

## Landlocked

By Neil Grimmett

Most people were disgusted and afraid of traps. Paul had learnt that step by step. But equally, that curiosity killed more than the cat; and there was always those who could not resist. From the most modern and humane that left their victim wriggling inside with plenty of time to repent, through to the more direct devices of an earlier age. All kept their allurements alive. Even the most brutal still had a place: a history of British gin traps decorating the local's food pub walls, with some old poacher paying for his drinks with tales of finding just a fox or otter's leg left in a metal embrace. "Chewed right off with its own teeth rather than be taken alive," he'd intone as the new pack sipped blood-red wine, sniffed the night-breeze and ground their own canines.

Banned now of course, along with Paul's favourite: the man trap. He had seen one once, on a school trip to a castle; the same school where he'd met his wife Carrie and his best friend Nigel. He would ask them tomorrow: "Do you recall that man trap and where we all were when we first saw it?" Surely that question could not be interpreted as being too threatening or provoking.

He looked out of the window and saw the freeze-frame elegance of moisture hanging from the webs; the delicate intricacy woven to ensnare, betrayed in the frozen purity of white - though in reality, giving away nothing, having already fulfilled its purpose. He shut his mind to such things and began his own preparations. The children ate their breakfast in silence and were glad to escape to school, with hands clutching coins instead of sandwiches and scalps glowing from his angry brushing.

"If only you hadn't resorted to violence," his mother-in-law said, as she did during every call. "I can't forgive it; no matter how sorry you are."

"I know," he said, clinging to the phone's ivory-coloured handset as though it were a tusk; broken off and as impotent as everything else had become during these two rogue-male weeks. "I know," he repeated, moving the phone and letting her words vibrate against the centre of his forehead with a frisson of excitement, visualizing a unicorn unbowed.

Then, because her accusations and his excuses were becoming nothing but a part of the always present clicks and whisperings of other machines and wires, he underlined their plan. "But at least with Nigel coming to stay we will have the chance to try and work things out."

"Why did you have to go and hit her, Paul? Anything else she would have stood. I knew that you were having problems - that's been obvious for some time. But Carrie's been telling me a lot of things that I find very disturbing and hard to understand, though I want to."

Paul could hear it in her voice that she was growing tired of her daughter's extended stay. And that she was more than ready to send her back. He felt her trying to stay in control; desperate to keep the foothold she believed she'd gained into their lives. Outside, the webs trembled as they dissolved in the unfurling of another day in a place he considered paradise.

“We’ll see you later, Paul,” she quickly said, as he heard the rattle of plates and cutlery in the background. He could picture his wife dishing up breakfast and listening as her mother kept him restrained and stated her terms.

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Nigel arrived at 5.30 a.m. on the dot. Paul nearly said: “This is the first occasion in nearly twenty years that you have ever been on time. I wonder why?” But they were facing each other as strangers: made tongue-tied and awkward by the sudden change of roles in what had always been a shallow and pointless friendship. Paul had believed for years that Nigel was no more than his stooge. Yet had never before asked himself why he needed one; or why Nigel was willing to play the role.

Now he knew. Everything was clear.

“Did you know,” Nigel had even told him once, “I had a date with your wife before you’d even met her?”

Paul and Carrie had been married for over ten years at the time and had two children. “In your dreams,” Paul quipped, trying to dismiss the statement as a joke. They were out fishing some dank little railway pond, covered in weeds and water lilies that were bursting into flower. It was reputed to hold some huge tench, but so far all they had managed were a few bootlace eels that kept swallowing the hooks and then twisting in agony as they tried to disgorge them, covering everything in slime. Nigel had suddenly pulled out a knife and slashed at one of them in temper. He’d nicked himself at the same time. “Be careful,” Paul warned him, “their blood is poisonous. It will make you seriously ill if it gets into that cut.” Nigel had dropped the eel and watched as the two stains on his hand began to merge. That was when he’d told Paul about his date with Carrie.

Later that day, Paul had broached the subject with her. He’d made it sound light and funny; he did not want it to join the growing list of things they were beginning to bury. She’d giggled about it. “I’d forgotten that,” she said. “I stood him up. We went on one date and then he wanted me to go to the cinema with him. Do you remember that weird suit he used to wear?” Paul pictured Nigel standing on the cinema steps. His hand stuffed into a bulging pocket with Carrie’s smell clinging to his flesh as the shimmer of charcoal and silver Lurex caught the row of lights flickering their welcome above.

He’d tried several times since to find out about that one date. On each occasion a new snippet was added until only the most fundamental question remained unanswered. Now his friend was standing in front of him and Paul might just come out with it over the next few days, to let them know he was aware.

“Do you still have the good ol’ Lurex suit?” Paul suddenly asked as they offloaded Nigel’s car.

“What?” Nigel sounded shocked.

Paul grinned, recognizing the concern in his friend’s voice and expression, and just how tensed Nigel was for the slightest sign; he wondered again on how many secret briefings there had been and where they were given. He guessed the back row of the cinema would have suited Carrie’s sense of justice and purpose just fine.

“This is real good of you Nigel, to come and stay,” he said. “I’m very grateful; we both are.”

“That’s okay,” Nigel said, still looking uncertain. “I know things are going to work out fine for you.”

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Nigel was playing cricket with the children at the top of the garden when the car pulled up. Carrie got out and threw herself towards them. Paul noticed her hair had been styled and had a strange, reddish tinge to it. She was also wearing new ski-pants that were boldly coloured and led in a maze of skin-tight patterns around every inch of flesh. The T-shirt was also unfamiliar and he knew he must not read its message. A familiar desire and longing made him want to rush out and hold her like everything was back to normal and nothing had ever happened to come between them.

His mother-in-law stamped through the kitchen door. Nigel on the sofa, him on the camp bed at his feet, and Carrie in the bedroom, he forced the rules back into his mind as she demanded a peck on the cheek and gave him her look of sympathy and understanding.

Carrie made her entry with a child clutching each hand. They inched past him as if he were about to pounce. Nigel, their protector, stayed close. Everyone sat together in the little front room taking tea and making small talk. He stayed there with Nigel as Carrie and the children went outside to wave good-bye to their Nan. He suddenly thought, almost panicking, that perhaps it was all a plan to grab the children and speed off down the tree-lined drive before he could respond. But they came back and went straight up the stairs. A short while later, the children came down to say goodnight. He noticed Nigel got a kiss, and that the three of them shared secret smiles.

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No other house or building was visible from theirs. It was surrounded on three sides by a once great forest, with just enough trees left to hide and protect the estate; or give the illusion of doing so, as they’d been thinned and were in danger of succumbing to the next great storm. In front of the house there was a large area of old pasture with a scattering of stately specimen trees. This was called ‘the park’, and the only area not being made to overtly earn its living. It was the subject of many rumours, including buried Roman treasure and a hidden site of ancient sacrifice and worship.

Carrie claimed now that this isolation was the trouble. Paul was trying to keep quiet and let her have her say. Nigel kept nodding and smiling and looking from one to the other like some kindly uncle. Two bottles of wine were open on the table and Paul was pleased to see that Nigel was going at it with his usual desperation.

“Everything becomes too introspective and important,” she said, “when there is no one else around to interrelate with. You begin to look back and deep, far beyond the normal vision, and see what you want. And then do what you want.” She stared at Paul with a mixture of contempt and disgust. “I can feel even as I speak that you are brooding over something. You still don’t understand what this terrible place is doing to us – *do you?*”

Paul saw Nigel flinch as Carrie shouted, then steel himself as he waited for Paul’s reaction.

“I’m just glad to have you back,” Paul said to Carrie, “and very sorry for what happened. I’m sure if we carry on having these discussions, with Nigel present to make certain we both stay calm, we can find a way.”

“A way out of here is all I want to find,” Carrie said, giving a pleading look to Nigel as if this were the perfect moment to play his part.

“I see,” said Nigel, “well, at least I think I do.” He looked at Paul to check that his response was acceptable to both parties.

There was a light tap on one of the windows and Paul watched as both Carrie and Nigel jumped and then tried to peer out into the darkness. Then he informed them.

“It’s the hornets hunting at night. There are nests of them out there in the old tree stumps. They like the rotting wood in the dark heart of the forest. Four stings and you are dead. But you must never run. That’s what the swarm want, you running, because they know you’ll trip up and make their attack easier. Funny how they know that. Generation after generation, hidden away, but still aware of our weakness.”

They both stared at him.

“I’m going to bed,” Carrie said sounding more disappointed than afraid.

The noise of her moving above them filled the room. One solid clunk, then another, followed by a whisper of something falling, then just a sigh, before maybe even gentler lures brushed the surface. He watched his friend’s longing reach almost imperceptibly towards the bait.

“There isn’t anything for a nightcap, I suppose?” Nigel asked, licking his tongue slowly around his lips and staring into the empty glass.

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“And your wife is definitely back to stay?” asked William, his boss and the manager of the estate. Carrie was strutting down the drive near to where they were working at the time. It was William’s business to ask, as officially, Carrie’s domestic duties at the big house made up part of Paul’s contract with the estate. Also, William had allowed him to take some time off to try and ‘sort out his marital affairs’. Paul watched as the man’s eyes searched her movements for the slightest clue; and perhaps even more.

“She is,” Paul replied.

Everyone on the estate knew that his wife had left him, though nobody had risked getting close enough to find out the reasons.

“We’ll be seeing her back at work shortly then, I expect,” William stated. “With, I hope, a slightly improved attitude. Not so much of the old sourpuss, now she’s got whatever it was out of her system.”

“Absolutely,” Paul lied, trying to ignore the fact that Carrie was now sitting cross-legged on one of the private garden seats and giving them both defiant and arrogant looks. He walked slowly back to the cottage at lunch-time, knowing his mother-in-law would have arrived, but still disappointed to see the tatty car parked haphazardly outside.

She would cover his dinner breaks. Nigel left after him in the morning and would be in place before Paul finished in the evening. Also, he had to give up his keys to his house. And there was the elaborate system of phone signals to make sure he did not attempt to be alone with her. Or, if he tried, that rescue would never be far away.

Carrie was taking a little rest, his mother-in-law told him as she bustled around preparing a fried lunch. Normally it would have been a sandwich or a bowl of soup from a tin. "I've told that daughter of mine," she said, "working-men need feeding up."

"True enough," Paul agreed, struggling to keep the sight of her fat white arms stirring the greasy mass from making him want to heave. He had no choice but to sit at the table with her and eat. She leant near to him and whispered, as if she could not risk Carrie overhearing their conversation.

"What exactly is going on, Paul? You used to be so happy."

"She doesn't like it here," he said, glad of the chance to stop eating and try any sort of explanation.

"There has got to be more to it than that. Lots of people don't like the place they live or the work they have to do. And all this jealousy after so many years. Why did you start hitting her? What exactly did you think that would achieve? She's her mother's daughter. No man has ever controlled me, or dared to try."

"Things just got out of control," Paul said. "I panicked. I know how strong and proud you both are."

She reached across and placed a heavy arm onto the bare skin where his neck and shoulder joined. "You will have to leave this situation," she said, "get back to the real world. Carrie misses having people around, she needs to be close to her family and friends. You are going to have to make the choice: job or wife. You have so much talent and potential. I personally don't understand why you would want to stay."

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That afternoon he worked in the old quarry, clearing a bridle path and preparing a place for the scouts who were coming there to camp. In a clearing in the wood a short way from him and lit by a single beam of sunlight, two roe deer tiptoed silently on the drying leaves. A slight breeze wafted the scent from wild honeysuckle around him.

There was no world outside; no need of one. "We could have been happy," he wanted to say to the sheer limestone cliffs, or the deer, or even into the secret entrance to a vast cave system he'd uncovered with its steady blast of cold breath from a labyrinth of hidden passages. Anywhere now, except where there were voices that would twist his words to their needs and give it in evidence against him.

"She was going to rush up to the manor in the middle of their dinner party and tell them how she hated this place and was no-one's skivvy," he cried. "One of her scenes for them and their guests!"

"I had to stop her - that was my duty. I'm not a violent person. I was provoked, deliberately."

The deer turned and prepared to spring to their freedom.

"But now I know why, and what it was all really about. Really about. Really..."

The cliffs echoed it back time and time again, mocking him, it seemed, that nothing ever changed and theirs would always be the final word.

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Three more nights passed, with their conversations flattening out into a reminiscence of their lives, never touching the future. Great moments of missed chances and almosts. Paul let Carrie and Nigel do most of the talking, prompting and listening, encouraging them to betray their true desires. Then, on Thursday, when they'd reached a point where he sensed they'd said all they would - or needed to - he made them an offer.

"I thought I might make a special Indian dinner for Friday." His curries had always been famous among their family and friends. "I'll slip off tomorrow afternoon and get all the ingredients, then cook it while you two relax with a beer."

That night, as he heard Nigel shifting on the sofa, he felt the need to say something before it was all over.

"Do you remember the time you cut that eel and I told you about its blood being poisonous?"

Nigel's reply was slow and slurred from drink and tiredness, but Paul felt sure he did recall the event.

"Well the reason - or at least what the experts think - is because of all the changes. The eel is born in the depths of the Sargasso Sea and is carried along on the tidal currents as a minute form of life; then it swims up the drains and rivers and transforms into an elver. It lives in rivers and ponds until it matures, then travels all the way back to the place of its birth, to spawn and die. It has something to do with its ability to keep switching between saltwater and freshwater that affects its blood. Here is a curious fact though: the real big ones, the record breakers, the kings of their species, are different. They get into a place and become trapped. Landlocked is the term. Maybe the water level lowers and the banks become too steep to climb back out, or an entrance pipe becomes blocked. Any number of reasons for their imprisonment or perhaps none, except the longing to stay. Whatever, they grow big and content with their life.

"Now, here's my question for the scientists: does the eel's blood remain toxic? Or does this acceptance of its new existence dilute everything? Personally, I bet it doesn't. What is your opinion Nigel?"

Then whispering, though he knew his friend was asleep, "You think the opposite, don't you? That it weakens and the great eel becomes a big fish in a small pond instead of a leviathan? I want you to imagine, though, hooking it on some unseen line and attempting to drag it from its kingdom. Try and envisage and feel its power as it fights for what it loves. Then you will know."

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Paul could see Carrie peeping out of their small kitchen window as he pulled up in the truck and began to unload the shopping. It was against all the rules for him to even be this close alone. But, as it was late, he held up the bags of food as a way of asking permission. He was certain that she meant a 'yes', though the look of concern in her expression increased.

"Nigel's late," she said, as soon as he'd got a foot inside the door, as if he'd not noticed that the car was missing.

"You know Nigel," Paul said, "he's probably slipped off with the boys for a quick drink or three. I expect he'll arrive any minute, beery-breathed and full of remorse."

“He promised me that he would always be on time, or that he would ring if there was going to be a problem. He swore it to me, over and over.”

Paul pretended not to see the children sitting on the sofa with their coats on, staring silently at their feet. “He’ll be here soon,” he told them, laying each ingredient for the meal carefully in place on the counter.

“I can’t get any reply from my mother either,” Carrie said, ignoring his attempts to reassure. “I’ve phoned just as we agreed. It rang and rang forever. Her mobile is switched off, as is Nigel’s.”

He heard the panic bubbling up inside her voice.

“You shouldn’t worry,” Paul coaxed. “This is your home, you’re quite safe here with me. I’ll prepare the meal while we wait for Nigel to arrive or for you to get through on the phone. If, when I’ve finished, Nigel still hasn’t turned up or there is no answer from your mother, I will drive you and our children over to her, if that’s what you want. Or maybe by then you might have decided you would rather stay here with me and eat a nice curry, share a bottle of wine and a few beers, and then, who knows.”

He could see the trapped look in her eyes as she kept concentrating on the deep darkness of the woods, hoping that Nigel would arrive or the phone start ringing; measuring the distance of the driveway that led through the trees to whatever now waited outside.

*Neil Grimmett has had over seventy short stories published. In the UK by among others: London Magazine, Stand, Panurge, Iron, Ambit, Prospect Magazine, etc. Australia, Quadrant, South Africa, New Contrast. Plus stories in the leading journals of Singapore, India, France, Canada, and the USA, where he has appeared in Fiction, The Yale Review, DoubleTake, The southern Humanities Review, Green Mountains Review, Descant, The Southern Review and Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine. He has appeared online in Blackbird, Tatlin's Tower, Web Del Sol, In Posse Review, m.a.g., Word Riot, Blue Moon Review, 3AM, Gangway, Eclectica, The Cortland Review, Segue, The Dublin Quarterly, Mysterical E and over twenty others. He has made the story South Million Writers Notable Short Story list for the last three years. In addition, he has won the Write On poetry award, the Oppenheim John Downes Award four times, two major British Arts Council bursaries and a Royal Society of Authors award. He is a member of the US branch of PEN. His mystery/thriller novel has just been signed by Josh Getzler at Writers House in New York.*