

# THREE SHORT STORIES

Copyright © 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in any form or by any means mechanical, electronic, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the author.

The right of John Cable to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This is a work of fiction, and any similarity between characters and real persons either living or dead, is merely coincidental.

- 1. Howler Was a Good Age**
- 2. Don't Even Think About It**
- 3. Some Excitement for a Change**

## Howler Was a Good Age

Howler walked slowly along the road. He felt good this morning with the sun warming his back. He felt there was a spring in his step though in truth anyone watching him would have noticed the awkward gait he had developed over the more than a year since his arthritis had become really troublesome. That was really when he had to admit to himself he was old.

He walked this way every morning come rain or shine, as he had done since moving the 650 kilometres from Bangkok to Ban Pathoom. Until last September, he and Namtam did it together and he continued after she passed away. The familiar sounds, sights and smells were pleasant and he enjoyed the measured pace and timelessness of country life. He knew the sound of each exhaust as the ladies pattered past on their motorbikes on their way to sell or shop at the morning market. The mango and banana tree scents mingled with the fragrant breeze from the rice fields on the other side of the river. His tired eyes made out one or two men peddling and pumping on the public exercise machines. They too were old, but still making a token effort at fending off the ravages of time – without much success their wobbling bellies told him. He smiled to himself. He was enjoying the time he had left to him.

When he got to the rain shelter with its neatly hung newspapers for public use, the sun had climbed to a point where it was just too hot. Howler was thankful to get under the shade and he laid down on the teak decking closed his eyes and relaxed. After a bit, he crossed the road to the shop for his breakfast and then returned and lay down again. Life was good in the countryside and his reverie took him back in time.

Life had not always been easy. Howler had lost his parents in a traffic accident when he was very young and in those days an orphaned youngster just had to fend for themselves in Bangkok. Howler knew what it was like to be hungry, really hungry, but he was luckier than most. He was not bad looking, had a friendly disposition and was quite bright so he survived quite well. He actually looked back on those tough times with fond memories. The advantage of having nothing is freedom. He had never stolen or hurt anyone, but not bound by the rules and regulations that go with normal family life, he was able to take full advantage of any opportunities that presented themselves. Howler had had some really good times – especially with the ladies. Ahhh! The ladies.

Never-the-less, Howler didn't really like Bangkok. It was hot, noisy and smelly, and not a very comfortable place to live even with air-conditioning. He didn't like air conditioning much anyway. It was always too cold in the shopping malls and on the buses and didn't exist for anyone who lived at the side of the railway at Bang Sue Junction where Howler lived.

Then he met Namtam and things started to change.

When she and Howler met, Namtam lived alone, her husband having died two years since of tuberculosis. TB is considered a disease of poverty but although her husband and her were not poor, it had taken him. The couple worshipped each other and Namtam swore she would never love anyone else. She was a government officer in Or Bor Jor and lived near San Dusit University, just a couple of kilometers from Howler.

For some inexplicable reason, Namtam took a liking to Howler. They soon developed an "open relationship". Howler could stay when he liked and go when he liked although he was never allowed upstairs. Namtam liked having Howler around. It was just a small house but it still had a very "empty" feeling when she was alone. Howler found himself staying at Namtam's more and more. Namtam

started going to the shopping mall or football park with Howler. Once she even went to the waste ground at Bang Sue Junction with him. After about a year, you could safely call Howler and Namtam “an item”.

Then, not many months later, it happened. Namtam was posted.

Government officers in Thailand can be posted at any time, and whether you have any choice about it depends on who you know. For someone like Namtam, who while well liked, was not the life and soul of the office and had no “clout” at all, it was a fait-acompli. Accept the new post or resign!

With still eight years to go before early retirement was a choice, and more or less alone in the world, Namtam was over the proverbial barrel. Namtam had never been further than Pattaya and the posting was to a place she had never heard of such that she had to go to one of her schools and borrow an atlas to find out where it was. It was rural, with a capital R.

She found herself unburdening herself to Howler that very night, fully expecting him to pick up on her unhappiness. Instead Howler seemed very happy – as though she was telling him about a holiday or adventure. After a restless night, she had made her decision “I must be positive as well, like Howler.” She said to herself. So they both went.

As it turned out, the two of them found it was the best thing that could have happened to them. They both loved the country. Namtam learned to ride a motorbike so she could get to work. Howler had no interest in motorbikes, or work of course, but was quite happy to ride pillion. They had a nice house with a garden and money in the bank from the sale of the Bangkok house so Namtam took early retirement at 50 and still had a good enough pension to live on. It was an almost idyllic lifestyle together. They were known as the Bangkokians, but people accepted them and were friendly. They knew everyone.

Nothing lasts for ever of course, and Namtam had a second bout of Dengue fever and passed away. Now Howler understood, really for the first time, how Namtam had felt when she lost her husband to TB. Howler now the same way about Namtam. There could be no one else.

\* \* \* \* \*

Howler stirred, scratched at a fly which settled on his nose, turned over in the rain shelter and continued to dream of Namtam. He was convinced she was sitting in the rain shelter reading the newspaper as usual.

Puk Chantlakern lived in the house next to Namtam and Howler. Unlike their home, Puk’s was always in a state of some disrepair and a bit, how shall we say, “grubby”. The mosquito screens were ill-fitting and the creatures were particularly irritating that morning and Puk, who habitually ran out of things, had run out of coils so she went to the village shop.

“Sawadee ka Puk.”

“Sawadee ka Nim.” “Have you got any mosquito coils?”

“Yes – but only the blue ones.”

“Good, give me two boxes. I’m getting eaten alive this morning. I see Howler is in the rain shelter as usual”

“Yes. He came to the shop for his breakfast and he’s hardly stirred since.”

“It’s a great life.” Puk replied with a hint of envy.

“Yes” replied Nim. Will you take this rice over and see if he wants it?”

As Puk crossed the road with the food, she could see, or rather sense, something was different. Howler was completely still even though there were flies on his nose.

“Nim! Come quickly. It’s Howler!” she screamed.

Nim ran across the road as fast as her short legs and tubby frame would permit and looked down at Howler. “He’s dead” she said dully “Howlers dead.”

“What can we do?” asked Puk.

“Nothing we can do” said Nim. “Dead’s dead. That’s why he hasn’t moved all morning. He was a good age you know.”

“How old was he?” Puk asked.

“I don’t know, but they were here 12 years before Namtam died, so he must be 16 or 17”

“We can’t just leave him there” said Puk.

“When our Chern comes home, I’ll get him to bury Howler in Namtam’s garden.”

“It’s a good age for a dog I suppose” murmured Puk. I wonder what will happen to the house?”

## Don't Even Think About It

"It's only eight o'clock, Dave. Come back to bed. It's freezing." Sandra grumbled, as she still wanted a cuddle.

"I need to go and see Mother" Dave answered.

"Getting you to visit your Mother is like trying to get lemon juice out of a conker. Today we're alone and suddenly you want to visit your Mother."

"I'll be back in an hour." he said over his shoulder.

In 15 minutes he pulled up outside his Mother's terraced house, he waved to old Kath at her window as he headed down the alley. "Kath the curtain twitcher never misses anything" he mused as he let himself in. His Mother was sitting in her shawl just as he had left her but the pleasant warmth set his raw nerves on edge. Anxiously, he said "Hello Mother!"

He should have expected the lack of response but the warm room confused him. When he put his hand on her shoulder, there was an unnatural resistance. He'd never touched a dead body before but he knew she'd gone. A mental image of a dead turkey flashed into his mind – and out again and he felt his face smile but he didn't feel "smile." He'd thought about this, but it wasn't what he'd imagined. He reached for the phone on the table.

While he was waiting for "them" to come, his mind struggled or rather forced its way back to the Saturday night a week past.

His Mother was waxing lyrical about the cost of the gas and the coal and the electric, even though it must've been 20 years since a coal-man had visited the street. This was intertwined with news about the old lady at 27 who'd died of hypothermia and the teenager at 107 who'd just become a Mum at barely 14 and wasn't sure who the Father was and punctuated with "are you listening?" and "You don't care about your Mother." In truth, Dave didn't care much about his Mother. He didn't remember his childhood fondly and felt little affection for her although people said she was lucky to have a Son who visited her. He visited her to please Sandra, who his Mother hated. Sandra was persona non grata with a capital P in his Mum's house.

Dave browsed his tablet about a crash on the M62, a local radio presenter who'd had a baby and someone in Halifax who'd been burgled and had a painting stolen. Desperate to stop his Mother's monologue on Mrs Horridge's hysterectomy, Dave told her about the news.

"I'm not surprised" said his Mother "the world is full of ne'er do wells, robbers, and children having sex. That contraption will tell you I've been done\_in one day and it was weeks before they found me no one ever visits me."

"Sandra makes sure I visit you every week." scolded Dave.

"And don't you mention that hussy's name in my house."

"She cares about you. And there's nowt here to pinch" said Dave.

"There's my Willow china and the painting – you don't know nothing!"

"No one would want that gloomy old landscape."

"You don't know nothing" repeated his Mother. "The man as give me that was very famous" and she humphed into one of her silent moods.

Dave got up and looked at the picture. He'd known it all his life but not taken much notice. It had migrated from the hall opposite the hat stand with deer's antlers to half way up the stairs and now it lived on the living room chimney breast. He noticed that it had no glass, just a frame and the surface

wasn't smooth. There was a familiar sounding name in the corner, L S Lowry. Idly he felt the back. It felt like an old sack.

Midway through the week, Sandra and Dave were ensconced on the sofa while Sandra was flicking through the channels with one hand and "adjusting" Dave's clothing with the other.

"Are you going to your Mum's on Friday or Saturday this week?"

"Why should I?"

"Because your Mum's old and lonely and it won't hurt you."

"Why do you care about her when she hates you" said Dave.

"She don't hate me, she just thinks I stole you from her and you could've done much better."

"She can't think that. I'm 13 years older than you and we had to get married before you left school."

"She's your Mother. Move your tablet I can't get at your button. What are you looking at?"

"Just some pictures."

"Oh let me see" Sandra made a grab for the tablet

"Not that kind of picture".

"Oh" pouted Sandra and carried on with her task.

"You're too nice." said Dave.

"I'm just a thikko" said Sandra. And you will go and see your Mum."

Dave had found Lowry on the Web and remembered he'd seen them on a school trip to a museum or somewhere. They weren't like his mother's though, more like children's pictures he thought, but an image search turned up a whole gallery and idly flicking through them, he found a country view, and then another. It seemed Lowry had done hundreds of paintings and drawings, many only found after he'd died. "Could his Mother be right?" he thought, "Not just potty after all"

On Saturday, Mother was in good form. She complained about the tea Dave made her which was too hot, too strong, didn't have enough sugar and too much milk and took him so long to make that she didn't want it anyway when it arrived. She blamed Sandra's Mum because the children never came to see her and . . . .

"Bert is a stupid name for a Grandmother anyway."

"So's Gert" Countered Dave.

"Gert's short for Gertrude."

"And Bert's short . . ." but he gave up. Then his Mother started on the neighbours and the fact that she could die of hypothermia and no one would know.

Dave didn't usually say nasty things – although he thought them often enough. He hadn't brought his tablet, and his Mother's non-stop complaining was getting to him.

"If you die of hypothermia it will be because you are mean. It's sensible to sleep in the living room with the bathroom downstairs and all, but you can afford to keep the room warm."

"You'll be happy when I'm gone, and that hussy you're with. I know all she thinks about. You don't know what it's like living on a pension. You just want my money."

"We don't want your money and if you're so hard up that you can't keep warm, the money's already spent."

"There's my house and my things"

"What things?" he said . . . and then his eyes rested on the painting.

Dave tried to shut out the idea. "Don't even think about it", he told himself. What if the heating went off? Mother couldn't turn it on. With her wheelie Zimmer frame, she could do simple cooking and the like standing up and go to the toilet which was fitted for people like her, but she couldn't bend down or

reach up. People did die of hypothermia and she was 85. He tried to shut the idea out of his head.

“I’ll make you a fresh pot of tea and I’ll go Mother. Do you want anything else?”

“No thank you. I don’t like to be any trouble” came the weak reply.

Dave made the tea and started for the door.

“Check the thermostat David, you know I can’t reach it. No more than 15 degrees”.

Dave was going to say “you can have it at twenty” but he didn’t and on the way past, slid it down to zero.

The siren announced the arrival of the ambulance. Dave met them at the passage entrance and took them in through the kitchen explaining that the front room was all cluttered. They were very efficient, kind and matter of fact. They asked Dave who he was and gently told him his Mother was dead.

“We’ will wait until the police arrive. They shouldn’t be too long” they said and within ten minutes two officers arrived followed almost immediately by a detective who introduced himself as Detective Sergeant Miles. Dave answered their questions about Mother and how he found her. The detective asked if there was any sign of a break-in or anything was missing.

“Do you mind if I have a look round the house?”

When he came back to the living room he arranged for Mother to be taken to the hospital.

“Looks like a normal case of passed away in her sleep” he said, “but as she lives alone, and wasn’t ill we need a post mortem”.

“I understand” murmured Dave.

“Can we get access to the house?” he asked, “just in case we need to check anything”

Dave gave him Mother’s keys.

“Mother an art lover was she?” said the detective. Dave started and said

“No. Why?”

“She’s got a copy of a Lowry hanging on the wall.”

The ambulance left with Mother, the detective left and the police and Dave left together.

Sandra was still sleeping when Dave got home. He told her his Mum was dead and she leapt out of bed and gave him a big hug.

“You get back in bed and I’ll bring you some breakfast up and give you a nice cuddle.”

“That’s your answer to everything!” thought Dave, but he had to admit it usually worked.

Sandra and Bert looked after all the funeral details, in fact looked after everything. There were only a handful of people at the funereal, Sandra, Bert, and the two kids, Kath the curtain twitcher and the neighbours on one side , Horace and Glad,. The neighbours on the other were also persona non grata.

“Your Mum was so lucky to have you visit her.” Kath told Dave. “At least you saw her just before she passed on.”

“Yes I was the last person to see her alive.”

“Oh you weren’t.” said Kath “That was Horace. He went round about half-past-eight and your Mum was fast asleep. House was freezing he said so he turned the heating up.”

Dave looked at her. Kath never missed anything.

The funeral at Park Wood crematorium was all done in about an hour. Afterwards, Sandra sent Dave to his Mum’s house. “Make sure it’s all locked up and bring back any papers. Bring everything, electricity bills, letters leaflets books – if its paper, bring it. We don’t want to be toing and froing for nothing.”

Dave scoured the house and had collected a Lidl carrier bag full of papers when there was a knock on the kitchen door.

“Anyone in?” came the detectives voice.

“Come in” shouted Dave.

“Hello! Saw your car outside and thought I’d drop off the keys to save me a journey.”

“Thanks. I’m just clearing out all the papers.

“Yes not the easiest time when you lose your Mum” said the detective.

“Close were you?”

“Not really.” Said Dave, and for some reason looked at the picture on the chimney breast.

“Its gone!” he exclaimed.

“What’s gone?”

“The picture.”

“What picture?”

“The one on the chimney breast.”

“Well I can see it” said the policeman.

“Its not the same” said Dave.

“Yes it is” said the Detective Sergeant, “it’s a Lowry. I’d recognise a Lowry anywhere. ’E’s my favourite artist.”

Dave looked at him and muttered “that’s very odd” as a thought crossed his mind.

“There’s lots of odd things in this house, like how the thermostat can drop to zero in winter. Good job Horace Wiggins turned it up.”

“Yes I thanked him” said Dave.

“Anyway, what’s done’s done” said the detective no point in going over it for ever.

“No” said Dave “I’ll take that copy of the Lowry” and the two men’s eyes met.

When Dave got in, Sandra and Bert started to go through the papers which were mostly junk. Suddenly Sandra giggled “How would you like to see me like this, Dave?” She held up a drawing that looked to Dave like the work of an 8-year old - except it was a woman with bare pointed boobs.

“Not really” mumbled Dave glancing at Bert, who knew her daughter only too well anyway.

“Here let me see that!” Bert said. “That’s a Lowry.”

“Oh not again” thought Dave.

They found four more sketches and Bert took one to a posh art and antique shop in Huddersfield and the owner pointed her to an auction house in Manchester. The sketches, marionettes, were the full Monte and worth a bob or three when they sold at auction.

When the solicitors had finished their work, the bills had been paid and the bank accounts closed, Sandra wanted to move to Dave's Mother's house but Dave would have none of it and for once Sandra didn't get her way. “Forget it! He told her, so she did. But Dave didn't.



## Some Excitement for a Change

The temperature was climbing to thirty and even with all the balcony doors open, the heat was stifling. One of the best schools in the territory and no air-conditioning in the classrooms. The whole class were nodding off in one of Mr. John's boring English lessons. Well, not quite the whole class. One or two boys were looking out the window, but there was nothing nice to look at, it being an all boys school. To add insult to injury, some past benefactor had had the inspired idea of calling it Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Boys School.

Suddenly, Bobby Chan leapt to his feet and shouted "Ostrich!"

"I'll bury *your* head in the sand in a minute," growled Mr. John. "Try giving it a subject and a verb."

"No honestly, there's an ostrich at the back of the chapel." The whole class looked, and sure enough, there was an ostrich.

While all this was going on, Lee Pak Lun decided to have one of his frequent 'walkabouts' and headed out into the corridor. As he turned towards the canteen he came face-to-face with a lion. Well not quite face-to-face, it was just coming from the top of the stairs, but Pak Lun, for the first time in his life, was seen rushing INTO the classroom crying "Lion, Lion. Sze Sze."

Mr. John was getting really angry by now. When he looked out and saw the lion he shouted "I will not have cats disturbing my lesson." His tone didn't have quite the same effect as it had on the boys and the lion just kept coming, so he shut the door and pushed a couple of desks in front of it.

"Better shut the windows lads – we don't know what other animals may be lurking around."

"Might be Mr. Leung," said Nicholas in a loud stage whisper, but luckily John chose not to hear him. Mr Leung is *only* the headmaster!

"Whose got a mobile?" Mr. John asked.

"I have," said Abe.

"Better 'phone the police then, and tell them we have some strays."

"I can't," said Abe. "I'm not allowed to use the 'phone in the classroom."

"OK, paragon of virtue" said Mr. John. "This time you can."

"Oh no I can't," said Abe in his best panto style. You could almost see an expletive trying to squirm of the teachers mouth. None of the boys had ever heard him swear but he had taught us never to give up so we kept trying.

"Why not?" Said Mr. John.

"Because you've got MY battery in your pocket."

Well, you could see Mr. John didn't like it, but he handed over the battery and Abe delightedly dialled 999 and we waited for the police to arrive. In a few minutes, sirens were heard, and marksmen used a dart gun to shoot the two animals with tranquillizer darts. They were soon all taken away.

It turned out that a lorry taking animals from Kwai Chung Container Port to Ocean Park Zoo had overturned on Tunnel Road, and the animals had escaped. We were a bit disappointed that everything had been resolved so smoothly. Anyway, at least it was better than an English lesson, we had a good essay to "embellish" with gory details in writing skills and Abe was happy because he got his 'phone back and no sanction.