

WRITING



2025 writings

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No way out

Rabbit: I was busy in a small nesting chamber at the end of one of the tunnels. Our warren is built with many entrances and exits and we can almost always make an escape if one of the holes is obstructed, or under attack. But on this occasion, I was trapped. The nearest junction was a few feet away and my path was blocked. I could smell the intruder and hear its frantic yapping and clawing. I was sure it could smell me too. I turned round a few times, but I refused to panic. In any case there was nowhere to go. The scrabbling sound was right ahead.

Dog: Rabbits, I just love rabbits. I can pick out the scent from afar and my master and I often walk past the warren on the sandy heath. On this particular day I was off the lead and free to run around on my own. I couldn't resist peeking into a burrow, and of course one peek wasn't enough. I went in a bit further. The smell was overpowering. Just a bit further and ... I pushed and pushed.

To begin with, I didn't realise I was stuck. I couldn't move forwards because of a root, but neither could I back out of the tunnel. I whined a bit. Surely my master would miss me, and then what? I suppose he'd have to dig me out. I am not claustrophobic by nature. But I began to worry a bit: what if something came towards me. I'd have no escape. A rabbit could saunter up to me and snigger in my face. The shame of it. The very thought made me struggle a bit more. Perhaps I could free my back legs a bit, or wiggle sideways.

Man: There used to be a hole in the fence at the back of the heath, out towards the field and the farm track that led to the car park. I'd walked there with Bunty (that's my dog) dozens of times, but someone had put strands of barbed wire across the gap. There was no way out. I turned back and looked for Bunty. She had vanished. I called her, but there was no reassuring bark.

It would soon be dark. I retraced my steps, calling as I went. I searched for what must have been an hour. I was back at the warren when I finally heard a small whimper. 'Bunty', I called again. I got down on my hands and knees and listened. It was definitely her. The sound was coming from a rabbit hole.

Oh no, she's stuck. What now? It wasn't far to the car, and from there, a short drive home. I'd have to dig her out, and for that I'd need a spade. I spoke to Bunty and explained my plan. But my plan was thwarted. The car park gates were locked at dusk. The sign saying 'way out' was wrong, there was no way out. It had started to rain.

I unlocked the car and reached for my phone. I didn't want to ring Mary, but I couldn't leave Bunty alone in the dark, stuck down a rabbit hole. Mary wasn't happy: 'you are what?' 'she's where?' 'how did that happen?' 'didn't you have her on a lead?' 'well you'll have to walk home. I can't help it if it's raining now, it's not my fault.' I slid the phone back in the glove compartment and got out of the car. It was raining heavily now. I rummaged around in the boot. Alongside the spare wheel, there was a rusty snow shovel. That would have to do. I set off into the wet and the dark.

Dog: I can't understand human speech, even though I pretend to. So when my master spoke with me, I had no idea what he was saying. Then he was gone leaving me stuck fast in the tunnel. I struggled a bit more, and finally gave up. I went to sleep, dreaming of rabbits.

Rabbit: The yapping had stopped. In fact, I think I heard snoring: but what about my family? They'd know there was a DOG in the warren, and they'd know I was missing. I had to find a way out. My only option was to dig. We doe rabbits can sense the distance to the surface of the earth, and we know which way to go. The chamber was quite deep, and there were tree roots in the way – but I had no option. I set to work scraping at the sandy soil.

Man: The snow shovel was a flimsy affair, but it was better than nothing. I set to work scraping at the sandy soil. I called to Bunty, but there was no sound. Had I got the right hole? it was hard to tell, and I'm not as steady on my feet as I used to be. I listened again. I was sure I heard a faint yap. After a while, I'd dug quite a good hole of my own. I paused and as I did so, the ground beneath me gave way and I fell into what must have been a large underground chamber. I tried to move but I felt a sharp pain in my knee. I couldn't free myself. My shovel was just out of reach. The phone was back in the car.

Rabbit: As all rabbits know, the problem with digging underground is what to do with the spoil. There was room for some loose earth in the dead-end tunnel and the chamber. I estimated distance and volume and figured that if I was careful I'd be able to dig my way up to the surface. I set to work and eventually bit through the last few roots. I eased myself out into the cold damp air, brushed my ears and sniffed. Human. I couldn't see him, but I could hear his shallow breath. The moon had not yet risen. I edged closer. The man had fallen through the roof of our living room and couldn't get out.



I hopped past the digging tool lying on the ground and made my way to the safety of the thorn bushes on the far side of the warren. That's when the flash-lights came into view. More humans.

Rangers: 'Wait there: we've caught you in the act. Don't run, there is no way out. Poaching. You'll get a heavy sentence for that. Look, he's got a shovel and a dog lead' .

Man: At first, I was pleased to have been found: wet, cold and immobilised in the hole. The Rangers got me out and I managed to limp over to the car park. It gradually dawned on me that I was in quite some bother, and not just because of my gammy knee.

Dog: When I woke, I had no idea where I was. Then I remembered: I was stuck in a rabbit hole on the warren. But there was no rabbit. Instead, I could smell fresh air ahead. If I could just get through this narrow section, I'd be able to escape. As it turned out, it wasn't that difficult. The obstruction had been dislodged and I inched forwards into the soft earth. A few moments later I scrabbled out of the hole, alive but covered in mud.

My master was nowhere to be seen. I went back to the car, but he wasn't there either. I know my way home from the warren, and I set off, looking forward to a rapturous welcome and a good breakfast. Dawn was approaching and the rain had stopped. I scratched at the back door, barked a bit, and looked up appealingly. After what seemed like an age, the door opened. It was Mary. She took one look at me: wet, filthy and bedraggled.

Woman: 'No way' she said. 'Out!'

Continued.... Feeling Lost

And with that the door slammed in my face. I would miss the regular meals and the comfy chair by the fire, but I'd always hankered for the open countryside and the right to roam. I set off with a spring in my step. I headed back to the sandy heath and jumped about a bit in the springy heather: pouncing at this and that and enjoying the interesting smells and surprises. After a while I found the stream, and this time I was free to follow it for miles. I pressed on through the undergrowth and into new territory beyond the realm of the known world.

I've never had any sense of direction, and I have no notion of time passing, especially not when I'm having fun, but my carefree abandonment was about to come to a sudden end. The sky darkened as the clouds scudded in. I sniffed the air. From experience I knew there was a storm brewing. What now? I had nowhere to go. I wondered if I was lost. Dogs do go missing, but if I had no home to go to then I couldn't be lost. I was where I was, and that was that. Even so, I didn't like the idea of getting drenched and I hate thunder.

Maybe life in the wild was not all that it was cracked up to be. I looked around and saw a fence with a small space below. I figured I could get under the gap and discover what lay beyond. After a bit of effort I found myself in a rather tidy garden, complete with an open fronted log store and a shed. I made for the store which proved to be an excellent place in which to shelter from the rain.

I must have gone to sleep for the next thing I saw was a small girl staring right at me. I gave a pathetic whimper and looked up at her, appealingly. She smiled back and ran off to the house. 'Mummy, mummy, come and look. I've found dog'. The little girl came back with a bowl of food and some water, and a few days later I was on the sofa. I was given a new name: not 'Scamp', as I was before, but 'Muffin'. I know enough about the world to know that this is the

name of a mule, not a dog. I should have taken this as a sign and made a run for it there and then, but the food was delicious and at the time I had no idea what lay ahead.

It didn't take long for the 'rules' to be enforced. No digging in the flower beds. No chance of exploring upstairs. No jumping up. No barking every time someone comes to the door. No time off the lead during my enforced exercise regime. Ok, I was comfortable enough, and smarter than ever before. I was combed and groomed and made to wear a fancy collar with 'Muffin' inscribed on a metal tag, but the routine was stifling. I longed for the freedom that I had lost.

I wondered about making an escape. I'm not all that clever, but eventually I remembered how I'd got into the garden in the first place. If I could get in, I could also get out. Of course, I'd be back in the wilds again, and I'd have no home. Millie (that's the little girl) might be upset for a while, but on the plus side, I'd be able to scamper about in the heather and the damp bracken and no one, but no one could stop me.

One day, after a so-called 'walk', I decided I'd had enough. I was allowed out in the garden from time to time, and on one of these occasions I inspected the perimeter fence. I was a bit fatter than before, but there was still space to squeeze under if I held my breath. So that's what I did.

Yippee, hooray and oh for the open road. That was me and I was away. Or so I thought. Little did I know that my new-found owners had already been alerted by the app: 'Virtual fence broken' pinged up on Millie's mother's phone the moment I made a break for it.

Fortunately for me, Millie's mother was chatting to a friend, and she didn't see the message straight away. But when she did, she could follow my route out of the garden. The spot on the screen (that was me) kept moving, and after a while I heard her running after me, 'Muffin, Muffin, come back, I'm here'.

I was absolutely furious. It must be the collar. And it was. Unknown to me, I was wearing a 'smart collar', made by a company called Tractive. It's an expensive device that offers a host of features including:

- Location updates in real-time.
- Virtual Fences
- Escape alerts
- Location History

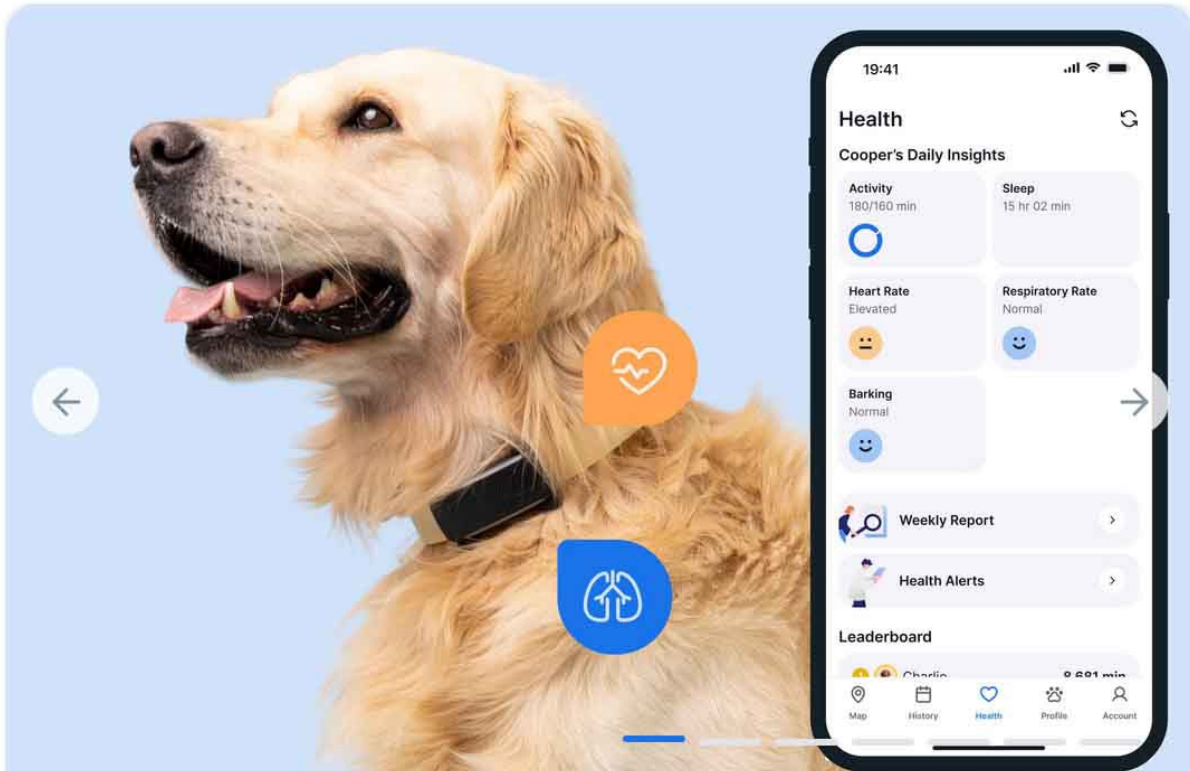
- Sleep monitoring
- Heart rate monitoring
- Bark monitoring

To name but a few.

Note: image for illustrative purposes only. As you know, I am a terrier.



Tractive for Dogs Tractive for Cats



Talk about an invasion of privacy! As we dogs say, this really takes the biscuit. If you check the Tractive web site (see the link below), you will learn that my every bark was being noted, and my every heartbeat recorded. I was outraged. I'd not done anything wrong: no murder, no robbery (or not much), no sex offending (not since I was castrated), and no fraud, but no question about it, I was in prison.

Millie's mother had me cornered. I know they call it 'a dog's life', but I had no idea it would be like this, tagged and pampered and never, underline never, lost again. If I had my way, these tracker devices would be banned. Simple as that. End of story.

A fantasy

M. sat in the waiting room. There was a faded print of a rural landscape on the wall. It wasn't by Constable, but it was in that style. The side table was strewn with magazines that no one read. M. checked his phone again. Another ten minutes. The waiting room was empty apart from an older man, slumped on a chair in the corner. He had his eyes shut, but he looked perfectly normal. That was something that continued to amaze M. All the other psychiatric out-patients looked normal. Eventually, a door opened. A smartly dressed woman came out. The door closed again. M., who had already stood up, returned to his seat.

It was another fifteen minutes before the door opened again and the doctor ushered M. into the consulting room. The doctor was a kindly man with thinning hair, hooded eyes and pebble thick glasses. He spoke gruffly. 'Do take a seat. How can I help?'

M. began. 'My GP says she can't do anything for me. She says my skin condition is a fantasy and that I do not have a bump forming on my head. She says that my hoarse voice is just 'wear and tear' and that I'm not turning into a rhinoceros.'

The doctor looked up. 'A rhinoceros?' he enquired. 'Yes' said M. 'A rhinoceros. I'm sure of it'.

The doctor turned back to the computer to check the notes. 'Ah yes, suspected Rhinocerotitis. May I ask you a few questions?'

'Sure' said M.

Doctor: 'Your notes say you had a happy childhood and that your parents loved each other. There was a family cat, but no record of zoo-related trauma. You've never seen or read any plays by Ionesco, and you've not been to Africa. Is that right?'

M. 'Yes, that's correct'.

Doctor. 'What about dreams? Do you have any day-dreams, nightmares, that kind of thing'

M. hesitated. 'I sometimes dream of open plains and tall grasses swishing in the breeze. In my mind's eye I see zebras and gazelles grazing in the distance.

Sometimes I'm wallowing in a stagnant pool, and sometimes there is a camera crew nearby. My moods swing between aggression and fear'.

The doctor was busy scribbling all this down.

Doctor: 'And your diet? What do you eat?'

M. 'I'm a vegetarian but I avoid cakes'.

Doctor: 'Ah yes, crumbs can make skin conditions like yours very uncomfortable indeed.'

Doctor: 'What about sleep'

M. 'No problem there. In fact, I can sleep standing up.'

Doctor: 'Headaches?'

M. 'Yes. Quite often. I take paracetamol when they come on and that seems to do the trick.'

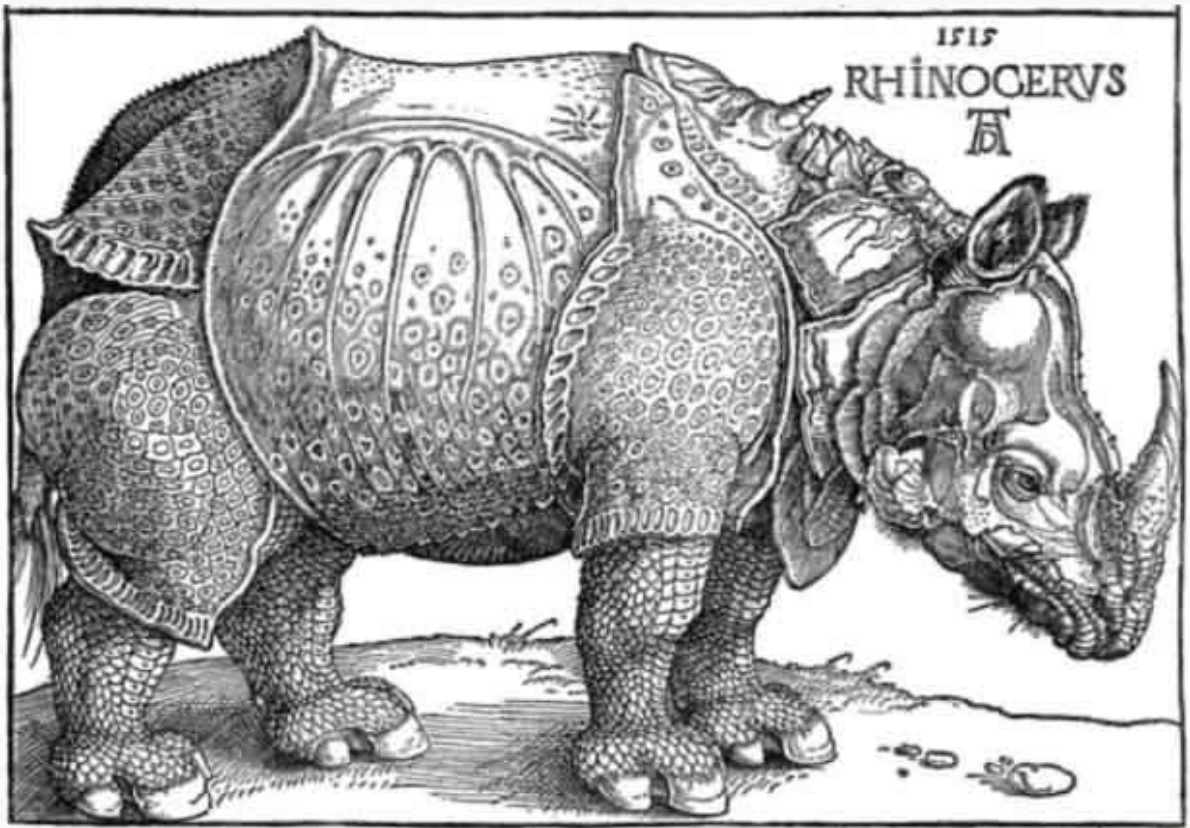
Doctor: 'Good. Good. That the thing to do. Sorry, but I've got to ask – do you have any history of substance abuse?'

M. hesitated again. 'I don't know if this counts, but I sometimes smear cosmetic mud all over myself. I can get through five or six face packs at a time'.

The Doctor took all this in. He looked at M. intently and it was then that M noticed the doctor's large and somewhat pointed forehead, his wrinkly hands and his huge fingernails.

Doctor: 'All the symptoms you've described fit the diagnosis of Rhinoceritis. There is no cure, but don't be alarmed. There is nothing wrong with being a rhinoceros.

It's true your skin is leathery and hard but don't get worked up about it. Many people find that becoming a rhinoceros is a rather pleasurable experience. Myself included.'

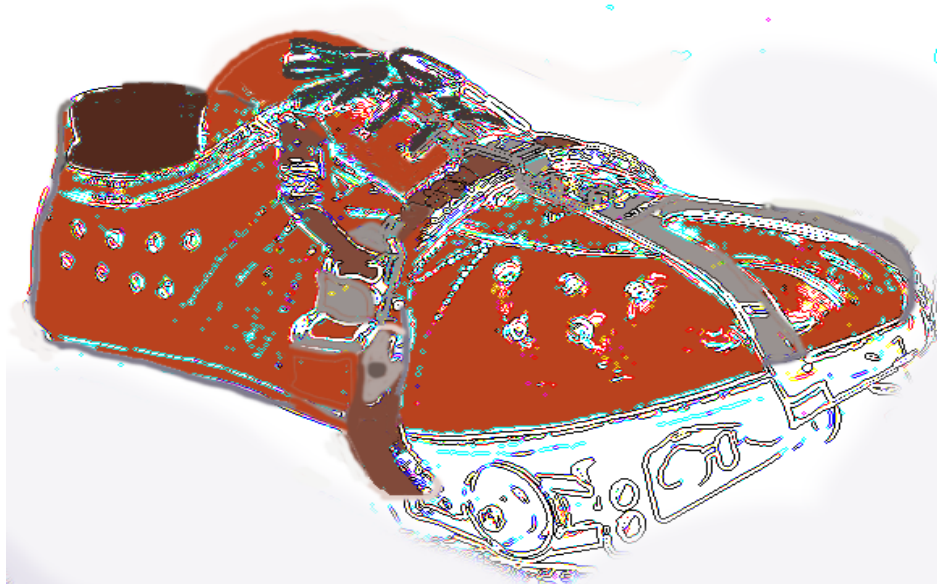


https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%BCrer%27s_Rhinoceros

Note: Durer never saw an actual rhinoceros.

Grandmother's shoes

I hated dismantling the material remains of Mum's life, but it had to be done. I had emptied most of the house and there was just the loft to do. I found the battered cardboard box up there, next to the chimney and covered in cobwebs. I brushed off the dust and lifted the lid, not knowing what I would find. The box contained a pair of well-worn shoes and a set of toe clips. My heart raced. Gran! These must be Gran's shoes from the days when she was a champion cyclist. Unknown to anyone, Mum had kept them all this time.



The reddish-brown leather was still in good condition, moulded by the shape of Gran's feet. I fingered the creases. Gran died before I was born, but I had seen the cupboards full of medals and trophies that she had won. Mum had given the entire collection to the National Museum of Women Cyclists, but for some reason she'd kept the shoes. I wondered why. My mother was not in the least bit sentimental and although she got on well with her father, Gran was known to be a difficult woman.

Now Gran and Mum were gone. Mum's house was sold and everything had to be cleared. I carried on with my work, but I put the shoe box and its contents to one side. When the weather improved, I'd fix the toe clips on my bike and if the shoes fitted, I'd put them on and go for a ride.

Gran must have been just my size: it was as if her shoes had been made for me. It was a glorious morning when I set off through the open countryside.

The primroses were already out in the ditches and the birds were singing. I sped along, exhilarated by the exercise and the fresh air.

I was about half a mile from home when I realised that something was up. I felt a strange sensation in my feet, not exactly a tingling but something like it. It was as if the shoes were gripping me, relentlessly propelling my legs round and round. The fields and trees flashed by, faster and faster. I glanced down at my bike computer and it was then that I began to panic. I was going at thirty miles an hour - something I'd never done before. The road was straight and empty but at that speed I'd have no chance if a car came the other way. I pulled on the brakes, but nothing happened. I squeezed and squeezed and eventually came to a juddering halt. I got off, trembling and shaken.

I leant the bike against a stone wall and looked at Gran's shoes. The early sunshine had gone, and there was a chill wind. I shivered, overcome with strange feelings about my family and my footwear. Gran had held the regional time trial record for more than two decades, beating anyone who tried to catch her. She didn't care about the prizes, but she was competitive to the core, or so I'd been told.

But what if it was the shoes? Did they have magical powers and was that the secret of Gran's success? I don't believe in fairy stories but in this case, I couldn't be sure. I undid the laces and inspected the shoes: first the left and then the right. They looked normal enough.

Sorting out Mum's belongings had been a powerful reminder of the fact that the lives of objects are entangled with the lives of those who own them. What if Gran's achievements had been etched into the leather, along with the creases. What if the shoes had taken on her spirit and determination and what if I was the one who was possessed? The thought of being a hybrid monster, part Gran, part shoe, part me, was terrifying but at the same time strangely comforting.

There was no getting away from it, I *was* an amalgam of overlapping histories. My mood lifted. I got back on the bike and set off again, knowing that Gran was with me, and knowing why Mum had kept the cardboard box and the secrets that it contained.

Back home, Adam, my boyfriend, was sitting on the sofa, checking his phone. 'Did you have a good spin?' he asked. 'Yes' I replied. 'It was quite a journey'.

Unexpected item on the kitchen table

The waves lapped gently on the clean white sand. It was the perfect location. Palm trees fringed the shore and there were a few fishing boats moored up at the island's makeshift jetty. The sea was a sparkling turquoise blue. If I had ever taken the time to imagine a perfect life, this would be it. Snoozing in the sun with nothing to distract me other than a few geckos flicking over the cracked concrete wall. No one, but no one, would find me here, and certainly not after all this time. I had disappeared without trace, leaving my past behind.



Things got tricky back home when I was rumbled by my mates. I don't know what roused their suspicions, but they discovered I was siphoning off the proceeds of our adventures. I never took more than ten or twenty percent and it did no one any harm. I'd been on the fiddle for decades, safe in the

knowledge that I'd not be handed over to the authorities, that my system was secure and that the missing bank notes would never be linked to me.

Looking back, I can see that I missed the warning signs but in less than a year, everything changed. Printed documents were replaced by email, electronic signatures, digital photographs and goodness knows what else. It was then that the international gangs moved in, ten times more sophisticated than us.

I didn't anticipate the urgency of my escape, but I knew my days were numbered. My hard-won skills in forging documents and creating false identities were soon to be eclipsed. Cash was dead and my little scheme was on the rocks.

Vanishing was my speciality so that's what I did. I invented a new identity, a new name and a new life off the coast of Costa Rica. It's true I had thousands of pounds in a safe deposit box, but I needed to lie low.

I like the irony of spending my days on what used to be a prison island and although there are some things I hanker for, I'm happy with my lot. The locals don't pay me any attention. They are busy with their fishing and their families, and to them I'm the eccentric foreigner in the tumble-down shack on the beach. From time to time, cruise ships sail by, slowing as they pass the ruined fort where the monkeys chase each other across the crumbling stones, and that's about as exciting as it gets.

Still an early riser, I put on my old dressing gown and flip flops and set the coffee pot on the stove. I do this every day, regular as clockwork. The kitchen has two rickety windows, and on the side that faces the track there are net curtains strung on old-fashioned wires. The termites have made a meal of some of the uprights and the structure needs attention. I made a mental note to get round to it some time, but not today. The shafts of sunlight promised yet another beautiful morning. I poured the steaming coffee into my chipped enamel mug and took it over to the table.

That's when I noticed the envelope. I was immediately puzzled – how did it get there? The doors were locked and no one else had a key. I tore the thick cream coloured paper apart. Inside was a note, typed with a poor-quality ribbon on an old-fashioned typewriter, just like the one I used to use. The message was short and to the point.

Stonesy, we know where you are

Stonesy. Only my closest friends called me Stonesy but this was not a friendly message. Someone had tracked me down, taken the trouble to visit the island, break into my home, let me know that I'd been found, and then disappear, undetected. If it was someone with a grudge against me, and Lord knows there would be many who wanted me dead, why not shoot me there and then? It must be about the missing money. Whoever it was must want to give me a fright: make me sweat a bit before coming on strong. I knew the drill. My uninvited guest would be back, armed to the teeth and expecting a fight.

It was too far to swim to the mainland and I'd be easy to spot in a boat. In any case, I couldn't face the thought of upping sticks and moving on, not again, and not at my age. I went out on to the verandah.

A huge white ship slowly emerged from behind the promontory, towering above the trees and as remote from island life as you could get. Wednesday. That's right, it was Wednesday morning.

It had taken a while to adjust but I'd come to love it here. I had a small inheritance and given my frugal existence, that was more than enough to live on. So what if I was found? If someone came asking for the stolen money, I'd hand over the details and that would be that. I'd be free.

I looked up and waved at the drone that hovered overhead. I couldn't tell for sure, but I supposed it was keeping me in view. I rummaged around in the kitchen drawer and eventually found a pen that worked, and an old pad of paper.

*To whom it may concern.
Help yourself.
Basildon Central.
Box no: 0078952
Code: 9841327
All the best,
Stonesy*

I could avoid the prying eye of the drone if I went out the back, and if I left the kitchen door open, they'd think I was still at home. I put my reply on the table and smiled as I imagined the intruder's reaction to this unexpected turn of events.

I headed over to a shady glade on the other side of the island, taking care to keep out of sight. It was nearly dusk when I returned. My note had disappeared and so had the drone. I never found out who had gone to such lengths to find me, or what they did with my ill-gotten gains. But to tell the truth, I don't really care.

The spice of life

My name is Johannes. I was born in Ghent in 1628 and I was about fifteen when I went to sea in a Fluyt, which is the Dutch word for a fast sailing ship. When I say fast, I mean fast by the standards of the day. It took us five or six months to reach Malacca and although we lost about a third of the souls on board that didn't bother me. I was oblivious to the risks: young and strong, fit and healthy, that was me.

The spice trade was at its peak and providing we made it back with our cargo of pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger, we'd make a handsome profit. Our ship, aptly named the *Gouden Gans*, or in English, the Golden Goose, was owned by the VOC. Back then, VOC did not stand for 'volatile organic compound', but for *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, also known as the Dutch East India Company. In those days, the VOC was a force to be reckoned with. The mark-up on good quality pepper from Malabar could be as high as 400%, and although it was a risky business, Malacca was bustling with adventurers. We had ousted the Portuguese just a few years earlier, taken command of the fortified port and terrorised the unruly natives.

In India, pepper had been used to season food from time immemorial, but I've never understood how it became the source of such enormous profit. According to Wikipedia (founded in 2001), spices were highly valued because they allowed Europeans to disguise the taste of rotten meat, but that's not the whole story. Lord knows how, but Dutch and Portuguese traders managed to cultivate a taste for spicy food in Europe and manipulate demand to their advantage. Nothing stays the same and nowadays salt and pepper are given away for free in little paper tubes. I've seen them in McDonalds. But I digress.

We landed in Malacca sometime in October, and I headed for one of the little boarding houses in the port. I didn't let on, but I was glad to be on dry land. After a few days I realised that I'd come to the right place and that Mrs Tengku, my landlady, was probably the best cook in the world. She made truly delicious food, fresh, fragrant and delicately spiced. The Tengkus don't speak a word of Dutch but I picked up enough of their language to say please and thank you and sometimes a bit more. The stews were spectacular. Yes, there was pepper but also hints of cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg and a sweet earthy taste that I couldn't quite place. I was amazed. Mrs Tengku noticed my reaction and smiled. 'Pipli', she said, which translates as long pepper. 'We keep it for ourselves. It's a secret.'

But it was too late, the cat was out of the bag. If I could get my hands on a private supply of long pepper and ship it home, I'd make a fortune, I was certain of it. Smuggling is strictly against company policy, and the penalties are extreme, but that didn't hold me back. I found a carpenter who was willing to fit a false floor in my trunk and I filled this hidden compartment with dark catkins of long pepper.



When the trade winds shifted, we set off on the return journey. All was going to plan until fate caught up with me. The bloody flux took just a week to do its work and once the balance of humors was out of whack there was nothing to be done. Overcome with an excess of plegm and bile, my body was unceremoniously dumped overboard along with the other casualties of the night. No one objected when my erstwhile mate, Gerrit Jan, laid claim to my few possessions.

Some months later, the *Gouden Gans* docked in the Netherlands and Gerrit Jan took my trunk back to his home in Delft. Gerrit Jan is not that bright, and it was only then that he began to wonder why my clothes took up so much room. He broke open the box and revealed a layer of strange botanical items: shrivelled and ever so slightly mouldy. They smelled a bit like pepper, but Gerrit Jan had no idea what they were, so he threw them out. I couldn't believe it. I knew he was thick but how stupid was that!

If I'd had my way, long pepper would have graced the finest tables of Europe. New dishes would have been created to take advantage of its subtle flavours. The finest chefs would have been itching to get their hands on just a little of this magic substance, and I'd have been rich, rich, rich. Instead, the spice of life had been taken from me and I was as dead as the proverbial doornail, decomposing at the bottom of the sea.

These days you can buy long pepper on Amazon, but tastes have changed. It is not for sale in Tesco or Waitrose, and it has not really caught on in the Western world. The VOC was disbanded in 1799 but by then new routes had been opened up and the spice trade was nothing like as lucrative as before. No one believes me when I say my stash of long pepper could have altered the course of history, but to be honest, no one really believes in ghosts either.

Social media

The tables and chairs had been stacked away and the floor was swept. I took a last look around the empty kitchen before shutting up shop for good. It was so sad. Half a year ago this place was buzzing with life. We were constantly refilling the trays of salad and garnishes, running to clear the tables and working the dishwasher overtime in the tiny space behind the counter. To be honest I still don't really understand what happened.

At first, I was wary of taking on the observatory café. It was a good half hour walk up from the end of the lane and there was not much passing trade. Ray was much more enthusiastic: the view from the top was stunning and he was certain we could make a go of it where others had failed. He said we needed a good following on the internet, and when we had that, our reputation would grow. With a bit of effort, Little Rushford would be famous not just in the UK, but across the world. We fixed on a simple menu: baked potato with a range of fillings for just £5.40 and we set to work, posting, chatting and uploading videos.

To my surprise, Ray's strategy began to have effect. In the early days, just a few visitors parked in the village below, but after a couple of months we were run off our feet. Ray, who was always one for gimmicks, suggested we give the first five customers of the day a free baked potato and a certificate.

Soon the queue was snaking down the hill when we opened at 8am. No wonder the locals complained about the cars and the disruption. Faithful followers camped overnight, enduring midges and tussocks of prickly grass to claim their prize potato.



It turned out that the queue itself was part of the attraction. Waiting for a baked potato had become an event in its own right- featured and commented on by users of tik tok, Instagram, facebook and x (formerly Twitter). By all accounts lasting friendships were formed between strangers who slowly inched up the well-worn path.

There had been quite an uproar when the observatory was built, what with the diggers and construction work and all, but that was years ago and it was nothing to the chaos brought on by the thousands, some say tens of thousands, of visitors.

A trip to the observatory café popped up first in recommendations about what to do in the area and modern-day pilgrims travelled from as far afield as Australia, South Africa to visit the 'hidden gem' they had read about online. Looking back, no one could have estimated the strength of these weak ties, or the global reach of a little food outlet a mile from the nearest village and with a menu of nothing but baked potatoes.

Equally, no one could have predicted the mix up of code behind the scenes. The fact that we'd just taken over, that we sold delicious food, or that Ray devoted hours to social media was beside the point. By some quirk of fate, an AI platform had interpreted 'the observatory café' as 'the café that everyone must see'. Once embedded in the system, the hidden machinery of random algorithmic escalation had acquired a life of its own.

The decline in interest was just as swift. Without warning, the ratings changed and after six months of roaring success, our café was no longer *the* place to be. Queuing for a baked potato was dropped from the list of attractions and the crowds left – moving on to the next AI-led destination.

The flow of eager customers dwindled to a trickle. On a good day a few hikers would stop for lunch but that was about it. The grass grew back on the path and the village returned to normal.

Ray looked at me sadly. 'Iris' he said 'It is time to move on'.

Secret

I put the beans and potatoes on to boil and watched that the sausages didn't burn under the grill. My mum looks after Angie, my daughter, when I'm out and she would be arriving for the evening shift in less than half an hour. After we've eaten, I do the washing up and get myself ready for work. We don't live far from Clapham Junction and every evening I get the 5.30 train into central London. The basic pay is low, but the hours suit me, and I love going against the flow of commuters heading the other way.

I work for a company called 'The Secret Service', which has cleaning contracts with office block owners across London, including MI6. So yes, I am a cleaner. No one knows this, not even Mum. I tell her I work for the 'Secret Service' and that I can't say any more. She smiles, knowingly, proud that I've done so well in life, and glad to look after Angie so that I can develop my professional career.

In fact, I clean toilets, tidy conference rooms and Hoover corridors. As the name suggests, the company provides an efficient, anonymous and invisible service. Working after hours in empty offices, with the lights on low, no one would know we've been in. Depending on the size of the building and the rotas we get a few floors each, and we work alone. I'm often sent to Vauxhall Cross, the home of the other 'secret service'. I like it there. I like the irony of the name, and I like the fact that they take security very seriously. There is a clean desk policy, so it is just a matter of emptying a few confidential waste bins into a black plastic bag. We keep a supply of these in the cupboard, and I have a special key fob that gives me access to wherever I need to go.

We have to sign the official secrets act to work there, and we are not allowed to take anything home or tell anyone what we see. That's not usually a problem, but it is a rule that I broke, just once.

It was a Thursday. The 21st March to be precise. It was dark outside, and raining. I was doing the usual round and a scrap of paper fell out as I emptied one of the bins on the third floor. I stopped to pick it up. Something, I don't know what, prompted me to flatten it out. There was an inscription, handwritten 'cavete viris ollarum florum'. I couldn't make head nor tail of it, but maybe it was in code. I can't explain why, but I put it in my pocket and carried on with my job.

When I got home that night, and after Mum had gone home, I typed the text into Google. The AI response came back in a flash 'Beware the flowerpot men'. And that was it.

MI6 is famed for its social life. On the notice board outside the cleaners' cupboard there are details of a knitting circle, a running club, quiz nights and the results of the annual badminton competition. It took me a moment to work out what the cryptic message meant, but then I remembered that Bill and Ben, from the fourth floor, had just got through to the semi-finals of the badminton league. Someone was sending a secret warning to Guy and Alec, on the third floor, who had won the coveted trophy the year before. The match between these two teams was scheduled for the following week. It all made sense. I put the slip of paper back into my pocket, intending to return it on my next shift. No one would be the wiser.

I was wrong. When I arrived for work on the Friday evening, I was greeted by someone I'd never seen before. 'Hello', she said, 'I'm Blaise. I'm in charge here. Last night the web cam spotted you taking a slip of paper from the 3rd floor.' I blushed red as a beetroot. I knew I could get the sack. 'I'm so sorry, I said, I don't know what came over me, but don't worry, I've got it here, I was going to put it back in the confidential waste tonight'. Blaise looked me straight in the eye. 'Jo, .. it is Jo isn't it?, could I see it'. I handed over the slip of paper, wondering what I'd say to Mum and how I'd explain my fate. Blaise took one look. 'Bill and Ben' she said under her breath.



All electronic communications are recorded, but a handwritten note, on paper, and in Latin – that would slip through the system.

Blaise quickly came to the only possible conclusion. Bill and Ben were double agents, and someone was sending a coded warning about them. Who was the recipient? Who else was in the know? Who did Bill and Ben really work for? There was only one way to find out.

‘Jo’, Blaise said ‘Don’t take anything home with you ever again, but if you promise me that, I’d like to offer you a new role. It would be the same hours but double the money. Would you be willing to work for me? It would be a private contract. Off the record. Of course, you’d still be a cleaner, and you’d still keep your job, but you are the perfect person to check through all the waste bins on these two floors. I’ll make sure your key fob allows you access to my office, and if you find anything even faintly suspicious, put it in a plain brown envelope and leave it on my desk. Bill and Ben work on the fourth floor, and I need you to keep a close eye on them’.

I looked at Blaise in astonishment. She obviously didn’t know about the badminton league or about the fierce rivalry between the third and fourth floors, but never mind that, she’d offered me a job. I’d be working for the real secret service. I didn’t know how long I could string her along, but it would be a good few weeks before the truth came out.

I agreed right away but my success was tinged with sadness. It was such a shame I couldn’t share the good news with Mum.

Fast fiction to include the words: Knitted/Agricultural/Womens' Institute/Waltz/Pig or any animal

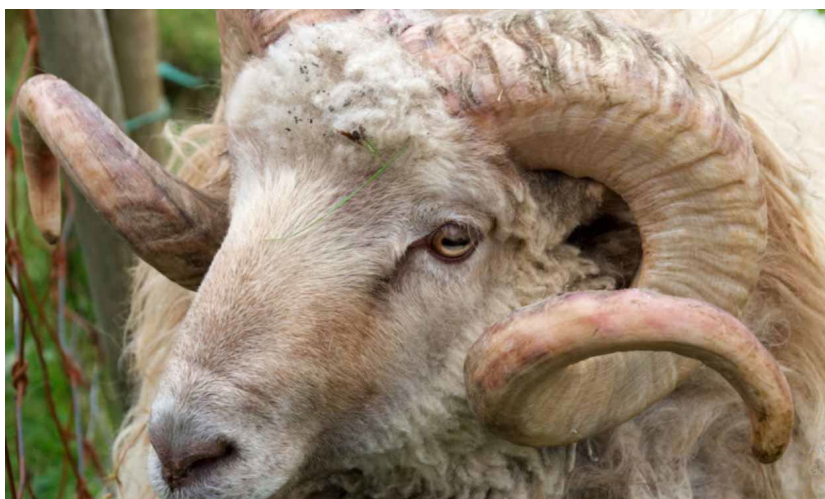
I'd been thinking about leaving her for a decade or more. We'd been married for 53 years and had two children, grown up now and with families of their own. There were never any big arguments and on the face of it we had all we could wish for. I had the lawn to mow and I went swimming once a week. My routine was set, but I wasn't content. Surely there was more to life than this?

The only solution was to leave. I'd got it all planned: where I'd stay, how the finances would be settled and what would happen to the house. As far as I could tell she didn't have a clue: she was occupied with her craft projects and her circle of friends, and she didn't pay any attention to me at all. Even so, I kept putting off the date of my departure – always finding one excuse or another.

The local agricultural show was set for 6th September, quite late in the season as these things go. It's one of the largest events of the year, and for the last few months she's been busy making things for the Womens' Institute stall: knitted tea cosies, specially dyed fabric, and who knows what else.

They always have a traditional fairground ride and we used to enjoy the swaying movement of the cars spinning on the undulating floor – it felt like we were doing a Waltz together. It was different now. Other couples queued to take their turn, but not us.

I went over to see the pigs: washed and brushed and snuffling around in their pens. I like pigs but my real favourites are the sheep, and especially the rare breed rams with their magnificent curly horns. There were rosettes pinned to almost every enclosure.



After I'd admired the livestock, I walked back across the mashed grass. As I did so, I spotted her in the main tent, gossiping with her cronies. Was it the way she stood? Or how she smiled? I can't explain it, but at that moment I knew, for sure, it was time to go. I had the car keys in my pocket and without a word I found our white Range Rover parked in the field opposite. I climbed in and drove out of the gate, leaving my ex-wife to her fate.

That must have been three years ago, maybe four. We don't correspond but mutual friends tell me she's so much happier now. By all accounts, the spinning and weaving business that she set up in what used to be my workshop is thriving. If I'm honest, I sometimes have a twinge of regret. My longed-for freedom is just a tiny bit hollow. I had no idea I had been holding her back or that she was the one who really wanted to me to leave.

A dream come true: The beast and the beauty

Once upon a time there was a handsome prince who lived in a splendid castle at the top of a steep hill, surrounded by ancient forests.

One bright autumn day, an evil fairy appeared in the castle grounds. She took one look at the flawless prince and cast a wicked spell. In an instant he was turned into a beast – somewhere between a bear and a wolf and as ugly as sin. 'There', said the wicked fairy, 'that will teach you to be so charming and so astonishingly good looking. No one will fall in love with you now. Ha ha. My spell is good and strong and can only be broken when a beautiful woman kisses your ghastly whiskers'.

The prince began to protest, but it was too late. The evil fairy vanished like mist at dawn. The clever jackdaw, who always followed the prince around, averted its beady eyes and looked sideways at the ground. This was quite some turn of events!

When the prince-who-was-now-a-beast caught sight of himself in the hall mirror he wept. Tears ran down his horrible furry cheeks and he turned away in disgust.



Days turned to seasons and seasons turned to years. Life went on as usual, but every night the beast dreamed of salvation. In his dreams a beautiful maiden appeared from the depths of the forest. It is always dark and stormy and the middle of winter. The beast would hear a faint tapping and when he opened the door there would be a lovely young lady wrapped in a threadbare cloak and a soggy woollen cardigan, desperate and soaked to the skin. Outside the wind would be howling and the sleet and snow would be whirling about. The maiden would recoil at the sight of him, but she would have no choice but to accept his hospitality, loathsome creature that he was.

Sometimes the beast would wake with a start and the hopelessness of his situation would stare him in the face. It was just about possible that an attractive woman would be out on her own and would lose her way in the forest on a dark and treacherous night, and there was a remote chance that she'd come to the castle, seeking shelter from the storm. But what then? She'd be terrified of her gruesome host and if she had any sense at all she'd escape as soon as she could. A kiss would be out of the question.

Sometimes the beast would dream on. In his fevered mind, the young lady would dine on the lavish provisions he'd laid before her. It was true she was scared of him - who wouldn't be? - but he'd keep his distance. He'd beg her to stay, but the more he begged the more adamant she became. 'No, sir, sorry sir, thanks ever so much for the delicious meats and the tasty carrot soup, but I must be on my way'. All hope vanished as he watched her disappear down the winding path. The beast would make his way back to his bare study and stare glumly at the decaying furniture. The jackdaw would hop around, oblivious to his master's anguish.

Still dreaming, the optimistic beast imagined another tap at the door. The beautiful maiden returned, dropped her knapsack on the tiled floor and threw her arms around the beast. He swooned as she parted his disgusting fur and gave him a smacking kiss. At this point the beast's subconscious finally kicked in. 'Come off it mate, that's not very plausible'. The beast had to agree. Ok, there was no tapping at the door, just the breeze in the trees.

Time passed and the beast became frail, pining for his lost youth, and for the future that the evil fairy had stolen. He often took to his bed. One evening he heard someone calling from outside. He hated visitors but curiosity got the

better of him and he dragged himself down the grand staircase and opened the heavy wooden door just a crack.

To his astonishment, he saw the maiden of his dreams. 'Sorry sir, but did I forget my lucky cardigan? I must have left it here when I took shelter from the storm.' The beast was confused, the timescales were all wrong, and in any case the lady visitor had been a figment of his desperate imagination. She spoke again. 'Oh my' she said 'you don't look at all well'

The beast staggered and gripped the umbrella stand. The lovely young lady forgot about her lost cardigan and reached out to help him to a couch. This was not the beast she remembered. He was withered and weak and not in the least bit frightening. 'Oh you poor creature' she said. 'Let me get you some water'. She returned with a goblet of something stronger than water and the beast took a sip. 'There', she said, 'There, there', and she smoothed his troubled brow. His eyes closed and he felt the softest, gentlest kiss.

As if by magic, the spell was broken. His fur fell away and features softened as he regained his human form. Despite all the odds, the beast's unlikely dream came true.

Zoom

/zu:m/

verb

verb: **zoom**; 3rd person present: **zooms**; past tense: **zoomed**; past participle: **zoomed**; gerund or present participle: **zooming**

Sharon sank back into the economy seat. Port of Spain, Trinidad, just 11 and half hours from London. This felt wrong. How could it be possible to move across climates and cultures at such speed. The magazine in the pocket in front had the same name as the airline. Zoom airlines filed for bankruptcy in 2008.



The original rocket lolly 'Zoom' was launched by Lyons Maid in 1963 to capitalize on the popularity of the TV show *Thunderbirds*. The brand has since ceased production. Lyons Maid was bought by Nestle in 1992. The zoom lolly was discontinued in 2019.



Nike Air Zoom is distinctive for its responsive cushioning system, which uses pressurized air and tightly stretched fibers to provide a springy, energetic feel and absorb impact. The fibers compress under pressure and quickly spring back, offering a feeling of speed and powerful push-offs. Zoom Air was officially introduced in 1996. Nike still uses Zoom Air technology in its running, basketball, and tennis shoes.



Zoom software was introduced in 2013. Zoom became globally popular almost overnight in early 2020 due to the widespread lockdowns caused by the [COVID-19 pandemic](#).

Zoom allows users to create and join virtual meeting rooms where they can communicate with each other using video, and audio. Additional features can give participants the ability to share their screen, share files, and use text chat within the meeting group or privately with others in the meeting. Video calling used to be the stuff of science fiction.





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Zooming might indicate an ever-accelerating society, but the concept has been around for a while. Google AI tells us that ‘the word "zoom" originated as an onomatopoeic term in the mid-1800s, mimicking the sound of rapid movement. By the early 1900s, it was used in print to describe fast, humming, or buzzing sounds, particularly with the advent of airplanes. The meaning expanded to include rapid movement without sound, and later gained a specific definition related to magnification in optics and photography, while the verb "to zoom" also became associated with using the video conferencing platform.’ Who knows where it will go next.