

Purple Love

A Love Story

By

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This moving story traces the life of a widower as he rebuilds his life with a new family beset with problems. It describes the tensions, which develop between mothers and daughters as they live out their lives. It is set in Israel, America and England.

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This book is dedicated to my African Family,
Celina, Erick, Andrew and Sean

David, retired lawyer, mid sixties, made his way out of Ben Gurion airport to pick up his rental car. His plan was to drive north. He'd booked the rental on the Internet in London, a process that turned out to be much easier than he expected. Having found the correct details, he viewed them with considerable trepidation, as he was by no means confident that he would get what he wanted. He checked the details several times confirming that he had booked a small automatic before he clicked 'send' and printed out the details.

His arrival at Ben Gurion airport felt very different from his first visit some ten years earlier with his family. Then life felt like an adventure; he was enjoying the opportunities of his profession, the exciting places he visited, the memorable things he did and the unforgettable people he met. It had all been so exciting and memorable that he had promised himself that one day he would return and revisit some of the places that had left an indelible impression on him. But this was nothing like his memory.

He felt alone, naked and vulnerable. There was no one to share his joys, no one to stop him making a fool of himself, no one to ease his doubts and fears. He was still emerging from the depths of despair following the death of his wife after nearly forty years of marriage, and was by no means

healed. So why had he chosen to come back to a place that held such powerful memories.

A friend of long standing hearing about his tragedy had invited him to visit Istanbul for a few days. When he went to book the flight to Istanbul, the Turkish travel agent had mentioned in the general discussion that the flight went onto Israel. On an impulse David booked the round trip. Although the opportunity had come about by chance, it seemed at the time too good an opportunity to miss.

On his arrival at Istanbul airport, David immediately recognised the tall dark impressive looking young man who was waiting for him at the barrier and they hugged. He had met Arkadas some years earlier at a men's bonding weekend, the Mankind Project, and they had developed an immediate rapport. Despite the time that had elapsed, it was as if they were picking up where they left off. A short journey took them to a basic hotel not far from the city centre. The owner, a big friendly man who knew Arkadas well greeted them. David's room was up a short stairway, it was basic but clean and adequate. He unpacked his few things and joined the two men in the reception room, which doubled as the dining room and the lounge. It was bright and airy and had a fine view over a small garden. Arkadas had to return to work leaving David to entertain himself. After a light meal he went for a walk. The hotel was in a busy part of

town and soon David found himself in a shopping centre, where smells and sounds intermingled.

The following morning after breakfast he was surprised to be told that two young women were waiting for him. He came down to greet them. They were local University students who belonged to a volunteer programme, which provided escorts for visitors to the city. Their names were Camille and Nadine. Camille was blonde with blue eyes and had a soft-spoken English accent whereas Nadine was dark and looked Asian. They introduced themselves and explained why they were there. They would meet him every morning after breakfast, escort him to the main landmarks and places of interest and leave him in the evening when Arkadas who had finished the day's work would join him. David was excited by the prospect of the company of the two young women and of experiencing a previously unknown culture.

Istanbul was all that he had expected. Situated at the crossroads between Asia and Europe it had fused the cultures of these two great continents into its own. The great dynasty of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk had merged with the modern West. As they walked the busy streets they bumped into people of all colours and creeds, mini skirted girls shared the pavements with the women wearing the hijab. They heard the sounds from the great mosques intermingled with pop music blaring from the music bazaars.

After a four-day whirlwind trip including a trip on the Bosphorus, David continued onto Israel. His plan was to drive north, stay at Caesarea and visit the ruins before going on and revisiting Hotel Nof Ginosar on the North side of the Sea of Galilee, a place that held precious memories for him. Having collected his luggage he followed the signs to the Car hire office. It was small and crowded with people trying to collect their cars. He stood listening to the voices some calm and patient others shrill and irritated. Eventually it was his turn. Handing the copied Internet form to the assistant he waited expectantly. Without looking up, the assistant barked, 'no auto's left, you'll have to have a stick.' Unfamiliar with the word David looked surprised; the man repeated what he had said. Unnerved by his brusqueness David asked,

'Do you mean gears?' Without waiting for a reply, David shrugged his shoulders and said OK. He was directed to the car. With the help of a small map, he drove out of the airport and joined the main freeway to the north following the signs to Haifa until he reached the crossroad to Caesarea. He turned towards the sea and soon saw the outline of the Hotel Dan Caesarea. Parking the car he entered a high ceilinged atrium and approach the reception desk. A young woman confirmed his booking and he was shown to a single room with a circular mirror, which was placed in such a way as

to make the room appear larger and brighter. The room overlooked a patio and the sea.

As soon as he could he asked for some information about old Caesarea. He learned that it was built by Herod the Great 25-13 BC and was named Caesarea Maritime serving as the main port to the province of Judea. In 22 BCE, Herod began construction of a deep-sea harbour storerooms, he then added a market, wide roads, baths, temples to Rome and Augustus, and imposing public buildings. Every five years the city hosted major sports competitions, gladiatorial games, and theatrical productions in its theatre overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

After dinner and in the silence that descended David walked down to the abandoned Coliseum and Theatre, much of which still remained. Standing alone in the warm Mediterranean breeze, he tried to imagine the noise and excitement of the crowds watching the chariots racing around the track at breakneck speed concealed in clouds of dust; the sudden screams of delight mingled with horror as one or more chariots interlocked wheels and went careering out of control; the hapless drivers being thrown out and crushed beneath the wheels of the remaining chariots. Now almost two millennia later it was a tourist site with young couples sauntering arm in arm through the ancient ruins.

After a welcomed rest, David proceeded on to Hadera then he cut East towards Afula and Tiberius beyond. He knew the road well although now it was a two-lane highway traversing the country, much improved since he was last there. Also new was a Motorway linking Jerusalem to the north. When he arrived at the crossroads he, thinking he was taking the road to Afula, mistook the turning and managed to take the wrong road. To his horror he found himself on the Motorway going south. The small map was of no use now; he had no choice but to continue driving south not knowing whether there would be an opportunity to retrace his steps. Fortunately after about 20 kms, there was a slip road, which enabled him to come off the Motorway, cross over and return north. The whole experience left him anxious and frustrated.

Afula was a small town with one central main road when he was last there but now it had become a significant small city. Finding his way out of Afula was quiet tricky and he took several wrong turnings until he found the main road out. He had travelled a further twenty kilometres when a sign to Safed appeared on his left. He recalled how interesting the town had been and on an impulse took the turning and pointed his small Fiat towards the city centre. Perched on the top of a hill, it was the highest city in Israel, 900 metres above sea level and could be seen from the road to the Galilee.

Since the sixteenth century, it, together with Jerusalem, Hebron and Tiberias has been recognised as one of the four holy cities of Israel. Since the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews it had become a centre of Kabbalah learning. During the War of Independence in 1948, the town came under siege from the Muslim Arabs. Two hundred Arab Liberation soldiers had tried to occupy the city's Jewish centre but had been repelled by Haganah men and women fighters, together with members of a Palmach platoon, both illegal forces of freedom fighters.

A second sign to Safed suddenly appeared and following it, David took the winding spiralling road climbing steadily for about 30 minutes. Reaching a plateau, he followed a further sign to Safed. After a short drive, he arrived at a public car park near a local school and parked his car. He switched off the engine and turned to the passenger seat but with a jolt. There was no one there. For a moment he felt almost sick, wondering what he was doing there? Why had he tried to retrace the past when he knew it wasn't possible? What had he hoped to discover in himself? So much had happened since he had last been there. Taking some deep breaths, he felt the thumping in his chest slowly subside. Getting out of the car, he locked the door and was about to walk away when a sudden thought crossed his mind. Would he find the car again? He had misplaced cars before and

he recalled how alarming it was. Looking around he saw some boys lurking near the school entrance and approached them. Only one, about 14 years old, a dark swarthy young man wearing a bright red T-shirt spoke a smattering of English and after some confused exchanges, David learned that the school was called Peace School. The others looked on making remarks in Hebrew that he couldn't understand.

David was very conscious of their appearance, the boys in Jeans and T-shirts could have been living in another time. They seemed to be from a parallel world with their I- phones and mobiles, technology which he struggled to understand. He thought again about the car and looked around trying to memorise the surroundings, the houses and shops repeating any English names that he could read. Finally he wrote down the name, Peace School, Jerusalem Street on a piece of paper and tucked it into his pocket.

Satisfied that he could now find the car again, he set off up the nearest set of steps, large flat stones cemented together with gaps in which weeds were growing. They were arranged in blocks of ten followed by a level platform presumably to allow the walker to rest. Breathless, after six flights, he reached a bustling road with a narrow pavement packed side by side with shops and cafes. It was the main bazaar street that led to the old city. He turned onto it and walked in the shady side until he

had reached a stone arch, which announced the Old City. He stopped suddenly fearful that he may not find the car and pulling the piece of paper out of his pocket reread the name Peace School, Jerusalem Street, confirming where the car was.

Now feeling calmer and more confident, he carried on to the old city reaching the Art Colony. Continuing on, he heard a tapping and looking up saw what appeared to be an open-air studio. He could see two men working on a metal structure. David stopped and waved to one of the men who gestured that he should come up and see what was being made. Before doing so, the man opened a door nearby which led David into an air conditioned studio where he was met by the older man who introduced himself as one of Israel's leading sculptors. The studio was laid out with many bronze figures, some quite small and delicately worked. The subjects were very varied and David admired many of them. Then he was invited to come up to the outside studio. Climbing some low stone steps, he reached the raised area where the sculptor explained he was preparing a piece of metal sculpture for an exhibition, Although the work was in its early stages, a large armature of steel was covered with chicken wire, it was already possible to visualise the final work, a rabbi blowing a shofar. It would consist of two parts to be joined together later and then covered in fiberglass and resin. A rubber mould would then be made from which,

using the lost wax method; the final bronze work would emerge as the older man explained in excellent English. He was obviously very successful because making bronzes at a casting workshop was a very expensive process.

The sculptor had two sons, one a sailor and the other the younger, was working with him. David took the opportunity of showing them some of his own work from a small photograph album. He had studied Art after retirement and was especially interested in sculpture. They exchanged contact details, he signed his name in the visitor's book and after thanking them profusely bid them farewell.

Walking on, David was still puzzling at his impulse to visit Safed. The town was on the way to Nof Ginosar where he was planning to stay for the next few days so maybe, he thought, he was trying to recapture the visit he had made many years earlier with his late wife. All that remains are the memory of highlights becoming increasingly blurred with time, he mused.

He recalled the colony from his last visit but it had changed. Then the buildings were dilapidated with many half fallen and unoccupied. Now the area had a new look with well-stocked small shops, private homes and cafe's. It was now much more commercial. He stopped to look at some paintings and sculptures most of which had a religious theme depicting Christ and the Madonna. Passing a pastry shop, he was reminded that it was lunchtime by the

overwhelming smell of freshly baked bread so he decided to stop and eat. He entered, savouring the piles of bread, rolls, pizzas and cakes laid out on the counter.

The owner a rotund smiling woman greeted him, 'Boker Tov' (Good Morning) and stretched out both hands to show him the wide array of breads and pastries that she had on sale. He selected a pizza and a sweet bun and together with a bottle of water retired to a nearby small park. He settled himself on a wooden bench with a view overlooking the distant hills and for a while was lost in the reverie of the moment totally unaware of the play that was about to unfold and occupy his every thought and action. Time was moving on and as he was beginning to feel tired, he decided to make his way back to the car and continue onto Nof Ginosar where he was staying for the night.

'Can you please direct me to the Peace school on Jerusalem Street,' he asked a likely passer by.

'Never heard of it,' the man replied in perfect English.

'It's a school on Jerusalem Road.' David insisted.

'Jerusalem road passes all around the town, which part of the street do you want?' Frustrated he began to realise that the address he had was insufficient to find the car park. David asked several other people on the way but got the

same reply. No one seemed to know where the car park was. Then things began to go from bad to worse and a feeling of dread began to fill him as he strolled aimlessly uncertain in which direction to go.

Suppose I don't find it? The town has some good hotels so if the worse came to the worst he could stay overnight and try again in the morning. What am I to do? He thought, walking along deserted alleys and descending flights of steps. He was getting desperate. He recalled moments in his younger days when he had felt almost paralyzed with doubt unable to decide what course to take. He wanted to ask for help from the police but no police car or officer appeared. In desperation, David finally stopped at a small shop selling artefacts and spoke to the shopkeeper. A native Israeli, he spoke good English and was very helpful. Although he didn't know the address, he pointed to a waiting taxi nearby and suggested that David should take the taxi and ride around until he found his car. At first David thought the idea ridiculous but he slowly realised that it was probably his only chance of finding the car. Reluctantly he approached the taxi driver who happily also spoke some English and showed him the piece of paper with the address of the school on it. He explained that he had left his car in the car park nearby.

'Jerusalem Street goes all around the city, which part do you want?' asked the driver, impatiently.

'I don't know,' replied David in frustration.

'I don't know any Peace school either. All right get in and we'll look for it,' the driver added.

They set off planning to travel the full length of Jerusalem Street hoping that David would recognise the school and see the car. They had circled the whole town and were beginning to return to the start without success, when the driver stopped and asked a taxi driver friend who was waiting for a fare.

'You mean Peis School,' the man announced, 'Yes, I know it, it's just along the street,' and within ten minutes the taxi had stopped outside the school and David recognized the car. He felt enormous relief and thanked the driver giving him an extra big tip. Leaving the town, David drove back down the spiralling road and rejoined the main northern route. Within a half an hour he would reach Lake Kinneret. He was aware of feeling something very special about approaching the lake with its history of Jesus teaching by the lakeside and the miracle of his walking on water. The road climbed steadily and then began a slow left hand bend. As he descended he could see the lake laid out before him. The long oval sheet of still blue water surrounded by fertile fields, a place of such significance, it was an unforgettable sight.

The road descended skirting the southern side of the lake until the bustling town of Tiberias was reached, the old settlement named after the

Emperor Tiberius. Seeped in history, the road passed stone figures, small roadside wells and many other notable artefacts, then into the town bustling with activity. Beyond, the road curved around the far end of the lake as it approached the kibbutz of Nof Ginosar set in a lush valley with many banana trees. The entrance to the Hotel was situated just before a garage on the right. There was no sign and he would have missed it but at the last moment he recognized it from his previous visit and turned into the drive, which led to a large car park. It was almost empty; most guests were visiting other parts he presumed. He parked the car near the main building.

It had changed a great deal since he was last there. A large modern two-storey building comprising a reception and dining room had now replaced the old building. Accommodation was in several individual two-storey buildings to the right reached through well-attended gardens and lawns. He was received warmly by the receptionist a young woman from Gaza and was lead to his room on the second floor. It had a large picture window with an unbroken view of the lake. Feeling tired, he showered and rested on the bed and was soon fast asleep. He awoke just as the sun was setting and gazed at the lake as the last beams of light reflected on the still water gradually fading to be replaced by twinkling lights from the hotels and restaurants on the far side.

Dinner was served on the upper floor of the reception building. By the time he had arrived it was bustling with people. It was a buffet and as he approached the soup counter he could hear many different languages being spoken. There was certain intensity about a buffet, he observed. Everyone was focussing on the food and judging how much to pile on their plates. Some behaved as if it was their last meal. David noticed that certain nationalities took the whole thing much more leisurely than others. Some, used to a smorgasbord came back several times taking small portions only. Others piled their plates as high as they could.

He was quite hungry and enjoyed a wide range of starters before choosing his main dish, fried fish from the lake. He spotted an Israeli dry white wine and had a small glass of the chilled liquid. Sitting at ease with the world, his thoughts were interrupted by a young American female voice.

'We saw that you were on your own and wondered if you would like to join us,' she said pointing to a table occupied by about six young people.

He turned and several smiled at him.

'Yes, that's really very kind of you, I would love to join you.'

He learned that they were part of an American University group in Israel to undertake excavation of a site in the Golan Heights. That evening he

joined them for a lecture from one of their teachers about the archaeological history of the region, which he found fascinating. The whole experience was quite refreshing and buoyed his spirits up no end. After the talk they all sat in the reception area. He found himself sitting next to a blond blue-eyed young woman, a typical fresher. She was rather quiet and sat listening to the others chatting happily. He decided to ask her about her college course and the trip that they were on. She turned to him and with tears in her eyes confided that she almost didn't come.

'Why was that?' David asked unprepared for the answer that she gave.

'My mother died two weeks ago,' she whispered, 'and I was in two minds whether to come but my friends persuaded me and I am pleased that I listened.'

'Would you like to talk about her?' David asked. She paused and then said,

'We were very close, Mum and I, almost like sisters. Mum was so gentle and kind and we had so much in common. She was too young to die,' she said struggling with the words, 'I miss her so much. When I was at college we would talk every day. I so miss those conversations. We didn't say anything really important but she was a great listener and made me feel that I could talk to her about anything.'

'What happened?' David asked.

'It was cancer, too far gone by the time she had any complaint so the doctors could do very little.'

'What about your father?'

'Mum and Dad had separated and he had a girl friend, we didn't get on very well.'

Suddenly the young woman whose name he never learnt got up and said,

'It's been fun talking to you. I think I'll hit the sack, we've got an early start in the morning,' and with that she was gone. David sat for a while deeply touched by the young woman's story. She was very courageous to have continued with the trip despite her loss.

He thought about his own mother. After her divorce, she had remarried. Sadly her second husband had died and she was on her own. She used to go to the Canary Islands for about three months each year, in order to get away from the British winter. She had a small flat in Las Palmas. He still carried the guilt of not seeing her often enough and in particular during the last year of her life. He had lived in a northern English town two hundred miles away from London and had used that as an excuse. She had been on holiday abroad and had just returned and was looking forwards to her granddaughter's wedding. During the week he had spoken to her and she had mentioned that she was suffering from what she called indigestion. He had suggested that she saw

the doctor but she didn't want to, saying that it would go away. A few days later as he was driving south for the wedding, he had heard of her death. She had been found slumped over her breakfast having died at the table where she sitting.

His thoughts returned to the young woman feeling uplifted by her strength. Finally he got up, said goodbye to the others, wished them good digging and went to his room. It was a clear night with an almost full moon when he left the main building. He walked between the flowerbeds down to the water's edge and stood listening to the lapping of the waves and the music drifting from the town. It was very peaceful and he remained there for a few minutes breathing in the scene and trying to capture it in his mind before retiring.

Although very tired, the sounds of the noisy plumbing and the occasional shouts from guests arriving late prevented David from sleeping. He lay staring at the ceiling trying to decide why he was there. He finally fell asleep before finding the answer. The bright light streaming into his room through the open shutters wakened him and he tried again to recall what he was thinking about during the night. No matter how hard he struggled, he couldn't. After showering and dressing, he stepped outside and stood for a while on the lawn.

The sky was clear apart from a few wisps of cloud and there was a cool breeze coming off the lake. He scanned its wide expanse before going down to the water's edge. It was still and grey in the early morning light and he tried to imagine what it would have been like 2000 year ago when Jesus was said to have preached to crowds of people by these very same waters. But his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a flock of pied kingfishers swooping and twittering in the nearby trees.

He stood for a moment before entering the dining room, feeling slightly self-conscious. He was aware of the clatter of plates and the aroma of burnt toast. Finding an empty table he sat down and was preparing to approach the food counter when his thoughts were interrupted by a cheery "Good morning" spoken in a slight American accent. He turned and saw a slim, smartly dressed woman in her early fifties, wearing a neat khaki trouser suit and open toe sandals seated at a nearby table. He returned her greeting and added after a moment,

'What brings you to these parts? May I join you?'

'Yes, of course, it would be nice to have some company, I have been travelling alone.' She replied. So began a friendship between two complete strangers in a dining room over-looking the Sea of Galilee. Although alone, the woman showed no shyness, smiling openly and conversing

easily. He learned that her name was Rebeka and that she was from New York. He was immediately taken with her calm confident manner.

Conversation flowed easily as she explained that she had attended a conference in Jerusalem.

'It's my first time in Israel and I had some time before returning home. I have a driver who is showing me around.' As she spoke he admired her unblemished clear complexion and noticed she wore minimal make up. She had deep brown eyes, which smiled as she spoke. There were shallow wrinkles around her mouth. The conversation turned to her husband whom she said had died of cancer only a few weeks earlier. She had nursed him through a long illness, watching him transform from a vigorous strong active man to a shell, with his clothes hanging on him and towards the end unable to stand. In his last days, she was hardly able to look at him. She felt deeply ashamed, she confessed, that she had failed him in his moment of greatest need. She paused as she recalled her feelings. Feelings she was willing to share with complete stranger, feelings, which she had kept secret from her closest friends and family.

He watched her as she spoke, her face contorting in pain as she struggled to fight back her tears. He listened, conscious that she needed to unburden her thoughts without interruption. Like her, he had gone through a similar experience but many years earlier and knew how long it took to

forgive, something she was yet to do. She told him about her plans to visit some of the sites in the area before returning to New York and her work.

'What work do you do?' He asked.

'I'm a freelance designer working for a number of Haute Couture houses in the States,' she said softly, pronouncing the words in a southern drawl.

'What about you?'

'Oh, I'm retired, I live a life of pleasure and indulgence.' He smiled.

'What did you do to be able to live like that?'

'I was a Solicitor, what you would call a lawyer. I was lucky, I went into property before the property boom so I was able to save a small nest egg on which I live.'

'Lucky you, most people I know lost money on property,'

The two sat in a comfortable silence and then David, taking courage into his hands and feeling less tongue-tied than usual asked if he could see her again.

She smiled, 'I don't usually see men who I don't know but,' and she paused,

'OK! Let me give you my New York telephone no and if you are ever passing by ring me.'

They parted company the following day, she to continue her exploration of the north while he continued on his journey south. The next stop on

his itinerary was Jerusalem. There was something, which drew him back to Jerusalem every few years. The western wall had an almost mythical appeal to him. Driving south on the Route 6 Motorway, he recalled the many times he had visited the holy city. But he never tired of returning to it. This time it would be during Hanukkah, the festival of the lights.

The hotel was full gaily lit with festive lights. The main foyer was crowded with families milling around greeting each other. He felt alone and conspicuous as if he should have a family but didn't. He checked in and was shown to his room on the fourth floor. It had an unbroken view of the old city with King David gate visible to his right. The sun was just setting over the city shining on the golden dome of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Dinner was served in the grand Dining room a huge room bedecked with chandeliers and long ornate curtains. He was shown to a table by the wall where he was able to view the proceedings. After the prayers, there was a free for all. Hordes of guests descended on the sumptuous buffet with the children leading the way. David immediately thought of a cloud of locusts stripping a field. He decided he must join the melee before all the food had gone but as he was about to go to the buffet, replenishments arrived and he sat back and waited until the storm had passed. One or two people wished him a happy holiday but otherwise he was

alone with his thoughts. Breakfast was similar to dinner but he knew now not to rush and to wait.

The visit to the wall was as emotional as he expected. He made his way across the park in the direction of David's Citadel, a journey of about twenty minutes. He recognised the familiar building as he entered King David's Gate, beyond was the souk. Walking down the long winding cobbled path between the market shops, he was greeted by shopkeepers inviting him to taste their wares or buy their goods. Every possible item was on sale from large beautifully worked carpets to small exquisite copper jugs. Hurrying on he reached the bend in the path and then turning left he walked into the open air. Before him was the large esplanade beyond which was the wall. He could feel the excitement building.

Already there were the familiar men in black praying at the wall, swaying back and forwards said to represent the movement of the camel on which they were travelling and praying. As he approached the wall someone handed him a paper cap, which he donned mechanically. Now at the wall he extended both arms and stretched upwards touching the cold rough surface. He closed his eyes and for a moment was transported to an earlier time. How long he remained there he did not know? He suddenly felt a tug at his arm and turned to look into the face of a young boy with his hand outstretched. David found a shekel and gave it to him. The rest of his stay in Israel seemed to pass

like a dream and before he knew it he was back in London.

It was a very different David who returned to the UK. Now there was a spring in his step, he smiled and said hello to strangers. Gone were the sad memories of the past. Now he was excited by the new world that had opened up. His meeting with Rebeka had restored his confidence and although she slipped further and further from his mind the confidence his meeting with her created remained. He fell back into his regular routine, weekly visits to the National Library, visits to the museums and the occasional theatre play.

One morning, he was reading a travel brochure that had dropped through his post box. He saw an advert for a trip to the Galilee. It immediately reminded him of his trip to Israel and he suddenly thought about Rebeka. What an extraordinary meeting it was? Why had he let it slip out of his mind? On an impulse he looked up her address. Why don't I visit her he thought? A trip to New York would be fun and if nothing came of it so what, nothing ventured ...

Ten days later he was sitting in the window seat of a Jumbo jet somewhere over the Atlantic admiring the cotton wool clouds drifting leisurely below. He had a momentary twinge of fear at the thought that this enormous machine depended on so many small bits to function and if one failed. No,

I mustn't go there, he thought. At that moment a pretty air hostess drifted by smiling at him. They must be trained to spot the doubting passenger and reassure them, he decided.

As usual the time seemed to fly and before he had a chance to recollect his thoughts and question what he was doing, he was standing with the other passengers easing his hand luggage out of the overhead locker, heeding the warning that things may slip and fall. The line of passengers began to move out of the plane in what seemed to him to be in an unnecessary haste. They all knew that there were several hurdles to jump before they would be free to meet their loved ones or find their cars, so why rush? He found himself caught up in the seeming frenzy and rushed along with the crowd pulling his hand luggage behind him across the bumpy aluminium strips on the floor.

The first hurdle was passport control. Long lines of passengers greeted him when he entered the large hanger-like hall, moving slowly towards the checkpoints. He joined what seemed to be the shortest but there was a hold up and he watched frustrated as his neighbours moved ahead in their line, secretly wondering whether a smile of glee would appear on their otherwise grim faces. Most people were just tired and wanted to get through as fast as possible. At last he was at the front of the line. The young female officer looked up and he advanced towards her brandishing his passport. As

a UK passport holder he did not require a visa but had to answer a number of questions about his visit. Should he tell her that he was visiting a female acquaintance he had met only once in Israel?

'Good morning Sir,' she asked politely, 'what is the purpose of your visit to the United States?' pronouncing the word States very clearly.

He had prepared his answer,

'I'm a world traveller and haven't been here for many years and just wanted to visit.'

'Where are you planning to go?' she asked staring vacantly at her monitor.

'I am staying in New York and then will decide what I will do.'

'Do you have any family or friends?'

He hesitated and decided that it could do no harm and in any case it was the truth.

'I am visiting a lady friend here in New York.'

'Oh, I see, have you known her long?'

'Look,' he said emphasizing the words, 'I think your questions are getting too personal. I've told you why I am here, isn't that enough, I don't like being grilled as if a criminal,' and stupidly he added, 'are you jealous?'

The officer ignored his remark and repeated the question without looking up.

David stood speechless. 'I've had enough, no more questions,' he snapped.

At that moment he heard a bell ring from within the desk and within a moment two Airport police arrived. One Officer pointing to David asked,

'Is this the man who is refusing to answer simple questions and is being offensive?' She replied,

'Yes, please take him away and find out the purpose of his visit.' She paused and ignoring him said, 'next?' David suddenly realised his predicament and grovelled.

'Look, there has been a mistake. I'm sorry if I have been rude. Please let me answer your questions.'

By this time people in the line behind him were getting angry. One shouted,

'Stop being such an ass, answer the officer's questions and we can all get home.'

David turned to the speaker and whispered,

'Look I'm sorry, you're right, I'm being stupid.'

'OK, then get on with it, answer the woman's questions, she isn't playing games you know.'

David turned to the Officer,

'I am visiting an acquaintance; I have only known her for a short while. We met in Israel and she invited me to contact her if I ever got to New York.'

'Then, why didn't you say that in the first place and we could have avoided all this nonsense.' Scowling, she stamped his passport and he walked through.

Standing at the carousel waiting for his luggage, David felt drained. He had done it again, made a bloody fool of himself. What was it about authority that riled him? Why did he react so badly in these situations? It wasn't as if it was the first time. He remembered a time at Heathrow, when he was late for a flight. A woman assistant wanted to check his papers again but he didn't want to stop.

'I have had them checked already and I have a boarding card,' he bellowed.

Calmly she repeated the question, 'May I see it please sir.'

David saw red and leaned forwards to read the name on her badge. Unbeknown to him that movement constituted an assault in law. She immediately blew her whistle shouting, 'assault.' In seconds he was surrounded by two burly armed police officers.

'There's been a mistake,' he whimpered, 'I'm late for my flight. Here is my boarding card. I meant no harm, I was panicking.'

'All right sir,' said the largest of the officers towering over him.

'We'll let you off this time but be warned, we won't be so lenient if it happens again, Sir.'

'Thank you, thank you,' David whimpered.

A large black trunk went by on the carousel with a red and blue strap around it. David recognised it immediately and chased after it as it

circled away from him. Catching up with it, he nudged some people aside and dragged it onto his trolley. Now for Customs, I must keep my mouth shut. Looking around he saw the familiar red and green signs and made for the green exit. No one initially appeared to be on duty as he walked through. Suddenly a uniformed officer appeared. David said good morning but the officer didn't reply. Although he had nothing illegal in his luggage, David had that sinking feeling. No matter how often he went through customs, that feeling of guilt remained. He had almost reached the exit when he heard that dreaded sound,

'Sir, just a moment, could I have a word?'

David stopped, with a feeling of nausea and turned,

'Over here sir,' said the officer pointing to a low desk. 'Just put your luggage on here please.'

David retraced his steps and on reaching the desk he lifted his two cases onto it. He stood waiting as if for the executioner's axe.

'Um,' the Officer began, 'I hear you had a bit of a rumpus at passport control. What was that all about?'

'Nothing really, I was tired and irritable, it had been a long flight.'

'You know what I am going to ask you?'

'Yes, have I anything to declare?'

'Exactly, have you read this declaration?' he said, handing David a card,'

'Yes, and the answer is No.'

'Good, thank you Sir, have a good stay,'

With that, he walked away leaving David flummoxed.

It was just after 8 am New York time when Rebeka's telephone rang.

'Hello who is that?' She asked sleepily.

'Hi, it's me David, you remember, we met in Israel some while ago.' She paused; who on earth can this be, so early in the morning and then she remembered, it must be that man I met at breakfast in Israel. I'd forgotten all about him.

His voice continued,

'We were staying at Nof Ginosar near Lake Kinneret, we exchanged details and I said I would ring you if I ever got to New York. Well I'm here. Can we meet? When are you free? I'm staying at the Pioneer Hotel on 3rd Avenue.'

'Yes, I remember, you have caught me by surprise; it's a bit early for me. Give me your cell number and I'll ring you in an hour or so.'

David looked at his watch, 8 am. Oh dear, I didn't realise it was so early, no wonder she wasn't up. I've made a fool of myself again, he thought. Not certain when she would ring he decided to go down for breakfast. Not being very hungry, he ordered the continental breakfast forgetting that in America even a continental might be too much. It included several varieties of cheese, cold meats

and a selection of fruit as well as the usual croissant, breads, cakes, marmalade, jams and coffee. Half way through the meal his mobile rang. He pressed the green button and heard her voice.

'Hello, is that you David? This is Rebeka.' He began to answer and then nothing. He was tongue-tied unable to speak. This had happened many times before to the point where he had come to hate the telephone. After a few seconds she repeated,

'Hello, is that you David, are you all right?' A gurgling sound came from his throat and then a cough and his voice returned, strained and rather high pitched.

'Yes it's me, thanks for ringing back. How are you?'

'Fine, just fine. It's a nice surprise to hear from you after all this time.'

'Yes, I was thinking about you and on a whim came to New York. Could we... meet?'

'Um, I um, don't know,' she hesitated. David continued,

'I would love to meet you, we could have some fun.' You could show me your New York,' his voice had now returned to normal.

'OK let's meet for lunch at MoMa. D'you know it?'

'Yes.' He replied.

'There are several places to eat at the Museum. Let's meet in the Cafe 2 restaurant. I

think it is on the second floor. You will need a ticket to get in but then I am sure you would want to look around the galleries anyway.'

'Good, that sounds fine. I am looking forward to it. What time?'

'Say 12.30, how would that suit you?'

'Perfect, see you then,' and she rang off.

David checked his watch. It was 9.30. That's good; I'll have a few hours to wander around the museum before I meet her. He was a devotee of Jacob Epstein, an American born sculptor who made his name in England. I'll look up his work when I get there, he decided.

It was still raining when David left the hotel to hail a taxi. He stood under the umbrella of the doorman until a yellow cab drew up and he got in.

'Where to?' the driver barked in a rich Brooklyn accent.

'Um, the Museum of Modern Art please.'

'You mean MoMa. We call it that here y' know, your first visit?' He asked.

'No, no, I have been here several times before, I love the city.'

They drove through the splashing rain with the cab bouncing about all over the place.

'It's the potholes,' the driver said turning to look at him, 'the city never gets round to repairing them. They're terrible for the cab. The tyres get damaged and the shocks need replacing every

year.' I am not surprised the way you are driving, David thought but said nothing. They soon arrived at the museum. The cab stopped.

'Here we are. That'll be \$20.' the driver said. David thought that was a bit steep but was pleased to get out and under cover and paid up willingly. He entered the large auditorium with its high ceiling supported by simple round columns. He had read a little about the museum and its origin in 1928 supported by the Rockefeller family. It had then opened in 1929 at 730 Fifth Avenue initially in three rooms and a further three had been added over the next ten years. In 1937 it moved into its present space in the Rockefeller Center. In 1997, the Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi won the competition to redesign the museum and it reopened in 2004.

The hall was filled with eager visitors including a large group of Japanese who were assembled in one corner of the open plan space. They sounded like a large flock of birds in flight. Near them he saw the sign to Cafe 2 on the second floor and made a mental note to get there on time. He then went to the desk and waited behind a number of visitors who like himself wanted some information.

'Excuse me, could you please help me?' he asked a young Afro-American assistant. 'I would like to see the Jacob Epstein Rock drill and any other Epstein works please.' She reached down

and took out a program and began to leaf through it.

'We have a 1962 bronze cast of the 1913-14 original, is that what you wanted to see?'

'Yes, that would be great.'

'It's in the sculpture collection on the third floor. You can take the elevator.'

David found the floor and began walking through the galleries until he saw it. He had seen the Rock drill reconstruction made in 1973 based on Epstein's original drawings at the Tate Gallery. He stood in front of a large photograph of it admiring its construction consisting of a plaster torso set upon a real rock drill. Subsequently bronze casts of the torso only were made and it was one of these, which was on show. He stood in front of it for some time reading the biography of Jacob Epstein. Born on the east side of New York in 1880 to German emigrants, he made his first trip to Paris when twenty years old. There he met and was influenced by the great French sculptor Rodin. He then went to London in pursuit of a Scottish woman whom he later married and set up his studio there. His first major work, eighteen oversized figures on the front and side of the British Medical Association Building in the Strand caused a storm of protest. This was to be the response to much of his work throughout his life. It was this outspoken originality that drew David to him. The Rock drill was a

statement about the futility of war, at a time when the First World War was about to be declared.

David wandered around the other galleries stopping here and there as the whim took him. Suddenly he noticed it was 12.15. I don't want to be late he thought as he hurried to the cafe. It was a bright-lit room with wall-to-wall windows showing skyline views of New York. Along one side of the room was the food counter at which people were already standing and collecting their food on trays. He saw an empty table and made for it, repeatedly glancing at the door. Would he recognise her, he wondered, would she recognise him? He was sweating a little and felt anxious and uneasy. They had met under unusual circumstances and in a place far removed from where he was now.

He saw her first, standing at the entrance, uncertain, looking around. He knew it was her although she was dressed very differently and her hair was now short and curled. Impulsively he walked over to her and extended his hand.

'Hi, Rebeka I'm David, how are you? You haven't changed.' For a moment she was confused and blushed.

'Oh, David yes, I remember, you haven't changed,' and then she hesitated.

'You said that didn't you, how silly of me, I need a drink.'

'Look, I've got a table over there, go and sit there. What would you like?'

'I know it's early but a dry martini would be good.'

'A dry Martini coming up.'

David returned to the table carrying the two drinks and handed one to Rebeka.

'Cheers, lovely to see you after such a long time,' he said smiling.

'Cheers, thank you for contacting me, it's really great to meet you again.' she replied. They fell into a comfortable silence each studying the bubbles of gas rising in their glasses. Then she broke the silence,

'Have you seen anything of the collection, it's one of the best in the world?'

'Yes, I've just spent some time looking at the Epstein's. I came about an hour ago. It's a wonderful place, I've really enjoyed it but there's so much to see, I could be here a lifetime and not see it all

'I come here several times a year and try to concentrate on just a few artists gradually covering the collection but you're right it's a lifetime's task,' she added.

'Let's get some food, shall we?' David said, 'lead away and I'll watch what you do.'

Rebeka set off to the food counter. He followed.

Turning to him she asked,

'How hungry are you? Do you want a cooked meal? I prefer something light at lunch a salad, they have a wide selection to choose from.'

David watched as Rebeka selected a mixed salad with Tuna, some brown bread and a glass of fizzy water.

'Is that all you're having? I need a bit more than that,' he said and began to select some chicken with potatoes and salad. He chose a beer and collecting them, followed her to the cashier.

They were settling down to eat when she asked,

'What are your plans? How long are you staying?' David paused and looked at her. I don't know what to say he thought, I haven't made any plans as I didn't know how she would welcome me, and then he said,

'I guess it all depends on you. I didn't know whether you would remember me or whether you were still working.' Plucking up courage, he blurted out,

'I would like to spend some time getting to know you better. I don't have a fixed plan, what about you?' Rebeka paused and then smiled,

'I'm pretty free, I have a day's work and then I could take some time off. What had you in mind?'

'We could explore this great city of yours, I am sure there are places you haven't seen?'

'Many, that sounds exciting, let me think about it.'

They finished the meal in silence and then David asked,

'Have you time to look at some pictures? It would be a pity to be here and not see anything.'

'Let me see,' replied Rebeka checking her watch, 'I need to be home at about 5. My daughter promised to phone and I don't want to miss her. We don't speak that often.'

Rebeka thought about the last time she had seen her daughter Barbara now called Beri the name she had changed to during her teens. It had been a difficult time for both of them. At the time Rebeka was trying to hold her marriage together having found out that her husband was having an affair with one of her work mates. He had denied it fervently but she knew. Meanwhile Beri had moved out and was living with a most unlikely partner, a musician who was heavily into Hashish.

'Why, haven't you seen her recently?' asked David, looking at the MoMa programme.

'It's a long story, I really don't want to think about it now.' said Rebeka abruptly.

David noted her reply and said,

'I see there's a new exhibition of David Hockney, the British artist who lives here in the States. He returned to his roots in the North of England and has done a series of paintings of the Yorkshire countryside. It was a very successful exhibition in London and is now here.'

'That sounds interesting, I love landscapes.' she murmured.

She checked her watch again.

'I've about two hours. We could see the Hockney's if you like. Yes let's do that.' Rebeka repeated focusing on the present. They left the restaurant, David leading, and made their way to the elevator. Alighting at the third floor they followed the signs to the Hockney Exhibition. There were already a large number of people milling around the desk waiting to buy tickets.

'Two tickets for the Hockney please.' David said handing the assistant a twenty-dollar bill.

'Thank you, Sir; it's a timed entrance. You are due in, in half an hour. There are some seats over there,' she said pointing to her right. They sat down and David began reading the program. Rebeka meanwhile returned to thinking about her daughter. How am I going to avoid another row when we speak? What can we talk about that won't provoke a shouting match? Even the most innocent sounding question is interpreted as a criticism. She struggled with her thoughts. Suddenly David was pulling at her sleeve.

'We can go in now,' he whispered and she followed him into the first gallery. Rebeka was not prepared for what she was about to see. The sheer brilliance of the colours seeming to dance off the paintings dazzled her. The rich reds, oranges and greens battling with the blues took her breath away.

'Wow!' she cried holding David's arm.
'They're terrific, what an amazing artist, the colours are unreal.'

'Yes, he has a wonderful way with colours, they seem to glow and sparkle. Rebeka,' it was the first time he had used her name and he liked it, 'you're right; they are out of this world. They're so surprising because his native Yorkshire where he was born and brought up and where he painted these pictures is dull and grey usually with an overcast sky.'

'So where did these colours come from?'
Rebeka questioned with her eyes glowing.

'He says they are the colours of his youth, how he remembers the countryside with the blossom on the trees and the fields in full bloom. The critics are divided, some understanding what he is saying others think the work is artificial and pretentious. You take your choice.'

'Well for me, the colours are real and vibrant. They make me feel happy and joyful as if I want to dance. Thank you for choosing this gallery I would never have thought of going on my own.' Leaning over, she kissed him lightly on the cheek. He felt a warm glow and squeezed her hand.

Rebeka let herself into her apartment on the eighth floor with its panoramic view of the city. She had only just removed her coat when the telephone rang.

'Hello Mum.'

'Hello darling, how are you?'

'Fine Mum, fine.'

'What have you been doing?'

'The usual Mum, the usual.'

I see it is going to be another one of those tip-toe conversations Rebeka realised, so she tried to find a neutral subject.

'Anything exciting? How's the work going?'

Anything new to tell me?'

'No, just the usual.'

Rebeka paused and took a deep breath.

'When am I going to see you? You know your room is always ready for you.'

'I know Mum, I know.' Beri paused. 'You know how it is, I am not ready for that yet.'

'OK dear, I just want you to know I love you.'

Tears welled up and she coughed.

'Goodbye Mum, I will ring again soon," and the line went dead.

Rebeka put the receiver down. Hot tears coursed down her cheeks as her body was racked with emotion. I just don't know what to do. I feel so guilty but don't know how to deal with it. Was I such a bad mother? I only did what I thought was best. It's so hard to know when things are going wrong.

Beri let the receiver fall and sat staring out of the window.

'Who were you talking to?' asked Matt seeing how upset she was.

'Mum, I said I would ring her I hadn't spoken to her for a long time.'

'How did it go?'

'Terrible, I just clammed up and behaved like a child.'

'It's not your fault you know, she's treated you real bad.'

'I know, but do I have to wait until she is dead before I forgive her?' Beri said turning to Matt, her eyes brimming with tears. Matt put his arm around her shoulder and drew her to him kissing her lightly on her wet eyelids.

'Beri I love you very much you know and I hate to see you hurt.'

'I know, I know I love you too.'

David turned the key to his hotel room and entered. It was small and dark. Rooms in New York were more expensive than he thought so he had decided to stay at a very basic hotel. I wonder what is going to happen with Rebeka and me, he pondered. He knew what he wanted, to get to know her better. He didn't let his imagination go that far but did she have the same idea? He would have to wait to find out.

He unpacked his few belongings and took a shower. He had some difficulty working out the plumbing but eventually realised that the main tap

controlled all. He adjusted the temperature and stepped in. There was something very relaxing about a good shower so he stayed in it for over ten minutes enjoying the hot water on his back and shoulders. Having dried off, he lay down on the bed and was soon asleep.

He was walking along a beach. He could smell the sea air and feel the breeze on his face. He seemed to be alone when he spied a figure walking towards him. At first he couldn't make out who it was but as it came nearer he realised it was Rebeka. She was wearing a loose skirt and a bikini top. She didn't seem to recognise him. As they came side by side he said hello but his voice failed and no matter how hard he tried no sound would come out. She took no notice of him and continued on her way.

At that moment his telephone rang and he was suddenly awake. He was in his room with his mobile ringing impatiently.

'Hello, is that you David?'

'Hi Rebeka, I must have fallen asleep, are you OK?'

'Yes fine. I wondered, did you have any plans for this evening? If not would you like to come to my place for dinner?'

'Yes, yes that would very nice thank you. What time would you like me?'

'Seven for seven thirty, it will be very informal, see you then.'

David lay back in his bed. Wow! That was amazing. He checked his watch it was 5.30, an hour to prepare and then a taxi to her place. He looked in his diary to make sure he had her address, Flat 808, 3464 Park Heights, off 31st Street. What to wear? He opened the cupboard and surveyed the very few piece of clothing. He settled for a dark blue loose linen jacket and jeans. I'll need to take a bottle, I'll ring the concierge, I am sure he'll know where to get one.'

'Hello is that the concierge?'

'Yes Sir, George speaking, how may I help you?'

'I want to buy a bottle of wine for a friend. Is there a liquor store near the hotel?'

'Yes, not far, what did you want? I can get it for you.'

'A Chilean Merlot if possible?'

'How much do you want to spend?'

'I don't know, how much do you think it will be?'

'About fifteen dollars not more.'

'OK, that's fine. Please go ahead.'

'Leave it to me Sir, you can collect it on your way out.'

David was surprised by the offer and had accepted it before thinking. Can I trust him? Will he bump the price up? It's too late now, I've done it so I pay a bit more, so what, he decided. At half past six David left his room and took the elevator to the ground

floor. At the entrance he met George dressed in his finery.

'Good evening Sir, I have the wine for you. It was 13 dollars.' George said handing David the bottle, the receipt. David gave him fifteen dollars.

'Thank you very much George, there's something for yourself,' said David.

'Thank you Sir, can I get you a taxi?'

'Thank you.'

Five minutes later, David was on the way to Park Heights, 33rd Street. As they approached Rebeka's Address the driver asked,

'What No?'

'3464 please,' David replied.

Entering the building, David pressed 808 and waited. The intercom crackled,

'Come in David.' The front door latch opened with a click and he entered making sure the door closed after him. Entering the elevator he pressed eight and felt it climbing silently. It stopped at the eighth floor where Rebeka was waiting to welcome him. She was dressed in a simple three quarter length white cotton dress with a red waistband and was wearing a pearl necklace.

'You look beautiful,' he was overwhelmed by her appearance.

'Welcome David, please make yourself at home. Come and sit by the window. There is a panoramic view of the city.'

David sat down on the settee and looked out across the city with its millions of pinpoints of light outlining buildings and roads with twinkling spots. He could see the evening traffic struggling along the roads. Beyond were darkened hills edged by the lighter sky where stars were just beginning to appear.

'What would you like to drink? I have most things,' Rebeka smiled.

'A glass of red wine would be perfect,' and then remembering the bottle that he was carrying, handed it to her.

'Thank you, you shouldn't have. It wasn't necessary. I have some already opened. It's from the Napa valley, a Cabernet Sauvignon I think,' she said peering at the label. David took a sip.

'Delicious just what I needed,' he said turning and looking around the room. It was a large room containing little furniture, all in white; the walls were in pale blue. At one end was a well stocked bar and at the other a simulated gas fire with two settees. In the centre, a small table was laid for two beneath a glittering glass chandelier throwing the surrounding room into shade.

'Let me tell you what we're having for dinner, no! Perhaps I will let it be a surprise.'

They raised their glasses and toasted each other, 'cheers!'

'Come and sit down, the first course is cold. I hope you like it,' said Rebeka pointing to a chair.

'Do I recognise a Greek salad? It's one of my favourites,' David guessed.

'Full marks, I get all my fresh food from Greenwich village which is not far from here.' David was hungry and soon tucked into the salad, eating it all.

'I see your mummy taught you to eat everything on your plate,' Rebeka joked.

'As a matter of fact she did and we weren't allowed a desert if we didn't. Years later I realised how illogical that was. If I ate everything on the plate I usually didn't have room for anything else.' He said laughing. 'You will be pleased to know that we didn't insist the same for our children.'

'How many children do you have? Rebeka asked leaning forwards on her elbows.'

David felt excited by her nearness and found himself admiring her lips, full and kissable,' he decided.

'Three boys, they are all grown up and happily married I think, and I have 5 grandchildren.'

Rebeka thought for a moment and then collected the dishes.

'May I help?' David asked.

'No, I've got everything under control, just relax and enjoy the view,'

'I am doing just that looking at you', smiled David.

Rebeka blushed.

'You've made me blush. I haven't done that for years. You must have some sort of magic?'

'I do, I assure you,' he joked.

'Well, I must find out. I like it,' she added.

'Dinner won't be long,' Rebeka called out from the small kitchen, 'I'll just have to warm the potatoes.' She came back carrying two serving dishes and placed them on mats in the middle of the table. Then she returned carrying two dinner plates and put one in front of each of them.

'Be careful the plates are very hot, don't touch them,' she warned.

David thought the food looked delicious; pink grilled lamb cutlets, new potatoes with mint and broccoli in a light curry sauce. He admired the visual contrast, the pink meat edged with brown against the white potatoes and the green broccoli. It was a perfect food painting.

'Don't wait, it will get cold,' Rebeka said and he began to eat using his knife and fork. In contrast, she cut up some of her food and ate it with her fork. Both noticed the difference and laughed.

'Isn't it strange?' she commented, 'I wonder how the two different eating methods developed?' Neither had the answer. The final surprise was the dessert that Rebeka brought in on a silver platter. It was a flaming ice bombe, which they both tucked into.

'That was delicious,' David exclaimed.

'You're a very talented cook? Where did you learn?'

'Not from my mother I'm afraid. She wouldn't let me in the kitchen. After I was married, I went on a Cordon Bleu Course here in New York.' She paused,

'David, why don't you relax while I tidy up in the kitchen?'

'Come on let me help. I'm very domesticated you know.'

'No, it isn't necessary, I've got all the tools to help me.'

'OK, but let me stand by and talk to you while you are clearing up.'

David followed Rebeka into the kitchen and stood on the side while she loaded the dishwasher.

'Come David, let's sit by the fire. Would you like a liquor, Brandy or Port?'

'Port would be perfect,' he replied.

The warm glow of the fire reflected David's relaxed feeling as they settled down in front of the fireplace. I am having a great time he thought. I don't want it to stop. Sitting close together they watched the blue flames licking the artificial coal in the grate, both deep in thought. Breaking the silence, David offered Rebeka a penny for her thoughts. She said nothing for a while and then her face clouding over.

'I was thinking about my daughter, I wish we had a better relationship.'

'Do you want to talk about it? Said David, reaching out to hold her hand.

Rebeka squeezed his hand.

'I don't want to bore you with my problems, it isn't fair on you.'

'Let me be the judge of that. I'll soon let you know,' he replied with a smile

'OK, I guess it started with my grandparents. They were the old school. Grandpa was very stern and the whole house revolved around him. Grandma tiptoed to his every whim and we kids somehow got drawn into it. I was continually being told 'Shush, you are disturbing Grandpa,' whenever we were talking or playing. He never seemed to see us certainly never kissed or hugged us. I grew up always keeping my thoughts to myself. Even when someone was being unfair I said nothing. I began to believe that was how I should be. My mother and father never seemed to have time for us. Both worked so that my brother and I saw very little of them. I was never allowed in the kitchen so I grew up unable to do the simplest domestic chores.' She suddenly stopped and turning to look at him, cupped his face in her hands.'

'David am I boring you? Please tell me'

'No, my sweet, I am very interested, please go on.'

'Where was I? Oh yes, when Barbara was born I was over the moon, I so wanted a girl and I was blessed with one. But I found it very difficult. I had to learn everything from scratch. My own mother was a professional woman and as soon as she could she had handed me over to a nanny.'

After that I hardly ever saw her alone, she was always with other people. I felt very lonely and I think I was a very unhappy child. So I had no experience or role model of being a mother. Soon after Barbara was born I became depressed and had to give up breast-feeding. Barbara became a very fractious and difficult child. I wanted to ask for help but my husband was often working away and my parents were now living too far to help. I resorted to smacking to control Barbara. She responded by becoming sullen and withdrawn. I knew things weren't right but I didn't know what to do. By the time she was a teenager, I had lost any respect she may have had for me so as soon as she could she left. Over the years I have tried to rebuild the broken bridges but without success. I know we love each other but I don't know how to express it.'

David listened without saying a thing until she had stopped. His heart went out to her as she sat staring into the fire so alone and forlorn. He reached forwards and putting his hands on either side of her neck, gently massaged the tense muscles. He felt her relaxing. Finally after a while he said,

'I am sure you're right, you love each other very much but have lost the means to say it.'

'What can I do about it? She pleaded, 'I can't leave it like this, it's breaking my heart.'

'I can see that on your face, the pain that you are feeling must be heart-rending.'

'It is,' Rebeka replied, 'I have never had to face anything like this before. I feel so terribly helpless, so alone, not knowing which way to turn.'

'You're not alone, I want to help you,' David said.

'But how can you? We have only just met, you hardly know me.'

'Yes, that's true, but you don't need to know someone for a long time to feel their pain and share their suffering.' Then lowering his voice David said,

'Rebeka, may I ask you a very personal question?'

'Yes, of course and I will do my best to answer it.'

'Have you ever said you're sorry to Barbara, I mean Beri that's her name now isn't it?'

'I don't understand, it's not me who is being difficult, it's her.'

David sat holding her, he was conscious of the quicksand he was on.

'Sometimes in life we have to swallow our pride and see the other person's point of view.'

Rebeka sat up suddenly and turned towards him angrily,

'What are you saying? You want me to apologise to her and say I'm sorry, sorry for what?' She blurted out. 'I did everything for her, it's she who should apologise.' David paused and let her

hear her words sink in. Slowly and as if realizing it for the first time she seemed to have some sort of awareness.

'Are you saying that, I was in some way to blame for the present situation?' Rebeka exclaimed.

'Well, you did say that once you had got over the miracle of her birth, you began to resent her. She was difficult and demanding and you found yourself in an impossible situation.'

'I know but?' Rebeka interrupted impatiently. David continued,

'Everything was new and dare I say a bit frightening and you had to face it alone without the support that you should have had from your mother. Where was she in your hour of need?'

'My mother, leave her out of this. What's it got to do with her? David, I don't think I can do this; it's getting too painful. Do you mind if we leave it?' Rebeka pleaded.

'No, of course not, I hope you don't feel I was too clinical like a therapist, I didn't mean to make you unhappy,' replied David.

'Oh! David, please I know you didn't. You are very sweet and I know you wanted to help me. Perhaps I can try again another time.'

They sat each struggling to break the silence and lighten the mood. David spoke first.

'Look, I have an idea. You know I suggested that we take a trip. Let's do that and visit your

daughter on the way?' Rebeka sat not moving.
Then after a while, she touched his cheek.

'Can I think about it?' and then as if she had pressed a switch, her mood changed.

'I've got some great music what do you like?'
For the rest of the evening, they listened to her music, every variety from classical to jazz, soul to heavy metal, sometimes just listening, then other times getting up and dancing. The mood had lightened and for a while Rebeka forgot about her daughter and the silence between them.

'Gosh, look at the time,' Rebeka suddenly shouted, 'it's past midnight?'

'I must go, I'm sorry I've kept you up so late.'
David said. Rebeka paused and then said,

'Look it's very late, why don't you sleep in the spare bedroom. It was my husband's. I'll get you some pyjamas, that's if you wear them and you'll find soap, a new toothbrush and paste and shaving things. I haven't had the courage to remove them.'
Rebeka said blushing.

'Are you sure, I can easily get a taxi, you know?'

'No, I would like you to stay, I think I need someone to be here.'
David didn't understand what she meant but decided not to ask. He felt sure that he would learn the answer some time.

'I am making a hot chocolate drink, would you like one?'

'Yes please, that would be very welcome.'

David couldn't sleep; his mind was in a whirl with all that had happened that day. He tried to clear his thoughts by a trick he had used many times in the past. He imagined he was floating inside a large cigar shaped airship. He could see the metal ribs that maintained the shape but he just couldn't conjure up the imagery for long enough to clear his mind. One image that kept recurring was the face of Rebeka when she talked about her daughter. David carried his own guilt, his failure to see his mother frequently enough. He kept on making excuses until that fatal day when he heard that she was found dead at her breakfast table. He had repeatedly promised that he would go and see her in London where she lived after her second husband had died but always allowed others things to come in the way. Eventually he slept until being gently shaken by Rebeka,

'Good morning David, it's time to get up, it's getting late and I've got to go out. Breakfast is on the table in the kitchen, come through when you are ready.' David dressed quickly and joined her in the kitchen.

'Sorry I hope I haven't delayed you, I overslept I'm afraid,' he said.

'It's OK I've got about half an hour so eat your breakfast and we can go.'

Several days later David phoned Rebeka. Her line was engaged for some while and then cleared.

'Hi Rebeka, that was a long conversation you were having, I hope it was with someone interesting,' David asked secretly jealous.

'Hello David, no I'm afraid I had another one of those impossible exchanges with Beri. She makes me so angry. We're really just not communicating; I'm at my wit's end. One part of me says give up and accept that we will never be close again and the other shouts in my ear, no! She's my daughter; it must be possible for us to talk to each other. So many of my friends have wonderful relationships with their daughters. They speak every day and meet many times a week, what have I done to deserve this?'

David listened, he had heard to all before. After a pause he suggested they meet for lunch.

'What a nice idea,' Rebeka replied, 'there's a Deli in Greenwich Village called Stateline, it's in West Putnam Avenue. I've heard it's very good. I'll be ready about twelve.'

'OK I'll come round and we can go by taxi, see you later.'

The Deli was humming when they arrived, full of young business people getting out for a lunch break. A young woman wearing hot pants and a T-shirt with the word Harvard blazoned across the front served them.

'What are you studying?' Rebeka asked the girl when they were handed the menus.

'Mechanical engineering, I'm in my third year.'

'That's an unusual choice for a girl isn't it?'

'I guess so but my father's a plumber and I want to do better than him,' she smiled taking their order. Rebeka asked for smoked salmon on rye bread and David had salt beef on pumpernickel. They sat near the window watching the world go by. After a while David as if talking to himself said,

'I've been thinking about changing my hotel. My current one is very uncomfortable, so much noise at night and although I have AC it isn't very good.'

'Have you complained to the reception?'

'Yes and they sent up an engineer who fiddled for a while but it's no better.'

David and Rebeka had begun to see each other once or twice a week for a meal and visit to the theatre and found much in common. Rebeka found it helpful to confide in David. As she listened to David complaining about his hotel room, she struggled with an idea. She had a spare en-suite room, which was empty. She wondered if she could ask him to come and stay with her without giving him the wrong idea. Eventually she summoned up courage and blurted out,

'You could come and stay in my spare room; I could do with some company at this time. Please don't misunderstand...we could do our own thing meeting occasionally if you liked.' David turned to look at her.

'That's a lovely idea, of course I won't misunderstand,' he said.

It was several weeks later when Rebeka and David were invited out for dinner and he was dressing that Rebeka suddenly called him.

'David come here please.' He knew she was in the shower so he was puzzled. What could she want?

'Come please, I want to show you something,' she repeated.

'Can't it wait? I am just dressing and I don't want to keep you waiting.' he paused and then said,

'OK I'm coming.'

He went into the bathroom and as he stood near the shower, she pulled open the curtain and stood naked, the water still running off her. He was momentarily excited by her bareness.

'What is it Rebeka? Are you all right?'

'Feel this,' she replied putting her right hand on her left breast.

'What is it?' He questioned.

'Please feel it?'

'I don't understand.' he said with surprise.

'Please just do as I ask.'

'I don't understand,' he said shaking his head, 'what do you want me to do?'

'I want you to feel my left breast.'

'Why now? You can see I haven't finished dressing,' he repeated.

'Because?'

'Because what? Why are you being so secretive?'

'Please David, just do it for me,' she pleaded. David put his hand on her breast. It was cold and wet.

'What can you feel? She asked.

'Your breast of course.'

'Is that all? Can't you feel anything else? Just press a bit harder with the flat of your hand.' David pressed his hand against her left breast. Suddenly he stopped, he had felt something.

'I think I can feel a lump, I don't know what it is?'

'Keep feeling, is it hard?'

'Yes I think so?'

'Anything else?'

'It's not very big, I'm sure it's nothing,' he said trying to reassure her. Rebeka began to cry,

'I'm scared David, I think it's,' and she stopped. 'Oh God I don't believe this is happening.' David drew her to him.

'It's alright I am sure it's nothing, we'll see the doctor tomorrow, you'll see it'll be nothing.'

The party was a disaster; Rebeka sat hardly saying anything unable to get the lump out of her mind. She remembered a friend who had cancer and what a terrible time she had before she died. Ruth the hostess noticed Rebeka's silence and when they were in the kitchen clearing up after the meal, she asked her,

'Rebeka are you all right? You don't seem to be yourself?'

Rebeka bit her lip trying not to cry and then she blurted out,

'I've found a lump in my breast, I'm scared stiff.' Ruth listened. She had had a similar experience some years ago and knew what Rebeka was going through. She decided to confide in her.

'Look Rebeka, I am sure it's nothing, I didn't tell you but I had a scare some years ago and found a lump. I had to have the lump removed. It was harmless but it worried me sick so I know what you are going through,' she said hugging Rebeka.

The following day, David and Rebeka were in the doctor's waiting room. David had phoned earlier and found the doctor had a vacancy. Rebeka felt empty and light headed. She hadn't slept and knew she looked a wreck, her hair dank and lifeless, no make up and a touch of lipstick only. She just didn't have the energy to bother.

'Do I look alright?' she asked David in a disinterested manner.

'You look fine,' he replied. The waiting room was empty apart from a receptionist who didn't look up as they entered. She seemed engrossed in something on her desk but David couldn't see what it was. He decided to wait and see when she would look up and see them. Eventually she did.

'Oh! I'm sorry I didn't hear you come in, the doctor won't be long.'

A few minutes later the far door opened and the doctor appeared,

'Please come in?' They followed him into his surgery.

It was a typical clinical room with minimal white furniture and shiny glass tops. His desk at the far end of the room was also white. He was about fifty, with an unruly mop of white hair above a sun-tanned face with blue eyes. He must have been a heart stopper when he was younger, thought Rebeka trying to take her mind off what was happening.

'Good morning Mr and Mrs Steiner,' Rebeka didn't want to explain that David wasn't her husband.

'How can I help you?' He asked.

'I've found a lump in my breast,' Rebeka whispered.

'I see, how long have you had it?' The doctor began taking notes as she spoke.

'I noticed it two days ago in the shower.'

'Nurse take Mrs Steiner into the examination room and I will come through.'

The nurse a short stocky woman with dark curly hair stepped forward and took Rebeka gently by the arm and steered her into the room next door.

'Slip off your top and bra please and put on this gown. Doctor won't be long.'

Rebeka sat feeling very alone. David could have come with me she thought and was about to ask to get him the nurse when the doctor appeared.

'Now Mrs Steiner, there's nothing to be frightened of. I am just going to gently examine you,' he said. He had a soft reassuring voice and she began to warm to him.

'Ah! Yes, I can feel it,' he said as he began to press her left breast with his hand.

'What do you think Doctor?' Rebeka said impatiently.

The doctor didn't answer immediately. He busied himself completing his records and then he looked up.

'You have a lump in your breast that shouldn't be there. I think we should arrange to remove it.'

'I see,' Rebeka replied, 'how soon?'

'As soon as possible.'

'Is it serious? I need to know.'

'I'm afraid it could be,' he said in a whisper.

Three days later Rebeka had the lump removed. It proved to be an early cancer with no spread. She

completed a six weeks course of radiotherapy attending three times a week

Although relieved by the good news, the cancer had made Rebeka think about her own life. Time seemed to be passing so quickly and she needed to understand why she and Beri were so far apart. She was only 18 and still a child herself when Barbara her only child was born. It was one of those unexpected events that was to change her whole life, a childhood romance that went badly wrong. She and Jake, a scion from an upper crust family met at a fresher's ball, tall, good looking and captain of the school baseball side, she had fallen for him immediately. They were inseparable and had talked about marrying when they had finished high school. To her it was the real thing but to him it was just a fling. She knew to be careful and he promised to take precautions but the outcome was a pregnancy she didn't want. Her periods were still irregular so she didn't recognise what had happened. She tried to hide the unexpected morning sickness from her mother but when a test confirmed the worst, she decided to get rid of it before anyone knew. It wasn't long however before the news was out. Her mother was shocked and reacted angrily.

'The boy's got to marry you,' she insisted. But Rebeka wouldn't hear of it,

'I want nothing to do with him,' she insisted, 'he doesn't love me, the bastard.'

'Then you must have an abortion, you are too young to be caring for a child,' her mother argued. They made the arrangements at the local clinic, which was held in an old colonial house on the outskirts of town. When they entered, Rebeka felt a cold shudder go through. A row of young woman like her were, waiting to be seen. It felt like a conveyer belt onto which she had mistakenly fallen. Rebeka and her mother sat waiting, both deep in thought. She heard a female sobbing in the next room. In that moment she realised that she couldn't go through with it.

'I can't kill my own child,' she wailed, struggling to make sense of her life.

'Mum,' she whispered, pulling her arm, 'I can't do this. It's wrong. Let's get out of here.' Rebeka had read so many arguments about the rights and wrongs of abortion that she began to realise that she had made a dreadful mistake even thinking about getting rid of her child.

In the early days of her pregnancy, it all seemed so easy and apart from a week or two of morning sickness, she had never felt better. The antenatal visits were fun meeting others and sharing tips about clothes, diet but as the date of delivery approached and she grew bigger, she began to hate her body and what the child was doing to it. Her mother was no help.

'It was your decision, Rebeka. I told you to get rid of it but you didn't listen, you're so obstinate, so now you are on your own.' She struggled for over a day in the maternity ward before Barbara was delivered. She was a beautiful child with bright blue eyes and golden hair and was admired by all. Gradually Rebeka grew to love her but she never forgave her mother for not being more understanding. It was only many years after her mother's death and with the passage of time that she eventually understood.

Barbara was a bright child and enjoyed the attention she received from her school friends but when it came to examinations she just balked and refused to try. Rebeka couldn't understand what was going on and repeatedly questioned her teachers who all agreed that Barbara was bright but lazy. Despite every encouragement, bribe and punishment, Rebeka could not influence Barbara's behaviour and as a result their relationship just got worse. Barbara rebelled against the restrictions that her mother tried to impose and was soon totally out of control.

'You can't stay in bed all day,' Rebeka shouted from the kitchen, 'get up and do something with your life,' and when Barbara would appear later, Rebeka would bark at her,

'That dress is indecent. Put something more suitable on.' Barbara would turn on Rebeka her eyes blazing,

'Mum,' she shouted, 'you're so old-fashioned. Why can't I wear what I want?' The final straw came when Rebeka smelled tobacco smoke coming from Barbara's room; she burst in to find her smoking lying on the floor watching TV.

'Mum this is my room, you're not invited,' protested Barbara but Rebeka ignored her, 'You are not going to smoke in this house that's it. Out! I don't want you here any more.'

Rebeka had been horrified when Barbara told her that she was pregnant and had tried to persuade her to have an abortion. In a way she was reliving her own childhood, an unwanted pregnancy when she was 16. So when her daughter presented with the same situation, it was history repeating itself. I am not going to let her go through what I went through, she swore to herself. But she had no idea how to influence her decision. She pondered day after day waiting for the opportunity to discuss it with her. She was planning to confront Barbara who now called herself Beri. But circumstances changed all that.

Rebeka was asleep when her telephone rang. She awoke suddenly aware of her pounding heart. No one calls after nine o'clock unless it's an emergency.

'Yes,' she croaked, 'who is it.'

'Mum it's me, I'm bleeding.' Rebeka glanced at her bedside clock, it was 2.30 am.

'My God! What's happened? Have you called an ambulance?'

'No! I'm scared.'

'OK, stay where you are, I call the ambulance and will come right over.'

Rebeka rang 911 and waited, tapping her fingers impatiently on the table.

'Come on, come on,' she shouted into the machine.

A calm voice answered, 'Emergency, What's the problem?'

Rebeka stumbled through the story,

'My daughter's uh, two months pregnant, she's uh bleeding?'

'Her name and address please and we will be with you as soon as possible,' the voice replied. Rebeka gave the details, grabbed some clothes, her car keys and house keys and rushed out of the house to her car. It was a five-minute drive to Beri's apartment. She arrived before the ambulance and rushed into the bedroom. What she saw made her gasp. Beri was lying on her bed in a pool of blood. She was moaning holding her stomach. Rebeka grabbed a sheet from the other bed and tried to bind it around Beri. At that moment the ambulance staff arrived. Summing up the situation, the taller Assistant wrapped the sheet more tightly around Beri's hips and carried her into the lift and out into

the street where the ambulance was waiting. Rebeka followed and joined her daughter in the ambulance. No sooner had they set off than an IV was set up, dripping a solution of dextrose and saline into Beri who was crying softly. Meanwhile the second assistant was completing Beri's medical chart.

Arriving at the hospital, Beri was rushed into the anaesthetic room, she was sedated and blood was taken for some tests. Slowly she calmed down and fell asleep. Once her breathing had become deep and regular, her bed was moved to a four-bedded ward and positioned in the vacant space. The bed was locked in place and the lights dimmed.

'How is she doctor?' Rebeka asked once the drama was over.

'Her condition is poor but stable. When she receives the blood she should perk up.'

'And the baby?' The doctor paused and put his hand on her shoulder.

'The baby is very weak. The heart is very rapid and showing signs of severe strain.

I reckon she is about 22 weeks, which makes the baby's prognosis poor but we will do what we can.'

'Yes! Yes! Please do what you can, Doctor, the child is very precious, I lost a child at her age and have never forgotten it.' Rebeka found herself saying.

'Every child is precious,' said the doctor not looking up.

'Yes, of course I didn't mean to.'

'I know, we will do our best I assure you.

Now why don't you go and get some rest. There is a lounge just outside where you can get hot drinks and something to eat. We will call you if there is any change. Try to get some sleep.'

Rebeka joined David in the lounge. He had remained outside while she was with Beri.

'You could have come in. There was nothing private, you know,' she said.

'I know, but I wanted to give you time to be alone with her. How is she?'

'Weak from blood loss but they are organising a transfusion.'

'And the baby?'

'She's very weak, the doctor reckons she's about 22 weeks.'

The sun was just rising above the horizon casting streaks of light into the hospital lounge when Rebeka woke. She looked up to see David still asleep curled up in an armchair. He looked very uncomfortable but she resisted the urge to move him. For a moment she was confused but then the awful truth dawned, Beri might die and she might lose her child, her grandchild. It was too awful to contemplate and she shook herself. I must be positive. Everything is going to be all right. She got up and helped herself to a cup of coffee from the dispenser. It was hot and she felt the liquid warming

her as it went down. That's better she thought. She tried to go back to sleep and must have done so because she was awakened by the doctor gently shaking her.

'What is it? How is Beri?'

'She's much better. She has had 2 pints of blood and has responded well. The baby is also doing well. Her heart rate is down and I think with fingers crossed we are over the worst.'

'Oh! Doctor that's wonderful,' Rebeka cried, putting her arms around him and hugging him. Thank you, thank you.'

'It's nothing, just doing my job.' He replied with a smile.

'When can she go home?'

'If she maintains this improvement she can go home this afternoon. She will need help. I'll pop in after lunch and see how she is progressing.'

Barbara's boyfriend Matt had been drinking heavily and had lost sight of the time. In an alcoholic stupor he focussed on his watch. It was 2,30 am - Christ! He thought, what will Beri think? I must get home. He got up slowly, waited until the room stopped spinning and made his way unsteadily to the door holding on to the chair arms.

'Take care Matt,' shouted the barman finishing off for the night.

'I'll be all right,' slurred Matt trying not to lose his balance.

Outside the fresh air hit him and for a moment his head cleared enough for him to make out his car in the car park. He fumbled in his pocket for the keys and carefully opened the car door. He got in striking his head against the frame, Damn he thought where did that come from. Once in the car he sat for a moment trying to decide what to do. He really wanted to sleep and began to nod off when he remembered where he was, I must get home, he repeated I must get home.

Matt hadn't really had a chance. His father was a heavy drinker and he was brought up by his Grandmother. He had had a poor school record and had cut school whenever he could. He was soon mixing with older kids, and was introduced to Marijuana and later Cocaine. Tall and slim, he had shaved intermittently, drank regularly and financed his habit by shoplifting and pick pocketing. Somewhere along the line, he had taken up the guitar and was beginning to realise that music could be his way out. But he already had a police record and unless things changed, he was doomed to a life in and out of prison. Beri was his life raft although he did not yet know it.

The house was in darkness when Matt crept in through the front door swearing at the noise the lock made as he turned the key but there was no sound from Beri. She's fast asleep he decided as he undressed in the dark and settled himself on the

couch. No sooner had he closed his eyes than the room began to spin. He knew the feeling well and steadied himself by opening them. Eventually he fell into a deep sleep snoring loudly unaware that there was no one to hear him.

The bright sunlight through the open curtains woke him with a start. Stirring himself he sat upright rubbing his eyes. It's very quiet he thought she must still be asleep, I'll give her a surprise. Carefully balancing the coffee on a tray, he tiptoed up the stairs wincing at every creak and groan of the old wooden planks. Reaching the bedroom he elbowed the door open and stood expecting to see her pleasure at his entry. Instead he saw the empty unmade bed with sheets deeply blood stained.

'Christ!' he swore, 'what the hell is that,' as he approached and tentatively touched the stains. The blood had dried stiffening the sheets. There was a dank smell.

'Where are you?' He shouted, 'what's happened?' but there was no reply. He searched every room shouting her name until drenched in sweat he sank down to the floor sobbing.

He didn't know how long he stayed there, but suddenly he heard her mobile ringing. Jumping to his feet he bounded upstairs and grabbed the phone. He read Rebeka's name on the screen and heard her voice, cool and measured,

'Is that you Matt? She asked.

'Yes, what's happened to Beri? I don't know where she is and the bed is covered in blood,' he gabbled.

'OK, Matt calm down she's OK. We're in the hospital.'

'What's happened? Is she all right? I'm coming, which one?'

'St Millin's,'

'I'll be right there,' and he dropped the telephone and rushed downstairs forgetting to lock the front door.

Rebeka was sitting holding Beri's hand when Matt burst into her hospital room.

'Damn you,' he shouted turning to Rebeka, 'how could you frighten me so?'

'You're a useless man you. You're a parasite living on her good will,' she said pointing to Beri. 'You couldn't bother to be there when she needed you.'

'I didn't know she was pregnant. How could I know? She didn't tell me.' Matt shouted.

'No, she didn't because she didn't think it would make any difference. You could've seen if you weren't always drunk or worse. You are so tied up with your own needs, you wouldn't have seen that she was pregnant.'

'Mum leave him alone. I'm tired I need to rest,' pleaded Beri.

'Come, let her rest. We'll come back this afternoon and hopefully we will be able to take her

home,' suggested David who had kept quiet during the angry exchange.

Matt who had said nothing, suddenly he spoke up,

'She's coming home with me, to our home not yours Rebeka. I'll look after her.'

Rebeka looked at David, 'say something David. He can't look after her, I won't let him,'

'Rebeka,' said David, 'you must let Beri decide, it's her choice, you have no alternative I'm afraid.'

Beri had had another interminable row with her mother and was feeling particularly low. She had felt drained and had needed to get out of the house and try to forget her problems. So with a friend she walked into a bar just after midnight when she knew it would still be humming. As her eyes got used to the dim light she could see that the place was still heaving, there was a threesome in the corner playing soft sexy music. It was while she was at the counter about to order her drinks that she had met Matt.

'Hi,' Matt said. She turned to see a slim longhaired young man with a winning smile. She was immediately attracted to him; he had a gold chain hanging round his neck, his open shirt showing a hairy chest. They hit it off immediately; he had come from a world, which she could only dream about. Alcohol, drugs and Pop music were his stock in trade and very soon she had become

part of it. The rows at home increased until Beri could no longer bear it. She knew in her heart of hearts that her mother was right but she was so intoxicated by Matt and her new life that she didn't care. She flung herself into the life of indulgence as if there was no tomorrow and he encouraged her. He had no money so she had become his bank. They set up home together in a sleazy part of town but their surroundings were invisible to them. Often they would spend the whole day drinking and smoking hashish. He was into mainlining cocaine and tried to get her to join him but something told her that it was a step too far.

It was on one of those days when Matt was so high that Beri couldn't even talk to him that she decided she had to get out for a few hours. With a friend she drifted from one bar to another drinking at each. It was after midnight when as she was about to leave another smoky noisy den that a male voice called out. It was Peter an old friend.

'Hi Beri, how are you? Its a long time since we last met, are you still with Matt?'

'Yes just about, he's become almost impossible to live with.'

'How's that?'

'He's living in his own world of alcohol and drugs.'

'What about you and him?'

'I don't know, we don't seem to be going anywhere.'

Beri remembered Peter from school. He was in a class above her. She had been very attracted to him then but it sort of fizzled out. Now he was much more mature and she began to wonder.

'Where are you going now? He had asked.'

'I don't know. I don't want to go home finding him spewing all over the place.'

'Look I live quite near why don't we leave this place and have a drink there.'

Beri had nothing to lose so she agreed. Peter let her into his apartment a third floor pad in a modern block.

'This is nice, do you live here alone?' she asked casually.

'Yes now, I had a girlfriend but we fell out. Now I like to live on my own. He poured her a drink. He helped himself to a whisky. He motioned to the couch and they sat down.

'Cheers,' he said, 'it's really great to see you again, you haven't changed.' They talked about the old times and then he reached out and kissed her. He smelled nice and she returned the kiss slowly. Why not she thought. They found their way to his bed and he began undressing her slipping his hands under her blouse and unclipping her bra, She felt her breast freed and enjoyed the pleasure as she pressed against him. He leaned forwards and began to kiss them gently sucking the nipples which soon became erect. She loved to have her breast fondled often doing it herself when alone

and unhappy. She helped him remove his shirt and stroked the soft hairs on his chest. Why stop she thought, I'm really enjoying this he's so gentle unlike Matt who usually grabbed her and forced his way into her.

He was beginning to breath faster as he slowly removed her pants and fondled her pubis stroking her hair and searching for her clitoris. She reached into his shorts and found his erect penis. The softness of the skin always surprised her and she began to stroke him slowly squeezing as she moved. Now he was searching until he found her soft opening. Her moistness allowed him to slip in and arching his back he pushed gently until he was deeply within her. He kissed her gently as he began to move slowly. Suddenly she thought he's not wearing anything. My God I don't. . she reassured herself it would be all right because she was due a period in a few days so she relaxed.

Slowly she felt the tightening of her vagina, the spasm spreading into her groins and lower tummy. She began to breath more deeply as the pleasure increased. He was still moving whispering words she couldn't hear and then a thundering in her ears as pleasure took over. She moaned,

'Yes! Yes! Oh my God. It's so beautiful,' she cried out. At that moment he came inside her she felt him pulse with pleasure.

They didn't meet again but she never forgot that night.

Matt rarely talked about himself but one night he began to. He told Beri how he had been brought up by his Grandmother and never knew his father. He had never met his mother who abandoned him soon after birth. She lived alone and was a seamstress working in a factory but he had never had the courage to go and see her. He had two older siblings, a sister and a brother. They didn't talk to him and strongly disapproved of his life style. He liked music and played a guitar and piano and wanted to study music seriously but didn't have the basic qualifications to apply for a scholarship.

When Beri didn't come home, Rebeka had in desperation gone to the police but as Beri was over 16, they could do nothing.

'What about the drugs?' Rebeka had shouted. 'Aren't they illegal? Aren't they breaking the law?' But she only got a sullen answer.

'Yes, Ma'am, but we have more important things to deal with,' so she got no help.

Later that afternoon Rebeka and David returned to the hospital, but Beri had gone, her room was empty. Frantically searching for the doctor they bumped into him on the corridor.

'Where is she? What happened?' She demanded, 'why isn't she here? We have come to take her home, to my home.'

'Rebeka please sit down,' the doctor insisted, 'Matt came earlier and she went with him.' Turning to David, Rebeka said,

'I want to go to her, she can't stay there with him, I won't let her. She must come home, her real home.'

Matt had arrived at the hospital earlier; he was slightly drunk, slurring his speech as he stumbled over his feet. He had reached the ward and made his way to her room. Pushing the door open, he had grabbed her arm and said,

'Get dressed we're going home.'

Beri was too weak to resist and holding her arm he had marched her out of the hospital and bundled her into his car. It was only a short journey to their home. The front door was wide open when they arrived. Beri had entered first and stopped gasping for breath. The room was in a shambles. Everything had been thrown onto the floor, the cabinets were empty their contents smashed, drawers were strewn everywhere, nothing had been spared.

'Oh my God!' Beri exclaimed, 'we've been robbed, we've lost everything.' Matt stood speechless and turning on him, she screeched,

'It's your fault you idiot, Mum was right, I should never have believed you, you promised so many times but you've never changed. Even today you were drunk. I will never forgive you. I can't stay here I've got to get out.'

At that moment a car drew up outside the house and Rebeka rushed in. She hardly noticed the mess; she was so bent on getting her daughter out of the house.

'You're coming with me,' she demanded, grabbing Beri by the arm. Then she saw the mess.

'What on earth has happened here?'

'Matt do you know anything about this?' Rebeka demanded.

'No! Why should I? I left the house in a hurry,' and then he remembered. Damn I left the front door open. That's how they got in, and then he said to himself, maybe if I say nothing they won't find out. Days later when the police were going through the house to find any clues they were puzzled that there was no evidence of a forced entry. They came to the obvious conclusion that the door had been left unlocked.

Beri was pleased to see her mother. She had been confused by the scene in the house and felt disgust for Matt. Her mother's appearance at that crucial moment was a godsend and she grabbed it.

'Mum, I need to get a few things and then we can get out of here. When I feel stronger I'll come back and sort things out here and see if there is anything I can salvage.'

'OK dear, we'll go back to the car and wait for you there.'

No sooner had Rebeka and David left than Matt began to plead with Beri to stay.

'Baby, I can clear up this mess in a day and the place will be as if nothing has happened. There's no need for you to leave, please.'

'Matt, you don't understand, we're through you and I. Enough! I had enough of your lies, the violence and the broken promises. Find someone else to practice your charm on.'

Sitting in the car waiting for Beri to join them, David realised that for the time being, he no longer had a place in Rebeka's life. She would be fully taken up with rebuilding her life with Beri and he would only be in the way. As soon as he could he would tell her so, and thinking about it decided to return to London. Maybe at a later date he would contact her.

David reluctantly bade farewell to Rebeka wondering if he would ever see her again. He knew it was the right time to leave. Mother and daughter had a lot of catching up to do. That last night was particularly poignant. Both of them knew that a new chapter was opening in their lives but were reluctant to take that first step. After a light meal taken in front of the simulated gas coal fire, they retired to the bedroom. Neither wanted to make love so they cuddled and held each other. Rebeka fell asleep first. David heard her breathing deepening and slowing and waited until she was

deeply asleep before creeping downstairs and resting on the couch. He had already packed so he was able to leave first thing in the morning. He would slip out while she was still asleep.

The sun was still low on the horizon in a clear blue sky as he closed the front door behind him. Turning he took one last look visualizing Rebeka asleep upstairs. A yellow taxi was already waiting to take him downtown to catch the Airtrain to JFK. After a 45-minute journey it swept him into the British Airways terminal. There were a few passengers already waiting at the desk when he joined the queue. He showed his documents and moved into the departure lounge. Sitting in front of a large picture window, he idly watched a BA Boeing 707 landing in the distance and wondered if it would be the craft he would be boarding.

The boarding sign for London lit up on the monitor and together with some 300 others, David lined up to board. A further check of his boarding card and passport allowed him to proceed along the narrow corridor to the plane. After a final check at the entrance, he found his aisle seat, stowed his hand luggage in the locker above and settled himself for the long journey. He sat feeling drained his mind full of confusing thoughts. But the overriding sensation was one of sadness that he had to leave Rebeka but he knew it was the right decision. He then got caught up in the practicalities

of selecting drinks and deciding his meal. By keeping his vision limited to the back of the seat in front, he managed to avoid the fear that he always felt when made aware of the sheer size of the plane. Soon after a disappointing rather dried up meal, he settled down and slept.

The plane's lights gradually roused him from a fitful sleep. He woke with sore eyes and a stiff neck. Almost immediately breakfast was served.

David found it strange coming back to his home in London after the excitement of New York. Nothing had changed but everything had changed. He was not the same as he was when he left three months earlier. His meeting with Rebeka had brought a whole new world into his life, a world that he wanted to be more involved with. He checked the fridge and cupboard and made a list of the things he needed. The shops were a short bus ride away. He was standing by the curb thinking about his life ahead when he decided to cross the road. He glanced at the lights, which were red, but he knew that he could get across provided they remained red. So watching them he began to cross. He was half way across when they suddenly changed to green and the traffic began to move. He was now in the middle of the road when he realised what was happening. He caught sight of a car on his left coming through on the inside concealed by a stationary bus and managed to jerk to a stop as

the driver braked. He saw the small-frightened face of the female passenger who then smiled as he stepped back. She had realised how close he had come to a serious accident possibly death. The driver had waited until he had reached the safety of the far pavement before continuing.

David had a sudden insight; I could have been killed or worse severely maimed. His first thoughts had been how stupid! How careless? I should have waited. I had time to stand and wait. What prompted me to take a chance? I could have in that moment of madness destroyed all my dreams. Yes, I had crossed the road several times before and had had no problem but I was always aware of my vulnerability as I crossed. This time David had come face to face with death or worse but thanks to the prompt action of a stranger, he was not injured.

The event must have played upon his mind because that night he had a dream, so realistic that he woke up shaking and sweating. He imagined that he was looking down from above observing his own accident. He was reliving the incident as if it had really happened. He was seeing himself lying in the road injured with the car looming above him. He was hearing voices and seeing faces but they had seemed distant and then a siren, a single high pitched wailing which came nearer and then suddenly stopped: then more voices in the

distance. He was feeling cold and began to shiver. What was happening? He was thinking. I must find out. He was imagining that he was hurt but how badly? He was investigating his body moving each part in turn. Having some medical knowledge, he was able to guess what his injuries might be. He was feeling his head. There was some wet sticky stuff on his right temple, blood he assumed. He had lost his glasses so everything was blurred. He could see that he could move both arms although his right shoulder seemed painful; bruised not broken was his conclusion. He was feeling his hips and trying to move his legs, no pain and then suddenly a severe sharp stab that took his breath away, a fractured pelvis he had decided. Now his belly, he was slowly pressing the four corners of his belly -no pain and no resistance -that's good he was thinking, no abdominal injury. He lay waiting and as the time passed he was feeling increasingly annoyed and frightened. How did he let this happen?

What a fool? He was thinking, He knew better, better than most how frail the human body was; how easily it could be damaged. Then he imagined a female voice.

'Are you OK? What is your name, can you hear me?' She was asking, He was giving his name and address, his age. She was replying,

'My name is Julie. You're OK. You've had an accident.'

'I know,' he was mumbling. 'Please cover me, I feel very cold.' A blanket was brought and tucked under his chin. He could hear that they were having a discussion and then he was eased onto a stretcher and placed in an ambulance. Looking upwards he was seeing the sky disappear as he was being lifted into the vehicle. It smelt of hospital and had various bits of equipment scattered about. He was seeing an oxygen cylinder, a drip stand and an intravenous set hanging from it. He imagined he was placed on a hard surface with a pillow under his head. Then he was hearing the words, ' Lets go' and he was feeling the vehicle begin to move. At the same time the siren began. It was so close, it was deafening. He was trying to attract the attention of the nurse but she seemed to be preoccupied with what he didn't know. After a short distance during which he was bounced about, the vehicle stopped, the doors were opened and he was wheeled out. He again saw the star lit sky above as he was wheeled across the car park, the cold air hit him and then they were in a building, he could feel the change in temperature. He relaxed, no use in trying to guess, just let it happen, he decided. They were in the A&E Department of a hospital, but which he had no idea. It must have been very local as it was a very short journey. The see-through plastic doors squeaked as they closed behind them. He seemed to be travelling very fast along a corridor because they were soon in the

operating suite. At this point he was bundled onto an operating table, he knew what it was because it was so narrow. He was now wide-awake and conscious of the pain in his hip and leg. A young woman was leaning over him looking into his face and flashing a very bright light into his eyes. He blinked.

‘His pupils are equal and reacting,’ he heard her say.

‘Good,’ came another voice, this time male and older, he figured about fifty. He had a slight hesitancy in his speech.

‘What did the X-rays show?’ ‘They are up on the screen,’ then another voice, he must have been pointing because he said,

‘See that, a fracture of the pelvis involving the hip.’ Yes David thought, you have got it right, it was what he thought, it felt like that. He was by now feeling quite faint and then everything went blank and he must have passed out because he had no recall until much later. He imagined that he was becoming paler and his blood pressure was dropping. The doctors decided that he must have been bleeding from inside because there was no visible outside bleeding. A wash out of his belly showed bloody fluid, signifying an internal bleed. He was apparently whisked off to surgery, had his belly opened and a ruptured spleen removed. If that had been missed he would have been a goner, so he was very grateful to them. He would have to

take antibiotics but that is a small price to pay for his life. He never found out who did the surgery although he asked several times. 'We are a team,' was the reply he got every time he asked, so he gave up. He realised that he was OK now but that the experience has changed him.

Reaching the far side of the road he stood breathing deeply, but confused. Did I have an operation he asked himself. Checking on his belly, he could find no scar. I must have had some sort of out of body experience. He decided that he must be much more vigilant when he crossed the road and be prepared to wait until the green light appears.

As soon as he got home, he phoned Rebeka, checking the time so as not to wake her.

The phone on Rebeka's desk rang. Hearing it from the kitchen Rebeka ran to answer it, seeing his name on the phone, she dried her hands and picked it up.

'Hi, David, are you home? How was the journey.'

'Yes, I am fine, a bit shaken but OK,' and then he told her about his dream experience on the road.

'So you imagined that you had been hit, that's grisly, I'm glad you weren't.'

'Me too, it was quite a relief. How is Beri?'

'Fine, fine.'

'Really you don't sound certain.'

'Well some of the old stuff has come up but I'm trying not to get upset by some of her accusations.'

'OK, look I won't ask any more, as long as you are coping?'

'Yeh I'm doing OK really. When are you coming back?'

'When you're ready. I want to give you time together.'

Beri had had mixed feelings about her reunion with her mother. She knew that she couldn't go back to Matt after what had happened but she missed her freedom. Within a few days, the old tensions began to surface. Rebeka tried hard to accept her daughter's dirty habits, her getting up late in the morning and slouching about the house all day still in her nightdress. She tried to look away hoping that her example would slowly bring about a change but it was not to be.

One morning, it all came to a head. Rebeka went into the bathroom as usual to be confronted with an array of wet and dirty clothes, some on the floor others in the sink and worse a toilet not flushed.

'Beri,' she shouted, 'come here, I'm not going to tolerate this anymore.'

'What's the trouble?' replied Beri coming into the room. She saw the disarray and began to tidy up.

'Why didn't you do this before I asked, why? I can't live like this, in this chaos.'

'Sorry Mum....' Beri began but Rebeka was now in full flow.

'Sorry, it's always sorry, I'm sick and tired of hearing you say you're sorry. I been so patient with you but I've had enough.' Beri stopped what she was doing and glared at her mother.

'Look mother, I said I'm sorry. What do you want me to do, go down on my knees and beg forgiveness? I said I was sorry. It won't happen again.'

'That's what you say every time I complain.'

'Mum I'm trying, it's not easy to change so much, you are a real stickler for tidiness you know and I'm not.'

'I know, that's the problem. You don't seem to change and I can't live with you as you are,' shouted Rebeka. 'I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to write you a list of rules.'

'Rules! You can't be real. I'm not a child anymore.' screamed Beri'

'Maybe, but you behave like one, so I am going to treat you like one, OK!'

So lists of rules began to appear in the kitchen, the bathroom and the toilet. Beri read the list with amusement but realised that her mother was serious and if she didn't follow them she would be out. Where would I go? She wondered, not back to Matt that's for sure but where else.

David soon got back into his familiar routine in London and for a while forgot about New York, Rebeka and her family. He phoned occasionally but often at a bad time and they couldn't speak for long. The calls became fewer and fewer and she gradually became less prominent in his life as he became increasingly absorbed with his own needs, shopping, washing and ironing, all the usual chores of daily living. He contacted a number of friends and met them for lunch or a theatre.

He also resumed his regular visits to the British Library one of his favorite past times. The summer was giving way to autumn as the leaves lost their green and took on brown and yellow with flecks of red. The multi-coloured paths of fallen leaves began to resemble brightly coloured carpets. With the colder weather came a change of clothes, more layers, a hat and gloves. David was spending more time indoors as the cold North wind swept through the streets and parks. Winter was not far behind. A telephone call one evening snapped him into back into reality. It was Beri, a frantic frightened Beri speaking too quickly so that he had to ask her to slow down.

'Mum's not well,' was the bad news she brought. 'She has had a recurrence, in her spine. I am so afraid,' sobbed Beri.

'How is she taking it?' David asked keeping his voice positive although his heart was racing in his throat.

'Like mum always does, calmly with no fuss, just a matter of fact,' Beri replied.

'I'm coming,' said David without giving it a second thought. 'I've a few things to sort out and I'll get the next plane out. Should be with you in two to three days.'

'I'll tell mum. She'll be pleased although she asked me not to tell you. 'Thanks David I knew you wouldn't let her down.' And the phone went dead.

David flopped down; poured himself a whisky and let the news sink in. Not good, a spinal secondary, and where else could it have spread? He wondered. He checked the time, it was 10.30 am. He idly figured out the USA time, it would have been about 6.30 am in New York, he realized. Picking up the phone he rang Emily, his regular travel agent.

'Get me on the next flight to New York please.' She knew the request by heart and in a few moments read out the details. A few minutes later the details appeared on his Iphone, BA Flight BA0173 Heathrow to JFK at 14.25, arr. 1715, Terminal 5.

Trying not to panic too much, he threw a few things into an overnight bag. That's enough I can get anything else I need there, he decided. Then he booked a taxi. He had about 30 minutes to burn

before his taxi so he did what he always did on these stressful occasions, put on his hat and coat and went out. The park was beautiful at this time of the year. The trees were bare with piles of leaves scattered along the paths. He kicked at them disconcertedly as he walked towards the pond hoping to see the swans on their nests. The time flew and he returned to see his taxi waiting for him. Collecting his bag he greeted the driver and got in. The roads were quiet and he arrived at Terminal 5 in good time. Checking in at the automatic kiosk, he collected his boarding pass and made his way to passport control.

Once on board David settled himself into his seat.

‘Good evening, let’s hope it’s a smooth crossing,’ he said to the lady sitting next to him, just making friendly conversation. She smiled back and he continued, ‘are you staying in New York?’

‘No I’m going onto to Atlanta,’ she replied with a southern drawl. My daughter has been arrested for being in possession of drugs.’

‘I’m sorry,’ David said not knowing what else to say.

‘It’s OK,’ she added. ‘It ain’t the first time.’ David was about to reassure his neighbour that it was just a phase and that her daughter would come out of it but as he turned to speak to her he saw that she was asleep. He sat thinking about what she had said. Drugs had become part of modern

life yet in his teens and later he had never met them or been tempted to take them so why had this generation become so drug oriented. The more he thought about it the more he wondered whether it was to do with the sense of the meaningless of life that so many young people seemed to grow up with.

The flight passed quickly and before he had realised it, it was coming to a halt at JFK.

Leaving the plane he made his way to passport control having no on board luggage to wait for. He was at the head of the line waiting to pass through passport control.

'What's the purpose of your visit?' Asked the young woman smartly dressed in blue.

'A dear friend is ill and I am going to see her and help out as necessary.'

'How long have you known her?' came the next question.

David could feel himself stiffening and getting angry. No I must keep calm and play the game

'About five years, I met her in Israel.' He was tempted to tell her about his friend, her age, colour of her eyes etc. but thought better of it. He waited while she checked her computer and her records.

Finally he asked,

'Is there a problem miss?' She didn't answer immediately then,

'I wonder if you would kindly wait over there,' she said pointing to a table and chairs to her right.

'An officer will come and speak to you.' David passed through the passport control kiosk and went and sat down at the table feeling puzzled and angry. He didn't have long to wait before a tall uniformed officer approached and introduced himself.

'Good afternoon, I am Captain John Ferrers. May I see your passport please? I would like to ask you a few questions. Can you tell me the purpose of your visit?'

'Yes, as I told the other officer I am visiting an old friend in New York who is sadly very ill.

'I see,' replied the Officer thumbing through the passport. 'You have been to the USA several times in the last few years. What was the purpose of your visits?'

David was beginning to feel very uncomfortable. What's this all about; it's just what happened the last time I was here. He was tempted to complain and get angry but he refrained from saying anything. The Officer continued,

'You have been to Israel several times also, what was the purpose of those visits? Patiently and speaking very slowly David replied curtly,

'I have been retired for many years and like to travel. Is that a crime? Can you tell me what this is all about? It's getting a bit tiresome. Every time I come to your beloved country, I am treated like a criminal, why?'

The officer ignoring David's comment continued,

'Everything seems to be in order, Sir, have a good stay,' and with that he walked away.

David continued to the waiting taxis still smarting from the official's officious manner,

As he neared Rebeka's home he could feel a growing fear of what he would find. Suddenly his mobile rang, it was an sms from Beri, *Where are you?* It read.

David replied, *I'll be with you in twenty minutes.*

He remembered when he first met Beri, what a state she had been in. She was abusing her body as if it was someone else's, and as if when she tired of this one she could get another. But how she changed when she learned she was pregnant and had decided to keep her baby. Suddenly she was a different person. She understood that her body was carrying a new life and she was responsible for that life. She began to read about good health and how she was becoming as healthy as possible. She had changed her diet, no more fast food, no more alcohol and quick fixes. No more lounging about in bed till midday. She began to attend a prenatal class and became one of their most ardent pupils. Her complexion changed, gone were the dark shadows under eyes, now they were bright and positive. She was happy and she radiated good health.

The taxi pulled up outside Park Heights in 33rd Street the tall apartment block where Rebeka lived. The elevator whisked him soundlessly to apartment 808 on the eighth floor. He walked on the deep pile to her door and stood reading the number. Unknown to him Beri was at that moment looking through the spy hole. He had hardly knocked than the door was flung opened and she was in his arms.

'David, I'm so glad you're here, thank you thank you so much,' Beri whispered, and then her face hardened.

'Please don't be shocked; she has changed so much since you last saw her. She's in the bedroom.'

'Shall I go in?'

'Yes, she's waiting for you.'

David knocked lightly and waited,

'Come in,' was the faint rasping reply. The room was in subdued lighting and for a moment he couldn't make out anything and then he saw her propped up in the bed. She had changed so much. Gone was the vivacious dark haired beauty he remembered, instead she was a shadow of her former self, her face hollow with pale yellow skin, lank grey hair and bloodless lips. He leaned forwards to kiss her and smelt her stale breath. He swallowed and fought back a feeling of revulsion. Instead he smiled, reaching for her hand and said,

'Hi Rebeka, it's really good to see you. How are you?'

'Hi David, you look well,' she said ignoring his question. 'How was your journey? I'm sorry you have to see me in this state.'

'Rubbish you look great. Beri has told me, I'm sorry. How are you managing with the chemo?' Rebeka looked out of the window and for a moment David thought she hadn't heard the question, then,

'I've decided not to continue. I've had enough. I just want to sleep, I am so tired.'

David was about to question the wisdom of her decision when he saw her eyes blink. He leant over and kissed her on the cheek and tip toed out of the room, Rebeka's eyes were closed before he had reached the door.

Beri was sitting in the lounge when suddenly a small girl walked in. She had golden hair and deep blue eyes.

'Mummy who, man?' she asked, pointing at David.

'Hello, what's your name young lady?' said an amazed David. 'I didn't know, of course, how old is she?'

'She's just over a year. We named her Joella.'

'Hi Joella, it's a pleasure to meet you, what a beautiful girl you are,' said David extending his hand. Joella was shy and backed away from him

snuggling next to her mother who kissed and hugged her.

'Where are you staying?' asked Beri. Before David could reply she added, 'you could stay here in the spare room. I am sure Mum would like that.' David was confused. He didn't want to do anything that Rebeka might disapprove of so he said Beri.

'I know she would want you to be near her,' Beri insisted.

'Please ask her for me.' Beri returned in a few moments from Rebeka's room. 'Yes, she wants you to stay, I told you so.' He would have preferred his own privacy but on second thoughts, Beri clearly needed support so he accepted and she showed him to the room. He remembered it from before. It clearly hadn't been touched for months. David walked around the room touching dusty surfaces. After a quick shower, he got into the single bed. Despite fatigue from the long journey the shock of seeing Rebeka's appearance prevented him from sleeping. Instead he tossed and turned in the narrow bed, being further disturbed by the unfamiliar sounds filtering through the window from the streets below. He must have slept because soft crying suddenly awakened him. He sat up confused by his unfamiliar surroundings and listened. It was coming from Rebeka's room. He waited uncertain what to do. Something prompted him to go to her as they hadn't said much to each other since he had arrived. Tiptoeing to her

door he listened. He could hear her moving about and decided to go in. He was about to knock when he heard her call out, 'Come in David.' He pushed the door open. She was sitting up in bed in a pool of light from her bedside lamp, her ghostlike appearance startling him.

'Come and sit by me,' she said patting her bed. 'It was really good of you to drop everything and come and see me. I guess Beri has told you.'

'Yes she did, how are you feeling?'

'Like shit,' she replied, 'it ain't no fun... I can tell you.' It's happened so quickly. You know when you were here last, I found that lump in my breast and had it removed. I thought stupidly that that would be the end of it but how wrong I was.' David could see how she was labouring to breathe, pausing to catch her breath. She continued,

'It all seemed OK but the bugger was hiding ready to pounce and pounce he did, in my back. I got this dull backache, we all get backache and I thought nothing of it but it didn't go away and began to stop me sleeping. I saw the doctor, had an x-ray and was told it was nothing. Then I began to worry and Beri said I should see someone else. He arranged a scan and there it was, one of the vertebra, had collapsed and that meant only one thing.' David leant forward and held her hand; her skin was hot and dry.

Rebeka added,

'I was devastated. I'd heard about recurrences but didn't think it would happen to me not me, I'm too young.' Then she stopped talking and tears began to appear.

'I've got so much I want to do. I'm Joella's Grandmother. I want to see her grow up, I don't want to die.'

'You're not going to.' interrupted David squeezing her hand. 'There's treatment, lots of medicines that can help you.'

'They want to do an operation,' Rebeka rasped, 'on my back. I could be paralysed; it's awful to think about. David, dear David, I'm scared, really scared and I don't know what to do.'

'Did the doctors talk about risk and success rates?'

Yes, it's fifty-fifty that I could be paralysed and,' she paused, 'they can't be certain that it hasn't spread elsewhere.'

'I see.' David sat back. It was unreal, as if he was watching a horror movie. He didn't know what to say. All he knew was that he loved this woman, this frail frightened desperately ill woman for whom he could do nothing. Tears pricked his eyes.

'Rebeka I love you more than anything else in the world I will do anything to help.'

'Hug me David, hug me tight.'

Beri heard the sound of movement and got up quietly. It was coming from her mother's room.

She glanced at her table clock it was 4 am. She found her bedroom door open and slipped in silently. In the dim light she could see David and Rebeka hugging each other as if the world was coming to an end. She stood watching them transfixed by the vision of love and thought of her father and why it wasn't him holding her mother. Then Rebeka saw her and beckoned. The three held each other their tears mingling as they shared that moment. Each was reluctant to leave but they all needed their sleep and after a short while David and Beri returned to their rooms. Rebeka still seemed to be sleeping when Beri went in the next morning to give her breakfast.

'Good morning Mum how did you sleep?' she asked leaning over the recumbent figure. But Rebeka didn't stir. Frightened she called David to come and see. He came immediately and realised that Rebeka had taken a turn for the worse. Her breathing was slow and deep punctuated with periods of breath holding. David had seen this pattern before and knew it had a serious implication.

'I think we should call the doctor,' he whispered to Beri.

After he had examined Rebeka the doctor asked to see them. Beri and David went into the lounge out of earshot of Rebeka. David was the first to speak.

'How is she doctor?'

'I am afraid it's only a matter of time. Her breathing is very shallow and slow. Her lungs are filling up with fluid.'

'Can't you do anything?' Beri pleaded. 'There must be something? Shall we take her to the hospital? Could they do something? We can't just stand by and let her die.'

'Beri, your mother is near the end. She told me that she doesn't want to die in hospital. Can't we let her die peacefully here with you by her side.' Beri grabbed David's arm,

'I can't bear to watch her die like this.' David turned to her and speaking softly said,

'I think the doctor is right. We should listen to him and not subject your Mum to an uncomfortable end in hospital because that's what will happen if we take her there.'

Then the doctor took Beri's hand and said,

'I will give her something for the pain, she won't suffer, I promise you.'" He went to his bag and took out a syringe, which he half filled with a clear yellow liquid. A few moments later he returned from the bedroom.

'I think she will be more comfortable now,' he said. Beri and David took turns to sit with Rebeka during the day and into the night. They gave her sips of water, as she wasn't able to eat anything. It was during David's watch that her breathing changed and became stertorous with long periods of breath-holding and he knew she was near the

end. He crept into Beri's room and shook her gently.

'Come, I am afraid your mother is near the end.'

David and Beri sat with Rebeka until the morning sun began to cast shadows on the walls. It was then that Rebeka took a last deep gasp and stopped breathing leaving an uncanny silence in the room interrupted only by the sounds of the early morning traffic. Not even the birds sang that morning.

For a while there was peace in the house. Beri was feeling well and her tummy was now evident. She was watching her diet and not putting on too much weight, but time was dragging, She began to wish the weeks away until the birth of her baby, a little girl, the doctor had said.

The days prior to the birth of her baby were increasingly stressful. Beri's ex-boyfriend Matt had contacted her and advised her that he intended to claim visiting rights to the child after she was born. He had been to the NYC family court and been told that as the father he had parental rights. He was helped to write a letter to Beri indicating his intentions. When the formal letter arrived it caught her totally unprepared and tipped her into a state of depression. She showed the letter to David who did his best to reassure her that Matt had no such rights. But the uncertainty hung over her and she

found herself descending into uncontrollable floods of tears.

Now it was only a matter of days before Beri was due to be admitted for a Caesarean. The decision had been made at her earlier appointment when a scan had shown that she had a placenta praevia, a condition, she was told, in which the afterbirth blocks the passage through which the baby has to pass. The danger was that if a normal birth was allowed, there was a risk of severe bleeding. Beri was now much calmer and was looking forwards to meeting her daughter.

Weeks later with her baby Joelle at her breast, she would say to her friends that a Caesarean was a doddle but today as she entered the hospital she felt tense and anxious, so much so that the nurse at reception took her arm and accompanied her to her room.

'The doctor will be here shortly,' she announced closing the door behind her. Beri found herself in a bare white room with a bed, a side table, a locker and a TV. In the corner was the toilet and bathroom. She sat for a while looking out onto the car park trying to take control of the situation. A knock and David entered. Looking around, he announced,

'Simple but adequate don't you agree Beri?' Beri nodded, not in the mood to discuss the standard of the decor. Within a few minutes the

nurse returned and gave Beri an injection and at the same time, asked David to leave.

'Good luck Beri,' he whispered giving her a hug, 'everything is going to be OK.'

Beri began to feel a bit woozy and didn't remember the anaesthetist visiting her. She had a vague memory of being transported on a trolley and a prick in her arm but then everything went quiet. She awoke in her room to the sound of a baby crying and opening her eyes saw for the first time her baby girl Joella. She smiled at her and fell in love. She did not know what happened next but eventually and slowly she surfaced to a room full of flowers with David sitting by her side holding her hand and a little bundle wrapped in white asleep in a cot by her bed. Suddenly she thought of Rebeka, her throat constricted momentarily and she was unable to breathe. How she would have loved to see the baby? She lay back slowly allowing the feeling to subside. Then a surge of joy invaded her, she was the mother of a beautiful little girl.

Beri was allowed home after two days and with the help of a neighbour and David settled into her new life. Her happiness was soon shattered when the following day her telephone rang. She was unprepared for the voice that spoke,

'Hi, Beri congratulations,' said Matt, 'I hear we have a bouncing little girl. I'm looking forward to holding her.' Beri was speechless.

'How did you know? Leave us alone, you are not going to see her ever.'

'You can't stop me. I'm her father and I have rights you know, rights.' and the line went dead.

'Who was that?' Asked David. 'What is it? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'It-it was Matt, he wants to see his daughter.'

As the date for the Court appearance approached, Beri became increasingly jittery. David could see her visibly shaking.

'I don't think I can go through with it,' she told him one morning over breakfast.

'Don't be silly you will be fine, just be yourself and nothing will happen.'

'Suppose he tries to trick me, he's a very cunning man and doesn't know the truth from lies.'

'Don't forget I'll be there and I'll make sure that he behaves himself, don't worry.'

On the appointed day, David, and Beri carrying little Joella arrived at the New York City Family Court and were ushered into their seats. Beri saw Matt sitting on the opposite side of the aisle with several people who seemed to be advising him. He had changed so much that she hardly recognised him. Gone was the grey, drawn, lined face with several days of stubble; gone were the dirty T shirt and jeans. Instead was a clean-shaven good looking man in a dark suit, white shirt

and tie. He saw her looking at him, smiled and waved at her.

At that moment, the Court Clerk entered and turning to the small group of people sitting in the courtroom, announced the entrance of Judge Raymond Black.

'All rise.' he commanded.

A tall grey haired Afro-American in his sixties entered the court and took his seat.

The Clerk began,

'The first case is Beri X, mother of Joella a three months old, versus Matt Y father of Joella pleading for visiting privileges.'

The judge turned to Matt,

'Please Mr.Y tell the court why you believe you should have visiting rights to Joella?'

'Your Honour, his mother and I lived together for many years as man and wife. Joella is my daughter and although her mother and are I are no longer together, I want the right to see her.'

'Thank you, you may now sit down.'

'Miss Beri, please tell the court why Joella's father shouldn't see his daughter.'

'Your honour, Mr Y is a drunkard, a drug user and a womanizer. In my opinion he has forfeited his right to be a father.'

The judge looked at Matt somewhat surprised by Beri's outburst and asked,

'Mr Y what do you have to say to that accusation.'

'Your Honour, she is right. I was all the things she accuses me of, but I have changed. I am not the man I was. May I call a witness?'

'Yes, who will that be?'

'Mrs Fiona Brown, my counsellor.' A slim woman in her sixties stood up.

'Mrs Brown, please tell the court your qualifications.'

'Your Honour, I am a state qualified Counsellor with the Baltimore State Authority.'

'Thank you, please proceed. What do you have to say in support of Mr.Y's claim?'

'Your Honour, I met Mr. Y about a year ago when he was referred to me by the State Police. He was in a terrible state.'

'Mrs Brown can you please explain what you mean,' asked the Judge patiently,

'Yes, Your Honour, he was a heavy drinker and took drugs by mouth and by injection.' She paused, 'he was totally out of control.'

'Go on,' he added,

'However in the last six months he has totally reformed, he no longer drinks or takes drugs. I have seen him at weekly intervals and I can confirm that he is now a changed man.'

'Do you think he is a suitable man to be a father?'

'Yes, I do,' she said smiling at Matt.

'Thank you Mrs Brown, you may sit down. Before I make my decision, is there anyone else who would like to say something?'

David sat listening to the exchanges and realised that unless something unexpected happened, Matt would have judgement. Suddenly in a flash it came to him. He leant forwards and whispered to Beri,

'Ask for a DNA test for paternity.'

'David, he is the father, it wouldn't help.'

'I know, but please do it, ask for the test.'

Miss Beri stood up and waited,

'Yes Miss Beri, what do you want to say?'

'Your Honour, I would like a DNA test for paternity.'

Mr Y jumped to his feet, 'Your Honour that's ridiculous, I'm the girl's father.'

'Please sit down Mr Y. I am sure you are but it is a reasonable request and I have no power to oppose it. I agree that it should be carried out as soon as possible. Mr Y do you agree?'

'All right, I suppose so' he said, mumbling under his breath. 'It's a waste of time and effort'

'Mr Y it's my responsibility to decide that.' added the Judge sharply.

Two week later the Family court reconvened to hear the result. The Judge called the Specialist to the stand,

'Doctor, do you have the results of the DNA paternity test for Mr Y and Joella?'

'Yes, Your Honour.'

'Please tell the court your results.'

'Your honour, the tests show that there is only a one in a million chance that Mr Y could be the girl's father. Simply put it means that Mr Y is not the girl's father'

Beri couldn't believe her ears. She turned to David, who had a broad grin on his face and hugged him.

'How did you know?' She gasped, her face burning.

'It was just something your mother said once.'

Later that day David suggested to Beri that they should go and introduce Joella to her Grandmother. It was a beautiful day when they arrived at Mount Carmel Cemetery. The trees now in full bloom were swaying gently in the slight breeze and the gardens beyond were beautifully laid out. Rebeka's plot was in the new area, which they easily found from the clear directions. They walked slowly toward her tombstone now surrounded by many others although at the time it was the only one in the row. Beri lifted Joella and showed her the writing on the headstone.

It read, ' In loving memory of Rebeka ... beloved wife, mother and friend. You will always be in our hearts. We need to add 'Grandmother' thought Beri as they returned to the car.

Later that day, when Joella was fast asleep, David sat Beri down and asked,

'What are your plans now that your life is back on track.' She paused before asking,

'I don't know, I don't think I want to live here anymore. Please don't misunderstand me; you and Mum have been wonderful. I don't know what I would have done without you but I have too many bad memories.' Suddenly the ring of the telephone interrupted them.

'Hi Beri,' a familiar voice said. 'How are you? I want to see you. I miss you. When I saw you in Court I realised how much I have missed you.' Beri was speechless.

'How dare you ring me after what happened in court? Didn't you hear what the judge said,' she shouted.

'Yes I did, I couldn't believe that you had been sleeping around and you pretended to be so righteous.'

'Leave me alone, I haven't been sleeping around as you call it, I don't know when it happened.'

'Who is it?' Asked David seeing how angry Beri was getting.'

'It's Matt; he wants to see me again. What shall I do?'

'Tell him where to get off. You don't want to see him again do you?' Said David.

'I don't know, he looked so forlorn in court and you heard what the Counsellor said, he's a reformed character.'

'Beri, I can't believe what you're saying, haven't you learned anything. He's a loser. Think what trouble he led you into.'

I know but he looked so sad. I did love him you know and if ...'

'If what?'

Matt was the eldest son of three children born to Miriam and Joseph Hill. They lived in downtown Baltimore. Joseph had left school at sixteen with no prospects but by chance a factory making car components opened during the Autocar boom and he was taken on. He liked the occasional drink at the Men's club but when during the depression the factory closed his life fell apart. The depression brought thousands of men onto the street searching for work. Family after family broke up under the strain. Matt was 13 at the time and was fully aware of the turmoil at home. By the time he was sixteen, he had decided to quit school and make his way to the nearby city. He had heard that there were jobs to be had if you wanted one and were prepared to fly close to the law. At school he had noticed that young men would hang about outside the gates seeming to do nothing. One day he was stopped by one of them.

'Hi,' he had said, 'how's it going?'

'All right I s'pose,' Matt had replied.

'It can't be easy for you guys studying hard and knowing there ain't any jobs when you leave.'

Matt eyed him suspiciously, 'what's it to you,' he growled at him.

'Nothing just being friendly, I just thought.'

'Thought what?'

'That you might like something better.'

'Like what?'

Matt had been warned in school about people that come up and offered easy jobs. There was usually a catch. But that day he was feeling particularly down. He had had another row about his father's drinking. He was now taller and stronger than his father so he felt he could retaliate. His Mum warned him not to but he couldn't resist it when he saw his dad rolling home drunk again one night,

'You're a drunk Dad; I hate to see you like this. We're short of money and you drink it away. It can't be right,' he had shouted. His Dad looked around wondering where the sound came from. Then he saw Matt and glaring at him, his words slurred, he growled,

'If you don't like it, you know what you can do, get out.'

That night Matt woke with the words ringing in his ears, Get Out! Get out!'

Why not? He thought. I don't have to stay. What am I staying for? There must be something

better. Later that week he saw the man outside school again but by this time he had decided,

'What have you to offer?' He had blurted out when he saw him, 'Anything must be better than this.' The man he learned was called Jako. Jako handed him a piece of paper.

'Meet me at this place tonight at 8 o'clock,' he whispered and was gone.

Matt returned to school just as the lunch bell was ringing. Clenching the piece of paper in his hand, he slipped into the toilet and sat himself down in a cubicle. Waiting until there was no sound, he carefully opened it.

Cafe Kos 264 Bowery, near Houston St at 8 pm, Jako.

He crumpled the paper and flushed it down the toilet.

As the school bell rang at 4 pm the pupils erupted into the playground and onto the street. Over one thousand youngsters were rushing home. Matt held back knowing that the trams would be full for at least another hour. He decided to walk. He knew a shortcut across the park and under the overpass. He walked until he reached the canal and then ducked down onto the towpath. Now deserted apart from holiday boats, it was once a busy highway for barges of all sizes carrying good to and from the city. Matt picked up a tram which would drop him close to his home. His mother heard him come in,

'Hi Matt, how was your day?'

'So so,' he called back, 'when's supper ready, I'm starved,' and then, 'is Dad home?'

There was a pause,

'He says he's working late.' Matt knew what that meant. He was not going to wait again to see his father vomiting in the hall, unable to stand.

'Mum I'm going out, OK?' He tentatively asked.

'May I ask where you are going?' she said.

'To see a school friend, is that OK?'

'Yes sure, be careful and don't be late.'

At half past seven, Matt slipped out of the house, shouting 'Goodbye,' as he went.

His mother's reply was lost as he rushed to catch the downtown tram. It dropped him off at Houston Street from where he could walk. He had decided to wear his heavy leather jacket, jeans and boots. As the tram reached his stop he got off feeling decidedly queasy. The street was full of rubbish with people sitting on boxes shouting at each other. Several drunks were weaving their way down the street. He began to feel the whole thing was a mistake and then he saw the sign, 'Cafe Kos on the Bowery'. Plucking up courage he manoeuvred around the rubbish and was soon standing outside the Cafe. He heard his name called and saw Jako coming towards him.

'Hi Matt, glad you could make it, let's meet the others,' he said in a broad Bronx accent. Matt

followed him into the brightly lit cafe, its small tables already occupied by diners of every shape and size. He noticed several Chinese, Africans and Indians as well as the usual locals.

'Follow me, we're in the back,' said Jako leading him to a door at the rear. He knocked and the door was opened. Matt followed him into a small room with a heavy smoky atmosphere. Four men were seated at a central table. A scantily dressed waitress was serving drinks.

'Come and meet the boys, we don't use names, we use car makes. Gentleman this is Matt, I have renamed him VW. Going around the table meet Rolls Royce our boss, Chrysler, our number 2, Ford, our accountant and Toyota our IT wiz kid. The work is simple. You pick up a parcel from here once a week and you deliver it to various addresses in the city. You will be paid \$100 a week provided our customers are satisfied.

Matt asked no questions and got on with the job. It was a cakewalk. He knew the town well and was able to deliver all the parcels in less than one hour. When his mother asked what he was doing, he said that he was a delivery boy. Now he had money to give his mother and to go out with his friends. He began to drink and take out bright young things that were attracted by his wealth. He began to smoke pot and this led on to stronger

drugs until he was hooked. It was then that he met Beri. Somehow she was different and he fell for her.

When Joella was born he was over the moon. He loved the little girl so much that when he found out that she was not his, his world fell apart. He had already taken the first steps to recover from his addiction when Beri walked out on him so by the time the court case came he was clean. Seeing her in court, he knew that no matter what, she was the one for him. After waiting a few days he rang her.

Her reply was not unexpected but he hoped that maybe they could try again. He struggled with the fact that Joella was not his. But as time went on he began to realise that he still loved her. Did it really matter that she did not come from his loins? He argued with himself; she was still the same beautiful child that he loved. When he told his friends they couldn't understand why he was bothering with a kid that wasn't his.

He had returned home late one evening when his phone rang.

'Hello? Who's that?' There was no answer so he repeated the question, He could hear soft breathing then his heart leaped, it's her I'm sure, he thought.

'Is that you Beri?' another pause and then a whispered,

'Yes, Matt, how are you?'

Matt could feel his heart beating faster.

'I'm fine. You looked so beautiful in court, I couldn't keep my eyes off you.'

'You looked real good too,' she added.

'Can we? Could we..... meet?'

'I don't know, I would like to think about it. I went through hell with you, you know?'

'I know, I'm so sorry. It was as if I was a different person, I don't know how I could have done what I did.'

'Goodbye Matt,' and the telephone went dead.

Matt sat looking at the receiver in his hand stunned by the conversation. He couldn't believe what had happened, seemingly a miracle. He now knew what he wanted but wasn't certain whether it was what she wanted. He suddenly stood up and punched the air as if he had just scored a goal.

Beri could hear David moving about in his room. She burst in and said,

'I phoned him.' she blurted out.

'Oh yes, so! What did he say?'

'He wants to see me,' she said coyly.

'Of course he does, what else did you expect him to say?'

'I don't know, but... I didn't agree. I said I will think about it.'

'I hope you do and decide that the whole thing makes no sense.'

Despite David's warnings, Beri kept on thinking about Matt and how he looked in Court. Joella needed a father and if Matt had changed, maybe? She mused, did miracles happen? She had had so many hard knocks maybe this time it will work out. I've got to be positive she said to herself.

So one day. Beri decided to act. She would meet him at a local coffee shop and decide whether there was any future for them.

Two days later she plucked up courage. She had fed Joella and the little one was sitting gurgling on her lap when she rang him.

'Hello Matt, it's me. How are you?' Matt recognised her voice. He held his breath and then he heard Joella's little laugh.

'Hi, is that who I think it is?'

'Yes it's Joella, she has just had her lunch.'

'I'd love to see her.'

'Would you, would you really? Even though...'

'Don't say that any more. I know I can love her as my own. Please believe me.'

'I just thought you might be free for a cup of coffee this afternoon. Joella will need her nap but we could meet later at the Diner in town if you like.'

'Sure that would be great, what time?' Matt was trying to keep calm and not get too excited by the meeting.'

'Say 4 pm, see you then?' and the receiver went dead.

Matt couldn't believe his luck. He was being given a second chance. This time he wouldn't fail he vowed.

He arrived early and selected a table near the front window so that he could see Beri as she approached. Just after 4 pm he saw her. She had parked the car and then picking the child up like a feather unloaded Joella into a small pram. Looking up she saw Matt's serious face through the window and waved. He waved back and got up to open the shop's front door to let her in. He leaned forwards to brush her cheek but she avoided contact.

'I have a table over there; he said pointing to his left. Beri began to take Joella out of her pram and he bent forwards to help her. At first Joella was a bit hesitant but then she recognised him and said 'Dadee' and was in his arms. A man sitting at a nearby table smiled at them.

'Hi' said Beri, 'she remembers you. Look Matt, I'm really sorry I didn't realise that...I didn't want you not to love her. It's all such a mess.'

'Beri,' Matt said, tears stinging his eyes, 'I love you. I love you both. It's going to be all right. I know we've just got to forgive and start a new life. I can if you will.'

Beri and Matt began to see each other more frequently. Beri was very wary of him and often

refused to see him for weeks on end. He felt he was on a roller coaster sometimes optimistic and happy other times in the doldrums as Beri failed to return his calls. She ranged from optimistic about their future together to downright depressed as she struggled with the decision. The memories of their earlier life kept coming back to haunt her. Had he really changed? Was she going right back to that old life? How could she know whether he was just acting? She tried to speak to him about her feelings, her doubts but he just dismissed them, saying he had changed, that he was a new man. The old one was dead never to appear again. At last Beri decided to try again.

'Lets go away for a weekend,' she suggested.

About four weeks later David decided to phone Beri. The telephone rang and rang but there was no answer. He tried several times during the day and concluded they must be away. A week later he tried again. Now he was getting a bit worried. If only Rebeka was alive she would know what to do, he groaned. Finally his patience had run out and he decided to visit them unannounced.

He knew that they lived in a small two-storey house in a residential area outside New York. David using his Satnav found it easily. He parked outside the well cared for front lawn and walked up the path. Everything seemed to be shipshape as if any

moment Beri would come out to greet him. He rang the front door and heard a three tone chime. He waited and after a short while repeated the ring. No reply, that's strange he thought what's going on, it all looked so normal. He decided to walk around and see if he could look inside but all the windows were shuttered as if no one was in yet the lawn was well cared as if someone was living there. It was a real puzzle. He went for a walk around the neighbourhood hoping to meet someone who might throw some light on the puzzle but it was still early and most were at work.

Completely at a loss and realising that he may be making a fool of himself, he eventually decided to go to the nearby local police station and enquire. He walked up to the counter and waited. The receptionist seemed to be deeply involved in something below his eye level and continued what she was doing. He coughed and she looked up, putting up one hand as if to shut him up so she could continue with her work. She was decidedly irritating David. Not knowing what to do, he began to back away when she suddenly looked up and asked in a surprised voice,

'Is anyone looking after you?' David suppressed a laugh and replied.

'No! Not yet, could you please?'

Having listened to his story she said absentmindedly that they were probably away and

that he should try another day. Getting more irritated David began to raise his voice,

'Please, Sir, keep your voice down, getting angry won't help.'

'Yes I'm sorry; it's just that I am very worried and you seem to be trying to fob me off. Then he told her the whole story,

'Its OK Sir, she said touching his arm, 'I can see that it is really worrying you. Let me see if I can do anything.'

When Matt decided to give up his decadent life and to wean himself off drugs and alcohol he didn't reckon with the Auto Group. They had been making a good living thanks to his efficient and discreet delivery service and this rapidly fell off as he realised that what he was doing was encouraging others to take up the same life. He gradually took on less and less work until one day he had a show down with them.

'Members of the Auto Club,' he began at their next monthly meeting to assess profits etc.

'I have decided that this work is no longer for me. I am giving one month's notice, enough time for you to find another delivery man.' There was a great outburst of laughter.

'VW, you don't think you can walk out on us like that do you? You're in this for life so get any thoughts of leaving us out of that thick head of yours.' Matt was prepared, he knew that they

wouldn't take his notice lying down so he had a card up his sleeve. He had been slowly building up a clientele base without letting the others know, so that he would be able to negotiate his departure promising to turn his list over to the next man. He decided to play his trump card,

'Gentleman I am sorry to hear your negative opinion. I have acquired a substantial client base which I supply. If you don't let me go I will hand it over to our competitors who will pay dearly for it whereas if you let me go it's yours for nothing.' The room went quiet. The members were not prepared to negotiate with one of their delivery boys.

'Gives us a few days to think about it does he?' Said the big man. When Matt had left the whole atmosphere changed.

'Who the hell does he think he's dealing with, a bunch of amateurs,' shouted Ford, 'if so he's got a lot to learn.'

Toyota interrupted.

'Lets play along with him, get the list and then make his life hell. We know where he lives with his woman and their kid

'No,' said Rolls Royce, 'we are not a bunch of petty thieves. We are running a social service, providing a necessary help to those that need it. If he wants out, we should let him go provided he gives us his list.' There was a general nodding and agreement around the table.

Having told the police about his concerns for the whereabouts of Beri, Matt and Joella, David decided that he had done as much as he could and that in the end it was their lives and they must get on with it. Now he found himself at a loose end. This had happened before in his life but he usually found a purpose and got on with things. But this time it was different.

He returned to his home in the UK when the winter had just set in. The sky was overcast with unbroken grey clouds. A light rain was falling misting up the large airport windows. He felt a heavy tiredness, a sense of the hopelessness of life. The question came back time and again, what's it all for? Why do we struggle to make the world, as we would like it when it will all end up in disaster? Leaving the airport he had a glimpse of the outside world before descending into the tube. He wheeled his bag down the stairs bumping it along. Standing on the platform, waiting for the train, he viewed his fellow man. Near him were four people who seemed to be travelling together, two men and two women. They looked american, the women were wearing flared denim skirts and trainers, and the men were in T-shirts and shorts. When the train arrived, they got in together and then the taller man spoke to David.

'I see you've come from across the pond,' he said laughing a little and added, we're from the

west coast and have been visiting your wonderful churches on an Evangelical trip'

David stood not answering.

'God bless you brother,' the second man said.'

'Thank you and the same to you.' David replied.

'Are you a believer my brother?' He continued.

David decided to face up to them.

'Now that you mention it, I'm not.' The two women who had been fingering their jewellery suddenly stopped and looked at him. It was as if they were looking at someone from another world.

'Brother, we are going to a meeting in London, why don't you join us? You might enjoy it.'

And so David found himself unexpectedly attending an Evangelical meeting in St Martins in the Field near Trafalgar Square. He learned that the movement believed absolutely in the truth of the Bible and the teachings of Jesus. About twenty people were waiting when they arrived. It appeared that the taller man was the leader because as soon as they had entered, the service began. David sat half listening as they intoned their belief in Jesus and his words. They seemed to know what it was all for, some sort of preparation for another world. Looking at their faces shining in the dull light it was as if they were possessed by some secret truth, a

certainty about the purpose of it all, a feeling he had never known.

What a strange world it was he thought, so many different beliefs held so firmly yet we all have the same need and wants. What makes us have such differing views about the meaning of it all? After a short while, he decided that he had heard enough and edging towards the door slipped out into the cold night air of the square. It was now quite late and the square was almost deserted, just the occasional couple arm in arm crossing the esplanade. David was still pulling his luggage and felt strangely incongruous. I must find a bus stop he thought and at that moment spied one on the opposite side of the road. He crossed the empty street and stood waiting by it. One or two buses passed but not the right one for him. Eventually he saw a taxi and hailed it. It was warm and comfortable and made him think why he didn't use taxis more often.

Once within the welcoming walls of his home he relaxed and switched on the radio. The familiar voice of the radio 4 announcer reassured him that everything was going to be all right. What a strange day he thought, meeting those evangelists at the airport really set him thinking. Who were there people who didn't question everything like he did, and why wasn't he like them. What had set him on this path never to be really at peace always asking why or what? It's not as if he got any answers only

more questions. He unpacked his case and tipped the dirty washing into the washtub.

Matt was living in a small apartment in a residential complex just outside Baltimore city centre having moved there after completing his rehabilitation. He was doing an evening course in plumbing and at the same time was working part-time as a plumber's mate. He had sorted out his life and was happy. But Beri was initially hesitant to join him there and wanted to find a new place so they could start their life afresh. They couldn't afford anything better for the moment so reluctantly she settled for his place. It had a small living room, one bedroom and a small kitchen with separate bathroom. Fortunately Joella was a very placid child and did not disturb them or their neighbours. Once she had settled in, Beri began to make plans for her future. She knew that being a mother and housewife was not going to be enough but she had to accept that for the present.

After Matt had left in the morning, she would busy herself with Joella but once she was asleep, Beri found time dragging. One day while she was out walking with Joella asleep in her pram, she came upon a nursery, which was being held in a nearby house. She plucked up courage, opened the gate and walked up the path to the front door. At that moment the door opened and a young woman came out,

'Hi,' she breezed, 'Are you new here? I haven't seen you before?'

'Yes, we have just moved into town and I am looking for a nursery for my little girl. What do you think of the place?'

'It's good, I work here part time and I leave my two year old here, she loves it. Sorry I must rush, what's your name? I'm Sally,' and before Beri could answer she had gone. Beri entered and found herself in a narrow corridor beyond which she could see a playroom with a number of children jostling on the floor. It had a happy sound and she went in. A middle-aged woman was sitting on the floor with her back to her. Beri coughed and the woman turned to face the sound. She was in her fifties with short grey hair, a round smiley face and greenish grey eyes,

'Hi, my name's Margaret, welcome, please come in, we are just finishing for the afternoon.' Seeing Joella in the pram she added, 'we have a vacancy if you are interested?' and standing up she came forwards to shake Beri's hand. Her grip was firm, and confident. Beri immediately took a liking to her. Yes, she thought this is the place for Joella.

'I am just making a drink, would you like to join me?' Margaret said beckoning Beri to follow her. She sat at a large bare wooden table idly rubbing the knots in the bare wood top. Finally Margaret returned with a tray and tea things.

'Tell me about your family?' She asked.

'I just have the one daughter Joella. She's eighteen months old and is getting bored with playing with me.' Beri laughed. 'I'm also getting bored at home and would like to get a part-time job. We've just moved here, my husband's a plumber,' she added feeling a little embarrassed, 'and we are struggling to make ends meet.'

'I know how you feel. I'm divorced and have a second job to help to pay the bills.'

Beri decided to enrol Joella and paid the first week's fee. She promised to bring her the following day. Walking home she passed a coffee shop and saw Sally sitting at a table on her own. On an impulse she went in and greeted her.

'Hi Sally, I saw you on your own, may I join you?'

'Please do, can I get you something to drink?'

'Coffee would be nice thank you.'

'It's Beri isn't it? How're you settling in, it must a bit of a jolt.'

'No, it's OK. The apartment's a bit small but we hope to move soon when we have some more money. How long have you lived here?'

'I came here after my husband died...was killed.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't realise.' Beri was confused. She didn't know whether to ask for more details or

just say she was sorry. Finally she said, 'do you want to talk about it?'

'I don't know, I keep thinking about him and feel so angry. He was killed in an accident while in the army. It was so unnecessary. Every time I think of it, I want to cry. We had only been married six months. I knew he would have to go abroad but some how hoped it wouldn't be for a long time. As it was he went very soon. He was so happy doing his duty although sad to leave his family. I saw him off at the army aerodrome. They all looked so smart. He waved and that was the last time I saw him alive.' Sally began to cry soundlessly. Beri hesitated then put her arms around her and hugged her. Drying her eyes Sally apologised,

'Sometimes I just can't help it, sorry to embarrass you.'

'No you haven't, I can't imagine the pain that you are going through.'

The two girls sat in silence nursing their coffee. Suddenly Sally perked up.

'Look I am going to a club tonight, I work there. If you are free, why don't you come along, you might enjoy it?'

'What do you do there?' Asked Beri innocently. Sally blushed and then in a whisper said that she was in a show at the club three nights a week.

'Doing what? That sounds fun,' said Beri. Sally looked away.

'Well it's not what everyone would approve of but it pays well and strangely I enjoy it. Tell me where do you live and I will call for you.'

It was cold and wet when the two women left Beri's home and made their way to the club in the basement of a large apartment block. It was not very obvious unless you knew where to find it. Beri noticed that there were a number of fancy cars in the car park but she didn't make any connection until later. Sally led her to a large door with a small window. She pressed the bell and waited. Suddenly the window opened. A man appeared, greeted her and opened the door.

'This is a friend called Beri,' Sally explained to the doorman.

'Any friend of Sally's is welcome here, please go through ladies.' The two women entered a brightly lit hall. Sounds of music and laughter could be heard. Beyond was a dimly lit room with a low ceiling. There was a small stage and a number of tables and chairs occupied entirely by men. Suddenly Beri realised where she was and turned to Sally.

'It's a ...' she began but Sally shushed her and said, 'see you later.'

Beri saw an empty seat at one of the tables and sat down. A man's voice boomed from out of the gloom,

'Hi chick, what are you drinking?'

'Um, a soft drink, a coke please.'

'One coke coming up for the lady.'

Suddenly there was a roll on the drums, the room dimmed and the audience went silent. A spot light lit up a small stage. A scantily clad woman with black stockings held up with black suspenders appeared in its beam. It was Sally. Beri watched amazed as she began a sinuously erotic dance. The audience rose to the occasion with catcalls and cheers. Sally then began to pass between the tables as men pushed money into her stocking tops. Beri was still surprised by what she was seeing and had had no idea that this was what Sally did after hours. For a while she was enjoying it, but slowly the sleaziness of the place began to get to her and she wanted to leave. Realising that she didn't know where the club was and didn't think she had enough money for a taxi, she began to feel frantic. Sally meanwhile was totally absorbed in her dance. There were several encores and then the lights dimmed and she disappeared behind the curtain. Beri sat impatiently uncertain what to do when Sally appeared at the table now fully dressed.

'Well how did you like my act?' she asked breathlessly.

'Um, I don't know. You took me by surprise. I've never been in a place like this before although I have seen pictures.' She wanted to say that it was a bit sleazy but didn't as she saw that Sally was still excited by what she had done. Instead she said,

' I'd like to go home now and make sure that Joella is OK.'

'Sure I'm ready. ' Margaret said goodbye to a number of people and then led to the way to the front door. She gave the doorman a peck on his cheek and the women left.

Outside it was beginning to snow lightly. Wrapping their coats tightly around them, they made for the car. Once inside, Beri was bursting to ask Sally how she had got involved with the club.

'I was in the nursery and it was about to close up when the father of one of my small boys said that if I ever wanted a part time job, to contact him and he gave me his card. I put it in my pocket and forgot about it. Some days later I was at the Laundromat and was emptying out the pockets before putting my things in the machine when I found it. I sat reading it while my clothes were being washed. It was advertising a private club for fun and entertainment. On an impulse I phoned him and he said that he was there most days after 6pm and that I should drop by.'

'So you did,' Beri added.

'Yes I went one day after work. I met him and he explained what the job was. I thought I was going to be a waitress but he had other ideas.'

'Weren't you a bit shocked, after all it's not really a job for a nice girl is it?'

'I thought that too but the terms were so good that I fought my prejudices and accepted. They gave me a few days training, sorted out an outfit and I was on. That first night was awful. I thought I would die of shame but it's amazing how we adapt and soon I was enjoying myself. I got into a routine that seemed very popular and began to make good money so I asked myself why should I stop?'

'Suppose some of the parents get to hear what you do in your eh, spare time.'

'I'll have to face that if it comes. Now that you have seen what I do, do you want to try? It's fun and the money's good. You've got a good face and figure so you've got nothing to lose?'

One month later Beri was fully installed, had perfected her routine and to her surprise was very popular. Life with Matt was happy. He was fulfilled and improving his customer base so that he was often out at night. This fitted in well with Beri's part time job as a waitress so she told Matt. Everything was going well. Joella was happy at the nursery, Matt was doing well as a plumber and Beri was saving money for a new home.

Some time later, Matt told her that he was involved in a difficult job in a large factory and warned her that he would be late. As it was Beri's working night she had organised her usual sitter and left for the club confident that all was well.

However unbeknown to her Matt's job finished earlier than he had expected so he and some friends went to a local bar for a nightcap. One of them suddenly made a suggestion,

'Look guys I belong to a fun club, it's not far, why don't we finish the evening there?'

There was general agreement so they all trooped off to the club. Sitting at a table having a final drink the conversation was interrupted by a roll on the drums. The house lights dimmed and a spot light came on outlining a slim, curvaceous, scantily dressed young woman. She began a slow sexy dance. Matt couldn't keep his eyes off her. There was something so familiar about her but what was it he wondered and then like a flash he knew. It was Beri. What on earth was she doing here? He struggled to understand what was going on. One of his friends had also realised who she was and nudged him.

'Isn't that Beri?' he began but Matt shut him up.

Matt's first instinct was to get up and drag her off the stage. A friend saw his anger and gently calmed him down.

'Matt, wait till you get home,' he advised, 'don't make a scene here, you could get yourself into trouble.' Matt decided to wait until he got home and confront her there. However he found himself watching her and enjoying her. Surely this was not

the girl he married. He had never seen Beri like this before.

Leaving the club before it closed, he let himself into the house, paid off the sitter and decided to wait in the lounge until Beri returned. About an hour later he heard her key in the front door lock and waited. She was startled to see him sitting half in the dark.

'Matt, what are you doing in the dark? Why haven't you gone to bed?' she asked.

'I wanted to wait until you got home, how was the coffee bar?'

'Busy as usual,' she replied.

Matt jumped to his feet, grabbed her by the shoulders shook her, shouting,

'You're a liar, you're a tramp, a bloody tramp.'

'What are you talking about? You're drunk. Let me go.'

'No you don't, I know what you're up to, coffee bar you said. I was at that club tonight. I saw you parading everything in front of those leering men, everything! Like a bloody prostitute. Why didn't you tell me? Why did I have to find out like this? I'm ashamed. You made me look a fool in front of me friends.'

'Look Matt, calm down and let's talk this through. I'll get you a drink.'

'Now listen Matt, what I did I did for the family. I don't want to live here in these cramped conditions any longer than we need to. I met a girl

at the Nursery and she suggested that I give it a try. I was very uncertain at first but as it turned out, nothing sleazy ever happens. The men are not allowed to touch us. So it seemed a bit of fun and a good way of earning the money we need to move.'

Matt began to calm down and listen to what Beri had to say. His first instinct was to reject everything. He hated the idea that all those men could leer at his wife but when she explained that what she was wearing was no less than what she would wear on the beach, he calmed down.

'Why didn't you tell me you were working at that club?'

'If I had asked you, you would have said no, so I took it upon myself.' Matt seemed to accept the new situation. They agreed that she would do it for a further three months until they had enough money and then she would stop.

Life returned to normal, Joella was walking and beginning to talk and she was proud of her five milk teeth often biting Matt's fingers when they played together. Matt was getting impatient with his present boss who was always interfering with his work and after talking to Beri decided to look for another job. He saw an advert for an independent plumber and applied. He would be working for a firm of factory plumbers. He would be self-employed but pay a fee for the jobs, which were procured for him. He went for an interview and was shown into the boss's office. Seated behind the

desk was a very attractive brunette whom he assumed was the boss's secretary.

'Hi,' he began, 'is the boss in yet?'

She continued to look at her screen as if she hadn't heard him.

He coughed, and she looked up,

'Oh, what did you say?'

'I said I've come for the plumbing job and I was told I would see the boss.'

'So you should,' she said, still glued to her screen.

He stood waiting, getting a little irritated. What sort of game is she playing? He wondered.

'Well, is he coming soon?' Matt finally asked, 'otherwise I'll leave. There is no point in standing around here.'

'No, he isn't, because I'm the boss.'

Matt was taken aback

'Oh I'm sorry, I didn't realise.'

'Now that we have established who I am, by the way my name is Belinda, who are you?'

'My name is Matt and I am applying for the job of self employed Plumber. I have been working for one of your competitors for about a year and would like a change. These are my credentials.' He said handing her a slim portfolio. She glanced at it then looking up said,

'When can you start Matt? The jobs yours.'

They shook hands and he left the office.

Matt liked the new job. Being self employed he could work at his own rate. Within a few weeks he was getting enough jobs to allow him to earn a good living and together he and Beri were saving up nice nest egg.

Some months later as he was collecting jobs for the next day, Belinda called him into the office. He had learned that she was the previous boss's daughter. He had died suddenly of a heart attack in his fifties. She was at college at the time and decided to give it up her studies promising to go back later, and take over the firm. She had taken to the job like the proverbial duck to the water and had seen the company grow substantially under her leadership. Now she was looking for an under-manager to take over some of the routine work and thought that Matt might be the right person.

'Come in Matt, please sit down. I have been looking at your work and have had excellent reports from the firms you have worked for. The reports say that you are well organised with a high work ethic. I like that, it's what my father always strived for.'

'Thank you Belinda, that's good to know.'

'I have been thinking about making some changes in the firm and thought about you. I want to offer you a management job looking after the new work and allocating it. It will mean that you are no longer self-employed but the opportunities for further advancement are excellent. What do you think?'

Matt was stunned by the offer. He had no idea that it was in the offering and didn't quite know what to say.

'Wow, I am quite flattered by your offer,' he stammered, lost for words.

'Naturally you'll want to talk it over with your wife, won't you?'

'Well no, I think I can make up my own mind. Assuming the salary and hours are OK, I'm your man.'

'That's splendid, I am so pleased to have you on the team,' enthused Belinda. 'Why don't we have a drink to celebrate? I have a small reception room upstairs, give me five minutes and come up.'

It was all happening too fast for Matt, what's she up to? He wondered. He waited uncertain and then slowly mounted the stairs. He could hear some soft music playing and reaching the door pushed it open. He was looking into a tastefully furnished lounge with large soft settees, low lighting and a bar at the far end. Belinda was seated at the bar. She had changed into a close fitting pale pink dress cut low at the neck with high heels. She turned as he entered, crossed her legs and smiling holding out a glass of champagne.

'Congratulations Matt, I hope you will be happy and successful in your new job. Here's to you,' and in one gulp she downed the whole glass. Matt tried to follow suit but choked on the last mouthful. Giggling, she teased,

'You must drink more champagne it suits you, Come and sit over here where I can see you, you handsome hulk. You know ever since you started working here, I have fancied you, kiss me.'

She leaned forwards grabbed him by the lapels and kissed him soundly on the lips. Matt realised he was in a tricky situation. He could go along with it and be seduced or try and ease himself away without angering her as this could jeopardise his job. It was clear what she wanted. Suddenly he had an idea. Reaching into his pocket he brought out his mobile and began an imaginary conversation with his wife.

'Yes dear, I have finished the job and will be home soon.' Turning to Belinda, he shrugged his shoulders and said,

'I'm sorry Belinda. I have to go, we have some people in for dinner. Thank you for the drink. I'll let myself out.'

Joella had settled well into the nursery and when collected by Beri was always reluctant to go home. She had made friends with a little boy roughly her age and they would sit together holding hands. Beri had now stopped her evening job as she had promised Matt, once he had a better job. They were planning to have a child together when life struck them a serious blow. It came imperceptibly almost unnoticed.

Like all little ones, Joella was prone to coughs and colds but one day while at school she had a nosebleed. Margaret immediately rang Beri who rushed to the nursery. When she arrived, Joella was resting on a low bed. She had been crying, her eyes were reddened and she looked very pale. Beri greeted Margaret and asked her what happened,

'Beri, I don't really know,' said Margaret, 'Joella suddenly came to me, her nose streaming with blood. I asked her if she had banged herself or if one of the other children had hit her but she said no.'

'I think I'll take her home and let her rest,' Beri decided. She left puzzled over whether Joella had fallen or been hit. She didn't want to disbelieve Margaret's explanation but she couldn't help wondering. She promised herself that she would ask Joella when they got home. Once Joella was in her bed, Beri asked her,

'Joella tell me what happened at school today.'

'I don't know Mummy, the teacher saw it, I didn't bang myself, really,' and she began to cry.

'Shush dear it's OK, Mummy isn't angry.'

Beri had forgotten about the incident when it happened again. This time Joella was at home playing in the garden. She came rushing into the house, her nose streaming with blood.

'Mummy, it's happened again, my nose is running, I'm scared,' she whimpered.

'It's all right dear, don't worry, I'll speak to Daddy.' That night after supper, Beri told Matt about the second nosebleed.

'It happened for no obvious reason,' she said. 'I'm worried, what could it be?'

'I'm sure it's nothing, nothing to worry about but I think we should see the doctor to make sure don't you?' A few days later they went to the local Surgery. The doctor was an old friend who greeted them warmly.

'Now then Beri, Matt and Joella, what brings you here? Come into the surgery.' They entered the familiar office and settled themselves in front of the large desk behind which the doctor sat.

'Beri tell me what's been the problem?'

'It sound silly, it's Joella, she's had several nosebleeds for no obvious reason and we are worried,'

'I see, have you noticed anything else? Has she had a cold, does she pick her nose?'

'No but she looks very pale and doesn't seem to have any energy, I'm really worried.'

'Joella let me have a look at you.' Joella slipped off Beri's knee and walked anxiously towards the doctor and stood in front of him.

'Mmm, there is a small clot in her nose, and she does look pale.'

'Pop yourself on my couch and let me examine you.' Joella climbed onto the couch and lay on her back.'

'Mmm, that seem OK' said the doctor feeling around her tummy. 'I think we should get some blood tests but I don't think there is anything to worry about, nose bleeds are quite common in children and usually recover without treatment.' One week later the phone rang,

'Hello,' said Beri,

'It's the doctor, I have the results of the blood tests. Can you come into the surgery tomorrow?' No sooner had the call ended than she was typing Nosebleeds in Children, into Google. It gave her a lot of information but one word stood out Leukaemia, Her eyes focussed on the word. She could feel her heart beating wildly. My God she thought I'm going to lose her, I must stay calm. Automatically she rang Matt. It rang for a long time before he answered. He could hear the anxiety in her voice.

'Beri, what's up. Are you all right?'

'Matt please come home, I think Joella may have leukaemia.'

'I don't understand, what are you talking about. I can't understand what you are saying'

'I looked up Nosebleeds on Google.' said Beri.

Matt switched on his desk computer and waited impatiently for the screen to light up. He sat drumming the desk with his fingers. Then he typed in Nosebleeds in Children. A number of sites appeared, He clicked on the Mayo Clinic site and was soon reading. It said that Acute Leukaemia had to be excluded. Reaching for his phone he called,

'OK I'm on the way.'

Beri was waiting at the door when he arrived home. She looked anxious and washed out. He didn't stop to kiss her.

'Where is she?' he asked breathlessly,

'I've put her to bed,' she replied as Matt bounded up the stairs and into Joella's room. She was lying on the bed reading one of her nursery books and looked up surprised to see him.

'Hello daddy you're home early,' she smiled.

'How are you sweetheart? Mummy tells me you have had another nose bleed.'

'Yes, but it was only a little one and stopped very quickly,' she replied, turning back to read her book.

Beri, Matt and Joella arrived early at the doctor's office. The smell of fresh coffee met them as they entered the empty waiting room. Matt helped himself to a cup of black coffee and offered Beri a cup but she declined and had a glass of cold water instead. They heard footsteps and a nurse entered wearing a starched white uniform.

'Doctor won't be long,' she announced.

After a further few minutes, the doctor appeared and ushered them into his office.

'Good morning, please sit down, I have the results of Joella's blood tests.' He paused, 'her blood's not quite normal, there are a number of unusual cells.'

'What does that mean doctor?' Asked Beri anxiously.

'I'm not really certain. She's very young so they could be normal but I think we need to do some more tests in particularly an examination of the bone marrow, which is where the blood cells are formed.'

'What does that involve?' asked Matt. The doctor hesitated and turned to Beri,

'Why don't you take Joella into the waiting room and have a look at the fish tank? There are some amazing fish there, while I explain to Matt.' Joella piped up,

'Yes, Mummy let's go and have a look at the fish please.'

After they had left the room, the doctor turned to Matt,

'We need to take a small amount of marrow from one of Joella's bones; the one we choose is the breastbone. Joella would be sedated and a needle pushed into the bone, and some cells sucked out. She would only need to be in hospital for a few hours.'

'Would it be painful?' asked Matt'

'A little but she would be given some painkillers. If you agree I will send you to a Haematologist who is specialist in Blood diseases.'

The ringing of his mobile suddenly interrupted David's thoughts; he could just make out a faint voice but he knew it like his own. It was Beri, her voice frantic despite its' faintness.

'David, thank God I got you, it's Joella, she's very ill and I don't know what to do. I need to see you,' and the line went dead. David looked at the phone now silent.

'She'll ring again I'm sure,' he decided, so he waited but minutes passed but there was no further call.

'I'll ring her, her number should be on my phone,' but when he checked the 'received call' box, there was only a three figure number indicating that it was an overseas call and could not be returned. Now he became desperate with a terrible feeling of helplessness. He resisted the rising feeling of panic and began to analyse what had happened. It was while he was struggling with what to do that the phoned pinged again and a message came through. He wrote down her address. It was somewhere in Baltimore not the address that he had visited.

Where was Matt he wondered? But decided that question could wait to be answered. Now he had a number to reply and sent off a message,

'I'm in London, will get the next plane out to you, stay strong. I love you.'

The plane touch down with a shudder and slowly taxied to the terminal. The journey had passed in a flash, looking back he realised that he couldn't remember one detail, his mind was so consumed with the need to be with Beri and Matt at this time. He hadn't appreciated just how important she had become to him. He came through passport control and customs and made his way to the large reception areas where the families were waiting to meet the arrivals. There was a large crowd milling around, some holding names aloft and for a moment he felt overwhelmed by the noise and the bustle.

Then he saw her, a diminutive figure standing apart from the crowd. She appeared so small and frail, the stress of her ordeal showing on her face. He called out her name and saw her looking around uncertain where the voice had come from and then she saw him and rushed forwards. They hugged as if they would never to be parted, tears streaming down her face.

'Thank God you're here,' he heard her cry, 'thank God, I don't think I could have gone on any longer.' For a moment time stood still as they held each other and then they slowly separated and he looked into her swollen face and reddened eyes.

'Beri, it's all right, it's going to be all right,' he assured her as a wan smile crossed her face as she struggled to regain her composure.

'Is that all you've got?' She asked, looking down at his small hand luggage.

'Yes, I've just brought a few essentials. I can get anything I need here.'

'Tell me what's been happening?' David asked holding Beri arm as they left the terminal.

'It's Joella, they think she could have Acute Leukaemia?'

'Leukaemia? How can that be possible?' Puzzled David.

'I don't know, it's only been a short time but she has had a number of nosebleeds and was getting very tired. We took her to the doctor and some preliminary tests showed that her blood was not normal. She is now going to have a marrow study. She's in the hospital at the moment, Matt is with her, he's been wonderful.'

The taxi drew up outside the main entrance of Baltimore City Hospital, a grand Victorian brick building with large windows on the ground floor. They rushed into the large reception area, Beri leading the way.

'She's in room 312, we can take the elevator over there,' she said pointing to the ornate doors in the middle of the wall. He pressed three and they waited. It was slow to arrive but eventually the doors slid open and they entered. It was empty,

apart from a porter carrying a bottle of blood in a container. Beri couldn't keep her eyes off the thick red liquid as it gently moved from side to side in the plastic container. The porter saw her glance at it and said,

'It's God's gift from which we all benefit.' Beri nodded. She was thinking of Joella and her pale white face drained of blood. Maybe she will need a transfusion and she began to think about donating her own blood. The elevator stopped with a jar, rocking gently before the doors slid opened. Without speaking, David followed Beri up the corridor to Joella's room. She stopped before entering, then turned to him,

'David don't be shocked, she looks very pale and unwell. Try to smile when you see her, I know you will.'

Despite the warning David was shaken by what he saw, Joella had grown since he had last seen her. She was now a teenager almost as tall as her mother. She was lying back on a pillow in a bed of gleaming white sheets. Her face was drawn and almost as white as the sheets. Her hands lay limply on the bed cover. All the life seemed to have been drawn out of her.

'Hello David,' she whispered, 'how are you? I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Mum said you were in London, you got here very quickly.' David nodded and then turning, greeted Matt who was sitting by the bedside holding her hand.

'Joella, I'm sorry to hear you haven't been well but Mum tells me you will soon be as right as rain.' he added.

'I hope so, I feel so weak and tired, I just don't seem to have the energy to do anything.'

'Why don't we leave you alone with Mum,' said David, 'while Matt and I go outside and have a chat, we haven't seen each other for a very long time have we Matt? He nodded released her hand and followed David out of the room. They saw a small reception area with a couple of chairs, a water dispenser and a coffee machine. Sitting down David turned to look at Matt. He hadn't changed. He was still the neatly dressed youngish man with a clean look, well groomed and at ease that he remembered from after the court case so different from his earlier wild appearance.

'It's good to see you Matt but not under these sad circumstances, how is Joella?'

'You too David, you don't seem to change, you look as good as ever.' He paused, 'it's difficult to say. I guess Beri told you that they suspect Leukaemia but we don't yet know if that is the case and if so what sort.'

'How do you mean, what sort?'

'Well, we've had to learn a lot in a short time. There appears to be many different sorts of Leukaemia some more serious than others. Joella is having a bone marrow test later today which should help to answer that question.' As they sat

talking, a porter with a trolley passed by and stopped outside Joelle's room. He went in and then came out with Joella on the trolley. As she passed the two men sitting in the reception area, she waved and they whispered good luck. About five minutes later the trolley was pushed through two plastic doors into a small operating room where the surgeon, his young assistant and the anaesthetist were waiting. Joella was carefully lifted onto the operating table. A needle was placed in a vein in her arm and she was given an injection, within a few minutes she began to feel woozy and then slipped into sleep. It was a simple manoeuvre to expose the upper part of her chest and prep it with an iodine solution. He then began to explain to his assistant.

'I am proposing to obtain a sample of bone marrow from this young girl's sternum, the chest bone. It is a rich source of marrow, which can easily be tapped. I will begin by injecting a small amount of local anaesthetic into the site. When that has begun to work I will take a trocar, a pointed metal tube and push it slowly into the bone turning as I go. At a depth of about 1.5 cms I would have enough marrow inside the tube. I will then remove it and place the sample in a sterile bottle.' The assistant watched fascinated by the procedure. Joella stirred a little during the operation but did not appear to have any pain. By the time the surgeon had finished she was beginning to wake up.

'Your chest will be a little sore for a few hours,' said the anaesthetic, 'but that will be all, keep it dry overnight.' Joella returned to her room where her mother was waiting.

'That wasn't long was it?' she asked, 'did it hurt?' Joella yawned.

'No, I fell asleep and when I woke it was all over.'

The result would be ready the following day. Beri decided to stay with Joella while Matt and David arranged to return the following morning. After seeing Joella fall asleep they crept out of her room and returned to their home.

'I've made up the spare room, David, you should be comfortable there,' Matt said as they entered the house. David slept badly. He kept on thinking about Joella and what might be ahead for her. No matter how he tried he couldn't clear his head and as the light began to filter through his curtains he got up. He could hear Matt moving about and called out,

'Good Morning Matt,' he got a gruff reply. 'I'll get breakfast, why don't you shower first?' Checking the fridge, David found some cheese, yoghurt and marmalade.

'Coffee or tea?' he called out.

'Coffee please.'

Soon they were both eating at the small breakfast table, neither was very talkative. David broke the

silence. In his matter of fact voice as if he was giving a lecture to some undergraduates, he began,

'I have read that childhood leukaemia is rare you know. The results of treatment have improved immeasurably in the last ten years. So much so that...' Matt interrupted him.

'David please stop, we don't know if she has leukaemia so why are you going on so.'

'Sorry, you're right of course but I like to face the worst scenario so that reality never seems to be so bad.'

'OK then,' Matt said wearily, 'carry on.'

Beri had taken a long time to sleep. She had sat by Joella's bedside holding her hand until she was asleep. She had thought about Matt and in time would tell him what a tower of strength he had been and how lucky she was to have had the good sense to see the man behind the troubled boy. Then she settled herself into the armchair but couldn't let her mind go blank. The uncertainty was leaving her with a sickly empty feeling as if she was hungry.

The noise of the room door opening shook her awake. Beri blinkered in the bright light and saw a nurse entering carrying a tray of food.

' Good Morning, hope you slept well.' She put the tray on a trolley and pushed it over the bed.

'Hi Joella I hope you're hungry, you need to build yourself up.' Joella sat up and pulled the tray

towards her. Initially she didn't feel hungry but the smell of the fresh fruit tempted her and she began to eat it with her fingers sucking the grapes and spitting out the pips.

'Have some Mum,' she said, 'I can't eat all of this.'

Beri caught the nurse just as she was leaving,

'Nurse, do you know when the doctors will be arriving?'

'No I don't, but I'll find out and let you know.'

About 10 minutes later the phone rang, Joella answered,

'Mum it's the nurse.'

'Hello Beri, I've had a word with the head nurse, the doctors usually come round at about 10 o'clock. I'll call you again when they arrive.'

Beri and Joelle sat in silence waiting. Joella broke the silence.

'Mum is it serious, am I going to die? She spoke in a strangely childish voice.

'No darling, of course not, you'll be better very soon. You'll just need to have some medicine. It doesn't taste nice so the doctor will probably give it to you in your arm.'

'Like I had it before the chest operation?'

'Yes just like that.'

Just before 10 am. Dr Macintosh arrived, a tall, thin man with a neat moustache and piercing blue eyes. He stood at the end of the bed looking at Joella.

Matt and David had arrived earlier and were seated by the window.

'Good morning young lady, how are you feeling today?' He began.

'Fine thank you,' she mumbled.

'Good, I want to talk to your mother and father so we are going outside for a short while, is that OK?' Joella nodded.

In the hall, the family waited to hear what the doctor had decided. Matt sat holding Beri' hand.

'Well.' he began, 'I have the result of the marrow test. I'm afraid Joella does have Leukaemia but happily it is a very curable form.' Beri gasped when she heard the result and tears began to run down her cheeks. Matt put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her.

'It'll be all right you'll see,' he whispered. David sat trying to take in what he had heard. It felt like a bombshell.

The doctor continued,

'It's what we call AML, Acute Myeloid Leukaemia. The test shows that we have caught it early so Joella should be cured. The first thing is to start treatment with chemo. Three courses lasting two to three days each. We will start the first course in hospital but she'll be able to go home in a day or two if all goes well. Beri caught the last phrase and pricked up her ears,

'How do you mean if all goes well?'

'Umm, if she has no troublesome side effects which she shouldn't. She may feel a little nauseous and I'm afraid she will lose her hair but it will grow back. Hopefully that's all,' he quickly assured them.

Dr Mackintosh knew that most parents would rush to the Internet to find out what they could so he had prepared a short Guide to Childhood Leukaemia, which he handed out.

'I think you will find answers to most of your questions in this pamphlet,' he assured them. 'If you agree I propose to start treatment this morning. Her blood's a bit thin so I'm proposing to give her two pints of blood as a little boost.' Beri remembered what the porter in the lift carrying the bottles of blood had said and gave a silent thank you to that unknown donor. She was finding it difficult to accept what was happening, it was all too fast. She needed time to absorb the new situation. That her daughter, her only child was suffering from a potentially fatal disease. She clung onto Matt's arm needing something solid and strong to support her. David wasn't doing much better. He was reliving his own life, that terrible time when he had heard similar news and how it all ended up despite the doctor's assurance.

The next few days rushed by. Joella completed the first course of treatment without difficulty and was soon sitting up in her own bedroom speaking to her friends. The second and third were carried out in the clinic over the next few

weeks. It was while in the shower that Joella began to realise the seriousness of her condition. She was shampooing her hair when a large handful fell out leaving a bald spot on one side. She screamed out and Beri came running.

‘Mum look it’s my hair, it’s coming out,’ and she began to shake with fear. ‘I didn’t expect it, I thought it wouldn’t happen to me, what I am I going to do?’ she wailed. Beri wrapped her in a large towel and hugged her.

‘It’s nothing we’ll get you a wig and no one will know.’

‘A wig I don’t want a wig, that’s for old people,’ and then she remembered a film star who had the same experience and refused to wear anything.

‘That’s what I’m going to do, I’m going to do nothing just let everyone see,’ she told Beri. At first Beri tried to dissuade her but could see that her mind was made up. Without telling Joella, she wrote a letter to her teacher telling her what had been happening, in particular about Joella’s hair and her decision not to wear a wig. The teacher read the letter to the whole school one morning at assembly. The children listened with disbelief on their faces and one or two began to cry. One voice from the back of the hall shouted out,

‘We can call her baldy.’ There was a hush, no one could believe what they had heard and all eyes turned on the speaker. Then the hall began to

resound with loud booing and stamping of feet building up to a crescendo. The speaker, a final year boy tried to apologise but his voice was drowned. Finally the head teacher hushed the hall saying,

‘Joella is returning to school tomorrow. I want everyone to welcome her and show her how we feel about her.’

Joella woke early aware of butterflies in her stomach. It had come at last, the day she was dreading, the day she was due to return to school. She turned over and tried to sleep a little longer but her mind was too active and wouldn't let her be. Finally she got up although it was still very early. Beri who was already up heard Joella moving about.

‘Are you OK?’ She shouted from the kitchen. Joella replied,

‘I'm OK Mum,’ deciding not to tell her mother how she felt. I must deal with this myself, she realised. Breakfast was always a subdued affair no one wanted to talk just to eat and get going with the day. Joella kissed her mother.

‘Goodbye Mum, don't worry I'll be Ok,’ she whispered and gave her a weak smile.

‘You'll be fine,’ Beri whispered.

Matt dropped Joella at the school gates on his way to work. They hugged and she set off up the drive towards the school entrance. As she approached

she could see a large crowd of pupil standing around. When they saw her they all began to cheer and the ones at the back lifted a large banner saying,

Welcome back to school Joella, we love you.

Joella was overwhelmed and tears stung her eyes as her fellow pupils crowded around her and hugged her. It was so unexpected, not at all what she had feared. All her doubts and uncertainties were dispelled by that spontaneous show of love. The day passed quickly, Joella couldn't wait to get home to tell her mother.

By the time the summer holidays had arrived Joella knew exactly what she wanted to do. She had found out about a farm that took students during the holidays and introduced them to the world of farming. It was called Hornfall Valley farm and was in the country just outside Baltimore. Both Beri and Matt were against the idea.

'It could be dangerous mixing with animals; it was too early after her illness; wait a little longer before you take any risks,' they said. But after a lot of nagging she got her way.

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The New York Greyhound bus slithered to a halt at the solitary bus stop on Route 21. The open road beyond was deserted as Joella gathered up her things, her new handbag, a gift from her mother, her holdall, and descended from the bus.

She got a cheery wave from the driver as the bus pulled away leaving a cloud of dust. Shading her eyes until it had had settled, she looked around. It was all so unfamiliar. She was excited by what was to come, a new adventure the first on her own but a slight fear tugged at her. Will I be OK, she wondered. Will there be anyone my age? Although she and her Dad had done a lot of research about the place she was going to, there were still so many unanswered questions.

A sign *Hornfall Valley farm* swinging gently in the breeze pointed to a narrow murrain path leading to a group of huts, barns and one larger Farmhouse. To the right of the path, a white open slatted fence extended around a field in which several horses were grazing. On the other side, the land opened up as far as she could see into a wide landscape. In the distance she could make out a valley and a stream lined by tall trees in full leaf. Beyond the land rose to distant hills, a pale blue haze in the bright sunshine. Joella was conscious of the unfamiliar silence interrupted only by the chirping of birds and the moaning of the wind. I'm going to like this she thought, so different from the scurrying urgency of the Baltimore. Picking up her things she set off down the lane carefully avoiding the loose stones and ruts. As she reached the gate and lifted the latch, a voice called out,

'Hi greetings, you must be Joella, welcome to the farm,' a man appeared from nowhere and approached her.

'I'm Bill the dairyman.' They shook hands, his grip was warm and firm and she could feel the rough thickened skin of his palm. He leaned forwards and picked up her bags.

'Let me take these, you must be tired.' She followed him past a barn to a building with a corrugated roof and wooden sides. He was in his mid forties slightly bowed with twinkling blue eyes within a wrinkled face worn brown by the sun and wind. He was wearing a soft cloth hat that concealed his hair; stubble was growing on his face. He had the rolling gait of a countryman unused to hurrying but able to be on his feet all day.

'This is where you'll sleep.' He said, pointing to a low wooden shack. 'We have two other young ladies joining you so you won't feel lonely.' He climbed the two small steps unlocked the front door and she followed him in. Inside was musty and dim and at first she couldn't make out anything. Bill opened some blinds and light flooded in. The room was rectangular in shape with three camp beds along one side, beside which were lockers with separate compartments.

'Choose a bed,' he said, 'and put your things in the locker, you'll see it has a key, so please don't lose it. The shower and toilet are at the far end.' It'll

be OK, Joella thought, basic but clean and spacious.

‘When you’re ready, come over to the house and have some tea.’ He left her and she stood for a moment alone in the middle of the room. It’s all happening so quickly she thought and decided to ring her mother.

‘Hi Mum,’ she said, ‘I’ve arrived. It’s basic but fine,’ she said hurrying her words.

‘Are you OK? It will be strange at first.’ Beri said noticing the nervousness in Joella’s voice.

‘I didn’t know, I’m going to be with two other girls, they haven’t arrived yet.’

‘Oh! That’s good. It’s nice to have other people with you.’

Joella unpacked her few things, put out some clean clothes and made for the shower. At first she had trouble working out the controls. Both taps seem to run cold but after a while the red one became warm and she spent a few moments enjoying the hot water splashing on her head and shoulders. Suddenly she heard the front door opening and Bill talking to someone. She abruptly turned off the water grabbed a towel to cover herself and called out,

‘I’m in the shower room.’

Bill replied,

‘It’s OK Joella; take your time. I’ve just brought Miriam. See you later.’

Joella called out,

‘Hi Miriam I’ll be out in a minute.’

Miriam 17 was the only daughter of a US born mother. Her father was an Italian who immigrated to the U.S. where they met and married. Miriam went to an Italian based school in New York. She had retained the dark complexion of her origins and when she smiled she showed a perfect set of shining white teeth. Joella emerged from the shower; her hair wrapped in a towel and greeted Miriam. The two girls eyed each other; Joella noticed Miriam’s perfect olive skin and slim figure; Miriam admired Joella’s natural blonde hair falling down over her shoulders. They hugged and giggled.

‘I don’t need to change,’ said Miriam, ‘so when you’re ready we could go and get some tea at the house.’ Just as they were about to leave the hut, Bill arrived with Angela. She was an African-American from Atlanta. Her mother was a headmistress and her father a Doctor. She was tall and dark skinned with deep brown eyes, the youngest of four siblings; she went to a Presbyterian school.

‘Joella and Miriam, this is Angela,’ Bill announced. ‘She’s joining you for the six weeks. I’ll see you at the house when you are ready,’ and he left. The three young women felt an immediate bond of friendship realising that although they came from very different backgrounds, they all shared a

love of animals and it was this that had drawn them to the farm and its' animal training programme.

Tea was served in the large dinner room in the Farmhouse. By the time they had arrived there were several farm workers already tucking in to the sandwiches and cakes. They were nearly all male, in their early twenties with bright sun tanned faces. The three girls were greeted with wolf whistles. Bill thumped the table.

'Enough of that, they're here to learn.' A space was cleared at the table and they sat together. As her eyes acclimatized to the dull light, Joella could see that there were a few females amongst the farm hands. She smiled at one. Then she got up and helped herself to a piece of fruitcake and a mug of scalding tea. Fifteen minutes later a bell rang. It was a sign for the farm hands to continue with their work. After they had left, Bill handed each of the newcomers a sheet of paper, it was their timetable for the coming day. Joella noticed that she was in the cow shed with Bill at 6 am before breakfast the following day. The others were equally involved, Miriam in the hen house and Angela with the pigs. Returning to their hut they found a note from the three full time female farm workers inviting them to the their hut for a chat after dinner.

Dinner was held in the main dining room. Even before they had reached the farmhouse the

girls could hear the sound of lots of voices. As they entered they felt there was an air of celebration, one of the farm hand was leaving to get married. A small group had set themselves up in one corner. The tables were decorated with flowers and there was beer and wine available on a makeshift bar. Joella found herself sitting next to a young man who introduced himself as Robbie. They chatted together and found a lot in common. Both were single children who did not know their birth father being brought up by their birth mother and they both hoped that one day they would become vets. Before the evening was out they had exchanged telephone numbers.

At about 10.30 the girls made their way to the woman's hut. It was very similar to their own except that it had been made more homely by the addition of a number of personal possessions including family photos, colourful curtains and bedspreads. One of the women made patchwork quilts as a hobby. All the bed had been decorated with brightly coloured covers. The three newcomers looked around with amazement.

'Wow! This is nice,' exclaimed Joella, 'you've made it so homely. How long have you been here?' Miriam asked. Carmelita interrupted.

'Make yourselves comfortable and we will tell you all about ourselves,'

'First of all tell us your names,' asked Carmelita.

‘I’m Joella and this is Miriam and Angela,’
and yours,

‘Carmelita, Ramona and Verletta.’ We come
from the same part of Mexico; a small town in the
north called Saltillo and we are on work permits.

‘How does that work asked?’ asked Joella.’

‘The US government has an arrangement
that allows foreigners to work in the states in areas
where there is a shortage of local labour.’ Carmelite
replied’

‘We meet at school,’ explained Ramona,
‘and keep in touch on Facebook.’ ‘You have
Facebook in Mexico?’ Enquired Joella
incredulously.

‘Yes, course! We all have Apples and are
computer literate.’

‘Of course I’m sorry,’ continued Joella, ‘it’s
so easy to think we in the US are the only ones
who’re into IT.’

‘We been to New York on holiday together
and wanted learn more about the country,’ Ramona
continued. ‘Then job came up and we jump at it.
We are working for 4 months.’

‘What about you?’

‘We have only just met I’m from Baltimore,’
explained Joella. ‘I was born there. I live with my
mother and step ather I never knew my real dad but
love Matt my stepfather as if he was my Dad.’ They
all turned to look at Miriam. She blushed and
stammered,

'I come from Boston. I am an only child. My mum was born in the US but has Italian roots. My Dad comes from Italy. He immigrated in his twenties and met my Mum here.

'I'm from Atlanta,' spoke up Angela, 'my mother is a teacher and my father's a Doctor. I have three brothers. I'm the youngest.'

The alarm rang at 6 am. It was still dark when the three girls dragged themselves out of bed and dressed hurriedly. They would shower later. They each knew where they had to go. The crisp cold air of the early morning quickly dispelled any residual sleepiness as Joella made her way to the far field where the herd of 140 or so grass fed Jersey cows had spent the night. She could hear their urgent lowing long before she reached them. A flashing light indicated Bill who was beginning the round up. The cows eager to be milked, their heavy udders dragging on them, didn't require a second call. They lined up patiently as if queuing for a favorite concert and followed each other to the milking shed a short journey away. Stepping through a disinfectant tank they mounted the gangway, their hooves slipping from the wetness, and waited as the two Dairymen attached them to their individual stalls and their teats to the central milking machine. The machine began its sucking action.

‘There, listen to that?’ said Bill. Joella could hear no change.

‘It’s over there, on stall 10.’ Bill strode off with Joella chasing after him.

‘There you see the teat has slipped off.’

‘How did you know?’ asked Joella in amazement.

‘It’s the sound,’ said Bill, ‘it’s like music to my ears. It’s almost more familiar than any other sound I know.’ There are over fifty cows being milked at one time here and if one machine fails I will hear it.’ He smiled. Joella was more aware of the overpowering musty animal odour, a combination of the cow’s smell and the fresh milk.

Miriam had set off for the hen house, which she soon recognized by the loud clucking sound coming from a large shed. She let herself into the enclosure and carefully closed the lock behind her. All the birds were still inside but as the sun rose they began to come out one by one into the enclosed yard.

‘We have over 20,000 hens here,’ said a voice from inside. She peered into the gloom and could just make out the shape of a man who was clearing out the straw.

‘Hi my name’s Mick. I’m in charge of the hens. You’re Miriam aren’t you?’

‘You’ve got a good memory.’

‘Yes, I never forget a face especially a pretty one.’ Miriam could feel herself blushing.

‘Come on in, I’m just cleaning up. If you get one of those baskets over there you can begin to collect the eggs from those,’ he said pointing to the back of the hut. Miriam’s eyes gradually became accustomed to the gloom and she could make out the baskets and the nests. She stood for a moment uncertain where to begin. Mick’s voice boomed out.

‘Don’t be afraid, go to the nests and check each one for eggs. Some will be empty and some will have hens laying. Leave those ones and continue with the others.’ Miriam made her way to the left side of the hut and began to examine the nests. The first three were empty but the fourth contained a single egg. She stared at it as if she was seeing a miracle and then tentatively leaned forward to pick it up. It was still warm. She was frightened to squeeze it too hard so she rolled it with her fingers from one hand into the other and carefully put it into the basket. Feeling proud of herself she continued until she had about ten eggs in her basket. By this time Mick had finished cleaning up and came to help her. She watched him as he moved quickly from nest to nest handling the eggs as if they were stones. They are much stronger than I realised she thought and began to copy him. Soon her basket was full. He glanced up and said,

‘Put your basket outside and get another.’ By coffee time they had collected all the eggs and together went to the Farm House for a break. On the way Mick explained that the hens begin to lay at about 18 to 22 weeks and continue for about two years when they are sent to the abattoir and replaced by chicks which are then brought on until ready to lay.

‘A hen is an egg-laying machine.’ He said coldly. It sounds cruel but at least ours are all free range and can roam at will. We don’t agree with battery-rearing’

‘What’s that?’

‘It’s a method of intense farming where the hens are confined to small wire cages throughout their whole life. They’re given warmth, feed and water but not allowed to roam or leave the cage. It’s inhuman but sadly is still legal.’

‘That’s sounds terrible.’

‘It is,’ said Mick.

Angela was making her way to the pigs. She was not looking forward to it. She remembered pig farms when she was much younger; smelly muddy places where the pigs lived in appalling conditions. She had met, John the pig man and was walking with him to the pig enclosure. It was a large field enclosed by a wire fence. Inside she saw row after row of individual huts with curved corrugated roofs.

The pigs were roaming free, rooting in the ground. There was no mud or smell.

'This is so different from what I had expected,' she said. He smiled patiently.

'Yes we treat our pigs almost as if they were human.' As Miriam walked amongst them, they came up and nuzzled her legs. She found herself leaning down and stroking their rough coats. Over coffee he told her about the pig, how it was genetically similar to humans. She learned that doctors could use skin grafts from pigs to cover skin defects in humans such as after burns or injuries. Some clever doctors have even successfully used specially treated pig's heart valves in humans. After lunch, Joelle, Miriam and Angela returned to their hut and compared notes. They were all keeping journals so they used the time to write up their impressions of the visit so far.

Joelle wrote, *I shall never drink a glass of milk again without seeing that kind face chewing the cud and giving it so freely.*

Miriam wrote, *my weekly egg will taste that much better thanks to the hens who provided it and*

Angela wrote, *To call someone a pig is to insult the pig.*

The word went around that the vet was making his weekly visit the following day so the girls were excited to meet him and question him. David was older than they had expected probably in his early fifties. Of average height, with greying hair

and grey brown eyes, he had a natural ease with people and was always in demand as a public speaker. They had hoped for someone who was a recent graduate whom they could ask about the best way to get a college place. As it was he turned out to be more informed than they had expected. He was a part-time Professor at Cornell Veterinarian college so was right up to date with college requirements. He arrived early so they had to chase after him to find out where he was going to first. They found him in the cow shed with Bill. When they arrived panting and sweating eager not to miss a word, the two men were examining one of the older cows whose milk yield had been falling off. As they arrived, they were introduced to the Professor who immediately turned to the girls.

‘Bill has just told me that this cow has recently had a drop in her milk yield and we are discussing the possible causes. Do any of you know what I should be looking for?’ Joella spoke up. In her reading she remembered that climate change and lack of water were two possible causes and said so.

‘Good,’ replied the Vet, ‘you’re right on both accounts but neither apply here do they Bill?’ Bill shook his head. ‘No we have found a more common local cause, mastitis.’ The young students crowded around as he showed them the slightly redder, swollen and tender teat.

‘Bill and I agree that it is early mastitis, similar to that which breast-feeding mothers can get, and is caused by the same bacteria, Staphylococcus Aureus. An injection of antibiotics and hand milking for a few days should see the condition recover.’

They moved on to another cow that Bill described as becoming lame. Careful examination of its left front hoof and lower leg revealed a deep cut which was inflamed and purulent, possibly caused by stepping on a piece of glass or wire in the field. The wound was cleaned bathed, sprayed with an antibiotic powder and dressed. An injection of antibiotic was administered at the same time.

‘We need to keep it dry and change the dressing when it’s soiled.’ he said. The next stop was the stables where a horse was lying down obviously in pain. The Stable man explained that the horse wasn’t able to stand on its right rear leg. It was difficult to examine as she kept on moving away from the examiner. After a careful examination the vet decided that it was a case of Laminitis a non-infected avascular condition of the hoof and lower leg bones. He explained that treatment depended on the cause so they needed some investigations including an x-ray before deciding what to do.

The day seemed to fly as they went from place to place seeing sick animals, trying to take notes but it was not easy as they moved from one

to the next. They returned to their hut tired but excited by what they had seen. They didn't want to forget anything so the girls began to write up the day asking each other questions about what they had seen. Suddenly they heard a commotion outside and went to see what was happening.

A rare breed bull was being put into a breeding stall to facilitate the serving of a cow when it broke loose and ran amok in the yard. Several of the farm hands were chasing it so the girls decided to follow and see what happened. The bull ran into a field under cultivation and after a while it stopped and began to eat the plants. Slowly the men advanced and surrounded it, trying to catch the end of the rope that was hanging free from its nose ring. It stood for a while pawing the ground but suddenly turned back on the followers and rushed towards Joella. She tried to get out of its way but it lowered its head and ran at her goring her in the thigh.

It all happened so quickly that no one was prepared for what happened. Joella saw the glaring red eyes and the flared nostrils before she felt a searing pain in her thigh. Still struggling to get away, she fell to the ground with the bull standing over her prodding her with its horns. One of the men began to shout, raising his hands to attract the bull. It turned toward him and he managed to grab the rope and together with others pulled the bull off Joella who lay whimpering on the ground. Angela was the first to get to her. Joella's jeans were ripped

open revealing a jagged wound spurting blood. She knew some first aid and removing her scarf wound it around the thigh just above the wound making a temporary tourniquet.

‘Get an ambulance,’ she called to one of the men, ‘she’s badly hurt, she needs a hospital; quick she’s bleeding.’ Joella heard Angela’s voice as if in a fog, she knew she was hurt but how badly. There was a burning pain in her thigh but below it felt numb. She put her hand down and felt the tourniquet it was so tight she tried to move it.

‘Leave it,’ commanded Angela, ‘it needs to be tight. You’ll be OK. We’ll get you to the hospital.

‘What has happened? I feel so strange as if in a dream. Where am I?’ she murmured, ‘please someone tell me.’

The telephonist at the ambulance station picked up the call.

‘I am ringing from the farm, one of our students has had an accident she’s been gored please come quickly.’ The alarm went out and an ambulance was soon on its way. Joella was lying on the ground with Angela holding her hand when they arrived.

‘Don’t leave me,’ whispered Joella, ‘I feel so cold.’ The ambulance drove onto the field and stopped near to the group of people. A medic jumped out and shouted,

‘Where is the injured?’

‘Here, here,’ they all replied, clearing a space. Soon a stretcher had been assembled and Joella was carefully lifted onto it. Once in the ambulance she was given a pain killing injection and an IV was set up. It was a bumpy journey from the field to the main road each shaking jarring her leg. By then the injection had made her sleepy; voices now seemed far away.

‘This is all a dream. I’ll wake up and it will all go away.’ she thought as the vehicle sped through the countryside. Suddenly it stopped and she was being wheeled out into the open and then into a corridor, the ceiling lights glaring in her face; someone was holding her hand.

‘Is that you Angela? She asked, yes it’s me. I’m with you all the way.’

‘Where are we?’

‘We’re at the hospital. You’ve had an accident, I’ve phoned your Mum, she’s on the way,’ Angela explained. Joella was now more lucid, her mind had cleared and she was now beginning to think logically,

Beri was in the shower when the telephone rang,

‘Damn!’ She thought, ‘always at the wrong time,’ She turned off the water grabbed a towel and padded to the kitchen.

‘Hello who is that?’ She asked.

‘I’m Angela a friend of Joella’s, I’m ringing from the Columbia Memorial Hospital, Joella’s has

had an accident at the farm she's been gored but she's OK.' Beri shuddered, gored, my God! She had an image of Joella being tossed into the air and landing on the horns just like the bullfighters she had seen on TV.

'How did it happen?' she shouted, 'tell me?' but the line went dead. She threw on some clothes and set off for the hospital. On the way she phoned Matt.

'Matt it's Joella, she's had an accident.' She heard him take a deep breath. 'What happened? Is she OK?'

'I'm not certain, she's been gored.'

'Gored! Gored by what?'

'A bull I think?'

'I don't believe it, how could it happen?'

'Where are you?'

'I'm in the office I'll meet you in the hospital in about 30 minutes.'

Joella was rushed through to the Emergency Room. The medical staff immediately surrounded her. She could feel her trousers being cut off and could hear a voice saying,

'It's a nasty gash, how long has the tourniquet been applied?'

'Just over an hour,' came a voice from the back of the room. Angela had insinuated herself into the room. She had tried to stay with Joella but had been asked to leave. Now she was able to

help. She had taken the precaution of checking the time when she applied the tourniquet. The surgeon looked in the direction of the voice and saw the slight figure standing by the door.

‘Who are you?’ He asked.

‘I’m Angela, a friend of Joelle. I was there when she was gored and I put on the tourniquet.’

‘How long ago?’ The doctor repeated. ‘Did you notice?’

‘Yes, about an hour.’

‘Great work young lady, you’ve probably saved your friend’s life by your quick action. We are going to take her into the OR come with us.’ Joella was wheeled into the OR and transferred onto the operating table. An injection in her arm had already put her to sleep. She lay on the table bathed in the bright lights like an offering. Her right leg was bare from groin to foot. The blood stained makeshift tourniquet was still in place on her upper thigh. Below it the limb was deathly white. In the front of the mid thigh was a deep gash three hand’s breadth long and a hand’s breadth wide. The surrounding skin was drawn back to reveal a red raw cavern in the floor of which was the white stone-like bone stripped of all tissue. On its surface could be seen the gore marks made by the horns. The surgeon looked up at the X-ray screen and remarked,

‘Good the bone is intact; she’s a tough girl. Thank God, we’re dealing with a soft tissue wound

only.’ The surgeon carefully prepped and gowned the limb to leave the wound exposed. Now the delicate business begins, he said under his breath. Carefully separating the tissues he found that the main limb artery was intact but one of its branches was torn open.

‘That’s it, the source of the bleeding,’ he announced pointing to the damaged vessel. Taking an artery forceps he carefully placed it around the torn stump and clamped it shut securing the end. Then he examined the rest of the wound. No further blood vessels were damaged.

‘Right,’ he said it turning to the anaesthetist, ‘please loosen the tourniquet slowly.’ The anaesthetist reached down under the drapes and slowly loosened it. Suddenly, the limb flushed pink and the damaged muscle began to ooze but no spurters appeared. After a short while the limb had a normal colour. The surgeon dried the wound and packed it leaving it open.

‘Why aren’t you closing it?’ asked his assistant.

‘Because there is a real risk of infection, the bull’s horn had been in the earth and might have carried anything into the wound including tetanus so she needs a tetanus jab ASAP together with antibiotics.’

Back in her room, Joella was beginning to moan and move her leg. She felt that she had been

in a deep pool of water and was now floating slowly towards the surface, towards the light.

‘Where am I?’ She said, trying to sit up.

‘You’re in hospital. You’ve had an accident. It’s all over. It all went very well,’ said the nurse helping her. ‘The doctor said that you’re going to be as good as new.’

Suddenly the door burst open and Beri followed by Matt rushed in. Joella could hardly breathe as Beri hugged her with tears in her eyes.

‘Darling are you all right? It must have been such a frightening experience.’

‘I’m fine; it was just a bit of a shock seeing the bull rushing at me. I don’t remember much else’

‘You know you could have lost your leg but thanks to Angela’s prompt action, the doctors says you will make a full recovery.’

‘Where is she?’ Asked Joella. Angela stepped forwards and they hugged. When she had heard the full story Joella asked Angela how did she know what to do?’

‘We learnt it at school; we have regular first aid lessons. One of the lessons was on how to stop bleeding and how to construct a makeshift tourniquet.’

‘How can I ever thank you for what you did?’ Joella said. Within a few days she was allowed home on crutches and by the end of the week was walking unaided.

‘Mum,’ she said one morning over breakfast, ‘Mum I’m ready to go back to the farm, I was having so much fun and I miss my new friends.’ Beri was a bit surprised. She was expecting a very different response and thought that Joella would be fearful and would take some time to recover mentally from the shock but she had underestimated Joella’s strength of character. Having checked with the doctor who gave Joella the green light, Beri took her to the Greyhound Station and bid her goodbye with a mother’s warning,

‘Please be careful we love you.’

Joella’s was overwhelmed by the reception she received on arrival at the farm. A large banner had been erected over the front entrance of the yard it read,

‘Welcome back Joella.’

She felt her eyes prickling with tears and wiped them away as the warmth of the reception overwhelmed her. Then the girls and many of the farm hands who could get away from their duties surrounded her. Everybody was excited to see her and congratulate her on her speedy recovery. Back in the girl’s hut, she agreed to show them her scar. She rolled down her trouser leg to reveal a 10 cm long pinkish mark running down the front of her leg. It was still tender to touch.

‘It’s fine,’ she announced, ‘the doctor said it will turn white in a few months time and will be almost invisible.’

The weeks passed very quickly and soon Joella was making plans to return home and prepare for the new school term. The three girls who had become close friends were departing at the same time perhaps never to meet again although they promised to do so. Joella had learned so much about herself. She had managed for the first time to be away from home on her own and felt much more confident. Her memory of the incident with the bull was fading. It was only in the shower that she would be reminded of how close she had come to a serious injury and then she would remember Angela whose quick action had saved her.

Beri had kept in regular touch with David either by phone or Skype and it was during a conversation online that Beri had first noticed that something wasn't quite right. They had been talking about things in general when David suddenly called her Rebeka and asked her how she had enjoyed her trip to Israel.

'That was a long time ago David,' she had said, 'Rebeka is no longer with us, I'm Beri.' On the screen, she saw a puzzled look come over his face.

'How do you mean?' he asked, 'aren't you in your flat in New York. I was thinking of coming to visit you?' Beri had then made some small talk, had said goodbye and had promised to contact him in a

few days time. As she switched off the screen she sat thinking about their conversation. She knew that there was something familiar about what had happened and then she remembered her grandfather, he had begun to do the same thing, living in the past, mistaking the generations. David had mistaken her for her mother. He was confusing the present with the past.

When Matt came home that evening she mentioned it to him.

'It was so strange talking to David, it was as if he had lost the last twenty years of his life.' Matt sat for a moment and then said,

'He's getting on you know, he's becoming a bit-,' and then he hesitated. He didn't want to accept that David, the great family friend was slowly deteriorating and that old age was creeping up on him.

'I don't think he has any family left. I think we're the only support he has and we're so far from him.' He continued. It was if he and Beri were thinking the same when they said in unison,

'We must go and see him.' But it was not as easy as they thought. Joella was on holiday and enjoying herself at the farm and was due to stay there for another four weeks. They couldn't wait that long, they had to go very soon and leave her behind.

‘Joella will understand if we go and see David. We can keep in touch with her by Skype and by phone.’ said Beri.

A few days later they were in London on their way to see David. He was living in a small flat in Sussex Gardens. It was in an old Georgian town house that had been converted into four apartments. He was on the first floor. Beri and Matt climbed the poorly lit stairs noticing graffiti on the walls and damp patches on the ceiling. It was all a bit neglected and smelly.

David took a long time to answer the bell. They could hear him shuffling to the door and then struggling to open it, swearing to himself. Finally the door opened and they could see him outlined in the poorly lit hall. He seemed to have shrunk and aged greatly. His grey hair was now almost gone, his balding head shining in the light. At first he didn’t recognize them and then seemed confused by their presence.

‘Hello David,’ said Beri. It’s Matt and Beri, we have come to see you.’

‘Oh! Hello,’ he said at last as if he was just recognising them.

‘Come in, I was just making a pot of tea. Have you come far?’ He said as if he had forgotten that they lived In the States. Neither answered but said they would like a cup of tea. They followed him into a small sitting room noticing that he was now walking with a slight limp dragging his left leg.

'What happened to your leg?' asked Beri.

'Oh, it's nothing, I had a slight stroke but it's much better now.'

David seemed to be absent-minded and hard of hearing that made conversation even more difficult. Then slowly and haltingly he told them what had happened since they had last met.

'When I came back to the UK I was fine. The house was too big so I sold it and moved in here. I was seeing friends and enjoying life when it happened.'

'What?'

'The stroke?'

'When did that happen?' Asked Beri.

'It was in the early hours. I hadn't been sleeping well and woke with a strange feeling in my right leg. I thought it was cramp and got out to try and ease it. But the feeling moved slowly up my leg that then the leg gave way. I managed to grab something before I fell onto the floor. I think I must have passed out because I can't remember anything until I woke up in hospital. Piecing the bits together, I learned that my cleaner came in the following morning and found me on the floor. It was she who called the ambulance. It was a very strange experience, being inside a body that didn't work normally. It was as if I had somehow got into someone else's. I was the same person but my body was not my own. The left side of my face felt heavy and when I eventually looked at myself in a

mirror I could see that it was drooping.' Beri took his hand as he continued.

'At its worse, I couldn't move my right arm or leg; the whole right side of my body was numb without feeling. What puzzled me was that I was amazingly calm?'

Beri and Matt listened as David described what must have been a very frightening experience calmly and without emotion. It was as if he was telling someone else's story and not his own. Every now and then he paused and took a sip of tea. Beri had many questions but didn't want to interrupt him. David continued,

'I don't know how long I remained like this but some days or weeks later I began to regain a little movement. At first it was my hand and then my foot and slowly it travelled up until I could move the whole of my arm and leg, not with precision but I could move. It was a great relief. It was then that I became frightened. Before it was in someone else's body but now I was returning to my own and it didn't work properly. I was walking like a young child, my right leg weak and wobbly ready to give way at the slightest provocation. My right hand didn't do what I wanted. I couldn't hold anything. Needless to say I was incontinent and needed my bottom wiped a humiliating experience. But I could speak; miraculously the speech centre in my brain was unaffected and I could write.' As he spoke there was a knock on the door.

'That must be Edna, she's my carer. She comes twice a day to see to me. She's a lovely lady and we get on very well.' A plumpish woman in her early fifties came in and kissed David on the cheek. He beamed.

'Edna, these are some dear friends, more like family from New York who have come to see me. We have known each other for a long time. I was very close to... and he paused, no matter I am glad you've met. They are worried about me. Tell them that I am in good hands.' Edna smiled.

'David is doing very well but still needs some help.'

'They want me to go back with them to New York?' blurted out David.

Edna took his hand,

'David and I are good friends; we talk about all sorts of things. His memory is not as good as it was but we manage don't we David?'

'That's wonderful, said Beri puzzled, 'are you? Are you allowed to become friends of your clients?'

'Not officially but David has asked me to marry him. I am a widow. I live alone. I have two grown up children. My husband was a soldier. He was killed in Afghanistan.' She paused and looked at David. He nodded.

'I've agreed to marry him.' She whispered, putting her hand on his shoulder. 'I know we will be very happy; he's a wonderful man and I have grown

to love him deeply.' Beri and Matt couldn't contain their delight; they came forwards and hugged the two.

'We are so delighted with your news.' said Matt. 'When is the wedding? We want to be there'

'We haven't fixed a date yet have we David?' said Edna, 'we want a simple ceremony probably at a registry office.'

On their way back to the hotel, Beri and Matt were silent. They were thinking about Edna and whether she had really appreciated what she was taking on. Matt spoke first.

'He doesn't look very well does he? But I guess she knows what she is letting herself in for?'

The Registrar Mrs Mary Jones married them four weeks later at the Registry office at Westminster Council House. David was wearing a dark suit with a rose in his lapel. Edna wore a flowered dress with a small chintz hat. They both looked very happy. Edna's two children and Beri, Matt and Joella attended.

Mary Jones was an impressive woman tall and majestic She spoke with a soft Scottish accent. As she began the whole hall fell into silence. Beri listened to the familiar words as the Registrar recited the prayers and the obligations of the couple. She was reliving her own wedding day when she had made the same vows. She remembered how the family had objected in view of

Matt's past record but they were wrong and he had turned out to be a wonderful husband. She reached out and took his hand and smiled at him.

By the time the happy couple emerged onto the street the sun had come out to greet them. The early rain had stopped and the day brightened. They all proceeded to the wedding lunch at the Fountain's Abbey Pub in nearby Praed Street. A table had been laid for twelve people with David and Mary sitting at the head side by side. Once they were all seated, Matt stood,

'I know I speak for all of us here when I say how delighted Beri, Joella and I are to be here to celebrate Edna's marriage to David. We have only known Edna for a short while but she has endeared herself to us all. David has been a wonderful friend to our family over many years, supporting us through some very difficult and challenging times. He has treated me like his son and has been the father I never knew.

After toasting the health of the couple, Matt asked David to say a few words. He rose swaying a little and with a glass in one hand and holding Edna's hand in the other, he said,

'My dear Edna, you have come into my life like an angel brightening up my every day by your smile and kindness. I am the luckiest man in the world to have found you and want you to know that I will do everything in my power to make you happy.' His last words were drowned by the 'Hear,

Hear' from the guests. There was then a rowdy rendition of '*He's a jolly good fellow*' before the meal was served.

Beri watched as David sat down. She felt a deep emptiness that her mother wasn't here to celebrate with them. She had once hoped that Rebeka and David would have married but fate had had another plan for them. But she was happy for David that he had found someone to care for him in his fading years.

Life slowly returned to normal for Beri, Joella and Matt. The memory of that terrible time when they thought they would lose Joella now forgotten. They slipped back seamlessly into their daily routine, the early morning alarm; Beri shouting at Joella to shower and dress while Matt returned from his daily run; the usual scramble for breakfast and then the rush to catch the bus for school and the inevitable traffic jam in Downtown New York. It was all so familiar and reassuring.

'It can't last,' said Beri one morning to Matt.

'What?' he replied, hardly listening?

'This.'

'This what?'

'This calm, something's bound to happen, I feel it.'

'You're being superstitious, just enjoy it and don't worry.' But Beri couldn't. She kept thinking of David In London. He had been so quiet. She

usually heard from him once a week, but he hadn't phoned now for several weeks. She was frightened to phone him. She dreaded that something might have happened. As the weeks went by, she began to get that familiar empty sick-like feeling in her stomach.

'There's something wrong,' she announced to Matt one morning. 'It's too quiet.' Plucking up courage she dialled David's number. There was a long pause before a voice answered.

'Hello.' Beri didn't recognize the voice at first and then she remembered it was Edna.

'Hello Edna, it's Beri speaking, how are you?'

'Fine,' how are you?

'We are all fine, how is David?' There was a pause.

'He's in hospital.'

'You didn't tell us?'

'I didn't want to worry you. He's had another small stroke but is getting better. They say he will be home in a few days time.'

'Should we come over?'

'No, there is no need to. He's become a little more confused and often doesn't recognise people even his friends.'

'OK, but if he gets worse we would like to be with him, you understand? 'Yes.'

Matt could see there was something when he got home. Beri was very quiet not her usual happy self.

‘What is it Beri?’ he asked. ‘It’s David. I phoned him and spoke to Edna.’

‘What did she say?’

‘David is back in hospital. He has had another stroke. It’s affected his speech. She is very worried about him. Matt I think I should go and see him.’

‘I know you must go. I can’t join you.’

‘Why? I don’t want to go on my own.’

‘I know but I can’t, I can’t. Joella and I will be OK. Don’t stay too long we’ll miss you a lot.’

Beri was shocked when she saw David in hospital. He was asleep when she entered his room. She sat looking at his familiar face now ravaged by time. Deep creases lined his eyes and mouth and a loud rattle accompanied each breath. His hands were clammy to her touch. She was reminded of her mother’s last few days a memory that brought tears to her eyes. Edna sat watching her. She knew what Beri was feeling. She had gone through it when her first husband died twelve years earlier. Since then she had sat with many of her clients in their final hours. She knew the end couldn’t be long and there were no words which could comfort Beri in her grief.

David was dreaming. He was at the hotel in Nof Ginosar in northern Israel. He was sitting with Rebeka enjoying the cool evening overlooking the lake. They had just shared an evening meal in the canteen at the hotel. He felt happy and relaxed.

Beri saw a smile flit across his face unaware of what had caused it. Then his breathing changed, it became slower and deeper. Edna had seen the pattern before and reached forwards to touch Beri.

'I think he is near the end,' she whispered, 'he'll be at peace at last.'

As the evening shadows lengthened and the room darkened, Beri and Edna sat as David slipped away until his breathing finally stopped. The room was left with an uncanny silence. Then as all the pain and hope exploded within her, Beri couldn't stop the sudden rush of tears that wracked her body. She had lost so many of her loved ones.

Martin Nelson was born in London in 193. During the second World 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 a MA in sculpture. He began writing in the years after retirement following courses at NEC, Arvon and The Open University. His wife of forty years died in 2005 . He has a daughter Sarah and a son Paul and four grandchildren. He also has an African family. He has published several E-books of poems and fiction covering a wide range of human emotions and experiences.

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