

TURKEY AND TANTRUMS

CHRISTMAS DAY MENU

Prawn cocktail

Turkey

Bacon

Thick gravy

Organic sausagemeat stuffing

Sage and onion stuffing

Roast potatoes

Roast sweet potatoes

Boiled potatoes

Yorkshire pudding

Garden peas, Carrots, Broccoli

Cauliflower, Sprouts, Parsnips

Leeks

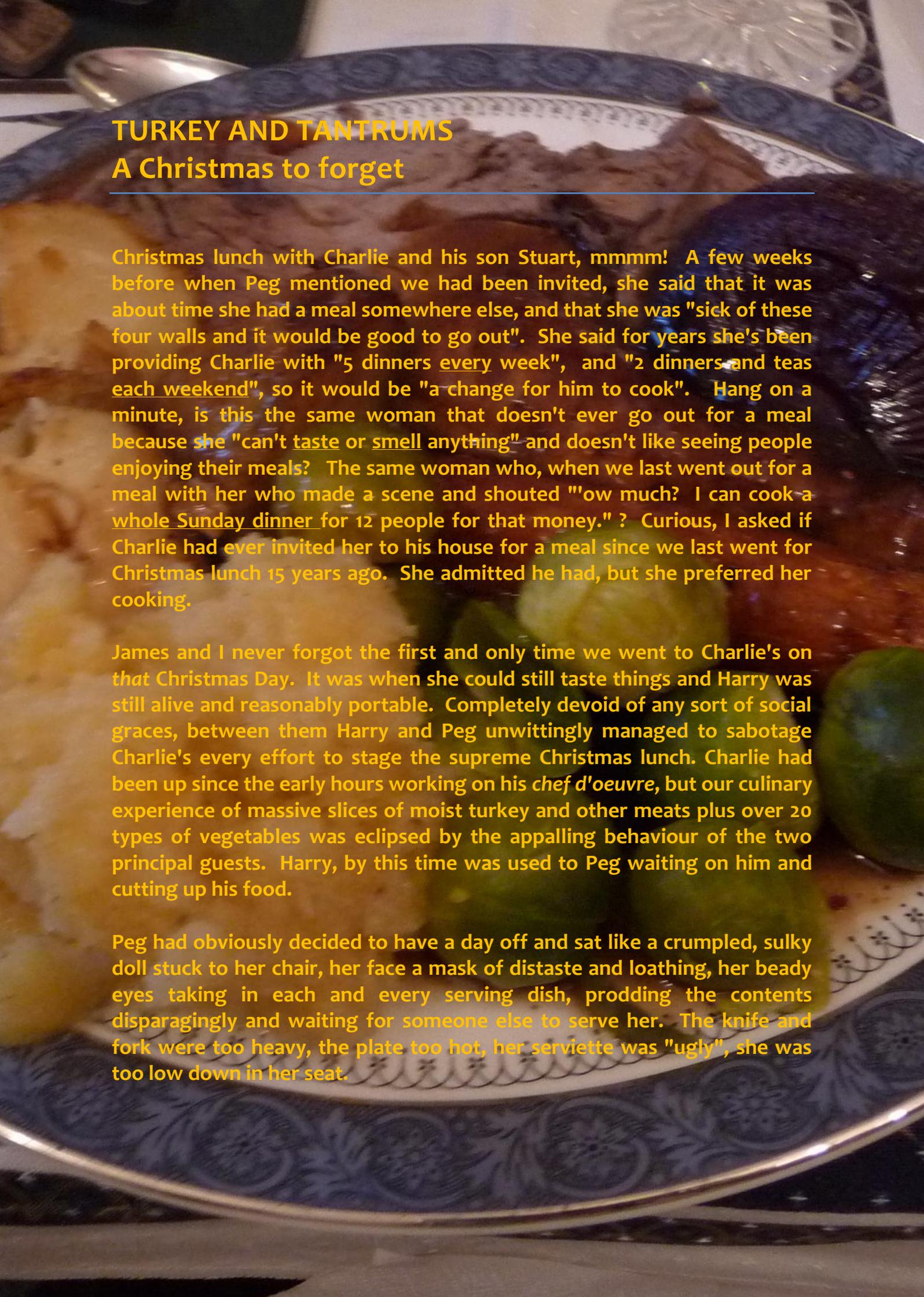
Christmas pudding

Brandy sauce

Runny cream

A cup of tea

A Christmas to forget



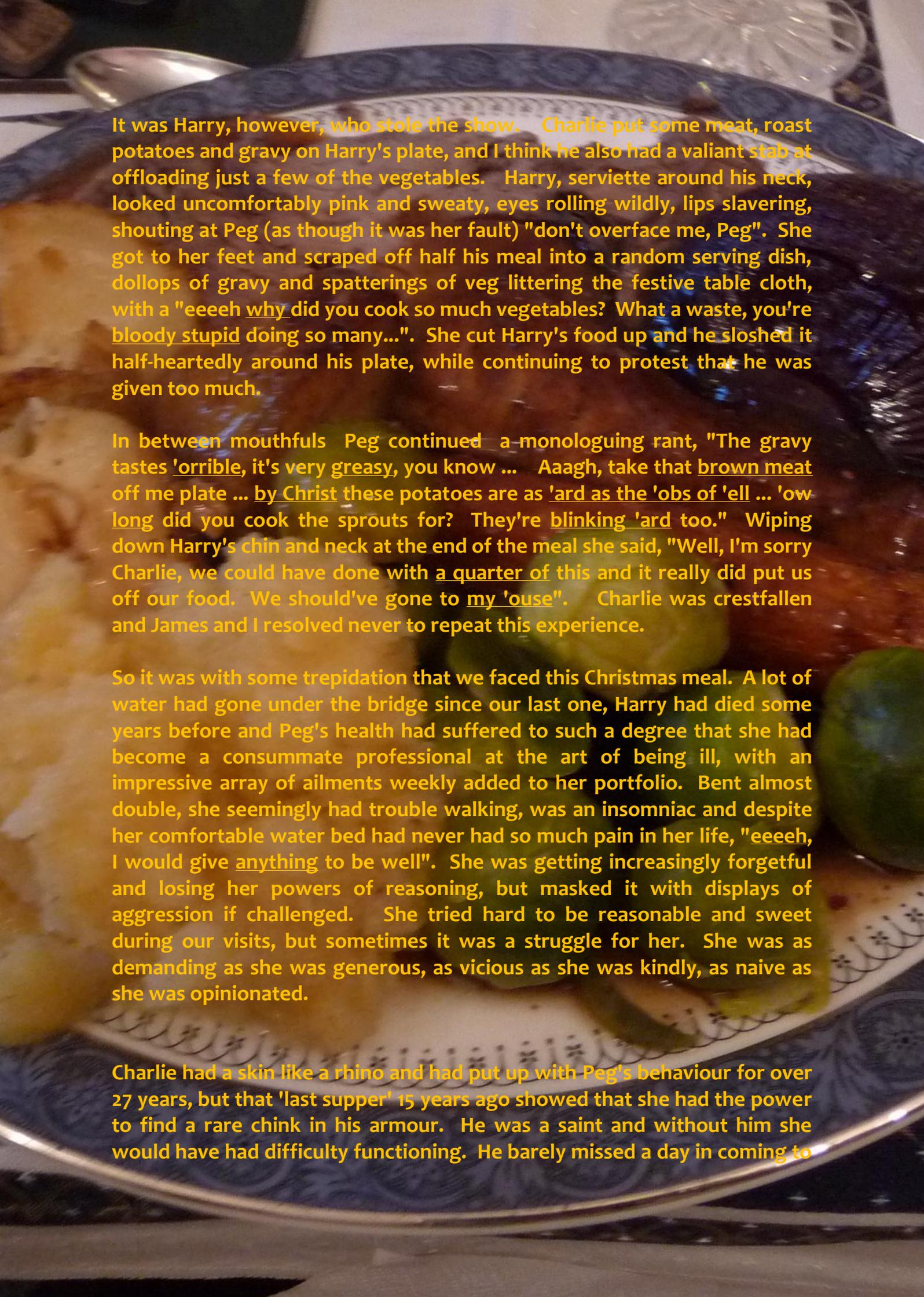
TURKEY AND TANTRUMS

A Christmas to forget

Christmas lunch with Charlie and his son Stuart, mmmm! A few weeks before when Peg mentioned we had been invited, she said that it was about time she had a meal somewhere else, and that she was "sick of these four walls and it would be good to go out". She said for years she's been providing Charlie with "5 dinners every week", and "2 dinners and teas each weekend", so it would be "a change for him to cook". Hang on a minute, is this the same woman that doesn't ever go out for a meal because she "can't taste or smell anything" and doesn't like seeing people enjoying their meals? The same woman who, when we last went out for a meal with her who made a scene and shouted "'ow much? I can cook a whole Sunday dinner for 12 people for that money." ? Curious, I asked if Charlie had ever invited her to his house for a meal since we last went for Christmas lunch 15 years ago. She admitted he had, but she preferred her cooking.

James and I never forgot the first and only time we went to Charlie's on *that* Christmas Day. It was when she could still taste things and Harry was still alive and reasonably portable. Completely devoid of any sort of social graces, between them Harry and Peg unwittingly managed to sabotage Charlie's every effort to stage the supreme Christmas lunch. Charlie had been up since the early hours working on his *chef d'oeuvre*, but our culinary experience of massive slices of moist turkey and other meats plus over 20 types of vegetables was eclipsed by the appalling behaviour of the two principal guests. Harry, by this time was used to Peg waiting on him and cutting up his food.

Peg had obviously decided to have a day off and sat like a crumpled, sulky doll stuck to her chair, her face a mask of distaste and loathing, her beady eyes taking in each and every serving dish, prodding the contents disparagingly and waiting for someone else to serve her. The knife and fork were too heavy, the plate too hot, her serviette was "ugly", she was too low down in her seat.

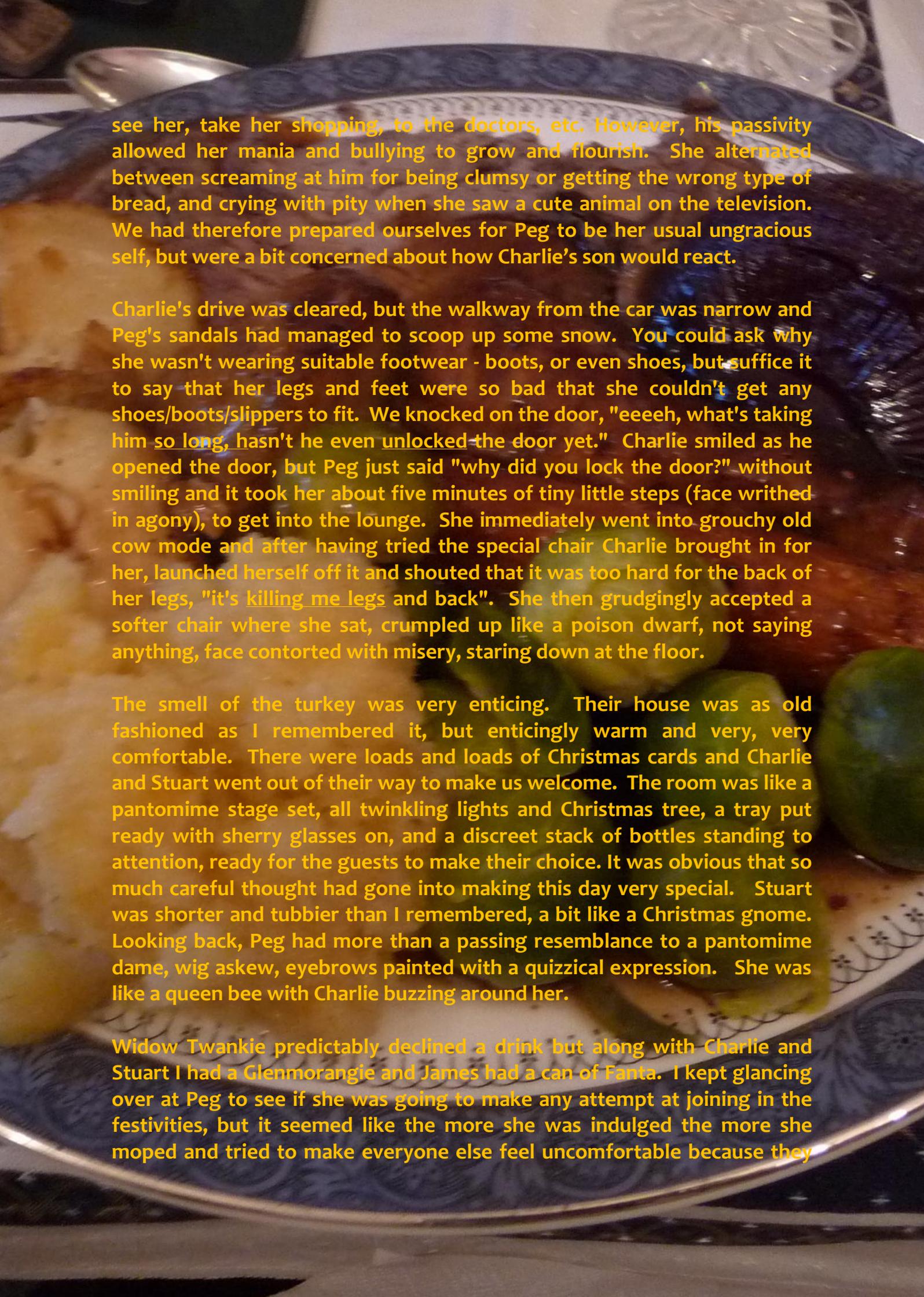


It was Harry, however, who stole the show. Charlie put some meat, roast potatoes and gravy on Harry's plate, and I think he also had a valiant stab at offloading just a few of the vegetables. Harry, serviette around his neck, looked uncomfortably pink and sweaty, eyes rolling wildly, lips slavering, shouting at Peg (as though it was her fault) "don't overface me, Peg". She got to her feet and scraped off half his meal into a random serving dish, dollops of gravy and splatterings of veg littering the festive table cloth, with a "eeeeh why did you cook so much vegetables? What a waste, you're bloody stupid doing so many...". She cut Harry's food up and he sloshed it half-heartedly around his plate, while continuing to protest that he was given too much.

In between mouthfuls Peg continued a monologuing rant, "The gravy tastes 'orrible, it's very greasy, you know ... Aaagh, take that brown meat off me plate ... by Christ these potatoes are as 'ard as the 'obs of 'ell ... 'ow long did you cook the sprouts for? They're blinking 'ard too." Wiping down Harry's chin and neck at the end of the meal she said, "Well, I'm sorry Charlie, we could have done with a quarter of this and it really did put us off our food. We should've gone to my 'ouse". Charlie was crestfallen and James and I resolved never to repeat this experience.

So it was with some trepidation that we faced this Christmas meal. A lot of water had gone under the bridge since our last one, Harry had died some years before and Peg's health had suffered to such a degree that she had become a consummate professional at the art of being ill, with an impressive array of ailments weekly added to her portfolio. Bent almost double, she seemingly had trouble walking, was an insomniac and despite her comfortable water bed had never had so much pain in her life, "eeeeh, I would give anything to be well". She was getting increasingly forgetful and losing her powers of reasoning, but masked it with displays of aggression if challenged. She tried hard to be reasonable and sweet during our visits, but sometimes it was a struggle for her. She was as demanding as she was generous, as vicious as she was kindly, as naive as she was opinionated.

Charlie had a skin like a rhino and had put up with Peg's behaviour for over 27 years, but that 'last supper' 15 years ago showed that she had the power to find a rare chink in his armour. He was a saint and without him she would have had difficulty functioning. He barely missed a day in coming to

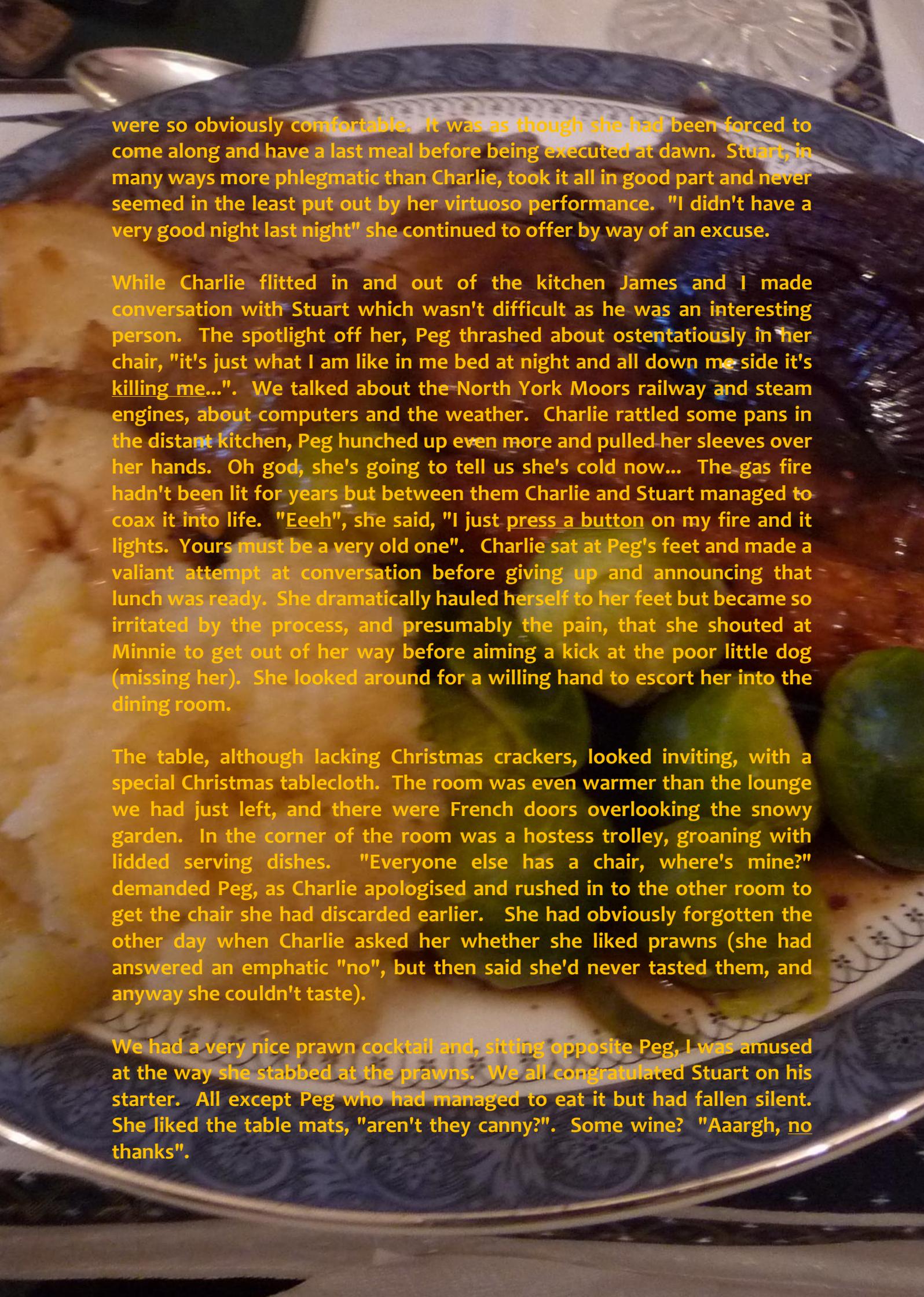


see her, take her shopping, to the doctors, etc. However, his passivity allowed her mania and bullying to grow and flourish. She alternated between screaming at him for being clumsy or getting the wrong type of bread, and crying with pity when she saw a cute animal on the television. We had therefore prepared ourselves for Peg to be her usual ungracious self, but were a bit concerned about how Charlie's son would react.

Charlie's drive was cleared, but the walkway from the car was narrow and Peg's sandals had managed to scoop up some snow. You could ask why she wasn't wearing suitable footwear - boots, or even shoes, but suffice it to say that her legs and feet were so bad that she couldn't get any shoes/boots/slippers to fit. We knocked on the door, "eeeh, what's taking him so long, hasn't he even unlocked the door yet." Charlie smiled as he opened the door, but Peg just said "why did you lock the door?" without smiling and it took her about five minutes of tiny little steps (face writhed in agony), to get into the lounge. She immediately went into grouchy old cow mode and after having tried the special chair Charlie brought in for her, launched herself off it and shouted that it was too hard for the back of her legs, "it's killing me legs and back". She then grudgingly accepted a softer chair where she sat, crumpled up like a poison dwarf, not saying anything, face contorted with misery, staring down at the floor.

The smell of the turkey was very enticing. Their house was as old fashioned as I remembered it, but enticingly warm and very, very comfortable. There were loads and loads of Christmas cards and Charlie and Stuart went out of their way to make us welcome. The room was like a pantomime stage set, all twinkling lights and Christmas tree, a tray put ready with sherry glasses on, and a discreet stack of bottles standing to attention, ready for the guests to make their choice. It was obvious that so much careful thought had gone into making this day very special. Stuart was shorter and tubbier than I remembered, a bit like a Christmas gnome. Looking back, Peg had more than a passing resemblance to a pantomime dame, wig askew, eyebrows painted with a quizzical expression. She was like a queen bee with Charlie buzzing around her.

Widow Twankie predictably declined a drink but along with Charlie and Stuart I had a Glenmorangie and James had a can of Fanta. I kept glancing over at Peg to see if she was going to make any attempt at joining in the festivities, but it seemed like the more she was indulged the more she moped and tried to make everyone else feel uncomfortable because they

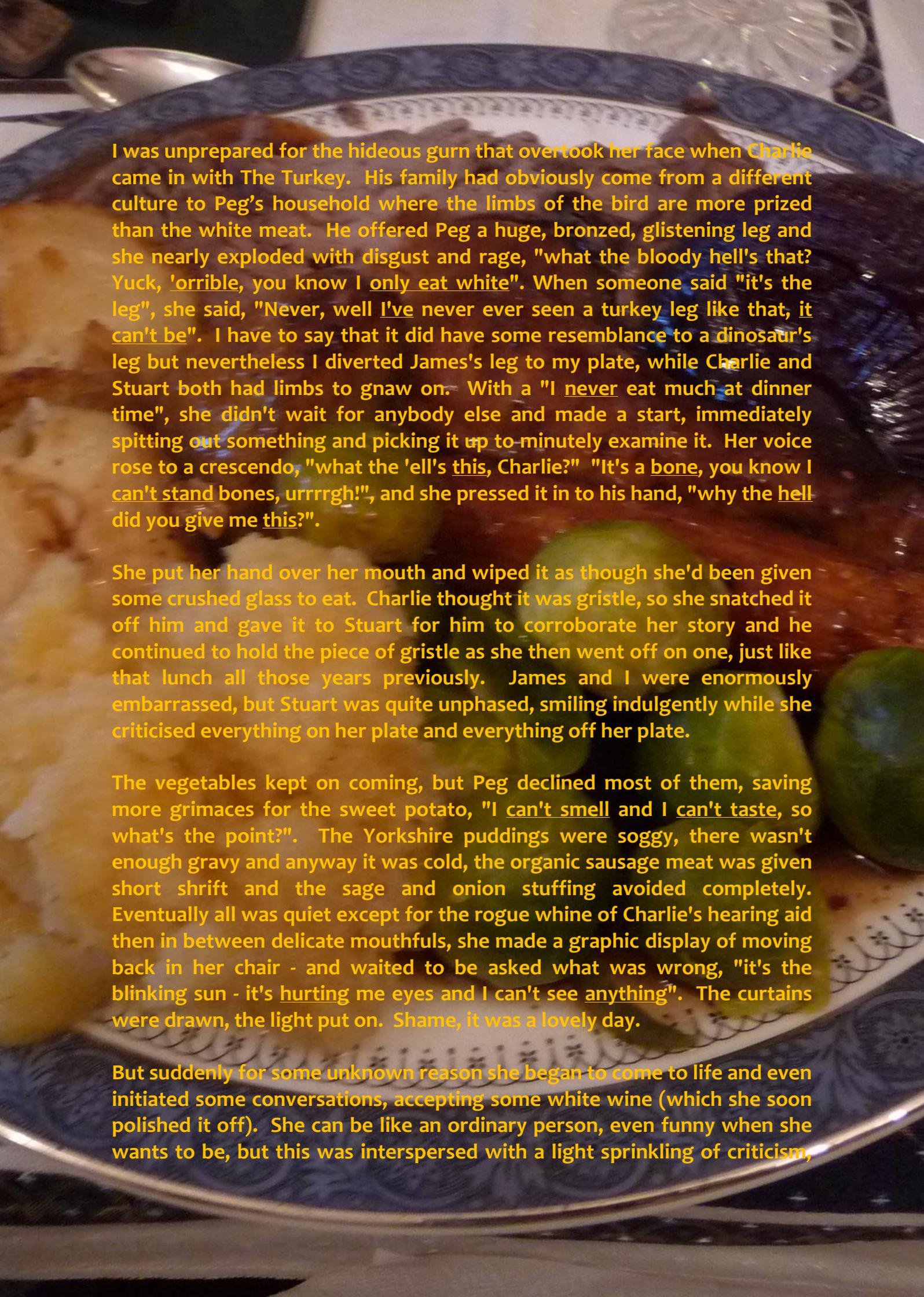


were so obviously comfortable. It was as though she had been forced to come along and have a last meal before being executed at dawn. Stuart, in many ways more phlegmatic than Charlie, took it all in good part and never seemed in the least put out by her virtuoso performance. "I didn't have a very good night last night" she continued to offer by way of an excuse.

While Charlie flitted in and out of the kitchen James and I made conversation with Stuart which wasn't difficult as he was an interesting person. The spotlight off her, Peg thrashed about ostentatiously in her chair, "it's just what I am like in me bed at night and all down me side it's killing me...". We talked about the North York Moors railway and steam engines, about computers and the weather. Charlie rattled some pans in the distant kitchen, Peg hunched up even more and pulled her sleeves over her hands. Oh god, she's going to tell us she's cold now... The gas fire hadn't been lit for years but between them Charlie and Stuart managed to coax it into life. "Eeeh", she said, "I just press a button on my fire and it lights. Yours must be a very old one". Charlie sat at Peg's feet and made a valiant attempt at conversation before giving up and announcing that lunch was ready. She dramatically hauled herself to her feet but became so irritated by the process, and presumably the pain, that she shouted at Minnie to get out of her way before aiming a kick at the poor little dog (missing her). She looked around for a willing hand to escort her into the dining room.

The table, although lacking Christmas crackers, looked inviting, with a special Christmas tablecloth. The room was even warmer than the lounge we had just left, and there were French doors overlooking the snowy garden. In the corner of the room was a hostess trolley, groaning with lidded serving dishes. "Everyone else has a chair, where's mine?" demanded Peg, as Charlie apologised and rushed in to the other room to get the chair she had discarded earlier. She had obviously forgotten the other day when Charlie asked her whether she liked prawns (she had answered an emphatic "no", but then said she'd never tasted them, and anyway she couldn't taste).

We had a very nice prawn cocktail and, sitting opposite Peg, I was amused at the way she stabbed at the prawns. We all congratulated Stuart on his starter. All except Peg who had managed to eat it but had fallen silent. She liked the table mats, "aren't they canny?". Some wine? "Aaargh, no thanks".

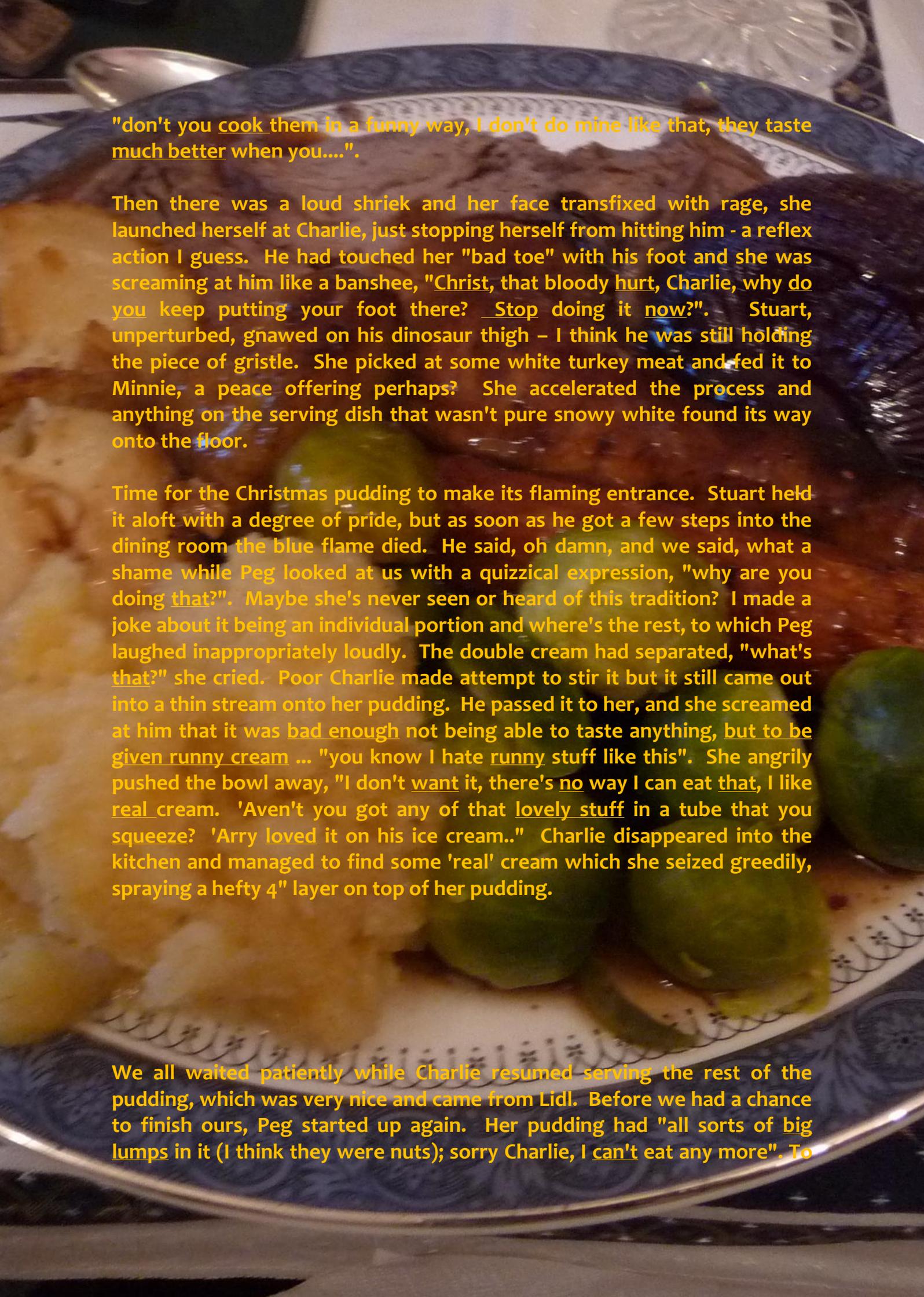


I was unprepared for the hideous gurn that overtook her face when Charlie came in with The Turkey. His family had obviously come from a different culture to Peg's household where the limbs of the bird are more prized than the white meat. He offered Peg a huge, bronzed, glistening leg and she nearly exploded with disgust and rage, "what the bloody hell's that? Yuck, 'orrible, you know I only eat white". When someone said "it's the leg", she said, "Never, well I've never ever seen a turkey leg like that, it can't be". I have to say that it did have some resemblance to a dinosaur's leg but nevertheless I diverted James's leg to my plate, while Charlie and Stuart both had limbs to gnaw on. With a "I never eat much at dinner time", she didn't wait for anybody else and made a start, immediately spitting out something and picking it up to minutely examine it. Her voice rose to a crescendo, "what the 'ell's this, Charlie?" "It's a bone, you know I can't stand bones, urrrrgh!", and she pressed it in to his hand, "why the hell did you give me this?".

She put her hand over her mouth and wiped it as though she'd been given some crushed glass to eat. Charlie thought it was gristle, so she snatched it off him and gave it to Stuart for him to corroborate her story and he continued to hold the piece of gristle as she then went off on one, just like that lunch all those years previously. James and I were enormously embarrassed, but Stuart was quite unphased, smiling indulgently while she criticised everything on her plate and everything off her plate.

The vegetables kept on coming, but Peg declined most of them, saving more grimaces for the sweet potato, "I can't smell and I can't taste, so what's the point?". The Yorkshire puddings were soggy, there wasn't enough gravy and anyway it was cold, the organic sausage meat was given short shrift and the sage and onion stuffing avoided completely. Eventually all was quiet except for the rogue whine of Charlie's hearing aid then in between delicate mouthfuls, she made a graphic display of moving back in her chair - and waited to be asked what was wrong, "it's the blinking sun - it's hurting me eyes and I can't see anything". The curtains were drawn, the light put on. Shame, it was a lovely day.

But suddenly for some unknown reason she began to come to life and even initiated some conversations, accepting some white wine (which she soon polished it off). She can be like an ordinary person, even funny when she wants to be, but this was interspersed with a light sprinkling of criticism,



"don't you cook them in a funny way, I don't do mine like that, they taste much better when you....".

Then there was a loud shriek and her face transfixed with rage, she launched herself at Charlie, just stopping herself from hitting him - a reflex action I guess. He had touched her "bad toe" with his foot and she was screaming at him like a banshee, "Christ, that bloody hurt, Charlie, why do you keep putting your foot there? Stop doing it now?". Stuart, unperturbed, gnawed on his dinosaur thigh - I think he was still holding the piece of gristle. She picked at some white turkey meat and fed it to Minnie, a peace offering perhaps? She accelerated the process and anything on the serving dish that wasn't pure snowy white found its way onto the floor.

Time for the Christmas pudding to make its flaming entrance. Stuart held it aloft with a degree of pride, but as soon as he got a few steps into the dining room the blue flame died. He said, oh damn, and we said, what a shame while Peg looked at us with a quizzical expression, "why are you doing that?". Maybe she's never seen or heard of this tradition? I made a joke about it being an individual portion and where's the rest, to which Peg laughed inappropriately loudly. The double cream had separated, "what's that?" she cried. Poor Charlie made attempt to stir it but it still came out into a thin stream onto her pudding. He passed it to her, and she screamed at him that it was bad enough not being able to taste anything, but to be given runny cream ... "you know I hate runny stuff like this". She angrily pushed the bowl away, "I don't want it, there's no way I can eat that, I like real cream. 'Aven't you got any of that lovely stuff in a tube that you squeeze? 'Arry loved it on his ice cream.." Charlie disappeared into the kitchen and managed to find some 'real' cream which she seized greedily, spraying a hefty 4" layer on top of her pudding.

We all waited patiently while Charlie resumed serving the rest of the pudding, which was very nice and came from Lidl. Before we had a chance to finish ours, Peg started up again. Her pudding had "all sorts of big lumps in it (I think they were nuts); sorry Charlie, I can't eat any more". To

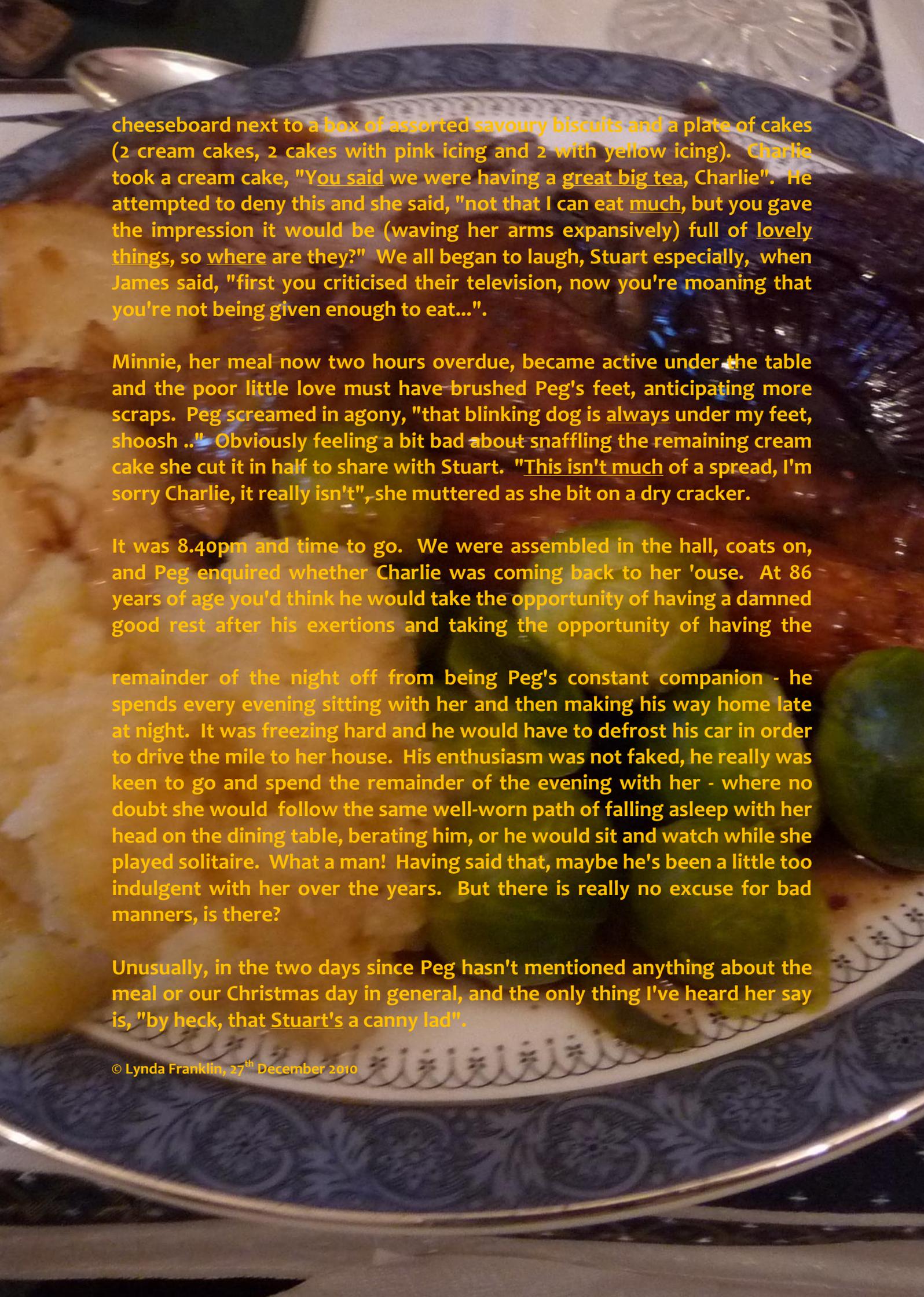
compound matters Charlie's foot repeated its gravitation towards Peg's bad toe and she lashed out even more angrily than before. We all fell silent and Charlie apologised. After lunch, we had a nice cup of tea at the table, but unfortunately Peg's was too strong so she had to have another one.

Peg needed all her strength to get to her feet and make her way back to the lounge. Bent double and grimacing she took little tiny steps that any Geisha with bound feet would be proud of. It was lucky that the fire wasn't lit because as soon as she sat down she was saying "eeeh, I'm mafted...". We were offered no further alcohol but had another cup of tea/coffee and a Thornton's chocolate from a lovely box, "eeeh, what a lovely box Charlie, don't throw it away, can you give it to me when you've finished, oh isn't that beautiful".

Time for the first of Peg's soaps, starting with Emmerdale, but her excitement lasted all of four minutes before she fell into a coma. She woke up with a start just as the programme finished, "oh damn, I missed it and I was looking forward to seeing whether they got married..". Once she began fixating on the television screen she couldn't help herself, "by heck, your picture isn't very good. Mine's much better than that, eeeh, what a difference to mine. !" Stuart muttered something about changing it soon, to which she replied, "you must have had it a very long time". James made an attempt to remonstrate with her and she said, "I was just saying...".

Next up Coronation Street. Stuart unfortunately was a soap virgin, so in between times Peg kept up a narrative so he wouldn't feel left out, but her grasp of the storyline wasn't as accurate as it might have been and she continued with this animated monologue through to the second episode of Emmerdale but by then Charlie was asleep and James, Stuart and I were flagging. "But I don't sleep so good," she said, "and this is what I get every night, me right side is killing me...". Rubbing her thigh vigorously, she rose to her feet as if to amplify the point that the pain was so bad she had to Now had to Stand. She heaved herself around to the back of the chair, and leant heavily on it (rather like she does a supermarket trolley) while we all looked on in mild astonishment.

Charlie came to our rescue by announcing tea was ready. This took Peg by surprise and having just returned to her seat she jumped up as though she'd been shot, "it's me nerves...". We filed into the dining room. Peg looked disparagingly at the table where three lumps of cheese sat on a



cheeseboard next to a box of assorted savoury biscuits and a plate of cakes (2 cream cakes, 2 cakes with pink icing and 2 with yellow icing). Charlie took a cream cake, "You said we were having a great big tea, Charlie". He attempted to deny this and she said, "not that I can eat much, but you gave the impression it would be (waving her arms expansively) full of lovely things, so where are they?" We all began to laugh, Stuart especially, when James said, "first you criticised their television, now you're moaning that you're not being given enough to eat...".

Minnie, her meal now two hours overdue, became active under the table and the poor little love must have brushed Peg's feet, anticipating more scraps. Peg screamed in agony, "that blinking dog is always under my feet, shoosh .." Obviously feeling a bit bad about snaffling the remaining cream cake she cut it in half to share with Stuart. "This isn't much of a spread, I'm sorry Charlie, it really isn't", she muttered as she bit on a dry cracker.

It was 8.40pm and time to go. We were assembled in the hall, coats on, and Peg enquired whether Charlie was coming back to her 'ouse. At 86 years of age you'd think he would take the opportunity of having a damned good rest after his exertions and taking the opportunity of having the

remainder of the night off from being Peg's constant companion - he spends every evening sitting with her and then making his way home late at night. It was freezing hard and he would have to defrost his car in order to drive the mile to her house. His enthusiasm was not faked, he really was keen to go and spend the remainder of the evening with her - where no doubt she would follow the same well-worn path of falling asleep with her head on the dining table, berating him, or he would sit and watch while she played solitaire. What a man! Having said that, maybe he's been a little too indulgent with her over the years. But there is really no excuse for bad manners, is there?

Unusually, in the two days since Peg hasn't mentioned anything about the meal or our Christmas day in general, and the only thing I've heard her say is, "by heck, that Stuart's a canny lad".