

The Arc Of Time

**A Collection Of Short Stories
From Africa**

By

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First Published as E-book in 2013
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ISBN 978-0-9926668-0-4
Manuscribit Publishing
LONDON SW7

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In this anthology, the author has created a series of short stories based on actual observed events during his seven years in Mombasa, Kenya. The characters are fictitious but the journeys they take are based on real people living out their lives.

To My African Family

LOST AND STOLEN

MITZVAH

A ROAD UNTRAVELLED

AKIO

BANANAS

THE BULL IN THE CHINA SHOP

CABIN 239

SCARRED FOR LIFE

SALAMI

UNDERSTANDING THE DEEP

THE LEFT-SIDED SANDAL

UPWARDLY MOBILE

THE LAST TIME

SEVENTEEN HOURS

LOST AND STOLEN

She knew she ought to go to bed. She had been working mindlessly on household chores until she was so physically exhausted she couldn't force her body to continue any more. She lurched between feeling emotionally drained and agonisingly fearful. She was fighting the ghastly mental images of what might have happened to her son who had wandered off from home and still not come back.

Doing the washing earlier in the day just to kill the time and keep herself occupied, she had held his new blue shirt he was so fond of in her hands while choking back the sobs that threatened to consume her. She couldn't face the thought that she might never see him again. He was her only child; she hadn't been able to have another although they had been trying for so long.

She was numb, physically and emotionally, as if she had had been given an enormous pain killing jab that had frozen her body. Her life had come to a halt and there seemed no way forward.

Where was he? Was he alive? The police had been courteous but evasive, offering bland and ineffective phrases that gave her neither comfort nor hope. And all the time she silently blamed her husband.

Things had been difficult between them for some

time. He was no longer the caring, warm-hearted man she had married, the loving family man. He was often distracted and absent minded and took less and less interest in the family. He came home late and was always very tired. When she questioned him he responded abruptly saying it was his business and his business alone, but she could not excuse his neglect.

She didn't understand how he wasn't able to watch his own son properly. It was the only time she had left him in charge. How could he have let him wander off to play outside alone? The sea was not far away from their house and he was too young and too adventurous to understand the dangers. He must have known that. She didn't trust him and he had proved himself.

She finally fell into a fitful sleep, still dressed, lying on top of the bed coverlet and dreamed of a small boy playing on the beach. She felt warmth and hope and reached out to him but then the image dissolved suddenly and she could no longer see him. She woke up sweating with her face bathed in tears.

Nancy and Silas lived in Mombasa, Kenya's port and seaboard entry 'The Gateway to Africa' as it is known. Silas worked at the vast port complex where the huge liners came in to offload their containers.

Nyali beach on the north coast is a broad expanse

of sun-bleached sand fronting the Indian Ocean that separates it from the subcontinent of India. At high tide the clean, almost white sandy beach slopes gently into what feels like a bath of warm, salty seawater. When the tide is out it reveals a stretch of about half a mile of sandy banks, intermingled with rocky outcrops draped with drying seaweed and small pools where tiny sea creatures shelter, eventually reaching a coral barrier reef which protects the 480 km of Kenyan coastline, only just stopping the huge sea rollers entering the lagoons that the tide creates when coming in.

This crested reef with white sea-horse waves prancing and rearing at the rocky barrier had been built up over eons with the skeletons of myriads of tiny sea creatures. You can smell and taste the sea, feel the breeze on your face and the sand between your toes. It is a place of such peace and calm it creates a feeling that you are in paradise or that at least that paradise is not far away. Much of the beach that stretches for miles along the coast is deserted and you can always find solitude and peace, except for the public area where in the evening after work the locals gather in large numbers to sit on their colourful kikois carefully spread out on the sand or to jump and splash in the water as they hold onto large inflated rubber tyres. The smaller children run about and play with abandon, dig holes and build sandcastles.

This is the danger. There are so many people it's too difficult to keep an eye on the children in those laughing, jostling crowds. And predators as equally dangerous as those that lurk in the ocean's deep abound on the sand, mingling unnoticed among the crowds.

These are men and women waiting for their chance to prey on the unsuspecting. As well as the usual run of pickpockets and thieves, there are a certain section of local women provocatively dressed, who wait for white tourists looking for a holiday romance. Then there are their local male counterparts who lounge around dressed in shirts open to their waists, medallions round their necks who sport oversized sunglasses through which they can attempt to inconspicuously eye unaccompanied women on holiday before making their move. Then they offer to show them the best places to shop or the best places to book a tour, or to accompany them to make sure they are properly protected. They are always angling for a liaison to develop that could lead to sex or romance for the women and for the men, money to feed their families and to pay for their alcohol, which is their main means of escape for a short time from a life of poverty, unemployment and often early death.

A young trusting child is no match for an unscrupulous dealer in human traffic. At least

adults have some choice in the matter – acceptance or rejection. But children are trusting and once snared, there is no way of finding them, the local police and child welfare organisations have no strategy specifically for this purpose.

Most children stay close to their families on such a day out at the beach, but there are always some ‘free spirits’ whose adventurous nature leads them to wander off. Such was Robbie, Nancy and Silas’s ten-year old. With his inquisitive nature he would talk to and play with anyone. He had an open, cheerful temperament and made friends easily with no shyness or guile. He was joyful and uninhibited, his slim, athletic body taking him running, jumping and cartwheeling. He kicked an imaginary goal, breasted the tape after a 100-metre sprint and jumped for joy when he scored into the basket. He was a bundle of energy and, like a spring, he unwound and invaded the world with his love of life. Unselfconsciously, he engaged in the pursuit of living in a way an observer could only wonder at.

That afternoon, when Nancy had gone to see her sick mother and had left Silas and two of his friends eating a leisurely lunch of roast meat, Robbie was at a loose end, bored and lonely. The men, liberally washing down their nyama choma with several bottles of beer, didn’t at first notice the boy was no longer in the garden. One moment, he was there, kicking a ball about disconsolately at the end of the

garden and the next he had gone.

They were not at first alarmed.

‘He’ll be somewhere nearby Silas. Don’t worry,’ said his long time friend and neighbour, Evans.

‘Boys will be boys. His mother protects him too much, comes from being an only child I expect. Mine are somewhere about. I bet they’ll be together having a good time.’

Silas wasn’t so sure. Robbie had strict instructions not to leave the house without telling his parents where he was going and when to be back. But Silas was enjoying this rare time with his friends, away from his worrying work problems. Fighting to retain his job in the face of opposition and intrigue, and convincing himself that Robbie would turn up shortly, he chose instead to quieten his conscience with another beer. But Robbie hadn’t and when Nancy got back and found the boy missing, she completely lost her head, shouting at him in front of his friends. They all went looking for him, but no one had seen him. In despair Nancy had dragged her husband to the police station, and they spent hours filing a report. But their desperate plea met with no reassurance and little action.

They were just not equipped to deal with lost children, they explained, and the boy had only been missing for half a day. He could turn up any time.

Nancy and Silas’s house was quite close to the

beach a favourite haunt of Robbie's. On that day, a simple shell excavated out of a tree trunk equipped with a single mast and a triangular sail was anchored offshore. The two men aboard it were busy putting out their lines and concentrating on any movement that would indicate that a fish had been hooked. The younger of the two, with a sullen face and a shiny head deplete of hair, glanced towards the beach and noticed a boy alone performing handstands and somersaults.

He felt a rising tide of excitement – this looked like a golden opportunity. He had always been profligate and, having lost several jobs, he was reluctantly helping his father in what he considered the demeaning boring and poorly paid job of catching fish to sell for a living.

'Dad' he said, in a low excited voice. 'Look!' pointing to the beach. 'There's a young boy over there on the beach. He seems to be on his own, he's just playing, running up and down.'

'So what?' grumbled the older man. 'What concern of that is ours? 'Why are you wasting time telling me this?'

'Because Dad, here's a chance to make money! We could take him and sell him to that man who comes around the village, you know, that man with the big car, the Mercedes, who's always asking

whether people would like some help if they have too many children in their families to look after. He offers to take children to relieve them of a burden, and he pays good money.'

'Are you mad? Don't you know that's against the law? And how would you feel if I had sold you when you were a child?' The old man said, becoming increasingly angry at yet another of his son's hare-brained schemes to make money, which always came to nothing, sometimes less than nothing as he often borrowed money to finance them and never paid it back.

Privately the surly young man thought he might have been better off if his father had sold him because the man with the Merc told the people in the village that he gives the children to people who haven't any, so they have a good life. Better than subsistence fishing! But he kept that thought to himself and replied to his father exasperatedly.

'I don't understand you, Dad, you're always complaining that you have no money and that business is bad and here we have an opportunity to earn some easy money and you turn it down! Look at him. He's on his own, and probably has nowhere to live. We would be doing him a favour.'

The older man thought for a moment and then in a resigned voice.

'All right then, see if you can persuade him to join us. But don't be rough; I don't believe in violence to children, do you understand. No violence!'

Delighted, the younger man began waving to the boy to attract his attention and, after a while, the boy noticed him and began to wave back. 'Would you like a ride on our boat? We have caught some big fish, you can come and see them.' He heard his own voice being carried on the wind.

Robbie stopped cavorting and thought about the offer. He recalled somewhere in the back of his mind that he shouldn't be talking to a stranger but the invitation was very tempting and the man seemed friendly enough. It didn't take him long before he called back, 'Yeah! Sure.'

'Start wading out' was the eager reply.

'We'll bring the boat nearer and then you can get in.'

The men manoeuvred the boat slowly, nosing it into the shallow water close enough for the boy to clamber in. The younger man put out his work roughened hand and gave a hefty pull. 'Sit over there and hold on, and we'll be off.'

At first Robbie was excited and thrilled. He was

shown the fish that had been caught and even allowed to hold a line. He was enjoying himself as the boat scudded along parallel to the coast but, after a while, the sun was beginning to set, the wind freshen and it began to get colder.

'I'm cold. I'd like to go home now. I've had enough, thank you.' There was no response and as he looked at the face of the younger man, he felt the first prickling of fear. They had come a long way and he realised he was far from home.

'Please. Let me go. I don't want to be a problem, but my mother will be worrying about me.'

The boat had changed direction and was now heading towards a small jetty that was requiring the men's attention. 'Shut up and stop snivelling,' snapped the younger man to the boy who was now very cold and beginning to shiver. The older man looked at his son reproachfully.

'Here put this around you, it will keep you warm,' he said giving him an old blanket that smelt of fish, he huddled into it, cold and frightened.

Once moored to the jetty, the younger man tied a dirty cloth around the boy's eyes, ignoring his father's objections. 'We can't have him seeing where we're going, can we,' he argued. Blindfolded,

the boy was dragged along, stumbling over the rough ground and he eventually felt himself being pushed into a room. He fell heavily onto a hard stone floor.

'Where am I, What's happening? I want to go home!' he pleaded, tears trickling down his face. As he heard the lock click and the men's footsteps departing, he began to scream. 'Help! Help!' but the sound forlornly echoed back to him. He struggled with the cloth that tied his hands together behind his back and managed to get it off, and then he pulled the cloth from his eyes and looked round fearfully. He was in a dark, cold, black hole of a place. He began to crawl around the floor searching for a way out, but there was none. Thoroughly dejected and dispirited, he sat with his back against the wall, clasping his knees. He was both tired and hungry and thought longingly of home where his mother would be preparing supper. Would they be worrying about him? Maybe his father wouldn't. He had been so unloving, angry, coming home late, saying his business was more important. It made him and his mother unhappy. He could not control his sobs. He eventually lay down and tried to sleep, with his arm under his head as a pillow.

He had lost all sense of time. He awoke and dozed off again several times, shivering, cold and

uncomfortable. It was daylight now and had no idea how long he'd been there. Then he heard voices.

'Are you mad?' a woman was saying. 'You can't sell this boy. His parents will be looking for him. It's a different case when people give their children away.'

He heard the now familiar voice of the younger man shouting at her in reply.

'Shut up, woman, this is business. And you'll have no difficulty spending the money he'll bring, will you?' he sneered.

Then Robbie heard his heavy footsteps going away and the door creaked open letting in a draft of warm air and, with it, a woman's gentle voice.

'I have some food for you. Here take it.'

She pushed a plate into his hands and left, locking the door behind her. It was beans and chapatti and he ate it ravenously, scooping the food into his mouth. It made him feel better, but he knew he would have to find a way out. He had to get out of there before the man came back. He passed the time trying to think of a way to escape, but it all seemed futile. It was almost dark before he heard the woman's footsteps again. She unlocked the

door and he saw she had brought him some bread. 'Eat this now. My husband is coming for you soon.'

Robbie knew it was now or never. He had an awful feeling that the man meant him no good and only bad things awaited him.

'Can I have a drink of water please,' he said, making his voice sound pitiful. He sat there, looking cowed and beaten. She looked at him pityingly. She felt bad about the whole thing – she knew what happened to children that were sold to 'Mr. Mercedes', as she thought of him – child prostitution and worse was usually their fate, many did not survive. This boy was a pre-teen, and very beautiful. She wanted to help, but she was too afraid to go against her brutish husband.

'I'll go and get some for you. Just wait,' she told him, and turned back to the house. Robbie could hardly believe it, she hadn't locked the door. He got to his feet, a little stiff, but with a lighter heart. This was his chance. He pushed open the door gently and slipped silently through. He was out and he was free. He set off, running like the wind. He could smell the sea, and the grass under his feet was sparse and rough, like sand dunes. Of course, fishermen would live close to the sea, he thought. If I can get to the beach I'll find my way home. They can't catch me there. He ran on, swift and silent as

a gazelle in the moonlight.

With laboured breath he finally cleared the hilly shrub and burst upon the beach. There was a new moon, giving him enough light to see by, but not enough to illuminate the shadows he might need if he was pursued. He ran sure footedly for about an hour before he had to stop to take a rest.

Looking around he realised he was not being followed but, at the same time, accepting that he could be in serious danger from a wild animal or other bad men who might be on the prowl. Warily he resumed his journey, at a slower, more careful pace, and gradually, familiar landmarks appeared. He was getting nearer home. Suddenly he saw a man approaching him and fear choked in his throat. He dropped behind a large rock, his heart thumping so hard it sounded like a drum.

The man was walking slowly, and then he stopped, head bowed, his posture sagging, and slumped down on a rock near to Robbie who caught his breath in astonishment. In the light of the moon he could see it was his father.

'Daddy' he called and Silas looked up as if he had heard a ghost. 'Daddy, it's me. Here I am,' Robbie cried getting up and running to his father who, unbelievably at first, grabbed his boy and swung him up in his arms.

'Robbie, Robbie, we thought we'd lost you. I felt so guilty, I couldn't rest, and I couldn't sleep. I've been out looking for you since you went missing.'

'You've found me Dad. I knew you'd come for me.' The boy's arms were round his father's neck, and he hung onto him as if he would never let him go.

'Pulling him gently free, Silas, wiping the tears from his face.

'Come on boy. Let's go home and tell your mother I've found you.'

MITZVAH

'Excuse me, Sir'. The words came so softly that I was initially unable to make out what the disembodied voice had said. Then it came again. 'Excuse me Sir.' I looked up to see a young man with a mass of unruly black hair framing a small, earnest-looking face rather disreputably dressed in dishevelled clothes. Seeing he had my attention, he smiled tentatively and held out a begging hand. I looked more closely at him and what I saw shocked me. His left leg, much shorter than the right, was hanging limply inside a turned up trouser leg and I could tell it was severely wasted because he was supporting himself with two old fashioned crutches with badly padded armrests.

He stared earnestly at me and I met his gaze. He needed money and had been reduced by his disability to begging and the shame and the need were mirrored there. I don't know what my eyes revealed to him but I think it was probably a mixture of pity, resentment, impatience, guilt and discomfort.

From his apparent age and his appearance I was certain that he had contracted polio as a child. Anterior Poliomyelitis to give it its full name is an acute, viral, infectious disease contracted by oral or faecal contact. In 90% of people, it is

asymptomatic, but 10% of those who contract it may suffer severe damage to the motor nerves in the spinal cord, which can lead to paralysis and sometimes even death if the respiratory muscles are affected.

It remained one of the most dreaded diseases of childhood in the twentieth century until a medical researcher named Salk whose name was subsequently given to the vaccine injection discovered a successful vaccination. Its use was accepted and spread around the world saving the lives and the health of many children. But there are still some who are not given the vaccine, probably for financial or superstitious reasons. This young man had obviously been one of the latter.

My initial feeling was one of pity; pity that this unfortunate man was afflicted with this terrible burden, a burden that he would carry for the rest of his life. Every moment of his waking day he would have to bear this load. He would never be able to forget it or discard it. There was no way in which I, looking at him from within an able body that had served me so well and which in large part I took for granted, could begin to appreciate his plight. I felt compassion and sympathy for him, a fellow human being so severely disabled.

But following my initial compassion slowly and imperceptibly I began to feel a sense of frustration

that the sight of this cripple was interrupting my day. I was being made to think about something that I rarely consider on a day-to-day basis, and I resented that. Why should my day be interrupted by this person who, without invitation had entered my life - albeit for a short time only?

It was not my responsibility. I already did my bit as a medical doctor, and part of that practice included Pro Bono work. Why didn't the government provide facilities for people like him? Why wasn't there a more comprehensive inoculation programme against polio where he came from? After all, this disease and its consequences are completely avoidable. I felt anger against the authorities, and also against his parents. Didn't they have a responsibility to protect their own offspring?

Then I felt it, the guilt. What right had I to be angry? I had had such a privileged life, a happy childhood, an excellent education and a very successful career as a doctor and now, in my later years, enough money to live comfortably. How had I the temerity to be angry with this poor man who had asked me for a coin or two to put bread into his mouth?

'Sedaka' is the Hebrew word for charity. Tradition has it that all Jews are required to give charity on the last day of their lives. I reflected on this and the religious dictates of my long ago childhood. Do we know which day will be our last? It is hardly written in blazing letters across the

panorama of our mind nor strewn across the sky in a huge warning banner. That being so, is it not appropriate to not only live each day fully as if it were the last in our lives, but also to give as if it were the last?

I emptied my pockets and gave the young crippled man who was balancing on his crude crutches all the coins I had. I felt I had received a Mitzvah – a special blessing. Maybe it was his last day on earth. It could have been my mine too.

A ROAD UNTRAVELLED

I knew I should go. I had shied away from it, avoided it, dodged, prevaricated and made any excuse. I had put it off day after day, but today I decided I would do it. After all I didn't go through all that for nothing. I hoped the challenge to my body would counteract the conflict I was feeling in my mind; that it would be a physical and mental primer for what lay ahead.

I was unfamiliar with the route but the thought of the uncertainty excited me. However I hadn't appreciated the physical demands accurately. As I proceeded the mountains seemed to wrap themselves around me. I soon became aware of how unprepared I was. My breathing was becoming increasingly laboured as the gradient became steeper with each step. I took in air in great gasps, my knees ached and my steps, no longer strident and firm, were loose and uncoordinated. I stopped and stood on trembling legs looking at the way ahead - the path skirting a rocky outcrop and climbing steeply upwards towards thick woodland.

The weak though encouraging voice in my head was dampened by another, more forceful and determined, whose footing was stronger than my own: Why put such demands on yourself? Tomorrow is another day. What's the point of all

this? Then another voice from even deeper within me countered: Michael, this is what life is about - being tested - keep going, push yourself, go that bit further, find the will to face what has to be faced. Somehow determination took over. My breathing calmed and I set off again.

The sun was warming and comforting as it flickered through the leaves overhead.

A trail, barely decipherable, wended its way through an ancient forest. I trampled over wet leaf mould, my boots sinking into it in some places, catching on hidden tree roots and throwing me off balance in others. The land rose higher, with the trees standing like sentinels on guard. Slowly the great arching canopy began to thin out, and I walked out onto the hillside, my mood elated as I was met by the magnificent view that stretched beneath me. On my right, the land fell away to the valley floor below, green and lush; the music of a fast-flowing river singing to me as it tumbled over boulders cemented into the earth from a primeval ice age. Tiny coloured mud huts snugly clustered together in a community. I could hear the sound of a truck carried on the airwaves from the dusty unmade road that snaked its way through this natural cleft in the earth's surface. I stood for a moment absorbed in the splendid panorama that spread out before me and as I did, the clarity of the pure air and light faded and an ominous grey slowly engulfed the sky.

To my alarm, as I had no protective clothing, heavy rains decided to teach me a lesson and began peppering me with hail. I stood uncertain as the hail turned into drenching sleet. Not only was I getting soaked to the skin, but I could also see the path beyond was treacherously slippery and muddy. I had to make a decision. Which way was easier, safer, quicker? Should I find shelter, but where? To go on would surely be too dangerous. Should I give up and go back now? It came to me like an illuminating flash of lightning - now I had an excuse not to go on. The Achilles heel that had followed me all my life - running away from a challenge - presented itself. I had the pretext I needed. It was as if the unseen Gods were telling me I didn't have to face my demons, at least not today.

Turning back, I found the route I had come from was as bad as the route forward. I stumbled along, half blinded by the driving rain and sleet, wet through, shivering, the relief of being absolved from the need to go on now dissipating, my mind filled with doubts. Not concentrating, I took a wrong turn but it must have been hours before I realised I was lost. Exhausted, I sat on a log drenched and aching. I didn't care anymore. Fate had taken over and if it was all to end here on this deserted African hillside alone, then it was another decision I didn't have to make.

I must have fallen asleep because I saw myself

walking towards my own house, up the familiar path through the front garden, past the bougainvillea now in full bloom, the pawpaw tree heavily laden and the solitary banana tree straining under the enormous bunch of green fruit. I stood at the open door uncertain what to do. She must have seen me through the glass pane. The door opened and we were in each other's arms, kissing and crying.

'You're safe.' Then I woke up. I lay there, shaking but I knew what I had to do. The clouds had cleared; there was a blue-sky overhead. I felt refreshed, my spirit renewed. I continued downwards, alert in mind and body until I reached the house just as the sun came out to taunt me.

AKIO

It was his unusual English accent that prompted me to turn and look at the man seated at the bar at the Yacht club. I was getting pretty familiar with the many English accents but this was different. English being spoken with Japanese intonation was very unusual to hear in Kenya. I turned to see who was speaking and saw a small figure at the far end of the bar. His face was the colour of dark mahogany with deep furrows around his eyes and across his forehead.

I watched as he sorted out some coins, muttering quietly to himself as he calculated how much to pay for his drink. When he grasped his beer to take a swig, I realised he had only one arm. He saw me looking and a friendly smile lit up his face. I smiled back and moved along the bar to greet him.

I learned that he was the captain of the small sailing cruiser I had noticed moored in the creek. As the evening wore on I listened to his amazing story, told slowly, spellbindingly, in his halting melodic voice.

I come from Hokkaido be began, the northernmost of the four main islands of Japan. I lived just outside Hakodate a small fishing village overlooking a sheltered harbour. My father was a fisherman and I have sailed since I was a small boy. I was about six years old when I went out with

him for the first time. I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday. We set off just after sunrise. The sky was a pale blue and there was a slight breeze. I stood on the jetty while my father stowed the tackle and the ample food supply my mother had prepared for us. At last we were ready. My father sat with the oars poised as I cast off the painter and jumped in. The boat rocked violently and I was scared I would fall out, but it steadied and I sat down in the bow at my father's suggestion. He rowed in silence for about an hour and as we left the protection of the harbour the wind freshened and the waves got bigger, rocking the boat as we edged our way out to sea. Slightly alarmed I held tightly to the boat, but was reassured by the sight of my father, unperturbed, he was rowing steadily. Soon a small island appeared in the distance and I realised that that was where we were heading. We reached a small, protected inlet and he shipped the oars and dropped the anchor.

I remember that during the journey I had a chance to study my father's face. It was probably the first time that I had really looked at him closely. He was about 40 years old, short and stocky like me; I imagine he looked much like I do now - dark brown, wrinkled face, small eyes permanently screwed up against the sun; small ears and nose, but a wide mouth which seemed to get much bigger when he smiled, which he did, often. He was a happy man, he laughed a lot and I loved him very much. I miss

him a great deal, even now, so many years later.

We fished all day, stopping only to eat the simple fare my mother had provided for us. He showed me how to set the bait (small worms which he had dug up the day before and kept in a small plastic box) so that the hook was not visible. He explained how I should wait for a nibble and then apply a gentle pull on the line to trap the hook in the fish's mouth. At first I couldn't get the knack but, with practice, I became quite good at it and, by the end of my first day's fishing, I had caught six fish, one of them quite big, almost as wide as my forearm. It was a magical day, the highlight so far in my young life. After that day he took me with him whenever he went out fishing and I became quite expert. His boat had a single sail that I soon learned to handle. He taught me about navigation and, when the new electronic systems arrived, I found them interesting and easy to master. By the age of 21 I was an experienced sailor.

He paused and I ordered another round of drinks. 'Am I boring you?' he asked tentatively. 'On the contrary, I am fascinated,' I replied honestly.

Well, it was on the voyage that eventually brought me here that I lost my arm. I had big ambitions of seeing the world, and maybe finally ending up in Africa, a place I had always wanted to

visit after I met a Kenyan working in Japan as a volunteer. He had learnt to speak some Japanese and he told me all about his wonderful country and all the wild animals in the big game parks. I had worked hard and had bought a small sea-going boat, which I called 'Mermaid'. I was trying to learn English and had read that the name meant Sea-Maiden. When I had accumulated enough money, I decided it was time for my big adventure and set sail.

I crossed the Pacific uneventfully; sailed into the harbour at Panama, and joined the lengthy queue to go through the Canal and thereafter on to Africa.

I went ashore, booked into a small, cheap hotel and was so tired I went to my room and fell asleep immediately. When I woke up it was dark and I was hungry, so I went out to find a place to eat. The street was very narrow, ill lit and badly paved, and as I stumbled along a car came speeding down it. I tried to get out of the way by pressing against the wall but there was just not enough room for him and me and as it careened by it hit me. At first I didn't realise what had happened, I was dazed and only aware of the agonising pain on my right side and then I passed out. I have no memory of what happened next, of being rescued or being cared for. Eventually I regained consciousness and became aware of a smiling face leaning over me.

'How are you feeling?' the face asked in a

gentle voice. The person had kind eyes and was wearing something on their head. I dimly realised this was a woman and she was in uniform. 'Where am I?' I asked weakly. Her face looked blank, and then she called to someone.

'I think he is speaking Nihongo Japanese. Can you ask the office if they have the name of a Japanese interpreter on file?'

I didn't know what she was saying then, I just felt so confused and weak and my arm pained me terribly and I couldn't move it. I drifted off again into a drugged sleep. The next time I woke a small Japanese woman in traditional clothing was sitting by the side of my bed.

'How are you' she asked me in my own language.

I felt an immediate sense of relief that I had someone I could talk to. 'What has happened to me?' I asked.

'Akio San, you were hit by a car and brought to this hospital by the people who found you. They saved your life as you would have bled to death if you had lain there in the street much longer.'

'Well, I am glad that I am alive, and I would like to thank those good people. But will you ask

the nurse what is wrong with my right arm. I cannot move it; I am bound up with bandages like a mummy, and I am in great pain?’

‘Akio San, I am so sad to tell you that you no longer have a right arm.’

I stared at her numbly.

‘The car hit you with such force it tore your arm from its socket. The doctors were unable to save it. They tried to re-attach it but it had been severed for too long and it became gangrenous. They had to remove it to save your life.’

I turned to the wall away from her, from everybody. I couldn’t believe what she was saying. It couldn’t be true. It must be some sort of bad joke but as the days passed I began to realise that what she said was true. And then despair filled me. I did not want to go on.

My life was finished. I was a fisherman. I needed two arms. I thought of my father, and warm tears trickled from my eyes. What would he think of me now and what was I going to do? It was all like a bad dream. I almost began to think that it was, and that I would wake up and everything would be all right. How could it be that one moment I was looking for somewhere to eat and the next...the next? I couldn’t grasp the enormity of what had

happened to me.

I went into a deep depression and would talk to no one. Eventually as my torn body healed I was sent to the Seaman's Refuge. It is to them that I owe my life. I slowly recovered physically, but mentally I could not face the world again. I was stranded in Panama with my boat. What could I do with the boat with only one arm? I was desperate. My plans had foundered and I didn't know what to do or where to go. I couldn't think and I tried to blot it out with the oldest of remedies, alcohol.

He paused and looked at his hand holding his glass.

One night I was in the bar slowly getting drunk when a priest came up to me. 'How are you?' he asked extending his hand. I hesitated before offering him my left one.

'Forgive me if I am intruding' he went on, taking a seat next to me, 'but I saw you sitting there alone and somehow I felt I should talk to you. Your face looked so sad. How did this happen to you? I can see it is something new, that you are not accustomed to yet. How are you managing and what are your plans?'

For some reason I didn't shun this man as I had most others. His face showed such compassion

and wisdom I felt instinctively that I wanted to talk to him. 'My life has gone crazy,' I looked at him despairingly. 'I was hit by a car that tore my arm off, I am stuck here with a boat I can't sail and I don't know what to do. Plans? You asked. How can I have any plans?'

He studied me for a moment. 'Why can't you sail it?' he asked.'

'Father,' I replied, exasperated by such a facile remark. 'How can I sail a boat with only one arm?'

Again he looked at me levelly, with understanding, composure and matter-of-factness. 'I am sorry about your arm, but my sorrow won't help you. My advice might. It is not impossible.'

'What is not impossible?' I asked him with a little anger.

'To sail your boat one handed.'

I looked at him sceptically, finished my drink and got up. 'Your God has forsaken me, Father. He has taken my arm; he might as well take my boat!' And I walked off, a trifle unsteadily, even more depressed than ever. Sail a boat one handed? What was he talking about?

I slept fitfully, waking up again and again and each time his words came back to me. Now sober, I began to wonder if he really did know what he was talking about. Early next morning I returned to the bar. It was closed at that hour but the owner came to the door when I rang the bell. 'Sorry to trouble you but I need some information if you could help me. Last night I met a priest here...'

'Oh! You mean Father John?'

'Yes, if he was the one here last night. Where can I find him?'

'He will be at the Church for Lost Souls around 11. He is there every morning. You will find him there.'

I thanked him and made my way slowly to the Church, not sure of what I was going to say, but somehow knowing I needed to talk to this man. I killed time walking along the quay admiring the many boats waiting to enter the Canal, and felt a pang for mine. She was moored and chained to the land like me, when we should have been riding out at sea together. At eleven sharp I was at the church. I entered and, in between the shadows and light from the stained glass windows, I saw the Priest seated at an old piano. I stood, uncertain, but

he saw me and called out 'Good morning, my friend. How are you feeling today? A little more cheerful I hope. You were in the pits last night.'

I hung my head in shame. 'I know Father. I am ashamed but I have been so low, so desperate. I apologise if I was rude to you, but last night you said something that has been going round in my head ever since.'

He smiled and waited. Feeling more confident, I carried on. 'You said that it was possible to sail a boat one-handed.'

Again, he waited silently, expectantly.

'What did you mean? Do you know of any one-armed man who has sailed a boat like mine?'

'Yes my son. Determination will overcome any obstacle, and it is true it has been done before. After I left you last night, I made some enquiries and found out that in 1977 a Canadian called Don Allen learned to sail despite having lost an arm and he continues to sail successfully, covering up to 20,000 miles a year.'

'I was still very sceptical but a faint hope began to rise in my heart. I had walked over to the Father by this time and stood by him, contemplating silently.'

'He must have had some modifications to his boat.' I finally said. It was a statement rather than a question.

'Yes, I'm sure he did. I don't know what they were, of course, but I know a man who would know. He has a boat yard along the quay about a mile from here. He is a very innovative and helpful man. I am sure he could assist you. If you wait until after morning service, I will take you there, but why don't you join us?'

His invitation set me thinking. I am not a religious man. Why had the priest entered the bar in the first place, spoken to me, and found out about one-armed sailing? Back home when I was growing up I was taught we have many Gods. It was very confusing so I dismissed these old beliefs, but now I was beginning to think that One Big One is enough to believe in, and maybe He might make miracles happen. I sat at the back of the hall as it gradually filled up with men of all shapes and sizes: big bearded men with loud voices, small pale-faced men looking uncomfortable and ill at ease. There were very few women, and the ones that came sat together.

The priest remained at the piano and welcomed everybody. He then began to play a melody that everyone seemed to know, and soon the hall was

ringing with the tuneful praise to their God. I sat and listened. It was beautiful, and I felt a calm enter my soul, peace slowly enfolded me after all the stress, pain and despair I had suffered. I recognised some of the words and began to sing along with the others. Soon I was joining in the tune, humming when I didn't get the words. I could feel the audience relaxing as the tension seeped out of their lives, as it had from mine, at least for a short while. I stayed on until the end of the service, and was then invited to have coffee and biscuits with the others being served by two women from a refreshment table on the far right of the hall.

My priest, as I thought of him now, was talking to some men who were listening to him earnestly, but he slowly edged his way towards me. I waited until he reached me.

'I enjoyed that', I told him simply.

'I thought you might. People from so many places come together for a short while to share in the love of God. Sailors, mostly, but recently a few women come. Some are visitors to Panama, here for a variety of reasons. They come from every corner of the globe. It doesn't matter what their beliefs are. It is as if God is giving a big party here for all the people of the world, of all languages and cultures, who live together for a few days while waiting to depart to their destinations.'

I was moved beyond words. Later on, when the hall had emptied, Father John gently put his arm under my elbow and led me off to find the boatman. It took us about 20 minutes to reach his workshop, a large hanger-like space facing the water. Several boats were up on blocks undergoing repair or renovation. Father John called out and a young man materialised, high up on one of them, limping, his left leg in a brace.

‘Welcome Father, how are you? I’m always glad when you visit my lowly abode,’ he said with a smile, ‘but I am sure, as well as admiring my handsome face, you have some favour to ask.’

Father John laughed, and even I smiled at the man’s easy, humorous manner.

‘I’m fine, Pedro. It is good to see you, and you are right in that I have something to ask you and someone who I want to introduce to you. His name is Akio and he is Japanese. He needs help and I have told him you are the only one that can do that.’

‘Flattery will get you everywhere, Father, you old charmer,’ Pedro replied, and then turned to me, at first extending his hand and then beginning to withdraw it when he saw my infirmity. I was getting used to this now and simply proffered my left, which

he took. 'I am honoured to meet you, Akio. Now I remember, I've already heard about you and about your terrible misfortune. I'm impressed by your courage to want to continue sailing.'

'It's not so much my courage, it's Father John who has inspired me to believe that I can continue sailing, that my life isn't over, and my boat can be converted to accommodate a one handed captain.'

Pedro laughed again. 'It was a lesson to me. If I can run a boatyard with only one good leg, you can sail a ship with one good arm, amigo mio. Let's get her over here and I can look at her and see what needs to be done.'

I couldn't believe it could be so simple. I stammered my thanks, which were politely shrugged off, as was my request about how much money it would cost (my meagre resources were already sadly depleted with all that had happened).

My boat was transported to Pedro's yard, he organised it all. He looked it over, told me it wasn't a big job and that he would be in touch in a few days. He was true to his word. Father John told me Pedro had researched the subject, contacted the boatyard in Canada that had done the modifications for the other fellow, and was following their advice.

After a few days, during which I divided my time between being with Father John, and daily walks to the boatyard, I received a message that my boat was ready. I collected the Father and we hurried excitedly down to the quayside. And there she was - my boat, my mermaid, my lovely lady of the sea, propped up on a sort of framework, looking beautiful.

Gone was the sea-weathered wear and tear; she looked in pristine condition with new paintwork, polished brass, clean decks but that wasn't what I really needed most, beautiful as it was. Pedro, accurately reading the thoughts in my face, murmured, 'come on board, there's more to see.'

I clambered aboard quite nimbly, (I was getting used to only one arm to rely on) and at once I could see the vitally needed changes. All the winches were now power driven, as were the halyards. The anchor was automatic, activated by a switch. The tiller had been replaced by a wheel, power driven and spring loaded in case the power failed. The diesel engine had been upgraded and was now auto-start, no pulling a cord to get it started.

Descending into the cabin, I saw more improvements. The navigation system was now automated. The kitchenette had been altered so it was operational with one hand, as were the heads. Pedro seemed to have thought of everything

needed to make it possible for me to manage the boat on my own.

I was so delighted and grateful I could hardly find the words to thank him enough. He graciously waved my stumpled speech aside, and would only take a token amount of money, saying that it had been great fun and he had learnt a lot.

Now I was ready to continue the next part of my planned journey, (planned a lifetime ago, it seemed, when I had two arms and a light heart), to cross the Atlantic before the cold weather set in. Such a sea journey, treacherous for a small boat in winter storms, could be potentially fatal for one like mine, single-handedly manned.

With revived hope and newly inspired optimism, I began stocking up provisions for the eight-week journey, trying to stretch my money and leave a little for emergencies: food, liquids, tinned goods, fresh produce, fuel. I had to be self sufficient in every way.

This took a couple of days and then I was ready. I had poured over the weather charts and conditions looked fair. I checked in with the Canal authorities and cleared my papers for the passage through the Canal, and then I went to say my farewells. With Pedro I exchanged hearty hugs and promises to stay in touch and let him know how I got on. Leaving him I found Father John at the church seated at his beloved piano. I stood in the doorway

as I had done a few weeks before and, as before, he sensed my presence, stopped playing and waited for me. I tried to thank him for what he had done for me but he held up his hand. 'God did it - and you did it. I was only the catalyst.' I left heavy-hearted and a little tearful. He had after all restored my life for me and I owed him everything and for that I can never forget him.

The following day I joined a small fleet of sailing boats passing through the Canal together. We went one after the other like schoolchildren being channelled along a busy street. Leaving Balboa, we passed under the broad expanse of the Bridge of the Americas and on to Miraflores, the first of the many locks between the Pacific and the Caribbean Sea, then on to Pedro Miguel Lock and under the Centennial Bridge. There were over 15 locks in all before we reached the Caribbean Sea.

We anchored for the night and then I set off at first light, travelling east along the North coast of Colombia and Venezuela. I was so elated at the prospect of being able to continue my journey that the still fairly difficult adjustments didn't worry me, at least they didn't dampen my spirits. But I had to plan my every move before doing it, thinking out the way in which I would tackle the job. Everything took twice as long but I persevered, gradually becoming more adept and more skilful and managing to keep my boat and myself clean, working well and in good

condition.

When I reached the Leeward Islands I rested for a couple of days and took on board fresh food and water; so far so good. But the real trials were yet to come. The next leg of the journey was worse than I could have anticipated and, looking back, I don't really know how I managed but I did, despite some awful storms. I silently blessed Pedro for the adaptations to my boat without which I would never have been able to keep going in such conditions.

I reached the West coast of Africa, travelling roughly along a Latitude of 5 degrees north, touching land at Lagos.

I was exhausted having had very little sleep and on arrival the authorities decided to give me a very rough time. They were so suspicious that they impounded my boat and held me in a cell until the Japanese Consul came to my aid and got me and my boat released. It was not the welcome to Africa I had envisaged. But I was undeterred. I had made it this far and I was determined I would reach my intended destination - Mombasa, Kenya.

I rested in Lagos for about a week, staying in a small hotel on the seafront called The Seafarers Escape and I soon recovered my strength with sleep and good food. Then the second life changing experience occurred – without warning just as the first had.

I was in a restaurant one night when a young Japanese woman came up to me and greeted me in my native tongue. It had been a long time since I had spoken my own language, and I stood up delightedly to greet her. The world stopped. The feeling between us was electric. I found between one heartbeat and the next what all the poets throughout the ages had been writing about. A part of my mind vaguely wondered why this woman, of the many that had passed through my life and left no impression, should make my blood fizz, my heart pound, and my legs turn to jelly. I felt as if I'd been struck by lightning.

The world had tilted, the air was crackling, it blazed with light – all because a small, slim Japanese girl with almond eyes and upswept hair, in a high necked, form fitting dress of blue silk, had smiled at me.

Even more amazing, as I watched the brightness grow in her eyes, was the excitement and gaiety in her manner. I knew that against all probability, it had happened to her too. I rarely made any impression on women with my looks and charm, and I rarely set out to make an impression on them, so now I stood there, tongue tied, like a fool.

I was fascinated by the turn the story was taking. What an apt description of love at first sight. He paused, reminiscing, and I could hardly wait. 'What

happened then?’ I asked eagerly.

‘Oh, I stayed a week in Lagos’ he replied calmly, ‘and then I sailed on to Kenya and entered the “Gateway to East Africa” - and here I am.’

I was crestfallen. ‘What happened to the electrically sparked romance? You left her?’ I queried, unbelieving.

A tiny smile curved his thin lips. ‘Come’ he said, and drew me to the window from where we could see his anchored boat. He pointed to it. ‘Read name.’

There was just enough light left in the sky to see. I scanned the boat’s name, and scanned it again. ‘It says ‘Chinatsu,’ I said, somewhat foolishly. ‘I thought you called it Mermaid?’

‘I did,’ he replied, ‘then I changed it. The only woman in my life now is the lovely woman I met in Lagos. She is with me in my boat. She doesn’t mind a man with one arm, a small boat, and a precarious life as the wife of a fisherman. All we want is to be together. I unwittingly followed a lodestone and found my way to my heart’s desire. Tonight is my bachelor night, I cannot be with her the night before my wedding, so you are the friend who now knows my life story and I hope you will continue to celebrate with me.

BANANAS

I looked at the smiling, dark-skinned boy who had just pulled a banana from a huge bunch still on the stem. I watched him eat part of it and then throw the half eaten fruit away. It was nothing to him; bananas grow on trees in his part of the world, there's nothing special about them.

How could I describe to him, someone who has known and eaten bananas all his life, what it was like to meet my first banana so many years ago? I was fifteen, and it was some time after the end of the Second World War. The shops, which had only been selling bare basics during the war years, were now slowly filling up with produce and fruit from overseas. I was with my aunt shopping, and she bought a bunch of peculiar yellow things, broke one off and gave it to me. It was a strange elongated fruit, rather like a cucumber, a sausage or a carrot I thought in my ignorance.

'What is it I asked?' She wanted to play a little game with me and said with a smile, 'Why don't you try it and find out?' How could I know that I had to peel it? So like a fool I first tried eating it with the skin on and learned the hard way that banana skin is inedible and bitter. My aunt gently laughed at me, took the mangled fruit from me and showed me

how to peel it, holding it at one end and pulling back the skin in long thin strips to expose the edible fleshy fruit.

I didn't know that it could be ripe or unripe, yellow or green or, if over-ripe, brown, but from then on I learned by experience, as this new fruit was fascinating to me. Once I had bitten into a green banana and tasted the bitter hardness, I learned to be patient and wait for the fruit to ripen and soften. I learned also that if I waited too long, it went brown and mushy and, in time, began to ferment like apples do when they are overripe. My aunt, seeing how much I had enjoyed my first, sent over to our house a bunch of green bananas (hence my unfortunate tasting episode). I waited and waited and with a little patience the big day came when my bananas were yellow, firm and ready to eat.

I peeled one carefully, making sure to remove the thin threads that remained after the skin was removed, more proof of my growing expertise.

When bananas were first re-introduced into England after the Second World War, apples were by far the most popular and common fruit because they grew abundantly in England and were able to withstand the harsh winter, but bananas were from tender tropical trees, which never knew winter.

Later, I found out, compelled by my burgeoning love of this fruit and my exhaustive reading on the

subject, that although tall and towering, the banana plant was not a tree but an elongated root belonging to a family consisting of several tropical and subtropical herbaceous tree-like plants of the Musaceae genus *Musa* esp. *M. Sapientum* that propagates from suckers and whose fruit hangs in great clusters from a main stem.

Not everyone knew all that, of course, I was the only one in my teenage circle who did, but I certainly was not the only one to love them. Within a few years, the banana took over as the UK's most popular fruit and it's easy to see why.

It has so much to offer. Its packaging is protective and yet easy to open, when picked in huge bunches still attached to the stalk they travel well, its long life is suitable in an air free atmosphere and they store well for months at a time. When ripe, their flesh is soft, edible, and easy to eat for the young and old. The banana provides a readily available source of energy and is a great favourite among athletes and sportsmen. It can be mashed and fed to invalids. In short, it is the perfect food. In restaurants and hotels, the banana can be prepared and used in every course – not just added to fruit salad, but also used in so many dishes, raw and cooked. It is served as an accompaniment to curry as a main course, or coated in sweet batter and fried as a dessert. It can be added to ice cream, and enjoyed as lovely moist, long lasting

banana cake. Some varieties can be fried as a vegetable, or served mashed. Is any other fruit so adaptable, so useful, or so delightful?

Bananas have a long history which indicates their usefulness to man. During the Second World War the banana became a staple food in Bermuda, a coral atoll lying in the mid Atlantic in the path of the Gulf Stream. The island was cut off from Europe, resulting in an absence of many fresh fruits and vegetables including potatoes. The banana came to the rescue. It proliferated in great numbers; when green it could be treated like a potato, boiled, fried, mashed – it became their staple food and is now so in many African countries where it is known as Matoke.

The name Banana was coined back in the 16th century, in the Spanish or Portuguese language, and that name has spawned many words and phrases such as:

Banana Republic - A country whose economy is dominated by one export.

Gone Bananas - To indicate anyone gone happy-mad

Top Banana - Most important man or woman in an organization

Banana Belt - An area of warm weather

Banana Plug - An electronic single pole connector

Bananaquit - A small grey and yellow songbird

Yellow fruit school of writing - An extended school of writers

As a mature adult I decided to take a cruise, which went to several countries in the tropics. At my dining table were a couple from a South American country with beautiful olive skins and thick, lustrous dark hair. The lady of the pair was quite voluptuous. They were pleasant, talkative people, but they observed me in silence as I picked a banana from the fruit bowl.

'You'll never eat another of those once you've stayed in the tropics,' the woman commented dryly.

'They grow there like weeds.'

'Ah no, madam, to me they are ambrosia, fruit from heaven. I will never stop eating bananas.'

'Then maybe you'll go bananas!' she retorted.

Since then I have eaten many bananas and I haven't 'gone bananas,' at least I think not, and even if I have, I could never forego the experience I still have when I take a first bite of that fruit of the Gods.

THE BULL IN THE CHINA SHOP

‘Give me my money back! Now!’

I turned, as did several others, to see the cause of the disturbance. Hell was slowly breaking loose. Transfixed, we were as gripped as though we were at the movies.

The source of the shouting was a burly man with close-cropped hair who was dressed in an olive green T-shirt, camouflage jeans with lots of side pockets, and big black boots. He was shouting at the top of his voice at the floor manager.

‘I’m a soldier, god damn it! I have to get back to my regiment tomorrow, and this stupid bastard won’t give me my piece of electronic equipment after I’ve paid the money for it!’

The manager who was clearly angry was not taking kindly to this loud and truculent customer shouting and making a scene. He turned to the male assistant who was busying himself officiously.

‘Yes sir,’ he replied obsequiously. ‘I took money for the item, but when I went into the back store to get it, I found we were out of stock. So I came back and explained this to this customer. I told him I would order it for him and it would be here in the morning but he wouldn’t listen, he just started shouting at me.’

The irate soldier, arms waving, was getting redder and redder in the face. Interrupting, he shouted at the top of his voice,

‘I can’t bloody wait until tomorrow! Doesn’t he understand plain English! I just want my money Back! I am due back in my barracks tonight. I can’t come back here tomorrow!’

The Manager, hardly able to get a word in between the two of them, was about to speak when he was cut off by his assistant who was now gaining courage – he now saw he had a big audience to play to and was feeling aggrieved at potentially being made to look a scapegoat.

‘It’s after four o’clock, Sir! It was time to close the register so I told him to come back the next day, but then he started making a scene.’

‘That is our procedure Sir,’ the manager turned to the soldier officiously without a shred of remorse. As floor manager, he could have bent the rules and produced the money, but he continued aloofly. ‘This store has rules. The till is closed. We cannot refund your money now. You will have to make arrangements to come back tomorrow.’

The soldier was fast losing control of what little restraint he had left and as he became angrier the manager became more distant and dismissive,

feeling he had to back up the assistant and present a united front.

I watched, as did many others in the store. There was a subdued muttering from the gathering crowd whose mood was much in sympathy with the soldier. But instead of acting, we all just stood there watching.

‘Give - Me - My - Money!’ The now out of control soldier screamed again, grabbing the cash register from the desk.

The manager unable to back down from his stand, tried to take it back from him but they became involved in a tug of war that only aggravated the soldier more. He began shaking the cash register angrily. ‘Open this bastard machine now! I want my money today! Now!’

The store manager shook his head unperturbed. Then the soldier lost his temper completely. He threw the cash register down onto the floor, grabbed the desk computer and did the same with that, then, looking around like a tormented bull in an arena, he reached out and grabbed whatever he could. There were a number of items on a table nearby that went crashing onto the floor. Nothing could stop him now in his rage, it was as if a bullfighter’s red cape was being waved before his eyes and he responded by charging like a maddened animal, pulling everything on the floor,

breaking items as he knocked things over.

People scattered, the assistant cowered behind the counter and the manager ran to his office. The police arrived in a matter of minutes and the soldier was overcome and taken away still shouting about his money but not before he had done a lot of damage and left the shop in a shambles.

I was sickened. Why hadn't I done something, anything? I had seen how the situation was developing and I could have calmed it down.

I could have gone to them, explaining the man was under stress, fighting for his country or asked the manager to waive the rules and help in this instance. Even when he, the soldier lost it completely and started smashing things I could have gone to him, held him and calmed him down, talked gently and made him realise that what he was doing was not going to solve the problem. I could have even, I reflected now with guilt engulfing me, offered to make an arrangement with the shop whereby I gave the soldier his money and the shop could pay me back the next day.

But I had done none of these things. I had just stood, like everybody else, watching this drama unfold, distancing myself as if I was watching a film and not real life. Of course it could be argued - I could even convince myself - that it would have

been dangerous to intervene. But I know that is not true.

I'm ashamed that I failed to act. I am sure the chances are that if I'd gone to him, I could have made a difference but I didn't.

I wondered if he saw the manager as a figure of authority denying him his rights, an image from which he had perhaps previously suffered? When the manager in his authoritative voice told him that he would not give him his money back, I wondered if he was reacting subconsciously. Perhaps he saw or heard his father again, telling him what he couldn't do. Perhaps, I conjectured, it had happened too many times, and now he just 'seen red' and responded in the only way he knew how. He was now a man, a soldier. He didn't need to be told what he could and couldn't do.

A soldier's life has unimaginable stresses and those who have never been in a dangerous, frightening, situation in the glare of gunfire blasting your eardrums, lurking enemies, or a 'kill or be killed' situation, could never understand the unbelievable feeling of taking another life. Who can say when or where the cracks will appear. Fear erodes and a surface veneer hides many layers that an often trivial (or so it may seem to others) incident can break the surface crust, unleashing a volcano of repressed emotion.

But what good is hindsight? He was taken away by

the police, and no doubt would have been held in a cell and was probably sentenced. The incident would have been reported to his captain, and it may have affected his career or not destroyed it.

I don't know what happened to the man, but I reflect on it often. I know that I could have stopped it and it saddens me that I didn't.

CABIN 239

The Surgeon

I am older now, but what happened then is as clear in my mind today as if it had happened yesterday.

I had left the dining room and gone up onto the deck of the 29,000-ton passenger liner SS Bermuda. She had passed through the Suez Canal some days before and had steamed into the Indian Ocean slowly down the Gulf of Suez into the Red Sea, on route for Kenya. I loved the sound and smell of the sea and was very excited by my new post as Junior Ship's Surgeon. I was 25 fresh and in love with life.

When this mighty piece of machinery, with its human cargo, arrived at its destination it glided slowly into the huge Mombasa harbour with its bustling maelstrom of humanity coming, going, loading and unloading. Dressed in summer whites, a short jacket with red epaulettes - the insignia of the ship's doctor - a starched winged shirt, black bow tie, and starched white trousers cinched in at the waist by a broad black cummerbund, I felt and looked the part. I was proud of my uniform, proud of my job, proud of my ship. I was standing on the main deck trying to get a breath of fresh air – despite the tropical humidity - when I saw her. She

walked up the gangplank with an older man, her husband I presumed. He gave her a perfunctory kiss, turned and walked away. She stood there so graceful in a lilac sari, her whole being exuding loneliness and sadness. I was immediately drawn to her as I had rarely been to anyone in my life. I was irresistibly attracted and I wanted to know who she was. I was determined to find her again once the voyage started.

The Wife

Kumar left me as soon as I was on board the ship. That's how our marriage was. No warmth, no caresses, no caring. How I had got into this awful state of affairs I did not know. Yet what choice did I have in the beginning? Most Indian marriages in Kenya are arranged. Good parents at least listen to their daughters and, if she doesn't like their first choice, they select another until both seem, at least, to like the looks and manners of the other. But my parents were still very old fashioned, which meant that I didn't meet my prospective husband until my wedding day. They had told me he was respectable and financially secure, and that he would take good care of me. They taught me nothing of what real love was. I wonder now whether they even knew. I was shocked to find after the ceremony that my new husband was much older than he had said and although he was a

decent person, he was very reserved emotionally. Not that I was experienced, I was as innocent as most other young Indian girls, but I instinctively knew things could be a lot better than they were. He blamed me for not getting pregnant but refused my suggestion that we see a doctor for both of us to be tested for fertility. And so little by little I began to rebel against our life together. When I received the message that my sister was in hospital in England, I asked him if I could go and visit her. He didn't take much persuading. I suggested that I travel by sea not just because I have a fear of flying, but also because it would give me more time away and that would give me the chance to think about everything even though I knew finding a way out of my situation would be impossibly hard. Standing on the deck, alone, reluctant to go inside, I became aware of a handsome man in a white uniform gazing at me. I was immediately attracted to him and hoped I would get the chance to meet him properly on this long voyage. It had been so long since I talked to another man.

The Surgeon

We were two nights out from Mombasa harbour and I was enjoying the peace of the ocean. I could feel the throbbing of the twin diesel engines as I stood at the rail looking out to the lights on the far shore, watching the two streams of sparkling wake

widening as they slowly disappeared into the distance. I realized I was not alone. Out of the corner of my eye I observed a figure in the shadow of a lifeboat. Turning, I saw it was her.

‘Good evening,’ I said softly. I could see her profile in the moonlight, her high cheekbones framed by a cascade of long, lustrous, dark hair. I heard the rustle of her chiffon sari, and as the light caught the diamante studs that decorated it, she turned to face me.

‘What a lovely evening’ she replied quietly.

‘You’re not afraid, alone out here?’ I asked.

‘No, I came out to get some fresh air. I am enjoying the sea breeze and marvelling at the stars overhead; so peaceful and beautiful.’ She said wistfully.

‘Yes’ I replied, ‘it’s magical.’

‘You are a doctor?’ she asked quietly, looking at me with her deep, dark eyes. I could smell her perfume, a light flowery scent. She was wearing diamond drop earrings that tinkled as she moved, flashing fire. Her beauty took my breath away.

‘I’m the junior Doctor,’ I smiled. ‘There are two of us on a liner of this size. The senior deals with the travellers. I look after the crew during the day and the passengers at night and call him if there are any problems I can’t handle or that need a second opinion.’

‘So will you be looking after this passenger tonight,’ she replied, provocatively.

'It would be my pleasure' I replied as casually as I could. 'May I offer you a drink?'

'That would be nice,' she replied, and I escorted her to the rear bar that was more secluded and quieter. We talked for hours. The connection between us was palpable; an invisible silver thread was binding us together. I don't remember much of what we said, except that I learned that hers was an arranged marriage and that her husband.

As she left she kissed me lightly on the cheek and whispered 'Cabin A239'. Her dress shimmered in the subdued light as she said in a louder voice for the benefit of the barman 'Good Night,' and before I could reply, she disappeared through the swing doors. It was all so unreal that I at first I wondered if I had imagined what had just taken place. Had I conjured her up? She was too real; we were too real. Cabin A239, she had said.

It was against ship's orders to visit a passenger's cabin, but it felt like fate, a meeting of souls. Even if I was wrong, I continued arguing with myself, if I went to her cabin and she made it clear there had been no hidden meaning to her words, I could just make an excuse that I was making sure that she had got back to her cabin safely.

Having made up my mind, I checked with the deck plan by the main lift, and then pressed the button. It came up empty. I got in and ascended to 'A' floor.

The corridor was clear as I walked along it on tiptoe, counting the numbers until I came to A239. I paused for a moment, took a deep breath, straightened my shoulders and knocked gently. I heard her soft voice, 'Come in.' I pushed the door and it opened soundlessly. I could feel my heart pounding as I entered the cabin. In the pink glow of the shaded bedside lamp I saw her seated at her dressing table combing her thick black hair that, now completely loose, fell almost to her waist. She was wearing a diaphanous negligee, which revealed the contours of her slender brown body. Without a word she stood up, beckoned me and went into the small bathroom; gracefully she slid out of her gown and stepped into the shower, switching on the water. She turned and looked at me over her shoulder and smiled. For a moment I paused and sanity prevailed. I was in a passenger's cabin, which was seriously out of bounds to ship's crew. This could put my whole career in jeopardy. Was I really ready to wreck a clean record for a shipboard romance? The temptation was too great. This beautiful woman was offering herself to me. How could I walk away? I put the catch on the door, undressed and followed her into the shower. The water was splashing off her shoulders and running down her belly. I was young, inexperienced, and aflame with desire. She looked at me, again smiling gently, and turned off the water. I was totally in her power. I held her in my arms, feeling the wetness of

her warm body. I dried her gently patting her body, her firm young breasts, her back and thighs. Then I picked her up and carried her to the bed, and she wrapped her arms and legs around me as if she would never let me go.

The night had a dreamlike quality. We made love – again and again. I didn't know I could be so amorous, so passionate; I didn't know it could be so soul shattering. Yet together, it was magical. We were both sated, body and soul, totally fulfilled and resting in each other's arms when the first light of dawn filtered through the porthole. I dressed, kissed her slumbering body lightly, and slipped out of the cabin.

The Husband

Despite myself, I experienced a sense of relief at Sushila's departure. She was no longer the young girl I married, no longer compliant, obedient, respectful, and accommodating. She was getting too independent, telling me what she wanted from our relationship. It was as if I was no longer the man in the house. She expected to be consulted about things that were my province and, even worse, expected the right to disagree with me. She was so unrewarding in bed. She just lay there, unresisting and uncooperative. She then told me that I should try to arouse her. A good wife should pleasure her husband. Such discussions are not in

our tradition. We had been having an increasing number of arguments lately and life at home was getting to be no pleasure at all.

I felt a little guilty sometimes as I blamed her for many things that, on reflection, were partially my fault. I was having a lot of problems at the office - a downturn in orders, having to sack a number of my faithful workers who had been with me for more than twenty years. I have to admit that I often took my frustrations out on Sushila. But she is still very young. I don't think she realized that my anger was not so much about her. But instead of reacting with a good wife's understanding, she became aggressive and demanding, refusing to make concessions, and getting more and more distant and less and less loving. When she told me that she wanted to go to England to visit her sister I felt a sudden sense of relief - or release - no more arguments, no need to explain my movements. I would be able to come and go as I wished, do as I wished.

When the day came for her departure, I took time off work and drove Sushila to the port in Mombasa. She was booked on the SS Bermuda, sailing to Southampton, a journey of about 5 weeks. She had chosen the sea voyage, saying she wanted to 'think things through' - what things? Such nonsense! Although we arrived about two hours early, the quayside was already full of people with their

luggage waiting to board. It was all very chaotic; no one quite knew what to do or where to go. Luckily I saw the captain, realized I knew him, and called him over. We exchanged pleasantries and then I told him my wife was going to England and needed looking after. He commandeered the situation, brushing aside the formalities, and very soon we were on deck. One of the stewards came to take the luggage to the cabin so I decided I did not have to hang around and I could now decently leave. I pecked her on the cheek and she looked up at me and said 'I do love you, you know, Kumar.' What sort of declaration was that? I saw her eyes had misted with tears but I didn't know what to say so I just nodded, told her to have a good time, and turned to leave her with a feeling of relief but, at the same time, knowing I would miss her. I did love her too, in a way. Perhaps, on reflection now, wiser with hindsight, I should have told her that.

It was dark when I got home. I could hear Lalita, the housemaid pottering in the kitchen preparing dinner and I felt a sense of freedom and relaxation as I switched on the television to the programme I wanted to watch, and poured myself a drink – a strong one, not the watered down version Sushila gave me. Lalita served me my meal at the table, and I ate in quiet silence. When she came to clear away she asked if I wanted anything else.

'No, thank you,' I replied perfunctorily.

‘Nothing?’ she questioned in a teasing voice. I looked up in surprise and saw the inviting smile on her face and, for the first time, I looked at her as a man looks at a woman. She was full bodied, with ripe luscious breasts, more my taste than my slim, elegant wife’s girlish figure. Lalita leaned seductively forward as she took my plate and they brushed against my hand and I realized she was not wearing a bra. She turned and bent to pick up my napkin that had dropped to the floor, exposing her thigh tops.

Putting the items on the side table, she turned back to me and said, ‘I can see you are tired and stressed. Memsahib does not look after you properly. Can I massage your shoulders?’

It was more a statement than a question and, before I could answer, she came behind me, and started kneading the admittedly tense muscles in my neck and shoulders. She pressed her body against my back and I could feel the excitement rising in me at the warmth and softness. I had not had sex for a long time, Sushila was always putting me off, and even when she did allow it, she never really participated. I am not a bad man, I think I have been a good husband, but the temptation was too much. I could feel a stirring in my groin and my breath was becoming faster. She pressed even harder against me and said in a seductive voice ‘Let me help you relax some more, Sahib.’ Trying to pull myself together I feebly replied ‘I must go to

bed, I have an early start in the morning.' I abruptly pushed my chair back, got up and went to the bedroom, but she followed me. I stood frozen, like a statue, as she came to me and started to undress me. I was embarrassed, excited, confused and aroused all at the same time.

'Don't be shy,' she said, lowering my clothing and gently taking my penis in her hands. 'This is beautiful' she said as she knelt and took it in her mouth. I could feel the softness of her lips and tongue as she slowly sucked and stroked me. My excitement increased and I leant forward to caress her but she pushed me back against the bed. I was sitting with legs straddled. She continued to tease, tantalize, arouse, suck and massage me until I arched convulsively and came with a pleasure that I had never experienced before.

Smiling, she looked up at me and said softly and triumphantly 'Did you enjoy that?' Then without waiting for a reply, she stood up and straightened her dress sensuously. 'Goodnight Sahib, sleep well. I'll see you in the morning' - and she left the room.

The Wife

I pretended to be sleep until I heard my cabin door close with a click. I lay there, happy, and ashamed at the same time. Me, a married woman who had never been touched by another man, who had

promised fidelity, who had never strayed before, not in thought, word or deed and now I had committed adultery. But this was something outside of that word. Michael and I were drawn to each other like I never believed could be possible. After talking together for so long, I felt we were twin souls - and I wanted him. The feeling was new, but it was too powerful to be denied. I couldn't help myself. Yet now, on reflection, I couldn't believe I had been so bold as to whisper my cabin number and equally hard to believe was the fact that I had led him on. I could have stopped it before it started but something stronger than caution prevented me. It had been wonderful. He was so gentle; he aroused me in ways I couldn't have imagined, but instinctively had known I was missing with Kumar. I could still, in my memory, feel him thrusting into me - the surge and the power of my overwhelmingly passionate response. I luxuriated in it. But caution was rearing its ugly head - no one could find out what I had done. There were eyes everywhere. Kumar had told the captain to look after me and he was a friend so would know what Kumar had really meant. Then there was my sister-in-law who had been suddenly and mysteriously summoned to the UK on family business and 'coincidentally' booked on the same ship as me. It would have terrible consequences if what I had done were ever found out.

Although now worried sick, the lovely memories sent me back to sleep and, by the time I awoke, the sun was high in the sky and my cabin was bathed in bright sunlight. I showered and, as I soaped my body, I relived the feel of those soft hands caressing me intimately. The feeling made me get excited again, and I longed for more. I chose to wear my favourite sari, the blue-green one, the colour of the ocean. I felt attractive, feminine, desired and happier than I had been for many years. I wondered if Champa my sister-in-law would notice the glow that I was sure was radiating from my face and ask me what had made me look so happy. She was a sour old puss, with very sharp eyes. I had to be careful.

When I got to the dining room, late, I saw she was still waiting for me at the breakfast table and, without pausing for me to sit down, or giving me a formal greeting, she blurted out 'Where did you go last night after dinner? You left the dining room without a word to me about where you were going, and when I went to look for you, you had disappeared. A steward told me the barman had said you were with the doctor?'

Sitting down, I waited whilst the waiter came to take my order, and then replied coolly (even though my heart was thumping) 'I had a headache and didn't want to bother you, so I went on deck to get some fresh air and while there I met the ship's doctor who

gave me some paracetamol. Then I went to bed early.' I kept my eyes down so she couldn't see what might be mirrored on my face. But I don't think she was satisfied with the explanation and, when I had eaten, she followed me out of the dining room like a shadow. They watched me like a hawk throughout the day, she suspiciously, the captain attentively, both with different motives, but the total combined effect was the same. I couldn't find an opportunity to be alone, and I didn't want to be face to face with my beloved Michael in public. I was sure our faces would reveal what our tongues could not. I didn't run into him that day, but I did the next day.

I was on the top deck with my sister-in-law. We were seated in the deck chairs, reading, when he walked by, paused and smiled, and I could see he was about to come over to us. I turned away, pointedly ignoring him, showing Champa my book as if there was something important in it. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him hesitate, a little bewildered, and then, after a moment he went on and out of sight. I felt terrible but I would have felt worse if he had come over and looked at me the way he was looking at me last night. It would have been clear to anyone what was going on without a word being spoken. Champa was irritated by the interruption; she wasn't interested in my book, and waved me away. I knew I had hurt him, but it would

hurt him more if our relationship became known. I could imagine Champa's call to my husband, her complaints to the ship captain, and I shuddered. She was so sharp I knew she doubted my story about the previous evening when I had left her and later when she couldn't find me. Twice last night she had come to my cabin unexpectedly, without warning, as if she was checking on me. I tried to get an opportunity to explain to Michael why I was behaving like this, but I couldn't. I was never alone. Champa had even recruited other women she knew to move around with me. I felt so guilty about ignoring him, but I knew I had to avoid him in public and I didn't dare write a note in case it fell into the wrong hands. And anyway, how could I get it to him? I could hardly go to the purser; it would be most irregular and could get him into trouble if they guessed he was having a relationship – any kind of relationship – with a passenger. As the days passed I observed from a distance his desperate efforts to contact me, but every time he came over to speak to me, I ignored him and walked away. I had to, for his sake. Champa was always there so even if I had just greeted him, his response might have triggered her suspicions and, for sure, I couldn't explain anything to him in such a public encounter. I knew what he must have been thinking of me and I felt so guilty, so ashamed of hurting him. But I couldn't jeopardize his job, or my marriage. Too much was at stake. So I suffered, living on one

night's beautiful memories and praying the gods would intervene in my life again and give me a chance of happiness.

The House-Girl

I was pleased and excited when Memsahib told me she was going to Europe and would be away for some months. That meant that Sahib and I would be alone in the house. This was my chance, the first chance I had to be in charge of my own life. Sahib Kumar was always polite to me and we got on very well. I knew he was not happy. He was much older than Memsahib Sushila and they were always quarrelling these days. I knew they were not having sex; the bed sheets were never messy when I went to change them, so I knew he was lonely. This was my chance to make him happy and then, I thought, he could help me. I had seen a movie on the television where a maid seduced the man of the house. I was a bit nervous and didn't know whether it would work but I decided to try. I didn't dress in the usual uniform Memsahib had given me, instead I put on a tight top without a bra, and a short tight skirt. I think it made me look sexy. It was after he had eaten that I made my move. I had kept getting close and touching him as I served the meal, and then I suggested I massage his shoulders. I followed him to the bedroom and planned how I would get him hooked. And that's how I began. It

wasn't difficult to keep going once I got started, and it didn't take long to bring him to a climax. I felt triumphant. But I decided to tantalize him a bit longer so as not to be available too quickly. I left the room satisfied and feeling like I was in the middle of a game of cards and that a chance card had come my way.

The Gardener

I was returning to my quarters after I had been to the village. It was quite late and as I passed the house I heard the Sahib moaning. I knew Memsahib was away in Europe and I was worried. I stood, undecided for a moment, and then made up my mind to go in. I was used to the house as I often did repairs inside and I could see the door was not fastened so I went in quietly and heard the sound again coming from the bedroom. I walked over and found the door half open and when I looked in I could hardly believe my eyes. I saw Lalita, kneeling in front of Sahib. I was shocked. I was disgusted! I drew back, realizing that if the Sahib saw me, I would be in big trouble. I quietly retreated and began to plan how I could use this knowledge to my advantage. I had been with Memsahib about a year now and I was very happy to be settled in a good job. I had been living on the streets in Likoni near the ferry existing from hand to mouth, not knowing where my next meal was coming from, sleeping

under a sack in any corner I could find until, one day, Memsahib stopped and spoke to me. I told her I was an orphan and alone in the world. She took pity on me, brought me to her house and let me work in the garden. I had a room, meals, pocket money, and I was grateful. Slowly I took on more duties. She told me I was a good worker.

I was the youngest of 10 children born in a remote village. I never knew my father who died before I was born and when I was six, my mother died too. My oldest brother brought me up. He was still a child himself really and did his best, but our life was terrible, so one day I decided to try my luck in the city. I didn't know anybody, what to do or where to go. I just roamed around sleeping in doorways and scavenging food from rubbish bins. Gradually I met other boys like me who had no family and we ganged together. In some ways it was a happy time, at least happier than in the village. I was totally free to do what I wanted but I had no future and everyday was a fight for existence. I lived like that for three years begging, scrounging and occasionally stealing if the opportunity came, until Memsahib found me and gave me a chance. I felt safe for the first time in my life. I owed her everything. Now I grieved for her husband's betrayal, and felt disgust by the Sahib.

The Surgeon

I awoke early next morning as usual and lay for a moment recalling the night before. I reflected on the wonder of a night of loving, a little scared of what I was risking with such an encounter, but knowing it was worth it. I could hardly wait to see Sushila again. I bounded out of bed, showered, shaved and dressed. I had a quick breakfast and went to my clinic. I saw a succession of people in the surgery with minor complaints and, by midday, I was desperate to see her but I couldn't find her. I searched all day and by evening I was sick with disappointment. Obviously I couldn't go to her cabin without her asking me to. I considered leaving a note but that would also be too dangerous, so I strolled about chatting to the other passengers, hoping to bump into her. It was the next afternoon when I saw her on the top deck, sitting with an older woman in the deck chairs there, both reading books. I tried to catch her eye and I am sure she saw me, but as I went to walk across to them she deliberately turned to the other woman and asked something about the book she was reading. She was clearly determined to ignore me. I was devastated. Did she regret what had happened? I didn't want to believe that. So I decided that it must be that she didn't want to publicly acknowledge our relationship, even with a casual 'Good day'. As the days went by it became clear she was definitely avoiding me. Where was the passionate lover of that wonderful night? It had been so special – well,

to me at least, and I thought it had been for her. Thoughts of her dominated my waking moments; I couldn't get her out of my mind and it was affecting my work. I had never felt jealousy before. I always thought it was an emotion of weakness exhibited by someone who was out of control, and I prided myself on my inner strength. But this was different. I was in her spell, I wanted her, I wanted her in my life, not just for a shipboard romance and I was jealous of every other person who had her attention. I couldn't sleep for thinking of her – but she wouldn't speak to me and there was nothing I could do. And so the days passed in torment.

The Husband

I was woken early by my alarm and showered, humming happily to myself. I felt young again and vitally alive. Lalita was already busy cooking in the kitchen when I came downstairs. She greeted me as if nothing had happened between us; bringing me my breakfast the same as always, demure, making no mention of the night before. I was puzzled. I was sure she would have followed up on her actions. So I just shrugged, ate, got my briefcase and was ready to leave the house when she came to the door and brushed against me with her voluptuous breasts. I reached out for her but she pushed my hand away and whispered, 'tonight'. My erection made me uncomfortable as I went out

to the car. I could hardly concentrate on driving or wait for the night. Her body excited me in a way that I hadn't experienced in years. That night she stayed in the kitchen when I arrived home. I poured myself a stiff whisky and tried to settle as I waited for my supper, but couldn't. Finally I went to the kitchen; she was bending over and her skirt had slipped up so I could see this time she wasn't wearing anything underneath. I put my arms around her and my hands cupped her full breasts, free of a restricting bra. I pulled her around roughly and she knelt before me subserviently. I felt like a king with a loyal servant. As I stood in front of her, she undid my flies and pulled out my penis, now swollen and erect. I felt so virile, so potent. She took it in her mouth and began to lick and suck it, moving it slowly in and out of her mouth, keeping her lips tight round it. I couldn't help myself; my back began to arch, my breathing became short and fast and, with a loud cry I couldn't control, I came into her mouth.

The Maid

The next morning I played it cool. I knew I must tantalize him, get him to need me so much he would forget caution and forget his wife. That way I could get what I wanted. Today at the door, which I went to open for him as he was leaving for work, I pushed against him with my breasts. He was immediately aroused but, before he could do

anything, I pushed his hand away. I wanted his anticipation to build. Later that night when he went to his bedroom I waited a few minutes. My heart was beating fast and as I knocked on his door. He opened it and I saw the pleasure of anticipation on his face. I slipped off my shift and stood there naked. I knew I had him hooked – and I knew he knew it. This time I let him do what he wanted to me. I could tell he had found new vigour. After that I used to visit his room several times a week, doing what he wanted me to do. I enjoyed being the mistress of the house and having such control over the master. It was the first time that I felt a whole person, not just someone to be ordered about and treated like dirt. I felt like a queen and, when I thought of my childhood, I wanted to laugh triumphantly.

I was born in a small village in the far west near Lake Victoria; the youngest of eight children - I don't remember my father. My mother tried to care for us all but she had no money and life was hard. I only had four years of primary education. At a very young age I had to go out to work. I found casual employment in local factories for very poor pay, and sometimes farm work, which was awful. I soon had experience with men. I knew that I was pretty and attractive as men would call after me and try and touch me. I tried to cover up my body so as not to show my figure but I couldn't disguise my shape,

apparent even at an early age. One day when I was coming home from work a man stopped me. He said if I would go to his house nearby and do some cleaning he would reward me. I was very short of money and I went with him. When he got me into the house he threw me on a makeshift bed and began to undo his trousers. I knew what was coming; children aren't spared such knowledge in a village where people all share the same bedroom. I tried to fight him off, but he was too strong. I was scared he would kill me if I didn't. He did give me some money, which I hid from my mother. When I had saved enough I ran away to the town, and managed to get a job as a house girl. I worked in several houses, but was always treated badly. The Memsahibs are usually very harsh and cruel. I often had to sleep in the kitchen on the floor and only had the leftovers to eat. Some of the Sahibs used me, but never gave me any rewards, but I learnt more about sex and what men liked. I came to work for Memsahib Sushila about two years ago and she has treated me well. I have a room and a bed and plenty to eat. I owe her a lot and I feel a bit guilty about what I am doing with Sahib Kumar, but this is my chance, and I have learned in life I must take opportunity when it comes. No one will do it for me.

The Gardener

I was still trying to come up with a plan to turn the situation I was witnessing to my benefit when I got a message from our second born saying that our eldest brother had died suddenly, and that they were burying him in two days time. We live in a rural area with no mortuary so people have to be buried quickly, also it is expected that every member of the family attend such an occasion and contribute to the expenses. I replied that of course I would be there. We believe that if we do not honour the dead in an appropriate way they will come back to haunt us, and bring us bad luck for the rest of our lives. I needed money and decided to speak to the Sahib and ask for extra pay.

When I explained the circumstances to him, he got very angry. 'I am not a Bank,' he shouted at me. 'You people have no sense of planning. I won't give you any more. You should have been saving your wages. You are a fool.'

I was shocked by such callousness and wanted to retaliate. After all, I had done my work well. He could have at least given me an advance. Then I thought about his behaviour behind Memsahib's back and I began to feel very angry.

'Not as big a fool as you, Sahib,' I replied quietly.

'What did you say?' he looked shocked at my

outspokenness, but I was determined to continue. 'I know what is going on between you and Lalita, Sahib. I don't want to tell Madam, but I will if I have to. I need money for my brother's funeral; I have to go.'

I was frightened at the enormity of what I was doing, but I stood my ground. He stared at me and I thought for a minute he was going to hit me. There was a long pause.

'How much do you want?' he finally said? We settled on a figure that would cover the journey, the burial, and a little more to leave with those at home. He counted out the notes and told me to get out. 'I'll be away for two weeks,' I said and he just nodded dismissively. I packed a small bag and went off to the bus station. It was a long journey and I didn't want to waste any time.

The House-Girl

I was feeling sick every morning. It was hard to do my work, even though the house was quieter with Memsahib away. I didn't understand it but after two weeks, and my 'monthly' not coming again, I realized with dread I was pregnant. Now what could I do? I hadn't planned on this, but he had forced unprotected sex on me, and how could I have refused? Maybe this might work to my advantage. He was responsible for my condition, after all. He was in a good mood one night when he

came home from work. Obviously he had had a rewarding day, so it seemed a convenient time to let him know. He was on his third whisky, watching television, when I went into the drawing room to see him.

‘Not now, Lalita,’ he said, not taking his eyes from the screen. ‘Come later.’

‘I have something I must tell you now, Sahib,’ I said quietly, standing my ground.

He turned the sound down with obvious irritation and looked up at me. ‘What? What is so urgent it can’t wait?’

‘I am pregnant’.

He stared at me, incredulous, for some moments, and then smashed his glass down on the little side table. ‘You stupid bitch!’ he shouted at me. ‘Why didn’t you take precautions?’

I stood there dumbly.

‘I didn’t have access to such things, and I didn’t really know what to do, and anyway, I never had time enough to go to these clinics that are supposed to help you.’

‘Get out!’ he shouted. ‘I don’t need this problem! I’ve got enough already.’

I couldn’t believe his harshness. I turned and went out with tears in my eyes. How could he treat me like this? I served his meal in silence and he ate it in silence, leaving the table and going back to the whisky bottle. I hung around in the kitchen not knowing what I should do next. Finally he called to

me brusquely.

‘You can’t stay here, Lalita. My wife will be coming back soon, and she can’t see you getting fat. There would be too many questions asked. You must go somewhere – back to your family maybe – until it’s born, and then you can decide what to do with it.’

My mind was in a whirl. ‘But how?’

‘I’ll give you some money. Pack your things, you can leave tomorrow.’

I was dismissed - just like that. After everything I had done for him.

I felt like killing myself. I just went to my room, cried for a long time, and then packed my few belongings in a bag. I was waiting for him next morning; I didn’t cook. I just stood in the hall. He barely greeted me, pushed an envelope into my hand and said, ‘go now. I’ll get someone else to replace you,’ and he turned away. I trudged to the bus station. I would have to go home in disgrace. Where else could I go? I knew no one in the city. At least when I counted the money, there was enough for me to manage. As the bus rumbled across the dusty plains my mind was consumed by his betrayal – of his wife and of me – and I planned my revenge.

The Wife

The days had passed and now the ship was nearing England. We had never managed to

exchange a word since that one glorious night. But then one evening, by some miracle Champa had gone back to her cabin for something she had forgotten and I was alone. I saw him chatting with a group of people, busy, but I was desperate, knowing I might never see him again. Taking my courage in both hands, knowing I had little time, I took the chance and walked slowly by. I looked across and met his eyes, and saw they mirrored the longing I knew was in mine. As I walked on, I heard him excuse himself, and so I moved into the shadow of a lifeboat and got as far behind it as I could. He came up to me, I turned, and then his arms were round me, and I was in heaven again, ignorant of my surroundings, only aware of the feel of his strong body, his breath on my cheek, his lips seeking mine. As the passion swept through me, so did the hurt of the lost days, the longing to be with him, the agony of the parting that was coming, the thought of the colourless life I would go back to and the tears threatened to blind me. I spoke clumsily, trying to explain why I hadn't been able to talk to him, but he gently shushed me to silence.

'It doesn't matter, Sushila, my love. I understand. And now you are in my arms. And I can't let you go. Come with me. Don't go back. We belong together. You can stay in England. I'll find another job – I'm a doctor, I don't have to go to sea.'

'How can I,' I gulped fighting back my feelings that were swamping me, my body aching to hold him

against me forever. 'But my husband and my family?'

'Just don't go back!' He drew back a little and looked into my eyes.

The longing to do what he asked was overwhelming, but I knew I couldn't. I couldn't hide, I couldn't run, the family tentacles reached far. They would find me. Not only would I be disgraced, my family would too, which was a worse sin. God only knows what they would do to me. Dishonour is a grave crime to people of my caste. We held each other for a long time. If only we had had another night together. Finally, we both knew I would have to go. They would start to look for me any time now. 'My darling,' I said, the tears coming again. 'I cannot run away'. He started to protest but I put my fingers to his mouth and he took them possessively and kissed them. 'I must see my sister first, then I must go back.' I stopped him speaking. 'I promise you, my love, when I get home I will see a lawyer, I'll explain to Kumar – he is as unhappy as I am – and try to arrange a divorce.'

His face lost some of the tension and took on a look of hope,

'You are mine Sushila, remember that. I will wait – I will wait as long as it takes.'

'I swear I will do it if it is humanly possible.' I replied.

One last lingering kiss and I tore myself away. It was as painful as if I was tearing off my own arm. I

stepped out of the shadows and continued walking, just in time to see Champa and her cronies appear at the far end of the deck. I was buoyed up with love, with tremulous hope, with trust in the gods that they would help me. Little could I guess the twist of fate that lay ahead?

PART 2

The Husband

I was waiting at the gangplank when Sushila disembarked. I watched her as she slowly descended. Even from this distance I could see she had lost weight – and in my opinion, she was too thin anyway. I had a mental vision of Lalita's ample curves - I gave an inward sigh. I had had rather a difficult time after I kicked her out. Sometimes I regretted it; I missed her ministrations, but I knew I was playing a dangerous game, and it would have had to end anyway when Sushila was back. I had found another maid, a much older woman recommended by my brother, and also another gardener. I couldn't take the chance of that upstart coming back and currying favour by blabbing to Sushila. I couldn't treat him too badly, either, because he could turn against me with the knowledge he had, so I had put him to work in the factory.

'I have missed you,' I said awkwardly to Sushila as I

bent to peck her cheek. In that moment, I really meant it. She was very quiet but before we could speak further, my sister-in-law, her husband and several of our cousins all clustered around us. There was a lot of chatter – news of family affairs and so on as we all trooped over to the cars. We had to go to Champa's house for a welcome home party, so it was quite late when we got back to our home. I carried Sushila's bags and she followed me in but just stood there in the hall looking around as if assessing the house for the first time. The servants I had employed came to greet her, and she looked at me questioning.

'I had to get rid of Lalita and Ali,' I said brusquely. 'They didn't work well when you weren't around. These two come recommended by my brother, you will find they are much better.'

She looked at me steadily for a long moment and it made me uncomfortable. I had been ready to try a nice reconciliation but if this was going to be her attitude I would not bother. The gardener carried her bags to our room, and the new maid served the meal. Neither of us was really hungry, there had been so much food prepared by various aunts and cousins at Champa's house. I asked perfunctory questions about her relatives in England, and got perfunctory answers. Finally she pushed her plate away and said, 'I'm very tired, Kumar. I'm going to bed.' And she turned and left the room. I gave her time to attend to her toilet and sitting with a whisky I

brooded. Was this how a wife was supposed to greet her husband after an absence of months? My mood, which had started off pleasantly enough when I went to meet her at the ship, was now souring. Getting to my feet I went to the bedroom and saw she was already in bed with the light off. I undressed quickly in the bathroom and, without putting on my pyjamas I got in beside her and pulled her over to me. I started kissing her but she put her hands against me and pushed me away.

‘Leave me alone, Kumar. I’m too tired.’

That did it. I was not going to take those old excuses – too tired, a headache, and the wrong time of the month. I had tried to welcome her back but this was worse than before. I slapped her in anger.

‘You’ll do what I want, as a good wife should!’ I growled out, tearing off her silk nightdress and forcing my knee between her legs and pushing them apart. After the pleasure I had had with Lalita, I wasn’t going to put up with this ice maiden. I held her down and her struggles only inflamed me more. Holding her legs apart with my knees I drove into her savagely - to hell with the niceties - all this nonsense about foreplay and a woman’s orgasm. I held my hand over her mouth to stop her screaming until I came. I flung myself back, and lay there, ignoring her sobs. I awoke in the morning to find

myself alone. In my mind she had provoked me. It was her own fault. She was waiting for me in the dining room. Food was on the table but she had dismissed the new maid from the room. I looked at her a little shamefacedly, but her face was cold and wooden.

‘Sushila’ I began, ‘I’m sorry if I was rough last night but a man has needs, you know. You turned away from me and you’re my wife and supposed to please me.’

She held up her hand to stop me talking. ‘Kumar! Enough, I have had enough. I can’t believe what you did to me last night, don’t you ever touch me again. I think I would kill you if you try. I want a divorce.’

I stared at her dumbfounded. A divorce! It was unheard of in my family. ‘I think you had better calm down and think about your situation,’ I said, as if speaking to a child.

‘If such a thing were possible – which it is not – how could you manage? Do you think I would smile and let you go, give you a big allowance? You obviously do not know me. And do you realise the shame which would come on both our families?’

‘I don’t care. I am seeing a lawyer,’ she announced and got up and left the room.

I sat stunned for a few moments, and then pulled myself together and went to call my brother. He listened attentively, and then said ‘leave it to me. I’ll

find out who she goes to and brief him. Let her think he is acting for her, and then she'll be calmer. He will pretend he is, but will keep on delaying things, and gradually she'll come to realize and accept nothing can happen and your life will eventually go back to normal.'

That put my mind more at ease. I had always relied on my big brother to sort out my problems. 'She's still very young,' I reassured myself. This trip has unsettled her. Women shouldn't be given these opportunities to travel, seeing how European women live, without control or respect, doing as they please. I shouldn't have let her go.

The Wife

I waited until Kumar had left and then summoned a taxi. I was nervous, but my mind was made up. I had still not been sure of what to do on that long, lonely trip back home. I had been busy in the U.K. seeing my sister first and spending time with her in the hospital, and then visiting other relatives, the weeks had turned into months. But finally I had booked the return trip and then the loneliness set in. I couldn't help thinking of Michael, reliving that night that had changed my life forever. Now I knew what love was, could I really go back to my barren life in Mombasa with a selfish, self-centred man, and an empty house? But to oppose him, to try and break away, to see my parents anguish if I took

such action, to find the courage to contact Michael again - had I the strength? Yet my aching body cried out for him, my mind and heart longed for the union of souls that I had experienced with him. With all that indecision and arriving home still undecided, last night had been the final straw, the catalyst that prompted me into action. I couldn't take any more. Raped mercilessly by my own husband. I wanted to finish it, a divorce. Completion. I couldn't go to the family lawyers, neither his, nor mine as I knew they would immediately consult my husband or my father. They wouldn't be bound by confidentiality. I found another address and called to book an appointment. I then took a tuk tuk to see him before my courage failed me. He was dry, factual, and unhelpful.

'There is no such thing as a man raping his wife' he told me, 'and that is certainly not grounds for divorce, nor is childlessness. Have you both been tested for infertility? No? Then who can say who is to blame? He could divorce you for that. Are you looked after well? Beaten? Restricted? Kept without money? No. He paid for you to visit your sister half a world away? Do you think all this is the behaviour of a bad husband? Do you really think I can present a case in court based solely on the fact that you are unhappy?'

Something fired my resolve. I would not be dismissed in this way. I reached into my purse and

took out some money. Brandishing it, I shouted 'I am paying you now to file divorce papers for me. I will take my chances of succeeding. I will not stay in this marriage. If you cannot act for me, then I will go now and find someone else.'

He looked at me, took the money and shrugged philosophically.

'You are my client, madam, and I have tried to give you good advice. But if your mind is made up, I will act for you, and begin proceedings.'

I turned and left before he could see the tears in my eyes. Was I really so trapped that I could never escape? All the way home in the Tuk Tuk I wept silently, thinking of my cold, empty life with Kumar and the love, which had illuminated my brief time with my darling doctor. In that one night my life had changed forever. Even if I continued the farce of living with Kumar as husband and wife, the love between us - if it ever existed - had gone forever. I had taken the first step. I could not let myself fail to continue on the path I had now chosen.

Sushila had been completely unaware of the black car that had been waiting on the opposite side of the road to her house that had discreetly been following her to the lawyer's office. And now, after she had left, the lawyer picked up his phone, the private line, to which his staff did not have access, and dialled a number. 'Yes, she has been in,' he said neutrally. 'I tried to put her off but she insisted,

so I took her money and told her I would act for her.' He listened to the reply. 'Yes, I will delay things, tell her there is a backlog at court and so on. You can rely on me.' He listened again, and then replied obsequiously 'Thank you Sir, I would be most grateful,' and put the phone down with a smile. Payment from both sides was always very satisfactory.

The Husband

When I tried to go into the bedroom I found she had locked the door. When I banged on it she told me to go away. When I finally went to the spare room I found that my clothes had all been transferred into the wardrobe there. At first I was enraged, then bitter, and then finally I calmed down and decided to be aloof about it for the time being. My brother had assured me to remain optimistic and that it would all blow over, but the atmosphere in the house remained cold. We barely spoke, and only at mealtimes so as not to alert the servants that something was wrong, but the maid had to know we were sleeping in different rooms. So I told the gardener one day that my wife was sick and had to sleep undisturbed for the time being, knowing he would pass it on. After an uneasy few months, I got the shock of my life. I had turned into the driveway and was parking, when I heard a soft cry near the Frangipani tree. I switched off the engine and

walked over to investigate. I saw a baby wrapped in a kikoi lying on the ground. I was stunned and bent down to look at it closer.

‘Go ahead, Kumar. Greet your son,’ came a voice from the shadows.

‘Lalita! Is that you?’

She stepped forward and gave a short, humourless laugh. ‘Who did you think it would be? You don’t remember our time together, what you did to me, and why you sent me away? Well, here is the result of your selfishness, your thoughtlessness, your callousness to me!’

‘But Lalita,’ I said sternly. ‘This is your baby?’

‘That’s where you’re wrong. This baby is yours. I can’t look after it. Nor do I want your bastard child. I want a life of my own. I’m sick of being used. You can have your child; your wife hasn’t given you one, so give it to her! And you can give me enough money to go far away from here and make a life for myself.’

Her eyes glistened in the moonlight and I wondered if she had gone a little mad. My mind was a conflict of emotions. I had no doubt she was dangerous. If she went to Sushila the outcome would be disastrous. My wife would then have real grounds for her divorce and the publicity would ruin me. A soft cry came from the bundle and I bent down and

awkwardly picked it up. I saw perfection in a little face and I felt a flood of emotion. My blood, my child. I held the tiny thing wrapped in its kikoi shawl against me and looked at its mother – no, not its mother, the woman who had given it birth, but who would not raise it.

‘I’ll give you all the money I have in my wallet, but I want you out of this garden, this road, this town, tonight! And you must never come back! If you do I will have you killed – make no mistake about that!’

She looked at me speculatively and part of me wondered what kind of a woman could give away her baby – but then, what kind of life did she live? Fortunately, I was carrying quite a large amount of cash. We had been paid for an order earlier in the day, and it was too late to deposit it in the bank. I hastily thrust notes into her hand. ‘Now get out!’ I said with as much venom as I could, she knew I meant every word I had said. She laughed mockingly, pushed the notes down the front of her dress between her breasts and walked out of the garden and out of my life without even looking back. I stood uncertain for a moment. How would I explain this to Sushila? To say I found the baby in our garden would be a little odd. Why our garden, anyone would say. I decided to tell her I had heard a cry from a dustbin further down the street and stopped to investigate and found this bundle, which

I hadn't the heart to leave.

I was amazed by her response on entering the house. My god!' she exclaimed as she heard it cry, 'Kumar, what have you got there?' She came forward and took the little bundle, and I saw her face soften and warmth steal over it. 'How? Where?' she began, and I cut in quickly with my prepared story. Then, seeing how protective she was already, I took a chance and said daringly, 'Shall I call the authorities?' She shook her head decisively.

'Definitely not, this baby is very small, probably premature, and who knows how long since it has been fed. We can't subject it to any more suffering. We will look after it. I do not believe in coincidences; I think maybe you were meant to save this child's life.'

I felt a great thrill of relief. A better reception, even, than I anticipated. Sushila was gently unwrapping the kikoi shawl and we both saw the child was a boy. A son! I exulted. Sushila immediately focused on the practicalities. Straight away she got on the phone to friends, begging the loan of bottles, formula, nappies, baby clothes, and a cradle and so on as a temporary measure. I watched her bath the tiny little creature, marvelling at his size and perfection. 'I'd like to call him Kupatikana,' I said,

it's 'found' in Swahili.

That night our lives – and our marriage – were changed.

The Wife

I suppose I like to make sense out of life and connect incidents together, rather than believing in coincidence. My immediate feelings were, how light he was and how tiny. I had forgotten how small newborn babies were. I inhaled the unfamiliar smell of a newborn, and I could already feel my emotions welling up inside me. I felt a sense of warmth and protection for this poor little mite, so vulnerable and so alone. I realised that I was experiencing maternal instincts, so thwarted in my loveless life, now blossoming like a slowly opening flower. I immediately called friends for help, and that night they came unstintingly with gifts to cover every immediate need. Curiously, with all this love flowing, it also emanated from Kumar whom I had never seen exhibit any real emotional depth. He watched me bath him, gazing with awe, even choosing a name. There was no question of handing him over to the authorities. He was ours. We both wanted him.

The arrival of Kupatikana transformed Sushila's life. No longer was she listless and bored, now she had a reason for getting up in the morning. She would

wake and hear the happy gurgle from the cot beside her and would smile, reach over and stroke his face. He was a happy baby, crying only when his nappy needed changing or he was hungry. Kumar watched this transformation of his wife with amazement. He loved the child but not in the way his wife did. Nothing was too much trouble for her. When the boy was off colour she fretted and worried. She had even forgotten the way in which the boy came into her life and the misconduct of her husband, although their relationship remained very distant. Kumar had become used to sleeping alone and no longer made any matrimonial demands on his wife aware that he would be severely rebuffed.

The Wife

Time passed very quickly and soon we were celebrating Kupatikana first birthday. He was such a beautiful child. I loved him so much as if he were my own. I had saved his life and, as the Chinese say, 'If you flout the gods and save a person's life, then that life is your responsibility'. I accepted it gladly. Kumar loved him too; in fact, the boy was the light of his life. This little child meant more to him than anyone else ever had, or would - certainly more than me. But our combined love brought us together in a more harmonious relationship. I was so happy in my daily routine, enjoying my little boy's progress; first crawling and then trying to stand.

Kumar spent all his spare time playing with the boy. At last there was peace in the house, and a certain degree of contentment for us both, though I kept my word and slept in a separate room. But I observed a curious fact as time went on.

Kupatikana increasingly looked more and more like my husband, so much so that strangers seeing him for the first time would comment how much they looked alike and took Kumar for his real father. One evening, after yet another comment along those lines from an outsider, I studied my husband's face while he was reading and I could see what they meant. Our son had his nose, the same dimple on his right cheek and something else that was very strange - the little fingers on both his hands were curled just like my husband's. I felt a pang of anxiety in case this was one of those bone diseases that progressed, as people got older. Eventually, because it kept nagging me, I spoke to a friend who was an Orthopaedic specialist. He said he would find out about the condition, so I put it out of my mind. He called me back a few weeks later, telling me to come to his office. I was puzzled; what had he found out? He sounded so serious. Was my boy OK or had he got some disease? I was frightened and when I entered his surgery, he saw it on my face.

'It's OK!' he reassured me. 'It's nothing to worry about,' I waited but he paused for a long time as if

he was debating what he would say, or maybe how he would say it. Finally I broke the silence.

‘Please tell me what you have found out,’ I stammered, my nerves on edge.

‘Well,’ he began. ‘A contorted, curly little finger is a genetically inherited flaw, passed down by the male in a family.’

I thought for a minute; first, with relief that it was not some insidious disease afflicting my precious son, then the remarkable coincidence that Kumar’s little fingers were also bent too, he too could not straighten them.

‘Is it common?’ I asked, and heard hope in my voice.

The doctor paused and then said slowly, ‘It is very uncommon . . . no, more than that, a very rare condition, passed from father to son. It is not a disability, but it is a very clear indication of a filial relationship.’

‘But that is not possible,’ I blurted out. ‘We adopted him - so how could he have the same condition as my husband?’

‘You are right, it’s probably one of those strange coincidences that sometimes occur.’

He looked at me with what seemed like pity in his eyes. He hesitated and then he said cautiously, ‘we could easily find out, if you wish. A simple DNA test would reveal the truth.’

‘A DNA test?’

‘DNA is like a genetic fingerprint, from the parent to the child. It can prove or disprove paternity,’ he explained.

What was he saying, or trying to say? I couldn’t face this and stumbled to my feet.

‘Doctor, thank you. Please let me think about it. I feel overwhelmed.’

He nodded sympathetically. ‘I am here if you want me,’ he added as I left his office.

Walking almost blindly from his surgery I automatically hailed a tuk tuk and on the way home, thoughts whirled in my head like paper scattered by a fan.

There couldn’t be a connection, I told myself, and it must be a coincidence. The more I struggled with it, the more ill at ease I became. Wasn’t it rather remarkable that Kumar had found the baby - in a busy street along which many people passing by? The baby’s cries would have been heard immediately, so it must have been dumped as he approached. Was it meant that he should find the baby? Was the baby’s natural mother waiting for Kumar?

After several days of torment, I decided it was better to know the truth, and I phoned the doctor. ‘When can you do these DNA tests,’ I asked, somewhat abruptly?

‘Just as soon as you like. I’m glad to know your husband has agreed.’

‘I haven’t asked him,’ I replied. ‘I would feel so stupid, and he would make fun of me, and there is no way he would do it. You just tell me how to get a sample to be tested.’

‘But I can’t do it without his permission,’ the doctor replied, somewhat aghast. ‘It could be interpreted as a form of assault, at the very least an invasion of his privacy, his individual rights.’

‘I didn’t think of that,’ I replied. ‘I just thought it would put my mind at rest if I had the test done and it proved things one way or the other.’

‘Let me ask you to think about what the result would mean to you. Would it change things, your feelings – for your husband? Sometimes we are better off not knowing secrets if we are in a contented situation and life is progressing gently like a flowing river. Do you really want to create a waterfall?’

‘I just need to know,’ I replied.

He nodded. ‘I do understand, and I have a lot of sympathy for you.’

‘How could I do it without him knowing?’ I interrupted.

There was a pause and I heard the doctor cough.

‘This is very irregular but if you really feel that you must know the answer then this is what you need to do. Please don’t tell anyone I have told you.’

‘I would need a fresh sample of his saliva, say from a glass, one he had used to wash out his mouth. If you sealed it with cling film and bring it to

me without delay, I could use it. But I must remind you, it is unethical and I would have to deny knowing what had been done.'

'Would you then do the test for me?' I asked, looking straight into his eyes.

'Let me think about it,' he said after a moment; 'let us both think about it. Call me in a few days time.'

A few days passed and I called him.

'I just can't risk doing it without his permission'. 'I am sorry'. He paused, and then continued diffidently. 'On the other hand if you gave me a sample of your own saliva, I could test that.'

'But that wouldn't be of any use,' I protested and then stopped. I suddenly realised what he was suggesting. 'Thank you, how do I arrange it?' 'Bring the sample and also the baby so I can test him too.' I paused, 'Will it cause him any pain?'

'No. I will simply remove some cells from the inside of his cheek with a swab. He won't feel a thing.'

Over the next few days I watched Kumar as he cleaned his teeth after breakfast. I noticed that he washed his mouth out under the tap and did not use a glass. I would have to think of a way to get him to use a glass.

'Kumar,' I said one morning going into his bathroom with a clean glass one third filled with water.

'Why don't you wash your mouth out with clean water? I've been told tap water can contain germs,

it isn't pure.' He glanced up at me, nodded, and took the glass from me. After he had finished, I could see some of his saliva on the rim. Just what the doctor had said he needed. He put it down and bustled off in a hurry to get to work. I picked it up gingerly holding it with a tissue, walked slowly to the kitchen and sealed the top of the glass with Cling Film. My heart was thudding in case the maid came in, so I quickly hid it in the cupboard for the time being and went to get Kupatikana and myself ready to go out.

We didn't have to wait long before being admitted to the doctor's room and as he rose to greet us, Kupatikana stretched out his little arms and smiled. I put the glass I had carried so carefully on his table and sat down with my son on my knee. The doctor took a glass slide and a small cotton pledget and, as I opened the boy's mouth, he wiped the inside of his cheek. 'Good,' he said, placing the pledget in a tube and sealing it. 'It takes about a week for the results to come through. I will ring you,' and he dismissed us with a smile, tickling Kupatikana under the chin.

The week passed slowly. I had some really bad nights, lying awake, wondering if I had done the right thing. I realised the doctor had subtly tried to tell me to let things lie and now I puzzled over whether he was right, but then that inner voice told

me inescapably that I had to know the truth. I had not behaved perfectly, but Kumar...I prayed I was wrong, that there would be some other explanation. The doctor phoned me five days later.

‘I have your results,’ he said tersely, getting straight to the point.

‘Tell me please.’

‘Why don’t you come to my surgery and we can discuss it?’

‘Doctor; tell me now.’ I was shaking inwardly but my voice was firm.

He sighed, and I could hear it clearly over the line. ‘I’m afraid it’s positive,’ he said. ‘The child is unequivocally your husband’s son, genetically as well as adoptively.’

I put the phone down without speaking and felt the tears come; heavy, uncontrollable sobs. I stood immobile for long moments as they racked my body, then after what seemed forever, they slowly subsided like a heavy downpour of rain slowly easing up. I felt weak. Curiously, like the lull after the storm, I now felt calmer. I dried my tears and made up my face. I was ready to deal with what I knew I had to do. The doctor sighed as he heard the phone click. He felt great sympathy for this decent woman, and little respect for the husband. It was not often that his news about consanguinity was received with sadness. Usually his patients were delighted when they found that the samples agreed. This case was one of the saddest he had

ever dealt with. He could not help but wonder at the outcome.

PART 3

The Surgeon

It's been over 5 years since that voyage and my memory of her is as fresh today as it was when I last saw her. I am still unable to accept our parting. I think of her often and even daydream that one day we might meet, but then I wake up to reality and realise how unlikely that is. She could have contacted me if she had wanted to. Life is unpredictable and sometimes fate is bizarre, throwing up coincidences that are beyond all odds. I now live and work in London. I couldn't bear the sea anymore. I had always loved it but now it constantly reminded me of her.

But yesterday, as I was walking along Oxford Street I saw her! A chance meeting - something that could only happen in a film. It felt too unreal to occur in real life. It was early spring and the trees were heavy with blossom. I had left my surgery at lunchtime and walked across Hyde Park to Marble Arch, one of my favourite walks. The pavement was jammed with people, hordes were streaming in and out of the Marble Arch station entrance and I struggled to get past. I have a sort of strategy when walking along a crowded pavement. I walk in a

straight line, only stopping if someone is on the same line as me. It works, making progress quicker, and, as often happens, there is a clear way ahead and it's in this way the miracle happened. I looked up and saw her walking towards me. I couldn't believe it. We came face to face; my heart was thumping furiously.

'Are you real?' I said or are you a mirage come to torment me?

'It's me' she replied, gazing at me with her soulful eyes. She hadn't changed, still that beautiful face with shining black hair and deep brown eyes that had ignited the flame of passion within me.

'What are you doing here?' I stammered like a fool, my thoughts incoherent.

'I'm sorry to say I'm here to see my sister again. The disease has caught up with her, and now the outcome is not good. I'm on my way to the hospital now.'

I hesitated, 'may I come with you?' I asked, not sure of her reaction, but not wanting to lose her a second time. She paused, 'Yes, of course.'

We took a No.30 bus and sat upstairs in the front seats. We were both quiet at first, just being together, and then, as I was about to speak, she said, 'I know what you are want to ask me.'

I was speechless.

'You're going to ask me why I never got in touch.'
I took her hand and held it in mine. It was soft and

warm.

'I couldn't' she went on. 'I really couldn't. You will never know how much I wanted to.'

'It's all right, you don't have to explain now. It's too wonderful to see you again.'

At the hospital I was sad to notice professionally that Sushila's sister's skin had a slight yellowish tinge and she was very pale. Her hands shook badly when she held her cup and I saw bruises on them. It was apparent to me that she had advanced liver disease; it was good that Sushila had managed to come and see her. Outside we walked in silence, our shoulders occasionally touching, and then, by mutual, unspoken assent, we linked arms. Without looking at me she said quietly, 'she hasn't got long to live, has she?' I didn't need to say anything; I just squeezed her hand, and wiped away the tears that ran down her cheek.

'What are your plans now?' I asked, dreading her reply. I didn't want to leave her; she was so sad and alone. My heart leaped when she said that she was staying longer. I would be able to see her and tell her how much I still loved her and that I hadn't been able to look at anyone else since we parted. Fate had brought us together after many long, lonely years – for me at least, but I instinctively knew for her also. It felt crazy how well we knew each other; could one long evening of soul bearing and one even long night of lovemaking be so binding that,

separated, neither of us was completely whole? I thought of inviting her to my flat that was nearby but hesitated. I knew it was probably too soon but time had never been on our side.

‘Can we have dinner together,’ I asked with my heart in my mouth. This was when she would say yes or no and it would indicate whether we would go forward or sink into the mire of missed opportunities. She looked at me:

‘When and where?’

‘My flat, 7 o’clock,’ I said with bated breath, and gave her the address.

She nodded, we kissed lightly and parted.

I could hardly concentrate; the afternoon just seemed to drag. I went into a frenzy of shopping. Once at home I rushed around picking newspapers off the floor, hoovering, plumping up pillows and putting light switches on low.

When everything was as ready as I could make it, table laid, music ready to switch on, I tormented myself by thinking I should have arranged to pick her up instead of leaving her to decide whether to come or not. I realised then with a stab of regret that I had been so bemused I hadn’t taken her number and I didn’t know where she was staying.

At seven o’clock sharp, I heard light footsteps approaching, and then the bell rang. Holding my breath I opened the door - and there she was -

adorned in a sari of a soft gold chiffon-like material that almost glowed. Her lustrous hair was loose and flowing down her back; she had heavy gold earrings and bracelets, and slipper sandals studded with small jewels. She looked like an Indian goddess.

‘You look so beautiful,’ I said, stunned for a moment. She laughed gently and led the way by reaching up and kissing me on both cheeks.

‘Why, this is lovely, Michael,’ she said, as she looked round my living room. I was tongue-tied and off balance like a young boy first smitten. But that’s how I felt. All those years since I had first known her – the tantalizing dreams where she appeared and then disappeared and now she was here with me, the reality surpassed my wildest dreams.

‘Let me get you a drink?’ I asked, and she smiled and nodded, seating herself gracefully on the sofa. I poured the wine, a fine rosé, into long stemmed glasses, brought them over and placed them on the table in front of her. I looked at her face; she was so beautiful that I could not help reaching out and touching her.

‘I’ve dreamed of this for so long. She leaned forward and kissed me lightly on the lips. ‘I love you,’ she whispered.

‘I’ve loved you since the first moment I met you. I’ve loved you through all the years since. I will always love you.’

‘I have waited so long for you,’ I whispered, taking her hands and gazing into her eyes. ‘I told you I would. I knew some day you would come into my life again. There hasn’t been another. I wanted – I waited – only for you.’

As we kissed longingly a fire raced through us both. After hours (we had dozed, and loved and dozed again) I kissed her gently and said, ‘I’m hungry, let’s eat!’

Laughing like children, we draped ourselves in towels and ate with our fingers, and drank the wine, and listened to the music, and at one time we danced dreamily, just circling round the round, body to body, her beautiful hair forward and draped over my shoulder, my hands keeping her close, holding her, never wanting these moments to end. When the music finished, I just picked her up and went through to the bedroom. I laid her gently down, and she reached for me and pulled me on top of her, and once more we were locked in.

When I next awoke, I could hear the shower running. I lay contentedly until she came through with a towel wrapped around her. Her smile lit up the room as she looked at me, blew me a kiss, then turned to start getting dressed.

At last I had to ask ‘why didn’t you contact me? Why didn’t you leave him and come to me?’

‘She paused then turned, her face no longer

smiling. 'I told him I wanted a divorce, I even went to a lawyer, but he blocked my every move. He told me the disgrace would kill our parents. I couldn't break away, I had no money; you don't know what it's like. You can only compare what an English woman could - would do in those circumstances.'

She paused and then added slowly and with such great depth of feeling, 'I never slept with him again after you.'

I sat up in the bed and reached out my hand.

'Oh, my love, if you had only contacted me, I would have come for you; sent you a ticket money, anything. Divorce or no divorce, it doesn't matter, it only matters that we are together.'

She smiled at me, with such love and sadness and age-old wisdom in her eyes.

'You make it sound so easy but there were many problems – I haven't begun to tell you all ...'

I jumped out of bed and went across to her and held her in my arms. 'Don't tell me any more. None of it matters. Just promise me this time you will stay with me. Don't go back. Forget him, leave everything behind. The only thing you need is me.'

'Not quite,' I thought I heard her whisper.

'I can't lose you again. I couldn't start another relationship. I tried, my God how I tried to forget you, to go out and have a good time, but every time I took another woman out, your image was in front of me, and nothing could compare with it, nothing could ever develop with another.'

I heard her catch a sob in her throat.

‘Promise,’ I demanded.

‘I promise,’ she answered, and I released her, content. I saw her whisper something under her breath, and thought perhaps she was repeating what I wanted her to say; but later, much later as I recalled it all I realised she was qualifying the promise so as not to tell a deliberate lie. She finished dressing and then told me she had to go now, all her papers and personal possessions were in the hotel.

‘Just collect them and come back soon,’ I told her and she smiled at me as she left.

I watched her through my big window, sensing a foreboding. She walked away as if she had been wounded.

The doorman told me later that tears were running down her face when she left.

I waited all day for her. I didn’t go to work. I paced up and down idly picking up a book and putting it down unread. I wanted to be here for her when she came back.

It was evening when the letter was delivered.

My Dearest One, it began.

This is such a hard letter to write but believe me I have no choice. The enclosed photo is the reason I cannot leave Kumar. He was found abandoned as

a tiny baby and I love him. When I found out that he was Kumar's child by a casual affair, I told him that now he couldn't keep me as I really finally did have concrete evidence to get a divorce. He told me I could go, but he would never release the boy. I would never get out of the country with him; he and his family would use their contacts, their influence to block every exit, by sea, land or air. The choice was mine - I was free to go – without my child; or I could stay and be a dutiful wife, at least as a front to outsiders, a mother to his son, and he would provide for us, leave me alone and make no demands on me. I had no choice. I love the child too much, and more importantly, I knew he needed me. I could not leave his upbringing to Kumar and his family. Fate gave me a taste of heaven with you, and then took it away from me. They gave me a child, and I am eternally grateful for him. I am blessed to have known you. I had a second taste of you yesterday and it will sustain me for the rest of my life. I will never forget you. You have made me so happy. Perhaps we may meet again in some other world. I love you.

Yours forever,

Sushila

I crumpled the paper in my hand as I looked at the picture of the beautiful little boy and I, who never

cried, broke down. My whole body racked with sobs
as my world collapsed.

SCARRED FOR LIFE

She turned from the window through which she had been gazing trying to clear her troubled mind into making a decision. At last and with great effort, she turned and looked at her bedroom clock on the white dresser. She realised with a sense of panic that if she was going to keep the appointment at the clinic, she only had 30 minutes to get there. She had been dithering since dawn as to whether she was doing the right thing, plagued by doubts, concerned about the money involved, worried that her parents would find out what she was doing and disapprove. She couldn't banish the feeling of guilt, that somehow it was her fault that it had happened. But now she had to make a decision. She had made the first step by booking the appointment and convinced herself it would all be OK. I can always say no at the last minute she told herself. I am not committed. Grabbing her coat and bag she crept down the stairs, opened the front door quietly so as not to alert her mother but realised it was raining. She paused for a moment - should she risk going back inside for an umbrella and possibly waking someone up. Deciding against it, she made it to the matatu stop just as one drew up.

'Morning Deborah,' the neighbour, her mother's friend, greeted her as the matatu door opened and

they both climbed inside. Damn, she thought, as she fiddled in her handbag for the right change. 'Now she's going to ask me where I'm going, what I'm doing and, if I tell her, it will go straight back to my mother. She deliberately waited until Mrs. Imani had moved along and found a seat, and then she chose one as far away from her as possible. When she got off the bus, she ran all the way to the Clinic and arrived panting, out of breath and slightly damp from the drizzling rain. The waiting room was already full. She didn't know whether to be glad or sorry - glad that she wasn't late for the appointment, or sorry that there were so many others so that she had more time to think about what she was doing.

'Name please?' came the high-pitched voice of the woman sitting behind the reception desk. Deborah realised she should have reported there first before trying to find a seat in the crowded room. Keeping her voice low so no one else would hear her she gave her details to the elderly woman clerk who efficiently wrote them on an information card in neat handwriting. Silently acknowledging the woman's efficiency, she waited until the clerk handed her a slip with a number on it.

'Take a seat, your name will be called,' the receptionist said without looking up. Deborah went to a vacant seat and sat down. She was committed now to seeing the doctor and

listening to what he had to say. Would he encourage her to do something about it, or tell her she shouldn't? Mulling it all over in her mind again, she felt an awful sick feeling, a deep pain in her abdomen that always seemed to be the seat of her emotions. What am I doing here? She suddenly panicked. Am I right to ask for help? She looked around at the other patients. A young woman seated across from her caught her eye. She didn't look nervous at all; in fact she looked very calm. Her mind must be made up already, Deborah thought. That must be a relief. At least once a decision is made you stop worrying yourself over it. She wished she could do that.

As patients went through the door to the inner office one by one, the crowd thinned a bit and taking her courage in both hands, she stood up and walked across to the other girl. 'Do you mind if I sit here?' she said nervously.

'Of course not,' the girl replied. 'I was looking at you before and I saw how nervous you were. You shouldn't be, you know. It's the right thing to do, to come here. The doctor will help you.'

Her calm, trust and belief made Deborah feel as if a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders. At last here was the encouragement she needed. Her mind went back to when it had happened – that awful moment when her father had come into the

house and found her drinking a Tusker beer. He had frightened her shouting, 'don't you dare drink at your age.' The family had been so dysfunctional for so long that now she felt she hardly knew him. He seemed so stressed these days, staying out late at night and shouting at everyone when he did come home. They were all afraid of his temper tantrums and his violence. She would often hear her parents shouting and fighting and when she thought about it, she couldn't recall a time when he was kind to her. Her mother told her that he loved them when they were small, but now he had 'problems'.

'And he takes them out on us,' her brother had said bitterly. Danny had left home now. He was going he said, before he had a fistfight with his father.

Sometimes her father looked at her strangely, as if he was assessing her now she was getting older, but not in a nice way. Deborah felt isolated, lonely, even when she was with her family. She tried to be invisible, not to be a nuisance, she tried so hard to gain her father's affection but his casual, almost callous attitude and his behaviour didn't change. And she believed it was her fault. I'm not bright at school, better at games, prettier than the other girls. She believed she had failed him.

Then came the terrible day that burned indelibly in her memory. She was in the yard where she often

went to find some peace away from the intolerable atmosphere inside. The back door had burst open and he stood there in the doorway, his face almost purple with bitterness, repressed anger waiting to be released. 'I told you not to drink, I warned you! He shouted and, stepping forward as she gazed unbelievably at him with the glass half way to her mouth. He raised his hand and hit her with all his force across her unprotected face. Stunned she was knocked completely off balance and fell sideways and backwards, striking her head hard against the ground, the broken glass cutting her face. Her last memory was of her father leaning over her, touching her, before she passed out. From then on she was scarred both mentally and physically. She became introverted, silent, and uncommunicative at home; her college work suffered and she never went out, shunning her friends. Now she had come for advice, for help. Seeing her distress at her memories, her new friend took her hand reassuringly and it gave Deborah solace and comfort. Before she could talk more to the girl, her own name was called.

'Good Morning,' may I call you Deborah? Please sit down.' The white-coated figure behind the desk motioned to a chair. Overcoming her first panic, Deborah took a deep breath and sat down.

'Thank you for seeing me,' she managed to blurt out and then unable to hold back, tears began to fill

her eyes.

‘It’s all right,’ the doctor said, taking her hand gently. He was an older man with grey hair and wise, understanding eyes.

‘Tell me how can I help? I have a short note about a scar that you want removed.’

‘Come near the light here and let me examine you.’

She waited, tensely while he peered at her face and gently touched the raised angry keloid scar.

‘Does it hurt or tingle?’

‘No.’

‘I think we will be able to help you.’

‘Really?’ Her voice was a little doubting but she felt hope and reassurance at his words.

‘Yes, really. Now go and see my clerk and she will make the booking.’

Deborah stood up and walked to the door. After she had completed the details, she walked outside into the sunshine, which now seemed warm and welcoming. Was there a light at the end of the dark tunnel she wondered? She seemed to have been struggling alone for what felt like forever. And then she saw him. He was standing on the road just outside the clinic. It was obvious he had been waiting for her. Her breath seemed to catch in her throat and the world turned dull again. She was rooted to the spot. He stepped forward hesitantly and she instinctively stepped back defensively.

‘Deborah, don’t please? I found out you were

coming here, and I had to come and see what they said, to give you some support.'

She saw to her surprise that his face was pleading, his eyes compassionate, and his whole attitude was different.

'I'm just so sorry. I feel so guilty. I haven't been able to forgive myself since it happened. I don't know what came over me and I was so ashamed I couldn't face you or talk to you. I have just come to say please let me pay this medical bill, it's my responsibility. You shouldn't feel you are facing this alone.'

Was this real? Deborah asked herself. He looked like a different man. Vague childhood memories came back of a laughing face, kind eyes, big hands and arms that scooped her up and tossed her in the air, laughing and catching her, giving her a feeling of security and love.

Was this man shedding his ugly Mr. Hyde persona and reverting to the kind Dr. Jekyll he really was? Her thoughts ran to the classic story she had read at school and found so horrible. She gave a tiny smile, and he reached out and took her hand.

'Can they do it?' he asked.

Finally she found her voice. 'Yes Dad.' The word came out easily now. 'They said it would take two operations, because the scar tissue on my face is ridged and puckered, but the doctor said he could improve its appearance. Most people won't even be able to see it, he said. The scar of the girl sitting

next to me was much worse than mine but she was so calm about it. She believed the doctor would make her better too. She made me trust him.'

Her father reached out and gently touched the angry, puckered scar marring the youthful innocence of his lovely daughter's face. He hadn't been able to believe how on that terrible day, he had completely lost control and struck out at her. When he saw how she had fallen with the broken glass lacerating her face he recalled how he had screamed for his wife, trying to staunch the blood with his handkerchief. Then there was the rush to the emergency room at the local hospital where they stitched the gaping wound. She had been kept in overnight to check for concussion, and had come home so subdued and so frightened of him. He had raged at himself for his temper, his inability to communicate any more with his family or with anyone for that matter. He blamed the stress on the factory job he had been forced to take just to earn money to survive with its dirt, squalor, ear shattering noise, long hours and poor pay and he felt the shame again as he realized the problem lay within himself. He had taken it all out on his family, as if it was their fault. Now his prayers had been answered. His daughter would carry no scar – inside or out. He affirmed this to himself. He would change. If nothing else this had made him realize what he truly valued. He had never been a

demonstrative man, but now he stepped forward and, reaching for her, he put his arms round his daughter.

SALAMI

I had been in Mombasa town with a friend and on the way home, feeling thirsty I decided to go to a coffee shop. To my dismay all the tables were occupied but I needed a break so I waited until one was free. Within a short while, a table became vacant and I moved quickly to occupy it but a mother and her two small daughters, also waiting, had the same idea. The hovering waitress suggested that we could all sit together. I indicated that I didn't mind and looked questioningly at the mother who nodded in agreement. We all sat down and the busy waitress, a middle aged, rather careworn woman wearing a black dress made of some sort of crepe material with a small white organdie bib apron and a little matching tiara like cap on her greying hair, came to take our orders. She already looked tired but was obviously doing her best to do a good job and take care of the café's customers.

'Just an Americano with hot milk please, and what do you have to eat?' I asked. She suggested a vegetable samosa. I agreed that would do very nicely feeling the need for a little self-indulgence.

The mother, a slim attractive woman with dark glossy hair, probably in her early 40s, also ordered a coffee for herself and hot chocolate for the

children. We soon got talking, as one does when thrown into contact with strangers under such intimate conditions. She explained the children were on holiday from Nairobi and they were out for the day. They lived close to Keren in the north of the city. Her husband was a Kikuyu but she originally came from the Northwest. She was a Luo. I explained that I was visiting Mombasa to see friends and was staying in my brother-in-law's house, before flying back to the UK. We were within a couple of feet of the next table where two young women with friendly faces were sitting. They had obviously heard our conversation, and turned to us. They introduced themselves and went on to tell us they were also on holiday and were having a day out shopping. The conversation continued and the talk turned to education when they commented on the little girls' good manners, saying they were teachers and so many in their field of work these days had terrible problems with discipline, especially in the government schools. I had heard about this problem and the difficulty teachers faced, and I was keen to find out how they dealt with controlling bad behaviour compared to the old days of 'spare the rod and spoil the child'.

We exchanged points of view, and then the mother told me that she had just completed her first year studying graphology and had today received the news that she had passed her exams. I offered to

buy her lunch to celebrate the occasion and we went on to discuss graphology. I asked her if it was classed as a science or an art.

‘It’s really quite scientific;’ she answered earnestly, ‘the analysis of handwriting can determine the type of person who has written it. For example, it’s possible to recognize a criminal’s handwriting. There are many distinctive features.’

I was a little sceptical but she went on to assure me that graphology was now a well-established science that was playing a role in criminology and education. I could see the teachers wanted to expand on this, but I could also see her two little girls were now rather restless and wanting to be involved in the conversation. The older of two was called Salome. She was about nine years old and very pretty with a bright open face, a tumble of dark curly hair and a lively smile. She wanted to tell us that she was supposed to meet a girl from school, an American. She was bossy and a bit of a know-all who tended to dominate others, and she took this opportunity to inform us solemnly that she was not happy with this arrangement at all. Her mother looked disconcerted, it was too late to go back on the arrangement now. She had obviously thought this would be a nice treat for her daughter. In an attempt to distract her from dwelling on this subject, I asked Salome and her sister if they would like

anything more to eat. Salome pleased by the prospect of an extra treat, asked for a plate of salami, 'her favourite,' her mother added. When I heard the way she said the word salami it was as if the clock of time had been turned back for me, and I was in another place and another time.

I was Salome's age, on holiday at Lake Nakuru, in northern Kenya with my family. My father was attached to the British Embassy and we had gone out to be with him during the summer holiday. It was beautiful at that time of the year. I remember waking up at dawn and standing by the window watching the sunrise across the still, glass-like water lightly enfolded in ethereal mist, the early morning light forming small rainbows that overlapped each other, the flocks of flamingos stationary on the water as if frozen in time. One morning my father must have heard me because I suddenly found him standing beside me.

'Beautiful isn't it?' he whispered.

'Try to capture this moment, so you can revisit it whenever you feel sad or lonely. Remember this.' I tried to focus on every detail, the pale cerulean blue of the sky set against the deep azure of the water, the flocks of standing flamingos, the smoky, grey-blue of the hills beyond. Like a camera, I took a mind picture of the scene for the future. Later that day we went into the local village for lunch. We

found a small lakeside café with all types of salami hanging from the ceiling. I remember looking up and trying to count how many there were. I got to about twenty before I lost count. I had never tasted salami before so, when we came to order I asked for a plate of different ones. They arrived thinly sliced on a large oval platter. I ate them with a chilled glass of wine - also a first – but, as Dad said, today was a special treat.

We were due to leave the following day as school was looming the following week. I remembered the details so clearly; they are imprinted in my mind as if it was yesterday because the following day, just as we arrived back in Nairobi, my mother came to us with her eyes brimming over with tears. I looked at her with a child's puzzlement to see her like that, and she quietly told us that my father had been killed in a car accident. Even now, so many years later, I can feel my heart tearing at the sadness of that moment; it is burned into my mind. But what I also have are those moments with my father looking at the dawn mist on the lake, and that plate of salami, the last meal we had together.

I came back to the present and looked around at the friendly faces of my new companions, and at Alice tucking into her plate of salami. I had long finished my coffee and samosa and it was time to go, so I bid them all farewell, wished them good

holidays, and left the café, setting off at a brisk pace down the hill. Lost in the past, I could almost feel the taste of salami in my mouth and that first ever taste of the cool sweetness of wine, and my father's presence, still with me.

UNDERSTANDING THE DEEP

Twenty kilometers off the coast of Mombasa and ten fathoms deep, they can hear the throbbing screws of the 28,000 ton MSC Ogata, a Greek container ship en route for the port of Mombasa. It is late morning and the crew is about to tip the remains of the morning's food overboard.

Hungry sharks have learnt to follow these ships as they pass the Likoni ferry and make their way through the narrow Kilindini channel, a coastal inlet formed by a prehistoric submerged riverbed.

The tide is on the turn when a small group of young men begin to swim across the narrow channel below the ferry at Likoni, a tradition that has been practiced by many generations of Kenyans. One of the strongest swimmers, Mohammed is proud of his swimming. Since a small boy he has always outpaced his peers and they have given him due respect for this. He sets off urging the others on unaware of what awaits him. His first sense of danger is when the water around him begins to heave and swell. Fear strikes him and paralyzed by what he sees, he is powerless to react.

The shark's narrow vision is disturbed by the flashing white legs of the swimmers above and goes to investigate. They seem a likely prey but on reaching the scene it is confused by what it sees

and strikes tearing at the moving target. The flesh is alien and it soon swims away. Meanwhile its prey is dying.

Mohammed feels a wrenching and pulling as he helplessly watches his right leg being torn from him. Strangely there is little pain. With the main artery to his right leg severed, his lifeblood is pumping into the sea creating an expanding reddish cloud around him.

A sudden feeling of panic, a deep-seated, stomach-churning sense of terror and horror overwhelms him. Desperate he tries to get away, but his strength is ebbing fast. All he can do is hope; hope that someone or something will come to his aid. Meanwhile the shark, disliking the taste of human flesh, has swum away. Watchers on the bank hear his cry and see him disappear without warning under the water. He comes up thrashing and screaming, his blood staining the water around him. The other swimmers know that if he is not reached in time, he will bleed to death long before he can receive medical treatment. His brother, Aslam swimming somewhere behind responds rapidly. Without thinking of himself and despite feeling uncertain and inadequate, he swims rapidly to his dying brother, tears off his T-shirt and fashions a makeshift tourniquet. It is enough to stem the main torrent of blood. A trained lifesaver, he brings him

back to shore. Even in this moment of tragedy, Aslam is proud to be able to assist his brother someone he has always admired. Mohammed who is now helpless and for the first time dependent on his younger brother, smiles and closes his eyes. Once on shore, the situation is grim. The victim's skin is ice cold and translucent, his eyes staring not seeing.

Mohammed has lost over half his blood volume. His heart is beating nearly twice its normal rate to make up for the blood loss and to keep his brain alive. A Tuk Tuk, a three-wheeled vehicle is passing by and he is bundled into it and transported quickly to hospital.

'Where am I?' He moans. He is just conscious and is still aware of voices and movement. The pain is bearable provided he is not moved. The tourniquet has successfully controlled the bleeding for the moment.

'Cross match 8 units of blood and lets get him to theatre,' shouts the surgeon who is still in his golfing gear having driven in from the local golf course. The trolley is rushed out of the Emergency Room and along the corridor to the operating suite no more than five minutes away. The injured man is lifted gently onto the operating table and the anaesthetist immediately gives him an injection to put him to sleep.

Now the operation can begin. The surgeon has to secure the bleeding vessels, the main artery and the main vein, excise any obviously dead tissue and then in suitable fashion a stump. As the makeshift tourniquet is slowly released, the artery springs into action. 'Forceps please,' and with an experienced movement, the surgeon clamps the spurting vessel. The atmosphere in the room visibly calms.

'OK. Everyone we can relax,' says the surgeon as he gently separates the torn shredded muscles; some is dead and has to be sacrificed. Gradually, he defines the healthy tissue. Then he checks the bone, the lower third of the thighbone had been crushed but with care it can be reconstructed. About an hour later, the tissues above the knee are secure, while the wound is left open and packed to permit any infection to drain out. Later a second operation will allow the stump to be closed.

'How's the boy?' Asks the surgeon, looking up from the table.

'Stable, he has good blood pressure and pulse. He's had six units of blood.

'He's young and can make it up very quickly. We can check his haemoglobin in the morning,' replies the Anesthetist.

Mohammed is returned to the Intensive Care ward. It's dark when he arrives. He has a dim recall of voices and lights but nothing else. A strong painkiller soon blots out reality and he drifts into a deep drug induced sleep. He is not out of danger yet.

On waking and before being aware of what has happened, Mohammed recalls a dream he's had, a long journey, but the details are vague although not forgotten. There was a meeting between him and a shark, not in water or in air, but in some other medium unfamiliar to him. The creature has attacked him in his dream and he asks him

'Why did you attack me? I was doing you no harm. I was a long way from where you were swimming and in any case you don't like human flesh do you?'

Mohammed can see clearly now that before him is a Great White shark. It ponders the question for a while and then in an almost apologetic voice it replies

'I don't know, I really don't know. It was a reflex. I was hungry and thought you were a fish, your shining legs moving in the water. I rely on smell. Did you know that it is over 100 million years since we sharks came on the scene and for centuries my kind have been hunted by predators?'

You are our most feared enemy. Do you realize your species kills millions of us each year and yet we survive because we have developed unique and rapid responses to danger? You represent that danger. Once I realised that I had made a mistake, I swam away.'

'Not before you almost killed me,' replied Mohammed.

'Yes, I'm sorry that was not my intention.'

'Although we seem to be so different, we have a great deal in common,' the shark reminded the boy.

'We both started our life in water. I still live in it but you only spend nine months here before you, at birth were released from that watery world into a gaseous atmosphere. Even so like me during your development you go through several stages that included a fish like one with gills, living entirely in water until the moment of your birth.'

Mohammed feels himself floating upwards as if from the depths of the sea to the light on the surface. He opens his eyes and looks around. The early sun is casting shadows in his room. He tries to move but feels a sharp pain in his right leg. He puts his hand down to feel it and then remembers, the leg only reaches to the knee, there is nothing beyond although he can feel his foot and toes.

Six months later when he is back at University the terrifying experience sits with him always as though

replacing the limb that he's lost. It has had a lasting effect on him both physically and mentally. But he becomes a Marine Biologist. At the interview for his first job in that field he was asked why he had chosen that subject.

He smiled and replied, 'I have a need to understand the deep.'

THE LEFT-SIDED SANDAL

I didn't recognise it when I first saw it lying in the gutter. A stray dog was trying to eat the strap and as I shooed it away I realised it was a sandal caked in mud lying in a pile of debris. It was about a size six, belonging originally to an eight year old I guessed. I was tempted to pick it up and examine it but it was so dirty that I decided to leave it. But for some reason it kept on playing on my mind. Who did it belong to and why was it left in the gutter, and more strangely where was the other sandal?

I then forgot all about it for a few days until one evening when I was at home with my daughter.

'Dad!' she said, 'something strange happened at school today. A small boy came to class with no shoes on! He said that he'd been running to catch a bus that morning and his sandal came off as he was getting on. He asked the conductor to stop the bus but he wouldn't and told the boy go back and find it later. In class the teacher asked him where his shoes were. The boy explained to his teacher: 'I didn't have time to go back and so I came to school. I couldn't wear one sandal so I walked bare foot.'

'Come and see me at the end of school today,' the teacher said to him, impatiently.

As my daughter recounted the story, It made me

think of my own school days and the many times I was kept behind for detentions.

I suppose I was a difficult child, perhaps because I was the middle one. I was always in trouble with my teachers and I probably spent as much time out in the hall as I did in the classroom.

‘Leave the class this instant!’ was a frequent command, at which point I would sheepishly get up to a sea of grins and make my way outside to stand in the corridor.

I remember that this was not a safe place either. Every day the Head would take a stroll along the corridors and if he encountered a student, they would be ‘invited’ to his office.

This happened to me on many occasions. I don’t remember the quota but after a certain number of visits it invariably lead to a caning, usually six of the best across the backside. Then I was free to return to my class, a lot sorer but no less enlightened.

‘Have you seen the head?’ was the opening question I was greeted with when I returned to class. If the answer was yes, I was allowed to go back to my seat.

‘Sit down if you can,’ the teacher would say, unable to hide his smugness. This was followed by a torrent of giggles from my so-called classmates and then the unforgettable command, ‘now and open your books to page 200.’

For some reason it seemed to always be page 200,

a requisite perhaps.

My problem was that I liked talking at the wrong moments. To me those were just the times I felt my most loquacious. I was naturally inquisitive and when the teacher would raise a subject but not explain it in detail, up went my hand,

‘Please Teacher,’ I would begin...

‘Not you again! Are you incapable of sitting and listening Nelson?’

And the fact was, I wasn’t. I had to know what the teacher was talking about all the time. School was a mixture of fun and pain in equal measure for me. But where was I? Yes, that’s right, I was telling you about the left sandal.

The following day, after some inquiring of her own, my daughter found out that the boy came from a very poor home. His mother couldn’t afford to buy him any new shoes after the incident on the bus, and after a thorough telling off, she decided to keep him off school.

A few days later, my daughter, waiting patiently for the familiar sound of the lock to signal my return from work, was standing by the front door with a distinctly mature and concerned look on her face. Before I could place my case on the floor, she had taken my hand and was leading me to the kitchen.

‘I have something important to ask you Dad,’ she said gravely.

‘You know that boy I told you about who hasn’t

any shoes, well I've been thinking, I want to buy him a new pair. I've saved up some money.'

I was taken aback, not only because I hadn't realised how much this story had affected her but also because it revealed a window into her young soul.

'That's very kind of you, but are you sure you want to do that?'

'Yes! We have been reading about helping people less fortunate than ourselves and I thought of him. But I just don't know how to do it?'

'What's his name?' I asked her.

'It's Billy.'

'Let me think about it and I'll speak to you tomorrow,' I reassured her.

That afternoon I rang the head teacher of the school and arranged to meet her. I left work early the next day and drove over to the school.

'Come in!' called a female voice. I entered a room that was bright, carpeted with bookshelves from floor to ceiling on both walls and a big picture window at the end through which I could see children playing in a field. I found myself standing in front of a tall slim attractive middle-aged lady who introduced herself as Miss Jelani.

'Please sit down, and tell me how can I help. You mentioned something about a pair of shoes?'

I recounted the story of the lost sandal and my daughter's offer to replace them from her own

pocket money. The Head listened intently.

‘It’s a very generous offer and I’m sure you are very proud of your daughter, but I don’t think she should have to pay the cost of the new shoes. I understand too your reluctance to go to Billy’s home, it would seem too much like charity and might embarrass them.’

‘So what do you suggest?’ I asked.

‘Leave it with me and I’ll speak to his class teacher to see if we can come up with a solution.’

A few days later I was invited back to the teacher’s office.

‘We have had an idea. We’ll run a treasure hunt as an extra item on our summer open day and ask all the children to hunt in bare feet, that way Billy can take part.’

The day came and those who were in the know were delighted to see Billy arrive with his Mother to take part in the hunt. Each child had a set of instructions. This way we would ensure that the instructions would lead Billy straight to the treasure just at the right moment.

‘Ready! Steady! Go!’ I watched them as they disappeared excitedly.

I thought about poverty and the devastating effect it had upon people’s lives. My own parents came to

this country with very little at a time when there was no welfare or family support. They worked in the market selling anything that they could get hold of and gradually saved up some money to rent a shop. By the time I was born, we were no longer poor but still had to budget and save if we wanted anything special. School was free as was lunch and morning milk. As I sat musing about my past, I saw Billy running back into the playground with a silver paper covered box held high above his head.

‘I’ve found it, I’ve found it,’ he shouted with delight. He handed it to the teacher and stood by her side until the others arrived back panting. The prize giving followed and at the end, the teacher gave a short speech and called upon Billy to receive his prize. His face was brimming over with a broad smile as he came forwards. Everyone was clapping and chanting his name.

‘Open it! Open it!’ Shouted the children as they pushed forwards to see what it was. Billy tore open the box to reveal a pair of brand new leather shoes, size six. With eyes opened wide, he rushed off the stage and into his mother’s arms.

UPWARDLY MOBILE

I was glancing at the Sunday paper over breakfast when my eye caught a photograph of a familiar face. I was sure it was him. I reread the caption:

Kenyan UK High Commissioner accused of embezzlement of two Million Kenyan shillings while in the employment of the Ministry of Education. Deportation order sought by Kenya Government.

I sat stunned and incredulous. How could it have happened? It couldn't be the same man?

I then recalled the last time we had met. I was standing on the white marble steps outside the Kenyan Embassy in London having rung the bell. I heard some footsteps and then the big carved oak door swung open. A tall, uniformed attendant asked me my business and I was ushered into a large tiled reception room, reminiscent of the huge hall at my University, a remainder of that period of the British Empire when no cost was spared to build magnificent edifices for Government offices, Banks and Universities. Tall marble columns and glistening white floor tiles decorated this otherwise simple space. The walls were adorned with over life-size portraits of Kenya's presidents, Kenyatta, Moi and Kibaki, together with smaller portraits of the Foreign Ministers. A mosaic centrepiece depicting the

Kenyan symbols of shield, spears and the black red and green flag completed the floor design.

I was directed to an elaborately carved mahogany settee covered with images of elephants, lions and giraffes. I became conscious of the pomp and ceremony for which this space had been created. I was to see an important man and it was necessary for the trappings reflect this.

I sat thinking about the man, the Kenyan Ambassador to the Court of St James and mused about his life and how a man from such humble beginnings had achieved this position.

I first met him on the streets of Mombasa. He was raggedly thin with his clothes hanging on him. He was wearing old flip-flops which he had repaired with strapping but which still flapped as he walked. He looked at me with large round eyes with his right hand outstretched. His attitude was familiar to me and I knew what he wanted. So many young boys roam the streets and sleep rough. Like them, he survived by stealing, picking pockets, begging and rummaging in rubbish bins for food.

'What's your name?' I asked, realizing that by that very question I had accepted some responsibility for his existence and survival.

'Napoleon!' he replied in a quiet voice.

'That's a great name', I said amazed that anyone would have chosen such a name for a son. What a

standard to live up to. It all seemed out of place as we stood talking by the side of a rough country road in Kenya. As he spoke, I looked more closely at him. He was about about 17 years old, painfully thin with close-cropped hair. He was wearing a torn T-shirt with the faded words 'Hakuna Matata' which means 'No problem' in Swahili. It was at one and the same time absurd and inspiring.

'I need an ID,' he said and then the whole story emerged.

Like so many boys who roamed the city and outskirts, he was born up country in a small village to an unmarried mother who had died when he was very young.

He never knew his father and had been brought up by an aunt, who then died after which he joined a large family, most of whom he never knew and who never wanted to know him.

He left home when he was eight years old, realizing that he was on his own and that no one cared about him. He drifted into the city where he knew there were more jobs but he had no skills. He was limited to labouring and with that came exploitation. He slept rough and moved from one group of boys to another. He had no formal education, and though he could speak Swahili, he was innumerate and illiterate. He told me he was in fact 18 years old and that the law required that he had an ID, and

that cost a lot of money. Officially it costs about 1500 Kenyan shillings, but in practice bribing was always required and he had no money do this.

He and boys and young men like him are always in danger of being picked up by the police and put in prison. He had already had one episode of this and told me about it.

‘It was terrible. I was in a small room, with eight other boys and men. The toilet was a bucket, which was emptied every morning. We slept on the floor on some rough carpeting. The food was very poor, some thin Uguli and water’.

He said that he was in that prison for three weeks and that by the time he came out he was so weak he could hardly walk. He was then befriended by two men who abused him sexually, fed him and gave him cover at night.

‘Can you help me because I need the money to get me an ID, this will help me get a job and earn some money and become independent?’

I thought for a moment, then realized that I could well afford the money without even thinking about it but I had a nagging doubt that if I was to give it to him, he would not buy an ID but would go and buy drinks with friends until they were all drunk, and the money used up.

I always feel guilty when I take this negative view of life. But experience has taught me that people often behave stupidly and are their own worst enemies. If I went with him to be government office, they would expect more than twice as much money from me than from him. The alternative was to send him with my partner Ester. She would be able to negotiate as an African and not allow the authorities to exploit her or him.

The next time I saw him he had visibly changed. Gone were the tattered clothes. Instead, he was wearing well-pressed trousers and a white shirt. I hardly recognized him but he stopped and greeted me.

‘You look wonderful,’ I exclaimed. ‘What are you doing now?’ I asked.

‘I am working in the Pension office as an office boy, running errands. It is not well paid but I am saving a little.’

‘What happened about school, did you finish your studies?’

‘An uncle of mine died,’ I didn’t know him,’ but he left me some money for my education.’

‘What are your plans,’ I asked with some hesitation, as I knew that it was so difficult to make plans in a country where nepotism and favouritism were so rife.

‘I want to go into politics,’ he said without hesitation.

‘That’s not easy,’ I said. ‘But good luck.’ And then we parted.

I didn’t think of him again for many years until I was again visiting Kenya and his name appeared in the newspaper I was reading.

The Right Honorable Mr Wachira was opening a new school in Kisumu and there was a picture of him, now a bit plumper and looking very important. He was attached to the Ministry of education.

I tried to contact him but my phone calls were not returned although the receptionist assured me that she would give my message to his secretary. After several attempts I gave up. I had learned that political people promise to do things but often fail for one reason or another.

I returned to the UK and continued with my life. Then I read that he had been appointed High Commissioner to the Court of St James. I was excited to realise that he was in London not far from where I now lived. I phoned several times and eventually after explaining that I wanted to speak to him, I was put through. He immediately recognized my voice and seemed pleased that I had contacted him

‘Come and see me at the Embassy tomorrow,’ he said, ‘I am looking forward to renewing our old friendship.’

It was thus that I found myself waiting to see him.

A far door opened and a young woman dressed in a dark blue suit beckoned me in. I was ushered into his office. It was an enormous room with a large picture window opening onto a well-maintained garden with a pond and a fountain. It exuded peace and calm. The walls were lined with bookcases and in the centre of one wall was an old fireplace with a marble surround. My eye was drawn to a shining object on the mantle piece. It was a golden cast of a child's pair of shoes. Mr Wachira came forwards greeting me warmly and kissing me on both cheeks. He hadn't changed, a little fuller and greying at the temples, but with the same old charming smile. He was wearing a Saville Row suit with hand made shoes and an Old Etonian tie.

'It's wonderful to see you again. It's has been a long time since we first met on the streets of Mombasa,' he reminded me.

'I have been very fortunate but how are you my friend?' He asked.

I told him how I had returned to the UK got my Law degree and had just retired from my own firm.

Then pointing to the mantelpiece he said, 'I see you have noticed the golden shoes.'

'Yes! I said,' 'what are they?'

‘They are to remind me of the time when I had no shoes,’ he whispered lowering his head. ‘Those days are never far from my thoughts.’

And then putting his arm around my shoulder and looking towards the garden, he said wistfully, ‘and I am sadly still the same man inside, always looking for a quick buck.’

I didn’t understand at the time what he meant but the next day, as I sat reading the newspaper, I realised that despite the position, his wealth and authority, he will still be that same scared boy forever dodging trouble and getting into scrapes.

THE LAST TIME

A fine rosary of bright red drops appeared as the scalpel lightly stroked the dark brown skin. The wound sprang open, revealing a thin pale layer of fat. Another stroke and a gleaming muscle covered with gossamer-thin tissue became visible. The surgeon paused. He was not at ease. Ever since he had lost a child on the table he had lost confidence and faith in his judgment. Although he knew it wasn't his fault, he was plagued with the thought that he was getting too old to perform surgeries. He was conscious of a tightening in his chest and difficulty breathing. He took a deep breath in.

I'm ok, it won't happen again, he told himself, resisting the desire to check with the anaesthetist and ask if the boy was all right.

He was aware of his own hands shaking, the sweat beading on his forehead. With a deep breath and great effort to get himself under control, he turned to a nurse who, without asking, patted his head with a sterile pad. He called upon his reserves of discipline and training that he had gained over the many years he had spent in the operating room and returned to the task in front of him. He identified the shallow valley between the two muscles and gently eased them apart revealing the bone, which emerged like whitened stone. It was fragmented and splintered but his trained eye could see that

enough was intact to stabilise and repair it. He could save the arm. It came again - that feeling, that doubting, and then - panic. He wanted to run away. He looked down at the still form under the blue covering sheet and recalled the other boy's face again. He remembered his expression when they had brought him in, pain-wracked and fearful. He recalled too the feeling he had always had up until that day when he could swing into action and examine and reassure his patients.

He was a handsome boy, adventurous as most of them were. The surgeon replayed in his mind the incoherent story that had tumbled from the boy's lips in a sort of apologetic expiation of the mess he had got into and the problems he was causing everybody. He had told the surgeon that he had woken up early that morning to a bright sunny sky and, as he had bounded out of his kibanda a thought grabbed him, one that had been nagging him ever since he had seen the huge, dead Baobab tree high up on the hillside. It had once been a glorious tree with wide branches heavily laden with foliage, full of birds, their musical chorus filling the air. Now it was dead, killed by a lightning strike so that its white trunk and branches resembled a naked body with multiple arms stretched upwards to the skies. It was an invitation to be climbed to an adventurous boy. It was a fascinating and, at the same time, fearful challenge but on this day, the

boy couldn't resist it. He wanted to climb the tree and more than anything, to sit on the topmost branch and survey the world. He knew his mother wouldn't approve but he had smothered his conscience, promising himself that he would be very careful. Dressing quickly he slipped out of the house without disturbing the rest of the sleeping household. By the time he reached the tree he was puffing and sweating. He paused for breath and looked up. It seemed taller and bigger than he remembered and he felt again the irresistible desire to climb it and at the same time he was scared.

'I told myself I'd be all right,' he said to the surgeon, a single tear trickling down his cheek. 'I thought I would show them,' he choked. The surgeon listened with compassion as the story unfolded, understanding the boy's need to tell it. It transpired the other boys always teased him about his small size, making him feel like he was a coward. They all seemed to him to have fathers who came to collect them from school but he had to go home with anyone who was going his way because his mother worked. He could hardly remember his father who had disappeared when he was only four but he had vague memories of a deep voice and a kind face, of playing ball with him, and holding his hand when they went walking together. He had never known why he had left. His mother wouldn't talk about it, or answer his

questions. The boy's voice choked up again as he stumbled over his words, and the surgeon took his hand.

He had planned his route, the boy told the surgeon, beginning on one of the lower wide branches and then selecting each one as he ascended. It wasn't as hard as he had thought it would be and he was soon high up in the tree from where he had a wide view of the surrounding countryside. He could see his home and the mud track, empty of traffic and beyond, the sea, and the white-fringed waves pounding the beach.

'I shouted out loud, I've done it,' the boy sobbed. I thought to myself: I'll tell them all at school tomorrow and they'll all want to hear all the details and I will be a hero and so I shouted again. It's me! I'm here! I've done it!

The surgeon waited until the sobs had subsided and asked him what happened next.

'I let go to hold up my arms and shout out to the sky and I slipped. I grabbed at the branch but I heard a cracking sound and then I felt the branch bend. Then it broke completely and I went crashing down. I tried to reach out for another but I kept on falling, striking against branches that broke as I landed on them, scratching my face and hands. Then I saw the ground rushing towards me . . . and

I can't remember any more. I don't know how I got here. I'm frightened.'

'You're safe now,' the surgeon told him in a calming, matter-of-fact voice, 'and I'm going to fix you up. Some people found you, and carried you home and your mother brought you here. You've hurt yourself falling out of that tree but I'm going to operate now and fix the damage. You don't need to worry anymore.'

The boy's face relaxed and looked trustingly at the surgeon as he was wheeled away for theatre preparation. In his mind he saw that look of trust and it swept over him once more. 'Their lives in our hands,' he reflected again, as he had often done before. He looked up from his musings and saw the waiting staff with questioning looks on their faces. He nodded at them and braced himself to continue, forcing his mind to control his hands - those neat, deft fingers which had dealt with so many problems, so many injuries. Could they still serve him? Was age removing their agility, their fine-tuned ability to perform he wondered.

He carefully removed some bone fragments, aligned the two bone ends until they could interlock, and then gently, very gently, bent them to the right angle, which released the soft tissues and locked the bones together. As he straightened the limb, the

fracture fell into position. He took a deep breath, realizing he had been holding it. Forcing his hands to hold the fracture firmly in place, his assistant secured it with a plate and eight screws while the attending nurse again wiped the sweat from his brow.

‘Close up now and apply a padded splint,’ he said unemotionally to his assistant. He nodded his acknowledgement and thanks to the scrub nurse and the anaesthetist and turned to leave the operating room.

‘What’s wrong with the old man?’ the anaesthetist asked the assistant surgeon watching him neatly closing the wound. ‘He seemed nervous.’

‘Yeah, he wasn’t at ease, that’s for sure,’ the assistant commented as he finished off with a padded splint. ‘And he was very distracted at one time. Remember how long he paused? Do you think he’s getting too old for this?’

The head nurse looked on disapprovingly at this banter, particularly as it concerned a senior surgeon. ‘The doctor has a fine record in this hospital,’ she said sternly, ‘I hope you will all do as well when you’re his age.’

‘I hope when I’m his age I’ll know when it’s time to take a bow and get off the stage,’ was the crisp reply.

The head nurse sniffed, her posture indicating her disapproval. The young scrub nurse was silent as she went about her work of cleaning and tidying up, but her eyes met that of the assistant surgeon and he knew she privately agreed with him. A surgeon who gets jittery could be a disaster, and they didn't want another one, even if no blame could actually be laid in any particular quarter for what had happened to the boy.

Sitting in the office, the surgeon reflected on the operation he had just performed. Thank God I got through it O.K. He silently said, although he had no belief in a benevolent deity, or any kind of deity for that matter. He silently acknowledged the fact that he had worked himself up into a state of anxiety, a bad thing for one in his profession. He could never have forgiven himself if anything had gone wrong or if he had in any way performed the tiniest bit lower than his own exemplary standards. That hadn't happened and he comforted himself. But it might have. That boy trusted me, he thought to himself. I should have gone when I was sixty-five he acknowledged.

He had made enough money for a comfortable retirement, the children were grown up and secure but it was his pride that hadn't let him leave. I'm as good as ever, I can keep on going for a while yet he'd tell his colleagues - but slowly, insidiously, it

had become more difficult. He had begun to sleep badly, particularly after a stressful day when he had gone beyond tiredness and couldn't unwind and he had begun to drink more frequently. It began as just a gin and tonic to relax in the evenings when he got home, too tired almost to eat. Then it became two, and then somehow it got to the stage where some evenings he was so drunk he could hardly stagger to his bed. He knew now it was wrong to go on. He looked up as the anaesthetist came into the room. 'The boy is fine, we've finished and he's just waking up.' The surgeon looked at the face of his old friend and he knew that the other man knew.

'Thanks very much' he told him, 'I'm still a little anxious after that case that went wrong.'

'I know,' said his colleague coming over and putting his hand on the surgeon's shoulder. 'It won't be long now until you can retire,' he said reassuringly.

'No, my old friend, it's over. It's finished,' he replied wearily but definitively. He stood up, straightened his shoulders in a gesture of pride and walked out of the operating theatre for the last time.

SEVENTEEN HOURS

Vincent was the chief Officer on late watch that day in the engine room when the accident occurred. He was the youngest of four children brought up on Lamu, a small Kenyan Island, a six-hour ferry ride from Mombasa the main port of Kenya. He had gone to school on the mainland and then returned to the island to help his father who was a fisherman. He soon became known for his skills in repairing all sorts of damaged items ranging from TVs and toasters to more complicated mechanical items. From a young age he had made it known that he wanted to be a naval engineer and his community had raised enough money to send him to the technical college in Nairobi. He then got a job as an engineer in the Kenyan Merchant Navy and was soon promoted to Chief Engineer.

All was calm in the engine room when Vincent finished and Edward took over. He went on deck to enjoy the fresh air before going back to his cabin. Relaxed, sitting on the railing, he began to dream about Sheila, her green eyes and soft skin so lovely to touch. Lonely for her, he longed to feel her warmth. He was trying to work out when they would be together again, when he heard a bird shriek loudly. With a start, he took his hands off the railings and looked up. Before he knew what had

happened he felt himself falling then hitting the water and cascading down through the blue green water. Struggling to stop his further descent, he kicked out, regained his balance and swam to the surface gasping for air unable to understand what had happened. He looked around and with disbelieving eyes saw his ship sailing away.

They will throw me a ring he thought. I'll be OK. But they didn't. No one was peering over the side; no one was calling out his name. He bellowed for help but his voice was immediately smothered by the wind. This must be a dream, he thought. I'll wake up, but it seemed too real, he could feel the wetness of the water and hear the drumming of the ship's engine. A voice inside reassured him: it will be all right, they will come back for you, stay calm and wait, it won't be long. Soon a lifeboat will appear, stay calm, swim very slowly not moving away from here, tread water; it's not too cold. Someone on board must have seen you fall and sounded the alarm.

He saw the sun descending slowly on the horizon in a fiery sunset reflecting red rays onto the crests of the breaking waves. The light was fading fast. With his ship almost out of sight, a chill of fear went through him. My God, he thought, what if they don't come back? On board his absence wasn't noticed immediately. Vincent would be on his way to his cabin and for all they knew, he would be asleep. It

wasn't until breakfast the following morning that anyone noticed.

'Where is Vince? He's not usually late for breakfast,' one of his fellow engineers asked. No one had seen him. Soon they realized that something must have happened to him and a search began. He was not in his cabin or in the engine room.

'Where else could he be?' the staff Officer asked with alarm. An emergency meeting with the captain provoked a full ship search. Every nook and cranny was checked. After about four hours, the search was called off. He couldn't be found. The alarm was sounded, 'Man over board.'

Looking at his watch, Vincent noticed that only one hour had passed since he had fallen overboard, it seemed like much longer. He was swimming with short strokes trying to conserve his energy. They will come soon. Be patient and hold on. But his true plight had not yet sunk in. So far he had managed to avoid the prospect that he wouldn't be found and that eventually he would give up and drown. That was not how he saw it. Even after hours in the ocean, he still hung on to that glimmer of hope. He swam slowly, the sea was calm and he was able to float and rest for minutes at a time.

There was a full moon that night so he was not in

complete darkness. He felt that this was a good omen and it buoyed him up. But he was thirsty, his mouth was dry and tacky, his skin was itching and some areas were painful. He did his best not to drink the sea water; he knew it would only make him thirstier. Meanwhile his trusted watch was still running, ticking away the minutes and hours of his life. By the eighth hour he was racked by doubts. What if they don't come, how will anyone find me here? I'm doomed, he thought. As time dragged on he was gripped by a cold fear in his belly that caused him to shake and shiver.

I'm going to die here alone in the middle of the ocean. At that moment a wave hit him and he swallowed a mouth full of seawater, he spluttered and gulped for air. He managed to spit out most of the acrid salty water but panic was overwhelming him and he called out, 'Oh God help me, please help me.' The only reply was the whistling of the wind and the breaking swell lifting and dropping him. He felt he was in a nightmare from which he could not escape, he saw himself staring into death alone and helpless. Terror engulfed him making him to gasp for breath and gulp more seawater making him retch and vomit. His eyes were stinging from the salt and his vision blurred as his eyelids swelled. His watch had stopped.

Soon he couldn't see. He was now aware that his

movements were more sluggish, his arms felt heavy and stiff. I can't go on, I have had enough, I will stop moving and just sink into the arms of the sea. I have had it. I have had it. I can't go on. Please let me die, he pleaded. He tried to die, tried very hard to die, letting himself slip deeper into the water, into the womb of the ocean but as his lungs began to strain for breath, he fought desperately against the desire to swim upwards but he couldn't, and with his lungs bursting he breached the surface, time and again.

The trawler Adventure had set out from Cochin harbour, on the West Coast of India in the early hours towards the fishing ground. It was a calm night and the crew was confident of a good catch. The plan was to cast the nets, trawl for two miles and then pull them in. By 5 am the nets were stored, the hold was full and they were homeward bound. Fernandez was taking first watch. Scanning the calm water through his binoculars, he saw something move. It was far away and at first he disregarded it. Sweeping the sea a second time, he stopped and concentrated on a small dark object about 300 meters away. It's only a piece of wood he thought but then he saw a movement. He wondered what it could be but then a white thin object like a human arm rose up.

'What on earth is that?' He called out to his no

2.

'Come and have a look at this, what do you think it is?' he said pointing to the object. His mate peered through his glasses and shouted,

'I think it's a body, I'm sure it's moving, It can't be alive surely, not out here?'

Vincent was now in no state to help himself. He had been drinking sea water to quench his terrible thirst. His mouth was caked and stiff, his lips hardly able to move, his limbs were swollen and his skin, paper thin, blotchy and blistered. He was barely conscious, and didn't hear the sound of the motorboat as it neared him, nor did he hear the startled voices of the men as they hauled him aboard.

'God, look at him, he looks like a fish bloated in the sun.'

Vincent was near death; the sea water had sucked out his body fluids leaving areas of raw flesh. His face was burnt, his eyes shrunken with the lids hollowed out, his scalp was bright red, scorched by the mixture of salt and sun and his limbs swollen beyond recognition. His hands were like paddles, the skin taut and broken in places from puffiness. Gently he was hauled aboard and laid on a soft blanket in the shade.

'Careful, don't grab him too hard, his skin is very weak, you'll tear it,' the captain advised.

'He needs water quick,' said another man. Water was slowly dripped into his mouth causing him to gag at first but then he began to swallow allowing the cool liquid to ease his thirst. Vincent tried to open his eyes but couldn't, the lids were glued together.

'Get the First Aid box,' shouted the captain. Slowly he began to regain consciousness hearing voices and realizing that he was no longer in the sea. He felt someone putting something on his eyelids and gradually and painfully he opened them. He saw a face peering down at him, kind eyes, reassuring eyes,

'It's OK, you're safe, just rest and we will get you ashore as soon as possible.'

'Where am I? He asked, 'who are you?'

'We are a fishing boat returning after a catch, we saw you moving in the water.'

'Thank you, thank you I don't know how...' His eyes closed and he slipped into unconsciousness.

By the time the fishing boat had arrived at Cochin City dockside, a large crowd had gathered. The news of his remarkable survival had been announced on radio and TV. He was a hero and hundreds of people wanted to see this extraordinary survivor. Vincent was vaguely aware

of the voices of the crowds as he was transferred to an ambulance and taken to hospital.

Later he would describe his survival as an act of God and his story flashed around the world's media. He had become a celebrity. On returning to his home he was feted as a hero. Approaching the island he felt a lump in his throat, tears welling up in his eyes, he could hardly believe what he was seeing. The islanders were assembled on the pier carrying large banners that read: Welcome home Vince Our hero, and another, Vince we love you. He was so moved by this, he waved and the people cheered back. A visitor to the island was amazed at this display and not knowing what it was for asked a local man standing near him.

'Don't you know? He is a living miracle, he was alone lost out at sea for 17 hours.'

For Vincent, that was not the end. He began to question why he was saved. He would wake up in the early hours bathed in sweat, with the question going round and round in his head. At first he ignored it assuming it was normal, after all, as he said to himself, it was an amazing escape. But his mind didn't let it rest there. He began to relive the experience, dreaming that he was drowning and waking up spluttering and gasping for air. One night while he was having a drink in a local taverna, a friend who hadn't seen him for some while came

over and began to thump his back, repeating it over and over again,

'What a miracle, what an amazing miracle, how did you survive? You are remarkable.' Vincent listened for a while and then unable to stand it any more, got to his feet and shouted to the room.

'No, I am not remarkable. I am just an ordinary man who survived an extraordinary event. Anyone of you would have done the same. Please stop calling me remarkable, I can't stand it,' and he began to shake and sob. His friends crowded round patting him on the back, reassuring him. Finally a voice in his ear whispered,

'Why don't you go and see the priest, he may be able to help you?'

As soon as he could Vincent made his way to the church and went to confession. Speaking through the shuttered window he poured out his story to the priest who listened patiently.

'My son, I wondered how long it would take you to come and see me.' Whispered the priest.

'I don't understand, why do you say that?'

'You have had a most extreme experience which has tested you to your limit. You are asking yourself why you were saved and of course no one

really knows the answer but what we do know is that some force chose you to live out your time on earth and not perish in the ocean.

'Yes Seignior, I understand, so what should I do?

'You have been given back your life as if a gift so you must use that gift to help others.'

It was just after four in the morning when Father Vincent was on his ward round. He was checking on his many young patients when he saw Jimmy sitting up in bed. Walking on tiptoe over to him he sat down by his bed and waited. The boy turned and looked at him, his eyes still heavy with sleep.

'Father,' he said, 'what did you do before you came to look after us?'

Vincent paused before answering, would this boy understand what he had been through, probably not he thought.

'I was at sea when something terrible happened to me which changed my life. It made me decide that I should spend the rest of my life helping others.'

'What happened to you?' asked the boy.

'I,' Vincent paused searching for the right word, 'I had a meeting with a stranger, someone I got to know very well. He opened my eyes and I saw for the first time. I saw that what I was doing was not

enough. He made me realise that I had a job to do and he showed me what that job was.' Jimmy had nodded off before Vincent had finished speaking. Kissing him lightly on the forehead, Vincent continued with his round.

MARTIN NELSON

was born in London in 1932. During the Second War he was evacuated to Bermuda and returned in 1945.

. After a career as an Orthopaedic Surgeon he returned to college to gain a BA in Fine Art and an MA in sculpture. He began writing in the years after retirement following courses at NEC, Arvon and the Open University.

His wife Diana died in 2005

They have a daughter Sarah and a son Paul and 4 grandchildren.

He has published 2 e-books of poems covering a wide range of human emotions and experiences.

