

Brechstein and Son

Tick List

Cycling from her home in Upper Dowanhill in Glasgow's West End, Hannah Wilson decided she would walk the last part of her journey to avoid the aggressive city centre traffic and its fumes. She also wanted to stretch her long legs after her period of confinement caused by another bout of asthma brought on by the damp autumn weather. Almost certain she had at last found the right man for the task, it was time to try to fulfil her father's request and get the model engine repaired.

I'll leave my bike at Kelvinbridge Subway; they have security cameras there.

Although she was determined to suppress her excitement, it was bubbling like a percolator inside her, disturbing her normally calm no-nonsense demeanour.

The shop she was heading for was listed as *Brechstein and Son*, a business she had researched on *Google* without much success then on social media where the entries were sparse but fulsome in their praise. Then she had delved deeper, researching more locally into the Mitchell Library archives to discover surprising information, information which she had compared with her father's records. Eventually, she had become certain this firm would be able to repair the model railway shunting engine a challenge which had defied her father's best efforts.

This repair was a task she had promised him she would do, another item to be deleted from her long tick list as she settled to a new future. Then, in accordance with his wishes, she would attempt to set the whole network running according to his schedule, film it with her iPad and submit her edit to the 2014 World Model Railway Congress to be held next spring in Basel, Switzerland. She had already planned the musical accompaniment to match her father's commentary.

Brechstein and Son's quirky website claimed: "we are Glasgow's foremost mechanical antiques repair workshop" and "we can repair anything from a tiny child's wristwatch to a full-scale locomotive". *Google Maps* and *Streetview* revealed that, although the shop front was small, the hotchpotch of workshops to the rear were extensive. Hemmed in on all sides by the soaring marble and glass towers of Glasgow's Financial Services District, these workshops were served from the rear by a narrow, L-shaped access lane.

With her large, upright Dutch bicycle chained to the railings in full view of the CCTV camera, she hitched her ancient rucksack onto her broad shoulders and set

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off at a steady pace that most smaller people would find hard to match when jogging.

Once she was up to speed, operating on autopilot, she set her mind free to enjoy a familiar reverie. Ahead of her most people veered out of her path, disturbed by the fierce intensity of her long, square mannish face and her odd disdainful grimace cum smile.

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Hannah

Hannah Wilson had spent most of her spinster life under the tyranny of her demanding, hypochondriac mother then a further decade caring for her house-bound father. Now he was gone too, at last she was enjoying her new freedoms. She allowed herself a smile at the familiar memory of her mother's demise.

"Hannah Wilson, for God's sake girl will you leave that bloody piano be and stop torturing me with those bloody dirges and come up here at once and do my bunions. I just do not.....".

Hannah had looked up when the voice stopped, listening intently to the thuds which followed as the body hurtled down the carpeted stairs.

This was not the first time her mother had fallen badly. She waited, listening.

Apart from the ticks, creaks and rumbles of the central heating system, the only sound she could hear was the tooting of a model railway engine from the top floor where her father had his layout. She was not supposed to 'play' with this network but since he was in hospital and may not return, she thought she would set it running, just to keep it from seizing up. She knew this was a fiction, but well, why not?

Two minutes passed. There were no groans or plaintive cries for help this time.

Ah! Can this be deliverance, at long last?

Reaching for her iPad, she stopped the almost completed recording and consigned it to the BIN, taking her disloyal words with it.

Smiling broadly for the first time in years, she reset her iPad to record again, *da capo*, and with a practiced, gentle and whimsical smile to the eye of the lens, she moved her hands to place her long, slim fingers at a hover above the starting keys, closed her eyes and began again. Hopefully, her rendering would be perfect this time and, if so, she would upload it to her personal YouTube channel which had gained a following sufficient to generate a steady income for her nominated charity, *The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust*.

From the autopsy results, the Coroner's Inquest had concluded Mary-Rose Wilson had suffered a massive cerebral haemorrhage, causing her to fall down the half-flight and break her neck.

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The report had concluded:

"Fortunately, Mrs Wilson's death would have been almost instant, almost painless."

During this hiatus, Hannah's father had been in hospital undergoing bowel surgery. Until Marcus Wilson's return home a few months later, Hannah had relished her first ever taste of freedom to make all her own decisions about almost everything.

Left to cope alone, she thought the funeral had gone well.

Yes, Mummy, I'm sure you would have enjoyed my playing of Chopin's Nocturnes, even though they were just a little off because the crematoriums' piano was in need of re-tuning. Dearie me, it was quite dreadful, really. At least they eventually admitted it and sent a £50 donation to Glasgow City Mission in your name.

Because of Mary-Rose's gift for creating disharmony, the half-hour slot at the Clydebank Crematorium had attracted only herself and seven busy-body ladies from 'Downhill Outreach', women originally members of a posh church near the Botanical gardens. Due to various disputes with others in this congregation, Mary-Rose and her well-heeled splinter group now met at a community centre in Maryhill on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays to dispense homemade organic lentil soup to the local poor and needy. On Mondays only, this hearty soup was supplemented by soft bread rolls of dubious freshness donated by a local bakery, returns from unsold weekend orders. On other days, Mary-Rose had provided her famed homemade organic rolls, oblong French Torpedo 'grenades' edible only after serious dowsing in the soup.

Although Hannah had invited around a hundred others from Mary-Rose's Christmas list, sending fancy gilt-edged RSVP invitations and acceptance cards complete with SAEs to make it easier for them, only a few remaining relatives replied, declining ungraciously, with, typically:

"Of course, a mercy for her and dreadful for you and Marcus, but sorry, no, I am fully booked that morning."

These excuses cited appointments for chiropody, dentistry, hairdressing, acupuncture, vet visits and so on. Several could not resist enclosing personal letters with their condolence cards. Without exception these vitriolic epistles replayed old stories about long-ago family tiffs.

The most charitable was from Mary-Rose's estranged cousin, Mother Superior Bernadette Helena-Maria. An acolyte of Mother Teresa, Auntie Bernie had served in Africa until she was retired to The Vatican to attend the Holy Father, her reward for five decades of exemplary service. After detailing her own many

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sufferings under the lash of Mary-Rose's tongue, hurts forgiven but never forgotten, the pious septuagenarian had ended her note with:

"Good riddance to her! Even though I pray she will be Forgiven, I cannot think I will meet her in Heaven, unless she becomes much changed by Purgatory. My dear Hannah, you are already a living saint. How you put up with that vicious tongue all these years, I will simply never comprehend. Please tell Marcus we are all praying for him. It was God's blessing on him that he was born profoundly deaf."

During the months before and after her mother's death, her father had been in and out of hospital being treated for bowel cancer. During the long years of remission which ensued, Marcus Solomon Wilson CA had declined slowly, confined to home by a weakened immune system caused by his medications. During this period, when he had sufficient energy, he had pottered but never dithered, his mind still sharp, researching his family tree online, exploring his mother's Jewish ancestry, corresponding via the internet, reaching back to records in Lithuania and Poland. On other days, when feeling more energetic, he added to his already extensive network of vintage model trains, searching online in model railway clubs' sites for the elusive missing models he sought.

Forced by his long absences to retire from his firm of stockbrokers, he had dedicated most mornings to managing his growing portfolio of high technology investments, becoming a tactical investor in *Google, Microsoft and Apple*, buying low and selling high, repeating the cycle over and over, as he still did with his earlier foundation investments in *IBM*, its 'Baby Blues' and his parallel stocks in *Hewlett-Packard/Agilent Technologies*, two companies which still operated under a symbiotic co-ownership partnership.

As a result, Hannah had inherited a portfolio with a cash value in excess of £60 million, a portfolio now managed by a private investment house in Guernsey, a place she had visited only twice to accompany her father as his chaperone and nurse, visits made after her mother's death as Marcus settled the fine details for his own exit arrangements.

Then, when her father had died Hannah discovered from her solicitor that she had inherited a comfortable four-bedroomed cottage villa with stunning south facing views of the French coastline. This property came with Guernsey residency and tax status.

In Dowanhill she now also owned her parents' family home comprising, on the upper ground floor, a large entrance hallway with cloakroom/bathroom and three grand reception rooms.

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On the lower ground floor there was a modern dining kitchen overlooking a large well-planted garden and a pathway to a triple garage with a private access lane. The remainder of this original 'servants' quarters' area was a rabbit warren of utility and service rooms and a well-stocked walk-in wine cellar.

On the two upper floors there were six *en suite* bedrooms with a narrow stairway to a fully developed attic with dormers, an area filled with bizarre artifacts and paintings from Mary-Rose's early days as an avid collector, before her eyesight had deteriorated.

Marcus Wilson had been obsessive about property maintenance, a perfectionist. As a result, *Highburgh House* and its large Victorian garden were in excellent order. It had been valued at circa £1.25 million for UK tax purposes when assessed for inclusion in her father's estate. This inventory had listed but not valued her mother's hoard in the attic. Jamie Simpson, the young valuer from the auction house had dismissed it as bric-a-brac eventually conceding it might fetch £1000 as a job lot. Hannah merely smiled as she bade him farewell, believing she would do much better selling the items online where she might reach a global market, including Chinese, Saudi Arabian and South Korean investors for whom most things British held valuable cache. Simpson had also failed to realise Marcus's model railway was important, built up over seventy years of collecting a restoring. In the end, when pressed hard by Hannah's solicitor, Simpson had flippantly assessed it at a nominal £500 based on £10 per train set. Hannah remained silent. She had no intention of selling her new toys.

Since the Guernsey money was under a different jurisdiction and was operated 'at far hand', it was protected from HMRC. The UK tax due was further reduced by around 80% by the terms of a complicated rolling family trust initiated by Harold Solomon Goldstein-Greene, Hannah's great-grandfather. Harry Greene had been a vigorous and aggressive man who had made his first fortune in coal and his second in music publishing. Unfortunately, the terms of the Goldstein-Greene Trust had not envisaged a female heir to the great man's fortune. Hannah had been forced to take the matter to court, an expensive and fractious process only recently concluded in her favour.

Aged fifty-nine at the time of her father's death, Hannah had retired at sixty-one after a lifetime spent as assistant bursar at *The Academy*, the school where she had been a pupil from kindergarten. During her career, she had twice refused the opportunity of promotion to Bursar.

Aged only sixteen, she left school with a Scottish Higher Leaving Certificate listing top marks for all subjects available in *The Academy's* curriculum and matching English GCE A-Levels, all awarded as "A"s. This gained her entry to

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Oxford, where her mother had studied the History of Art for five years but had never graduated. After three tortured years, Hannah was awarded a Master of Arts in 'Mathematics with Music', with distinction.

Her university years had been lonely, humiliating and thoroughly disagreeable, a trial she had endured by studying and then adopting Stoicism, taking on the challenge of learning Greek to allow her to read in the original, the writings of Zeno of Citium (a town in Cyprus) and his cohort as they had propounded their radical views to the 3rd century BC populace of Athens. Graduating *in absentia*, Miss Hannah B. Wilson had already returned to Glasgow to care for her mother after her first stroke, at the start of her forty-year period of servitude.

During her early years back in Glasgow, she had immersed herself in music, her limited social life developing slowly as she became a much sought-after piano and organ accompanist for various amateur choirs. In her mid-twenties, a plan hatched in her mind in which she would, with the help of Auntie Bernie, take Holy Orders, an escape route prevented by her lack of belief in any God who would permit the wars, disease, poverty and duplicity exposed on television and radio, horrors which she escaped by the simple stratagem of listening only to BBC Radio 3. In more recent years she had subscribed to YouTube to benefit from its amazing collection of classical music offerings.

Another idiosyncrasy which had served her well after graduation was to dress in men's clothing. She also kept her hair severely short to encourage the notion she was even more mannish than her facial features and slim build suggested. Both these affectations tortured her mentally because she longed to be girlish and sought after. Only at home did she wear female attire, dressing up from time to time to enjoy re-plays of her favourite rom-coms and, when feeling especially romantic, daubing make-up and spraying liberally with expensive perfume to boost her libido.

When 'felt up', as had happened frequently in her twenties and thirties, she perfected the art of grasping and severely twisting the fingers of the wandering hands of the men and occasional strange women who thought she might be amenable, despite her unsmiling demeanour.

On one occasion, at a school end of term function, she had been cornered by a persistent Governor, whom she knew was a minor television celebrity despite his grotesque Billy Bunter appearance. In the exchange she punched hard into his genitals and head butted his nose before hurling him into a WC cubicle and making her escape from the ladies' staff toilets. It was a memory she had re-played over the years with much satisfaction.

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Confirmed in her philosophy of Stoicism, as she rolled onwards into her fifties and through her menopause, Hannah Wilson promised herself if she was ever to enjoy the intimacy of sex and lovingkindness, it must be real, natural and heartfelt, not anonymous, furtive and 'dirty'.

At school and for choir rehearsals she dressed formally in expensively tailored three-piece suits in a variety of sombre colours, always with a thin pinstripe, of the sort worn by her father who always dressed formally from dawn to dusk, indoors or out. From reading his diary entries of long ago, she knew Marcus had longed for a son, a fact which he had tried to hide from her while always encouraging her. Never once had he revealed this disappointment. Nor had he ever criticised or reprimanded her, even when, as a rebellious teenager she tried to provoke him with deliberate acts of naughtiness such as submitting sloppy homework for his inspection; leaving food-smearred dishes in the sink un-rinsed or scattering her clothes about the house, ignoring her mother's screeching admonitions.

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While Hannah had been loping towards her destination, the rain, which had started as drizzle, had quickly developed into a squally downpour, not as forecast. As she approached James Watt Street, she made a short detour taking her past the recently built and impressive *Glasgow City Mission* centre in Crimea Street. Hannah was a thoughtful giver to charities and knew *GCM* was well run and highly effective; this was the acid test she applied and re-applied constantly to her many charities.

Her involvement with *GCM* had begun almost by accident twenty years earlier when she was approached on Byres Road by a former member of staff from *The Academy*. She had been present at his final interview, in her role as an observer and recorder to ensure the established protocol had been followed rigorously, a procedure which ended when he had been sacked for drunkenness and alleged lewd behaviour towards a teenage boy. Following the initial allegation by the twelve-year-old's parents, the Assistant Head of Chemistry's small office had been inspected after hours. In his desk, unlocked by Hannah and the Head using her master keys, they found one empty and one nearly full bottle of Vodka and a thick photo-album of naked teenage boys and a few slim, boyish-looking girls, all in compromising poses. Among the victims were several Academy pupils Hannah had immediately recognised from years past.

On that long-ago day, with snowflakes falling gently on them as the Christmas shoppers bustled passed, the small rake-thin man with long, greasy hair sank to his knees onto the slush, both palms upwards in desperate supplication. From his

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glazed expression she saw he did not recognise her. After a short, terse exchange, she had relented and given him a £20 note, worried he might use it for alcohol or drugs. Several days later she heard on the school grapevine that Dr Daniel Molina had died in the *Glasgow City Mission* night shelter, not of drugs but from undetected septicaemia.

Standing across from the new *GMC* centre, she nodded and smiled before turning away, pleased at what her donations with others had had enabled. Now she was almost at her destination, her heart raced as she wondered if her deductions might be true.

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Jonathan

Jonny hauled his tall, beanpole frame upright and closed the ledger. At least now the numbers could no longer torture him. He was neither blind nor stupid, just severely dyslexic. He yawned and sighed wearily. He had not slept soundly for months, making him fraught, jumpy, anxious and uncharacteristically depressed. He knew it was time to decide and move ahead, despite his repeated promises to both parents made individually and collectively at each new anniversary of the founding of *Brechstein and Son*.

Even his escape into the world of singing no longer acted as a recuperative balm. Unable to read music, he had never auditioned for any famous choirs. However, he was fortunate to be blessed with perfect pitch and a powerful aural memory. Early in his career as an enthusiastic amateur singer, Jonny had settled on a self-tuition approach, recording top-rated BBC Radio 3 broadcasts from a high-fidelity radio to a high-quality tape recorder. More recently he had taken to downloading podcasts, using these to help memorise his words, hone his diction, set his phrasing, and mimic exactly the correct pitch and intonations of his guide professionals.

Despite his lack of ability to sight-read new works, as a powerful and secure Second Bass who focused intently on the guidance from his Musical Directors, he never missed an entry or exit. As a result, Jonny Brechstein had earned a reputation for quick learning, becoming a stalwart of three mixed voices non-audition choirs in the Newton Mearns area, and one enormous choir for male voices only, a choir based in Westerton, his only foray north of the River Clyde. In the concert seasons, he was always much sought-after as an Augmenter, often singing in up to four concerts over busy weekends from early December.

Jonny Brechstein also sang with two informal ensembles. His favourite was *The Red Hot Trot*, a trad jazz grouping which performed in a small family-run hotel, singing a *cappella* for Sunday lunchtime diners, their efforts rewarded by an excellent home-cooked meal. The other grouping, *The Eastwood Crooners*, comprised up to twenty older men and two lady tenors, (his mother had once been a member of this section). With an amateur DJ who played a multi-function keyboard with backing tracks, through the winter months this jolly group performed a loose karaoke on Saturday afternoons, singing against a backdrop of raucous chatter from elderly indoor carpet bowlers, in their redoubt near Mount Florida. These performances were rewarded by a traditional sit-down fish tea

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with red sauce and mushy peas. On the run-up to Christmas, Jonny organised a Donation Christmas Raffle, the proceeds going to Erskine Care Home, a duty inherited from his mother.

With both his parents now dead and no siblings or near relatives in Scotland, the sixty-five-year-old Jonathan David Brechstein was struggling badly. Jonny knew his father Solly (David Solomon Brechstein) had been disappointed in him, but after years of trying to 'cure' his son with 'special treatments', (quack medicines, expensive speech therapists, and among many other gadgets, a pair of huge wrap-around tinted glasses from America, an item which had made Jonny look like an alien from outer space), Solly had resigned himself to his son's condition and arranged a series of home tutors to satisfy the education authorities.

In practice, it had been his mother Ruth who had taught Jonny, introducing him to sung mnemonics as a way of memorising important facts, a rhythmic method which Jonny developed into his own complex system which allowed him to recall the finest detail of conversations and radio programmes, reaching back to his childhood.

Despite his lack of formal academic achievements, in all other aspects of his life Jonny had proved to be (in Yiddish), אַ גוטער זון, *a guter zun*, a good son. A lingering disappointment for his parents, seldom raised but ever present as a visitor stalking the dark shadows of their rambling family home in Pollokshields was that their son had never married, depriving them of grandchildren to preserve the Brechstein name and heritage.

This Brechstein dynasty had been established in 1893 when the first David Jonathan with his wife Martha and their infant son Saul had settled in Glasgow. According to family legend, the trio had arrived on Christmas Eve on a ship inbound with cargo from Dieppe. Discharged at Broomielaw quay with only the remains of Martha's dowry (her father had been a master jeweller and goldsmith, Saul, his apprentice). This remnant comprised a few slivers of gold leaf and a child's handful of tiny, low-value diamonds of the type used to surround main gemstones. This remnant was hidden in a suede pouch sewn into the first Martha's undergarments.

Although much reduced in circumstances, they were not yet destitute. They had been hoping to reach America and their first instinct was to find another ship and keep travelling but baby Saul was poorly. Drenched and shivering in the sleety rain, surrounded by strident and incoherent voices, they were rescued by a trainee Rabbi who overheard them speaking to each other in Yiddish. After a rapid discussion in their home tongue, Jonathan and Martha decided to stop for a while in Glasgow, until Saul was stronger. For this reason, they had accepted Abraham

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Gurovich's kind offer of temporary lodgings with his mother in their Govanhill home until they could find their feet.

The reality was the Brechsteins were exhausted by months of trekking on foot through Europe from their Lithuanian hamlet town called פרוכטבאר פוסט, *Ffrukhtbar Pustch*, fertile hollow. This small close-knit agricultural enclave of five hundred souls had once been a thriving community on the border with Poland.

As related to Jonny by his grandparents and later verified by Jonny's mother Ruth through her diligent researches, the Polish authorities supported by the Catholic Church, had decided to annex the village and its valuable agricultural land in a vicious pogrom during which the first Jonathan Brechstein and extended family had been scattered far and wide. It was through Ruth they had discovered a few strands of their 'own Brechsteins' in Manchester, Liverpool and Cardiff but none in Scotland. Like Jonathan, Martha and Saul, these other Brechsteins were like hundreds of thousands of Irish immigrants and other penniless refugees arriving at a time when the economy of Great Britain and her Empire had been booming.

Although the Glasgow Brechstein family had initially huddled with other displaced Jews in the Gorbals area, they soon fell away from religion and chose instead to devote their energies to commerce, diligently hoarding their wealth as gold, diamonds and, later, buying expensive jewellery and works of art, portable items of wealth should they need to flee again from future persecution.

To gain a foothold and establish themselves, the early Brechstein clan joined a growing band of secular Jews who paid their tithes but only made nostalgic visits to their synagogues on special occasions or feast days. When they moved from Shawlands to Pollokshields to inherit the family home, Solly had moved his allegiance to the busy main synagogue in Garnethill. Because of his dyslexia, Jonny was excused religious education classes. After his Bar mitzvah, he rebelled and from that time had refused to participate further in what he called a 'sham adherence'.

Being tall, blonde and clean shaven meant the original Jonathan David Brechstein and his progeny did not fit the stereotypical image of the predominant majority of Jewish men who were dark, swarthy and frequently overweight, mingling self-consciously in argumentative groups, wearing dark coats and ever-present fedoras to hide their Yarmulkes, barking at each other aggressively in poor Yiddish and a mixture of other European languages.

From the outset, at Martha's insistence, like other families of their ilk, they sought to improve themselves by trying to find suitable local girls and young men

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from well-to-do families as future sons and daughters-in-law. To this end they had joined every club and organisation which would take them, always first to donate to raffles or provide prizes for lucky draws or charity housey-housey sessions. Both Jonathan and Martha were good singers with a ready ear for a tune and soon discovered that choirs were a good way to cross the social divide, slowly climbing the ladder by joining more prestigious choirs in Giffnock and Clarkston, if they could get through the auditions.

It was during this period (for around five years), they had changed their family name to Greene but later, when they felt more secure and had moved from the Gorbals to a main door flat in Lower Shawlands, they dropped this artifice. Living in Shawlands, they had had to face a new challenge and had joined several bowling and tennis clubs, supporting but not actually joining political parties of every persuasion, helping campaign on the left, right and middle ground depending on the direction of the prevailing political wind.

By the end of WW2, the new premises in James Watt Street had been established. Over the ensuing years Solly and Ruth Brechstein had acquired the surrounding packages of land to the rear of their shop front premises, embarking on a process of expansion, developing from their initial offerings of antique jewellery, reproduction paintings and crystal objects of every size and shape, moving into antique furniture, including reupholstery, repairs and restoration. Harvesting the make-do-and-mend marketplace culture of the early fifties, they moved into radio and gramophone repairs. In the sixties, they moved on to include television repairs and rentals. Later still, they had a brief attempt at early computer sales and repairs which was profitable only until the explosion of portable devices left them struggling to compete with more specialist shops and the new throw-away culture of their customer base. Another line had been buying and restoring upright and grand pianos for shipment to Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This market had dried up with the advent of Yamaha electric pianos and keyboards which doubled as organs.

In the early 1980s, they changed direction again, taking on repairs to vintage and heritage cars, earning a reputation for restoring Rolls Royce models and various iconic sports cars. During a five-year period, they had restored an actual steam engine and its carriages, a vanity project for a titled man of Scottish origin whose main residence was an estate in Hampshire where the engine ran most weekends through his extensive grounds, a side-show indulgence he put through his books as a marketing activity.

Because of Solly and Jonny's father-and-son-interest in model railways, they embarked on a successful marketing strategy of taking stalls at various model rail

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exhibitions, firstly in the UK and then throughout Europe. This in turn led to a thriving mail order business for the repair and restoration of vintage model engines and carriages, mechanical toys, musical boxes, accordions, concertinas and portable home harmoniums and the like.

However, as Solly grew older and the burden passed to Jonny. However, because of his dyslexia, the mail order operation had slowly declined. After the crash of 2008, this once thriving business was already more or less moribund. With his parents now in retirement, Jonny had the full burden of running *Brechstein and Son* and knew well enough he needed a good website to compete in the global market. Wary of computers, he had procrastinated. Eventually, the workshops at James Watt Street were reduced to relying mainly on walk-in trade and referrals from their remaining established but aging customer base.

Meanwhile, all around *Brechstein and Son* the face of Glasgow's Broomielaw waterfront area was changing. their premises became a target for developers keen to demolish their hotch-potch of crumbling buildings and replace them with further high-rise offices, hotels and leisure outlets.

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Head to Head

Jonny Brechstein picked up the vintage Bakelite telephone which he had converted to operate with the BT digital network and slowly rotated the dial to connect with *Mankovic Law*, where he asked for Barbara Lowenski, the secretary of Bob Levy the senior co-partner of the expanding firm of solicitors who had looked after Brechstein business for the last decade.

'Jonny, how are you today?' said Barbara as she started her timer and continued typing rapidly, listening to Jonny through her headphones and responding through her throat microphone, juggling, under pressure to complete the legal offer on behalf of a new client ahead of the 2.00 pm deadline set by Bob. She was finding these calls from Jonny Brechstein wearying and had asked her boss to re-assign him to a junior associate.

The voice in her ear took her by surprise.

'Babs, I think I should accept that latest buy-out offer from *Hardcastle Estates* and move on. I was sixty-five yesterday and well, honestly, I've had enough. Bob said last time it is the best we can do. It should allow me to settle my staff. I'm down to the last nine now, all about my age so I think they will be happy enough to go. Sally and Brenda in Upholstery and Drapes have been with us since I was twenty-two. They must be in their late seventies and it's just not fair to have them working in that shed with its leaking roof and faulty heating. How long do you think it would take? I'd really like to get out by Christmas. Then, after the concerts are behind me, I'll get away for some Winter Sun, maybe the Canaries. Is that do-able, Babs, please?'

'Jonny, great news. Hold while I get Bob for you.'

Barbara hit the mute button and let out a yelp of delight, waving to Bob through the glass panel holding her thumbs up. She saw Bob look up with a wry smile on his face, lip-reading her exaggerated drama queen rendering of:

JONNY BRECHSTEIN WANTS TO ACCEPT HARDCASTLE'S OFFER!

Bob Levy was already out of his desk and moving towards her, keen to strike while the iron was hot. He grabbed her extension handset:

'Jonny, that's great news. Now, tell me true that this time you will NOT change your mind, please. It cost you fifteen grand in abortive fees the last time we did

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all this and when you withdrew at the eleventh hour, we lost the competing offer from *Auchenhowie Associates* too. Your name is mud out there. Honestly, you won't get a better offer than *Hardcastle's*, certainly not at this time of year. Jonny, tell me true, my dear chap, is this a definite *go-for-it instruction*, this time?'

'Yes, Bob. We are down to only a few projects here. In truth we've been spinning the wheel for over a year now. The overseas trade never recovered after the 2008 meltdown. Yes, it's time to move on.'

'Right, leave this with me but stand by your phone and fax machine, OK? And Jonny, you're doing the right thing, you know that don't you?'

'I suppose so, but mother and father would spin in their graves, if they hadn't been cremated.'

'OKAY. Thunderbirds are go! I'll be back to you soon as!'

Johnny reached for the tannoy button.

'Hello, everyone. Would you please make your way to Reception? I have some news to share.'

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By noon the premises were empty. He had sent his staff home to let them absorb the news of closure and redundancy, assuring them they would be well-cared for. Led by a tearful Sally and her sister, one by one each staff member shook his hand and left.

He stood in the doorway, sheltering from the rain, watching, hearing them laugh.

'Right team, let's go for a celebration lunch, a blow-out', shouted Bert from Pianos and Organs.

'Yeah, let's try for *Gamba*,' screeched Sally, 'money no object!'

'Right away,' said Mary-Ann Moran from *Teddies and Dolls*, 'I've got them on my mobile now.'

'And tell them to put six bottles of Prosecco on ice,' called Helen from *Pre-loved Vintage Clothing and Hats*.

'And another six for me,' screeched Mary-Ann Devlin from *Numismatics and Philately*.

Turning the corner, they were gone.

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Jonny Brechstein remained in the doorway for a long time, daydreaming, his eyes vacant, his mind swirling thoughts of a future alone and what he would do with his days. Perhaps he would travel, meet someone he fancied who might take to him. Both Mary-Anns, one widowed, one divorced, had met their latest boyfriends online, the new way to date, an idea which seemed impossible. Maybe he would attend adult learning classes at Strathclyde University as his mother had done in retirement, maybe take up art or pottery. That might be a good way to meet someone. Or perhaps he would pluck up the courage to take up ballroom dancing, as his mother had always said he should.

After many long minutes, shivering despite his thick three-piece tweed suit, and quite unaware he had been observed from a similar doorway across the street, he turned away. Inside, he locked the outer door, intending to wait in his office for news from *Mankovic Law*.

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In Reception, he saw the answerphone red light blinking and checked for messages, hoping his acceptance of *Hardcastle's* offer had been already agreed.

'Hello? Hello? Is there anyone there?'

The voice was pitched nicely, a high alto cum second soprano, cultured, husky, slightly breathy, reminding him of his mother.

*'Oh dear, I did **not** expect an answering machine. Horrible inventions. Well, I do hope you **will** be there when I arrive. I'm at Kelvinbridge Subway and intend to walk to your premises, ETA 1.23pm or thereby. Arrivederci!'*

Jonny glanced at the clock and saw she was overdue. Perhaps she had changed her mind. A pity, he thought, she sounded interesting if a bit brittle. However, just in case, he set out two chunky 1970's dark brown glazed coffee cups of Scottish origin, items which had become popular in Germany's coffee drinking culture during the run up to the Millennium. He also unearthed an authentic Swiss Etsy percolator from the 1930's with its matching hand grinder and an early air-tight Kilner jar of coffee beans, a rare item manufactured and embossed by the Yorkshire firm, part of a set gifted to Prince George, Duke of York on the occasion of his wedding to Prince Mary of Teck in July 1893. This item was retrieved from his mother's tiny antique American Electrolux gas-fired refrigerator, designed for caravanning and camping expeditions of the 1940s.

In the off-chance his visitor might be a tea-jenny like his mother, Jonny brought out her favourite Majolica teapot. He added cups and saucers of the finest

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porcelain, hand-painted in colours which almost perfectly matched the teapot. His mother had hated drinking from 'thick china'. This crockery was a remnant from a 1920's wedding service, with larger cups, their bright colours ever popular with tea-drinking aficionados, items Ruth had reserved for special callers only.

Both tea and coffee items were laid out on a large rectangular EPNS-plated tray with black ivory handles, standing a few inches above his desktop on tiny elephant shaped legs of bright white bronze. To this tray he added two matching oval-shaped serving plates made of shining white pewter, objects his parents had bought in Kuala Lumpur during their retirement world cruise. On these trays he decanted a line of overlapping ginger snaps on one and thin chocolate ginger biscuits on the other. These favourites were from his personal supply, also kept in airtight tins in the refrigerator.

In the distance, the front doorbell sounded a ponderous Big Ben chime from a speaker in Reception. Pressing the front door push also activated a sharp auxiliary buzzer in Jonny's office, a place which had once been his mother's domain, a cubby hole space made to seem larger by three walls ornamented with gilt-framed mirrors of various shapes and sizes and hung at varying sloping angles, creating an intriguing though peculiar kaleidoscope effect. When the buzzer sounded, Ruth had checked her small CCTV desk monitor, rushing to Reception, genuinely pleased to see returners and offer a special welcome to new callers.

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'Ah, hello, do come in. What a dreadful day to be out walking the streets of Glasgow.'

Her hand shot out and her grimace turned to a warm and open smile.

'Hannah Wilson. Ms. Hannah Wilson.'

'Ah, yes, sorry, Jonny Brechstein.'

'Would you care to re-phrase your greeting?'

'Ah, yes, I see what you mean. Ah, yes, this area does have a reputation, especially after dark. I'm afraid our private lane is, well, a rendezvous.'

'Perhaps just too much information?'

'Ah, yes, sorry about that *faux pas*.'

'Right, now, Mr. Jonathan David Brechstein, have we established I am a *bona fide* customer and not the other type of caller?'

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'Yes, of course, would you like to hang all your wet things over there and come into my office where it's warmer?'

'No, just my jacket, otherwise I would be naked. Completely soaked through, I'm afraid.'

When Hannah slipped out of her jacket, Jonny could see her strong, lithe torso revealed by the clinging material of her wet shirt outlining her small breasts, unfettered by a bra. This was the nearest to a nude woman he had ever seen, except in paintings. He averted his eyes but everywhere he looked, he saw reflections of her in the mirrors, smiling, posing boldly he thought. This notion took hold and his mind swung ahead, creating the erotic image of her undressing for him.

'Ah, yes, I see. Yes. Yes, you poor thing. I'll fetch a towel for your hair and a blanket? Shall I?'

'Yes, and what about a hot toddy?'

'Let me check in Vintage Wines and Spirits. You go ahead and get warmed up. I'm sorry, I should explain, it's just us here at present. I hope that's alright?'

'All alone?' She smiled even more broadly. *Did she wink? Or did she have a lazy eye, like his father?*

'Ah, yes, sorry. You see I sent my staff home early. It was my birthday yesterday and I've decided to retire.'

Hannah raised her eyebrows in reply. *How old can he be? I know he is sixty-five, but he could pass for fifty. Such peachy pink skin, lucky man.*

'Right-o, then Ms. Wilson, back in two shakes of a lamb's tail.'

She watched him turn away then smiled, almost giggled as he muttered to himself:

'Now, where are Archie's keys? Ah, yes, here they are, just where they should be, in the night safe.'

Because her quick-dry Rohan walking trousers and shirt were wet through, she chose the larger from the two plywood and steel tubular chairs, the staff room version of the type they had once used at *The Academy* before they upgraded in the early 1980s. Listening, she could hear Jonny in the far distance so took a chance, sliding the large, thick, leatherbound ledger across towards her then scanning backwards from the bookmark with a practised eye. The entries for recent months were indecipherable, the handwriting miniscule, scrawly as if written by a tiny drunken insect.

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Dyslexia!

Hannah had become involved in the early days of *Dyslexia Scotland*, eventually becoming a sponsor then, after training, a tutor and assessor and, later, a board member for a term. This voluntary work had come about when the then headmaster had been put on the spot by parents angry that the school was lagging in its provision, refusing to accept initially a fair percentage of its pupils were at least partially dyslexic, even some of the brightest, especially those who chose Art and Music, avoiding 'academic' subjects such as Mathematics and the Sciences.

Tracking backwards in the ledger to June 2010 and earlier the monthly page summaries were in a small, neat hand and clearly legible. Flicking back and forth to the business year end summaries at each December, she could see *Brechstein and Sons* had been in gentle decline since 2004, a trajectory which had become alarmingly steeper from mid-2008.

Hannah heard Jonny approach, still muttering to himself.

'I wish Archie were here. Is *Bowmore* a nice whisky, I wonder? Or what about *Lagavulin* or *Auchentoshan*? Well, well, we will soon find out if they suit our gorgeous Ms. Wilson.'

'Ah, there you are, Ms. Wilson. And you've got the kettle going too. Good for you. Not many people know how to work a primus stove nowadays. Now, the moment of truth. I know nothing of whisky or any form of alcohol for that matter. I did drink a small glass of sherry at my twenty-first birthday celebration, but it made me dizzy and gave me a thundering headache. Here we are, time to choose your poison.'

'How kind, but no, no thanks. I never drink from Sunday to Saturday. I'm sorry to have put you to such trouble. I was just checking something, something important to me. You see, I too am teetotal, a sort of compensation for my mother's excesses. I hope you have not suffered under the tyranny of a bi-polar parent who found solace in alcoholism, have you?'

'No, fortunately not. My parents were also abstainers. Mum preferred tea and Dad preferred coffee. And you, Ms. Wilson, tea or coffee?'

The coffee smells very nice but I never drink it after the Sun's zenith so, tea please. Is it Darjeeling?'

'Yes, two for tea it is, then. Actually, to be honest, I'm not sure if these coffee beans are still fresh enough. I think they've been around for maybe a year? Since

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coffee drives me insane, I never drink it. And since we are closing down from today, perhaps you might like to have this as a gift?'

'What an unusual Kilner jar! My mother has a collection somewhere in her attic hoard. Or rather she *had* a collection. The poor dear is long gone so I suppose it's mine now. This one looks very special. I see you have replaced its rubber seal. Can you still get these?'

'Oh, yes. I have a supplier. Mrs Mariah Vernon. Doncaster. I'll give you her telephone number, shall I?'

Jonny recited the number from memory as Hannah tapped it into her iPhone Contacts.

'Ms. Wilson, would you like a biscuit?'

'Oh yes please! As a special treat, to mark your birthday and retirement, I'll allow myself two of each, please. Now, look away. Living alone, one develops terribly bad habits. Eyes closed now, please. I plan to lick and suck on the chocolate gingers first, make them last while our tea infuses. Seven minutes exactly, not a second more, or less. I've set the timer on my iPhone. Then, if you'll allow, I'll dunk the ginger snaps. I know, I know! You should see your face! Licking, sucking and dunking, just so *infra dig*, but, well, as Mother used to say, "among friends, why not?" And of course, as you cannot know, this is such an unexpected treat, to eat during daylight hours! Since Papa died, I tend to fast from dawn till dusk.'

'Really? My Mum was keen on fasting too, but only on weekdays. She ran the admin side here. I miss her greatly and well, here we are, at the end of *Brechstein and Son*. After almost one hundred and fifty years of trading, it is time to bring this part of my life to a close. Now, Ms. Wilson, why did you come today? What can I do to serve?'

'I have an item for repair in my rucksack, a rather special and personally important item. It's one of my father's model engines.' The phone app timer pinged. 'Oh, there we are. One should take tea drinking seriously, as a *first* priority. Don't you agree? Shall I play mother?'

'Yes, I do, thanks, but please, you are my guest, let me pour. Now, I don't take milk or sugar, do you? I think there should be some in the staff mess room fridge. I'll just pop along . . .'

'Oh no! Not with Darjeeling! Milk and sugar? Ugh! Sacrilege, surely. Proper tea *must* be taken *au natural*, surely?'

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'Yes, I agree, but Mum always drowned hers with milk and added three heaped sugars. Disgusting, actually.'

'Mmm, just like my own Mother. As you say, disgusting.'

The desk telephone rang. Holding the saucer while he sipped his tea, Jonny clamped the handset between his head and shoulder. As a result, Hannah heard what transpired.

'Bob Levy here, Jonny. Yes! The deal is done. You have until the end of March to sell up and clear out your premises. I've had a first go at your numbers. After the lump sum gratuities to staff past and present and the pension tops-ups you insisted on during the previous Hardcastle debacle, with fees and UK taxes settled you stand to net around £2.8 million. How does that sound?'

'Ah, eh, OKAY, I suppose. Actually, it's quite a bit more than I thought.'

'Check your fax machine, it should be pinging now. You need to get someone to read it over to you, all the small print stuff especially. Then sign it and fax it back to me. I've told Hardcastle's team we would confirm by 1600 GMT, OK? Can you do that, Jonny? This has to go down today or, I warn you, they *will* walk away. They are *not* in the mood to stall again. I hear on the grapevine they are moving for a site in Cadogan Street, a huge knock-down and rebuild job on a sixties office block.'

Jonny thought of phoning *Gamba* in the hope of catching *Miriam* still sober, to ask her to come by taxi as his reader. Shrugging his shoulders at this prospect, he thought of asking Bob to send someone from his office in Edinburgh. As a last resort, Jonny Brechstein raised his eyebrows in query to Ms. Hannah Wilson who smiled, nodded then reached round to lift and sort the welter of incoming sheets from the fax machine in-tray.

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With the documentation reviewed, queries answered and agreed by telephone with Bob Levy, Jonny signed the acceptance affidavit. This was witnessed by Hannah and faxed to *Mankovic Law*.

The deal was done.

Hannah prepared a second pot of Darjeeling.

'Well, Mr. Jonny Brechstein, are you happy with your decision?'

'I suppose I have to be. Of course, I knew we were losing money recently. Actually, I must be honest, insofar as I could figure it out, we have been losing money for

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years. And, yes, I knew that a lot of the work I was taking on was at a loss, just to keep us busy, or trying to. With all these antiques programmes on television, there's been an explosion of businesses like us, many of them based in the Far East and fronted by websites with UK addresses. Mum counted them one time before she died. There are more antiques repair workshops purporting to be operating in the Cotswolds than there are Hotels and B&B's combined. Maybe I should downsize and work from home. Kate, a friend from one of my choirs says her son Michael could easily craft me a website, relaunch me, trade on the name of *Brechstein and Son* but, well, as you seem to have guessed, I'm no use with computers. Actually, I didn't have the heart to tell her.'

'Yes, home working is becoming much more common. Cuts down on travelling too, I imagine. Do you live nearby?'

'Ah, yes, Polloksheids but well, that's another problem to be solved.'

'Oh? Well you know what they say, a problem shared?'

'The problems with the old place have been going on for years. I tried to get my father to face up to the dry rot in the basement and our dodgy roof, but he resisted, said the house was 'Clyde built to last'. Last month I had Jenny, an estate agent friend from one of my choirs, give it the once over. She brought her surveyor who crawled all over the place, wearing a disposable white overall and a face mask, like SOCO people. They advised I should move out of the main building immediately, condemned it as a death-trap.'

'Oh dearie me, is it as bad as that?'

'Yes. Jenny is touting it round her developer friends to see if any of them want to take it on as a site for a block of luxury flats. She says it might fetch £800,000 to a million, with a fair wind. There are already three other similar projects on the go nearby. Jenny says I may have to wait my turn if I want a best price offer. Currently I'm camped out in the rooms over the garage, living with hundreds of boxes packed with the house contents, including all my model train stuff, all dismantled. As a consequence, I've got a bad case of MTDS.'

'Ah, yes, I get you, you've got 'model train deprivation syndrome'?''

'Yes, and I can smell the lingering odour of horse mixed with cat pee from the strays I have moved in with.'

'Horse? The garage used to be a stables block?'

'Yes. One thing though, I've become quite adept at strip-washing in a galvanized washing tub in freezing cold water. Luckily, Miriam my receptionist has been very

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kindly doing my laundry and ironing. Dear old Auntie Miriam, she must be eighty-five I think but still a party girl, so everyone tells me. I imagine she'll be up singing and dancing at *Gamba* as we speak. "Indestructible" my mother used to say about her.'

'Well, well, Jonny Brechstein, you *are* in a pickle. Best to grin and bear it, I say. These present trials and tribulations will also pass and soon the golden rays of hope and delight will shine on you again. And, let's face it, Mr. Jonny Brechstein, you are far from destitute!'

The iPhone timer sounded and Hannah poured the tea.

'Ah, sorry. Yes, enough of me and my problems. Well, Ms. Wilson, why did you call here today? How can I help you?'

'Perhaps you'd like to call me Hannah? May I call you Jonny, or would you prefer Jonathan or maybe even David?'

'What? Sorry, I mean, how do you know so much about me?'

'I looked you up at Companies' House. You are the sole remaining director of *Brechstein and Son*. But I have other sources too. Actually, Jonny Brechstein, according to my father's records, we are relatives, very distant relatives, through my father's mother's family who were also from your founders' native town of *Ffrukhtbar Pustch*, on the Lithuania-Poland border.

'I'm sorry, I'm out of my depth here. Mum was the one who did our genealogy but she was always reluctant to share. "Too many secrets, Jonny", she used to say. "Sadly, not all your ancestors were good people. In fact some of them were bad people, evil people. Best to leave them alone, I say."'

'Yes, Jonny, it is true but that time is long past. She is talking about the Nazi period and their concentration camps. But our personal ancestors were long gone and living in Britain by then.'

'So, Hannah, are you a Brechstein who has changed her name to Wilson?'

'No, no, nothing like that. Brechstein is indeed my middle name and yes, my father had hoped for a son, hoped for grandchildren to carry on this name but it wasn't to be. So, Jonny, we are both at the end of our dynasties, it seems. I did think of a donor sperm baby, years ago, but well that failed and then I thought of adopting, but, well, you know, I kept procrastinating.'

'Me too, actually but well, an oddball single man with learning difficulties, who would accept me? If I applied, they might think I was well, you know.'

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'So, Jonny, we seem to have just ourselves to cling to, long lost cousins.'

Hannah rose and offered her hand again and this time they shook more warmly and as they did so, they smiled, knowing instinctively their futures would be different.

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Dress Rehearsal

Their taxi was waiting in the downpour. Hannah could hear the internal alarm countdown sounding in the distance as Jonny used the drive key to lower the roller shutters.

It was just after half past four and they had a booking for five-thirty *Upstairs at the Chip*, ahead of her seven-thirty dress rehearsal in her mother's former church off Byres Road. By her calculation, allowing for heavy traffic, she would have just enough time to take Jonny to her home where she would shower and change before they ate, provided the taxi was willing to wait, suitably rewarded. She would collect her bicycle tomorrow.

It had taken quite a bit of cajoling to assemble her singers for a series of Flash Mob events to raise money for *Glasgow City Mission* by singing Handel's *Messiah*. After negotiations, helped by support from the iconic James Hunter, she had struck an agreement with *Glasgow Life* to be allowed to perform at *Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum*, *The Peoples' Palace* and *The Burrell Museum* over the weekend before Christmas. She had a good complement of Sops and Altos and although she was short of true Tenors and Second Basses, she had a strong cohort of higher Baritones and lower First Basses to compensate. All were experienced singers and this dress rehearsal was to run through the arrangements and enjoy a couple of 'sing throughs' under the deft leadership of Paul Keohone, the doyen of the Mackintosh and other choirs.

In the taxi, which was small, they had difficulty accommodating their long legs and were forced close together with Hannah's rucksack on her knee.

'Ah, so you have the item for repair in there. I forgot all about it, sorry.'

Hannah fished inside and retrieved the shunting engine protected in a neat package by several layers of bubble wrap, the bulky outline of its winding key showing from inside an envelope affixed with Sellotape.

She recited her father's familiar scrawl.

"This dud bought from a dealer in Birmingham who refused a refund and then promptly ceased trading. I bought it as part of a set, "The Yuletide Shunting Yard". It winds but when released, the wheels do not turn. Needs repair, but where?"

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'Would you like me to have a look, see if I can get it running? No charge for family members!' he chortled in a deep rumble which Hannah found very pleasing.

Placing her hand on his and squeezing, she said, 'Yes, please, but there's no rush. I would like to see how it's done, perhaps you might like to come back to my place later, after the rehearsal. We should be finished by nine-ish so not too late? Not too late at all. Do say yes, please.'

'Ah, ah, yes, that would be nice. Thank you.'

'And, since you are family, why not stay over, I have lots of spare bedrooms; five of them for you to choose from, actually. And I'm only a five-minute walk from Mum's old church.'

'Ah, ah, yes. *And stay over?* Yes, thank you, that would be a nice treat. Much better than my leaky old stable block with assorted stray cats for company.'

'Thank you very much, Jonny Brechstein!' she jested. 'I'm so, so glad you find me better company than stray cats!' nudging him with her elbow and laughing in a fine low Alto which reminded him of his mother.

Hannah took a chance. Leaning into him, she placed her free hand on his leg, just above his knee and squeezed. Jonny felt a surge of desire tingle through his body.

It was a moment he thought would never come and now it had arrived. Placing his hand over hers, he squeezed gently then rippled his fingers, stroking. As she squeezed his thigh more firmly, he closed his eyes and sighed softly.

Hannah checked and saw his smile was as wide as hers.

'Jonny, how tall are you?', she asked, her voice husky.

'Six-eight. You?'

'Snap!' she giggled.

'Jonny, have you ever thought of trying out ballroom dancing. My father and I used to have a go while watching *Strictly*. I really miss dancing. I've been practising with online classes but well, it's not the same, alone.'

'Yes. I did try a few times with my Mum but well, she was only five ten and to be fair, I was hopeless. But yes, I do still want to learn.'

'Perfect!'

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After the Flash Mob rehearsal, they trudged up the hill through another downpour, arriving at *Highburgh House* both soaked to the skin, the second time that day for Hannah. Jonny was thoroughly soaked through, his tweed suit sodden and his thick blond hair plastered to his head, making his large aquiline nose more prominent on his thin face, giving him the appearance of a bedraggled Afghan Hound.

'How lucky!' she whispered under her breath.

As she opened the door into the hallway, she turned, smiled coyly and asked, "Well, Jonny, time to shower and change for bed? We don't want to catch a cold, do we?"

We? Does she mean we should shower together?

'Eh, Ah, yes. Yes.'

'Use Father's old room. Don't worry, I've had it "made over", as our American friends say. There's a new walk-in shower area and a new bed. I've had some of Father's old jim-jams laundered, Christmas and birthday presents I bought him that he never got around to using. I've had the whole place kitted out as a guest bedroom. I had a notion of trying Airbnb, just for the company but, well, no, it's not really my style.'

'Ah, so, toothbrush and, eh?'

'Yes, all laid out for you. I did it earlier, just in case. Well, you know what I mean, yes?'

She smiled coyly, seeing him turn away, his colour rising.

He's a virgin too! Perfect!

Calling after him as he climbed the stairs, she added, 'Take your time, no rush. I'll be downstairs, just when you are *fully* ready.'

Goodness, Hannah, you really are going to far! Behave, or you'll frighten him away!

Less than ten minutes later she was in the kitchen, Johnny Mathis crooning from a carefully chosen playlist, the upgraded Linn Acoustics home music system set to 'romantic ambiance'. The sixty-two-year-old 'teenager' was vibrating with anticipation, showered, her favourite Chanel No 19 generously dispensed, wearing only light make-up, loosely draped in the outfit she had chosen that morning, when this actuality had been a mere dream.

To her delight her first ever beau was wearing *Jolly Green Giant* pyjamas a surprise extra for her father's fiftieth birthday and smelling strongly of Giorgio

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Armani Privé Ord Royal, a more recent unused gift bought for what proved to be her father's ultimate birthday.

'Do you know, Hannah, I wanted a pair of these pyjamas when I was a boy but Mum always refused, said they were ridiculous. Yes, eh, maybe she was right?'

My goodness me, he has an erection! Wow!

Her face bloomed, her nipples hardened, itching. Down below, things were leaping and throbbing, demanding attention. With her mouth dry and her tongue weirdly inert, unresponsive, it was Hannah's turn to stumble over her words,

'Well, no, no, Jonny, they suit you perfectly, I would say. Yes, without a doubt, well, I think they suit you very well indeed, even though they are a bit, yes? But, well, anyway, I suppose, well, surely that's a good thing, yes?'

'Yes, eh, yes, to be honest, they do feel odd. I suppose it's because I don't usually wear pyjamas nowadays.'

Mmm, what a delicious image! Perfect!

Raising her eyes and dropping her jaw, she set her face to display mock horror.

'NO! No, no, sorry, I didn't mean to imply anything. **And that bed, its enormous.**'

'Yes, I went a bit mad, I'm afraid, the danger of online shopping. It is an "Extra Long Emperor", seven feet wide and seven-six long. The mattress was made to measure by the people who supply Cunard, claimed to be the most comfortable in the world.'

'So, have you, eh, well, tried it out?'

'No, Jonny, not yet. It. . . .'

Hannah was about to say. "it only arrived yesterday" but managed to stop herself.

The kettle whistled. As she rose, she smiled innocently and, as if by accident, let her dressing gown slip off her shoulders, revealing her diaphanous negligee set, a shorty baby doll top in bright yellow not quite reaching her clinging hot pants in pillar box red.

As she loped back towards him with the teapot, Jonny was gawping, his face and neck flushed bright pink. She poured the hot water and set the timer on her iPhone.

Enveloped in a fruity, spicy cloud of perfume, aftershave and peppermint with Jennifer Rush singing *The Power of Love* on a repeat loop, they sat side by side on stools at the breakfast bar with the pot Rooibos and a plate of home-made

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chocolate chip cookies, deliberately and quite unnecessarily close, their thighs pressing and rubbing against each other, their heads gently touching, both feeling warm, tingly, dreamy.

The shunting engine was before them, still wrapped as before, side by side with a small spray can of WD40, both items placed on a copy of *The Financial Times*, spread to catch drips or gunge. Using a craft knife, working carefully to avoid scraping the paintwork, Jonny released first the key and then the body of the engine.'

'Well, well, now, its years since I've seen one of these. The Yuletide series were popular as children's gifts in the 1920s for those who could afford them. And still much sought after. Let's see if it will play its tune for us?'

'Play?'

Jonny wound the mechanism and released the stop/ start lever and the room filled with the quiet tinkling sound of "The Twelve Days of Christmas".

Picking it up, Hannah closed her eyes and concentrated, holding it to her ear until the long tune ended.

'Amazing, note perfect from start to finish. The English version updated from the original French melody to include the extended "Five Gold Rings" section added by Frederic Austin in 1909.'

She rolled it gently over the newspaper, testing.

'So, Father had it all wrong, had he? It's not meant to run, it's just a musical box?'

'No, I think it should be able to run. Let me check.'

The timer sounded and Hannah poured the tea.

Jonny turned the engine upside down and peered at the maker's name and studied the small plate.

'Yes, it should run.' He shook it gently and they heard a tiny rattle. 'My guess is a broken crankshaft. Back at the workshop I should be able to make a replacement and get it running. Best leave it until then, yes?'

'Biscuit?'

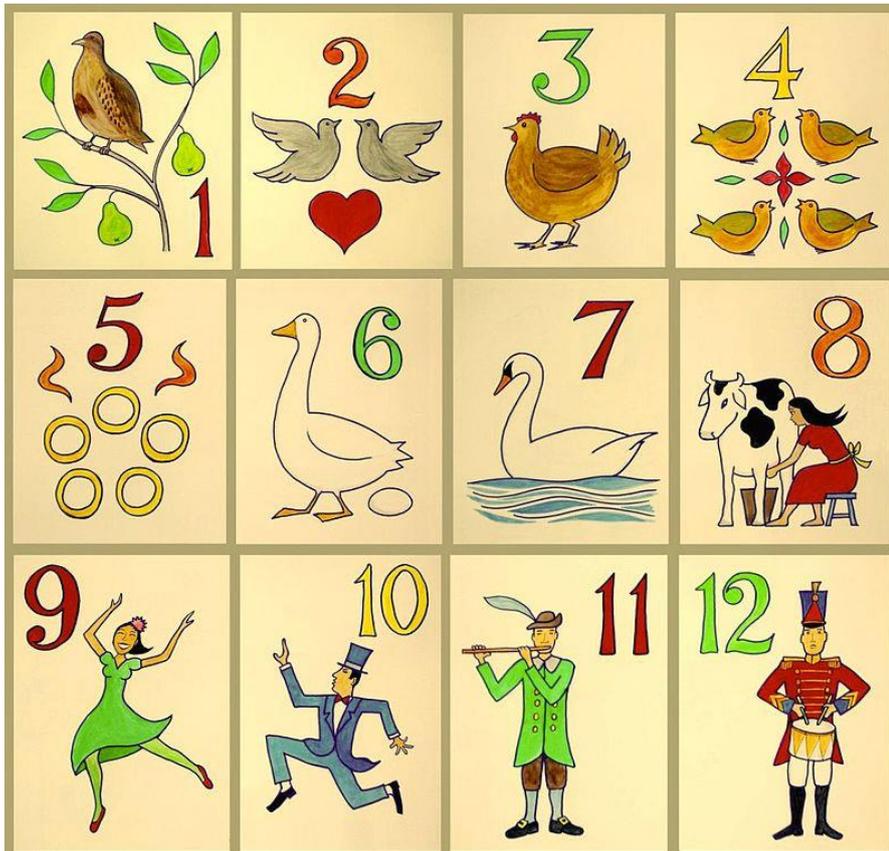
'No, I've brushed my teeth, ready for bed.'

'Me too. Time to fill our hot water bottles, yes? As my guest, you get first pick: "Harry the Hairy Hedgehog" or "Barney the Honey Bear"?''

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'Ah, Eh, Yes. Well, Hannah, do we have to choose? I mean, well, you know, you said you wanted to try out that bed, yes?'

'Jonny Brechstein, I thought you'd never ask!'



(This image is from Wikimedia Commons: the artist is Xavier Romero-Frais)