



## **Lively Custard**

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**Published:** 2004

**Categorie(s):** Fiction, Fantasy, Short Stories, Romance, Short Stories, Short Stories

**Tag(s):** fiction fantasy speculative satire humorous romantic

**Lively Custard**

**A Short Story**

**By**

**Michael Graeme**

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The little market town of Frinton-Cum-Hardy was not exactly a part of the nation's literary scene. Indeed there had long been a sense of anything "literary" having deserted us altogether, ever since our last cosy little book shop closed some twenty-odd years ago. Of course, more recently, one's ability to procure a decent book has improved, at least for the web-savvy, courtesy of the dot com. vendors, otherwise we would be entirely at the mercy of the publisher's clearance outlets, of which Frinton-Cum-Hardy boasts several. Unfortunately, the latter tend to be of the here-today-gone tomorrow variety and in the main cannot be relied upon.

By far the most resilient of these establishments is Books Galore on Market Street where, to be fair, a good many bargains are to be had provided you have no clear idea what you're looking for in the first place. Books Galore also has the considerable merit of being the only employer who was willing to offer my dear Jenny a job, when she left school.

Jenny lived a few doors down from me, with her aged aunt, though she seemed to spend an increasing amount of time in my place, tidying up and Hoovering around, while I worked on my memoirs, my quest for the meaning of life, and other such web-published nonsense. It was she who called round one evening bearing a glossy flyer advertising a lecture to be given in the public library by the "eminent" literary critic Doctor Eric Chumley. The subject of his talk was to be an analysis of the Stunner Prize winning novel, "Rolling my Conkers." by the reclusive and hitherto little known author: Mr. Jarvis Tongue.

Now, I must admit I had not read "Rolling my Conkers", though of course I'd heard of it on account of the publicity surrounding the prize.

"Why don't you go, Mr. Armitage?" asked Jenny. "It sounds just up your street. I mean books and stuff."

Jenny had a charming innocence and a sparkling wit that disguised her inability to read above the level of top infants. I remember fondly the evenings we laboured over tales of Wilma and Biff, only for her to begin fussing over a dusty cobweb, or some other convenient distraction. Alas, poor Jenny; books would never be her forte and it is one of life's little ironies that she should eventually find a job selling them.

"Doctor Chumley?" I mused. "Sounds rather imposing. I doubt I shall understand a word." I leaned back in my chair. "Though I suppose it would do me good to get out more," This was certainly true! "Now, tell me: what news of Frinton-Cum-Hardy?"

She sat upon my desk and swung her skinny legs while sifting her memory for the day's gossip. "There's a tree sprouted overnight in the library car-park."

I feigned surprise. "Really?"

This was a little game we played. It had begun as a means of breaking the ice, when she had been a gangly adolescent, and me a grumpy, prematurely redundant schoolteacher, trying to make ends meet by coaching backward students. "What news, my dear?" I would ask and she'd reply with some made up nonsense that had grown ever more outrageous as the years had passed.

"A tree you say?"

"Full grown. Huge it is. And it's causing such a row 'cos the cars can't get past."

"Then we must ring the council and have it cut down."

"Oh, no," she said in all seriousness "They can't cut it down. Someone from council's been already and 'cos of its size he says it must be at least two hundred years old, so he's put a preservation order on it."

"How remarkable! But surely, if its in the way?"

"I know. They're having a meeting about it. But the they way they do witter on I'd say that tree's safe for a long time to come."

She looked at the flyer, spelling out the words in her head while twiddling her tongue, as if feeling the curve of them. "Have you read that book? Only I could look out for it at the shop if you like. "Rolling my Conkers." She giggled. "It sounds a bit rude to me."

"It's metaphorical, my dear. I suppose it could mean something vulgar, but I'm sure it doesn't."

She looked at me blankly. "Met-a-phor-ic-al?"

"Words that are used to mean something other than what's actually written down," I explained.

"But who decides what means what?"

"Well, no one really. There are usually clues in the context, and people generally understand."

"So I could call that cup a sandwich, and you'd know what I meant?"

"Well, not exactly. But I could say my cup was empty and it might be taken to mean my spirits were low, or I felt drained."

"But your cup is empty. Can I make you a cup of tea while I'm here?"

"Erm,... well... yes. That would be lovely."

"So, will this Doctor Chumley be talking about metaphors then?"

"About them, and probably in them as well."

"It sounds fun. Can I come too?"

"Well, of course. Though you'll probably find it rather tedious, I'm afraid."

On the evening of the lecture, Jenny turned up at my door wearing a very pleasant if somewhat old fashioned dress that she'd borrowed from her aunt. Her sister, Paula, who was a hairdresser, had given Jenny's normally lank locks a bit of a perm. I also caught a whiff of perfume and suddenly she seemed quite grown up. None of this should have surprised me, of course for by then Jenny was well into her twenties and rather a comely lass. There was an air of excitement about her as she chattered dizzily all the way down Chapel Street and into the town centre. I found her company delightful as always, though I was still anxious she might find the evening something of a bore.

When we arrived at the library I was puzzled by a small crowd that had gathered outside. They were gazing up into the boughs of a mature beech tree that was growing in the middle of the approach to the library car park.

"Then it's true," I said.

"Of course," said Jenny. "Come and see."

At first I thought it was a prank, the tree some sort of stage-prop, but I tapped it with my stick and it seemed solid enough. It had apparently burst through the tarmac, its girth swelling to four or five feet in diameter.

"It's astonishing," I said.

"Don't you think its pretty?" asked Jenny.

"Pretty? Why yes. I just don't see how it could have grown so big like that overnight. I mean, it's impossible."

"Can't be," she said with disarming logic. "Or it wouldn't have happened."

After settling into our seats in the library's little lecture theatre, I took a moment to weigh up the crowd. There were your usual middle aged tweedies, myself included, and there was also a gathering of the fashionably scruffy. Now, I admit I was surprised when Doctor Chumley eventually took to the podium. He was far younger than I'd imagined, more fashionably scruffy than tweedy and with piercings through his nose and lip that would have earned him a thick ear if I'd been his father.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen," he said. Then he paused and the crowd responded with a round of polite laughter as if at some secret joke. He held up a glossy hardback with a picture of a tree on its cover.

"Rolling my Conkers," he said. There was silence, except for a stifled snort from Jenny. Then it began:

"Bollwoddle," said Doctor Chumley. "Fair doodle. Bollwoddle." He sighed, his eyes lowered mournfully, his arms reaching out as if to bless us all. "And in the morning, before the afterwards, said ringing loud to pinch my nose, he went." This last sentence was delivered with such poignancy, I felt the hairs stand on the back of my neck. It was the oddest thing, for though I sensed the passion in the man, I couldn't understand a word he said. I looked at Jenny. She was sitting upright and perky, smiling, eyes aglow. Perhaps it was my hearing.

Chumley went on. "And so you see, the model for the artichoke was obviously torn from his Sunday morning. It sent shivers through the dull middle and had the cockatoo spinning all over the kitchen floor. But never did anyone say they'd seen the moon rise over the gasworks, which all goes to prove my whistle stop at point blank. Point blank, I say. Bollwoddle."

This raised a murmur of assent from the audience, who were now clearly hanging onto the good doctor's every word.

"But," he continued, brandishing a warning finger. And then again, though softer this time, as if to draw us into his confidence: "But. " The finger began to wag from side to side. "We must not forget the billio, for the billio is the crux, and all before it slides."

I listened attentively for a good half hour but, try as I might, his words ran through my fingers like greased rope. Gradually I fear the lecture became no more than a bee buzzing in my ear and I eventually drifted off, carried into some delightfully exotic dream, on a wave of Jenny's aunt's perfume. Then came the shuffle of feet and the scraping of chairs. It was evidently over, the audience crushing slowly to the back of the room where tea and biscuits had been laid on by the WRVS. Nearby I noticed a veritable mountain of "Rolling my Conkers" was being slowly dismantled, exchanged for twenty pound notes and tucked under the arms of the newly literate Frinton-Cum-Hardians. And the air fairly crackled with wonder at the genius of the reclusive Jarvis Tongue, and the sparky erudition of Doctor Chumley.

Jenny squeezed in close and asked me what I'd thought.

"It's the biggest load of tripe I've ever heard."

A bespectacled youth at my elbow turned sharply, his face tight with indignation. "Well I enjoyed it," he said.

I was surprised, and curious. "You did? Then would you mind explaining it to me?"

"Well obviously," he replied, "if the farthing on the porch step doesn't twinkle how am I to know where to hang my hat?"

Meanwhile the crowd circulated. I recognised Harold Pearce, the owner of the Jaguar dealership on Cop Lane, talking in an animated fashion to his wife. At one point they both tipped their heads back and laughed. "Bollwoddle," they sang in unison.

Now at this point I must admit I was for slipping outside but Jenny gave a little pout and tugged me back in the direction of tea and biscuits.

"This is the best part for me," she complained.

"Very well. It's just that I haven't a clue what anyone's talking about."

"I can't follow it either," she said. "But then I didn't really expect to. I just like looking at what people are wearing."

The back room was all a-throbbing with lively conversation, but I tried not to focus on any of it in case it further aggravated my nerves. It took very little these days to set my ears ringing, and then I would have to spend the next day or so lying down in a darkened room, a malaise that had lost me my job, which was ironic since it was probably the flipping job that had caused all the problems in the first place! With a deep breath then, I made my way to the WRVS counter and asked for two cups of tea. As I went I ran the odd sentence of the doctor's lecture through my mind. Had things really moved on so much beyond the staid, provincial boundaries of Frinton-Cum-Hardy, that I no longer understood my mother tongue?

Of course, I might easily have suspected this was no more than a case of the Emperor's New Clothes, that all I had to do was expose Chumley as a charlatan and then everyone would wake up, except everyone seemed to have got something out of the lecture. Indeed they were positively energised by it. It was as if all the courtiers at the Emperor's ball had dropped their kit and begun to dance.

In pensive mood, I made my way back to where I'd left Jenny, but was accosted on the way by Amelia Barrett, local solicitor and keeper of my last will and testament. No more sober and straight laced a spinster would you find anywhere.

"So," she said, gesturing with her eyes to where Jenny was by now engaged in conversation by a gaggle of horny male youths. "Fresh towels on the Monday morning then?" she enquired.

Was that some catty smear on Jenny's good name I wondered? Why did nothing make sense any more? Had I suffered a mild stroke? Was I merely tired? "Erm,..."

"Bushing fastly I'd say," she went on earnestly.

Was the meaning carried in the intonation? Had words themselves become irrelevant? I shook my head slowly and gave a sagely sigh. "Swivelling slowly, Mrs Barrett. Swivelling slowly's the way." At which she coloured brightly and looked daggers at me, as if I'd suggested something filthy. Obviously intonation was not the key, and I had some way to go before I caught on.

The young men of Frinton-Cum-Hardy had, I noticed, developed a sudden and peculiar affectation when greeting each other. It involved extending the middle finger downwards and shaking it while uttering the words: "Bollwoddle." The gesture was the same when greeting a female except it was accompanied by an awkward knee-bending action, bobbing up and down, as if riding a horse. Several engaged Jenny in this apparently sophisticated and cosmopolitan manner, all to her apparent amusement.

"Bollwoddle," said one.

"Bollwoddle," said another.

Each bobbed earnestly, though somewhat out of sync, resembling to my eye a ragged entourage of self-conscious jack-in-the-boxes. Jenny looked from one to the other, covered her embarrassed smile, and blushed modestly.

"The young men were quite taken with you," I remarked later, upon rejoining her.

"Oh, no Mr Armitage," she answered guilelessly. "They don't want to share my babies or anything. They just want to touch my bunnies."

For a moment I thought she'd caught the bollwoddle bug, but on careful reflection I realised she had probably made the most penetrating observation of the evening.

"Well - erm - all the same, I'm sure their interest is perfectly normal. All young men have a certain fascination for things of - well - that nature."

"That's as maybe, Mr. Armitage, but they needn't dress it up with their posh manners. I'm a simple girl and whoever touches my bunnies has to share my babies as well."

"Admirably put, my dear."

At that moment none other than Doctor Chumley himself approached, twiddling his nose-ring, somewhat caddishly, and resembling,

in my imagination at least, the piggy-wig in Lear's nonsense rhyme. He wiggled his middle finger at us and bobbed obligingly for Jenny.

"Fart?" he enquired.

I looked wide eyed at him while Jenny covered her mouth and coloured yet again.

"Fart," he repeated, a little louder this time.

Jenny turned away in order to control her mirth, at great pains not to show herself up in front of such a cultured academic.

"I heard you the first time." I said.

"Well, on the down-blast, don't you think?"

By now I'd had quite enough. "Look here young man. I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

Jenny caught my arm, sensing my agitation and was afraid that perhaps I would expose my small town ignorance through a moment's indiscretion. But I was not to be swayed.

"As for that infernal book, I've never heard as much rubbish in all my life."

"Have you read it?" he enquired.

The plainness of his words wrong-footed me. "Well, actually no."

"Then how can you possibly diggle-bat on the ringo, old possum?" His tone remained level, but challenging.

"I can... bloody well diggle-bat as much as I like. I taught English in this town for fifteen years and I haven't heard a word of it spoken all evening."

Doctor Chumley gave a condescending smile. "This book's perhaps a livelier custard than you're used to throwing then, old man."

"Oh really?" I gestured to the copy tucked under his arm. "I wonder, would you mind if I read the opening paragraph?"

He shrugged. "Be my sleep-over."

It was a heavy tome, the design of the tree on the cover highly stylised. I found the first page and began to read:

*Down went the ripping chord upon her Kiwis bare and threaded slow across the dripping windowsill, thick with words of dry gravy. Dry gravy. Rocking high and low, the day. The day. And when her full moon rose she walked beyond the gasworks gate and sat upon the clay. The clay. And sat upon the clay,...*

I snapped the book shut with a faint grimace and handed it back to Chumley who waited expectantly for my opinion.

"Remarkable," I said, with a carefully measured dose of sarcasm.

"It has a mesmeric quality, don't you think?" he gave a cocky wink  
"Lively custard eh?"

Then, keen to mingle, he wiggled his finger at us and bobbed in parting.

"Lively custard?" enquired Jenny.

"The only custard in this room, my dear is the stuff that's apparently replaced everyone's brains."

But bolwoddle and custard were not the only conundrums to challenge our senses, for that same evening, the driver of a petrol tanker swerved suddenly in order to avoid ramming a twenty foot oak tree that had apparently taken root in the middle lane of the M65, just a few miles north of Frinton-Cum-Hardy. I heard it on Newsnight shortly after returning from the library. Jenny had poured us both a glass of wine and seemed reluctant to make tracks for home.

"We're famous," she exclaimed. "We're on the news. Another tree. Isn't it odd?"

"After what I've heard this evening I wouldn't be surprised by anything." I looked at my watch, a calculated gesture that was entirely lost upon her. "Don't you have work in the morning, dear?"

"Well, yes. But Uncle Bob's staying at Aunty's and he's a bit over-affectionate these days, if you know what I mean? So, anyway, I thought I'd stay in your spare room for a few nights if that's all right, Mr Armitage. I'd feel much better. It's ever so awkward and I do hate being impolite to uncle Bob but impoliteness seems to be the only way to make him behave. "

It was not the first time this had happened. Jenny frequently complained about her cramped quarters and all manner of domestic inconvenience, from her over-affectionate uncle to her aunt's voluminous snores.

I gave a sigh. "Very well. But we must think about finding you somewhere else to live if things are really so bad as you say."

I was woken around eight the following morning by Jenny bringing tea.

"I had to boil the water on the gas ring," she said. "There's been a power cut. And there's ever such a fuss in Mr. Dalton's garden."

"Fuss? In what way?"

"It looks like another tree. At least I don't remember him having a big tree like that and in any case it's made an awful mess of his potting shed. The electricity people are there as well."

"Really?"

Trevor Dalton lived three doors up and worked as a school caretaker. I'd known him since we were boys. Unlike me though, he still worked at Frinton County and I often dropped in for a chat to see if I could pick up a bit of gossip about the old place. That morning I found him in the back garden of his little cottage gazing up into the boughs of the most spectacular Chestnut tree, while a team of hard-hatted electricians milled about, erecting a little shelter over a hole they'd begun to dig. The remains of his potting shed lay scattered about the base of the tree, it having apparently sprung up from underneath. One half of what I took to be the mains electricity cable was held aloft, snagged in the tree's branches, while the other half I presumed was still buried in the earth where the electricians were furiously burrowing.

"Ah," I said. "That explains the power cut. Pity about the shed, Trevor."

"No harm done," he replied. "It were rotten anyway."

"Lucky it didn't rupture the gas as well."

"Suppose so."

"Whatever are you going to do with it?"

He slid back his cap and scratched his head. "I've always wanted a tree-house," he said. "I reckon I could fix a good one up there."

I was touched by his enthusiasm.

"Pity it wasn't around when we were boys," I said. "Imagine the fun we might have had with it."

Just then the man from the council arrived with his clip-board and tape measure. He wiggled his finger, said: "Bollwoddle," and introduced himself as Leonard, then proceeded to inspect the tree, shaking his head all the while.

"Run the bloated barfly!" he spat. "As if the horny toad last night wasn't the cold one."

"Ah, you mean the tree on the motorway?"

Leonard seemed embarrassed. He was a little old to be playing with the modern vernacular and obviously not very good at it, since I'd evidently understood him. He reverted at once to plain English. "Popping up all over the place," he said.

"You mean there are more?"

"A dozen we know about. We've got ruptured water mains all over town. Puddles everywhere."

"How dreadful!"

"Well, we can work round most of them. The one on the M65 will have to go of course. Pity though. It's the finest oak I've ever seen."

"Mine's a Chestnut," said Trevor, proudly.

"You won't be allowed to cut it down, you know."

"Perish the thought," said Trevor.

"Any idea what's causing it?" I asked.

Leonard shrugged. "Not my department really."

Several other trees popped up in the course of the day - everything from hornbeams to hawthorns, but by far the most spectacular occurrence was a stand of scots pines that came up outside the town hall. The Mayoral Limousine was overturned and a Vauxhall Astra carried aloft some forty feet - requiring the assistance of a mobile crane in order to extricate it. But for all the mess the Mayor was said to be delighted.

Naturally, the nation's press descended upon us and within days the sleepy market town of Frinton-Cum-Hardy became a global sensation. I passed the library one afternoon, and there I spied Doctor Chumley, loitering shamelessly in front the beech tree, a copy of "Rolling my Conkers" in his hand which he flashed to the assembled cameras. He seemed to be making some obscure connection between our tree phenomenon and the infernal book.

"All fell within the shark's basket," he explained. "And so of course the frilly ones took their place by the ringlydoe."

I moved on in utter contempt of the man. The book explained nothing, but it was sufficient to get him on the tea time news. "Rolling my Conkers" consequently shot to number one in the book chart and suddenly, threadworn literary types were to be seen on pretentious arts programmes poring over the endless and quite preposterous metaphors as if they actually meant something. Meanwhile the author, Mr. Jarvis Tongue, perhaps wisely, declined all invitations to be interviewed, thus preserving his mystique rather than exposing his metaphorical buttocks.

*Down went the ripping chord upon her Kiwi's bare and threaded slowly cross the dripping windowsill, thick with words of dry gravy.*

Lively custard. Indeed!

Frinton-Cum-Hardy weathered this media onslaught as best it could. Fortunately attention spans are short these days and by the end of summer we had the place to ourselves once more. By this time Market Street had become pedestrianised, on account of a small copse having taken

root at either end. And my own potting shed was duly torn asunder by a noble cherry with which I was absolutely delighted.

Meanwhile, I noted the fashionably scruffy now wiggled their little fingers and exclaimed "Yow!" upon greeting. Thus, by degrees, I sensed the trend of these trendy ones drifting more towards the post-literary. Alas it seemed poor Jarvis Tongue had had his season of fame.

Trevor built his tree house and sat up there of an evening smoking his pungent rough-cut while gazing out over the houses and the meadows beyond. I took to joining him now and then and once, over a drop of malt he asked me what the rhubarb was with me and Jenny.

I raised my hands in defence. "Cold pudding," I assured him. "Strictly cold pudding, old man."

"I thought she'd moved in."

"Spare room. Uncle trouble. But cold pudding and mutual, I'm sure. Besides she's half my tangibles."

"Too fresh a sprout for your dinner-wear, you mean?"

"Exactly."

He gave a sigh.

"Tangibles or no, are you sure it's mutual?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"Well, folk reckon she's always had her winket cocked at you."

"Her,... winket?"

By the end of that summer "Rolling my Conkers" went the way of all contemporary print, finally appearing on the shelves of Books Galore before disappearing altogether. Jenny purchased a copy for me and duly brought it home.

"Look, Mr Armitage? Look what I've brought you? It's that book – remember?"

"Ah, splendid. But listen, we really must talk about things, you know? Plain speaking and all that? There are rumours... some are saying you've cocked your winket. And your winket's far too fresh a leaf for my old dinner ware, you know? Too fresh by far."

She giggled. "Mr Armitage! Really. Listen, when we reach the stage when words can mean anything, perhaps it's better we don't talk at all 'cos then well understand each other all the better." With that she sat in my lap, snuggled comfortably close and began to unbutton her blouse. "How'd you like to touch my bunnies?" she asked.

*Slowly then she went a-tumbling down the tidy swathe, her lily fronds a-floating upon the green felt of that piano grand, and music therefrom did bang upon*

*the drum. And in the morning she stood, rose from a tiny corm, and waving in the blue yonder, told all who passed this was his end of days and late had woken up to take her home with him.*

*Bollwoddle.*

In spite of its early demise in printed form, "Rolling my Conkers" went on to achieve some measure of underground credibility when the last remaining hard copies were scanned and placed online. These varied from one pirated version to the next of course, depending on the quality of the OCR software that had been used, but there was no discernible loss of meaning, since it was Jarvis Tongue's perverse genius to ensure it was the reader who provided the meaning in the first place.

So, with the in-crowd moved safely on to pastures new, there arose a curious revival among the second wave, the sort of people, like me, I suppose, who still frequented the DOS chat forums and wrote poems on their Sinclair Spectrums. Meanwhile Tongisms entered the common vernacular with the ease of a virulent sickness, and for all my earlier disdain I took to dipping into the copy Jenny had bought me. It was, I found, a curiously comforting tome, on account of my not having to worry about what anything meant. Even more intriguing though was the mind's insistence on supplying plausible interpretations for what it knew to be utter nonsense.

When autumn finally came, the trees of Frinton-Cum-Hardy shed their leaves, carpeting our walks with gold and crimson. And as the weather grew cooler there came fewer arboreal manifestations, so the council set in motion plans for getting things back to normal. Telegraph poles were moved, water, gas and electricity supplies re-routed and roads diverted. Few trees were felled and the whole operation seemed more one of adapting to our circumstances, rather than combating them.

Then, in the spring, the trees began to appear again. Slowly, in ones and twos, but gradually reforesting the commons, and tracing out the lines of communication to neighbouring towns. Housing was unaffected, though why the trees should spare bricks and mortar yet sprout so blatantly through our potting sheds remained a mystery.

It was an inevitably popular topic of conversation for Trevor and me, when the warmer weather enticed us back into his tree-house of an evening. "Its like the tablecloth as it would have been if we hadn't eaten off it," he remarked. "All clean, instead of dobbled with ketchup and cold chips."

"Yes,.. a sort of reversion." I turned to my by now heavily dog eared copy of "Rolling my Conkers". The book had exceeded all expectations, though not for the reasons that had originally been intended. I'd taken to consulting it on all manner of conundrums, a process that involved framing a question in my mind, opening the book at random and selecting a passage. Then I would dive into the sea of slithering words and thrash about for anything of apparent relevance. Incredible though it might sound, by this method I found I could come up with an explanation for virtually anything, or arrive at some profound insight that eluded the otherwise rational processing of one's brain. "Rolling my Conkers" it seemed was the oil that freed the cogwheels of cognition.

"It says here, and I quote: *'Far beyond that one sweet pea the vines did surely stretch and tangle. But swinging through the window did he trip and break his leg-o.'*"

Trevor slid his cap back a fraction and meditated on it. "So," he said. "If Frinton-Cum-Hardy's the sweet pea, and the trees are the vines. Then the window,.."

"Is a window of opportunity, perhaps, through which some people are looking to swing."

"Okay, I'll go with that. So, if we look upon this as an opportunity, we'll break our leg-o, in a manner of speaking?"

"Exactly. For example, I hear over in Market-Chingford they're even planning to cut down any hardwoods that cross over the boundary between us and them. There's a line of oaks that's been steadily making its way over there for weeks. English hardwood's worth a fortune on the open market, because its so rare, you see?"

He shook his head and muttered darkly: "That's a bad brew, a bed brew, indeed."

"Different council." I reminded him "They come under West Bingley, not like us. They've always had too much beer behind their belly buttons in West Bingley."

"But they'd be drinking a frog if they tried it, surely?"

I closed the book. "According to Jarvis Tongue they would. But we'll see."

We pondered on this for while, then Trevor sought a change of subject.

"How are things between you and Jenny?" he asked. "Still cold pudding?"

"Not any more. We had a chat. Expecting our first little Charlie in the Summer."

Trevor beamed and punched my arm. "Well, there you are. I told you didn't I? I told you she'd tipped her winket at you."

"Yes, except I can't help thinking she only tipped it so she'd have somewhere to hang her curtains and keep warm. I mean, God bless her, I love the girl and she's welcome, but I'm not much of a prospect, other than my own front door, am I? Not much more than a shovel of coal keeping the fire in these days, and the bunker's all but empty."

"Ah, but think on it: Jenny and that little Charlie of yours, well they'll have the key to that front door one day. It's a passing on. Like when we ran relays on sports day for old Stinker at school, remember? You'd bust a gut while you were carrying that baton, knowing you had 'im on yer back. But when you'd passed it on, it was up to the next bloke and you could breathe easy."

Trevor looked down at the row of little gardens, at the strips of grass, at the larch-lap demarcations and the rough brick backs of the houses. Lights were beginning to glow in the twilight, curtains were being drawn.

"Built in 1900 this street," he said, waving his pipe and showering the gloom with sparks. "You and I were born here, lived all our lives here. Ran like mad 'uns up and down these backs when we were nip-pers. Generations went before us and generations will follow. Hanging curtains, keeping warm. Yon Jarvis Tongue can prattle all he likes but warm pudding and your own front door, that's the meaning of life if you ask me."

"Seems rather a bleak vision though, don't you think?"

"How can you can say that with the likes of young Jenny to roll your Havana? Bleak no! I'd swap rolled Havana for cold sheets any day."

"Well, I know what you're saying, but still old man, there's more to life than that. For example, don't you really want to understand where these trees are coming from? What's causing it?"

"Seems to me any explanation's as good as the next one, like reading that book of yours. We can say whatever we want and argue 'till the paint goes sticky but it won't alter the fact that we'll never know all there is to know. Puddings will always blow hot and cold. There's nowt in a pudding,.. too transient a thing for it to mean anything, but if you look to moments like this warm summer's night among the trees, now and then something will touch you deep inside. And you'll realise that understanding anything means about as much as spit on a sponge. Spit on a sponge, old man."

It was to be the last time I spoke with Trevor. One evening, while Jenny and I attended ante-natal classes, he tumbled tipsy from his tree house and died among his cabbages with an enormous and quite inexplicable smile on his face. There are children in the treehouse now and hot pudding in the bedroom where once his sheets had been a cold wrapping. And no one knows or cares about the words we shared, or the games we played as boys.

Transience.

A passing on.

Recently, I was strolling on the common with Jenny, our little Charlie, now in his second year, running out ahead and chortling with delight. The sun was glimmering low upon the dew as he tore a swathe through the long grass in his little red wellies. There had been much water 'neath the bridge since those trees first came and Jenny tipped her winket at me. Oh, life goes on, yet for all the daily grind, and nappies filled, her hands are warm and they do roll so very gently still. She turned to me then, that amber eve, her eyes aglow, but did not speak. And there was a moment, upon the common, beneath the trees when the glimmering parted and I saw beyond the mist to hills of gold. It was the briefest of happenings, but it poured a swelling heat into a heart worn thin by years of making do with pudding cold. Then Charlie tripped over a root and squealed like a stuck pig.

I still think of Trevor in his tree house sipping malt and sucking on his pipe, and slowly I am coming to the conclusion he was right. The first oak to cross the parish boundary into Market Chingford was duly cut down and sent off to a sawmill, thence to a London cabinet maker who turned it into a set of wardrobes and a kitchen dresser. But it was, as Trevor had foreseen that night, rather a bad brew, for the trees took to coming up in the middle of living rooms after that - but only in Market Chingford, you understand. The place now lies in rubble, deserted, to be gawked at by eco-tourists, some of whom I note still clutch their second hand copies of "Rolling my Conkers."

Like me they look for answers to the strangeness of the world and, 'twixt its tortured lines, as in all our idle twaddlings, they sometimes catch a glimmer. But all we mortals really have are moments now and then when we might feel a glory that rises beyond articulation. The long in-betweens are marked by puddings, hot and cold, with the constant dig of Stinker on our backs, until the march of front doors passes from

the present generation to the next. And the rest, as they say, no matter how lively the custard.

... .is just a load of old bollwoddle.

Michael Graeme

## From the same author on Feedbacks

Love is a Perfect Place (1999)

A short story by Michael Graeme - a twenty minute read: He scooped some water up and drank. It astonished him. It tasted like he imagined the most perfect water should taste, but it was a sensation spoiled by the queer fact that he wasn't thirsty even though he had walked for hours under a hot sun.

"Perhaps we don't need food,... or water," he said. "Only when it pleases us."

He looked around then at the land and he felt a chill. What manner of place was this? And what manner of being had he become?

The Enigma that was Carla Sinclair (2004)

I was not completely unhinged. She was just a computer program, a crude simulation - at best a never ending animated cartoon with only one character and no story line. But she was "something",... She was a hobby I suppose you might say. Other young men had hobbies, equally obscure, though perhaps more socially inclusive. They collected camera gear, they went fishing, raced cars or drank themselves stupid. Me? I coded in my bedroom. Same thing? Well, not quite. You see, while other people's hobbies took them out of themselves, mine enabled me to climb deeper inside.

A Moth on the Moon (2004)

Most people - except the conspiracy theorists - know the United States landed a man on the moon in 1969. What's less well known however, is that the British beat them to it, in 1947.

The Choices (2006)

A fifteen minute read:

I am sitting here in the lounge-bar of the McKinley Arms Hotel, by the shores of Loch Lomond, and I am staring out into the twilight at my choices. I have been this way before many times and I always seem to go wrong at this point, so you must forgive what must seem like fastidious caution, but I simply have to get it right this time!

Escape From Paradise Island (2007)

A 25 minute read by Michael Graeme: Crime doesn't pay. That's what they try to teach you in prison, and fair enough, I might even have left there one day determined to go straight except, suddenly, I was on an island in the China Sea, gazing at a beautiful girl in a yellow Bikini. So maybe it had been worth it after all. But careful now! You had to avoid thinking things like that because they'd a nasty habit of dissolving back into reality and you'd wake up right back in that stinking grey cell: five years of your life already erased, with another two to go, and all because you'd never been able to resist the puzzle of a pretty motor car!

*Push Hands (2008)*

Phil and Penny were made for each other - the only problem is they are married to other people. When they meet at a Tai Chi class they quickly realise the depth of one another's loneliness and need for a sympathetic ear. Fearful of the consequences, they go to elaborate lengths to avoid each other but their paths begin to cross with chance-defying regularity, pulling them ever more deeply into one another's confidence. Is this evidence of a mysterious power at work, or should they simply have an affair? Middle aged and married for a long time, their apparently unavoidable relationship causes them to ask serious questions of the meaning of their lives and their marriages, and finally to demand that their families respect them for who they really are. But will their families recognise them? Can they even recognise themselves?

*Push Hands* is a full length novel, complete and free to download.

*The Man Who Could Not Forget (2008)*

A Short Story by Michael Graeme (a fifteen minute read):

...I have a problem with my memory. It isn't that it ever fails me - quite the opposite in fact. Indeed, my recall of events from all but the earliest years of my life is truly photographic, so there was little doubt in my mind the woman before me now was the one who had stolen the book....

*The Magician of Monkton Pier (2009)*

Joshua is navigating his eco-boat, *The Mattie Rat* along a dark and stinking stretch of the old canal through Monkton - a city overwhelmed by gangs and gun toting militias. Joshua's seen it all before: urban decay, corruption and the death of hope.

Living on the water, and with no need for money, he's usually able to slip unnoticed through these dark town stretches and into the green beyond. But when he's tricked into picking up a pair of enigmatic hitchers, Joshua knows there's going to be trouble in Monkton.

In spite of his best efforts, the wily old Waterman is about to become an accomplice in the biggest magical stunt of all time. And if the world no longer believes in magic, well, it only has itself to blame.

*Crystal Says (2009)*

A twenty minute read: So, I'm standing in this crop circle, down in Wiltshire, England, and there's a girl dangling a crystal from the end of a chain. She's very pretty, so I'm thinking I'll have to find a way of overlooking the fact she's probably also some kind of crank if I want to take advantage of the situation here,...

*Katie's Rescue (2009)*

A thirty minute read: It felt odd, driving into Raworth, because where I come from Raworth does not exist. I know that stretch of road, you see? It dips down to the river Warfe, crosses over by the old bridge, then rises up the dale on the other side. Ordinarily there's just a steep wooded ravine and a picturesque waterfall on the river but, like I said, on this occasion, there was also Raworth,...

*The Summer of '83 (2009)*

Well, that's middle age for you: you either grow up, grow into it, accept its imperfections, its disappointments, and grow old grumbling at someone, or you ruin yourself on a mad fling with a girl half your age that you know won't last, and then you grow old alone and with only the walls to grumble at.

In the absence of any other alternatives, I know which of the two I prefer, ... but what if there was a third alternative?

*The Man Who Talked to Machines (2010)*

You have to talk to them, counsel them, mesmerise them into stillness before you set foot anywhere near them. And, though I may not be considered wholly sane, at least I have a reputation for the way I talk to machines.

*Pandora and Melanie (2010)*

My dear Richard, I apologise for the delay in writing to you but it's only now I am beginning to come to terms with the implications of your discovery, and also the news of your collaboration with the woman known to you as Pandora,...

The author joins in with the doom and gloom and predicts the end of the world, but as you might expect, there's an upside to every situation.

*Rosemary's Eyes (2010)*

A short story about life, and death: Rosemary was by the house, feeling her way among the delicate stems of a clematis, her light touch seeking the beauty of its tissue-thin blooms. She paused at our approach and looked towards me, her eyes passive, waiting. Then she reached out, inviting my embrace. And when she gathered me in her arms, she raised her lips to my ear and I felt her whispered words, hot and curling against my skin.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "Look into my eyes once more."

*The Road From Langholm Avenue (2010)*

A story of unrequited love, of unexpected love, of love lost, and found again. With divorce and redundancy looming, our hero, Tom, is left facing middle age with the feeling that he made a wrong turn somewhere in his past. Then, as if things aren't bad enough he's inexplicably haunted by memories of Rachel, a girl he had a crush on at school. With emotions bubbling up to the surface he realises the old business with Rachel has never really been forgotten and that before he can find a way through his crisis, he's going to have to journey back in search of his deepest past. Tom sets out to find Rachel and, regardless of her circumstances, do the one thing he couldn't bring himself to do a quarter of a century ago: ask her on a date. But things don't quite go according to plan. Tom discovers a lot can change in twenty five years, but that some things remain exactly the same. And when it comes to the business of unrequited love, even those closest to him are not immune. This is a full length novel - complete and free to read. It is not a teaser or a taster.

*In Durleston Wood (2010)*

A middle aged romantic, Richard Hunter has hit the buffers. Divorced and estranged from his children, he trains as a teacher and takes up a post in his home village at his old Primary School. Never more than arm's length away from a nervous breakdown and hopelessly in love with his headmistress, Richard seeks solace in his boyhood haunt: Durlleston Wood. But the wood now hides a secret, a mysterious woman kept hidden there as the apparent "property" of a villain - or so she tells him. As he learns more of her fate, and her plan to transfer her "ownership" to him, he tells himself this is the last thing he wants, while wondering if it isn't actually something he needs more than anything, that far from destroying him, rescuing her could be the one thing that stops him from going under.

This is a full length novel - not a taster or a teaser.

*The Lavender and the Rose (2010)*

Matthew Rowan finds himself drawn to a secluded valley in the English Lake District where he meets Amanda, mistress of Crag-side, a cottage nestled deep in a fold between high fells. On the surface it seems like the ideal refuge from a world gone mad, but what he doesn't know is that the house sits at the epicentre of a magnetic anomaly and has a reputation for playing strange tricks on the mind of anyone who sleeps there. There's also something peculiar about Amanda, who calls herself Beatrice and leads a secretive life dressed entirely in Victorian costume. *The Lavender and the Rose* is an unusual love story, an erotic adventure, and a spiritual odyssey. It's also a psychological mystery whose resolution will require Matthew to question his understanding of the nature of human identity, and even reality itself.

*The Singing Loch (2011)*

Scott Matthews, a disillusioned city worker, finds himself drawn into a bizarre corporate conspiracy. From the ruthless greed of '80's London, to the austere beauty of Western Scotland, Scott begins to unravel the threads of an enigma dating back centuries, while gradually falling under the spell of the mysterious and forbidden Singing Loch. Here he discovers love, enlightenment, and ultimately a truth more startling than legend.

*The Last Guests of La Maison du Lac (2011)*

Writer Richard Graves arrives at La Maison du Lac, a remote hotel in the Swiss Alps, where he hopes to find the inspiration to begin the most important story of his career. It's here he meets the enigmatic Gabrielle, a beautiful Frenchwoman rebelling against her over-protective parents.

As he comes to know more about Gabrielle he realises he must rescue her, and that the story he must write is the one he finds himself living. The story will be a far cry from anything he's attempted before, with nothing appearing to be as it seems, including Gabrielle herself.

As their story unfolds, Richard's instincts tell him that only a tragic ending is going to make sense, and what follows is a desperate battle between his desire for a lasting happiness, and the seemingly darker intent of his muse.

At times mysterious, romantic and erotic, this is a journey that will take Richard and Gabrielle literally beyond the edge of reason, where the only guarantee is that neither of them will view life, or love, the same way again.

This is a full length novel, complete and free to read. It is not a taster or a teaser.



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