

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

THE DROSTEN'S CURSE



A.L. KENNEDY

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Chapter 55
Chapter 56
Chapter 57
Chapter 58
Chapter 59
Chapter 60
Chapter 61
Chapter 62
Chapter 63
Chapter 64

Chapter 65
Chapter 66
Chapter 67
Chapter 68
Chapter 69
Chapter 70
Chapter 71
Chapter 72
Chapter 73
Chapter 74
Chapter 75
Chapter 76
Chapter 77
Chapter 78
Chapter 79
Chapter 80
Chapter 81
Chapter 82
Chapter 83
Chapter 84
Chapter 85
Chapter 86
Chapter 87
Chapter 88
Chapter 89
Chapter 90
Chapter 91
Chapter 92
Chapter 93
Chapter 94
Chapter 95
Chapter 96

Copyright

About the Book

Isn't life terrible? Isn't it all going to end in tears? Won't it be good to just give up and let something else run my mind, my life?'

Something distinctly odd is going on in Arbroath. It could be to do with golfers being dragged down into the bunkers at the Fetch Brothers' Golf Spa Hotel, never to be seen again. It might be related to the strange twin grandchildren of the equally strange Mrs Fetch - owner of the hotel and fascinated with octopuses. It could be the fact that people in the surrounding area suddenly know what others are thinking, without anyone saying a word.

Whatever it is, the Doctor is most at home when faced with the distinctly odd. With the help of Fetch Brothers' Junior Receptionist Bryony, he'll get to the bottom of things. Just so long as he does so in time to save Bryony from quite literally losing her mind, and the entire world from destruction.

Because something huge, ancient and alien lies hidden beneath the ground - and it's starting to wake up ...

About the Author

A. L. Kennedy has twice been selected as one of *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists and has won a host of other awards - including the Costa Book of the Year for her novel *Day*. She lives in London and is a part-time lecturer in creative writing at Warwick University.

BBC
DOCTOR
WHO

THE
DROSTEN'S
CURSE



A.L. Kennedy

BBC
BOOKS

For Honor and Xavier

PAUL HARRIS WAS dying. This wasn't something his afternoon's schedule was meant to include. Death, as far as Paul was concerned, was one of the many unpleasant things which only happened to other people. He'd never even attended a funeral - *all those miserable relatives*. He'd also avoided weddings - *all those smug relatives*. And he'd skipped every christening to which underlings in his firm had thought they should invite him - *all those sticky, noisy babies... all those sticky, noisy underlings...*

Mr Harris's death was particularly surprising to him as it involved being eaten alive by a golf bunker. At least, he could only assume that something *under* the bunker was actually what was eating him alive - now he'd sunk down past his knees into the thing - and he could only assume that it wasn't going to stop eating him because... it wasn't stopping.

First he'd been gripped around his ankles while he eyed a tricky shot for the thirteenth green. The process had involved an initial pressure, combined with a slight, but very disturbing, pain and then a type of numbness had set in. Next, he'd sunk into the sand by a few inches, before another - he tried not to think of the word *bite*, but couldn't help it - before another *bite* was taken with a little more gentle pain and then more numbness and another tug downwards. Paul liked to think of himself as powerful and unstoppable and there was huge power and a definitely unstoppable will at work here and he would certainly have admired them both had they not been ruining his very nice pair of lime green golfing trousers and his very nice legs inside them.

Paul was surprised to discover that he was completely unable to scream for assistance and there was no one about to even notice his rather unusual situation, never mind save him from it. His golfing partner, David Agnew, had unfortunately flounced off towards the clubhouse a short while ago. As Paul was jerked further into the sand, he

reflected that Agnew had proved himself as bad a loser as he was a really irritating man. Still, it would have been helpful if Agnew had stuck around because then maybe he could have pulled Paul out of the bunker, or written down a few last requests, or got eaten too. Paul imagined that seeing David Agnew get eaten by a golf bunker would have been highly satisfying, because people like David Agnew were pretty much ideal golf bunker food, in Paul's opinion, although he was prepared to admit that he knew nothing about bunkers which ate people and what they might prefer. If he'd had any information on them, perhaps provided by his loyal secretary Glenda, then he might not be plunged to his waist in one right now.

The list of things that Mr Harris knew nothing about was extensive. He had never been at all curious about those aspects of the world which didn't benefit him directly.

Nevertheless, the most inquisitive human alive on Earth at that time still wouldn't have known Paul was being consumed by a creature so old and so mythical the universe had almost completely forgotten it ever was. The thing had passed beyond legend and was now simply a vague anxiety at the edge of reality's nightmares.

In a way, it was quite wonderful that such a being should still exist. Although, of course, it wasn't wonderful for Paul Harris, whose abilities to communicate - by signalling, crying out, or extending a subtle and sophisticated telepathic field, should he have been able to do so - had all been suppressed by his attacker. His attacker didn't like to be interrupted when it was feeding and fortunately evolution had allowed it to develop an ability to prevent its meals from attracting any kinds of aid. Unless, that was, the beast wanted dessert to arrive in one big arm-waving, or feeler-waving, or tentacle-waving, or slave excrescence-waving, or tendril-waving crowd of would-be rescuers, all panicky and delicious. In which case, screaming, pleading

and pretty much anything else along those lines was permitted.

Evolution also meant that, although Paul was being injured horribly, he was feeling only mild distress. Eating a struggling meal was potentially dangerous and tiring, so the creature had developed many complex and fascinating mechanisms which meant that each bite it took of its prey released soothing analgesics and sedatives into - taking this afternoon as an example - Paul's ravaged circulatory and nervous systems.

By this point, Paul's arms were flopping gently on the bunker's surface and his torso was locked into the sand as far as his armpits. He wasn't a stupid man and he was fairly sure that as much of his body as he could still peer down at and see was about as much as was still available for board meetings and games of squash or, for that matter, golf (although he was definitely beginning to go off golf). It seemed strange to him that he couldn't seem to be too upset about any of this. He was, in fact, increasingly docile and happy in a way that reminded him of once being a quite pleasant child with many exciting and generous prospects ahead, every one of which he had ignored or wasted later.

As Paul's head was tugged down beneath the surface of the bunker, he could still feel the gentle summer breeze tickling at the palms of his hands which were raised and therefore still vaguely free. He experienced a brief regret that he hadn't kept up his piano lessons and that he'd gone on holiday to the Turks and Caicos Islands instead of attending his own grandmother's funeral. Paul then thought, 'Is that breathing? I seem to be able to hear breathing... A bit like a cow's or a horse's breathing... some very big animal. I wonder what it is.'

At which point, Mr Harris stopped wondering anything.

Anyone who had passed by the bunker at that exact moment would have seen two well-manicured hands

apparently being sucked into the bunker and disappearing. They could then have watched the sand tremble and shiver until it presented a perfectly smooth and harmless surface again.

BRYONY MAILER WAS quite possibly the most inquisitive human alive on Earth at that time, which was 11.26 a.m. on 2 June 1978. She was a slim but wiry 24-year-old female human with a great sense of humour, huge reserves of ingenuity and a degree in European History. None of these things was helping her enjoy what she had once hoped was a temporary position as Junior Day Receptionist at the Fetch Brothers Golf Spa Hotel. There wasn't a Senior Day Receptionist, because that would have involved Mr Mangold, the hotel's manager, in paying Senior kind of rates. So Bryony was Junior and would stay that way for as long as she was here, stuck in perhaps the most tedious place on Earth. Lately, a couple of guests had even checked in and then simply given up on the place, leaving their luggage and running away. Their accommodation had been paid for in advance - it wasn't as if they were trying to dodge their bills - and she could only assume the sheer boredom of the Fetch had driven them out. And the wallpaper in the bedrooms was quite offensive - she didn't think she'd want to sleep inside it, either.

When Bryony wasn't folding away other people's abandoned pyjamas and storing their unwanted spongebags (in the unlikely event of their coming back for them), she was dealing with the health and beauty requirements of golfers' bored wives, coordinating the coaching and playing and post-game massage and bar lunch requirements of the golfers and generally fielding every bizarre request and complaint that an old hotel full of petulant people can generate on any given day. She didn't get a lot of down time.

But she'd been having a quiet spell lately. For as long as six minutes, she'd been able to ponder whether she'd have her tea with or without a biscuit and whether the biscuit would be a Mint Yo Yo or an Abbey Crunch. It wasn't so long ago that she'd been able to tease apart all the convolutions of French foreign policy under Cardinal

Richelieu, but now even a choice between two biscuits was likely to give her a headache. And Mangold would probably have eaten them in the meantime, even though they were her biscuits...

And, now that she thought of it, she was getting a lot of headaches and that was probably Mangold's fault, too.

She decided to take the risk of leaving the slightly scuffed reception desk unattended and propped a small handwritten card next to the brass counter bell - PLEASE RING - ADVICE & ASSISTANCE OBTAINABLE IMMEDIATELY - before she slipped off through the door next to the scruffy room-key pigeonholes and along the narrow passageway that led to the Staff Office.

Bryony had never liked this passageway. It was too narrow and its wallpaper was dreadful - worse than in the bedrooms - a claustrophobic pattern of purple and red swirls which almost seemed to wriggle when you looked at them. And it was always either overly cold in here or - like today - much hotter than was pleasant. She tended to rush the journey.

As she rushed - it wasn't far and would take less than a minute - she wasn't aware that behind her the wallpaper not only wriggled, but swelled in two places, heaving and stretching until it seemed there were two figures caught behind it and fighting to get out. Had she turned and seen this happening, it would have made her very frightened and also slightly nauseous, but she kept on walking, hurrying, simply aware of an odd taste in her mouth, as if she'd been sucking pennies.

When Bryony reached the office doorway, she saw that both her packets of biscuits had disappeared and there was a little gathering of crumbs on the shelf where she'd left them.

She didn't see - because her back was turned and anyway why on earth should anyone be on the alert for such a thing? - that two figures had detached themselves

stickily from the nasty wallpaper and were now padding along towards her. Each of them seemed unfinished, like rough models of small human beings made out of purple and red meat. Their outlines shifted and rippled horribly. Eyes and teeth emerged to the front of the two rudimentary heads, they showed white and shining and clever against the shifting masses of glistening flesh.

And there was no way out for Bryony. The Staff Office was a dead end in every sense, as she'd often told herself.

'Oh, bum.' Bryony sighed. This was going to be another awful day. And she had the very distinct feeling she was being watched. There was a tingling against her neck. She was filled with an impulse to turn round and also an idea that if she did she might not like what she discovered.

As they walked - now very close to Bryony - the figures kept altering, their outlines firming, features coming into focus and solidifying. Then four arms stretched out towards her and, as they lifted, were sheathed in fresh skin. Four hands became completely hand-like, with four thumbs and sixteen fingers and twenty fingernails, just as they reached out to clutch her.

As Bryony finally did begin to spin round, she felt herself being held by both her wrists and heard the word, 'Boo!' being shouted by two very similar voices.

'Oh, for goodness' sake.' It was the Fetch twins, Honor and Xavier, looking up at her and giggling while they squeezed her wrists. 'You two nearly scared the life out of me.'

'That would be bad. Your life should be in you,' said Xavier, the boy twin. The Fetch twins weren't absolutely identical, as they liked to tell everyone. They were a boy and a girl, very alike, but not the same. 'We're very sorry.' Xavier didn't currently look sorry at all.

Neither did Honor. 'We didn't want to scare you... only sort of worry you a bit. To be exciting.' She smiled and looked very sweet. 'Excitement is nice, isn't it?'

Bryony forgave the little girl, as she always did. She always forgave both twins – they were just extremely... forgivable. Even though they did seem to turn up suddenly more often than not, as if they were creeping about and planning something only they understood. And it wasn't as if Bryony didn't need some excitement. She longed for it, in fact.

Xavier squeezed her hand between his, tugging. 'Grandmother says she would like you to come and visit her for tea.'

This was sort of good news – the twins' grandmother was the millionaire Julia Fetch, the reclusive widow who owned the hotel. If she had decided to like Bryony, that might make life much easier for the Permanently Junior Receptionist and maybe even mean Mangold didn't eat Bryony's biscuits. Then again, she really didn't want to work here for much longer. Possibly it would mean she got a good reference when she resigned, though...

The twins peered up at her, identically expectant and cute with their willowy limbs, perfect complexions and sun-bleached hair, Xavier in a blue and white striped T-shirt and blue shorts, Honor in a red and white striped T-shirt and red shorts. They were both barefoot, as usual. Bryony thought maybe she might mention to Mrs Fetch that running around with no shoes on wasn't terribly hygienic. Then again, maybe Mrs Fetch ran around in bare feet, too. No one ever saw her and she was incredibly wealthy – she could do whatever she liked. She could just not wear anything at all, ever, if she felt like it, or dress as a pirate. Of the two choices, Bryony was strongly in favour of the pirate option.

Honor squeezed Bryony's hand this time. 'Do say yes. We'd be ever so pleased and have cucumber sandwiches.' Both twins spoke like children out of an old-fashioned story book. 'Truly we would.' And maybe incredibly wealthy people talked like that all the time – Bryony had no idea,

being what she might have called *incredibly not wealthy*, if it wouldn't have depressed her to do so.

Bryony nodded at the twins - while thinking *pleasepiratecostumepleasepiratecostume* - and both kids gave a cheer. 'Thank your grandmother very much. When I have a break I will come over.'

'This afternoon! This afternoon!' The twins skipped and chanted as they scampered away up the passage and out of sight.

'Weird little people.' Bryony shook her head and, in the absence of biscuits, pattered back out to the reception desk. There was no sign of the twins and the grandfather clock was, as usual, not ticking. As far as Bryony was concerned, life was dusty and hot and dull, dull, dull.

OUT ON THE golf course, now shimmering with heat under the June sun, a peculiar person struggled with his golf bag, which seemed to be much larger than was necessary. It was almost taller than him. But then, he was on the small side. Once again his putter fell to the grass and once again a fellow golfer spotted him flailing about just where he shouldn't be and yelled, 'Get out of the way, man! Fore, for heaven's sake! Fore!'

As he picked up his putter, only to watch several woods clatter onto the carefully manicured turf in a heap, the figure sighed and wondered, 'Four of what? I don't think I even have one of them... I don't think...' He was out of his depth, as he usually was, and felt distinctly hot and uncomfortable in his black woollen unsuitable suit. He peered in the direction of the Fetch Hotel and the Fetch Hotel front entrance and the Fetch Hotel reception desk and the area near to the reception desk and the precise spot - which he could only guess at longingly - where Bryony Mailer was standing at that very moment.

He sighed again, this time from the soles of his feet, right up to the ends of each hair on his head. It was horrible being in love. It was considerably more horrible being in love with someone too beautiful for you to even look at properly - unless you knew they were looking somewhere else and you wouldn't have to meet their eyes and blush and then want to burst into flames or evaporate or something. It was more horrible still when you understood completely that the person you loved clearly found you far less interesting than watching a pebble. It was most horrible when your love could never be, not in any way, not ever.

He sighed again until he felt completely hollowed out and didn't even flinch when a golf ball sliced past him, close enough for him to hear the way its tiny dimples disturbed the air.

Some of the balls had dimples and some of them didn't - Putta couldn't understand that, either...

'Fore, you *moron!* *Fore!*' An irate voice screamed away to his left.

He really would have to work out this four thing. He bent to gather up his clubs with a heavy and tragically romantic heart.

AS A GOLF ball landed much further away from the twelfth green than its owner had intended, Bryony thumbed through her stack of pending reservation slips while deciding – yet again – that she hated golf, hated golfers, hated golfers’ wives (did they have no lives of their own?) and that she really hated her ex-boyfriend Mick (a non-golfer) for having sapped her confidence, just when she’d been making postgraduate career decisions. A year ago, she’d thought working here would be relaxing and give her a taste of real life, and maybe she could write a book about... something... something to do with history... in her evenings off before becoming a stunningly attractive and popular young professor somewhere. Now she knew she was bored out of her mind, was never going to write anything if she didn’t get away from the horrible Fetch premises and horrible Fetch guests and the horrible Mr Mangold. Bryony was equally certain that she had no idea what came next. Her lack of clarity about what came next was scary and why she hadn’t left yet.

‘Oh, I wouldn’t worry terribly much about that, you know,’ said a friendly, velvety kind of voice.

Bryony glanced up to see a very tall man studying her from the doorway. He grinned with rather more teeth than one person should have. He appeared to have been dressed by a committee, possibly a drunk committee: wing collar and something that might once have been a cravat, baggy oatmeal trousers, brown checked waistcoat, plum-coloured velvet jacket with bulging pockets, raddled shoes... an immense and disreputable scarf with a life of its own... ‘These things quite often work themselves out in highly unpredictable ways. Luck has a lot to do with it. Although one can make one’s own luck, I always think. At least I think I think that. Or else someone told me that. Probably someone lucky.’ He made his way across the foyer towards her, half loping and half tiptoeing with a general air of being highly delighted to see everything around him

including the dust on the broken grandfather clock. 'Ah, not a grandfather clock, you know - a *grandmother* clock. They're a touch smaller... Someone told me that, too. At some point.' Bryony thought she had never encountered anyone so remarkable in her life.

She was right.

As the man toped, or liptoed, up to Bryony's desk he continued amiably, 'Quite possibly you'll discover you're a creature of infinite resource. It's very warm for January, isn't it? Or then again I may have missed January and I'm definitely not in Chicago. Am I?'

Bryony heard herself say, 'Arbroath. Or a few miles outside Arbroath... And it's June.' Somehow the width of the stranger's grin was making her feel as if she had entered a different layer of reality - a previously secret and peculiar layer where locations and dates were no longer certain.

'Well, that's quite close. I degaussed the Mackenzie Trench circuit before I set off. Which sometimes works. But mostly not, now that I think about it.' And he smiled again, even more largely. 'Hello, I'm the Doctor.' He seemed somehow like her oldest friend, like a wonderful relative she'd heard a lot about but never met.

Bryony, while wondering how any human being could have that much hair - this kind of dense, lolloping head of wildly curly hair - fumbled through all the possible replies she could make to this Doctor person. Among them were, 'Who on earth are you really, though?' and 'How did you know what I was thinking?' and '*What?*' and 'Do you ever wash that scarf? Or can't you because it would object? Would it be like trying to wash a cat...?'

While she *urged* and *ahed* and didn't make any proper words at all, the Doctor nodded patiently, even slightly annoyingly, as if he were coaxing a dim child through a really easy sum. On the one hand he was clearly the type of person who should make anyone sensible very nervous, but

on the other he filled her with the deepest sense of trust she'd ever experienced. Which took her right back to supposing she ought to be nervous.

Eventually, she managed, 'Do you have a reservation?' Which was a completely boring thing to say and made him look gently disappointed.

'A reservation? Well, no, I don't believe I do. When I travel I generally bring my own accommodation.' The Doctor's very large and very curious eyes lifted to ponder the ceiling while his monologue ambled along both gently and unpreventably. 'I might be due a holiday, of course. I always forget to take them. Usually someone reminds me, but there's no one to do that for me at the moment.'

Just for a second as she met the Doctor's eyes, Bryony experienced a stab of immense loneliness - almost unimaginable and inhuman isolation. This was followed by something much more pleasant, something very like the type of excitement she'd experienced as a child when she'd looked forward to holidays or birthday presents.

Bryony shook her head and wondered if she really should have searched about for overlooked biscuits, or rummaged in the second-from-the-left desk drawer for that dog-eared packet of Orangeade Spangles and eaten something, because she did feel a bit weird. But then - like so many humans - she let her mind simply dodge away from something too unusual to be comfortable. Instead, she decided to wonder if this Doctor person was just some weirdo who was camped in the scrub by the lake - they'd had that kind of problem before. He smelled a bit peculiar. Then again, it was a clean kind of smell: more like the way the air smelled right before a thunderstorm with a trace of added icing sugar than the scent of someone who had woken up in a tent.

The Doctor continued, while apparently trying not to laugh. 'I was lost in a virtual jungle for a while quite recently. Have you ever been lost in a virtual jungle? Takes

it out of you. Perhaps I should have a holiday?' He eyed her name tag. 'Bryony Mailer, do you think I need a holiday? Should I stay here?' Then he looked straight at her the way an extremely bright boy might if he were expecting ice cream.

And Bryony Mailer thought - *This is it. This is what's next.*

Then she told the Doctor. 'Yes. I think you should stay. You should stay here.'

AT THE MOST secluded edge of the Fetch Estate in a small, but dazzlingly well-equipped cottage, Mrs Julia Fetch rearranged her extensive collection of glass octopuses (or octopodes). She had them made in Venice by an increasingly elderly team of master glass blowers, lamp workers and glass artists. She softly ran her – she had to admit – increasingly elderly fingers across the rounded head of an *Octopus rubescens* and gently waved at the perfectly modelled tentacles of a red-spot night octopus, or *Octopus dierythraeus*. She smiled.

As the years had passed, she'd found that she had become slightly forgetful, perhaps even very forgetful – she could barely picture her long-ago husband's face – but she had perfect recall when it came to the names of octopus species. She had always been fond of octopodes (or octopuses) and she was using a tiny fraction of her monumental cash reserves to have every variety of octopus modelled in glass. There were over a hundred to reproduce and each exquisitely delicate sculpture took nearly a year of the craftsmen's work. It was very possible that she wouldn't quite manage to see the collection completed. She was also sole patron and very generous supporter of the Julia Fetch Foundation for the Care and Support of Octopuses (or Octopodes). These were really her only two remaining indulgences, apart from the cottage's fantastic kitchen – which she hardly used – and the marble-lined bathroom and generously proportioned bath in which she soaked her sometimes rather achy limbs, while wishing that she had more legs. Or more arms. Or both.

When she was younger, Mrs Fetch had enjoyed the usual toys and treats of the ultra-rich: buying sports cars and villas on sun-kissed coastlines, owning a London townhouse and a moderately sized castle (with village attached) quite near Folkestone, running stables full of racehorses and country estates all of which were seething with fat, juicy, slow-moving game birds and succulent deer. But she didn't

really enjoy driving, and paying other people to drive her Bugattis and Duesenburgs and Alfa Romeos had seemed silly. Filling her villas (and the townhouse and the castle) with loud strangers hadn't been nearly as much fun as she'd expected, and filling them with friends was very difficult because having friends when you're vastly rich just gets quite *complicated*. Rattling around next to her swimmerless swimming pools or wandering alone across her dusty ballrooms had been depressing. She'd caught herself talking to the geckos in one place and half expecting them to answer. Her racehorses were beautiful, but had never seemed that fond of her - they tended to be slightly highly strung. And she had never been able to bring herself to kill anything on her estates. In fact, she'd been vegetarian for at least twenty years, if not forty, or sixty... Eventually, she'd given away all her homes apart from this cottage. They'd been turned into community centres and octopus research facilities. She'd sold her sports cars and horses and let her estates go back to nature and be overrun by unshot-at animals and, by now, some quite rare plants, which nobody shot at either.

Or that was the past which she currently remembered. She sometimes had the feeling that she had previously remembered other pasts, but she couldn't be sure. Being this old was slightly confusing. Then again - as the twins often told her - it was very reasonable to be confused when she knew so much and had been to so many places and done so many things, occasionally in diving gear (but never dressed as a pirate).

And as long as she had the twins - her beautiful, kind and charming Honor, her handsome, kind and charming Xavier - she knew that everything would be all right. That was something she didn't forget.

She never left her cottage these days. She didn't need to. A dedicated geostationary satellite poured a constant flow of information into her personal communications hub -

located in what used to be the pantry - and she could spend all day, if she wanted, learning more about octopus camouflage techniques, or the cunning ways in which they could impersonate other sea creatures, or reading her Foundation's latest test results on octopus intelligence. From the hub, she could also keep an eye on the stock market and watch her money quietly making more money.

But she did feel the need for a little company now and then. She did think - perhaps regularly, perhaps only once a month, she wasn't entirely certain - that it would be nice to invite some pleasant people to take tea with her. Nothing grand, or fussy - just tea with small sandwiches and perhaps slices of fruit cake and maybe scones.

She did sometimes tell the twins about arranging to have tea and they did promise to go and find her suitable guests, but she couldn't - if she was honest - absolutely recall how often this happened, or if she had ever served anybody tea, or discussed the mating rituals of squid while buttering very thin toast and handing out napkins. Occasionally she dreamed that the inside of her mind was somehow becoming occupied by a being much cleverer than she was, something with dark tendrils, or tentacles reaching into her personality and softly wriggling about across her memories in a way that made them jumble and fade.

Still, it didn't matter. She was entirely happy and probably had forgotten her last tea party in the usual old lady type of way. Probably, if she concentrated, she could say how many cucumber sandwiches this or that visitor had eaten and whether there had been enough jam. And there was no reason to worry if she couldn't. As she stared out through her window at the well-groomed trees and glossy shrubs bordering her golf course, she nodded to herself and smiled again. She had a good life. And sixty-eight perfectly lovely Venetian glass octopodes. Or octopuses.

DAVID AGNEW WAS a man who purposely ate octopus whenever he could. He was currently sitting in the Fetch Hotel's Sweet Spot Bar and wishing he was, instead, lolling by the pool at his Greek island villa, tucking into some fresh octopus legs and shooting geckos with his air pistol. These were the kinds of things he enjoyed.

He was not enjoying his vodka and orange which was warmish and rather unpleasant and definitely hadn't involved fresh orange juice, even though he'd asked for it specifically and in his most commanding tone of voice. Some chance of proper service in a dump like this. Still, Fetch Brothers had a fabulous golf course and he could usually get round it in 86. Or 90. Definitely in 98. And soon his most commanding voice would really mean something around here.

Agnew considered complaining, but he couldn't be bothered because at present he felt extremely good about life. He'd showered after he left the course, changed into his new, rather dashing, safari suit and he wasn't due back at the office for another two hours. That gave him more than enough time for a spot of lunch. He snapped his fingers to summon the barman and ordered a prawn cocktail and a basket of scampi and chips. And a glass of Liebfraumilch.

While he waited for his bar meal, he glanced around at the golfing prints, the photos of men in large caps and plus fours, the little shelf of donated trophies and the Challenge Cup. This year, he had a real chance of winning the Cup. There had been ten players who were better than him on paper, but seven of them weren't competing this time round.

Actually - he corrected himself - eight of them wouldn't be competing. Yes, he was sure of that. He was absolutely sure that Paul Harris wouldn't be trying for the Challenge Cup this year. Or any other year.

David Agnew tugged at his beige jacket to smooth it and grinned. The world was a very satisfactory place.

Then it became significantly less satisfactory as a grassy, shabby, scrawny, sweaty man, clattered into the bar with a golf bag he seemed quite unable to control. Knocking over a number of stools as he proceeded, he then sank to a halt at the table next to Agnew's and flopped the bag messily down beside him. Its ancient clubs emerged like a rusty threat and disfigured the carpet.

Agnew gave the newcomer his best withering stare and pointed to a large sign which read GOLF BAGS AND GOLF ATTIRE ARE NOT PERMITTED BEYOND THE CLUBHOUSE.

At this, the dreadful interloper flinched and said, 'Oh. Oh, dear... I... but I'm... well, I thought that as I was... I'm a resident... guest... that is... oh, dear... I am very...' He fumbled at the bag's shoulder strap, which had come adrift, and stood up rapidly in a way that produced a shower of tees, grass tufts and dried mud. Then he reached into his bag and pulled out - Agnew couldn't begin to guess why - its last remaining club, a battered putter, and waved it around as if he was conducting some type of interior orchestra.

'Careful! You nearly had my head off with that. What's wrong with you?'

The putter crashed down across Agnew's table while the ghastly little man mumbled, 'Wrong...? No, it's just me... me, you see... people always seem to find that me being me is wrong... I don't mean it to be...'

Agnew bellowed, 'Sit down!'

At this, the stranger squeaked, 'OK.'

Agnew announced, 'I have a headache and would like to finish my lunch in peace.' Which was a confusing thing to say as his lunch hadn't arrived yet, but he was too annoyed to make sense. Agnew frowned while the man peered at him.

‘Well, I... Sorry for speaking... but I won’t interrupt. That is... I’m Mr Ian Patterson.’ The grubby man recited his name as if it was something he’d had to memorise recently. ‘And I... being here without golfing was... it would have seemed... but I don’t golf... and...’ He shoved the fallen clubs back into his bag distractedly. ‘They loaned me these... things... and I already had the... the putter thingy...’ Then he started to thump at his clothing in a doomed effort to remove the layer of muddy dust under which he was now operating. This simply spread the dust further.

‘Mr Patterson!’

‘Ah!’ Patterson ducked warily for an instant and stopped thumping. ‘Yes?’

‘Why don’t I give you a golf lesson?’ Agnew smiled like a crocodile approaching a fat gnu he’d caught out paddling by itself. ‘Would you like that? Eighteen holes? I’m David Agnew. Allow me to be...’ He clearly found it difficult to say the next word. ‘... Helpful.’

Before Patterson could even think about how unlikely this was, he found himself suddenly having his golf bag thrust into his confused arms and being propelled out of the bar while Agnew shouted to the barman, ‘No lunch for me. Busy. Cancel it all. Back in fifteen minutes.’

This puzzled Patterson because even he knew fifteen minutes wouldn’t give them enough time for a full round of golf, not that Patterson wanted a full round or really anything more to do with golf. It seemed a ridiculous game and – *oh, dear* – he was being badgered along towards the front entrance and – *oh, no* – here was Bryony, lovely Bryony, talking to a bizarre-looking guest and apparently getting on extremely well with him – *it was the curly hair, women loved curly hair* – Patterson’s hair was as flat and lifeless as his hopes – and it was ginger – and...

‘Good afternoon, Mr Agnew.’ Bryony had lifted her head. Her extremely attractive head. And because of the whole

attractiveness thing it was horribly impossible not to look at her, while she then said, 'Good afternoon, Mr Patterson.' And the whole looking at her thing meant that Patterson was completely, supernaturally, aware that *she* was looking at *him* in return. This caused a kind of searing pain to dart straight into his chest and then bang right out again through his back. It was such a real sensation that he worried about his jacket and whether it had been singed.

'Oh, I'm... sorry... covered in mud... and grass... and... trying some, er, golf...' And the last thing he saw of her as he was bundled down the steps and outside was a smile. It was a slightly confused, if not dismayed smile, but it had been for him.

She'd smiled at him.

That was wonderful.