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# I

## Just Where Does The Buck Stop?

I'd just hopped across the shopping precinct, perspiration trickling down my spine, and was crouched outside Westcott's Pet Emporium, when two men staggered out from the Crown and Anchor, a local watering hole adjacent to the Pound Shop, and swayed to a halt. One grasped the sleeve of the other.

'Christ, Sean, do you see what I see?' slurred the sleeve holder, pointing at me while bringing his free hand up to rub first his right eye and then his left, shaking his head once he'd done so.

'It's a rabbit, Mick,' declared his mate, attempting to focus his bleary eyes on me, but failing miserably.

'Jesus, I know it's a rabbit, but just look at the bloody size of it.'

'Tis big, to be sure.'

'To think they sell rabbits that big,' said the sleeve holder, looking up at the pet shop sign.

'Tis enough to scare the shit out yer,' said Mick's mate, still in his clutches, both rocking from side to side.

'Hi guys,' I called out from where I was crouched in front of the shop, my voice muffled by the rabbit costume I was wearing.

'Bloody hell, Sean,' spluttered the sleeve holder. 'It can talk too.'

'What did it say, Mick?'

'Don't care what it bloody well said, Sean, I can't be having with a rabbit that talks. Especially one that size.'

'I need another drink,' exclaimed Mick's mate.

'Me too.'

Both men reeled back inside the pub from which they'd just emerged.

By now, I was feeling very hot under the collar. Well, to be more accurate, very hot under the skin of the rabbit outfit I was wearing. A rather grubby, white all-in-one costume complete with whiskers and large pink floppy ears. The heat generated from being encased in synthetic fur was fuelled by the fact that I was crouched down, attempting to hop across the pedestrian precinct of Westcott's shopping centre on a sultry, very humid July afternoon. At the same time I was being snapped by a photographer from the *Westcott Gazette*, a smart young lady called Zara, in tight jeans and a bronzed naked midriff, the latter proving an effective background to the silver stud that gleamed in her navel. A gleam that was reflected in my eye when I first spotted it. A gleam that rapidly faded as my eyes glazed and I started to keel over from heat exhaustion.

I'd spent the first few minutes hopping from the Pound Shop over to Westcott's Pet Emporium. There, I ground to a halt, swaying at eye level with a rabbit hutch, the inmate of which gave a startled twitch of his nostrils, as I snuffled through the mesh at him.

'Not bad, Paul,' shouted Zara, still clicking away. 'But would you mind hopping about a bit more as I'd like to try another angle. An action shot if possible.'

I swung round and was in the process of slowly hopping back when I heard an excited low pitched growl and someone shouting, 'Come here at once, Sammy. Sammy... no... let go... you naughty dog.' I felt myself being dragged backwards, my bum yanked from side to side. As I was pulled past the Pound Shop, I briefly glimpsed

a large basket of beach balls before being shunted helplessly into it. Out tipped its contents. Beach balls began bouncing before my bunny-eyes.

'Splendid stuff, Paul. Just the sort of shot I was looking for,' cried Zara. 'Our readers will love it.'

*What a load of balls,* was all I could think of.

The blame for my current predicament fell squarely on the shoulders of Beryl, our receptionist at Prospect House. She had first mooted the idea as a means of raising funds for WARS – Westcott's Avian Rescue Society – during a tea break in the office.

I walked in just as Eric, one of the senior partners, said, 'Sounds rather fun. I'm sure Paul would be willing to do it.'

'Willing to do what?' I asked, taking my mug of tea across the room to sit in the chair next to Eric.

'We've been discussing ways to raise funds for WARS,' he said.

'And...?'

'We've come up with the idea of a sponsored walk.'

Didn't sound like much of an original idea to me.

'Well actually,..' Beryl intervened, giving me one of her customary owl-eyed looks, 'it's more of a sponsored hop.'

'Hop?' I didn't like the way this was heading. Straight in my direction.

Eric chuckled. 'Beryl's suggesting you should dress up as a rabbit and see how many hops you can do round the shopping precinct.'

It sounded a ghastly idea. And I said so.

'What's this...?' Crystal had just breezed in, a waft of her perfume filling the air.

Eric looked up at his wife. 'We're trying to persuade Paul to do a sponsored hop as a rabbit.'

'Why... Paul, that sounds terrific fun.' Crystal turned her cornflower blue eyes of a Julie Andrews lookalike on me – eyes that when I first started at Prospect House, had me dreaming of sallying on to the Downs with her as my Maria, me as a little goatherd, dancing silly-billy to the tune of *The Sound of Music*.

Now it seems I was being asked to sally round Westcott's shopping precinct to the accompaniment of... what, I wondered – *Run Rabbit Run*?

I couldn't imagine Crystal, as the other senior partner in the practice, slipping into such a costume – well actually I could – an image of her in Bunny Girl gear popped up – fluffy ears nestling in her copper curls and bobtail mounted on her cute little derriere.

'It's a great idea,' said Crystal. 'Don't you think...? Paul...? Are you listening?'

'What? Sorry... was miles away.'

I was suddenly conscious of the funny looks all three were giving me and quickly hopped out of my reverie.

Desperately, I tried to find some way out of the hole into which I felt I was falling – rather like the white rabbit in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Was Beryl about to organise a Mad Hatter's tea party in front of the Pound Shop? With Crystal as my Queen of Hearts? Eric would be well suited as the Cheshire Cat. And Beryl? Well, with the way I currently felt about her, there was no need for her to have a costume – she'd make a perfect Gryphon just as she was, even in her customary attire – black trousers and top, black cardigan draped across her shoulders.

But with the odds stacked against me, I had no choice but to succumb to Beryl's idea of donning a rabbit outfit and bobbing round Westcott's shopping precinct, making a complete fool of myself.

'It will come as second nature to you,' reasoned Beryl.

*Thanks Beryl. Love you too.*

As to finding a rabbit outfit to wear, Beryl had already thought of that.

One of the practice's clients, Tim Hutchinson, had such a costume. As Beryl told me, he and his wife, Anna, were employed by the local council to act as guides for visitors to Westcott's Wonderland – one of the tourist attractions down on the seafront – Tim dressed up like a rabbit – Anna trussed up like a chicken. Part of the Wonderland theme, apparently.

'Why can't you ask Tim to do this rabbit thing?' I whinged.

'Because he's getting on a bit and his knees aren't up to it,' explained Beryl. 'So he wouldn't be able to hop about much.'

'Besides, with you doing it,' Crystal interjected, 'it means there's be a bit of free advertising for the practice. That can't be bad can it?'

'How long am I supposed to make a fool of myself?' I asked.

Beryl shrugged. 'Depends.'

'Depends on what?' I persisted.

'How long you can last out.'

Not a very reassuring answer.

In the event, I survived just over half an hour. More than most of the people who sponsored me thought I would.

Still, some funds were raised for WARS.

And Zara managed to get the picture she wanted. One of me being hauled past the Pound Shop by a golden retriever with his teeth in my scut. The shot was featured on the front page of the *Westcott Gazette*. As I suspected, the editor, Finley O'Connor, had great fun concocting suitable headlines – *Rabbiting On for Charity*. And below it, in lower casing – *Local vet, Paul Mitchell, doesn't get off scut-free*.

My association with that rabbit outfit – or at least with its owner, Tim Hutchinson – didn't stop there.

'I say, Paul,' Eric remarked one afternoon just as I was about to start evening surgery, 'there's a very large rabbit and an enormous chicken sitting in the waiting room for you to see them.'

He saw my incredulous look. 'No honest, there is,' he insisted, with a wicked chuckle. 'You'll soon see.'

I did see, but not before I heard.

A commotion suddenly erupted from the waiting room. The sound of dogs growling, voices raised, a 'Give it here.' Then, 'Let go.' Finally, 'Drop it Jasper, drop it.'

What the heck was going on? I rushed through to find two Labradors executing a tug of war over a large rubber chicken's head, its red wattles flapping wildly from side to side as the dogs fought, in a frenzy of growling, to wrench it from each other. Across the room, a spaniel was running round in gleeful circles, vigorously shaking a white rabbit's head clamped in his jaws. Between them, a headless chicken and a headless rabbit were flapping and hopping to and fro in their attempts to regain possession of their heads which, with the aid of the dogs' owners, they eventually succeeded in doing.

The rabbit I recognised as Tim Hutchinson who, when everything and everyone had eventually settled down, introduced me to the chicken – his wife, Anna.

Meanwhile, the reason for their appointment was sitting quietly in a cardboard carton on a chair, nonchalantly washing its whiskers.

Tim explained that having just finished their afternoon stint at Wonderland, they'd popped in on the off chance they could be seen. Beryl had said that though Crystal was solidly booked right through to six o'clock (nothing new there – she had many admiring clients), Paul had got plenty of spare appointments.

Bless you, Beryl.

With their rabbit and chicken heads rescued, it was a rabbit that Tim and Anna lifted from its box on to my consulting table minutes later.

'He's called Munchkin,' said Anna.

'Though he's not doing much munching at the moment,' said Tim. 'That's why we've brought him in.'

I half-expected to be looking at a white rabbit similar to the suit Tim was wearing, but the one I was presented with was far smarter in appearance. Of medium size, but slender build, he did have a short-haired white body but with erect black ears, a black nose, and paws and tail that were also black. But it was to his eyes that I was drawn. Pink and somewhat disturbing in their intensity.

As to breed? I didn't have a clue, not being that familiar with rabbits – apart from dressing up as one. In fact, in doing that, I'd surprised myself as I have this irrational

phobia about lagomorphs. Something to do with a surfeit of Beatrix Potter bedtime reading as a boy. The endless doings of Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail. Or maybe it was the Tiggly-Winkle doings suggested – but never quite put into practice – by my Uncle Benjamin, sitting at the end of my bed with a lustful look in his eye, whenever he babysat for my parents.

It was Tim who told me the breed. ‘It’s a Himalayan,’ he said. ‘They’ve a super temperament.’

‘And Munchkin here is one of the best,’ interjected Anna. ‘Well at least Tim thinks so, don’t you?’

‘No question,’ he answered and bent over and kissed the rabbit’s head. He briefly informed me that he was a bit of a rabbit fancier and had quite a collection at home.

‘Whereas I’m more into chickens,’ confessed Anna.

Maybe that’s why she’d opted to wear the chicken outfit in preference to being a bunny. No problem. Everyone to their own.

And Munchkin’s problem?

‘It’s his teeth,’ said Tim. ‘I’m afraid they’ve got a bit overgrown. Guess you might have to clip them.’

While Munchkin sat quietly hunched on the table, Tim gently raised the rabbit’s head using his thumb and forefinger and levered open his mouth. He’d guessed right.

Clipping of both upper and lower incisors was required.

Munchkin had an undershoot jaw and the malocclusion had allowed his lower incisors to grow up past his upper ones without getting ground down by them – the usual means by which they stayed in shape. They were now digging into the inside of his upper lip almost pushing into his nostrils.

I ran a finger along the edges of his cheek teeth, checking to see if the malocclusion had caused any problems there. Often spikes of enamel develop which can rub against the mucous membranes of the cheeks and cause ulceration. But no. No such spikes could be felt.

So it was a simple job of clipping the front incisors and advising Tim to bring Munchkin in on a regular basis to have his teeth checked and trimmed.

Before leaving, Tim apologised profusely for the scene he and Anna had caused. I reassured him that it was of no consequence. Already forgotten.

‘And by the way,’ added Anna, ‘if you ever fancy visiting Wonderland, do let us show you round. We’re there on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday afternoons and all day Saturdays.’

‘Thanks. I may take you up on that,’ I replied, in what I hoped was an enthusiastic tone of voice. But Westcott’s Wonderland didn’t appeal. For a young man in his mid-twenties I couldn’t see there being anything there to attract him unless the thought of fulfilling a childhood dream by sitting on a giant toadstool pretending to be a goblin or whirling round in an over-sized teacup was a turn-on. It certainly wasn’t my cup of tea. So I never did visit Wonderland and meet up with the Hutchinsons there.

But I did meet Anna again when she brought some chickens into my surgery – though this time she was not dressed as one.

Beryl had booked them in for me.

Anna was alone. No Tim this time.

She explained his absence by saying she was more interested in chickens than he was. Loved the idea of having freshly laid eggs every day.

She took after my dad in that respect. He’d been keeping six Rhode Island Reds for many years in the back garden of the bungalow in Bournemouth. It was a sloping garden rising up from the patio and at the top of it were a couple of apple trees. Around one of them he’d built a wooden structure to house his small flock. It was more fortress than hen-house, tiered with a ladder running up to the first floor, where there were three nest boxes, above which, on a second floor, were roosting perches. All interwoven between the branches of the apple tree. A masterclass in innovation. And his hens seemed to enjoy a contented life up there, the product of their contentment being a clutch of brown eggs every day, each one carefully dated in fine pencil by Dad before

being placed in date-order on the rack inside the fridge door. Heaven forbid if you used one out of the order in which they had been laid – in the fridge that is – though I suspect if he'd been able to monitor the individual bird responsible for production of a particular egg that would have been noted as well. Dad also kept an exercise book recording the number laid each day; and like his birds, he meticulously kept it up to scratch.

I was a little apprehensive about seeing Anna's birds and could happily have chickened out. It wasn't so much the thought of examining the birds, more the mess that might be incurred in doing so. Feathers and droppings on the loose seemed likely. And that would not please Mandy, our senior nurse.

A few months back, I'd treated a sheep in my consulting room. It had scattered piles of droppings, a trail of them leading through from the waiting room. Mandy – a stickler for cleanliness which sometimes bordered on the obsessive – had been sent into a complete tizz. Metaphorical feathers flew then, so I could anticipate a ruffling of Mandy's should I have to admit the chickens for any reason – let alone the foul language it might generate.

The birds arrived in a large cardboard box which Anna heaved on to the consulting table. 'My four Ms,' she declared.

'Yes. Your four hens,' I replied.

'No, Paul, they're my four Ms,' she firmly corrected me. It was the way she said it, combined with the jerking forward of her neck, chin thrust out, that I suddenly had visions of Tim as a hen-pecked husband.

Once she had untied the string wrapped round the box and lifted the lid, four heads promptly popped up and eight beady eyes stared at me quizzically. Anna tapped each one on the head. 'Martha, Mavis, Matilda and Mabel. My four Ms.'

'Er... yes. I see,' I mumbled. Though I didn't really. Each bird looked identical to me. Red comb and wattles. Reddish-brown plumage. I hazarded a guess as to their breed. 'Rhode Island Reds?' That was a mistake if ever there was.

'Warrens.'

Once more put in my place. 'So, Anna, what seems to be the problem with your Warrens?'

Anna pushed a lock of grey hair behind her ear before answering. 'Martha's moulting heavily. Much more than normal. And the others are also losing quite a lot of feathers.'

The chickens jostled against each other, softly clucking, their heads jerking to and fro as they peered over the edge of the box. I couldn't remember which was Martha, took pot luck and lifted one out.

'That's Mavis,' said Anna.

Mavis got bundled back in amidst a cloud of feathers. I lifted up another.

'Matilda,' I was informed.

I dropped her back. The third squawked indignantly as I hoisted her up.

'You've got Mabel.'

I lifted out the last one. 'Martha?'

'Correct.'

The hen flapped her wings wildly. In the torrent of down that erupted into the air, I sneezed and lost my grip on her. She sailed on to the consulting table, skidded across the smooth surface like a drunken ice skater, careered against the side of the box and knocked it off the table as she disappeared over the edge. The other three birds tumbled out of the box, clucking in alarm.

As if a quilt had suddenly burst, the room filled with feathers. In a blinding snowstorm of down, Anna and I careered around attempting to round them up. Suddenly the consulting room door shot open. Through the fog of feathers, I saw the disapproving face of Mandy and heard her loud 'Tut' above the squawks of the hens before the door slammed shut again. So no offer to re-box them. Thank you, Mandy. That decided it. It was me getting my feathers ruffled, not her. In a hissy fit, I decided

then and there to admit the hens for further examination and make damn sure it was Mandy who would assist.

With the chickens tipped into a spare kennel, I watched them strut round, their heads twisting to one side as they eyed their reflections in the steel feeding bowls. I then I called Mandy. She appeared, her crisp, white apron crackling against her fresh, green uniform. I pointed to moth-eaten Martha.

‘See that rather scraggy one over there? Could you please catch her and bring her through to the prep room.’

Mandy’s eyes narrowed. Her lips pursed. A look of thunder clouded her face. ‘I’ll get Lucy to help you.’

I shook my head. ‘No... No... She’s only a trainee nurse. You’re so much more experienced at dealing with difficult animals. You do it please, if you don’t mind.’

Her black look showed she clearly did mind. I smiled sweetly at her and then quickly shot out to the prep room, where I stood listening to the squawks, swear words and rattle of kennel bars as Martha was rounded up. Mandy eventually staggered in, the bird pinned tightly under her arm. She was breathing heavily, her apron creased and smeared, her hair smothered in feather dust. She blew a feather off her lip and levered Martha on to the table, her hand gripping the bird’s legs together while her elbow ensured one wing stayed wedged in place while the other was stretched out for me to examine the under-surface. All very expertly done. I have to admit, Mandy did know her stuff. Only I felt perilously close to being the one she’d stuff. When I had finished my examination of Martha’s plumage and skin, I allowed Mandy to scoop the bird back up.

‘All done then?’ she said with a thin smile.

‘Er... no. I’d like you to catch up the other hens for me.’ If looks could kill, the one Mandy shot me would have had me plucked, stuffed and ready for roasting – especially if she knew that I’d already sussed out what the problem was. But I thought it worth the effort – well Mandy’s effort anyway – to check the other three hens just to make sure.

Her lips narrowed until they almost disappeared into her chin.

‘Very well, if you insist.’

I nodded.

And yes, they had the same problem. Lice. I’d seen a few crawling through Martha’s feathers and had spotted several clusters of nits.

When Anna collected her chickens and the medication to fumigate the hen-house and treat the birds, she presented me with six dark brown, speckled eggs.

That made me feel guilty about how I had treated Mandy. She hadn’t really deserved it. Not nice of me. Rather juvenile in fact. So I decided I needed to make amends. Apologise somehow without losing too much face. So that lunch-time, I went down to the newsagent at the bottom of the Green, next to Bert’s Bakery, and bought her a box of chocolates. I left this in the tea-room; and with it, a card apologising for being such a nitwit.

After all said and done, like it or not, Mandy really did rule the roost. And that was the problem. It was sometimes difficult to tolerate her rather bossy manner. It had added to the difficulties I’d had with Lucy, affecting my relationship with the junior nurse over the past year. She’d constantly felt she was the underdog. Never fully getting the appreciation she deserved – in her work – clashing with Mandy: and in her love life – clashing with me. However, recently it seems she had gradually found her feet in the hospital. Her working relationship with Mandy had stabilised. They now respected each other’s virtues – and worked better together as a result.

As to Lucy’s relationship with me? How did she view that? Difficult to tell. She kept very much to herself when working in my presence. Polite. Respectful. Doing her duty. No indication of her feelings towards me. Perhaps she had none. They most likely died the moment she left Willow Wren – the practice cottage we’d shared for seven months – and moved back into the flat over the hospital. Since then, I’d found solace elsewhere. In the arms of Jodie, Crystal and Eric’s daughter. Which was fun but I suspected only



temporary. Jodie was the sort of girl who had itchy feet. And was likely to do a runner soon – find herself another soulmate.

And then?

Then, maybe I'd find out what was truly missing in my life.

Could it still be Lucy?

The coming months would tell.



## **This Little Piggy Went...**

**O**ne scorching August afternoon – a Thursday – my half-day off from duty – I was cocooned in a bed of flattened yellow corn on the edge of a vast swathe of wheat that undulated in sheets of rustling swirls across the Downs to the north of Westcott – Downs that heat-haze shimmered under an ultramarine sky. It was a beautiful scene of pastoral bliss.

I was alone – Jodie having wanted to go over to Brigstock with some old six-form friends of hers and spend the time dipping in and out of the sea whilst, in between, sunbathing on the resort’s pebbly beach – a beach which would have been packed sardine-like with masses of other sun worshippers intent on doing the same. Not for me. I wanted some peace and quiet. A contemplative time to myself. Even if it meant missing out on a rough and tumble in the corn with Jodie.

But I wasn’t to get it – the peace and quiet, I mean.

I’d dropped my rucksack containing a couple of ham sandwiches wrapped in cling film, a packet of peanuts and a bottle of water, dragged off my T-shirt, kicked my sandals to one side, and hesitated for a moment, deliberating whether to yank my shorts and boxers off as well. The spot I’d chosen was off the beaten track, some way from the South Downs Trail with its steady trickle of walkers.

Stretched out naked, I’d be alone, out of sight, and could commune with Mother Nature in whichever way I desired.

Be as one with her.

I could already imagine her saying, ‘Feel the warmth of my fingers running down the length of your body.’ Mmm...

‘Allow me to wrap you in my sultry embrace.’

Mmm...

‘Lie back, Paul,’ she’d whisper. ‘Let my hot breath blow over you.’

Yes...

‘Lick your nipples...’

Yes... oh yes.

‘Course down your torso and swirl round your...’

I stripped immediately and sank back into the flattened corn with a deep sigh of expectation, waiting for Mother Nature to do her thing.

I don’t know what it is about nude sunbathing but it does seem that whenever you bring out something normally kept under wraps, it makes it easier to bare your soul at the same time. And boy, did I need to bare mine. I’d been going through a rough patch of late, what with the heavy work load at Prospect House and my fall-out with Lucy. I felt as threshed as the wheat surrounding me would be in a couple of weeks’ time.

Not that I made a habit of habitually exposing myself whenever I reached an emotional low. And definitely not in the company of others wishing to feel liberated from the incumbencies of modern living. That sling-your-hook-zip-toggles, let-it-all-hang-out mentality wasn’t for me. A no-go area. Rather like the section of pebbly beach that the council has cordoned off over in Brigstock for those that wished to air their differences in a stiff sea breeze. Not a place I’d want to hang out in. Bit like being in a geometry lesson: questions of shape, size and relative position with one’s protractor encompassing the scene, assessing the variety of triangles from an obtuse angle. All ‘pi’ in the sky as far as I was concerned.

But here, up on the Downs, in solitary splendour, I felt at ease with myself. Pythagoras eat your heart out.

Above me arced a dazzling ultramarine sky.  
The brown, whistling whirling of a skylark.  
Tiny white dots of cloud.  
*White fluffy clouds in a cluster.*  
*Hanging on a breeze to dry.*

Those words hung like those clouds in my brain. Drifted through as murmured memories. I closed my eyes and drifted with them. They danced to a tune that sent me spinning back to the time when my gran, who lived with us when I was in my early teens, used to sing one particular song over and over again until it became etched in my mind. A song by one of her favourite singers of the sixties, the light entertainer, Max Bygraves. He'd croon:

*'Up there the sun is a big yellow duster*  
*Polishing the blue, blue sky.'*

I could hear my gran joining in, her voice crystal clear even though she was, back then, in her early nineties.

*'Say what you will, the countryside is still...'* she'd chortle.  
*'The only place where I could settle down...'*

Oink.

*'Troubles there are so much rarer...'*

Oink... Oink...

*'OUT of town...'*

Plop... Plop... The liquid sound of evacuating faeces.

Oh shit.

Through my drowsy stupor, eyelids struggling to open, I became aware of a twitching disc – a snout – the wrinkled end of which looked like one of those instruments you use to clear blocked drains. Behind it, a pair of golden eyes glinted, and folded black ears drooped down each side of a very black porcine face.

There was another loud serenade of oinks and plops with a few fruity farts thrown in as the pig that had emerged from the corn did a rumba with my rucksack and tossed it into the air. Peanuts showered out to be rapidly hoovered up with further oinks of pleasure. The creature then swung its snout round and started snuffling between my thighs.

'Oh, no you don't missy,' I muttered and rolled out of reach to scabble to my feet.

The pig then switched to executing a fandango. Like a flamenco dancer, head thrown back, rose clenched tightly in teeth. Only instead of a rose, it was my boxer shorts dangling from her mouth, rhythmically being waved from side to side.

The pig was a medium-sized porker. A 'saddleback'. Female. Black with the characteristic band of sparse white hair over her shoulders and running down both front legs.

'Now, my girl, where the hell have you come from?' I asked myself as her black tail knotted up into a question mark of her own.

As I stood pondering on the porker, looking for an answer, she dropped my boxers – no doubt disappointed at finding no nuts in them (mine were now safely secreted, commando-style, within hastily donned shorts) – and emitted a long, ear splitting squeal. The sound was like a group of bandy-legged flamenco dancers with dodgy castanets. It certainly rattled me.

I began to have an inkling of what pig I was dealing with here.

The Rymans' Miss Piggy. I'd had to attend to her when she'd had difficulty in farrowing. She was a known escapologist. The Houdini of the porcine world. In fact her owners, Jill and Alex Ryman, were rather proud of their pig's capabilities to up sticks – or rather up fence poles, paddock rails and electric netting – in her quests for pastures new. A pig has a great digging and uprooting tool in the disc of its nose. And Miss Piggy was very adept at putting her nose to good use, trenching across the paddocks and out under the fences surrounding them. The POWs of Stalag Luft III, famed for their

abilities to escape that 2nd World War camp, had nothing on her tunnelling techniques.

Okay. The question now was, 'What do I do next?'

A plan of action was required.

I gingerly stepped forward again and snatched up my rucksack. Mobile phone in zipped inner pocket was still in situ. Good. I could phone the practice and get Beryl to contact the Rymans and see if their Miss Piggy had gone walkabout. Within five minutes I'd verified that this was indeed the case, and that one of the Rymans would meet me in the car park at the foot of the Downs here as soon as they could. Mind you, there was still the problem of getting Miss Piggy home, whether from up here or down in the car park.

I decided that problem would be best tackled in the car park, assuming I could entice Miss Piggy down. The ham sandwiches in their cling film wrapping were still squashed in the bottom of the rucksack. Excellent.

I pulled them out and waved them at the sow.

'Let's get moving eh, Miss Piggy?'

And move she did.

She suddenly transformed into a black barrage balloon.

A jet of brown, foul smelling sludge burst from her back end, propelling her forward as she launched herself at me. A pig on the loose in every sense of the word.

I managed to side-step her to snatch up my muck-splattered T-shirt and sandals but in the process trod in a very smelly pile of shit, feeling it squirt warmly up between my toes. And the smell. No need for me to raise a stink. Miss Piggy was doing it very nicely on my behalf, thank you.

I lurched along the side of the cornfield, with her close on my heels, prancing from side to side, squealing with apparent delight. I know pigs are highly intelligent and have plenty of character. They make people want to laugh out loud with joy in the way they can skitter along on their tiptoe hooves, tails perkily coiled. But this porcine really did seem to be hamming it up at my expense. And I felt it was no laughing matter.

Once at the top of the field and on to the white chalk path that ran alongside it, I stopped and leaned against a fence post, exhausted from the heat, perspiring heavily. Miss Piggy also stopped and with a grunt, poked the bottom of my rucksack. A slice of ham was clearly required and I duly obliged. 'Well cured, honey roast, no added water,' I muttered as I watched her gulp the sandwich down with further grunts of satisfaction.

I slid my feet into my slippery, smelly sandals and decided the T-shirt was just too rancid to wear; but with it draped over my shoulders to keep some of the sun off my back, I started to work my way down the steep track.

Miss Piggy hesitated at the top of the path above me, her head swinging from side to side, haloed by the sun behind her. She raised a polished trotter and set it down tentatively on top of a rut. The chalk, dry and crumbly from the heat of the past few days, collapsed under her weight. Her other front trotter flailed in the air, her back legs caved in under her, and suddenly 200 kilos of pork was spinning rapidly down the path towards me. Help! I was about to be flattened by a massive ham roll. There was an urgent need to save my bacon, if not hers.

I've never seen a rotating pig except a hog roast on a spit. So this revolving sow was a revelation as a ball of trotters, snout, tail and ears spun past me and plummeted into a bank of brambles at the bottom of the path. I slithered down to where Miss Piggy lay on her side, flanks heaving like bellows, silent. Surely she must have injured herself? A fractured leg? Internal injuries? But apparently not, as with an almighty snort, she flailed her trotters in the flattened brambles, before heaving herself to her feet, looking none the worse for wear, apart from a graze across her shoulder which oozed a bit of blood. Amazing.

Amazing too that she hadn't forgotten there was another ham sandwich in the offering, since she trotted up to me with a snuffling snort as if to say, 'How about it then?'

So with sandwich held high out of snout reach, the two of us negotiated the remaining stretch of narrow footpath with its banks of brambles and nettles either side. Eventually we stumbled out on to the small gravelled area where I was parked and, in the process, scaring a border collie that had been directing a stream of urine over the front tyre of my car. He raced back to his owners, a middle-aged couple having a picnic next to their silver Toyota, a blanket spread over the grass. Picnic basket open. A Thermos. Two china cups. Two plates – a pork pie on each one. How apt. And too irresistible for Miss Piggy who scooted across and made short work of the pies while the couple barricaded themselves in their car, and looked out aghast as the sow noisily hoovered the blanket and cracked crockery under trotter.

Still, it gave me the chance to unlock my car and swing the boot open where I quickly rummaged through the mountain of vet gear – boots, smock, black bag, plastic gloves – to unearth a rope suitable to throw round the pig's neck and harness her. Well that was my intention. But not Miss Piggy's. No way.

Even though she had her snout buried in a plastic tub of Tesco trifle as I approached, it wasn't a sufficient distraction to prevent her from wheeling away from me, and trotting off down the lane towards the main road, carton wedged firmly on her nose.

Oh Lord, I thought, that's all I need. A pile-up on the main road. Pork chops and spare ribs all round.

It was the collie that came to my rescue. He'd been watching intently, crouched, shoulders down, head forward. Suddenly he swiftly glided forward and slid past Miss Piggy, turning a few feet in front of her to block her way. With a squeal she ground to a halt, flapped her ears and stamped the ground crossly with her front trotters. Clearly the collie had put her snout out of joint. He, meanwhile, had very slowly advanced forward, placing one paw stealthily in front of the other. With another sharp bellow of disgruntlement, Miss Piggy sprang, turned, and came trotting furiously back up the lane, the collie snapping at her hocks.

I was smiling, watching all of this. Great fun. Highly entertaining. But I felt the grin fall from my face as the sow was hustled past me, herded down the side of my car to the open back, where a nip to her ankles made her spring up and land with a crash in the boot. The force of her landing caused the boot to drop shut with a sharp click.

The couple emerged from their car, bemused, bewildered and very bothered. Both were extremely apologetic.

'So, so sorry,' said the man. 'Shep's never done anything like that before.'

His wife smiled weakly. 'At least you've got your piggy back. She seems quite settled.' She nodded in the direction of my car where Miss Piggy, having tossed some of my gear around to make a nest, had sunk in to it, head resting over the front seat. Great.

Just at that moment, a green, mud-splattered Land Rover swept into the car park and out jumped Jill Ryman closely followed by her two children, Emily and Joshua, both still in their green and grey school uniforms. Miss Piggy gave a friendly 'Oink' as Jill and the kids ran up to my car.

'Where did you find her?' asked Jill, who, despite her fuse-wire build, had no difficulty in helping me to haul Miss Piggy out of the boot. The sow rubbed her left shoulder against Jill's overalls and gave another contented grunt as Jill pulled a halter out of her pocket and slipped it over Miss Piggy's head.

'Up there.' I pointed to the chalk path winding down the side of the Downs.

'We've been mithsing you,' lisped Emily, peering at Miss Piggy through metal-rimmed glasses, while reaching out to scratch the sow's right shoulder. 'You're a naughty girl. But we still love you to bits.'

Joshua, the older of the two kids, at around nine years of age, stood back, his dark eyes fixed on the sow, his face serious.

'She'll come a cropper one of these days,' he said.

His words were prophetic.

A few days later there was a call through to the hospital.

'Alex Ryman's on the phone,' said Beryl, cupping her hand over the receiver, 'Miss Piggy's had an accident and is in a bad way. Can he bring her in straightaway?'

I was skimming through my list of Monday morning appointments – booked solid until 10.30 – followed by the customary crop of routine ops – three cat speys, a dog castration and a couple of dentals. Not much leeway to squeeze in a pig. But I knew the Rymans wouldn't have bothered us unless it was something serious.

I nodded. 'Tell him "Yes" but he might have to wait.'

Alex screeched into the hospital car park in his battered Land Rover twenty minutes or so later. To make it in that time from Chawcombe must have meant a high speed drive over the Downs. So things were serious. That 'serious' was etched over his face as he tore in, his tangle of coal-black hair and wild dark eyes adding to the sense of panic that immediately enveloped reception.

'Okay, Alex, let's go and take look,' I said, and dashed out with him to the car park where he threw open the back of the Land Rover. I peered in expecting to see the black-coated shape of Miss Piggy. But what I saw was a lump of sand. A breathing large lump of sand, piled in one corner.

'Yes, it's Miss Piggy,' said Alex. 'She got out this morning and wandered up to the gravel pits.'

'And... don't tell me... she fell in.'

Alex nodded glumly. 'Some of the guys working there managed to drag her out. But she was in a bad way. And as you can see, still is.'

I clambered into the back of the Land Rover and edged over to the sand-covered sow. She was lying on her right side, neck and front legs stretched out, making soft bubbling snorts with every shallow breath she took; and completely oblivious to my approach. I ran my hand down her bristly flank. It was cold and clammy. All pointed to a very shocked pig. But that was not all.

'Reckon she's done her hock in,' muttered Alex. 'Looks all twisted.'

I'd already seen that her uppermost left hind leg was sticking out at a funny angle from the point of the hock down. It didn't look good. Not good at all.

As if Alex was reading my mind, he said, 'Is she a goner?'

'Well, she's in a pretty bad state.' My voice trailed off, not wishing to admit to the fact. At the same time Emily's voice echoed in my head from when I'd last seen her with Miss Piggy. 'We love you to bits,' she'd said. I turned to Alex. 'Let's see what we can do.'

I levered myself back out of the Land Rover just as Mandy and Lucy appeared at the top of the steps, holding between them the hospital's portable stretcher – a canvas sheet supported by two poles threaded through the sides. They'd obviously been alerted by Beryl to the emergency and, no doubt, had everything geared up, ready and waiting for whatever I decided to do. It was on occasions like this that the two nurses really did pull together.

With the stretcher rolled out on the ground behind the Land Rover, we all braced ourselves for the task ahead – to lever the recumbent Miss Piggy out.

'Look, I tell you what,' said Alex, 'why don't you two girls get in the front and push while Paul and I pull from the back.'

With the sow being the piggy in the middle, I thought as Mandy and Lucy did as instructed and leaned over the front seats to begin pushing against Miss Piggy's back. Alex wrapped his arm over the sow's head and began easing her backwards, with me at her rear end, hands grasping her right leg above the hock, slowly hauling in the same direction. Inch by inch we eased her back, the two nurses clambering over the seats to continue pushing as we got her to the tailgate, ready to lever her down on to the stretcher. All the time, there was barely any recognition from the inert Miss Piggy that she was being pushed and shoved – other than an occasional muted squeal, just audible above her stentorian breathing.

'Now for the difficult bit,' I gasped, pausing to catch my breath.

'Shouldn't be a problem, there's four of us,' declared Mandy giving me one of her customary hard stares. Lucy remained silent though I saw the slight pursing of her lips as she caught my eye and I guessed what she was thinking.

Still, though I might have made a pig's ear of my relationship with her, this was no time to reflect on it with a real live porker to contend with. Well, a pig that was just alive. And in need of prompt treatment to ensure she stayed that way.

With as much grunting as Miss Piggy might have made, the four of us managed to roll her out and ease her down on to the stretcher. Then with each of us crouched down, holding one end of the poles, Alex commanded, 'One... two... three... four. Hey, ho, up she goes.'

And up we went, knees straightening, arms bending. Over the drive, up the steps, into reception to receive a squirt of 'Summer Bouquet' from Beryl, then stagger on past her and down into the X-ray room.

It only needed one radiograph of the hock to reveal what I had suspected. A dislocation. A separation of the end of the tibia from the collection of small bones that made up the hock.

'No breaks that I can see,' said Mandy staring over my shoulder at the X-ray plate on the viewing screen. She pointed to the tarsals below the point of the hock. 'They seem fine.'

'Er... yes, they do,' I said, forcing back a bubble of irritation.

'Crystal would probably splint it. Will you?' Mandy asked.

Another bubble popped.

'Uhm... probably,' I reluctantly agreed.

'Crystal would definitely.'

Two more bubbles popped in rapid succession.

This was just typical of Mandy. The same scenario had cropped up many times in the past twelve months. Crystal this... Crystal that... Dr Crystal Sharpe BVetMed, BSc, PhD, MRCVS – the driving force in the practice. The one with a firm grip on the wheel. If you dared stand your ground with her you were likely to be flattened, with a large tyre mark over you to show for it. So I soon learnt to tread carefully and attempted to keep my distance from any situation that was likely to cause road rage. But it could be difficult when it involved Mandy. She worshipped the ground Crystal drove on and like today was forever telling me what her boss would do when a challenging case arose.

Bubble... Bubble... Bubble... I was fuming now.

Alex cleared his throat. 'I'll leave you to it,' he muttered.

'I'll let you know how things go,' I called out to his rapidly disappearing back.

Meanwhile, Lucy too had vanished, slipping quietly away to the prep room.

'So?' Mandy turned to me. She did have soft, damson eyes with attractively long eyelashes. But they looked more like sour grapes when she was in one of her moods. Like now.

I hesitated a moment and then said, 'I think plastering the hock will do the job.'

Two spots of red appeared on Mandy's cheeks and her mouth twisted open.

She was about to speak when a voice boomed out from the door. 'Beryl tells me we've a porker with a problem.' In bounced Eric, his shirt half-out of his baggy trousers, his semi-bald head pink and gleaming. He rubbed his hands together. 'So this is Miss Piggy.' He looked down at the prostrate pig. Then up at the X-ray of her hock.

'Ah, yep. A dislocation. So you'll be plastering her no doubt?'

He glanced at my glowering face. Then at Mandy's pinched one. 'Whoops... have I said something wrong?' He glanced back down at Miss Piggy again. 'Best if we get her shunted into the prep room eh?' He grabbed two ends of the poles, Mandy and I grabbed the other two ends, and between us we slid the stretcher through to next door where we found Lucy had set out the plastering kit. No sign of any splints. Good girl.

'Okay. Need to get her knocked out now. Yep? What do you reckon she weighs?'

'A good 150 kilos plus,' I suggested.

'Easily. But let's err on the side of caution and go for that.' Eric turned to Mandy, holding out his right hand to take the bottle of anaesthetic solution she was offering.

He peered at the label as she said, 'It's what Crystal would use.'

'I'm not Crystal,' he snapped, clicking his fingers impatiently. 'Ketamine on its own's not going to be very helpful here, is it Paul?' He looked at Mandy as he spoke. 'It won't



allow the muscles to relax sufficiently for us to yank the hock back into place.’ He continued to stare at Mandy as her cheeks went redder and redder. ‘So get us some Diazepam would you? We’ll mix up a cocktail.’

Did I detect a slight flounce of the shoulders as Mandy turned sharply and headed over to the medicines cabinet, unlocking it to remove the bottle of muscle relaxant Eric had requested.

I don’t know about the pig, I thought, but a shot of Diazepam might have done Mandy some good. She needed relaxing. Boy... was she uptight.

While we waited for the injected cocktail to take effect, Mandy and Lucy washed down Miss Piggy’s rear, rinsing off the sand, paying particular attention to the damaged left leg, patting it dry once they had finished.

‘Okey-dokey,’ said Eric, stuffing his shirt in the waistband of his trousers. ‘I’ll leave you to it, Paul. If you need any help, just give me a shout. I’ll be up in the office.’

Right, I thought. Here we go, Paul. Pull-a-pig time.

With Mandy and Lucy positioned behind Miss Piggy’s back – Mandy’s arms were linked under Miss Piggy’s left shoulder while Lucy tucked her right arm under the sow’s left groin – both nurses tensed, ready for the tug of war that was to ensue. Lucy looked at me and smiled. Mandy remained po-faced.

‘Okay, girls, I’m going to start pulling on the leg now. Brace yourselves.’ The problem with any dislocation is that with ligaments torn, bones overlap. So I was going to have to stretch that leg out in the hope that the bones in Miss Piggy’s hock would snap back into place. In theory it shouldn’t have been too difficult. In practice...

Ten minutes later, I felt as if I had been put through a mangle, squeezed dry of energy. I’d pulled, pushed, levered, rotated Miss Piggy’s leg through all points of the compass, waiting desperately for that magical sound – a ‘clunk’ – which would have meant the joint had finally been repositioned. But no. No clunk. Just a leg that remained obstinately floppy.

I leaned back on my heels and sighed. Lucy flashed me a brief smile of sympathy. Mandy said brusquely, ‘I’ll go and get Eric shall I?’

‘Proving a bit of a bugger, is she?’ said Eric, when he breezed in. ‘She’s a well-muscled lady so I’m not too surprised.’ He knelt down and tucked up Miss Piggy’s front leg. There was no resistance. ‘Still well relaxed. Jolly good.’ He shuffled along to her damaged hind leg and raised the hock allowing it to rest in his right palm, while taking a firm grip of the fetlock. ‘Okay, Lucy, I’m going to start pulling now, so make sure you keep hold of her thigh.’ Lucy nodded, her arm once again locked around Miss Piggy’s groin. Eric gave a sharp yank. There was a grunt from Miss Piggy and a clunk from her hock. He carefully levered her trotter back and forth, flexing the leg cautiously. No crunching. Everything seemed to be in place.

He scrambled up looking embarrassed at how easy it had been. ‘Just had a lucky break,’ he declared, and then chuckled when he realised what he’d said. ‘That’s the way it goes sometimes.’

Okay, I was cross with myself for not having been able to correct the dislocation myself, but I needed now to focus on plastering the leg to ensure the hock didn’t dislocate again. Surely I couldn’t louse that up. Or could I?

The sour look Mandy gave me before she excused herself and left the prep room to make up some prescriptions suggested I could.

Lucy had made sure everything required was to hand.

‘I’ll stay to help,’ she said quietly.

I have to admit I was a bit shaky. Partially due to the effort I’d just expended, partially due to nerves. It was the first time I’d put a plaster cast on a pig. But it wouldn’t be any different to putting a cast on a dog or cat’s limb, would it? Of course not. But – confession time – I’d never put a cast on one of them either. This was going to be my first plastering. Hence the jitters. What if I put it on too tight? The leg could swell. Cellulitis could set in, the infection rampaging up the leg leading to septicaemia – meningitis even. Catastrophic. And if applied too loose, Miss Piggy could flick it off and we’d be back to where we’d started. Oh Lordy.

'Paul.' It was Lucy holding out a tube of stockinette.

'Sorry, yes.' I took it from her, bent down and unrolled a sufficient length to slide up past Miss Piggy's trotters and over her hock. Lucy crouched next to me and cut off the end. Her forearm briefly touched mine and I caught the delicate scent of the perfume she always used to apply before leaving me for work each day. *Mystique*, I think it was called. Memories.

'Paul.' Lucy had reached up to the prep table and was now handing me a roll of cast padding. I began to unwind the cotton from the fetlock upwards, pulling it tight and overlapping each turn. As it unfolded so too did more memories of the good times I'd had with Lucy. I forced them back as the cotton was curled over the hock and back down the leg. Another leg presented itself just inches from my face. A slender, trim calf. Lucy's. She had stood up and was leaning across me to reach for a roll of plaster casting which she'd been soaking in warm water. I felt stirred, much like the plaster.

'I'll just give it a squeeze for you,' she murmured, looking down at me.

'What?'

Lucy rolled on to my palm a lump of warm plaster of Paris.

We had thought of spending a weekend in Paris once. See the sights. Eiffel Tower, Seine, *Mona Lisa*. Stop it, Paul.

Concentrate. Concentrate.

I began to apply the plaster roll, slowly unfolding it up her leg, making sure each turn overlapped; and smoothing the plaster flat with my fingers, tracing over the delicate turn of her ankles and the plump swell of her calf.

'Paul.'

With a jolt, I realised I'd reached Miss Piggy's hock and so began retracing my steps in less passionate mode.

'And again?' Lucy was handing me a second roll of warm plaster to repeat the procedure.

'Oh, yes, please.'

Once finished, I got to my feet, feeling very stiff. And that was just from putting the cast on. But I had to admit, I was pleased with myself. I felt I'd done a good job. With no small thanks to Lucy of course. But then we'd always worked well together. Same in our private lives. Just a shame the latter had all recently fallen apart. Something I hoped wouldn't happen to Miss Piggy's plaster in the ensuing days.

With her slid into a large pen down in the ward with the help of Mandy and Eric, it was just a matter of waiting until she came round from the anaesthetic and seeing how she'd cope hobbling around with a plastered hock. She actually did remarkably well. And within twenty-four hours, the Rymans were over to collect her.

She received rapturous greetings from the whole family.

'Mith Piggy... our dear Mith Piggy,' said Emily, throwing her arms round the sow's neck once she'd been led up into reception, under the disapproving eye of Beryl who hovered nearby, a finger on her 'Summer Bouquet'.

Even the serious face of young Joshua creased into a smile as he gave Miss Piggy a tickle under the base of her right ear, to which she responded by twisting her head to one side and emitting grunts of pleasure.

So ecstatic were the Rymans that I half-expected them to burst into song as they had done last year when Miss Piggy had recovered from a difficult farrowing.

Then Emily had skipped round singing:

'Our Mith Piggy goes Oink... Oink... Oink.'

Oink... Oink... Oink.' With all the family joining in at that point.

But no such sing-song was forthcoming today, curtailed I felt by the smothering effect of several blasts of 'Summer Bouquet' that were squirted over our heads and which rapidly turned us all into walking lavatory blocks.

As I watched the Rymans drive away with Miss Piggy's snout sticking out from the top of a back window, I did wonder if having a plaster on would curtail her wanderings.

It didn't.

The following week's edition of the *Westcott Gazette* had a picture of her outside Chawcombe village hall into which she'd trotted during a rehearsal of the local rep's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Finley O'Connor had been in punning good form yet again with the headline: *Miss Piggy. A New Cast Member.*

Made me think that next time she could perhaps audition for *Ham-let*.

