

## ALICE a novel

Martin Nelson

This is a work of fiction. The places are real. The Characters are fictitious. Any similarity between them and living persons is purely coincidental.

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‘Hey Lady, you can’t sleep here,’ the Officer said shaking my shoulder.

‘Wha-at, did you say? I don’t understand?’

I was floating down through layers of billowing clouds towards a flickering light. I slowly opened my eyes and was blinded by its brightness. Blinking I realised that it was coming from a torch held by a Patrol Officer.

‘You can’t sleep here.’ He repeated.

I struggled to sit up, shivering from the cold; wrapping my rags around me.

‘OK OK, let me get my stuff, I’ll go.’

I’d got used to this kind of thing. Ordinary people don’t like to see down and outs like us trying to sleep in public places. They don’t want to be reminded of the unfortunates in society. Why can’t they see that they are very close to the edge? The death of a loved one, the loss of a job, an illness can unexpectedly push a person onto the street. We are all one-step away from desolation and loneliness.

Maybe we are an uncomfortable reminder of what could happen to anyone? On the street people avoid us like the plague. They may stare, they may ignore us and they may even cross the road, looking the other way as they walk past, or even glaring at us as if we had chosen to be there.

But now the endless question, where will I go? Where will I hide from the pitying look of passers by? I wonder? I think there's a toilet near here. The police officer is still waiting.

'I'll go, I promise but let me sit here for a moment, I beg you. I feel dizzy and sick.'

Patrol Officer Murphy had been through this so many times before. He wanted to leave me to sober up but he had orders and that meant moving the undesirable out of sight.

I struggled to my feet. Then I remembered the Public toilet in Central Park. He can't follow me there. I prayed that it would be open. I picked up my bundle, all my worldly possessions and struggled unsteadily down the steps. The stairs were slimy, still wet from the recent rain and I could sense my feet slipping. I stopped and felt with my bare toes, step by step until I reached the bottom. That's when I got a whiff of the smell, that nauseous smell of toilets, a mixture of urine, tobacco and disinfectant. I stopped and waited to catch my breath, panting and sweating, I listened. I couldn't hear anything. It's empty. I breathed a sigh of relief. I hated meeting people in the public toilets; they always looked at me as if I'm trash. What do they know about me, nothing? All they see is a dirty old smelly woman.

They don't recognise me. I want to tell them who I am. To shout out that I was famous, famous! I don't think they would believe me if I told them that I was once feted, an actress who was a household name. They would have seen my movies, my face on beauty magazines. It makes me feel so miserable to think who I was and who I have become.

I was an only child and grew up in a middle class family. I had everything I needed. I went to a good school and as soon as I could I joined the amateur dramatics society. I loved to show off. I knew I was pretty, my mother told me so and dressed me in pretty clothes. I was soon doing all the lead parts in the school shows. I think I was very gifted, everyone said so. I was called a child prodigy. One year Matthew Marks a film producer, the father of one of the children in my school came to the school play and saw me. I didn't know anything about it until later. He came to our house and spoke to my parents. I was in my room at the time and they called me to come down to meet him. He was not old, about my father's age. He had a mustache and blue green eyes. I remember his eyes; they seem to stare straight through me. My mother introduced him.

'Alice this is Mr Marks. He is a Theatre director. He saw you in the school play and thinks you are very talented and that we should send you to Drama school when you are eighteen. Would you like that?'

I was so excited. I couldn't wait to tell my friends at school. My mother knew that I was in love with the theatre and would give anything to be an actress. I jumped at the opportunity and two years later with his help I enrolled in the Julliard school of

Drama in the Lincoln Center in New York. I remember my first day. Mother came with me. We got a taxi from the station and it stopped outside a prestigious building of glass and Portland stone. Above the entrance were the words 'The Julliard School' and below 'The Irene Diamond building'. I remember staring at them; they seemed to be an invitation into a miraculous world.

I was eighteen and I thought I was invincible, I had the world at my feet but I had a rude awakening. My fellow students were so talented so beautiful and handsome, I felt like an ugly duckling beside them. I had a regional accent and had to learn to hide it. I was still a bit gawky with baby fat and I soon began to eat carefully and exercise regularly. I could feel myself changing. I was becoming a woman and a very attractive one. But it was very hard. I had to be so disciplined. When I went out with some of my fellow students I watched, as people around me would drink and smoke, things I was dying to do but knew I mustn't. Everyone seemed to be so grown up and I was struggling to become an adult. I felt as if my life had stopped. I didn't know where I was going but one day that all changed.

A noise stopped my musings. Someone had come into the toilet. I waited until I heard the toilet flush and their footsteps slowly fade before I moved. I couldn't stay there all night so I decided to go back to the park hoping to avoid the officer. I soon found a bench in an area concealed by bushes and lay down. I must have dozed off because I was suddenly woken by the sound of a young woman screaming. I dragged myself off the bench and peered through a hedge in the direction of the

sound. My head was throbbing and my eyes sticky and sore. Through the bushes I could see a group of young men standing over a young black girl who was screaming, some of her shirt was torn as they were grabbing at her. Shaking my head to clear the effects of the wood liquor, I tried to shout,

‘Stop get away from her,’ but my voice came out like a croak.

Is this my problem? I asked myself. Haven’t I enough difficulties without getting involved in another person’s life. I’m sure she’s enjoying it, the attention of so many boys. She must have brought it on herself. I’ll just ignore it. But her cries of help! Help! Drew me back and thinking no more, I struggled through the undergrowth to confront them, boys all less than eighteen year’s old. One saw me and nudged the others.

‘Look whose come to help?’ They laughed and one gave me a V up yours! Sign.

‘Go away bitch, you’re not wanted here,’ another shouted. At first I was frightened but then I remembered and reached into my bag. I felt about and found it. Closing my fingers around the handle, I withdrew my pistol, an ivory-handled Lady Derringer and brought it into view. I always carried it since I had been attacked many years ago. I cocked it. Suddenly the young men stopped what they were doing.

‘What the hell?’ One said. ‘She’s got a gun. Fuck!’

Another began to advance towards me with his hand outstretched.

‘Come ‘on missus, give it to me,’ he said in a wheedling voice. ‘You wouldn’t know ‘ow to use it you old bag.’

I drew myself up to my full height and with my hand shaking pointed it at him.

'If you come any closer, I'll blow your brains out,' I said. 'You girl come over here.' The girl began to move.

'Don't you move or I'll throttle you,' one said to her. There was visible fear in the girl's eyes and her face had blanched but she continued to move towards me.

'Stand behind me girl,' I commanded in my toughest voice. The young men were obviously confused and as I stood with the gun pointing at the nearest one, the oldest one said,

'Lets get out of here, the old woman's mad. She might do anything. We can always find another bitch,' and they were gone.

There was a strange silence after they had gone. The girl remained crouching on the ground uncertain what to do.

'Get up dear,' I said softly putting the gun back in my bag. 'What are you doing here anyway? It's dangerous for a young woman like you to be out at this time,' I said naively. She got to her feet. I could see she was no more than eighteen and very thin. She was wearing a short tightly fitting skirt and a snug top outlining her small breasts.

'I was waiting for a client,' she said in a Southern accent.

I was confused for a moment. I should have realised what she was doing but it didn't cross my mind. In a funny way we were both in the same position, she on the street selling herself and me on the street having ruined my life. While I was pondering over the situation she said,

'What were you doing in the park?' Her question surprised me. I thought it was pretty obvious from my appearance.

'I umm, am homeless. I've been living like this for several months. I lost my home. It's a long story. I don't want to bore you with my problems you've probably got enough of your own.'

'No wait, I am interested. Look, you saved my life today and I owe you.'

'No you don't, anyone would have done the same. You don't owe me anything.'

'Listen lady, that's where you're wrong. In my short life no one has ever done anything for me without wanting something in return, d'you see what I am saying, no one. I never knew my parents and was brought up in a home. You are the first. You risked your life for me and I owe you. I believe we are bound together by fate.'

I listened. It was as if she was lifting a veil on my life and showing me that I was not a nothing that having nothing didn't make me a nothing. Then she said something that surprised me.

'I don't know you and we have never met but I have a small pad and a couch. My name is Delilah, that's my working name my real name is Sofia. Would you like to stay there tonight to clean up and we could discuss our future together?' She smiled.

We were walking towards her place when the same officer suddenly appeared. He must have been waiting for us.

'Hey you!' He called out to me 'I've just heard you carry a gun? Two young men told me to watch out for you.'

'Two young men did you say? Were they wearing hoods and jeans?'

'Yes why?'

'Because they and their friends were about to rape my friend here, I got there just in time and when I flourished my pistol they ran!'

'You should go after them not us; we're going home.' interrupted Sofia.

'Is that true?' Asked the policeman obviously confused. 'Were they attacking you?'

'Yes but thanks to this lady and her gun they fled.'

'OK on this occasion I'll do nothing but in future make sure you have a license, we're not in the Wild west here you know?'

'I wouldn't have known.' said Sofia under her breath.

Sofia's offer was too good to refuse. I was so tired and sick of living rough. But I was a little suspicious. Sofia was a complete stranger and she was offering me a bed. In all the time I'd been a social outcast I had never been offered anything, rather I'd received abuse and ridicule. I've been spat at, had rubbish thrown at me, even sworn at, being accused of being 'a lazy fat cow'. Terrible names that really got to me. But I suppose they weren't wrong. I was a failure. I had slipped out of the normal pattern of life into a parallel existence living but not living. Now a total stranger was being kind to me and I was suspicious.

I smiled for the first time in a long time.

'Thank you I would like that,' I said.

I picked up my few things and followed her. She walked too fast for me and I had to ask her to slow down. She turned and with a smile took my bundle



and carried it for me. After several hundred yards we entered a door to a local high-rise building.

'I live here,' she whispered, 'on the fourth floor, can you manage? There's a lift but its not clean.' I nodded.

It was a difficult climb and I was breathing heavily when we got to her front door.

'Wait here while I get my key and then you can rest.' I stood leaning against the wall feeling my heart pounding in my chest. Gradually it slowed and I felt better. By this time the door was open and I followed her into the darkened room. The air was stale with the smell of clothes waiting to be washed. Sofia hurried to the windows and pulled open the curtains. The room was suddenly bathed in bright light and fresh air came flooding in. She had a single large room with a small cooking area in the corner, a bedroom and a separate shower and toilet. She had made it very homely with a small couch covered in a flowery material adorned with several cushions.

'This is it,' she announced. 'Make yourself at home.' I felt very self-conscious knowing how dirty and unkempt I must have appeared but she seemed not to care.

'You must want to clean up,' she said. 'I've got some lovely hot water and plenty of towels. Let me have your clothes and I will put them in the washing machine.' I undressed and stepped into the shower. It had been a long time since I was last naked and it felt strange, my body was a stranger to me. I reached forwards and turned the tap on slowly, I didn't want the jet to be too strong. Looking down I could see the dirt encrusted on my feet washing into the outlet.

The warm water was delicious. The feeling of it pouring over my head and my shoulders, running down my back, made me want to cry. My skin, so dry and flakey, peeled off to reveal healthy pink skin underneath.

'How are you doing Alice?' shouted Sofia. 'Are you having fun in there?'

'It's wonderful. I can't believe what an amazing feeling it is. I had forgotten what a pleasure a shower could be. It's been such a long time since I last had one.'

Wrapped in a warm towel. I sat on the settee waiting for my clothes to come out of the machine. Sofia joined me.

She needed to explain:

'When I was sixteen they threw me out of the home, it's the law you know. I don't know what they expected us to do, homeless and penniless. So it was inevitable that I went on the street.'

'Couldn't welfare help you? There must be people that could help you?'

'Yeah well I went to see the social to try and get a job.'

'What happened?'

'I went into this big building, climbed three flights of stairs and entered a large room. There were lots of people sitting around and there were people at desks. I had to complete an application form. I don't read well you know so I couldn't do it so I asked a man who was sitting next to me to help me but he just turned away.

'Do it yourself,' he said and got up and sat somewhere else. I felt such a fool. Anyway after a time my name was called and I sat at the desk in front of a big fat blonde woman. Her name was

Maisie. It was on the sign on her desk. She is reading my form and I can see that she is confused. She begins to ask me some questions like what was my address. It was stupid; she could see that I had been thrown out of the home. I got a bit angry.'

'Look Miss,' I said. 'I ain't got anywhere to live. I need help not a lot of frigging questions. Then she got angry and told me that if I didn't cooperate, she would ask me to leave. It was just awful. In the end she found me a hostel where I could stay at night but had to leave in the morning. She also gave me an address for a job.'

'I ain't got no money,' I said and she fishes in her bag and gives me five dollars. That was the kindest thing she did and I thank her for that.'

'Then she asked me to leave and that was that.'

I was watching Sofia as she recalled the interview.

'I can see it really upset you.' I said

'Yeah it ain't my fault that I can't read well. It's not that I'm stupid. I just didn't get the chance. Why didn't she of all people understand that? That made me really pissed off. That woman had made me feel a fool.'

'What did you do then?'

'Well I goes to the hostel. It wasn't far away and I go in. It was a miserable place near a factory, the road outside was full of rubbish and there were un-emptied rubbish bins spilling over with flies. The smell was awful. The entrance was dark but my eyes got used to it and I see a desk in the far side. A man is sitting reading a newspaper and smoking. I walk over and say,

‘Good morning.’ He doesn’t look up. I stand waiting and then I kick the desk lightly. He glares at me’

‘You come from social?’ he asks.

‘Yeah,’ and I hand him the piece of paper. He looks at it and mutters to himself,

‘More rubbish?’ Just loud enough that I can hear, I ignore him. Then he says,

‘The hours are 7 pm to 9 am. Come back tonight and I will give you a bed.’

I nod and leave.

‘Did you go and look for the address of the job?’

‘Yeah I can still recall it. It was a restaurant. I was to work in the kitchen. It was a fast food outlet I remember, serving hamburgers, fish fingers and the like. I asked to see the manager.

‘Good morning,’ I said. ‘I am the new worker that you wanted. I have come from the social.’ A woman in her thirties came out from the back. She was wearing a dirty apron.

‘Do you have any experience?’ She bellowed at me.

‘No,’ I said, ‘but I am a quick learner.’

‘OK you can start in the kitchen peeling potatoes and vegetables.’

It was the days before French fries could be bought already cut. She gave me an apron and I began work. I hadn’t done any physical work with my hands for a very long time so I found it very hard and I wasn’t very skilled with the potato peeler so I wasted a lot of the potato. She stood over me and shouted,

‘You’ve got to do better. I can’t afford so much waste.’

‘So what did you do?’ I asked,

‘I tried harder cutting more carefully and gradually I got better but it was a soul-destroying job. I hated it. I used to dread going to work to be faced with the mountains of potatoes to be peeled and cut. Even now I’ll do anything to avoid peeling potatoes.’

‘What was the hostel like?’

‘Not bad I guess, I had my own room, small but private. I shared the shower and toilet. The showers were open so that there was no privacy. Some of the women would go around prodding you while you were showering asking to see your pussy. It was very embarrassing. Being so young they were always interested in me.’

‘So then what happened?’

‘What I have learned in my short life is that you need a bit of luck.’

‘How do you mean?’ I was interested in this because I didn’t really believe in luck.

‘I had been working for about three months when this fella starts talking to me. I hadn’t noticed him before but he calls me over one day and says how much he is attracted to me. His name was Larry and he was in his early twenties, a smart dresser and I could see he had money. Larry starts to come in at the same time each day and I begin to look forward to seeing him as he always left me a big tip. I should have known that he was up to no good but I was young and didn’t know better. One day he sidles up to me and says he would like to meet me after work. I refused at first but he’s insistent ain’t he and I agree.

Larry is waiting for me after work and walks me to this big, black, shiny limo. He opens the door for me like a real gentleman. It seemed all unreal

and I fell for it. We drive to a beauty spot and he is all over me telling me how much he loves me and how he wants to give me a better life. Well it had to be better than what I had so I agree.

After a few days he comes to the café and gives me an envelope.

‘See you later,’ he says and off he goes. I was so excited I couldn’t wait to open it. During my break I sit on the toilet and tear it open. Inside was a piece of paper with an address written on it, and a key. I sat looking at the key. I knew that I was about to take a chance. I was a bit scared, I had heard about men who take advantage of young girls but I was so desperate. I hated my life and would do anything for a change. After work I checked on the address and took a bus. It stopped outside a smart block with a doorman.

‘What d’you want? You can’t come in here.’ He growled as I entered the building through the rotating door. Then I showed him the piece of paper and he changed, suddenly he was all ‘yes Miss no Miss.’

‘You want the third floor number 308 Miss,’ he said pointing to the lift and rushing forwards to press the button. I was beginning to enjoy what was happening. I got out and checked the door numbers until I found the one.

I stood outside the door reading the brass numbers. Oh well I said to myself I may as well go in. The key turned easily and the door opened with a swish. I entered. It was amazing. I had seen places like it on the TV but never in real life. It was real cool with black and white furniture, what they call minimalistic. There was a thick carpet on the floor; my feet seemed to sink into it as I walked in. Beyond I could see the bedroom with this King

sized bed and ensuite bathroom all shiny and white. It felt like I was in heaven. I bounced on the bed shouting for joy. I couldn't believe my luck. I should have known then that nothing is for nothing. It always comes with a price and I paid a big price.'

'How do you mean?' I asked.

She continued,

'I arranged to bring my things there, had a wonderful shower and slept a bit when I hear a key in the front door and Larry comes in all cheery.

'Good,' he says coming over and kissing me. You've made yourself at home.' I feel so grateful to him that I kiss him back and one thing leads to another and we make love. He stays the night and next day I make him breakfast like we were husband and wife. Everything went OK for a few days and then one morning he says to me that he has a friend who would like to meet me.

I say,

'Fine, any friend of yours is a friend of mine,' I says laughing. Well later that day the friend arrives. I was surprised when he had a key and was able to let himself into the apartment. Suddenly this complete stranger is standing in the lounge.

'Hi,' he says, 'my name's Peter.' We shake hands. He goes over to the bar and helps himself to a drink and now I am feeling very uncomfortable.

'Is Larry coming later?' I ask but he doesn't reply. He gets himself another drink and then asked me what I would like. I don't drink much and in any case it was mid afternoon. So I said,

'I'll have a coke.'

'Come and sit down next to me,' he says patting the cushion. By now I am suspicious. Then he grabbed me and pinned me on the couch. Then

I realised what he wanted I tried to push him away but he forced himself onto me and raped me.

I was showering in the bathroom when I hear Larry's voice. I rushed out and grabbed him.

'Your friend here,' I said pointing to Peter, 'has just raped me.'

'She wouldn't cooperate so I had to force her,' Peter said. I expected Larry to be irate but he just smiled and said to Peter.

'I'm sorry she'll get used to it, don't worry.' And then the whole thing came out.

'You don't think I put you into this place because I love you? Get this into your pretty head, you're here to work.'

I could see that Sofia was getting more and more furious as she told her story.

But I was beginning to yawn and said,

'I need to hear your story but I'm tired so tired can't think straight. Can you continue the story tomorrow?'

'Sure I'll just stay here on the couch and relax.'

We said good night and I settled down on the sofa. It was the first time in years that I slept on a soft comfortable surface and expected to be asleep in minutes. As it was I lay awake with the Sofia's story spinning in my head.

My story was so different. I was stunning in my early twenties. The critics described me as a classic beauty with my clear blue eyes, dewy complexion, high cheekbones and luscious long hair. I had returned to England and was already getting small parts in films as the maid or the



secretary but it wasn't long before my big break came. I was offered a part in a soap being made at the Lime Grove Studios by the BBC. It was a country story and ran for several years. I played the part of the Lord of the Manor's wife, much younger than him who got involved in a number of risqué affairs. At the time I was living a small bedsit but soon bought a small flat in Chelsea when prices were still quite reasonable. My life was very enjoyable. I had a number of girl friends and a boy friend, someone I had known from school.

It all changed when a scout from a film studio in Hollywood approached my agent Jonathan Craig. He represented a number of actresses like myself.

He told me what happened. One day he got a phone call in his office.

'Hello,' he replied, 'this is Craig's Creative Agency, Can I help you?'

'Yes my name is Pete Gregory. I am ringing from the States. I am from the Hollywood Film Agency. I believe you represent a Miss Alice Saxon.'

'Yes, she is one of my up and coming stars,' he had said.

'Good we are interested in her and would like to audition her for a part in a new film we are shooting.'

When Jonathan told me about the call later, he initially thought the whole thing was a hoax.

'I was very suspicious,' he said, 'so I asked for their telephone number and I said I would ring him back. I promptly looked up the agent's details on the Theatre and Film Agency's Register. I found that he was a genuine agent in Hollywood who

acted as a scout for likely new faces for the film industry.'

'I phoned him back and this time I wanted to know more.'

They apparently settled on a fee for his services and a fee for me, which included handsome expenses.

I was very excited when Jonathan phoned me with the news. My phone rang just after 9 am. I recognised his voice.

'Hi stranger,' I started. I hadn't heard from him for a week.

'How are you?' He asked in a matter of fact way.

'Fine,' I said wondering what he had phoned for and always hoping.

'Are you sitting?' He said.

'Yes why?' I asked.

'Because I have a wonderful surprise for you.'

'Oh yeah?' I said.

'Yes I have just had an offer for you to audition for a film in Hollywood. They want you there at the end of the week.'

I couldn't believe my ears. I was so excited.

'I hope you said yes.'

'No,' I said. 'I would speak to you and let them know.'

'Please say yes.'

Then I remembered I was in the middle of a TV soap.

'I can't I'm filming.'

'Oh that! I spoke to them and they said they would hold it for a week, you should be back by then.'

'You're wonderful, now I know why I pay you so much money.' He laughed.

I was to travel first class to Hollywood landing at Los Angeles International Airport. There I would be met by a car and taken to the studio for the audition. Hollywood was everything it was cracked up to be and more. As promised I was met at the airport by this long shiny black stretch limousine. The chauffeur greeted me,

'Good morning Miss, how was your flight?'

I was still reeling from the journey. I had never flown before and by First class, I felt like a queen, my every need attended to; my large comfortable seat tipped back to sleep; meals that were so tastefully served that they demanded to be eaten; air hostesses beautifully coiffured.

'Lovely,' I said. 'Lovely.' He opened the car door and helped me in. I sat back into the soft yielding seat as the vehicle glided away with hardly a sound. This can't be real I kept saying to myself. I am going to wake up and it will all be a dream - but it wasn't. We drove through empty streets still shining from the early morning rain and after about 15 minutes the Studio came into view.

'Hollywood Studios' was written in large neon lights across the front of an enormous building, which seemed to stretch to the heavens. I craned my neck to see the top and counted over 30 floors. We were whisked through the entrance. The chauffeur who was called Leon waved a cheery 'hello' and we stopped in front of a grand entrance. White marble steps led up to a wide revolving door. I stepped out into the bright sunshine momentarily shielding my eyes. Leon went ahead and helped me through the door. I entered a huge shaded

atrium with glass elevators riding up and down the walls. I stood for a moment stunned by their appearance and watched fascinated as they zipped up and down. People were already being transported in them. My reverie was interrupted by a softly spoken voice.

‘Welcome Miss Alice to Hollywood studios, I am Deborah your guide.’ I turned to see a young woman no more than my age wearing a smart pale blue suit with a red silk scarf at her neck. We shook hands, hers were soft and warm, mine a bit moist from my nervousness.

‘I will be your escort and help you find your way around. First do you need to powder your nose?’ I was dying for the loo and nodded. I followed her to the side of the entrance where the ‘Ladies’ toilets were located.

‘I’ll wait here, we have plenty of time.’ I could have stayed there all day. It had the most luxurious toilet I had ever sat on. There was even a shower room if needed with piles of thick towels, everything had been thought of. As I came out into the atrium, Deborah was waiting for me.

‘I’ll take you to the Director’s office. He will explain about the audition.’ I followed her up some spiral stairs to a room on the next floor. The walls were entirely made of glass and I could see a man sitting at his desk. He was in his mid forties, slim and clean-shaven. He was wearing a dark blue suit with a pale blue tie.

‘That’s David Redwood the producer. He’s a really super guy you will like him.’ At that moment he looked up and came to open the door.

‘Hi, I’m David you must be Miss Saxon? Welcome to the studio,’ he said smiling. I took a liking to him immediately. Deborah touched my

sleeve, said goodbye and indicated that she would catch up with me later.

‘Please sit down,’ said David. May I call you Alice?

I nodded.

‘Everyone does,’ I replied.

‘I hope you are not too tired from your journey? Let me tell you the programme. Deborah will take you to your apartment where you can rest. This evening at 7, I will call for you and we will go for a light dinner, the cameraman and other members of the team will join us. We should finish by about ten.’

‘When you get back to your apartment, you will find a whole wardrobe of clothes to choose from, I think we got your size right. Tomorrow I will call for you at 10; the audition is scheduled for the afternoon. Room service will provide you with anything you need. I would suggest having your breakfast in your room, there is a fine view of the city from the balcony.’

‘I think that’s about all. Oh yes, here is a local cell phone, which has my number in it if you need to call. Don’t hesitate if you have any problems.’

He pressed a button on his desk and Deborah appeared.

‘I hope you have a restful day,’ he said shaking my hand.

I followed her out of the office thanking David.

‘What a nice man,’ I said.

‘Yes he is very kind and caring, it’s a pleasure to work for him.’ I thought I saw a slight shadow cross her face, but then maybe I imagined it.

Returning to the apartment I ran a bath. There were a large number of assorted bottles on the side, I found one labelled 'bubble bath' and added some to the water. Immediately the water foamed up. Undressing I checked the temperature and then got in. The water was just right and I wallowed in it feeling the warmth slowly easing my stiff muscles. I lay there my mind a blank. I was so relaxed that I must have fallen asleep because I was suddenly jerked awake by the ring of my cell.

'Hello,' I mumbled still a bit woozy.

'Hi, it's me, how's everything?' It took me a moment to recognise the voice.

'Jonathan? Hi I'm fine. You wouldn't believe where I am. It's just as well you can't see me.'

'Why, where are you?'

'I'm luxuriating in a massive bubble bath just like a Hollywood star.'

'Is there room for me?'

'Yes and three more besides but not today,' I laughed.

'You sound amazing. Are they looking after you?'

'Yes superbly, David Redwood the producer is a sweetie.'

'Have they arranged the audition?'

'Yes it's for tomorrow. I'll ring you and let you know how it goes.'

That was nice of Jonathan I thought as I got out and wrapped a large warm towel around me. I was really enjoying myself. I could easily get used to this life I thought. I would have no trouble in adapting to this magical world.

Next morning David arrived promptly. I had spent the previous hours going through the array of

clothes that had been hung in the wardrobe. In the end I settled for a pair of white skintight jeans and a pale blue top cut low with short fitting arms. I had my hair combed close to my head with a decorative pin to hold back the curls. I looked good if I say so myself. David stood at the open door and whistled low.

‘You look good enough to eat ’ he said. ‘I’m sure you will wow them.’

The audition was held in a small specially designed studio with a stage, spot lights, cameras and several onlookers. I had expected something grander but as the day proceeded the informality of the room put me at my ease. I had struggled with my make up, not too little and not too much but I shouldn’t have worried because the make up team knew what was required and attended to me. They told me not to look because I would appear over made up but that was apparently necessary for the cameras.

‘We were due to shoot at 2pm and I had about two hours to prepare. I was asked to read a piece of Shakespeare of my own choosing, make a short impromptu speech and have an imaginary row with someone I cared for. I returned to my apartment and relaxed on the balcony where I practiced the pieces.

The Shakespeare was easy. I chose a piece from Twelfth night.

*There is a fair behaviour in thee, captain and though that nature with a beauteous wall doth oft close in pollution, yet of thee I will believe thou hast*

*a mind that suits with this thy fair and outward character.*

*I prithee and I'll pay thee bounteously conceal me what I am, and be my aid...*

My speech would be a 'thank you' for the kindness I had received during my visit and the argument would be between my mother and me when I said I wanted to go to Hollywood. It all seemed straightforward but I knew when the time came, the butterflies might win the day. I hoped not.

At about 1 pm there was a knock on my door. It was Deborah. She had arrived to escort me to David's Office. He was already in the studio checking that everything was in place. Just before 2 pm I was taken there. I had this crazy feeling that I was being walked to my doom. When I entered, the studio was in the dark apart from the stage that was lit up with a circle of light in which I was required to stand. I walked into the light and turned to face the camera but could hardly see anything in the gloom. I heard David's voice.

'Start when you are ready Alice and I began.'  
It seemed to be over too quickly so that I thought in some way I had muffed my words but they all congratulated me and said how good I was. I knew that was what all actors are told.

I must have been dreaming because I woke to someone nudging me. It was Sofia with a cup of coffee.

'Good morning, how did you sleep?'

'Fine,' I lied, not wanting to tell her about my nocturnal adventure.



'Help yourself to breakfast; there is cereal, toast and coffee. I need to go out and earn some money.'

'I feel really bad,' I said.'

'There is no need to. It's what I chose to do. It's the only thing I do well.'

'So early?'

'Yes, you would be surprised some punters like an early start so I'm there for them.'

Sofia and I hugged and parted. I had a whole day ahead to look forward to. I no longer needed to hide. I felt that I had been given a new lease of life. My new friend had without realizing it, released me from a prison into which I had unwittingly placed myself.

It had all started so well. I was in Hollywood and the world was my oyster, or so I thought. Despite my reservations, the audition turned out to be a great success. After the first rushes had been printed David rang me.

'Alice you were wonderful, terrific. I had been waiting for some one like you a fresh new face and voice. I am so excited.' Then he paused thinking.

'I don't want to throw you into the deep but I would like you to accept a small part in my new film.' Do you think you are ready for it?'

'I can't wait,' I said

It was a thriller and I was to play the maid who finds the body. It wasn't what I had hoped for. I wanted a bigger part but as it turned out he was right. I hadn't realised how much I needed to absorb and I faced a steep learning curve. The film was shown locally for 6 weeks during which time I was able to find a low priced apartment. It was

much more basic than the studio one but was within my budget. Jonathan kept on phoning me.

'Hi Alice, how are things?' he would ask.

'Fine,' I said not wanting to tell him too much.

'What are your plans after you finish the present contract?'

I hadn't thought that far ahead so I mumbled,

'I don't know, I'll let you know when the time comes.' I could hear that he was getting impatient.

'What's going on Alice? Why are you being so secretive?'

I was now beginning to wonder whether I should return to England. Life was working out well and I had a greater opportunity of develop my career here than back in England. Work began to flood in. Small parts at first but then I had a breakthrough. David had been asked to produce a blockbuster and he selected me as his leading lady. It was to be set in Tokyo before the Second World War. The Emperor was Hirohito and I was to be his wife. In the film he becomes ill and I am then called upon to run the country although the people are kept ignorant of the fact. It ends in the infamous Pearl Harbour attack, which I try to prevent. I had to learn some Japanese and was dressed on occasions in the traditional dress of a Geisha. It was a very demanding role. When the film was released it was very successful and I was nominated for an Oscar.

I realised then that my future was in Hollywood and I rang Jonathan. He was surprised to hear from me.

'I was thinking about you and wondered why I hadn't heard from you. Are you OK?'

It was going to be a difficult call after all, he had done so much for me but I knew that he was no longer the agent I needed.

‘Jonathan,’ I began, ‘I think the time has come to say goodbye. You have been a wonderful agent and friend and I will never forget you. Without you I would never have been able to be where I am but,’

He interrupted,

‘What are you trying to say Alice?’

‘That I have moved on. I am now living in Hollywood and need a local agent.’

‘I see. I wondered when this would happen? I could hear him struggling to find the right words.

‘You know you are making a big mistake.’

‘I don’t think so. What I’m doing now is the right thing.’

‘One day you will come back to me but I won’t be there for you. All I can say is ‘Good Luck’ I hope you get everything you desire.’

The phone went dead. I sat looking at the receiver little did I know then how true his words would be.

My life then took a turn for the better when I played opposite a very handsome man called Flint Canova, that was not his real name but it suited him well. Tall and slim with wavy light brown hair, hazel eyes, dimples and a winning smile, he was all that a girl could want and I fell for him. We became an item spending all our time together and having eyes only for each other. I thought I was the luckiest girl in the world and for a while I was in heaven. We played opposite each other in a number of films and became known as ‘the dream couple’. After a few weeks we bought an apartment and moved in together. Looking back it was one of

the happiest times of my life. I never wanted it ever to end.

As we both became more in demand for films and TV we would find ourselves many miles apart. Sometimes I would be away and he would be in our home on his own. Other times I would find myself alone. It was on one of those occasions that I decided to spring clean the place before he returned. It was while I was wiping the bathroom cabinet that my world collapsed. I was removing the items from the shelves one by one prior to cleaning them when a small package, which was hidden from view, fell on the floor. I heard it clatter and took no notice at first. When I had finished wiping I bent down to retrieve it. At first I didn't recognise what it was and then as I tore back the cover, I could see that it was an unfinished packet of condoms. It originally contained six, now there were two left. I stopped and slumped to the floor dazed by what I had found.

Flint was double crossing me. There could be no other explanation. We never used them as he said he hated them. What was I to do? One part of me said, ignore it but just be more careful, what do you expect a handsome man to do when you are away?' The other side said, confront him, don't let the bastard get away with deceiving you.

I was torn between two choices. In the end I settled for the former, to say nothing and see how he behaved. But could I? Would I have the ability to say nothing when it was tearing at my heart? Would I be able to pretend to be the loving partner when inside there were so many unanswered questions. Who was she? How long had he known her? Was it serious?

I wanted to cry out to release all the frustration and anger but I couldn't. Instead I rang him. The line rang for a long time and then he answered.

'Hi Darling,' I said. 'How are you? I miss you so much. When are you coming home?'

'Hello my sweet,' he replied. 'I miss you too. We're on the last day's filming so I should be home at the end of the week.'

I was in the house when I heard his key in the door. I rushed into his arms and we kissed.

'Mmm,' I whispered. 'I missed you so much.'

'I'm hot and sticky. Let me go and shower and we can have a quiet evening in.'

'I would like that,' I said.

While he was bathing, I went into the kitchen and prepared a light meal, which I laid out on the coffee table in the lounge. I had put the opened packet of condoms in my pocket and planned to place it by the side of his plate and wait to see what he had to say. At the last minute I had cold feet and put it away. I was frightened to learn what I didn't want to hear so I muffed it.

That night we made love but I felt tense and couldn't relax. He noticed.

'Are you alright you don't seem happy, has anything happened while I was away?'

'No I'm fine,' I said. 'Just a bit tense worrying about the future.'

'In what way?'

'Well I was reading about a break up of another actor's marriage. They seem to be dropping like flies. We're all right aren't we?'

'Yes we're fine don't worry yourself.'

But I had a feeling that things weren't right. He seemed distant and not very talkative, not his usual chatty self.

It was some days later when I was in town that I passed a newspaper shop and went in to buy a local paper. There was a queue at the counter and I was waiting to pay when my eye caught a photo in a glossy celebrity magazine. It was some way away and I couldn't see it clearly. As the queue shortened and I got nearer to the counter, it seemed familiar and then I recognised the face and read the caption 'Flint Canova with his latest starlet at the Celebrity bar in downtown Hollywood.' It was a terrible shock. How could he? I immediately bought it and stood shaking as I read,

*Up and coming star the handsome Flint Canova is seen at the latest hot spot with another starlet on his arm. The actor has the pick of the young beauties in town.*

I was quaking with rage when I got home. The bastard was double crossing me as I had suspected all along. This was too much, the gall to parade with another woman in Hollywood knowing that I would get to hear about it. He didn't even care enough about me to take his pleasures out of town.

I was waiting in the hall with the magazine open when he let himself in. I held it up in front of him so that he could see the cover and read the caption. He was completely taken by surprise and made no attempt to deny it. He could see my anger.

'So what?' he said. Why shouldn't I go out with whom ever I please? We are not married and in any case I don't believe in monogamy it isn't natural.'

'She's not the first is she? You've had others here in this house haven't you while I was away. I found a half used box of condoms in the bathroom cabinet. You didn't even bother to hide them. Deny it if you can.'

'No I have no intention of denying it.'

'You bastard!' I rushed at him trying to hit him, trying to take the smirk off his face but he held me off.

'No you don't,' he shouted. 'Don't you dare try and hurt me. My face is my fortune.' I stood back not knowing what to do. I didn't want to share him but I loved him and didn't want to lose him. While I was deciding what to do next he turned and said.

'See you later,' and left.

I was crest-fallen. I felt my whole life was in ruins. I tidied up my face and as I looked in the mirror. I shouted,

'No I won't let him destroy me. No, I have my career.'

But I didn't reckon with his cruelty. He began to badmouth me at the studio, claiming that I had hit him and threatened him. I noticed the difference when I returned to work the following week; we were doing a rerun of a scene. Everyone was very subdued, avoiding eye contact and sitting away from me in the canteen. I naturally assumed it was me. It was as if I had been black balled. At the interval I grabbed the producer and asked,

'What's going on? Why is everyone so gloomy?' Then I was told that the angels had withdrawn the money and that the film we were doing was to be scrapped. It was weeks later that the truth came out. Flint had threatened to withdraw

from the film he was making if they didn't sack me. As I had a contract for the rest of the shooting the only way was to close down the film. When I told him that I had lost my job, he only laughed.

'Now you know what will happen if you cross me, do as I say and I won't trouble you.' After that he hardly came home and when he did he would bring young women and flaunt them in front of me.

But something happened to change him. It was some time later that I heard why. Apparently he had had a scare that he might have HIV Aids. One of his closest had died of it. His doctor told him to go back to his wife and stop sleeping around. He was so frightened that he took the doctor's advice. Thereafter he became affectionate and attentive. So much so that he suggested we go on holiday together. I jumped at the chance. At last I would have him to myself and hopefully rekindle the love that we had enjoyed.

'I've got a surprise,' he shouted as he came in. He seemed really animated and happy. I hadn't seen him like that for a long time.

'We're going on holiday.' He wouldn't tell me where. It was to be a secret and I promised not to try and find out. It was only when the plane touched down that I learned where we were. Our destination was a group of Islands off the east coast of South America, called Trinidad and Tobago. It was a tropical paradise and we settled into a luxurious hotel called the Grand Courian Spa resort in Scarborough a town on the north shore of the main island Trinidad. The hotel was for adults only so it was very peaceful with no screaming children. Our room overlooked the pool and the ocean. The weather was perfect, warm days and cool nights. I



felt happy and forgot about our troubles. I relaxed and we made love. It was like old times. But I should have known it wouldn't last. The word went round that two famous actors were staying there and we were quickly bombarded for signatures.

Flint started to stay behind at the bar and soon I learned that he was back to his old tricks. He denied it at first but it became obvious and we had a flaming row

'You're at it again,' I shouted. 'What a bastard you are! And I thought you had grown up.'

In the end we travelled home separately. It was only a few weeks later that I realised that I might be pregnant. My period, usually regular, was late. A test confirmed the worst. I was gutted. It was the last thing I wanted and I immediately made plans to have an abortion. I was all prepared for it when Flint got wind of my imminent abortion and sent me a message.

'I hear that you've been knocked up. I guess it's mine. Don't expect me to help, you're on your own.' As I read his message something clicked in my mind. There really was no depth that he couldn't sink to.

Waiting at the abortion clinic, I saw one woman after another give up their baby, I couldn't. When my turn came I stood up,

'I'm sorry I've changed my mind. I want my baby,' and with tears streaming from my eyes I rushed out into the street.

The days that followed were full of confusion. I needed to confide in someone to share my doubts and worries but who to turn to? Suddenly a face

came into my mind, my mother. I hadn't spoken to her for years I didn't know if she was still alive. I fumbled with my address book and found it. I stared at the number reading it out aloud. I didn't even know if she was at the same number.

Now came the indecision the uncertainty and fear. Would she answer? Would she reject me as she did before? I don't know how I would deal with that. I was older but I don't think any stronger when it came to dealing with my mother. She had always made me feel like a child, a stupid child. But whom else could I turn to?

I sat down near the window where the light was brightest and dialled her number.

'Hello who is that?' I didn't recognise her voice at first, it was much rougher almost a low growl.

'Mum, hi mum,' I said in my brightest voice, 'hi mum it's me.' There was a pause as if she had put the receiver down. Then,

'What do YOU want,' she said.

'I just wanted to say hello.' My voice was now thin and shrill like a child's.

'I suppose you've got yourself in trouble again and want me to get you out of it, just like the old times?'

'Mum please listen, just listen I need your help.'

'I thought so, you only phone when you need help. How long has it been, years, years of silence leaving me alone to struggle on when I gave you the best years of my life?'

'Mum please don't go on, just listen.' I was beginning to feel that the whole idea was a mistake. I was tempted to put the receiver down but I was

desperate so I listened as she ranted on. Suddenly she went quiet.

‘Well, what is it? What have you done now?’

‘Mum I’m pregnant.’ The receiver went dead. For a moment I thought she had walked away but I could hear her breathing, a slight wheeze.

‘I see, do you know the father?’

‘Of course I know the father.’

‘So why have you come to me? What do you want me to do?’

‘I need you to listen. I need to see you. Please Mum, I need to speak to you, to share what’s happening after all my child will be your grandchild.’ Again a pause,

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m in Hollywood.’

‘Hollywood what are you doing there?’

‘I live here, it’s a long story.’

Two weeks later I was alighting from a train in Scarborough Yorkshire. I had travelled over five thousand miles. Pulling my baggage behind me, I got in the queue for a taxi. I waited about 10 minutes and then one arrived, an old banger that coughed and spluttered as it came to a halt.

‘Where to miss?’ Asked a craggy old face leaning out of the window. I gave him the address.

‘You must be the daughter from America,’ he said whistling. ‘You’re a pretty thing?’

We left the town and travelled along narrow country lanes lined by carefully manicured hedgerows. Autumn was arriving with the leaves of the trees beginning to turn. The wheat had already been gathered and large tight rolls of straw were spread willy-nilly on the now bald fields. I had

forgotten how peaceful and neat the Yorkshire countryside was. We were now reaching the outskirts of Scarborough. My mother lived in a fisherman's cottage overlooking the sea, a neat bungalow with a main room, a small kitchen and a bathroom cum toilet. There was a small rear garden but the front room opened onto the road. My taxi stopped outside number 7.

'She lives here,' he said not waiting for me to ask. I handed him a few notes.

'No thanks,' he said. It ain't often Mother Saxon has a visitor especially her daughter. Have a good time,' and he was gone.

Standing outside the cottage I had very mixed feelings. I had been eager to see my mother after so many years despite her gruff manner but as I stood there I was decidedly nervous like a small girl coming home late from school expecting to be smacked. She must have seen me through the window because I heard a key turn in the lock and slowly the front door opened. We were now facing each other after over ten years. I went forwards to hug her but she stiffened and leant backwards.

'Hello Alice,' she said coldly. 'It's been a long time. You look well,' she added. I was still taking in her appearance. She was bowed and had shrunk and was now at least a head shorter than me. Her hair was snowy white, long and tangled. She had aged and her features were screwed up as if she was staring into a bright light. She stepped back and I followed her into the dimmed front room.

'Well now that you are here, what do you want?'

I stood thinking, why had I come? What was it that had drawn me to seek her out after all this time? I

wasn't certain. It was a mixture of many things certainly the pregnancy was a factor. I was repeating my own history, but I think it was more about survival. I wanted the child that I was to bear to have the advantages I had. Most importantly I wanted my mother to be part of its upbringing, to know it and to love it. I tried to explain it to her.

'I wanted you to know your grandchild. I wanted you to be part of our family. You could come and visit us and stay with us. The world is much smaller today than when you were a child. Travel is easier and safer.'

I don't know whether she was listening but she suddenly interrupted.

'What does your husband do?'

'We are not married any more. He's an actor like me.'

'Why aren't you married?'

'We broke up.'

I could see she was puzzled. Then I blurted out,

'He wanted me to have an abortion.'

'Why didn't you? It would have made your life much easier.'

'I thought about it and almost went through with it but at the last minute I couldn't.'

'So you intend to have the baby?'

'Yes.'

'Where?'

'I don't know. I thought you might help me work that out.'

'Me, I'm an old woman. I have my own problems I don't need yours,'

'But mum?'

'Don't but mum me. You were happy to make your own way. You went to Hollywood. Did

you ever think of inviting your dad and me? No, you just thought about yourself.'

'It wasn't like that. I had a job to do. Working in Hollywood isn't easy. You have to watch your back.'

'How do you mean?'

'Someone is always trying to edge you out, to take your job.'

'Anyway now that you are here you may as well stay for a few days. I get very lonely I could do with some company.'

I had secretly hoped that when we met again after so many years, mum would like to hear what I had been doing, but she wasn't really interested, she was simply trying to survive. She insisted that I slept with her in her double bed. She said it would be like old times having someone to snuggle up to. She missed my dad. They had been married for almost fifty years. I thought about that. Married to the same person for fifty years it seemed incredible.

We were in bed talking when I asked her,

'Was dad ever unfaithful?' I was surprised by her reply.

'Of course he was, all men are. It's in their nature.' She said it in such a matter of fact way.

'Weren't you upset?'

'I suppose so I can't remember. All I know was that he was a wonderful father and husband. I didn't let his weaknesses become more important than his strengths.'

I lay in the darkness amazed at my mother's wisdom. I had never thought of her as wise but wise she was, much wiser than me. I had told her

about Flint and his constant affairs. But by that time we were both very tired and fell asleep.

The following day over breakfast she asked me, 'Could you ever forgive Flint? He is after all the father of your unborn child.'

'It's difficult Mum, I love him but he can't be faithful. If we stayed together I know he would always be sleeping with another starlet or model and I would hate that.'

I stayed with Mum for about three weeks but by then I could see that we were both ready to be parted. It had been the right thing to do and I left with a warm feeling knowing that despite the long years of separation she and I still had a close relationship. We hugged and I promised to keep in touch.

'Don't wait another ten years,' she shouted as I got into the taxi.

I think the noise of the key turning in the front door woke me. I looked up to see Sofia come in. She looked very happy.

'How was your day?'

'I did OK. I had some gentleman clients who were very generous so we have some money. Let's go out and celebrate tonight,' she said. 'What about you? How have you spent the day?'

'I was a bit morose. I keep looking back, going over the things from my past.'

'Let's not be miserable tonight. I know just the place we can go. It's a small private club with a three-man group and a soul singer, you'll love it, the food's good too.'

It was about a twenty-minute cab drive to the club. I followed Sofia down some stairs to the basement. I could hear music coming from behind

the entrance - a heavy black door with a small window. She knocked and a face appeared, 'Hi Sofia good to see you.' I heard the lock open and we were in. It was already pretty full with the music low and sexy. A singer in a full-length silver lamé dress was draped around a mike crooning. Some people were already dancing with slow sinuous movements. It took me a few moments to adapt to the gloom as we were shown to a table. Everyone seemed to know Sofia and wanted to say hello. She introduced me as her new friend.

I was beginning to relax and enjoy myself. It was the first time in years that I felt like a human being. I saw my reflection in the mirror, my face was already filling out, my hair was shining and I was wearing a new dress. I looked all right I thought. Sofia saw me looking in the mirror and smiled.

'What will you drink?' asked the waiter. I paused and looked at Sofia. I hadn't yet told her about my addiction.

'I'll have a soft drink please,' I said.

Sofia interrupted,

'Come on Alice, we're celebrating, have something stronger. Bring her a gin and Tonic.'

'Sofia, no thank you,' I repeated. 'Please don't insist.'

The waiter looked at Sofia, puzzled and shrugging his shoulders.

'OK, give her what she wants but get me a double Vodka and lime, thanks.'

Sofia soon forgot our little difference and slowly became increasingly inebriated. She downed one drink after the other, her voice became slurred and



her movements erratic. She was meandering around the floor knocking into the dancers. Some just smiled others looked angry and pushed her away. I could see that the time had come to take her home but how without making a scene.

Fortunately events overtook her. She slumped in a chair and began snoring quietly. This was my opportunity. Some friends of hers had also noticed her state and offered to help me and together we bundled her into a taxi. By the time we reached home she had sobered up a little and I was able to assist her into the apartment and help her into bed.

I returned to the lounge now wide-awake. The events of the evening had shaken me a little. They were all too familiar.

My visit to see my mother had given me back my confidence and I had quickly settled back into my routine in Hollywood. There were a number of jobs waiting for me. Nothing big, just some TV work and advertising. I was over the first three months of my pregnancy. The nausea and sickness had almost gone and I was beginning to feel really well just like the books said. I felt confident and that must have been evident because people began to say how well I looked. I often read about Flint and felt a pang of jealousy. He must have known I was back in town and that I had decided to have the baby but he never contacted me.

Hollywood is a small place and it was inevitable that sooner or later we would meet. It happened in the local Sweetbay supermarket, one of a chain that crosses the state. I was pushing my trolley towards the checkout when I saw him. He was with a young woman with long blonde hair.

She was guiding a small child in her trolley. I stopped and began to go in another direction but he saw me and called out.

'Hi Alice, I didn't know you were back, come and meet Janet. She's a neighbour and I was helping her with her shopping.' Then he leant down and pointed at the boy,

'This is Patrick he's two years old.'

It all happened as if we were old friends meeting. He didn't seem to be embarrassed. I was almost speechless.

'Hello,' I mumbled, 'Pleased to meet you. I'm sorry I'm in a hurry,' and I rushed off. I didn't want them to see how uncomfortable I felt; I was so self-conscious, me with a big belly meeting him as if nothing had happened between us. It could have been one of my movies but it was in real life. I pushed my trolley into the car park and took a deep breath. I was shaking. For a moment I was completely disorientated. I couldn't even remember where I had left my car.

I started to walk between the rows searching my mind to remember. There was a number and a letter, what was it? Then I remembered Lane C row 4. I felt a rush of relief and made my way towards the car. There it was waiting unaware that I had almost lost it. I felt enormous relief as I loaded my shopping into the boot. I was about to get into the driver's seat when I heard Flint's voice. He must have followed me.

'I wanted to speak to you but you hurried off. I'm sorry you must hate me.' I waited. 'I don't know how to make up to you for the way I have treated you.' Was this some sort of joke? I wondered to humiliate me even more. Then he said,

‘Could we just sit, have a drink and talk. I need to explain.’

‘Oh, OK then,’ I said and locked my car. I followed him to a café near the store and we sat outside under the shade. It was still early and there were very few other customers.

‘What would you like?’ he asked.

‘A cappuccino please.’ I watched him as he walked to the counter to order the drinks. He had put on a bit of weight but was still a very attractive man. He returned carrying the drinks on a tray and sat down handing mine to me. He took a sip from his cup and jokingly said, ‘cheers.’

I sat looking at him. I didn’t know what to say. Then he began,

‘Alice I have treated you very badly I know and nothing I can say can undo that hurt. I have lived a selfish and greedy life completely mindless of those I have hurt especially you.’

I put my hand up to say something but he continued.

‘Let me finish. Seeing you like this and knowing that your baby is mine has really shaken me. I wanted you to have an abortion but you decided not to. I admire you so much for that. It took real courage particularly because I had walked away from you.’

He stopped talking and looked at me. I was puzzled. I didn’t know what he was getting at so I waited. Now he seemed to be confused as if not knowing what to say.’

I interrupted his thoughts,

‘What do you want me to say? I knew when it came to it that I couldn’t destroy a life. I know I made the right decision.’

'I know you did too. What I think I am trying to say so badly is that I want to be part of your life and the baby's life. There were tears in his eyes as he struggled with his emotions.

'I, I want us to start again. Could you forgive me?' At that moment the sun came out momentarily blinding me so that Flint appeared in a haze. It seemed like an omen. As I looked at him with the light creating a halo around his head, I realised that I still loved him. I remembered my mother's words and a feeling of hope surged through me.

'Yes, yes let's try again,' I said.

I was in the kitchen preparing supper when I heard the front door open and Sofia came in. She looked tired.

'How was your day?' I asked worried that she had had a bad experience?

'Ok I s'pose much like every day,'

'Sofia, tell me more about what happened to you, if you're not too tired? I'd like to understand.

'OK, I realised that the man who I thought loved me was using me. He was a pimp and all his words about loving me were a lie. I had become his whore. But I was stuck. I had no one to turn to. When I refused to accept my life, I learned that I was only one of a number of girls that he used.'

'What did you do?' I asked. 'It sounds like you were having a terrible time.'

'Well one day he came home drunk. After we had fucked he fell asleep and left his notebook on the table. I crept out and read it. There were about twenty names with phone numbers. I copied them onto a piece of paper and hid it in my bra. My plan was to go to the police and report him but the more

I thought about it, the more I realised that it would make no difference. It wouldn't surprise me if some of my punters were policemen. But I was desperate. I would do anything to escape. But it was very difficult. I had got used to my life style. He wasn't mean so I had nice clothes and money in my pocket.

'How did you get away from him?' I asked.

'It's a sad story. I didn't know that he was mixed up with a drug ring and had got himself into trouble with the gang. I didn't know that he apparently owed them a lot of money. The first I knew about it was when they burst into the apartment when we were in bed and grabbed him. They forced him to get dressed and marched him out the flat. I tried to stop them but one of them threatened me.

'Stay out of this, it's none of your business.'

The next I knew was, when the police arrived and told me that his body had been found by the roadside. He had been shot in the head and died instantly. I was very upset. In his way he had been good to me and he didn't deserve to die like that. There was an inquest and I had to attend the court. The judge asked me what was our relationship? I said,

'Friends. What else could I say? It wasn't the time to tell the true story. You are the only one I have ever told it to.'

We settled into a sort of family life, Sofia being the breadwinner so to speak and me the housewife. To an onlooker we must have appeared an unlikely pair but it worked. I got back to doing the shopping and the housework. Living under a roof had restored my health; I had regained some of the lost

weight and now had a healthy complexion. A soft normal skin had replaced the dry scaly one that I had acquired while living rough. I was happy living from day to day not thinking too much about the future.

Gradually over the next few weeks Sofia told me about her childhood.

'Its all a bit unclear,' she said, 'but I do remember that when I was sixteen I fell in love with a boy from the sport's club. He said he would be careful and wear a condom but the damn thing burst. I knew I was in trouble when I began to feel sick. I hid it from my Ma as long as I could but couldn't after my belly began to swell. She went berserk and beat me with a stick, black and blue across my back. The police got wind of it and I was taken into care.

They persuaded me to have it aborted. Even now as I think about it I regret what I did. I have regretted it ever since. The care people were very kind. I made friends with one of them and when I was released I planned to live with her but she became ill and died and I became homeless. Life is such a lottery, I was lucky and I wasn't, it was as simple and as harsh as that.

My life with Sofia was getting a bit fraught. I was now feeling so much better and had regained my old enthusiasm for life. I realised that I couldn't go on living off Sofia. In any case I had got to do something about changing her life. That was the reason why we had our first real row. It started from nothing. I had been thinking about her and had simply said one morning,

‘Sofia isn’t it about time you made something of your life?’ I didn’t mean it to sound as if she was nothing but that’s how she took it. I could see I had made a mistake as soon as the words left my mouth, I could have bitten my tongue. At the time, she was cleaning some dishes at the sink. She suddenly turned around her eyes glaring.

‘What do you mean make something of my life? Don’t you think what I am doing is something?’

‘Sofia I didn’t mean that,’ I stuttered.

‘What did you mean then?’ She stood with her hands on her hips waiting for my reply. I had started so I may as well go on I thought.

‘I meant that, well I know you don’t want to be on the street all your life, do you? You want something better don’t you?’ There was a long silence between us; I could see she was thinking of a reply, so I went on.

‘You’re not getting any younger and there will be a time when.’

‘Stop,’ she shouted, ‘if you don’t like what I am doing, you know what you can do. You didn’t mind when I picked you up from the street, did you?’ She yelled.

‘You picked me up off the street? I said emphasizing the words. ‘Let me tell you, if I hadn’t been there at the time those hooligans would have killed you.’

‘You think so do you. You think that was the first time I’d been roughed up. You kid yourself. You think you’ve had a hard time but you know nothing. You’ve had it cushy most of your life and since you’ve met me your life has become easier.’

‘I agree with you and I will always be grateful but?’

‘But what?’

'You know what I am saying is true don't you?' I saw Sofia's face crumble and her eyes screw up. She began to cry silently. I had been too hard on her. I should have been more understanding and kinder.

I reached forwards and held her. She was shaking with emotion. I heard her muffled voice, 'I'm sorry I know you're right, I've got to get out of this terrible life. I must, it's killing me. I must but how? It's the only thing I know. What else can I do? I don't have any skills except fucking.'

We sat holding each other like mother and child. I felt very close to her and would do anything to make her life better.

I began to think about life and the way we are thrown in without having control of our destiny. For Sofia for example it could have been so different. She could have been the child of a comfortable family, who educated her and gave her a future. Instead she was a cast out.

Later as the shadows lengthened she turned to me.

'You know Alice you have never told me how you went from a successful Hollywood actress to being on the equivalent of skid row.'

It was true I had never described it to anyone. It was something I was so ashamed of. I often think that it didn't need to be that way. That I could have seen it happening and avoided it but that was with hindsight. The truth is that a series of events came together that I was unable to cope with.

Since our chance meeting in the supermarket Flint had been good as his word. He seemed to be a different person and we had decided to resume our



life together. He was losing his looks and was no longer in great demand but we managed to live comfortably. But the last three months before the birth were tedious. I had this great bump, making my backache and generally bad tempered. I guess every woman feels the same towards the end. The newness had worn off and no matter how hard we try our appearance is no longer important, all we want is to get it over with.

I had opted for a caesarean. I knew it carried a slightly greater risk than a normal delivery but I just didn't fancy all that pushing and straining. I had heard so many terrible stories from other women and seen live births on TV. I didn't want to go through that, it was so humiliating like an animal. But nature had other plans.

Flint and I had gone for a drive in the country when my waters burst. He rushed me to the nearest hospital but the baby's head was already presenting when we arrived. I had only just got settled on the bed in the birthing room when he popped out, a little boy weighing 3 kg. Flint said that he wanted to be present but when the baby was about to be born, he weakened saying he felt a bit sick. We called our son Christopher after my grandfather. I stayed for about three hours and then Flint drove our new baby and me home.

Thinking I was happily settled with Flint and our new baby Christopher, I had this crazy idea. I wanted to propose marriage. The year was a leap year and I planned to pop the question on the traditional 29<sup>th</sup> of February. I knew it was unusual but I also knew that if I waited for him I could wait forever. The day fell on a Saturday so it was ideal.

In the morning when he was on his way out after breakfast, I stopped him.

‘Flint darling,’ I said. ‘I want to make a special dinner for us next Saturday. Can you try and get home early?’ He just nodded and said he would try and so I made plans. I needed to get two wedding rings, nothing elaborate, Woolworth’s would do, and we could get fancier ones later.

Flint was as good as his word and at six on Saturday, he arrived home carrying a bunch of red roses.

‘I thought I would get into the mood of our special dinner together,’ he announced handing me the flowers. I was so touched. He wasn’t the indulgent type so I really appreciated the thought.

‘Darling they’re lovely,’ I said, hugging him. ‘Why don’t you go and change into something informal. He went into the shower and I could hear him singing. I was excited. It felt like the old times.

I set the table on the verandah. It was a balmy evening with a harvest moon just rising against the skyline. It was very romantic I thought. The meal went smoothly. I cooked his favourite, tender rump steak, French fries and a salad. We ate it with a bottle of Californian red wine from the Napa valley. I chose the moment before he had the dessert to act.

‘Flint darling,’ I said. ‘I would like to ask you a question. Before he could say anything,’ I said

‘Will you marry me?’

I thought at first he hadn’t heard me and then a big smile came over his face. ‘You know it should be me asking that question not you.’

‘I know,’ I replied, ‘but you know what the date is today?’ He checked his phone,

'It's the 29<sup>th</sup> of February.

'Exactly,' I said. It's leap year and you know what that means. It's a woman's prerogative to ask the question. Well what is your answer?'

'Yes, yes I would like to marry you.' At that point I brought out the two Woolworth rings and said,

'Let me have the ring finger on your left hand.' He put it out and I placed the ring over the finger. I leaned forwards and we kissed.

It was as simple as that yet I felt it was as solemn as if we had been married in church.

Christopher our son was the apple of my eye. I found myself just looking at him unable to understand the miracle that had produced him. Flint was also besotted by Christopher and always hurried to his room when he came home from the studio so that he could pick him up.

I didn't realise how quickly children grow and before I knew it he was walking. Unsteadily at first and falling a lot but he quickly got the knack and then I was always looking out for him.

But our joy was not to be. It was a nosebleed that prompted me to go to the doctor. It happened one morning for no obvious reason. We were playing with a ball when suddenly he began bleeding from his nose. I thought he must have fallen. It gave me quite a fright and I immediately called Flint. He was on the set and it was some hours later that he rang me back. I explained what had happened.

'Is he still bleeding?' he asked.

'No, it stopped quite quickly, but I'm worried. I think I'll go and see the doctor in the morning. The doctor was very kind and listened patiently to the

story and then examined him. He had difficulty looking into his nose because Christopher kept turning his head away.

‘How is the young man generally?’ he asked. ‘I see he hasn’t gained much weight since he was last here.’

‘I know doctor, he is not a very good eater.’ Finally he said,

‘I don’t think there is anything to worry about. Let me see him again in a fortnight if you are still worried.’

When Flint came home I told him what the doctor said.

‘I hope that puts your mind at ease?’ He said. But I wasn’t happy. I decided to look up ‘nose bleeds in children’ in Google and got the fright of my life. There were so many causes but one in particular caught my eye, Leukaemia. I read the section. It said that although it was a very rare cause it was one of the most serious and needed immediate treatment, I panicked. The following day I made an appointment to see the doctor. He greeted me.

‘I’m surprised to see you here so soon, has something happened?’

‘No doctor but I read somewhere that nosebleeds in children could be Leukaemia.’

‘Oh dear, a little knowledge can cause so much fear. Yes its true but it is so rare that you needn’t worry about it.’

‘Please doctor I am worried. Could you please do some blood tests to check it out, just to put my mind at rest?’

‘OK if that’s what you want. We will need to take some blood for examination.’ Christopher was

very brave and hardly cried when the blood was taken.

‘The result should be through at the end of the week I will phone you.’ The week seemed to drag as I waited for the doctor’s call. It came sooner than I thought. I recognised his voice,

‘Yes doctor this is Alice speaking,’ I replied. ‘You want me to come to the surgery tomorrow, is there anything wrong?’

‘At half past nine, he said, and the phone went dead. That’s strange I thought. He didn’t answer my question.

Flint, Christopher and I were at the surgery before nine the following morning.

‘Come in,’ said the doctor as he came through the front door. We followed him into his office. He busied himself getting Christopher’s records and then briefly read them.

‘Now Alice and Flint, Christopher’s blood tests weren’t exactly normal.’

‘How do you mean, not normal?’ I asked.

‘There are some cells which are not fully formed.’

I could see he was struggling with the words.

‘What does that mean, is that serious?’ Flint asked.

‘I don’t know, said the doctor. ‘I think it would be wise for Christopher to be seen by a blood specialist, a Haematologist.’

I liked the Haematologist he was a very matter of fact man, small and neat, in his mid forties with frontal balding and some greying at the sides. He spoke simply and gave me confidence.

'I have to warn you that whatever I am going to say will frighten you but the more you know and understand the less frightened you will be. I think Christopher could have Leukaemia, We have caught it early and the prognosis, that is the likelihood of full recovery is very high.'

Christopher was so brave. He hardly flinched when they stuck the needle in his arm to give him the chemo. Being in hospital with him was strange. I felt a fraud. I was his mother used to tending to him but here there was nothing for me to do. Everything was being done for him. Even when I offered to wash him, the nurse only reluctantly agreed and stayed with me watching as if I wasn't doing it properly. He slept a lot of the time, as the chemo seemed to knock him out. I was really sad watching him collapse after the treatment, he should be out enjoying himself, playing with the other boys not lying there recovering from the effects of the chemo. I felt increasingly redundant as time went on and tried to occupy myself with TV or reading but I soon get bored. I went for long walks in the grounds. They had some lovely places to sit and watch the gardeners at work. They were so professional. It was as if the same care that the patients were getting in the ward was being given to the plants outside.

I waited patiently every morning for the Doctor to arrive and greeted him expectantly.

'Good morning Doctor, how is my boy doing,' I asked. He always looked a bit tired as if he had had a bad weekend. I wanted to ask him about it but decided not to. It was really none of my business and in any case he was a busy man and I

am sure he had a lot more patients to see and wanted to get on.

He picked up Christopher's notes and read the results of the last blood tests.

'Good,' he said still looking at the chart.

Then he looked at me. 'How are you doing? It's not easy is it?' He spoke as if he had been through it himself.

'No but I am coping. How is Christopher?'

'Fine. The recent results were normal, his blood has come right back. All those abnormal cells have been killed.' He said it as if it was a battlefield, our good guys against their bad guys.

'It's a fight Christopher has to win,' I said quietly.

'You're damn right,' he said smiling. 'Don't worry he's going to win.'

I changed the subject.

'When can I take him home? Could he have the treatment at home? I have all the facilities,' I asked.

'Another couple of days and I think if he continues to progress as he is, he could go home.'

'How long will he need the Chemo?'

'We usually give two courses of four weeks with one week's rest in between.'

I suppose I should have remembered that he would lose his hair. He looked like he had come from outer space but he didn't seem to mind. He loved to wear the brightly coloured woolly hats with logos on them that I bought from the hospital shop. Logos such as, 'you won't catch me I can run faster.' and 'Go away bogey man.' They had been hand knitted by a cancer charity group and came in all sizes for adults as well as children. He wore them with pride

and was coping with his illness much better than me.

Flint took some compassionate leave from the studio to be at home and I think, looking back it bound us together, we became a family again. Christopher had completed his treatment and seemed to be cured. But we were warned that the disease could return and that we needed to make sure that Christopher was reviewed regularly.

I was getting restless. I tried to resume my acting career and for a while I got some small parts for an older woman but they soon fizzled out. Frustrated, I was left to be a housewife something that didn't really suit me, I thought I had more to give. Flint was away for long periods so I was on my own at home a lot of the time. I got bored and reached for the bottle. At first it was a Gin and Tonic in the evening before Flint came home. It made me feel happy and that nagging feeling of uselessness disappeared for a while. But then I learned that if you drink Vodka, it doesn't smell on your breath. Soon I was drinking every day, buying it from the supermarket and hiding it in my clothes cupboard. I knew it wasn't good for me but it helped to get me through the day.

I needed something to do and decided on a part time job. I saw one advertised in a local bookstore. I love books and it seemed a good way to combine doing something with my hobby. I had walked past it many times but then a small add appeared in the window.

'Wanted part-time assistant to work 20 hours a week.'

It was a specialist shop not part of a chain and concentrated on biographies. I went in and



approached the desk. The owner Michael Foster was in his sixties but looked fifty.

'I see you are looking for a part time assistant,' I said. 'Is the post still vacant?' He looked up and an air of surprise appeared on his face.

'Hi, aren't you Alice umm, I forget your last name, an actress?'

'Yes but I have retired. Is the job still vacant,' I repeated?'

'As a matter of fact I think it is. I took on a young man yesterday but he hasn't turned up. Do you have any experience dealing with books?'

'No, but I love books and am an avid reader.'

'I have to admit that I feel a bit uncomfortable employing someone as famous as you. I don't pay very much.'

'Don't be, I'm just a woman looking for a part-time job. I'm sure the pay will be fine.'

I started the following Monday. I loved it. That evening I phoned Flint. He didn't seem very interested. He was too occupied with his latest blockbuster and had been away for some weeks filming and didn't know when he would be back. Christopher was living at Uni so I was on my own.

I had been working in the shop for a few weeks and as I was the only other member of staff, Michael and I spent a great deal of time together, He showed me his book coding system as well as the on line sales procedure. It was similar to a Public Library but on a smaller scale. I began to like him. He was relaxed and very informal at work. There was no boss and worker division; we were as he often said a team each helping the other. I liked that. Inevitably he talked about his family, how his

wife had died and he had remarried but it didn't work out. He had a daughter who lived with his second wife. He didn't see her very often. In the evenings at home on my own. I often thought about him.

Why can't a woman invite a man out? I often wondered. Why did she have to wait for him to act first even though she wanted the friendship? I decided to act.

One evening as we were closing up and about to say goodbye, I turned to him and said, 'Michael, if you are not doing anything tonight why don't we go and have a drink?' I know a nice place.' I could see that he was surprised by the invitation and hesitated.

'Yes, yes I would like that,' he finally said. 'Whose car should we take?'

'I'll drive,' I said blushing, 'since it's my date.' I drove us to a small bar overlooking the lake. It was already busy when we arrived. Marcel the owner greeted me.

'Hello Alice, he said, everyone calls me Alice. 'How are you?'

'Fine,' I said. 'Can you find us a nice quiet table near the water?'

It was a lovely evening. The sun was just setting over the distant hills casting streaks of pale yellow light across the water bouncing off the waves.

My favorite waiter Marcel appeared,

'Good evening Alice, good evening Sir,'

'Your usual Madam?' I nodded, 'and for the gentleman?'

'I'll have a dry Martini no ice, please,' said Michael.

'This is nice. What a wonderful place you've found. I've never been here before,' exclaimed Michael glancing around.

'Yes it is. I try and keep it a secret and only tell my closest friends.'

Before he could make a comment I asked,

'Would you like a snack?' knowing that they did a wide range of continental and Greek snacks. We chose a number and ate them with a dry Californian white wine. I was enjoying myself in a way I hadn't for years, I felt carefree and young, and it was a wonderful feeling. I think Michael could see it from my behaviour.

'You are in a very coquettish mood tonight,' he said reaching forwards and holding my hand.

'Yes you make me feel so at ease I am so happy I met you. You know I was very nervous when I entered the bookshop that first day. It all looked so forbidding and you were a bit distant.'

'Yes I suppose I was because you were the last person I expected to apply for the job. I am so glad you did.'

I was having such a good time that I didn't notice how late it was. Michael must have seen me glance at my watch because he said,

'I think we must go although I don't want to end this most enjoyable evening. I need to have an early start tomorrow.' I drove him back to his car and we said good night. I drove home feeling a little wistful that we hadn't been a bit more affectionate. I think if he had wanted to I would have kissed him. Once I got home I phoned Flint.

'Hello dear, I'm sorry that this call is a bit late. How is the film going?' He sounded a bit gruff as if he had been drinking.

‘OK I, I had a bit of a row with the director, he keeps forgetting that my right side is my best.’

He doesn’t change, I thought sadly. I suppose he never will, only thinking of himself. We talked a little about the house and he said that he would try and be home at the weekend.

I put the receiver down and lay in the dark. Suddenly I began to think of Michael. Somehow he had entered my life by chance and now I was thinking about him. I could feel his hand on my arm. I could see the fine hairs on the back of his hand. I felt his breath on my cheek. What am I doing? I can’t do this I must put an end to it. Why am I thinking about him? I’m married with a grown up son; I’m not a teenager with her first infatuation.

Then I knew what I had to do. I was due at the bookshop at 10 the following morning. I didn’t sleep well after that. I was too wide-awake. I got up and walked around in the semi-darkness feeling unsettled. I’ll make a drink I decided then changed my mind, in the end I lay down. I think I must have fallen asleep because I woke with a start the sun streaming into the room. I checked my clock it was just after 6 am. I had time to have a leisurely shower. As the warm water coursed between my legs I felt a stirring and held myself. To my surprise Michael came into my thoughts not Flint. I dressed quickly, had a cup of coffee and left the house at 9.30. The sky was now overcast as if rain was due. I got into my car and I sat for a while rehearsing what I would say,

‘Michael I need to say something. We had a wonderful evening together and I felt very happy for the first time in years. I know that you are fond of me and that...’

I glanced at my watch. I must get going the traffic is bad at this time and I don't want to be late I hated being late. I slowed the car and stopped in my usually parking place. I sat. I felt nervous. Why do I have such mixed feelings? Why can't we go on as we are? Am I imagining all of this? Is it all in my mind? No I am sure I am doing the right thing.

I got out of the car and locked the door. I collected my bag and some papers I was reviewing and went to the front of the shop. The sign on the door said Open and I went in. At first I couldn't see Michael; he must be in the back room. I called out,

'Good Morning,' and heard a muffled reply. This is it, now is the time to tell him. There are no customers so he will have to listen. I put my things on my desk and walk slowly into the back room. He was bent over a drawer getting something. His face was not visible to me only the top of his head I could see his greying temples. I wanted to reach forward and stroke them. But I waited. He heard me come in and slowly stood up. A smile crossed his face.

'Hi how are you? Thanks for a really lovely evening.' he said. 'I had a great time.'

'Me too,' I mumbled. 'Michael' I begin. 'There's something I must say.' He put up his hand.

'No please Alice don't say anything please. I don't want you to say anything.'

'But Michael we can't I can't...'

'I know I want...and he stopped words failing him. There was a silence in the room.

'I think I must give my notice. I can't work here anymore, with you'

'Why? Alice I don't understand. Don't you like the work? You are very good at it, a natural. You have a flair for books, haven't I told you?'

'Michael you know what I mean, you know what's happening.'

He reached out and held my arms. I could see the sadness in his eyes.

'I don't want you to leave.'

'And I don't want to leave but I must. I am a married woman. I am very fond of you Michael. You have made my life brighter and somehow given me hope for the future but I have a husband.'

'I don't know what to say. If your mind is made up then you must do what you need to do.'

I saw the pain and anguish in his face and cupped it in my hands.

'You know I don't want to, you know that I...'

and my voice faltered. Then we were kissing slowly and gently at first and then more urgently seeking out each other's lips pushing squeezing, my heart was leaping in my chest, it felt like a bucking horse as if it will jump out. I am alive, a feeling of a joy coursed through me. I don't want it ever to stop. After a while we separated breathless, unaware that a customer had entered the shop. Michael heard the movement and said,

'I think there's someone in the shop, wait here I'll be back.'

I could hear voices. Michael was talking to a customer. After a while I heard the cash register ring and the front door close, Michael returned breathless.

'Where were we?' he said laughing and swinging me around.

I knew that I had started on a path and I didn't know where it would end but I feel invigorated. At last I

am having the courage to take control of my life and not let others decide what is good for me. Some will say I am selfish not thinking of others. I am fed up with thinking of others, now is my time, mine!

Wasn't it the sage Maimonides who said 'If not now when? If not me who?'

We were silent for the rest of the day. I went out to and got some sandwiches and he made the coffee. We ate our lunch in the back room, busying ourselves with small talk as if we are frightened to say what we really felt. The day ended and I packed up my things.

'Good night Michael, see you in the morning,' I said kissing him on the cheek. I saw the surprise on his face and a look of disappointment, not wanting the day to finish like that.

I drove home; my mind's was now in turmoil. I also didn't want the day to end like that but didn't know what to do. I was standing in the hall when I did something that I knew would change my life forever, I rang Michael. He answered immediately as if he was seated by the phone.

'Michael, it's Alice.' There is no reply but I could hear his breathing. I didn't wait for a reply, 'Would you like to come over for supper?' 'Yes I would love to,' he stammered.

I busied myself preparing dinner not daring to think beyond the moment but my body knew no restraint, it was humming with joy.

What to wear is always a problem. I have so many clothes but don't like any of them. Standing in front of the mirror in my pink underwear, I

shuddered at what I saw. I reached into the top drawer and brought out my favorite black frilly ones, I always feel sexy in them. I then settled for a pair of cotton slacks and a loose top. I may as well go the whole hog I decided. Now that I knew what I was going to do all my doubts had gone and I couldn't believe how easy it was.

Michael arrived on time. I hear his car in the drive. Now I'm nervous. I don't know if I can go through with it. But I have no time to think as I let him in and we hug. I smell his after-shave, a light lavender. He hands me a bottle and I read the label, a French Chardonnay from The Loire.

'Thank you, a perfect choice. I hope you like fish?

'I love fish.'

We sat in the patio for coffee and liqueurs. I felt very relaxed and could see that Michael was getting a little drunk. He was laughing and talking more than usual, but I was happy that he was so at ease. I was in the kitchen making the coffee when he came in and put his arms around my waist.

'It's been a wonderful evening. The meal was perfect, you are a very talented and lovely person.'

I turned to look at him and we kissed lightly.

'I love you Alice,' he said simply.

I put my fingers on his lips,

'Shush, say no more. I will finish here and go upstairs. Come up when you are ready. You will see the light in my bedroom.'

I am amazed at myself, how calmly I had invited him into my bed. I had just removed my outer clothes and put on a silk dressing gown when I saw him come into the bedroom. I was standing



by the light so that he could see through my gown. I heard him gasp.

'You are beautiful,' he said coming towards me and clasping me in his arms. We kissed passionately. I turned and undid his tie and helped him remove his shirt. His belly is flat. He is breathing fast. I loosen his belt and he steps out of his trousers and his shorts. I run my hands down his belly and cup his penis in my hand. It is hard and throbbing with his heartbeat. Now he begins to remove my gown, which falls to the floor. He leans forwards and removes my bra, my breasts fall free and he buries his face in them, kissing the nipples I feel them tingling and hardening. I step out of my panties. He slips his hand down my belly and strokes my dark pubic hair. I am gasping for air and I can feel moisture on my face. We fall onto the bed laughing.

'I love you.' he repeats.

'I love you,' I say as we move together. I roll onto my back and he gently lowers himself onto me. I hesitate,

'Don't worry I am sterile, I've had a vasectomy.'

'Don't move,' I whisper. Let me feel your weight, your power. I close my eyes it feels so beautiful I don't want it to stop. He reaches down and touches my sex gently caressing the lips I can feel the moisture.

'Now,' I say as he slowly enters me. I can feel the fullness of his penis easing into me and I grasp it with my vagina. I hold him tight and then relax squeezing him. I hear him cry out,

'Alice, Alice.' He moves in deeper as I relax and then I squeeze again feeling his hardness inside me.

‘Don’t move,’ He hisses. ‘Don’t move, I want to stay here forever.’

We lay together with only the sound and movement of our breathing. I reach out and clasp him around his back and begin rhythmically moving against him. He responds and we move together. I feel spasm after spasm of contraction deep inside me expanding and releasing. Suddenly they seem to burst and pleasure envelops me with wave after wave of sensation. Michael lies still, he is spent and is breathing rapidly. My breathing is slowing and my heart is no longer pounding in my chest. I take a deep breath. I have done it, freed myself from the inhibitions of my culture. I want to sing out with joy. I turn and see Michael sleeping his face calm, all lines erased. For a short while I am at peace and sleep overcomes me.

It is early morning when I wake. I can hear Michael in the shower.

‘Michael,’ I call out. ‘Good Morning what a wonderful day.’

He leaves the shower and comes over to me he is naked and we kiss. I can see that he is ready for more.

‘No Michael not now, later I promise.’

Later we eat breakfast in silence. I think I know what he is thinking. Where do we go from here? Was it just a one-night affair? He says nothing, we kiss and he leaves.

Mid morning the telephone rings. It must be Michael. I reach for the receiver.

‘It’s me Flint. Hi darling,’ he says full of life. ‘How’s it going? I miss you. We will finish filming

tomorrow so I should be home the following day. Can you meet me at the airport?’

‘I think so.’ I replied although I was due at the bookshop that morning.

‘Sure,’ I said making a mental note to ring Michael. ‘Yes I’ll check your flight time and wait in the car park. See you later, love you.’ I said it automatically acutely aware and realising what it meant.

He knew nothing about my job. I know I should have told him but it never came up in conversations. He was always telling me about what he was doing, never asking about me. As soon as I could, I rang Michael.

‘Hi, how are you?’ I said in a quiet voice. ‘Are you OK? I miss you,’ I added spontaneously.

‘I miss you too.’

‘Michael I have a problem about tomorrow. Flint rang and I said I would meet him at the airport, is that OK?’

‘No its not, I need you here,’ he said joking. ‘Of cause its OK. I will think about you and dream of you. I love you so much, kiss kiss.’

As the time approached to meet Flint I became increasingly nervous. It was the first time I had been unfaithful to him. Would he notice? Did I look any different? I studied my face in the mirror. I did look younger and my skin looked softer, it must be the light. Surely sex couldn’t do that, could it?

The plane was on time and 30 minutes after it landed I saw Flint coming out of the terminal entrance. I waved and he saw me. We hugged. He loaded his luggage into the trunk and I moved over so that he could drive. It was a hang up of his that

he didn't like a woman driving even me although he admitted that I was a better driver than him. We left the car park and made our way to the freeway. During the drive he said very little so I kept quiet apart from a question or two about his journey. He looked well; the Californian climate suited him and had given him a good tan. Once inside the house and after unpacking his luggage we sat in the lounge and had a drink. He wanted a whisky and I chose a G and T.

'You drinking alcohol?' he queried. 'How long has that been going on?' He spoke as if I was a child.

'I have the occasional drink, what is wrong with that?'

'Nothing I suppose but I don't like the idea of you drinking on your own.'

'I'm a grown up you know and in any case I usually drink with friends.'

'Any friend in particular?' He queried. What was this all about I wondered, why was he so suspicious? Had he in some way got wind of my friendship with Michael?

'I've got a job,' I blurted out.

'Doing what?'

'I work part time in a bookshop in town.'

'That's nice,' he said absentmindedly as if he was now thinking of something else.

'By the way I saw Christopher in New York.'

'Oh, what was he doing there?'

'He had a weekend off before his exams and we arranged to meet there.' That's funny I thought why didn't he tell me and why didn't Chris come home for the few days?

'We did a few shows. He's a fine boy. He said his exams were going well.'

‘Did he tell you what he wanted to do after college?’

‘I don’t know if we talked about that, he was mainly interested in the football results. What are our plans for lunch?’

Before I could answer he said,

‘Why don’t we go into town and have a hamburger and you can show me where you work?’ I hesitated.

‘No you look tired, why don’t I make us something here,’ I said trying to deter him from meeting Michael. I wasn’t ready for the lies I might have to tell.

‘No I’m fine, get your coat on and I’ll drive.’ It was inevitable that on the way he would ask me to show him where I worked so that he could drive passed it. The road was quiet.

‘That’s the shop,’ I said. ‘We don’t need to stop let’s go onto the restaurant, I’m hungry.’

‘No I would like to meet your boss. Look there’s a place over there where I can park.’ I was now feeling decidedly uncomfortable. Would I be able to hide my feelings? I followed Flint into the shop. Would Flint notice anything? Michael was in the back room but heard us come in and appeared. He saw me first and his face lit up and then he saw Flint. I felt really bad I should have warned him but I didn’t have the opportunity.

‘I’m sorry,’ I mouthed over Flint’s head. ‘Hello Michael this is Flint, he wanted to come and see where I worked.’

‘Hi Flint,’ enthused Michael. ‘How good to meet you, Alice has told me so much about you. I’ve enjoyed many of your films.’

Michael had now regained his composure and appeared genuinely pleased to greet my husband.

'Would you like to look around. I have a large section on the stage and film as well as TV?'

'Perhaps another time, we are off to lunch, would you like to join us?'

'Sorry I can't, I would have loved to but I have a large order I must get out.'

'Sorry, it was nice meeting you. Good-bye,' said Flint.

The restaurant was very busy when we arrived and we had to stand in line. I was in front of Flint. I could hear him fiddling with some coins in his pocket.

'Are you OK?' I asked.

'Yes fine, I just don't like waiting.'

'I'm sure it won't be long.'

At that moment the server appeared and showed us to a table on the verandah overlooking the water.

'This is nice,' I remarked as we were seated.

'What's going on?' demanded Flint glaring at me.

'His question took me by surprise. I had hoped that he hadn't noticed Michael's pleasure at seeing me but he had.

'You know what I mean, the way Michael looked at you.'

'It's nothing, we are just friends no more.'

'Are you sure? I don't believe you.'

'Please Flint let's enjoy lunch. We can discuss this when we get home.'

'No I want to discuss it now. You're a whore? How could you?' He yelled.

'Flint keep your voice down, people are looking.'

'I don't care what people think.

'I am going to leave if you don't stop this. It's ridiculous, can't you see what a fool you are making of yourself.'

By this time Flint was out of control. He stood up, placed his hands under the edge of the table and tipped it up, the glasses and china came sliding towards me crashing onto the floor. Several diners stared in our direction having heard the noise. I saw others stand up and with their phones taking pictures. I tried to cover Flint's head with my coat to hide his features but he tore it away.

'I'm not ashamed. You don't need to hide me.'

Then he turned on me and raised his fist. It all happened so quickly that I didn't have time to protect myself. I felt a sharp pain in my face, which toppled me backwards onto the chair. I lost my balance and fell amongst the broken glass. I tried to get up by clawing on the floor but I put my hand in the glass and cut my fingers.

Then I vaguely saw the waiters rushing towards me and heard Flint shout again and again.

'You whore, you whore, she deserved.'

Flint appeared to be in a daze. I saw a look of disbelief on his face as if he couldn't believe what he had done. He eyed the mess staring at it as if he didn't know what it was, I then saw the gaze that I had seen so many times before, a look of innocence as if this had nothing to do with him. It must have been someone else who caused the chaos. He turned and looked at the onlookers' his

arms wide apart saying that this was not of his doing. He was gesturing. I had nothing to do with this I don't know what happened, anything to distance himself from blame, from responsibility.

I heard the uproar in the restaurant; people were standing up, pointing and shouting. I heard cries of horror. Flint meanwhile had knelt down beside me and was trying to comfort me. Then I think I must have lost consciousness because I remembered no more. The papers described how the Maître d'hotel was by chance to be looking in our direction when it happened and saw it all. He had immediately got his assistant to call the police. They had arrived in minutes. The paramedics followed them soon after. At the same time an ambulance was heard screeching to a halt outside.

Pointing to Flint the maître d'hotel had said,  
'That's him. He hit her. I saw it all.'

The police had wasted no time. They closed in on Flint who was now standing dazed by the events and placidly accepted the handcuffs without comment. He was marched into the reception area and stood up against a wall. He was then bundled into a police car and driven to the station. All the time he was protesting his innocence.

'You've got it wrong. I was only trying to help. I wouldn't hit her. She's my wife. I love her.' He kept repeating. He was photographed, fingerprinted and placed in a cell.

'I want my lawyer,' he kept repeating. 'Let me see my lawyer.'

Flint was allowed a phone call and soon his lawyer Robert Chain appeared. He was tall and thin and



walked with a slight stoop. He was wearing a suit that was too big and hung on him and wore rimless glasses perched on a roman nose, which was out of all proportion to his otherwise small features.

'Good Evening Flint,' he began reaching through the bars to shake hands.

'Bob thank God you're here. You must get me out of here. There has been a terrible mistake.'

At that moment a Sargent arrived carrying some notes and a bundle of keys. He opened the cell and let Mr Chain in. He sat on the small chair.

'Give me a moment Flint.' He proceeded to read the police report aloud.

*'At 8.30 pm I was called to the Lazy Fox restaurant on main street La to a fracas between two diners. The maître d'hotel described how he saw Flint Canova (his stage name) strike his wife. He knew them by sight as both were well known in the neighbourhood. The woman had severe injuries to her face and was taken to the hospital. Canova was warned, hand cuffed and charged.'*

'What do you have to say Flint? On the face of it, it's a very serious offence.'

'They've got it all wrong.' He then gave his version of the incident.

'So you are saying that you did not hit your wife.'

'Yes exactly.'

'How do you explain the maître d'hotel's story?'

'He's mistaken that's all.'

'I see. Flint I'm your lawyer and you need to come clean with me. If you did it please tell me and

then I can construct the best defence. But if you lie to me and your lie is found out, I won't be able to help you, do you understand?'

'Yes completely, I am innocent.' Flint insisted. 'I did not hit her.'

I was conscious of being shaken and realised I was in a vehicle rushing somewhere. Then I was bundled onto a stretcher. I was lifted onto a bed and felt everything go quiet. I opened her eyes and looked up. A fan was turning lazily in the ceiling. I watched it mesmerized by its movement. My face was strange; it felt stiff and sore. I tried to touch it but it seemed to be covered with bandages. I struggled to sit up but my back ached and my neck was sore. There was something in my hand. It was soft and I squeezed it. I heard a bell ring outside and then a nurse appeared.

'Ah! Good you're awake. How do you feel Alice?' She asked.

'Umm,' I said. 'Ok I suppose but I ache all over.'

'I'm not surprised you've had a bad time.'

'I can't remember, what happened?'

'Don't worry it's all over now. Just think about getting better,' said the nurse, giving me a sip of water.

'Mmm, that's nice,' I said rolling it around my mouth.

'I must go now but doctor will be in shortly, try and rest.'

I lay back unable to sleep. I kept on trying to remember what had happened. I must have had an accident, but how? I remembered being in the restaurant sitting with Flint but then it all went blank.

Listening to the whirring of the fan I must have fallen a sleep.

I was playing in a garden. The grass was bright green and the trees were in bloom. My mother and father were sitting in deck chairs watching me. I was showing off by swinging higher and higher. I felt free with the wind blowing through my hair. I leaned back to go even higher.

'Be careful,' I heard my mother shout and then I was falling, falling into nothingness. I woke with a jerk not certain where I was. I could hear breathing and turned towards the sound to see Michael sitting by my side holding my hand.

'I'm so sorry,' he was saying, 'it's all my fault.'

'Why are you sorry?' I mumbled.

'Because if I hadn't fallen in love with you, this wouldn't have happened.'

'I don't understand. What did happen?  
Why am I here like this?'

'You don't know?'

'No I'm so confused, I can't remember what happened to me? Please tell me.'

'I wasn't there but the police say that Flint hit you.'

'Flint hit me? No! Why? When?'

'You were having lunch with him. Apparently he lost his temper and struck out at you.'

'I can't believe he would do that. Where is he now? Why hasn't he come to see me?'

'He has been detained at the police station.'

'What's he doing at the police station? I don't understand, I'm so confused.'

'I think that he has been charged with causing grievous bodily harm. I'm sorry Alice I

know it must be hard to believe but that is what they are saying occurred.'

I lay back in silence. I didn't know what to say. I still had no memory of what had happened. They must be mistaken. He wouldn't do that, hit me, he wouldn't.

Michael was speaking,

'They say they have eye-witnesses and photographs taken by other diners, of you being hit.'

'Oh Michael, is this really true?'

'Yes I'm afraid it is. Alice please don't upset yourself. You've gone through a terrible ordeal. You must rest.'

I must have been dozing when I heard some voices outside my room and recognised that it was Christopher. The door opened and he came in. He had changed. He looked so mature with a small mustache and combed-back short hair. He was wearing a dark jacket and fawn trousers.

'Mum,' he said coming to the side of my bed and taking my hand.

'I heard that you had an accident. Are you all right?'

'I'm getting better but it hasn't been easy. I can't remember what happened. They say Dad hit me, is it true?'

'I don't know but Dad is being detained by the police.' Did you have a row?'

'I can't remember. It's all so vague. I remember going into the restaurant for lunch but after that...'

'It's OK mum as long as you are feeling better. What are those stitches on the side of your head?'

'I had to have an operation. They told me that the side of my cheek was knocked in which broke the bone underneath. It had to be put back. It's OK now, nothing to worry about. They say I will be as good as new. Have you seen Dad?'

'No! No one is allowed to see him except his lawyer.'

'Christopher is this real or just a bad dream. I am so confused.'

'I'm afraid mum it's real.'

'Christopher are you OK?'

'Yes I'm fine.'

'Where are you staying?'

'I have some friends who live nearby. I'm OK mum don't worry about me. When are you going home?'

'They say I can go home at the end of the week.'

'You're going home on your own? That's not a good idea. You need someone to be with you for a few weeks at least.'

'I'll be all right, I have some good friends.'

Three days later, Christopher came for me and drove me home. He parked the car close to the front door and helped me into the house. The curtains were drawn and there was a musty smell as we entered; the house hadn't been aired for several days. I noticed there was a film of dust on many of the glass surfaces. I idly wiped my finger across one. I remembered I used to sign my name in the dust when I was a child. I was tempted to do it now. Christopher went ahead and opened the

curtains and unlocked the windows. Fresh air flooded in and it began to feel more like my home. I was now feeling woozy and achy.

‘I think I’ll go to my room and rest,’ I said. Christopher took my small case upstairs and helped me undress.

‘Mum you can’t stay here on your own. I’ll move in to my old room and look after you.’

I didn’t have the strength to argue with him.

‘OK leave me now,’ I said. ‘I must rest.’ I was woken by the sound of the telephone and Christopher’s voice answering it.

‘Mum, it’s a man.’ He says his name is Michael. Do you want to speak to him?’

‘Yes dear, please put the call through to my bedroom.’

Christopher couldn’t avoid overhearing my conversation.

‘Hello darling thanks for ringing.’

‘How are you?’ Michael asked.

‘I’m OK, still very groggy and achy but I can walk and it’s wonderful to be at home.’

‘Who was that I spoke to?’

‘Oh, that’s Christopher my son. When he heard about the accident he came right over and insisted on staying here to look after me.’

‘I want to see you, please.’

‘Darling, I want to see you too but I think at the moment it wouldn’t be a good idea.’

‘I know it’s all such a mix up.’

Christopher couldn’t understand what was going on. As soon as I put down the receiver he came into my bedroom.

‘Mum who was that? You sounded very lovey dovey. What’s going on Mum? Are you having an affair with this Michael fellow?’

‘Darling you won’t understand, please don’t judge me. Your father and I haven’t been getting on for some while. I don’t want to speak badly of him but he has been sleeping around, you know that don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Christopher said. ‘I hoped he would settle down and we could be a family again.’

‘I would have liked that too but...’

‘But what? You’re having an affair with another man isn’t going to help the situation.’

‘I know. I wonder if you have any idea what it’s like being married to an attractive man who can’t keep away from young girls. From the moment we got married he was unfaithful. Even after you were born he continued. He even brought his women into this house, it became unbearable.’

‘How did you meet Michael?’ said Christopher not wanting to hear anymore about his father’s behaviour.

‘As you know your Dad is away filming for weeks on end. I was lonely and needed something to do. I saw a part time job advertised in a bookshop. It was owned by Michael, he was divorced. I fell in love.’

‘Have you slept together?’

‘Christopher I don’t think that’s any of your business.’

I was getting angry. My twenty-year-old son was judging me. How dare he? What does he know about marriage?

I needed to change the subject.

‘I hear you saw your father.’

'Yes.'

'How was he?'

'OK I suppose. I don't really know. He seemed all right but how can I tell what he's thinking? What I know is that he said it was not his fault. He said that he accidentally lifted the table and it fell against you knocking you to the floor. He doesn't understand why he is being held in custody when he says he is innocent. He told me he would never strike you, he loved you too much.'

I was slowly recovering. The swelling and bruising of my face had almost disappeared. My regrown hair was hiding the scar and I was more confident. But Christopher and I were at loggerheads over the ensuing court case.

'You don't need to go through with it Mum, you can simply say that you are confident that it couldn't have been Dad, he would never hit you. Couldn't you say that?'

'I could but it wouldn't be true. What about the eyewitness accounts and the photos, are you saying that they are all wrong?'

'No but if you supported dad, I'm sure the court would be more lenient.'

The court was due to sit in three weeks. Both sides were preparing their case.

A prosecuting Lawyer called Isaac Swale had arranged to see me; he came to my home, as I was still not really fit to travel far. A tall African-American quietly spoken, he was selected by the State to prosecute the case and had a record of successful outcomes in cases like mine. He told me that he had been tempted to go into his own practice, but his strong sense of Public duty



prevented that. He said it was because of his own upbringing. The youngest of seven children he was born in the Deep South under segregation. His father had been lynched by the mob on a false charge of raping a white woman. He remembered his mother's scream of pain when the body of his father was returned to her. He vividly recalled how she clung to his corpse for several days eventually having to be pulled away from it. He said that image had remained with him to this day. It underpinned his strong sense of right and wrong and remained his guiding light in his battle for truth.

I was still feeling weak and confused. I received him in the sitting room with its windows overlooking the garden. It was simply furnished with a settee, two armchairs and a coffee table.

'It's very good of you to come to see me in my home,' I said shaking his hand. His grip was firm and comforting. 'I do appreciate your kindness. It is still very difficult for me to go out any distance.'

'It's a pleasure Alice, may I call you Alice?'

'Yes please do.'

'I realize that this may still be very painful for you but I do need to hear the story from you, the injured party.' He was about to say 'the victim' but stopped in time, He always hated that word and tried hard to avoid using it although it was the correct legal term.

'Before we begin,' I said, 'I must ask you a question. If I were to withdraw my evidence would it be possible to abandon the case. You see we have a son Christopher who is being torn apart by this case. He loves his father and would do anything to prevent the court case. Is that possible?'

Mr Swale sat thinking, trying to find the kindest way of saying what he had to say.

'Alice I understand how you and your son feel and I would be the first to want to do what you want but, and it's a big but, the case against your husband is overwhelming. To commit an act of grievous bodily harm is a criminal offence. To put it bluntly, he has broken the law and must stand trial. There is no alternative. It is not you that is making the accusation it is the court.

Flint had been taken to the California State Prison in the city of Lancaster, outside Los Angeles. It was opened in 1993 and was notoriously over-populated. He was in the section used for mild to moderate offenders. Each cell, originally designed for one inmate was now occupied by two. Flint found himself sharing with an older man accused of attacking his own son who was a drug addict. He eyed the other man trying to avoid the distain he felt. He kept going over in his mind the events of that day. They've got it all wrong, I didn't hit her, the table fell. He could see it all in his mind's eye.

Suddenly his thoughts were interrupted by a booming southern accent.

'So you're the pretty boy of Hollywood that wants to get into the fight game ha? People like you make me sick. You privileged parasites sucking the life blood from the likes of me.'

'You've no right to abuse me I didn't do it. The papers got it all wrong.'

'Of course they did. Flint! Is that your real name? Who would give a kid a name like that? What's your proper name?'

Flint hesitated, he hated his name and here he was about to give it to a complete stranger.

‘It’s Horace,’

‘Horace!’ the man roared. Ain’t that a thing?’

Flint couldn’t believe what was happening. Hell couldn’t be worse than this.

The sight of the warden standing outside his cell interrupted their exchange.

‘Horace you have a visitor.’

He followed the warden into the visitor’s room and was taken to a desk.

‘Wait here,’ he was told. He waited then looked around and at first couldn’t recognise anyone. Then he saw Christopher walking towards him. He looked strained and uncomfortable.

‘Hi dad,’ he said as they hugged. ‘Are you all right? You look terrible in that garb.’ Horace was wearing the standard prison outfit, a grey blue shirt, loose cotton trousers and trainers.

‘It’s what they gave me, they took away my clothes.’

‘When are you getting out of here? Why hasn’t your lawyer done something?’

‘I don’t know. He said he would get me out of here in a few days but I’ve been here a week.

Christopher it’s hell. I share my cell with a gorilla, an enormous man who insists on abusing me. I’ve complained to the officers but they just laugh at me.

‘What do you expect?’ They say, ‘the Ritz.’

‘Christopher you must help me I can’t stay here much longer I’ll go crazy.’

The Los Angeles Daily News was having a heyday.

*‘Hollywood heavyweights engage in fisticuffs.’*

One of the most famous marriages in Hollywood was broken apart recently by violence. Flint Canova the well-known lover faces battery charges after punching Alice Saxon his wife in the face at a popular eating-house. He is cooling off in the local jail while awaiting trial. It is not to be missed, probably better than most of their films.'

The story even got into the New Your Times.

*'Hollywood stars break up in restaurant scuffle.'*

The lights in his cell suddenly flared many hours before he was due to appear in court.

'Horace rise yourself, you're in court today.' He yawned and stretched. A bundle of his clothes were pushed through the bars.

'Here are your things, we want you to make a good show,' said the guard, laughing at his own joke. Horace showered and dressed. At least I can look good he thought although he dreaded the prospect of appearing in court. He knew that the papers had damned him and no amount of smiling and waving to his fans would silence their disappointment.

By 7.30, he was seated in a Police van rumbling through the empty streets of Los Angeles. Twenty minutes later he arrived at the court. It was deserted apart from the guards who quickly ushered him into the cell below the courtroom. The door clanged shut and he was alone.

'Coffee,' shouted the guard handing him a plastic cup of hot fluid through the bars. Horace was shaking with fear.

'Sugar?'

'No thanks.'

'Take it easy fella your case ain't till 10.'

The streets around the Hollywood Courthouse on Hollywood Boulevard were soon crowded as eager onlookers pushed forwards to get a good seat for the 'Trial of the Century' as it had been called. Court officials, lawyers and secretaries were harassed as they threaded their way through the crowd accompanied by shouts of,

'Give him what he deserves!'

Across the street a group of 'Anti-Violence against Woman' protesters was beginning to assemble their banners. A slogan 'STOP female violence NOW' was written across the top of a van that had been parked.

Not far away from them were a group of Canova fans waving a huge photo of the actor.

'We love you Flint,' they were shouting, trying to drown out the shouts from their neighbours. Idly watching the proceedings were two heavily armed policemen leaning against a wall.

Inside the court, there was calm as the officials prepared for the case. They had a lot to do before the schedule commencement at 10 am. Secretaries were checking that the bundles of documents were correct and placed on the correct desks. Elsewhere the jury was being sworn in. The judge Mrs Margaret Hastings had been rushed through the back entrance to avoid the TV cameras and was changing in the Judge's Room. While waiting she glanced at the headlines of the Variety magazine and read.

“Mrs Hastings a senior court judge has been selected to try the infamous Hollywood battery case. *Can the husband get justice? We ask.*”

Smiling to herself she adjusted her gown, took a drink from a glass of water and relaxed. It’s was going to be a long day, she knew.

Horace was dozing when his cell door was opened.

‘They’re ready for you,’ said the guard jogging him. ‘Smarten yourself up, your on, you may be about to play the biggest role in your life.’

Just before 10 am the huge wooden doors of the court were slowly opened allowing the crowd to surge forwards eager to get the best seats. The favorites were the front of gallery. People pushed and shoved to get up the stairs, fighting for the best places. Quickly the court filled until no more could be admitted. Those left outside tried to bribe the officers to let them in.

As the town clock struck ten, the court official stood up and shouted.

‘All rise, Judge Margaret Hastings is deliberating.’

Walking slowly with her papers tucked under her arm she made her way to the middle of the raised platform and stood in front of a capacious leather-bound armchair. On the wall above her was a roundel in the form of the shield of Los Angeles. It had a central figure of a Native American woman surrounded by six iconic images, three on her right and three on her left

She bowed to the audience and sat down.

'All be seated,' called the Court Official. There was a loud scrapping of chairs as the spectators were seated.

The Court Official continued,

'The case of "Canova versus Canova" is to be heard in front of Judge Margaret Hastings under the California Penal code section 273.5 (Corporal injury on a spouse or cohabitant)

It states that in order to convict someone of this charge, the state must prove that there was,  
1 Willful and intent to inflict bodily injury and  
2 The injury was inflicted on a current or former spouse, partner, girlfriend or someone with whom you have had sexual relationship or a person with whom you have a child together.

Horace Canova dressed in a smart dark suit and wearing a club tie listened intently. He was seated next to his brief Robert Chain in the front row. Mrs Hastings tapped her gavel.

'Will the State Prosecutor please present the case against the accused?'

Isaac Swale, wearing a long black gown walked slowly to the centre of the room. He was tall and thin with a drawn wasted face and a designer beard.

In a deep and sonorous voice, he began.

'Your honour, the case against the accused Horace Canova is that on the agreed date he, accompanied by his wife Alice Saxon, went to a restaurant for lunch. Sometime during the meal he struck her in the face causing her to fall backwards onto the floor. She sustained serious injuries consisting of....'

'No please stop,' interrupted the Judge. 'We will no doubt be hearing from the medical expert concerning her injuries.'

Yes Madam, may I go on?'

'Yes please.'

'The Prosecution will show that the accused deliberately hit his wife with intent to harm her. As a result she sustained severe physical and mental injuries, from which she has not yet fully recovered. We will be showing video film taken at the time of the assault as well as presenting eyewitness accounts of what happened. We will be calling a Medical and Psychiatric expert to describe the extent of the victim's physical and mental injuries.'

'Your honour, I regret that I will be unable to call to the stand the victim herself. She has asked to be excused. She is still suffering from amnesia and has no recall of the actual assault.'

'Of course Mr Swale, the court understands and excuses Alice Saxon.

Please call your first witness.

'I call Mr Monserat.'

A short thickset man with slicked down dyed hair, a ring in his left ear and wearing a white suit, strode to the stand and took the oath.

'Please give your full name and occupation,'

'My name is Guido Monserat. I am the maître d' hotel of the Lazy Fox restaurant,'

'Mr Monserat please tell the court in your own words what happened on the relevant day.'

'Madam Judge I was on duty as the maître d'hotel at the Lazy Fox Restaurant. At about 12.30, Mr and Mrs Canova sat down to lunch at their reserved table. They are regular customers, very nice people.'

'Yes yes, tell the court what you saw.'



'I was looking in their direction when I saw Mr Canova get up and reach over and the sound of a scream and then I saw Mrs Canova lying on the floor with blood coming from her face and head. I saw the table tip and heard the sound of glass and china breaking.'

'What did you do then?

'I called an ambulance.

'Someone called the police was it you?'

'No, I only called the ambulance I think it was...'

'Objection,' shouted Mr Chain. 'That is conjecture.'

'Sustained,' said Mrs Hastings. 'Mr Monserat please only tell the court what you did not what you thought others did.'

'Sorry Ma'am, I then went over to help Mrs Canova. She was in a terrible state. The ambulance men helped her onto a stretcher and took her to an ambulance.'

'Thank you Mr Monserat, no more questions.'

Mr Monserat got up and was about to return to his seat.

'Mr Monserat, please stay where you are, the defence lawyer may want to ask you a few questions'

'Thank you Your Honour,' said Mr Chain rising to his feet. He was of slight build with light brown hair.

'Just one small question Mr Monserat. 'Did you see Mr Canova strike Mrs Canova?'

'Well I saw his arm in the air and her lying on the ground.'

'Please answer the question Mr Monserat. Did you actually see Mr Canova strike Mrs Canova? Yes or No?

'No I guess not.'

'No more questions,' said Mr Swale.

Mr Chain, the defence lawyer stood up.

'Mr Monserat, you told my colleague that you could not be certain that you saw Mr Canova strike his wife. Why was that?'

'Because I was some way away.'

'Are you saying then that he could have hit her but you were too far away to be certain?'

'Yes exactly. I know they were having a row. I heard Mr Canova shouting at her but didn't hear what he said.'

'No further questions'

'I would like to call Ms Dorothy Lewis,' said Mr Swale

A slim gray-haired woman wearing a tweed suit went into the stand and took the oath.

'Please tell the court your name and occupation.'

'I am Miss Dorothy Lewis and I am a retired librarian.'

'Now Miss Lewis, I believe you were having lunch in the Lazy Fox when the incident occurred. Please tell the court what you saw and heard.'

'Your honour, I was having lunch with my friend Lucy. We meet every week and eat at a different restaurant. That week we had chosen The Lazy Fox. It has a Michelin star; the food is very good I would recommend it.'

'I am sure the food is very good' said Mr Swale impatiently. Please tell the court what you saw.'

'Oh yes, I was sitting facing the Canova's table so I could see everything.

'Miss Lewis, tell the court what you heard.'

'I was starting my main course when I heard raised voices. Mr Canova was shouting at Mrs Canova.

'Could you hear what he said?'

'Yes he was accusing her of having an affair while he was away filming. I heard everything, I have very good hearing you know for my age.'

'What happened next Miss Lewis?'

'I was looking at my friend when I heard a crash. I turned towards the sound and saw that the table had tilted and everything was on the floor.'

'Did you see how it happened?'

'No I didn't. It must of happened while I was eating and talking to my friend.'

'Did you see Mrs Canova?'

'Yes she was lying on the floor, in a terrible state.'

Clearly getting very frustrated by her answers, he asked slowly'

'Miss Lewis, did you see Mr Canova hit Mrs Canova?'

Miss Lewis sat for a minute thinking then in a very quiet voice said,

'No I didn't' A great groan went up from the spectators hoping that she would say yes.

'Would Loretta Staines please take the stand?' A tall very slim young woman walked to the stand. She had long fair hair.

'Please state your name age and occupation.'

'I am Loretta Staines. I am fifteen. I am at High School.'

'Loretta I believe you have something to show the court?'

'Yes I was present during the incident. I was having lunch with my parents. They had come up to LA to see me during my mid term break that day. I took a video of the whole affair.'

'Before we see the video, could you please tell us a little about how you took it?'

"Yes your Honour. I started shooting as soon as I heard the raised voices. It's a hobby of mine so I am always prepared and it takes me no time to set the camera up. In the video you will see Mr and Mrs Canova sat at their table arguing. The audio isn't good enough to hear what they're saying.'

Mr Chain stood up.

'Your Honour I have not seen this video. Would it be possible to see it in camera so that you can decide whether you want to admit it as evidence?'

The judge nodded,

'We will have a short recess. Loretta, Mr Chain and Mr Swale please come to my office. I will get our IT man to set the video up on my TV. It shouldn't take him a moment.'

After a short while the TV was ready to show the video from Loretta's camera.

The video begins.

'Loretta please tell us what is happening.

'Mr and Mrs Canova are seen arguing, each raising their arms. Their faces are clearly seen. Suddenly Mr Canova angrily tips up the table

spilling the items on it onto the floor. He then stands up, shouts something and hits out at Mrs Canova. You can see his fist striking her face; She falls back onto the floor blood coming from the blow to her left cheek. Something then blocks the picture and the video ends.'

The room went silent. The judge spoke first.

'Mr Chain, have you anything to say?'

'No Madam.' He was struggling to absorb what he had seen. Flint had deliberately lied. He had sworn that he hadn't touched a hair of his wife's head and yet there he was. It was completely damning to his client. He must find some way of preventing it from being admitted as evidence. Finally he found his voice.

'Your Honour as you can imagine this video evidence has come as a complete surprise. I need to consult with my client and my colleagues to see where we go from here. I would like to request an adjournment for one day.

'Mr Swale, are you in agreement?'

'Yes Your Honour.'

The judge left the court and an adjournment was announced.

In the canteen, Mr Chain reached for his phone and dialled a number. He needed to speak urgently to his assistant Philip.

'Philip we have some urgent work to do, meet me at the office now.'

'Now? It's my day off,' he texted.

'I know but it's urgent,' replied Mr Chain.

His office was on Skid Row the seedy part of town. He had intended to move to a more salubrious part

but had never got round to it. There were lights in the office when he arrived; Philip had got there first.

‘What’s the crisis, boss?’

‘It’s the case I’m doing. I’m defending at the Courthouse.’

‘You mean the one where Canova hits his wife.’

‘Yes, I need a precedent to stop a video from being used in evidence. If the jury see it my client is damned.’

‘OK leave it to me. I’ll trawl the law on videos in court and let you know.’

Later that evening, Robert got a call.

‘I think I’ve got it. You say the girl who took the video is fifteen.’

‘Yes, what’s that got to do with anything?’

‘Well she’s underage and can’t appear in court as a witness. She certainly can’t confirm that she took the video and that it is genuine so it cannot be used in evidence.’

Mr Chain couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

‘Philip, that’s brilliant; just send me the case details. I’m due to appear in court tomorrow morning.’

The court resumed the following day. Mr Swales was about to continue his interrogation of witnesses when Mr Chain stood up.

Mrs Hasting saw him and said,

‘Gentleman, will you please approach the bench. What is it now Mr Chain, I am getting irritated by these interruptions. Please be brief.’

‘I’m sorry Your Honour. It’s in connection with the video evidence. As you know the young woman who took the film is underage. I would

respectfully contend that as a minor, she cannot appear as a witness in this court, her video evidence is deemed inadmissible.'

Mr Swales threw his hands into the air.

'That's outrageous. The video clearly shows that Mr Canova hit my client. There is no doubt about that. How can the defence suggest that it is inadmissible? That's despicable.'

Mr Chain with a slight smile on his face patiently replied,

'I am not questioning what the video shows but in order to be acceptable, Loretta has to swear to its authenticity and as an underage person she cannot.'

The judge put up her hand.

'Mr Swale, I took the opportunity of investigating that point also and I am afraid that Mr Chain is legally correct. Now let's get on with the case.'

The two men returned to the court and Mrs Hastings to the bench.

A rather subdued Mr Swales continued with his cross-examination.

'I call Doctor Boole.'

'Dr Boole, tell the court your qualifications.'

'I am a board certified surgeon in accident and emergency surgery and I work at the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Hospital.'

'Thank you.'

'Please tell the court what happened on the relevant day.'

'I was on duty when Mrs Alice Canova was brought in by ambulance.'

'Can you please tell the court what her injuries were?'

'There was an extensive contusion of the left side of the face associated with depression of the left cheek consistent with a depressed fracture of the cheekbone. The left eye was blood shot with impaired vision.'

'Are you able to estimate what may have caused such a terrible injury?'

'The injuries were consistent with a direct blow on the left face.'

'What in your opinion caused the injury? Was it consistent with a punch.'

'Yes a strong punch could have caused the injury.'

'Thank you doctor please stay, the Defence may want to ask you a question.' said the Judge

'Yes thank you,' said Mr Chain.

'Doctor, could the injuries be consistent with a blow from the edge of a table falling against a seated victim?'

'Yes I believe it could. Both mechanisms would result in a direct injury to the face'

'Thank you doctor you may sit down.'

'Your Honour I would like to call Miss Daphne Follows a Psychologist,' said Mr Swale.

'A woman wearing a mannish suit walked briskly to the stand.'

'Please tell the court your name and qualifications.'

'I am Dr Vivienne Rhodes a Qualified Psychiatrist.'

'Thank you doctor, please explain in simple language the effect of the relevant injury on the victim.'

'A severe direct blow on the cheek and side of the head would have resulted in a significant



concussion as a result of the severe jolting of the brain inside the solid bony skull. Minute bleeding would have occurred which would have interrupted the normal electrical connections resulting in a loss of memory of the event. The victim would have amnesia, no memory of the blow and the events preceding it.

'Doctor, are you able to estimate how long this effect would last.'

'It is very difficult because it varies from one victim to another and depends on the severity of the injury.'

'Doctor, having heard the description of the injury, could you hazard a guess as to how long the effects would last?'

'On the balance of probabilities, I would expect the effects to last many months.'

A gasp went up from the audience.

'Quiet please,' shouted the Court Officer.  
Mr Swale continued.

'I see, would it make any difference if the injury occurred during an argument with a spouse?'

'Objection!' Shouted Mr Chain. 'The Prosecution is assuming a situation, which has not been established.'

'Your Honour I was only trying to establish if the amnesia would be affected by the circumstances of the blow as well as its severity,' said Mr Swale.

'Doctor you may answer,' said the Judge.

'Yes if the blow occurred as a result of an argument between two people who were emotional attached, the effect would be that much more prolonged.'

'I see the time is almost 5 pm we will adjourn till tomorrow at 10 am sharp.' said the Judge.

As he was being escorted out of the court, Horace caught a glimpse of Alice on the arm of Michael. Incensed by what he saw he pulled at the arms of his escorts in an attempt to get near to her. Alice saw his movement and held Michael closer.

‘Let get out of here please Michael, I can’t bear the sight of him any more.’

The court assembled the next day when Robert Chain presented the defence. He called Horace Canova to the stand. He took the oath.

‘Please state you name and occupation,’ asked the Court clerk

‘My name is Horace Canova and I am an actor.’

A sudden roar with prolonged clapping was heard from a small section of the gallery. Immediately the judge banged her gavel on her desk.

‘Quiet, if I hear that interruption again you will be expelled from the court and charged with contempt,’ she said staring up at that section of the gallery.

‘Mr Chain please continue,’

‘Thank you Your Honour.’

‘Mr Canova, please tell the court what happened on the day in question.’

‘Your honour I had finished filming and had a few days at home to relax. My wife Alice is a busy lady so I thought it would give her a break if I took her out to lunch, I booked a table at our favourite restaurant, the Lazy Fox. We go there regularly and they always look after us very well. We arrived at about 12.30 and were ushered to our favorite table on the patio overlooking the water. The server took

our order and we were talking amiably. We were discussing a domestic problem and had a slight disagreement, so I may have raised my voice. While we were waiting for our food to arrive, I reached down to adjust my napkin and I think my shoulder accidentally tipped up the table. It must have been unsteady. It fell away from me tipping the glasses and cutlery on the floor and at the same time the edge hit my wife's face throwing her to the ground. I was horrified and rushed to her aid.'

'Thank you Mr Canova, please answer this question.'

'Did you hit your wife?'

Mr Canova turned to face the Judge.

'No your Honour, I did not. I would never hit her. It is not in my nature.'

'No further questions, your witness,'

Mr Swale rose and walked towards the bench so that he was standing close to the witness.

'Mr Canova, you have stated on oath that you did not hit your wife. How do you explain the video?' There was a sudden shout from the Judge.

'Mr Swale and Mr Chain, please advance to the bench.'

There was a murmur in the court as the two lawyers walked to the bench.

'Mr Swale I have instructed you that the video is inadmissible.'

'But your Honour it shows clearly that the accused hit his wife.'

'Mr Swale don't you understand? It is inadmissible. That is my last comment on the subject. If you mention the word video again, you will be in contempt of court and I will deal with you later.'

But the members of the jury had heard the word video. One whispered to his neighbour,  
'What video? I didn't know there was a video.'

'Let's talk about it later,' said another.

There was a commotion in the court as the word video was passed from person to person.

'Quiet please,' shouted the Court Officer.

The spectators settled down and the Judge continued.

'Mr Swales, please present your summing up on behalf of the state.

Mr Swales walked to the centre of the court and faced the Jury.

'Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, this is an open and shut case. The evidence has shown that the accused Mr Horace Canova did during the course of eating lunch with his wife Alice lose his temper and strike her on the face. It was a severe blow, which fractured her cheekbone and rendered her amnesic to this day. I seek the longest custodial sentence permitted within the law.'

'Will the defense please present his case?'

Robert Chain stood up and walked slowly to the centre of the courtroom.

'Madam Judge, my client Horace alias Flint Canova is a popular and successful actor having made a number of Block busters.'

The judge interrupted,

'Mr Chain, I don't understand the word Blockbuster. Could you please explain its meaning?' A snigger of laughter ran through the court.

‘Yes Madam, a Block buster is a film made on a grand scale that amasses a large return for the film company.’

‘Thank you, please continue,’

‘My client acknowledges that he took his wife to the Lazy Fox restaurant where the alleged incident occurred. He contends that he accidentally tipped the table, which fell against his wife’s face throwing her to the ground. It was entirely an accident. At no time did he strike her. He is full of regret for the suffering that his wife has experienced, but denies being responsible for it. There was hum of voices around the court.

The judge stood up and turning to the jury said,  
‘Ladies and Gentleman of the Jury, you have heard the evidence presented by the Prosecution that the accused Horace Canova deliberately hit his wife Alice in the face causing her severe bodily damage. You have also heard from the Defence and the accused himself that it was an unfortunate accident arising when a table tipped over in the restaurant.

It is your duty to consider the evidence and only the evidence and decide which of these versions you believe to be the truth and let the court have your decision. You will have heard the word video mentioned. Under no circumstances should you seek to see the video or use any evidence obtained from a video in your decision. Please retire to the Jury room and consider your verdict.’

The jury had been deliberating for about thirty minutes when the subject of the video was raised.

'We are not allowed to consider it,' said the chairman. She then asked whether anyone had seen it.

'Yes, I have.' answered one of the men. 'I have it on a disc. It was shown on Television. You can see it if you like.' They all crowded round while he inserted the disc into his video player and switched it on. They watched in silence as the whole tragedy unfolded before them.

'The bastard,' one said.

'No wonder the defence wanted to ban us seeing it,' said another.

The jury reassembled an hour later with their verdict.

'Have you reached a decision?' asked the judge.

'Yes we have,' replied the spokesman, handing the clerk a small piece of paper. The judge read the message.

'How do you find?'

'We find the accused guilty.'

The court went wild, people were shouting, some clapping others crying. It was pandemonium.

'What sentence do you recommend?' The court went quiet.

'Fifteen years without parole.'

Sofia was getting confused and asked Alice,

'Where were you at that time?'

'I was sitting at the back, waiting for the court to clear not wanting to face the cameras and the questions. When I heard the verdict, I felt that a great weight had been lifted off my mind. Now I could get on with my life without the fear that it might happen again. But what of Christopher, I

thought. He loves his father very much. How will he cope with the verdict that his father's a criminal in prison? It was a lot to bear for so young a person.

I had asked Michael not to meet me after the court case had finished. I didn't want to excite the flapping tongues.

After the case had finished I realised I must phone Christopher. He needed me now more than ever. I dialled his number and waited, listening to the repeated beep I waited for him to pick up.

Christopher must have seen my name appear on his screen. He had apparently just seen the TV announcement about the verdict. He was in the college refectory when it appeared. Other students watching, turned to look at him saying nothing their faces conveying their feelings some of sadness others gloating. He felt empty. Why had they done this to me? What did I do to deserve this humiliation because that's what it is? He fought back tears and rushed out of the room. His friend Brian saw him go and followed him. He caught up with him on the stairs,

'Wait, where are you going? I'll come with you.'

They walked together in silence and then Brian spoke turning to face Christopher.

'Look Chris, it's not your fault. They're adults, don't blame yourself. Don't take on their problems.

'How can I not, they're my parents? I love them both.' He stopped walking and turned to face Brian.

'I'm frightened for Dad. He's not strong like mum. He won't survive in a prison, he's a free spirit,

he needs space, being locked up in a cell will kill him.'

Then as if speaking to himself he said,

'Why did mum let it happen? She didn't need to complain to the police. We could have kept it in the family. Now everyone knows, I feel like I am a pariah an outcast.'

'Your mum couldn't have stopped the case. Once the police were involved it became a criminal offence. By that time she had no say in what happened. Don't blame her. She'll be as upset as you.'

'No she won't she will be free to go to her boyfriend.'

'Boyfriend?'

'She's got a boyfriend, how do you know?'

'He phoned the house and I heard them talking. His name is Michael and he has the bookshop on Main Street. I hate him; he is responsible for what's happened.'

Brian could see that there was no way that Chris could understand what had really happened. He had gone through a similar disaster with his own parents. He had also blamed his mother but as time went by he realized that it takes two to break up a marriage.

As soon as he got home Christopher crept up to his room and began to pack his few belongings. He rang Brian,

'I've decided to leave home. Can you put me up for a few days until I find somewhere.'

'Sure,' Brian replied, 'you can sleep on the settee in the lounge.'

As he was leaving I came into the hall.



'Christopher where are you going? I asked confused by the luggage he was carrying.

'I'm leaving Mum, I can't live here any more.'

'You can't. I need you here. Where will you go?' I stumbled over my words. 'Why are you going I don't understand?'

'Mum I just can't live here anymore.'

I couldn't accept what was happening until I saw Christopher leave and get on a bus with his belongings.

'I must phone Horace,' I said automatically and then realised what I had said.

'I'll ring Michael; he'll know what to do.' The phone rang and after a long wait Michael picked up.

'Sorry I was with a customer, are you all right?'

'Christopher has left,' I blurted out. 'He's taken all his belongings.'

As soon as he could Christopher arranged to visit his father. It was a dull depressing afternoon when he set off for the prison. As he approached the gates a large forbidding building loomed into view, grey and bleak in the poor light. The bus stopped outside and he with several others alighted.

Dripping wet he ran for the covered entrance and lined up in order to enter. After about ten minutes his turn came and he presented his pass to the officer.

Glancing at it he said

'Section D, you're the son of 'pretty boy' aren't you? You look like him. Christopher ignored the remark and followed the signs to Section D. Another check of his documents and he was shown into a large room already occupied by visitors.

'Wait here and I will get him,' said the guard. It was about ten minutes later that Horace appeared. Christopher saw his father limping slowly towards him. He hardly recognised him he had aged so much. His head was shaved; he had a five o'clock shadow and a bandage around his head. Horace sat down and looked at Christopher blankly.

Dad, it's me,' Christopher said. He looked at his father's hands noticing that they were white, the skin dry and peeling.

After a while Horace seemed to recognise him.

'Christopher, it's you? I'm so glad to see you,' he said quietly. 'I, I', his face suddenly creased and he collapsed into his son's arms in tears. Christopher was shocked. He had never seen his father cry, he always thought of him as being so strong.

'Dad, what happened to your head?' Horace looked up as though he were a small child and gazed at Christopher.

'I got into a fight with the man in my cell. He said something about my name and I lost it. I told him to stop but he kept on teasing me so I picked up a jug and hit him with it. I don't remember what happened after that but I woke up in the prison hospital with a gash on my head. They accused me of attacking him but he provoked me. Anyone would have done what I did it's only human.'

'It's OK dad, you'll be all right, you are strong.'

'No Christopher, you must get me out of here. I can't bear it any longer. They are making my life hell. I'm not made for this. Please do something anything but get me out.'

Christopher could see that his dad was near to breaking point.

'All right dad I'll do what I can. I'll go and see the Prosecuting Officer. I'll tell them what you said. They will send you to an open prison. It will be easier,' he said, desperately trying to find some way to reassure his father.

I hadn't heard from Michael for some days. As the time passed I felt more and more alone. I hadn't gone into the bookshop since the court case. I thought it would be better if Michael and I were not seen together for a while and he had agreed.

No longer jubilant about the result, I was beginning to feel more and more deserted. Why doesn't he ring? I asked myself. He knows I'm on my own, he knows that he is all I've got. I have no one else. Sitting with the phone on my lap I was dozing when suddenly it rang. I grabbed at it.

'Hello,' I cried praying it was him.

'Darling how are you?' I heard his familiar voice.

'Oh Michael it's you, I thought you would never ring.'

'How could you think that, I love you? He hesitated, 'can I come and see you?'

'I'm not sure that's a good idea. Why don't I come to the shop?'

I was looking forward to seeing Michael but now it felt different. Before it was an adventure, a new and exciting romance. But so much had happened since then. I was no longer the same person. Then I felt young and vibrant, now I was uncertain. I no longer felt carefree and excited at the prospect of a new love. Would it be the same?

Would he still want me? Now I was dependent, needing him and that made me scared. I was trembling as I dressed, what to wear, not too dowdy, not too flashy and flamboyant.

This was madness, I realised. How had I got myself in this mess? And with Christopher gone. Where was he? What was he doing? He doesn't answer my calls. He said he was going to see his father. Thoughts went careering around my head.

I started the car and drove slowly towards the shop, my mind in a whirl. Parking in my usual place I sat trying to collect myself, to convince myself it would all be OK. I struggled to remain calm, repeating to myself that it was all going to be all right. Nothing had changed; it's going to be fine I kept repeating to myself.

Michael heard the doorbell and came out of the back room to see who it was. I saw his face light up when he saw her.

'How wonderful to see you,' he said, rushing towards me. He clasped me in his arms kissing my face, my ears and then my lips. I now knew that it was going to be all right, that all my doubts had been in my imagination. I hugged him crying out in relief.

'I love you; the case is all over I am free at last.'

'We have the whole of our lives together,' he said.

As soon as Christopher got back to town, he began his search to find the officer who could help to move his father to an open prison. Frustrated by repeated rejections, he decided to ask his father's

lawyer Robert Chain to help him. Mr Chain was a bit surprised to see him and when Christopher told him what he wanted, he laughed.

‘There is nothing I can do to help your father. He was found guilty and the law took its course.’

‘Couldn’t you argue on compassionate grounds that my father is an artist and is incarcerated in a place with drug addicts, murderers and rapists; it’s a terrible place for him, he is a sensitive man. He is not usually a violent man.’

‘That’s not what the jury thought, they convicted him for a violent act.’

‘But it was a domestic incident surely that’s different?’

Mr Chain thought for a moment.

‘The law doesn’t see it that way; violence is violence in whatever form it takes. I think you are wasting your time I don’t think you will be successful, good day.’

Christopher wouldn’t take no for answer. Eventually he found himself in the office of the Chief Prosecutor. Facing him was a big man with fiery red hair and a cherubic face. He was of Irish descent and still retained a slight Irish accent.

He listened patiently to Christopher’s plea. He knew the work of Flint Canova and liked many of his films and they began to discuss some of his father’s main characters.

Finally he said,

‘Leave it to me, I understand why you want this and I will do what I can.’

Michael and I slipped back into our former relationship. Our love was much more gentle and

comforting rather than the breath-taking experience from before. I needed to discuss the future, what were Michael's intentions? To me he was a lifeline flung to me in a moment of deep despair. Was I just a midlife fling or was I more? I was hesitant to confront the issue so I waited. We had decided at this stage to remain in our own homes although I began to spend more and more in his. My home was becoming redundant and I was worried about the mounting expenses. Finally I decided to confront the issue.

'Michael', I began, 'I have been thinking that I am spending more time in your home than I am spending in mine. Do you think I should put my house on the market and move in with you permanently?'

No sooner had I said it that I could see that he hadn't thought that far ahead.

"I don't know,' he said finally. 'Are you sure you want to live with me?'

'Michael I love you and yes I do.'

What I didn't realise at the time was that Michael was secretly concerned what his daughter would say. She was very attached to her mother. He needed to ask her, to get her approval.

Horace was dozing. He was dreaming of his earlier life, remembering the adoring crowds that hailed him wherever he arrived at an opening of a new film. He loved the glamour and basked in their adoration.

Suddenly he was awake, someone was jogging him.

'Wake up Horace, the Governor wants to see you'.

He dressed quickly, brushed his hair and followed the guard. The Governor's office was on the top floor of the administrative building. It had a wide view of the prison grounds including the exercise yard, the gardens and the prison block. The guard knocked and the two entered. The guard left and Horace found himself sitting alone in the waiting area. After what seemed like hours, a secretary appeared and ushered him into an inner office. The Governor, a small mouse-like man with a pointed nose, beady eyes and a shiny pate leaned forwards from behind a huge desk.

'Horace,' he smirked, 'the famous actor, the great lover, what a mess you have made of your life. I read the judgement. You are a bully hitting a defenceless woman'.

Horace said nothing; he had learned that it was better to keep quiet.

'Much against my wishes, the chief prosecutor's office have instructed me to release you to another prison on the outskirts of LA. He thinks you don't fit here, not that he knows much about how I run this place. I don't agree. I think you need a bit of your own punishment. That fight you had with your cellmate was your fault.' Horace could no longer keep quiet.

'Sir,' he began, 'the fight that you describe happened because he kept on riling me. He couldn't accept that I had been more fortunate than him and decided to take all his grievances out on me. It went on for days until I had had enough. I had reached a breaking point.'

'So you hit out at him like you did to your wife. Is that the only way you know to settle a disagreement, by force?'

By this time Horace realised that he had dug a hole so he decided to stop digging.

‘Anyway its no longer my problem,’ said the Governor. ‘Transport has been arranged for 2 pm. Get your clothes, go to the office and collect your personal belongings. Be ready to leave here by 1.30 sharp and good riddance.’

Horace couldn’t believe his ears. He was being sent away from this place, a place that he had grown to hate. He hated everything about it, the claustrophobic atmosphere, the dregs of humanity that were incarcerated there and the guards with their intolerance and violence. He couldn’t wait to leave anything would be better.

He was waiting at the entrance when the police van arrived promptly at 2 pm. It was a short journey through the outskirts of LA until the open country was reached. Then they were driving through fields of wheat swaying in the wind. Horace felt as if he was being transported to heaven. He took deep breaths of air marvelling at the blueness of the sky. After about an hour they stopped in front of a gate in a low wall and waited for it to be opened. Beyond he could see open spaces and low buildings in the distance.

‘This is it.’ the driver announced showing his credentials. Soon they were passing small-forested areas, ponds and well kept gardens. Horace could feel his spirits lifting, gone were the high menacing walls and the barred windows. He saw some of the inmates chatting by a pond. They were wearing civilian clothes and there were no guards in sight. He was escorted out the van and entered the main building where he was led to an office. There he



was given a small booklet of the rules and a key to room 2156.

A guard escorted him to the room, waited until he had opened it and left wishing him good luck. He stood unable to comprehend what had happened. In just over an hour his world had been transformed. He was not a believer in miracles but what had just occurred was as near a miracle as dammit. He stepped into the room blinded momentarily by the shaft of bright sunshine coming through the window.

As soon as he could Horace phoned his son hardly able to control his excitement.

‘Christopher you won’t believe it. They’ve moved me to an amazing place a prison without bars. It’s a miracle.’

‘That’s good. I’m so pleased.’

‘How did you do it?’

‘I’ll tell you when I see you. I’ll try and get over tomorrow meanwhile just relax and enjoy it, you’ve still got a long time to go.’

Michael hadn’t heard from his daughter for some while. He knew she was tied up with her final exams but it wasn’t like her to remain out of touch for so long. He had tried several times to reach her without success. I could see that he was becoming anxious.

Why don’t you speak to her mother? I suggested, ‘She may know where she is.’

‘I haven’t spoken to her for years.’ We just don’t have anything in common.’ I realised I had touched a raw nerve and changed the subject. A few days later I brought up the matter again.

'Have you spoken to her yet? He knew who I meant.'

'Not yet, I will. Please don't nag me it isn't easy.'

'Ok,' I said. 'I won't mention it again but if you want to see your daughter I wouldn't leave it too long.'

The following day when I was out shopping he had phoned his ex-wife.

'Hello,' He waited for a reply.

'Who's that?' came a familiar voice.

'Its me, Michael.'

'What do you want?'

'I just wanted to...' interrupting she said,

'I don't want to speak to you, how dare you ring me.'

'I've been trying to speak to Jo but she doesn't pick up. Do you know where she is?'

'Yes!'

'Please tell me, is she all right?'

'Well as it happens she isn't.'

'How do you mean? What's happened to her?'

'She had an accident.'

'What, how?'

'She was cycling in the campus when her wheel slipped on some ice and she drove into a tree. She broke her leg in two places. She had an emergency operation to fix it. She's home now.'

'Why didn't you tell me about her accident?'

'Why should I? Have you ever shown any interest in her?' Michael realised there was no point in arguing.

'Can I speak to her please?'

'Yes,' there was a pause then he heard, 'Jo it's your Dad.'

'Dad I'm so sorry. I lost my phone and couldn't phone you. Then Mum said I couldn't. Are you all right?'

'I'm fine.'

'You seem to have been in the wars. Mum told me you broke your leg.'

'Yeah it was a stupid accident.'

'How are getting on?'

'OK I suppose. I'm not allowed to put any weight on it so I'm getting around on crutches. I'm getting pretty good at them.'

'Can I come and see you?'

'I don't know, Mum's pretty angry with you. Maybe I should come and see you, I could get a cab.'

I was at Michael's house when Jo arrived. I was in the kitchen preparing something and didn't hear the doorbell. I brought Michael a cup of tea into the sitting room and there Jo was. It gave me a bit of a shock.

'This is my daughter Josephine but we call her Jo,' he said introducing her.' I thought she was a lovely young woman, tall like her dad but fair not dark like him. I didn't know what to say. But Jo assessed the situation immediately.

'You must be Alice?' She said. 'Pleased to meet you, Dad told me a lot about you.'

'Hello Josephine, Your Dad has told me so much about you. It's a pleasure to meet you.'

'Weren't you a famous actress?'

'I guess I was but that was a long time ago, now I am a book shop assistant. I work with your Dad.'

'Yes he told me. Isn't that how you met?'

I liked her. She was frank and uncomplicated and clearly loved Michael, as he loved her. It must have been difficult when her parents split up.

‘You still live with your mother?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, she lives not far from college so it’s very convenient although I would like to get my own pad as soon as possible.’

On the outskirts of town, Horace was going through an anti-violence programme at the open prison. He was meeting his psychologist once a week for a one to one session. It always started with the same question.

‘How angry do you feel today from a score of one to ten?’

‘Six,’ replied Horace. I had that dream again where I am a child and my father is shouting at me.’

They had been doing some retrogression, going back to his childhood. He hated doing it because it always brought back painful memories especially with regards to his father. They had had a difficult relationship. His dad wanted him to go into the professions, to be a doctor or a lawyer but studying didn’t appeal to him and he often missed his homework. That would provoke a violent outburst from his father. All he wanted to be was an actor.

‘That’s a sissy’s subject,’ his father used to say. ‘No boy of mine is going to be an actor,’ but that is what Horace had wanted to do ever since he saw Richard Burton in the famous St Crispin Speech in Henry Fifth. He used to go around reciting, *‘and gentlemen in England now a-bed,  
Shall think themselves accurs’d  
they were not here,*

*And hold their manhoods cheap  
whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon St  
Crispin's Day.*

In the school play one year, he had the opportunity to act the part of Henry the fifth and his fate was sealed. His father never forgave him and throughout his life never saw one of his son's films even when he had become famous.

Time was dragging and Horace was looking for something to do. He mentioned it to Christopher on one of his visits.

'You know it's so much better being here and having so much freedom but I don't know what to do?'

Christopher thought for a moment.

'Dad, I've just read a biography of Napoleon. It was a great read. Why don't you do something like that? Write your biography, you've had an amazing life. I'm sure it would be a best seller.'

'I've never written anything in my life apart from my name,' Horace joked.

'So what? Have a go. I'm sure there will be people here in the jail who could help you.'

After Christopher had gone, Horace thought about what he had said. Back in his room he started to ruminate about his past, the amazing things he had done, the numerous places he had visited and the people he had known. Slowly he began to formulate a plan, an outline. Could he do it and where would he start? It was later when he was in

the library that he casually mentioned it to the librarian.

'I really don't know how or where to start,' he said.

'Horace, I think it's a great idea and I know the person to help you. One of my regular readers was a writer. I feel sure he can put you on the right track. His name is Hocksmith; I don't know his first name. Shall I tell him that you would like to speak to him when I next see him?'

A few days later Horace received a note from Graham Hocksmith inviting him to meet in the Library after lunch that day. It was with some trepidation that he went along to the library. It was deserted apart from a tall white haired man standing at the desk talking to the librarian. Horace approached and was introduced to the writer Graham.

'I hear you want to write your Bio.' he said.

'Yes, my son suggested it as a way of keeping me busy while I serve out my sentence.'

'You're the actor, the Hollywood actor aren't you? I've enjoyed a lot of your films.'

'Yes that's me but now I am just a number in a prison. Not a very auspicious end to a career is it?'

'No but the story is not over yet. I'm sure there's a lot more to come. Meanwhile you've had an amazing career in a world that most of us know very little about. I think it could be bestseller.'

'Do you think so? That's very encouraging but I have no experience of writing so I need a lot of help.'

'I think you will find that you are better than you think. Everyone can write. What puts most people off is the thought of the thousands of words.'

It feels like an enormous mountain to climb but as the saying goes 'a journey begins with the first step. You have taken that step; the wish to write it, now comes the journey. In a way it is a bit like eating a meal.'

'I don't understand?'

'Well you have a plate of food in front of you and you set out to eat it. You take a small portion and put it in your mouth. Then you take another until the meal is finished. Writing is a bit like that. You start by writing about one incident and put it aside then you write about another and so on. Before you know it you have written thousands of words.'

'Then begins the real task, that is to edit. Decide what you want and in the order you want it, that's the hardest part but I can help you with that. If you want I will be your editor and read and correct where necessary.'

'That's a wonderful offer. Are you sure you want to take me on?'

'Yes I would enjoy reading about your career. It's a world I know nothing about.'

Horace was so excited, he couldn't wait to tell Christopher.

That evening after supper he rang.

'Christopher you know when you suggested I wrote my Bio I was very uncertain and a bit frightened. Well something amazing has happened.'

Then he proceeded to tell Christopher all about it. Christopher could hear the excitement in his dad's voice. It had been a very long time since he had felt so happy for his father,

'Dad it sounds wonderful. I'm sure it's going to be a great read.'

Like everything he had done, Horace took the idea of writing his bio very seriously. The prison timetable had left him time in the afternoon after he had finished all his chores and that was when he got down to writing. He tried writing in his cell but found it too claustrophobic. After hunting around he found a bench overlooking the gardens. It was shaded by a large oak tree and was far enough away from the exercise yard so as not to hear the shouts of the football players. Although he had access to a computer, he preferred to write by hand. It was tedious but he felt he was more in control.

Soon the writing was going well and Horace was feeling more positive but there was something nagging him. He began to feel a dull ache in his left side. At first he ignored it but it gradually got worse until he decided to see Doctor Durant the prison doctor. He went to the prison surgery and made an appointment the following day. There were a number of prisoners already waiting and eventually it was his turn.

He began to describe his symptoms but the doctor had a very brusque manner and hardly let Horace talk before he prescribed some tablets.

'Take one three times a day after meals.' He said.'

Horace left feeling very dissatisfied with the interview. He took the tablets for three days but the pain was no better. He was still worried and didn't know what to do and told Graham, his editor when they next met.

'What do you think I should do Graham?' He asked.



'When is Christopher due to see you?'

'Not for a few weeks.'

'I see, do you have his phone number?'

'Yes.'

'So why don't you ring him?'

"Do you think he would mind me disturbing him during his studies?'

'Let me ask you a question. If he was in trouble would you contact him?'

'Yes of course.'

'Then the same applies. Ring him and tell him about the pain. I'm sure he would want to know that you are not feeling well.'

Christopher was in college when his father rang. He saw his name come up on his phone, He quickly left the library and answered it.

'Hi, dad.' he said. 'Is everything all right?' It was unusual for him to phone during the day.

'Christopher, I'm a bit worried; I've got a problem. Could you try and come and see me tonight.'

'Sure Dad, can you tell me what it is?'

'I'll tell you later.'

Christopher arrived at the prison early that evening. He had hardly said hello before his Dad launched into his medical problem.

'Christopher, I've had this pain now for two weeks. I saw the prison doctor and he gave me some tablets. I think he was trying to fob me off. It isn't getting better and I am worried. It's stopping me from sleeping and I seem to have no energy.'

'I see,' said Christopher. 'I think you need to see another doctor at the hospital. I'll go and see the Governor. I'll be right back.'

The meeting with the Governor had not been very productive.

'I see no reason why your father needs to see anyone else. The doctor here is very good. I can't allow it,' concluded the governor.

'Sir I'm sorry to disagree with you but I know my dad. He is not well and I am worried.'

'Good day,' the Governor said turning away and returning to his work.

Leaving the Governor's office, Christopher realised he was not going to get any help from him. Later that evening Christopher spoke to his mother.

'Mum. Dad isn't well. He has a bad pain and I am worried. I spoke to the Governor and he supports the prison doctor who says there is nothing wrong. What should we do?'

'Darling do you think you can persuade the Governor to change his mind?'

'No, he is adamant that Dad's OK.'

'Have you seen your father?'

'Yes, and do you agree that he is not well?'

'Yes I think we should get a second opinion'

The following evening after dark, Horace walked into the garden ostensibly to go for a stroll. He reached the low fence surrounding the prison and slipped over it. It was an open prison so leaving it was not difficult. Christopher was waiting for him by the road in his car. Horace got in and they drove off to the nearest Emergency room.

'Did you remember to leave the note on your bunk to say what you are doing?'

'Yes Christopher, they will see it on the night round don't worry.'

'I think I will phone the Governor and let him know what we have done just to be sure. Christopher rang the prison and asked to speak to the Governor.

'What do you want this time?' The Governor demanded.

'I want to let you know that the family is worried about my father and we are taking him for a second opinion. My father has left a note for you in his cell.' The Governor sent for the note and on reading it was furious.

'He can't get away with this, I'm sending my people to bring him back,'

By the time the prison officers arrived at the hospital. Horace had already been seen by the duty doctor and promptly admitted with a diagnosis of obstructed bowel. The officers demanded to see the doctor and insisted on the prisoner being returned to prison but the doctor didn't budge.

'May I see your warrant?' he asked politely.

'We don't need one. We're from the prison. You are harboring an escaped prisoner. Hand him over.'

'I'm sorry I can't do that. Mr Canova is a very sick man. He is being prepared for surgery. He has an obstructed bowel, a surgical emergency and needs an operation urgently.'

'You will hear further from us,' they threatened angrily.

Upstairs Horace was being wheeled to the OR on a trolley. Dr Corrigan the surgeon on duty was scrubbing with his assistant Dr Belamy a senior resident.

Once Horace had been anaesthetized and draped, the surgeon spoke,

‘Now doctor he began,’ tell us what you think we will find when we open up the patient.’

Dr Belamy thought for a moment and said,

‘Sir, the MRI scan showed a mass blocking the descending colon. It is most likely to be cancerous.’

‘Correct. What will we do when we get inside?’

‘We will meticulously separate it from the surrounded tissue and if dissectible, we will resect it with the involved bowel.’

‘Excellent.’

‘Then we will reconnect the bowel making sure that the lumen is patent.’

‘Yes please explain to those present who may not know what that means.’

‘It means that we will make sure that there is an intact channel inside the bowel.’

When the Governor was told that Canova had absconded, he was furious and demanded his return.

‘Bring him back immediately.’ he shouted. ‘I want him here in one hour.’

The Officers returned before the hour and stood before the Governor.

‘Where is he?’ He bellowed.

‘Sir, we are sorry but the doctors wouldn’t allow him to come out yet. They say he will be in hospital for at least ten days.’

‘Ten days! What’s the matter with him?’

‘He has had a bowel cancer removed.’ The Governor went quiet.

If this got out his neck would be on the chopping board, he realised.

He quickly called his secretary and dictated a letter.

'Dear Mr Canova, I am sorry to hear that you have been unwell and have had to have operation. The staff and I join in wishing you a speedy recovery. We look forward to your return when you are fully recuperated. Yours sincerely, etc.

Horace received a hero's welcome when he returned to the prison. The inmates had assembled on both sides of the drive to see him walk up the road towards the entrance. He waved and a huge cheer went up. It was as if he was playing the greatest role in his life. The Governor was waiting with a huge smile on his face.

'Welcome Horace, it's good to have you back.'

'It's good to be back Sir,' said Horace shaking his hand.

'How are you feeling?'

'I am much better thank you.'

After he had gone Horace mumbled,

'That's made him eat humble pie although I would have preferred it not to have been something quite so serious.'

When Christopher visited later that day, Horace expressed his concern that the cancer might return.'

'Dad the doctors are 99% sure that they have removed it all.'

'I know but what about the 1%?'

Horace quickly got back into the routine but now he was respected. If any one said a bad word about him, three of his fellow inmates would leap to his defense. But it had been a long time since he had put pen to paper so it took him a while to get back into the rhythm.

He found that delving into his past was sometimes a painful journey and he would sit struggling to remember someone's name or role. The most challenging problem was the temptation to gloss over his mistakes or try to justify them rather than being cruelly honest.

He was finding Graham's editing very frustrating. They used to meet once a week when he would hand over the draft he had written and receive the edited work from the week before. Graham liked to use a red pencil so that the edited work sometimes looked like a blood-spattered page. To soften the blow he would add small encouraging remarks such as 'a better piece or 'I like your description of...'. But it was progressing and he had now completed over 20,000 words.

'You need a minimum of 50,000 words' warned Graham, otherwise no one will be prepared to read it let alone publish it.' Week by week Horace was getting to know Graham better and one day when they had finished discussing his latest week's work, Graham began to talk about himself.

'It was all going so well. I had a number of books, which were selling well bringing me in a reasonable income but I was greedy. I was hoodwinked by an offer from a publishing company. I knew it was too good to be true but I fell for it. They offered me a contract to write a series of three books and said they would pay me through an off

shore bank so as to avoid income tax. The writing was all going well and I delivered the first book on time and was paid handsomely. I was naïve. I should have known better, but I went ahead and began writing the second volume. That's when the letter came from the tax people. I spoke to the publisher who advised me to reply in a bland way confirming my details. Then the bombshell occurred. I was arrested and the rest is history. I'm here for three years but I'm hoping to be out after eighteen months.'

'Are you writing anything now?' Asked Horace. Graham thought for a moment uncertain whether he should share his private thoughts with someone whom he hardly knew.

'Not exactly, I am making some notes like a journal, which may become something I don't know.' Horace was becoming interested. He leaned forwards.

Graham continued,

'It's about prison really, does putting people away actually do any good? For example, how did sending me to prison really address my crime, a serious one I acknowledge? Couldn't society have found a better way to deal with crimes in which violence is not the issue I don't know? Anyway let's get back to your writing. How would you say it's going?'

'Better than I thought. I seem to be getting a flow, the words are coming more easily and your advice to use a Thesaurus was cool. It meant that I could have a much bigger vocabulary.'

Alone in his room Horace thought about Graham's fall from grace. He was a good man who did a foolish thing. Could the same be said about me?

‘No, I was seduced by fame. I believed in all the things they wrote about me, handsome, talented, a special person. I was called an idol and I believed it. That was my mistake, hubris, conceit, arrogance I was all of them. I want to put them in my book, to admit my frailty, my vulnerability and to say sorry especially to Alice. She didn’t deserve the way I treated her. Later that night as he put down his pen, he had an idea. I know, I’ll dedicate the book to Alice and I’ll call it, “My Fall from Grace”.

Christopher and his friend Brian had finished their final examinations and were talking about how to celebrate. They couldn’t make up their minds between a local dance and a Jazz club in town. Neither of them had been there before but they had heard that the music was great. Finally they settled for a Burger Joint in the main street within walking distance.

The place was humming when they entered. They recognised some of their classmates and waved. It was going to be fun Christopher thought as Brian went to give the order. Sitting on the other side of bench seat was a young woman with pale blonde hair. He haven’t seen her at first but got a whiff of her perfume a flowery smell. He inhaled it. She must have heard him sniff and turned to look at him.

Their eyes met. At that moment he felt that a bolt had hit him. For a moment he couldn’t speak.

‘Hi,’ he stuttered. She ignored him and turned away. His food arrived and Christopher turned back to Brian.

‘Brian,’ he whispered, ‘I’ve just seen the most amazing girl.’

‘Did you speak to her?’



‘No, I tried but nothing came out.’

‘Shh! Chris,’ said Brian, ‘speak quietly she’s just there.’

At that moment the girl got up and joined her friend at another table.

‘There she is, isn’t she something?’ Said Christopher. Brian only saw the dark haired girl sitting waiting.

‘I see what you mean,’ he said. I love her long black hair. She’s gorgeous?’

‘No I mean the blonde.’ I wonder where she’s come from?

‘Well there is only one way of finding out, ask her.’

At the other table, Anna, the dark girl was whispering to Josephine.

‘Jo, I think he is going to come over and speak to you.’

‘Who?’

‘The good-looking guy who was sitting near you.’

Christopher was confounded. He knew what he wanted to do. Normally he would have no problem. He would just go over, smile and say,

‘Hi girls, how’s everything going?’ and the rest would be easy but now when it really mattered, when the most important thing he wanted to do was to speak to her, he was paralysed.

‘Go on,’ urged Brian. Do it, you know, walk over and say ‘Hi’ like you’ve done many times before.

'It isn't easy this time. I really dig her. This could be the real thing and I don't want to mess it up.'

'Man, what are you on about? You haven't even spoken to her yet? Just go and chat to her.'

'Here he comes,' whispered Anna. 'Lets pretend we're having a serious chat and we don't hear him when he speaks.' Christopher stood up straightened his trousers and looking very serious, walked over toward the girl's table. He was conscious of his legs; they seemed to be stiff and wooden as if they didn't belong to him. He felt self-conscious. His face was burning and his heart pounding. This is ridiculous he said to himself. I'm not a kid. I'm behaving like a scared rabbit. Pull your self together.

As he neared the table the girls began laughing as if sharing a joke. Now he was almost there. Every fibre of him wanted to turn and run but by now he was committed. The girls pretended that they were so engrossed they hadn't seen him.

'Hi girls, how are you?' the words tumbled clumsily out like wooden blocks. At first he got no response. They acted as if they hadn't heard him. Jo turned and looked at him with a disdainful gaze and then as if she had been hard enough on him, she smiled and said.

'Great how are you doing?'

Soon the four of them were chatting amiably and had agreed to go onto the Jazz club. Looking back he would never forget their meeting.

Christopher was having a magical night. He was dancing with a beautiful young woman who had come into his life as if by magic.

He wanted to fling her about but she said, 'I have to be careful because my leg is still weak after having broken it biking last year.' As they moved leisurely together to the slow rhythm of the jazz group, he wanted to pinch himself. Was this really happening or would he wake up and find she had gone?

They talked as if old friends, both having just completed their final exams and keenly awaiting their results, she wanting to be a lawyer and he a businessman. But there was a cloud over their early friendship; he was very shy about giving her his surname. He realised that sooner or later she would have to know who his father was.

They had been going out for several months when Christopher said he would like to meet her parents.

'What for?' She asked.

'Because I want to.'

'Please Chris, let's not have secrets,' she said with a serious look on her face knowing full well why he wanted to speak to her parents.

'OK then, I want to ask them for your hand in marriage.'

'Don't you think you should ask me first?'

'What if they say no, then there is no point in asking you.'

'You mean that you would be put off if they said no.'

'Yes of course.'

A pretend sad look crossed Jo's face.

'Of course not silly, we would have to elope that's all.'

'Jo will you marry me?'

'Yes of course, why has it taken you so long to ask?'

'I'm shy that's all,' he said enveloping her in his arms.

On one of his visits to the prison Christopher told his dad that he had found the girl of his dreams.

'Does she know about me?'

'I don't know, I has never mentioned it.'

'Have you told her that your father's in prison for beating your mother?'

'Please Dad, no I haven't.'

'Are you ashamed of me?'

'That's not fair, why do you ask that?'

'Because I want to know.'

Well, I suppose it's yes and no. Now leave it please Dad.'

'Are you going to let me meet her?'

'Yes but not yet.'

Christopher left feeling so confused. He loved his Dad but at the same time he had done something really terrible.

The visit to the prison had left him with an empty feeling as if he was a traitor to his own father. That was a terrible thing to be and he hated himself for it. So he decided that he must tell Jo and deal with the consequences.

They had arranged to meet in the park at one of their favorite spots. They loved to walk hand in hand through the rose garden flower beds watching them change from week to week They would then sit on their favorite bench watching the ducks. This week they both had something they wanted to share. Christopher could see that Jo was troubled.

'What is it Jo?'

She blurted,

‘I’ve missed a period; I think I could be pregnant.’

‘Are you sure, I was very careful?’

‘I know. I hope it’s a false alarm. I will have one of those tests and let you know.’

‘Now tell me what’s on your mind Chris?’

It’s my Dad. I have never spoken about him so you must wonder? He’s in prison.’

‘I know.’

‘You know. How come?’

‘When you told me your surname I put two and two together. It’s all right please don’t feel ashamed. It’s not your fault.’

‘I sometimes wonder if it was anything I did’

‘How could it have been you? You were a child. No it’s their problem not yours.’

‘Look I wonder, would you be prepared to meet him. I love him very much and I know he would love to meet you. What do you think? I’m afraid it means going to the prison but it’s an open one not like the prisons you see on the movies.’  
Jo didn’t hesitate,

‘Sure I would love to meet him after all he might be my father in law you never know?’

As soon as he could Christopher phoned the prison and arranged a visit. It was raining when he and Jo got off the bus and scurried under their umbrellas to the entrance. The route was familiar to Christopher as they made their way to the visitor’s room. They were allocated a table to wait for his father. Before long Horace walked briskly into the room and immediately spied their table and came over. He looked fit and tanned, the worry frowns were gone and he looked year’s younger.

'Hello Christopher,' he said, giving him a hug, 'is this the gorgeous young woman you never stop speaking about?'

'Dad let me introduce you to Josephine, She likes to be called Jo for short.'

He reached forwards and shook her hand.

'Jo I am delighted to meet you. Christopher has told me so much about you. You are even more attractive than he described.'

Jo blushed.

'I am very pleased to meet you sir. I don't often have the chance to meet a famous Hollywood film actor.'

'Please, I suppose I was but whether I will ever act in a film again I don't know, perhaps the lead in a film about my downfall.'

'Dad don't be so morbid. Whatever you're doing here certainly suits you, you look great.'  
How's the book going?'

'Good I try and write everyday and my friend Graham then takes what I have written and tears it apart.'

'When do you think it will be finished?'

Christopher turned to Jo,

'Dad's writing his memoirs, it should be very interesting.'

'Well it's growing a bit like a tree, the longer I take the bigger it gets. I'll have to try and finish it.'

Sofia was sitting at Alice's feet as she continued her reminiscences.

'You remember I told you that I had decided to leave my house. Well I eventually plucked up courage to do it and decided to have a last visit. I left the car in the drive and walked up the broad drive and entered the house. It was full of so many

memories; it was as if the house was part of me, as familiar as my own body an extension of my being. I opened the patio doors and walked into the garden. The smell of the freshness hit me and I inhaled deeply. There was a stillness, just the hum of the bees and the wind vibrating the leaves, no road noises could be heard. The Rhododendrons that the gardener and I had planted were just coming into bloom as they had year after year; enormous splashes of colour from the palest of pinks to the deepest reds.

I walked to the back of the garden where the vegetable patch was. It was still too early yet to begin planting the seeds that would become the vegetables that I would have gathered later in the year. I eyed the soft fruit canes, still waiting for the early sun to bud and grow. In late summer I would have picked the raspberries and strawberries as they came into fruit. All these and more will become only a memory. I felt a deep sadness that nothing stayed the same. Everything moves on including me I realised. I can't stay here any longer. Returning to the front of the house I checked that I had all my belongings, locked the front door, and turned as tears began to prick my eyes. I drove out of the gates.

Michael was waiting for me when I arrived at his house. He could see that I had been crying. He put an arm around my shoulders and walked with me into the house.

'It was hard wasn't it,' he whispered.

'Yes the hardest thing I have ever done. I loved that house. I left so many things behind, things that were such a large part of my life.'

Then as if Michael wasn't there I continued to reminisce aloud.

'We were married there in the garden. We set up a bough of flowers taken from the garden and we stood under it. It was a lovely day I was so happy.'

Michael waited and then handing me a small bunch of red roses and said,

'Welcome to your new home, I hope you will be as happy here as you were before.' He leaned forwards and stroked my cheek with his lips.

I found it very difficult at first to get used to living with Michael in his house. I had to learn a whole new way of life. I couldn't just transfer my ways to this new situation. He liked different food. He didn't eat a big breakfast like Horace used to and preferred his main meal at lunchtime rather than in the evening. He wasn't as fastidious about his personal cleanliness as Horace, which I found very difficult. He would wear a shirt for several days until I literally had to take it away from him to wash it. But gradually we worked out a compromise, which suited us both.

The bookshop business was expanding and when the shop next door became vacant we moved into it. I had been reading about the new craze for CDs and videos and decided to approach one of the major suppliers. I told Michael about it at breakfast one morning

'Michael, now that we have the second shop I think we should branch out into a new venture.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, I met an executive from MGM, the major CD and Video distributors and they would be prepared to stock a counter with their products on a



commission basis. That would mean that we would sell CDs and videos, what do you think?  
I wasn't prepared for his response.

'I don't understand, you went behind my back to MGM without asking me about it?'

'Yes I thought you would be pleased that I am showing some initiative?'

'Well I'm not. I would have expected you to discuss it with me before going ahead like that.'

'I'm sorry Michael but I thought we were partners?'

'We are but not in the shop.'

'I see how does that work? It's all right for me to share your life at home but when we get into the shop, I am only a part time assistant is that?'

'No it's not like that.'

'Well what is it like? I need to know. I'm not prepared to be a part time lover. I want to share all your life, all or none,' I said defiantly.

Michael stopped what he was doing. He realised that he had been too sharp too insensitive. He said that I was right; I can't be only part of his life. I must share all of his life.

'Alice I have been on my own for such a long time that I have forgotten how to share. Please forgive me.' I came over to him and put my arms around him.

'Darling, it can't be easy having a busybody like me around.'

'No it isn't,' he smiled. 'But I love it. Look I have an idea. Since you have done all the planning for the new shop, why don't you take it over as your baby, stock it with what you want. I'll be happy to help if you need any but from the way you are going I don't think you will.'

Josephine was frantic when she phoned Christopher. She didn't wait to greet him but simply blurted out.

'It's positive. Oh my God I'm pregnant.'

'Hey! Calm down,' he said. 'It's OK.'

'It's OK for you of course but it's going to ruin my life. How can I tell mum? She'll kill me.'

'Where are you? I'll come right over.'

'Meet me in the park. I'll be there in twenty minutes. I need to get dressed.'

Christopher could see that Jo's face was tear stained as they kissed. He took her arm and helped her sit.

'I don't know what to do? I want to die. How could we have been so careless? It's going to ruin my life,' she repeated.

He waited for her to calm down.

'Jo listen, Jo!' He spoke louder. 'You're not alone in this. I'm here and I won't leave you.' Then as if she had found the solution she exclaimed,

'I'll have an abortion that's what I'll do.'

On the way to meeting her, Christopher had thought about what she said. He had an inkling of what she wanted to do. By the time he reached the café he knew what he wanted. Under no circumstances would he let her have an abortion, of that he was sure.

He remembered a conversation he had had with a former girlfriend who had had an abortion. When they got to know each other intimately she had confided in him what she had done. He would never forget the look of sadness on her face. It was as if she was carrying the burdens of the world on

her shoulders. He wouldn't let that happen to Jo if he could avoid it.

'What am I going to do?' wailed Jo caught up in the panic of the situation. Christopher's thoughts were now clearer.

Holding her firmly by the shoulders he said,

'Firstly we go to the doctor together and confirm that it is true and when the baby is due. Then we go and see your mum and your dad and tell them the good news.'

'You're mad Chris. How can you take this so calmly? I'm pregnant don't you understand pregnant.'

'Yes and I am thrilled I can't wait to meet our baby.'

'You're a fool but I love you so much,' Jo said beginning to smile.

'It's going to be OK. I'm looking forward to changing her diapers,' said Chris hugging her across the table.

'Wait how do you know it's going to be a girl?'

'It's simple, a handsome man makes a girl didn't you know? I thought everyone knew that.'

By the time they came around to visiting the parents to tell them the good news, Christopher was less sanguine. He particularly dreaded telling Jo's mother. She was from the old school. She was bound to blame him.

Something told him that they should go separately. Jo should go first and tell her mother without him being present then he would arrive. As it turned out it was easier than he thought. Jo was already at the house when he arrived so her

mother already knew the news and had time to digest it,

‘Hello Mrs Foster, How are you?’

‘I’m fine. I see you are doing OK,’ she smirked. ‘Congratulations Jo has told me the good news. I always wanted to be a young grandmother.’ And that was it. No telling off, no lecture on carelessness: just pleasure at the forthcoming birth. It was too easy.

The visit to see her father was more stressful for Christopher. He had only met him once when he was busy in the shop. Michael thought he was a customer and it took a while before he realised he was Jo’s boy friend, so they started off on the wrong foot. Now he was going to tell him that he was the father of his daughter’s child.

Jo had made the arrangement. They were to meet at her father’s home after he had closed the shop.

‘Dad you remember Christopher, you had that confusion when he came to the shop.’

‘Oh yes I thought he was a customer. Business had been very slow that day so I was quite disappointed.’

‘Oh dad.’

‘What did you want to see me about so urgently?’

‘We have something to tell you. Go ahead Chris tell dad. Chris cleared his throat.

‘Michael I love Josephine and would like to marry her and incidentally she’s pregnant.’

‘Pregnant, you stupid fools, how could you be so careless?’ he yelled.

I was in the kitchen when I heard Michael shouting. I came out to see what's all the noise was about?

'Hey what's all the fuss?' I said coming into the room. I stopped in amazement.

'Christopher what are you doing here?'

'You know each other?' Intervened Jo.

'Yeah we sure do, he's my son.'

'Christopher is that true?' Asked Jo.

'Hi mum how are you?' He said going over and kissing her. 'Yes, this is my mother Alice.'

'Let's all sit down and see if we can calm the situation,' suggested Michael. 'Alice please get us all a coke, I think we need it,'

It was quite late when the youngsters departed. There was an air of joy once the parents had accepted the full situation. I was over the moon at the thought of becoming a grandmother. Michael was confused by it all but wished the young couple every happiness and promised he would do all he could to support them until they got on their feet. To show his good intention he promptly asked for Jo's bank details and arranged for several thousand dollars to be transferred into her account to tide them over.

Feeling more lighthearted Jo and Christopher left the apartment hand in hand.

'It was easier than I thought,' said Christopher still trying to grasp his mother's presence at Michael's place.

There was one other person he needed to tell. He would phone his Dad and tell him the good news as he had already met Jo and seemed to like her.

'Dad how are you?'

'Fine how are you? Dad I've got some good news.

'Good I could do with some. I'm really struggling with my Bio. I am so bad at writing. Every time I submit some to Graham he returns it with so many corrections, I despair that I will ever finish it.

'Don't give up Dad, I'm sure you will win in the end.'

'What's your good news?'

'Are you sitting down?'

'Yes.'

'Jo and I are getting married, and,

'And what?'

'We're having a baby.'

'We?'

'You know what I mean?'

'I guess that's congratulations twice over. It's a bit quick isn't it you've only known each other a little while?'

'I know dad but I love her and with the baby on the way. I think it's the right thing to do. Christopher could hear his father breathing.

'Dad are you still there?'

'Yes, I was only thinking about your reply. You don't have to marry her you know just because she's pregnant,'

'I know but I want to and the baby coming makes it more sense.'

'I am delighted for you and wish you both, every happiness. Please bring Jo soon so I can congratulate her personally.'

'Sure Dad, love you.'

Josephine had a dilemma. She was due to start an internship as a law clerk with a legal firm when she found out that she was pregnant. She didn't know

what to do. Should she tell them or should she wait until 12 -16 weeks when the bump would begin to show.

‘Chris what do you think I should do?’

‘I would be inclined to be honest. You should be protected by the law against dismissal on those grounds.’

‘But suppose they find some trumped up excuse to sack me, like I’m too slow or something.’

‘They won’t because you won’t give them an excuse. You are a very bright young woman and they are lucky to have you, remember that.’

‘Thank you darling you are my best reference.’

But things weren’t so straightforward at the Office. Jo’s boss Sinclair was a perfectionist. He was a stickler for routine even to the point that all her pens had to be in a straight line on her desk. At first Jo accepted this as a quirk but she became increasingly upset when he repeatedly picked on her for the slightest reason. She didn’t know what to do and became progressively unsure and the more he criticized her the worse it got.

She had had a particularly difficult session with him over a report she had submitted and managed to escape to the rest room to get away. Sitting there alone she felt useless, angry with herself that she couldn’t accept the situation. The more she thought about it the more depressed she felt until without warning she burst into tears. By chance one of the senior secretaries came into the room and saw her sitting, sobbing.

‘What’s the matter Jo? What’s happened? Why are you upset?’

'It's Sinclair,' she sniffed. 'He doesn't stop getting at me for the slightest thing. I just can't do anything right.' The woman sat down next to Jo and put her arm around her.

'I'm afraid he does that to all the new staff. I don't think he realises what he's doing, Let me have a word with him, I'm sure things will improve.'

The weeks rushed by and very soon the little one was beginning to show. Christopher loved to pat the bump but Jo was less eager. One evening he found her sitting in the kitchen looking very forlorn.

'What's the matter darling, you look real sad?'

'I feel sad. I've just been reading about a baby that was born with no spine and will be paralysed all its short life. Oh Chris our baby's going to be all right, isn't it?'

'Darling of course it will be. Don't worry everything is going to be Ok.'

But the thought of her baby being born imperfect began to weigh on Jo's mind.

That and the thought of telling them in the office started to affect her sleep. She was lying awake, struggling with her thoughts when she felt a sharp pain. She tried to stifle her yell but Christopher heard her muffled cry and woke. What is it? Are you Ok?'

'No I've just woken up with a severe pain in my tummy I don't know what it is?'

'Put some clothes on I'm taking you to the hospital.'

Josephine must have fainted because she had no memory of the journey or arriving at the Martin



Luther King Jr. Community Hospital. She learned later that she was apparently taken into the Emergency room where an Obs. doctor saw her. Christopher was panicking. He had never seen her looking so ill. Her face was ashen with dark shadows under her eyes. She whispered as if the effort to speak was too much. How had she become so ill in such a short time he wondered and conveyed his fear to the doctor?

'What is it doctor? Will she be all right? What about the baby?'

'Calm down Sir, everything is fine. She has just had a slight internal bleed. Her condition is now stable and the baby is fine, it didn't even increase its heart rate.'

He paused briefly and then asked.

'Has she been under any stress lately?'

'Well yes, she's working in a legal office and is getting a lot of criticism from her boss, apparently he gives everyone a hard time.'

'I see.'

'Why do you ask?'

'Because I think this may have happened because of that.'

'Are you saying that she shouldn't go back to work?'

'Yes not for a month at least until the baby is bigger and more settled.'

'She won't like that.'

'No they never do. I find in our modern world having a baby is often seen as an incidental activity; nothing to require any alteration in lifestyle but that is not the case. If she is getting very upset at work maybe she should think about not returning until the baby is born?'

‘Thank you doctor, I appreciate your frankness. I’ll do what I can to make sure she rests as you have advised.’

But it turned out to be more difficult than he thought. Josephine only stayed in the Maternity ward for three days and was then allowed home with clear instructions to rest.

‘Darling I spoke to the doctor and he thinks that the incident last week may have been due to the stress of your job. He recommends that you don’t go back to work until the baby is born.’

‘Chris that’s impossible, I must finish the research paper I’m writing. It’s part of an on-going investigation that the firm has undertaken.’

‘Someone else will have to do it if you aren’t there.’

‘ You don’t understand, they can’t. It has involved a lot of reading of legal cases, which I have summarized in my notes. It means someone doing all that work again.’

‘Why can’t they use your notes?’

‘Because I have written them in a short hand hoping to transcribe them later. Chris I do need to get back to work, please trust me.’

‘What about our baby? You know what the doctor said. How can you put your work before the life of our child? I can’t believe this is you talking?’

By the time two weeks had passed Josephine felt fully recovered and ready to continue her work. She and Christopher were not talking. Breakfast was conducted in silence. What words that passed between them were monosyllabic. Christopher was distraught. It was the first time he and Jo had had a serious difference and he hated it. It was something

he hadn't expected. He had seen it when he was growing up and hated what his parents were driven to, the awful things they said to each other. He had sworn that his life would be different but here he was powerless to stop Jo doing something that he knew was foolish and risky. Try as he might short of tying her down, he was unable to persuade her not to resume her work.

In desperation he spoke to her mother pleading with her to intervene.

'Christopher listen, I know Jo. She wouldn't do anything to harm your baby, believe me. Rest assured that she would not overdo things. She will rest when she is tired trust her. You are going to live together for the rest of your lives. Try and accept that you will have differences. See this as a test of your trust in her. Do it.'

Christopher put down the phone. She was right he realised, it is a matter of trust. I must learn to have confidence in Jo's decisions.

The secretaries were already in their offices when Josephine arrived early on Monday morning. They greeted her warmly clearly pleased to see her.

'How are you feeling?'

'Fine, ready to get back to work.' She replied picking up a cup of coffee and walking into her office. Although they both noticed her bump neither said anything but just looked at each other knowingly. Josephine had no sooner sat at her desk than she heard her name called.

'Josephine will you come into my office please.' said Sinclair. She got up and went in. He was on the phone shouting at someone

'Take a seat I won't be a moment,' he said pointing to a chair in front of his desk. Josephine

could hear the voice on the other end of the phone  
It was a woman's. She was angry.

'I'll let you know when I'll be home. I'm busy  
now goodbye,' and he put down the receiver.

'That was my wife. Sorry where were we?'

'You wanted to speak to me.'

'Oh yes, how are feeling? Are you better? I  
was sorry to hear that you weren't well.'

'Yes I'm fine now, I wanted to finish that  
project you gave me. I was beginning to get to grips  
with it when I became ill.

'Now Josephine I have a problem. When I  
took you on as a law clerk. I thought you would be  
with us for at least two years, which I think is the  
minimal time to learn the basics of the law. But I  
see you had other plans,' he said sarcastically.

'No not at all, I intend to complete the two  
years and hopefully take my law degrees to  
become a lawyer.'

'I see, but am I being stupid aren't you  
pregnant?'

'Yes.'

'Isn't that going to interfere with your  
career?'

'Only for a very short time I hope.'

'I don't think I understand?'

'Well my plan is to work right up to the last  
week if possible, have the baby and be back to  
work within a few days provided there are no  
complications.'

Sinclair listened with astonishment. By the time  
she had finished, he was almost speechless. He  
had never heard of anyone doing what Josephine  
planned.

'That seems a very ambition plan. Who will  
look after the baby when you're at work?'

'Me.'

'You?'

'Yes me. I intend to breast feed my child, which I can do here. It will only take twenty minutes at the most and the rest of the time the child will be sleeping during which time I will be working.'

Sinclair sat amazed as he listened to Josephine's plan.

Finally he said,

'I think it is a very ambitious plan and I need to think about it.'

That night over dinner, he described to his wife what Josephine had proposed.

'Is it feasible dear?' He asked, 'it seems outlandish to me.'

'I agree,' she said, 'on the face of it, it seems unworkable but I read recently about working professional mothers who have done just what Josephine has described. It appears that they are much more fulfilled and do a better job if they can continue with their work rather than being stuck at home often on their own.'

The following day Josephine learned that her proposal had been accepted and the staff all wished her good luck. Now she had to convince Chris. That may be more difficult she feared.

'How was it getting back to work today?' He asked when she got home.

'I was a bit tired but it was wonderful to be active again. I feel really well, no pain and no problems.'

'That's wonderful darling. Did you get a chance to talk about maternity leave?'

'Yes,'

'Well what did you say?'

'I told him that I would like to work up to the last two weeks if possible and return two to three days after the birth.'

'Isn't that a bit early?'

Josephine then explained her plan to an open mouthed Chris.'

'That's ridiculous why can't you do what most mothers do and take off 6-8 weeks maternity leave?'

'Because I don't think it's necessary. I hope if all goes well to be able to follow my plan.'

Meanwhile I was enjoying life. I had got used to the new routine and was happier than I had been in years, Michael was more loving than I could have imagined but a dark cloud was beginning to appear over our lives. I was a bit worried about Michael's health. He seemed to tire easily and had put on a lot of weight.

'Darling you should see the doctor. I think he could help you.'

'No I'm fine I know I weigh a little too much but I'm trying to lose it. I am sure that's all I need to do.'

'At least, see if you have anything to worry about, you do seem to be getting tired very easily.'

After some persuading Michael agreed to see the doctor. Alice had agreed not to go with him. He arranged to see a Dr Granville and was surprised to find out that Dr Granville was a woman. She soon put him at ease. After examining him she ordered some blood tests and a technician carried out an ECG. He got dressed and waited for the results. After about ten minutes the doctor reappeared with the heart tracing.

'Now Michael I have looked at the ECG. It shows that there is evidence of a heart strain. This is not serious but I think it would be advisable to take a mild heart tablet three times a day. You also need to lose some weight. Here is a diet sheet that will guide you. Come and see me again in three months and I will repeat the tests.'

Michael was not very keen on taking medicine and after about a month he stopped taking them. I tried not to worry but when I saw that the bottle of tablets was not emptying, I asked Michael.

'Are you taking the tablets?' knowing full well that he wasn't.

'Yes of course,' he replied kissing me.

'Michael that's not true, I know you are not because I have been watching the bottle of tablets and they are not going down. Why do you lie to me? You know you should be taking them.'

'I know but I hate taking them. They remind me that there is something wrong with my heart and I don't want to know, can you understand that?'

Michael began to get stabs of pain in his chest when he overdid things. Lifting boxes of books was becoming increasingly difficult and made him puff and his heart pound in his chest. Gradually even the slightest exertion made him short of breath. He knew he should do something about it but kept putting it off.

I am a light sleeper and one night I was awakened by the sound of heavy breathing coming from Michael. I sat up and put the bedside lamp on. Michael was lying on his back struggling to get his breath.

‘Alice,’ he muttered. ‘I feel strange, I woke up with this sense of foreboding as if something bad was going to happen.’

‘Just relax dear I’m sure its nothing serious; It might have been that pasta you did eat a lot of it.’

‘I know but it doesn’t feel like indigestion I don’t think so. I feel a bit unreal. I’ll take an Alka Seltzer.’ He went to the bathroom and returned with a glass full of bubbling liquid.

‘I hate this stuff but here goes.’

‘Drink it all at once dear, it’s easier that way,’ I suggested now sitting up in bed. Michael lay back resting. I could hear him breathing, taking deep breaths.

‘It’s as if I can’t fill my lungs,’ he said. ‘I have this heavy feeling across my chest here,’ and he moved my hand to feel his breastbone. ‘It seems to be here inside; it’s not really a pain more an ache.’

I could see that he was very pale and there were beads of sweat on his forehead. His face was clammy. I felt frightened.

‘I think we should call an ambulance.’

‘OK if you think so, you know best, I don’t feel well.’

Ten minutes later we could hear the ambulance siren getting neared and nearer. It stopped outside our building.

‘He’s in here,’ I said, pointing to the bedroom as two paramedics carrying a heavy medical kit bag enter the apartment.

‘Take it easy, we’ll get you to hospital right away.’ One said as he rolled up Michael’s sleeve and gave him an injection.



'Just to calm you,' he said. 'Now I want to set up an IV. Are you right handed?' Michael nodded.

'OK let me have your left arm.' In a short time the line was inserted and clear fluid was running from a plastic bottle into his arm.

'Good,' said the Medic. 'Stay still while I strap it into position.' Meanwhile the other paramedic was putting chest leads in position and was recording Michael's heart function. As the tracing started, he noticed the reversed ST segment and nodded to his colleague.

'Lets get him to hospital; quickly, there's a problem here.'

Michael didn't remember the journey. He found himself slowly slipping into oblivion. Voices become blurred and the shaking of the vehicle became softer and gentler. I was sitting by his side and saw him close his eyes. I was holding his hand and felt his grip relax.

'I think he's asleep,' I said to the paramedic sitting beside me.

'Good it won't be long once we get him into IC. We can set up the monitors and take control.'

'OK.'

Just relax Alice; he's going to be all right, a voice inside my head said.

But then the doubts and fears flooded in. I prayed silently.

ICU was already busy when we arrived. Placed on a trolley Michael was slotted into a station equipped with monitoring equipment. Immediately chest leads were attached and he was linked up to an ECG machine. Soon the regular beats of his heart were heard and seen as a

recurring tracing on the screen. A mask providing Oxygen was strapped to his face. I sat by his side holding his hand. Already his color had improved and his cold clammy hands were now warm. I relaxed; he's going to be all right I told myself.

Michael was confused; he seemed to be suspended in the air high above his own body, looking down on the scene. He saw himself lying on a bed attached to a monitoring machine. He saw Alice, dear Alice, holding his hand. How he loved her. How wonderful his life had been since she came into it. He saw the tears on her cheeks. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her and not to worry about him he was fine but he couldn't. Instead he watched the technicians busy themselves trying to stabilise his circulation. Suddenly as if his lifeline had snapped, the tracing flattened. The electrical pathways in his heart had failed. It was no longer able to shoulder the task of pumping the blood through his circulation.

A shrill call from the alarm broke the silence. The technician looked up and saw the tracing slowly flattening until it was only a single moving line. He knew what it meant, four minutes of life remained unless they could get the heart to start again.

'Fibrillator,' he shouted. Immediately the machine was rolled into place and flat pads were placed on Michael's chest.

'Stand back,' the technician shouted and suddenly Michael felt a surge of power discharge through his body. His heart twitched and writhed searching for its rhythm and suddenly it began to beat. The tracing reformed and the regular outline returned.

'He's back.'

Michael felt himself slowly descending and then it was calm. He opened his eyes,

‘Hello Alice.’

‘Darling Michael, oh my God you’re alive.’

Thank you thank you everyone,’ I said tears of gratitude flooding my face.

Christopher and Jo were waiting impatiently at the end of the phone for news of Michael’s condition. Both knew how critically ill he was and were preparing themselves for the worst. So when Alice rang to say he was out of danger they were overwhelmed with joy. Now their lives could return to normality.

Christopher was swotting for his MBA and didn’t want to be disturbed. But Josephine was restless. She had two weeks to go and had started her maternity leave. They had been very supportive at work wishing her good luck. Even her boss Sinclair had wished her well and given her a kiss on the cheek.

‘I’ll must round to see Mum,’ she shouted as she left the apartment.

‘See you later,’ shouted Christopher from his study.

Josephine didn’t usually warn her mother she was coming. She would just drop by and take potluck. Today she was in luck; mum was in the garden picking some flowers.

‘Hi Mum,’ she shouted from the open patio door. ‘How’s Dad doing?’ ‘He’s on the mend and should be out of hospital in a day or two.’ Isabel replied. ‘What a lovely surprise, I’ll be in, in a

minute. Pour yourself a coffee, I've just made some fresh.'

Coming into the kitchen, Isabel asked,

'How's Chris?'

'OK, he's at home studying. He's got his final exam on Monday.'

Josephine was cupping her coffee in her hands admiring the garden when she felt dampness on her seat.

'Mum, are these seats wet?' She asked.

'Wet, how do you mean?'

'I seem to be sitting on a wet patch.'

'Oh dear, I think your waters may have burst. Let me see, yes they have. We need to get you to the hospital. Don't worry it's nothing to worry about.'

'Am I going to have the baby?'

'Yes, but not right away. Get your bag and let's get going.'

The Obs. unit was quiet when they arrived. They had only one birth that morning.

'Hello Jo, what are you doing here? What's happened?' asked the nurse.

'I think my waters have burst.'

'OK, get undressed and I'll take you into room 4.'

'Mum please tell Chris. Tell him where I am. Tell him not to worry I'm fine.'

Christopher picked up the phone and listened.

'I'm on my way.'

By the time he had arrived, Josephine was in bed with an IV dripping slowly into her left arm. She was reading a book.

'Hi darling,' he said kissing her. ' You look very relaxed, how are you?'

'Fine.'

'When is the baby due?'

'They say it may be some while. I've been admitted as a precaution. Chris, you don't need to stay. Mum will let you know when things are happening.'

'OK I'll go home but make sure you tell me in time. I want to be with you when the baby is born.'

Some hours later his phone rang,

'Chris It's on the way.' He dressed and jumped into his car. Dialing Isabel on his phone he asked,

'What's happening?'

'After you left, Jo fell asleep but then her pains began and increased rapidly. The doctor decided to have a scan and it showed that the cord was around the baby's neck.'

'What does that mean?'

'If she proceeds to a normal delivery, the blood supply to the baby's head may cut off. '

'Does that matter?'

'Apparently yes, so they have decided to do a Caesarean.'

'I'm about 10 minutes from the hospital, see you soon.'

Josephine was in the OR when he arrived. He wanted to be present so he was gowned and taken in to sit by her side. He was surprised to find that she was awake. He reached under the sheets and held her hand.

'How are you darling? This is exciting'

'For you maybe but not for me, I'm really scared.'

'Why are you awake. Aren't you meant to be asleep?'

'I've had a epidural, I wanted to see our baby born.'

Christopher looked around. The OR was bigger than he thought it would be. There were many people standing around, nurse and technicians. He could see two surgeons scrubbing up behind a glass wall. Suddenly he heard one of them speak

'I am Dr. Filtzer. Our patient today is a thirty-eight weeks primip whose waters have broken.' He then went on to describe the scan findings.

'We have decided to do a C Section. She has opted to have an epidural to keep an eye on us, haven't you Jo? She wanted to see her baby born.' Josephine nodded. Chris squeezed her hand.

After swabbing her abdomen with an iodine solution he positioned four green drapes so as to leave only the lower abdomen visible. Checking with the anaesthetist that the epidural was working, he stroked the skin with a scalpel. Beads of blood appeared which he diathermied. He then deepened the wound and split the muscle. Now the outline of the womb could be seen. He divided the peritoneum and entered the abdominal cavity. The womb reddish brown in colour bulged upwards. Choosing a spot at its lower pole he incised the muscle transversely until he had reached the uterine cavity in which the baby was lying. He gently lifted it out of the womb.

'It's a boy,' he exclaimed with delight. 'No matter how many times we see a baby born,' said the surgeon. 'It never stops being amazing.'

'Congratulations Jo, you have a son and he weighs 7 and a half pounds.' At that moment there

was a loud wail from the baby. Everyone clapped in delight.

Isabel was waiting in the room when Jo returned with her baby in her arms trying to suckle.

'Congratulations darling,' she said kissing her and the baby. 'He's gorgeous,' she exclaimed, 'the spitting image of Chris. Where is he?'

'I think he went to the men's room. He looked overwhelmed by what had happened,'

In the men's room Christopher was leaning over a basin. He had been sick and was wiping his face. He pulled himself together and feeling a little sheepish returned to Josephine's room where he was welcomed with hugs and kisses.

'Congratulations,' said Isabel hugging him. He went over to Jo and hugged her and kissed his new son, tears pouring down his face.

'I can't believe it,' he said.' You are so clever Jo.'

After a short while Michael and Alice arrived. They had brought a bottle of champagne. They all kissed despite the animosity that still existed between the two families and Chris made a short speech,

'Michael, Alice and Isabel, I hope this will be the beginning of a closer understanding between our two families. I am so sorry that dad couldn't be here.' They all clapped.

As soon as he could he took a video of the family and their new son whom they had named Simon and sent it to his father. They laughed and hugged, promising to take the baby when Jo was feeling stronger.

Josephine was completely overawed by Simon. Before putting on a new diaper, she would examine him from top to toe, admiring his strong little body.

She would count his fingers and toes each one perfectly formed. She loved to touch his ears, to trace their shape with her finger while he lay gurgling on her lap. But she was impatient to get home and persuaded the doctor against his better judgement to let her go.

‘I’ll be fine. I’m a natural.’ She boasted. ‘In any case I have two mothers to help me if need be.’ Josephine was wanted to start work again. She knew she wasn’t fit to return to the office but she could do her work at home. Without Christopher knowing she phoned the office. Sinclair came on the phone.

‘Hi, I’m home with a bouncing boy called Simon. When can I start? I want to work from home. Can you get your IT man to connect my home computer to my office one? Then I can continue with the project. It’s almost finished and I can’t wait to complete it.’

Sinclair listened, he had long given up trying to organise her.

‘OK sounds good. You should be connected by tomorrow. Let me know when it happens.’

The following morning Christopher woke early and reached out to cuddle Jo only to find that her side of the bed empty. She must be in the nursery he decided and went to look for her but she wasn’t there. He could hear her computer going in the study. Standing at the door he saw her bent over the keyboard tapping away,

‘What on earth are you doing down here at this time in the morning?’

‘Sorry did I wake you?’

‘No you didn’t but I couldn’t find you, I was worried.’



'I'm just setting up my computer so that when the IT man at the office comes in, he'll link it to the office one.'

'Why would you want to do that?'

'Because I want to start working again.'

'But you haven't recovered from the op yet? The doctor said you need to take it quietly for a couple of weeks.'

'I know and I will. What I want to do is to work from home. In that way my pregnancy won't interfere with my project.'

'I bet your boss Sinclair won't agree with that?'

'Well that's where you're wrong, he has just given me the OK.'

The many visitors after the birth of his grandson tired Michael and he knew he still wasn't well. He felt that he was only a shell of his former self. He needed assistance to get out of the car and leaned heavily on my arm as we walked slowly towards their apartment, stopping at least once to catch his breath. Once in doors he flopped down on the settee breathing heavily.

'I'll rest here for a while before I go upstairs,' he gasped.

I went into the kitchen. I could see that it was going to be long time before Michael recovered. I found it difficult to accept that this man who had always been the strongest, the rock on whom I had depended, was now relying on me. I thought about the shop. Fortunately a friend had run it for some weeks. He had taken some holiday from his own job and filled in for them but now he had to leave. What to do about it? I knew that it would be

sometime before Michael would be able to resume running it. The doctor had warned me.

‘He’s had a bad heart attack. It’s going to take a long time for him to recover.’

It was some days later that but Michael raised the subject of the shop.

‘I’ve been thinking about the shop. I don’t feel able to return there at present. What do you think we should do?’ I knew what was needed but was reluctant to suggest that I should take it over for the meantime.

‘I don’t know Michael, what do you think, should we try and get someone else to run it?’

‘I think that would be very difficult, nobody wants to work for someone else they would want their own business.’ He was reluctant to suggest me; it was asking a lot, as I was already very busy running the home.

One morning at breakfast I brought up the subject again.

‘Michael we have to do something about the shop. We can’t afford to sell it. We would have no income.’

‘Alice,’ he asked, ‘I know this is a big imposition but would you do it? Would you try? I know you could do it.’

I feigned surprise.

He continued,

‘I think you would run it better than me. You have a natural affinity towards the customers. I have seen the way you discuss a book with them. Many now come specially to ask your advice about the next book they should read.’

‘I don’t know, Michael. I could try it for a while until you feel better.’

‘Thank you darling, I would feel much happier with the thought of you in the shop. I could always come in and deal with the administration. Soon I think but not yet. I still feel very weak.’

I had noticed how Michael had changed. He seemed to have no strength. He was no longer the active striving man instead he sat waiting for me to bring things to him. Sometimes I felt angry at the way he was now depending on me. I wasn’t to know how he hated the way he was. He knew that he was becoming a burden on me but try as he might, the slightest exertion brought on paroxysms of coughing and breathlessness, leaving him gasping for air.

He was seeing the doctor regularly and complained that he wasn’t getting any better.

‘Michael you had a very bad heart attack, you almost died. It’s bound to take a long time. Be patient the heart is an amazing organ; it has the most remarkable powers of recovery.

‘What did the doctor say?’ I asked on his return home.

‘The same old thing, be patient. How much longer? I’ve been patient but I don’t seem to be improving. I can’t even walk to the shop to get the paper. I’m a cripple. I hate myself. I’m old before my time.’

‘Darling please don’t, it breaks my heart to hear you so unhappy. I wish I could do something.’

‘I know, I’m sorry it’s just that I get so cross with myself.’

Six months later the first edition of ‘My Fall from Grace’ was published. Horace sent a copy to Alice

One morning while in the shop I received a parcel by special post from a publisher. I opened it

completely unaware of what it contained. Suddenly I was holding in my hands a book called ' My fall from Grace' by Horace Canova.

I turned to the dedication page and read

*To Alice, in search of forgiveness*

When I got home, I showed Michael the book. He sat looking at it turning over the pages.

'Do you want to us to stock it?'

'I don't know what do you think?'

'I think we should. It's from a reputable publisher from whom we have had other books. I was hesitant to ask about an author signing. It was a common practice to invite the author to sign his book. But Michael suggested it.

'Alice, should we invite him for a signing?'

'Would they let him come?' I replied.

'I don't know. I'll contact his lawyer, he'll know the procedure.'

Robert Chain, Horace's lawyer thought it was great idea and agreed to approach the Governor to ask whether Mr Canova could be allowed out for one day to do a signing of his new book. The governor decided to consider it and called a special meeting. He had never had such a request before.

At the meeting, Robert Chain appeared and requested that his client be allowed to attend the Book signing on the forthcoming Saturday.

'My client has had an exemplary record since being here. He is due for release in one year's time. I can vouch for his conduct.'

The officer read out Canova's record since his incarceration,

'Sir, Canova has had no incidents since he came here. He has carried out his duties in a satisfactory manner and we feel he poses no risk '

When the news was told to Horace, he was overjoyed. It would be the first time he had seen me since the court case. He had mixed feelings, of excitement at the prospect of fame albeit for a short while and apprehension about meeting me. He apparently rehearsed many times what he would say to me but nothing sounded right.

The police van was on time and waiting when Horace was escorted to the front of the prison. Calls of good luck were ringing in his ears. In town the word had got out that a famous actor was coming to the bookshop to sign his Bio. The shop had opened early with a special sale of his book and they were swamped.

'My Fall from Grace' was going to be a best seller. Lines of people wanting to buy the book began to form hours before the shop opened. The crowd was excited to see the police van draw up outside the bookshop. They surged forwards to get a glimpse of Horace and cheered when he appeared and stepped onto the pavement. He waved and was promptly escorted into the building. I was waiting for him.

'Hello Horace,' I said coldly. 'It's good to see you.'

'Thank you Alice I am delighted to be here.' We both felt strained and tense after so long a separation.

Then in a business-like manner I described what I had planned.

'You can sit behind the desk by the wall and the readers will present their purchases to you for signing. Is that OK?'

‘Perfect,’ he said. ‘Let’s get going.’  
Immediately the doors were opened, the crowd surged forwards.

Horace was clearly relishing the task. I had mixed feelings as I watched. He hadn’t changed. He still loved the limelight. Occasionally he would look up between signing and smile at me.

Suddenly it was all over and the crowds had gone. Horace was whisked away back to prison. We hardly had time to say goodbye before I found myself alone. Undoubtedly it had been a financial success but I was still smarting from Horace’s attitude. He had shown me no remorse. It was only when I remembered the dedication that I began to soften.

As soon as I could I rang Michael. I didn’t want to be too enthusiastic but he could hear in my voice how excited I was.

‘It went very well,’ I said in a measured tone. ‘A lot of interest and we easily covered our costs.’

‘Good, well done you must feel very proud.’ He didn’t wait for an answer before adding, ‘how was Horace?’

‘His usual self,’ I replied, ‘basking in the adulation of the crowd.’

‘Well you knew he would, ‘leopards don’t change their spots.’

At home, Michael sat about trying to occupy himself while I was juggling two jobs, the shop and keeping the home together. The stress was beginning to tell. Coming home exhausted I would find Michael lounging on the settee watching a cowboy movie. One day I exploded.

'I've had enough Michael. I can't keep this together, something is going to break.'

Michael didn't interrupt. He knew I was right. It was too much for one person. Unknown to me, he made a resolution. The following morning I was amazed to find him fully dressed and ready to go out.

'Michael, where on earth are you going?

'Where do you think? I am going to the shop.'

'But?'

'No buts, let's go.'

After a few weeks I was able to reduce my hours at the shop and concentrate more on the home. But Michael was finding it increasingly difficult to climb the ladders and sort the books. His old chest pain began to recur which made him feel giddy and light-headed. He took the heart tablets whenever this happened but they were not working well and sometimes not at all. He said nothing to me.

'How was your day? I would ask when he came home. 'Any pain?'

'No, no pain, he would lie.'

But I could see that he was getting worse. I spoke to Isabel. They had started talking since the birth of their grandson.

'He's impossible. I know he's having his heart pain again by the ashen look when he comes home but he denies it. What am I to do?'

'Nothing I'm afraid. He has always been like that ever since I've known him. He is unable to accept any compromise. I think you will have to let him be, he won't change now.' Alice put the receiver down with the words; 'he will never change now,' ringing in her ears.

The end came sooner than I had expected. I was at work when Sinclair burst into her office. He looked terrible.

'Alice I'm afraid it's bad news. Jo has just phoned to say that Michael has collapsed and has been taken into hospital.' I was in a whirl as I raced through the streets to the hospital.

'He's in IC,' shouted the receptionist as I rushed by. Bounding up the stairs I hurried into the room. Michael was lying on a trolley wired up to the heart machine. I could see the tracing. It was irregular and there were long pauses.

'I am afraid he's near the end,' said a doctor pulling up a chair so I could sit next to Michael.

'Can't you do anything?' I whispered her voice cracking.

'His heart has given up. There is nothing more we can do.' At that moment Michael opened his eyes.

'Alice are you there?'

'It's all right dear, I'm with you, just rest.'

'I love you Alice,' he said closing his eyes. I sat with him as the light in the room slowly dimmed. His breathing slowed and then he took one last gasp and was still.

I sat listening to the clicking of the machine mesmerized by the straight line it was now tracing.

'I'm afraid he's gone,' said the doctor lifting me gently by the elbows and walking me into a waiting room. He sat down beside me and held my hand.

'I'm sorry we did everything we could.'

It was a simple funeral. Michael wanted to be cremated. Christopher said a few words.



'My dear family and friends, thank you for coming today to share this sad day with us. Although Michael was a second dad to me, I loved him as much as my own father. He and Mum had a very special love, which his death cannot diminish. We will miss his smile, his ready wit but above all his generosity of spirit, which touched all who came into contact with him. May his soul rest in peace.'

I watched as the flower covered coffin slid silently away. I felt as if I was watching someone else's cremation not Michael's. His death had not yet sunk in. Even when I returned home, family and friends accompanied me. It was only when they took their leave and I was alone that his absence became palpable. It was so quiet there was hardly a sound. I was used to hearing him walking about, occasionally coughing, calling for something or just sitting together. I would unexpectedly hear his footsteps and turn but no one was there. Suddenly the telephone rang. It was Jo.

'Hello Alice are you alone?'

'Yes.'

'We're coming over.'

Within twenty minutes their car drew up in the car park and the two jumped out carrying Simon. I was at the door before they knocked and let them in.

'We've brought some cold chicken and salad, you must be hungry.' said Jo taking the food into the kitchen.

'Yes I am,' I said. 'I've completely forgotten to eat today.'

After supper, the three of us sat together watching Simon playing in his pram. No one spoke. Jo was the first to break the silence.

‘At least he saw his grandson,’ She said reaching out to lift the boy onto her lap. ‘Although sadly he will never know his grandfather.’ she added.

‘We must make sure he sees photographs and that we talk about him,’ said Christopher stroking Simon’s curls. I said nothing. I was still numb by the events of the last twenty-four hours. As it got later Jo looked at Chris and nodded.

‘Sorry Alice I think we must go home. We’ve all got a busy day tomorrow.’

Once alone I felt the emptiness of the house bearing down on me. I wandered from room to room oblivious of their familiarity. It was as if I was a stranger who had accidentally tumbled upon an unoccupied house. Objects that I had come to love seemed unfamiliar. I moved from one to another touching them as if they were in some way alien. And all the time I was looking for Michael. I heard him everywhere but when I went to find him, he wasn’t there. I would call out his name and wait for his reply but no sound returned.

As the night came on I went upstairs and went into the bedroom. I lay down on the bed, the bed that we had shared for so many years. For a brief moment I thought I saw him and reached out to him but the image faded and disappeared. During the night I awoke suddenly. I could hear his breathing. Reflexly I tried to touch him but he wasn’t there. Sadness and heavy tears wracked my body as tiredness overcame me. I called his name but there was no answer. Gradually I felt myself drifting, and I fell asleep.

Next morning, as the sunlit filtered through the curtains I awoke. I felt for Michael and then the emptiness, as I remembered. I lay still waiting as the room filled with light. I didn't want to move, I wanted to stay there forever, as time no longer seemed to have a meaning.

I knew I couldn't go on like this. I needed something to make me forget to allow me to put the past behind and to begin a new life. I remembered in the old days when I was down I would take a drink and it seemed to help, it seemed to take my troubles away. I knew that Michael had some alcohol somewhere but where? I searched and searched but found nothing and at last tired and frustrated I flopped down on the floor by the stairs leaning against a door. It was hard on my back and I turned. It was a door but leading where. Suddenly I knew, it was a basement; I wondered if that was where he kept his liquor? By this time I was desperate. I pulled open the door, it wasn't locked and then I could see into the room. The walls were stacked with rows of bottles.

It was as if I had tumbled into Aladdin's cave. I searched along the rows looking for brandy; it had become my favourite. Selecting a bottle I returned to the kitchen and opened it, tearing impatiently at the wrapper. The pale yellow liquid glinted in the light as I poured half a glass. I drank it neat in huge gulps, gasping for breath as the fiery liquid burned my throat and scorched my stomach. I took a deep breath and waited. Slowly the alcohol took effect and I began to feel light headed. The sun seemed to grow brighter and I shaded my eyes.

Carrying the bottle and the glass I tottered into the lounge and collapsed heavily on the settee.

I wanted more but by this time my hands were shaking and in trying to pour more into a glass I tipped some onto the floor. I went down on all fours and wiped it up with my hands and licked it off my fingers. I was beginning to feel giddy and placed the bottle carefully on the floor. I stretched out on the settee and fell asleep. I was reliving that I was back on the set playing my favourite character; everyone was clapping. I was being feted and loved; I wanted it to go on forever.

It was the next morning that the knocking on my front door woke me. I heard someone shouting my name.

‘Alice, are you all right?’ It was my neighbour.

‘Yes,’ I shouted back. ‘I’m fine thank you.’

‘Can I do anything for you?’ he added

‘No thanks everything is OK.’

But of course I wasn’t. Once I had started I couldn’t stop. Slowly over the next few months I drank my way through the whole cellar. Anything with alcohol was acceptable. My whole life was now centred on drinking. I stopped eating, rarely washed and ignored everything that was going on around her.

Unknown to me my neighbour had noticed that I never came out of the house and that my post was piling up in the post box. Time and again he called me but by now I was beyond hearing. In desperation he apparently called the police. When they came round they could see how neglected everything was. After failing to rouse me they broke through the front door and found me unconscious on the bed. By this time I had no awareness of my situation.

'Hello Alice, how are you?' were the words that came floating into my mind. They were echoing and unreal. At first I didn't respond but when they were repeated I slowly opened my eyes. I was looking into the kindest face I had ever seen.

'Welcome back,' she said. 'You have been on a long journey.'

'Where am I,' I asked looking around.

'You're in a Rehab unit.'

'How did I get here?'

'The police found you unconscious in your home and brought you here.'

I lay back confused. I had no memory of any of that. It was as if a large chunk of my life had been removed. At last I said,

'Why am I here, I should be at home. What's happening to my home, my things whose looking after them?'

'We contacted your son and he is dealing with it. Don't worry I'm sure it is in good hands.'

'We need to talk about your future. My name is Doctor Stein but call me Jenny.' You were found semi-conscious in your home surrounded by piles of empty bottles. Our tests show that you are seriously ill from chronic alcoholism.'

At first I didn't understand I felt fine I didn't know why an IV was dripping slowly into my left arm.

'I'm Ok, I want to go home please.'

'Yes I know you do, but you are very ill and unless we treat you, you will die.'

'I don't believe it. I want to go home, I insist.' I said.

'Alice listen to me. Why would I, a doctor keep you in a Rehab unit unless you needed help.'

Be sensible it's your only chance. Carry on like you have and you won't live out a year.'

'So you see Sofia I was at the lowest ebb in my life or so I thought. I didn't know that it could become worse.'

'Did you stay and have the treatment?'

'Yes in the end I decided to stay. They had warned me that it wouldn't be easy but I had no idea how hard it would be. I had got so used to drinking that when I stopped it, I had terrible withdrawal symptoms. I don't think anyone who hasn't been there can imagine how awful it is.'

'I don't mind if you don't want to talk about it.' said Sofia.

'No I think I need to. You will be the first person that I have told about it.'

'By five o'clock that evening, I was starting to feel uncomfortable. I was dying for a drink and I noticed my hands were beginning to shake and I was feeling hot. Sweat began to break out on my forehead. I called out for a drink and they brought me a jug full of juice. I drank three glasses and was still thirsty. I tried to sleep but was attacked by ghost-like shadows that kept moving just outside my reach. I must have called out because someone came to my bedside and stroked my brow I never knew who it was.

By the following morning I was feeling wretched and I called for help, but I was told I had to just hang in there.

The giddiness was the worst. I just couldn't stand it. The slightest movement brought on a swirling motion of the room causing me to reach out across the bed to steady myself. I seemed to be on a roundabout going faster and faster. I tried to get up

to go to the toilet. I managed to struggle to my feet by grabbing on to the side of the bed. Once upright I tried to walk but the giddiness overcame me and I had to crawl back to bed. It took me over a week to feel like eating anything.'

'After that I began to feel better and I think I was allowed home after four weeks. I had looked forwards to being in my own surroundings but once home the old feelings of emptiness returned. I continued to have the impression that life had become purposeless. My sleep pattern was still disturbed and it took almost three months before I could sleep through the night.

I had completely forgotten about the shop and when I returned to it, it was closed up. Unpaid bills had mounted in my absence to the point that I was bankrupt. All my money had gone. If that wasn't bad enough, I tried to stay in the house but eventually the bailiffs came and I was thrown onto the street. I had gathered up a few things and tried to find somewhere to live but without money I couldn't afford anywhere to stay.'

'What about your son couldn't he have helped you?

'I was too ashamed to contact him. I was a failure and I wanted to hide.'  
Sofia was beginning to nod.

'I think you've heard enough for today,' I said. 'Now you know how it all happened. It was a series of events which I didn't see coming until it was too late. Once I had lost everything there was no way back.'

Unknown to me Christopher was looking for me. We had lost touch when my world fell apart and I moved onto the street. There I was virtually

invisible. He had tried all the usual lost people agencies including the LAPD adult missing persons Unit without success. But luck played into my hands. The policeman who moved me on that morning took my details and handed them in to the Unit. As he was writing his report, the sergeant who was standing behind him, read the details over his shoulder.

'You say, you moved on an old woman, sleeping rough today?'

'Yes, he said her name was Alice. She was in a terrible state I wish they would let us help them.' he added.

'I wonder,' said the sergeant, it may be a coincidence but we had an enquiry about a missing woman a few weeks ago. Let me look up her details. Here it is, a Mr. Christopher Canova the son who was trying to find her. They lost touch when she fell on to hard times after a bereavement. Her name was Alice. Where did you see her?'

'She was sleeping on a bench in Grand Park,'

'When you're next on duty, see if you can find her?'

I was out shopping for supper and was coming out of the supermarket when I passed a Patrol Officer whose face looked familiar.

'Hi,' I said. He looked surprised as members of the public rarely spoke to him.

'Aren't you the Officer who moved me on in Grand park some while ago?'

'Yes mam, I think so.' he said. Then he recognised me. 'I'm glad to see that you're getting back on your feet. Where are you living?' I gave him our address and continued home. That evening



when Sofia came in I recounted what had happened.

‘I gave him this address. I hope that’s OK?’

‘Sure I guess he wanted it for his records.’

The Officer was very excited when he returned to the station.

Sergeant I met that woman.’

‘Which woman?’

‘The bag woman called Alice. You remember the one that was reported missing. I got her address.’

‘OK leave it to me, we’ll send an officer around tomorrow and let her know that her son is trying to find her.

‘Why not give him her address?’

‘She might not want to see him, it’s got to be her choice.’

The following day the Officer knocked on the door of Sofia’ apartment. I was still asleep so Sofia peeped though the spy hole in the door. A patrol officer was standing there. Her heart dropped, Oh my god she thought, he has come for me. She shouted through the letterbox.

‘What do you want?’

‘I am sorry to trouble you Ma’am, I’m Patrol Officer Murphy from the Missing person’s bureau. Does Alice Canova live there?’

‘Yes I’ll get her for you,’ she said, relieved that he didn’t want her. I had overheard the conversation and opened the door.

‘Yes I’m Alice Canova. Who wants me? Oh it’s you Officer?’

‘Yes this is my beat.’

'How may I help you?'

'The bureau has had an enquiry from a Mr Christopher Canova who is looking for his mother. He is trying to contact her.'

'Do you know him?'

'Yes he's my son.'

'Your son Alice?' Said an incredulous Sofia.

'Yes.'

'May I give him your address?'

'Yes I think you can.'

'Thank you ma'am good day.'

As soon as the door had shut Sofia turned to me.

'You never told me you had a son. Why have you kept it a secret? Why haven't you kept in touch with him?'

'Dear Sofia, it's a long story. I am so ashamed of what had happened to me. I didn't want to embarrass him. I thought it better if I just disappeared.'

'Well clearly he doesn't agree. He wants to see you.'

Christopher was delighted when he heard from the police that they had located me and that I was alive and living in Los Angeles.

He was reading a report when the phone rang. It was his secretary. 'Christopher it's the Police.'

His heart dropped. Had something happened? Why were they phoning him?

'Hello this is Mr. Canova, how can I help you?'

'Good morning Sir, I am Officer Murphy from the LA Missing persons bureau. We think we have found your mother Alice. She had been living

rough in the park and got lost from our Radar. She now has an address.'

'Thank you, thank you that's great news.'

Christopher couldn't wait to tell Jo.

'Jo, he shouted, 'I've just had some amazing news,'

He rushed into the house.

'Something miraculous has happened. You remember I told you that I had left Mum's details with the LA Missing persons Bureau?'

'Yes,'

'Well guess what? They phoned me today, they've found her. Isn't that amazing?'

'Are you sure? They sometimes make mistakes.'

'No I'm sure it's Mum.'

'If it's her, that's wonderful news. We must go and see her as soon as possible.'

As Jo and Christopher were both working, they arranged to drive over to LA at the weekend.

It was a very emotional reunion. Simon looked on in amazement as his parents greeted his new grandmother. Everyone was crying. He had heard so much about her and had been looking forwards to meeting her.

Jo made the formal introduction.

'This is Simon, Alice you probably remember him as a newborn child. He is now twelve.'

'Say hello to you new grandmother.'

'Hello Grandma Alice I am pleased to meet you.'

'Hello Simon I suppose you are too grown up to give your Grandmother a kiss.'

While the family was reuniting, Sofia sat watching. She had never seen a close family and was amazed at the affection they showed. As the greetings continued, Christopher became aware that they had almost ignored her in their pleasure at seeing his mother. As soon as he could, he asked Alice to introduce her. Alice took Sofia's hand and said,

'This is my dear friend. She has shown me such kindness and has opened her home to me.

'Hang on Alice, tell them how you saved me from a bunch of louts who were attacking me.'

'Yes that's how we met, we've been friends ever since.'

When they got home, Josephine and Christopher were unusually quiet. Both were trying to frame a request that the other would agree. Josephine began.

I was thinking it was wonderful to find Alice after all these years. Do you think?' She paused.

'What dear?' asked Christopher now guessing what she wanted to ask.

'We could?'

'What,' he said smiling?'

'You know what I want to do?'

'Yes of course and I think it's a wonderful idea. Which of us should ask her?'

'Let's ask her when we next see her.'

'What about Sofia? I was talking to her. She is a very bright young woman. I felt we owed her a great debt of thanks, I asked her if she would like to go back to school and finish her studies. She jumped at the idea. I thought we could sponsor her. What do you think?'

'I think it's a marvellous idea. It could be a nice way of thanking her for rescuing your mother?'

'Yes I'll say that to her when we next meet.'

It was while Christopher was collecting Alice's things to bring to his home that he made the suggestion to Sofia.

'Jo and I are so grateful to you for inviting mum into your home and sharing the little you had with her. We would like to do something tangible to show our gratitude.'

'It ain't necessary. I only did what was right and I would do it again.'

'I know, you are a very generous and caring young woman. We came up with the idea of sending you to school. I know you are interested in fighting for the rights of young woman abandoned at an early age. This would give you an opportunity of doing something about it.'

Sofia was overwhelmed.

'I have been doing some research and have found a college, the Irvine University College of Law which does part time courses leading to the Jurisprudence Degree which is the first degree in law and is required to practice law in the USA' Would you like to study law?'

'That would be great thanks a lot.'

'We don't need thanks, just show the world what you're made of.'

Sofia didn't need any encouragement. It was as if a damn had burst, as if her brain had been released from bondage. Now freed from her past she devoured knowledge like a starving person

I have for too long believed I was stupid,' she told us, unable to understand, limited but now everything is at my fingertips.

From the moment she arrived in class and sat diligently listening, the tutors knew that she was different. There was a fire burning in her eyes. There was a hunger, which was impossible to satisfy. It was no surprise to them that she got top marks in her finals.

Five years later Sofia was awarded her JD with Honours. The principal had watched her progress and made a special award for her, which she was to receive at the Degree ceremony.

As she climbed onto the stage to receive her degree the audience went quiet. She took the scroll, shook the hand of the Principal and turned to face the audience. As she began to speak, tears ran down her cheeks.

‘Fellow graduates, Teachers, Parents, Ladies and gentlemen. Today is the greatest day in my life. I have arrived at a place that seemed unimaginable a short time ago. With the help of dear friends who believed in me, I have achieved my goal and begun my life’s work. I dedicate myself to the task of fighting for all those men and women who by the lottery of birth were denied the opportunity to fulfill their potential.’

As the audience rose clapping and cheering, Alice, Josephine, Simon and Christopher were brimming over with pride.