



# Summer & Winter Tales

A short story by Graham Price

She struggled to hold the red umbrella from the wind that was gusting strongly, with the rain slanting down on her legs and feet. Evelyn then noticed the shop on her left with a small alcove into the doorway and a blue protective awning above — The Wise Owl Bookshop. A little shelter, she thought. She slipped into the alcove. The shop was closed and there was a grey cat huddled beside the door. The cat was wet as the rain continued to hit the lower part of the door. She crouched down. “Oh, you poor darling, this will keep us dry.” She positioned the umbrella so that it covered both of them . . . she wasn’t sure how long she could remain in a crouching position, especially with the new shoes she was wearing. The cat looked up at her and mewed . . . it touched her leg with its paw.

“Oh, did your naughty owner leave you out here all alone? Not very nice, is it?” The cat looked up at her and mewed again. The wind tried to tear the umbrella from her. “Well, my little ball of fluff, I’ll just have to wait here with you until things clear up. Cuddle up now.”

She heard some movement behind her and the door opened a crack.

The door opened further. “There you are Misty, how did you manage . . . oh, hello!”

Evelyn stood up and turned. He was about forty years of age, much the same height as her — an angular, reasonably handsome face with hazel eyes that seemed full of questions.

“I was just sheltering from the rain,” she said, “together with your cat. What lovely eyes she has.”

“It’s a he.”

“But the name!”

He smiled then. “My daughter Virginia named him, and in these days of gender equality, does it matter? You look a little wet. You’d better come in and dry off . . . this weather has turned rather foul. Usually, I’d stay open till four on a Saturday, but because of this dreadful weather, well, hardly anyone about.”

“Thank you. I would be looking rather ragged by the time I got home. Thank you for your kind offer.”

“Come through to the parlour. You’re just in time for some tea.”

The cat scampered inside and Evelyn closed the door. The shop was small, but tightly packed with shelves of books. She’d passed by numerous times and had always promised herself that she would call in and browse, but time being what it was and with an eagerness to get home, she never did. Besides, she had her favourite bookshop on High Street where she could sit with coffee and cake to read. There was something different about this shop; her regularly visited was large and efficient, very bright, this was small with what seemed to be a certain warm untidiness about it. She was even sure that she could see dust on one of the shelves. The light was subdued with the electric lighting being turned off, so what was coming through the front windows cast a bleak paleness upon the books . . . kind of spooky, she thought. Dickens would have loved it. She could imagine Pip sitting on one of the wooden chairs, leafing through the book that was all about him — *Great Expectations* — with a withered looking Miss Havesham sitting behind the desk, writing with a quill into a formidable brass-edged diary. For a moment, she imagined that she saw those piercing grey eyes, but then they vanished.

The man said something inaudible, which startled her out of her dream. And she walked through the short passageway into the parlour. Surprisingly, it was tidy and clean, the furnishings were of soft colours with one wall papered over. She looked closely, the wallpaper was a light lemon shade with trees, shrubs and flowers, around which tiny cats and dogs played again and again. There was what appeared to be a small kitchen at the rear and at the side a timber stairway with wrought iron railing running up, no doubt to living quarters. The building was ancient. She thought perhaps 1870s — solid stone facade, some granite on foundations and edges, red brick outer side-walls, but sturdy timber and smooth plaster within High decorated ceilings, long windows almost floor to ceiling, an air of ageless architectural grandeur. What had it



been before it became a bookshop? A grocery perhaps, no, it would have to have been more upmarket than that . . . something such as millinery — a tailor's perhaps? Or had it had numerous retailers of much variety since its foundation? Whatever, it would originally have been owned and run by a live-in family, being of three levels. An interesting history, perhaps?

“Help yourself to a seat, Miss er . . .”

“Evelyn Hughes,” she said, selecting the soft brocade-covered one near an open fireplace which was blazing away, with crackling sparks flying fiercely now and then behind the brass fire screen. Cosy, she thought, stretching her hands out toward the tiled warmth.

“Welsh ancestors, no doubt,” he said, “much as mine are. I'm Robert Lewis.” He disappeared into the kitchen.

“Mmm, I guess so.” The cat came up to her, sat by her feet and gave another tiny mew. “Do you have a towel handy?” she called out.

“Yes.” He re-entered after a moment with a scarlet coloured bath towel and handed it to her.

“It's not for me. If it's all right with you, I'll give your cat a rub down.”

He laughed. “Fine by me. You like animals?”

“Always. Had cats and even a dog as a child, but none since moving up here.” She placed the towel on her knees, popped the cat on top, and proceeded to gently wipe down the furry creature.

“You should get yourself one. Must see how the jug is going.”

Misty purred and began kneading his paws into the towel. “Loving this aren't you, my little sweet?”

“He'll want you to do that always. He's a Russian Blue, you know.” said a young voice coming from the stairway.

Evelyn turned to see a girl with long wavy auburn hair and brown eyes, about eight years of age, standing on the lower step.

“Oh hello, you must be Virginia!”

The girl came toward her. “I am. You're not doing that quite right. You have to rub down from the head to the tail, not all over willy nilly.”

“My, you've probably had more experience than me. Do you want to finish?”

The girl stood close. “No, if you just be gentle with him, that's fine. He's very sensitive, you know.”

“He seems to be enjoying it.”

Virginia nodded, her auburn hair falling in front of her face. She brushed it back. “Yes, he must like you, otherwise . . . who are you, anyway?”

Her father came in with a tray of tea and biscuits. “The lady's name is Evelyn Hughes, Virginia, and she very kindly protected Misty from all that horrible wind and rain with her umbrella. So, we are giving her thanks by inviting her in for afternoon tea. Would you like some biscuits, or perhaps there is some cake left over from your birthday yesterday?”

“Oh,” said Evelyn, “Happy Birthday! So, now you are, what . . . nine, eight?”

“I'm eight, and thank you for the wishes. Would you like to see what daddy bought for my birthday?”

Evelyn finished rubbing the cat down and placed him on the carpet. She folded the towel and placed it to one side. “I would . . . I most certainly would. Are you going to give me a clue, or will it be a surprise?”

“A surprise! A surprise!” chuckled Virginia. “I won't be a moment.”

Robert laughed and began to pour the tea. “She was so excited when she undid the wrapping and saw what it was. It wasn't an easy choice . . . she's long past dolls and childish games . . . so, I thought, because she's so smart . . . oh well,



let her show it, that will please her very much. It looks as if you have won a heart. You said earlier, that you'd moved up here, from where might that have been?"

"Tasmania. I'd always endured Hobart's cold winters with some sort of courage, but Melbourne's seem to be just as freezing."

"Tell me about it! I'd prefer it a little warmer, even if to entice more customers in. Do you work around here somewhere? Milk, sugar?"

"Milk thanks, no sugar. Yes, walking distance. I'm a graphic designer with Barlows. We sometimes do book covers."

He nodded, taking his tea black with one sugar. He was watching her carefully, probably not yet thirty, perhaps about twenty-seven, fair curly hair, brown eyes . . . a handsome if not beautiful face. "Yes, Cowan Sheridan's last book cover was done by them. Very apt. I'm sure it helped his sales figures."

She took a sip of her tea. "That was one of mine."

He put down his cup. "Really! So, I'm sitting next to a celebrity."

She laughed and nearly spilt her tea. "Oh no, nothing like that. But, yes, I did think it worked for me, and him as well. Have you met him?"

He munched into a biscuit. "No, I don't move in those circles. Life has taken on a quieter tone for me, since . . . well, since Susan went."

"I don't follow."

"My wife passed away four years ago. Cancer . . . it wasn't easy toward the end, and it was difficult trying to shield Virginia from the downside of it. Well, the bookshop simply took over . . . I suppose I buried myself in my work. I so love books. I guess it was a natural enough transition going from the depths of grief into loving and selling books. They so often deal with death and grieving and then often, quite often, moving on into light."

"Oh, I . . . um, sorry."

"Well," he said. "Eat up, there's plenty more biscuits where these came from."

Virginia ran down the stairs clutching a parcel.

"Look," she said, kneeling on the floor and placing the object on the small occasional table. She unwrapped it. Evelyn raised her eyebrows. "A Notebook computer! Oh, that's very clever of your father, Virginia. And what do you plan to use it for?"

Virginia looked up at Evelyn, rolled her head to one side and smiled. "I write little stories. Now, I can print them out and give them to my friends. May I send one to you?"

"Yes, you may. I will give you my address. You know, Virginia, I write stories too."

"Oh, really! Are you published?"

"Yes, indeed. Your father may have my book of short stories in his shop."

Robert put his cup down with a loud clatter onto the saucer. "Hughes . . . why, of course . . . *Summer & Winter Tales!* Why didn't I realise that?"

Evelyn laughed. "You had no reason to think that a wet bedraggled stranger and a teller of short tales was one and the same."

Virginia had dashed off into the bookshop.

Robert rubbed his chin with his right hand. "I expect she knows exactly where it is . . . you know, Evelyn, for an eight-year-old . . . well, sometimes I think she has the mind of one who is twelve or more."



“She’s lovely.”

“Yes . . . without her my life would be somewhat forlorn.”

“You’re very fortunate as a single father that your work and domestic life is contained within one building.”

“Yes, I’m grateful for that. The shop is doing well. I have a select clientele for whom I regularly buy in certain genre books — they are my bread and butter, and then there are the passers-by, who sometimes come in droves during better weather than this. But the shop gets too crammed on busy days; I was thinking of smashing down the connecting wall and extending into this room. There are plenty of rooms upstairs, so it wouldn’t really matter to lose this parlour.”

“Might need to consult an architect for that. These old buildings have hidden reinforcements where you wouldn’t expect them to be.”

“You know something about buildings?”

Evelyn carefully sipped her tea and hesitated before answering. “My late husband was an architect.”

Robert looked startled. “If you don’t mind me saying so, you look so . . . so young to be, ah . . . to be a widow.”

“Well,” she laughed, “thank you for that, but I will be thirty-three next week.”

“Ha, so you are a Leo sign, just the same as Virginia!”

She shrugged. “Looks like it.”

Virginia came rushing back with the book in her hand. “There was only this one left.”

“Let me see,” said Robert. “Oh yes, second edition too. I think I have sold twenty or more copies. What do you think, Virginia, if we ask nicely perhaps Evelyn will sign a few copies for us? I’ll have to order more. In fact I could do a special window arrangement for *Summer & Winter Tales*.”

“Goody, fancy us having a real writer in our home! Please say yes, Evelyn!”

“Well, you have me here as your guest, so I’d be very pleased to sign firstly this copy, and then any copies that your father might order in for the next time I visit.”

Virginia jumped a little, bouncing up and down on her feet. “Yes, come again, come again. I could bring my school friends around to meet you.”

Robert smiled and shook his head “Not so fast, Virginia. We’ve only just met Evelyn. I’m sure she will need some time to consider things. Besides, *Summer & Winter Tales* is not a children’s book.”

“But Evelyn could write one for us, couldn’t you?”

Evelyn reached out for Virginia’s hand. “Yes, possibly, about an eight-year-old girl who receives a magic computer for her birthday and who, upon opening it up finds it full of stellar beings from another world. Yes, I think I could write that. But, you’re a story writer, Virginia . . . you could do that . . . just think what magic is inside your new Notebook! You could write it up for your friends, and one day, Virginia, you will have a book of your own to display in your father’s bookshop.”

“Yes,” said Virginia, “I will, I will. And I will call it *The Wizard Cat of the Magic Notebook!*”

And, dear readers, that’s exactly what happened. Three months later Evelyn Hughes and Robert Lewis were married, with a little story teller as their flower girl. Then, nine years after that a children’s book display appeared in the window of The Wise Owl Bookshop with signed copies from the author, Virginia Lewis. The book was on the children’s best seller list with its dust jacket designed by Evelyn Hughes-Lewis. Oh, and the book’s name? Why, *The Wizard Cat of the Magic Notebook*, of course. And curled up in the corner of the window next to an illustrated page of one of the books was a little grey cat, with its blue eyes half closed and its paws curled gently around its whiskers. And if cats could smile, this one certainly was. •