

George Fowler opens the front door. A broad smile ripples across his face under his Chevron moustache, revealing a fine set of glistening incisors. Surprising for a man of his age with a passion for Cuban cigars.

'Lucy, how lovely to see you.'

'Hello, George.' I respond warmly. 'It's good to see you too.'

I make sure all traces of grime on the soles of my shoes are left on the substantial coir matting doormat before stepping over the threshold onto the recently laid New Zealand wool carpet. The memory of Basil tramping dog poo onto its Axminster predecessor is still fresh in everybody's minds.

The grandfather clock chimes. I have arrived at exactly 7.00p.m. Edna would like us to come at 6.50p.m. She is always there to open the door, so we can start promptly at 7.00p.m.

'Oh dear, I'm a little bit late, I'm afraid. All trains in and out of Waterloo were delayed today. Maintenance on the line... I've come straight from the station.' George chuckles as he helps me take off my coat and a whiff of cigars disappears up my nose.

'There's no need to apologise, Lucy dear. It's par for the course when one works in London. The others have only just sat down.'

George is always upbeat on a Thursday. I imagine he enjoys a few hours to himself drinking a glass, or two, of his favourite Scotch and puffing on a Cohiba cigar. I can see a decanter, a cut-glass tumbler and a large glass ashtray perched on a small table next to his red leather chair in the snug.

'Go on through.' He says, extending his arm in the direction of the dining room.

I walk in and shut the door behind me. Edna, at the head of the table, is leaning forward. She lifts her ample bosom with her right forearm before resting the pendulous orbs on the edge of the rosewood dining room table as she pulls in her chair.

'I'm so sorry I'm late, Edna. Good evening, everybody.'

'Ah, Lucy, dear. There you are. Don't worry. My spies told me there had been a few disruptions on the Waterloo line today.' The others look up, mouthing words of welcome. 'Sit, sit!' Edna pats the upholstered Rococo dining chair next to hers, and I sit down.

Edna rubs out a few ripples in the Cleethorpes check waterproof tablecloth using both hands. Since Barbara spilt her Himalayan Monkey tea across the table's shimmering surface, it's been used for our weekly meetings. The spillage could have been much worse had Beryl not come straight from the Lido. Saving the day and the Axminster by whipping out her swimming towel to mop it up. Barbara felt so bad about it she bought Edna the easy-care, wipe-clean vinyl Cleethorpes check tablecloth as a present. Edna graciously accepted the gift and agreed to carry on hosting our weekly get-togethers. After Basil put his foot in it and the ensuing £3000 insurance claim, the trivial tea incident paled into submission. We were all amazed when Edna declared she was still prepared to continue hosting our Didsbrook Authors and Writers Group meetings after the new wool carpet had been laid.

Edna Fowler's work-in-progress is contained in three lever arch files. Emblazoned down the spine of each bulging green binder are the words *Dulcie Darling and the Wizard's Caldron* by *E. D. Fowling* and individually marked *Volumes 1, 2 and 3*. Edna is convinced she is Didsbrook's answer to J. K. Rowling, hence the somewhat suspect non-de-plume. She believes a pen name will be essential after Dulcie's exploits are published; otherwise, her privacy will be exposed.

After finishing the fifth rewrite, she collared me in Hargreaves, Didsbrook's old-fashioned purveyor of meat. An orderly queue of customers had formed, spilling out of the door and onto the pavement. Didsbrookians prefer to pay twice as much to watch Mr Hargreaves hack off their chosen Sunday joint with his cleaver and give the hermetically sealed equivalent from the supermarket down the road the cold shoulder. Edna's loud, booming voice ricocheted around Mr Hargreaves' tiny shop with its sawdust-covered wooden flooring, amplifying her theatrical tones.

'Of course, once my book is reviewed, and no doubt you will be reviewing it too, won't you, Lucy, dear?' I manage a feeble smile and nod. 'It will be all over the press, the Internet and everywhere else. I'll have fans turning up on the doorstep asking for autographs every five minutes and, although I appreciate attracting thousands of fans to Didsbrook, would do wonders for the local economy, as I am sure Mr Hargreaves would agree.' She paused to look

at Mr Hargreaves, who smiled vacantly, then bore his cleaver down onto an inert carcass as Edna continued. 'I know they would mean well, but they would take up far too much of my time whilst I'm writing the sequel.' Us aspiring writers need to keep the faith, and I wish mine was as strong as Edna's.

She spans both hands against the Cleethorpes check.

'Welcome, everybody. I trust we've all been scribbling away feverously for the last seven days? I've never stopped. Talk about a purple patch. My fingers are on fire, and my memory sticks are about to explode, but the words just keep flowing!' She laughs, her voluptuous breasts wobbling in sync.

Edna loves a good smattering of her own wit and banter. I flash her one of my very best smiles. Despite everything, our age gap and her unwavering self-belief that she is about to join the ranks of world-renown authors, I am very fond of her. Every inch of her reminds me of *Patricia Routledge's Hyacinth Bucket*. Edna's work-in-progress and future bestseller is about a fourteen-year-old busybody. But, no, wash my mouth out with soap. Dulcie Darling is a meddlesome teenager who is blessed with magical powers. Her wizardry was inherited from her mother, who mistakenly ate magic mushrooms when pregnant. Week by week, we are enchanted by Edna's jaunty readings of the 'away with the fairies' Dulcie as she magically extracts herself from farcical situations.

'Now everybody, let's get started. What have you all brought along to read to us today? Basil, let's start with you.' I sense a degree of venom still lingers in Edna's tone. She might have erased the Himalayan Monkey tea spillage from her mind, but eradicating the memory of the Axminster fouling will take a little longer, now poor Basil has committed a further crime.

Basil Bowater is a prolific author; his journals on various species of *Insecta* have been translated into several languages. But, last week, the unassuming Basil committed his deadliest crime. Far worse than the dog poo tramping, he dropped off whilst Edna read an extract from the fifteenth rewrite of Dulcie Darling and the Wizard's Caldron. He could have been listening intently with his eyes closed, but when he started to snore, his crime was exposed.

I am almost Dulcie Darling word perfect, so I wasn't listening either - I was thinking about the piece I needed to write for the Didsbrook Echo, and the deadline was only twenty-four hours away. So I would need to churn it out somewhere between going to bed and catching the 7.30a.m. to Waterloo when my thoughts were bought back to the room a loud, strangled cry.

'Basil Bowater! How dare you go to sleep during a reading! It's outrageous. Not to mention, downright rude!' We all sat to attention around the table, sending understanding vibes to the very red-faced Basil as he grovelingly apologised for his disrespectful behaviour.

We are all so pathetic when it comes to providing Edna with a candid critique. Edna never holds back when it comes to giving feedback to the rest of us. So many of us would-be writers have such brittle egos, we don't take criticism well, and maybe we all sense it would be the end of the Didsbrook Writer's Group if we were brutally honest.

After Edna read us the chapter about Dulcie's remarkable escape from Holloway prison and asked for feedback, we were all rendered speechless. I pointed out that Holloway was demolished in 2016, so I wondered how many young teens would have heard of it. But Edna was quick to retaliate in defence of her plot. We were told that all these places added educational value to the intrigue.

'I thought I would read a few paragraphs on the beautiful Coccinellidae.' Muttered Basil.

'Ladybirds? Good, good.' Edna swiftly continues with her round the table interrogation. 'And you, Tom? Are we going to hear more about your father's World War II exploits?'

Tom Shuttlewood is the only other man in our group. He is writing a novel loosely based on his father's seat-of-his-pants missions in his Spitfire during World War II. I once asked if his father had ever considered writing it as a memoir, but I got shot down in flames. I think Tom sees himself on the same shelf as Ken Follett.

I am, by far, the youngest member of the Didsbrook Authors and Writers Group, better known as DAWG, so I try to mind my P's and Q's. My mother knew Edna through the Didsbrook Amateur Dramatics Society, affectionately known as DADS and told Edna she had a daughter who *wrote a bit*, so I was asked to join the group about a year ago. I was very

flattered to be asked and readily accepted. I only found out afterwards that the doyen of the Didsbrook Writer's Group and someone I greatly admired, the multi-published Jocelyn Robertshaw, had just dropped off her perch. Jocelyn's death was a real blow to the community, and it was such a privilege for me to be asked to write her Obituary. Edna, without any hesitation, heaved herself into the role of official Group Coordinator, and I was wheeled in to make up the numbers.

Including Edna, there are eight of us. Daphne Mortimer has published ten novels to date, and I have read every one. Jocelyn initially invited her to join the group to share her experiences of the long and lonely road to getting published.

Now Edna is in charge of the group; she is so obsessed with getting *Dulcie Darling* into print that Daphne doesn't get much say about anything, apart from reading snippets from her excellent work-in-progress.

Then there is Barbara, spiller of tea and our local badger enthusiast, who is compiling her life's work with British badgers. I imagine her being one of Didsbrook's few hippies, or possibly the only hippy, back in the day. Now 65, with multi-coloured hair extensions, she makes me feel I have become a little too staid before my time. Barbara spends most nights in a sleeping bag close to badger setts around the country. Her husband left her last year. After thirty years of married badger-bliss, he abandoned her for a younger model. After my mother described him as a complete and utter shit, even she thought it was funny that the other woman was Didsbrook's hedgehog champion. I imagine Barbara slipping home after our meetings and smoking a joint. Something I find very appealing but, as I still live at home with my mother, the likelihood of getting spaced out ever, let alone once a week, is highly unlikely as she gets a whiff of most things within a hundred-yard radius.

I had plans to live in London after I graduated, but I decided to move back home for a while and try to save some money.

Charlotte looks a little like Edna in stature but is nearer my age. She has very red cheeks, especially after she has read to us. I don't know why she gets so nervous. Charlotte writes very well. Although she has nothing specific on the go at the moment, apart from her unexpurgated tales of living with her Tibetan Mastiff, Rocco, I am sure she will.

I like Beryl too, she is always upbeat, and we go way back. She teaches PE at Didsbrook's secondary school, including me, for seven years. I thought she was a bit long in the tooth for the job then, but she was probably only fifty-something. She would send us out for a five-mile run up the A59 and follow us in her topless MG shouting words of encouragement. Beryl is due to retire at the end of next term and is working on a novel. From the rather steamy pieces she has been reading to us, she could well be Didsbrook's answer to E. L. James. She captures everybody's attention when she reads, especially Basil and Tom, who are as animated as we ever see them. I can't help wondering if Beryl is drawing from her own experiences. If she is, I really do need to get a life.

I love my job with the magazine Review UK. I review what's on in London and new books in my own name, but I also have a pseudonym. Jane Jones. My self-rechristening came about after The Didsbrook Echo asked me to cover events within the community, including my mother's debut as a producer for the DADS performance of Les Miserables. When my mother told me their next production was going to be Les Mis, I said I thought it might be a bit ambitious for DADS, given that the average age of their membership is fifty. So it was Jane Jones who slated her production of Les Miserables at the Didsbrook Arts Centre. Fortunately, my mother dismissed Jane Jones's savage review as part of the highs and lows of being creative.

'It's a shame you didn't have a chance to review it before that wretched Jane Jones woman got in on the act,' my mother said over breakfast one morning. Her loyalty knows no bounds. She believes that Jane Jones could learn from someone as discerning and erudite as herself, a Roehampton Creative Writing and Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies graduate, with honours.

Since then, hiding behind my pseudonym when reviewing the work of people I care about that lacks a little substance has proved a godsend. Apart from my co-conspirator, the editor of the *Didsbrook Echo*, nobody knows who the hard-nosed Jane Jones is, including my fellow writer's group members.

Edna may well conjure up a publishing deal in a world of wizards, but I won't need to read it to review it because it's been read to us so many times during our group meetings. I pride myself on writing honest reviews, which means that Jane Jones will be credited for

bursting Edna's bubble when she writes the review of Dulcie Darling and the Wizard's Caldron, and I won't have to leave the country. 'Lucy?'

'Um, yes, Edna.'

'It looked like you'd drifted off for a minute there, dear. What have you bought to read to us tonight?'

'Well, I thought I would read a piece from my novel.'

'Novel?' Edna is surprised. 'That is exciting, dear. I'm so glad to hear you're being inspired by our weekly meetings.' Everybody murmurs in agreement. 'When did you start writing it?'

'Three years ago actually, just after I finished Uni, and I'm really close to finishing it now.'

'Gosh, well done you, Lucy! You're a dark horse, though; you never told us you were writing a novel.' Daphne is always enthusiastic, and her comment is met by more mutual murmurings. 'What's it about?'

Clearing my throat, I announce with a degree of pride that it is a romantic drama about two people who have both known the pain of loss and the sting of betrayal and are thrown together under challenging circumstances.' My voice cracks a little; it's been a rocky ride.

'What a novel idea, dear.' Edna interjects, chuckling at her own joke.

'That is *so* exciting!' Daphne chips in again. 'I would love to read it and would be happy to give you all the help I can. Perhaps we can meet for a coffee sometime?'

'That would be great, Daphne. I would find that really helpful. Thank you.'

'It will be interesting to see which of one of us DAWGs will get published next,' Daphne not only writes brilliantly, but she also has a very generous heart.

'Well, we'll be all ears, Lucy dear, when it is your turn to read,' Edna interrupts. 'Please try to keep all your readings down to around 500 words, everybody or, by the time we get

round to Lucy, it will be time for you all to go home. Now... let's not waste any more time. I thought I would kick things off tonight and read you the final chapter of Dulcie Darling and the Wizards Caldron. I, too, am very excited that I'm nearing the end.' I think we all are very excited that Dulcie's devilment is about to reach an explosive climax.

'Call me!' Daphne mouths across the table, and I nod enthusiastically as a telepathic sigh passes between The Didsbrook Seven as Edna clears her throat and starts reading in her DADS voice. I sit back in my chair with my eyes closed, ready to recite Dulcie's exploits in my head in tandem with Edna as Basil whispers in my ear.

'I would be extremely grateful if you could give my foot a good hard kick, Lucy, dear, if I show any signs of drifting off. I really don't want to incur the wrath of Dulcie Darling's creator for the third time.'