang of panic which always seemed to follow his opening line whenever trying to impress a female holiday maker for the first time. She had told him her name, so that had been a promising start, but now she sat on a tuft of schilf at the top of a steep sandy slope watching herself wiggling her toes deeper into the sand. Mo never understood that the object of his attentions may merely have been selfconscious. Although she was actually trying to work out how to tell him nobody grills lobsters, without offending him, he saw the silence as pure female malice, designed to make him feel a fool. There was nothing else for it! If Deidre wouldn't help, he'd just have to keep going on his own.

"Another blisteringly hot day. I suppose the aunties and neighbours will be certain to complain it's not natural. Such weather that is."

His voice tailed off. He wanted to groan, dig a hole for himself, put the clock back five minutes so he could change his tactic and simply walk past the bronzing beauty. Why did he always sound so trite? His

friends talked nonstop drivel to their chat-ups and that always seemed OK. She looked up at him. The glare of the sun made her squint. He thought it was a smile of encouragement. On! On! he told himself.

"They've moaned the last five years about the crap summers and effect it's had on the seasonal trade and now the sun finally comes up every morning like a fireball and hangs in the heavens all day scorching the bollocks and tits off the stupid bloody holiday makers and they're still not satisfied."

"The holiday makers?"

"No the Aunties!"

"Oh," was the weak disinterested reply.

The lack of enthusiasm was lost on Maurice. She'd spoken. That was encouragement enough. He'd long since given up trying to get any real reaction from a home-counties' girl like Deidre. The ones he'd encountered thus far hadn't even slapped his face when he'd tried to put his hand up their skirt. They had merely politely, disinterestedly removed it with a patient sigh as if nothing were the matter. He was so elated with her answer that Deidre's black humour was lost on him. He continued to hold forth, as if her obtuseness were a sign of her stupidity, not his. "Rows of them in casualty yesterday, like a load of fat boiled lobsters, waving their arms like so many tentacles...."

"Do your aunties have testicles?"

A suppressed giggle erupted into a snort and the more she snorted the more she giggled. Mo decided to be unimpressed.

"Of course they do" he put in with more emphasis than

intended. "Not aunties that is but lobsters and they have tentacles." His voice was beginning to betray his annoyance with her. "Boys have....." he started.

Deidre from Dartford could hide her mirth no longer. She burst out laughing and fell back onto the tufts of schilf, now digging her toes as deep as they'd go into the hot Jersey sand.

If Mo was offended at so much mickey taking, he was determined to hide it. Here he was giving of his best chat-up line to a girl called Deidre of all names, from Dartford of all places, whose nails would make him a laughing stock of his form should one of them happen along the front and she lay there, rolling in the sand, his sand after all, she was the holiday maker, mocking him - laughing at his expense.

He couldn't control a blush, the price he paid for being fair and freckled, which made her laugh all the more, but her laugh was a laugh he could live with. It was even more captivating than her beauty, which had seduced him to try his luck once more with a holiday maker, although he'd only ever made a fool of himself in their presence in the past. He told himself that he should have saved his effort on this occasion too. He'd never worked out what made the holiday trade tick and had always ended up disappointed by their shallow attitude to a simple islander. He knew he should get up and try to walk away with some dignity still intact but all the successful studs at school told him he gave up too easily. One had to persevere until one found a line that impressed them. So, he forced himself on this occasion not to be

deterred. After all he'd only been trying for a mere five minutes and even her stupid giggling had its charm. He decided to ignore the embarrassment of the moment.

"They lay there too sore to put their limbs flat on the bed" he continued, trying not to notice the stare she had fixed him with, "hoping someone will mercifully happen past and put them out of their misery."

This rather neatly summed up how Maurice felt at that moment and he had no sunburn.

"That painful eh?" she muttered into the air. Would this lad ever say or do anything interesting or exciting or was she destined to endure the most boring holiday flirt of her life. She too conceded to herself that it was a little early to give up on him. He'd only been hanging round her a few minutes and after four days on the island, she had to admit she'd not met anything better looking than Maurice. He was certainly a very pretty boy even if a little immature.

"There can be nothing worse than a raw lobster-coloured sun burn," he conjectured, "and the knowledge that it's self-inflicted can't help."

"Why were you down the hospital Mo?"

It was a question Mo never got to answer for Deidre quickly lost interest, turned toward him and sat up again, waved a lazy wasp from her pomegranate, replaced it between her knees and delicately picked a seed from it with her exaggeratedly long finger nails. The sight of those nails picking dexterously amid the pomegranate structure quite diverted his attention from the sun-baked holidaymakers. Mo mused

that he'd never fancied a girl this much, but if only she'd cut those stupid finger nails life would be less complicated. It was all right going out with a holiday maker who couldn't tell a lobster from a snail, had a distinctly Dartford Tunnel accent and ostentatiously spat pomegranate seeds in a wide arc around where they were sitting, but a townie with quarter inch claws, for whom it was a major logistical exercise to type her name or wind her watch, would make him the joke figure of the whole year. Not even her beautiful long brown legs, disappearing beneath her beach skirt, nor her penetratingly blue speckled eyes beneath long slender upward turning lashes would counterbalance those nails when under the critical scrutiny of his spotty teenage mates. He wanted to ask her how she managed to pick her nose or wipe her bum but realised that their young love hadn't progressed enough for such intimacies. And anyway, the girls his class mates were groping, or being groped by didn't always bear close inspection. But those nails. No! He'd definitely have to stay in hiding with this one. The biggest trouble was, he had to admit to himself, that he really fancied Deidre. He had no doubt that she could be common, brassy, loud mouthed, and yet he was equally sure that when she was being any of those things, she would carry it all off with such flair that he would forgive her everything. Nevertheless, it would be wise to keep Dartford Deidre under wraps for the minute, especially as he hadn't even managed to kiss her yet. Supposing everyone found out and then he never got anywhere anyway. A term of piss taking he could handle, but he wasn't about to go through it for nothing.

He watched her delicately angle another seed out, balanced between two pincers, rather like a parrot cracking open the kernel. She then positioned it carefully on her tongue and with great ostentation, spat the tiny kernel miles and grinned with pride. Why didn't she swallow the pips, like everyone else does?

"Bet you can't spit one that far," she challenged, the hospital/lobster discussion thankfully forgotten.

"You're right!"

"Well at least have a go! You're no fun."

"I've never cared for pomegranate."

"Boring! What do you like?"

This was a watershed question. Upon his answer lay the success of a beautiful relationship. Should he go for real bravado and be as outrageous as possible? Not wise with mainland girls, especially such cosmopolitans like Deidre. This needed to be a childish brag, but one that would stand comparison with hers and never need be proven.

"I can spit a cherry stone miles.... well six metres fifty-two actually," he finally ventured. "I got a prize and a certificate for it at the last school fete."

He felt the latter piece of information rather debased the whole achievement and wished he hadn't been such a nauseous bragger. Deidre though was anything but critical.

"Bloody hell," she murmured in admiration. "That's one enormous flob. Measure it out," and she jumped up, dumped the pomegranate in Mo's lap before drawing the starting line in the sand

with her foot. Mo joined her and started pacing out his legendary blast, albeit his metres were a bit short for Deidre's liking, but she dared not question the honesty of a boy with a certificate.

"That's impossible!" she exclaimed when he had drawn a new mark in the sand.

"It is with pomegranate pips," he countered with carefully measured aloofness. "You can't get enough pressure behind them before they come out, not even with a full set of front teeth. Now cherries. That's different."

Mo was learning fast. The emphatic way he announced the fundamentals of pomegranate versus cherry stones was genuinely convincing. "But I don't like cherries," she complained.

Mo put on a carefully measured air of disdain. Deidre was moved to retrieve her pomegranate, select a pip with great precision, put it between her lips and start gentle deep breathing, in and out, slowly but surely filling her lungs a little more with each cycle. On the strength of Mo's shouted advice, she carefully tilted her head back to achieve what she judged was the required angle, but he lost concentration before her chin was anywhere near lifted high enough from her long slender neck, for his eyes were on stalks. He'd always found her a little flat chested for perfection but there was no doubt now in his mind that it was just the cut of her sloppy low necked T-shirt that had fooled him for he could clearly see how the excitement of the moment caused her nipples to protrude, pushing against the now tightly spanned cotton, so hard that he nearly forgot to track the path the pip

took when the blast finally came. And then, after all that preparation, Deidre was mortified to see her missile describe the makings of a long parabola, only to be caught in the fresh breeze from the sea and die but a few metres from her. If she was obviously displeased, Mo saw the moment to play his trump.

"You blew too flat. An angle of forty-five degrees to the horizontal is optimum."

She gazed at him with wide eyed admiration. He'd never been gazed at like that by a girl and as she fell with a disappointed groan back onto the sand, so he melted, fell onto his knees beside her and moved his lips to within an inch of hers. Only then did he learn the price of being too convincing. Deidre ignored his lips hovering inches from hers.

"Where can we get some cherries?" she cooed at him and moved her nose to a tantalizing almost touching distance of his. The smell of her fragrant skin, the piercing beauty of those eyes, the form of that chin, next to, almost, just a whisker from his, had Mo's pulse rate in three figures and an embarrassing stirring in his over tight shorts. He surmised later that he should have struck and immediately clamped himself to those gorgeous pouting lips. Instead he let his inbred honesty murmur a truthful reply, hoping perhaps he would be rewarded by her closing the last vestige of a gap between their bodies.

"Greengrocers I suppose," he managed despite puckering his lips further than he'd ever believed lips could pucker. He regretted his artlessness. Deidre wriggled from beneath him, lobbed her half-finished

fruit into the sand dunes and started along the beach in the direction of the town.

"Where are you going?"

"Into town to get some cherries."

"It's miles," Mo wailed in disbelief. Was he really about to be blown out over an unblown cherry stone.

"I don't care," came the merciless reply. "I want to see you spit a cherry stone six metres and something."

Mo trawled behind her puffing at the energy she could muster for a two mile walk across hot soft sand that flowed in but never back out of their summer pumps. They finally stopped to cast off their shoes but the sand was so hot they soon had to struggle back into them. The town, when they finally reached its shady streets could produce no cherries. One greengrocer after another they had to visit, even though the first immediately told them that there'd be no more cherries that summer. Deidre was in no mood to take no for an answer. She'd met a feller who claimed to have spat a stone six metres and something and it would be hard enough to convince her girlfriends, even if she could claim to have witnessed such a mighty blast, but if she went home and said she'd only heard of such a feat, got herself laid by a lad who only said he'd achieved such a distance, she'd be laughed out of class. And there was still the problem of his age. The first five minutes of conversation had let her guess he was anything up to two years her junior, but she'd be able to lie about that with little fear of discovery. In fact, she had already a guilty conscience about treating this sweet little

sixteen-year-old so harshly and mocking him so callously about his aunties and lobsters. She had to admit to herself that every lad had to start somewhere in his quest for a girl's attention and she had been less than encouraging. And now it transpired he could probably out blast her!

"What now?" Mo groaned after the fourth greengrocer had laughed at them. "We'll try the supermarket for a jar of cherries!" was the emphatic reply.

"Is this really worth all the effort?"

"Am I worth the effort?" She turned and smiled her dazzling, igloo melting smile. "You spit a cherry stone six metres fifty."

"Fifty-two," he interrupted.

"Even better!" she eulogised, "and I'll make it worth your while." She stroked his juvenile whiskers tenderly. "That's a promise." Not surprisingly Maurice's tiredness evaporated and new reserves of enthusiasm coursed his veins. This sounded like a different class of holiday adventure.

"There's a well-stocked supermarket at the other side of this block," was his prompt and helpful reply.

"That's more like it," she purred as she took his arm, "lead the way."

The supermarket was crowded with Friday evening shoppers and Mo had no idea where to look for the fruit conserves. Deidre was beginning to smell a rat about the six metres fifty-two when they ended up at the jams and marmalades for the third time. It was she who

spotted tins of Polish fruit.

"There!" she exclaimed in triumph."

"How do you know what's in it? It's all foreign!"

"Polska written round a picture of a cherry will do me," was her tetchy reply but Mo wasn't finished with his last-ditch resistance to having to spit such an enormous distance that seemed to get bigger every time he thought about it.

"It's a tin," was his statement of the obvious. "How shall we open it?"

"We'll run to a can opener too! Do stop being so negative. You'd best save your breath for other things," and there was that smile again, this time with a mischievous, almost naughty twinkle mellowed by eyelashes demurely cast downward. This was new ground for Mo. He was sure he could win her and if it took a spit of ten metres, he'd do it. He only hoped his knocking knees wouldn't let him down. He decided a more positive approach was required so he took her hand and headed silently for the household items where a can opener tinkled into the basket alongside the can of cherries.

They pooled the contents of purse and pocket and hurried toward the checkout, but after the figures had gone into the machine they were still fourpence short of the total. The checkout girl was a class mate of Mo's and she showed no mercy, but instead sat behind the till glaring from the nails to the face, then over to the figure of Mo's companion. The nails were appalling but the rest was stunning. The girl drummed her fingers on the counter and looked away into the distance

to hide her jealousy. Mo was desperate.

"Can't you lend me fourpence Georgie, just till tomorrow," he whispered urgently. He knew cuddly Georgie had the hots for him was acutely aware of how he'd treated her without compassion. How quickly one's sins are sometimes punished? Georgie owed him nothing and he knew it.

"Get screwed Mo!" came the terse, whispered reply. He wanted to scream with elation to the whole shop that he was doing his best to achieve exactly that but needed a little help. But instead he had to whisper and grovel like an exposed conspirator.

"This is really important George. She's a cousin over from the mainland and I forgot to buy the cherries for a trifle and I'm dead if I go home without them. Aunties, Uncles, a real houseful and I forgot the cherries Georgie. You've got to help me."

He saw her wavering. Relations from the mainland were a big deal in any islander's family life and she knew she had to tread carefully here. The queue was beginning to get restless too.

"Why don't you put the can opener back, then you'll have enough. You're bound to have an opener at home."

Mo's heart sank. How could he tell her that the can without the opener was champagne without bubbles, a kiss without a squeeze on lips that would remain forever closed to him. Perhaps he should try the truth. He ran it through his mind.

"I've never got this close to getting laid Georgie. You've got to help me."

He could hear the reply echo along the queue of restless natives, some of whom lived in his street.

"Piss off Mo!" would come back the merciless instruction. No!! Lies were more reliable in the long run.

"We broke ours this morning," he tried. "The tin's no good without an opener."

"Borrow one from next door. You can go past our house on the way home. Me Mum's in. She'll lend you one. We've got two anyway apart from the electric one...."

She droned on with such reasonable sensible solutions to his lack of fourpence, how the till had to be right and she couldn't personally get him fourpence as her purse was in her locker. Company rules and all that. God, she could be infuriating in her boring correctness. Deidre was impatiently going from one foot to another. Mo was as red as a beetroot. The queue was becoming angry. A shrill voice from the back cut across Georgie's self-righteous monologue on why it had to be the way it had to be.

"What's going on up there you two?"

The crowd murmured appreciation.

"Mo's short of fourpence Mrs. W." and off she went again repeating the whole argument and her preferred solutions, to the queue. She was even more roughly silenced this time.

"Oh my gawd! Shut up the pair of you!" and five hands fished in five purses, then to send batches of small change to the front of the queue.

"That's too much. Me till won't be right," wailed a desperate Georgie, who spied her supervisor heading past the tomatoes to see what the commotion was at the checkout. Mo grabbed the contents of the basket in one hand and Deidre with the other and headed for the door, leaving Georgie to sort out the mess.

Maurice could hardly keep up with Deidre as she headed back to the beach. He held the heavy can and she the opener, brandished before her like a standard. Once at the beach she chose a sheltered spot that wouldn't be wind assisted, drew a start line in the sand, and then a series of lines, eight in all, which she judged to be one metre apart. Mo looked on with dismay. He was no longer so sure he'd really spat a cherry stone six metres fifty-two. He'd been a few terms ago now and it all seemed so long ago. Had his cherry stone spit been six metres or had that been his long plunge in the school swimming gala? Six metres looked unbridgeable and suddenly a figure of four metres something or other seemed more likely. There was certainly no point in starting to discuss the matter with beautiful Deidre from Dartford. For some unfathomable reason spitting cherry stones or pomegranate pips was the Dartford equivalent of girding one's brows with oak or whatever it was Coriolanus did.

Deidre was carefully adjusting the lines, apparently not yet sure that they were really equidistant. Finally, she turned to him.

"Haven't you got the can open yet?"

Mo fished feebly into his pocket and produced the can opener.

He looked round for a firm surface to rest it on and finding there was no shortage of heavy rocks behind where they were sitting, had to oblige. The can opened, the dark cherries glistened in the late afternoon sun, suspended beneath the thick sweet syrup.

Deidre stood near him, giving him admiring looks. She apparently thought his reluctance to start the procedure was due to his mental preparation, and she knew she must not disturb him in these vital moments. He dipped his finger into the liquid and tried to fish out a fruit. They were soft and very slippery. Deidre reached over and tenderly removed his fishing hand, sensuously licked the sticky syrup from his fingers and then plunged the nails of her thumb and forefinger into the juice. Out came a cherry, held with the precision and delicacy of a crocodile egg between its mother's teeth.

"Open wide," she murmured.

He obeyed and the cherry was dropped onto his waiting tongue. He shut his mouth and started the delicate process of removing the meat.

"Deidre," he said in a mild matter of fact way, while studying some distant point on the horizon.

"What is it love?" she cooed back from beneath big cow shaped eyes, determined not to upset his concentration.

"The cherries have no stones," he continued in the same monotone distant voice.

"What?" she shrieked.

"They've been stoned."

Her nails went back into the tin and out came a second exemplar. She grimaced but stuck it in her mouth, then sighed.

"Oh, you poor boy. All that mental effort and there's no bloody stones in the cherries. What shall you do?"

Mo fully expected Deidre to be mocking him but as he searched her eyes for the hint of sarcasm, he found only deepest sincerity. This cherry spitting thing was for real.

"I daresay I'll get over it," he sighed convincingly, "but what do we do with an opened 1kg tin of cherries? Stoned cherries." he corrected himself.

"It doesn't say they are stoned on the can," she complained.

"You didn't say you spoke Polish Deidre," and he lifted himself onto a high rock. Deidre failed to notice the facetious tone in his voice but Mo felt much better. He'd paid her back for the mocking he'd taken over the lobsters and Aunties and he'd got out of the cherry stone spitting fiasco, albeit he feared only temporarily, with what looked like honour. But even if life is made up of a long series of temporary successes he told himself, they were infinitely better than permanent defeats. He only had to mop up now by securing a date for that evening, during which she would surely agree to deliver her promised bounty. Tomorrow and cherry stone spitting would take care of itself.

As he leant across the cherry tin, took both her hands in his one free one he had to work hard to hide his smugness.

"So, what's on tonight Deidre? Can I show you the walk beneath the castle? There's a very low tide and its quite special at

sunset."

"Sorry Mo. I'd love to. But we're all going to a restaurant at Corbiere. Family celebration and all that. Can't get out of it. How about tomorrow?"

Tomorrow! It sounded fantastic, but he was already obliged to the family and there was no getting out. He clutched at straws of his own making but they all sounded too pathetic to be pronounced. In the end, he gambled on the truth.

"I'd love to. But I have to babysit my little brother. My parents are away all day. Would you mind coming up to the house?"

"Not at all."

She pulled his face down to her lips and kissed him so delicately and so full of passion that he was left gasping. Mo was still sitting several feet above her and they both would have gasped had they seen how close he came in his passion to tipping the cherry juice down her heaving cleavage.

Dawn, or what felt early enough to be dawn, was ushered in by the usual family row. The oldens were going away for a couple of days, across to the mainland for a business appointment, and were in danger of missing their flight. What better overture to recriminations?

"Where's the damned taxi?" screamed father, already well stressed.

"Where's Maurice?" screamed mother. "One day in the year when I need to rely on him and he comes home the night before sick as

a dog having pigged out on cherries. Why, I ask? Why does he do it. Out of pure badness to be sure."

The house fell silent before the final blast. Mo pulled a pillow over his head just as the bedroom door opened. It was brother Stan, come to make sure he'd taken cover.

"You're ready then Mo?" Stan whispered, and crawled under his big brother's covers. "She's gonna go elliptical any second."

"I know," was all Mo could manage.

"She's sure you've forgotten you're looking after me today." "I know," came the same groan.

"Did you forget you're looking after me today?"

Before he could answer, the long-awaited tirade came up the stairs, one hundred decibels of it carried on a force nine wind. It told him how useless, ungrateful, uncooperative, insensitive the whole family were and how unreliable Mo was in particular. Mo replied that he had a really exciting day planned for Stan, how everything was under control and little brother would be best catered for. His assignation with Deidre he chose to omit.

"What will the pair of you do all day?" Father poking his oar in. Silence. In his sleepy stupor Mo had forgotten both a contingency activity and excuse. He groped his mental faculties into gear. Stan prodded.

"For Christ sake Mo. Say something or the old man will be told to find us jobs."

Mo was just as desperate. A day of car and window cleaning,

weeding, bike polishing or whatever, was looming ever larger, wiping out the preferred vista of a little hanky panky in the long grass with Deidre. He ached his brain to provide of something reasonable, which would also leave him time for Deidre. He tried to picture her clipping the hedge; the image just wouldn't form in his mind and he knew why. Seconds ticked by.

"Today's plan", he called, "it's not so easy to explain, I mean explain briefly."

His voice faltered. The silence from the bottom of the stairs could have crushed granite. Stan came to the rescue.

"We're going to build a reptilium."

"That's nice," came a relieved and thus already disinterested call back up the stairs. "We're off now. Don't stay too long in bed."

The front door closed and the slamming doors of a waiting taxi preceded its noisy clatter out onto the road between the high granite walls.

"What in hell's name is a reptilium?" had to be Mo's first sleepy interlocution.

"A thing for keeping reptiles in," came the matter of fact reply.

"I'm sure it's not called that but it was a nice piece of crisis management little brother. The only trouble is that the oldens will expect to see a reptilium when they come home."

"So? We'll have to make one!"

"And I have a rather important date today; so important I'll make it well worth your while not to louse it up."

"What's her name?" came the bored inquiry.

"Deidre," Mo hardly dare mutter. Stan came up from beneath the covers amid fits of contrived hysterical laughter.

"Oh please! This has to be another of your scrubby holiday makers. You just can't leave it, can you?"

Mo would have strangled his brother but for the slumber still in his limbs and the pressure of a kilogram of cherries on his digestive system, laying like a stick of dynamite waiting for the fuse to burn down. Instead all he could manage was a grunted reply.

"You worry about you reptilium. I'll look after my sordid love life. Right now, all I need is a crap."

By the time Mo had finished his ablutions and found his way downstairs to the kitchen, Deidre and Stan were in animated conversation about saving the animal kingdom during such dry weather. Mo had agreed to meet Deidre at the bus stop in about an hour and was duly amazed at her presence. Stan explained.

"I had to get some more milk and at the bus stop I saw an obvious holiday maker, well off the beaten track. I stopped to ask her name. Well I mean."

He grinned at Mo but was polite enough to make sure Deidre couldn't see him mimicking her claws.

"And when she said, Deidre, I knew for certain."

He could no longer control his mirth. Mo groaned inwardly but Deidre smiled benignly.

"Don't worry Mo," she sighed. "I've got younger siblings too." She pulled the corners of her mouth down and bared angry fangs at Stan who fell silent, unsure if he shouldn't have been offended. Deidre continued quickly, before her adversary had time to recover his wits. "Your Stan left me in no doubt on the way from the bus stop, as to what he thought about my nails and name."

"And you still came up?" Mo hardly dare ask.

"I swallowed my pride when he promised breakfast. I'm starving. And anyway. This vivarium sounds a fantastic idea for a day like today." She looked at Stan's heavily bandaged wrist. "He won't be doing much building with that. Was it the reason you were at the hospital?"

"Yes," came Mo's weak reply.

"I think that's really sweet how you look after your Stan." She stood up and walked over to Mo. Who would have thought his little brother would have earned him such a soft luscious kiss on the cheek? Not Mo and not Stan, who was pretending to be sick in the sink behind Deidre's back. Life, Mo surmised, can be so full of beautiful surprises when the right woman is around. He just prayed Stan wouldn't ruin the moment by recounting Mo's unsavoury part in the wrist becoming sprained in the first place, or his torrid time after a tin of cherries. It was time to change the subject.

"Reptilium, vivarium. What's got into everyone. I thought you were into cherries?"

Mo could have bitten his tongue off. The less said about

cherries the better.

"They can wait until later Mo," she reassured him. "I think Stan's idea is fantastic."

"What exactly is Stan's idea?"

Stan recomposed himself, ready to be sunned in the aura of scientific research.

"Deidre says she's going to study biology, just finished A-levels she says and I've noticed how dry our garden is. Yesterday I found six dead newts, all for lack of water. I think, if we dig a hole and line it with clay, then granite stones and throw some vegetation in, we should be able to save the rest of them."

"You seem to have given this a lot of thought."

"We've got to do something Mo. They look so awful dried up on the pavers where it used always to be so damp."

Mo decided to enter into the spirit of things. He applied himself to the logistics.

"We'll have to dig somewhere not too far from the dried-up pond, but as close as possible to the stand pipe."

The three explorers gulped down their tea and cornflakes and descended the steep steps from the old wooden orangerie to the terrace some ten feet below the level of the house. In front of them was the parched wild area of long grass and thistles, bog weeds and rushes, an area normally fed by a tiny spring which had dried up this year for the first time in living memory. The left of the terrace was occupied by a few old glass houses in which cucumbers and peppers were ripening.

Stan headed straight for the parched reed beds to see what further damage had been wrought and Deidre wandered through the greenhouses, which were mainly uncultivated. She called over to Mo, who found himself alone on the terraced lawn.

"Why not put the newts in the greenhouse itself? It may be warm in here but it'll never dry out, not with that cucumber sprinkler."

Mo joined her in the first of the houses. He looked round, trying to weigh up his parent's objections and then declared, "I don't see why not. We wouldn't have to dig - just bring in a barrow load of boulders from the dry wall, which is falling down anyway, and the newts should be fine."

Several barrow loads were brought in and despite the intense heat under the glass, the stones were carefully stacked to make a damp sheltered area for the newts. Deidre wanted to help with the fetching, carrying and subsequent building, but with her delicate talons she was obliged to sit on the side-lines, directing the boys. Stan did his best with one hand. He actually had the courage which failed Mo, and told Deidre outright that she'd find a pair of nail scissors in the bathroom cabinet. Deidre snorted something unpleasant about pubescent boys by way of an answer. Stan set about memorising yet another word he'd have to look up and Mo decided not to get involved. He was having to do most of the work, was soaked in sweat and was finding beautiful women and little brothers less recommendable now.

It was around noon before they were ready to show the newts their new home. As they made their way to the dried-out bog, Deidre let

go a pearl of wisdom worthy of prospective under-grad status.

"What I can't work out is why the newts didn't migrate into the glass houses on their own, once the bog became too dry. There was plenty of cover in there before we put in the stones."

Mo and Stan stopped on the lawn. Mo was too speechless after all his hard work so it was left to Stan to face the unpleasant truth.

"You mean we might be wasting our time anyway?"

Deidre grinned her ice melting grin which momentarily even squashed Stan's hostility.

"Yes and no! We may not save the newts but we are having fun."

Stan agreed. Mo wasn't quite so sure. All he wanted was to get Deidre behind a cool shady bush, but when he'd tried to steal a kiss in the greenhouse, on one of the few occasions Stan hadn't been around, she'd pushed him off, declaring that a man toiling in such temperatures, and bathed in sweat, did nothing for her libido. And anyway, she reminded him, there was still the small matter of a cherry stone, or had he forgotten.

"I've found one!"

It was Stan from the long grass. Mo's worst fear was that he'd found a cherry.

"Where?" Deidre shrieked past Mo, standing forlorn on the terrace.

"I'm getting nowhere fast," he muttered to himself but decided he'd better keep the interest going a little longer, so he headed wearily

in the direction of the commotion. Stan came bounding over with a listless newt carefully cupped in his hands. He showed Mo then headed for the greenhouse. The next squeal of delight came from Deidre.

"I've found a huge toad, but he doesn't look well."

Stan was at her side with that sense of urgency that only a twelve-year-old can muster. Deidre went to pick it up.

"Not with those nails. You'll hurt it," was Stan's desperate response. Deidre was having none of it. She liked little Stanley, but his constant piss taking about her nails had gone far enough.

"You're certainly no good with a gammy wrist," she snorted back. This was her toad she told herself. Mo wanted to intervene, but how? Annoy Stan, and he could ruin all his progress with Deidre. Annoy Deidre and she would be on the next bus into town. Deidre ignored the brothers and lunged forward and grabbed at the toad.

Was it her anger at Stan, or nervousness at picking up a moving but ill animal? Who knows? Mo couldn't believe her sudden lack of dexterity. She caught the toad firmly between her pincers. It kicked hard in panic and she either had to drop it or increase the holding pressure. She was proud and not about to leave this one to Stan. She knew she was being more childish than her young friend and perhaps that knowledge caused her forefinger to slip under the toad. It wriggled just one more time and she tightened her grip, but now her fingers pressed from underneath. She couldn't believe the feeling as her nails sliced through its soft orange belly. The toad kicked one last violent time and then fell still. Deidre's other hand, which she'd cupped under

the toad for safety, filled with a mixture of blood and gall.

"You stupid cow," was all Stan could manage as remonstrated, but he put so much venom and disdain into his hissed response to Deidre's clumsiness that Deidre felt tears filling her eyes. Mo wanted to intervene on her behalf with some banality like, "accidents will happen," but he never finished the articulation. Stan pounced this time straight at the jugular, as merciless as only his uninhibited youth made possible.

"Go upstairs now and cut those stupid bloody nails before you do any more damage."

Deidre shrunk into her shoulders, dropped the occasionally jerking toad and obeyed, running, weeping, sobbing up the steep steps back into the house. Mo tried to tell Stan he'd been a bit out of order, but Stan wasn't listening. He was studying the unsavoury toad before him, wondering how to finish it off. Neither brother knew what to do.

When Mo had stopped making excuses for Deidre, when the toad had twitched for the very last time, when the sun was as high as it was to get that disastrous day, Stan wandered off in search of a shovel to bury the animal. But Mo, guessing what he was about, called after him.

"I'll take the toad Stan. You'll be all right on your own now, finding more newts and putting them in the greenhouse?"

Stan shrugged his shoulders and nodded. Mo continued.

"Tell Deidre I'll be in the cellar when she comes back down."

"Sure Mo." Stan managed to smile again. After all, he told

himself, it really wasn't Mo's fault he always fell for daft bimbos.

Stan passed on Mo's message without an ounce of forgiving in his voice. Had he bothered to turn around he would have seen that Deidre had cut her nails back to the finger ends and her face was full of contrition, eyes still red, begging to explain how miserable she was. Instead she was left to turn silently and on her own find the door beneath the steep steps, down into the cellar.

Although a bulb was lit, it took her some time to make Mo out in a distant gloomy corner. He had a test tube rack and some scalpels laid out next to a white cutting board. On the board was the dead toad. She was relieved to hear that Mo's voice was not charged with hostility.

This is where you can help Deidre."

"How?"

"Can you bare the toad down to the skeleton. I don't want all the meat on it."

She viewed the ancient but well- preserved dissecting kit.

"Where did you get that from?"

"Found it down here when we moved in. This house used to belong to the island's only vet come doctor."

"If you want to preserve the skeleton, you'll have to clean it in formaldehyde."

"I just want a piece of the bone structure. I'll tell you why while you're cutting. There's an old apron hanging on the nail there."

Deidre took the apron and started carefully stretching and

pinning the tiny corpse to the board. All the old dexterity was back in her fingers. Mo started to explain his investigation.

"I was reading an article about a guy who thought he'd committed the perfect murder. I think he did his landlady in or something like that, to get at her money I suppose, but he got caught because he believed he wouldn't be found guilty in the absence of a corpse. When the police questioned him he more or less confessed to the murder but told them that no matter what they knew, without a body they couldn't prove a crime had been committed."

Deidre looked up from her task.

"I remember. It's in one of the standard school chemistry texts on sulphuric acid. He tried to dissolve the body up in concentrated sulphuric acid. She'd owned the hotel where he was staying and he couldn't pay the bill. He murdered her and tried to turn her into calcium sulphate with acid." Deidre was warming to the subject. "Haigh was his name and the acid failed to dissolve up all the bone structure, but they also found her plastic denture and gallstones."

"That's the story! The silly bugger forgot to remove her plate and the police found a hundredweight of greasy sludge but enough remained to show it had been a body. Now I reckon his mistake was to believe that the bone structure, being mainly calcium carbonate, would dissolve up. Of course, it reacted with the sulphuric acid to make calcium sulphate, which I think must have formed an insoluble, impervious cover over the rest of the bone, hence preventing further reaction. But I'd forgotten about the gallstone. Can you look if toad has

a gallstone?"

"Don't be silly. This isn't an autopsy!"

Deidre looked at the tiny spread body of the toad and wondered if she could even find its gall bladder, never mind a stone. But she felt an inexplicable urge to oblige this sweet boy, who had, she admitted to herself, quite caught her fancy. Try as she might though, his request couldn't be met. Then the row of three test tubes in the rack, each half filled with liquid and labelled respectively "Sulphuric, Hydrochloric, Nitric," caught her eye.

"You morbid sod Mo. The penny has just dropped. You're going to see if he would have got away with it if he'd used different acids. Morbid but interesting. There's never a dull moment when you're around."

"That's the general idea," he said filling with adolescent pride at the back handed complement she had paid him. "So, I need a small piece of bone for each tube. We know that fairly concentrated sulphuric or nitric would have got rid of the skin. I've only managed to find dilute acids in Stan's chemistry set but I still think it's worth a try."

"Won't Stan be upset about this happening to his toad?"

Deidre didn't want to be party to any more emotional catastrophes for poor Stan. Mo laughed at her concern. He knew his little brother far better.

"Yes!" he agreed. "He'll be angry as hell, but only because we didn't invite him to the party. He's not sentimental about the toad. He'll be furious he's missed the dissection and chemistry."

"So why don't you invite him?"

Mo put his arm round her waist, pressed his lips against her shoulder he could feel under the thin cotton blouse and blew hot air through it. She giggled and wriggled and complained she couldn't concentrate if he carried on with such nonsense. Mo drew back a little.

"And Stan would view a quick snog with loud disdain!" he exclaimed, but didn't remove his arm. She laughed as she handed him a fairly clean limb. Now he had to unfurl himself from her delicious body, full of an exciting fragrance which he knew didn't emanate from any perfume bottle, in order to carefully place the thin bone structure beside the first tube. Another back leg was soon available followed by a smaller front leg and claw. Mo dropped a limb in each tube and stood back well satisfied as the first bubbles began to appear. Deidre knew it would take hours, if not days for any conclusive result and as much as she wanted to feel Mo's arm round her, his breath beside her cheek, she decided not to hurry things, so began to wander around the huge cellar room.

There was another door, slightly ajar, leading into a long low narrow side chamber which ran the whole length of the old house. She eased the door open, found a light switch, and went exploring.

The house hummed to the silence of a hot summer afternoon, occasionally broken by Stan in the garden turning a stone in his search for newts or by the angry zirring of grasshoppers in the long grass. The cellar silence was of a different kind. It was a cool, slightly moist

stillness, which had nothing of the heat from outside. The more shattering then was the scream of honest horror with which Deidre broke it. Mo rushed to the door of the second cellar room expecting to find at least the oily remains of one of Haigh's last undetected corpses.

"What is it?"

Even in the relative cellar gloom he could see that Deidre was as white as a sheet.

"That Mo!"

Her voice trembled. He looked to where her arm pointed. There on the wall hung an oil painting of a huge toad with the face of an old man. Long hair and a beard hung down from his face. He sat on powerful haunches in the middle of a shallow river. The face was a picture of equally powerful fury, mouth wide open, displaying just a few razor sharp teeth.

"Oh him!" Mo was obviously dismissive of Deidre's problem. "That's just Thokolosche."

"Thokowota?" she tried to echo with a shaky voice. She felt the complete idiot for the second time that day and had to shift her weight to prevent her knees giving way to an embarrassing shake.

"Thokolosche," Mo repeated. "He's an African mythical figure. A troll I suppose we would call him. He lives in a river but comes out sometimes to snare pretty girls," he hissed beside her cheek in his best Hitchcock voice which caused Deidre to grab his arm, "and young and old women as well. They really believe in him in some parts of Southern Africa. The men insist all the girls and women have their beds

on blocks so that he can't reach to climb in beside them, for the story goes that once a woman has been bedded by Thokolosche, her husband will never again be able to satisfy her. Needless to say, the husbands aren't too keen on this idea, so they supply the blocks."

"But he's awful. They must be very scared of him."

"And yet they are powerless to keep him from their beds. Any guy with looks like that, but can pull any woman must have one mean secret in his charm."

"Scared of him, horrified by him yet powerless to resist him. Fascinating! His eyes remind me of that toad. It looked at me, dead as it was, as I stretched it out to pin it. A disgusting sight yet so full of pathos. Why do you have such an awful picture down here in the gloom? I'd never mess with anyone's myth, no matter from how far away."

"I suppose that's why he's down here. If we are really honest with ourselves we don't want the myth in the house at all so we've banned him to the cellar. But the story as to why we've got him is quite simple. My dad went to an exhibition of an unknown, poverty stricken African artist and was obviously expected to buy something. He took this because he liked the story of Thokolosche. Stan and I were quite glad my mother wouldn't let him hang him in the house."

"I'm not surprised," Deidre whispered as she stepped closer to study him. "That face is truly incredible, an enormous raw power, the power of Africa waiting to take the world. But the trees and flowers around him aren't so good. Who painted it?"

"Pass. I think there's something about the artist on the back," Mo called back to her from his test tubes. Deidre hardly heard. She moved herself around the painting, trying to catch as much light as possible, in order to see the detail of the picture. She found the story enchanting and couldn't stop herself imagining what it would be like to have Thokolosche creep into her bed beside her, lift her nighty and caress her. And ugly or not, animal or man, she found her daydream quite pleasing. If it was Mo or Thokolosche, she wasn't sure, but something about this house was a real turn on. And where, she asked herself, was the adolescent guilt which normally accompanied such wicked wanderings into the sexual fantasy? Nowhere to be found. Thokolosche's eyes had fixed hers and had he hopped out the picture she would have been powerless to resist. A warm sensation grew from the centre of her being and she gasped despairingly at her inability to control her imagination.

"It must be the heat," she told herself, "or the shock of killing the toad. Never mess with anyone's myth," she repeated in a whisper to herself, but still the eyes held her, and as she imagined him ever more vividly taking her young body, she fancied the cruelty was gone out of the face. And then, as she fought with another stray thought, full of guilt at her promiscuity, Thokolosche broke her dream, with her innocence still just about intact. She fancied he smiled at her and then looked at something over her shoulder. Involuntary, she turned to the shelves behind her.

Perhaps the ghostly quiet of the cellar had only lasted but a few minutes but Mo was aware of a different atmosphere when Deidre stood next to him again. She placed a large jar on the table next to the test tubes and at that moment Stan came lazily down the cellar stairs.

"Everyone alright?" he jauntily enquired. "I thought I heard a scream."

Deidre tried to get some self-respect back into her voice.

"That was ages ago. Fat lot of use you'd be if I were dead on the floor."

"Yeh, well you're not dead on the floor, are you?" Stan snorted at Deidre. He bit off the obvious conclusion to the sentence, "more's the pity." Instead he looked at the jar next to the chemistry set and asked, "what are the cherries for?"

"Mo owes me a forfeit, involving some cherries, with stones in," she added with emphasis. "Yesterday we couldn't find a cherry with a stone anywhere in St. Helier. Now I find jars of conserved cherries in your cellar."

Her voice was as strict as a school mistress who'd found bubble gum on her chair, and her look twice as searching. Mo withered beneath it.

"I forgot," Mo mumbled. "Besides they are bound to be stoned."

"Crap! We never stone them," came Stan to his brother's rescue. "It's much too much bother," he added with disarming honesty.

"But you know Mum's touchy about anyone opening them

before Christmas," Mo countered.

Stan looked bewildered. Mo could sense his brother was not about to help out. Instead he put together a "Garbage," with such emphasis on the first syllable that the word drawled through the cellar rooms for several seconds.

"We never finish all the cherries from a picking. There's fruit in there from five years ago," he added as a final demolition job. Then he retreated back up the cellar steps.

Deidre looked at Mo who tried not to look at Deidre. It was no good. Her voice was back under control and sterner than ever, but now with a hint of forgiveness in its approbation. She knew for certain that Mo had been winding her up on the beach, that he was nothing but a lying little bragger, two years her junior, who'd promised her the world and a six metre cherry stone spit, just to win her. She'd toiled two miles across a beach, two hours in a greenhouse, killed a toad, lost her nails, dissected a toad, and this lad was all hot air. She wanted to stalk out in a self righteous huff, but instead merely said in a quietly resigned voice, "I'll have to go now Mo."

She looked at her watch then immediately back to him, searching for eye contact. He would have likened himself to a stranded jellyfish and perhaps it was that which calmed her animosity toward her little boaster.

"I'll see you tomorrow on the beach beneath the wall," she continued, "and you'll have a jar of unstoned cherries with you."

Mo knew he'd fallen in love with her and was equally sure his

love would founder on his next feeble excuse. There was no way round the truth though.

"I'm sorry Deidre. My parents don't get back until late tomorrow. I'll still have to look after Stan. Oh Christ. I've forgotten to make him some lunch. There'll be hell to pay if he tells on me."

"That's fine!" Deidre snorted by way of stamping her authority on the proceedings. She smelt sweet revenge for her humiliations of the day. Mo waited for the final death blow.

"You can feed him after you've walked me to the bus", she commanded, "and don't be late picking me up off the nine o'clock bus tomorrow."

Mo could have jumped for joy. This was better than he could have possibly expected from such a goddess. Apart from feeling pleased and flattered that he should merit another day of Deidre's time, he was elated that he'd be able to play at home again for the second leg in this match he was so desperate to win. He reasoned that if Stan were happy catching and tending newts, he and Deidre might actually have some undisturbed time together. Deidre took the quiet smile which flickered across Mo's face as his consent to her plan, so she turned to follow Stan's footsteps up the cellar stairs, but realising she'd nearly forgotten the reason why Mo was to get a second chance, she stopped again and came back down to her still joyous beau. His brow furrowed. What now?

"Can I borrow that picture until tomorrow?"

Borrow it? He'd have given it her had she asked.

Deidre went straight to her hotel room, opened the parcel Mo had carefully put together and placed the picture on her dressing table opposite her bed. She pushed her bed up to the dressing table so that Thokolosche would have but a small spring onto her bed. She sat on the bed and turned and arranged herself so that she could admire him from several angles. Finally, she picked it up to read the short artist's biography on the back.

Motshile Nthodi. Father of the Bakwena tribe. Mother of the Ndebele. He acknowledges that his style is influenced by observing playing tribal children, drawing tribal games and stories in the dust, animating their pictures by then drawing independent lines over the basic outlines to emphasize different actions.

She replaced the picture on the dressing table and studied it for the independent lines that would have explained her adventure in the cellar. For the first time, she was able to look beyond the fearsome face, down to the claws on his hands, claws that reminded her painfully of her own nails. His body rippled with muscles and he sat on a wide pile of stones, surrounded by water. This time though she couldn't reach him. Try as she might, the thoughts from the cellar wouldn't reappear in her mind. Something was missing. She felt if she could but create the right moment, the right atmosphere, ambience, she would not only enjoy him in the picture, in her imagination, but he would come to her physically. A gloomy quiet place was obviously best, but her conscious had proved risky. A stray guilty thought, jar of cherries even, could

obviously ruin everything. The question was, how to do it? How could one invite Thokolosche into her unconscious?

An hour went by in this way, turning all the possibilities over and over, rotating them through every plane. It would soon become a matter of some urgency, for she needed to get washed and dressed for the evening. But as she got ready her eye always wandered back to Thokolosche. She was unable to divorce him from the toad she murdered with her vanity. He was connected to Mo and her experience in the cellar. Finally, famished, and certain she would get grief from the family, she locked her bedroom door and went out for the evening. She had agreed to go to a dinner dance. It turned out to be an interesting evening, but she excused herself as soon as the band played the last chord and headed for her room.

"It's not late. Stay for a nightcap," her uncle insisted.

"Really? I don't know," she answered. I think I have had too much sun today. I need to rest, or cool down on a walk."

She tried to find less feeble excuses. Her unconscious answered for her!

"I thought I might go for a walk beneath the castle."

She could have screamed "Eureka!" so overjoyed was she. It had to be the answer. It all fitted in. Mo, the cherries, the toad and of course his request for a date beneath the castle where rocks and water would surely supply the ambience she needed. But then again, she mused, it made no sense. How could she try to explain to anyone else a connection that was only there in her mind? She couldn't explain, but

she was sure that the rocks at low tide, were holding the secret to Thokolosche. Her Mother looked so disquieted that she quickly modified her intentions, as it happened, without having to lie.

"A walk beneath the castle and then straight to bed."

She fled to her room to change into more sensible shoes and make a few last preparations. And then into the bar to ask her favourite waiter how to get to the promenade by the castle. It was all so clear to her, and when she reached the promenade beneath the castle it was deserted at that bewitching hour. The distant water seemed miles away over the seaweed strewn rocks which Mo had known would be quite exposed by an exceptionally low tide. And the moon. Huge and irresistible! She was sure she could walk to the water, by the light of it.

As she descended the steps though, from the promenade to the rocks, her courage started to leave her. She had to force herself not to consider the loneliness and isolation of the scene. In the half-light, the rocks had an eerie feel to them. The gullies were filled with long shadows and after only a few yards it became difficult to judge their depth. She realised, she had only seen the illuminated tops to the rocks. Most of the landscape had been hidden to her. She soon couldn't breathe for fear but still she kept walking outward toward the distant water. She had after all taken the trouble to find out from the waiter exactly when the tide would turn and knew there to be no danger of being cut off, but the ghostly quality of the jagged area between her and the sea, still scared her. But that was obviously why she had been brought to this

place. She was prepared to take risks, shun genuine fear, if only it would bring her Thokolosche just one more time. Thokolosche as he was, without prejudice, demanding the world see him without prejudice. An ugly wart of a man, with the power to seduce any woman. This was the deity she had to meet, she kept telling herself and here was the place she would find him, where nothing would distract her from his sensuousness.

As she climbed the successive ridges and gullies, she expected any moment to see him sitting on a rock waiting for her. It would be awful. Supposing she were to get it all wrong again. She would surely lose him forever.

A large water filled fissure lay in front of her. She hesitated. There were bound to be crabs and who knew what else in such a deep pool. Was it deep? How did she know? She sat down to take off her shoes and found herself transfixed by the mood and hostility of the moment, but the longer she sat holding her light sand shoes, the darker it became and blacker was the water. A breeze rippled the surface. Her face pulled down into furrows and the water blurred as her eyes filled with tears. Where was he? A cloud plunged her into darkness.

"Oh my God!" she whimpered, "I am so scared. Thokolosche," she called. A glance over her shoulder did nothing to allay her fears. There were lights on the deserted promenade. That would give her the direction, but not reveal the dangerous, water-filled pools. A fish plopped somewhere in a distant pool and as she tried to stand, a wading bird, which had thought itself settled for the night, started up with a

squawk and a flurry of spray. She cried out and then had to sit several minutes longer, shivering on her rock, until she could get her breath and pulse back under control.

Finally, a deep pant of resolve and she started lowering herself into the cold water. As soon as she tried to wade forward the jagged rocks hurt. She stood ankle deep pulling the shoes back on when, just as she had finished the difficult struggle of wet canvass over sandy skin, before she was able to carefully test the ground in front of her, she overbalanced and had to stride forward to prevent herself falling. But there beneath the water was an unexpected boulder, a stride became a stumble and she was pitched forward, first up to her waist but still unable to regain her balance, she was swimming. She felt again for the boulder that had precipitated her forward but as her foot found it, so it disappeared from beneath her flailing limb. Unable to stand, her light summer dress pulling her down much more than she would have anticipated, she felt the chill of disaster creep over her. Seconds of near panic passed before she realised she was swimming freely. It was alright. Despite the dragging of her clothes she found she could tread water and kept telling herself there was as yet no real danger. But she still faced the task of getting out and now, deep in the pool she was robbed of the last streaks of light. The ridge from which she had foolishly launched herself was just a jagged silhouette against the silver sky. She shivered from the cold. She shivered from fear and tears poured over her already wet salty face.

"So Thokolosche," she half whispered, half sobbed to herself,

"I'm in your hands and shivering with fright. Is that how you like your victims? Scared but filled with morbid curiosity? Then come for me tonight. I have some questions for you. Don't let me down," and she closed her eyes and let herself sink beneath the water. Bladder wrack caught at her legs and as she opened her eyes the darkness was awful. But there! A piece of firm rock caught her foot and she began the difficult task of lifting herself from the water

Deidre's return to the hotel was much later than anticipated. Each step from the pool had to be carefully investigated and she became nearly too cold to climb the perilous fissures. She fell badly once and lacerated her leg and hip, then tore her skirt and lost a shoe, but luckily was nearly back at the road by then. She rejoiced at a bus stop, but how could she get on a bus in the state she was in, even in the unlikely event that one would come. There was nothing else for it but to hobble nearly a mile back to the hotel with only one shoe, but at least the promenade was safe from the awesome sound of the incoming water that had been slopping and sluicing through the cracks and fissures. Her watch had stopped in the pool and she knew she hadn't misjudged the whole adventure. She admonished herself for her foolhardiness. It could all have gone so wrong. A slip could have broken a limb, a fall rendered her unconscious, at the mercy of the incoming tide. And as punishment for her whim she was crying, bleeding and very cold, with not a hint of Thokolosche. But she'd been so afraid for most of the time that she'd not been able to concentrate on anything but survival.

Once back in the light of the town she realised how wise she'd been to take the precaution of leaving the fire escape door to her room open. How could she have walked through the bar, full of pot-bellied gin and tonic swillers, without a host of questions which would have exposed her stupidity, and ruined Thokolosche for ever, after all she'd been through? She told herself it had been for a noble cause and she shouldn't let emotions such as embarrassment, shame or inhibition ruin the heady feeling she now felt, for the relief of being safe again and the prospect of soon being in the warm, having escaped such a perilous adventure, filled her with an elation she'd never known before. The thread she'd secured the fire door with to stop it swinging in the breeze, resisted more than she expected and she had to wryly admit to herself that it was an ill wind that didn't blow anyone any good. Her long nails of earlier in the day would never have allowed her to prise the door from its jam.

The room was lusciously warm compared to the cool night air. She undressed and laid naked, hair still wet, on her bed, and gently caressing the colder parts of her body she waited for sleep to come and take her mental and physical exhaustion from her. She was mindful of the fact that the most difficult part of her plan was still to be realised. That Thokolosche would come for her was not in doubt. He had saved her among the rocks - pushed that vital boulder under her foot and made her ascent from the pool possible. So, as the first slumber descended upon her she forced her consciousness into play, and lay there suspended just this side of sleep, making her tired brain concentrate on

the day dream in the cellar.

The detail was stunning. She called to him and ran her hands over her thighs and caressed between her legs, but he always stayed in the picture. For fleeting moments, he was physically there in her room, but every time this happened she became so elated that her conscious intervened and dragged her with a start, sometimes a violent twitch, back to reality. Eventually, she could keep up the game of hide and seek between conscious and unconscious no longer and a hitherto unknown drowsiness of such weight and intensity came over her that she gave up trying to control her balancing act. A final glance at the picture in the weak light from the street showed there to be just a black sheet in the frame. She smiled and let herself slip into a deep slumber.

She slept soundly until the first streaks of dawn fell through the uncurtained window and touched her motionless body. She felt her eyes opening and as she followed the shafts of light to her bed and floor around it, they merged to a pool of water and her bed to a rock, barely submerged beneath the rippling, glinting, reflecting surface of tiny mirrors indiscriminately scattered around her. Above her were the branches of a tree, hanging down nearly to her belly, the full dark red fruit touching her skin and hair. Between the boughs she could make out the face of Thokolosche, and although water dripped from his hair and beard it didn't make her wet. Yes, she realised he was that close, sitting on his huge haunches between her parted thighs. She smiled at him with satisfaction as he separated the boughs to look at her. She

smiled warmly at him.

"I knew you'd come. You couldn't let me down."

He laughed. His mouth and throat were huge and coarse but his breath, so close to her body was sweet and intoxicating.

"You certainly went to enough trouble to call me."

"I wanted to sure," she added shyly.

"Why? What is so important to you? Was I worth risking your life for?"

She was silent for a few seconds while she summoned the courage to bare her soul. She knew she was being stupid to be so shy. If one couldn't tell a troll who was probably only a figment of her imagination, then whom could one tell?

"I want you to tell me," she started hesitantly, "the real worth in a man that I should seek."

He laughed mockingly.

"Whether he can spit a cherry stone six metres or not is as meaningless as the nails you shed yesterday. But that's another matter."

"I know that," she sulkily replied, "that was just a piece of youthful folly. I hope I'm still allowed that. You will excuse my idiocy with the toad too?"

He didn't seem to hear her. Instead he was eying her naked body in a way that quite unnerved her. But his answer showed he actually hung on her every word!

"It's not for me to judge or excuse the foolishness in others and as I'm neither toad nor newt it's all quite irrelevant to me. If you want

my opinion, for what it's worth, any accident can be forgiven provided you learn from your folly." He paused to reflect and only when he seemed satisfied with his exposition did he continue. "However, I trust you didn't call me all this way just to ask me that. I expect quite different requests. What did you mean? The real worth in a man?"

"I couldn't believe, couldn't understand how you could win me, excite me so easily, the way you did in the cellar, cause me to lose all control over my emotions. I've obviously been deceiving myself by wanting... well... certainly something other than you."

"Be honest," he commanded, "You are really trying to ask what an ugly little toothless troll can offer a beauty such as you. You're cross at the ease with which you offered yourself to a hairy toad in a puddle and perhaps you are scared you might do it again. But I diverted your dream the moment I sensed your doubt. I realised this about you, down in the gloom of the cellar and by looking at the cherries I distracted you and gave you the chance to reconsider. I hope that this time I'll be able to quell your fears and settle your doubts. I assume that's what you want, that's why you went to so much trouble to get me. If not...Your dream will evaporate in front of your eyes, just as it did in the cellar. If some stray thought of guilt or regret should intervene again this time, I shall be gone for ever."

With one hand he rubbed the inside of her thigh and she was amazed at the softness of his scaly skin. And with the other he plucked a cluster of cherries from a bough, chewed one and despite a huge breath and considerable effort, his lack of a full set of front teeth to hold

back the air and build up pressure meant he barely managed to spit the stone as far as her belly button, where it landed and nestled. He laughed mockingly at his pathetic yet successful effort, for the stone made her tummy glow as if a warm sun were inside her. She murmured her appreciation and he smiled at his own feelings of pleasure. Then he leant forward on top of her and put a fruit in her mouth. The sensuousness of this touch covered her in goose flesh. She gasped, and then sighed and without any air to carry it, her stone too, without aiming, as if transported by some medium she couldn't control, landed alongside his.

"That's what's important," he declared, and she felt his excitement rising against her thigh at the prospect of her body. She waited expectantly, her body quivering with a different excitement, but instead of the expected reaction from him he spoke again.

"So you see, the debacle beneath the castle was very dangerous and quite unnecessary. I would never have come to you in such a state of distracted fear."

"I wasn't sure what I'd need to do to get you. I knew I'd have to concentrate very hard to be able to feel you and get into contact, feel your vibes I suppose and because African women are afraid of you...."

"Nonsense!" he scoffed. "Yes! a few African women are afraid of me, but believe me, they needn't be. I only visit the ones like you who call me. It is their men whom they really fear, and the men of course then have to be afraid of me. But it was nice to see you go to so much effort to make sure I would come to you this night. That too is

however quite usual," he added in a matter of fact way, but without vanity or presumption in his voice. He leant forward again, this time resting his body on hers. She felt his gentle penetration, more gentle than she had ever believed possible. Was he made of silk? And as he moved himself inside her he let his head nestle comfortably in the valley between her breasts, so short was he. She, for her part, let the waves of pleasure come over her and as she wriggled her body to take his tiny form more comfortably she had to wonder how such ugliness could give such beauty. She stroked his wiry hair and beard, and ran her fingers along the furrows of his brow, which seemed to please him greatly as she was soon to realise. When he was finished, he washed her body with the purest water in which they lay and fed her from the exotic fruits which hung from the boughs. She tried to untussle his hair. He smiled at her efforts and declared her to be worthy of his visit and covered her anew in kisses of fiery heat and softest perfume.

"Only consider things of goodness and beauty," he whispered all the while, "and of people, reject those who will not consider the health of your soul for that must remain of paramount importance to you." His powerful back legs once again held his body in perfect line for her pleasure, but somehow now he was able to whisper directly into her ear. "For only you are responsible for your own happiness" he continued, "only you can get it right for yourself," and she gasped anew with pleasure and as his movements became both long and fast she cried out, "Yes Thokolosche! Tell me all you know. Give me your wisdom of a thousand times a thousand years." And he did. She felt the

warmth of the sun beneath her navel spread downwards and then out to fill her whole body.

Then he slept with his little troll features next to her, but still she wanted to know more, although he was obviously wearying of her persistency.

"Thokolosche," she cooed, "is it true no other man will be able to please me as you have done?"

She shook his tiny frame and repeated the question. His eyes began to open.

"I heard you the first time," was his gruff reply.

"Well Thokolosche? Why don't you answer?"

"It is true," he started wearily, "that you will never be satisfied with the wisdom of the moment. You will always want more, but as to whether that will involve one man or many men in your search, only you can answer. Look at yourself now!"

Then he lifted himself to again sit beside her and turned her face gently toward the mirror at the same time parting the boughs obstructing her view.

"Be honest," he admonished. "Do you like what you see after a night of love?"

"Yes," she sighed with deep conviction. While he talked on he encouraged her hands to explore all his body.

"But, people are not wisdom," he continued. "Nevertheless, it's a good sign to be able to love yourself after loving me. You realise only your own experiences can really answer the questions you pose, but if

you search carefully and accept only good courageous and fine men and women in your life, you will not be disappointed. Do not wait too long though," he sighed.

His eyes fell shut again as he let huge gushes of semen flow across her navel. His body was a taught picture of the strength and virility of his continent, his face filled with such ecstasy and serenity that she would have preserved his pleasure for ever and kept it for herself. But because that couldn't be she sighed and kissed his parted panting lips and the question she hadn't dared ask for fear of spoiling his moment, she could hold back no longer.

"But Thokolosche," she urged with the folly of youthful determination, "what if I haven't the right man. Surely your own teaching tells me I must wait until he comes."

"If you always behave with the honesty, courage and lack of any prejudice you have managed this night," he murmured, "all will come right for you. Although foolish, I am impressed with the trials you were prepared to undergo down on the rocks for my sake. You're a fine and beautiful woman. Perhaps the right man is but a spit of a cherry stone from you."

He chuckled at his own joke and then yawned.

"Now I must sleep. I have so many visits to make today. You know the answers to all your questions now. I can teach you nothing more. We must wait and see if you have the courage to apply your wisdom," and he sank gently beneath the water and was gone.

As the sun came up over the horizon and filled Deidre's room with bright light, she awoke and momentarily couldn't sort dream from reality. She felt for the water and the fruit laden boughs but found only the damp pillow from her wet hair and her damp summer dress which she had carelessly thrown over the head of her bed. She jumped from the bed and ran to the mirror above the dressing table. Surely there must be marks from his long claws and scaly skin. But no. She could find only the coarse abrasions from her fall among the rocks. She felt for the dry crustiness of his spent passion, but what she found could have been dried sea water from her adventure.

She ran back to the bed. Surely there must be signs of their love there. Nothing that betrayed the slightest passion was to be found. She sighed. It had been but a dream, but as she turned to her damp bed, there beside the marks her wet body had left, was a long black hair, full six inches and coarse, as from a beard. She took the hair and studied it. Perhaps it was just a bit of fibre from a seaweed which had caught in her own hair. But just as she was about to put it in the waste bin she caught her reflection in the mirror and there was another, just like it, nestled between her breasts. She held both the hairs together and felt there could be no doubt they had the same origin. In her jewellery box was a tiny pendant which could be prized open and into it went the sole evidence of her night with Thokolosche.

It was not surprising Deidre couldn't get back to sleep. She was troubled by a multitude of thoughts, not least of all, the pragmatic, such

as how to get her clothes and bed dry. She tried to distract herself with futile tasks, but an hour before the first breakfast, the room was tidied, clothes hung out and the picture carefully wrapped ready to go back. She caught the early breakfast sitting and the earlier bus. It rattled slowly through the narrow lanes leaving her ample time to reflect how she would handle her next encounter with Maurice. She was sure she'd find him still in bed!

In fact poor Mo had been up with the lark,³ too but his first waking hours hadn't quite enjoyed the same level of divine thoughts as Deidre's. The evidence of his morning vigil could be found round the back of the house, across the grass terrace and up the steep steps, for on the balustrade was a half empty jar of cherries and across the lawn were spawned a hundred cherry stones, all spat from the same fiduciary point. As only Mo knew where that point was, only he knew the result of his endeavours but the hanging head above sagging shoulders wasn't encouraging. Down in the cellar he found his pieces of toad limb little effected by any of the acids.

"Looks like I'd better not murder my landlady either," he grumbled as he replaced the test tubes one by one in their rack. The door to the long room was still slightly ajar and it reminded him of Deidre's strange request to borrow the picture. The whole scenario had been so odd that only the wildest sweeps through his imagination seemed to produce a likely explanation. When Stan had asked what Deidre had carried out the house so carefully wrapped, he'd reacted to Mo's explanation by declaring her to be a clandestine art dealer, sent by

the Mafia to retrieve a priceless work. Ludicrous as that sounded, Mo couldn't come up with anything more sensible. Would she even return with the picture? Did it matter? If she liked it, she might as well have it! And if she did return, would she be prepared to explain the fascination of an unknown work by a little-known artist.

He heard the distant chime of the doorbell, glanced at his watch and wondered who would be ringing at 8.25 during the holidays. Certainly not a friend. They would all be in bed still. This had to be trouble. With an uneasy feeling he started for the front door but was surprised by the continued impatient ringing.

"Oh god! This is definitely bad news. Stan has probably kicked his football into next door's prize chrysanthemums."

With a thousand silly excuses on his tongue he unlatched and pulled back the heavy oak door. There was Deidre, picture lovingly wrapped, smile that could have microwaved a bag of frozen chips, and a flush in her cheeks that he had never seen on any woman he had known. He struggled for a winning line that would re-establish him in the running as a suitor, but he was never at his best before ten.

"Come in," was all he could manage.

She blushed and stammered something about not expecting him to be awake and that was why she had rung so impatiently. She actually had wanted to tell him she had been looking forward to finding him sleepy and in his pyjamas, but suddenly all her old shyness was back again. Maurice was simply confused.

"I'll make us some breakfast," he offered.

"Later Mo," and there was that smile again. "Firstly, I have to hang Thokolosche up and for that I need your help."

Mo couldn't be bothered to argue. They descended the cellar steps in silence and made their way through to the small second cellar room, full of preserves, unwanted junk and the occasional picture.

"Stan was right." Mo asked himself why the most intense silences can only be broken with banalities. "We have got plenty of unstoned cherries."

"Bugger the Cherries Mo!" was the last answer he'd expected. He was also surprised how carefully she shut each cellar door behind them. It took his eyes a while to grow accustomed to the paltry glow of the single low watt bulb at the far end of the low long room. She unpacked the picture with great care and hung it in the only square not occupied by glasses and jars of fruits and jams. She seemed to linger over each movement in front of the canvass far longer than Mo could understand, and then she stood in front of it and seemed to mutter something. Was she praying to it? Mo wanted to break the tension by calling Thokolosche an ugly bastard but fortunately for him couldn't force the words out into the still atmosphere of the cellar. Then Deidre turned to him, stroked his neck and tenderly kissed his unbelieving lips. She drew back from him a little and started unbuttoning his shirt and gently fondled his chest and tummy.

"Your hands are like silk," he gasped and involuntarily tightened the muscles of his abdomen under her touch. In a flash her hands had found the gap left between skin and trouser. And her lips

were all over him causing sensations that he would never have believed possible, now biting gently at his nipple and then back to his neck. He jerked his head back to receive her caresses and as he glanced over her shoulder at the wall he could have sworn he saw Thokolosche wink at him.