





Silentnight



What people have said about *Silent Night*

“A complex tale of mice, men and mattress.” J. Steinbeck, New York Times.

“A feel-good story for our time.” The Manager of Leiston Cinema.

“Excellent bedtime reading.” Cuddly Scamp.

All characters are fictional apart from us.

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Cardboard outer, covered with ticking. Inner springs printed on plain paper. Stuffing, genuine mattress material. Binding by hand.

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Chapter 1. Abandoned

Tuesday: 3.40 pm.

Jack heard a van outside and went to the door. It was for him. Two delivery men opened the back doors of the transit and pulled out his new mattress, beautifully wrapped in a huge clear plastic sheet. They brought it into the bedroom and were kind enough to help him take the old one out to the garage.

Tuesday: 11.00 pm.

Jack couldn't sleep. The new mattress was comfortable enough, but did he really need a 'King Size' when there was now no one to snuggle up with him? His thoughts turned to Pauline. She walked out a year ago, abandoning him for another man. He is still hurt, and he still misses her. Angrily he turned over. He tried to go back to sleep, but no chance. He started thinking about the old mattress in the garage. What was he going to do with that?

Then he had an idea. He got up and drew the curtains: perfect. It was a dark and silent night and he quickly dressed in his burglar's black cat suit. We have not mentioned this yet, but Jack is a burglar by trade. Out in the garage he heaved the old mattress into one of his several stolen vans. He paused for a moment and then bundled up the big sheet of plastic that had come round his new bed: he couldn't think of a use for that either. The gravel crunched as he inched out of the drive and into the night.

Tuesday: Just after midnight.

Jack pulled off the main road and made his way down the track that led to the abandoned quarry. He threw open the back doors of the van, as he always did. He slid the mattress out and tipped it over the rim of the quarry along with the plastic sheet. Job done.

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Tuesday: 3.40 pm.

Sylvie was sitting at the edge of her favourite meadow. The sunlight glinted on the stalks of the stubble, but she barely noticed. She was feeling low. And who wouldn't be in her situation. She was pregnant, again, and again she'd been

abandoned. She still couldn't believe it: Mick, her most recent partner, was such a strong character, so full of fun, and with such nice ears.

Tuesday: 11.00 pm.

Sylvie made her way to the old quarry, she needed to bed down for the night and she knew that she could find somewhere safe there. Safe enough for one, but what would she do when she had given birth? She'd need a really good hiding place then.

Tuesday: Just after midnight.

She heard something move and her whiskers twitched. She crouched lower into the rusting can. Suddenly, a huge white shape dropped from the sky just a few feet away. She froze. Surely not an owl! She waited: nothing. Then, very nervously, she peeped out. She had never in her life seen anything like it. Sylvie had always been curious, even as a very young mouse.



A few minutes later she was out, prospecting. She found a slit in some fabric, and inside a fantastic playground. Coils, nesting material, foams of different textures, and even some crumbs. She lay back, relaxed and abandoned herself to the comfort of her new surroundings: she had found a perfect home.

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A month later...

Wednesday: 4.30 pm.

Jack was snoozing in front of the TV. He'd been out at work all night, and it was beginning to take its toll – perhaps he should abandon this game, he'd been at it too long. He heard a van outside and went to the door. The driver knocked and said 'John Lewis?'. Jack paused for a minute, he had so many false names but this was the one he always used for online deliveries. It never failed to amuse him, and he smiled broadly. 'Yes, that's me' – he must have ordered something and forgotten about it.

His jaw dropped when the police officer showed his badge and said, 'We'd like a word with you'. Jack's mind went into overdrive: the stolen vans behind the garage, and the garage itself crammed with loot. But why go on with it all? He really hated the unsocial hours, the anxiety of the whole business, and the tedious work of flogging stuff on. This was Jack's moment of truth.

The police officer was off on another tack. 'We believe you have been fly tipping' he said. 'We found this sheet of plastic with your name and address alongside a discarded mattress.' But Jack wasn't listening. 'Come with me' he said, 'This is what you are looking for' and he led the way to the garage. Faced with such an enormous haul of stolen goods, the policeman gasped. He quickly called HQ and lost all interest in the mattress.

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Wednesday: 4.30 pm.

Sylvie's brood were preparing to abandon the lovely home she'd found for them. She was heartbroken. How quickly they grow up she thought.

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Then the mattress spoke, pompous as ever.

‘I am ‘Silent Night’, it says so on my front, and if you want to know about abandonment you should listen to me. I have been abandoned three times over: by Jack, by the police and by Sylvie’s offspring as well. I can tell you from experience that abandonment is never an ending, it is but a moment in the ongoing flow of life. It is always a new beginning’.

Chapter 2. The Garage

For the last three weeks I have set Wednesday afternoons aside to clear out the garage: a huge task and not one that I look forward to at all.

I swung open the huge wooden doors. There was Jack's yellow vintage car that he was going to get around to renovating, sometime in the future. He had left rags and oil cans littered everywhere. But I have to admit it: I still liked the sweet musty odor of old wood shavings and decades of grease. After a while my mood lifted a bit.

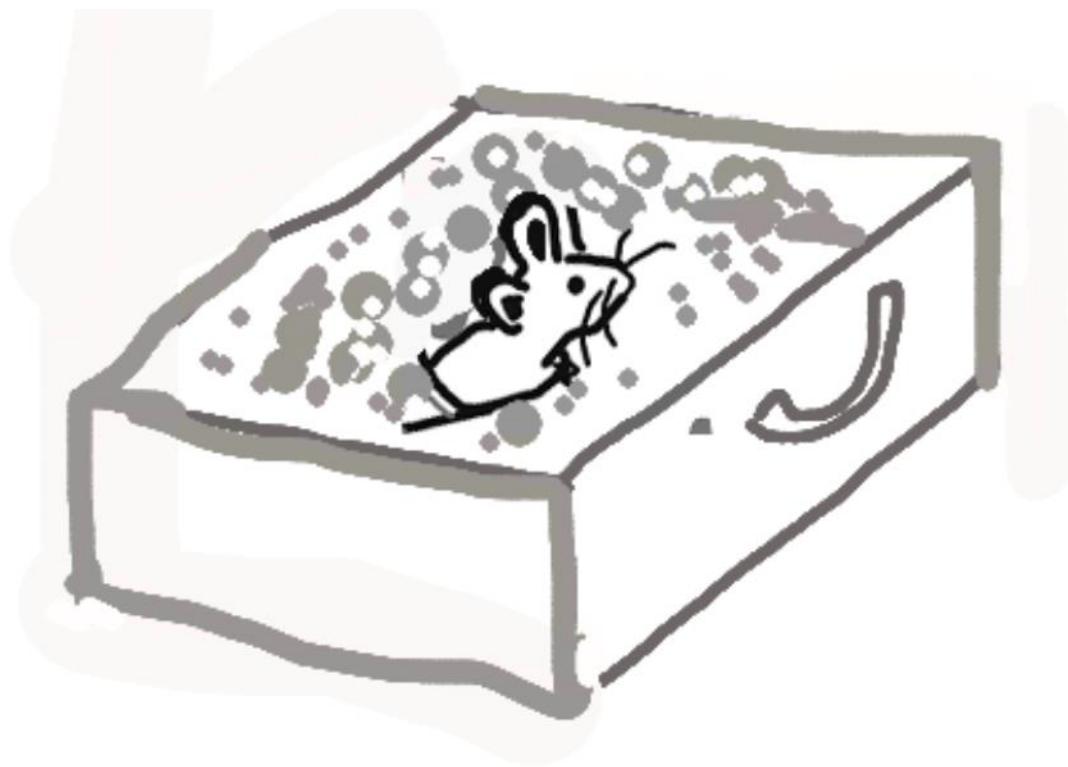
There was my rusty bike, hanging on the wall and the cockatoo cage on top of a pile of scrap metal. The sight of it took me back. Years ago, Jack had acquired a fancy cockatoo with bright a yellow crest. I have no idea why, but he was devoted to the bird. I became quite fond of it too, despite its raucous squawking.

Then there were the tools. Boxes of them, in no apparent order. I rummaged through the spanners. What use were these now? Thoughts kept popping into my head. One lovely sunny afternoon I was busy in the garden. In the background I could hear Jack tinkering with one of his vans - his entire collection of spanners spread about on the ground. I blanked these memories out and focused on the job in hand. I knew where most things were but underneath the workbench was a drawer I had never opened. I pulled.. it was stiff but I managed to get it free.

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I took one look up at Pauline and gasped. Oh no! She had discovered my home, crafted out of chewed up rags, tastefully decorated with scraps of coloured paper, and nestled in the corner of the workbench drawer. I made a run for it and rushed out behind the metal cupboard to the right of the stove.

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That beady eyed, big eared mouse in the drawer gave me the fright of my life but I was curious: where did he go to? I crouched down by the stove, and as I did so I noticed something else. There was a package about the size of a shoebox, wrapped in shiny red paper. The label on the top said 'For Pauline'. I eased it forwards and gingerly opened it up. Inside there was a card. 'To Pauline, with all my love, Jack: October 2018'. How could that be? I had left Jack in September that year. What was going on? I lifted the tissue paper and there, underneath, were five netsuke, one in the shape of a cockatoo.



[Just in case you don't know, netsuke are small often decorative toggles that are fixed to Japanese kimono. These were no ordinary netsuke. Jack had made them, each a miniature figure delicately carved in the finest boxwood.]

I gasped.

Jack! So that was what he had been doing all along. He hadn't spent hours in the garage because he didn't care about me: he did, and here was the evidence. The netsuke were really beautiful. Just like those my mother owned back home in Kyoto. I picked them up and examined them carefully, one by one, before putting them gently back in the box.

I decided to write.

To Jack van Stollen, c/o HMP Hollesley Bay

Dear Jack

This letter might come as a surprise, but I had to write. I found the netsuke in the garage and I now know that I made a terrible mistake. I should never have left you. Please forgive me.....

I waited for a week. No reply. Another week, still no reply. After three weeks, the letter was returned: 'not known at this address'. I was desolate. Then it clicked. I should not have used his real name. He would be using a stolen identity, as he always did. But which one? He had so many. I was desolate, again.

On my next visit to the garage I sat slumped in a broken arm chair that was due for repair. My thoughts wandered and my gaze drifted underneath the yellow vintage car. There was another box. I pulled it out, but no surprises for me here: this one said 'Toolstation' on the front and was addressed to John Lewis. In a flash, I knew it. That would be his name. I wrote again:

To John Lewis, c/o HMP Hollesley Bay

Dear John

This letter might come as a surprise, but I had to write. I found the netsuke in the garage and I now know that I made a terrible mistake. I should never have left you. Please forgive me.....

Four days later, a letter arrived.

To Pauline Otsuka-van-Stollen

Dear Pauline

Thank you for your letter. I am so glad you found the netsuke. They have been on my mind a lot. I wish I had sent them to you after you had left. They were for your birthday. I should have given them to you anyway, but I just couldn't accept that you had really gone. If you were willing, I would love to see you once I am free...

I pushed the heavy garage doors together: no need for any more clearing out. It would be a while, but this was definitely the promise of a new beginning.

Chapter 3. New beginnings

3 months later...

I decided to make Toshikoshi Soba and I managed to find some Japanese aubergine to grill with ginger. Perfect. The table was set, the lighting was soft, and everything was ready. Pauline was due to arrive in just ten minutes. I checked on the aubergine again. It looked good.

The doorbell rang and there she was!

I put her thick blue coat on the hook. It was damp.. it must be raining outside. I led the way in to the living room and invited her to sit down, but in the hall she spotted one of my latest acquisitions: a small pen and ink drawing of two windmills on the outskirts of Stollen, the village my family came from in Noord Brabant. It was a fine work by Cornelis Pronk (1691-1759).



Pauline paused to admire the detail. I was pleased she liked it. 'Do you want to see the other one?' I asked. She said 'yes' right away so we went on to the bedroom. There, just above the dressing table, was a second Pronk. A watercolour, larger than the first, and showing the church with sheep in the foreground. I said 'It's Stollen'.

Pauline looked up, aghast. 'Jack' she said 'but you promised!'. I hesitated for a moment, then realized her mistake and laughed out loud: 'No Pauline, I mean Stollen, not stolen'. She relaxed. 'You had me worried there' she said.

I quickly changed the subject. 'That's not the only improvement I've made. I got a new mattress, look!' This time Pauline went pale. She shouted at me. 'Jack, what have you done! Where is it, we must find it at once'.

This was not turning into the romantic evening that I had planned. I had no idea what she was talking about but before I could ask the smoke alarm went off. Oh no! The aubergines. I ran to the kitchen and she followed me, but it was too late. They were black.

'Jack, where is it?' She insisted. 'Where is what?' I said, now thoroughly distracted by culinary concerns. 'The old mattress of course' yelled Pauline. 'Why are you shouting at me about a mattress?' I said. 'It's a disaster: the aubergines are burned to a cinder. I dumped the mattress in the quarry months ago. Forget about it.' But Pauline was insistent and I knew from experience that there was no stopping her now. 'We have to go right away - get in the van, quick', she said, pulling on her coat.

The gravel crunched as we inched out of the drive and into the night. It was dark and raining heavily. We parked at the end of the track and then slid and slithered all the way down to the bottom of the quarry. I kept asking 'What is all this about?' but Pauline did not reply. She swung her torch this way and that. Finally, she saw the edge of something white under a new growth of brambles. It was the mattress.



Pauline yanked the brambles apart and poked at the old mattress. 'Jack' she shouted 'it's no good, it's too dark and prickly down here, we have to get it back'.

I was now well past caring, but I helped her heave the sodden thing up the bank. By the time we got into to the van we were drenched.

Pauline swung open the large garage doors, as she always did. 'Put the mattress flat on the floor' she said. And I did as I was told. To my amazement, she knelt down and found a slit in the fabric. She put her hand in and drew out a small metal box. Quietly she said 'It's all there, Jack, it's all there.'

‘What is all there: what is going on?’ Now it was my turn to yell.

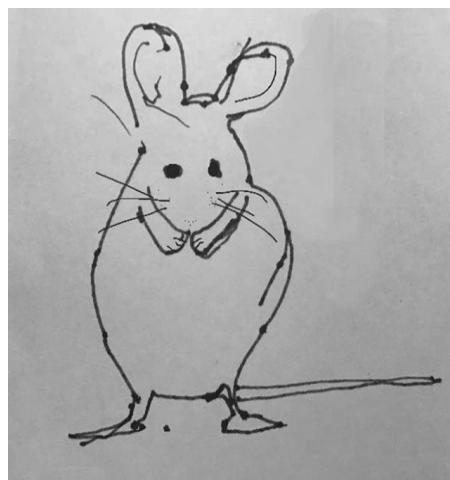
Pauline slumped in the broken armchair that was due for repair. ‘I’ve got something to explain’ she said. ‘Those watercolours from your great aunt, the ones you said were nothing but tat, well, I sold them in Japan and made a fortune - 5 million yen to be exact. You would have spent the money straight away but it was for us and for our future, so I hid it in the mattress. I was going to take it when I left, but I thought no: it is your money, not mine. I just couldn’t bear to tell you’

We looked at each other and suddenly we were back together, hugging and laughing and covered in mud. With £37,477.50 (at current rates) we really could have a new beginning.

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I could hear the rain pattering softly on the top of the mattress and I was nearly asleep when something like an earthquake struck. I have heard about these things but never experienced such a shock. The ground rocked and swayed and I was rolled over and over. I clung tight to the springs and after what seemed like hours the tremors finally subsided.

I have always been curious, even as a very young mouse. A few minutes later I was out, prospecting. All the brambles were gone and as far as I could tell, I was in a garage. I looked this way and that, and my whiskers twitched.



What was that scent? Surely not Mick! My heart missed a beat. He had been such a strong character, so full of fun, and with such nice ears. Then, in the distance, I heard singing and I knew for certain: it *was* Mick. A moment later he peeped around the corner. We looked at each other and suddenly we were back together, hugging and laughing.

In a few weeks there would be another nest of offspring and another new beginning.

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Mick and Sylvie lay back and relaxed, abandoning themselves to the comfort of their surroundings. As they were drifting off, they heard some muffled musing. It was the old mattress talking to itself again.

‘I can tell you from experience that abandonment is never an ending, it is but a moment in the ongoing flow of life. It is always a new beginning’.

Chapter 4. Favourite Season

I must apologise, I should *never* have let such a bunch of novices tell you my story. My name is Silent Night, it says so on my front. It is true, I am sagging badly and my ticking is torn. Jack and Pauline are right, it is time for a youngster to take my place. I have had a wonderful life and I have no regrets but before I go to my final resting place I wanted to leave some record of my life. I thought I'd found the answer when the members of a writing group agreed to take the job on – their topic was 'abandonment' and this was my chance.

But honestly, what a mess they made. What a mess! They twisted my tale this way and that and produced some mushy romantic fiction with an uplifting and impossibly happy ending. Jack and Pauline, separated and now back together again! Whatever next?! And all that business about the mice. Ridiculous. What irked me most was how quickly I was dumped.

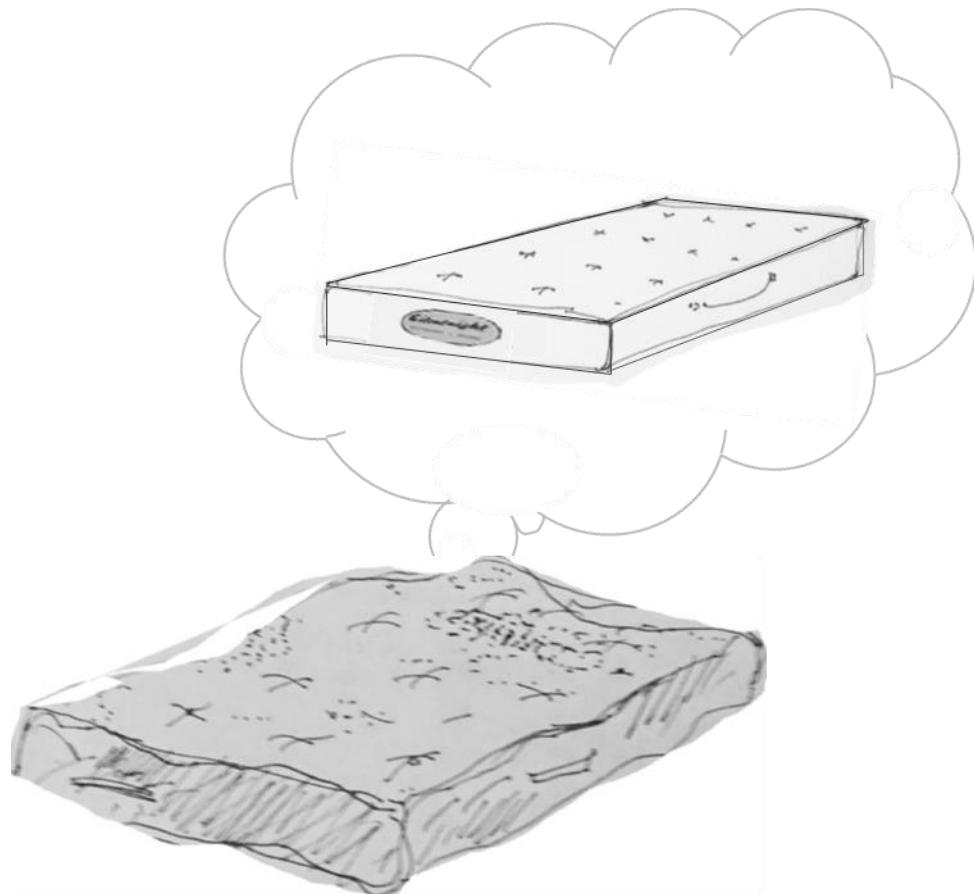
They did bring me in, here and there, but there was no character development and no effort to convey my inner feelings. I said a few words about abandonment and new beginnings. It is true, I *am* quite philosophical, but if you read their measly effort you will see that nobody, and I mean it, *nobody but nobody* was listening to a word I said.

If only they had paid me more attention. Mattresses are *very* absorbent and I have taken in a lot of reading in my time. On Jack's side this was mostly romantic fiction (there goes another seterotype for you!) meanwhile Pauline was into philosophy, and then the classics. One way or another, there is not much I don't know about narrative structure, points of view, dramatic tension and catching the reader unawares. Sadly little of this made any difference: my amateurs muddled on.

It could have been worse. At one point my writers were thinking I might be found by a dog (ugh!) or slept on by a Chinese migrant who then ate the dog (what awful stereotypes!). On a whim, they stuffed me with money, but with no planning or forethought. Where did this money come from? If it was stolen, what would that say about Pauline's scruples? Why didn't Jack know? They wrestled with this problem for days. The final compromise was neat enough, as a piece of fiction, but as I am sure you spotted, there was not a word about me. Not a word.

Instead of sticking to the facts they went off on their own. They fancied they were being clever and creative but the characters they invented were *horribly*, and I mean *horribly* inconsistent. Does Jack have any moral fibre or does he not? Are we supposed to believe he is a ruthless thief, a caring lover *and* a skilled craftsman? They do not have a clue: not a clue!

This was not my idea at all. I wanted them to start from the beginning and I wanted to give you a sense of what life was like when I was in my prime. I mustn't brag, but at one point, I was probably *the best mattress in the world*. The salesman said, so, over and over again. I was firm, but not too firm, I was strong and I was handsome.



Unfortunately, the writers I picked were not interested in me at all. They were worried about their audience (that is you). 'Surely', they said, 'the mattress cannot

be the central character in our story'. How condescending is that! They were willing to make up stuff about talking mice and Japanese carvings and money in a metal box, but they drew the line at me.

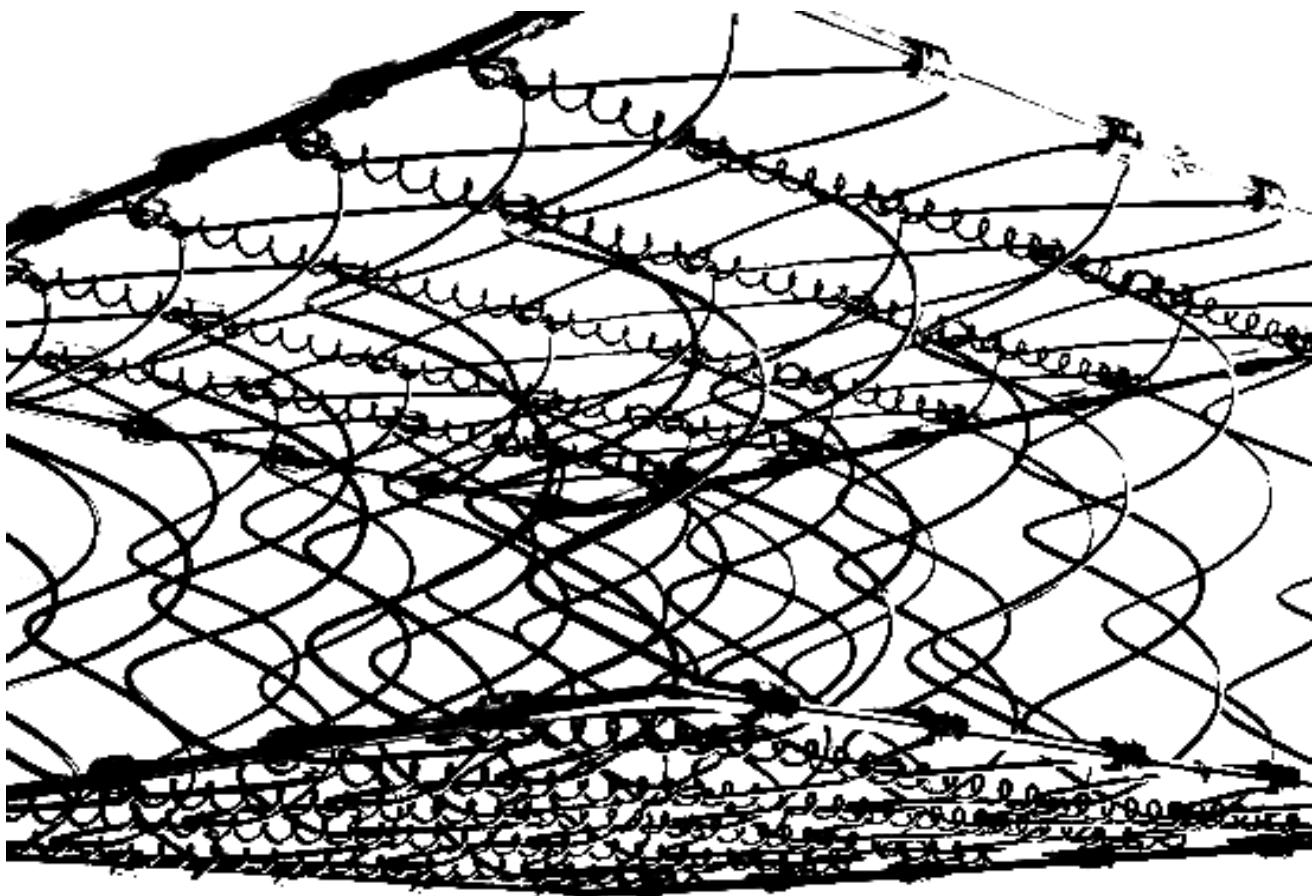
I was bitterly disappointed. Who would not want to hear of what I have learned, and what wisdom I have accumulated over the years? Guy de Maupassant (1882), one of my favourite authors, is eloquent on this topic. 'The bed, my friend, is our whole life. This is where we are born, this is where we love, this is where we die.' How right he is.

Of course I realise you might be a bit skeptical. I know you might be thinking, Oh no! Not that pretentious mattress waffling on and now quoting from literature as well. But just think about it. I have soaked up books and dreams and secret thoughts, and I have heard more pillow talk than you can possibly imagine. Just listen to the mattress says, Maupassant: 'What moving, terrible adventures, as well as gracious adventures, as well as other endearing ones! What lessons could we not learn from it, and what moralities would there be for everyone?' How right he is.

If they had taken my advice you would have had something profound and inspiring to read instead of pages full of jokey text and baffling reflexive turns. I am certain you would have been gripped by the fascinating life I have led, beneath the sheets. Mattresses are part of the ongoing drama of non-human existence and they have emotions too. Maybe muffled, but there all the same. My memory foam is crumbling but I was once viscous and dense: I was coiled for action. I was probably *the best mattress in the world*.

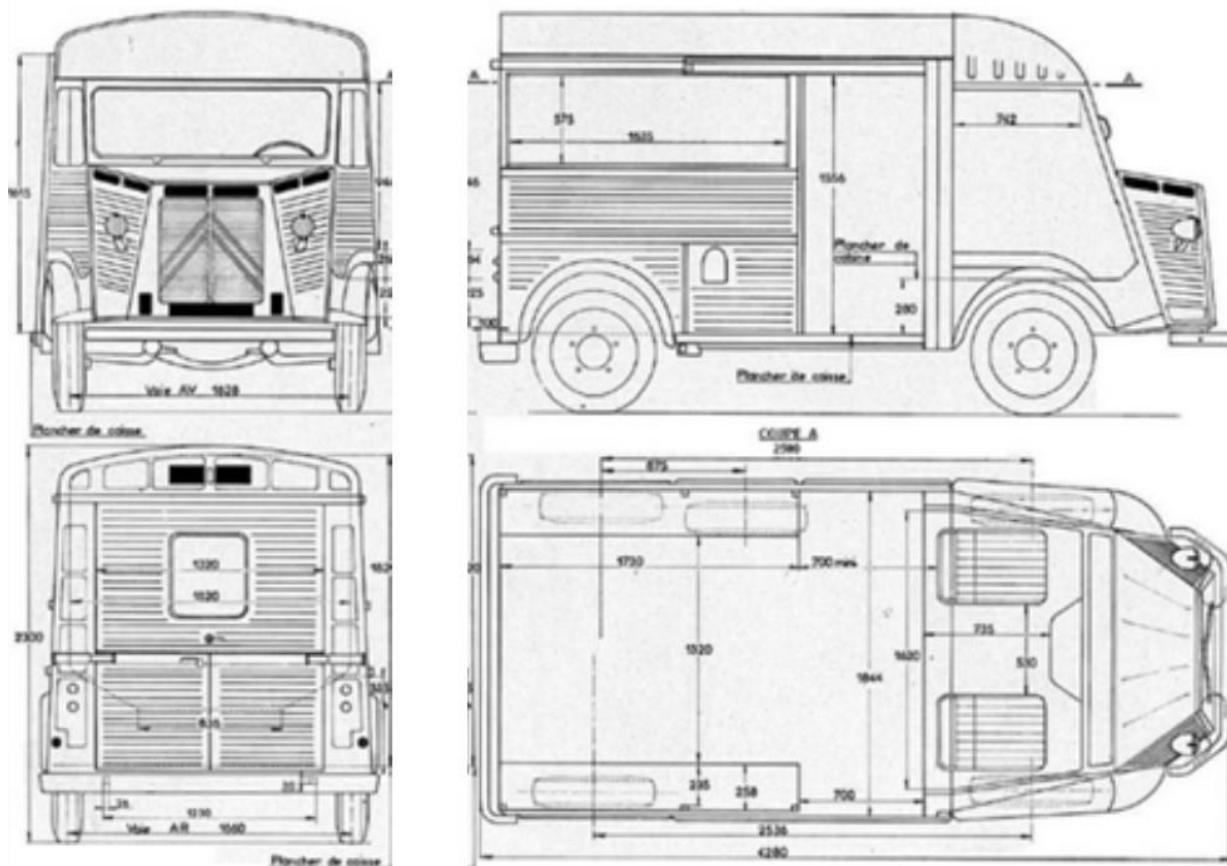
Had they followed my instructions you would have learned about my experiences in later years. I could have told you about Pauline's upbringing in Kyoto and her dreams about that city. You would not have had to reach for google to find out what 'netsuke' are and you'd know all about Jack's fondness for Dutch watercolourists, Pronk included. Why those so-called writers made out he was a burglar I have absolutely no idea. Jack is definitely not a night owl. He is a perfectly respectable mechanic with a steady job and a really good collection of spanners. He sleeps well. As for Pauline, the idea of leaving Jack was a fantasy, it is true she thinks about this at dead of night, but only once or twice a year. And the mice, well the less said about them the better.

It is not entirely the writers' fault. They want to do something fancy but they have to work with titles that are given: 'abandonment'; 'the garage'; 'new beginnings' and now 'favourite season'. My time is up, the T.I.P. awaits and I'll soon be gone, but I do hope they take my one last word of advice. Speaking as a mattress, the only possible response is 'spring'.



Chapter 5. Springing into life

Pauline and Jack are reunited and living together. The mattress has finally dried out. Rather than being taken to the T.I.P., it is stored in the garage, providing a comfortable family home for the mice - Sylvie, Mick and their offspring. Jack spends most of his time repairing his vintage Citroen H van. One day he has an idea.



Jack: 'What about taking the Citroen H to the Dieppe rally – it is on 22nd May this year. What about it? We could take it easy, enjoy a leisurely journey and have a few days camping afterwards. What do you think?'

Pauline: 'You must be joking, that old van would never make it. And in any case, what would we sleep on?'

Jack: 'It's been running like a dream since I replaced the starter motor and all that chewed up wiring. That was the problem, I'm sure of it. And it's great for camping. There's so much space we could even take your precious mattress. Just

think about it, late spring, the smell of wet grass, the hiss of the old primus and the freedom of the open road - what could be better?’

Pauline: ‘Well if you’re certain about the van .. Where is this rally anyway? Pass me that ipad... Oh, Jack, look. It’s not far from Miromesnil and you know what that means!’

Jack: ‘No idea: never heard of it. Somewhere in France I suppose.’

Pauline: ‘Guy de Maupassant! Miromesnil. That’s where he was born, or so his mother said. I’d love to go there.’

It wasn’t easy to book the ferry, but Jack finally managed to get a place on the 4pm sailing from Newhaven to Dieppe on the 20th May. He packed well in advance, stacking the sleeping bags, the primus and the camping gear in the hall ready for loading. Pauline took care of the clothes and the food, as she always did. Just as they were about to set off ...

Pauline: ‘Jack where did you put my tablets?’

Jack: ‘Your tablets? I don’t know, I brought everything in from the hall. I thought you’d packed them.’

Pauline: ‘Yes they are in the mustard yellow bag, but the bag is not in the van. We can’t go without them. Here, give me the keys, I’ll have to go back.’

Jack: ‘Be quick. The ferry is at 4pm and it will take us at least three hours to get there.’

Twenty minutes later...

Pauline: ‘I can’t find the bag in the house. I’ve looked everywhere. Are you *sure* you didn’t put it down somewhere by mistake. ... Oh, look, what’s that, there, right behind your seat?.. it’s the yellow bag. Why didn’t you say?’

After some grumbling, Jack and Pauline are finally on their way. Pauline is driving and Jack is reading the map. It’s not a route they know.

Jack: ‘I said turn left, not right. We are going to take that short cut through Mortimer to make up some time.’

Pauline: ‘You’ll have to speak up, I can’t hear you above the din this van makes, and anyway I thought you said aim for Mortimer.’

Jack: ‘I did, I said Mortimer and it was on the left.’

Pauline: 'No, the sign definitely said Mortimer to the right. Turn the map round, and remember which direction we are going in.'

Jack: 'You'll have to go back, we're heading towards *Stratfield Mortimer*, and Mortimer is behind us.'

Pauline: 'What did you say? I can't hear.'



Jack: 'TURN ROUND AND GO BACK'

Pauline: 'NO, I CAN'T THERE IS SOMEONE RIGHT BEHIND ME'

Jack: 'THERE IS A LAYBY AHEAD'

Pauline: 'I CAN SEE THAT. WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO DO ABOUT IT?'

Jack: 'STOP, WHY DON'T YOU STOP, YOU JUST KEEP DRIVING ON'

Pauline: 'Don't keep shouting at me: look there is another turn to Mortimer, I'm going to take it and see if I can loop round.'

When Jack and Pauline eventually find their way out of Mortimer they make good progress. By 3.30pm they are less than a mile from the ferry terminal at Newhaven. This time Jack is driving.

Pauline: 'The outside lane, it says get in the outside lane.'

Jack: 'I can see that, you don't need to tell me.. what's that noise. I think that's the rattle.'

Pauline: 'What rattle? I can't hear anything.'

Jack: 'I think it might be ... the you know what.. I'll have to pull over.'

Pauline: 'But you can't, we're nearly there and we've only got half an hour now after all that silly Mortimer business.'

Jack: 'That's not the problem, we'd have been fine if you'd not gone off to look for your tablets. I told you I'd already packed all the bags from the hall. Listen, it is *the rattle*. And it is getting worse. I'll have to stop.'

Jack pulls over. He knows exactly what to do, but time is short. This is not the relaxing journey he had in mind.

Jack: 'Pass me the spanner. No, no, not that one, the one with the yellow tape on the handle: no, no, turn it the other way round. Hold that while I pull the side panel back into position. Hold it here. No, HERE.'

Pauline: 'Why don't you ring DFDS. We are not going to make it.'

Jack: 'We will make it, I am nearly finished, just one more nut.'

Pauline: 'But we must phone, we might not get on the next ferry if we don't. They might all be booked up for the rest of the day.'

Jack: 'We are probably too late to call now, and anyway it's just one more nut. Can you see a small nut on the ground, it must have dropped out.'



Pauline: 'Why don't you phone them?'

Jack: 'it must be somewhere here on the tarmac, never mind.. I'm sure I've got some more in the tool box.'

Pauline: 'I'll get the phone number.'

Jack: 'look, look, there it is, it is just by your hand, look, the nut, you had it all the time!'.

Minutes later, the ancient Citroen H van springs into life. Phew..!! Jack, Pauline, the mattress and the mice make it to the boat with seconds to spare.

Chapter 6. Through a crack in the door

I woke early and looked around me. Something was not quite right. I always sleep facing the top end of the mattress, but now I was at the bottom. Then I remembered. There had been another earthquake. Sylvie, the kids and I had been swayed this way and that, and our bedroom must have turned around.

I yawned and stretched a bit, as I always do. Everyone else was curled up tight, fast asleep. As I gazed about I saw that the ceiling was deformed, dipping unevenly here and there. I ventured out. What! Nothing, but nothing, was the same. The yellow car had gone, there was no workbench (I used to live there at one time); and no familiar smell of grease and wood shavings. Instead, just the plain walls of a metal box, and at the end, a chink of light showing through a crack in the door. There was a strange whistling sound above. I froze. The whistling came and went, and as it did so, everything moved. It was then that I spotted something new: a tasty set of fabrics. I absolutely love bright colours and these were fantastic, a striking cherry red and a flash of yellow trim.

I flexed my muscles. Could I make it up there and bring a sample back to show Sylvie? No, not now. There were other things to do. I ran towards the chink in the door. Half way there I was distracted. Biscuits!! Not your ordinary Tesco digestives but the real McVities. I am a connoisseur. So, we had not gone far. Jack loves McVities, and he sneaks them out to eat in the garage. He must be somewhere near. I took another look around and then figured it out. We were in the Citroen H van. Reassured, I sauntered over to the gap in the door and leaned forward. In the distance far below, I could see grass.

And in the grass, a gorgeous, and I mean *gorgeous*, damsel. She winked at me. I couldn't help myself. I winked back. I just had to meet her. I threw caution to the wind. A few minutes later, I was at her side. 'Hello, I'm Mick' I said, and I turned slightly to show off my ears. She replied 'Bonjour monsieur, vous avez tres grand oreilles.' She smiled coquettishly. Mon Dieu, I thought, it is a souris.

'Where are we' I asked? She said 'You are at a campsite outside Dieppe, not far from Château de Miromesnil, which is said to be the birthplace of Henry-René-Albert-Guy de Maupassant.' Her English was impeccable. I was impressed. She was smart!

We chatted so animatedly (we are animals after all) that I lost all sense of time. I was pulled out of my swoon by a familiar voice from somewhere far away. 'Mick, Mick, where are you?' It was Sylvie. At this the charming demoiselle arched her elegant little eyebrows just a shade. 'So sorry', she said, 'I must go.' And she darted off, just like that.



I turned and saw Sylvie peering at me from the back of the van. 'Don't worry' I yelled, 'I've just popped out for a moment'. Sylvie was in a flap. 'But you are such a long way down, how are you going to get home?' I thought for a moment. She had a point. I'd been so taken with that charming souris that I'd just jumped.

Before I could answer, there was a terrible rumbling noise and a huge cloud of exhaust. A terrified Sylvie lurched away from me. But not for long. A few metres on, the Citroen H came to a shuddering a halt. From my vantage point 'dans l'herbe' (that's French for 'in the grass') I saw Jack get out and open up the bonnet.

The back door was still ajar and Sylvie was panicking. 'Mick, Mick, quick, quick, this is your chance.' She was right. Sylvie vanished as Jack appeared. He swung the van doors open wide, as he always did and said 'The spanners, where did you put my spanners'. Pauline replied. 'Down the left-hand side of the mattress, where they always are.'

I swiftly planned my route. Up the wheel, behind the wheel arch, through the rust holes, past the bunches of delicious wiring on the left, then a sharp right and up through the worn away floor. That should do it.

.....

Some time later, the front of the antique Citroen was in bits. There were tools and rags on the ground. Outside, the sun was powering down. Inside, Mick was in trouble.

Mick: 'Sylvie, can you hear me?'

Sylvie: 'No, where are you?'

Mick: 'I'm under the floor'

Sylvie: 'Speak up, there is such a racket going on out there'

Mick: 'I am under THE FLOOR'

Sylvie: 'Under the four? What four'

Mick: 'I am under THE FLOOR'

Sylvie: 'What are you doing there? And who was that you were you talking to in the grass?'

Mick: 'I'm trying to get in but there is something blocking the way'

Sylvie: 'Well just eat your way through it. That's what you always say'.

Mick: 'I can't, it is metal. I'll have to go a different way round'

I scrambled down to the crumbling wheel arch to find another hole but that was not what caught my eye. Jack had taken off the battered jacket that he wore in the workshop and hung it over the open door. Pockets means biscuits. I estimated the distance— 230mm. A stretch, but possible. I flexed my muscles, flattened my ears and made it into the jacket pocket just as the engine spluttered into life.

Jack called out to Pauline: 'it's going! Just grab those spanners and fling my jacket in the van. We can go..'

.....

I landed heavily and looked up, dazed. In front was the edge of our home, draped in a cherry red sheet with yellow trim. And from below, the unmistakeable tones of the old mattress. 'Camping.' It grumbled. 'Camping, in a van. My whole body aches, my springs are sore and my foam is gone. How low can I go? Why Oh Why can't they give me a rest.'

Chapter 7. A favourite item of clothing

It's a beautiful morning and the vintage van rally is getting going in the grounds of the splendid Château de Miromesnil.



The vans are all set up ready for Madame Romert the Marquise de Miromesnil to do her rounds. Jack and Pauline have finished their traditional Japanese breakfast (rice, miso, natto and nori). They are sitting in their deck chairs with a thermos flask and some digestive biscuits, enjoying the smell of wet grass. Jack is wearing his favourite jacket, the one he keeps in the workshop.

I am in the back of the van suffering. I've had yet another terrible night. I've said it before and I'll say it again. I just can't take the pressure these days. I'm certain that Jack and Pauline are getting heavier and in any case it's time they realized I am done. I am gone. I'll admit it to anyone who asks. I am no longer the best mattress in the world. It is time that I retired.

Pauline: 'Jack, Jack, look it's the Marquise.'

Marquise de Miromesnil: 'Bonjour monsieur, est-que-ce votre van?'

Jack: 'wee wee.'

Marquise de Miromesnil: 'Mon Dieu, c'est un citroen HZ. Ah, I see you are English.'

Jack: 'wee, wee, I mean yes.'

Marquise de Miromesnil: 'I have every, *but every*, model of citroen van *except* an HZ. I would give anything to get my hands on one.'

Pauline: 'What do you mean, anything?'

Marquise de Miromesnil: 'I can't stop, I've got the rest of my round to do but I may call back: would you sell for 50,000 Euro?'

Jack and Pauline go to the back of the van for a quiet word.

Pauline: '50,000 euro for this cranky old thing! It is nothing but trouble.'

Jack: 'I don't know, I've put a lot into this van.'

Pauline: 'But Jack, it has got rust holes everywhere and the wiring keeps fraying. It won't keep going forever and you'll have to scrap it one day. It will look fantastic in the Marquise's collection.'

Jack thought for a moment. She had a point.

Jack: 'But we can't just sell it now, how would we get home, and in any case, what would we do with the mattress?'

Pauline: 'We could rent a car but you are right, we'd never get the mattress in a car, and we can't just abandon it here....'

Jack was about to reply when Madame Romert the Marquise de Miromesnil reappeared.

Marquise de Miromesnil: 'So, what do you think - will you sell?'

Jack: 'The thing is, your ladyship, we've got a bit of a problem.'

Marquise de Miromesnil: 'What's that?'

Jack: 'It's the mattress.'

Aha, I thought, that's me!

Marquise de Miromesnil: 'What mattress?'

Pauline: 'It's a long story' (in fact it's the same story as the one you are reading now).

The Marquise de Miomesnil looks in through the back door.

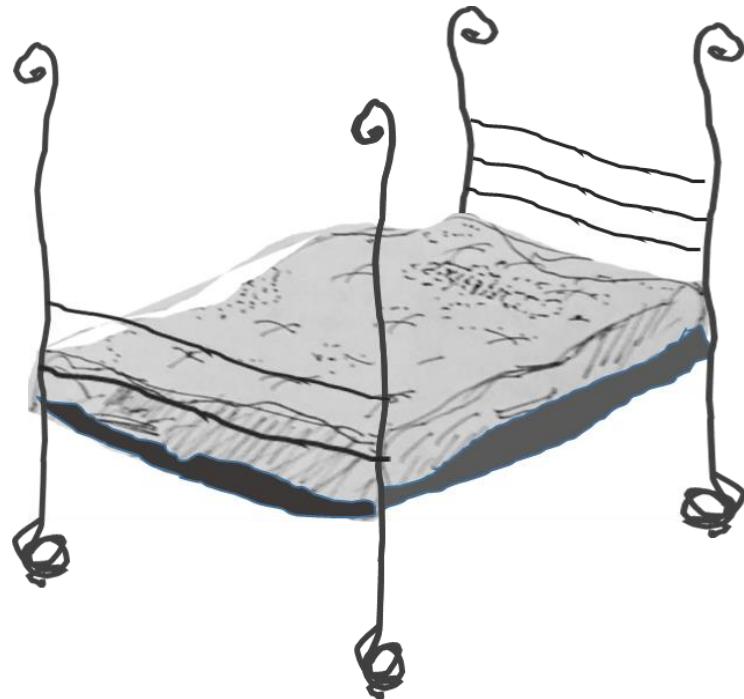
Marquise de Miomesnil: 'Mon Dieu, that is exactly, and I mean exactly, what I want.'

She winks at me. Me, winked at by a Marquise!!! I am impressed. She is smart!

Pauline: 'You want our mattress? Whatever for?'

Marquise de Miomesnil: 'The room in which Guy de Maupassant was born is going to be open to the public: I've got everything ready, the dressing table, the bed, the curtains but no mattress'.

At these words my few remaining buttons almost pop out of their sockets. I am so puffed up with pride. I will be famous. I will be known. I will be the, and I mean the, mattress on which Henri-René-Albert Guy de Maupassant was born. At last, I will be laid to rest. I could not have dreamed of a better ending myself, not in a million years.



Some hours later Jack and Pauline are packing their camping gear into a brand new, bright red rented Renault. Soon they will be on their way to Stollen and with luck they'll find another Pronk to add to Jack's collection.

Pauline: 'Jack, where is your jacket? The one you wear in the workshop? You've not left it in the old van have you?'

Jack: 'You must be joking. I might be willing to part with the Citroen H, but not my jacket. Never. I've stowed it away behind the seat, along with your famous yellow bag of tablets.'

Pauline laughs: 'That's it then, that's us, we are on our way!'

Back in the Château de Miromesnil, Mick, Sylvie and family take up residence as he official 'souris de maison.'

.....THE END.....

Postscript: Changing places

If you shuffle the letters of 'silent night' around you can get new combinations: 'in the glints', 'linen tights', 'thin tingles', 'hint glisten' or 'listen thing'. This is what writing is about - shuffling letters around and changing their places, and that's what we've been doing these last few months.

There are other ways of thinking about changing places. People and objects move from one location to another. This is a simple matter of geography, maps and coordinates. But as we know, things are not always that simple: after all, it is easy to get lost in the Mortimer area. Even so, distances and destinations are simple to describe. Jack and Pauline took the ferry to France. Pauline Otsuka grew up in Kyoto but moved to England where she lived with Jack. The Pronk watercolours, painted in the Netherlands, have been transported from one place to another and so have the nestuke, made in Jack's garage and now prized in Japan.

Space and status sometimes go together. Mick, Sylvie and their offspring now live in the Chateau de Miromesnil and not in the bushes at the edge of a quarry. In mouse terms, they have gone up in the world, changing places socially and culturally. Jack and Pauline were separated for a while, but are now reunited: relationships evolve.

The mattress is of course much more complicated. For years and years it did not move, or that's how it seemed. But appearances can be deceptive. Underneath the ticking and in between the springs, it was constantly changing places in its imagination. It followed Jack and Pauline in their dreams, it travelled back and forth from the saleroom floor of its youth to the present, and it was transported by fiction, including some invented by Guy de Maupassant.

Despite being heavy and awkward to shift, its position in relation to other people and things is always on the move, sometimes rapidly so.

During its career, and through of no fault of its own, it has been somewhere to rest at night, a hiding place for money and an object of fly tipping. It has been the focus of panic and scrambling around in the dark, a means of going camping, and now an historic object, an object of admiration, and we might add, something of a fraud - it is only pretending to be the mattress on which Guy de Maupassant was born.

There are physical changes too: its youthful firmness has gone, it sags and crumbles over time. Its place in the world shifts. It becomes a different place to be.

More fundamentally, this book would not have been written if Elizabeth had not changed places, from Waterhouses in County Durham to Saxmundham in Suffolk, or if the corona virus had not travelled around the world. Some changes set others in train, and when you think about it, nothing stays the same. Saxmundham, where Joss and John live, is not the place it was when we started this tale.

In writing these words we are also changing places, changing from being outside the story we have written to making ourselves part of it. So what did we three authors make of the experience, and how were we, in some small way, changed in the process?

Elizabeth: I learned quite a lot about changing points of view and I learned about inventing characters which I'd never done before. I discovered the fun of just making things up, and changing the course of events – is Jack really a burglar or not? Have we produced a piece of mushy romantic fiction, despite the mattress' advice, or have we not? Can we change the reader's mind about what is going on?

John: through this writing process I have sometimes been willing to change my mind, and I've been prepared to discuss options and go along with the result. This is a change for me.

Joss: Normally we write about a given subject: abandonment, the garage, or the crack in the door. No one in the U3A writing group has strung different topics together or made such a long story before. The writing group is also different. We zoom into each other's homes but there is no actual travel involved.

As usual, the mattress wants the last word. It wants us to tell you that 'every ending is a new beginning'. And so it is.

.....THE VERY END.....

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