

# Transforming Pandora



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Transforming Pandora

In a dark time, the eye begins to see.  
Theodore Roethke



I dedicate this book to you, dear readers.  
May you be well.  
May you be happy.



## Chapter 1 – SPRING 2003

‘It’ll do you good,’ Margery said, as she dusted round me. ‘You can’t just lie there moping all day. You never know, you might hear something that’ll perk you up.’

‘It’s not really my sort of thing.’ I sniffed, wishing she’d go away and leave me in peace. I had no desire to witness anyone’s Uncle Arthur hailing them from the great beyond. I was quite bereaved enough without wallowing in other people’s misery, thank you very much.

Margery’s nose twitched. ‘For someone who’s got all them wotsname books—’ She nodded towards the bookcase.

‘Mind, Body and Spirit,’ I muttered.

‘—I would’ve thought an Evening of Clairvoyance would be just your cup of tea.’

‘I haven’t opened those books in ages,’ I said, feeling something approaching shame that I still had them. ‘Most of them came from my mother. She’s into all that.’

Margery shook her head and came closer, giving me a piercing look, just as my grandmother had when I was developing measles or some other infant inconvenience.

‘You still on them funny pills?’

She was referring to the medication I’d been prescribed for the fear that had gripped me when my husband had become ill. But once he’d died I needed to know where I really was on the grieving scale, so I’d flushed them all away.

‘No. And I might be sad but I’m not mad. At least not mad enough to believe that he’ll be popping back from beyond the grave for a chat.’

My tormenter thrust her duster into the pouch in her apron and sat down opposite me on Mike’s armchair. The lady was not for turning.

‘There’s no harm in it, you know. We sing a couple of hymns, the medium gives a little talk, then a demonstration.’ She leaned

forward, seeking to mesmerise me with her bulbous eyes. 'Come on. I was only saying to Bob the other day, you've hardly been out since the funeral.'

The thought of Mr and Mrs Grove discussing my every move induced a mild attack of paranoia, so I made my escape to the kitchen sink, with her following close on my heels, like a terrier.

'Thing is, my friend Joyce – who I usually go with – she's away at her sister's. So you'd be doing me a favour. It's only £4. Won't break the bank.'

'Okay Margery,' I sighed, knowing when I was beaten. 'But if I come with you, you've got to promise me something.'

'Course, love. What is it?'

'You've got to stop doing my cleaning. I'm perfectly capable of doing it myself.'

Seeing her face fall, I put my arm around her, clumsily patting her back, which was both plump and solid at the same time.

'I really appreciate it, Margery, but I can't let you do it any more—'

I paused, not sure how to continue. I knew why she'd been coming. It was displacement activity for what she really wanted to do.

'—I know how much you miss working at The Cedars.'

She rallied at this, sensing an opportunity.

'So do you think you'll be taking some bookings? Now that you're...on your own?'

That was a question that had been troubling me a lot recently. I'd suspended operations six months before Mike had died, which was when I'd laid her off. But since the funeral, Margery had been turning up unannounced at my cottage, brandishing her Brasso. At first I'd been glad of the company. And the Hoovering. But it couldn't go on, as I was in no position to pay a cleaner. Not with my reduced income, and The Cedars in need of a new roof.

She was waiting for an answer.

'I'm not sure whether I'll revive the business. In the meantime,

we'll leave it that Bob still does the gardening and I'll call on you if I do decide to reopen the house.'

Despite being in her late sixties, Margery looked more than a little piqued that her husband still had a job and she didn't.

She shrugged. 'Well I hope you make the right decision, for your sake. They always say new widders shouldn't do anything hasty. And you'll need something to occupy yourself, specially now he's gone...'

She was interrupted by Oscar cannoning through the dog flap, spattering the newly washed kitchen floor with soil from a flower bed he'd just excavated. Margery pursed her lips, grabbed her coat and bag, and made for the front door.

'I'll leave you to it, then. See you at seven. You don't mind picking me up do you?'

Oscar looked perplexed at her rapid departure, cocking his right ear appealingly. Blessed with good looks – his fur a silky pale grey, except for white paws and moustache – he'd grown used to people cooing over him, not retreating from him.

I bent and kissed his handsome head. 'Thank you, darling. I thought she'd never go.'

\* \* \*

So there I was, at Margery's insistence, perched on a hard wooden chair, bang in the front row of a musty old spiritualist chapel, devoid of the riches and ritual once familiar to a lapsed Catholic like me. She, eager to witness the communion of living and dead, and I, dreading being singled out for psychic attention. The last thing I wanted was to burst into tears in front of forty or so perfect strangers.

The room we occupied was the size of a small hall. At the further end stood a table covered with a white lace-edged cloth, too short to conceal its chipped legs. A plain, brass cross sat in the centre, flanked by a vase of tired flowers and a large candle in a glass container.

Facing this makeshift altar were ten rows of eight chairs, divided by an aisle. The wall behind the altar was scattered with pictures and posters, the rest of its surface displaying traces of Blu Tack and yellowing Sellotape. Among the pictures were some colourful, framed portraits of attractive subjects, bathed in light.

‘Who are those pictures of?’ I whispered to Margery.

‘A couple of them are angels and the others they call ascended masters. They’ve got funny names like Lord Khutumi and St Germain.’

She pointed to a portrait of a tall, blond, curly-haired youth in a white pleated robe, his muscular upper body surrounded by an aura of blue, white and gold contained within the upper curve of his wings. In his right hand he held aloft a shining sword.

‘That’s my favourite, Archangel Michael. They usually ask for his protection before a session. Course, I’m C of E really. Me and Joyce are more spectators, if you get my drift.’ She winked. ‘It makes a change from the telly.’

We’d already had the hymns, sung *a cappella* in the absence of an organ. Not recognising any of them, I’d just opened my mouth like a goldfish. The chapel chairwoman, who was overseeing this evening’s meeting, had then led us in the Lord’s Prayer, after which she’d introduced the medium, a man called Reg, who was almost as antiquated as the chapel. He’d been sitting behind a lectern, to the right of the table, and now rose to his feet and launched into his preamble.

‘Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. A few of you will know me already. I’d like to welcome anyone here for the first time.’ I deliberately lowered my eyes so he couldn’t read that I was one of those. ‘And, for your benefit, I’ll give you my little spiel and I’m sure our regulars will bear with me.’

He beamed at his fan base and they responded with knowing smiles.

‘So for those of you unfamiliar with the process of communicating with spirit, I am, to put it simply, a channel to the astral plane.’ He paused for effect. ‘But I don’t have any control over who comes

through, so if you've come here to contact somebody in particular, there's no guarantee they'll appear. Then again, Great Aunt Maud, who passed over before you were even born, very well might.'

There were some murmurs of agreement in the ranks. 'But,' he continued, rubbing his hands and beaming at us, 'with the help of my Cherokee spirit guide, Tooantuh, I'll do my best to transmit what comes through, in the hope that it will not only show evidence of life after death, but also give some guidance along the way.'

So saying, he bowed as far as his ancient joints would allow, and began slowly pacing from side to side, his right hand clutching his temple. His first targets were a middle-aged couple across the aisle from us, and he approached them, announcing, 'I've got a Ron here for you. Can you place that name?' They looked baffled, and he added, 'Or maybe it's Don. He's wearing a trilby hat and he's showing me a train. I can feel a pain in my leg.' But they shook their heads. Reg opened it up to the room, with no response.

After that he walked up and down the aisle throwing out names and giving descriptions of the dead persons who were making contact, but only getting an occasional reaction from the audience. While waiting for some spectral recognition to take place, I found myself fantasising about what these departed spirits might be able to communicate to the still-alive and kicking. Even if nobody recognised them, Reg could still ask them some searching questions. Could they explain crop circles, for example? The Bermuda Triangle? Or, on a more terrestrial note, provide the key to unsolved crimes. Like the identity of Jack the Ripper.

Reg paused beside a man and began to describe a red-haired girl who had died young, asking if he knew who she could be. The man said he didn't, but Reg continued anyway.

'This little girl. She's saying you've been having trouble with a battery of some kind?'

The man looked puzzled, until he remembered something. 'I had to get a new back light for my bike last week.'

Reg nodded. 'That's it. She's sending you a message to check

your inner tubes as well. She's fading now.' And on he moved up the rows.

I had an irresistible urge to laugh, but managed to control myself by concentrating on the picture of the delectable Archangel Michael. An explosive sneeze from Margery, however, brought me back to the medium's voice. He was telling a woman that her dead mother needed 'healing thoughts'.

I couldn't resist whispering to Margery, 'It's a bit late for healing thoughts now she's croaked. Is this as good as it gets?'

Margery smirked behind her hand. 'He's not having much luck, is he? Poor old devil. His mate Tooantuh's not adding up tonight...'

'Or maybe he's legged it back to the Happy Hunting Ground,' I giggled.

But almost before the words were out of my mouth, Reg's voice rang out from the back of the room.

'Tooantuh is bringing me Mike. I feel he's passed over recently.'

An old woman piped up, 'Is it my Spike?'

'It's Mike, dear, Mike,' Reg said, raising his eyes to heaven.

Margery elbowed me in the ribs. 'Put your hand up.'

'But it might not be *my* Mike,' I hissed back.

'Oh, don't be so daft,' she retorted and raised her own hand, whereupon Reg strode down the aisle and planted himself in front of us, a palpable look of relief on his face.

Margery swiftly presented Reg with the facts of the matter, either because she'd taken pity on him or because she was getting bored.

'Her husband's name was Mike. He died of a heart attack three weeks ago.'

Reg's beady eyes lit up. I could see what he was thinking. This could be his chance of salvaging the evening and keeping his reputation intact. As they say in football – you're only as good as your last game.

'...As I said, passed over recently,' he intoned. 'Yes. He's saying it was a shock.'

I nodded, to encourage him to go on. Although actually it hadn't



been such a shock. He'd had his first attack a few months before.

'May I ask your name?' said Reg, addressing me.

I hesitated because I hated answering that question. People usually said something like, 'You don't look like a...'

'Pandora,' I answered, and someone in the room sniggered.

Reg cocked his head as if straining to hear. 'That's not the name I'm getting. Did he call you something else? Something like Sandy?'

My spine started to tingle slightly, all the way up to my neck.

'He called me Suzy.'

Reg touched his forehead and looked into the middle distance. 'That's right. He's saying that's what he preferred to call you. I'm getting a picture of you and him with your children.'

He glanced at me enquiringly, expecting confirmation, but, without thinking, I gave my stock reply: 'I haven't got any children.'

Bemused, Reg began tapping his forehead for further inspiration. It was at that point that the chairwoman pointed to her watch and raised an outspread hand to signify that he had five minutes left. As a result, Reg decided to quit while he was, just about, ahead.

'He sends you his love, my dear. He says he didn't suffer and he's always with you.'

And then he moved on to a woman the other side of the aisle and began describing her dog. It was too late to call him back, but I was kicking myself for not answering yes to his last question, because although I didn't have any offspring, Mike did. I felt a nudge.

'He got the name thing right, didn't he?' whispered Margery.

'Not really,' I protested.

'Well, as near as makes no difference. And he gave you a nice message. I told you it'd be worth coming.'

I smiled weakly, and dug my nails into the palms of my hands as all my grief at losing Mike flooded back. Coming here had made me feel worse, but I couldn't tell Margery that. She was enjoying herself too much.

Becoming aware of Reg talking to a giant poodle called Spike, I started to worry about Oscar being on his own, especially as he was

missing Mike so much himself. I had an overwhelming desire to get out of the place and race home, but I couldn't because of Margery and her lift.

While this was running through my head, I heard the chair-woman announcing that this reading would have to be Reg's last. Spike's owner was now sobbing and being comforted by her friend, so it was with obvious relief that Reg returned to the lectern. He was just reaching the end of his valedictory speech, however, when he stopped dead, pointed towards us and declared, 'Hold on. We haven't quite finished yet.'

Margery and I regarded each other, unsure who was being addressed. To my embarrassment he announced, in a sepulchral voice, 'Pandora. I have a High One here, whom you have called in. He says contact between you is not possible yet, but if you meditate every day, your vibration will rise and you will eventually be able to connect with him.'

Reg paused, scanning my features for a sign of comprehension. But I sat immobile, still taking it in. So he continued, 'He says try to bring to mind your previous practice. Do you remember how to meditate?'

My brain creaked into life again, enough to remind me of an attempt I'd made years earlier.

'Yes. But...'

'Good,' said Reg, then slumped down in his chair, mopping his brow.

'That was powerful,' he puffed, as he swallowed half a glass of water.

I stood up, with the intention of approaching him for more details. Sensing this, Margery took my arm, gesturing towards the chairwoman who was rattling her keys.

'She gives him a lift home, so I wouldn't hold him up with questions if I was you.'

As we made our way out of the building with the rest of the congregation, it dawned on me that my message – to me so mysti-

fyng and portentous – to them would probably have seemed par for the course. Margery's words confirmed it.

'I shouldn't worry too much about that last bit, dear,' she said, in the tones of an old hand at the game. 'If the evening hasn't gone so well, they often do something like that at the end. For effect. You know, a bit of a show so's people won't be disappointed.'

After dropping her off, I put my foot down and got home in record time. As I pulled into the drive, passing The Cedars and turning right on to the small road leading to my cottage, I wondered if what Reg had said really had been all hot air – something to impress the punters so the evening ended on a high note.

I let myself in, expecting Oscar's usual exuberant greeting, but there was no sign of him. I eventually found him upstairs, on my bed. He'd only started doing this since Mike had died – maybe there was still a trace of Mike's scent in the room. He raised his head when he saw me and looked mournful, but wagged his tail weakly and followed me down to the kitchen where I made some tea for both of us.

Later, as I lay in bed, I went over the evening in my mind. Had Mike really communicated with Reg? If so, why hadn't he chosen to talk about something more meaningful than my name? Maybe it was my fault for stalling at the word 'children'. If I'd kept quiet, Mike might have dropped some pearls of wisdom from the astral plane. Like how I could go on living without him.

I had a little weep on my pillow and considered what else Reg had said about Mike. I wasn't too happy with the promise that he was always with me. Not in the bathroom, surely?

As if in response to this thought, an image of Mike's amused blue eyes popped into my head. There was a certain expression he would wear when he thought a situation or person was ridiculous, usually accompanied by a pithy comment. I could almost hear him say, 'Don't forget to check your inner tubes, Suze.'

My heart seemed to squeeze in on itself, it missed him so much. I closed my eyes and flicked back through my internal photo album, to the very first print of him.

## Chapter 2 – SPRING 1970

Mike and I first set eyes on each other at the Green Oak Rhythm and Blues Club, held in a hall attached to a pub called The Woodman's Arms. My friend Cecilia and I had been planning to go to the Mecca Palais, where the DJ played records with a good beat – easier to dance to than some of the music at the Green Oak. But it had one drawback. The other girls tended to have jobs, whereas we were still at school doing A-levels. Our experience in the past had been that the boys who patronised the Palais thought themselves too cool for schoolgirls.

The Palais was aptly named, as it was truly palatial. An impressive revolving stage dwarfed the DJ on the nights when no live bands played. The dance floor was vast, and surrounded on three sides by gold-legged burgundy velvet chairs and glass-topped tables. At the back of the ballroom was a sweeping staircase which led to a wonderful powder room, with rows of mirrors where we could back-comb our hair and freshen up our eyeliner and pale pink lipstick to our hearts' content.

In contrast, the Green Oak R & B club was as basic as could be, with plain stackable chairs along the walls, dingy wood-panelling and bleak toilets. It too, had a stage, but this one was framed by cheap cotton curtains, usually closed on weekdays, their grand opening being reserved for the bigger groups who played at the weekends.

The acts tended to set up on ground level in the week, so they were flanked by the crowd, who either stood tapping their feet on the wooden boards or danced in couples to the music. The club owner had laid a curve of carpet in the corner, to the right of the stage, to mark the musicians' territory. As the evening progressed, the foot tappers were displaced by the dancers. But since it moved them nearer to the bar, they didn't seem to mind.

The Green Oak may have been shabby, but it was in a more salubrious neighbourhood than the Palais. The admission was

cheaper as well, which was why we finally decided on the Green Oak. We had just enough money for the entrance fee, bus fare and one drink – Cecilia because she earned a bit babysitting her younger sisters, and me courtesy of my Saturday job at Roy's Fashions.

We were in the final weeks of our seven long years at St Thérèse de Lisieux Convent High School for Girls. Cecilia's sights were set on teaching, while I was desperate to go to work, so I could afford to extend my meagre wardrobe of two tops and two miniskirts – even though, as Cecilia the mathematician pointed out, that did make up four outfits.

Cecilia, who preferred to be called Cece – as in two letter Cs (or yes-yes in Spanish) was always kitted out in new gear because her mother was a dressmaker and would use up spare bits of material to make her skirts and dresses. They were about the same size, and Cece even wore some of her mother's stuff occasionally.

There was no danger of me borrowing my mother's clothes, because she was no longer around – having failed to come home from a music festival the summer before. But even if the contents of her wardrobe had been available, I wasn't really into the flower power look. Anyway, she was a pocket Venus whereas I was more Olive Oyl – skinny with big feet.

\* \* \*

So we were standing in the Green Oak, this Wednesday night, trying to get into the groove with James Jay and the Blue Jays, at the same time avoiding eye contact with anyone we didn't fancy in case they asked us to dance, when I felt a tap on the shoulder.

'Excuse me. Do you mind if I ask you a question?'

A gap-toothed smile scanned both of us. Its owner was tall and gangly with unusually blond hair, giving him the appearance of an attenuated cherub. Sensing that there was a punch line looming, I assumed my sardonic face, which involved focusing on the end of my nose.

‘What?’

‘Are you wearing a wig?’

At which point he leaned towards me and gave my long dark hair a sharp tug, to the raucous amusement of three boys standing a few feet away. I noticed he didn’t so much as tweak Cece’s chestnut pageboy.

‘Course I am,’ I retorted, gathering up my hair as if to pull it from my scalp. ‘It’s my Cleopatra wig.’

The blond boy grinned from ear to ear, but before he could say anything, one of the others spoke.

‘Don’t take any notice of Ray. He’s being a prat.’

The speaker was standing quite close to me and he added softly, ‘You’ve got lovely hair...’ but trailed off when he realised his friends had moved closer and were listening in. I responded to his compliment by waggling my head and touching my hair like a model in a shampoo advert and we both laughed.

Ray looked a bit miffed at this and turned his attention to Cece, who I could tell was more than pleased, from the way she was widening her eyes and pushing her shoulders back to display her sizeable bust to its best advantage.

The boy who’d spoken to me was shorter and beefier than Ray. He was wearing jeans, a checked shirt and a brown suede jacket – a bit like a cowboy. He had piercing blue eyes which held an expression of interest. He wasn’t trying to disguise it, either. As for me, I liked what I saw too.

‘I’m Mike. What’s your name?’

‘Ann.’ I didn’t want to say what it really was.

He asked us if we’d like a drink and while he was at the bar getting our Cinzano and lemonades, Ray and the other two, a boy called Brian and his brother Rick, told us how they’d been having a bet to see whether I was wearing a wig. This is not as bizarre as it sounds – it was the fashion to wear wigs and hairpieces in those days.

‘Who won?’ I enquired.

'Mike. He was the only one who said it was natural.'

'He must have been having a good look, then,' chimed in Cece.

'How much did he win?' I asked.

Brian and Rick smiled slyly at each other.

'He won you.'

Cece gave me a meaningful glance and opened her mouth to speak, but I shook my head slightly, as he was approaching with our drinks.

The boys clustered round, including us in their group. It turned out they were members of a cycling club and their conversation largely consisted of drinking and cycling stories, shamelessly exaggerating quantities and distances in view of there being girls present. They were good company and at ease with each other and with us.

We had to leave by 10.30 to be in before the 11.15 curfew our parents had imposed, and when we left, Cece and Ray had already fixed up a date for Saturday. But Mike had just squeezed my hand and whispered, 'See you next Wednesday? I'll be here.'

On the bus home, Cece was highly excited about seeing Ray again.

'I can't wait for the weekend. What about Mike? Are you seeing him?'

Upset that he hadn't made a proper date or asked for my telephone number, but having too much pride to admit it, I just said, 'No. But he said something about being there next week.'

Cece looked surprised. 'You looked as if you were really getting on. Are you disappointed?'

The answer was yes on both counts, but I decided not to tell her that in case she told Ray. I knew in my bones that Mike fancied me, so why hadn't he made a date? Maybe he was too cool to go out with a schoolgirl, even though I was eighteen. Anyway, if he was in the process of making up his mind, it was better for me not to blow too hot. One thing I did know was that the male of the species would rather chase than be chased.

Trying to sound detached, I said, 'Maybe I'll see him there again,' and left it at that.

\* \* \*

I couldn't wait for Monday morning to find out how Cece's date with Ray had gone, because I'd been hoping that Mike had asked for my phone number. She looked tired but happy. She said the weekend had been great. Ray was great. Everyone she'd met was great.

They'd gone to a party, at the house of someone called Phil, where there were loads of boys from the cycling club. His parents were away and apparently all the lads with girlfriends had been trying to take advantage of the – um – shall we say, bedroom facilities. Cece went into detail about the cut and thrust of her romantic skirmishes with Ray. More cut than thrust – we were good Catholic girls still at that point.

There being only one partygoer I was remotely interested in, I finally exploited one of her rare pauses.

'Was Mike there?' And, as an afterthought, 'And Brian and Rick?'

'Yes, they were all there. Brian and Rick were both chatting up the same girl but she wasn't interested, so they went for a curry. A few of us went with them. My parents went mad at me for being late, but Ray came round on Sunday and they liked him, so it's all right.'

I couldn't have given a tinker's cuss whether Mr and Mrs Byrne had turned double cartwheels at Ray's arrival, killed a fatted calf or danced naked on the red carpet. I had to know.

'Did Mike go with you?'

'No, he'd already left.' She paused, '...With his girlfriend. They're getting engaged. She was telling me they've been going out for two years—'

That's when my heart froze and I was transported back to the day last year when my dad told me my mother wasn't coming home. It was as if all the good had been sucked out of everything and life had turned a miserable grey.



‘—She’s a hairdresser and she’s quite pretty. Small with long, blonde hair.’

In my relatively short life I’d had quite a lot of practice faking unconcern but I wasn’t sure I was up to it this time.

‘Are they all lovey-dovey?’ I gulped, trying to keep the misery out of my voice.

By now some atavistic instinct had alerted Cece’s antennae. It was dawning on her that I wasn’t quite as interested in her love story as I should have been, and she had no compunction in quashing any hope I had.

‘Not really. But she knows all the other girls and I heard her talking about Mike’s mother. She’s a widow and she gets on really well with her. Goes round and does her hair.’ Cece must have taken pity on me then because she added, gently, ‘I suppose that’s why he didn’t make a date with you.’

My heart was still encased in ice but my brain had begun to unfreeze enough to examine this revelation. He might have a girlfriend, but I was sure the attraction between us had been as genuine on his side as it was on mine. And I certainly hadn’t imagined the way he’d stood next to me all the time we were in the Green Oak. Like a centurion, protecting me from unwanted attention.

Cece continued. ‘Your name *was* mentioned, though.’

I caught my breath. ‘Who by?’

‘Well Ray was telling some of the others how he really thought your hair was a wig and he’d pulled it. And I said, “Pandora didn’t mind,” and Mike said, “Who?” and I said, “Pandora”, and he said, “I thought her name was Ann”. Then I said, “That’s what she tells people because otherwise they think she’s posh.” And then he looked annoyed and...’

She broke off, looking unsure whether to continue.

‘And what?’ I demanded.

‘Oh, something about you being lady muck.’

A wave of humiliation flooded my veins and I felt my cheeks

blaze.

‘Oh flippin’ heck.’

‘So then he took his girlfriend home. She wanted to stay but he said he was tired.’

\* \* \*

Cece was my best friend but when it comes to boys, teenage girls can lose all sense of loyalty, you know what I mean? And now she had a proper boyfriend, she was relishing her superior position. In the days and weeks that followed, she’d occasionally feed me morsels of gossip about seeing Mike at this party, or that restaurant – Indian or Chinese and always lateish in the evening after the pubs had closed. Sometimes he was with the boys and sometimes with his girlfriend, who was called Val.

When I finally saw Mike again it wasn’t in the Green Oak – I hadn’t ventured back there since Cece and Ray had been dating. So I hadn’t seen him at all, until I bumped into him outside Campbell’s grocery store one afternoon on my way home from school. He was carrying a tray full of canned goods, which he dropped when he saw me. We both stared at each other in deep, blushing embarrassment. Him in his crumpled white delivery outfit and me in my school uniform. Cece had told me he had some sort of driving job, but I had no idea it would bring him so close to home.

‘How you doing?’ he mumbled.

‘All right,’ I said, wishing I could think of something fascinating to say. Something that would make him want to go out with me. And ditch his girlfriend. (What did I say about teenage girls?)

To cover our embarrassment, we both began frantically rescuing fifty-seven varieties of canned soup from the pavement.

‘Haven’t seen you at the Green Oak lately,’ he said, his tone veering towards reproachful.

I had toyed with the idea of asking Anna, one of the girls from school, to go with me, but the memory of what he’d said to Cece had

put me off.

‘I haven’t been for ages,’ I answered. ‘Not since we met you...and the others.’

Our hands brushed as we piled the cans into the delivery tray. His blue eyes were level with my green ones and he held my gaze.

‘Why not?’

‘Because Cece told me you called me lady muck.’ My voice dipped at the last two words, I disliked that expression so much, but I wanted him to know it had hurt me.

He looked uncomfortable. ‘Well why didn’t you tell me your real name?’

My voice got higher without my wanting it to. ‘Because people usually laugh and make jokes.’

Like the boys at junior school who’d christened me Pansy Potter. Or, worst of all, frying-pan. Had my mother had such a deficiency of imagination that she was unable to work out how my first name would combine with my surname, Fry? It was almost as bad as Eileen Dover.

His eyes had softened in sympathy. ‘It’s not that bad.’

‘I hate it. My mum named me after some film she saw when she was pregnant, *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*.’

‘Could have been worse,’ he grinned. ‘It could have been *Lassie*.’

This failed to amuse me. And coupled with the fact that mentioning my mother had triggered a great surge of missing her, my eyes misted up with tears. He began to look worried.

‘What do your friends call you?’

‘Pan.’

We’d returned all the cans to the tray and Mike lifted it easily off the pavement. He was strong and healthy and good-looking. And I didn’t mind a bit that he was a delivery man, which surprised me somewhat.

‘Where do you live?’ he asked.

‘Just around the corner. Nightingale Road.’

At that moment Mr Campbell appeared in a flurry, to see why his

delivery was taking so long. Mr Campbell knew my father, so I didn't hang around.

I waved goodbye to Mike, leaving him red-faced and irritated at this interruption. I almost skipped home, my longing to have my mother back being rapidly replaced by a yearning to see Mike again.

I was sure he was still interested, but I kept telling myself to let him do the chasing. After all, he could contact me via Cece if he really wanted to.