

THE CHEESE MINDERS

A Tale of Mystery and Imagination

by Dave Hawkins



Therapy

The day was one of those when the weather couldn't seem to make up its mind. Rain had been falling steadily at the outset, then had cleared for most of the journey. Just as Frank pulled the car off the main road and onto a gravel track the skies opened up, forcing him to stop. "You're sure this is right?" he asked.

"According to the map," replied his wife from the front passenger seat. In less than a minute, the hammer of rain on the vehicle's roof became a little quieter. "It seems to be easing," observed Tanya unnecessarily.

Frank scowled through the windscreen along the track ahead which was now mostly waterlogged. Starting off again in low gear, he drove cautiously, trying to reduce the experience for his passengers while navigating a surface no longer visible. The car dipped and lurched along through puddles, many of which hid ruts and potholes. Ten minutes of this helped build the tension, especially for the driver whose grip on the steering wheel tightened with every bump. Then the front wheels found a deeper hole. The car jarred to a sudden halt. Nerves already on edge, the girl on the back seat let out a shriek. They all jumped, Tanya in particular. "Jody!" she complained, "That was right in my ear."

"Well, I'm sorry," returned her daughter unapologetically, "But this is turning into a nightmare."

A young boy's voice chimed in: "Sook."

"Get lost, dip-stick!" sneered Jody.

"Will not, butt face," her brother Tommy sniped back.

Frank exploded: "For crying out loud! I'm trying to drive here, in case anyone hadn't noticed. Give me a break, will you?" He sat trying to compose himself, breathing heavily as he stared unseeing through the windshield. After a few seconds when no-one had plucked up the courage to break the awkward silence his outburst had instigated, he said: "Thank you," then added: "Tanya, pass me the mud-map, please."

"What, don't you trust me to read a map now?"

Frank sighed. "I'd just like to see it for myself." Taking the sheet of paper, he traced a finger along a line penned as the main highway, moved it down an adjoining minor road; and

changed direction again to the last line marked 'gravel track'. Sneering through the screen at the way ahead, he grumbled: "Gravel might have been right before the deluge turned it into a swamp. And it doesn't look that long on the map. We should be there by now. Maybe we took a wrong turn."

"We turned off at the mailbox like it said." Tanya was trying to remain calm. "How many Pinn's can there be in the district? On the planet, even?"

"But you said the house was four K's from the highway. We must have covered at least ten."

"Three point six, actually. If you'd been watching the speedo you'd have seen."

Frank moaned and sneered at the dash panel. "How can I watch the speedo when I've got my eyes glued to this God-awful road?"

Tanya paused and hoped she didn't sound too pedantic. "Well, we've only done three point six, darling. Take my word for it."

"Fair enough." Accepting she was probably right, he handed the map back and somewhat reluctantly put the car in gear. About to start off, the rain intensified again. Frank merely groaned quietly and began driving. Despite his best efforts to avoid the puddles, there were too many for him to miss them all and the car continued to bounce and lurch. The track eventually led to a gap in a dilapidated stock fence. "Is this on the map?"

Tanya frowned at the paper on her lap. "Not that I can see." When the car's engine faded and died, she asked: "Why did you switch off? We aren't there yet."

"I know that," Frank hissed irritably through gritted teeth, "And I didn't do anything – the car just stalled." Taking it out of gear, he turned the starter a few times with no effect.

"Frank?" Tanya queried.

"It won't start. Must have been that big puddle back there."

"Oh, bloody great!" exclaimed Jody.

"So, what do we do now?" Tanya asked.

"Well, the car's obviously not going anywhere. We'll have to improvise. The house can't be far."

"You're not suggesting we walk?" Jody whined in disbelief. "Not in this!"

Frank glowered over the shoulder at his daughter. "I'm not suggesting *you* do anything; except maybe stop whingeing for five minutes. I'll see if I can find the house." Opening the door, he glanced dismally up at a blanket of dark clouds. "So much for summer."

Tommy opened his door and jumped out. "Tommy!" Tanya called after him.

Frank arched his eyebrows and extended her a weak boys-will-be-boys smile. "It's only rain." He climbed out. In moments his hair was flattened and water was streaming down his face. "What's he going to do – drown?"

Unappreciative of the sarcasm, Tanya topped it with some of her own: "You both might. Just be careful. And don't be too long."

The doors being slammed simultaneously with the windows shut made Tanya's ears pop – just one more discomfort added to the day's misfortunes so far. She watched her husband trudging along the track, shoulders hunched. Her son dashed on ahead; leaping some

puddles and landing in others; probably on purpose, knowing Tommy. Jody's voice whined pathetically from the back seat: "What are we doing here, Mum?"

"You know as well as I do."

"But Dad's the one who went troppo..." Realising she had said the wrong thing, Jody waited for a reprimand. She hadn't expected it to be so fierce.

"Don't you ever let me hear you say that again Jody!" Tanya drew in a few deep breaths with eyes closed to calm herself. "Your Dad had a nervous breakdown, that's all. He needs time to work things out."

"You could have done that without me," said Jody, merely reiterating her earlier pleas that had fallen on deaf ears. "I'd have been alright at home."

"I can imagine," droned Tanya. She watched Frank and Tommy disappear round a bend, then shifted in the seat to fix her daughter with a concerned, maternal gaze of appeal. "Doctor Singer said Dad needs his family around him - he made a point of it. He needs our support."

Unable to maintain eye contact, Jody took to staring out of the side window. There was little to see except a few metres of stock fence and a paddock, both swallowed by a mist of rain. "If we had to travel to the middle of nowhere on doctor's orders, surely we could have supported Dad better from a motel in town. At least there'd be a slim chance of intelligent life."

"There's nothing wrong with the bush," insisted her mother. "Anyway, it's peak season and motels cost money. We wouldn't have got this if it hadn't been for Doctor Singer."

"Lucky us," moaned a sneering Jody.

"For pity's sake!" snapped Tanya, spinning to face front and glare through the windshield. "Stop being so damned negative!" Movement on the track ahead caught her attention. Frank and Tommy were coming back. "We're going to make the best of this for Dad's sake," she declared in a tone of finality. "Now let's drop the subject, please."

2

On his return to the car, Frank was hoping it would start. It was not to be, so there was no choice but to walk. In keeping with her performance to date, Jody grumbled and complained as she waded through puddles, struggling with enough luggage to last a lifetime. It wasn't until she was standing before their "holiday home" that she really noticed it. "My God! What a dump!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Tanya, rocking her head from side to side. "I think it's sort-of... rustic." The house was that alright: an old weatherboard, most likely turn of the century. Although not quite derelict, its paintwork was peeling, the odd window was cracked; and the roof of corrugated iron was held together with rust. The state of the yard accentuated the neglect, weeds sprouting from red dirt and puddles, plus a few scattered eucalypt saplings that had presumably self-seeded at random.

Tommy was less interested in what was, than in what might yet be. “Hey,” he chirped hopefully, “Do you reckon it’s got a ghost?”

Jody snorted. “Even a poltergeist would have to be mental to live in that!”

Tanya countered the surly comment with a scowl. “At least it’s got a roof. That’s one thing to be grateful for. Let’s get in out of the wet.”

Not needing a second invitation, Tommy sprinted towards the house. Tanya was about to call after him to come back and pick up his bag, but decided it would be best to leave him be – at least one of the children seemed to be enjoying the experience. A sideways glance at her husband was not as reassuring as she would have liked. Frank was clearly having second thoughts. She smiled encouragement. “It’ll be fine, Frank, believe me. We’re going to have a great time.”

Tommy bounded up the wooden steps onto the veranda and went straight for the door. He must have tried the knob because it turned back and forth with a rattle which disturbed the quiet inside the house. The presence standing by the window smiled - *they* had come! It looked out through the grimy pane at the other members of the family and was further cheered by the sight of one in particular. Then the view was blocked by the boy who pressed cupped hands against the glass as he tried to look through. In a second he had gone, presumably attracted by some boyhood curiosity of greater import. The presence switched attention from the girl to watch the approach of the two adults. The woman paused and turned to see that her daughter hadn’t moved. The girl was just standing and seemed both sulky and unsure as she continued to stare at the window.

“Come on, Jody,” called her mother, “You’re getting soaked out there.”

Jody sighed despondently, picked up her bags and began sloshing through the mud of the yard towards the house. Her father was at the door, fumbling a key into the lock; her mother waiting impatiently at the top of the steps with “that look” on her face. It changed to a frown when she noticed Tommy further along the veranda lying face down and peering intently over the edge at something beneath the wooden decking. “Tommy! What are you doing? You’ll get filthy.”

The boy’s face turned and his expression was aglow. “We’ve got us a snake,” he declared excitedly.

Jody stuttered to a sudden halt. “Right, that’s it! I’ve had it with this place! I’m going back to the car.”

She had taken barely two steps when Tanya called after her: “Come back Jody, please. And you, Tommy,” she said sternly, “Get over here and stop stirring Jody!”

“But, Mum...”

The door lock clicked as Frank finally managed to turn the key. The sound distracted Tanya, but only for a moment; then she was focussing on her son again. “But nothing, young man. Here! Now! Do something useful for a change and help with the bags.”

Frank was first in. Tanya followed, dropped a suitcase on the floor and went to stand beside him. Producing a theatrical, disillusioned sigh, he drawled sarcastically: “Not exactly the Hilton is it?”

It wasn't, not even remotely. Although surprisingly clean, the room and its contents were an anachronism. The furniture was old and chipped. An escritoire canted against one wall and a chaise-longue reclined under the window, both seemingly antiques that had seen better days. Tanya slipped an arm through his and squeezed gently. "Does it matter? We're on holiday, darling."

The erstwhile romance of the moment was broken by Jody who had just entered. "Yeah, right on," she sneered, panning the room with a look of major disapproval, "Let's hear it for Doctor Singer."

Tanya felt Frank stiffen. Needing to lighten the mood, she ignored Jody and guided him to a heavy wooden table in the centre of the room. "Hey, someone's left us some wine. Isn't that nice?" Reaching out to pick up an envelope propped against the bottle, she said: "And it's my guess this is a welcome note." Deciding not to open it herself, she passed it to Frank. "Maybe it's from Doctor Singer."

While he opened the envelope and began to unfold a sheet of paper, Tanya caught sight of Tommy who was apparently on a journey of exploration. The boy quickly skirted the room, pausing occasionally to touch something before moving on. Under different circumstances it might have been a recipe for damage or breakages, but judging by the state of the place it was doubtful anyone would either mind or notice, so she let him carry on. Next, he had opened a connecting door and was disappearing through it into the hallway beyond. About to go after him, she heard Frank say something and momentarily forgot Tommy. "What?"

Frank flapped the piece of paper. "It's not from Doctor Singer. It's from someone signing themselves J. T. Pinn."

A second distraction passed by as Jody scowled her way across the room to another open doorway and stood looking through. "The name on the mailbox," Tanya reminded her husband quietly.

"Maybe he's the owner," suggested Frank.

"I thought Doctor Singer was."

"So did I." He re-scanned the words on the paper. "Anyway, he – or I suppose it could be a she – says to treat the place as our own. There's food in the kitchen, apparently."

Tanya could see Frank was unnerved by the entire situation, in particular Jody's negative attitude which wasn't helping. The girl had eventually drifted into the adjoining room and could be heard making her recalcitrant statement by opening and closing cupboards and drawers as noisily as was humanly possible. It was preferable that Frank be removed from the situation, so Tanya said: "Tommy's on the loose. You'd better find him before he wrecks the joint." Hearing a sudden crash, Frank's head jerked in the direction of the room Jody was taking her frustration out on. Tanya put a hand on his arm and squeezed reassurance. "You see to Tommy; I'll sort Jody."

"She really loathes being here, doesn't she?" he droned despondently.

"Of course not." Tanya sent him a comforting smile. "She's just being Jody, that's all."

"Yes, I suppose," Frank muttered as he turned and headed off to scout for Tommy.

Tanya discovered the room Jody was in to be a kitchen, one from a bygone era like the parlour. Shelves on a Welsh dresser housed a collection of mismatched crockery; and reclining on the very top were a number of old tins sporting quaint retro-labels of products no longer available. Dangling from hooks on the wall was a selection of pans and skillets, seemingly well-used, but clean, nevertheless; and these were conveniently close to a cast-iron wood stove which Jody was in the process of inspecting. "The whole place needs condemning," she declared in disgust, "There isn't even a microwave."

Tanya smirked. "I don't know how we'll survive."

"You know what I mean, Mum."

"No, not really," said Tanya with a defeated sigh.

Jody turned to glare at her mother. "You do – I can see it in your eyes. You wish we'd never come; but you won't admit it because of Dad, so we all have to suffer."

"And what does that make me, Jody – bitch of the month?" She paused for effect. "I don't think so." Tanya wandered over to a central jarrah-wood table on which was an array of food – a cottage loaf, a fruit cake on a plate and a whole cheese-round on a wooden platter. There were also jars of pickles and preserves. "At least we won't starve. Let's give it a go, eh?" There was no response: Jody had turned and was leaving, so Tanya sent a parting shot to the girl's back: "What have we got to lose?"

3

Having changed into dry clothes, the family was seated at the parlour table. It should have been a pleasant gathering, a congenial one; but Jody was managing to sour the occasion. She appeared sullen as she systematically and absently broke the slice of bread she was holding into crumbs. Some fell on the plate, but most bounced onto the surrounding table top. The other three were more appreciative of the food which Frank had likened to a ploughman's lunch. Only Tanya seemed aware of Jody's preoccupation; but she decided to keep the concern to herself rather than spark a slanging match. That certainly wouldn't have helped Frank who was gradually becoming far-less agitated.

"Funny about first impressions," he mused, cutting himself a slice of cake, "They always tend to be so stark and defined; then after a while they begin to mellow." He cast a glance around the room and actually produced a small yet genuine smile. "I suppose you learn to look past the imperfections."

"They grow on you," said Tanya.

"Like ringworm," put in Jody sourly, crumbling more of the bread.

Her mother tutted. "Would you eat that or put it down please, Jody. You're making a shocking mess."

Jody's nostrils flared. Whatever she was going to come back with never passed her lips. Her subsequent actions, however, spoke louder than words as she dumped the remainder of the bread on her plate and stood up. Frank stayed surprisingly calm and casual as he asked

where she was going. Jody's reply was quite the opposite, a grating: "Outside. I need some space."

Tanya was watching her daughter's strut to the front door and called after her: "Just don't get wet again."

Jody stiffened momentarily, then continued on. Passing the window, she leaned towards the glass and looked through. "It's stopped raining," she declared in a haughty, self-satisfied tone. Confident that she had won this particular exchange, a triumphant exit was next on her agenda. Opening the door, she prepared to leave.

Not to be outdone by his grouchy sister, Tommy reclaimed centre stage with a mere flick of the wrist and succeeded in knocking over his glass. "Um-ah! Sorry."

The apology didn't help. Water had flooded across the table top and onto his father's lap. "You clumsy clod, Tommy!" growled Frank, starting to rise.

"I said sorry," the boy reminded his father, "I didn't do it on purpose."

"Maybe if you didn't fidget so much it wouldn't have happened," Tanya scolded. "Stay put, Frank. I'll get a cloth." Her intent was to go to the kitchen, until she noticed that Jody was still standing at the open front door. She had hold of the knob and seemed to have frozen on the spot. Tanya frowned. "Jody? What is it?" When there was no response she started towards her: "Darling...?"

Jody continued to stare through the open doorway and hadn't moved. "I..." She turned slowly to look back at her mother, her expression clouded by shock and confusion. Colour drained from her face and she tottered unsteadily against the door which slammed shut with her weight. Then eyes rolled up in her head and she fainted, slipping to a crumpled heap on the floor.

Tanya rushed to her. "Frank, quick!"

In moments, Tanya was kneeling beside her daughter, while Frank hovered above feeling useless. "What is it - lack of food, maybe?" he suggested. "I don't recall her having breakfast, and she ate nothing for lunch."

"I don't know," declared Tanya. "Could be anything." Tommy had arrived on the scene and seemed more intrigued than he was sympathetic. Before he could start asking awkward questions, she said: "Frank, help me carry her to the bedroom. Tommy, clear the table and take the food back into the kitchen, please."

"Is Jody going to be okay?" he asked.

"Of course she is," Tanya snapped, a little too severely, she thought, and repeated the reassurance in a softer tone. "Don't worry. We'll see to her. Now, sort the food, please. Put the cold stuff in the fridge."

"I don't think we've got one," the boy advised.

"Surely..." she started, then said: "Whatever. Just find somewhere cool; maybe there's a pantry. Use your initiative."

Once they had Jody on her bed, Frank only stayed a while until his daughter opened her eyes and was speaking. The voice was faint and trembling, but she sounded lucid which

was encouraging. "I'll leave you to it," he said. "Then you can talk about secret women's things without me inhibiting you; apart from which I, don't fancy being embarrassed."

The heart-to-heart Frank had predicted never eventuated. No amount of gentle persuasion would encourage Jody to reveal what had come over her, or why. "I don't want to talk about it," was all she would offer. "I'm okay, now. I'd just like to sleep. You'd best go and check on Dad, in case... Well, you know."

Tanya remained watching over Jody for a few minutes until the girl's breathing became regular. Pausing in the doorway for a final look back seemed to confirm that her daughter truly was asleep, so there was little more to be done at that moment. Closing the door quietly, Tanya went to find Frank. He was before the closed front door standing rigid, almost a mirror image of Jody; and his focus seemed to be transfixed on the wood panelling. Tanya's voice invaded his preoccupation: "She's sleeping. I think she'll be okay; I hope so, anyway. She wouldn't say what the problem was. Maybe she saw Tommy's snake. I never knew she was so scared of them..."

Frank was turning slowly, a look of bewilderment on his face. "It wasn't a snake," he declared positively, nervously. Walking to her, he took hold of his wife's hand and began guiding her towards the front door.

"Frank? You're shaking. What's the matter?"

He declined to answer. Once before the door, Frank pointed at the brass knob. "Open it."

A shiver ran down Tanya's spine. "What for? What is this – some kind of test?"

"Please, Tanya," he appealed, "Open the door and look out. Tell me what you see." She said nothing, merely stared at him. "I know what you're thinking," he said woodenly, "It crossed my mind too. That's why I want you to open the door. I need to know."

Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and placed a hand gingerly on the knob. Her uncertain glance back at Frank seemed to say: *I'm doing as you asked, hand on the knob ready to open the door. I don't know why, but I'm doing it.* Frank nodded encouragement, but there was no accompanying smile which was a worry. Even so, she plucked up the courage to open the door. At first her eyes were focussed on the ground, expecting there might be a snake on the veranda, despite what he'd said. There was no snake; but on closer inspection she could see no veranda either. Opening the door wider, she looked up and out. The front yard had gone too, along with the surrounding bush. Beyond the door was another room; and this was the really weird part: it looked exactly like the parlour they were standing in.

Tanya spun, her mouth open, eyes wide, frightened. Frank simply returned her look. He had his confirmation – if he was going mad, it was catching. "I tried the window, too," he said in a wavering voice, "The outside looks normal through the glass, until you open it; then it's gone. How can the outside just disappear?"

Both stood gawping, unspeaking. Being confronted by an enigma that neither could explain, what was to say? In spite of the sound as he thumped across the wooden floor, they didn't hear Tommy's approach until he spoke: "I've finished the washing up," he declared

proudly. That in itself was a miracle worthy of a reaction, but his parents failed to respond. Obviously disappointed, he walked towards them. “What are you looking at?”

Still befuddled, his father said: “Um... nothing really.” Tommy was a smart boy and it was doubtful he would leave it there, so Frank added: “Just checking on the weather. Jody was right – it’s stopped raining.”

“So, I can go out, then?”

Tanya must have recovered her senses and heard the question. Slamming the door shut, she barked: “No!”

“Why not? Dad said the rain’s stopped.”

“Because...” Frank started, but couldn’t think of an excuse good enough to satisfy Tommy.

“Because we need to talk to you,” said Tanya, engaging her practised maternal talent to calm herself in times of crisis. She started walking. “Come on. Let’s go in the kitchen. I can get on with the washing up.”

“Mum,” droned Tommy with a groan of exasperation. “I’ve done it - I told you that.”

“Sorry. I was distracted. It didn’t register.”

“What’s the matter, Mum? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I... er... Something strange has happened, is happening,” she mumbled awkwardly.

Rather than plying his mother for the details, he merely said: “If it’s about the magic cake, I’ve already seen it.”

“What?”

Clearly appreciative that he was now being taken notice of, Tommy explained: “We ate half the cake; now we’ve got a whole one again.” He took off for the kitchen. “Come and see. It’s really mint.”

Expecting this to be one of Tommy’s silly pranks, Tanya said: “You go, Frank. I want to check on Jody.”

Tanya wasn’t long. Jody was sleeping peacefully, hopefully recovering from her shock; and what she had witnessed through the front door must have been exactly that. It was certainly a shock for her parents. As for Tommy, he was ever-resilient and was likely to treat the enigma as something cool that, with a little creative thought, might be turned to his advantage. At least probably, that was; when he was eventually told about it.

Returning to the kitchen, she found the two boys standing by the table, gazing down at the food on it. Frank heard her coming and looked up. “How is she?”

“Sleeping,” replied Tanya simply. “What’s with the cake?”

“It’s weird,” said Frank, “As if it hasn’t been touched. I know I ate some.”

“And me. I had two pieces,” Tommy admitted, “And some cheese.”

Frank raised his eyebrows in a gesture of incredulity. “The cheese is the same. We cut it only moments ago, but now it’s whole again - see.”

The round of cheese was indeed still complete, and a small wedge sat beside it on the platter. Tanya reached over, picked up the cut portion and inspected it briefly before frowning at the round. “There must have been two, surely?”

“Only one,” Frank said, then: “Watch this.”

Taking the knife laying beside it, he cut into the cheese, more confident with this demonstration than the first time he'd tried it. Once he had slid out the wedge, Tanya stared, intently, watching the narrow gap in the round, waiting for something to happen. When it didn't, she queried: "So?"

"Just give it a minute," advised her husband, starting to wonder if he had perhaps imagined the enigma.

Tommy's encouragement was welcome support. "Keep watching, Mum," the boy urged, clearly excited. "It's magic."

The statement proved to be less fanciful than it sounded. As the three continued to observe, the cut section of the cheese gradually repaired itself until the round became whole again. Tanya snatched a breath and held it.

"Neat, eh?" declared Tommy. "Told you it was magic."

"It's... quite..." Understandably lost for words, Tanya shivered. Following a nervous glance at Frank, she returned her attention to Tommy. "Sweetheart, why don't you find something to do? Dad and I need to talk."

The boy shrugged. "Okay. Can I go and play? There's a great climbing tree the other side of the yard..."

"NO!!!" Frank's knee-jerk reaction was too harsh, the kind of irrational outburst that had previously caused him to seek medical advice and had eventually brought them to this place. The problem now was that rationality was hardly appropriate under the circumstances; and he was no longer alone in his madness, if it was actually that. Tommy was looking at him, uncertain and - dare he think - fearful...? But not of the strange disappearance-of-the-outside enigma which he hadn't been told about yet: the boy was frightened by and of his own father. That was not good. Frank hastily composed himself and said as calmly as he was able: "Just play your game in your room for a while."

When the boy hadn't moved, Tanya advised: "Do as Dad said, please. And don't make a lot of noise - Jody needs to sleep."

Tommy produced a sneer of reluctant acceptance and began scuffing out to the parlour, mumbling: "Can't go out. Can't make a noise. Shit-of-a-holiday this is turning out to be."

Tanya waited for him to leave before going to the open kitchen door and looking out. Tommy could be seen disappearing into the hallway on the far side of the parlour. "He's gone to his room," she reported, turning with the intention of checking the amazing, self-repairing food on the table; maybe in the hopes that it had all been imagination. Footsteps and the creak of floorboards attracted her attention. Frank had gravitated to the window in the far wall where he was standing motionless. "What is it?" she asked as she went to join him.

"Isn't it obvious?" He felt her arm snake though his and was vaguely comforted by the contact. "What if it's the same?"

"The outside gone, you mean? But what if it isn't?"

Following a brief, nervous hesitation, Frank reached for the frame of the window and prepared to open it. "Only one way to find out."

They had spent a while trawling through the house, systematically testing a theory. Hope dwindled with every disappointment. Returning to the parlour, they appeared defeated; not surprisingly because, beyond every window and exterior door they'd tried appeared to be a view of the same room they were standing in. "It's not possible, Frank. There must be some way to get out."

He was on edge and was sorely tempted to challenge Tanya's persistent naivety; but that wouldn't solve their problem. "We've tried everything we can think of. I don't know what else we can do, short of climbing through the roof. And I'll bet if we did that we'd only end up in another attic; probably the same one. It's crazy; or maybe we are."

Reaching the table, Tanya slumped onto a chair; purposely facing away from the front door which she preferred not to look at. "It seems the only way out is in."

Frank was in the process of pouring himself a large wine. He downed it in a single swig and began refilling the glass. "Stating the bloody obvious isn't helping, Tanya."

"No, I suppose not, but neither will you getting drunk."

Sinking down onto a chair beside his wife, he held up the bottle to inspect the contents. "That wouldn't be hard. The wine's the same as the cake and cheese – keeps refilling itself. You know, there's a fortune to be made here if we could learn the secret."

"Always assuming we could get out into the real world to reap the benefits; but we can't. Why is that?"

Although the question was rhetorical, Frank took it personally. "Because there is no bloody out! Not anymore! What's going on here? Who's doing this? Why is it happening to us?"

"You've been chosen, Frank." The voice drifted across the room from behind them.

Startled, they both turned in their chairs to see a man holding a shopping bag standing just inside the parlour with his back to the front door. Tanya exploded with a trembling: "Oh, my God!"

Frank's response was more pragmatically male as he jerked to his feet, knocking the chair over; but this was as far as he got. "What the...! Who the Hell are you?"

The intruder delayed answering. He advanced, but in a round-about way, roaming around the parlour as if conducting an inspection. Presumably satisfied, he said: "I am Jeremy Pinn. This is my house."

Rather than who he was, Tanya was more interested in his actual and sudden presence. "H-how did you get in?"

"The usual way," said Pinn casually. "I knocked. Perhaps you didn't hear."

Tanya was off her seat in a flash and rushed past him to the door. Grabbing the knob, she yanked it open and stared out. The glimmer of eager expectancy in her eyes diminished instantly. She shot Frank a look of despair. He was simply gazing into nowhere, totally bewildered. Closing the door, she sent Pinn a hostile glare. "It's you, isn't it? This... this stunt is all your doing." Shaking her head in disbelief she continued: "Why? What did we ever do to you? We don't even know you."

Still not fazed, Pinn crooned pleasantly: "There'll be time to get acquainted later, Mrs Reynolds – plenty of time."

"Never mind later; when it suits *you*, Pinn," snarled Frank. "Just let us out of here – Now!"

The man seemed to be playing a game, one he was in perfect control of, and winning. "I'd rather you stayed," he said in a soft, lilting tone, "For a while, at least."

"You can't keep us here against our will." Frank's declaration was less than confident and was laced with fear; so he tried to add something more forceful: "It's illegal! It's kidnapping!"

Pinn smirked condescendingly. "Deprivation of liberty, actually. There is a difference."

"To Hell with what it's called," Tanya cut in. "It's still against the law!"

The man shrugged. "So, sue me. Call the police."

"We already tried," grated Frank despondently, "Couldn't get a mobile signal; not in the house, anyway."

"Yes, pity about that," mused Pinn pseudo-apologetically, stroking his cheek thoughtfully as he monitored their reactions.

"You smug bastard!" Frank made a move to confront Pinn physically, but for some reason he stopped short of actually touching the man and merely assaulted him with an angry demand: "Let us out of here, right now!"

"Or what, Frank?" Pinn held his ground momentarily, then skirted Frank and walked to the table where he placed the shopping bag he was carrying on the top. "What will you do? Beat me to a pulp; make me wish I'd never been born?" He turned to glance from Tanya to Frank. "You could always try, but then you'd be stuck here, wouldn't you? Maybe forever..."

Tanya could feel Frank about to boil over and considered it would only serve to inflame the situation. Although she was trembling, a reaction she hoped Pinn hadn't noticed, her plea was delivered as calmly as she could make it: "Look, we just want to leave; peacefully, quietly. If it's money you want..."

"No, Tanya!" roared Frank. "I'm damned if I'll pay this lunatic a single cent! And I refuse to be intimidated!"

"Frank," she coaxed, "I'm sure Mr Pinn has a good reason for doing what he's done. Isn't that right?" she said, switching her attention to Pinn. He had his back turned so wouldn't have been aware she was addressing him; so she added: "Mr. Pinn? Would you be good enough to tell us what you want with us?"

Pinn felt warm inside, unusual of late. It must have been psychological, no doubt a result of current circumstances. Able to wield power over these people at his discretion was God-like; and keeping them in the dark for a little longer was an enjoyable bonus. Picking up the bottle from the table, he said "I see you've tried the wine." Raising it higher to look first at the label, then past to the contents, he added: "A good vintage, I'm told - lingers well."

"The wine!" exclaimed Tanya. "That's how you did it – you drugged the wine! We're hallucinating."

Pinn raised a single eyebrow as if considering the possibility. Picking up Frank's glass, he sniffed over the rim, then had a sip. "A hint of plum, or is it raspberry? Subtle, anyway."

“Okay, it’s not the wine,” Tanya had to admit; at least she imagined Pinn was unlikely to have sampled a drink that might have been spiked. “It must be in the cake, then; or the cheese. How do you fancy taste-testing them?”

Putting the glass down, Pinn started to walk away. “Some other time, perhaps. I only stopped by to make sure you were settling in.”

“Hang on a minute...!” An instinctive lunge for the man’s arm had no effect and he kept walking. Frank stared at his hand incredulously. It seemed to have passed straight through Pinn. Gathering his senses, he stumbled after their captor. “You can’t just leave us here!”

Tanya hadn’t seen Frank’s failed attempt to grab Pinn’s arm; but she was very aware that control of their predicament was slipping away. “Frank, do something!”

A smile spread across Pinn’s face. He continued on to the door and halted before it, but made no attempt to reach for the knob. Hearing Frank’s footsteps thudding on the floorboards towards him, he turned slowly. Frank stuttered to a halt, fists clenched, his intentions obvious. After the attempted arm-grab, Pinn was unconcerned. Changing the smile to a condescending leer, he said quietly: “Is it worth it, Frank? You’ll only confirm what you already believe. Calm down, learn to be patient – both of you. I’ll be in touch. Oh, a bit of advice: these old places can get pretty humid, so mind the cheese. Everything will be fine if you mind the cheese.” Seemingly as an afterthought, he nodded to indicate something behind them. “I’ve left a few things for you in the bag on the table.”

Totally stupefied by their experience, they both turned to look. Although neither recalled the bag which had been, at the time, a mere incidental; now it seemed important. Following a brief, quizzical stare at the object on the table, they turned back to seek an explanation from Pinn; but he had gone. If not for the shopping bag he had left, he might never have been there at all. They took to gazing at it, wondering whether to look inside. A brief spurt of bravado saw Frank extending a hand towards it; then he changed his mind. “It’s probably nothing,” encouraged Tanya.

“It’s from Pinn,” grated Frank, “It’s bound to be something, most likely more tricks. I might open it; *after* I’ve had another wine – join me?”

Tanya nodded absently and once Frank had poured another glass, both of them took to staring in silence at the bag.

Bloodline

They eventually plucked up the courage to empty the contents of the bag on the parlour table and were fishing through them. Frank unfolded the newspaper in anticipation of being brought up to date with current affairs; at least the kind presumably still going on in the real world. Then he glanced at the date. “This is two months old,” he announced irritably. “Jeremy bloody Pinn obviously fancies himself as a bit of a comedian.”

"I don't hear either of us laughing." Tanya was inspecting a pill bottle. "Why would Jody need iron tablets?"

"I don't know. Does she?"

Tanya showed him the prescription label. "It's got her name on it." A spark of realisation struck her. "Doctor Singer – it has to be!"

"Why Singer?"

"Because his name's on it too; and he was the one who arranged for us to stay in Pinn's house." She looked up at her husband who apparently had failed to appreciate the significance of the new information. "Don't you see: they must know each other. And Singer's our family doctor - he treats all of us, including Jody. It must have been him who provided Pinn with the drug that's been doing these weird things to us."

Frank shook his head in denial. "You're still convinced we're hallucinating, aren't you?"

"What other explanation is there?" Tanya went on to remind him: "I've watched you walk out the front door, only you weren't going out; you were coming *in*! Don't try to tell me that actually happened."

He thought about the experience and shuddered. "I don't know anymore, Tanya. Every time I blink I expect to find myself in a rubber room."

"Forget crazy, Frank. This isn't to do with your mental state; or mine, come to that. It's Singer, I'd bet my last dollar on it." Her focus drifted back to the bottle in her hand. "So, why did he give Jody iron tablets?"

"She's probably on one of those stupid diets," he droned sardonically. "You saw how much she didn't eat for lunch." Something else occurred to him: "Or... My God, you don't suppose she's pregnant?"

"Don't be ridiculous...!" Tanya was about to add that their daughter was only fifteen; then, on thinking about it, a young age provided no immunity from sexual urges. Her attempt to dismiss Frank's suggestion didn't sound all-that convincing: "No, of course not. Jody's far too sensible."

The sound of Tommy entering was at least a normal occurrence which they recognised and could safely ignore. Frank now had a pack of batteries in his hand. "And what are these for – my hearing aid? Did I go deaf as well as nuts?"

Tommy interrupted: "It's stuffed." He was referring to a hand-held video game that he was banging and shaking. "Must be the batteries. Can we get some more?"

The comment and its association had Frank staring down at the bubble pack. Tommy glanced at his father in hope and saw he was wearing a puzzled expression. Searching for a reason, his eyes fell on the pack of batteries and he was instantly ecstatic. Hurrying to the table, he grabbed the packet out of Frank's hand. "Excellent! Thanks, Dad." With that, he raced off. Skidding to a halt half-way across the room, he spun and said with a huge grin: "Sometimes you really are cool." Then he had gone.

Frank was chewing his knuckles, a past and annoying habit he'd thought he had cured himself of. "I don't feel very cool," he mumbled despondently.

"How did he know?" asked Tanya.

“How did who know what?”

“Pinn, of course. How did he know Tommy had a video game and would eventually need batteries?”

Frank shrugged. “Same way he knew about your allergy, I suppose.” He slid a bar of unscented soap across the table towards her. “Same as he seems to know every bloody thing! We’re the ones in total ignorance.” He watched his wife fingering the soap while she stared moodily across the room. Absently, he wiped a hand over his face and noticed two things: his skin was icy cold, and he was trembling. Reaching over, he took her hand and as he squeezed it gently, he felt how warm it was compared to his own. “Help me, Tanya. I’m scared. What are we going to do?”

2

Their bedroom reflected the tone of the house in general. Furniture was old and mismatched; the wash stand painted cream while the rest was varnished oak, suggesting it had been imported from overseas many moons ago. There being no electricity, Frank was sitting up in bed reading the paper by the light from a candle. Tanya was perched on a rickety stool in front of the dressing-table mirror brushing her hair. She paused and listened to the sounds of wind moaning and the eerie creaking of the house settling. “What do you think Pinn meant by minding the cheese?”

Frank flicked to another page. “Who knows? The guy’s a fruit-loop.” He shifted the newspaper to catch more light. “Struth! That’s *him!*” Hearing her get off the stool and approach him, he turned the paper so that she could see and pointed to the article of interest. “It’s got to be him - look!”

Peering at the accompanying picture closely, she frowned and said doubtfully: “Could be anyone. You know what newspaper photos are like.”

“But the story mentions his name,” Frank insisted, “*And* his doctor – none other than Bradley Singer MD!”

Tanya read the opening lines of the story and shook her head. “It can’t be him. The man this is about is dead.” She scanned the page for a date and found one at the top. “See – it’s like you said before: this news is two months old. Our Jeremy Pinn was here today, we saw him. He was as alive as you and me.”

Fortunately she was still reading the article and didn’t notice his shiver when he had a sudden recall of his failed attempt to grab Pinn’s arm. Then both their heads jerked in the direction of the voice: “Appearances can be deceptive, can’t they, Frank?” It was obvious from their vague searching of the darkened room that they hadn’t spotted him yet, so Pinn decided to help them out: “Over here – in the mirror.”

Frank didn’t move, but Tanya took a few steps towards the dressing table and pulled up short to stare at the image in the mirror. It was Pinn alright, yet there was no reflection of herself as there should have been. An unnecessary glance around confirmed the man was

in the mirror and nowhere else. "Sorry to disturb you," he said casually. "I won't stay long. Just called in to drop this off." Raising his arm, he extended his hand through the glass of the mirror and deposited the book he was holding on the dresser top. The hand withdrew. "I know it's early days yet, but home births can be tricky; and I gather it's a few years since you've..."

Frank lurched off the bed. "Get out of here you sick bastard!"

Pinn shrugged with his eyebrows. "As you wish. I didn't mean to trouble you."

When he began to fade, Tanya leaned forward until her nose almost touched the glass. "No! Come back! What did you mean by home births?"

The image returned. "Calm down, Mrs Reynolds. I need you to be strong; especially now."

His eyes seemed mesmerising and disturbing. She diverted hers and this was when she noticed the book on the dresser top: a guide to pre-natal exercises. Picking it up, she waved it at him. "If this is for me, Mr Pinn," she snorted derisively, "You've got your wires crossed."

"Tommy's what – eleven now?" he mused. "A long time between drinks for you. Techniques change."

"So do people," sneered Tanya.

"Ah, you mean your hysterectomy. Doctor Singer told me; such a shame."

"God, you are insufferable, you and Singer!" She lurched away momentarily, a sign of disgust. "If this is a feeble attempt at psychological torture, you can forget it. Thanks to our big-mouthed doctor, you know I can't be pregnant."

"*You* can't, no," crooned Pinn smugly, "But your daughter's still a complete woman; and with your assistance..."

"Jody?" Tanya exploded. "You dare lay a finger on my little girl and..."

"Hardly a girl anymore, Mrs Reynolds. She's a woman now; soon to be the mother of my child."

"God damn you!" Frank took a second to find a missile of some kind. The only item on the dressing table was Tanya's hairbrush. Despite being plastic and most likely ineffectual, he snatched it up anyway and prepared to hurl it at Pinn's image.

"Steady Frank," warned Pinn condescendingly. "You're making a fool of yourself; and it's really too late for recrimination. The seed is already sown, so to speak. Doctor Singer performed the insemination of Jody a fortnight ago – in my absence, of course. I suppose you could say mine was a posthumous contribution."

Tanya had taken hold of Frank in an effort to calm him; but on hearing this latest news, her tightening grip was less than comforting. "You're lying. Jody would never submit to anything as bizarre as that."

"Oh, there was no need to ask her consent. She thought Doctor Singer was conducting a routine examination. You know the kind of thing, Mrs Reynolds. Well, of course you do. Jody wasn't inconvenienced, I assure you..."

"Not inconvenienced!" spluttered Frank. "What you're talking about is no less than rape!"

“Such an ugly word, Frank,” droned Pinn, “And quite unjustified. Jody never even knew it had happened; she still doesn’t.” He smiled. “I was hoping you could break the glad tidings to her for me.”

“You’re mad!” snarled Tanya. “You’ll never get away with it. You’ll have to let us go soon...”

“Why is that?”

“Because...” She hadn’t yet thought of a convincing argument and just snatched up the first one that came to mind: “Because, when the food runs out we’ll starve to death. Then you can add murder to your other crimes.”

Pinn tapped a finger on his temple. “You’re not thinking, Mrs Reynolds. Remember the cheese, and the cake - everything you need to survive is here. The house will take care of you, as long as you treat it gently. If not...” He made a point of staring directly at Frank. “Well, let’s just say that it doesn’t appreciate fits of temper. Are you reading me, Frank?”

Even during his mental breakdown, there had always been a way back to sanity; at least so he had been assured; but at that moment Frank felt as if he was drowning in an inescapable sea of gothic fantasy. It was unfair, unimaginable, impossible. “Why, Pinn? Why us? What did we ever do to deserve this?”

“You just happened to be in the right place at the right time, Frank. But, more importantly, you care about family. If not for you, mine would have died out. You see, I was the last of the Pinn’s; but now, thanks to Jody, the bloodline can continue.”

Pinn’s image began to fade again. Tanya pleaded: “Wait... Mr Pinn, *please*. Don’t leave yet.”

This time the image continued to fade and Pinn’s voice became echoing and ghostly: “Stop worrying, Mrs Reynolds. I’ll be back; especially now that I have a reason to return. And you’ll be perfectly alright. Use the cheese as your barometer – stay happy and it will remain fresh, as will the rest of the food.” Despite Tanya’s own reflection starting to re-appear, Pinn’s voice was still audible: “You couldn’t ask for more. Life will be simple, admittedly, but Doctor Singer seemed to think that was just what Frank needed. And if we can’t trust our doctor, who can we trust?”

Following his wife’s earlier lead, Frank clutched at his own straw: “You won’t get away with this. Sooner or later, someone will miss us – they’ll come looking.”

Pinn laughed. The distant sound was chilling, evil. “And they’ll find nothing, Frank. The moment you stepped into my house, you entered a different world – my world. Enjoy the experience, Frank; you too, Mrs Reynolds. And don’t forget to mind the cheese.”

Frank and Tanya waited, but there was no more from Pinn. All they were left with was the reflection of two bewildered people staring back at them from the mirror. Tanya focussed piercingly on Frank’s eyes. “How am I going to tell Jody?”

People cope with anomalies in their own ways. They decided eventually that Tommy needed to know about the enigma, and his acceptance was predictably phlegmatic. For Tommy, here was a quirky phenomenon a cut above video games because it was actually real; at least, this was how he viewed it – surreal wasn't in his vocabulary. Standing facing the open front door, he lobbed an apple out to what should have been the yard. No sooner had it passed through the opening than it was coming back. Tommy caught it. "Hey, if I had a tennis racquet and a ball..."

"You'd be having fun," observed his father sourly, "And we'd still be stuck in here. It isn't a game, Son."

At that point, Jody's raised voice drifted in: "I'm the one who's pregnant, not you." She was in the bedroom with Tanya who had eventually plucked up the courage to tell her the news. Needless to say, Jody was not pleased and, judging by the distress in her voice, her mother's assurances were inadequate.

Frank had initially kept out of the matter, reasoning that this was a no-win situation and definitely not a man's province; but it seemed his wife was in need of support. Hearing a chair scrape and footsteps starting across the wooden floor, Tommy turned to see his father leaving: "Is that true, Dad?" the boy called after him, a cheeky grin on his face.

Frank hesitated in mid-stride. "Is what true?"

"Jody being in the club," Tommy had obviously heard Jody, which confirmed frequent observations that he had ears like radar dishes. Now he had an audience, it was time to deliver the punch-line: "I bet I know who knocked her up."

Feeling anger rising, Frank took a moment to compose himself before advising sternly: "You don't know anything, Tommy, so I suggest you keep quiet." Recommencing his walk to the door, he added: "And no more experiments, not for now." He waited for Tommy's response. When there wasn't one, he pressured: "Okay?" Now he did receive a nod, albeit reluctant and disappointed.

As he entered the hallway, he could hear Jody sobbing out: "He's supposed to be a bloody doctor! I trusted him!" There were more snippets of conversation drifting through the closed bedroom door. Frank only caught the gist. In truth, he would have been quite happy to remain in total ignorance and be somewhere else. Under the circumstances, however, prolonging the agony would do his nerves no good at all; so he bit the bullet and went in. Jody had apparently just received some more unwanted advice. Her back to Tanya, she was looking out of the window. "Why should I?" she demanded sulkily.

Tanya acknowledged Frank's arrival by rolling her eyes at him, then replied to Jody: "Because getting upset isn't helping." Offering no reply, Jody shivered visibly and wrapped arms around herself. Tanya went over and placed a hand gently on her shoulder. "I know how you must be feeling, darling..."

"You don't!" Jody blurted tearfully, "You can't possibly. None of you can."

Tanya let her hand drop away. "Your Dad and I think..."

Unaware that her father was now in the room, the girl sneered: “Dad? Don’t make me laugh. He can’t sort his own head out. How’s he going to fix this? Chuck another wobbly? Take me to the country on a nice holiday?” Frank was already backtracking towards the door. Just as he was through and closing it he heard Jody’s wounding accusation: “If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be here!”

By the time Jody had eventually settled and Tanya returned to the parlour there was no sign of Frank. Tommy was standing before the open front door, his arm extending through the gap into what should have been the outside. Another arm and hand was reaching into the house towards him – Tommy was trying to touch himself. Tanya bristled with both fear and anger. Although she and her husband had conducted a similar experiment, a far more dangerous one in her opinion, nothing had come of it except to confirm that Frank had stepped out, only to walk back in. Young boys being what they were, however, Tommy in particular; and the fact that no-one had any idea what else this incredible anomaly might have in store for them; she had visions of her son performing the same stunt, perhaps even leaping through. What if he managed to defy the odds and break free never to return? Rushing over, she pushed Tommy out of the way and slammed the door shut. “Don’t let me see you doing that again, or anything like it!”

“I was only...” Tommy started.

“Well don’t even think about it!” She glanced around the parlour. “Where’s Dad?”

“Dunno. I thought he was with you.” A thumping sound from somewhere in another part of the house reached them. Tommy looked casually towards the hallway. “Is that Jody going birko?”

Tanya spun and hurried away. “Stay here, Tommy. Just...” The thumping became louder and more erratic. “Just stay here, please.”

Following the sounds, she discovered Frank in what appeared to be a junk room cluttered with piles of boxes and furniture. He was on his knees, repeatedly attacking a wall with a broken chair leg, sobbing and grunting with each blow. “Oh, Frank.” She went to him, but attempts to arrest his actions were futile as he continued his mechanical pounding. “Frank, Frank, please stop this.” Her touch and words finally began to seep though, slowing his swings until the business-end of the makeshift club rested on the floor in front of him.

Looking up at her, his face was streaked with tears, dark shadows of sorrow and depression raked into his features. “I had to try, Tanya,” he explained simply.

He appeared even worse now than he had at the peak of his previous breakdown; but at least then there was help of sorts, doctors and psychiatrists just a phone call way. Unless she could somehow find a way to bring him back from the depths of despair, Tanya was convinced he would be lost to her forever. “We will, Frank. We’ll find a way out together...”

“No – *me*, Tanya! I have to do it; otherwise I’m no good to any of you; no good to myself.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to us, darling.”

“To Jody, I do. You heard what she said.”

Tanya sucked in a deep breath and exhaled it in a long sigh. “She was out of line; but she was upset, and who could blame her?” Judging by his blank expression, he wanted to

believe; was sending pleas from bloodshot eyes for something more positive that he could identify with. “Jody will come round; and when she does you’ve got to be there for her, Frank; for Tommy and me, too. If we stick together we’ll get through this. If we play it cool.”

Frank let the chair leg slip from his grasp and looked down at his hands. They were trembling and he held them out for his wife to see. “With me like this? Like I was before? I’ve got a lousy track record in that department.”

“So, who’s counting?”

“I suppose,” he admitted reluctantly. “I only wish I could be sure Jody believed that.”

“She does, she will, you’ll see. Just give her time.”

Frank closed his eyes for a few moments, allowing the impossibility of the situation to settle in his mind, hopefully to a level he might eventually learn to cope with. Then he was glancing up at the ceiling and around the room. His gaze settled on Tanya. “It’s about all we’ve got left, isn’t it – time, plenty of time?” This plain statement of fact was less easy to accept because of its cruel ramifications; and he said in a grating, venomous hiss: “That bastard Pinn!”

Rules of Confinement

In the early stages, knowing the date seemed important; but back then it was simply a matter of recalling how many days had passed. As their incarceration dragged on, however, one week rolled over to the next, and even the month they were in seemed irrelevant. Tommy’s original suggestion that they record the passing of time by emulating long-term prisoners and scratching marks on the wall was not well received. “But that’s what we are – prisoners,” he had insisted, “Like the Count of Monte Cristo.”

Tanya’s surprise that he even knew about the story was overshadowed by the implication of her son’s comment and the casual way he had accepted the situation. When he had further suggested that they try digging their way out with a spoon, she had reacted badly. The result was an uncharacteristic stream of verbal abuse and her throwing a plate across the kitchen which had cracked the window. The house, apparently, was not pleased. This was when the cheese began to develop mould. Other effects were a slight change in the flavour of the wine and the cake becoming a little dry.

Adopting her mother’s advice from long ago, Tanya had taken to slicing the mould off the cheese. That seemed to do the trick temporarily, and the rind had healed almost instantly over the cuts; but after a while, the mould returned and had to be excised repeatedly. There was little to be done about the cake or wine except tolerate the change in taste; and the stale bread made passable toast. In consideration, it was decided to avoid temper tantrums, not easy under the circumstances. Eventually it was realised that their confinement in such a limited space necessitated routine; and this engendered a placating effect that turned out to be salvation of sorts. At least the food remained edible.

If not entirely accurate, there was one progression that was fairly reliable for marking the passage of time. Jody's pregnancy was advancing and it was obvious from her size that she was close to giving birth. Tanya's conclusion that this confirmed they must have been there for almost nine months should have triggered a bitter response from Frank; instead of which he merely smiled absently and nodded, then went back to reading one of the books Pinn had brought. Jody too had accepted her fate remarkably well. She was sitting by the window looking out as she had taken to doing regularly. "The garden's starting to look nice with all the rain," she commented. "Masses of wildflowers – they're beautiful." From someone who had always regarded the wonders of nature as boring, it was a signal reflection.

Frank simply picked up on it. "Maybe I ought to think about putting in some vegies..." Closing his eyes for a moment brought him back to the reality of their predicament and he corrected the faux pas: "Just *think* about it..." he droned with a sigh and went back to reading.

Tommy broke the tranquillity with a loud: "Shit!" and flung himself back in his chair.

"Stop saying that word," chided Jody. "I don't want the baby picking it up. They can hear, you know."

"Well..." Her brother grated sourly, tossing the video machine he was playing onto the table. "Stupid game! Do you reckon Uncle Jeremy could get me a new one?"

Frank looked up. "That'll be the third this month."

"But Uncle Jeremy doesn't mind. He said so." Hearing his mother approaching from the kitchen, Tommy sent her an appeal for support: "Didn't he, Mum?"

"That's right, darling," lilted Tanya pleasantly. "He'll be along this afternoon. Why don't you ask him then?" She placed the tray she was carrying on the table.

Frank bent the corner of the page and closed his book. "Ah, lunch. I'm famished. How's the cheese?"

There was a momentary silence of apprehension until Tanya proclaimed: "Fine. Cutting off the mould seems to work quite well."

Frank picked up an apple and inspected it. "This looks a bit wrinkly. I suppose the cake hasn't improved at all?"

"No, but it's still palatable." Tanya was about to sit and called over: "Come on, Jody..." The girl had turned away from the window, was presumably about to rise when something happened. A sudden pained expression accompanied hands flying to her swollen belly. Tanya noticed. "What is it, Jody? Are you okay...?"

"It's coming," Jody announced with a hiss, closing her eyes as another contraction gripped her. "The baby's..." Her final words died in a shriek of pain.

While Tommy played his new game at the table, Pinn was pacing up and down the parlour, wringing hands in anguish. “Why is it taking so long?” he pleaded, looking to Frank for an explanation, demanding one.

“It usually does with the first child,” Frank replied, taking another swig from his glass before casting his own concern across the room to the hallway.

Pinn had ceased prowling and was moving in the direction of the door. “I’m going in. I have to see for myself.” Frank was off his chair in a flash and rushing to intercept, extending arms sideways to bar Pinn’s attempt to leave. The man’s nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed to shoot a belligerent warning. “Get out of my way, Frank! You can’t stop me, you know that.”

Frank stood his ground. “No, I don’t suppose I can. You can do exactly what you want with us. You have the power, Pinn; except in one area – you can’t make us like you.”

Pinn sneered. “Whether you do or not is irrelevant to me. Now, get out of my way or I’ll walk right through you.”

Not wishing to suffer another disturbing supernatural experience Frank stepped aside. “Maybe we are irrelevant in your twisted mind, but what if the child hates you too?”

The prospect had apparently never occurred to him. Pinn stared grimly through the open doorway. In a second or two he managed to regain his composure and the enduring confidence that his control was absolute. “Love isn’t on my agenda, Frank. I don’t need it, never have. The bloodline is all that matters. It will continue, and that will bring me more satisfaction than any amount of sentimentality. It will give me peace.” He turned towards the table where Tommy was seated. “Anyway, despite what you believe, I’m sure there’s one among you who regards me with some affection. Isn’t that right, Tommy?” The boy was so engrossed in his game that he failed to reply. Here was one time Pinn really needed a response to overcome the doubt that had started to creep in. For some strange reason he was almost desperate to secure a friend. “You like your old Uncle Jeremy, don’t you...?”

The plea was stifled as the cries of a newborn baby echoed through the house. For Tommy, this was a minor distraction – there were monsters to kill, enemies to defeat; and a game of virtual reality was far more crucial than concern for a sister who was reaping the rewards of her own stupidity. He tapped a button – another foe was instantly obliterated in splatter of blood. The whole point of a fictitious scenario was winning, staying alive – well, most of the time - and when you’d had enough of playing; unlike boring real life, you simply pressed the off-switch. He pitied grown-ups.

Pinn, however, was not Tommy and was enthralled by the latest development: it was even more important than the support of a selfish boy. This for him was a momentous occasion and he was ecstatic. “At last!” he hissed with supreme satisfaction. “The line remains unbroken.”

The smug exclamation drove Frank through the doorway and into the hall. At that instant, Tanya's head poked out of Jody's room. She said: "Frank, can you come here, please," then ducked back inside the room.

Hurrying ahead with Pinn on his heels, by the time Frank entered the room his wife was lowering herself onto a chair beside the bed. Jody lay there under the blanket looking exhausted, a small wrapped bundle cradled in her arms. Pinn was right behind Frank and hurried over to peer down. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Annoyed by his mere presence, Tanya glared at him and directed a scathing reprimand to her husband: "Why is he here, Frank?"

Frank offered a weak smile of apology. "I couldn't very well stop him. How is Jody?"

"Never mind the girl," Pinn interjected irritably, "What about the baby? Is it a boy or a girl?"

Continuing to ignore Pinn, Tanya replied to Frank's question about their daughter's welfare: "She's fine. A bit tired, but that's to be expected..."

"Damn it!" Pinn grated, "Tell me! I have a right to know!"

Tanya's fingers curled, gathering a ball of blanket which she squeezed tightly. Her head jerked in the man's direction, eyes blazing with pure hatred. "No you *don't*, Pinn! You've got no rights here, not anymore. But I'll tell you anyway – it's a boy."

"A boy!" His face lit up with rapture. His dream had come true. The bloodline of the Pinn's was ensured and the name would live on. "Truly excellent!"

Rather than firing Tanya's anger further, the expression of joy merely gave her the ideal opportunity to deliver her crushing blow: "Like to know something else? This isn't your child, Pinn. So, seeing as you really have no business here, why don't you just...?"

"What do you mean, not mine?" he spluttered. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course it is! What kind of a fool do you take me for?"

"A white one, Pinn," Tanya drawled with satisfaction, "A Caucasian." She waited a moment for the stunning declaration to sink in. "Unless you have Aboriginal blood somewhere in your ancestry, this child has nothing to do with you and your lousy family."

"But that's impossible!" he whined, "Doctor Singer assured me..."

Tanya moved a hand to gently draw down the baby's cover revealing a tiny face, a decidedly coffee-coloured one. Pinn was stunned. "But how could this have happened?"

Accepting the advantage of a temporary ceasefire among the senior antagonists, Tommy had drifted to the bed so that he could inspect the infant in his sister's arms. He smirked and pondered thoughtfully: "I guess this makes me an uncle, huh?" Then he cast a sideways glance at his mother. "Does that mean me and Denny Whelan are brothers?"

"Denny Whelan?" Frank puzzled, "Who's Denny Whelan?"

"Jody's boyfriend," Tommy explained casually. "Bound to be the father – I saw them bonking behind the..."

"Shut up, Tommy, you little pig!" rasped Jody.

Pinn was trying to take it all in. "But this must mean she was pregnant before Doctor Singer..."

Now was the moment for Tanya to beam with satisfaction. “Looks that way, doesn’t it? At the risk of sounding vulgar, it seems young Denny got in before you. And if he’s anywhere near as handsome as his son, I’m glad he did because he’ll leave you for dead, *Mister* Jeremy Pinn.”

Endgame

There was concern that Pinn would exact revenge for his disappointment; but it seemed he was so devastated that he literally faded away in their midst. The prime consideration then was for Jody and the baby, both of whom really needed professional medical attention. After Frank discovered that the outside had suddenly re-appeared and they were able to leave, he was all for heading back to reality immediately. Tanya, however, advocated patience: “Jody will need a couple of days at least to recover; and I’m sure the baby will be okay.”

Frank reluctantly agreed. In preparation for eventually leaving, he intended to fetch the car up to the house; but when he tried to start it the battery was flat. Plan B was to find somewhere to call for a taxi – the mobile phone battery was also dead. “I’ll have to walk to the next property to ring for a cab,” he announced on his return.

“Not yet, Frank,” Tanya advised. “Wait till we’re ready. Maybe you could fix something to eat.”

It was as well their continued stay wasn’t to be an extended one. The cheese no longer replenished itself and developed mould much quicker than before. As for the cake and bread, the leftovers were eventually inedible. Once this happened, Tanya decided they should call it quits.

Frank’s hope that there would be another property close by was dashed and he had to thumb a lift to a service station to use the phone. His delay had Tanya worrying until she heard a car’s engine approaching. Looking out, she saw a taxi driving off the track into the front yard with Frank in the passenger seat. “Dad’s here,” she called out encouragingly. Jody had been sitting in the window cradling her baby. “Are you okay, darling?” her mother asked.

“Fine,” replied Jody, smiling down at the infant in her arms. Looking up, she panned a resentful gaze around the parlour. “And I’m glad to be getting out of here, that’s for sure.”

Tanya nodded in agreement. “We all are.”

Footsteps creaked up the veranda steps and Frank entered. “Sorry it took so long.”

“You’re back, that’s the main thing,” said Tanya, very relieved.

Tommy must have heard and was carting his bag to the door. Noticing a taxi in the yard, he was puzzled: “Where’s our car, Dad?”

“In a ditch,” said Frank. “We had to push it off the track to get past. I’ll call a tow truck later,” he added, picking up two suitcases and turning for the door. Aware that nobody was following, he urged cheerfully: “Come on, guys – we’re going home.”

As Frank came trudging towards him, the cab driver who was waiting behind the open boot asked pleasantly: "Holiday, was it?"

Frank tried not to sneer. "You could say that; a slightly extended one."

The driver took one of the cases and placed it in the trunk. "Aren't they the best kind?"

Casting a look back to the house, the fact that he was finally and, thankfully seeing the back of it failed to raise even the hint of a smile on Frank's face. "I guess it depends on your point of view."

Jody climbed into the back of the cab and waited for Tanya to pass her the baby. Tommy had just arrived, dumped the bag he was lugging into the dirt and took off towards the house. "Tommy!" Tanya called after him. "Where are you going?"

The boy replied over his shoulder: "I forgot my game."

Tanya snapped: "No, Tommy!"

Frank growled: "Leave it, Son! Get in the car... please. I'll buy you another."

"There's no panic," advised the cab driver. "He can get his game."

Ignoring the concession, Frank produced his final warning: "Now, Tommy – in the car!"

Becoming involved in family disputes was not in his job-description; so the driver shrugged and tracked the boy as he scuffed resentfully to the cab, finally throwing himself sulkily onto the back seat next to his sister. The two adults were just standing, both staring back at the house. Being none of his business, he made sure the boot was secure before climbing in to wait for the last of his passengers to finish their reveries.

Without looking at his wife, Frank said: "What do you think happened to him – Pinn, I mean?"

Tanya savoured a few seconds of contemplation before answering. "If there's any justice in the world, I'd say he went straight to Hell along with his bloodline and his rotten cheese."

"Yes," Frank agreed hopefully, "I'd reckon he did, at that." Shaking his head in an attempt to dispel uncomfortable memories, he placed an arm around his wife's shoulders and guided her back to the cab. "Let's go home."

Back in the house, a translucent image of Pinn was standing before the window, watching as the taxi pulled away. It could have been so good, so perfect; now all that remained was oblivion; for him, for his family. The only sound in the emptiness was the jingle of music from the video game in his hand. As the image of the man faded, the game machine fell to the floor. It lay there, jingling and jangling away on its own. It had to – the last of its players had gone.

The End

Adapted from an original teleplay script *The Cheese Minders* © Dave Hawkins 1996

Published as a short story by *A Season of Happiness* © DV & KR Hawkins 2019