

Unhinged

by Emma Myatt

I took a deep breath and knocked on the door. It fell away from me to crash onto the floor of the shed in a whirl of dust and debris. I stood, hand still held aloft, staring into the gloom.

‘Make an entrance, why don’t you?’ said a voice.

‘Mr Gilroy?’ I tried to keep the wobble out of my voice. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...’

‘You’re obviously stronger than you think,’ he said and emerged slowly, growing large as he stood up. He stepped onto the door, which cracked loudly under his feet. He reached for my still-raised hand and shook it. ‘I’d say come in, but in and out seem to have become one.’ He stepped towards me and squinted into the light.

‘I’m Laura Carter,’ I said. ‘From the magazine.’ I reached for my notebook and pen.

‘I suppose we should sit.’ He beckoned me inside and found me a stool. He placed it opposite his desk, a battered old leather-topped thing, pulled his chair around and sat facing me.

‘I won a competition, to interview you and...’

‘Yes. Not sure what possessed me to offer, but let’s get on with it.’

I coughed. ‘Mr Gilroy. You’ve been writing all your adult life, first getting published in 1974 with *Words from Wood*, and going on to write forty-three novels. How do you keep finding ideas?’

‘Are you a writer?’ he asked me.

I looked at him. ‘Well, I’d like to be,’ I said.

‘No. *Are* you a writer?’

‘It’s what I’ve always...’

‘Do you write?’

‘Yes,’ I said. This was what I’d been warned about: his uncooperative attitude, his directness.

He smiled. ‘Then you are a writer. As well as a shed-wrecker.’

I glanced at the door on the floor. ‘I’ll pay for any damage,’ I said.

He waved this away.

‘What do you write?’ He looked into my head with piercing blue eyes.

‘Short stories, mostly. When I get good ideas.’

‘And how often is that?’ He leaned back in his chair.

‘Not very often,’ I admitted. I was about to add that I had to work long hours and take care of my mum, but I didn’t think he’d understand. I knew from my research he’d always lived alone.

‘Write this,’ he said.

‘Write what?’ I asked.

‘You. Coming here. This encounter.’

So I did. It didn’t take long. I held it out to him.

He scanned it. ‘Rubbish,’ he said. ‘Try again. Add some magic.’

I took a deep breath and knocked on the door. I’d obviously been training too hard for the village weightlifting contest because the door fell away from me as if it were made of cardboard. From inside came a noise like a cross elephant and a man appeared, covered in dust, Einstein-hair full of debris.

‘Ah! The winner of the *Meet Gilroy* contest. What a wonderful, dramatic entrance. Do enter my writing cave.’

I was swept inside by his enthusiasm, into a den made of words. Pieces of paper scribbled with odd sentences adorned the walls. Framed posters of some of Gilroy's book covers hung above a well-loved desk, which was piled high with skyscrapers of paper and books. In the middle was a typewriter.

'Let me hear it,' he said.

I read it out.

'Better,' he said.

'I still have to interview you,' I said.

He flapped this comment away with both hands. 'Write,' he said.

I bent over my notepad.

I gasped. The famous Gilroy typewriter. The conduit through which he'd produced his world of words, his legacy. I leaned over and touched it.

'Write something, if you like,' he said.

I stood, wound in a clean sheet of paper from the pile and laid my fingers on the keys.

I took a deep breath and knocked on the door. My hand went straight through it, into a space I couldn't see. I withdrew it and peered through the hole. I saw flecks of dust alight in a sunbeam, a head surrounded by a halo of hair, gnarled fingers typing furiously at a typewriter, which shook as the keys were banged. I could see words suspended in the air above him, as they floated out of the small machine and dissipated into the space above him, to become more twirling dust motes, planets around their sun.

'Not bad. Bit over-written,' he said, peering over my shoulder.

'Thank you,' I said.

'Now tell me,' he pursed his lips. 'Do you write?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Good. Now you may ask me your questions.'

I took a deep breath. 'Where do you get your ideas? I mean, forty-three novels, that's almost one a year. And they're – well, massive. Complicated. Amazing.'

Charles Gilroy tapped his head. 'I daydream a lot. Onto the page. And if I'm stuck, I create a situation, and put myself in it. Sometimes that involves getting myself to Venice and throwing my passport into a canal – plish! – other times stealing a packet of sweets from Tesco. Sometimes I loosen things, just a little.' He winked at me and looked at the door on the floor.

I followed his gaze and saw that the hinges were missing.

I turned back to him, my breath caught.

He grinned and held out his hand to me. He uncurled magician's fingers to reveal some screws.

'Now we've both got a story to tell,' he said. 'But first, be my assistant in fixing this door. It helps to keep the real world at bay.'

He handed me a screwdriver and we lined up the door against the hinges still attached to the frame. We worked in silence and soon the door was rehung.

'You'd better test it for me,' he said.

I went outside and he closed the door behind me. I stood for a second in the world outside, blinking at the brightness, my eyes flooded with colour.

Any outcome was possible now. I took a deep breath and knocked on the door.