

# **The Legend of the Merry Milkmaids**

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The Legend of the Merry Milkmaids.

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# The Legend of the Merry Milkmaids

by Giles Booth

‘I think I’ve found somewhere.’

‘Hmm?’

Ian noticed that Kate wasn’t really listening, so he said it again.

‘I’ve found somewhere. Somewhere to stay. For your birthday.’

Kate’s birthday fell on the 2nd of January, and was always a problem. Everyone was too broke, or hungover, or both, to want to do anything. The last time they’d had a party was five years ago. It was not a success.

‘We can’t afford it.’

‘Just for a couple of nights, we can. Nowhere special, just a place in the country, middle of nowhere.’

‘Middle of no *where* exactly?’

‘Somerset. Air B&B. Last minute cancellation. Be nice to get away.’

‘Show me.’

Ian slid his laptop across the kitchen table to his wife.

‘No TV, WiFi, poor phone signal.’

‘It’s a selling point. Digital detox. ‘We offer isolation and peace’ it says.’

‘Is there a pub?’

‘I think there’s one about a mile away. It even has a stone circle, one of the stones is actually in the garden.’

‘Where even is it?’

‘Stanton Maltravers.’

‘Sounds like an Agatha Christie character.’

‘Ha. Well, it’s marketed as perfect for a writing retreat. Maybe you could finish that novel...’

‘My writing aspirations died five years ago, murdered by your friend Dave, if you remember?’

Ian’s friend Dave’s behaviour was one of several things that had ruined her birthday party. After a few glasses of wine, they’d got talking about new year’s resolutions. Kate had talked about finishing writing her book.

Dave, who had had far too much to drink even before arriving, had told her her book was shit. The conversation had gone something like this:

‘How about you, Kate?’ someone had asked.

‘If I *have* to have a resolution, then I’m going to finish writing my novel.’

‘Don’t bother,’ said Dave.

‘Excuse me?’ asked Kate.

‘It’s shit.’

‘How would you know?’

‘It’s bound to be. There are too many books, too many novels.’

‘Do you know Jonathan Swift complained about there being too many books published, so that was true in 1700?’ Ian chipped in. Kate gave him an angry look which he had not noticed.

‘You’ve not read it.’

‘Don’t need to. If it was any good, you’d have finished it and it would be published. You didn’t and it’s not. More wine anyone?’

Kate had not written a word since. She closed the laptop and passed it back to Ian.

‘Well, you probably wouldn’t have any time for writing anyway. But I think we should still go,’ said Ian.

‘Just the two of us? Not a house party.’

‘It’s a small house. Sleeps three.’

‘Oh no. No no no no no no.’

‘What?’

‘We’re not inviting Margate Louise.’

‘We could...’

‘I’m not even in touch with her any more.’

‘Don’t say you haven’t thought about it.’

‘No I have not.’

‘You have. We’ve talked about it. About what nearly happened.’

‘Not seriously.’

‘You could ask her.’

‘I told you, I’m not in touch with her.’

‘Text her. On the off-chance.’

‘You text her.’

‘I don’t have her number. And that would be weird.’

‘Anything to do with her is weird.’

‘It would be creepy if I asked her. She’s *your* friend.’

‘*Was* my friend.’

‘Okay, okay. We should still go. Just the two of us. Get out of London. Birthday in the boondocks. Or the Quantocks. Where even *are* the Quantocks?’

‘Hmmm.’

‘It’ll be nice.’

Kate almost smiled. ‘Okay.’

Margate Louise was Kate’s best, and Ian sometimes used to say, her *only* friend. She was called Margate Louise to disambiguate her from another Louise who was a friend of Ian’s. The other Louise had long ago fallen by the wayside, but Margate Louise had kept her geographical prefix. They saw her infrequently but when she arrived, often unannounced, once twenty seven hours late for a dinner party, she brought chaos, tears, laughter and booze. Always booze. Her love life was famously disastrous and unrequited. She was always falling in love with straight women, married men, gay men, Catholic priests, gay Catholic priests...

Then there had been the birthday party five years ago.

The drive to Somerset did not go well. They set off much later than Ian had planned, and the poor weather meant it was already going dark by 2pm. Everyone seemed to be going somewhere on new year’s day. It took them over an hour to drive out of London and by early evening they were still on the M4, it was dark and pouring with rain.

‘Can we listen to something else?’ Kate asked.

‘Driver gets to choose. Anyway, I made this playlist specially.’

‘Who’s this? Alt-J?’

‘If you don’t like it, skip to the next track.’

Kate skipped through Portishead, Massive Attack, Placebo, Public Service Broadcasting, Heaven 17, Saint Etienne, Placebo and the Thompson Twins before settling on Fun Boy Three. When the song finished she turned on the radio.

*‘...and here in the studio with the new year weather news, here’s Darren Bett, Darren!’*

‘Just in time for the weather,’ said Kate.

*‘Not good news I’m afraid, the showers are turning torrential as Storm Arthur sweeps across the country from the west, the first named storm of the new year. Already we have flood warnings in place for Devon and Cornwall...’*

Ian snapped the radio off.

‘Hey! You hate it when I do that.’

‘I think we got the gist.’

The rain got heavier, and even with the wipers on full speed, it was a struggle to see the road ahead. The traffic slowed right down aside from the occasional maniac in the outside lane followed by blue lights.

The silence was eventually broken by Ian. ‘Shall we turn round and go home now?’

‘If you like.’

‘We’re much more than half way now, though,’ he retracted.

‘Why don’t we turn off and try an A road instead?’

‘We’d just get lost. As long as we’re moving, I’d rather stay on the motorway.’

The traffic came to a complete standstill.

‘Great.’

‘It’ll actually *be* my birthday before we get there at this rate.’

‘Look for another route from the next junction.’

Kate’s phone pinged at an incoming text message.

‘Who’s that?’

Kate angled her phone away from Ian’s view.

‘No-one.’

He grabbed it.

‘Margate Louise! Did you invite her after all?’

‘Look for yourself.’

The message read ‘SO GOOD 2 HEAR FROM U, SORRY CAN’T MAKE IT, AT A BOAT PARTY IN BRISTOL. CATCH UP IN NEW YEAR HUN XXX.’

He grinned at the thought of Kate relenting and inviting her old friend.  
'Do you think she sailed there from Margate?'

'Wouldn't put it past her.'

They giggled. A smile remained on Ian's lips a fraction longer than necessary.

'You're thinking about her, aren't you?'

'I am not.'

'You're such a bad liar.'

'I don't fancy her, not my type. You know that.'

Indeed Margate Louise was in every respect the opposite of Kate, being unpunctual, disorganised, tall, and having long, dark hair. But he was thinking about her and what did, and didn't, happen five years ago.

'What was it you said again? At the party?'

'Not that again, Kate.'

'When you made that Bloody Mary with too much Tabasco?'

*'My lips are on fire.'*

'And what did Margate Louise reply?'

*'I can help extinguish them if you like.'*

They both laughed.

'You and Dave made such tits of yourselves, fawning over her.'

'Dave, maybe.'

'Both of you. Like adolescent schoolboys lusting after a French exchange student.'

'Look, she was being outrageously flirty. Even by her standards.'

'True. I honestly don't think she'd had a shag all year.'

'Kate!'

'She did seem utterly desperate.'

'To be hitting on me, you mean?'

'To be hitting on both of us.'

Silence.

'Oh look, the traffic's moving.'

They arrived in Stanton Maltravers just after 11.30pm. The village pub was not only closed but boarded up and not a soul was in sight. The pub sign was swinging madly in the wind, glistening with rain water.

‘The Merry Milkmaids,’ said Kate. ‘Well we won’t be going there for a cosy pint of cider and a bowl of chips. Odd sign, the figures are half human, half statues.’

‘Which way now?’

‘Left.’

‘You mean right,’ said Ian pointing. Kate’s inability to tell left from right meant he usually took the opposite turning to any she suggested.

‘Yes. I mean no, it *is* left.’

After driving for another ten minutes or so, they arrived at the house. Maltravers Lodge was a small detached Victorian house, very tall and thin, built from a mixture of red and yellow bricks. It looked out of place with its surroundings. There was even a small glazed turret in one corner that looked slightly ridiculous on such a small building. The rain had eased off enough to unload the car without getting drenched. There was a pint of milk on the doorstep, which Ian hadn’t spotted and almost kicked over.

The interior was elegantly and simply decorated, the walls painted in pastel shades, a few well-chosen ornaments scattered about.

Ian put the milk in the fridge.

‘I’m starving. What can we cook quickly?’ asked Kate.

‘Pasta? Beans on toast? I’ll pop the champagne in the freezer.’

‘It’s freezing. How do you put the heating on?’

‘There’s a folder here, information for visitors.’

Ian found the thermostat and turned it up. He returned to the kitchen to find Kate rifling through the drawers. ‘Oh I have excellent news. There’s a visitors’ book!’

‘That’s the evening’s entertainment sorted then. Who needs WiFi?’

They shared a passion for mocking comments written in holiday home visitors’ books. Ian took it and opened it.

‘*“Catriona and Miles enjoyed the horseriding as a welcome break from swotting for Cambridge. A real rural idyll! The Hoopers, Aylesbury.”*

‘Strong opener,’ said Kate, snatching the book back and flipping through its pages. ‘*“We enjoyed our stay although the grill pan handle is loose and the soap holder in the shower needs replacing. Malcolm and Lucy, Addington.”*



‘Not bad. One more. “*The perfect escape. The romance of the stones entwined and embraced us all. Alice, Jon and Sarah.*” Blimey.’

‘Let’s take that to bed.’

‘Just that?’

‘And the champagne. After we’ve had supper.’

‘Is there really not even a TV here?’

‘No. There’s a radio though.’

‘A wireless, marvellous..’ Kate turned it and fiddled with it. ‘No reception.’

‘Try FM instead of DAB.’

‘It’s not a digital radio, it’s ancient, look at it.’

‘Medium wave? Long wave?’

The chimes of Big Ben filled the kitchen.

‘The Home Service.’

‘Happy birthday, love.’

‘Thank you.’

They kissed.

‘Any resolutions?’

‘Ha! Well I do feel a new start may be in order. I’m so fed up with work. Publishing is not what it was ten years ago.’

‘Not going to finish your book, then?’

‘No. But I quite fancy selling other people’s. Book shops seem to be making a bit of a comeback. Maybe I’ll find an empty unit somewhere and open one.’

‘Sounds good.’

‘How about you?’

‘Now you mention it, I’m getting cheesed off with my job as well. Too many project managers and not enough people actually doing the work. Maybe I’ll join you in the book shop. Or do a sideline selling beer. Beer and books.’

‘It’s more likely than me finishing my novel.’

They kissed again, and opened the champagne.

It was, the novelist in Kate noted, a dark and stormy night. The Peanuts fan in Ian did the same. Though the house was warm enough, and the main

bedroom cosier than the building's angular brick exterior might suggest, the windows were old and single glazed. They rattled as the storm approached and they did not sleep well, despite a supper of baked beans and drinking the bottle of champagne. Ian tossed and turned and harrumphed and sighed.

'So much for isolation and peace,' said Kate.

'It's just the wind.'

'What was that?'

'What was what?'

'That noise!'

'The wind.'

'The banging.'

'Not this again. What time is it?'

Kate looked at her phone.

'3.43!'

Kate waking at this time claiming she could hear banging was a recurring event. Ian blamed a Christmas ghost story they'd watched on TV, around the same time as the final, failed birthday party. A character kept being woken by a knock at his front door at 3.43 in the morning, and Ian was convinced it had somehow wired itself into his wife's psyche.

'If it makes you happy, I'll go and look.'

'Please.'

Ian fumbled for his phone and turned the torch on.

'You could just turn the lights on.'

'Thank you, Scully.'

He turned the bedside light on, got up and turned on the light in the landing. The main bedroom was upstairs, and as he walked down the stairs he felt the need to call out mockingly 'hello, hello, who ever you are, I'm coming, I'm coming!' He reached the front door which had small frosted panels of glazing. Lacking a spyhole, he peered through them as best he could. He could see nothing. There was chain on the door, which he attached and opened the door a fraction.

'Hello?'

The wind battered the door and it strained against the chain. He unhooked it and opened it wider. A security light switched on and

illuminated the short front path and tiny front garden. There was no-one there. He closed the door and chained it. He was tempted also to lock it, but ever since he'd had fire warden training at work and the firefighter had told him that locked front doors was where they usually found the bodies, he'd never locked a door from the inside again. He shuddered, unsure if he was chilled by the cold air, the thought of the charred corpses of fire victims, or the thought of some ghostly presence banging on the door.

'Well?' shouted Kate from upstairs.

'Nothing. Nothing at all. I'll make you a chamomile tea.'

'Thanks, love.'

It was 4.33 when Ian was woken by a noise. He sat up in bed, unsure for a moment if he was still dreaming. He struggled to recall his dream. Had there been a hotel? A train journey? Both were common features and he used them to recall his dreams, but neither worked this time. Then he heard the noise again. Banging. He was sure of it. He was less sure whether to wake Kate, who was now snoring. The banging came again. He could not understand how Kate was sleeping through this, when she was frequently woken by imaginary noises.

'Kate.'

'I can't help it.'

'No, not the snoring. Can you hear that noise?'

'What noise?'

The banging came again.

'I'll go and investigate.'

Kate pulled the covers up round her as if they offered her any kind of protection from a fantasmagorical apparition. Below, Ian called out. A voice called back.

'Hello! Can you open the door? I'm drenched.'

He undid the chain and opened the door.

It was Margate Louise, holding a bright red wheely suitcase and brandishing a bottle of fizz.

'Where's the birthday girl?'

'It's half past four in the morning. And you said you couldn't come. And how did you even find us?'

‘So many questions, sweetie. Aren’t you going to invite me over the threshold? I suppose I should have brought coal. I *am* dark-haired though!’

Kate and Ian rose early the next morning as they couldn’t get back to sleep properly. They had packed Margate Louise off to the single room in the turret and told her to get some sleep as they were too tired to party. Louise had given in as she was tired herself after getting lost on the drive from Bristol. She had found roads blocked by fallen trees and it was, she said, a miracle that she’d found them at all, using her powers of deduction to locate the only Air B&B in the area.

‘Do you think we should wake her?’ asked Ian, munching on a triangle of toast and marmalade.

‘Nah.’

‘We’re only here for one more night, hardly worth her being here.’

There was a pause as they both considered the word ‘night’.

‘If the weather improves, it’d be nice to go for a walk,’ said Kate, changing the subject.

‘At least there’s no DVD player or WiFi so we can’t spend the evening watching a dreadful erotic thriller like last time she stayed,’ said Ian, changing it back again.

‘There are board games, we could play Scrabble.’

‘She’d play filthy, suggestive words.’

‘She would, you’re right. Monopoly then.’

‘She’d offer to forgo rent in exchange for a snog.’

‘True. So that means there’s literally nothing we can do that she won’t twist.’

‘Maybe we should just give in.’

‘We didn’t give in last time, not even when she pushed a packed of condoms under our bedroom door.’

‘I’m going to look out back.’

‘What for?’

‘To see what the weather’s doing. Tried to check the forecast but there’s no signal on my phone.’

Ian unbolted the back door and Kate joined him, clutching her cup of tea. The sky was grey but the rain had stopped. Surprisingly warm wind



lashed their faces. The back garden was larger than the front. A muddy lawn, some beds with bedraggled unidentifiable plants, a shed with a sagging roof. The garden tapered uphill to a point at the far end, which made it look longer than it really was. And there stood the stone. It was about six feet tall, slightly wider at the top than the base. A stone owl ornament sat nearby in the border, as if guarding it. They walked up the path to it and both touched it without quite knowing why. It was the highest point in the garden and they could see an avenue of bare trees in the field beyond.

‘Not very big, is it? And here’s the rest of the circle?’ asked Kate.

Ian stood on tip toe and looked over the hedge.

‘In that field. I can only see two other stones though.’

‘Let’s go for a walk.’

A voice rang out from above. ‘Morning love-birds! Up with the lark?’ It was Margate Louise poking her head out of the turret window.

‘We’re going for a walk,’ Ian called up. ‘Want to come?’

‘Love to. One mo, darlings!’

Ian looked at Kate. ‘What? It’s a walk. The three of us. What could possibly happen?’

Margate Louise appeared remarkably quickly as Kate was clearing away the remains of their early breakfast.

‘There’s still a bit coffee in the pot. Bread’s over there if you want toast.’

‘Just a quick sip of coffee for me. I’ll eat something later. Where are you going for your walk?’

Ian was in the corner of the kitchen rifling through a whicker basket full of leaflets advertising local attractions, old guide books and maps.

‘Thought we might go to Worm World,’ he said.

‘Worm World?’

‘Eel smokery. Same thing. Oh look, there’s a history of Stanton Maltravers here.’ He held up an old, small pamphlet, badly printed with rust marks around the staples. ‘It has a map with a suggested walk, and a section on the stones.’

‘Let’s have a look,’ said Margate Louise, putting on reading glasses. Ian had never seen her wearing glasses before. He liked the way it made

her look suddenly less frivolous. *‘The Merry Milkmaids, stone circle of uncertain age or origin. Only three stones remain, making it more of a stone triangle than a stone circle. Various legends surround the stones. One is that three local milkmaids each fell unsuitably in love, one with the lord of the manor, one with the parish priest and one with the village schoolmaster. Their folly was punished when they were turned to stone by lightning strikes as they danced in a field on midsummer’s eve. Another theory, favoured by this author, is that the stones were another kind of folly, one built in the late 1700s by Tertius Maltravers, for his own amusement.’*

‘Tertius Maltravers? Sounds like another Agatha Christie character,’ snorted Kate.

‘Let’s take this with us,’ said Ian, grabbing it out of Margate Louise’s hand. Margate Louise downed her cold, dreggy coffee and put her coat on.

Although the lodge was marked on the map in the guide book, they had difficulty finding the footpath into the field where the other two stones stood. In the end they gave up walking on the road and climbed over a low stone wall and walked across a muddy field, devoid of whatever crop had grown there. The sky was blotchy with light and dark clouds, sunlight looked like it might break through, but so did rain. The field was on the brow of a hill which made the sky seem bigger. There was not a house, a person or even a bird to be seen anywhere, just ranks of tall, thin bare trees in the distance.

‘Do you think this is all right?’ asked Ian.

‘Worried about an angry farmer?’ asked Kate.

‘Randy bull, more like,’ said Margate Louise. Kate and Ian exchanged glances.

The two other stones were at least thirty metres apart, of similar size and shape to the one in the garden, Margate Louise ran towards one of them, whooping as she stumbled over rutted mud.

‘Let’s take one each!’ she cried.

Ian ran towards the other stone in the field.

‘Oh, I’ll just go back the way I came then, shall I?’ said Kate.

Ian ran back across the field in the direction of the house and waved at Kate to take the other stone in the field. He attempted to vault the hedge and fell over backwards in the mud. Margae Louise hooted with laughter.

‘I’ll go back the way I came,’ he said.

He reappeared, slowly. Kate couldn’t believe it, he was climbing the stone.

‘Ian, get down before you hurt yourself!’

Soon he was on top waving his arms. ‘Happy birthday! Happy new year!’ he shouted.

Margate Lousie now began to climb her stone. Kate did not want to follow but she noticed her stone was leaning, and climbing it on all fours was actually quite easy. Soon, the trio were atop the Merry Milkmaids, waving and whooping.

A shot rang out. Ian, who was jumpy at the best of times, wobbled and fell off the stone in the garden. Margate Louise screamed. ‘I’m ok,’ he shouted, ‘landed in a border!’

A man in a flat cap holding a broken shotgun stood silhouetted on the ridge of the hill.

‘Get orf my land!’ he yelled, and then burst out laughing. ‘Only kidding. I mean, this *is* my land, and I would rather you didn’t climb on the stones, but you’re all right.’

Margate Louise jumped off her stone and approached him. He was slightly younger than she had expected, in his late thirties. She smiled and said ‘I am so very sorry, we were looking for the footpath...’

‘You did give us a fright. Is that thing loaded?’ asked Kate, approaching. The gunman showed his open weapon.

‘Not any more. I was shooting rabbits. Sorry if I scared you, assumed you’re up from London, staying in the Lodge, couldn’t resist a bit of sport.’

‘Yes, well, we *are* from London, and we are staying in the lodge.’

‘I know, I let it out to you. Thought it was just the two of you, mind.’

‘Our friend was an unexpected visitor.’

‘Last minute change of plan.’

‘I see.’

By now Ian had emerged, covered in mud and bits of decaying foliage.

‘Going birding in that camouflage are we?’ asked the gunman.

‘Ha. No. Just exploring the stones. Fell in the compost,’ said Ian, taking the guide book out of his coat pocket and waving it as explanation.

‘Ah, the myth of the Merry Milkmaids!’

‘You don’t believe it then?’

‘I probably should, would probably be good for the tourist trade, but I agree with the chap who wrote that book there, they’re no more than 200 years old. The old lord of the manor...’

‘Where *is* the manor?’ interrupted Ian.

‘I’ll get to that. The last lord of the manor was a reprobate. Spent the dwindling family fortune on follies, drink and women. The rest he wasted, as they say. Died childless, in a fire that destroyed the manor, along with a mistress and a young servant girl from the village. It was never rebuilt and the land was sold on to neighbouring farms to pay off his debts.’

‘Where was the manor?’

‘Over in the next field,’ said the cheerful gunman waving over his shoulder, ‘All farmland now. I live a couple of miles away. Anyway, enjoy your walk. Mind, the storm’s not over yet, so I’d make sure your indoors before nightfall. Footpath to the village is just behind the other stone, keep left as you cross the field and you won’t go wrong.’

‘Is there much in the village?’

‘Since the pub closed? Bugger all. Good day!’

Their walk revealed that the gunman was not wrong. There were some beautifully restored houses in the village, The Old Post Office, The Old Vicarage, The Old Dairy, The Old Forge but nothing actually current, and nothing open. Everything was a mere echo of its former self, they felt like they were walking round ruins of a Roman villa with signs explaining where each room used to be. There were expensive cars parked everywhere but they didn’t see any people. Ian assumed they were all indoors, managing their portfolios. Even the church was padlocked shut, and they ended up sitting on a bench outside the boarded up pub. The sign creaked as it swayed in the wind.

‘Welcome to Stanton Buggerall, twinned with Buggerall Magna, Buggerall Parva, and Great Buggerall,’ said Ian.



It started to rain again.

‘Shall we head back?’ asked Kate.

‘Sorry you’re having a rotten birthday,’ said Margate Louise.

‘Yes, sorry, love,’ added Ian.

‘It’s okay. Better than doing nothing at home.’

‘...when you can do nothing in the rain a long way from home?’

Back at the lodge, Ian examined their provisions. They had half a loaf of wholemeal bread that was on the turn when he packed it, a bottle of red wine, Margate Louise’s bottle of cheap fizz, pasta, a jar of pesto, and a packet of chocolate biscuits.

‘Looks like pasta for supper then!’ he said.

‘There’s got to be somewhere round here we can get food. Look, I’ll go and have an explore in my car, you two have some peace and quiet,’ said Margate Louise.

No-one argued with her unexpected thoughtfulness, and Kate and Ian had a cosy afternoon reading. It was dark by the time Margate Louise returned, laden with carrier bags.

‘It’s getting wild out there again. They said on the radio it’s the tail end of the storm, but feels like whole new one to me. Anyway, I found a lovely farm shop, and I have provisions!’

She unpacked the bags. There were two large bottles of local cider, bread, cheeses, posh imported crisps and two huge pies.

‘Wasn’t sure if you’re still veggie, Kate. One’s steak and kidney, that’s the one with the triangle on top, the other is roast vegetable. Shall I pop the oven on to warm them through?’

Kate and Ian were impressed by Margate Louise’s bounty. They drank cider together and ate the fancy crisps and chatted amiably in the kitchen while the pies warmed through. She’d had various jobs since they last saw her, in various shops and cafés, then, surprisingly, a brief spell as care worker which, even more surprisingly, she said she quite enjoyed but packed it in because the hours and pay were so bad. Her love-life had settled down somewhat, having had to reasonably long-term relationships with an artist (female) and a bookshop owner (male), which she strongly hinted had overlapped by several months. The bookshop had gone bust and the owner had moved back to London to find work, which had made

Margate Louise realise that she had been more in love with the idea of living over a bookshop at the seaside than with the actual owner of the bookshop, so she'd stayed in Margate and moved back into her old flat which she'd sub-let to an old uni friend.

As Storm Arthur's tail lashed the lodge, pies were eaten. Margate Louise and Ian sharing the steak and kidney, Kate having a third of the vegetable one. The fizz evaporated and cheese was taken in the snug sitting room, with the bread and bottle of red. Kate was rather dreading what might come next, and was not disappointed when, before eleven o'clock, Margate Louise announced she was off to bed. Alone.

'No, really?' protested Kate.

'Yes, I'm beat. Long drive in the morning. What time do we need to be out of here?'

'Ten I think,' said Ian.

'Ouch! Well, in that case I'm certainly heading up. I can't take the booze like I used to. Lightweight Louise, you can call me now. Good night!'

Ian and Kate sat in silence for a while.

'Well. That did not go how I expected,' said Ian.

'Indeed. So much better. Or are you disappointed?'

'God no.'

'I mean, don't mind me, you can tiptoe upstairs and...'

'And what? Put a slice of cheese under her door?'

They both laughed.

'Happy birthday.'

'Thank you. Wasn't so bad after all. Thank you.'

They kissed then Kate started dozing off in Ian's arms, and Ian was not far behind her.

Kate and Ian both awoke with a start. Wind rattled the windows, and the lodge was now cold and dark. It sounded like someone was pounding on the door. Kate instinctively looked at her phone. 3.43.

'You can hear that, right?'

'Yes.'

'Turn the light on.'

‘I can’t. Must be a power cut.’

Ian heard Margate Louise call out from the turret room as he got up to investigate.

‘It’s okay, you stay there Louise! I think the power’s out. Have you got a torch on your phone?’

‘My phone’s dead.’

The banging noise rang out again.

‘Just stay there.’

There was a crash and Margate Louise, dressed in tartan pyjamas, landed at Ian’s feet. She let out a small whelp, shuddered and then was perfectly still. Ian screamed. Kate stumbled towards them, unable to locate the torch button, using the dim light of her phone’s lock screen to guide her.

‘Fuck. Is she okay?’

‘I... I don’t think so.’

Kate put her hand on her neck and felt a weak pulse.

‘She’s alive. We need to get help.’

‘I’m too drunk to drive.’

‘So am I.’

‘No signal on my phone. I’ll try upstairs.’

‘Be careful!’

Kate held Margate Louise’s hand.

‘She’s very cold. Shall I put the heating back on?’

‘I don’t think it’ll work without electricity. Wrap her in a blanket,’ Ian called down. ‘No signal up here either. Guess the phone network is down.’

‘We can’t leave her.’

Ian reappeared at the foot of the stairs. ‘I don’t think we should move her either. Maybe I’ll get a signal outside, on higher ground.’

He put on his coat and went into the back garden. Wind almost took his breath away. The moon and stars appeared intermittently between racing black clouds. He shone his phone’s torch on the garden and made his way up the path towards the stone. One bar of signal flickered on then vanished. He tried dialling 999. No connection.

‘Any luck?’ shouted Kate.

‘No. I had one bar but it’s gone.’

He started to climb the stone. It wasn't until he'd reached the top and, standing on the broader top, was silhouetted against the moonlit clouds that Kate realised what he was doing.

'Ian! Get down!'

'I've got three bars! Hello! Ambulance! Maltravers Lodge, I don't know the post code. Outside Stanton Maltravers. Someone's fallen down stairs, she looks bad. How long? Please hurry, we've no power and she's getting very cold.'

'Get down!'

'I'm coming. Called an ambulance. They said they're very busy and short-staffed, could be a couple of hours.'

'Fuck. Now please get down.'

Getting down, especially on a windy night, turned out to be a lot harder than getting up. Last time he'd been felled by a gunshot, but he didn't fancy taking a leap in the dark.

'You might have to help me.'

'For fuck's sake Ian.'

'Look, I called an ambulance! I couldn't get any signal at all in the house.'

'Sorry. I'm just terrified something very bad is going to happen.'

Ian decided to try and get down from the stone without help. He knelt down and tried to find a foothold. He failed. Falling, he banged his head on the owl garden ornament. Kate ran to him, and shook him. By the light of her phone, she could see blood streaming down his neck from a wound on the back of his head. She couldn't rouse him, but he still had a strong pulse.

Kate couldn't move Ian and wasn't sure if she should try. She ran back inside and fetched a couple of coats to cover him. At least an ambulance is coming, she told herself. Back in the lodge, Margate Louise was still cold but the pulse was still there. Although Kate herself was now freezing, she wrapped took her jumper off and covered Louise in it before wrapping a couple of blankets back round her. She found a hot water bottle in the cupboard under the sink, sheathed in a hand-knitted cosy. But the stove was electric, so she couldn't even boil a kettle. She dropped the hot water



bottle and bashed the controls on the hob in frustration. She kept pacing between Louise at the foot of the stairs and stone at the end of the garden.

At 5am there was still no sign of the ambulance, but the wind had dropped. Kate decided to look for help. With great difficulty, she dragged Ian back inside the back door. She wrote a note saying 'head injury in kitchen also' and left it with Louise. She left the front door on the latch, and walked outside. She saw that a piece of wood had come loose from the roof and was banging against the house. If the paramedics got there before she got back, heaven knows what they'd think had happened, some kind of bizarre attempted mass murder, probably.

Kate started walking down the lane in the direction of the village. She walked for what seemed like an eternity and started to wonder if she was walking round in circles. Then she heard a whirring sound that was vaguely familiar, a sound she'd not heard for years. She couldn't quite place it. Something from childhood? Then she saw lights flickering through the hedgerows. A car! She ran towards them, waving her hands.

It was not a car. It was a milk float. She stood before it and the whirring sound dropped in pitch as it stopped. She hadn't seen a milk float for decades, and wondered for a moment if she was hallucinating with the stress.

'Help me! There's been an accident! Two accidents! I called an ambulance but it's not come.'

There were two women in the cab of the milkfloat. The driver jumped out.

'What ever is the matter?'

'Please help me! We're staying at the lodge. My friend fell downstairs and my husband fell in the garden. They're both unconscious!'

'Hop in, we'll come and see what we can do,' said the driver.

When Kate got in the can she saw the two women also had a child with them.

'Budge up, Poppy, make room for the lady,' said the other woman.

'School holidays. We can't leave her on her own when we go out on the round, and I wouldn't have Rose going out on her own, not in this weather.'

'No. Of course. Hello Poppy. My name's Kate.'

Poppy blinked and said nothing. Rose started the milk float.

‘You know where the lodge is? Maltravers Lodge?’

‘Yes my dear,’ said Rose, ‘It’s on my round. Where do you think your milk comes from?’

‘Of course.’

It had seemed to Kate as if she had been walking for ages, but within five minutes she recognised a road sign that showed they were approaching the lodge. A warm glow came from within the building.

‘Great, the power must be back on!’

Rose stopped the milkfloat.

‘You stay here, Poppy.’

The security light switched itself on as they walked up the short front path. The front door knocker burnt Kate’s hand as she touched it.

‘Stand back!’ shouted Rose, karate kicking the door open. Kate had not had time to explain that the door was unlocked, and the door flew open. Flames filled the door frame. Kate screamed and moved towards the door, Rose held her back.

‘They’re both in there!’ she screamed.

The flames were now engulfing the upper floor of the lodge as well. The roof started to catch.

‘I’ve got a radio in the cab,’ said Rose. ‘Mobile reception is so bad round here, we can’t rely on it. I’ll call for help.’

Kate was too traumatised to thank her, and Rose’s companion moved her away from the house.

‘Can we get round the back?’

‘We need to move back, dear. Wait for the fire brigade. There’s nothing we can do.’

Kate watched in horror as the turret started to burn, its pointed roof exposing its skeleton of beams before crashing down inside the house.

The ambulance still hadn’t appeared, but a fire engine arrived within a few minutes, followed by a police car not long after. Kate was led away into a police car by a young officer.

‘Best let the guys do their thing. How many people were inside?’

‘Two,’ sobbed Kate. ‘My husband. And my... my best friend.’

‘You here for New Year?’

‘My birthday,’ said Kate, before bursting into tears again.

‘Those guys are the best, honest. We might be out in the sticks, but they’ve saved so many people...’

‘Are you open?’ a lady in late middle age with a shopping trolley shouted round the open door.

‘Not yet, tomorrow. We’re just getting ready.’

‘Oh I see. Sorry to bother you.’

‘Not at all. We’ll be open at three o’clock tomorrow, special opening, there’ll be wine and cake. And beer! Please join us!’ said Kate.

‘Thank you, my dear. I might just do that. So nice to have something open in the village. A bookshop and a pub! So clever.’

‘Well, it’s not really a pub. No food. And we’ll be keeping hours more like a shop. We’re trying something new. More a beer shop and book shop and a kind of micro-pub. We’re even publishing some of our own books, local interest.’

The lady with the shopping trolley pointed at the pub sign, freshly repainted, its hinges oiled.

‘You’re keeping the pub name? The Merry Milkmaids?’

‘Tradition,’ said Ian emerging through the door to pass his wife a cup of tea. ‘I hate it when pub names change. And the legend of the Merry Milkmaids is very important to us, isn’t it love?’

‘It is.’

A battered old Honda pulled up. Margate Louise got out with the aid of a walking stick. Only now they called her Maltravers Louise. She opened the boot and waved at a large cardboard box. ‘Hot off the press! Give us a hand, Ian.’

‘Our first book!’ said Kate.

‘*Your* first book,’ said Ian.

‘What is it?’ asked the lady.

‘*The Legend of the Merry Milkmaids*. 2024 edition,’ said Louise, carrying the box inside. ‘A mixture of fact and fiction, you should come and get a copy signed by the author tomorrow.’

‘I shall be delighted,’ said the lady.

‘It starts with a bit of historical fiction about the old lord of the manor, and ends with the fire at Maltravers Lodge. Do you remember that?’ asked Kate.

‘I certainly do. Are you...?’

‘Yes, we three. I’m lucky to be alive,’ said Maltravers Louise. ‘If the milk ladies hadn’t found Kate and raised the alarm, and if Ian hadn’t regained consciousness and dragged me out into the back garden, we’d not be here.’

‘And if I hadn’t left the hob turned on...’

‘Enough of that. We’re all here now,’ said Ian.

‘We are. We are indeed,’ said Louise.

‘See you tomorrow then, at three,’ said Kate.

‘Three o’clock,’ said the lady with the shopping trolley.

The trio went inside and closed the door.



Kate's birthday fell just after new year so it was always a struggle finding people in the mood to party. Hoping to exorcise the memory of a disastrous birthday party five years ago, her husband Ian books a getaway in rural Somerset. Unfinished business with Margate Louise, a friend they lost touch with, a storm called Arthur and a stone circle that is not what it seems, ensure that this new year and birthday do not go to plan...



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Giles Booth was born in Bristol and grew up in North Somerset. He enjoys reading and writing short fiction. His novella *Constance Breakwater* and *Her Beautiful Museumhood* is available as an eBook and paperback via Amazon.

