Green Goddess
Chapter 1: *Josie*

"Thought you'd like to know." Mags grins, "Your Dad's bought a fire engine."

"That's OK," I shrug, "he's always on the lookout for Dinky cars for his collection." I close the gate and lock it behind Mags - allotment committee rules. My plot is next to the gate, which is handy for transporting stuff to and fro. Mags wears a blue tracksuit and yellow trainers, but she's not breathing hard, she'll have been on one of her 'jogs' that turns into a walk after a few yards. She gives me a hug and I catch a whiff of cigarette. Mags is wiry, her face prematurely wrinkled. She rests her hand on my shoulder, her eyes sparkle in the afternoon sun, "No hen, it's a *real* fire engine. A stonking great beast. One of those green ones, the things they used in the strikes."

I sigh, shake my head and smile back. "Where did he find it?"

"e-Bay, like everything else."

"Where's he going to put it?"

"That's a good question."

"Hmph. Well it's up to him. I'm not my father's keeper, at least not yet. Could be worse I suppose."

"A Thai bride?" said Mags.

"Very funny. I think even Dad knows his limits. I'll bob in and see him later. At least it should keep him occupied through the summer."

"Aye," Mags says, "I thought you ought to know." She looks across at the fading green plastic chair in the corner of my plot. How's your life of leisure - I see you're getting into the swing of it, what about a sun-lounger?"

"I'd like a shed really."

“Well get one hen. What d’you think your redundancy money’s for?”

I give her the look, but she’s not impressed. Straightening up to ease my back, I point across my plot. “That’s the next one to weed. The advantage of raised beds is that you’re not supposed to turn over the soil. Digging destroys the structure and all the mycorrhizal thingummies. Just needs a bit of gentle weeding. It’s called the ‘no dig method’. I’m sure a bit of weeding will be good for you, you know, some upper body strength to go with the jogging.”

“Thanks but I don’t dig that right now. I’m on the last of five night shifts tonight. Do you fancy a coffee the day after tomorrow?”

“I’ll call you.”

The lock clicks and the gate squeaks behind her as another gardener enters the allotments. Mags takes the opportunity to leave. I lock the gate. She jogs a few paces down the road before turning to wave. She’ll walk the rest of the way.

I find my kneeler and get to work on the plot. Whoever invented the no-dig method was not acquainted with bindweed.

There’s nothing like the feel of soil in your hands. The smell of the earth at this time of year when it’s just starting to warm up and lose the cloying wetness of winter is magical. So here I am, ‘between jobs’ as I tell people, with enough redundancy money to see me through until the autumn at least. I can finally eradicate the horsetails and bindweed, organically of course, keep the edges under control and use at least some of the plot for permaculture. Never again will the committee have the temerity to tell me that plot 87 does not look as if it has been cultivated. Hah!

I'm gradually aware of a rhythmic thudding in the background, and it's not my heart. That's been skipping a beat from time to time, but this noise is regular as a metronome. I stand up slowly, survey the results of my work, stoop down to pick up the uprooted weeds and then dump them in a pile next to the compost bin. I turn to look for the source of the thudding. The bin lid gives me something to adjust, so it's not obvious that I'm looking.

It's mattock man again. Last time I saw him he was there, on plot 89, but with the silver-haired woman, one of the many plot-holders whose name I cannot remember. This time he's on his own, wielding that mattock like his arms were born to it, making trenches, for potatoes most likely. He's working his way backwards towards me. At the end of a furrow he stops, takes off his shirt and mops his head. He's not as muscular but it's the skin that gets to me, exactly the same deep brown colour as Charles.

Mattock man turns, looks at me for a second, and starts on the next furrow. It's almost hypnotic, watching him, but I make sure I'm busy watering by the time I hear him pause at the end of the next row. My water butt is almost empty so I've a reason to fill my watering cans from the communal tap, a task that takes me past plot 89. I smile and nod at the man as I pass, he returns the favour. The front of his chest is a tight array of interwoven muscles with no spare flesh but it's when he turns round to resume his work that my heart misses more than one beat. Close up, I see that his back is covered in masses of heaped up scars like beached kelp. Lashes, dozens of them. I feel sick. I don't want to look at that again in a hurry. I return to the safety of 87.

The sun disappears behind a bank of cloud coming in from the west and it's suddenly chilly. Should I fill the cans again? I turn and look. He's put his shirt back on. The furrows are done and he's having a go at some brambles. My silver-haired neighbour was another one at risk of the committee's approbation, but not for long with this man at work. By the time I'm on the return journey, he's made a pile of brambles as high as his waist. His forearms and hands are dripping blood, lacerated by the thorns. He has an otherworldly smile I've seen on someone before. I scroll through my memories, trying to place the image: Catholic high school forty odd years ago - The Ecstasy of St Teresa.

Chapter 2: *Ken*

An escort of Harleys, that's a first. They follow me into the service station, handling their bikes like royalty, parking up carefully before coming over to check us out, Penny and I. The four blokes look about the same vintage as me, though I dare say some of that is wear and tear. Bazzo, Tiny, Sarge and Sherlock introduce themselves and want to know all about my Goddess. I was looking for my flask when they came over, but my tea won't stretch to the new fan club. This pit stop was at the insistence of my bladder, so after a visit to the gents, I share a table with the bikers and they treat me to a cup of Yorkshire tea.

I give them the full spiel, how the Goddesses were designed as mobile pumps when the country was preparing for a nuclear attack in the early 'fifties; how these beasts were integral parts of complex convoys designed to deliver 900 gallons a minute over long distances, in relays. I don't tell them I've only been the proud owner of Penny, my name for this bit of vehicular aristocracy, for all of four hours and this is my first trip. Her full moniker, I've decided, will be Penelope Gordon-Wilson.

I've been looking out for a good one for months and had even been across to Cheshire to meet Brian and PGW 163, a beautiful machine that he'd driven in the '77 strike, so I know what to look for. The bidding on e-Bay wasn't exactly manic but it was clear that at least one other person was serious. Whoever was up against me, really wanted her as well, so Gary, the seller, got almost a grand over his target price. He's welcome to it – poor bloke, another self-employed guy on the edge, a victim of the bankers' recession.

"I'm gutted to see her go," Gary said, then blew his nose.

"I'm not," said his missus, her arm around his waist, helping him see the deal through and keep the bailiffs at bay.

Gary and I spent a couple of hours putting his Goddess through her paces before I paid cash, shook hands on it and set off. Fuel's an issue because they were built to run on leaded petrol and there are things that need to be added to get a good mix. Gary's filled her up so I can get her back home without the extra hassle. His wife waved us off with so much enthusiasm, and hugged Gary with such force that it occurred to me she might have been pushing the bids on eBay. Ah well, I don't begrudge them the money, they need it more than I do. Once I was on the open road and in fourth gear, Penny hummed happily enough on the flat. Gary told me that she'll do ten miles per gallon, if I'm lucky. Josie, my daughter, will have words no doubt, about the state of our planet. Not that I'm planning many trips with my new aristocratic mistress, the priority is to build Penny a home.

The bikers push back their chairs and get up. I say goodbye.

"No, Ken, we're coming with you," says Tiny, as he looks down on me.

I look at their faces, I haven't misread them have I, Hell's Grandads after all?

"Harley Davidson outriders at your service," all four of them salute in unison. "We do this sometimes, out of respect for a vehicle, and its driver of course," Tiny looks round his mates. "D'you remember that narrow boat on the low-loader the other week, what a beaut she was, eh?"

So, for my last half an hour on the motorway I have Bazzo and Tiny leading the way, with Sarge and Sherlock, just visible in my inadequate mirrors. We plod away at a steady thirty-five, on the downhills anyway, until I signal for my exit, they salute again, and roar off down the tarmac. I'm well chuffed.

Penny's a bit of a camel to steer and the brakes are all or nothing but it only takes me three shots at getting her nose as far into my drive as possible. I'd done measurements months ago, got rid of a flower bed to make enough width down the side of the house, but I wasn't going to shift my best shed until I brought a Goddess home.

I go in for a pee and have a bet with myself about how long it will take Mrs Aysgarth, my neighbour, to offer her five penn'orth. I walk round to Penny's rear and almost collide with Mrs A. I check my watch.

"Three minutes thirty-seven seconds. Yes, I win!"

"Come again?" she says.

"Good afternoon, Mrs A. What do you think?"

"I'm gobsmacked Ken, to be honest. It's enormous. What are you going to do with it?

"With *her,* Mrs A, I'm going to look after her, give her the care and attention she's deserves, maybe take her out occasionally, for a little light pumping."

"Thank you for that Ken. Well, her big arse is obstructing the pavement and anyone with a buggy, wheelchair, mobility scooter or whatever will not be best pleased if your fat lady forces them into the road." Her hands are on her hips.

"Point taken, I'm on the case." I get down on my knees and turn away as if to check the exhaust. Her shoes turn and leave but are quickly replaced by some cowboy boots belong to a Scots voice I know well - Josie's friend Mags. I get up slowly and peck her on the cheek.

"Wondrous, isn't she?" I say.

“Well,” she starts. Mags is not usually lost for words.

“’Preserved’, is what you’re looking for.” I say. “She’s only two years older than you, lovely body.”

“You old rascal,” she laughs. “I’ll be having a jog later, so if Josie’s at the allotment, I’ll let her know.”

“Give her my love.” I check that Penny’s doors are locked and go in to make myself some beans on toast.

The Goddesses were kept in air-conditioned warehouses, until the Home Office decided they were surplus to requirements. The bodies don’t stand up to weather at all well, so I’ve made my plans for a ‘car port’ down the side of the house with every dimension calculated to accommodate a Bedford R Series truck. Fortunately, my neighbour on that side is Kamaljeet Singh, a retired engineer, owner of a magnificent beard and magnanimous nature.

I power up my laptop, telling myself that I need to send a quick e-mail to Gary to let him know we have arrived safely, but the real reason is that I’m always on the lookout for bargains. Just now I’m looking for decent lengths of timber, so have a look through Freecycle and Gumtree. I check the weather forecast, see how the bids are going on the eBay for the Dinky tanker, can’t resist looking to see if anything else of interest has turned up. Before I know it, I’ve lost an hour.

Tarpaulins, like most other things, can be purchased online and delivered to the door. I have a patriotic selection of heavy-duty red, white and blue tarps ready for Penny’s arrival. She has a ladder up the back so all I have to do is climb up there with one cover at a time, arrange them like bedcovers and truss her up with the ropes I’ve already attached to the corners of the tarps.

I sniff the air as I close the side door of the house behind me. Smells like rain, no time to lose. I collect a folded blue tarp from the shed and carry it in front of me, it's so bulky I can't see where I'm going.

"Careful Dad," says Josie as we almost collide on the drive.

"That I am."

"Isn't it beautiful," she strokes Penny.

I almost drop my burden, did I hear her right? She does irony very well, our Josie, but I don't detect any. "*She* is," I say. "I need to wrap her up before this rain comes. Do you want to give me a hand?"

"My back's playing up," Josie says, "so I'm not lifting anything heavy."

"No problem." I take two ropes from the leading edge of the tarpaulin, tie them together, hitch them over a shoulder and climb the ladder to a refrain of "do be careful Dad, are you sure you know what you're doing?" and other admonitions. Once atop the ladder, I pick my way along Penny's roof, untie the ropes and drop the free ends for Josie to secure them to the wing mirrors. And so we proceed, overlapping the covers, Josie finds suitable anchorage points for the ropes that I cast over the sides for her. She's humming as she works.

Takes me back to family camping, we started when she was six – half a century ago. When Peter and Josie were tots, Jean and I would book a cottage but Peter used to climb the walls, sometimes literally. On Jean's salary we could have afforded B&Bs, hotels even, but Peter was already an embarrassment to her. Neither of us expected camping to work, imagined Peter taking off when we weren't looking, or having a meltdown. We chose a site close to home, where we could abort the mission if necessary. Peter, aged 7, stood with the breeze in his hair, his full-lipped mouth gulping in the freshness, eyes gazing at the far hills (it

was the paediatrician who said Peter's eyes were 'starry'), his blanket in hand, spellbound.

Josie helped me with the guy-ropes, alright I had to readjust them all after she was done, but she loved to help. Jean was happy enough once I'd furnished her with a cup of tea. Even happier once night had fallen, the children exhausted and fast asleep and we could find each other in the double sleeping bag. "Earthed," she said, and came back for more.

The rain starts to tap on the tarpaulins as Josie is tying down the last one. I back down the ladder, carefully of course. I make her a hot chocolate in the kitchen and we look at each other through the steam.

"Another project then?" she smiles.

I'll allow her the hint of condescension, I would still have been out there in the rain, now hurling itself so hard at the window that I wonder if it's hail, had she not come round to see me. She keeps herself busy, our Josie, stops her thinking about things. It takes one to know one.

"Indeed," I say. "She's a remarkable bit of kit, came from a good home, only one previous owner, after the Home Office of course.

"You can't keep her wrapped like in a tricolour like a heroine of the Revolution can you? Where she's going to live?"

That smile again. My eighty years does feel like a bit of a watershed. There's no clear ridge, it's clarty underfoot, sickly green sphagnum hides deeper bogs, eventually you realise the water is trickling away from you, and it'll be downhill from now on, with someone like Josie, bless her, guiding you in your declining years. A drop off a vertical cliff in the dark might be preferable.

"What are you thinking about Dad?"

“Peat bogs.” I smile back.

“She can’t live in one of those, can she?”

“No. You’ll be pleased to know I’m about to build her a high-class lean-to, the mother of all carports.

She stirs her hot chocolate for a while then looks at me. “There’s an interesting guy working number 89.”

“’Interesting’?” I raise my eyebrows.

“Not interesting in that way. I’m guessing he’s an asylum seeker. He’s a great worker, that plot’s getting sorted in no time.”

“You should ask him to help with yours.”

“I don’t need any help Dad. This will be my summer of love - for the allotment. I’m really looking forward to catching up with it at last.”

“Interesting in what way then?”

Her eyes are moistening. “We just don’t know what these people have been through, do we?” She looks down and grips the mug.

“Isn’t that true for all of us?”

Josie finishes her hot chocolate and goes to the sink to wash her mug. She’s a lovely girl. Her blonde hair is out of a bottle now, of course, but it helps to remind me of the look she had in her twenties, before her marriage fell apart. I’m thinking Goldie Hawn as was, but Josie would not be at all amused to know that. I’m so proud of the way she pulled herself out of the depths and rebuilt her life.

“Bye then.” She says. We hug before she lets herself out.

Chapter 3: Josie

I have a latte, Mags a double espresso. It's all Fairtrade of course; I wouldn't go anywhere that wasn't. The waitress and the barista are chatting about the election result. I'm glad they're angry that the Conservatives are back in. The staff are recent graduates, I guess, the age of so many of my friends' kids. Good minds, rubbish jobs, huge debts - but they're still smiling. So is Mags. She's on my case. We take our drinks outside and sit down. A couple of sips of espresso and her eyes skewer me as much as her question: "How many years have you been separated?"

I give my coffee a couple of unnecessary stirs. "About twenty-five," I mutter. It is, in fact, twenty-six years three months but I'm not letting on that I count the months, not even to Mags.

"A quarter of a century. How can you live with your capital 'L' when you're saddled with the title 'Mrs Emenike' like some baleful albatross round your neck? I don't understand you lassie, it's more than time to break free from your past.

She's beginning to sound like a broken record, the one I play in my head more often these days. We're sitting outside on shiny metal chairs perched on new decking, catching some May sunshine. So many coffee shops have sprung up since our suburb, known as 'the village' by some, became such a desirable place to live. For some it was the chance to catch the wave of rising house prices, for me it's where I have my roots. Fortunately the incomers haven't spoilt it, the local primary school is still as diverse as ever and I enjoy dipping into the blooming local arts scene when I can.

“Josie,” Mags reaches her hand across the table and clasps mine. “You canna let your life slip away like this.”

I withdraw my hand and look straight back at her. It's not hard to see why some men find her so alluring. Anyone could look past the profusion of laughter lines and be attracted to her mysterious grey-blue eyes. Her exploits are legendary. She is a bit more circumspect about men of her own age now, since the sudden death, in her bed, of the Elvis lookalike. She searches out younger models. They have a lot to learn, apparently.

I look back at those eyes. “I like my name: ‘Mrs Josie Emenike’. I’ve never stopped loving Charles. Yes I could jump into bed with someone I fancy, I’m sure you would give me all the tips I need, Ms Mags Munro.” I was glad we were alone on the decking, where grumbling traffic soaked up our intimacies.

“This is not about me, you eejit. Twenty-five years for God’s sake. You’re an attractive woman. What more can I say?” She drains her espresso in one. “Are you paying or am I?”

“My treat,” I say. “I expect you’re right, I just need to think about it.”

‘Think on.” Her eyes impale me again. She grins and gets up. We hug and she’s off, striding down the broad pavement, hips swaying, blue jeans clinging to her thighs, tan cowboy boots completing her ‘come hither’ look.

I take my time, pay the waitress, add a generous tip and set off along a street of between-the-wars semis, past the cul-de-sac with the four-bedroomed detached where I spent my childhood, past the old people’s home where Dad might end up, straight on towards the valley.

She's right of course. I should get a divorce. The pressures of work are off, switched off, just like that. One day I'm up to my elbows in a morass of NHS administration, the next I'm tilling the allotment. I refused the standard daytime nibbles and half-baked speeches courtesy of the NHS Trust. An evening meal with a few friends was a much better idea. My post had been shafted by the latest lot of jumped-up bean-counters; I certainly wasn't going to publicly thank them for the privilege of spending more time in my garden. But it is an opportunity, stepping off the hamster-wheel. There's more to life, I know that. Fifty-six is young these days. Living with a capital 'L' sounds good, but what the hell does it mean?

My flat is part of a three-storey block of no architectural merit but it's more than redeemed by the uninterrupted view of the trees in the valley. To wake in the morning, pull up the blinds and contemplate the interlacing wisdom of so many trees is a balm to the soul. I cried when one of them fell into the stream last year. There wasn't even a storm to uproot it, or heavy snow to weigh down its branches. It just fell.

Mags may be right, but I'm not going to contact any solicitor today. I didn't tell her where I'm going this afternoon. I even forgot to mention it to Dad when we were putting the tarps on his Green Goddess, but he never forgets. We mark Peter's birthday in our different ways. Today, I throw together a packed lunch, put on my walking gear and take the long route to a bus stop, up through the narrowing wood that preserves the lush essence of the valley, on past the allotments. There's no sign of mattock man.

The 36 to Harrogate has ideas above its station, but I'm not complaining. Its plush black imitation leather seats, generous leg room and capricious wi-fi are all very well, but my pleasure is the view from the top deck, enhanced today by red kites showing off their russet, white and black plumage riding the breeze in the noon sunshine.

The single-decker 24 up Nidderdale has no pretensions. There aren't many people on it. A few folk returning up the valley with their Harrogate shopping, a couple of high-school students bunking off or, perhaps, researching for Personal and Social Education as they snog noisily on the back seat. A young woman with a buggy, a toddler and a lad about four get off at one of the villages; on their way to visit granny, I overhear.

My first memory of my big brother Peter was the shock of realising that I was toilet-trained while he was still in nappies. My second was his kick in my face when I said "poo-poo pants."

"He's such a chatterbox," everyone said. Most children going to nursery are content to name cow, pig, duck and join in with their noises in 'Old MacDonald's Farm'. Our Peter talked of hippopotamus, elephant, even a platypus. His language was exotic. He had his own unique accent, neither the broad Leeds of Dad or the refined Harrogate of my mother but a strange Peterish, a breathless posh, Kenny Everett imitating David Cameron. When you got to know Peter - and by the time I joined him in the primary school at the end of our road, I knew him better than anyone else - you realised that his aristocratic 'conversation' was all one-way traffic. His tone was conversational but he didn't care if there was an answer or not, he just ploughed on, in Peterish.

“We don’t know where he came from.” A shorthand phrase used by both my parents, accompanied by a laugh, a way of explaining and not explaining their unusual son to other people. It’s true he didn’t look like either of them. Of course they knew where he came from. The school playground told me what mummies and daddies did to make babies long before my mother got round to it. I asked her, when I was five, whether Peter was adopted.

“Of course not Josephine.” She used my full name often, particularly when telling me off. I was always ‘Jo’ to my Dad. Much later, when I did the maths at high school, I realised she was already pregnant with Peter when she married Dad.

The 24 stops to let me off. I put a green waterproof on over my purple fleece and stroll down through the village, past their little school, still sporting strings of miniature cycling tops to celebrate ‘Le Tour’ last year. The old mill has slipped into disuse again, the wine merchants and tea-shop went with the recessions, a notice tells me there’s a planning application in to convert it into apartments. It’s a commutable distance to Harrogate, or Leeds or Bradford. It might work. I could imagine retiring here myself in a few years time, but for now I like the buzz of the city, my friendly suburb. And then there’s Dad.

“Secret Lake, SECRET LAKE!” Peter’s voice is in my head now as I walk up the gravel track on the other side of the valley.

The lake was his all time favourite place. When we were at primary school, before my parents’ relationship entered its ice age, or at least before I noticed it had, trips into the country were a solace to us all. Dad would show Peter and I flowers, fungi, birds’ nests; turn over stones to look at beetles, woodlice, worms and once, even a toad. On tracks like this one, my mother would often be way

ahead, relishing the fresh air. Sometimes she sang to herself, occasionally she would stretch out her arms and turn a full slow circle, her blonde hair blowing in the wind. I loved seeing her smile, when it was a real one.

They had to ration trips to the lake. By six it was Peter's favourite place, by eight it was his obsession. It was kept for special days, which is why I'm here now. The track has taken me past some cottages and a couple of barn conversions and over a stile into what could only be described, at six years of age, as a deep dark wood.

There are gritstone crags ahead and the steepening valley side is covered with a chaos of boulders colonised by lichen, moss, ferns, bracken and trees. The wood is only dark and deep for the first few yards of the path as it meanders between rocks under dense holly before the canopy breaks up and it's mainly birches with the occasional oak. A couple of boggy bits are easily avoided and then my route will take me over tree roots, dead bracken fronds, leaf litter. But I don't want to rush it. I know what's going to happen.

I sit on a boulder, breathe in the musty smell of damp Yorkshire birch woods and listen to my first willow warbler of the year. Three of them in fact, each staking out its territory. My back clicks and complains as I push myself on to my feet.

We passed another family here on one of our outings. Peter rushed up to them, as he did, and started gabbling on about something while their Labrador sniffed around his backside.

"Is he autistic?" said the woman, patting him on the head and smiling.

"No," said Dad, "He's Peter." Dad carried on walking. He didn't pat the Labrador.

When we had a whole day, Peter would be allowed as much time as possible at his secret lake. The next part of the adventure was to find the Tolkienesque path that took us past the crooked tree and angled up under the cliffs to the heather moorland above and on to the folly of two stone towers with the long view up the dale. By then, whether or not there were bilberries to be picked, Peter would be shouting "Secret Lake, SECRET LAKE!" and we'd have to retrace our steps. Only the promise of ice-cream or chocolate would persuade him back to the car.

It's hardly a lake, it's a large pond. It's not a secret either. As I stand gazing at the flat water there are a couple of crisp bags stuck in a bramble and a plastic bottle rammed between two rocks beside me. I collect all the litter and stuff it in my rucsack. I crouch down at the water's edge. Toadspawn. There's even toadspawn this year! At last I'm crying. It had to come.

The days are still short and I'm getting cold standing here sobbing. No time for the cliff path today, I've a bus to catch. The willow warblers are still going strong as I dawdle down the path. There's a motorbike coming. I stand aside as not one but two trailbikes roar and sputter towards me, their tyres gouging the track.

"You're not allowed here!" I scream at them, waving my arms frenetically, flapping like bat's wings.

One lad gives me the finger, the other tries, and fails, to spray me with mud as he revs his machine past me, too close.

I pick up a hot chocolate from a coffee shop opposite the bus station in Harrogate, but then have to down the drink too quickly when the driver reminds me that no hot beverages are allowed on his precious 36.

Back at the flat, weary and ready for an early night, there's an answerphone message on my landline. It'll be Dad, asking how I've marked the day, although he'll have guessed. But it's not Dad. It's the regal contralto of Mrs Patience Emenike, my mother-in-law.

"Josephine my dear, please phone me back. It's about Charles."

Her tone to me usually has just a hint of pity. This time there's an unsteadiness in her voice. She's no longer sure of herself, I can tell. Perhaps it's her age – she's well into her seventies and has moved to Solihull to be near one of her daughters. But this is about Charles, she said. I play the message again, my heart misses a few beats. I pour myself a gin and tonic.