

# Professor Bilman's Mysterious Shed

A John Smith Short Story

by

Nigel Warner



Published on behalf of the author by Bickering on Sea

© Nigel Warner, 2021

All rights reserved.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

The day when the new neighbours arrived was, for young John Smith, the most exciting day of his entire life... so far.

His mother had, as usual, stationed herself in the bay window at the front of their Victorian house, watching the world. She had called to her husband. “Frank! It looks like the new people are arriving, Frank! It’s a big lorry, Frank!”

Sarah Smith had been peering through the upper pane of the bay window with, as usual, a dish cloth hanging loosely from one hand as she tried, with little success, to cover her nosiness by pretending to be cleaning the windows.

John himself had been nine years old at the time, sitting on the floor nearby, playing with his Lego. His mother’s declaration had made him look up, spring to his feet, and dash to the window to see for himself. And so began what would become his main interest for the next seven years, watching Professor Bilman.

Even at nine years old, John liked to know what was going on in the street almost as much as his mother did. In fact, for most of his childhood he usually stood next to her in the bay window as she watched the comings and goings on the street. In fact, if she was doing the housework, he would stand there on his own and he noticed that the same people who looked at his mother with suspicion when they saw her being nosy, didn’t seem to mind when they noticed a young boy peeking out from under the net curtains. They even waved at him on occasion.

On the day when the Bilmans arrived, John rushed to the window to be greeted with the sight of a large, dark blue Pickford’s Removals lorry parked at the curb. It had pulled up right in front of the pathway to the front door of the house next door, which had been up for sale since the death of old Mr Yarwood. Like all boys his age, John quite liked lorries, and he was even more impressed when a group of tattooed, burly removal men spilled out from the cab and started to chatter and swear at one another, as they wrestled with the catches on the side doors of the lorry and dragged large ramps into place, preparing to unload the furniture inside. When these men looked in the direction of their

bay window, John waved. The strange tableau of a middle-aged woman and a smiling, waving boy caused the removal men to wave back, their faces a picture of confusion and disbelief that the new neighbours of their employers were as open as they were with their nosiness.

“There’s four men, Frank!” his mum shouted from beside him, quite possibly loudly enough to be heard by the men. “And they’ve got ramps!”

Frank, a big man in an open necked shirt, walked into the living room. “Haven’t you got anything better to do than spy on the neighbours, Sarah?”

“Not really,” she replied, without looking round. “Anyway, it’s important to know what’s going on. We don’t want any drug dealers or gangs moving in next door, do we?”

“In Bickering on Sea?” he asked, incredulously.

“You never know, Frank. You never know.”

Frank shook his head. “Still, it’s not New York. Come on, lad,” he said to his son, “let’s go and find something useful to do, eh?”

“No thanks, Dad. I want to stay and see what happens.”

John’s Father looked as if he would say more, but, instead, furrowed his brow and looked daggers at the back of his still spying wife’s head. “Sarah, do you really want to turn our son into another nosy parker like you?” The frustration was clear in Frank’s tone.

“Frank! Really! I’m not nosy! I’m just keeping an eye on the neighbours, that’s all. Johnny understands that, don’t you, son?”

Frank grunted and turned to leave the room, saying, “I can tell you one thing, the people I know in Bickering aren’t doing anything interesting enough to warrant the effort of spying.” Then he stomped away to find something useful to do.

“You’d be surprised, Frank. I’ve seen some things,” Sarah replied darkly, seemingly unaware that he had gone. “Besides, these are new people, Frank. Gladys at number 17 says she heard they’re from London. Who knows what they’re up to, eh?”

There was silence, before John crowed delightedly, “Look!” as an old silver Renault Meganne pulled up to the curb and parked in front of the lorry. A mismatched couple climbed out of the car, to be greeted by the biggest of the

tattooed men, who seemed to be in charge of the removal team.

“I think this must be them, Frank,” Sarah said. “Ooh, it’s not a very nice car, is it? Ooh, he looks very tall, doesn’t he? Distinguished... but a bit scruffy. And she looks a bit short and fat to me. I wonder if they have children, eh, Johnny? It’d be nice to have a little friend next door, wouldn’t it?”

There was a pause, before Frank shouted from the next room, “Who cares?!”

As it turned out, the new neighbours didn’t have children, although they did come from London. The couple were named Professor Richard and Dr Miriam Bilman, and young John found them fascinating. They were an oddly matched pair, as Sarah had pointed out. Professor Richard Bilman was tall, thin and bald, with the sort of domed head that gave the impression that it was so full of brain that it had outgrown his hair. Professor Richard Bilman didn’t wear glasses, but John thought he probably should, to complete the impression of the absent-minded professor. He almost always wore brown clothes, which were always slightly tatty. The good Professor clearly had better things to do with his time than fuss over clothes.

Dr Miriam Bilman, on the other hand, always looked perfectly presented. Her preference leaned towards tweed two-piece suits and high heels, with smart handbags and crisp white blouses. Where he was tall and thin, Miriam was very round and short. In some way, she reminded John of a balloon that was about to take off. She was always busy and immediately began to give firm, straightforward orders to the removal men who jumped into action, even as her husband wondered into their new home.

From that first moment, John was desperate to talk to them and find out more. In the weeks after their arrival, he took to waiting outside of his own front door in the hope of running into them and having, no matter how brief, a conversation. He would also sit at the top of his slide in the Smith family back garden. It gave him a good view over the fence into the Bilman back garden and a vantage point to watch their comings and goings.

The Bilmans spent a great deal of time there, too. Within a few weeks of their arrival, Professor Bilman had had a very large shed built at the bottom of the long space, which covered almost the whole width of the end. It appeared to be built of blue painted shiplap, but John, who had watched it being built, knew that it was also lined with metal and sound proofing of some description. There were only a very few windows and a large door, which had a keypad to one side

and would ‘swoosh’ as it opened when Professor Bilman placed his palm on the pad. There were also CCTV cameras and, in truth, the word ‘shed’ was hardly an adequate description of the building at all.

After it was built, Professor Bilman began his daily routine, which meant he would walk purposely down to the ‘shed’ at 8:00 am sharp, smiling in a distracted way at his little watcher perched on the top of the slide. He would stay there until 8pm, when he would walk more slowly back, almost reluctantly, to his house, watched by John, who was now looking through his bedroom window. At times during the day, John and his mother would hear loud noises coming from the seemingly wooden building. Bangs and crashes and, on one occasion, what sounded to John like the enraged bull elephant he had seen on TV a few nights before.

Dr Miriam Bilman spent much of her day turning the rest of the back garden into an enormous vegetable plot. John recognised it from his visits to his grandad’s allotment. There were carefully dug over and weeded rows of dirt, separated by narrow pathways of grass, or wooden planks. There were areas of beanpoles, looking like campsites of naked teepees, a small potting shed halfway down the garden path where she kept her tools, and a greenhouse, tucked into the corner near her husband’s workshop. The odd thing was that, even though she was on her hands and knees in the mud for much of her time, Miriam Bilman always wore a two-piece tweed suit and high heels, under a sackcloth apron. She would emerge from her house in the morning looking immaculately presented, only to go inside at lunchtime looking a real mess of dirt after her hard work digging and planting. Then, after lunch, she would emerge once more, freshly groomed and dressed with the same care and style as she had been first thing, only to get just as mucky as before.

At dinner in the evenings, Sarah Smith would tell her husband and son all about the things she had found out about their new neighbours during her visits to the town and the shops.

“Gladys says that her Kirtsy says that Geraldine had heard that he’s a Doctor.” Frank studiously continued to pick at his food, making a point of ignoring the news, but Sarah simply kept going. “Not a useful Doctor, apparently. No, a scientist Doctor. Mrs Claxton says that she heard that he’s been working for a University up London and was disgraced. Drummed out, she says, for doing unhealthy experiments.”

“Like what mum?” John asked.

“Ooh, I don’t know, do I? All I ask is whether he’s the sort of person we want living next door? Eh? Frank? Eh?”

Frank looked at his wife, put down his knife and fork and replied, “It really is none of your business, woman. Leave the neighbours alone. Please. They seem nice enough to me.”

“Nice? What do you mean nice? He spends all hours in that monstrosity of a shed and she dresses like she’s my old head mistress and spends all her time in the garden. I ask you. In two piece and pearls? Gardening?”

“And as for that shed, you didn’t even complain when they put it up, did you? Eh? Despite my worries. And now we have loud noises at all hours and a small farm next door!”

Frank put his knife and fork down and looked seriously at his wife. “You can hardly call it all hours, can you? I’ve never heard a thing after eight o’clock and what they do with their back garden is their own affair. Your father has a vegetable garden behind his house, doesn’t he?”

“Well... yes... but that’s different.”

“No, it’s not. Now, can we please get on with our food? Top Gear is on in a minute and it’s nearly John’s bedtime.”

Sarah reluctantly went quiet, but not before she mumbled, “We could be murdered in our beds and you wouldn’t care...”

\*\*\*

It had only been a few days after that conversation when Miriam Bilman knocked on the front door, gave Sarah a large bag of potatoes from her allotment, had a cup of tea, and transformed her suspicious neighbour’s attitude forever. Sarah reported on it all at dinner as usual while John listened in fascination.

“She’s ever such a nice lady, Frank. Very friendly. And potatoes too. She grew them herself. We talked for ages.”

“Oh... good,” Frank replied, seemingly uninterested.

“And the potatoes are from her allotment, Frank. Isn’t that nice? And she told me all about her clothes and ...”

While Sarah Smith continued talking Frank looked up, a question in his expression. “Hold on a second,” he said. “Did you say the potatoes came from her allotment? But it’s not the season for them. And they’ve only been here for

a few weeks and you said they were from London. How did they get them to grow so fast?"

Sarah sighed, as if talking to an idiot. "That's what I'm telling you, Frank. I do wish you'd listen."

"You were talking about clothes, woman. I always stop listening when you talk about clothes."

"Dad's right, mum," John joined in. "You didn't say anything else."

"Well, thank you very much, John William Smith! Let the grownups talk without your interruptions." She only ever called him by his full name when she was annoyed.

"Sorry, mum," he replied quietly.

"That's what I was trying to tell you, Frank. She's a scientist too."

"What do you mean?"

"Miriam is a botanist, which is supposed to be scientist who does plants. And she works on growing things very fast, which is why she wears her suits all the time! Don't you see?"

"Not really," Frank replied.

"She told me all about it. Apparently, her and Richard are both scientists and they've moved to Bickering to let them work in peace and quiet. She is working in her plants, getting them to grow very fast, and he is doing his things."

John was feeling a little put out by his mum's short temper, but couldn't resist adding, "Her plants are growing quite fast in their back garden."

"Exactly," his mum said. "And he is, apparently, quite a famous inventor. In fact, you know the hand dryers down at the supermarket? The ones which are shaped like a pointy hat? They're his. Or at least, they're his invention."

"He's that Bilman?" Frank was impressed, despite himself. "Wow, they're amazing. Much better than the normal ones."

"I know. And they made his fortune. Miriam told me that now they're living here, he's doing his own things."

"Like what?" John asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Something to do with Astral Physicals, or something."

“Astro-physics?” Frank asked.

“That’s the one. Anyway, he’s working on something while she works on her thing. But she makes sure he doesn’t work too hard and makes him stop at 8 o’clock. Otherwise, she says, he’d never leave his workshop.”

“Sound’s interesting,” Frank replied.

“Good. Because they’re coming round for dinner next week. I thought I’d make duck.”

\*\*\*

Over the years that followed, Sarah Smith and Miriam Bilman became quite close. The first dinner had been interesting, to say the least. Professor Richard Bilman had spoken very little, but mostly because he couldn’t get a word in edgeways. Miriam spoke for both of them, and he simply listened and ate, answering only the occasional questions that were directed towards him. He did spare a smile or two for John, who tried to start a conversation, but that was about all. And in the following months he came round less often, until, eventually, Miriam Bilman visited on her own, more often than not.

On the surface, Dr Miriam Bilman and Mrs Sarah Smith had very little in common, other than relatives in Godalming. Sarah was a rather simple housewife who had left school as soon as she could, had little or no ambition outside of Bickering on Sea and worked as a shop assistant in one of the local shops. Dr Miriam Bilman, however, was a world-renowned botanist; highly intelligent and worked for several universities and at least one bio-chemical company. Both of them, however, had the ability to talk without taking breath and loved to gossip about the things other people got up to more than just about anything in the world.

For Miriam, the world she moved in simply didn’t afford much opportunity to talk about simple things, whereas simple was almost the only thing Sarah knew. They talked for hours and hours about their family, colleagues and, after some time, their neighbours and the many characters who lived in and around Bickering on Sea.

John would listen and, as he grew older, join in. His own world of school and scouts was just as interesting to his mother and their next door neighbour; but what he was really interested in, was any information he could hear about Professor Richard Bilman. There was something about the tall man, who he only really ever saw walking to and from his elaborate shed, that John found



fascinating. The fact that Miriam Bilman very rarely let anything slip about her husband's work and interests simply acted to raise John's own desire to find out more.

By the age of 16, John was tall enough to see over the fence without the need to climb and sit on top of the slide. For nearly every day of those seven years, John greeted Professor Bilman every morning and evening as he walked purposefully between the shed and the house. There were weeks, it was true, when Richard wasn't at home due to some appointment, trip, or other, but otherwise, morning and night, he would be hallooed by his neighbour's son, peering over the fence, with a "Good morning/evening, Professor Bilman." To which he would simply reply, "John," and continue on his way. John learned nothing at all from those moments, but he yearned for them.

Much more was learned, over a period of years, from Dr Miriam Bilman and her conversations with Sarah. Miriam and Richard had met at Cambridge, where he had been a brilliant researcher and she had been a post-graduate student. She had started talking to him at the post-graduate dinners at Downing College and things had progressed. Frank Smith said that he thought that with Richard's silence and Miriam's incessant talking they must have made a natural couple. Sarah wasn't too pleased by that, so she burned his toast on purpose.

From there, Richard had earned a chair (something that John thought was a bit strange until he found out that it meant he had become a Professor) and then left the academic world to work in industry where, together with a friend, he had founded Arkwright and Bilman, a company that invented and manufactured vacuum cleaners, hand dryers, car parts, and all sorts of things. Professor Bilman was the inventive genius behind the scenes and Philip Arkwright was the public face.

All the while, Dr Miriam Bilman had herself become a leader in her field and, when Richard Bilman had sold his shares in AB PLC, she had left her career to follow him to Bickering on Sea. Apparently, he had given the bulk of his newly secured fortune to Bill and Melinda Gates to alleviate world poverty and with the remainder, which was probably more than most people could earn in a lifetime, they purchased a modest house in a Victorian street and settled down to concentrate on their own projects. Hers, she told Sarah and John over coffee and cake, was to find ways to help feed the world with fast growing fruit and vegetables, and his was, well, something else entirely.

It was in September that Professor Bilman, after seven years of habitually

working twelve hours in everyday in his shed, changed his schedule. On the first morning, John was woken at 6:30 am by the back door of the Bilman's house slamming shut. He got to the window of his bedroom in time to see the good Professor disappear into his shed, and the man didn't come out until 11:30pm, when John noticed the back garden security lights flash into life as Professor Bilman returned home. After that, Professor Bilman was up and down to his shed at all hours, a look of concentration and purpose on his face.

A few days later, at coffee, Miriam Bilman had been quite agitated and had told Sarah Smith that her husband was close to a breakthrough. As such, his working pattern was, of necessity, rather erratic. What sort of breakthrough it might be, she wouldn't say.

\*\*\*

It was a warm autumnal morning when John was preparing for a Scout camp. His rucksack was packed and waiting, and he was just pulling on his hiking boots. Any minute, John was expecting his Group Scout Leader to pull up by the back gate and give him a lift. Suddenly, John heard the back door of the Bilman's house open and slam shut. The young man stood up quickly in an effort to see what might be happening, with one boot still unlaced.

He was greeted by the sight of Professor Richard Bilman hurrying down the path, pulling on a heavy coat and hat, a day sack held in his other hand and a look of impatient excitement on his face.

"Morning, Professor Bilman," John called at the hurrying man. To his surprise, Richard Bilman stopped dead in his tracks and spun to face his young neighbour. "Good morning to you, young John Smith. Good morning indeed. I can't stop... exciting times!" Professor Bilman seemed almost to skip down the garden path, leaving John open mouthed in amazement. His enigmatic neighbour had never said that much to him in seven years, then suddenly three whole sentences.

In a thoughtful daze, John finished tying his laces. He stood there in the hazy autumn sunshine considering the number of times Professor Bilman had entirely ignored him, or simply nodded in recognition as he walked down the garden path. Why would today be any different?

John lifted the rucksack onto his back and set off at a slow walk down his own garden path, towards the back gate where he was due to be picked up. However, as the young man walked, he noticed that the door to Professor

Bilman's shed was still open. Another thing that had never happened before.

From inside the shed, John heard a loud whirring noises and, he thought, he could make out, a sickly green light. He stopped in his tracks, watching and listening. The whirring noise rose, before it stopped suddenly. The green light blinked out and there was an enormous pop, which was replaced by a humming noise.

The young man looked around. Miriam Bilman was nowhere to be seen, and there was no sign of his mother and father either. For all these years John had watched his fascinating neighbour from afar, but, his teenage brain concluded, here was an opportunity he shouldn't miss. His lift hadn't arrived yet, so, as he drew level with the door of Professor Bilman's shed, he walked towards the fence and listened.

He was sure he could hear voices, and wondered if Miriam might be in there too, but he had never seen her go into her husband's workshop before. He could also hear that the noise coming from inside the shed had changed again, to what might only be described as a 'whum, whum'. Even as he listened, it seemed to be growing in both urgency and volume.

Looking around once more to check that he was alone, John Smith, the nosy son of Sarah Smith, climbed over the fence between the gardens. The rucksack didn't seem to hinder him at all as he landed on the other side and his feet sank into soft mud.

John moved cautiously towards the open door of Professor Bilman's shed, making sure to keep an eye out for anyone who might not approve of the trespassing he hadn't dared attempt before now. His heart was pounding and the noises from inside the building reminded him of something from a Marvel film, only it was very real and very close.

On reaching the door, John peeked around the edge. What he found was a small porch area lined with shiny steel panels and another slightly open door. In the porch was a shoe rack with two levels and space for three or four pairs in each level. On the lower level he saw a single pair of brown, brogue shoes, which he recognised as Professor Bilman's. On the upper level of the rack were three pairs of boots; a pair of shiny green wellingtons, a pair of scuffed steel toe-capped workman's boots and a pair of running shoes. There was also a gap which, John guessed, must have held another pair of boots or shoes. The inner door was closed, but, unlike the outer sliding door, there was no lock.

John pushed the steel door tentatively, but had to push much harder to get it to open. He poked his head inside and gasped. The room he looked into was much bigger than it should have been and was lined with all sorts of computers, work benches and shelves full of what seemed to be Kilner jars and books. The room was lit by harsh strip lighting and, in the centre, on a low dais, was what looked like a steel-edged doorway. Where the door should have been, however, looked like the rippling surface of a mercury filled swimming pool, only vertical.

The young man slipped through the doorway into the huge laboratory, and stood stock still, as if his movement might trigger an alarm. His rucksack seemed to get in the way, but he didn't dare take it off, so took extra care. Set up in-front of the mercury doorway was a video camera on a tripod. A laptop stood open on a tall table next to it, showing a live feed of the doorway.

The steady 'whum, whum' was louder here – almost uncomfortable. John surveyed his surroundings. The work benches around the edge of the room had all sorts of instruments and gadgets strewn across them, yet, what seemed like chaos at first glance, was quite well organised. The workspace of a man who knew exactly where everything was. The shelves lining the walls had lots of books on them, but the jars were clearly full of samples of plants and, more worrying, small animals and what seemed to be body parts, floating in liquid.

In the corner furthest from him, John saw what looked like a large remote-controlled version of the Mars Rover he had seen on TV.

His head swam. There was so much to take in. But John also felt shame, as if he had violated a friend's trust by trespassing on his most private sanctuary. The young man made the decision to leave before anyone saw him, when the 'whum, whum,' noise rose in volume and, with a sound like a wellington boot coming out of wet mud, Professor Bilman was violently vomited out of the doorway, crashing into the camera and laptop and landing face down on the floor.

Without thinking, John leapt to the prone scientist's aid, kneeling next to him and practicing his first aid. The man was breathing, but there was a large wound, wet with blood, on the back of his head.

"Professor Bilman?! Can you hear me?" John called.

The tall Professor was dressed in brown clothes, as usual, but wearing hiking boots, not unlike John's own, which had what seemed like an almost

fluorescent green mud on them.

John heard the same squelching noise he had heard a moment before. He turned to look at the doorway, only to see what looked like a tentacle emerging from it, groping around for something unseen, as if searching under the sofa for a lost coin. Suddenly, Professor Bilman took a deep breath and scrambled to sit bolt upright. His eyes were wide and he looked terrified.

He focused on the tentacle, which was getting closer, and groped urgently in his coat pocket, from which he producing what looked like a remote car key fob.

He fumbled with the fob, unable to get his fingers to work properly, dropping it. The gadget fell next to John's knee and he picked it up and tried to hand it back to Professor Bilman, who just couldn't get his hands to take it and knocked it to the floor again.

“Press the green button!” the scientist shouted urgently as John retrieved it. “Press the bloody green button! Now!”

John stabbed at the largest button, which was green, and there was a change in the noise, just as the tentacle touched his left boot. Immediately, the doorway changed colour and, with a fleshy sound, the tentacle fell twitching to the floor, severed by whatever had happened to the door, and the ‘whumming’ noise calmed down again.

Professor Bilman took a deep, shuddering breath of relief and fell back onto his elbows. He turned to John, who was still kneeling next to him, and said, “You? What are you doing here?” Then fell backwards as he passed out.

For several moments, John didn't know what to do. The tentacle was still twitching nearby, but his Scouting instincts took over and he made sure Professor Bilman was comfortable, before tentatively crawling towards the now inert appendage and gently poking it. It felt muscly, like the snake he had held at the zoo in the summer, only cold and damp. “What the hell is that?” he asked out loud.

“I have no idea,” Professor Bilman almost whispered. “Are you alright, lad?”

“Er... yes. Thank you...”

Professor Bilman, with John's help, sat himself up, leaning against the leg of one of the workbenches. “Good. Now... what on earth are you doing here?”

John was embarrassed, but simply answered truthfully. “You left the door open at the front and I followed you in when I heard the noises. Sorry.”

Richard Bilman looked at his neighbour for a long time, before shrugging. “I’m glad you did. Silly of me to leave it open. Goodness knows what could have happened to you. To everyone really.”

John didn’t know what to say. Besides, Professor Bilman had never spoken much before. His voice was quite deep, and his sentences were clipped, if well spoken. “Well? Cat got your tongue?”

“Not really, sir,” John replied, “But you’ve never really talked to me before.”

“Can’t get a bloody word in edgeways with Miriam. Besides, got better things to do than talk. Work, you know. So much to do.”

“Sorry.”

“Stop saying sorry. If you hadn’t followed, that thing might have got me.”

“Oh. What was it?”

“I’ve told you. I don’t know. But it comes from here.”

John didn’t understand and his face must have shown it. Professor Bilman asked, “Can I trust you, John? Eh?”

John liked to watch people and gossip but, unlike his mother, he also knew when to keep his mouth shut. Growing up with Sarah and Frank meant that he had learned to listen, because his mum talked so much. “I think so,” he replied.

“Actually, I know you can,” Richard said. “Never told anyone about my shed, have you? Never had friends over to take a look, have you?”

“Well, no.”

“But you like to watch, eh? Nothing wrong with curiosity. And you’ve never got under my feet. I think I can trust you. But what I’m going to tell you is for you only, understand?”

“Yes.”

“If you tell anyone, I will kill you.”

John was shocked. It was threat he had never heard before, and spoken with such certainty that he knew it was true. “In fact,” the Professor continued, “I might have to kill you anyway. So, think carefully and say the right thing. My

work here is mine alone. Do you understand? I won't share it. It needs to stay secret. Understand?"

The Professor reached into another pocket and pulled out a different fob, which he pressed and John heard bolts on the front door slide into place. He felt his skin prickle as he drew away from the professor in fear, rushing to try the door which was, as he knew it would be, locked.

"You can't get out. So stop trying."

John stopped.

"Why have you got a rucksack on?"

"I was going to go camping with Scouts," John replied. "They'll be wondering where I am. Please let me go."

"They can wait. Now, do you want to know what I'm doing here, or not?"

Despite his fear, John's curiosity rose and he nodded.

The Professor smiled and tried to get up. "Give me a hand, will you?" John helped him onto a tall stool next to the workbench, then bent over to retrieve the fob with which he had caused the tentacle to fall off.

"What you have there is a dimensional key," the Professor pointed out. "It operates the door. When you pressed the button, that door there changed dimension. That's what caused the tentacle to be sliced off."

John simply stared at the fob. It had four buttons. The largest was green, and surrounding it were three others of blue, red and yellow.

Professor Bilman continued, "That door is a portal to a parallel, or alternative dimension. It is anchored to this spot in all dimensions. Do you understand?" John looked confused and shook his head.

"The world we are in here," the Professor explained, "is only one dimension. I believe that there are infinite other dimensions. Each one similar, but different, to our own. Some might be only slightly different. Perhaps the grass is blue. Or you are a girl. Others might be wildly different. The world might be volcanic. Or, as was the case in the one I was just visiting, populated by tentacled monsters. Do you understand?"

John said, "I think so."

Professor Bilman sighed at the slowness of the boy. "So, when I walk

through that door, I emerge in an alternative version of Bickering on Sea. I can look around and come back here.”

“That’s amazing,” John exclaimed.

“I know. It’s my life’s work.”

“So, you can go wherever you like in different dimensions?” John asked.

“Not quite. I can go to the other side of the door and back here, but I can’t aim it yet. It’s like that tentacle. I can reach out and touch somewhere, or somewhen. But if I let go, I can’t get back. I haven’t worked out how to do that yet.

“I thought I had today. I had visited a Bickering that is in the grip of an ice age and I thought I could get back there. I severed the connection and tried to reattach, only to come out in tentacle world. I nearly died. But the blue button clearly doesn’t work.”

“Pardon?”

“Each button is supposed to do something different. Green to go to a new dimension. Blue to go back to the last dimension. Red to turn off the door. Yellow to show you the number of the dimension in that little counter at the top of the fob there.

“Press the yellow one now. See? We are in dimension 0. That’s our starting dimension. The further away one travels, the higher, or lower the number, and the more different it will be. The ice dimension I wanted to get to is +453. The tentacled dimension is -5437467.”

“So why did you go there?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose, young John. I was expecting to return to reality +453. When I stepped out there was fluorescent green mud and huge beasts with tentacles. One of them knocked me over and I hit my head. I’m glad you were here when I came out. Thank you.”

“So there are different Bickering on Seas in different dimensions and they are all different? And they’re all linked to here?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” the Professor said irritably. “It seems that my invention of this gate means that there is a gate in every dimension. I think that it will appear in this exact spot in any dimension when one presses the green button. But, until I can aim the point of exit, I cannot test my theory.



“Right now, however, the green button seems to link randomly to a dimension. When I have finished, I will be able to travel to whichever one I want.”

John was impressed. It sounded like a story, but he was standing in a shiny, space-age shed talking to a genius professor who was recovering rapidly from his fall and the shock of the attack from the beast with tentacles.

“Why are you telling me all of this?” John asked.

“I’ve kept it to myself for so long. It’s good to tell someone. Not even Miriam knows all of it. Now you do. But, unfortunately, I cannot take the risk of your telling anyone else. Regretfully, I will have to kill you.”

Professor Bilman reached under the workbench and retrieved a small metal case. Laying it down, he opened it and took out a silver object that looked like a gun. He clipped a syringe into the gun and turned to look at the young man.

John was terrified. Backing away, he pleaded, “Please, don’t. I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

Professor Bilman stood up and staggered slightly. Gathering himself, he said, “I promise, it will be painless, John. You have to understand, my work is too important. I can’t let anyone know about it until it’s complete. I’m sorry. Truly.”

“What about my mum and dad? What about my body?”

“Your mum and dad will be sad, it’s true, but they’ll never find your body. I’ll simply put it into another dimension. They’ll think you disappeared camping. I’m sorry,” he said again as he walked towards the young man. Professor Bilman was much taller than John, but he was struggling with nausea.

“You’re not sorry!” John shouted. “Or you wouldn’t do it!”

Professor Bilman took hold of John’s shoulder and started to reach out with the syringe. John tried to wriggle free, but couldn’t break the iron grip. So he panicked and kicked Professor Richard Bilman right between the legs.

The professor doubled over in pain and John leaped away from his attacker. The young man still had the dimensional key in his hand and, looking at the professor who, even now, was recovering and had a look of real anger on his face, John knew he wouldn’t be able to get away. So, he took a deep breath,

and walked quickly through the rippling mercury of the dimensional portal.

He came out the other side to find himself in a green meadow, looking down on the unspoiled bay where Bickering on Sea had been built over centuries. Behind him, the dimensional portal door stood, completely alone in the centre of the landscape. There was no frame around it, it just seemed to be a pool of mercury rippling in the air.

It blinked out of existence...

\*\*\*