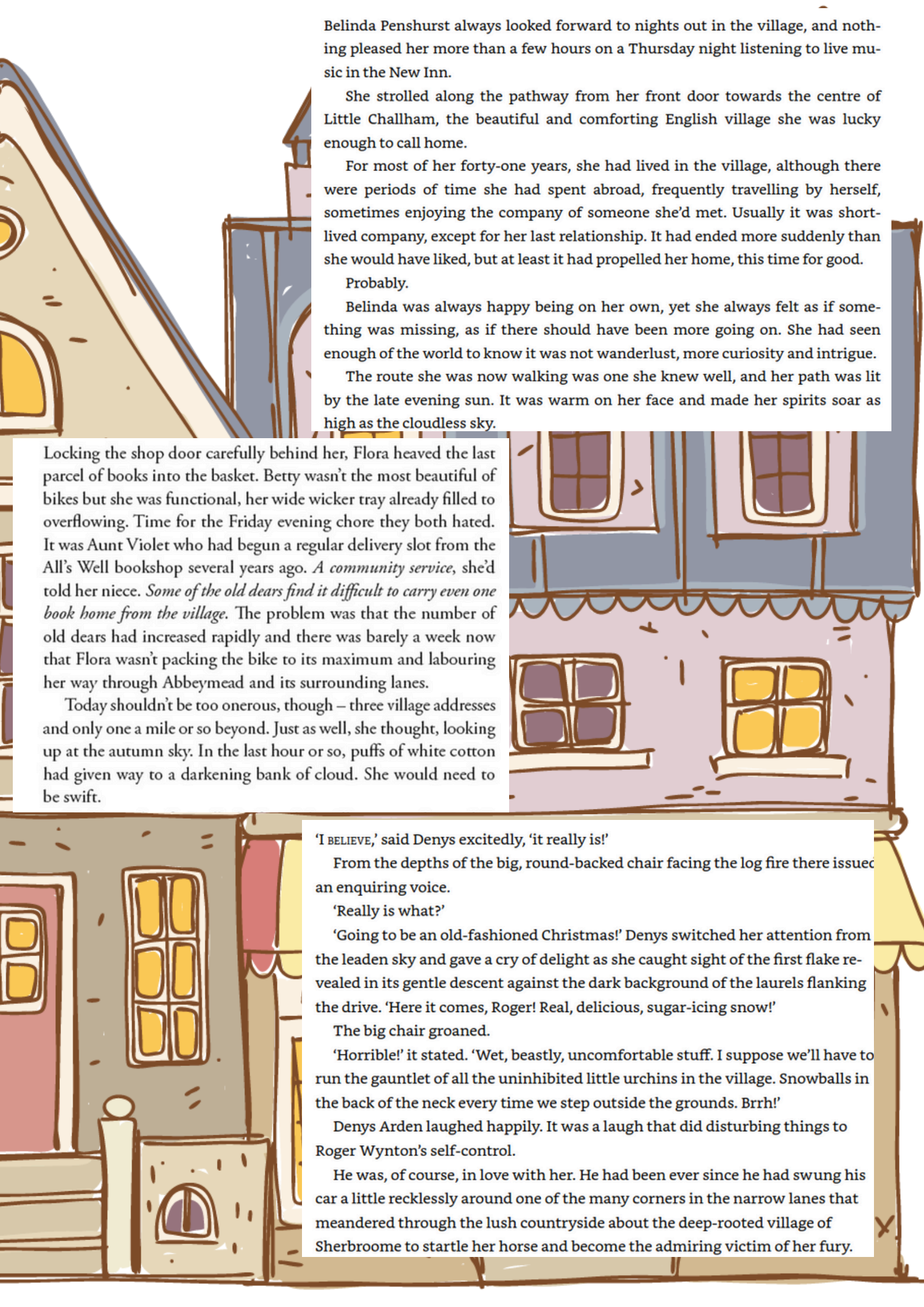


A stylized illustration of a village street. On the left, a house with a yellow door and a window is visible. In the center, a chimney rises from a building. On the right, a house with a red door and a window is shown. The street is paved with cobblestones, and there are some small plants and flowers. The overall style is simple and colorful.

Belinda Penshurst always looked forward to nights out in the village, and nothing pleased her more than a few hours on a Thursday night listening to live music in the New Inn.

She strolled along the pathway from her front door towards the centre of Little Challham, the beautiful and comforting English village she was lucky enough to call home.

For most of her forty-one years, she had lived in the village, although there were periods of time she had spent abroad, frequently travelling by herself, sometimes enjoying the company of someone she'd met. Usually it was short-lived company, except for her last relationship. It had ended more suddenly than she would have liked, but at least it had propelled her home, this time for good.

Probably.

Belinda was always happy being on her own, yet she always felt as if something was missing, as if there should have been more going on. She had seen enough of the world to know it was not wanderlust, more curiosity and intrigue.

The route she was now walking was one she knew well, and her path was lit by the late evening sun. It was warm on her face and made her spirits soar as high as the cloudless sky.

Locking the shop door carefully behind her, Flora heaved the last parcel of books into the basket. Betty wasn't the most beautiful of bikes but she was functional, her wide wicker tray already filled to overflowing. Time for the Friday evening chore they both hated. It was Aunt Violet who had begun a regular delivery slot from the All's Well bookshop several years ago. *A community service*, she'd told her niece. *Some of the old dears find it difficult to carry even one book home from the village.* The problem was that the number of old dears had increased rapidly and there was barely a week now that Flora wasn't packing the bike to its maximum and labouring her way through Abbeymead and its surrounding lanes.

Today shouldn't be too onerous, though – three village addresses and only one a mile or so beyond. Just as well, she thought, looking up at the autumn sky. In the last hour or so, puffs of white cotton had given way to a darkening bank of cloud. She would need to be swift.

'I BELIEVE,' said Denys excitedly, 'it really is!'

From the depths of the big, round-backed chair facing the log fire there issued an enquiring voice.

'Really is what?'

'Going to be an old-fashioned Christmas!' Denys switched her attention from the leaden sky and gave a cry of delight as she caught sight of the first flake revealed in its gentle descent against the dark background of the laurels flanking the drive. 'Here it comes, Roger! Real, delicious, sugar-icing snow!'

The big chair groaned.

'Horrible!' it stated. 'Wet, beastly, uncomfortable stuff. I suppose we'll have to run the gauntlet of all the uninhibited little urchins in the village. Snowballs in the back of the neck every time we step outside the grounds. Brhh!'

Denys Arden laughed happily. It was a laugh that did disturbing things to Roger Wynton's self-control.

He was, of course, in love with her. He had been ever since he had swung his car a little recklessly around one of the many corners in the narrow lanes that meandered through the lush countryside about the deep-rooted village of Sherbroome to startle her horse and become the admiring victim of her fury.