

A BASKET CASE by Terry Spring.

Cindy loved the Brighton Pavilion and adored shopping in the Lanes' cobbled streets. John knew she would. His American wife seemed to love every brick of the English Victorian buildings he'd pointed out. He'd showed her his old haunts; the pubs and cafes where he'd spent nights 'hanging out' with his university friends. Their next call held many a fond memory for him - 'The Wheel and Foot'

With the top down, he drove the sports car through the narrow country lanes explaining his great times in the sixties as, with a pint or three, he and his friends chatted up girls.

'Saturday night was our big-night ...we really splashed out at this pub and ate 'Chicken in a Basket'.

'Why did you have it in a basket?'

'Oh Cindy, it wasn't the type with a handle. That's just what they called it. The chicken was served in small cane baskets. It was delicious, chicken fried in a crisp coating and it came with chips...fries.'

A laughing Cindy said 'You English do have some odd names for things. 'The Wheel and Foot' – why would you call a place that?'

'I think the farmers ground wheat there in the seventeenth century. It's the prettiest place. A thatched roof, a stone building set next to the river... a typical English pub. You'll love it.'

'Sounds lovely. Wonder who caught their foot?'

The car wound its way through the countryside with the laughing couple but John noticed Cindy flinch- she wasn't used to driving on the 'wrong' side of the road. To take her mind off the drive he guided her eye to various points of interest until they came upon the lane and the pub sign, swinging in the breeze. Surprisingly the sign appeared battered and the grass in the fields over-grown.

Cindy looked around puzzled.' The place seems a bit run-down John. Maybe it's not popular anymore.'

'In England things don't change for centuries Cindy. Brighton still looks the same as it did ten years ago.'

The car rounded the bend and the familiar thatched building came into view. John drew up to the car park and stopped. 'Well, who would have thought? I wonder why it closed down. This place had a purpose for centuries.'

'It sure is pretty though, John. Let's get out and have a look round.'

They stepped out of the car to the loud calls of bird in the trees above and the sound of running water. Walking through the undergrowth they drew near the boarded-up building with its split thatched roof, ivy and weeds spurting out of every stone crevice. Around the house, the grass stood tall, stalks waving around with the breeze; everything looked derelict. The couple made their way round the building and the sound of the river grew louder whilst, overhead, tree branches moved with the wind, their leaves rustling. Large noisy black birds sat on the branches looking down at them and Cindy had to raise her voice to be heard above the river's gushing water and the boisterous birds.

'It's certainly lovely but I think the owners must have closed up long ago.'

John seemed bewildered. 'Mmm... wonder what happened? People used to come from miles around. It was packed every night. We used to dance out here...right here in fact.'

John's arms encircled Cindy as the pair, imagining the music, laughingly waltzed around the grassy flagstones; the only sounds were the wind, the river and the squawking birds.

They stopped dancing and, hand in hand, strolled to the ivy-covered building, peering inside through cracks in the wooden shutters covering the casement windows. The place looked empty and neglected. Unexpectedly a voice came from behind, and startled, they turned to find a middle-aged woman carrying a dog's lead. The dog came running across a field towards them.

'Can I help you?' the woman enquired. 'This place has been long closed'.

Surprised, John stuttered 'we...we...um ...we were hoping to eat here. I can't believe its shut. It used to be so vibrant here. I loved their 'Chicken in a Basket.'

'Yes they had a profitable business before the court case. You must have read about it. It was in all the papers and on TV. The case sparked new regulations.'

A puzzled John replied, 'Um...no...I've been out the country...know nothing about it. What happened here?'

'Well, it appears one evening, when the place was packed, a patron eating his fried chicken meal started to choke and go blue ... turned out he was choking on a pellet.'

'A pellet?' John and Cindy laughingly exclaimed in unison.

'Yes, he was so annoyed he took his uneaten chicken meal to the local food inspector next day.'

Candy smiled as she turned to John. 'Surely, they don't shoot chickens in England, do they?'

'Of course not' interjected the woman. 'The food inspector had the meal analysed...turns out it wasn't chicken at all.'

John's grin disappeared. 'Wasn't chicken? What else would they put in 'Chicken in a Basket'?

'Well, the managers here had decided to save money and decrease the noisy bird population in one 'fowl' swoop, so to speak.' The woman's raised her gaze to the trees above...'it wasn't chicken they were serving, it was crow.'
