

The Inconvenience Store

A Modern Day Fantasy

By

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BOOK 1

CHAPTER 1

Small Cornish villages are very picturesque, but after you've seen half a dozen they do start to look very similar. Dennis had seen several during the week, and this one did seem very similar to the last one, and the one before that, and... Well, just take the main street as a starting point. Opposing rows of small houses, probably fishermen's cottages at one time, now small shops selling novelty rock, chunky jumpers and the sorts of souvenirs that your friends and relatives dread you buying for them.

"Oh, how nice, you shouldn't have!" and they really mean that you shouldn't have. Give them enough of them and they will develop a real hate for you. They will cross the road to avoid you. They will move house and not leave a forwarding address. They'll even move continents if necessary.

Cobbled streets built on a severe slope, cast iron lamp posts with wrought iron frills, narrow pavements and the smell of Cornish pasties. At least the name of this street was slightly different, Dennis noted.

"Not The Road to Smuggler's Cove Street." It had a certain something about it, Dennis thought, the sort of world weariness of a local person who was tired of being asked which road led to Smuggler's Cove.

At the bottom of the street it widened out to form a small square, where two new roads branched left and right along the sides of the small harbour. Rowing boats and small fishing craft were just visible, lying in the soggy mud of low tide. Gulls pecked at mounds of seaweed hoping to find something the crabs had missed. Beyond the harbour wall a grey sea lurked beneath a leaden sky, the occasional whitecap reaching out frothy fingers to try to touch the low clouds.

"Summer in Cornwall," mused Dennis wishing he was at home. That was rare. Normally when he was at home he wished he was somewhere else entirely, maybe even Cornwall. But the caravan had been paid for, and Lois was determined to get her money's worth out of it. So Dennis tramped the streets of the little town, whose name he had already forgotten, looking for something to distract him from the misery of his annual holiday.

Lois, being made of sterner stuff, was lying on the grass adjacent to their caravan, book clasped firmly in hand as she tried to convince herself that she was relaxing and unwinding away from the stresses of her normal everyday life. Maybe she was, thought Dennis. Maybe being cold and damp and trying to read the sort of book she normally wouldn't have in the house was all she needed to unwind.

Dennis looked at his watch, seeing that the hands had moved precisely three minutes towards the time when he felt he could enter a pub and not feel guilty about it.

The pubs were all open, offering breakfast for those who rose late and lunch for those who rose earlier, but Dennis couldn't contemplate entering a pub before mid day. His mother always had strong words to say about people who were in pubs before mid day. They weren't the sort of people that she, and by that she also meant Dennis, should associate with. Lois

agreed with her. Lois agreed with everything that Mrs Daniels said. Lois got on very well with Mrs Daniels, and they formed a deadly alliance against Dennis and Poor Father.

Poor Father's name wasn't really Poor Father, of course. It was Michael, but Dennis had always thought of him as Poor Father, ever since he could remember hearing the first scolding being delivered, somewhere around the time he was three years old. There had probably been other, earlier scoldings, but Dennis couldn't remember them. That first remembered one was exceptional though. Delivered at sufficient decibels to qualify for a government health warning, it contained all the elements that Dennis would hear randomly repeated through the years:

"Useless article."

"If you had a brain cell it would be lonely."

"How could you forget something as simple as that?"

"Why didn't you write it down?"

"My mother warned me."

"If I had my time again."

"To think I could have had my pick of men."

"Get out of my sight before I do something I'll regret."

"No, not in there, I've just washed the floor."

And Dennis's all time favourite, "What a waste of good skin you are."

As far as Dennis could recall the scolding had been about forgetting to buy a bottle of milk, but smaller failings were known to trigger just as vicious attacks. Poor Father never had the nerve to make a mistake bigger than forgetting to buy milk. When you're married to someone like Mrs Daniels you very quickly learn to be careful.

Michael Daniels had been over 6 feet tall, but Dennis always visualised him as being considerably smaller, especially in relation to his tyrant of a wife.

While Lois didn't have Mrs Daniels' undoubted talent, she tried hard to emulate her mother in law, and Dennis had learnt to spend as little time in her company as possible. It had led him to spend enormous amounts of money on hobbies, clubs and societies, and almost as much on beer, but it had worked and they were still together after 30 years. Michael Daniels had gone to a better place many years before. Bridlington, or so it was rumoured.

Dennis looked at his watch again. Ten minutes to go. He had reached the end of the road, literally as well as metaphorically because it was the highest point on what was quite a steep hill and there was no choice but to turn left or right. He turned and started his meander back down the other side of the narrow strip of cobbles. At the bottom, just round the corner, he knew there was a pub, which was now his destination. He just needed to make the walk down the hill last 10 minutes. Half way along he paused. Something wasn't right, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

He turned back to look up the hill, surveying the shop fronts as his eyes swept across them. He had walked down this side twice so far that morning, and was confident he could pretty much identify every shop front from memory, but something was amiss. There was a shop front he didn't recognise. He wasn't sure which one it was yet, but he was meticulous and would pin it down in a moment.

Dennis checked again. From the top: novelty rock shop, souvenir shop, pasty shop, boutique, another pasty shop, cheapo pound shop, estate agent, artists supply shop (with

gallery above), chunky jumper shop, another novelty rock shop, this one also selling souvenirs, shop he couldn't identify, yet another pasty shop.... Whoa, back up there a little.

Shop he couldn't identify! Why hadn't he spotted that before? He stepped back up the hill the few yards that were necessary to put him in front of the shop's windows.

The windows were filthy, and looking through them was like peering into onion soup. There were shapes behind the glass, probably merchandise, but what it was couldn't be distinguished. Dennis tilted his head back to view the shop's name.

"Sainsco Express" was spelt out in large letters. Below which, in a smaller font, were the words "Your Local Inconvenience Store". That can't be right, thought Dennis. He read it again, but the words remained unchanged. At the bottom left of the sign, in very small letters, were the words "Est 11.54", and to the right of the sign the legend "Prop Thos Moss Esq"

Dennis looked again. That date couldn't be right. That would make this the oldest shop in the country, and he was sure he would have heard of it if it was the oldest. It would at least be mentioned in the guide book. The date shouldn't have a full stop in the middle of it either, he was sure. He was also sure it now read "Est 11.55". He looked at his watch to check the time. Sure enough, it was 11.55. He looked at the sign again, trying to see if it was very cleverly designed digital display, but it was plain to see that it was just dark blue paint on a faded yellow painted background.

A shop that was established at whatever time your watch said? Unlikely, but Dennis had been alive long enough to have seen a few unlikely things. He had even seen Millwall Football Club play in the FA Cup Final and things didn't get much more unlikely than that!

Dennis had stopped being curious at about the same time he had first asked Lois how she liked her eggs boiled, and had been given a fifteen minute lecture on the correct way to boil an egg. They had been married for two weeks, were waking up on their first morning after their return from honeymoon and he wanted to make Lois her breakfast for the first time. He had made breakfast every day since that day, including the day he returned from hospital having had his appendix removed.

Such a lack of curiosity should have made him turn away from the little shop and continue his meander towards the pub on the square. He checked his watch again. 11.56. He looked up at the sign again. "Est 11.56". There was nothing he could do. Wild horses, his mother and Lois combined couldn't now keep him out of the shop.

The bell on the shop door made a welcome jangling sound as he entered. The filth on the windows was matched by the gloom of the interior of the shop, which appeared to have no electric lighting. Shelves ranged round the walls, supporting boxes of differing sizes and made of what seem to be every material known to man. Cardboard was dominant, as one would expect, but even in the gloom Dennis could pick out leather, plastic, various types of metal and several woods distinguishable by their colours. High up was what looked like a silk covered hat box, but Dennis couldn't be sure. Everything was covered with a thick layer of dust. Thos Moss Esq clearly took the Quentin Crisp approach to dusting.

The shop seemed to be unoccupied. In fact it appeared to have no entrance other than the one Dennis had come through. Dennis wandered around the small room, peering at the boxes and trying to decipher labels that were made illegible by age. He dared himself to open one of the boxes, and chose a heavily scented wooden one. There was something inside, he was sure

of it, but couldn't make out what it was. He lifted the lid higher and was raising his free hand towards the opening when a cough rattled close behind his ear.

Startled, Dennis let the lid of the box slam shut with a bang. He turned to see who was behind him. No one. In the far corner stood a man, probably tall, but bent by age. Dennis was confused. The cough had definitely erupted within inches of his ear, but the only person in the room who could have made it was now several feet away, and hadn't made a sound in getting there.

"Can I help you, Sir?" Age reduced his voice to a harsh and croaking whisper. Dennis could hardly hear him, and moved closer, despite his reservation about who the man might be and how he might have got there. How had the shopkeeper got into the room through the only door without setting off the jangly bell? Dennis checked again. And again he was certain that there was no other way into, or out of, the room. Prioritise Dennis, he scolded himself (was he becoming his mother's son?).

Dennis took a moment to examine the old man further. His hair was wispy grey, plastered across his head in what was commonly known as a "Bobby Charlton", or 'comb over'. His face was long and narrow, flanked by equally long ears.

Dennis remembered an illustration in a children's book. "The Big Friendly Giant" it was called, and Dennis appeared to have the living embodiment of the illustration in front of him now. Of course he wasn't a giant. Bent over as was he barely reached Dennis's height. He was clad in a cardigan that seemed to be more holes than wool, which failed to conceal a shirt that might once, with a little imagination, have aspired to be white but could equally have been grey. His trousers were beige corduroy, with an interesting 'unidentifiable stain' motif across the groin area and the tops of the thighs. Dennis didn't have to look at the shopkeeper's feet to know they would be thrust into battered tartan slippers, but he looked anyway. Bingo! Battered tartan to the very inch, with the interesting addition (or should that be subtraction?) of a hole in one which allowed a grimy toe to poke through. Beneath the ragged toenail Dennis was sure that new life forms were evolving as he watched.

Dennis realised that the man was waiting expectantly for his reply.

"Er, Um.... " Now he was here Dennis was unsure why that should be. "If you don't mind me asking, what is it that you actually sell?"

The man looked puzzled. "The sign above the door says it all, Sir. We're an inconvenience store. We sell everything you never needed."

Dennis tried, in vain, to make sense of the statement. Why would anyone sell the things people never needed? Judging by the man's attire and the state of the shop Dennis reached the conclusion that the man didn't, in fact, sell anything. To anyone. Ever.

"I'm not sure....." Dennis started to reply.

".... You understand what I mean. Yes, it gets some people that way. We sell the things you don't know you need.

"How do you know I don't need them?"

"Ah, a clever question at last. We anticipate your needs, if you like. One day you will need something, and when you do we will sell it to you. And we're unique. You wouldn't be able to get these things in Tesco you know. Not even in M & S."

"What sort of things? Give me an example."

“Well, suppose your house is infested with rats. We can sell you something to get rid of them.

“That’s hardly unique. I can buy a rat trap in almost any hardware store.”

“I didn’t mention rat traps, Sir, that’s just your interpretation. No, what I would sell you is something that will actually get rid of the rats, not trap them or kill them. Get rid of them so they’re never seen again, anywhere.” The final word hung in the air menacingly. How could a live rat never be seen anywhere again? Dennis decided to dodge that one.

“Wow, that’s amazing.” Despite himself Dennis was actually impressed. “How does that work?”

“I couldn’t possibly tell you that, Sir. If I did you wouldn’t need to buy the thing from me, would you? Now, what do you not need?”

Dennis’s brain was suffering under the strain of the strangeness of the shop, and what he really did need was to get out of it. “I don’t need something that will stop my wife being a pain in the bum.” He blurted.

“Hmmm,” the old man mused. “A pain removal device focusing on spouses and the nether regions. Interesting. Look, I don’t think I have anything quite like that in stock right now, but perhaps you could come back tomorrow. I’ll have a word with our suppliers.”

“You can’t be serious. I was only joking, really. Wives are wives, and some wives are more wives than others. I’m sorry I wasted your time.” Dennis turned to leave the shop.

“Oh, but I do think I really can help, Sir. Why don’t you come back tomorrow?” The man wheedled.

“Look, I think we’re getting onto dangerous ground. I don’t want to harm my wife. She’s just a bit of a pain sometimes.”

“I understand, Sir. Heaven forbid we should harm your wife. Believe me, Sir, we always make sure our products do absolutely no harm to anyone or anything. We’re law abiding business, Sir. Always have been, always will be. We wouldn’t do anything illegal, and we wouldn’t allow you to do anything illegal. Come back tomorrow why don’t you, eh?”

Reluctantly Dennis agreed. His curiosity was, after all, still aroused. What sort of product could the old man provide that could stop Lois from nagging him? Maybe he had a box with a good divorce lawyer in it. The idea brightened Dennis’s mood as he finished his stroll down the hill to the pub. He checked his watch to make sure it was now after mid day, and was surprised to see that it still stood at 11.56. Oh well, maybe the shop’s a time machine as well, he imagined, which set him off on a new train of thought as he disregarded his mother’s advice for the first time ever and pushed open the pub door with a full two minutes to go before the Town Hall clock would.

CHAPTER 2

Even in his befuddled state Dennis knew he was in trouble. Deep, deep, trouble.

Lois stood on the top step of the caravan, foot tapping an ominously slow rhythm. Dennis knew Lois's rhythms off by heart and couldn't recollect seeing one as slow as that before. The taxi driver was a Cornishman born into a fishing family. He recognised the signs of an impending storm when he saw them. He rapidly wound up the window of his cab and drove off without waiting for the tip that Dennis had been searching his pockets to find.

The pub had been convivial, the locally brewed cask conditioned bitter had slipped easily from the glass into Dennis's mouth, and he had drunk far more of it than he had planned on drinking.

His overindulgence had been caused by his confusion about the shop. He had asked the barmaid if she knew of it, but the girl's Eastern European accent told Dennis he was barking up the wrong tree. The group of fishermen in the corner had turned out to be Spanish, and so were of no help either, but it was both the landlord's and his wife's lack of knowledge of the shop that really puzzled Dennis.

They had, Dennis found out, run the pub for 20 years and had no recollection of a shop, as described by Dennis, being on Not The Road To Smuggler's Cove Street. He described it again, this time reciting the litany of shops from the top of the road to the bottom. The landlord ticked them off on his fingers, one by one, until he got to Sainsco Express, then resumed his ticking after he had denied its existence. The landlord's wife confirmed her husband's findings, and to help out had listed all the shops on the other side of the road, just to make sure that Dennis hadn't got his left and right hands mixed up. Dennis offered to take the landlord to the shop and show it to him, but the landlord declined, clearly suspicious of Dennis's insistence and perhaps imagining an ulterior motive for getting him out of the pub.

In the end Dennis supped his beer absent mindedly, trying to work out the puzzle and quickly losing track of how many pints he had drunk, until the point where the question itself wouldn't have been understood, let alone the answer.

And now Dennis was facing the wrath of Lois. OK, Lois wasn't as fearsome as his mother, Dennis knew, but that was like saying that a 5 megaton nuclear weapon wasn't as fearsome as a 10 megaton nuclear weapon.

The foot tapped slower and slower as Dennis shuffled towards the caravan.

"Where did you leave the car?" Like the slow tapping of the foot the low, almost calm, tone of Lois's voice was more terrifying than a shout would have been. It was also an unusual opening gambit. Her normal opening line was "And what time do you call this?" or, occasionally, "Look at the state of you, how much have you had?"

"Car Park." Dennis hiccupped. "Near the centre of the town." He continued.

"Which town? That taxi wasn't local, I know the local one." Through the beery haze Dennis knew what she meant. The local town had a single local taxi firm which, to the best of Dennis's knowledge, also had a single local taxi.

"Forget the name of the town." Dennis hiccupped again. "Don't worry, I'll remember in the morning."

“In the morning!” The volume of Lois’s voice crept up a notch. “It’s only 6 o’clock. What about this evening? I wanted to go to the pictures tonight; you promised to take me to the pictures!”

Dennis racked his brains but could remember no such commitment. As far as he could recall their plans for the evening had been a take-away meal and a film on DVD. He was sure Lois had even specified which of the four films they had brought with them it would be. It wouldn’t be one that he would have chosen, he knew that, but what the heck. It still wasn’t a night out at the cinema. Even in his drink sodden state Dennis recognised the tactic. Accuse him of failing in a promise he had made and Lois’s indignation would be all the more justifiable. Even though it wasn’t true, Dennis was now further in the wrong than falling asleep in front of a DVD would have put him. Lois knew her man and knew he would never risk her anger by denying having made the commitment.

That would require serious amends to be made, and that would probably be expensive. Ah, yes, Dennis recalled. The restaurant. The one owned by the TV chef. The one he had said they couldn’t possibly afford to eat at. And the one that they would almost certainly sit down to dine at the following night. Clever, admitted Dennis to himself. Very, very clever.

Dennis made it into the caravan and feigned collapsing onto the small sofa. He waited a few seconds before faking some snores to make the picture more realistic. Lois’s rant started, but gradually became fainter as real snores replaced the fake ones. Even in his sleep Dennis knew he wasn’t out of the woods by a long way, but at least he had postponed Armageddon until the next day.

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Dennis’s brain resembled nothing more than cold porridge, he felt, as he struggled to deal with consciousness once again. Lois was nowhere to be found, but her clothes were still in the tiny wardrobe, so Dennis was not overly concerned by her absence. In fact he welcomed it.

Searching his wallet for some clue as to where he had been the previous day Dennis came across the business card of the taxi company he had used, pressed into his hand by a pub landlord who was anxious to see the back of him. Dennis fumbled around his clothing until he found his mobile ‘phone and dialled the number.

The driver was the same one that had brought him to the caravan park the previous evening. He smirked when he recognised Dennis. A shower, a change of clothes and a rudimentary breakfast had done something to return Dennis to his normal appearance, but the signs of a heavy session were still evident in his bloodshot eyes, his pallor and the small scabs where his hand had betrayed him while shaving.

“Bad was it?” asked the driver, eager to have some new gossip for his friends and family.

“Was what bad?”

“You know, the missus. Last evening she looked like she were getting ready to rip your head off.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I fell asleep as soon as I got inside.”

“Oh.” The driver was clearly disappointed with this news.

The journey continued in silence until it was necessary to find the car park where Dennis had left his car. They found the right one at the third attempt, and the driver deposited Dennis at the entrance, wished him a good day and sped off to find more stimulating company.

Dennis stood in front of the car park's pay station searching his pockets and wallet for enough money to pay the charge for over 24 hours of parking. He failed to find enough, and so headed off to the town centre to find a bank.

As Dennis walked the fresh Cornwall air cleared the cobwebs from his brain and he began to remember why he had drunk so much the previous day. The memories came back in a series of snap shots, each telling a different part of the story. The pictures didn't arrive in order, so the first had him trying to engage in conversation with a group of Spanish fishermen, while the next had him standing in the street trying to decide whether or not to go into a pasty shop to buy one of their delicious smelling products. At last a snapshot arrived of him standing outside a shop on Not The Road to Smuggler's Cove Street, trying to work out what it sold. The remaining memories rushed into the forefront of his brain and filled in the blanks.

Ah yes, the Inconvenience Store. Should he go back? Was it all a lot of bunkum? Did it even exist? The landlord of the Salty Seadog certainly didn't think it did, and nor did his wife and after 20 years they should know. As Dennis took the handful of notes from the cash dispenser he realised he would need to change some of them for coins to feed into the machine in the car park. That meant going inside the bank to change them. So much for the convenience of a cash dispensing need! Now what he really did need was a machine that dispensed coins, but would have to do with the impatient attention of a member of the banking staff as she made it clear that the transaction was well beneath that defined by her skill levels. The idea of an Inconvenience Store suddenly made more sense. The cash point he had chosen was set into the wall of a bank, and that bank stood only a few yards from the top of Not The Road to Smuggler's Cove Street.

The transaction took only a few seconds, and Dennis found himself back on the street again. He tried to turn towards the car park, but his feet refused to obey him. Instead they kept trying to take him towards Not The Road to Smuggler's Cove Street. Dennis knew enough basic biology to recognise that it wasn't his feet that were making the decisions. However he didn't know enough basic psychology to understand how the decision was being made. In the end he thought 'bugger it, I'll go with the flow', which is enough of an understanding of psychology for most people.

Not The Road to Smuggler's Cove Street is 150 yards long, but it wasn't until Dennis had walked nearly 700 yards, peering into every shop window, that he finally found Sainsco Express. He was sure he hadn't passed it earlier, and even more sure that he hadn't passed it twice, but the fact remained that it wasn't until he had passed it for the third time that he spotted it out of the corner of his eye, having to retreat back up the hill just as he had the previous day.

He check his watch, 10.15 a.m. then looked up at the bottom left hand corner of the sign. Sure enough, it read "Est 10.15." Dennis felt in need of a drink, but knew he couldn't risk the "Wrath of Lois" two days in a row. Instead he entered the shop, setting the bell jangling.

Dennis had expected the shop to be empty, and for the old man to do his magical appearing act again, but he was disappointed. The man stood a few feet inside the door,

holding a polished wooden box. He held it out in front of him, as though presenting it to someone.

“Ah, Sir, excellent timing. Your item has just arrived. Oh, where are my manners? Good morning to you.”

Slightly wrong footed Dennis stumbled over his reply. “Oh, Um, yes, good morning.” Catching sight of the box he blurted out his next question. “Is that it? Is that going to help me with my wife?”

“It is indeed, Sir. My supplier was most definite that it will solve your problem.” He opened the lid of the box. Inside, nestled in a velvet lined recess was what appeared to be a television remote control.

On closer inspection Dennis could see that it wasn't quite what it seemed. It was the same shape as a TV remote control, but where such a device was normally festooned with buttons, some of which failed to serve any known purpose, this one had only a single button. One large, very red, button.

“May I?” Dennis asked, reaching towards the box.

“But of course, Sir.” The old man reached out with his arms and Dennis advanced until he could touch the box without stretching. He lifted the device from the box, treating it with all the respect he would give to rare porcelain.

Dennis resisted the temptation to press the button. Who knew what would happen? “How does it work?”

“Well, Sir, the instructions are all in foreign, but I've spoken to the supplier and they said that all you have to do is point it at the offending spouse and press the button. The effects will be instantaneous, and you will only need to do it once.”

A thought crossed Dennis's mind. “Does it work on mothers as well?”

“Of course, Sir. It's guaranteed to work on any pain in the nether regions. Take care though, that no one points it at you. It works for whoever is holding it.”

Dennis was struck dumb. The key to his happiness appeared to be a TV remote control. Could it be that simple? He turned it over in his hands. The device had no seams along its side, no screws or nuts holding it closed. It appeared to be moulded out of a single piece of plastic. No chance, therefore, of opening it up to find out how it worked. It didn't even have a battery compartment, he realised.

“How do I change the batteries?”

“Not necessary, Sir. By the time the batteries run out you will have returned it to us.”

“Returned it? I thought I was buying it.”

“Buying, yes Sir, but only for a limited period. While you have it, you own it and you own any consequences that arise from its use. However, you must return it to us no later than 30 days from today.”

“But surely I if I own it, I own it forever.”

“Oh yes, Sir, you own it forever. Let's just say that we keep it safe for you. That's what all these boxes are doing here.” He swept his eyes round the gloomy shop, failing to remove any dust from the hundreds of boxes on the shelf. “We're keeping all of these safe for their owners, just in case they need them again.”

“And what happens if I don't bring it back?”

“Oh, Sir will do that, we’re sure. After all, Sir wouldn’t want to find out what would happen if Sir failed to return it.” The smile that had spread across the old man’s face was pure saccharine, and Dennis believed wholeheartedly that he really didn’t want to find out what would happen. A shudder ran down Dennis’s spine, and the old saying that someone had walked over his grave felt extremely real.

Something else struck a chord in Dennis’s brain; something else that the old man had said. It drifted to the front of Dennis’s consciousness and he grasped at it as it floated by.

“You mentioned consequences. That I would own any consequences arising from its use. What do you mean by that?”

“Ah, Sir is perceptive. Not everyone hears that bit. This is an Inconvenience Store, Sir. The use of our products sometimes leads to inconvenience. It’s not usually a problem, or not too much of a problem anyway. You will remember the example I used yesterday, of the rats?” Dennis nodded.

“Well, the rats disappear, just as described, but your house does always have jaunty pipe music audible afterwards. Some people might find that inconvenient, you understand. Personally I quite like the sound of pipe music, but it’s not to everyone’s taste.”

“I see, so for every up side there’s a down side?”

“Not necessarily. Sometimes there’s no down side, as you put it, or at least not an obvious one, but sometimes there is. We can’t predict what will happen. That’s another reason why it’s inconvenient.”

“Well, OK, then, I’ll take it. How much does it cost?”

The old man said a number which made Dennis’s eyes water, but he realised that the prospect of happiness made the price, however high, worth paying. He fumbled for his wallet and offered his credit card.

“Sorry, Sir. We’re a little old fashioned here. Cash only, you understand. I think Sir will have to go back to the cash point.”

Go back? How did he know Dennis had been to a cash point already? Could he smell the fresh notes in Dennis’s wallet? However, the old man was quite correct and Dennis would have to go back to the cash point. He was glad he owned a credit card that allowed him to draw money right up to his credit limit. Dennis was also glad he had a very high credit limit with almost none of it already utilised.

Dennis turned to leave the shop, and the cough sounded in his ear again, just as it had the day before. Dennis turned back and found that the man was still standing several feet away, holding the empty wooden box. Nice trick, thought Dennis, it certainly made you pay attention.

“The device, Sir. It can’t leave the shop until the transaction has been completed. Sorry Sir, I’m sure you’re as honest as the day is long, but not everyone is, so we have to have the rules you know.” He smiled his saccharine smile again.

Dennis deposited the device back in its velvet nest and the box snapped shut, seemingly of its own accord.

Fifteen minutes later the transaction was complete, and Dennis was walking back up Not The Road to Smuggler’s Cove Street towards the car park, the shiny wooden box tucked under his arm.

* * *

The door to the caravan stood open, Dennis noticed, as he parked the car. Lois's head appeared in the doorway as she heard the sound of the engine, then disappeared back inside. Dennis had only caught a fleeting glimpse of her expression, but what he had seen made his heart sink. He turned to look on the back seat, where the box lay. The hopes that had built up inside him while he stood inside the little shop now deserted him.

A device that would change the nature of his wife, at the press of a button? The idea was absurd. He had been conned, he realised. Well and truly suckered. In 30 days time he would go back to the shop and the old shopkeeper would deny having ever met him. Dennis realised that he didn't even have a receipt for the box and its contents. The story of Jack and the Beanstalk popped into his head, unbidden. Only this time Jack was sure that the beans wouldn't turn out to be magic.

With a gloom laden heart Dennis retrieved the box from the back seat of the car and walked towards the caravan, dragging his feet despondently through the short grass.

Lois was sat behind the table in the caravan's tiny kitchen. Her lips were pursed so tightly she wouldn't have room to insert a drinking straw. Dennis knew this look and opened his mouth to try to get his version of events in first. The attempt was doomed before it began.

Lois wasn't the sort of person to let someone else get the first word in – or the last, and sometimes any words at all. She launched straight into the attack.

“Where have you been? What took you so long? I've been worried sick. I go out for a walk and come back and you're gone. You could have been dead for all I know, stumbling around in that drunken state you could have walked off the cliff.”

She paused long enough to draw breath, but seeing that Dennis was about to reply she threw herself back into the attack with all the vigour of an All Black flanker.

“And what's that? Have you been wasting your... our Money again on rubbish? You're always telling me we're hard up, then you throw you money around on garbage, or drink, which is even worse, but the house is full of your old fads...don't you point that thing at me.. and I do love you so much.”

END OF EXTRACT

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